

The Hindu Rights Action Force and the Definition of the 'Indian Community' in Malaysia

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Abstract

The Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) started in 2006 as a coalition of non-governmental organizations and various individuals struggling for the preservation and protection of Hindus' rights in Malaysia. Although the coalition began as a religious movement, it ended up widening the scope of its mandate so as to include various demands for social and economic rights. The present paper describes some representations of the 'Indian community' as these are expressed in HINDRAF's discourses and in some supporters' views on the condition of Malaysian Indians. In particular, the paper examines processes of ethnic boundary making and unmaking, more specifically how ethnic boundaries are both expanded and contracted on the basis of various socio-cultural and economic factors.

Keywords: HINDRAF, Malaysian Indians, Ethnicity, Boundaries, Hindu, Minority Rights

Introduction

- 1.1 Malaysian Indians^[1] have been described as a marginalized minority in Malaysia, situated between the political hegemony of Malay and the economic domination of Chinese (Nagarajan 2008). In particular, the great cultural and social diversity of the Malaysian Indian population has been considered one of the main factors affecting this minority's political and economic role in the context of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia (Ampalavanar Brown 1993; Arasaratnam 1970; Muzaffar 1993; Willford 2007). As a result, strengthening a sense of unity among all Malaysian Indians has hence been one of the main concerns for many religious, social and cultural movements throughout the twentieth century (Muzaffar 1993; Arasaratnam 1970, 1993; Milner 1998). For example, some of these organizations have put special emphasis on Tamil cultural identity, while others have focused on plantation workers' solidarity (Arasaratnam 1970; Willford 2007).
- 1.2 Among recent Indian movements in Malaysia, one of the most widely discussed is the *Hindu Rights Action Force* (hereafter HINDRAF), also known as *Hindraf Makkal Sakthi* (People Power), which started in 2006 as a coalition of non-governmental organizations and individuals committed to the preservation of Hindus' rights. The coalition has long been described as illegal by the government and in press coverage (Yang & Ishak 2012). Its social status was that of an unregistered organization since 2008, when it was banned as a national security threat and a terrorist group (Singh 2009), until March 2013, when a part of the coalition was officially registered and granted status as an organization.
- 1.3 Nowadays, similarly to other previous organizations, HINDRAF aims to strengthen a sense of *unity* among Malaysian Indians, in order to struggle for various socio-cultural, economic and political rights. As I will examine in the present paper, the movement underlines class fractions within the community, and tries to widen the scope of its initial mandate by crossing internal socio-cultural divisions. As a matter of fact, an important characteristic of HINDRAF is the fact that it simultaneously aims to foster a sense of *unity* among 'Malaysian Indians' and to stress the internal *diversity* of the 'community', in particular by underscoring the political and economic privileges of a few Indians. For example, a consistent part of the movement supports the belief that Malaysian Indian political leadership, in particular the *Malaysian Indian Congress* (MIC), has betrayed and

misrepresented the community (Khoo 2010; Noor 2008b). The very idea of a political betrayal by some part of the leadership has proved strategic in some official HINDRAF discourses in order to reinforce a sense of solidarity among those parts of the community considered as marginalized and under-represented. As a result, achieving a clear-cut definition of the 'Indian community' in Malaysia has become especially problematic (Noor 2008b).

- 1.4 The paper explores how HINDRAF and some of its supporters define the 'Indian community' in different and ambivalent manners by mostly drawing on a variety of ethnic and non-ethnic principles that relate both to internal diversity and to a sense of commonality. In particular, the paper examines how, on the one hand, some discourses by HINDRAF and its supporters on the condition of Malaysian Indians reduce a variety of non-ethnic factors (e.g., social, political, economic) into contractive ethnic and cultural representations (e.g., Hindu, Tamil) in order to define the 'community'. On the other hand, the focus for identification can be extended from ethnic and cultural aspects to other social, economic and political factors (e.g., political choices, the past, plantation proletariat, 'poverty', 'the struggle for rights'). More specifically, three main strategies of boundary-making will be analyzed, through reference to a variety of framing processes and identity factors other than religion (Hindu) and language (Tamil): a strategy of 'boundary-contraction' emphasizing ethnic and cultural specificity; a strategy of 'boundary-expansion' leading to a more inclusive social and political category; and finally, a 'universalist' strategy (Lamont *et al.* 2002), informed by a 'human rights' and equality-based discourse.
- 1.5 I draw on my analysis of the movement's official discourses and of individual comments. Among the numerous associations operating in Malaysia, I choose to focus specifically on HINDRAF for, along with Noor (2008a), I believe that it has played a special role in bringing the condition of the Malaysian Indians to the forefront of the Malaysian political landscape. The movement has also played an important role in proposing various definitions of the 'Indian community' that cut across national, local, cultural and class-based lines (Kuecker *et al.* 2011). HINDRAF's mode of communication, ranging from public meetings and rallies to online forums and blog discussions, has generated special attention and mixed reactions from the government and in particular from the *Malaysian Indian Congress* (Noor 2008a). HINDRAF is not a homogeneous group, but a varied set of political and social movements involving a variety of individuals. I do not consider HINDRAF and its discourses as the sole representatives of the multifarious experiences relating to Malaysian Indians. However, I believe that the debate surrounding this movement, the internal divisions and the active participation of supporters in various social networks are especially interesting in order to explore the heterogeneity of Malaysian Indians.
- 1.6 The paper is based on research work carried out in July 2008, when I visited the cities of Georgetown (Penang Island) and Ipoh (Perak, Peninsular Malaysia)^[2] to conduct interviews, to engage in conversations with the then national coordinator, along with some experts and supporters, as well as to participate in some HINDRAF gatherings. Here, I integrate my data collected during my fieldwork with excerpts from blog discussions and from some social networks (namely Facebook and Twitter). The analysis of blog and social networks is important in order to track the historical changes and the development of the movement throughout the past few years. Online discussions represent an integral part of HINDRAF's political landscape and an important occasion for various individuals to express their views. I have also observed a common tendency in conversations and in web comments to use similar terms, which at times overlap with the official and political language of parts of the movement. More specifically, the paper illustrates some excerpts from conversations, official discourses and online discussions that were collected since 2007 until more recent times, and that explicitly describe the socio-economic condition of Indians in Malaysia. Furthermore, special attention is devoted to those excerpts from online comments that especially concentrate on group and intra-group boundaries. Some of the ideas expressed in these comments overlap with HINDRAF's official discourses, and render the representation of the 'Indian community' very complex and multifaceted. The experiences and comments of people herein introduced are by no means exhaustive in covering the varied experiences and conceptions on the issue. Rather, they are manifestations of certain processes involved in identity discourses. I am aware of the complexity of the situation of Indians in Malaysia, as well as of the heterogeneity of HINDRAF. Here, I explore just some of these identity discourses.

Theoretical Background

- 2.1 The present paper draws upon the 'ethnic boundary-making' approach across the social sciences (e.g., Brubaker 2004; Lamont & Molnar 2002; Wimmer 2008, 2013), according to which 'ethnicity' is not a matter of relations between pre-defined and fixed groups, but is a dynamic process of constitution and transformation of groups' boundaries (Cangia 2012; Nagel 1994), and a relational process of reconciliation and combination of different identity factors (Cieslik & Verkuyten 2006; Eriksen 2001). I wish to contribute to the study of 'ethnicity' by

looking at the way ethnic boundaries and categories are modified, expanded and contracted by HINDRAF's discourses relating to the 'Indian community' in Malaysia. 'Ethnicity' is understood here in accordance with Weber's tradition (1978), as 'a subjectively felt sense of belonging based on the belief in shared culture and common ancestry' (Wimmer 2008: 973). The concept of 'boundary' presents both a categorical dimension, through which the social world is categorized into groups, and a social dimension, which indicates how to relate to individuals classified as 'us' or as 'them' (Wimmer 2013). 'Ethnicity' is a form of boundary in itself, 'a distinction that individuals make in their everyday lives and that shape their actions and mental orientations towards others [...] typically embedded in a variety of social and cultural differences between groups that give an ethnic boundary concrete significance' (Alba 2008: 22).

2.2 In order to understand these processes, I draw upon the concept of 'framing' (Snow 2004): frames are ways of packaging and presenting events, issues, and ideas with the aim of generating shared beliefs, motivating collective action and defining appropriate strategies (Merry 2006). The process of 'framing' involves the selection, connection and coordination of some events, experiences, and ideas in contrast to others, 'with the result that they become more salient in an array or hierarchy of group-relevant issues, perhaps coming to function as significant coordinating symbols or mechanisms' (Snow 2004: 400). According to Snow (2004) 'frames are continuously articulated and elaborated during the course of conversation and debate among the interactants within a discursive field as they go about the business of making sense of the events and issues with which they are confronted' (403). I argue that the framing process leads to complex discursive articulation of groups' boundaries: the dynamic and recursive processes of selection, connection and coordination of events, experiences and ideas that are salient to groups' definition and collective action can result in boundaries-shifting strategies. These may be achieved in different ways, either by reducing the number of categories and expanding existing boundaries, or by adding new ones and thus contracting previous boundaries (Wimmer 2008b). The analysis of 'framing' and 'boundary-making' processes helps understand how people and organizations 'do things' with boundaries classifying individuals and groups of individuals. It helps understand practices of self-identification and group categorization (Benkins 2008), and the way categories are embedded in political discourses and narratives (Brubaker 2004).

2.3 The present analysis, thanks to its special focus on how group identities are discursively constituted, and its emphasis on the variable and at times ambivalent character of self-identification and group categorization processes, aims to support not only the literature on 'boundaries', but also the general 'social constructionist lens' on ethnicity, race, multiculturalism, nationalism and related issues. By looking at the varied meanings associated with the 'Indian community', the article strongly supports those perspectives across the social sciences that avoid treating ethnic categories as fixed and pre-determined entities (Mertovec 2007; Zagefka 2009).

2.4 First, I briefly outline the main political developments in Malaysia since independence in 1957. Afterwards, I introduce HINDRAF's emergence and development, with a focus on the main internal debates and the movement's mandate. Finally, I examine the specific framing processes constituting the three main strategies of boundary-making (namely 'contraction', 'expansion', and 'universalism'), in particular the most recurrent factors highlighted both in official discourses and in some supporters' views and online postings, in order to see how the 'Indian community' is defined, and how this definition concretely overlaps with more specific (e.g., Hindu, Tamil) and general categories (e.g., 'poor', 'human'). The concluding section discusses resulting implications and challenges for the coalition and for future research.

Background

3.1 Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has been governed by a multi-party coalition, including the Malay-based *United Malays National Organization* (UMNO), the *Malaysian Chinese Association* (MCA), and the *Malaysian Indian Congress* (Shamsul 1998). This coalition, known as the *Barisan Nasional* (BN, National Front), has continued to be successful until 2013, and again won a majority of seats in the last elections in May 2013. The constitution of an independent Federation of Malaya was based on the distinction between natives, the 'Malay' (*bumiputra*, literally 'sons of the soil') and the 'non-Malay' (*non-bumiputra*). The British colonial administration created the ethnic categories 'Malay' and 'Malayness' with the first census conducted in 1891. These terms came to be officially accepted and applied to various colonial and post-colonial policies (Shamsul 2001). Through these policies and in the name of 'national harmony' (*rukun Negara*), non-Malays were accepted as full-fledged citizens and, in return, Malays' special position, rights and privileges were legally recognized and protected. The process of national identity building was thus premised on notions such as *bangsa* (people, race, community, nationality, state), and on projects of 'ethnicization' and 'Islamization' of the country (Holst 2012). The 1957 legislature especially safeguarded Malay political, religious and economic privileges, so as to reinforce a

breach between the Malay and other ethnic communities (Khoo 1999; Devadas 2009). This 'hegemonization' of Malay privileges resulted in the 1969 inter-ethnic riots. The 20-year New Economic Policy (NEP) was launched by BN to tackle the riots, and aimed at reducing interracial tensions by improving the incomes and economic weight of the *bumiputra*. The NEP, especially in the seventies and eighties, placed special emphasis on ethnic differences in the economy and education sectors, as well as on the Islamic resurgence, and therefore ended up reinforcing ethnic-based controversies among communities. The National Development Policy (NDP), which followed the NEP after 1990, kept maintaining a special emphasis on 'Malay dominance' (*ketuanan Melayu*). These policies were mainly based on the promotion of economic growth, and on measures of redistributive justice, considered as a strategy to reduce tensions and to provide the conditions for 'national harmony' (Devadas 2009).

3.2 In this context, social categories of 'Malay' and 'non-Malay' were considered as givens. Throughout the post-colonial era, however, political 'coscientization' (Shamsul 1996) and new identity discourses emerged in different contexts among 'Non-Malay' and 'Non-Muslim' communities, including indigenous groups in Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak and Sabah (Zawawi 1996, 1997, 2008; Nah 2003), as well as the Indian and Chinese communities (Heng 1996; Graezer Bideau & Kilani 2009; Willford 2007). Although at times these counter-discourses are in open contrast with the government's nationalism, they can be framed within the same ideological context in which a 'national identity' was institutionalized and officially constituted. In particular, some of these discourses are to be framed within the ideological 'principle of *unity in diversity*', according to which 'though ethnically different we are all Malaysians, that is, we are Malaysians precisely because we can all maintain our ethnic, cultural and religious diversity' (Giordano 2012: 144). The study of HINDRAF can also be framed in this context, especially if we consider the coalition's simultaneous emphasis on a sense of *unity* and on *diversity* within the 'community' and within the movement itself.

Malaysian Indians and the Hindu Rights Action Force

4.1 Between 1890 and 1930, during the British colonization (1874-1946) and under the indenture labor system, people were brought from India to Malaysia to work in large-scale rubber, sugarcane, oil palm, rice, and coffee plantations (Baxstrom 2000; Jayaram 2004; Jain 2004). The predominance of Tamils in these plantations was the result of a specific colonial immigration policy, which recruited Indian laborers especially in the state of Madras in India. This policy described 'the South Indian peasant' as particularly 'hardworking, docile and orderly' (Marimuthu 1993: 466), a 'satisfactory type of laborer' (Sandhu 1993: 152), most likely to stand work conditions and accept low wages. Some Telegus and Malayalis were also recruited for work in the plantations (Baxstrom 2000). Other Indians, especially Ceylonese Tamils, on the contrary, were better educated, and had greater access to high positions and professional occupations (Puthucherry 1993). The socioeconomic gaps between individuals of various origins have reinforced sub-ethnic loyalties and affected social and economic development. In 2010, Indians in Malaysia accounted for 7.3 % of the total population^[3]. The Tamil constitute a substantial majority, up to 75 % of the Indian population (Rajantharan 2012). Other Malaysian Indians include North Indians (Bengalis, Gujeratis, Punjabis, Sindhis), Malayalis, Telegus, Ceylonese Tamils, and Pakistanis. According to the census conducted in 2000, around 85 % of Malaysian Indians were Hindu, 7.4 % Christian, 3.9 % Muslim, and smaller groups were Buddhist and Confucian (Brown *et al.* 2009). Despite the rapid urbanization from rural areas to cities occurred since independence, socioeconomic differences persist between parts of the Indian population and the other two main 'ethnic groups' in Malaysia, namely Chinese and Malay (Nadarajah 2004).

4.2 In this context, HINDRAF came to prominence in 2006, when it campaigned against the demolition of Hindu temples occurring in different parts of Malaysia. Since its foundation, lawyers and other professionals of Tamil and Hindu descent, including the de facto HINDRAF leaders P. Uthayakumar and P. Wathya Moorthy, have been leading the movement. HINDRAF's call to mobilization through the organization of rallies against temple demolition attracted between 10,000 (Brant 2007) and 30,000 (Ramasamy 2008) individuals. Despite the protests, temple demolition continued across the country until 2007 (Noor 2008a). The police violently suppressed the protests and detained five key protest leaders, including P. Uthayakuma, under the Internal Security Act (ISA^[4]) (Singh 2009). Three weeks later, about 20,000 Indians demonstrated in Kuala Lumpur against the five leaders' detention (Montlake 2008).

4.3 HINDRAF's membership includes Tamil individuals and various local organizations. A large number of people participating in the rallies were from a Tamil Hindu background and from the plantations (Noor 2008a). However, the mobilization cuts across class lines, with the participation of a large number of professionals, including doctors and lawyers, who were the first to start campaigning for the rights of lower-income Indians (Kuecker *et al.* 2011). Internal divisions have been present in the movement since October 2008, when the

government outlawed the coalition on the grounds that it was a 'terrorist group' linked to other international Hindu and Tamil extremist groups, such as Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in India. The movement split into various factions, with some leaders favoring the BN government, and others either supporting the *Pakatan Rakyat*^[5] (PR) parties or detaching themselves from both orientations. Some of these factions include the *Human Rights Party* led by Uthayakumar, *Persatuan Hindraf Malaysia* led by Waytha Moorthy, the *Malaysian Makkal Sakti Party* led by the coalition's former national coordinator R S Thanenthiran, along with various other sub-groups.

4.4 Despite the different political orientations, a similar emphasis on certain aspects of the condition of Malaysian Indians, in particular on the five main blocks of 'progress' identified in the initial mandate of the coalition, resonates in most of the discourses of these factions' leaders and their supporters. The five main blocks of 'progress' include *combating poverty, enhancing security, ensuring education and strengthening unity among Indians*. Consequently, the initial and current demands of the movement can be divided into five major clusters (namely religious, cultural, economic, political, and international), and are grouped in the coalition's 18 Point Demands and represented in the *5-year HINDRAF Blueprint For Bringing the Indian Poor Into the Mainstream of National Development*. The points mentioned in the movement's demands seem to be recurrent themes present in various political comments, and serve to emphasize collective solidarity among certain parts of the community.

4.5 One of the main groups of demands pertains to religious rights, namely the end of Islamic extremism, the end of Hindu temple demolition, and the provision of lands for Hindu temples and burial grounds. 'Hindu rights' represented some of the main topics of interest when the coalition emerged in the context of temple demolition, but the movement soon began to attract substantial criticism from supporters and individuals participating in online discussions. In particular, some people have criticized the coalition's focus on specific religious rights, and the consequent exclusion of Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, atheists and agnostics Indians (Leong 2009). Some supporters suggest the movement focuses the attention on education, as this 2008 blog comment illustrates:

I would like to suggest that we should stop building more temples as we already have much. We should now start to build and fund out Tamil Schools^[6].

4.6 Other related demands include *the re-construction of Tamils schools, affirmative action plans, grants and scholarships for Tamils*. The role played by teachers in promoting 'Tamil culture', and by the 'next generations' (children and youths) for the future of the community, is highly valued both by supporters and the coalition.

4.7 Other demands include the Internally Displaced Estate Workers (DEW) program, targeting those plantation workers who were displaced from rural areas. These demands include housing programs, employment, educational and business opportunities, as well as microcredit for small business start-ups. However, in regard to the image of the 'Indian poor', other supporters were strongly critical of the idea of 'victim-hood' attached to Indians by the coalition, an idea that was seen as diminishing the impact of the movement's cause and as perpetuating the exclusivist nuances of Malaysian politics (Leong 2009).

4.8 As already mentioned, since its foundation, HINDRAF has accused MIC's leadership of not being able to stand up to the demands of the UMNO, to uplift Hindus' economic condition and to defend 'Hindu culture' (Noor 2008b). This criticism must be viewed within the framework of the demands (*strengthening internal leadership to contrasting political parties and their economic privileges*) concerning the economic and political divisions within the 'community', in particular the demands regarding the large disparity between the under-represented population (under-represented both in terms of religious and socio-economic rights) and the Malaysian Indian political leadership. *Contrasting political parties and their economic privileges* which is one of the five blocks of demands present in the coalition's initial mandate, works as a unifying strategy to cross religious boundaries (Hindu) and expand group's boundaries for a more inclusive definition of the 'Indian poor'. At the same time, the opposition to the privileges of a few Indians represents one of the most contentious aspects among HINDRAF's supporters. Recently, in April 2013, factions arose among those supporters and leaders expressing their dissent against Waytha Moorthy's decision to negotiate with Barisan Nasional. In particular, Waytha Moorthy signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak concerning the government's commitment to a number of proposals included in the coalition's plan. Waytha Moorthy was appointed deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Department and, on that occasion, clearly stated he would focus on *the 1.5 million poor and underclass Malaysian Indians, the oily faced and dark Indian man, the displaced estate worker*, thereby emphasizing economic issues as a principal concern, on the one hand, and undermining political interests (i.e., *contrasting political parties and their economic privileges*), on the other. Criticism was

expressed with regard to the choice to negotiate with the long debated government coalition, a choice that has been defined as a betrayal by some supporters and leaders. Similar criticism was raised in the past on the occasion of the choice made by the former national coordinator (Thanenthiran) to create a separate group, the *Malaysian Makkal Sakti Party*, and to support the BN in 2008.

4.9 Fractions among HINDRAF's groups and supporters relate to specific objectives of the coalition's mandate, which are not always seen as concomitant: on the one hand, political demands (opposing UMNO-BN rule), which are identified as one of the main concerns by a part of the movement and its supporters; and, on the other, economic demands (*the uplift of all Indians*), which are emphasized by other sections. Fluctuations in political and socio-economic interests create further divisions among the community and the coalition itself. These fluctuations end up marking a line based on economic factors between those supporters interested in the rights of the 'Indian poor', on the one hand, and 'middle and upper class' supporters, on the other. This separation is well illustrated by an excerpt from a recent HINDRAF letter on the website:

[...] what has become evident over the days and weeks since the signing of the MOU is that a significant portion of the Indian middle and upper classes have as poor an understanding of the problems of the Indian poor as the rest of Malaysia does.

4.10 Another HINDRAF characteristic relates to the fifth cluster of demands, namely the internationalization of its political agenda. HINDRAF extended its appeals from local authorities to foreign governments (India and a few Western countries) and started campaigning to bring Malaysian law in line with international human rights standards. In November 2007, after the protests against temple demolitions, the coalition's leaders filed a four trillion dollar lawsuit against the British government on the grounds that Britain had a responsibility towards its formal colonial subjects (Noor 2008a). In addition, on 15 November 2007, HINDRAF sent a letter of appeal to Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, calling on the British government to use its influence in order to convince the United Nations to intervene in favor of the Malaysian Indians. On 25 November, the coalition organized its biggest demonstration at the heart of Kuala Lumpur's Ampang district in order to submit a petition to the British High Commission. On the occasion of some leaders' detention under the ISA, Waytha Moorthy left the country to promote the cause to other target political interlocutors on a global scale. Part of the 5-year Blueprint clearly refers to *raising the standards of human rights practices* as a specific demand, including

to bring the standard of Malaysian law to be consistent with international human rights law and international humanitarian law in the areas of protection of civil and political rights, elimination of all forms of racial and discrimination, protection of and provision of assistance to internally displaced communities.

In addition, the proposal made on April 2008 by Waytha Moorthy to the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights to appoint a *Special Rapporteur on human rights and fundamental freedoms affecting the ethnic Malaysian Indian community* should also be understood in this context.

4.11 In the attempts to make its mandate international, the movement demonstrated an awareness of the relevance of the Indian diaspora worldwide, in particular all over North America and Europe. Its appeals, including talks, meetings and rallies organized overseas, clearly aim to attract the attention of new and mostly influential members of the Indian diaspora around the world. As a matter of fact, while HINDRAF did not succeed in mobilizing the support of foreign governments abroad, it managed to spread its message among the Indian global diaspora in other countries. In that sense, HINDRAF seems to act also as a transnational organization (Noor 2008a). In particular, in January 2012, HINDRAF launched a global cyber petition against racism in Malaysia, in order to target as many as possible people worldwide as signatories^[7]. In March of the same year, Waytha Moorthy received the Global Human Rights Defender of Indian Diaspora award during the Human Rights Conference of Indian Diaspora in Different Parts of the World, held in New Delhi and organized by India-based global human rights movement, Human Rights Defense India (HRDI)^[8].

4.12 Against this background, the definition of the 'Indian community' cannot be limited to single and unitary representations. On the contrary, by including Hindu, Tamil and other more specific cultural and socio-economic variations, this definition appears to be extremely complex and to involve very different political views and interests. However, to reinforce solidarity and a sense of unity among Malaysian Indians represented an important strategy in order for the coalition to handle internal diversity^[9] - as well as HINDRAF's internal divisions - and to consequently propose a wider and more inclusive definition of the 'community'

Some HINDRAF Supporters' Views on the Condition of Malaysian Indians

5.1 HINDRAF's discourses and supporters' comments focus on those factors that characterize the coalition's official demands and that were mentioned in the previous paragraph. In some web comments and

during my conversations with the then national coordinator and some supporters, I have identified recurrent framing processes, which at times overlap and at others contrast with each other. A special emphasis on religious (e.g., the demolition of Hindu temples carried out by the government, and the need for the country to become a 'secular state') and socio-economic rights seems to be present in most of these discourses. Other factors, in particular various political demands such as *contrasting political parties' economic privileges and power*, as discussed in the previous paragraph, are subject to major debates and different approaches, which vary according to the political proximity to the government of certain parts of the movement.

5.2 In different excerpts, experiences and ideas relating to the 'community' refer to religious (Hindu), cultural (Tamil language), historical and economic principles: all these principles are based on recurrent frames, particular historical events (*violations of the Federal Constitution*), categories ('privileged Malay', 'the Indian poor') and related demands (*the end of Hindu temples' demolition and Islamic extremism compensating Indians for the fifty years of violations of the Federal Constitution* and *Tamil Schools built and funded*). These factors therefore represent 'significant coordinating symbols' (Snow 2004), mostly evoked in the majority of the movement's strategies and in many supporters' views. In my analysis, I have observed a special emphasis on religious factors stressed by supporters met during HINDRAF gatherings, and by individuals participating in online debates. This is well illustrated by the following comment from my conversation with a supporter during a movement gathering in Ipoh:

The right to one's culture and religious faith in a pluralistic society as Malaysia is in the Malaysian constitution and this right has been violated for long time in particular through the demolition of Hindu temples, the acquisition of temple lands.

5.3 Similarly, a blog comment stresses religious factors by referring to the Islamization of the country by the government:

Not only Indians have been denied their economic opportunity, the extremists in the UMNO are pushing to make Malaysia a complete Islamic state.

5.4 During our conversations, some supporters especially emphasize the idea of the 'struggle for rights', rooted on non-ethnic factors (economic and political disadvantages, historical memory). The struggle for 'people rights' is represented as the result of the long suffering past of plantation workers, and is described on different occasions (e.g., meetings; blog conversations) as one of the most important identity factors that needs to be passed through generations. The mobilization of past memories and 'testimonial culture'^[10] (Ahmed & Stacey 2001) for a 'long-suffering minority' is an important framing strategy for the construction of politics of belonging (Wemyss 2008), and very common in many of the coalition's discourses and in many supporters' comments. On the one hand, the historical association of plantation labor and Tamil origins tends to contract group's boundaries. On the other, the idea of historical memory is significant in order to cross boundaries and to overcome internal diversity based on caste and other cultural factors. The image of the 'plantation' is a significant factor that makes viewing HINDRAF as merely a religious movement problematic, and that helps the coalition extend its political action towards the internal diversity within the 'community'. In particular, the economic and power-based gaps between underprivileged and privileged Indians represent an important demarcation line, which I have identified during my fieldwork and in a number of web comments. The emphasis on the 'plantation proletariat' is strategic in this regard. A boundary is marked between the 'Indian poor' and a 'small group of Indians' who think about money and power, in other words

those Indian PMEBS (Professionals, Managers, Executive, Businessmen) i.e. fat rich lawyers [...] those who drive continental cars, live in big bungalow houses.

5.5 A participant in a blog conversation similarly divides the 'Indian community' into different groups, namely between an 'emotional Indian' who *lives in fear*, 'courageous Indians' (including HINDRAF) who cannot fight properly as they are not supported by the government, and finally those 'rich Indians' who do not care:

The profile of the Indians is as follows: 1. Nearly 80% of Indians (Hindu, Christian) live in fear, fear of losing their jobs, business, house etc. [...] 2. 10% of them have the courage to fight but since they don't have the support they cannot contribute - these are people like our HINDRAF HEROES [...] 3. 10% don't care, these are of course, rich suckers.

5.6 Emotions relating to Indians' social and economic conditions (i.e., fear) play a strategic role here in crossing religious boundaries. Hindu and Christian Indians are both associated with the same inclusive category of those 'Indians who live in fear of losing their jobs, business, house, etc.'. Another recent comment on HINDRAF's website concerns the signing of the MoU with BN, and marks a class-based line between those who 'belong to the upper class' and 'poor Indians':

[...] whoever the winner of the PRU 13^[11] will not make a change to your life as you are an arm chair critic and belong to the upper class whereas to the poor Indian, it will surely affect them. Hindraf Blueprint will solve the problems of the poor Indian. If there is an opportunity to give a permanent solution to Indians' problems, it doesn't matter who signs the document and with whom Hindraf works. Hindraf is only interested in giving a quality and dignified life to the poor. I honestly have the welfare of the poor Indians at heart [...].□

5.7 Boundaries within the 'community' are designated as between the Indians 'who struggle' and those 'who prefer to stay back':

[...] the attitude of our own people. Some wanted to live a present comfort life and refuse to think of future. These people are not only blocking Indians progress but also helping the corrupted government which refuse to accept the truth, to strength their accusations in Hindraf issue. These groups of people [...] are engaged with government, banks and hi-tech companies. These groups see the comforts and prefer to stay back. Why they refuse to see their future? Who is there to give them hope and open their awareness? [...] These groups of people should get their awareness and start joining hands with the struggle.

5.8 These boundaries seem to be based not only on different economic conditions and interests, but also on internal attitudinal differences and generational differences, in particular on different mentalities, emotional involvement and approaches to the 'struggle for rights'. In a blog comment, the different 'mentality' between 'new generations' and 'old people' is pointed out:

The old people's mentality is another phenomenon that hinders our struggle. These people are already felt the hardship living in India. They always compare that life with our country. Due to that, they have set their mind to lose their rights for this country as long as they live a better life than other place. Here they have neglected the coming generations future. [...] How to make these old people to understand the current struggle of Indians for our children's future?

5.9 A recent statement on HINDRAF's website written by the national advisor N. Ganesan states:

Hindraf calls out to all Indian Malaysian to set aside the differences that emerged during these elections and concentrate efforts on positively moving the agenda of the uplift of the Indian community forward, no matter where we all stand, politically. Hindraf has always stood for the cause of the uplift of the Indian community and will continue to do so.

5.10 Similarly, another supporter in Ipoh comments:

[...] In the past, I felt so sad to see my community fighting between each other [...] but today, we smile to each other,□ we help each other, we want a better future, we want our present and future generations to succeed despite who you are, as long as you are Indian you are welcomed.

Internal boundaries are hence re-contracted and different attitudes and political views are apparently absorbed in order to call on all 'Indian Malaysian' to unite.

5.11 HINDRAF's willingness to create unity among its supporters led first to a process of boundary-shifting□ from religion-based (Hindu) to culture and language-based (Tamil) identification, a sort of 'Tamilization' so to□ speak, already undertaken by some social movements during the 1950s and the 1960s (Arasaratnam 1993). In the case of HINDRAF, however, there is more at stake in regard to the representation of the 'community', for religious and cultural factors - i.e., the demolition of Hindu temples or the decrease in the number of Tamil school - have become the last straw in a complex context of power-based relations, and political and class conflicts. As□ mentioned above, principles relating to economic and political privileges, as well as power-based and class divisions, are often highlighted by leaders and supporters, especially when different positions concerning political choices (e.g., approaches and views regarding possible negotiation with the government) emerge.

5.12 Similarly to former Malaysian Indian movements, keywords such as 'plantation laborer' and 'Indian poor' overlap with terms like 'Tamil' and 'Hindu', both in the movement's official vernacular and supporters' views.□ However, economic problems and social marginalization are also framed to cut across ethnic-based differences and overlap with other 'minority identities' in Malaysia. A 2013 letter by Dr. Paraman Subramaniam^[12], who belongs to the HINDRAF think-tank and was involved in the blueprint negotiations, describes the former plantation workers in these terms:

The internal displacement of estate workers occurred over a period of several decades and constitutes mainly Indians due to their historical background. These displaced estate workers eventually have force fitted into the urban□ community. They now constitute a significant section of the new urban poor and underclass and have become□ indistinguishable and unquestionable in the overall population segment of the Indian poor. Many however fail to

realize that the HINDRAF blueprint is also open for all other races provided they can show valid proof of being a DEW or a descendant of one. [. . .] If it needs be reminded, the stateless Indians in question transcend all religions.

- 5.13** An interesting example of boundary expansion in the coalition's discourses is represented by the opposition between a people's 'democratic front' and the ruling government, as illustrated in the use of framing images such as *individuals from all walks of life who are opposed to the UMNO-BN rule*. In October 2012, a letter^[13] of Johore political entities and NGOs^[14] to the Johore people refers to a wider community and political front crossing ethnic boundaries and cultural differences:

The people of various ethnic groups must unite, regardless of class, political party or religion, and be prepared to consign UMNO and BN to the dustbin of history, so that the popular aspirations for any democratic reform will become a reality.

- 5.14** One of the three pressing demands evoked in the letter is to *eliminate racial oppression and work towards equality for all ethnic groups*, and in particular, to *respect and protect religious beliefs and customs of ethnic minorities*. A broader 'community' and 'front' constituted by different ethnic groups needs to struggle for cultural and religious rights, for the respect and safeguard of beliefs and customs, as a prerequisite to reach 'harmony', 'enhance security' and 'strengthen unity'. The letter continues:

[...] the religious beliefs and customs of ethnic minorities should be respected and safeguarded, only then can racial harmony and unity be achieved. The country will then be able to enjoy stable development.

- 5.15** Institutional common discourses such as 'harmony' and 'security' seem to be used strategically with the aim of strengthening unity among different 'ethnic groups'. 'Security' and 'stable development', in particular, represent an ideological framework that, while making use of the government's vernacular on 'national harmony', attempts to draw a contrast with the government's political privileges. According to the movement, a common effort in opposition to the ruling government can help protect cultural, social, political and economic rights and, at the same time, can contribute to the achievement of 'stable development'. In this regard, HINDRAF elects itself as promoter and representative of a wider target people, the so-called 'poor, weak and voiceless'^[15], or, as stated in the 18 demands, 'all homeless Malaysians'. These framing discourses evoking 'religious rights', 'ethnic minorities', 'poverty' and the like, combine a variety of cultural and ethnic principles with political and economic factors.

- 5.16** While contracting and expanding boundaries within the 'community' by making use of 'ethnic groups' categories, a potential challenge for HINDRAF might be to cross and question these very boundaries, on the basis of a more inclusive and secular idea of 'rights'. This is well illustrated in the following excerpt from the blog:

one of my sincere request to HINDRAF members is that make the organization global & not restrict to Malaysia alone. Also extend it to other than Tamil speaking people but to all Hindus irrespective of language, country & state. [...] The issues at hand are more about getting equal rights. It doesn't matter whether you're a Hindu, Muslim, Christian, etc. etc., or even Indian, Chinese or Malay. Bottom line: We want equal rights regardless of color, race, and religion.

- 5.17** The mobilization of 'people' in HINDRAF's slogans, as well as the constitution of a 'democratic front', become important and strategic: while being a communitarian organization that seeks to mobilize Malaysian Indians on the basis of an exclusive identity, the movement may offer different meanings for the 'community' that cross groups' boundaries and that, by implication, can challenge a segmented idea of 'ethnic and religious groups' in Malaysia. Crossing and shifting groups' boundaries on the basis of non-ethnic and secular standards can also represent an important strategy in countering any accusations of sectarian extremism, and hence avoid running the risk of putting the coalition's political credibility in jeopardy.

'Indian', 'People' or 'Human' Rights?

- 6.1** This paper has thus discussed the principles and strategies of boundary-making as these are expressed in HINDRAF's discourses and its supporters' comments. In particular, it has examined how boundaries of the 'Indian community' are both expanded and contracted in these discourses on the basis of varied cultural, political, social and economic factors, including religion, language, political and economic privileges, history, generational attitudes, and universal values. This analysis demonstrates that 'ethnicity' is a dynamic and ambivalent process. It can be based on complex, ambiguous, and shifting repertoires, which people use, emphasize or downplay under certain circumstances, and through which they can position themselves vis-à-vis others (Jenkins 2008: 15). The modification of boundaries seems to represent an interesting and strategic aspect of the HINDRAF's political debate and its supporters' conceptualizations. As already mentioned, the coalition has introduced a marker line between different groups of Indians, and while consolidating the image of the 'Indian

minority' on the basis of an exclusive ethnic and cultural identity, it has adopted a broader discourse on 'rights' that might expand ethnic, class, regional, and national boundaries, and cut across a variety of categories. In general, three main strategies of boundary-making seem to be recurrent among HINDRAF and its supporters: a strategy of 'contraction' of boundaries based on the emphasis on ethnic and cultural specificity ('Indian'); a strategy of 'expansion', leading to a wider and more inclusive category ('people'); and finally, a 'universalist' strategy, informed by a 'human rights' and equality-based discourse ('human'). These strategies are not clear-cut, separate and mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they can overlap and are simultaneously based on a variety of factors that cut across ethnic and non-ethnic (e.g., economic, political, social, attitudinal) lines of identification. In this regard, some supporters have suggested enlarging the target population of the movement's political action, redefining peoples' 'rights' (religious, 'ethnic', 'human') and renaming the coalition accordingly, namely *Hindraf* (Indian Rights Action Force), *Makkal Sakthi*^[16] (People Power), or *HUndraf*^[17] (Human Rights Action Force).

- 6.2** The paradox of HINDRAF's politics seems to lie, as Devadas argues (2009), in the ambivalence between the shift towards non-ethnic and more inclusive factors, on the one hand, and the return to cultural and ethnic specificity to strengthen solidarity, on the other. Nevertheless, this paradox can also represent a challenge for the coalition. As already mentioned, renouncing an ethnic and religion-based terminology, as well as adopting a more inclusive and secular nuance, can represent worthwhile strategies within the context of Malaysian inter-ethnic relations within which HINDRAF operates, and in view of the Islamization process advocated by the government. This is especially true considering the association often made by the Malaysian government, in the name of its 'war against terror', between HINDRAF and other international Hindu and Tamil extremist groups. However, it seems legitimate to wonder how, and to what extent, 'extending HINDRAF' can be effectively achieved in a coherent manner, or whether, on the contrary, the framing of an 'Indian ethnic community' could more easily help generate a sense of solidarity and mobilize collective action. On the one hand, proposals such as the extension of HINDRAF's mandate, while increasing among supporters, seem to be in contrast with other ideological frames, in which economic gaps between Muslim/Northern Indians and Hindu/South Indians, for instance, lead to associating the identification of the 'Indian poor' with Hindu and Tamil identities. On the other hand, an ethnicity-based language and ideas such as 'Indian poor' and 'ethnic minorities' appear to be powerful means of interacting within the institutional and ideological context of Malay/non-Malay polarization.
- 6.3** In the study of HINDRAF's politics, there are other important questions to be asked about when and why 'ethnicity' or other cultural identity factors become particularly salient, and under which circumstances, as well as 'how the mobilization of ethnic groups in collective action is affected by leaders who pursue a political enterprise, and is not a direct expression of the group's cultural ideology, or the popular will' (Barth 12: 1994). These questions go beyond the scope of the present article, yet pave the way for a broader research agenda. Future research should also compare HINDRAF's ethnic identification processes with other social movements struggling for immigrants' rights in other countries, in order to evaluate whether and how strategies of boundary-making are similarly or differently used to mobilize people in different contexts, and how these strategies may differently pertain to processes of identity construction from a comparative perspective.

Appendix 1

<http://makkalsakti.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.hindraf.co/>

<http://www.makkal.org/>

<http://www.just-international.org>

http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/census2010/Taburan_Penduduk_dan_Ciri-ciri_Asas_Demografi.pdf

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/hindraf.support/?fref=ts>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Hindraf/370560933053047?fref=ts>

<https://twitter.com/HINDRAF1>

Notes

- 1 I mostly use the term 'Malaysian Indians', or 'Indians in Malaysia', to refer to the population of Indian origins living in Malaysia, including Tamils, North Indians, Malayalis, Telegus, Ceylonese Tamils, and Pakistanis. In the course of the article, I also refer to terms like 'Indian poor/plantation laborer', 'Hindu' and 'Tamil', when discussing HINDRAF and its supporters' conceptualizations of the socio-economic, religious, and cultural condition of Malaysian Indians.
- 2 The research was conducted during my Doctorate at the Department of Social Anthropology of the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), when I participated in an inter-university program on multiculturalism in Malaysia, organized and funded by the Conférence Universitaire de Suisse Occidentale (CUSO).
- 3 http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/census2010/Taburan_Penduduk_dan_Ciri-ciri_Asas_Demografi.pdf
- 4 The ISA is a preventive detention law allowing for the arrest of individuals without trial.
- 5 The *Pakatan Rakyat* (People's Pact or People's Alliance) is a political coalition formed by the *People's Justice Party* (PKR), the *Democratic Action Party* (DAP), and *Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party* (PAS) on April 2008, after the 12th Malaysian general election.
- 6 In the quotations, spelling, grammatical, syntactic, and lexical mistakes were not eliminated.
- 7 <http://www.malaysia-today.net/hindraf-launches-global-e-petition-against-racism/>.
- 8 <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2012/03/10/waytha-gets-human-rights-award/>.
- 9 From my conversation with Prof. Kartighesu, writer and former Professor at the *University Sains Malaysia*.
- 10 Ahmed and Stacey (2001: 2) define 'testimonial cultures' as those cultural practices that use 'testimony' about past injustice, trauma, pain and grief as a way of speaking and acting in the world, and that help understand the formation of communities and collectives.
- 11 General Elections 2013.
- 12 <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2013/03/03/blueprint-transcends-racial-religious-boundaries/>.
- 13 The letter was entitled 'Unite! People of Johore. Realize 3 pressing demands. Smash UMNO Hegemony. Form a Democratic United Front'.
- 14 Including the three parties in Pakatan Rakyat: i.e., *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* PKR, *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* PAS, *Democratic Action Party* DAP, as well as all parties, including *Parti Rakyat Malaysia* PRM, *Parti Socialis Malaysia* PSM, *Human Rights Party* HRP, etc., NGOs and individuals *from all walks of life who are opposed to the UMNO-BN rule*.
- 15 Another term often used in HINDRAF's discourses.
- 16 Currently used by HINDRAF's supporters formally as a slogan and informally as a second name for the movement.
- 17 A locution proposed by a supporter.

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