

How similar were the achievements and limitations of nationalism in southeast asi...

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The period before 1941 can also be referred to as the pre-war period before the Japanese Occupation. The Southeast Asian nationalist movements then had similar achievements and limitations. Their achievements were scarce as the majority of the population was politically apathetic. To add to this, the nationalist groups often lacked mass support and military strength. The greatest achievement of these nationalist movements, though, would be that they managed to unify a diverse group of people who had little in common by providing them with a common cause – to overthrow the colonial government.

The main achievement of pre-war nationalist movements was that they were able to bond the people of the country together using the concept of territorial nationalism. These nationalist movements started off with cultural aims so as to appeal to the masses. However, the difference between these movements lie in whether or not the nationalist leaders could go beyond these aims to band together the people of the country.

In the case of Vietnam and Indonesia, the nationalist leaders managed to make use of these aims to develop a territorial identity whereas in Malaya, the nationalist groups were unable to put aside their racial differences and hence bonded only within their communities to establish ethnic nationalism. This can be seen from how in Indonesia, nationalism was initially focused on Java but later spread to include the rest of Indonesia. One major achievement of Indonesian nationalism is that of the Association of Political Organisations of the Indonesian People (PPPKI) established in the late 1920s.

It created a set of common national idioms such as the red and white national flag and the national anthem 'Indonesia Raya'. It also came up with the idea of Indonesia comprising of one people, one language, one homeland, which is indicative of the Indonesians' strong cry for independence[1] and even tried to cut across the party lines in their attempt to achieve it. Similarly, in Vietnam, there was an evident shift from cultural nationalism before 1920 to more territorial nationalism (not from religious to secular.

Look back to your main point!) after 1920. Previously, before 1920, Nationalism was confined very much to the Tonkin region, with the Dong Kinh Free School being set up in 1908 to promote cultural nationalism. Later, secular nationalist groups such as the Vietnam Quoc Dang Dang (VNQDD) and the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) emerged with a more political plan aimed at a more inclusive national identity, as seen from the choice of words in their names – “ Vietnam” and “ Indochina”.

Following that, in 1941, the Vietminh was established as a more united nationalist organisation in reaction to Japanese involvement in Vietnam, and tried to mobilise nationalists beyond party lines, appealing to both communists and non-communists alike. This dominant organisation stood strong and later successfully led Vietnam to achieve independence. In Malaya however, nationalism ironically made the racial lines of Malaya more evident.

The emergence of the Singapore Malay Union, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) which comprised of mainly Chinese and the Central Indian Association

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of Malaya (CIAM)[2] further aggravated the pluralistic society in Malaya, thus making a united strive for independence impossible. With the exception of Malaya, the pre-war nationalist movements generally managed to bond the people of the country together. This would facilitate future movements to overthrow the colonial powers.

A major limitation of the nationalist movements before 1941 was that they lacked mass support even though some groups managed to achieve a popular appeal. For example, in Vietnam, the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) lacked mass support but had some appeal due to its adaptationist leaders. It associated its aims with superstitions and anachronistic customs and disguised its communist stand to appeal to the Vietnamese, as communism lacked a direct appeal then. 3] This action of using folk religion to disguise its communist front was also adopted by the PKI in Indonesia, which rallied the people's support by calling for a holy war or a jihad, against the Dutch.

It portrayed capitalism as promoting greed and distance from God, and imperialism as threatening the world of Islam so as to stir up feelings of anger amongst the Indonesians. [4] However, there are nationalist groups in Southeast Asia which severely lacked mass support such as the Young Malay Union (KMM) in Malaya, whose idea of a merger with Indonesia did not appeal to the Malaysians. 5] Furthermore, in Indonesia, although the Indies Party tried to appeal to all races and beyond Java, it had limited appeal as it was predominantly an Eurasian organisation with only 7700 members. As such, whether or not nationalist groups were able to achieve a mass appeal

depended on how well they modified their methods to appeal to the peasants. Hence, the nationalist movements before 1941 generally lacked the mass support they needed to succeed.

Even if mass support was achieved, this does not guarantee success of the nationalist movements as the example of Sarekat Islam clearly demonstrates. Despite its mass following of 2 million, its lack of a united front seriously undermined its potential, and it was eventually torn apart by internal divisions between the Marxists and Islamic leaders. Another limitation of pre-war nationalism was that they often lacked military strength to launch a successful large-scale revolt and were hence vulnerable to the suppression of the colonial powers.

This can be seen in the Vietnam Quoc Dang Dang (VNQDD)'s failure to overthrow the French colonial government during the Yen Bay Uprising of 1930. Their home-made weapons were inferior to the advanced ones of the French hence the uprising was quickly put down by the French. As a result of this episode, its founder, Thai Hoc and other leading figures were captured. This deprived the organisation of good leadership it needed to launch another large-scale nationalist movement thereby preventing them from regaining their political strength again. 6] Similarly, in Indonesia, although the Perserikatan Komunis di India (PKI) managed to gather support to form an army called the Red Guards of 3000, their military power was still uncomparable to that of the Dutch. They attempted to stage a revolution in 1926 but failed. After the revolt, the Dutch arrested 13, 000 of them, imprisoned 4, 500, interned 1, 308 and exiled 823 to Digul, West New

Guinea. This severely crippled the membership of the PKI and they were finally outlawed by the Dutch in 1927. [7] Hence, pre-war nationalism failed partially because of the militarily weak nationalist movements.

In conclusion, the achievements and limitations of the SEA nationalist movements before 1941 were largely similar, with the lack of mass support and military strength being the key weaknesses. As nationalism during that period was quite under-developed, the main achievement of these movements in Vietnam and Indonesia would be that it managed to bond the people together towards a more inclusive territorial-based national identity that would serve as a stepping stone for further nationalist movements.