



## Ear to Asia podcast

**Title:** Federalism to the rescue in ethnically divided Asian societies

**Description:** Colonialism has often left diverse and mutually hostile ethnic groups trapped inside a common national border. In Asia, countries like Myanmar and Sri Lanka have played out their unresolved ethnic divisions in prolonged civil unrest and bloodshed. How can ethnically splintered nations find a way forward? Can federalism be utilised to ease conflict and promote stability? Asia governance experts Professor Baogang He and Dr Michael Breen dive into the details with presenter Ali Moore. An Asia Institute podcast.

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Voiceover:

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Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Michael Breen:

One of the problems in Myanmar, for example, has been that different ethnic armed groups and ethnic political parties have not often worked together. And so when you have this new sort of oppressive authority coming in, it can help build new alliances and build the strength of existing alliances, and this can help instigate federal democracy as the next phase.

Baogang He:

We see this retreat across Asia and this coincides with this global retreat of democracy. But I personally believe that federalism and democracy are the modern solution.

Ali Moore:

In this episode, federalism to the rescue in ethnically divided Asian societies.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

The legacy of colonialism in Asia as elsewhere has too often meant the yoking of diverse and even mutually hostile ethnic groups inside a common national border. Countries like Myanmar and Sri Lanka to name but two have been left to play out their unresolved ethnic divisions with prolonged civil unrest and bloodshed. Political and economic spheres in these young nation states tend to be dominated by one group over another, or by two groups over a third, only fueling resentments anew and perpetuating the cycle of volatility.

And among the victims are prospects for inclusive and stable democratic institutions. So how can ethnically divided democracies find a way forward? How do they balance autonomy with stability and unity? Federalism is one answer, with new models increasingly getting the attention of both



scholars and policymakers. Federal democracy has long had a home in Asia in countries like India and Malaysia, but how can it be fashioned to ease conflict and promote stability in nations where ethnic animosities remain raw and where federalism is the stated aim, what's the reality on the ground? Joining me to discuss these issues are Professor Baogang He, Alfred Deakin Professor and Personal Chair in International Relations at Deakin University, and Dr. Michael Breen, public policy researcher at the University of Melbourne, School of Social and Political Science. Welcome Baogang and welcome Michael.

Michael Breen:

Thanks for having us.

Baogang He:

Thank you, Ali.

Ali Moore:

When we talk about federalism in Asia, what's the model we're talking about, Michael? What are the key ingredients that must exist for a nation to be said to be governed by a federal system?

Michael Breen:

Yeah. So federalism is not a term that people necessarily agree on what it means, but there's a few key features that we can say are essential to federalism. Federalism is basically about the sharing and division of state power between a central government and regional or provincial governments. So it can be characterised as combining shared and self-rule. Another way of characterising it is unity in diversity, and so this is particularly important where you have ethnically diverse countries like we do in many parts of Asia. So one of the most important parts of federalism is that the power is actually allocated by the constitution, and so there needs to be rule of law. The constitution needs to be Supreme, and it needs to be some kind of independent umpire or judiciary that arbitrates and adjudicates between the centre and the provinces or regions. There's also usually two houses of parliament and the upper house is intended to be representative of the States and regions, although in practice, it doesn't always work that way.

When you look at ethnically diverse countries too, we find that the way that you design the regions or provinces known as States in Australia is particularly important. Because one of the reasons that you're looking for federalism here is to provide some kind of cultural autonomy to the different ethnic groups. And so when you draw these boundaries to incorporate or accommodate particular groups, we have this kind of ethnic or multinational federalism, but this is in itself the cause of much controversy and disagreement in some of the countries that we'll be talking about today.

Ali Moore:

And so what happens Baogang, when your ethnic groups are widely dispersed for federalism to work, does it require geographic concentration of different ethnicities?

Baogang He:

If you have a concentration of one ethnic group, sometimes at sub state level and this constitutes small than 60 or 70%, always difficult to work out a federal solution. Sometimes these diverse and disparate ethnic group actually take advantage for federalism. Nepal is the best example you have for diverse ethnic groups spread everywhere, and then it is possible to build up federalism.



Ali Moore:

I suppose, it's possible because of strong multi-ethnic political parties, how core are they to the success of federalism Baogang?

Baogang He:

To successfully establish federalism, you need political will. So political party is a key player and the political parties decisions that accept, promote federalism is a fundamentally important issue. So when that political party reflect ethnic group, sometimes they demand to be fully independent. So sometimes they don't want to federalism. Sometimes under certain conditions they demand federalism because federalism offers a better deal.

Ali Moore:

Michael, to what extent is ethnic tension an essential ingredient and does there have to be a problem for federalism to be the answer?

Michael Breen:

I think that the modern day federal systems are essentially in response to this problem that results or comes out of some of these ethnic tensions. So previously you had this idea of coming-together federalism, which think we know very well in Australia-

Ali Moore:

Canada would be another example, wouldn't it?

Michael Breen:

Exactly. Yep. So you have these different colonies coming together and forming a new country, sharing some of their powers with the centre, whereas these days they're almost all what we call holding together federalism. And they're essentially in response to a risk of secession, so the country's elites and major political actors want to hold that country together. And as Baogang said, they can be these pressures from ethnic parties and ethnic armed groups seeking to establish their own state. And federalism is a response to that, and we see it in almost all modern day peace settlements, some kinds of federalism or some kind of ethnic autonomy. So in a sense, federalism is a risk management strategy for secession and to try and find some sort of middle ground between providing ethical autonomy, but without providing so much that this new unit becomes its own self and seeks to split off from the main country.

Baogang He:

If we talking about federal solution to ethnic problems, first, we need to look at this is a pre-modern conditions, pre-modern society. Virtually all modern societies – in United Kingdom, in France and the China or even Myanmar, or Thailand, they will implement this kind of a centralised policy to just convert those small ethnic group into a bigger group, that seems to be a kind of universal phenomena in the pre-modern condition. So as Michael rightly said that in the modern condition, we gave up this kind of older way and in modern days more and more countries use federal solutions. So best example in the Asia context is 2015, Nepal adopt a new constitution, build up a federal system, but be aware that there's also another solution is non-federal minority rights



protects your mechanism. So, that is also modern solution to offer rights protection to all the ethnic group-

Ali Moore:

Where would be an example of that?

Baogang He:

If we think about Australia and United States. So indigenous people definitely in Australia, some are demanding this kind of federalization of indigenous issue. That means that indigenous people can have its own state, has more legislated power, but this unlikely will work out in Australian context. Also in the America, American Indians in the historical, demand their independent state. It wasn't worked out. As well as the United States, black population before civil wars, the demand establish independent state, even British was the advocate to promote this idea. All those ideas didn't work out, but still help to provide a solution to ethnic problems – that is provides a rights mechanism. What do we see in both United States and Australia, we see that state slowly promote, develop and protect set of rights that protect indigenous groups.

Ali Moore:

Baogang just mentioned there Nepal, in terms of being one of the modern conditions regarding federalism. Michael, you argue there are actually three generations of federalism in Asia, Nepal would be in the third, but can you take us through those different generations as you see them?

Michael Breen:

Yeah, so essentially, federalism started to become an approach in Asia following second world war and decolonization process. And we saw it introduced into Pakistan, India, and Malaysia, and also Myanmar and Indonesia also very briefly had federalism, at least in them. Although it was never really implemented at all in Indonesia and certainly not properly in the case of Myanmar. And so we have these three longstanding federations in Pakistan, India, and Malaysia. And this is like the first generation of federalism, and then through the '60s, the '70s and '80s, we saw the introduction of federal features onto unitary States. And so this is the case in China, Indonesia, and the Philippines. So they remained fundamentally unitary, but they provided some kind of constitutional decentralisation, which is one of those fundamental features that I talked about.

Although, when you look at, say a case like China, when you don't have a Supreme constitution, you can't really say that it has federalism, but it does have these important federal features, which were then, for a time at least, enhanced through special autonomy for Hong Kong. Most recently we've had this emerging third generation, and if you asked me a few years ago about it, I would have been very, very positive. And we had processes underway in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Philippines, all to introduce a new federal state. Today, we've seen that Nepal is the only one that's successfully established federalism as part of its democratic transformation. We've seen Sri Lanka take a step backwards towards some kind of mono-ethnic nationalism and abandon at least for now it's federal agenda.

The Philippines president's quietly dropped federalism from the agenda. Although this is partly because they've strengthened the autonomy arrangements in Mindanao, which has taken some of that pressure towards federalism off. And in Myanmar we're witnessing now the tragic reassertion of military power. So there has been a bit of a reversion, but the federal idea is by no means dead in these countries, it is resting I would say.



Ali Moore:

We'll certainly return to that, Michael, and the issue of a bigger picture. But if we can just go to some of those countries, very specifically, and Baogang if I ask you about Myanmar, do you think that given recent events, do you think that it spells the death knell of federalism in Myanmar or do you think as Michael says, it's resting?

Baogang He:

We don't know what's going on. We see this largest protest going on right now, and even ethnic group joins Burma group together, and protest against military regime. We don't know how these events unfolding in this year. So there is still a possibility that current events might provide a critical opportunity to moving federalism ahead and fast. But also it's possible if the military regime maintain its power it will not only destroy democracy definitely we'll also destroy federalism for a certain period, at least for a few years. But I don't think Myanmar can resist the federalist idea, this idea will survive.

Ali Moore:

You say Myanmar can't resist it, Baogang, but what progress has been made in reality in Myanmar over all these years, even with a stated aim of federalism that has been there for so long. How strong are the Federalist institutions and the federal roots in Myanmar?

Baogang He:

So the Federalist idea of practise is deeply rooted in the history of Myanmar. They had several setback, but the idea always survives, always very strong. So the big promoter of federalism come from minority group. So Myanmar is a diverse country with so many different ethnic group. The driving force always find this diverse ethnic group. So in order to maintain state unity, so whoever to come to power in Myanmar, they have to adopt certain elements of federalism, that they must protect the institutionalised minority rights. So, that's probably they have to do in the modern conditions.

Michael Breen:

I would agree. And I would think that it's very hard to see any alternative in the long term in Myanmar to some kind of federalism. There are areas in the country at the moment that the military and the government aren't able to govern at all. They have to ask for permission to enter these quasi mini states. So in a sense, you already have this federal practise in a way it's about legitimising that and incorporating it into the state. And the absence of federalism over all these years has been the major factor that's been inhibiting democratisation and economic development, and the lack of kind of alliance between some of the democratic forces and the National League for Democracy and those ethnic groups who are demanding federalism has again inhibited democratisation. But looking at the present situation, I just want to add that the military has actually reasserted its commitment federalism.

The problem of course, is that we can't really believe what they say or put too much faith in it. So they are trying to use federalism as a way of getting some of those ethnic groups on board. So they are trying to create a split, I suppose, between the democratic forces so that it splits between the Burmese majority and NLD supporters and some of the ethnic groups. But at the moment, most of the ethnic groups and ethnic political parties are continuing to protest and side with the National



League for Democracy and the reinstatement of federalism. But I think one way or the other, we're going to see federalism instituted in Myanmar, whether it's sooner or later.

Ali Moore:

At the same time though, Michael, could you not argue that holding together ethnically divided States potentially becomes ultimately counter-productive particularly when you look at the history and I'm thinking of Myanmar now?

Michael Breen:

Yeah, absolutely. It can be counterproductive. And there are certain situations, I think where it's a better idea that countries do split up, and we can look at say Singapore, for example, and it's done quite well.

Ali Moore:

That was Singapore and Malaysia that were together under a federal arrangement in the '60s, but that lasted a nanosecond, didn't it?

Michael Breen:

That's right. Yeah. And then of course we have East Timor and I don't think we would find too many people arguing that East Timor should become part of Indonesia again. But unfortunately the history of secession around the world is usually associated with large scale violence and even genocide. And we do have these powers that be in Myanmar that are very, very resistant to this idea of secession. So I think that the most practical approach is a federal solution rather than trying to break up the country. And we also need to look at issues of capacity and whether these kinds of areas that could potentially break off would actually be able to govern themselves in the longer term. I think that's quite questionable.

Baogang He:

So one critical issue right now is the impact Chinese abide law the initiative is Asia in particular in Myanmar. So if we look at this Belt and Road Initiative project that involved billion dollars project, variety of project from north to central Myanmar to the south. So projects spread everywhere in Myanmar. In order to successfully implement, complete those project on Chinese side, that's kind of required a more centralised government. So this is kind of driving force confront economic side. So those economic side driving force where kind of pull Myanmar into another centralised government rather than this federal system.

Ali Moore:

Michael, what about Sri Lanka, we've looked at Myanmar in some depth, how different is the picture in Sri Lanka?

Michael Breen:

Sri Lanka has some important different conditions in relation to the makeup over the ethnic groups and I think is very significant in how it all plays out. So in Myanmar, you have upwards of 100 different ethnic groups. And in Sri Lanka, you pretty much can divide it into three major ethnic groups, the largest and dominant ethnic group, the Sinhala are around 75% of the population. So they can under the democratic system, pretty much monopolise power. And if it's in the interests of



the particular elites, they can enforce a unitary view of the state. So it was in response to the repeated rejection of demands for subcultural rights and language rights, and equal treatment in education and employment that the Tamils started to demand some kind of independence or federalism.

Initially those demands weren't there, but because they were excluded from political and economic spheres, then we started to see this uprising. It's very difficult to design a kind of political system that creates a better power balance because it is so one-sided towards the Sinhala majority. And so what you get is this kind of approach where the political parties focus in on appealing to the specific ethnic interests of that majority group, because they know they don't need the minority vote to win anymore. And you get this idea of what they call ethnic outbidding. And so where they gradually make more and more nationalistic type promises in order to capture that particular vote, because that's the vote that will get you in government.

And unfortunately there is more votes in that kind of strategy and strategies of tolerance and minority rights and federal rights tend to lose out when it comes to election day. And we've seen that in the most recent election where there was one party who was basically pushing for more tolerant and federal approach, and one party that was pushing for ethno-nationalist and Buddhist focused agendas, and they won comprehensively.

Ali Moore:

Michael, does that go to the heart of the design of the electoral system, would a different electoral system in Sri Lanka produce a different outcome?

Michael Breen:

So Sri Lanka actually has tried the two main electoral systems being first-past-post or plurality, and also proportional electoral systems. And it doesn't actually make too much difference in Sri Lanka because of where and how people live. So the time was mostly populated in the north. So they win their proportion of seats-

Ali Moore:

But it is too small to make an impact it.

Michael Breen:

... But it's too small to make an impact. That's exactly right. So they need to look at alternative options, like what we call consociationalism, where you get basically a mandated sort of coalition government or minority veto rights on certain things. But the theory is, and I agree with this approach that you also need to accompany those kinds of rights with some kind of autonomy, whether that's just cultural autonomy, that doesn't necessarily be linked to particular territories, or whether it's some kind of territorial autonomy. Those things need to go together. But it's very difficult to get federalism instituted in an existing democracy when you have those kinds of demographics, because it becomes an electoral issue. And the majority tend to prefer the status quo because it privileges their particular identity and culture and religion.

Michael Breen:

And then we've seen it come about in Asia in the past, it's actually been as part of a democratisation process where these small groups who might otherwise be outnumbered can have a greater say because of the power of arms, essentially, in a number of cases. Because Sri Lanka has been out of



these countries looking to become federal, it's been the one that's had a long standing democracy. So democracy in this case has actually been a barrier towards its federalization.

Ali Moore:

You're listening to Ear to Asia, from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institutes online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at [melbourneasiareview.edu.au](http://melbourneasiareview.edu.au). You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others plus you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again, you can find at [melbourneasiareview.edu.au](http://melbourneasiareview.edu.au). I'm Ali Moore, and I'm joined by International Relations expert, Professor Baogang He and public policy researcher, Dr. Michael Breen.

Ali Moore:

We're talking about how a Federalist approach to governance might work to ease tensions in countries with high levels of ethnic conflict. Baogang, we've spoken about Myanmar, we've spoken about Sri Lanka and earlier Michael made the point that President Duterte in the Philippines has essentially given up on his proposal of federalism. Why is the Philippines a country where federalism has not been embraced?

Baogang He:

So if we look at Duterte, when he came to power, one of the slogan, promise, was that he would turn the Philippine into the federal system, within first two years, that was his promise, but he failed to do so. Even a few years ago where you discuss some project with a Philippine colleague in Manila. So we try to use this deliberative democracy approach to discuss this Federalist issue in Philippines. But in end of the day, one of my collaborators who was the Dean of International Relations studies in one of the top university, he was out of favour by Duterte. So Duterte was no longer interested in federalism.

Ali Moore:

But why, what was it that changed? Was it not embraced by the people of the Philippines?

Baogang He:

So, one is his personality impact. Second is his impact of Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. So, under Duterte's presidency, China has been able to embark many BaR project across different provinces. In order to complete those projects successfully, you need a centralised coordination. So those economic driving force push towards a more centralised government, plus the Mindanao issues so far, they give us this autonomies and as their work on deal already Mindanao was the kind of driving issue, driving force for Philippine to establish a federalism. Apparently there was another kind of level of the issue, so it's a kind of internal politics going on. So when you transform unitary system into the Federalist system, that means that distant states, they will demand the equal rights, equal kind of monetary power as those autonomous states that inevitably you kind of redesign that whole centre and a state relationship. This is the issue that involve so many problem.





Ali Moore:

Michael, it's an interesting case in the Philippines, isn't it? Because Duterte himself of course, is from Mindanao, which is the area where the significant ethnic divisions remain.

Michael Breen:

He came in and he was quite determined to institute federalism, and he took a lot of active steps early in his tenure towards it. And all of those points that Baogang has made are very true, but I would also add that it just didn't turn out to be very popular with the people. And a lot of people thought that Duterte is so popular, we can put it forward and people will get behind it. But people are increasingly cynical about these kinds of governance reforms. And a lot of the selling points were actually removed from the original proposal. So when they first started talking about it, they were talking about changing from a presidential system to a parliamentary system, they were talking about abolishing the current provinces and removing the power from the existing governors. And now also talking about putting a ban on political dynasties.

And so throughout the drafting process, which was very elite driven and also involve the political parties, they basically removed all of those things from the final draught or the draught constitution that they consulted on. And so they went around and they did a roadshow in various towns and cities right across the country and found that their proposals to be very unpopular and survey results were more than 60% of people were opposing any kind of change of this nature. So people just saw, okay, so you're going to keep the provinces, it's going to be more expensive, more inefficient. You're going to keep the political dynasties. This is just a power grab to reinforce the existing political dynasties that we have. And we don't trust that this is going to be for genuine reasons anymore. So that process of drafting a constitution took out, in a sense, all the attractive parts and the people pretty well rejected the idea in the end.

Ali Moore:

Michael is that unique to the Philippines, if you look at how federalism is viewed by people in other countries, let's say in Myanmar or in Sri Lanka or Nepal, is that hostility towards federalism unique to the Philippines situation?

Michael Breen:

I don't think it's entirely unique, but there is a general concern that exists that federalism can be more expensive and it can just be another way of giving more people power, more access to resources, more opportunities for corruption and clientelism to come about. But I think one of the key differences is that those ethnic divisions in the Philippines besides with the Bangsamoro in Mindanao, far less than they are in many other countries in Asia. So in countries like Myanmar and Sri Lanka, people are looking for federalism as a way of getting ethnic autonomy and some kind of self-determination. But in the Philippines, people are more looking at, end this hyper-centralization in Manila that currently exists.

And so with the Bangsamoro in Mindanao autonomy arrangements, that ethnic based pressure is gone, and so now it becomes around issues of economic development, efficiency, and democratisation. Philippines is already a democracy, and there's just not enough argument for it in a sense.



Ali Moore:

Baogang, we mentioned earlier Nepal, and in fact in the context of it being a success, would you describe Nepal as the successful example of federalism? And indeed, I wonder how that sits with very recent events, including the attempt to dissolve parliament by the prime minister.

Baogang He:

So as Michael mentioned earlier is that, in the third stage of federalism in Asia, among those countries only Nepal was successful to build the federalism. All the other countries like the Philippines, Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka experienced setback retreat. Nepal's success was largely due to this constitutional settlement. They successfully developed this what we call a harboured federalism. So is the key states – seven states is not pure based on ethnic group. The state is based on a mix of viability, geographic consideration, plus certain components of ethnic elements. So they are combined, these ethnic federalism with territorial federalism, and mixed together delivery a kind of workable solution to Nepal's problems. So if we compare this [to] Myanmar, so Myanmar has historically advocated this pure ethnic federalism that all the state must be based on ethnicity even a few years ago, when Michael and me, we went to Myanmar the scholar often talking about this pure federal solution even makes the sixth region in Myanmar the Burma state.

So the rest of the seven ethnic states and the Burma state on the equal basis. So those kinds of ideas, those got pure essence federalism doesn't work in Asia. So Nepal's success was a very practical, political compromise, mix the ethnicity and viability, and geography consideration together deliver innovative institutional solution. So currently the Myanmar if they want to further continue federalism, one of the issues they must reconsider is whether they should abandon this pure ethnic federalism. So Michael and I, we did a survey. We found that even most people reject this kind of pure Federalist idea.

Ali Moore:

So, Michael is Nepal a good example, I guess, of the flexibility of federalism and how strong the federal institutions in that country, looking at the recent political issues that they face?

Michael Breen:

So federalism, yeah. One of its strengths is absolutely that it is adaptable to all kinds of different contexts. And so you can't just obviously import one model of federalism into another country. So Myanmar of course, needs to design its own sort of approach, and I fundamentally agree with the point Baogang has made, because when you are looking at federalism as being in response to a secession risk, you can actually increase that secession risk by having these pure ethnic States, because they can develop their own identity and their own sort of resources to then mount the secessionist movement in the future. So federalism in this sense is kind of a paradox where it can both increase and decrease this risk of secession depending on how it's designed. So the design features are fundamentally important. In terms of the strength of Nepal's federal system, it has been tested more or less recently through the attempt by the prime minister to dissolve the parliament, which was against the constitution.

And it has passed that test, thankfully. It has gone to the court and the court has upheld the rule of law and the appropriate process and parliament has been reconvened. And so this is a really important demonstration of the durability of Nepal's transition. And I think it's subject to a lot of criticisms because people have so much hope for how federalism will be able to transform their



country and transform its democracy and bring economic development. Now, these are very high expectations, and so it's been five or six years now since the constitution, and it's been three years since the elections. And so I think that given the time frame and the depth and breadth of changes, Nepal is doing quite well in its transition.

Another test that it recently faced was in relation to COVID, and what actually happened was that the new provinces and the new local governments, so they actually have a three tiered federal system. The local governments were the ones that were most prominent and active and really stood up when it came to managing this kind of crisis situation. So there's a long way to go in Nepal, but it's passed some really important tests. And I think the outlook is quite positive.

Ali Moore:

Michael, what do you say that there is, and especially Asian form of federalism? Can you say that or is that to be naive maybe in the way I'm describing it?

Michael Breen:

Yeah. And I think that we can see an Asian form of federalism emerging, but not fully fledged. And much of it still depends on the outcomes in these other third generation countries that we've talked about most particularly Myanmar and Sri Lanka, but what is happening in Asia in relation to federalism is different to elsewhere. Although there are similarities to Africa, but specifically we do see through emphasis on mixed or hybrid institutions as Baogang mentioned, particularly at the level of provincial design. So trying to mix up some of these ethnic groups a bit, but at the same time, providing them with a degree of autonomy and a greater role in governance at the local level. And this is an approach that's not very common elsewhere.

We also see mixed electoral systems and mixed political party systems. So again, we talked a little bit about the importance of having these larger multi-ethnic political parties that can represent all the different ethnic groups, but we also see ethnic parties still playing an important role in these systems. So the theories are basically that you need either multi-ethnic parties, or you need only ethnic parties that have these mandated set roles and set allocations or set representation. But by having these mixed systems, you can get minority ethnic groups having a say in those large parties, but also holding those larger parties to account through their regional and smaller ethnic parties that can also hold power in some of the states or provinces. And then we have mixed electoral systems, which are also really important because they mix the majoritarian elements with the proportional elements. And so they give enough proportionality in a sense so that more groups are represented and more groups are able to be at the table. And there aren't people who are permanently excluded from access to power, and so resulting to arms for example.

But we also have larger or close to majorities, and so you get more governance stability because it's easier to build and hold together coalition governments with these larger multi-ethnic parties that come about more when you have these mixed and majoritarian electrical systems. So the change in Nepal's political party system was one of the key reasons in my view, that it was able to reach this peace agreement and actually implement federalism because it made constitutional changes that required political parties, the large political parties to be multi-ethnic and have proportional elements in their candidature rather than just in the electoral outcomes. Previously, these larger parties they might have called themselves non-ethnic or neutral, but in actual fact, they were basically the ethnic parties of the dominant group. And so now they are much more mixed and now they are taking into account the interests of the smaller ethnic parties.



Ali Moore:

Could that be an answer for Sri Lanka?

Michael Breen:

Absolutely. I think this is the approach that Sri Lanka needs to go down. So its major parties are fundamentally ethnic parties, and I talked about that problem of ethnic outbidding, which is particularly prevalent in Sri Lanka. And at the moment Sri Lanka has major political parties, do have some minority representation, but they're pretty much token representatives and they're not supported by the majority of their constituents. And they don't have much influence in the party. But if those parties were forced to include minorities in important positions in those parties, those voices would be at the table. And I think we'd see some kind of change in how those political parties develop their policies and sell them to the public.

Ali Moore:

If we look at Malaysia, a country we've not touched on specifically, but they do have multi-ethnic parties. How successful has it been in Malaysia?

Michael Breen:

Yeah. So Malaysia is different to the model that I've talked about in the past. So Malaysia has a multiethnic coalition. It doesn't have multiethnic parties, so to speak, other than in the short-lived Pakistan higher upon coalition. So I'll come to that. The coalition that's been in power for the majority of Malaysia's independence period has been led by UMNO which is, I would say, a fundamentally Malay ethnic political party. And in the earlier days of Malaysia, it was required in sense to go into coalition with other political parties, and it has held that coalition together more or less over the time. But at the same time, the influence of those smaller ethnic parties has declined to the extent that you wouldn't say that they were very influential at all. And I think that this is one of the problems with multi-ethnic coalitions versus multi-ethnic political parties, because they all come to the table with their particular set positions and can be rather inflexible.

When you have a multi-ethnic political party, you get more internal deliberation, and as a result of that internal deliberation, you can get more moderate policies. So the main opposition parties were multi-ethnic parties, and they were able to gain power briefly, although that was largely in response to the corruption issue. Malaysia is a different situation and the multi-ethnic coalition has been able to hold it together and bring economic development. But you wouldn't say it has furthered democratisation or minority rights. And so I would say that the situation of minorities in Malaysia would be much improved if they were able to develop more multi-ethnic political parties, as opposed to this Malay dominated coalition that is currently in place.

Ali Moore:

We're almost out of time. But Baogang, let me ask you how you view the future of federalism, do you think that what we're seeing are speed bumps? You made the point earlier that Myanmar can't resist federalism do you believe that it is the future – it's just that we face developmental challenges along the way?

Baogang He:

Michael mentioned these three generations of federalism in Asia. So right now we see this kind of fourth generation, this Federalist retreat in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, even to some degree in Philippines,



even India's democracy has also suffered. We also see the biggest to retreat is Hong Kong, in the basic law, Hong Kong actually enjoy much more constitutional rights than any other province and the autonomous regions. We can't interpret Beijing's arrangement as a kind of federal system, but in the recent year we see that Beijing's has abandoned the previous practise and asserted centralised control. So some of the federal elements in Hong Kong arrangement is gone. We see this retreat across in Asia, and this coincides with this global retreat of democracy. But I personally strongly believe that federalism and democracy as a model solution, as the modern answer.

So those retreat should be regarded as short term. And in the future, the idea of federalism will come back again. Where obviously the idea of federalism, despite of retreat in the 1960, '70s, many countries, Asian country abandoned the federalism 60, 70, but at the end it appeared again in an 80, 90, again, revive towards the 2000. So I think eventually this federalism idea where they appear in Asia

Ali Moore:

Michael, do you agree? What do you think that the recent setback across a number of countries says about the future of federalism?

Michael Breen:

I agree, and I think they can be seen as setbacks and that the federal idea will re-emerge and it certainly hasn't disappeared. I'd said it's resting. It's probably more to the point hiding in some of these cases, but I think this kind of democratic decline can actually assist in the long run because it can help to bring people together. And one of the problems in Myanmar, for example, has been that the different ethnic armed groups and ethnic political parties have not often worked together. And so when you have this new sort of repressive authority coming in, it can help build new alliances and build the strength of existing alliances. And this can help instigate federalism as the next phase and in response to that democratic decay.

And so you can see that in Nepal, for example, when the King in the early 2000s intervened, it drove the political parties and the Maoist rebels together, and they were able to form an Alliance that was then powerful enough to overthrow the King and bring in federalism and democracy. So, perhaps this reversion that we're seeing in Myanmar is actually, is potentially even almost necessary step towards bringing together the other groups and building their strength in order to reinsert their vision of federal democracy.

Ali Moore:

I have absolutely no doubt, this is a topic that we will revisit over the coming years, because it's fascinating to see how these countries develop and indeed not just the flexibility of federation, but the intricacies of each country's own circumstances. And an enormous thank you to both of you for your insights and for joining Ear to Asia. Thank you, Baogang. And thank you, Michael.

Baogang He:

Thank you Ali.

Michael Breen:

Thank you Ali. It's been a pleasure.



Ali Moore:

Our guests have been Professor Baogang He, Alfred Deakin Professor and Personal Chair in International Relations at Deakin University and Dr. Michael Breen, Public Policy researcher at the University of Melbourne, School of Social and Political Sciences. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia, by following us on the Apple podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or SoundCloud. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show, and please help us by spreading the word on social media. This episode was recorded on the 22nd of March, 2021. Producers were Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons, copyright 2021, the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore, thanks for your company.