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# Consociational Approach to Ethnic Resolution in Malaysia and Lebanon

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## Abstract

This study aims to address the importance of consociational approach in achieving sustainable peace in post-conflict in multiethnic countries. Malaysia and Lebanon have been applying this concept in resolving the ethnic conflicts and improving the nation's solidarity. This includes the biggest racial riot in Malaysia on 13th May, 1969 that triggered the suspension of the parliament. Whereas the civil war in Lebanon that lasted for almost 15 years (1975-1990) has altered the composition of the parliamentary representatives. Since the ethnic conflicts are still brewing in both countries, thus the underlying concept of consociational approach has been the subject of criticism. Against these backdrops, there are consociationalist such as Lijphart enumerate that this approach is conducive in emerging the balance of power among the elite group that represent their subcultures. The historical comparative method is specifically useful in conducting the analysis of this study, and the finding showed that the consociational approach is still widely accepted in both of the countries, since it emphasizes the role of elites of sub culture and institution in containing of ethnic conflict.

**Keywords:** Consociational approach, Ethnic conflict, Malaysia, Lebanon, 13th May 1969, Lebanon Civil War (1975-1990)

## 1. Introduction

The outbreak of ethnic conflict in some countries can be attributed to the growth of intolerant attitudes which could be due to inability to share economic cake, political power, social, language and religious rights with others ethnic group. This can be seen in what is happening in Croatia, as a result of the rise of religious sentiments and the ethnic loyalty of each group such as Catholic Croats, Bosnian Muslim and Orthodox Serbs have sparked conflict and ended with the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Yugoslavs (Kunovich & Hodson, 1999). The resulting ethnic conflict will not only stifle economic development and threaten national harmony, but it will also complicate the development of a national identity in forging a national solidarity especially in a multi-ethnic country. Even though

each of the ethnic groups lives in the same locality, their interactions are limited and superficial such as at market places. This situation will complicate the process of developing a country either social, political, economic or cultural realms as each ethnic group unable to work together in fulfilling the country objectives (Husin 2011).

The difficulties and problems in containing ethnic conflict have gained international consensus, especially for a multiracial country. There are some scholars who highlight methods and approaches that could lead to sustainable peace. McGarry and O'Leary (1993) outlined seven conflict regulation approaches, which are assimilation, secession, genocide and the forced displacement of population, third-party intervention, the hegemonic control and power sharing which are integrative and consociational approaches. Although hegemonic control has introduced several procedures to resolve ethnic conflict, these remain unacceptable because they do not recognize the right of the minorities to practice their culture and tradition. For this study, the focus is on the consociational approach as it is more practiced in many multi-ethnic or multi-religious countries such as Lebanon after the civil war from 1975 until 1990, in Malaysia after the ethnic tragedy of May 13th, 1969 and in Northern Ireland that has succeeded in promoting compromise and moderation through voluntary coalition (Joanne 2006).

## 2. Method

The historical comparative approach and textual analysis are specifically useful in conducting the analysis of this study. Therefore, this study has applied the 13th May 1969 conflict to relate to the consociational approach to ethnic resolution in Malaysia, and for Lebanon the consociational approach analysis is based on the issue of 1975-1990 civil war.

### 2.1 *The Consociational Approach and Ethnic Conflicts*

Consociational politics is an approach through which it promotes power sharing with a specific kind of promises for a democratic solution to societies confronted by political conflict and ethnic division". It has been put forward by Lijphart (1977), and his model could facilitate the much needed cooperation among the different ethnic communities in a democratic country. Generally, this approach consists of four elements starting with grand coalition which emphasis on the participation of elite group from all the ethnic groups so that this cooperation will translate into all-encompassing ethnic groups which could form a majority block in a parliamentary system. The block could decide the important appointments such the President, the Prime Minister and the Speaker of the House. The focus here is not to create a cohesive working alliance, more importantly to get the elite groups that represent their respective ethnic group to work with their elite counterparts, such as in Cyprus. Despite the British policy of consociationalism with the 18-member Legislative Council with 3 Muslim Members, and 9 non-Muslim members who were reluctantly accepted by the Greek Cypriots, the British continued to promote cooperation among the elite representing the ethnic group (Attalides 1979).

**Second** is the mutual veto or informal minority veto, a kind of reset button that could be used by any groups especially the minority groups should they feel threaten or be at the disadvantage position due to any decision made especially by the bigger groups and with this provision all the decisions should be based on broad consensus. Lijphart (1977) opined that there is a risk to the coalition if the minority group is allowed to use the veto power. It could upset the cooperation since the minorities have the power that is bigger than the power of the coalition itself. This can be seen in Cyprus, the failure of peace attempts after the collapse of the political system in 1960 because of the implementation of veto power, which was a hindrance to cooperation between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot (Schneckener 2002). As a result, the Greek Cypriot disagrees with the introduction of proportionality because it does not mirror the demographic balance (Joseph 1997).

**The third** element is proportionality which means the size of the parliamentary representative is based on the size of the ethnic group population. This distribution is also applied in other important appointments such as in civil service. However, the process of making the decisions again is hampered by the threat of mutual veto power as in the case of Greek and Turkish Cypriot (Schneckener 2002). **The fourth** element is the segmental autonomy which refers to each segment of the society or every ethnic community is given the right to manage and make decision that is related to their respective ethnic communities such as religious affair, education system including the language and cultural issues (Lijphart 1977; 1985). Normally, segmental autonomy groups prefer to protect their

group identity, and the evidence of consociational experiences in Kenya, showed the action of the kikuyu ethnic group in defending their rights during President Kenyattas leadership (Lijphart, 1985).

The effectiveness of this approach in solving the problem of national unity in multi ethnic countries has been subjected to critics based on two issues. **First** since it emphasis strongly on forming a broad coalition, there will be less competition which is the main element in a democratic process or the presence of opposition among minorities outside the coalition is insignificant to make the process of check and balance meaningful (Lijphart 1977). This was the case in Cyprus, where the Greek Cypriots majority was responsible for the breakdown of consociational arrangements. A similar case can be seen in Northern Ireland with a population dominated by Christian Protestants (Lijphart 1985). **Second**, due to the distribution of top post appointment based on agreed allocation, the most capable individuals which are important for an efficient administration, may be side-lined.

As stated by Zartman (1992), among the causes of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1989) was because of the political power that favoured the Christian ethnic group with more of the dominant members in 1943 and not based on the size of the population in the 1970s, this situation has provoked the Muslims especially the Shia who was the largest sectarian group at that time. Another contentious issue is the threat of mutual veto which could not only delay the decision making process, it also may halt the agreed decision to be implemented should a group reverses their decision (Lustick1997). Since the concept takes full recognition of the role of each ethnic community, it may indirectly enhance the ethnic sentiment and this is supplemented by the implementation of several activities or programs under the segmental autonomy. Furthermore, certain ethnic group may seek help from their fellow ethnic from other countries. The problem of segmental autonomy was also highlighted by Cornell (2002) that it could be misused and open the opportunity for the outsiders to interfere the internal affair of the country. In Cyprus, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots are more loyal to their patron states which are Greece and Turkey respectively than to their own country (Darby 2001).

According to Lijphart (2004; 1977; 1985), even though this concept may not be able to bridge the ethnic schism, however it could create a relatively stable multi-ethnic democratic country. This argument was supported by Ayana (2016), based on the implementation of this concept in Netherlands, Switzerland, Northern Ireland and India. Not only that the concept has enhanced the understanding among the ethnic communities on their differences in languages, culture and religions in Cyprus (Mcrae 1979). For example, Switzerland, that is composed of three major ethnic groups, which are German, French and Italian, and possessed two major religions, Catholic and Protestant, have enjoyed the long period of peace and continuous practice of consociationalism (McCrackan 1970). It should be noted that segments of roughly equal size are more likely to cooperate during negotiations for the establishment and maintenance of consociational democracy. Conversely the uneven size of ethno-linguistic groups in Africa produces hurdles for the existence of consociationalism hence making the favourable requirements for consociationalism to be missing. The African societies are unevenly divided among various ethno-linguistic groups, having dominant communities on one hand and a small minority of other. So this factor, also, suggests that the ethno-linguistic composition of Africa is not favourable for effective consociationalism, though successful trials have been made in Botswana in its incongruent bicameralism (Parliament), where it is very difficult for one party to gain a majority in both houses and this has continuously proved to be a check to the majority regulation over the minority in the country (Lijphart, 1985).

As specified by Helga (2006), the elements of grand coalition and segmental autonomy could bring a stable peace in the country and for a country in conflict, it could be an effective peace building strategy. Sneckener (2007) emphasizes on the need to play a direct role by the influential elite of all the segmen groups in strengthening this concept. Due to the complexity of a multi ethnic society, Bormanny (2011), suggested that before the concept can be implemented, the country prevailing political system has to be understood first and a neutral consultative body represented by all the ethnic groups and religious organization have to be established to facilitate the implementation process. This also includes discussions with the nationalist groups to ask for their cooperation and those who are working in the government as well as private sectors. The advantage of consociational politics in term of equality of rights and privilege to all the citizen regardless of their ethnicity should entice them to be more cooperative, enhance inter-ethnic cooperation for the good of the country as well as everybody. This will indirectly improve the country stability.

In this study a multi ethnic country, Malaysia and a multi sectarian country, Lebanon were chosen to investigate the effectiveness of consociational politics in solving their problems. The analysis is based on the elements of consociational politics and the emphasis is on the two watershed events of the respective countries, which is the biggest ethnic riot in Malaysian history that occurred on 13 May riot and the civil war in Lebanon that lasted for almost 15 years (1975-1990).

### 3. Consociational Approach in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country with three main ethnics namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians and with demographic distribution of approximately 55 %, 25% and 7 % respectively (Husin 2012). The Malays are the original inhabitants of the land whereas the Chinese and Indian were the recent immigrants brought into Malaya during British colonization to serve the later economic interests. These three ethnics have noticeable different physical outlook, cultural heritage which includes religions and languages. Since the country is a democratic country, consociational politics is the only option available with the emphasis based on consensus in reaching collective decisions with the inclusion of segmental autonomy in safeguarding each ethnic cultural heritage such as language, religion and education system Lijphart (2004).

According to Means (1991) the democratic system in Malaysia is based on cooperation and consensus that emphasis on high level of tolerance is an important factor in strengthening the country solidarity and unity. The country political system and background have almost similar attributes to that articulated by Lijphart (1968) in which the ethnic communities are very much separated and competing with each other through their respective ethnic-based platforms. This prevailing condition has influenced their political activities such as the need to constantly be reminded on the importance of solidarity and unity through power sharing. This ethno-centric phenomenon is not only due to the inherent cultural attachment, it was reinforced by the colonial policy of 'divide and rule'. The consequences of this ethnic consciousness resulted in the formation of ethnic based political parties and organizations.

The formation of the Alliance was seen as the bulwark in promoting cooperation between the main parties from the Malays, Chinese and Indian ethnic communities (Lijphart 1968). This warm relationship between the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) in 1952 and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) accepted as a third partner in 1954, indicated a successful formation grand coalition known as Alliance and it received huge support across ethnic communities (Chee 1991). Alliance was also successful in persuading the people to vote for whichever Alliance candidate that was nominated for that district, irrespective of the background of the candidate. This is called as the 'vote pooling' which refers to the exchange of vote across ethnic or racial lines, normally as a result of agreements between parties for the exchange of electoral support. It also indicated as the heart of intergroup compromise as a set of alternative recommendations to consociationalism. Even though the concept of power sharing, consensus and the spirit of cooperation had successfully led to the Independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957, however, after the independence was obtained the concept of power sharing and cooperation had lost its compass that resulted in a violent conflict on 13 May 1969. It was almost a smack on the face to the leaders who had been galvanizing for inter-ethnic cooperation for the country solidarity and unity and the riot had shaken the Malay community recognized as the sons of the soil (Abdul Rahman 1969) There were political scientists who attributed the principle of power sharing and tolerance advocated by the Malay leaders had subjected the Malay community to the abuses by the non-Malays communities by stoking provocations especially during the demonstrations and parades. The high level of tolerance displayed by the Malay leaders had caused anger among the Malays and as a result, after the 555hegemony under the leadership of Tun Razak Hussein with quasi democracy in order to stamp out inter-ethnic acrimonious environment.

#### 3.1 Consociational Politics in Malaysia Post-Conflict 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969

After the riot that caused 196 deaths the concept of consociational politics was under spotlight of its effectiveness and according to Marshall & Juliet (2014) it shows the failure of the elite groups to convince their respective ethnic community as a whole to be united under MCA leadership. The Chinese community was more inclined to support other chinese dominated parties which were outside the grand coalition such Democratic Action Party (DAP) and *Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* (Gerakan) Both parties were accused of fanning the racial sentiment (Abdul Rahman,

1969). The inability of the grand coalition headed by the Alliance to satisfy the competing demands by every segments including by the Malay's group on their demand of better distribution of the country economic cake since they were far behind the Chinese and Indian communities putting a strain on the coalition. However the concept continued to be the preferred choice and to sustain the coalition they created (Asna 1996), several enactments to pacify this tense relationship such as Sedition Act 1948 to prevent any parties from questioning several sensitive issues pertaining to the foundations of the country such as the special privileges of the Malays, the position of the Malay rulers, the citizenship of the non-Malays and the position of the Malay Language as the sole official language. Other Acts enacted include Official Secrets Act 1972, Internal Security Act 1960 and University and College Act 1971 (Ishak, 2000). Even though these acts have curtailed some features of democratic principles, it has brought some stability and until now the segment autonomy remains, in fact it is better managed than certain countries such as Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia and Africa (Kartini et al 2013).

### 3.2 Grand coalition

Grand coalition was started when the people of Malaya was looking independent from the British. A rudimentary work was initiated between the Malays under UMNO, the Chinese under MCA and the Indian under MIC. Initially this grand coalition was so successful and during the first election the coalition secured 53 seats out of 55 seats contested. With the inclusion of several other parties the coalition was renamed as National front (Pritti 2012).

This coalition won the subsequent election and the policies, rules and regulations enacted so far manage to ward off any untoward incidents of ethnic strife. In order to strengthen this fragile solidarity and unity, the government introduced social re-engineering and affirmative action programs formulated by National Operation Council, such as the New Economic Policy and National Principles (*Rukun Negara*). The acceptance of the above principles has resulted many political parties formed broad-based coalitions and for example there are 12 political parties comprising parties from peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak.

After 13 May 1969 riot many people doubted whether this grand coalition will remain as it is or it will evolve to become a more dynamic coalition (Cheah 2012). Several internal power squabbling within UMNO caused the splits and breakaway parties such as *Negara*, *Semangat 46*, *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) and *Bersatu*. Some of these breakaway parties have formed a new coalition with the existing parties outside the UMNO led coalition or National Front such DAP and PAS to unseat the national Front. However, this new coalition suffered ideological differences especially between Islamist PAS and Chinese led liberal DAP which as a result the coalition collapsed (Segawa 2015).

### 3.3 Segmental Autonomy

Segmental autonomy has been the main feature in the practice of consociational politics in Malaysia. The special privilege of the Malays as the original inhabitant of the land, the recognition Islam as the official religion of the state and the Malay language as the sole national language. Other ethnics can freely practise their religions and their native languages and education systems are recognized as parts of national education system. To bridge the economic gap between the have and the have not, the main reason for the 13 May riot, the government introduced a new policy known as the new economic policy to economically empower the Malays (Faaland 1991). Even though the preservation of segmental autonomy could increase ethnic sentiment instead of national sentiment as pointed by Kassim (2017), Jarret (2016) and Lijphart (1977) opined the advantages is far outweigh the negative effects.

## 4. Consociational Approach in Lebanon

Lebanon was granted Independent from France in 1943 and even though majority of them are Arab, the country is multi religious society. Muslims which comprise Sunni, Shiite and Druze constitutes 59 %, Christian 39 % and the rest are Jews and Kurdish (Saouli 2019). In order to avoid religious and sectarian conflict, a grand coalition comprising all the sectarians. The coalition known as National Pact 1943 envisaged for an establishment of a stable democratic Lebanon with the hope to reduce religious conflicts. The important appointments were distributed with Maronite Christian was allocated the post of President, the Prime Minister post was reserved for the Sunni Muslim and the Parliament speaker for Shiite Muslim. The agreement also requested for the ban of outside interference of

Lebanon internal affair whereby the Christian will end their military cooperation with the west, the Muslim will cease their connection with the Pan Arab and accept the current geography boundary (Brenda 2000).

Consociational politics in Lebanon incorporates the element of proportionality. In 1943 the Parliament seat distribution of 6:5 for Christian and Muslim respectively was used since the Christian was in majority (Samir 2018). However, over the years with the migration of Palestinians into the country the Muslim currently constitutes 61%. This has caused some unease among the Muslim since the country still sticks to the initial ratio of proportionality (Lijphart 1977; Barclay 2007). Another strong element in this consociational politics is the segmental autonomy which was implemented from 1943 to 1975 which created a stable peace in the country. However, it was shattered by another civil war between Muslim and Christian that resulted about 150000 deaths and this had prompted the scholars to question the potency of consociational politics in preserving peace (Richard 1978; Salvador 2018).

#### *4.1 Consociational Politics in Lebanon Post Civil War (1975-1990)*

After the civil war (1975-1990) the main elements of grand coalition remain intact including proportionality on the ratio of parliamentary seats, even though the Muslims expressed their dissatisfaction since it was taken based on 1932 populations (Salamey 2009) and Barclay (2007). Besides, the domination of sectarian Maronites in the grand coalition continues after the Ta'if (1989) agreement even though the Muslims felt they have been discriminated such as the case of fisherman in Sidon. However, the Lebanese democracy system still retains key elements in consociational approach such as grand coalition, proportionality, and segmental autonomy as per the Ta'if Agreement (1989) which was signed after the end of the Civil War (1975-1990).

#### *4.2 Grand coalition*

After the civil war, all the previously allocated appointments not only remained, there were additional allocations whereby the Deputy Prime Minister was given to Orthodox Christian and the army Chief to the Muslim Druze (Brenda 2019). It seems these important appointments have become the hallmark of the grand coalition (Nagle & Clancy 2019).

#### *4.3 Proportionality*

The element of Proportionality in the democratic system refers to the system of representation and this element was also retained after the Civil War as outlined in article 24 of the Ta'if Treaty of 1989 which agreed to ensure equal representation of the divisions between Christians and Muslims (Boogards 2019). Before the agreement the ratio was 6: 5, six Christians serve five Muslims in parliamentary representation, however after the Ta'if (1989) agreement the ratio has changed to 5.5 between Muslim and Christian due to the demographic changes (Richard 1978). In addition, further 18 sub divisions were introduced whereby Muslims were divided to Sunni, Shiite, Druze and Alawites and the Christians were divided to Greek Orthodox, Maronite, and Armenian Orthodox. Each groups will be given a seat in the parliament and each sectarian must come from at least one political party (Samir 2018).

#### *4.4 Segmental autonomy*

In the Ta'if 1989 agreement, article 9, each sectarian has the right to manage their own religious affairs and education system (Boogards 2019). Since 1920 most of the schools are either private entities or sectarian based on religious organizations. Only 5 to 10 % of the population go to the government school. Even though the government has made an effort to control the education system, it proves to be futile. Because of these circumstances, the education system unable to be used as a tool to improve people mutual understanding, not only that it could be a breeding ground for the country to be in perpetual sectarian in nature Baytiyeh (2016).

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

Based on the above studies, it is found that consociational politics is the most viable way for a multi-ethnic or multi sectarian democratic country. The implementation of consociational politics in Malaysia is only focused on grand coalition and partial segmental autonomy that could provide more room for the politicians or leaders to initiate for more flexible policies especially in bridging the divided communities. For example, vernacular schooling is only for student up the age of 12-year-old, after that all ethnic communities must join the national school. Besides, the grand coalition is not something casted in stone, whereby the member can leave the coalition

and new members can join the coalition. In addition, the country does not practise the element of proportionality, except for the post of the King. In Lebanon the consociational politics has enhanced the sectarian sentiments since it embraces proportionality and a rigid grand coalition that tied up with the important post appointments. Besides the education system is very much follow the sectarian line that could strengthen the sectarian nature of the society that may in turn be perpetually a divided nation.

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