

WHEN BEING “NATIVE” IS NOT ENOUGH: CITIZENS AS FOREIGNERS IN MALAYSIA*

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Why do the natives of Sabah oppose the internal migration of natives from the rest of Malaysia? Why is being “native” not enough? The hostility is in direct contrast to what most scholars know about Malaysia: a multiethnic country with successful preferential policies for its natives—the “sons of the soil.” In a plural state like Malaysia, there are competing native claims on citizenship. Here, regional natives (Kadazandusun from Sabah) contest claims by federal natives (Malays). The conflicts over culture, economy, and political power fracture a national citizenship into its regional and federal parts, pitting native against native. In particular, regional natives empower the notion of a regional citizenship by supporting restrictions on the internal migration of fellow citizens. As a consequence, Malaysia’s goal of a “national” citizenship fashioned on native Malay norms is undermined. Malaysia offers important insight into the enduring dilemma of modern plural states: how to create a common national citizenship.

Key words: Malaysia, nationalism, democracy – East Asia

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Introduction: Citizenship in a Multiethnic Society

"[I]n a plural society the basic problem of political science . . . is the integration of society."

J. S. Furnivall, 1944¹

In 1999, I was standing in a queue at the immigration office in the Malaysian state of Sabah (East Malaysia) when I noticed Malaysian students from Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia) filling out immigration forms.² We were providing the same biographical details, such as our name, sex, age, address, race, and residential status, and were going through the same immigration procedures, yet I was an international visitor to Sabah and they were Malaysian citizens. The experience seemed counterintuitive to the common view of Malaysia as an integrated multiethnic union, and led me to reflect on the broader implications of migration in Malaysia, especially in regard to the rights of "outsiders." Freedom of movement, according to the literature on plural democratic societies, is a fundamental right for all citizens, yet Sabah was treating citizens and foreigners on an equal footing when it came to internal movement within the country.³ Why were West Malaysians excluded from this citizenship right in their own country? If democratic societies provide for the equal movement of all citizens regardless of race or ethnicity, why is Malaysia different? What can the Malaysian case tell us about the scope and limitations of citizenship in pluralistic societies, and the justification of specific regions to control migrations (both internal and external)?

At a time when most states facilitate domestic freedom of

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1. J. S. Furnivall, *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (Cambridge, U.K.: At the University Press, 1944), p. 463.
 2. Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, 1999. West Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia) is over 1,000 miles from Sabah, a regional state in East Malaysia, and is separated from it by the South China Sea. It takes about three hours to reach Sabah from West Malaysia by airplane.
 3. The right to free internal movement is restricted in some totalitarian and communist states such as Russia and China. Most democracies—liberal or illiberal—maintain this right to movement. See Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978).