

## **Book Review: *State and Sub-State Nationalism in Southeast Asia* by Jacques Bertrand**

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**Jacques Bertrand.** *State and Sub-State Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 2025, 75 pp., £ 16.82. (Paperback), ISBN: 9781009583039

Nationalism remains a central yet contested concept in the study of Southeast Asian politics. While the region's ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity has long attracted scholarly attention, explanations for the persistence of sub-state nationalist movements often oscillate between culturalist accounts emphasizing primordial identity and instrumentalist perspectives focused on elite manipulation or material grievance. In *State and Sub-State Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, Jacques Bertrand offers a theoretically parsimonious and empirically grounded alternative. He argues that sub-state nationalism should be understood primarily as a political response to state-led nationalist projects that are exclusionary in content and authoritarian in implementation. Rather than viewing separatist or autonomy-seeking movements as aberrations or failures of integration, Bertrand positions them as predictable outcomes of specific state-building choices.



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This intervention is particularly relevant to Southeast Asia, where postcolonial states have pursued nation-building under conditions of profound social heterogeneity and uneven state capacity. By examining Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar, Bertrand advances a comparative framework that foregrounds the state as the principal architect of nationalist conflict and accommodation. His argument resonates strongly with the Philippine case, where decades of conflict in Mindanao have exposed the limits of centralized, assimilationist nationalism. At the same time, recent institutional reforms, especially the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), offer an empirical context in which to assess Bertrand's claim that inclusive nationalism and political flexibility can mitigate sub-state mobilization. The book thus speaks directly to debates on nationalism, conflict management, and democratic governance in the Philippines and beyond.

Bertrand's core theoretical move is to reconceptualize nationalism as a state project rather than merely an expression of collective identity. He distinguishes between *state nationalism*—the official definition and institutionalization of national identity—and *sub-state nationalism*, which emerges when groups contest the state's claims to represent the nation as a whole. Two features of state nationalism are central to his explanation: exclusivity and authoritarian enforcement. Exclusivity refers to the degree to which the state defines the nation in narrow ethnic, religious, or cultural terms, while authoritarian enforcement captures the use of coercion to impose this definition and suppress alternative identities.

This framework challenges both primordialist and reductionist accounts of nationalism. Sub-state mobilization, in Bertrand's view, is not inevitable in diverse societies, nor is it reducible to economic underdevelopment or elite opportunism. Instead, it reflects political exclusion embedded in state institutions and practices. This emphasis on contingency and political choice allows Bertrand to explain variation across cases and over time, making his argument analytically flexible and broadly applicable.

The theoretical contribution is especially significant for comparative politics. By linking nationalism to regime type, institutional design, and state capacity, Bertrand bridges literatures that are often treated separately. His framework also carries implicit normative implications: inclusion, recognition, and decentralization are not concessions to separatism but strategies for sustaining national cohesion in plural societies.

The book's comparative scope strengthens its explanatory power. Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar represent diverse colonial legacies, regime trajectories, and patterns of nationalist mobilization. Yet across these cases, Bertrand identifies a recurring relationship between exclusionary state nationalism and sub-state resistance. This comparative strategy allows him to avoid both regional exceptionalism and overly abstract theorization.

The Philippine case is particularly well-suited to Bertrand's argument. Philippine nationalism emerged from colonial experiences that privileged Christian, lowland identities and centralized authority in Manila. Muslim Mindanao was incorporated through military conquest and administrative integration rather than negotiated settlement, producing a persistent sense of political and cultural exclusion. Bertrand's analysis situates Moro nationalism within this broader state-building trajectory, reframing

it as a structural outcome rather than a security problem or cultural anomaly.

Although the book's concise format limits detailed historical narration, Bertrand effectively integrates secondary literature and comparative insight to support his claims. The result is a focused analysis that privileges causal explanation over descriptive exhaustiveness.

Bertrand's framework is particularly illuminating when applied to the Philippine experience. From independence onward, the Philippine state pursued a unitary nationalist project that emphasized territorial integrity, linguistic homogenization, and centralized governance. While formally inclusive, this nationalism marginalized Muslim and indigenous communities by denying recognition of their distinct political institutions, legal traditions, and historical experiences. Land policies encouraging Christian migration to Mindanao further entrenched dispossession and grievance.

Within this context, Moro nationalism emerged not simply as a defense of religious identity but as a political project seeking recognition, autonomy, and self-governance. Bertrand's emphasis on state nationalism helps explain why military campaigns and development programs repeatedly failed to resolve the conflict: they addressed security and poverty while leaving the underlying structure of exclusion intact. In this sense, the Philippine case exemplifies Bertrand's broader claim that coercive state power often intensifies, rather than suppresses, sub-state mobilization.

The establishment of BARMM represents a critical shift in this trajectory. By recognizing Moro distinctiveness and devolving political authority, the Philippine state has partially reconfigured its nationalist project. Bertrand's framework allows this development to be interpreted not as a fragmentation of sovereignty but as an attempt to renegotiate national belonging. While the durability of BARMM remains uncertain, its creation supports Bertrand's contention that institutional flexibility can reduce the appeal of separatist nationalism.

One of the book's principal strengths is its analytical clarity. Bertrand presents a concise and coherent framework that avoids unnecessary conceptual inflation. This clarity enhances the book's utility for scholars and graduate students seeking a comparative model for analyzing nationalism and conflict.

Another strength lies in the book's capacity to integrate empirical analysis with broader theoretical debates. By foregrounding state nationalism, Bertrand challenges narratives that treat sub-state movements as inherently destabilizing. This perspective is particularly valuable in the Philippine context, where policy debates have often framed autonomy as a threat to national unity. Bertrand's analysis suggests instead that exclusionary nationalism poses the greater risk to state legitimacy.

The book also contributes to discussions of democratization and governance. Bertrand's emphasis on authoritarian enforcement highlights the paradoxical effects of coercive state power: efforts to impose national unity through force can undermine the very cohesion they seek to achieve. This insight resonates with Philippine debates on militarization, counterinsurgency, and democratic consolidation.

Despite its contributions, the book has limitations. The brevity of the volume constrains empirical depth, particularly in the Philippine case. Greater attention to intra-Moro dynamics – such as elite competition, class divisions, and generational change –

would have enriched the analysis. These factors complicate the relationship between state exclusion and nationalist mobilization, even if they do not undermine Bertrand's core argument.

The book also engages only briefly with international and transnational influences. In the Philippines, international mediation and donor involvement played a significant role in shaping autonomy arrangements. A more explicit discussion of how external actors interact with state nationalism would have strengthened the analysis.

Finally, while Bertrand convincingly argues that inclusivity can mitigate sub-state nationalism, he is less explicit about the political conditions required to sustain such reforms. The long-term viability of BARMM depends on fiscal capacity, elite commitment, and broader democratic institutions. Addressing these constraints would have deepened the book's engagement with debates on post-conflict governance.

*State and Sub-State Nationalism in Southeast Asia* is a theoretically innovative and empirically persuasive contribution to the study of nationalism and state-building. By re-centering the state as the primary driver of nationalist conflict and accommodation, Jacques Bertrand offers a framework that is particularly illuminating for the Philippine case. His analysis helps explain both the persistence of Moro nationalism and the political significance of recent autonomy reforms.

For scholars of Southeast Asia, comparative politics, and nationalism studies, the book provides a valuable analytical lens for understanding how state practices shape the possibilities of unity, autonomy, and conflict management in plural societies. While its concise format leaves room for further empirical exploration, its core argument is compelling and generative. Bertrand's work thus stands as an important reference point for future research on nationalism, governance, and peacebuilding in the Philippines and beyond.

## **Disclosure Statement**

The author does not share any conflict of interest.

