Research Articles

Unionist vs. Nationalist: Potential Re-emergence of Identity Crisis in Post-Brexit Northern Ireland

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Abstract
As the world begin to enter another decade of the third millennia, Europe has been struck with various challenges that greatly affects its surrounding geopolitics that, depend on the path further taken, would decide its future: whether maintaining solidarity and regional 'fraternity', typically in context of European Union (EU), or towards complete jeopardy and dissolution of the long-lasting union that has been tighten since the end of the Second World War. However, preference of member-states is beginning to drift away to the latter as crisis and problems continue to spring, both internally, such as cases with Greek's monetary inflation, and externally, concerning massive influx of refugees coming from the Middle East and Africa. As suggested by constructivism, the key of successful resolution depends on the intensity of diplomatic communication. By doing so, both countries should have deep understanding of each other's perspective. In addition, views and interest of Unionist and Nationalist side should be taken into account for in mitigating possible rise of new conflict.

Keywords: identity crisis, Brexit, Northern Ireland

I. Introduction

As the world begin to enter another decade of the third millennia, Europe has been struck with various challenges that greatly affects its surrounding geopolitics that, depend on the path further taken, would decide its future: whether maintaining solidarity and regional 'fraternity', typically in context of European Union (EU), or towards complete jeopardy and dissolution of the long-lasting union that has been tighten since the end of the Second World War. However, preference of member-states is beginning to drift away to the latter as crisis and problems continue to spring, both internally, such as cases with Greek's monetary inflation, and externally, concerning massive influx of refugees coming from the Middle East and Africa (Pakpahan, 2018:143-4). These problems encourage the rise of many far-right nationalist and anti-unionist movement trough out the continent, including in the United Kingdom (UK). This then led to the now-known effort by the country to leave the union that familiarly known as Brexit; marked by the winning of "yes" vote during the 2016 referendum. Though, the intention to leave is primarily driven by the willing of 'taking back control' and maintain full sovereignty of the country (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017:1), the action does come with some significant consequences such as border problem. One of the prominent is concerning Northern Ireland; UK's only land border with the neighboring Republic of Ireland, an EU member-state. Seemingly, the issue could simply be talked in a manner of bilateral diplomacy between both countries and institutionally with the EU itself, but the core has its root within both countries chapter in history.

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II. A Brief History of Northern Ireland: Birth of Crisis

The foundation of Northern Ireland can be traced through bloody disputes that went through between both UK and Ireland from the early 1800s and roughly end by 1921. The initially Isle of Ireland, a possession of the British Crown, saw a new struggle emerge between centripetal power—those who in favor of the monarch presence or usually referred as the Unionist—and centrifugal one—who sponsored 'Irish nationalism' and strive for self-ruling right of the island which usually known as the nationalist, politically represented by Sinn Féin (de Mars, et. al., 2018:2). Tensions rise as both factions continue to push on each other, racing seats within Irish Parliament to voice out their interest. The situation then fell to the victory of the Nationalist as the House of Lords enacted Home Rule Act, allowing limited autonomy to be implemented in the region. However, the Unionist, which mostly comprised of the northern counties, felt unsatisfied with the outcome, hence closing ties even more to Westminster. After a long period of conflicts, protests and guerilla tactics that nearly went to civil war, this dispute ended in 1921 with a petition recognizing Northern Ireland as a part of UK and secession of the south—turned into an independent republic (de Mars, et al., 2018:2-3; Bosi & De Fazio, 2017:18).

Though, the problem did not end there. Populace of Northern Ireland continued to be divided between pro-nationalist, who sought to fully claim the whole island solely as sovereign property of the republic, and pro-British loyal-unionist. Underground movements and militias, such as Irish Republican Army (IRA), spread terror which prominent between the 60s and late 80s. Politically, Unionist voiced-out with the creation of Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). The mounting pressure pushed UK to lay a line of militarized hard border between their neighbors. This phase of history is known as time of *the troubles*. Fortunately, the conflict ended with the signing of Good Friday Agreement (GFA) by both factions in 1998 that introduced a power-sharing model of governance. People of Northern Ireland are granted choice on whether having a British or Irish citizenship, especially for the newborn of Irish decent. In addition, GFA also addressed the right of Northern Ireland Settlers to unite with the neighboring republic in the future, only if they wish to do so. The hard border torn down and both governments also acknowledge the diversity of the region and committed to eradicate discrimination to citizens over preference of one's identity (de Mars, et. al., 2018:3-4).

III. Theoretical Approach: Constructivist Analysist

Considering historical constraint of Northern Ireland, it is then suggested that the social construction of the region involves a wide array of different agents and their social role which led to its present shape. Assumption of constructivist theoretical approach also proposed that the existence of such phenomenon is not due to its pre-given nature, but rather periodically built through active interactions between actors (Wicaksana, 2018:158-9); resulting in the creation of structures. Wendt (1992, cited in Jackson & Sorensen, 2009:308) adds that social structure is built upon common knowledge and perception of certain discourse shared among involved agents. In this case, issues in Northern Ireland revolves between The Unionist and The Nationalist as two separate social groups who have engaged in a long historical feud. Nationalism surfaces as a cultural artifact which express one's sense of belonging towards a 'national' community (Anderson,1991:113-5). This applies to both

British Unionism and Irish Nationalism; the former feels that it belongs with the British unity, while the latter argues to differ and pronounces a new model of Irish society.

This condition is also backed by the fact of strong religious sentiment as much of Northern Ireland's and UK's population are predominantly Protestant, whereas Ireland holds the majority of Roman-Catholics—denoting ones living in the North as minority (Bosi & De Fazio, 2017:18). Thus, Constructivist believed that both aspects promotes an 'othering' attitudes of the two factions, but at the same time, reveals pattern of interaction towards those considered as 'friends' and 'foes' (Hadiwinata, 2017:263). Unionist continue to pledge their support to British central government, while Nationalist, whose movement came from the deemed incompetence of the pro-unionist government in establishing concrete measure towards civil rights issue, particularly of the Irish-decent people (Bosi & Fazio, 2017:14,18-9; Kennedy, 2001:87), strengthen their identification of Irish nationhood. By analyzing through Wendt's three master variables (1992, cited in Hadiwinata, 2017;262), it is known that both Unionist and Nationalist shared sense of common fate and identity of the two factions towards either UK and Irish community which led to an interdependent relation between one of the mentioned. Despite of that, constructivism also suggests that cooperative mechanism, such as diplomacy, is proven significant in reconciling different expectations of each actors (Wicaksana, 2018:159). Thus, this what happened when both Unionist and Nationalist shared a common interest, manifested in a form of compromise by the signing of GFA after an understanding achieved by, what Onuf (1989, cited in Hadiwinata, 2017:261) described as, 'language' and 'communication' in negotiation process that led to self-restraint attitudes.

IV. EU and Brexit: The Future of Crisis

As a regional institution, European Union (EU) have also played a substantial role in maintaining peace in the region. After the GFA was ratified, EU implemented Program for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland (PEACE) which is mandated by the Special European Union Programs Body. It contributed to 2.3 billion euros funding committed for the region's stability (Tongue, 2017 cited in Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017:3). Moreover, both countries membership in EU during the agreement did foster the chance of having a positive deal (Mulhall, 2016, cited in Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017:3; Wright, 2018:109). UK and Ireland would likely to consider future implications that might follow and reactions of their surrounding geopolitics, thus tuning the discourse within corridor of agreed European law in EU context (Wright, 2018:109-10). In addition, other programs, particularly trade-related, have also indirectly help to secure a healthy relation. EU enacted the Common Agricultural policy (CAP) and development funding which played a vital role, especially during Foot and Mouth Crisis in 2001. This policy put both Ireland and Northern Ireland into a single agricultural area, thus enhancing interdependency between the two (de Mars, et. al., 2018:5-6). Furthermore, EU subsidies provided through the CAP currently represent 87% of income for Northern Irish farmers compared with 53% for the UK overall (Burke, 2017 cited in Wright, 2018:107). These evidences then reaffirm the importance of communication in international relations as addressed by constructivism, as Hobson (2000, cited in Wicaksana, 2018:162) states that shared beliefs and common values between actors and effectiveness of global institutions leads to a secure and peaceful international interaction. However, continuation of progress towards Brexit may change that status quo.

Aside from the intention of UK to leave is solely implied to EU's customs union and its single market area, the implication of Brexit may potentially redraw the hard border. Indeed, all involved parties have committed to respect the decision of UK's referendum and do their best to carry it out in an orderly fashion. This includes a safe solution of avoiding reconstruction of hard border—as it would potentially re-trigger identity outcry which has been tried to be suppressed for years—which at both countries' and EU's best interest (Wright, 2018: 110). However, if a hard border is due to be established, it will also re-establish identity conflict that has subsided. Gormley-Heenan and Aughey (2017:4-6) also added another aspect called 'border-in-mind'. Though GFA has managed to end the conflict peacefully with compromised agreed by both sides, ideas of nationalistic value still exist, but concealed and tamed by the current circumstance. It continues to develop inside the minds of the populace, especially within the Northern Ireland settlers who have experienced *The Troubles* first-hand. Re-erection of border walls may trigger the return of extreme and militant views of both Unionist and Nationalist sympathizers. In the other hand, EU has no longer the ability to reconcile and maintain the peace if such thing happened in the future. The issue would be above their jurisdiction, and if proceeded, would be a violation of a nation's sovereignty.

However, there are other alternative scenarios that could happen to post-Brexit Northern Ireland. One of them is considering reunification. In accordance to GFA, it is believed that the prolonged uncertainty of Brexit can be avoided if the whole island is reunited under the flag of the republic. This is also supported by a survey conducted by BBC on Northern Ireland citizens' stance on Brexit (Davenport, 2018). The survey sees that 28% correspondents who used to support Northern

Ireland's unionism have shifted their political attitude towards nationalist agenda of reunification. This then re-stressed the point that Brexit has failed several North settlers as they have seen benefits of EU, both in securing the peace and the region's perpetual stability. Thus, siding with those whom concern about the role of the institution. Another possibility, yet also extreme, is about a creation of a new identity. According to the same survey, it is revealed that 57.9% correspondents identify themselves as Northern Irish, gapping the pro-British staggeringly (46.9%) (Davenport, 2018). From the data, it may be seen that North settlers may have grown their own sentiment of belongings. Also, given the fact that Northern Ireland is a special autonomous region with its own representation assembly and executive body, as well as its long history of dispute, make the populace to believed they have evolved themselves a new kind of distinctiveness.

V. Conclusion

To conclude, although all side agree to cooperate, the difficult part lies on making a decision which would please, or at least, would not offend anyone. As suggested by constructivism, the key of successful resolution depends on the intensity of diplomatic communication. By doing so, both countries should have deep understanding of each other's perspective. In addition, views and interest of Unionist and Nationalist side should be taken into account for in mitigating possible rise of new conflict. Despite of that, it must be stressed that complete acknowledgement of both side's intentions cannot stop only in political platform. The long feud that have UK and Ireland cost *The Troubles*, has ingrained within the populace of Northern Ireland; becoming a hidden idea that subliminally implanted for generations. Thus, tolerance

must be achieved between Unionist and Nationalist in grassroots level. Ultimately, the choice remains in the hands of the people itself to determine. This may end with common understanding, possible reunification, or formation of a new kind of identity which does not interlinked with both UK and Ireland; a new form of nationhood.

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