



# Political tie diversity and inclusion at work in Asia: a critical view and a roadmap

Mustafa F. Özbilgin<sup>1</sup> · Cihat Erbil<sup>2</sup> · Nur Gündoğdu<sup>3</sup>

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## Abstract

Diversity and inclusion scholarship addresses inequality at work across categories of difference marked with historical disadvantages such as gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and class or categories meaningful for the industrial, organisational or local settings. This scholarship has not considered political ties to be a diversity strand. However, political ties are a considerable source of uneven power relations, unearned privileges, and unjust discrimination in many contexts. Similarly, political ties could be sources of disadvantage, exclusion and discrimination for individuals with weak, absent or oppositional political affiliations. Our paper focuses on the Asian context, where political ties are often a legitimate human and institutional resource that can shape individual choices and chances at work. By defining political ties as a diversity and inclusion strand, we critique the legitimacy of political ties as a dominant and desirable resource and present political tie discrimination as a wicked social problem that entrenches uneven relations of power and authority in workplaces. Highlighting how political affiliation manifests across different national contexts in Asia, we explore the utility of adding political ties to the Asian vernacular to regulate workplace diversity and inclusion. Asia provides an interesting context in which the interplay between political affiliation and workplace relations is often culturally endorsed, remains unregulated and unscrutinised through ethical and anti-discrimination regulations. Thus, Asia provides an ideal setting to explore the emergence of political tie diversity and inclusion at work. We illustrate this through country-specific examples, illustrating the cross-national varieties of political tie diversity in the Asian business context. We also suggest a roadmap to manage political tie diversity and inclusion for this context.

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✉ Mustafa F. Özbilgin  
mustafa.ozbilgin@brunel.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Brunel University London, London, UK

<sup>2</sup> Ankara Haci Bayram Veli University, Ankara, Turkey

<sup>3</sup> University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK



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## Introduction

The Asian context provides an ideal setting to introduce and explore political ties as a diversity and inclusion strand at work (Syed & Özbilgin, 2010). In Western politics, the big corporations/donors spend money on political campaigns and candidates, and when they are selected, they will benefit the corporations. Political ties exist almost everywhere. However, most countries of the Global North have sought to regulate business and political ties at the individual and workplace levels to avoid democratic corrosion and conflict of interest and to exclude political ties in career and work decisions through demands for transparency in the separation of political and business powers. In most countries in the Asian continent, political ties continue to provide pathways of privilege and disadvantage for individuals at work. We demonstrate the significance of political ties in shaping work and career outcomes for individuals across Asia. In their review, Chen et al. (2023) call for future studies to explore status, power and belief-based differences that shape workplace relations, highlighting a dearth of emic explorations in the Asian context. In response to this call and to fill the gap of critical diversity and inclusion studies in Asia, we introduce the strand of political tie diversity in Asia.

Critical studies of diversity and inclusion (D&I) focus on categories of difference in the workplace that emanate from historical struggles for equality. (Özbilgin, 2024). Earlier scholarship in D&I in the 1990s focused on etic strands of social difference (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). Etic categories are defined as universally recognised categories of diversity, such as gender, ethnicity, and disability, which are now enshrined in United Nations conventions that seek to eliminate gender, race and disability discrimination internationally. Other etic categories also received international recognition as D&I strands due to the widespread nature of inequalities and social struggles and movements to combat them. These include categories of sexual orientation and gender identity, religion and belief, age, social class, and migration. Etic categories provide a standardised framework for discussing diversity that transcends local cultural specifics, facilitating global dialogue and policies. Emic categories, in contrast, are defined as culturally specific, locally meaningful categories of diversity which do not travel well outside their cultural context. They reflect unique aspects of diversity pertinent to specific social, cultural and political environments. For example, *hemşehri* in Turkey or *jati* in India illustrate emic categories of diversity. *Hemşehri* (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2024a) refers to people from the same hometown. In Turkey, such connections influence social dynamics, employment opportunities, and political affiliations. Similarly, in India, *jati* has distinct traditions, occupations, and social statuses that shape its social fabric and individual identities. In the Chinese context, the concept of *Guanxi* shares a similar meaning with *hemşehri* to some extent (Xing et al., 2020). Emic categories demonstrate how diversity manifests in different social settings.

Some strands of diversity and inclusion are transitioning from emic to etic, gaining wider recognition. For example, the rights of indigenous communities previously



presented an emic category that was considered exclusively relevant to limited geographies of colonisation. This category is now widely recognised. This paper introduces political ties, a critical emic category of diversity and inclusion at work. Political ties are widely used in the Asian workplaces to shape business politics relationship, to inform and design human resource and management politics and to regulate informal workplace relations. However, political ties are rarely scrutinised as wicked social and workplace problems that lead to uneven formal and informal dynamics in workplaces and career processes and outcomes of individuals. In this article, we are introducing a strand of diversity and inclusion that informs privilege and disadvantage at work in settings where political ties are recognised as legitimate individual resources at work, allowed to shape individual access to work and career opportunities, shaping how recruitment, selection, promotion and seniority decisions are made and often weaponised against individuals without such ties or oppositional politics.

We do not only introduce political ties as a diversity and inclusion category, we also highlight how organisations and diversity and inclusion officers may operationalise political tie diversity as part of their emic interventions to boost fairness, equality, meritocracy, performance, creativity and innovation in the workplace. Recognising political ties as a diversity and inclusion strand will enable organisations to better regulate how political ties shape workplace dynamics and relations. Organisations should address the complex interplay between unearned advantages that individuals with political ties have and systemic barriers that individuals who do not enjoy such ties. By recognising political ties as a distinct category of diversity organisations can impact the intended and unintended consequences of allowing political ties to shape workplace relations. The recognition of political ties as a diversity category aligns with broader historical movements driven by struggles for equality, emancipation, recognition, representation, inclusion, belonging, and the elimination of discrimination and exclusion. It underscores the importance of organisations acknowledging and respecting individuals who are not politically connected or engage in oppositional politics. Political ties are often explored under the guise of non-market strategy in Asian settings (Mellahi et al., 2016). Yet, in this paper, we take a critical diversity studies perspective to flesh out issues of justice, equality, and equity in uneven struggles for power inherent in valorisation of political ties as legitimate business and individual resources. Peng et al. (2023) highlight how some individuals may be minoritised due to their atypical demography or oppositional politics. Drawing on the tradition of critical diversity and inclusion studies, we argue that, like other forms of diversity, organisations should have a good representation of individuals with and without political ties. It is important to include a healthy dose of opposition and internalise opposition in organisations. Such opposition could come from the sociodemographic (shallow) or ideological differences (deeper) level of diversity.



## Diversity and inclusion in Asian business and management

In their recent bibliometric review of diversity and inclusion in the Asia–Pacific region, Chen et al. (2023) identify that most studies have focused on etic categories of difference, including gender (Bae & Skaggs, 2019), race (Lans, 2022), ethnicity (Cheong & Sinnakkannu, 2014), and nationality (Orsini & Magnier-Watanabe, 2023). They categorise diversity research into environmental, organisational, team, and individual factors and offer an inclusive and objective overview of the diversity landscape, avoiding subjective biases inherent in previous review methods. However, there is a limited body of research addressing political connections in Asian diversity studies. For instance, Wei et al. (2023) examine social categorisation theory by analysing the ethnic minority status on executive turnover in China. They demonstrate that political capital among executives reduces turnover, particularly in non-autonomous regions. This study is in line with the broader international review by Fitzsimmons et al. (2023), who concluded that international business literature treats diversity and inclusion concerns without a focus on uneven relations of power among actors. Authors call for critical exploration of diversity and inclusion strands in international business.

A large number of studies have recently emerged on diversity and inclusion in Asia. First, many of the studies tackle diversity and inclusion strands as variables, exploring gender, ethnicity and disability as variables in relation to other workplace phenomenon. (e.g. Son et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2022) Second, most of the studies explore diversity and inclusion as a workplace concern, exploring barriers to diversity and inclusion, leaving a dearth of knowledge about appropriate diversity and inclusion measures and interventions in organisations (e.g. Alcantara & Shinohara, 2022; Ozbilgin & Syed, 2010; Syed & Ozbilgin, 2010). This second pattern is evident as diversity and inclusion is yet to be a common professional category of work in the Asian context, with the exception of multinational enterprises emanating from the region.

### Political ties as an emic category of discrimination, diversity and inclusion in Asia

We propose that political ties are a strand of workplace diversity in Asia. It is important to ask why the Asian context. Many countries lack strong traditions of democracy, which are interrupted by conflict (i.e., Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq), trauma of colonisation (e.g. India and Pakistan), autocratic (e.g. China, North Korea), tribal (e.g. United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Lebanon), feudal leadership experiences (e.g. Russia, and Azerbaijan) and religio-ideological strictures (e.g. Saudi Arabia and Iran), and traditionalism (e.g. Japan and Armenia) and alt-right turn (e.g. Israel, Turkey, and Brunei) in their political systems (see Table 1). In places of conflict and war, where martial law is practised, it is not possible to



**Table 1** Countries or regions in Asia, their political tie dimensions and relevant references

Asia	Political tie dimension	References
Azerbaijan	Clan politics and bureaucratic oligarchy	Safiyev (2017)
Brunei	Religion, monarchy and political ties	Cleary and Francis (1999)
China	Authoritarianism	Chen and Cao (2016), Krzywdzinski (2018)
	Political ties for innovation, performance, and firm value	Kwak et al. (2023), Sheng et al. (2011), and Sun et al. (2015)
	Guanxi and social networks	Nolan and Rowley (2020)
India	Political capital and measurement	Wei et al. (2023) and Stockmann et al. (2020)
Indonesia	Political ties and performance	Zhang et al. (2019)
	Political tie as a resource	Dieleman and Widjaja (2019)
Iran	Political ties and stock performance	Faraji et al. (2020)
Israel	Business groups and political ties	Kosenko (2007)
Japan	Clientelism	Aldrich (2011)
Jordan	Crony capitalism and ethnic politics	Monroe (2019)
Lebanon	Sectarianism	Baroudi (2000)
Malaysia	Political ties for accessing state rents	Gomez et al. (2021)
North Korea	Authoritarianism and everyday life	Dukalskis and Lee (2020)
Pakistan	Political connections, business groups and regime change	Shoukat and Gomez (2020)
Philippines	Political tie management	White III et al. (2018)
Post-Soviet Region	Nomenklatura	Marandici (2023)
Russia	Political ties in authoritarianism	Krzywdzinski (2018)
Saudi Arabia	Religious elites and political ties	Mouline (2014)
Singapore	Business politics relations	Haggard and Low (2003)
South Korea	Personal connections to presidential candidates	Jäger and Kim (2019)
Taiwan	Family ownership influencing political tie dynamics	Chung and Zhu (2021)



Table 1 (continued)

Asia	Political tie dimension	References
Thailand	Political tie and inter-firm cooperation	Tangdenchai et al. (2023)
Turkey	Political capital	Birner and Wittmer (2003)
	Alt-right turn and political ties	Buğra and Savaşkan (2014)
	Political tie as a privilege	Erbil and Özbilgin (2023) and Ergur et al. (2015)
United Arab Emirates	Political ties, religion and business	Yamak et al. (2015)
	Political ties as capital	Madichie (2010)
General Asia	Tribalism	Alshawi and Gardner (2013)
	Authoritarianism and business politics relations	Rithmire (2023)
	Cultural diversity and political ties	Syed and Özbilgin (2010)
	Talent management and political ties	Tatli et al. (2013)



expect efforts to bias proof workplace relations against political ties. Colonisation has left an indelible mark on the socio-political regimes of colonised regions, destabilising their chances of democracy. In Asian context, there is an observable trend wherein authoritarian regimes advocate for and prioritise the establishment of political connections with both domestic and international political actors. Such a strategic push for political ties serves as a mechanism through which authoritarian regimes seek to consolidate and maintain their power, exert influence over economic activities, and mitigate potential opposition (Rithmire, 2023). For instance, Buğra and Savaşkan (2014) identify that in the Turkish context, the establishment of political ties has been a strategic tool used by the conservative government to foster a new class of business elites who align with its political and ideological goals.

Political ties exist not only within countries but also across countries in the region and further a field through colonial ties in some cases. Yalkin and Özbilgin (2022) illustrate how there are hierarchies of knowledge, privilege and disadvantage in the deployment of colonial ties even today in scientific employment. Individuals from colonised territories suffer second-class status and colonial relations persist in colonising countries in how they treat scientific staff and knowledge from colonised territories, instrumentalising them for extracting knowledge as a new resource of colonisation. Thus, we contend that political ties in Asia are not isolated but connected globally through a historically embedded web of uneven power relations.

Considering political ties as legitimate helps sustain and entrench neo-colonial relations. Endemic nature of autocratic, tribal and feudal leadership in the region presents a barrier to workplace democracy through which political tie bias could be moderated or combatted. Strong adherence to religious and ideological belief systems in the region also entrench discrimination based on political ties in countries which are ruled by dogmatic norms. Systems of nomenclature in communism (Krzywdzinski, 2018) and fealty in Islamic regimes (Özbilgin & Yalkin, 2019) exacerbate political tie discrimination. Finally, traditionalism and alt-right turn bring about deterioration of meritocracy, democracy and secularism in Asia (Rithmire, 2023). Much of the socio-political mechanisms of the Asian context entrenches political ties as a form of political capital at work and fosters a docile and unitarist workforce free from oppositional politics and resistance. Thus, Asia is an ideal context in which to explore political ties as a diversity and inclusion category.

As traditions of democracy are often interrupted in the region, labour markets and organisations are not tasked to combat politically connected recruitment, selection and promotion decisions, which can be endorsed and enforced by the state or the ruling political elite in some cases. Vincent et al. (2024) explain that countries which do not responsabilise their industries with equality, diversity and inclusion expose workers to discrimination and exclusion. Responsibilisation means the act of making industries or organisations responsible or accountable for their specific actions or outcomes. Lack of responsabilisation in eliminating discrimination and exclusion based on political ties is common across Asian countries. For example, in the unregulated neoliberal context of Turkey, opposition through trade union activism is politically combatted (Erbil & Özbilgin, 2023), and abusive supervisory relationships are culturally condoned (Camgöz et al., 2023). In such a context, we explain here



why political ties could present a multifaceted concern for diversity and inclusion scholars: First, a political tie presents a source of unjust and unearned privilege and advantage for individuals who are connected to the ruling political elite or ideology. For instance, Stockmann et al (2020) ascertain in their research that political affiliations exert a significant influence on diverse economic, social, and political outcomes, augmenting individuals' access to resources through affiliations with governmental entities in the context of China. Political tie discrimination happens when organisations selectively recruit, promote and mobilise staff based on their perceived or real political ties to the political power, often with the expectation that such ties could enhance business performance in politically charged marketplaces. Second, lack of political ties could jeopardise choices and chances of individuals as they would be viewed as lacking political capital (Wei et al., 2023). Third, having oppositional political ties may lead to discrimination, exclusion, marginalisation and minoritisation of those individuals who hold oppositional ideologies to the mainstream at work.

Political ties may shape individuals' access to careers, status and resources (Birner & Wittmer, 2003; Harvey & Novicevic, 2004; Nee & Opper, 2010; Zheng et al., 2017). Political ties and individual use of these ties at the individual level may take multiple forms. First, there are individuals with strong political ties to the ruling elite, the government or the leading political party and who mobilise these ties to gain workplace privileges. Second, there are individuals with political ties as the first category but some of those individuals may not mobilise their political ties for workplace privileges. Third, there are individuals who do not have strong political ties and therefore may not mobilise political ties for workplace relations. Fourth, there are individuals who have strong political ties to oppositional political groups and who use these connections to locate themselves in workplace relations. Fifth, there are individuals who have oppositional political ties but they do not use these ties in the workplace.

At the organisational-level political ties may be recognised as legitimate or illegitimate sources of individual career and work processes and outcomes. There are organisations which exclude political ties as a consideration when recruiting, retaining and mobilising their staff at work. There are also organisations which accept political ties as an individual resource and a career capital for their staff, making decisions based on these political ties in recruitment, retention and mobilisation of staff (Kuzman et al., 2018). While the former type of organisations seek to combat the bias associated with political ties, the latter type instrumentalises the political ties that staff hold within the workplace. For instance, in Qatar, the persistence of tribal affiliations influences various aspects of societal interaction, including employment and career advancement within organisations. Alshawi and Gardner (2013) explain that in Qatari corporations, individuals from prominent tribes, such as the Al Murrah, may receive preferential treatment in hiring promotions. Organisations embedded in tribalist traditions often justify preferential treatment by citing the perceived loyalty and robust networks associated with strong tribal connections, which they regard similarly to political affiliations in various cultural contexts. A healthy balance could also be possible for organisations. Bringing in the full spectrum of political views and representing all political





views could help workplace democracy in organisations. It is not possible to talk about workplace democracy, justice and fair representation without allowing representation of a broad range of political views, ties or lack of them among staff. Yet, such a transformation will require interventions at the organisational-level, surmounting to concerted efforts over time.

The supposedly innocuous organisational choice between allowing or disallowing political ties to shape workplace relations has certain ethical and justice implications for organisations. Organisations that favour political ties fail to recognise and respect talented individuals who are not politically connected or those who engage in oppositional politics. Favouring political ties lead to erosion of workplace democracy as it signals to other workers that political ties with the ruling elite are as legitimate, if not more, than competencies, knowledge, skills and abilities at work. For example, Erbil and Özbilgin (2023) show the privatisation of sugar factories in Turkey depicts how political and economic policies under a neoliberal regime can silence workers' voices. This is particularly evident in alignment of labour unions with political interests rather than worker welfare, leading to silencing of dissent and critical voices among workers who are not politically aligned or in opposition. Such practices underscore the risk associated with allowing political ties to shape organisational and labour relations, potentially leading to significant imbalance in workplace justice and democracy.

Favouring political ties also signal lack of tolerance for political difference, resistance, and opposition in the workplace, discouraging talented individuals who are not politically connected from applying or even staying in the country. Özbilgin and Yıldız (2022) show that many academics left Turkey for the UK in pursuit of workplace democracy. Groutsis et al. (2020) also highlight how deterioration of human rights such as access to jobs free from biases is a significant reason for migration. Usta and Özbilgin (2023) showed in the case of Turkey again that pursuit of safety and security from strong political interference were reasons migrants from Turkey to the UK cited.

### **Political ties: from a wicked social problem to a diversity and inclusion concern**

Political ties are often viewed as a favoured political capital that an individual may deploy to improve their stakes in the labour market in Asia. We explained above the cultural (e.g. hierarchical power relations, Confucianism and paternalism), social (e.g. *wasta*, *quanxi*, tribalism, caste, *hemşehri*) and political (e.g. neoliberal, feudal, totalitarian, statism) that entrench political ties as legitimate forms of capital. We problematise this utilitarian and instrumentalist approach on grounds of social justice and equality. Peng et al. (2023) scope diversity and inclusion in the Asia–Pacific region and identify that minoritised groups including women, ethnic, religious, and disability groups, struggle for power, status and influence in the Asia–Pacific context. With the choice of the term minority, authors signal the power and privilege afforded to majority and dominant groups in the region. Authors also allude to how future research needs to study power, status and privilege-based hierarchies at work



in order to understand emic notions of diversity and inclusion in the workplace. In line with their argument, we examine political ties as both capital and disadvantage in the region and contest the legitimacy of political ties as a form of political currency at work. We argue that political tie-based discrimination harms equality, social justice and meritocracy at work, as political tie does not, should not and ought not predict an individual's chances and choices at work. There are economic, social, political and moral arguments that present political tie discrimination as a wicked workplace problem.

Drawing on Rittel and Webber (1973) definition of wicked problems as multifaceted social policy concerns that defy simple solutions due to lack of clarity in their moral, logical and social processes and outcomes. Political ties fit the definition of wicked problems, framed as legitimate and illegitimate practices, depending on instrumental, moral, market, social and political perspectives. The complexity of what a political tie is and when it becomes as a social policy and discrimination concern renders it a suitable theme for exploration as a wicked problem. Resolving wicked social problems requires multilevel efforts and interventions involving international-level actors such as the United Nations, International Labour Organisation, OECD, and supranational groups such as the European Union have a role in recognising political ties as corrosive and wicked social problems. At the national-level, recognising political ties as the basis of discrimination and unethical conduct could help national laws and policies combat the misuse of political ties in business and management decisions (Head, 2019). Further, media have highlighted and raised awareness of the misuse of political ties as corporate scandals, which media often name as '-gate scandals', which now appear in common vernacular in English. Gate scandals are also apparent in countries such as Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Hungary, Greece, and Turkey (Joseph, 2017; Keane, 2013). The term is also used in Mandarin Chinese with the suffix -mén. Although we are exploring political tie-based discrimination as an endemic practice in Asia, political tie discrimination is an international phenomenon that resonates with most contexts, some of which have developed legal and social measures to combat political tie-based discrimination.

Although the national-level efforts are interesting and crucial for effectively combating political tie discrimination, this section focuses on the organisational-level interventions to combat the misuse of political ties in the workplace. Diversity and inclusion interventions are constructs developed in North America and Western Europe. Yet today, they find currency internationally, including across Asia. However, Küskü et al. (2021) note that there is a toxic context of Turkey which lacks supportive legal, and social policy and discourses for diversity and inclusion in the workplace. The Asian context of diversity and inclusion in the workplace is often limited to compliance with the United Nations conventions against discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and disability. There is little emphasis on the responsabilisation of the industry (Vincent et al. 2024) for effective and fair management of diversity and inclusion.

Across Asia, political ties have multilevel consequences from institutional support arrangements at the macro-level, business political relations at the meso and individual political ties at the micro-level (Rowley & Oh, 2020). Institutional



support mechanisms, when reinforced by political connections, can stabilise business operations and provide essential resources. However, they also foster a dependency on political frameworks. Moreover, it promotes a culture where success is predominantly determined by connections rather than capabilities. According to Akcigit et al. (2023), such dynamics are evident in their extensive analysis of how political ties influence organisational behaviour. They highlight how the strategic use of political connections can lead to an uneven playing field, where connected firms have an unfair advantage in accessing critical resources and navigating regulatory landscapes. Such dynamics potentially lead to lower overall economic growth and a misallocation of resources, where firms invest more in cultivating and maintaining political ties rather than in technological advancement and process improvements.

The role of political ties in organisational settings, particularly in Asia, has evolved from a peripheral element to a central interest in management. Accordingly, corporate governance has focused on political ties in business as a modern governance concern (Yamak et al., 2015). While political ties provide critical advantages in navigating complex regulatory environments, they also pose significant risks of undue influence and conflict of interest (Sheng et al., 2011). Dieleman and Widjaja (2019) emphasise the dual nature of political ties. They show that political ties provide critical resources, such as licences and legitimacy in restrictive regulatory environments, thereby facilitating organisational growth. However, political ties introduce complex challenges and the potential for exploitation and manipulation by more powerful entities, which may prioritise personal or political gains over the organisation's interests. Such paradoxical manifestation makes political ties a wicked problem in management in Asian context, where solving one aspect of the problem may exacerbate another.

At the micro-level, individuals might leverage personal political connections to enhance their career prospects, which, while beneficial for the individuals involved, can lead to significant disparities within the workplace. In some cases, marginalised individuals may use political ties to compensate for their other marginalised status (Samdanis & Özbilgin, 2020). For example, a trans singer in Turkey may build and mobilise political ties with the ruling party to overcome LGBT+ discrimination in the country (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2024b). Individual political ties risk compromising equality of opportunity and blurs the distinctions between personal gains and professional qualifications. Such dynamics can foster a workplace culture where connections rather than merit dictate advancement, potentially demoralising those without similar ties. For instance, Helal et al. (2023) describe how *wasta*, the practice of using personal or family connections to gain advantages, facilitates job placements and bureaucratic navigation in Lebanon. However, the authors imply that *wasta* also leads to the employment of less qualified individuals, thereby undermining organisational productivity and fairness. They highlight the need for organisations to implement robust policies that minimise the impact of personal political connections on career progression.

At the inter-organisational-level, business networks can be a significant source of political ties, offering avenues for influence and mutual benefit between businesses and political figures. These networks have the power to influence policy-making through formal and informal channels, granting their members a privileged position



within organisational settings. In the Asian context, business networks play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining political ties (Liu, 2001; Zhu & Chung, 2014). For example, Shi et al. (2014) discuss the importance and impact of political ties on China's business. In China, business leaders often hold memberships in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (Sagild & Ahlers, 2019) or the National People's Congress (NPC), providing them with direct access to political elites. Additionally, Keiretsu networks in Japan have also historical and ongoing relationships with government officials and political parties. Samsung scandal in 2016–2017 highlights the deep connections between the family conglomerate and government officials in South Korea (You, 2021). In Indonesia, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KADIN) serves as a powerful platform for business leaders to influence policy and build political ties and creates a broader acceptance of business elites as stewards of state institutions (Warburton, 2024). These examples show the deep entanglement and close interplay between business and politics, demonstrating how business networks in various Asian countries serve as vital sources of political ties. These networks shape policies and influence governance through their economic power and strategic connections. Having individual or organisational-level relationships with business networks can provide easy access to resources, but it can also be a source of different types of inequalities.

We presented macro, meso and micro levels through which political ties could be mobilised as political capital by national actors, organisations and individuals. These levels are interconnected in constructing political ties as legitimate human capital for workers. While this political ties in Asia is widely used as a multilevel political capital (Chen & Cao, 2016), one of the consequences of this approach is that it strips organisations of healthy representation of oppositional views and political diversity. Focusing on political ties to the ruling government and political party also contradicts ideas of equality and social justice for all, similar to gender, ethnic and other forms of discrimination. While the etic categories of discrimination such as gender, ethnicity and disability are widely recognised internationally and combatted through UN conventions, political ties are not problematised as discriminatory practices, even though they provide unfair and privileged access to politically connected candidates to jobs, careers and promotions.

Admitting that political ties present a wicked multilevel problem requires us to propose a set of interventions to make it possible for individuals with and without political ties to co-exist and have equal chances and choices at work. In order to solve the wicked problem of political tie discrimination, we suggested three antecedents: first, the maturity of awareness to combat political tie discrimination in the context. Second, the availability of resources and leadership support. Third, macro-social and political support from international, supranational, and national bodies to combat this form of discrimination. In emerging economies, where institutions are often weaker and governance systems less developed, the impact of political ties becomes even more pronounced. Organisations rely on political ties to navigate bureaucratic landscapes, secure business, and influence policymaking. Yet, this dependency creates vulnerabilities, as political ties may lead to inappropriate influence over organisational decisions, skewing them away from business logic towards political expediency (Kwak et al., 2023). This scenario often results in



strategic misalignments and may hamper the organisation’s ability to operate independently, thereby complicating efforts towards transparency and ethical governance. Such transformation towards managing diversity and inclusion in this field will require socio-political support, organisational resources and support and a long vision.

We offer below a three stage roadmap (see Fig. 1) to move from problematising to managing political tie diversity and inclusion:

**Awareness and training** in Mandarin Chinese with the suffix Organisations currently use political affiliation as a legitimate method in their human resource systems in Asia. Considering political affiliation as a diversity and inclusion category makes these relationships transparent, allows them to be recorded and monitored and regulated when they unfairly compete with other rationales as equality and justice for all at work. The first phase of the roadmap for organisations is to accept that political ties present a problem that warps equality, social justice, equity in the workplace. Such a recognition could galvanise into intelligence gathering to understand employee views on political ties and what they experience in the workplace. Such intelligence could be used to draw policy statements that regulate how political tie diversity and inclusion could be sustained. Appropriate awareness and training opportunities could be offered to entrench the organisational policies. Giving and receiving information presents the first phase of the roadmap towards achieving political tie diversity at work.

**Structures and processes** Organisations with their structures and processes are capable of producing unintended inequalities and discrimination (Acker, 2006). In recognition of Acker’s (2006, p. 443) inequality regimes four aspects of organisations, “practices, processes, actions, and meanings”, need to transform to regulate political tie diversity and inclusion better. These interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings at work need to be scrutinised and transformed to capture the requirements of design for political tie diversity and inclusion.

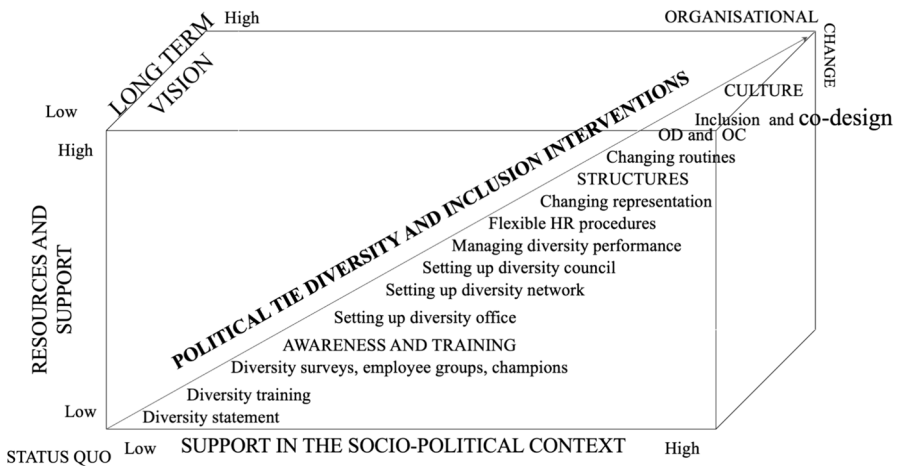


Fig. 1 Roadmap for political tie diversity and inclusion interventions for organisations



**Culture and symbols** At the core of shifting political ties from a social problem to managing diversity and inclusion of political ties requires a paradigm shift that valorises human rights, equality, inclusion, industrial democracy and social justice for all. We predict that with the radical transformation that disruptive digital technologies are bringing, workplaces will need a wider range of individuals from diverse backgrounds to develop technological products that cater for all. Unless the push for political tie diversity is from the socio-political context and endorsed by leaders in organisations, the pace of change would be slow and how change happens will remain at the shallow level. Considering the talent shortages that Asian countries are experiencing (Cooke, 2021; Tatli et al., 2013), strategic approaches to talent acquisition require elimination of systemic and local biases in order to foster sustainability. This is also particularly important when Asia is becoming a significant location for reverse brain circulation (Saxenian, 2023). One bias that is detrimental to talent acquisition is based on political ties. We gave a long list of examples as to why this cultural and symbolic change is rife in Asia as part of its competitive drive and efforts of sustainability.

Although we located the roadmap at the organisational-level, there is a more urgent need for political reforms that can ease the pressure on organisations to consider political ties as a form of political capital for workers. One such reform could be in the form of separation of powers between business and politics at the macro-level. Although such a separation remains unrealistic in the context of neoliberal expansion which blurred boundaries between business and politics (Ozbilgin & Slutskaya, 2017). Such a separation could foster social as well as workplace democracy in which oppositional politics and political tie diversity may flourish. For this to happen, progressive social movements and political groups need to advocate for policies that support measures to enhance the visibility and empowerment of political diversity and inclusion.

## Conclusions

While politically tie-based appointments provide competitive advantage to some organisations for concerns such as market penetration, privileged access to business deals, and sustainable engagement with political power, they also harm moral integrity, social justice and merit systems. As such, political ties are wicked problems that present social policy challenges in terms of diversity and inclusion. Political ties are a bane of inequality that afford access to resources, power and privilege to individuals who align themselves with the ruling elite in Asia. In this paper, we critique political ties and present it as an arbitrary yet wicked choice for shaping individual choices and chances at work. Instead, we introduced political tie diversity and inclusion, informed by values of workplace democracy, social justice and equality for all. Introducing political ties as a category of diversity and inclusion at work will make it possible for organisations to change their paradigm towards valorising political resistance and opposition as healthy aspects of difference. In the diversity context of Asia (Küskü et al., 2021, 2022), considering such a transformation towards protecting and promoting political tie diversity may



appear as an unrealistic expectation. However, we explained the moral, economic, social and business rationales of eliminating discrimination based on political ties and fostering possibilities of political tie diversity among workers. We presented a roadmap with three antecedents and three phases for a roadmap towards political tie diversity in Asian organisations. The antecedents include a supportive socio-political context, organisational support and resources and a long term vision. If these antecedents hold true, organisations may engage in a set of awareness raising and training activities, structure and process reform and cultural and symbolic transformation to regulate political tie diversity and inclusion.

Although we have selected examples from the Asian context, political tie diversity manifests internationally in different guises, and it may open up future research venues in the field. Business politics relations is a relatively well-established field internationally that does not have a professional domain in workplaces. Responsibilising diversity and inclusion officers in workplaces in understanding, monitoring, and regulating political tie diversity could combat a new form of emic discrimination and provide a line-level professional outlet for business politics interface to be considered. Our paper attempts to raise awareness that can challenge general ignorance, opening up future research on this important yet understudied topic.

**Data availability** As our study did not involve the use of data, we have not included a data availability statement.

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**Mustafa F. Özbilgin** is Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Brunel University London, UK. He also holds two international positions: Co-Chaire Management et Diversité at Université Paris Dauphine and Visiting Professor of Management at Koç University in Istanbul. His research focuses on equality, diversity and inclusion at work from comparative and relational perspectives.

**Cihat Erbil** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Business Administration at Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, Turkey. His research focuses on organisational sociology and critical management studies. Through his work, Erbil aims to amplify the voices of 'others' and increase their visibility.

**Nur Gundogdu** is an Assistant Professor of Strategy and Sustainability at Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, UK. Previously, she worked at Brunel University London and Aston University. Her main research interests include artificial intelligence and digital transformation for sustainability; sustainable, responsible, and inclusive business; well-being and mental health, gender equality and diversity at work. Gundogdu has carried out academic and professional careers together and collaborated with academia, government, industry, and nongovernmental organisations in a national and international context. Her research and consultancy experience has been funded by EU Horizon 2020, UKRI ESRC, UKRI Research England, UKRI EPSRC, and the British Council.

