



SUMMARY

- Separatism and extremism in Southeast Asia have unfortunately been associated with Islam as seen in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand and have contributed to the hybridization of security provision in these countries.
- State actors, such as the military, the police, the defense bureaucracy, and politicians are perceived to have been accountable for the rise of these twin phenomena in Southeast Asia, and could be major causes of the hybridization of security provision in the subregion.
- Regional cooperation to stem the impact of external forces like daesh/ISIS/ISIL have been stepping up in recent years, as seen in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Ethnic Separatism and Religious Extremism in Southeast Asia: Implications for the Monopoly on the Use of Force¹

by Carolina G. Hernandez

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia offers a good case study on the issue of ethnic separatism and religious extremism, as well as on the implications these processes for the state's monopoly on the use of force. This region illustrates how the use of force has increasingly proliferated beyond the reach of and in opposition to the state. This region is a classic illustration of the Global Reflection Group's main findings regarding the issue of the 'state's monopoly on the use of force' – namely, that this monopoly is more a myth than a reality, in particular because the state, with very few exceptions and under very restricted circumstances in both the Global North and the Global South, has been faced with the proliferation or hybridization of the provision of security. This development is driven by a variety of factors, including ethnic separatism – largely shaped by Western colonization, which was attended by arbitrary demarcation of national borders that broke up once relatively homogenous ethnic communities – and religious extremism. The root causes vary between different cultures and regions, though they share the reality of rising social inequities, forms of exclusion, and more general deficits in social, economic, and political systems of governance.

The present think piece focuses on Southeast Asia as a region exhibiting country-specific problems regarding the monopoly on the use of force. It will describe how ethnic separatism and religious extremism have contributed to the proliferation or hybridization of security provision that challenge the state's monopoly on the use of force in different countries. Four countries – Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand – will be used to describe the problem of ethnic separatism, while three countries – namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines – would serve as examples of religious extremism in the region. From these two sets of discussions, the paper will draw

¹ Strictly a presentation draft and not to be cited.

conclusions concerning the state's monopoly on the use of force. In so doing, it hopes to provide further validation of the Group's main finding on the proliferation or hybridization of security provision throughout the world.

ETHNIC SEPARATISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Southeast Asia confronts the challenge of ethnic separatism faced especially by former colonial countries in Africa, Asia, the broader Asia-Pacific region, and elsewhere. Among the most prominent root causes of contemporary ethnic separatism were the arbitrary demarcation of the boundaries of colonial possessions, which subsequently became the borders of postcolonial nation-states, and the fact that the state- and nation-building efforts of post-colonial ruling elites were often attended by violence and socio-economic inequities and injustice. Whatever their root causes, however, multi-ethnic societies in a number of key post-colonial states in Southeast Asia continue to face the challenge of ethnic separatism, with security implications for both the ruling elites and regimes and the people on the ground.

INDONESIA

By far the largest state in Southeast Asia in terms of territory and population is Indonesia. Indonesia's enduring ethnic separatist movements illustrate the challenges of both state- and nation-building in post-colonial societies. Apart from Aceh separatism, which had been quieted by a peace agreement following the disastrous Indian Ocean Earthquake and the tsunami of December 26, 2004 during the first term of former President S. B. Yudhoyono (SBY), the most notable and still active armed ethnic separatist movements in Indonesia are those in Irian Jaya/Papua, Maluku, West and Central Kalimantan, and Poso (Central Sulawesi).

The armed components of these ethnic separatist movements include the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (Free Papua Movement, or OPM), Laskar Jihad in Maluku, and numerous armed groups in Poso, including Jema'ah Islamiya (JI-Tanah Runtuh), and Laskar Jihad. Acehese separatism used to be led by the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). At present, various armed groups operate in the country with alleged external links to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/the Levant (ISIS/ISIL).

MYANMAR

The military junta (State Law and Order Council or SLORC and later State Peace and Development Council or SPDC) that ruled Myanmar prior to the launch of its

own 'Road Map to Democracy' under President Thein Sein cited the highly ethnically fragmented Union of Myanmar among the reasons for its repressive rule. Despite ceasefire agreements forged with many of the country's ethnic groups, separate armed forces with their own command structures and territories under their control continued to exist. Upon assuming office in 2002, President Thein Sein sought to put an end to ethnic separatism in Myanmar as a top priority of his administration. The president and the leaderships of various ethnic armed groups sought, among other measures, to achieve a nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA) prior to parliamentary elections in November 2015. However, the sheer difficulty of getting all of the armed groups agree to sign such an agreement while other ethnic groups withheld their acceptance demonstrated the enormous difficulty of putting an end to 60 years of armed ethnic separatism in Myanmar.

Prior to this, various ceasefire agreements were forged between the government under the SPDC and, since 2002, the Thein Sein government and some of the ethnic armed groups. For example, in 1997 the SPDC defeated the Karen insurgency, allegedly linked to Aung San Su Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), thus paving the way for ceasefire agreements with 17 other ethnic groups. For his part, Thein Sein has forged ceasefire agreements with some of the most intransigent separatist groups, such as the Shan State Army-South (SSA-South), the Chin National Front (CNF), the Karen National Union (KNU), and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). A cursory examination of Myanmar's ethnic armed groups shows that, even within an ethnic group such as the Shan, there can be more than one such armed group claiming to represent the Shan. Thus, a nationwide ceasefire agreement represents a herculean task for any government, which also holds true for other countries in the region threatened by ethnic separatism.

THE PHILIPPINES

Ethnic separatism in the Philippines included the movement launched by the indigenous peoples of the Cordillera Mountains, which led to a peace agreement with the Philippine government under the administration of the late President Maria Corazon C. ('Cory') Aquino. As a result, the Cordillera People's Liberation Army (CPLA) ceased to exist as an armed opposition group.

At present, the most acute challenge of ethnic separatism is posed by the separatist aspirations of various Muslim communities in Southern Philippines/Mindanao. In 1996, the Philippine government and

the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) under Nur Misuari from the Tausug community signed a peace agreement under Indonesian mediation. However, although an Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was subsequently established with Misuari as governor, a splinter group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) with a larger army than Misuari's MNLF, refused to recognize the agreement and continued the armed struggle against the Philippine Government.

In 2014-2015, the administration of President Benigno S. ('PNoy') Aquino III (Cory's son) signed a Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) with Malaysia as facilitator. Its legislative vehicle was the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), which aspired to end all hostilities between the MILF (representing all the Muslim/Bangsamoro in Mindanao) and the Philippine Government. However, another splinter group from the MILF continued its armed struggle with government forces (the police and the military) through its own Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

Other Muslim armed groups are the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Its original members were veterans of the Afghan War against the former Soviet Union, but it subsequently became a kidnap-for-ransom criminal group. At present, it claims to be a part of ISIS/ISIL, also known by its Arabic acronym *Daesh*, although in the past it also claimed links with al-Qaeda. Thus, at present there are several armed ethnic secessionist groups operating in Mindanao. The failure of the Philippine Congress to enact the BBL during PNoy's term has only exacerbated violence in parts of Mindanao in the area of operations of the BIFF, MILF, MNLF-Misuari faction, and the ASG. This failure has led to an increase in violence not only in Mindanao, but also in other parts of the country, including Metro Manila. Blood ties among armed Muslim separatist groups in the Philippines make it extremely difficult to distinguish between one armed group and another, quite apart from the influence of the idea of the community of Islamic peoples, the Muslim *Ummah*, which does not recognize state boundaries.

THAILAND

Similarly, ethnic separatism in Thailand is basically confined to Muslim groups and is found in the southern provinces – Patani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun – of this Buddhist-majority kingdom. While there are minority ethnic groups in other parts of the Kingdom of Thailand, it is the Malay-Muslim separatism in Southern Thailand that has seen violence and armed conflict with the Thai state. Understandably,

Malaysia is anxious to broker a peace agreement similar to the one it mediated in Mindanao between the MILF and the PNoy administration.

However, the secessionist struggle continues even under the government of General (now Prime Minister) Prayuth Chan-ocha, who ousted the popularly-elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra in May 2014, in a setback for Thai democracy. Although the Prime Minister made putting an end to ethnic separatism in Southern Thailand a priority, the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) continued to oppose Bangkok's sovereign rule over Patani, and Malaysian mediation in the conflict continued to be resisted by elements in Thai society. Part of the problem resides in the long history of Malay-Muslims in Thailand and the more recent ›support‹ provided by Malaysia for Thai Muslim ›insurgents‹ during the 1980s and 1990s, a fact that is not lost on some sectors in the Philippines who similarly recall Malaysia's role in the long conflict in Southern Philippines that the MNLF under Misuari ›internationalized‹.

RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Religious extremism is another process that challenges the state monopoly on the use of force in Southeast Asia. Religious extremism is not new in the region. Following the 9/11 attacks in the U.S., the region was labeled in some circles as the ›second front of the global war on terrorism (GWOT)‹. It earned this label largely because it includes Indonesia which has the world's largest Muslim population. The porous borders of the region enable Muslims in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines to move across national boundaries and to be hosted by their close relatives and clans, which do not recognize national borders originating in the colonial period. Some of the Muslim secessionist leaders from neighboring countries are shielded from their governments by local groups linked to the Taliban of the earlier Afghan War, including Indonesia's Jema'ah Islamiyah (JI), whose leader hid in Malaysia while Indonesia hunted him down and whose adherents also found refuge in Mindanao among Muslim secessionist groups. It is thus not coincidental that ethnic separatism in Indonesia and the Philippines is related to religious extremism, where the link between them is more likely to have been established after 9/11 rather than before. The idea of the Muslim *Ummah* may also be one of the reasons for the link between Muslim secessionism and religious extremism, and even terrorism.

It is noteworthy that none of the governments of the three countries discussed below acknowledged the

link between ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism even after 9/11. Indonesia was in denial regarding acts of terrorism perpetrated by religious extremists until the Bali bombing in 2002 and subsequent bombings of five star hotels in Jakarta. The Malaysian government has continued to turn a blind eye to activities of former Malaysian *Mujahedins*, whose past ties to al-Qaeda were common knowledge in academic and policy circles. The Philippine government has similarly played down possible links between armed ethnic separatism in Mindanao and religious extremism that has led separatist groups to engage in terrorism.

Over time, it has become apparent that terrorist groups in Southeast Asia are part of a vast regional network that is part of the global network of terror. Terrorist activities are perpetrated not only by Muslim groups but also by others such as communist groups and by states as well. Among the region's concerns is the danger that terrorist activities in Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere could inspire Southeast Asian religious extremists and that foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) might return to their regions of origin. 5 per cent of the 20,000 FTFs in Syria and Iraq are allegedly from Southeast Asia and, in the case of the Philippines, workers in the Middle East who have converted to Islam (*Balik-Islam* or returned to Islam) could pose a threat upon their return to the country, which is made more likely by the drastic drop in oil prices worldwide. Moreover, Southeast Asia should be concerned about the ›self-radicalization‹ of individuals and groups living on the margins of society.

INDONESIA

Religious extremism has become an important issue in contemporary Indonesia. Particularly targeted are non-Muslims in a polity that is touted as Southeast Asia's most advanced ›democracy‹. More secular Muslim organizations, particularly the *Muhammadiyah*, have worked with influential non-Muslims to address the problem of religious extremism, especially since the democratic opening attending the fall of the New Order government under late President Haji Mohamed Suharto. Members of the international funding community operating in Indonesia have provided support for non-governmental organizations, such as SETARA, which promote religious toleration. And secular Muslim scholars have also contributed to greater awareness and knowledge about religious extremism in an effort to mitigate societal and communal violence in the country.

MALAYSIA

Cognizant of the threat that religious extremism can pose to the security of the state and the people, an

increasing number of groups and organizations in Malaysia have been addressing this issue and its likely links to Daesh. The annual Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR, jointly organized by ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies – ASEAN ISIS – and ISIS Malaysia) began addressing this issue in its discussions, as have their bilateral dialogues with counterparts in other regions of the world.

As Chair of ASEAN in 2015-2016, Malaysia has also made efforts to speed up the building of the ASEAN community, whose three pillars address very important issues related to the rise and mitigation of religious extremism and terrorism in the region.

THE PHILIPPINES

There is widespread concern in the Philippines that religious extremism is increasingly connected to ethnic separatism and the failure of the Philippine Congress to enact the BBL is escalating the level of violence and terrorist activities attributed to various armed Muslim separatist groups, such as the MILF, BIFF, MNLF, ASG, among others.

While the Philippine Army (PA), the ground forces of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), has tried to calm Filipinos about the sharp increase in armed encounters between government forces, including in some places the police, and various Muslim armed groups in Mindanao, it is becoming increasingly difficult to alleviate public apprehension about the increasing communal violence in Mindanao and armed encounters between state forces and ethnic separatists, with links for example between the ASG and Daesh being cited in social media. The latter's presence is symbolized by its black flag.

Moreover, the role of Saudi Arabia in this state of play can be seen from the increasing spread of religious conservatism even among *Maranao* Muslims who have traditionally been regarded as less conservative due to their orientation as traders and commercial people.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MONOPOLY ON THE USE OF FORCE

From the above discussion, one can draw some conclusions for the state monopoly on the use of force, namely that both ethnic separatism and religious extremism have contributed to the proliferation of security providers, a situation that belies the Weberian notion that the state has a monopoly on the use of force in society. This think piece provides further

evidence that there is a huge gap between the theoretical concept and the empirical reality of the state as the holder of the monopoly on the use of force in society.

This paper has not even addressed the question of why various ethnic groups in Southeast Asia view their counterpart armed groups as the legitimate provider of their security as opposed to the state, whose armed forces uphold what these minorities consider to be an unjust and illegitimate socio-economic and political order favoring those who are the sources of the injustice they experience and of the suppression of their right to self-determination.

REFLECTION GROUP MONOPOLY ON THE USE OF FORCE

The Reflection Group »Monopoly on the use of force 2.0?« is a global dialogue initiative to raise awareness and discuss policy options for the concept of the monopoly for the use of force. Far from being a merely academic concern, this concept, at least theoretically and legally remains at the heart of the current international security order. However it is faced with a variety of grave challenges and hardly seems to reflect realities on the ground in various regions around the globe anymore. For more information about the work of the reflection group and its members please visit: <http://www.fes.de/de/reflection-group-monopoly-on-the-use-of-force-20/>

THINK PIECES OF THE »REFLECTION GROUP MONOPOLY ON THE USE OF FORCE 2.0?«

The Think Pieces serve a dual purpose: On the one hand they provide points of reference for the

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deliberations of the reflection group and feed into the final report of the group in 2016. On the other hand they are made available publicly to provide interested scholars, politicians and practitioners with an insight into the different positions and debates of the group and provide food for thought for related discussions and initiatives worldwide. In this sense, they reflect how the group and selected additional experts »think« about the topic and hopefully stimulate further engagement with it.

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