SOUTHEAST ASIA: IMPACT OF SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS

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Introduction

The name for the region Southeast Asia was first coined in the 20th century. It was previously known as Further India as opposed to the Indian subcontinent. The Southeast Asia consists of Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam

Southeast Asia has an area of approx. 4,000,000 km² (1.6 million sq miles). As of 2004, more than 550 million people lived in the region. The distribution of the religions and people is diverse in Southeast Asia and varies by country. Countries in mainland South East Asia practices mainly Buddhism such as Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Singapore's population also largely practices Buddhism. In the Malay Archipelogo, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei are mainly Muslim. Christianity is predominant in the Philippines and East Timor.

The Southeast Asian islands are one of the major source of world petroleum supplies; the region is also a center for logging. Southeast Asia has experienced great economic growth since the 1980s; Singapore was one of the four original "East Asian Tigers" and in recent years Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand have often been considered a new brood of "tigers". Tiger refers to the rapid growth of these economies. Much of this growth has been driven by foreign direct investment (FDI) in local industries; the money came from the U.S. and Japan and later from international investment portfolios. This growth was effected badly by the Asian financial crisis of 1997, which occasioned a period of more cautious, slower growth.[1]

It was expected that the end of the Cold War will bring peace to the world. Unfortunately, the miserable events in Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and many more shattered that hope by posing the most serious danger to national and international stability.[3] Particularly, Southeast Asia experienced a number of separatist movements and conflicts. For instance, Moro s conflict in the Philippines, Aceh movement in Indonesia, and Muslim separatist movement in provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narithiwat in Southern Thailand. The demands of these movements range from socio-economic and political rights to regional autonomy to secession and independence. Some of the more serious conflicts have witnessed human rights abuse, created large number of refugees, and generated complex political and humanitarian emergencies.[2]

The separatist movements not only threaten the security of the country of its origin but the region as a whole. As it results in refugee flows, weapons flows, develop guerrilla bases, bring terrorism, crimes and create insecurity in the region which alternatively impacts the world peace. Separatist movement can be defined as: the attempts to obtain sovereignty and to split a territory or a group of people (usually a people with distinctive national consciousness) from one another or (one nation from another). [3]

The success of a separatist movement encourages the other separatist movements of the region directly or indirectly, to follow the same activities and patterns of the violence to create unrest in the particular country. Thus, they try to achieve targets or fulfill their unlawful demands from the state. For instance, independence to East Timor in Indonesia in 1999 encouraged Moros in the Philippines to step up their war of independence.[4]

The separatist movements in southern Thailand, the Philippines, and Aceh represent the most visible signs of armed separatism in Southeast Asia today. Some basic factors contribute to the ethno-religious unrest in these regions like insensitivity to local concerns, regional neglect, and military repression and forcible attempts to impose uniformity of language and social behavior on entire community. The purpose of the present research paper is to review the separatist movements in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines and to find out their impacts.

The War in Aceh

Indonesia is the world s largest archipelago in the Southeast Asia having more than 17,000 islands. It has a land area of 752,400 square miles. It consists of more than 300 ethnic groups and 250 distinct languages. While the country is primarily agricultural, oil deposits on the islands contribute to the economy as well. Originally settled by the Dutch, Indonesia gained independence in 1949. At first a federation of individual states, Indonesia voted in 1950 to return to a republican form of government. Soon after that, in 1953, Aceh was part of the Darul Islam rebellion, which called for an Islamic state of Indonesia. Though this rebellion didn t last long, it contributed to the feelings of resentment against the capital in Jakarta that led to the founding of the Aceh Independence Movement (Aceh Merdeka) in 1976.

The province of Aceh, rich in natural resources (oil and gas) and with a population of around 5 million is located on the northern part of Sumatra. Since Aceh was a Sultanate and not under Dutch colonial rule, the Acehnese claim that it should not have been included in the Republic of Indonesia in 1949. During the Soeharto era, as a result of the unequal distribution of revenue earned from the exploitation of the natural resources of this

province, the Free Aceh Movement known as Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) came into being in 1976. The Indonesian government has suppressed this movement for long with a heavy hand through its military and with the help of its Anti Subversion Law of 1963.

Economic jealousy is helping to keep alive the insurgency in this province as wealth produced is among the highest while income and consumption per person is perhaps among the lowest in the national rankings. Though the insurgents may be fighting for an independent Islamic state, economic inequality and regional autonomy seem to be the major issue for the struggle. The separatist rebels in Aceh pose the greatest internal security threat in Indonesia. John B. Haseman stated it as the most serious challenge to the territorial integrity of the Republic. [5]

The Aceh movement gained sympathy and support from local civilians as well as from the international community; since the Indonesian army started public execution and murders of those involved in Aceh movement. This unrest continued till the fall of Soeharto regime in 1998.

After several unsuccessful ceasefire efforts, government of Indonesia and GAM signed an agreement to end hostilities in December 2002, facilitated by the Switzerland-based Henry Dunant Centre, giving Acehnese greater autonomy. The Government demanded that GAM withdraw its demand of independence and accept the Special Autonomy Act, which gave Acehnese a greater share of revenues from natural resources of Aceh province.[6]

This agreement couldn t bring peace to the country as Government realized that GAM leaders consider this accord as the first stage in their bid for independence. The GAM never stopped

pursuing a goal of independence in its propaganda and public statements. The government never agreed to give Aceh separation from Indonesia, as it did to East Timor. One of the reasons for Indonesian reluctance to grant separation of Aceh when they have given up East Timor is that Aceh is an area rich in oil giving economic benefits to the Indonesia. For that reason most Indonesians and political leaders support the military operations and strongly oppose Acehnese demand of separation from the republic. President Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono who came into power in 2004 is attempting to gain political settlement in Aceh and might bring an end to separation demand by Acehnese by both political as well as military means.[7]

One of the aspects going against GAM is the attitude of neighboring countries of this region regarding perceived implications of Aceh independence. For example, Malaysia and Singapore won t feel comfortable having in their backyard an emerging Islamic state. Besides them, Australia and some Western countries would feel their interests threatened in the straits of Malacca, if Aceh broke off with Jakarta. Thus, there would be great pressure from these nations against Aceh independence. The success of East Timor might have inspired Acehnese to pursue their struggle for self-rule, but international scenario has changed after 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C. World has become more cautious and to do anything to curb the separatism with Islamic feelings.

Indonesia can never agree for secession of this province and it is incorrect to compare Aceh with East Timor which was annexed by Indonesia while Aceh was part of this nation from independence. Hence, GAM cannot keep insisting on independence but have to come to the negotiations table with the commitment to remain part of Indonesia. While the Indonesian

government may have to strengthen the various aspects of the provincial rule to make it a genuine autonomy and to formulate adequate economic development plans. For this both sides have to give in to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution to get over the impasse and usher in peace which has been eluding this state for long.

Muslim Separatism in Southern Thailand

Thailand's origin is traditionally tied to the short-lived kingdom of Sukhothai founded in 1238, after which the larger kingdom of Ayutthaya was established in the mid-14th century. Contact with various European powers began in the 16th century but, despite continued pressure, Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country never to have been colony of European power. A mostly bloodless revolution in 1932 led to a constitutional monarchy. Known previously as *Siam*, the country first changed its name to Thailand in 1939. During that conflict Thailand was in a loose alliance with Japan; after that Thailand became an ally of the United States. It then saw a series of military *coups d'état*, but progressed towards democracy from the 1980s onward.

Thailand is exposed to the challenges arising from resurgent extremism in its Muslim-majority provinces in the south. These resurgent extremism centers on the activities of the Muslim population in the provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narithiwat, which constitute part of the form kingdom of Pattani. Thailand s Muslims are principally ethnic Malays and represent 3-5 percent of the country s total population.[8]

Thailand is a devoutly Buddhist country. The secessionist by Malay-Muslims has risen due to religious distinction coupled with geographical remoteness. The southern provinces of Thailand are economically underdeveloped as compared to rest of the country. The Malay-Muslims also complain of few domestic religious

educational facilities and also demand the establishment of more Islamic courts and Islamic banks.

Two Muslim separatist groups operate actively in Southern Thailand: PULO (the Pattani United Liberation Organization) and New PULO. PULO is operating in Southern Thailand since the 1960s with the goal to establish an independent Muslim state. It consisted of more than 3,000 Muslim separatist fighters who have waged a secessionist campaign since the 1970s. The group carries out violent activities for its secessionist struggle and tries to gain international support for Pattani s Malay Muslims. All the militant insurgent activities are carried out by Pattani United Liberation Army-a separate armed wing responsible for several bombs and arson attacks against government establishments in the south.

PULO mostly attracts external support from northern Malaysia. The Malaysian support to PULO was confirmed in 1997, following an operation called Falling Leaves in Thailand which was unlikely without Malaysian support. It created tensions between Bangkok and Kuala Lampur. Thai government warned of curtailing economic ties with Thailand if the support of PULO didn t discontinue.[10] Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad accepted the Thai government s offer of joint police raids against secessionists believed to be hiding in northern Malaysia in a fear that it might jeopardize Malaysia-Indonesia-Thailand Growth Triangle (MITGT). This collaboration became successful in shape of arrests of several PULO and New PULO leaders in early 1998. As a result many PULO members gave up the struggle and voluntarily joined government-sponsored rehabilitation programme pledging to become active participants in peaceful national development. But this development couldn t end the armed separatism in the southern Thailand, as this part of country is still underdeveloped, having less per capita income as

compared to other provinces of the country, and less Muslim participation in the local business. These factors contribute to the feelings of discontent and frustration, restricting the true growth of country.

In 2004 there were attacks by Muslim separatists in Thailand's three southern provinces; Muslims, who are in the majority in the provinces, have complained of discrimination in education and employment. The conflict there has been exacerbated by the sometimes excessive response of the Thai police and military, and the attacks continued into 2005.[9]

Separatist Movement in the Philippines

The Philippines consists of archipelago of more than 7,000 islands in Southeast Asia. With land area of 115,800 square miles and a population of over 80 million. Economically, the country is primarily agricultural, exporting rice and sugar, among other crops. There is also fishing and mining of the many mineral resources of the islands, but those industries are not as advanced. Influenced by a history of Spanish and United States rule, the Philippines is the only predominantly Christian nation in the region with 83% Roman Catholics, 9% Protestants, 5% Muslim, and 3% Buddhist and others religions.

The first Muslims came to the Philippines as traders from Malay Peninsula and Indonesia in the 14th century to Sulu and Mindanao. Through settlement and trading, influential Islamic communities developed on those islands. Throughout the next few centuries, the southern islands were home to a number of notable sultanates, including the Sultanate of Maguindanao, which is said to have ruled all the Muslims in Mindanao at one time.

When the Spanish conquerors arrived in the 16th century, their initial efforts were focused on Luzon and the other northern islands of what is now the Philippines. These were soon under Spanish colonial control, and attention turned to Mindanao and Sulu, but the sultanates there resisted Spanish rule successfully for more than three centuries. The Spanish coined the term Moro to refer to the Filipino Muslims, calling them after the Moors, the North African Muslims who had once occupied the South of the Iberian Peninsula.[10]

After the Spanish-American War (1898) Manila came under U.S. control, including the territories of Mindanao and Sulu. At the time, the Filipinos had been fighting the War of Independence against the Spanish. When the Americans replaced the Spanish, the aggression of the freedom fighters turned towards the Americans. To better handle this threat, the Americans signed the Bates Treaty in 1899 with the Sultanate of Sulu, so that they would only have to face the Catholic forces in the north. Under the treaty, U.S. was to pay the Sultan and tribal chiefs for the right to occupy certain lands. After World War II, it was decided that the Philippines would be given independence. This first step towards independence was a move to commonwealth in 1946, at which point the question of whether Sulu and Mindanao should be incorporated into the Philippines arose. While the majority of Muslims on those islands protested against the planned integration, they were ignored, partially because they were no longer overwhelmingly the majority in those areas, due to an American policy of aggressive settlement of Filipino Christians in formerly Muslim-controlled areas. So, in 1946, Mindanao and Sulu were incorporated into the commonwealth of the Philippines and moved with the Philippines into independence on July 4th, 1948.

The separatist movements, in the southern Philippines, Centre around the activities of the Moros the Muslims on the islands of

Mindanao and Sulu archipelago.The Moros have fought for independence of the Mindanao-Sulu region for a long time because of exploitative economic policies and uneven investment flows, which benefits industries in the northern Philippines. Due to this socio-political and economic reason, the separatist Islamic insurgency in the southern Philippines has been fought since 1971.[11]

In 1996, Moros succeeded in achieving partial autonomy and established the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao by an agreement with government. The MNLF: the Moro National Liberation Front, the largest of the Moro armed organization, received a stake in the Philippines political process due to this agreement. Two separatist groups remain active in Southern Philippines: Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The main objective of the MNLF remains the complete liberation of the Moro homeland; whereas the Abu Sayyaf Group struggles for the establishment of an independent and exclusive Islamic state in Mindanao.

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was established by an alumnus of the University of Philippines named Nur Misuari in 1972. He declared *jihad* against the government and gained great support both from outside, and in Mindanao and Sulu. The MNLF engaged in a civil war against Philippines Armed Forces for the next 4 years claiming at least 100,000 lives. President Marcos agreed to go to Tripoli to meet Misuari to negotiate an agreement for ending the violence. The Tripoli Agreement provided Mindanao s 13 provinces autonomy though not independence. However, the peace didn t last long and violence started again. Due to compromise between government and Nur Misuari to bring an end to violence, a critical group separated themselves from MNLF and created a more fundamentalist group named Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). They never agreed

on any compromise on independence like Misuari did. Avoiding dealing with the MILF, the government continued trying to negotiate with the MNLF and Misuari, who they saw as more reasonable and more willing to accept a compromise on independence. But the conflict didn t end as Misuari lost popular support of Mindanao s Muslims. Even his own men and the MNLF soldiers refused to adhere to any agreement or ceasefire and began bombing campaigns in the south. One particular group that began to catch the notice of the international press was the Abu Sayyaf, the Bearer of the Sword , a small, militant group that had attracted some of the more extremist members of Misuari s MNLF. ASG (Abu Sayyaf Group) have been the group associated with high profile kidnapping and ransom cases in the Philippines. The government has attempted several times to resolve the conflict but all in vain.

Misuari once again signed an agreement with government in 1996 that set up a Muslim Autonomous Region in Mindanao with Misuari as the first Governor. It displeased both the Muslims and the Christians in Mindanao and MILF publicly denounce the agreement and stated that they would be taking over the Islamic revolutionary movement. Violence has escalated since with such incidents as the Abu Sayyaf kidnappings and beheadings.[12]

Hence, it can be concluded that Mindanao-Sulu has long history of separate state notion since the birth of the Philippines. It has employed guerrilla tactics and violence in its campaign for the creation of an independent democratic Islamic state.

International Terrorism and Southeast Asia

One of the major impacts of these conflicts in the Southeast Asia is the U.S. pronouncement of this region as a second front in global war on terrorism. All the militant groups in Southeast Asia

are condemned for having contacts with international terrorists like Al Qaida. Many of the terrorists in Southeast Asia were believed to be trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The MILF and Abu Sayyaf Group are believed to have support from fundamentalist Islamic organizations in a number of countries including Egypt, Pakistan and Libya. Apart from financial assistance they are provided with religious instructions and military trainings.

Since Afghanistan war in the 1980s in which U.S-supported Mujahidin guerillas fought the Soviet occupation have contributed a lot in introducing new elements into terrorism in the region. Some of the important factors are:

a)   The Afghan experience is the main reason for bringing radical Islamic separatism in Southeast Asia. The great majority of Southeast Asia s Muslims had moderate views and was ready to live together with other religious groups and secular institutions. However, the students from *madrasas* (religious schools) of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan brought immense changes in the ideologies of Muslims in this region. Many leaders of separatist movements of Southeast Asia have trained or studied in *madrasas* of countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan.

b)   Islamic resistance in Afghanistan brought new dimension to Southeast Asian separatist movements. Local groups were provided with finances and assistance by well-funded international movements.

c)   Other factors contributing in bringing radical Islamic separatism in this region are socio-economic factors. The separatist groups have been denied of autonomy by governments. The Asian financial crisis since 1997 played a

big role in making governments reluctant to give spending in fields like education which encouraged the citizens to rush towards religious schools.

d) Criminal activity like drug trafficking is on high scale in the region and can assist resources movements by radical groups. [13]

International terrorism expert Rohan Gunantra argues that Al Qaida is the major source of bringing new terrorism in Southeast Asia. According to him, Osama Bin Laden has converted Islamic resistance to Soviet occupation of Afghanistan into a global *jihad* against U.S. and its supporters. Osama Bin Laden was able to create links with ASG and Jemaah Islamiyah members and created a network of terrorists in Southeast Asia by providing financial assistance and military trainings. Key Al Qaida operatives are central actors fostering regional linkages between ASG, JI and MILF.

Groups such as Mijahidin Council of Indonesia, *Laskar Jihad*, *Laskar Jundullah,* Aceh Free Movement, Moro Islamic Liberation Front, Pattani United Liberation Organization (both PULO and New PULO) are declared as the regional terrorist groups and are under the analysis of most of the regional security specialists. Due to these groups Southeast Asia has become the epicenter of terrorism globally. [14]

It can be concluded that international terrorist groups like Al Qaida exploited the economically deprived, politically instable and socially discriminated parts of Indonesia (like Aceh province), Thailand (such as Yala, Pattani, and Narithiwat) and the Philippines Mindanao-Sulu region; and instigated separatist movements in these regions against their governments by providing military trainings and financial assistance.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the above literature review that ongoing internal conflicts have major potential economic and security implications for the mentioned Southeast Asian nations Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. These conflicts have been responsible for thousands of deaths in the past few years alone. The conflict in province of Aceh in Indonesia has cost 15,000 lives alone. Apart from huge cost in terms of human insecurity, internal conflicts deter foreign investment and tourism. Continuing conflicts may affect international trade with this region, create security concerns in the form of refugees and affected sea-lanes. These conflicts potentially have a number of serious implications for Southeast Asia. These unresolved conflicts could possibly be the cause of separation of the provinces from the countries of their origin resulting in the creation of additional, possibly unstable states lacking in resources and infrastructure.

The Aceh province in northern Sumatra, Indonesia, is subject to civil unrest that can be traced back to the days of Dutch colonialism, due to the country's wealth of natural resources. A resistance group known as the Gerakan Aceh Meredeka (GAM), or "Free Aceh Movement," was formed in 1976, comprised mostly of Islamic fundamentalist rebels opposed to the uneven distribution of revenue, and seeking independence for Aceh. As many as 15,000 Acehnese have been killed by the Indonesian military in the years since the group's formation. In 2003 the area was placed under martial law, until a year later when a State of Emergency was declared until the tsunami occurred.

In the Philippines, Islamic fundamentalists, communist rebels and indigenous tribal peoples have clashed violently with government forces. In the southern Philippines islands (including Mindanao), a sense of lawlessness has developed. In response, most people

who live on the islands carry guns with them at all times.   More than a few underpaid police and military officers supplement their incomes by selling their own ammunition. Kidnappings of tourists for ransom or for media attention by separatist groups have become more common.   Piracy is also a growing concern in the waters off the Philippines.   Many of the countries in Southeast Asia are oil producers who rely heavily on secure shipping lanes for their oil tankers.

Thailand   that is exposed to the challenges arising from resurgent extremism in its Muslim-majority provinces in the south, has seen more than 800 people killed in last 19 months, creating more fear among people of these areas. Moreover, the activities of Southeast Asian terror network are raising serious continuing concerns. Governments of all the countries of this region are making arrests and trying to overthrow the establishments of the network, even though the network is capable of continuing its extreme vision of Islam and carrying out its activities. Thus, the presence of the network remains serious threat to the regional security and integrity.

This carnage against Muslims in Pattani will have significant internal repercussions. The Thai government has thus far failed to realize that heavy-handed security-based approaches result in radicalizing oppressed communities and increasing popular support for resistance groups. The US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and the continuing presence of foreign troops in many Muslim societies have already worked to radicalize the Muslim community in Thailand and increase their awareness of global Muslim grievances.

This increased awareness contributed to the Pattanese perception that Thai oppression against them is part and parcel of a global campaign aimed at suppressing Muslims worldwide. Last year,

reports indicated that the US was seeking to establish a military base in Thailand to help government forces combat Muslim separatists. If the US eventually takes an active role in suppressing Muslims in the south, the global confrontation between Muslims and the US will definitely widen. Moreover, the crackdown on Pattanese Muslims may also have an impact throughout Southeast Asia due to the multiple ideological and logistical linkages between Muslim separatists operating in the region. Given recent US war crimes in Iraq and America s insistence on militarily confronting Islamist groups throughout the world, Al-Qaeda s ideology will definitely become more prevalent among oppressed Muslims worldwide.

The literature review of separatist movements in Southeast Asia particularly Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines and their impacts reveals that Southeast Asian separatist movements has caused vulnerability to the region by making it haven for international terrorism, has caused the deaths of thousands of lives, affected international trade, created security concerns in the form of refugees, and deterred foreign investment and tourism.

The governments of the respective countries need to improve the circumstances of disadvantaged minorities. To avoid separatism and to preserve the union of a particular state a special constitutional arrangement with the regions in which separatism is growing, is to be established. A confederation or commonwealth should be settled for the republics or provinces that would like to break away.

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