Ethnic Conflicts in Southeast Asia

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This book could not have materialized without the paper-writers who made the task of the editors and conference organizers easier by producing papers of high academic standard, as well as by being cooperative in revising their papers as suggested. To the conference participants, we also owe a debt of gratitude for their valuable input.

Finally, the organizer cannot claim the conference to be a success without recognizing the staff of ISIS who laboured over many months prior to, during, and after the conference, at times under trying conditions.

Introduction

Francis Fukuyama in his seminal book, *The End of History*, and President Ronald Reagan's prediction of the "New World Order", envisioned, as the Cold War came to an end, an international community at peace and with social and political stability being the norm. Unfortunately, the world has not lived up to their expectations. On the contrary, the term "New World Disorder" would be more appropriate as the emergence of a "new history" has been marked by destabilizing tensions and conflicts. More often than not, such conflicts have their roots in ethnic and religious rivalries and divisions. Conciliation, resolution, and a return to ethnic harmony have proved difficult, if not impossible to achieve. One has only to look at the chaos, for example, in Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Bosnia, and the current problems in Aceh, Indonesia, or the three southern provinces of Thailand to see examples of that disturbing them.

The end of the Cold War has also broadened the meaning of ethnic conflict, hitherto subsumed under the security of the state. At present, security has taken on multiple dimensions from the state down to the individual, thus adding more layers to the analysis of ethnic conflicts.

In Southeast Asia, ethnic diversity, social stability, and national unity, have all presented challenges with which all the countries have had to cope from the time of their independence. Thailand, although never colonized, is no exception. Also, without exception, ethnic problems are seen as a threat to the state and/or regime. Nevertheless, despite incidences of ethnic conflict, situations in the Southeast Asian region had been kept mostly under control in one way or another until Indonesia's policy of "unity in diversity" unravelled after the fall of the New Order of President Suharto. This has led to concerns in other Southeast Asian countries about possible "echo effects".

Moreover, ethnic conflicts in neighbouring countries have had cross-border impacts in the form of refugees, displaced persons, illegal migrant labour, as well as drugs and arms smuggling. Such impacts have had the potential to ruffle relations between countries, as has happened between Thailand and Myanmar as well as between Malaysia and Indonesia. Needless to say, the loss of life and human suffering from ethnic conflict, such as in Aceh, Ambon, and Myanmar, have been enormous and cannot be ignored for humanitarian and other reasons.

It is also to be recognized that different kinds of ethnic settings pose different kinds of problems for governments and leaders, and thus, different responses are to be expected. Five main sets of factors frame the ethnic setting in any country: demographic patterns and ethnic geography; pre-colonial and colonial legacies; the histories, fears, and goals of ethnic groups in the country; economic factors and trends; and regional and international influences.[1]

One might also consider how the issue of globalization affects ethnic conflicts and their resolution. The positive and negative aspects of globalization are not limited to the economic sector, but have social, cultural, and political implications as well. There is no doubt that government policies on ethnic relations, if misguided, can aggravate existing problems even to the point of deadly confrontations. On the other hand, a benign policy can help mitigate ethnic problems. A country's political system can also explain the goals and implementation of the policy that a government pursues: multicultural integration or assimilation; inducement or coercion. It is also possible that a policy that works well in one country at one particular point in time may not work well under other conditions.

The conference, thus, saw case studies that served to provide an empirical foundation and productive comparative platform for the development of some general arguments about causes, successes, and failures of the prevention and management of ethnic conflicts that could contribute to a theoretical discourse and serve the academic community. It also aimed at providing policy makers and administrators with policy options in dealing with ethnic problems in their respective countries, and, in the process, serves to prevent their adverse impact on regional stability.

In such an environment, it is essential not only to define and categorize the ethnic causes of conflict and understand the dynamics of

the conflicts, but also to develop strategies to prevent, modulate, and resolve such conflicts.

The keynote speaker of the conference, Surin Pitsuwan,[2] set the tone with the statement that when ethnic groups feel threatened by the heightened pressure from the interaction of globalization with traditional culture, they "withdraw into their own familiar institutions, values, traditions, and rituals". He noted that post-Second World War, newly independent states in Southeast Asia were managing the issue of ethnicity very well while going through the process of nation building for four or five decades, with Thailand standing out until recently for its success in integrating its Muslim population in the south.[3]

In the chapter on Myanmar, Tin Maung Maung Than noted how, in the formation of the new state upon independence, much of the inter-ethnic goodwill and trust for the Bamar majority depended on the person of Aung San, whose assassination prior to independence did as much damage in this area, as in others, in the laying of strong foundations for the new state. The theme that runs through the effort at nation-building since independence from Britain in 1948, has been the conflicting options of a federation and a unitary state. Dr. Tin very elaborately outlined the efforts that the current regime undertaken to bring about ethnic harmony, as an "illiberal democracy" in a "unitary state", including negotiating ceasefires and a return to "legal" existence with and for the ethnic minorities. To oversimplify, Dr. Tin shows very clearly the impossibility of the present regime's quest to bring about the integration of the ethnic groups in the border regions, while insisting on a unitary state with all real power kept to themselves.

Rizal Sukma divided conflicts in Indonesia into horizontal and vertical ones. Kalimantan, Maluku, and Sulawesi were examples of the former, where violence was centred on purely ethnic lines (for instance, Madurese versus Dayak), whereas Achenese and Papuan conflicts were vertical and took "the form of secessionist conflict". He also distinguished between immediate causes and permissive causes of conflict. The latter are considered to be at the root of conflict. He identified the root causes of the conflicts to be in the nature of Suharto's New Order, characterized by centralism in politics, economics, and resource exploitation, and indifference to their impact. Addressing the debates on the various preferable forms of the Indonesian state in the wake of ethnic conflicts, Sukma examined the constitutional revision carefully to

establish the prospects of such an offer in satisfying ethnic and regional demands, and ended on a cautionary note as to the possibility of a return to autocratic rule if democracy was not carefully nourished and if the problems discussed were not solved.

Professor Ferrer, addressing the two significant problems of ethnicity in the Philippine Archipelago, reminded us that "conflicts are not cyclical nor do they evolve in a linear or ladder-like fashion". When grievances accumulate, counter-elites become motivated to lead protests and even start wars, with both sides perpetuating the conflict until both are willing and ready to end it. As conflicts of ideologies emerge, they get prolonged alongside mismanagement by states. Such was the case of the Bangsa Moro of Mindanao, a conflict that went on for twenty-five years, in addition to the centuries of attempted repression preceding the present iteration of the conflict. Ultimately, Professor Ferrer was optimistic about the possibility that some form of autonomy or federalism would satisfy the Muslim population without threatening Manila's basic requirement of territorial integrity. Nonetheless, the conflict that continues in Mindanao is not surprising, given the apparent lack of willingness in Manila to come to terms with the genuine needs of the minority, and the continued infusion of arms and ideology from outside into the minority region.

In a paper on Thailand that focused on the case of the non-Thai peoples of northern Thailand, Dr. Chayan noted how the government, while taking over border resources like the forest, chose not to incorporate all minorities in line with its policy of national integration. The Thai government, in fact, emphasized during the 1970-80s the replacement of opium cultivation with cash crops, following what was to be an altering of the policy of assimilation to that of "integration". What happened, in fact, was a selective allocation of citizenship. As explained by Dr. Chayan, the reason was the fear that granting of citizenship so closely related to resource rights would result in greater flows of migration to the country. The discussion, however, emphasized the contrast between the policy in the north and that of the northeast, both regions whose population were ethnic cousins who could, and in fact, did, over time become integrated into the Thai nation.

In a paper on Malaysia, Professors Zakaria and Kadir pointed out that few societies were more racially divided than Malaysia, where, for example, students segregated themselves racially on campuses

for virtually all social purposes. Yet, few countries have been more successful in dealing with ethnic issues. The May 1969 racial riots sufficiently frightened all groups into encouraging an acceptance of "a new order", in this case the New Economic Policy. The object was not to economically downgrade the richer Chinese or Indians, but to enrich the Bumiputra, the Malay majority, as the economy grew. The ensuing spectacular economic growth is to be considered an important part of the explanation of the country's impressive stability since 1969. Though the Chinese still own a disproportionate share of the economy, increases in the Bumiputra's percentage of the population resulted in the former's acceptance of the Malay's political stewardship of the nation. Nonetheless, the fact remains that Malaysia became an explicitly Malay-dominant society, rather than a multi-ethnic society. Indeed, Islam has become the "major" issue of Malaysian politics, as the authors note. An interesting theoretical point was made that, while change was mediated highly successfully in the political sector, the divisions remained explicit and almost absolute in the social arena.

On the whole, the conference participants gave special attention to conflict avoidance and conflict resolution. The latter could come about, as a number of papers suggested, when the issues of national integrity and sovereignty were separated as in the case of Mindanao, where the Bangsa Moro people were able to gain "sovereignty" while the Philippines maintained its national integrity. Democratization and devolution could also be seen to work in a similar fashion in the Indonesian case. Discussion at the conference focused on ways in which pluralism and democratization could be reconciled and enhanced. It was concluded that a clearer understanding of the forces at play and the many layers of issues at the heart of the conflicts were critical to any change in the prospects for conflict resolution. It is no less important to ensure that the provinces are happy.

Kusuma Snitwongse and W. Scott Thompson

Notes

1. Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly, eds, ***Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*** (Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1997), p. 512.
2. Former professor at Thammasat University, Foreign Minister of Thailand, who has served with international groups devoted to conflict resolution, as well as being a Muslim and a member of parliament from a southern province.
3. With the outbreak of violence in the southern provinces in 2002 and the government's use of force in response, claims for Thailand's successful integration of its Muslim minorities appear to be premature.

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Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia: Causes and the Quest for Solution

Rizal Sukma

Introduction

Indonesia's transition towards democracy entered its fourth year in 2002. However, that transition remains difficult, messy, fragile and, above all, painful. The final outcome of the transition process remains uncertain, and the country still risks the return of authoritarianism. Indonesia is still to cope with multiple threats to the fragile democracy. Ongoing inter-religious and inter-ethnic violence, and the threat of ethnic-based armed separatism, constitute such a threat. The very foundation of the Indonesian state — religious and ethnic tolerance — has clearly been shaken when this problem results in thousands of people dying and hundreds of thousands becoming internally displaced. The nature and the magnitude of the problem becomes more complex when the state itself has become part of the problem rather than the solution. Indeed, a society plagued by such religious and ethnic divisions and conflicts serves as the worst enemy, not only to Indonesia's democratic transition and consolidation but also to the very survival of the Indonesian state itself.

It should be noted at the outset that any discussion on the state of ethnic conflicts in post-Suharto Indonesia — regarding their causes, dynamics, and solutions — faces a number of formidable challenges. First, the nature and number of the conflicts, and the magnitude of the problem, make it difficult for any analyst to do justice to them in a short chapter such as this. The country is now faced with at least four major conflicts (Poso, Maluku, Aceh, and Papua) and has experienced several other conflicts that temporarily seem to have subsided (such as ethnic conflicts in West and Central Kalimantan provinces). As the country continues to face inter-religious and inter-ethnic tensions, the potential for future conflicts in other areas cannot be discounted. Second, while some conflicts share common characteristics and patterns, it is also important to recognise that each conflict has its own distinct and unique cause and dynamics, thus demanding different solutions. Third, it is not always easy to characterise what constitutes an ethnic conflict. For example, the conflict in Ambon, Maluku, might have had an ethnic dimension in the beginning of the conflict, but soon turned into inter-religious conflict. Similarly, the problems in Aceh and Papua, despite their nature as secessionist conflicts, cannot be properly understood without taking the ethnic dimension into account.

With these caveats in mind, this paper seeks to examine the problem of these ethnic conflict in Indonesia in terms of the broader social, economic, and political context. More specifically, the paper seeks to examine the causes of the conflicts and their perpetuation, analyse the attempts (or lack thereof) to prevent and manage the conflicts, and explore the prospects for resolution. The discussion is divided into four sections: the first section describes the nature of the conflicts and their human and material consequences; the second section analyses the root causes of the conflict, conflict dynamics, and "the incentives to participate in violent conflict" — grievances and greed — that grew out of the broader social, economic, and political context; the third section explores the problem of the reduced state capacity to prevent and manage the conflicts; the fourth section looks at the Indonesian debate on the merits of federalism and autonomy as the proper form of the state to address the problem. It first discusses the internal debate on the merit, value and viability of a federal system as a way to manage and prevent ethnic and religious conflicts in the country and proceeds to review the prospects for the resolution of the conflicts peacefully through to the introduction of the policy of *otonomi luas* (broad autonomy).

The Nature of the Conflict: Horizontal and Vertical Conflict

At the risk of oversimplification, this paper seeks to analyse the problem in Indonesia by using a common analytical distinction made by Indonesians themselves between horizontal and vertical conflicts, both of which involve ethnic dimensions. Horizontal conflict refers to conflict within the society itself or intra-society conflict. It occurs between at least two culturally or religiously differentiated communities under a single political authority. Meanwhile, vertical conflict refers to a conflict between the state/government and a particular group (ethnically, religiously or ideologically-motivated) within the nation-state.[2] The conflicts in Kalimantan (Sangau Ledo, Sambas and Sampit), Central Sulawesi (Poso), and Maluku can be grouped into the first category, while the problems in Aceh and Papua Province (where some groups of ethnic Acehnese and Papuan in both provinces seeks to secede from the Republic of Indonesia) fall into the second category.

Despite the differences regarding the type of each conflict, however, the ethnic dimension can be identified in almost all conflicts. In Kalimantan, the conflict was fought along ethnic lines between the Dayak and Madurese. In Ambon, Maluku, the conflict first started between the native Christian Ambonese and the migrants of Bugis, Buton and Makassar. Even in Central Sulawesi, where the religious manifestation of the conflict has been stronger than in other areas, the fighting always began between the Pamona Protestants and the Bugis Muslims of Poso.[3] In Aceh and Papua, the ethno-nationalism of the Acehnese and the Papuan clearly motivated the quest for an independent state in each region.

The Horizontal Conflicts: Kalimantan, Maluku and Sulawesi (Poso)

Conflicts that occurred in Kalimantan, Maluku, and Sulawesi were conflicts among different groups of society, divided either along ethnic or religious lines. Those that took place in Kalimantan, first in Sangau Ledo in 1997 and Sambas in 1999 (West Kalimantan province), and again in Sampit in 2001 (Central Kalimantan province), presented a clear case of violence carried out along ethnic division. The Dayak-Madurese clash in 1997 caused more than a thousand deaths.[4] Then, a more devastatingly bloody conflict occurred between the native Malays

and the Madurese (both are Muslim groups) in 1999, during which more than 150 people died and around 10,000–15,000 people were displaced. The worst violence, however, took place in Sampit in February to March 2001 and quickly spread to Palangkaraya, the provincial capital. This latest resurgence of inter-ethnic violence in Kalimantan soon became the most violent conflict in the history of Dayak-Madurese relations.

The consequences of the latest cycle of violence on human life were devastating. By early March, it was estimated that 469 people were killed, of which 456 were Madurese, and more than 1,000 homes were burned.[5] Estimations from the Madurese side, however, put the death toll as high as 2,000–5,000. While the actual numbers were difficult to determine, it was plausible that they extended beyond what was reported by the press. Many Madurese, for example, were killed as they fled to the jungle and their bodies were never taken to the hospital. The conflict could possibly have claimed over 1,000 lives. In addition, the conflict forced more than 108,000 Madurese to flee the province into Madura and other parts of East Java, causing a serious strain on the province's financial resources.[6]

In Maluku, Indonesians were told for decades by the New Order regime that ethnic and inter-faith relations in the region was successfully managed through the imposition of "Pancasila", the five principles that underpinned the Indonesian state, in every aspect of life. Indeed, in Ambon in particular and Maluku in general, harmonious inter-ethnic relations were often seen to have genuinely manifested in daily life. Ambon was also seen as a model for harmonious inter-faith relations in a pluralistic society due to the traditional *pela gandong* system. However, all these much cherished qualities suddenly ended when Christian mobs stormed and attacked Muslims celebrating Idul Fitri (Islamic Holiday, the end of the fasting month of Ramadhan) on 19 January 1999. A cycle of violence soon ensued between the two religious groups, leaving thousands of people dead, while thousands of houses and shops were either damaged or set on fire.[7]

The conflict in Ambon/Maluku evolved in two phases. The first phase, which began in 19 January 1999, started with an attack on the non-Moluccan Muslims of Bugis, Buton, and Makasar. Despite the division along religious lines between the two communities, the presence of an ethnic dimension could also be identified.[8] It is widely believed that feelings of marginalisation among the Christians constituted one