

Religion
AND
Nationalism
IN
Southeast Asia

BURMA • INDONESIA • THE PHILIPPINES



Fred R. von der Mehden

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Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia

To My Parents



PREFACE



The birth of nationalism in Asia had a number of causes, including color discrimination, economic oppression and disruption, Western education, Japanese expansion, religion, and the development of communications. This study, therefore, does not seek a single determinant to explain this complex phenomenon but is concerned with a comparative view in depth of one factor, the interrelation of religion and nationalism.

Religion has long been recognized as an integral part of European and Middle Eastern nationalism. The impact of Polish Roman Catholicism on Russian hegemony, Christian Balkan reactions to Turkish overlordship, the continued use of the tarboosh in parts of the Middle East as an outward manifestation of nationalism, and the role of the Moslem brotherhoods have all been examples of a not unusual facet of nationalism. In Asia the imprint of religion on political life has evidenced itself in a variety of ways. Religiously oriented parties exist in a number of newly independent states: The violent actions of the Cao Dai have been felt in South Viet Nam; Hinduism has influenced a number of Indian leaders; and Buddhist monks were involved in the assassination of the prime minister of Ceylon—to name but a few examples. In the more purely nationalist sphere two outstanding cases of the impact of religion have been Pakistan and Japan. Islam was basic to the formation of the former and the place of Shinto in the Japanese national ideology has received lengthy study.

Three states form the nucleus of this monograph, Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The first two are the primary

examples of the relationship between religion and nationalism and are emphasized, while the Philippines are considered only when their peculiar situation illustrates a specific point. These countries were chosen in order to present a variety of conditions in which to analyze the single factor of religion. Burma is a Buddhist country, a former British colony conquered only in the last century, and the product of a bitter, if not very bloody, transition to independence. Indonesia is primarily Moslem, was a Dutch colony for three centuries (although parts were not pacified until this century), and has unhappy memories of a long and at times violent fight for independence. The Philippines were under Spanish control for four centuries (during which time the vast majority of the population was converted to Roman Catholicism) and then became an American colony. The islands rebelled against Spain but enjoyed a peaceful development toward freedom under the United States. Against this varied background, religion played a vital role in the evolution of nationalism.

The nations chosen differ fundamentally in two areas which appear to be vital in the growth of nationalism: the former colonial ruler and the type of nationalist development. Although the following short explanation may cover well-known ground, it will place this study in perspective. Indonesia, like the Philippines, did not exist as a single entity prior to Western dominance. Following the successive disintegration of the Shrivijaya and Majapahit empires, the islands slowly came under the control of the Netherlands over a three-century period. Thus, out of a conglomeration of a few relatively large, and many petty, kingdoms, sultanates, tribes and wandering cultivators, the Dutch established through military force, economic pressure, intrigue, and peaceful negotiation the state which has come to be known as Indonesia. The government imposed by the conqueror was primarily secular and paternalistic; at the time of the nationalist awakening it was adopting the first essentials of national representation. The system established was, in fact, probably the one most conducive to the intensification of nationalism: a legislative council partly representative

but with a disproportionate number of European and other minority groups; a policy toward the nationalist movement often inconsistently alternating between weakness and oppression; and an unwillingness to put Indonesians in places of major responsibility. Thus, although the Netherlands East Indies presented to the world the picture of a relatively peaceful and progressive colony, it carried in itself the seeds of its own destruction.

The second nation, Buddhist Burma, came under the control of the British following a series of wars which culminated in the abolition of the Burmese Kingdom in 1885 and the exile of the last monarch. Nationalist activity thereafter operated under a colonial regime which until five years prior to World War II was part of the government of India. The development of representative institutions, therefore, followed, if at times belatedly, the reforms instigated in India and it was not until 1936-37 that Burma embarked on her own dyarchical system under a series of Burmese prime ministers such as Dr. Ba Maw and U Saw. The political system operating in India's easternmost province was, therefore, one of growing Burmese responsibility on the national and state level but with ultimate control in the hands of the British.

The Philippines constantly offers a challenge to the scholar attempting to make comparisons in Southeast Asia. Longest under continuous colonial rule, the islands are notable in Asia for their almost universal acceptance of Christianity and the comparatively deep imprint of colonial rule. The Philippines are the only state to have had two recent colonial administrations, the Spanish and American, and in the process to have changed from the rule of a government largely dominated by the clergy, which provided minimal opportunities for national self-expression, to the rule of a power imbued with the philosophy of separation of church and state, which promised ultimate independence.

A comparison of the nationalist movements of the three countries must consider the period of their development, the type of colonial rule, and the presence or absence of violence. Chronologically, the Philippine nationalist movement was

earliest, asserting itself in the second half of the nineteenth century. This is not to say that there were not xenophobic reactions to the foreigner previously, but what has come to be termed modern nationalism is only a century old in the islands. This nineteenth-century development put Philippine nationalism under the impact of liberalism rather than Marxism. Second in terms of time was Indonesia, whose initial political group, Budi Utomo, was founded in 1908 and was followed by the first mass nationalist movement, Sarekat Islam, a few years later. Finally, although the Young Men's Buddhist Association was founded in Burma in 1906, it did not initiate its first full-scale political program until 1917.

This difference in date did not result in sharp divergence from a general pattern of nationalist development. In each case, the first manifestation was xenophobia displaying itself in local risings often monarchical in tone. This was followed by an early intellectual phase, expressed in the rise of the Y.M.B.A. in Burma, Budi Utomo in Indonesia, and such writers as J. Rizal in the Philippines. This period was characterized by an interest in reform, rather than in separation, and particularly in Burma and Indonesia, an interest in the "glorious past," in the national language, and in intellectual questions. Change followed upon the alleged inability of the intellectuals to gain needed reforms, the impact of World War I, and changing colonial policies of the home government. The next step was for the political activists, who turned to such modern weapons as political organizations, boycotts, non-cooperation, political campaigns, and, in extreme cases, planned rebellion.

Of more importance as a point of comparison is the impact made by colonial policy in the respective states. In the Philippines, Spanish policy allowed few outlets to a society which had ready a core of articulate spokesmen for mass grievances. Continuing repression by the Spaniards was a major factor in the change from peaceful propaganda for reform under the great national hero, J. Rizal, to secret societies and planned rebellion under the nationalist organization, the Katipunan. The American regime afforded possibilities for political expression and hopes for ultimate independence

that probably account for the peaceful nature of the nationalist movement during its occupation.

In Indonesia, alternating oppression and acquiescence played an important role. In general, into the early twenties the Dutch administration in Batavia allowed an extraordinary freedom of expression except from groups which got out of hand, such as an Islamic group involved in anti-Chinese riots. This period of freedom allowed the burgeoning of a politically active Moslem movement with some one million adherents, a Socialist party, and a Communist group, among others. However, after a number of politically inspired incidents, Communist-led strikes and bombings, and the growth of what the Dutch felt to be radical elements, the regime began to crack down with a series of acts intended to control those nationalists not in government favor. Dutch reaction was solidified by the abortive Communist-led revolts in Java and Sumatra in 1926-27 and the tone was set for government policy for the next fifteen years. The period to World War II saw the exile and imprisonment of nationalist leaders and the destruction of effective anti-colonial activities. The heritage of this period and the vagueness of immediate postwar policy has been the often intransigent antipathy of both sides which characterizes Indo-Dutch relations.

Burma, in contrast to Indonesia, provided an example of a nationalist development far more orderly and with minor exceptions less violent. Burma did not suffer either the repression by the Spanish as did the Philippines, or the vacillation culminating in stringent governmental restrictions by the Dutch as did the Indies. There were political arrests, but until 1940-41 they were not wholesale. Blood was shed but with the exception of the casualties of an economic rebellion with religious overtones in 1930-31 and of World War II, violence was largely inter-racial and religious. In many ways the situation closely paralleled that in the Philippines during the first years of the American occupation except that the Burmese nationalists were more divided in their leadership and aims, and the colonial power was not so explicit in its promise of ultimate independence.

In this study, the problem of effectively ascertaining the

extent to which religion has been a determining factor in the nationalist movements of Southeast Asia presents a series of challenging questions to the student of that area. Given the generally highly respected place of religion in all facets of society, how does one differentiate between religious influences and others? What is the place of religion in a nation developing under the impact of agrarianism, the growth of a middle class, awakening political thought, and the multitude of ideas and changes which have assaulted the minds of the population of Southeast Asia during the past seventy-five years? The last question is particularly baffling since the aforementioned influences, combined with a multitude of possibly less pervasive factors, each often intimately entwined with another, make it difficult to refine out one causative agent. To do so without giving due recognition to impinging elements would, in fact, present a wholly inaccurate picture of political life. In a number of incidents which follow, religion was only an outer covering which obscured basic economic or political motivations. For example, the Saya San rebellion of 1931 in Burma incorporated within it a number of traditionalist religious and superstitious elements which led some foreign observers to class it as purely religious in its origins while any more than a superficial study would reveal economic and social causes as well. Again, to class the antifriar movement in the Philippines as a purely religious manifestation is to overlook the place of the friars in the political, social, and economic life of the islands, a situation which was the root cause of anticlericalism there.

More than one writer and politician has taken the simplistic approach in explaining events described in this volume. Burmese nationalists have described the 1938 anti-Indian riots in their country as wholly political, religious, and economic in turn. Commentaries on nationalism by prewar writers are well known for their all too frequent tendency to describe anticolonial actions as xenophobic and superstitious on the one hand or Communist-inspired on the other. Needless to say, such overt manifestations of rising nationalism can rarely be portrayed adequately in such simple terms.

This, of course, raises the further problem of assessing the extent to which any given act is religious or secular in origin. For example, one of the issues to be met in this book is the degree to which the longstanding opposition of the Karen minority to the Burman ethnic group was based upon traditional antipathies of hill people toward the population of the plains, hostilities which developed during the war, missionary activities and the aspirations of the Karen Christian leadership or charges by Karen leaders of sharp dealing and condescension on the part of the Burmans. That a number of these factors were present is obvious, but the extent to which the religious issue should be emphasized is less ascertainable. This is only one of several problems rising out of the material under survey.

Finally, this is not a monograph on theology, and theological questions will be presented only as they influenced political life. The literature of this period is well supplied with debates by learned scholars on the possibilities of synthesizing religion with Marxism, the function of the modern Islamic state in the light of the Koran, or the duties of the Christian toward the state. These are important questions in themselves, but they and ones of a similar character will be discussed here only insofar as they were debated by political leaders or influenced an appreciable number of the body politic toward political action. For example, the arguments between members of Sarekat Islam (Indonesia's first nationalist mass movement) on the place of Marxism in Islam were vital to that organization's existence and the Buddhist attitude of tolerance provided real difficulties to those leading the religious campaign against communism that was initiated in Burma in 1959.

This study is divided into two sections. Part I attempts to put the relationship of religion and nationalism into religious and historical perspective. Then there follows a historical analysis of the changing role of religion in the nationalist movements of the states involved. Basically, this development is considered to be from (1) early traditionalist xenophobia to (2) the rise of religious and intellectual organizations and

individuals nurturing the seeds of modern nationalism to (3) the infusion of strong nationalism into the religious organizations and the formation of sectarian political parties to (4) the waning of religion in politics as the nationalist movements expanded to (5) the conflict between religion and Marxism and secularism and, finally, to (6) the contemporary rather anomalous position religion now plays in the newly independent states. Part II emphasizes the roles played by various individuals and organizations in the religio-nationalist movements. In this section will be assessed the actions of religious leaders, lay politicians, missionaries, and non-political religious organizations.

Source materials have been garnered from English, Dutch, French, German, Spanish, Burmese, and Indonesian sources, and where possible the most common proper names are used. Some variation appears when direct quotations or newspaper titles varied from the norm. Translations and any errors in transcribing are the responsibility of the author.

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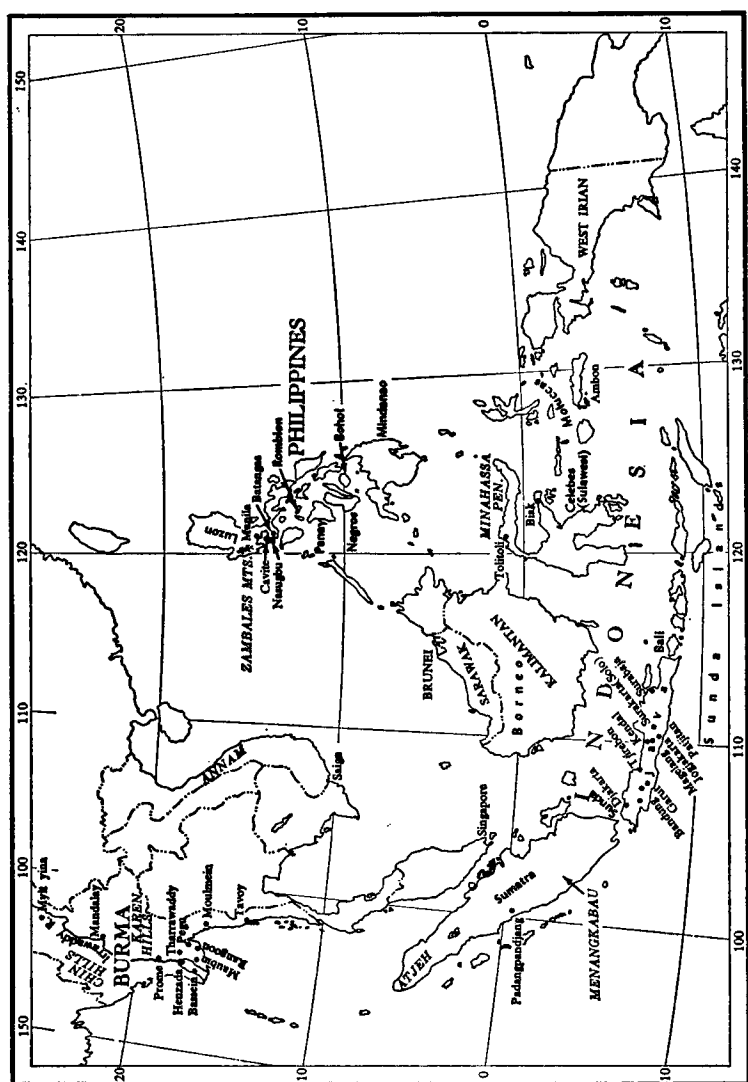
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PART I



The Patterns



Southeast Asia: Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines.