

# Postcolonial Religious Conflict in Southeast Asia

By Matthew Kosuta



Thai soldiers stand near Muslim women staging a protest at a military checkpoint in Thailand's Pattani Province December 17, 2006. Source: Reuters / Alamy Stock Photo.

**“All religions teach people to be good people,”** or so the Thai saying goes. This fits in with the general belief throughout Southeast Asia that religion is a good thing—though of course each person believes his/her religion to be the highest good. It is not surprising, then, that religious belief and practice remain key elements in Southeast Asian private and public life, with secularism little more than a theory. Religion continues to define the majority of people's sense of self in Southeast Asia and thus defines their worldview. In Southeast Asia, “good” religion thrives, and yet, tens of thousands of people have died in conflicts involving religion. Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims have all been, and are still involved in, major and minor disputes, conflicts, and killings for ostensibly religious reasons. Most of the time, Southeast Asian religious groups are not in conflict and live in mutual tolerance, interacting in public spaces, markets, work, and the like, though less so in private life. Nevertheless, a persistent unease exists between religions and ethnic groups, and conflicts do occur. There are also frequently clashes between Muslims and non-Muslims, though conflicts pitting Christians against Buddhists or animists also occur. Many Southeast Asians struggle with this fact and generally conclude that religious conflict comes from bad people misusing the common good of religion. They conclude that politics, ethnic tensions, resources, and other factors—not religion—are always to blame. Taking a brief though serious look at religious violence in Southeast Asia challenges this cherished Southeast Asian belief in the essential goodness of religion and in the belief of religion's ability to nurture peace.

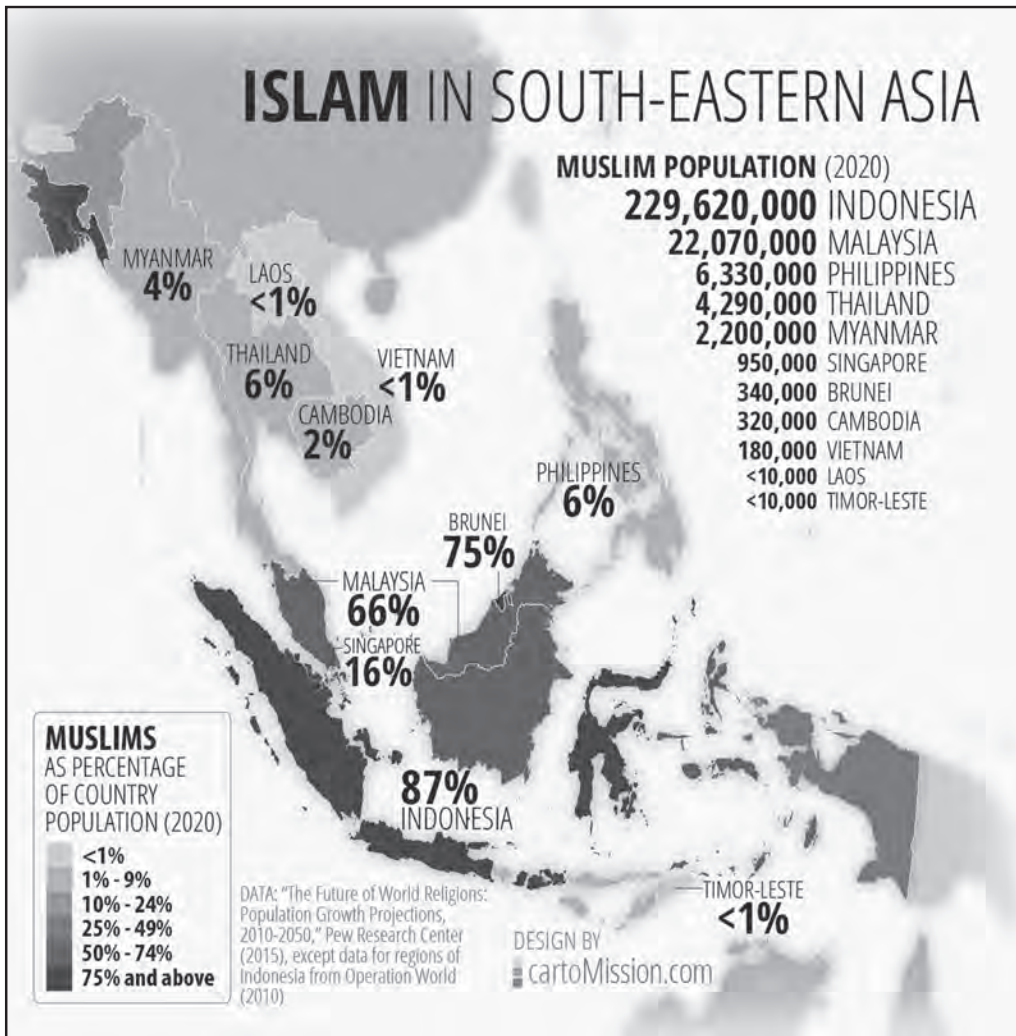
**S**outheast Asia is geographically and religiously split between a mainland region that is largely Buddhist and a maritime region that is largely Muslim. Sunni Islam represents the majority religion with estimates of just over 40 percent of the Southeast Asian population. Buddhism (mainly Theravada) comes in second, followed by Christianity, with the bulk of its followers living in the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> Thus, while Southeast Asia as a whole is religiously pluralistic, individual nations are near religious monoliths, the exceptions being Singapore and to a lesser extent Malaysia. To the consternation of purists, all three world religions are heavily influenced by indigenous animist religion, which makes them religious hybrids that often escape strict categorization. Ethnicity is an issue in religious conflict because religious identity in Southeast Asia is frequently inseparable from ethnic identity.

## Historical Context

Before European colonial conquests, wars between people of the same religion in Southeast Asia were commonplace. Mainland Theravada kingdoms and states were frequently at war with one another, as were maritime

Sultanates and minor Muslim states. Overarching Theravada or Islamic culture did not create a common shared sociocultural identity that quelled political, economic, or ethnic disputes. Except in the border regions between Burmese states and Muslim Bengal and on the Malay Peninsula, wars between Buddhists and Muslims were infrequent, and when they did occur, they were seldom specifically about religion. The wars between Siam and northern Malay Muslim states were primarily territorial and political, and while religious identity was a very important aspect, one would not categorize these conflicts as religious wars.

The significant disputes and conflicts that broke out after World War II and during decolonization mostly involved ethnic-religious minorities either desiring to avoid joining or escape remaining in a majority Muslim nation, or Muslim minorities desiring to separate from or at least have autonomy within majority non-Muslim nations. Among the exceptions were Aceh Muslims seeking autonomy from majority Muslim Indonesia and the plethora of rebellions in Myanmar. These areas are continuing sources of tension and even conflict in the contemporary postcolonial world.



The future of world religions: Population growth projections, 2010–2050. Source: Cornell University Library website at <https://tinyurl.com/koghxp9>.

**Southeast Asia is geographically and religiously split between a mainland region that is largely Buddhist and a maritime region that is largely Muslim.**

In the first case, after the British incorporated the Rakhine region extending along the Bay of Bengal in present-day Myanmar into British India in 1825, the colonial government allowed, and even encouraged, large numbers of Bengali Muslims to migrate into Buddhist Rakhine. Over the years, their population steadily increased. In 1930 and 1931, serious anti-Indian violence occurred throughout lower Burma. In 1938, riots erupted and participants specifically targeted Indian Muslim communities. World War II produced bitter Muslim–Buddhist killings in Rakhine, and just after Myanmar independence in 1948, Muslims in North Rakhine bordering East Pakistan declared *jihad*, with the goal to separate and join East Pakistan. In 1954, the Burmese government defeated the main rebellion. Currently, the Myanmar government does not recognize the right of citizenship for hundreds of thousands of “Rohingya,” claiming they are more recent

In the aftermath of World War II, the Straits Chinese in Malaysia and the Christian Moluccans in Indonesia represented two groups desiring to withdraw from newly formed majority Muslim nations. The Straits Chinese were located in the four British Straits settlements of its Malaysia colony, where they formed large majorities: Panang, Dinding, Malacca, and Singapore. The case of Chinese communities is generally treated as an ethnic and economic issue rather than a religious one, and thus it will not be addressed further; however, it is important to quickly note that violence did erupt in Malaysia in the mid-1960s and the late 1990s in Indonesia, which involved Muslim attacks on ethnic Chinese communities. The case of the Moluccans shows a more clearly religious motivation, as Moluccan Christians did not want to be part of the new majority Muslim nation of Indonesia, while ethnic Moluccans who followed Islam had no substantial objections. The Moluccan Christians had converted during Dutch colonial rule and as Christians enjoyed privileged positions in the Dutch colonial administration and military. While tensions ran high, no physical violence erupted, and the Christian Moluccans gave up their demands and were incorporated into the nation of Indonesia. However, religious tensions would finally come to a head at the end of the 1990s.

Three cases involved Muslim minority communities who wanted to separate from predominately Buddhist or Christian countries—Myanmar, Thailand, and the Philippines—and who had ethno-religious compatriot majorities in the nations just across the new postcolonial borders of Bangladesh and Malaysia. Philippine Moros trace their connection to Saba, Malaysia, through the Sulu Archipelago.

refugees and illegal immigrants, particularly those who arrived during and after the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.

Nationalist Thai policies both before and after World War II mandated using the Thai language and attending government schools in an effort to create a unifying “Thainess.” This put pressure on the Malay Muslims in the extreme southern provinces of Thailand bordering Malaysia, where they constitute a majority. While Thai government policies did not require giving up Islam, it meant placing Malay language, culture, and Islam in a subordinate position; they were to be “Thai Muslims,” not Malay Muslims. Low-level clashes took place in the 1950s, and the situation subsided after the Thai government eased off full implementation.

The third case of a Muslim minority desiring to separate appears on the Philippine island of Mindanao, where local ethnicities do differ but there is an overall Malayo–Polynesian ethnicity. Here, religion is an even more obvious factor in creating conflict, because ethnic differences are of secondary concern. During the centuries of Spanish colonial rule, there were frequent raids and military clashes between Philippine forces and Moros—southern Philippine Muslims—as well as other Muslims in the area. During the Spanish Colonial Era (1521–1898), Spain never controlled Moro territory. Soon after taking control of the Philippines from Spain in December 1898, the United States colonial administration suppressed a Moro revolt and abolished the Moro Sultanates, ending direct Muslim rule. In the 1930s, the United States encouraged migration of Filipinos to less populated Mindanao. These migrants were Catholics moving to predominantly Muslim Mindanao, which served only to exacerbate the centuries-long tense



## In 2003, the Indonesian government declared martial law in Aceh and a new major government offensive began.

and often-violent relationship between Muslims and Catholics in the Philippines. The Mindanao Moros openly rebelled in the 1970s.

The case of Aceh in north Sumatra provides an exception to the general rule of tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in one sense but is consistent in another. Aceh is unique in Southeast Asia because Aceh Muslims desired high levels of autonomy from majority-Muslim Indonesia, but it fits the above pattern in that Aceh people did not want to be ruled by a new nation that was deemed to be both too lax in its Islam and too secular, thus essentially a non-Islamic government. Aceh played an active role in the movement to make Indonesia an Islamic state in the 1950s, and the new nation adapted the creed of *Panca Sila* (*Five Principles*) as its philosophical base. *Panca Sila*'s first principle is “the belief in the one and only God” and is declared in the Indonesian Constitution. This does not make Indonesia an Islamic state, but does make it a religious state with a dominant Islamic perspective. Paradoxically, this general constitutional principle helped defuse attempts to make Indonesia a strictly Islamic state. Aceh, however, continued to militate for greater autonomy and representation of Islam. A full-scale rebellion broke out in the early 1950s and continued until the Indonesian government made concessions in 1959. The conflict flared up again in the mid-1970s.

The various ethno-religious rebellions in Myanmar break the pattern of conflicts pitting Muslims against Buddhists, Christians, or even other Muslims. Myanmar has one of the highest percentages of ethnic minorities relative to the majority of all Southeast Asian countries. Minorities make up roughly 32 percent of the population: Shan (9 percent) and Karen (7 percent) collectively constitute about half of all minorities. The Burmese majority is 68 percent of the population.<sup>2</sup> This has meant that ethnic rebellions are both more frequent and more destabilizing for Myanmar than anywhere else in Southeast Asia. Given that Shan Buddhists, Mon Buddhists, Karen Buddhists and Christians, Kachin Christians, and Bengali Muslims (Rohingya) have all fought for autonomy or independence from the Burmese Buddhist majority, the ultimate causes of these conflicts appear to be both ethnicity and religion.

A final case arose much later in Việt Nam, where a long history of often-violent confrontations between Confucian-Buddhists and Catholics exists. In 1963, south Việt Nam experienced the “Buddhist Crisis” caused by the Diem government’s political favoritism of Catholics and its political and legal discrimination against Buddhists who constituted the majority population. When Buddhists protested against these discriminatory policies, the Diem government moved to suppress the protests through state violence involving both the police and military. It was during this crisis that the iconic photos were taken of Buddhist monks immolating themselves in protest. Buddhist protests persisted until near the end of the year, when the protest and other factors caused Diem to lose the support of the United States and was assassinated in a coup. After the North Vietnamese Communist victory, the Vietnamese government secularized, and religion was suppressed and controlled; this resulted in limited religious freedom but better relations between religious groups in Việt Nam.

### Contemporary Cases of Religious Conflict

All the conflicts presented above flared up again, some in the 1970s and others in the 1990s and 2000s. The primordial feelings of religious and ethnic identity, and accompanying desires of autonomy or independence, had never gone away.

The Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*) was formed in the mid-1970s and went so far as to declare Aceh independence despite the



August 15, 2002, students protest in the city of Banda Aceh in Indonesia's rebellious Aceh Province. They were demanding independence of the resource-rich area from Indonesia, where guerillas have been fighting for independence for decades.

Source: Reuters/Tarmizy Harva Alamy Stock Photo.

fact that the movement had very few members and weapons. Desires to have Islam play a greater role in public life never subsided, though now calls for autonomy were more rooted in political rather than religious goals. This initial movement was weak and quickly suppressed. The 1980s saw a renewal of the movement and armed conflict, with rebels having received training in Libya. By 1992, insurgent attacks and Indonesian government counterinsurgency campaigns produced a death toll of roughly 12,000, mostly civilians.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the 1990s, there was movement toward a peace agreement; however, in 2003, the Indonesian government declared martial law in Aceh and a new major government offensive began. The whole situation changed with the tsunami on December 26, 2004, a catastrophic event for Aceh and government troops in the area. Both parties called for a ceasefire. A peace accord was finally signed in 2005 that granted a great deal of autonomy to Aceh Province. While disagreements persist, armed conflict has ceased.

Still, in Indonesia, events just before and after the 1998 fall of President Suharto after thirty years in office destabilized Indonesia. Ethno-religious violence broke out, particularly in the Moluccans and Sulawesi with violence between Muslims and Protestant Christians.

The Moluccas experienced severe violence from 1999 through early 2002, with an estimated 5,000 killed and hundreds of thousands displaced. Violence erupted in Sulawesi in 1998, continuing until 2004, with most of the violence occurring in the first three years. Estimates of the death toll range from 1,000 to over 2,000.<sup>4</sup> In both cases, widespread destruction of homes and businesses took place. The fighting mostly consisted of armed gangs of Christians and Muslims raiding each other's communities and brawling. Rival forces in the Moluccas consisted of local Muslim groups and the Java-based *Laskar Jihad* Forces, which sent troops to the Moluccas to reinforce Muslim fighters opposed by *Laskar Kristus* (Christ Troops). On Sulawesi, Christian forces included the vigilante “Black Bats” and the paramilitary “Christian Red Force,” while Muslim forces consisted in part of the Mujahidin KOMPAK militia of Sulawesi and the *Laskar Jihad*. In both the Moluccas and Sulawesi, the Indonesian government encouraged internal migration of people, mainly from densely populated Java, to less densely populated areas; this led to an influx of Muslim Indonesians into traditionally Christian-dominated areas. Not surprisingly, this caused resentment among Christians. Blame has also been put on the decrease in the importance of indigenous Adat (Southeast Asian Muslim) beliefs and practices. Adat practices continued after Moluccans adopted Christianity and Islam, and they still underlie both Muslim and Christian belief and

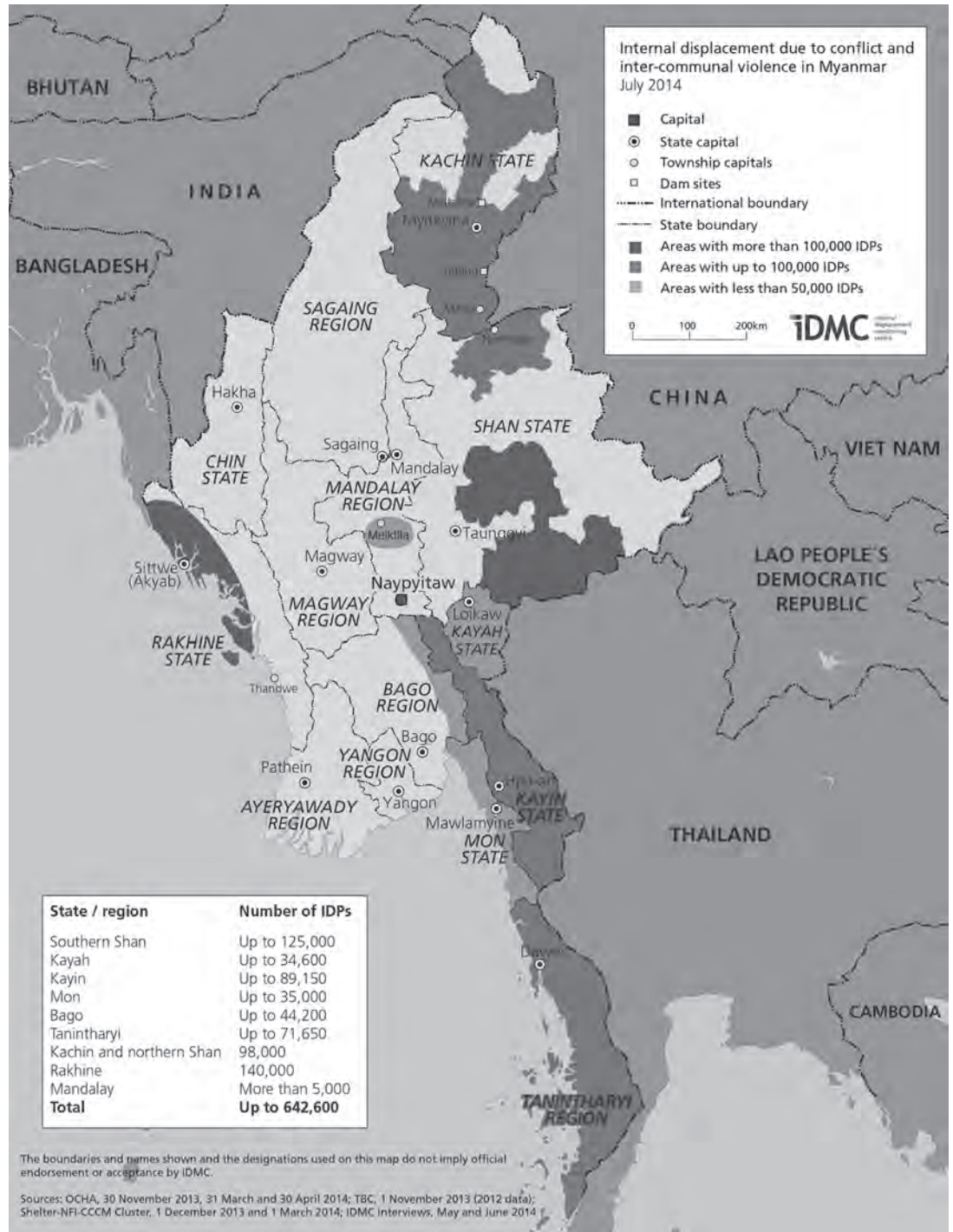
practice. Adat thus forms a link between the two religious communities. However, reformist Muslims increasingly reject Adat as un-Islamic, and thus this crucial traditional link between communities is being severed.

Violence flared again in the three majority Muslim provinces of southern Thailand (Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat) in 2001 and greatly increased in 2004, due in part to Thai government soldiers and the police's harsh treatment of Muslim militant protesters. Muslim militants renewed their demands for full autonomy, if not independence, and the institutionalization of Islamic law and custom. These Muslim insurgents frequently present their struggle as jihad. The conflict remains a low-level insurgency with targeting of soldiers, civilian defense forces, government teachers, Muslims considered collaborators, and occasionally Buddhist monks; however, ordinary citizens are frequently collateral damage in the drive-by shootings and bombings. Soft and hard responses by various Thai governments have had little success, and negotiations usually break down quickly. Most casualties are due to Muslim insurgent attacks, and to date, over 6,500 people have been killed and over 10,000 injured—with thousands of others becoming internally displaced persons.<sup>5</sup>

The Mindanao conflict broke into armed rebellion in the early 1970s and represents one of the longest and bloodiest postcolonial conflicts involving religion. Since that time, the crisis has alternated between periods of intense military clashes, lulls in the fighting and ceasefires. Neither the military dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos nor subsequent democratic governments have been able to either defeat the Moro rebels militarily or come to a satisfactory political agreement. During the late 1990s, it seemed a political settlement was at hand; however, the cycle of violence did not end. As noted, the conflict has been a bloody one, with the estimated death toll climbing to 120,000 people by 2010. Presently, Moro militants, particularly the Abu Sayyaf group, cooperate with international terrorist organizations and have been involved in high-profile kidnappings and extortion.<sup>6</sup>

Problems in Myanmar never stopped; rebellions against the government mixed with ethno-religious conflicts, a Communist insurgency, and warlord drug runners have all continued to take place since decolonization began. Over the years, the Myanmar military government sought ceasefires with rebel groups. Generally, the Buddhist insurgent groups fell in line first, which suggests that being coreligionists does aid in conflict resolution. Currently, most rebel groups have some type of ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar government or have

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2014 IDMC (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center) map of Myanmar. Source: IDMC website PDF document at <https://tinyurl.com/ltr584y>.





Major General Nerdah Bo Mya (front, right) and soldiers of the Karen National Defence Organization. Source: Screen capture from the documentary *Heart for Freedom: The Story of the Karen and the World's Longest War*. A film by Scott Johnson. Scorpion Film Productions and the Tribal Action Group Film. Posted on YouTube by the Tribal Action Group at <https://tinyurl.com/kjxz65r>.



Buddhist nationalist monk holding up an anti-Muslim protest sign. Source: Screen capture from the documentary *Who Are The Rohingya Of Myanmar?* Produced by AJ+. Available on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/ma5jypd>.



A Rohingya boy looking out from behind a makeshift concentration camp fence. Source: Screen capture from the short documentary *The Rohingya People*. Produced by Press TV Doc. Available on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/lj4dcqg>.

simply ceased fighting. A notable exception is the Christian Karen, who continue to hold out. After sixty-plus years, it seems insurgency and opposition to Buddhist rule has become a way of life in Myanmar.

One area of tension in Myanmar that lay quiet for decades but now commands world attention is Rakhine State and the relations between Muslims and Buddhists. Major tensions arose in 2012 when interethno-religious violence between Buddhists and Muslims flared across Myanmar but mainly in Rakhine State. While the death toll in Rakhine remained low, around 100, an estimated 140,000 Rohingya—Bengali Muslims to the Buddhists—were displaced and are still housed in refugee camps. The violence subsided, but tensions remained high and anti-Muslim violence broke out in other regions of Myanmar. November 2016 saw violence erupt again with the killing of Myanmar border police. At the time of writing this article, there is a large government military operation in northeast Rakhine in response to these killings, and the cycle of violence and recriminations has renewed. Buddhists see the Rohingya in particular and other Muslims generally as an existential threat to Buddhism and their particular ethnicity, be it Burmese, Rakhine, Mon, or Shan. The Muslim marriage custom of conversion to Islam, *halal* food, and other practices are seen as divisive and efforts of conversion. The dramatic population growth of the Rohingya—and the neighboring Bangladeshis—is presented as the next phase in the history of Muslim expansion from west to east across Asia that saw all Buddhist cultures disappear along the way. For their part, Myanmar Muslims focus on the immediate human rights abuses and humanitarian crisis, and it is this that resonates in international news reports.

### Analytical Observations

The core question in these cases of religious conflict, as in religious conflicts throughout the world, is whether religion is the cause, a proximate cause, simply a symptom, or even a victim of conflict. This debate is far too large to address here, but we can make a few observations to contextualize the debate in Southeast Asia.

Two policies during both colonial rule and postcolonial statehood have caused interreligious conflict: immigration and privileging. Immigration





July 2015, Camp Darapanan in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, Philippines. Rev. L. Daniel Alba Pantoja with Moro fighters belonging to the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), the armed wing of the MILF. Source: *The PBCI (PeaceBuilders Community Inc.)* page "Understanding the Moro Struggle in Mindanao" at <https://tinyurl.com/ky8htkx>.

caused problems because local communities lost control of immigration. As noted earlier, colonial powers opened borders within their colonies and encouraged migrations beneficial to colonial governments and not the local communities. After independence, many new Southeast Asian nations encouraged internal migration, again ignoring the feelings and rights of local communities within the nation.

Colonial privileging involved a colonial power favoring one ethnic and/or religious group over others. Most often, the privileged were minorities who frequently formed key components of police and military, and were used to control the majority, as was the case with the Bengali Muslims and Karen Christians in British Burma and the Christian Moluccans in Dutch Indonesia. After decolonization, these minorities had no desire to lose their privileged position and again be dominated by the majority. Postcolonial states have generally done just the opposite of the colonial powers by privileging the majority religion, a fact that can be witnessed in Southeast Asian national constitutions. This comes as no surprise and is exactly what the privileged and other minorities wanted to avoid by seeking autonomy or independence during decolonization and state formation.

Useful analytical categories have been developed for investigating religion in politics and religious conflict, three of which will be demonstrated here: primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism. Primordialism means that a religious community, frequently an ethno-religious community, traces its origins to a distant past that establishes ancient roots, creating both a strong feeling of community and a legitimacy to claims of local autonomy. Often, the tradition taken as primordial is in actuality a constantly shifting construct and may not even be that old; however, people believe and feel there is an unchanging religious tradition. Constructivism describes how religious identity is a construction or an invention frequently done by political elites for political purposes. The constructed religious identity often seeks to produce a claim of primordialism, thus legitimizing the demands of the religious group. Instrumentalism holds that religion and ethnicity are means that are used for political and individual ends. In the case of religious conflict, religion may not be the problem itself, but

## Colonial powers opened borders within their colonies and encouraged migrations beneficial to colonial governments and not the local communities.

religion makes an appearance because of its value as a tool in advancing a political position. Both political and religious institutions can use religion in an instrumentalist way, and these three categories can frequently be seen in play at the same time.<sup>7</sup>

The three cases above of Muslim minorities seeking separation from Buddhist and Christian majority nations illustrate nicely the workings of these analytical categories. Both the Malay Muslims in southern Thailand (Pattani Muslims) and the Moros of Mindanao have strong cases as primordial ethno-religious groups. Each has been established in its present area and followed Islam for centuries. The Rohingya, on the other hand, have an extremely weak claim to primordial locality in Rakhine. Rohingya elites have thus resorted to the second category and constructed a history that presents a story of a primordial Rohingya people in Rakhine State. Constructivism is unnecessary for the Pattani Muslims and Moros, though they do sometimes embellish and exaggerate their respective histories. Lastly, all three engage in instrumentalism by using their religion and primordial claims as tools in the political fight for autonomy or independence. Of course, their majority Buddhist and Christian adversaries engage in similar strategies.

In an interesting note on religious solidarity, in the Pattani and Moro cases, Islam serves as a unifying factor; however, the Moro have been more successful in achieving their political aims. For several reasons, the Moro are more united than the Pattani Muslims, and one factor seems to be leadership. The Moro have been led by local elites and political leaders. In contrast, Pattani Muslims have been led by local elites and *religious* leaders.

## Do all religions teach people to be good, and is religion a good in and of itself? Despite all that has been presented here, most Southeast Asians continue to believe this.

The implication is that religious leaders do not make the best leaders in political causes external to the local religious community.

An intriguing thesis to present is Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster, 1996), which states that with the collapse of the bipolar capitalist–communist dynamic in the early 1990s, civilizational factors—religion being a core factor—now define and create intrastate and interstate conflicts. This essay appears to support this thesis in that decolonization experienced outbreaks of religious conflict that in most cases subsided during the bi-polar capitalist–communist Cold War, only to reappear near or at the end of that conflict, much as Huntington predicted. Huntington's statement about "Islam's bloody borders" also rings true because there are conflicts at the three land-maritime borders between majority Muslim states and majority non-Muslim states in Southeast Asia: Bangladesh–Myanmar, Malaysia–Thailand, Malaysia/Indonesia–Philippines. The Aceh case appears to fit the Huntington thesis because while the conflict was between coreligionists, it pitted more fundamentalist Muslims against more moderate ones. Interestingly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) brought together two civilizations during the Cold War—Buddhist and Islamic—that, according to Huntington, create an extremely unstable association. Currently, Islamist movements seem to be aggravating the situation, but all

the religious conflicts presented here predate contemporary Islamism, and thus we need not look to it as the defining culprit; more mainstream Islam appears sufficient in aiding and abetting, if not producing, these conflicts.

### Conclusion

Do all religions teach people to be good, and is religion a good in and of itself? Despite all that has been presented here, most Southeast Asians continue to believe this. Perhaps this is why interreligious dialogue has gained so much ground in Southeast Asia as a solution to the above problems. As a theological process, interreligious dialogue appeals to the religious sentiments of Southeast Asians in a way secular political and economic solutions do not, even though at the same time these same advocates of interreligious dialogue claim the innocence of religion and the guilt of ethnicity, politics, and economics. However, this insistence on interreligious dialogue appears to be a veiled admission of the partial responsibility of religion in cases of conflict. And rightly so, religion is so intricately woven into the personal and public identities of most Southeast Asians that belief systems stand inseparable from ethnicity, politics, economics, and life. Therefore, religion in Southeast Asia stands inseparable from conflict. ■

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### NOTES

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