



Religious Fundamentalism in South-East Asia

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As a region with a long history of trade and interaction with both the East and the West, Southeast Asia is a melting pot of peoples, cultures, and beliefs. At the intersection of the world's most dominant religions, being able to manage the tensions between these beliefs and practices remains a key barrier to progress for the region. In this series, London Politica examines the risks and challenges posed by religious fundamentalism in South-East Asia, and how various governments have tried to tackle them.

Indonesia

Indonesia is home to the greatest number of Muslims in the world, taking in around 225 million Muslims. It is thus no surprise that religious fundamentalism is a concern in Indonesia. The Covid-19 pandemic has given a boost to Islamist groups who claim that the Covid-19 virus is a sign that the end days are coming and that their fight is reaching a climax of sorts. With the Covid-19 virus originating from China, Islamist groups in Indonesia have used that as “God’s sign” that they should focus on attacking Chinese Indonesians. They do this believing Chinese Indonesians are indirectly aiding The Chinese government’s treatment of Muslim Uyghurs. The Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) group, for example, have focused their efforts on violently demonstrating against China.¹ This strong support for the Uyghurs has led other terrorist groups such as the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) to back foreign-based groups such as East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a terrorist group based in Turkmenistan.²

Islamist religious fundamentalism has always been a major concern in Indonesia, but the rise of ISIS has accelerated the impacts of terrorist groups.³ The first group to pledge allegiance to ISIS in Indonesia was the MIT, who are the only terrorist group in Indonesia to have conquered an area of land in Poso. Despite the reduction of Islamist terrorist attacks, which started in January 2016 with family-led bombings, ISIS’ reach is still active in the corners of the Indonesian dark web, where they distribute propaganda and recruit radicalised youths. IHS Markit has stated that low-capability attacks remain “probable”, but the greatest danger lies in the resurgent insurgency in the Papua region. Experts have suggested that Indonesian authorities were largely caught off-guard by the innovation and randomness of the attacks, ranging from family-led bombings in Surabaya in May 2018 to an attack on Indonesia’s Chief Security Minister Wiranto in October 2019. Overall, these attacks and a few other major incidents have left 20 dead and a few dozens injured in recent years. These have led IHS Markit to categorise the risk of Indonesian terrorism as “High”.⁴

The work of counterterrorism police unit Densus 88 (Special Detachment 88) has helped Indonesia avoid a large-scale attack such as the one in Bali. The authorities from 2018 to early 2020 have detained around 700 individuals for terrorism charges. The government has also ramped up efforts by passing a law in 2018 revising existing anti-terrorism laws which now provide for longer detention periods and criminalises foreign fighters. It also gives greater powers to the Indonesian authorities to arrest on suspicion instead of only fighting back whenever an incident occurs. On an international level, Indonesia has also used its

Security Council Presidency of the United Nations to push through a resolution calling for the prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration of those involved in terrorism-related offences.⁵ The domestic and international actions of the Indonesian government show its hard stance against Islamist extremism, which is significant in the country hosting the largest number of Muslims worldwide.

Despite the efforts mentioned above, many concerns remain. In fact, one of the most significant risks is radicalisation.⁶ Out of the many sources of radicalisation, the main three ones are prisons, universities, and religious schools. Research by the University of Indonesia has shown that “high-risk” prisoners recruit other convicts in prison.⁷ In universities, on the other hand, the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) has revealed that terrorist agents have entered universities to radicalise students, even reaching top Indonesian universities such as the University of Indonesia in Jakarta.⁸ Lastly, some pesantrens and madrasahs, or religious schools, have spread extremist teachings and have militarised their students.^{9 10}

Another concern is the growing Arabisation of Indonesia, that is, the import of Saudi-based understandings of the Muslim religion which may blunt the government’s efforts to stop fundamentalist threats.¹¹ The fall of the former governor of Jakarta Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) has acted as a tipping point for Indonesian Islam. At the end of 2016, tens of thousands of Indonesian Muslims marched in Jakarta against what they perceived to be blasphemous comments from Ahok. Following this event, President Joko Widodo appointed conservative cleric Ma’ruf Amin as his Vice President in the 2019 elections, which shows, according to critics, a slide towards a more conservative form of Islam. These events are all accompanied by Indonesia’s trend towards Salafism, a more conservative form of Islam supported by Saudi Arabia. Saudi proselytisation usually goes hand in hand with violent acts against Shia and Sufi Muslims, Christians, and other smaller Muslim sects such as Ahmadiyyah. This could potentially add to the spread of Salafi-Jihadism, thereby accelerating the efforts of terrorist groups to disrupt Indonesia.¹²

In the next five years, many factors will determine whether religious fundamentalism will grow, remain constant or shrink in Indonesia. The first factor is the government’s response. Currently, the government has taken relatively effective measures to stamp out any large incidents, and recent bills have given them more powers to stop lone wolves. However, governmental efforts might stifle if the leadership takes a more conservative turn for electoral purposes. Lastly, the conservative march will need to be closely monitored to assess whether it placates Islamist groups in Indonesia in search of a more conservative government or whether it feeds into the Islamist groups’ narrative of success.

Myanmar

Buddhist fundamentalism in Myanmar burgeoned after the 2011 political reforms, which led to the transfer of governance from the military junta to a civil government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Buddhist fundamentalism in Myanmar is characterised by religious-based nationalism, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric, and communal violence. In Myanmar, where Buddhists account for 80 per cent of the population, Buddhist fundamentalism is critical in analysing Myanmar’s socio-political risk climate.¹

Buddhist fundamentalism, manifested and promoted through nationalist organisations, is emplacing hotbeds of religious clashes across Myanmar. The Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (also known by its Burmese acronym, MaBaTha), later renamed as the

Buddha Dhamma Charity Foundation, is one of the most influential Buddhist nationalist organisations. MaBaTha employs the narrative of a siege mentality on Buddhism to mobilise the Buddhist community, most prominently by conjuring a spectre of an Islamic threat to Buddhism. For instance, they often play up the displacement of Buddhism by Islam in nearby countries such as Afghanistan and Bangladesh, and Islamic terrorism against Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Thailand.² MaBaTha also resorts to using rumours and fake news to instil fear amongst Buddhists. For example, they spread the belief that Muslim men are culprits of raping and forcing Buddhist women to convert to Islam.³ Buddhist fundamentalists consistently rejuvenate these narratives with newer events, such as using the 2017 Muslim-affiliated al-Yaqin attacks in the Rakhine state in Myanmar to continue stoking fear.⁴ The combination of these narratives and the religious legitimacy MaBaTha has through the well-respected Buddhist monks in their ranks means that grassroots support for Buddhist fundamentalism is unlikely to wane.⁵

MaBaTha's relatively successful mobilisation of Buddhists has led to two contemporary risk factors of Myanmar's stability. First, the virality of anti-Muslim hate speech and discrimination by the Buddhist majority, which is heightening ahead of the upcoming elections (as it did in the 2018 by-elections) slated to be held in November 2020.⁶ Second, the episodic violence targeted at Muslims over the past decade, including a Buddhist monk-led mob attack on Muslims during Ramadan prayers in 2019.⁷ The risk of large-scale instability arising from these two factors is not merely hypothetical. In 2013, Buddhist-Muslim tensions led to communal rioting, displacing around 9,000 people from one of Myanmar's major cities, Meiktila.⁸ Seething religious tensions cultivated by Buddhist fundamentalism means that reincarnations of devastating communal violence are not unexpected, particularly in the context of religious identity being a cornerstone in the upcoming national elections.⁹

Instability rooted in religious fundamentalism takes an extreme turn specifically in the Rakhine state in western Myanmar. In the Rakhine state, the socio-political risk is no longer prospective. The Rakhine state is a complicated warzone acting as the nexus of Myanmar's political instability. The conflict traces back to 2017, when Muslim insurgents from the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked multiple police posts in the Rakhine state. Declaring ARSA as a terrorist organisation, Myanmar's military (known as the Tatmadaw) responded violently targeting Rohingya Muslims to the extent the United Nations condemned them for "ethnic cleansing".¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Arakan Army (AA), a Buddhist fundamentalist and secessionist organisation, started its campaign to create an independent state in Rakhine and has been in combat with the Tatmadaw since early 2019.¹¹

The tripartite conflict is unlikely to end soon. Myanmar's government designated the AA as a terrorist organisation in early 2020, signalling their desire to crack down rather than politically engage the AA.¹² Yet, the Tatmadaw is struggling to contend with the AA's guerrilla and terrorist tactics, requiring the Tatmadaw to intensify their firepower.¹³ The implications for Myanmar's political environment is significant. Myanmar's relationship with their western neighbour, Bangladesh, is deteriorating because of a refugee crisis on Bangladesh's borders resulting from the mass exodus of Rohingya Muslims seeking to escape persecution by both the AA and the Tatmadaw. Despite substantial opportunities for economic partnership, Bangladesh is concerned with Myanmar's willingness to take back displaced Rohingyas and the security of their borders.¹⁴ Internally, the Rakhine war is fuelling the Covid-19 crisis. A failed ceasefire in the Rakhine state is witnessing a surge in Covid-19 cases which has spread to the Yangon state, Myanmar's economic hub.¹⁵ Coupled with Myanmar's weak medical infrastructure, especially in the Rakhine state, Myanmar is

becoming an epicentre of the global pandemic.¹⁶ The political, economic, security, and now public health implications the conflict carries are defining the political risk in (western) Myanmar, which is unlikely to diminish in the near horizon.

Discounting the outright war in the Rakhine state, Myanmar's authorities has not been successful in reducing MaBaTha's nationalism in central and eastern Myanmar. Hate speech continues to proliferate despite the government's desire to stand against it. Moreover, attempting to curtail MaBaTha risks enhancing MaBaTha's rhetoric that Buddhism is besieged. After the Sangha Council (Myanmar's Buddhist authority) labelled MaBaTha as an illegal organisation, MaBaTha changed its official name but retained its strong political influence. Moreover, the Tatmadaw, still referring to the organisation as MaBaTha, has explicitly supported MaBaTha in the form of cash donations.¹⁷ Concurrently, the state has to balance the possibility that religious minorities (especially Muslims, but also Christians) slip into violent extremism in response to Buddhist-based discrimination.¹⁸ It is unclear how the state will move forward in its interaction with religious fundamentalism in Myanmar. The state-fundamentalist dynamic will add yet another layer of risk to Myanmar's political landscape.

Philippines

As a predominantly Catholic country and one of the closest allies of the US, one could be forgiven for assuming that the Philippines might be more insulated from religious fundamentalism and terrorism compared to the other more Muslim-dominated countries in ASEAN. However, the archipelago is home to one of the longest ongoing insurgencies in the region, and has been identified as one of the countries most exposed to ISIS in the region.¹ While recent developments such as the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao have paved the way towards greater normalisation and coexistence between the Muslim minorities and the Manila government, the growing internationalisation of the Jihadist movement in the region has proven to be a solid barrier to the peace process, and has greater implications for counterterrorism and radicalisation in ASEAN at large.

Similar to many other separatist movements across Southeast Asia, the conflict in Mindanao can be partially attributed to the partitioning and grouping of kingdoms into various colonial territories. The Moros in the Philippines originate from a group of sultanates that were clustered around the Sulu Sea. With the introduction of the colonial powers, the Sulu sultanate was eventually split between what was to become Sabah in Malaysia, and the Sulu Archipelago that was owned by the Philippines. This bifurcation produces two relevant factors in the assessment of risk in the Philippines: the stressors within Mindanao stem from a "clash between two imagined nations"² of the Moros and the Filipinos, and the links between the Moros across national borders have resulted in security issues that inevitably require the cooperation of more than one national government. In the first factor, the ethno-religious nature of the Moro peoples means that securing peace will be a fraught process over the next few years. The recent years have been a positive step in that direction, with the Philippine government's peace with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) culminating in the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in 2019. A year on, the government has managed to dramatically decrease political violence and demobilise many military groups in preparation for elections in 2022,³ which is an achievement worthy of note. However, while less radical groups such as MILF have acceded to the peace deal, radical jihadist groups that were closer aligned to religious goals have

continued waging a sustained campaign against the Philippine government, most notably in 2017, when a group of ISIS affiliated groups captured the city of Marawi. In order to ensure the long-term stability of any transitional authority, Manila will need to work with BARMM to ensure that they provide a space both for its physical and religious community to thrive. Failing to do so would only give further legitimacy to the groups that are contesting religious hegemony in Mindanao.⁴

Beyond the local resolution of the conflict, it is crucial to acknowledge the wider impacts of terrorism in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. In order to accumulate resources for their organisations, many terrorist groups in the Sulu Sea turn to piracy, which serves as a “force multiplier” for these organisations at the expense of trade and economic stability for the region.⁵ More worrying is the growing integration of terrorist networks across South-East Asia, which utilises the porous border along the Sulu Sea to coordinate attacks and pool resources together. While a large amount of radicalised fighters had previously travelled directly to the Islamic State to support the alleged Caliphate, ISIS has begun focusing on vulnerable areas in the Philippines and South-East Asia, even as its own operations in the Middle East face a coordinated assault from Western coalitions.⁶ Despite the successful expulsion of the militants from Marawi, Duterte’s government has failed to stop an increasing spate of bombings and terrorist attacks, all claimed by ISIS. Worse, a one-two punch of coronavirus and an extensive anti-terrorism act have made it even more difficult to rehouse victims of the war on terror, increasing discontent with the authorities and fuelling radicalisation among the Muslim populace.⁷ Bringing a solution to the Mindanao issue will therefore need close engagement by Manila, both within and outside the Philippines. The global nature of terrorist networks means that the organisations can move and pool resources across various national borders. During the siege of Marawi, ISIS-linked groups received help from jihadists across the region, with some fighters travelling to the city to participate. Stopping the consolidation of terrorist resources would thus require the concerted action of all the South-East Asian governments, giving no chance for groups to retreat and return in the future. For the long-term sustainability of peace in BARMM, the Philippine Government will have to look beyond simply autonomy as a solution against religious fundamentalism. While cracking down on counter terrorist groups prevents the organisation of attacks, it fails to eliminate the underlying factors of discontent that make religious ideologies so appealing in the first place. Ensuring that the Moros are able to be integrated into Philippine society, rather than remaining a hostile minority, will be the necessary and final step towards creating a long-lasting solution in the Philippines.

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