Ethno-Religious Movements As A Barrier to an ASEAN Community

By Thanawat Pimoljinda
Efforts to create a community among members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have so far focused on building greater economic linkages among the countries in the belief that the most promising basis is common prosperity and enhanced trade between ASEAN members.

Thai political scientist Thanawat Pimoljinda, however, argues that the vision of an ASEAN Community is at risk if simmering ethno-religious movements in the region are not confronted.

A COMMITMENT TO deepening regionalization has marked the Association of Southeast Asian Nations since the 1980s. Its explicit expression is the goal of an “ASEAN Community” expressed in the 2003 Declaration of ASEAN Concord II. In line with this declaration, the 12th ASEAN Summit in January 2007 resulted in the Cebu Declaration, which set a goal of establishing the ASEAN Community by 2015. At the latest ASEAN Summit held in Thailand in October 2009, ASEAN leaders reaffirmed their commitment to regional integration and community building in line with the theme of the Summit: “Enhancing Connectivity and Empowering Peoples.”

However, external and internal security issues remain a challenge for Southeast Asian countries. Even though there is an enormous effort to develop peaceful coexistence and constructive economic and political collaboration, the region remains vulnerable to threats stemming from separatist ethno-religious nationalistic movements vying for self-determination and self-government. Such movements are a major challenge to national and regional coherence, and thereby represent a stumbling block to achieving a fully fledged ASEAN Community.

INDIGENOUS MILITANCY
Southeast Asia has been home to indigenous Islamic militant groups for decades. In a historical context, almost all Southeast Asian countries were dominated by colonial powers before World War II. As the war progressed, and then in its aftermath, most territories became independent when their foreign rulers departed either through an independence struggle or voluntarily. In other cases, territories were governed by unrepresentative governments that were both undemocratic and brutal. In many cases these issues affected Muslim identities and values directly and accordingly exacerbated feelings of antagonism and animosity towards central governments, with a far-reaching impact on regional security and stability as a whole.

In response, a minority of Southeast Asian Muslims who have been politicized and radicalized by extra-regional influences, primarily from the Middle East, are willing to use political violence and armed resistance to create Islamic states. In this regard, the conflicts were not only related to ethno-religious disparities, but also political-religious history and social discrimination. These fundamentalist ethno-religious movements are an important challenge to security, national unity and regional stability.

Even today the strategic landscape of Southeast Asia is divided between regional cooperation and terrorist and separatist movements. For example, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Philippines, both of which have links to Indonesian and Malaysian jihadist forces, are pursuing a broadly autonomous Muslim Mindanao region. The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in Indonesia aimed to create an Islamic state in Aceh, but came to an accommodation with the government in 2005. Libya was known to have provided GAM with extensive training in guerrilla techniques. The Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) in
Burma have been fighting to liberate Arakan from Buddhist rule, with the aim of establishing an Islamic state.

In parallel to this, the Pattani insurgent movements in the southern provinces of Thailand also have links to the regional Islamic community. According to the statement of Hali Lukman Bin Lima, the Deputy President of the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), “This is a Jihad against the Thai Buddhist Kafir government aimed at ending domination over our Malay Islamic homeland: Pattani.” In the last several years, insurgents in Thailand have forged an umbrella grouping known by the Malay name “Bersatu” (Unity).

With these challenges in view, it seems that insurgent movements develop from the calls of indigenous rebels for social justice and the maintenance of their own ethnic identity to external linkages with international terrorist groups in the course of a struggle for self-determination.

As a number of regional security analysts have observed, Afghanistan and Pakistan are the international centers for ideological and physical training of Islamist guerrilla and terrorist groups. The end of the Soviet-Afghan War also had an indirect impact on ethno-religious separatist movements, heralding the emergence of Al-Qaeda. Specifically, analysts have said that Al-Qaeda has provided ideological and financial support and training for more than 100,000 Muslim youth to fight in Mindanao in the Philippines, Maluku and Poso in Indonesia, and Burma, including aiding ties to the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which operates in many parts of the region and has had a goal of establishing a Southeast Asian caliphate in Mindanao, Indonesia and parts of southern Thailand and Malaysia.¹

Additionally, in 1995, the Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani (GMIP) in Thailand was formed by Nasori Saesaeng, a veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war. The post-September 11 environment and the fear of global terrorism entering local conflicts have added to tensions and religious conflict in the region.

Even though ASEAN leaders signed the Joint Action to Counter Terrorism at the 7th ASEAN Summit held in Brunei in November 2001, local separatist movements and some transnational terrorist groups are still operating in the region. Unfortunately, the notion of a security community that would enhance cooperation and ensure that member states live in peace in a democratic and harmonious environment did not take into account the issue of ethno-cultural conflicts. In this regard, it might be assumed that Southeast Asian governments ignore or misjudge these challenges. Instead, they focus mainly on economic cooperation, which they believe can bridge the economic development gap among member states and pave the way to closer ASEAN regional cooperation.

**IMPACT ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

In order to achieve an ASEAN Community, the Hanoi Plan of Action, which was ratified during the 6th ASEAN Summit in December 1998, was the first in a series of action plans with the goal of regional integration. This was followed by the Vientiane Action Program, which was proclaimed during the 9th ASEAN Summit in November 2003. In addition, as mentioned at the 10th ASEAN Summit in 2004, ASEAN leaders asserted that the idea of the ASEAN Community would be encouraged through economic integration.

The emphasis has been on economic cooperation and bridging the development gap among member states. This explicitly implies that a security community or socio-cultural community would be achieved through economic dynamism rather than political or security cooperation. Nevertheless, Southeast Asia’s now-
vibrant economic growth, good communication and transportation links and more relaxed visa regimes also make it an attractive operating base for terrorist groups. For example, even if no definite links with external terror groups have surfaced, the arrest of Hambali, JI’s regional operations chief, in Thailand in August 2003 raised fears that the spate of violence in Thailand’s Muslim southern provinces since 2004 is linked to regional extremism, if for no other reason than that Hambali was present in Thailand.

In March 2004, the Philippine government uncovered an Abu Sayyaf plot to launch a series of bombings in Manila. At the same time, JI was held responsible for a series of terrorist attacks, including the 2002 Bali nightclub bombings, the bombing of the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta in 2003, an attack in 2004 on the Australian Embassy, and, most recently, the twin suicide bombings of the JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in July 2009. The attacks mostly targeted symbols of Western countries. Aside from the human cost, these attacks, of course, provoked suspicion on the part of both foreign and local investors regarding instability and insecurity. Other plots have been uncovered in Singapore and defused.

**THE FUTURE OF AN ASEAN COMMUNITY**

The idea of a socio-cultural community is part of what is meant by the ASEAN Community. It was initially broached in the 2003 Declaration of ASEAN Concord II. As a major objective, ASEAN leaders seek to forge a single community that is outward-looking and bounded by a sense of partnership and a caring society that lives in peace and stability. As stated in Article 3 of the declaration, ASEAN “shall urgently and effectively address the challenge of translating ASEAN cultural diversities and different economic levels into equitable development opportunity and prosperity, in an environment of solidarity, regional resilience and harmony.”

This is a tall order. Even if all ASEAN states recognize that the region is composed of diverse ethno-cultural groups, the only effort to respond to this state of affairs has been transnational cooperation to preserve diversity in cultural herit-
age and promote regional identity. ASEAN leaders seem to have overlooked the crisis caused by internal ethno-cultural differences, especially ethnic irredentism on the part of some separatists. As observed, they make no proposals as to what should be done to prevent conflicts stirred up by ethno-cultural tensions. This might also be seen as a failure of the ASEAN Community when it comes to dealing with important challenges.

POLICY CHOICES
ASEAN has indeed contributed to overall stability in the region and to the general feeling of trust among member states. However, if ASEAN leaders aim to develop closer regional cooperation comparable to the European Union (EU), they might simultaneously come face-to-face with ethno-cultural diversities that could undermine progress.

This is not because of member government provocation, but rather because of the existing diversity in individual states. Therefore, ASEAN leaders should pay more attention to ethno-religious separatist movements. Understanding the origins, motivations and objectives of these groups would be helpful for governments in designing specific measures to address insurgencies and terrorism. At the same time, understanding such issues could pave the way for appropriate policies towards minority groups.

If ASEAN leaders are aiming to make economic cooperation the leading factor in the creation of an ASEAN Community, issues of domestic stability and security also need to be addressed. These are unlikely to be limited to the challenges of separatist movements, but they will also involve a broad range of questions relating to people-to-people issues in the region.

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