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Studying Southeast Asian Religious Conflicts: Bringing Back Religion

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

The study of Southeast Asian religious conflicts paradoxically downplays the role of religion in these struggles in favour of essentially nationalist grievances. New insights from the natural sciences suggest that religion should be brought back to the fore in such studies.

Commentary

SOUTHEAST Asia seems to be going through a period of religiously-motivated unrest. Indonesian Islamist militants recently bombed a popular Buddhist temple in Jakarta, in apparent retaliation for violence on Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. The fragile truce between the Buddhist Thai State and Patani Malay-Muslim insurgents in the troubled Deep South of Thailand seems to have shattered, while the nascent peace process between the Catholic Philippine State and Moro Muslim insurgents in Central Mindanao appears similarly stressed.

Furthermore, continuing troubles between the Buddhist Myanmar State and its Rohingya and wider Muslim community have generated regional impacts as well.

More than just political

However, prevailing analysis of these troubles appears largely driven, not by a religious perspective, but by a socioeconomic, political and ultimately nationalist standpoint. An influential school of thought suggests that these conflicts only *appear* religious on the surface, while what really drives them are nationalist political and socioeconomic concerns cloaked in religious garb. In short religion is but a means to an end. Hence religious idioms – whether Islamic or Buddhist as the case may be – merely serve as an ideological mechanism to

justify violence essentially motivated by more traditional socioeconomic and nationalist concerns.

Admittedly, there are other voices amongst Southeast Asian country studies scholars who demur. They insist instead that the religious motif – though not always obvious and often intertwined with nationalist grievances - is the *primary* impulse behind many of these conflicts. As it turns out there are now scientifically sound reasons for this perspective.

A view from the natural sciences

Firstly, some evolutionary psychologists have pointed out that religiosity - basically a belief in supernatural agents - is inescapably rooted in human nature. In particular religiosity is regarded as an evolutionary *by-product* of the human penchant for among other things, cause-and-effect thinking, storytelling and mythmaking. The religiosity instinct interacts with environmental influences throughout an individual's lifetime and this interaction determines whether he turns out as a fundamentalist, atheist, agnostic or believer.

Religiosity - as the individual instinct - moreover becomes religion the cultural system at the group level. Religion, comprising a combination of supernatural agents, symbols, myths and collective rituals, is very much an *adaptation* to promote in-group cohesion vis-a-vis out-groups. Neuroscientists, social psychologists and evolutionary biologists have added that this ingroup/outgroup divide is pervasive and universal.

Moreover, they emphasise that the ultimate roots of intergroup violence go well beyond relatively ephemeral nationalist and ideological grievances, and are located instead within in-group ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and the drive for higher social status in relation to relevant out-groups.

Secondly, it should be noted that nationalism is itself rooted in religion. Evolutionary anthropological evidence indicates that religion is the most powerful institution in human history. It evolved as an adaptation to enable the members of an in-group to cohere effectively so as to rival out-groups and vanquish them. Evolutionary-minded religious scholars have shown that religious symbols have historically included sacred physical space such as territorial homelands.

Religion scholar Mark Juergensmeyer thus hits the target when he observes that "secular nationalism" possesses "many of the characteristics of a religion, including doctrine, myth, ethics, ritual experience, and social organisation," and importantly – the ability "to give moral sanction to martyrdom and violence." This is precisely why it is said that, "beneath the surface of nationalism often lies religion."

Bringing back religion

Taking religion as a central factor - rather than as a peripheral adjunct to nationalism - would enable students of Southeast Asian conflict to pick out elements they would have otherwise dismissed as of marginal relevance. Some key instances: the founder of the Indonesian Darul Islam movement Kartosuwiryo was a dedicated Sufi who believed in spirits and whose Javanese mysticism added to his mass political appeal; the ringleaders of the historic 28 April 2004 mass assault by Patani Malay-Muslim insurgents on Thai government targets in the Deep South reportedly expended time and effort on blessing knives and swords, shirts, and amulets belonging to individuals involved in the attacks, and even deployed "holy sand" on roads leading to their targets to prevent security forces from interfering with their plans; the invoking of religious oaths by the leaders of both Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah and Patani Malay-Muslim militants to ensure loyalty on pain of divine retribution; the constant fissuring of the Moro Islamist movement in Mindanao into splinter groups declaring themselves to be more genuinely Islamic than the predecessors, the latest being Umbra Kato's Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF); and the controversial Myanmar Buddhist leader Wirathu's deep-seated fear that Buddhism in that country would be rendered extinct within 100 years by rapidly growing Muslim masses.

In short, these conflicts have never been animated simply by socioeconomic grievances and nationalist sentiments. The religious motif has always been integral to the fabric of these struggles, rather than playing a merely instrumental role. Thus the religion factor should arguably be front and centre of the analysis.

Implications

Two implications may arise.

Firstly, the finer details may vary across national boundaries, but the general principle should be clear: over and above policy solutions seeking to improve socio-economic governance and address nationalist political concerns, equal or greater effort must be employed in ensuring adequate respect for the relative social standing, sacred practices and cherished symbols of affected religious communities in regional conflicts. In sum, religion matters.

Secondly, from an analytical standpoint, staying within one's disciplinary comfort zone seems closed-minded. Southeast Asian country studies scholars have performed a crucial service by exhaustively sketching out the pressing themes, key social actors and groups pertinent to any conflict and the relationships between them. But more can be done.

What is needed is what legendary Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson calls a *consilient* approach integrating insights from the natural and social sciences in a careful, systematic manner. Only then will the study of the role of religion in Southeast Asian religious conflicts be put arguably on a more nuanced and policy relevant footing.

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