



Armed Muslim Separatist Rebellion in Southeast Asia: Persistence, Prospects, and Implications

ANDREW TAN

Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies
Nanyang Technological University
Singapore

The persistence of armed Muslim separatist rebellion in Southeast Asia is demonstrated by the ongoing rebellions in Aceh and Mindanao. A strong regional identity infused with Islam has been a binding factor in these separatist movements. Their persistence demonstrates the failure of Indonesia and the Philippines in achieving legitimacy for their post-independence political structures as well as continued internal weakness. The prospects for their quick and peaceful resolution are not good. The external dimension of Muslim separatism has heightened mistrust among states in the region and raised apprehensions over the broader issue of Islamic fundamentalism and the implications for the region should Aceh and Mindanao achieve secession.

The Persistence of Armed Separatist Rebellion in Southeast Asia

Armed separatist rebellions have continued to constitute serious challenges to the security of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states, notwithstanding the rapid economic development of the region as a whole, and the end of the Cold War in 1989. The persistence of armed rebellion demonstrates that some states in Southeast Asia are still relatively weak and continue to face a fundamental problem with legitimacy.

There have been several significant armed separatist movements in the region. The ethnic separatist movements in Myanmar broke out in 1948 but appear to be well under control in 1999, especially with the defeat of the long-running Karen rebellion. However, while the Muslim separatist movement in southern Thailand has not made much headway and the situation has been relatively stable, the same cannot be said for the Moro rebellion in the southern Philippines as well as the Aceh rebellion in Indonesia. In these instances, the separatists have mounted very credible challenges to the authority of the central government.

Islam has assumed greater significance of late, given the persistence of demands for separate Islamic states in Mindanao and Aceh, and the desire to impose hudud laws in Aceh as well as the northeastern Malaysian states of Kelantan and Terengganu following

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Address correspondence to Andrew Tan, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, South Spine S4, Level B4, Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798.
E-mail: isthtan@ntu.edu.sg

the electoral gains of the fundamentalist Partai Islam (PAS) in Malaysia in 1999. Indeed, the Malaysia and Indonesia governments have cited extremism arising from the Islamic religious revivalism as a sufficiently serious internal security threat to merit extraordinary administrative and military measures to contain it.

The rise of political Islam in maritime Southeast Asia has exacerbated center-periphery relations, worsened ethnic and religious conflicts (particularly with Christians), and caused fissures within the body politic, especially with more modernist Muslim elements. In both Malaysia and Indonesia, the response to modernization has been a retreat towards Islamization, with schisms separating moderate modernist Muslims and the more pious fundamentalists. This in turn has put more pressure on governments of both countries to respond to the demand for greater Islamic values and practices. In turn, this has raised doubts over their ability over the long term to maintain their multi-racial secular orientation. Moreover, the spectre of Islamic extremism cannot be dismissed, if the experience of the Middle Eastern states, which have to grapple with the extremist Muslim Brotherhood, is any guide.

In addition, the mere possibility of independent Aceh and Mindanao, and perhaps a semi-autonomous fundamentalist Kelantan and Terangganu, conjure images of Central Asia and the northwestern corner of South Asia, where there are unstable and warring Islamic regimes and factions. Added to these fears have been real apprehension over the possibility that post-Suharto Indonesia could indeed fall apart, particularly if Aceh does manage somehow to obtain independence. This could result in a situation akin to Yugoslavia, with a number of squabbling mini-states, some of which could be of a fundamentalist Islamic orientation, characterized by instability and conflict.

Armed rebellions in Southeast Asia have been notable for their persistence, which has been reflected in several ways. The first is their duration.¹ Dan Smith commented that civil conflict “resembles a slow torture . . . they simply continue. More than half the wars of the 1990s lasted more than five years, two-fifths lasted more than ten years and a quarter more than twenty.”² In Southeast Asia, many of the armed rebellions have gone on for many years, for instance, the Muslim separatist movements in southern Thailand, southern Philippines, and Aceh. The Karen and other ethnic rebellions in Myanmar started at the end of World War II and went on for some 50 years.

The second is their very severity. The Rwanda conflict was especially savage, with the loss of life totalling some 500,000 in just one month.³ In Southeast Asia, the most underreported conflict has been the Mindanao civil war involving Muslim separatists and the Philippine armed forces, a conflict that broke out in the early 1970s and which has caused some 100,000 casualties and over 500,000 fleeing as refugees.⁴

The third is their resistance to negotiated settlement. Kegley and Wittkopf have commented that “making peace among rival factions that are struggling for power, driven by hatred, and poisoned by the inertia of prolonged killing that has become a way of life is very difficult.”⁵ Thus, there has been no easy solution, for instance, to the Moro problem in Mindanao, given the long history of Christian-Muslim bitter animosities and conflict there and the determination of the Moros to achieve independence. In Aceh, the sense of separateness is also very strong, given the strong local identity that has been infused with Islam, the proud historical heritage of having being an important kingdom in the past, the sense of bitterness generated by the brutality of counterinsurgency operations by the Indonesian armed forces, and what they see as discrimination and rapaciousness on the part of the central Javanese government.

Another feature can also be added, that of its linkage to an external dimension. The external links between Muslim separatist rebellions is the most significant, involving

co-religionists in other ASEAN states. Separatist rebellions in southern Thailand, the southern Philippines, and Aceh in Indonesia all have an external dimension, involving co-religionists and ethnic kin elsewhere in the region as well as the support and sympathy of the international Islamic community.

This article will examine armed Muslim separatism in Southeast Asia. It will examine three related questions: (1) What accounts for the persistence of armed Muslim rebellions in the region? (2) What are the prospects for their resolution? and (3) What are the implications for the region? The article will focus on the Moro and Aceh rebellions. The Muslim separatism in southern Thailand is left out, due to constraints of space and to the fact that the situation there has been relatively stable for some time. Indeed, Bangkok's more sensitive developmental approach has taken the sting out of the Muslim separatists, although they are by no means crushed.

The Problem of Legitimacy

The persistence of the Moro and Aceh Muslim separatist rebellions demonstrates the failure of Indonesia and the Philippines in achieving legitimacy for their post-independence political structures as well as continued internal weakness. The presence of fundamental differences with the dominant ethnic/religious group and the central government imply that the prospects for their peaceful resolution are poor. Moreover, the external dimension of these separatisms has also heightened mistrust among the states in the region. In addition, fears have been raised over the broader question of Islamic fundamentalism as well as the implications for the region should Aceh and Mindanao achieve secession.

The fact that the ASEAN states (except for Thailand) have been artificially cobbled together by departing colonial powers has meant that some states have relatively underdeveloped institutions and lack national cohesion. Their governments thus face the problem of legitimacy, which is accentuated in situations where that legitimacy is regarded as suspect due to the authoritarian political domination by an elite, such as the military in Thailand and Indonesia, or a political strongman, such as in the Philippines under Marcos. In recent times, the real fear of a break-up of Indonesia, Yugoslavia-style, in the wake of the ethnic, religious, political, economic, and social fissures in that country in the post-Suharto era, has demonstrated that this problem of legitimacy is very real, at least in the case of some countries in the region, such as Indonesia.

The ASEAN states thus exhibit the classic feature of many decolonized developing countries, that is, the lack of a close fit between nation and state. They are in fact multinational or multi-ethnic states, where the dominant ethnic group invariably holds the reins of power over other significant ethnic minorities that are often located at the periphery. There are also further complications due to differences in religion, geography, and historical experiences. The nation-building efforts of the dominant group, however, often require the subordination of the minorities, creating grievances that tend to find expression in demands for separatism or irredentism.

Armed separatism can be defined as "a process whereby an ethnic group . . . seeks to secede or gain autonomy from the control, *de facto* and *de jure*, of a given state, through an organised and purposeful use of force, alone or in combination with other means."⁶ A broader interpretation is provided by Donald Horowitz, who defined it as "attempts by an ethnic group claiming a homeland to withdraw with its territory from the authority of a larger state of which it is part."⁷

These separatisms are not merely based on territorial grounds alone, but must have

as their basis a sense of community that provides a network of communications and a basis for leadership. As McVey has noted, some of the most serious and persistent separatist movements have depended greatly on a consciousness of past importance as a state. The fact that the Muslim sultanates of Aceh, Sulu (in the southern Philippines), and Pattani (in southern Thailand) were historical power centers, enduring until recent times, provided self-confidence and a network of leaders who have retained their prestige.⁸

Despite decades of independence and nation-building, the issue of armed separatism has remained very much alive in the internal politics of some of the ASEAN states. There have been several major armed separatist movements extant in the ASEAN states since 1975: the armed Muslim separatist movements in the southern Philippines, southern Thailand and Aceh, the Free Papuan Movement in Irian Jaya, the East Timorese resistance movement, and the Karen rebellion in Myanmar (the most significant, although a number of smaller ethnic groups have rebelled since 1948). Of these, the East Timor movement has had the greatest success, achieving independence through a UN-supervised referendum in 1999. On the other hand, the Karens have only recently been defeated by the central government in Myanmar.

While some of these examples cited are Islamic in character, their separatist demands reflect their claims to difference and the right to exist as separate nation-states. In East Timor and in Irian Jaya, the resistance to Indonesian rule has centered on their forced incorporation into Indonesia—East Timor in a brutal invasion in 1976 and Irian Jaya earlier in 1962. The Christian nature of the peoples in these two areas is significant in the context of their sense of separate national identities and the rejection of the Javanese Muslim/abangan central Indonesian government and its institutions as a foreign imposition.

In all cases of separatism, one can detect the clash between the dominant group and its cultural values and the subordinate one with its own religious-cultural identification. The national identity is invariably defined in terms of the dominant group's values and culture, with other groups in the periphery tending to be left out. Thus, Thai nationality, which revolves around Buddhism, Thai culture and language, and the Thai monarchy, is alien to the Malay minority in southern Thailand, which subscribe to Islam, and have their own royal traditions, language, history, and culture.

Similarly, in the southern Philippines, the Muslim Moros are an anomaly in a country dominated by Catholics heavily influenced by Spanish and American culture. As W. K. Che Man has pointed out, the Malay Muslims of both Pattani and Mindanao have been historically autonomous and distinct peoples, with the persistence of the separatist movements an indicator of their will to survive, with their struggles for independence characterized by periodic resurgence and recidence depending on internal and external factors.⁹

In Aceh, the sense of separateness is also very strong, given the strong local identity that has been infused with Islam, the proud historical heritage of having being an important Islamic kingdom in the past, the sense of bitterness generated by the brutality of counterinsurgency operations by the Indonesian armed forces, and what they see as discrimination and rapaciousness on the part of the central Javanese government. In addition, there is also a clash of ethnicity and religious differences. The Acehnese resent the Javanese, which dominate the bureaucracy and the armed forces. Moreover, the Acehnese adhere to a much stricter form of Islam compared to the more abangan or nominal Muslim lifestyle of the Javanese.

In all three states, the presence of large numbers of the dominant group in territory traditionally populated by these minorities, and the heavy-handed, often insensitive at-

tempts by the central authorities to impose “national” values, that is, the values of the dominant group, on the minorities, have resulted in resentment and the fear of losing their own identity to what they see as foreigners and intruders. Accentuating the problem is the attitude of members of the dominant group, which sees minorities as inferior and therefore feel justified in taking advantage of them. Thus, Catholic Filipinos see the Muslims as inferior, and have proceeded, with the assistance of corrupt local officials and the police, to takeover vast tracts of land in Mindanao (since Muslims rarely record land titles), for the purpose of agriculture and plantation activities, thus depriving local minorities of their land, rights, and means of livelihood. In Aceh, the Javanese-dominated central government has kept the bulk of natural gas revenues from the province, where there is widespread poverty and unemployment. Random brutality by the Indonesian armed forces, which has acted more like an occupation force, has also alienated many Acehnese. Not surprisingly, this has fueled anti-Jakarta sentiments.

Paribatra and Samudavanija have thus noted that:

In post-colonial Southeast Asia . . . it has been conveniently forgotten by central governments that the constructing of what is more accurately a state-nation, merely means that external or western imperialism had been replaced by an internalized one, which is potentially more brutal and enduring.¹⁰

It is therefore not surprising that armed separatism occurs as a means of expressing frustration over their inferior positions, and to redress the situation through the use of force. Since peaceful secession is virtually out of the question in centralized nationalistic states such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, armed separatism is the only solution.

The Moro Rebellion in the Philippines

The Moro rebellion in the Philippines has been the largest and most persistent of the armed separatist movements in the region since 1975. The roots of the conflict go well back into colonial history, when the Islamization of the Philippine islands was halted by the Spaniards, who arrived in 1565. They defeated the Moros in the north and continually attacked the Moro sultanates in Mindanao and the Sulu islands in the south for the next 350 years. Despite these attempts, the Spaniards were never able to completely subdue the Moros due to the strength of their resistance. The Moros subsequently disputed the handover of all the Philippine islands, including Moro lands in the south, to the United States in 1898 following the Spanish-American War of that year. Anti-American resistance was crushed in a brutal campaign of pacification. After that, the situation was aggravated by a massive influx of Catholic settlers from the north.¹¹

By the 1960s, the Moros had become a minority in many parts of their traditional homeland, with many losing their land to the immigrant settlers through dubious legal transactions or outright confiscation. Indeed, Catholics outnumber Muslims in most provinces in the south today. The problem of growing Moro landlessness was compounded by the settlement of many surrendered communist Huk rebels who were given land in the south. Violent confrontations between Muslims and Catholics became so serious that President Marcos imposed martial law in 1972.¹²

The very real grievances of the Moros were reinforced by a growing sense of Muslim identity associated with the worldwide Islamic resurgence. New mosques were built and contacts with Islamic organizations in the Middle East, Indonesia and Malaysia

were established. In 1969, the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM) was created and it vowed to establish an independent state in Mindanao, the Sulu and Palawan islands.¹³ At about the same time, other radical Muslim organizations, the Union of Islamic Forces and Organisations (UIFO) and the Ansar El Islam were also established. Overseas sympathizers in the Middle East, notably Libya, also established an Islamic Directorate of the Philippines to coordinate overseas assistance. The goal of the Moros was independence; this was clearly stated in the MIM Constitution, which said that “the policy of isolation and dispersal of the Muslim community by the government . . . has been detrimental to the Muslims and Islam” and that “Islam being a communal religion and ideology, and at the same time a way of life, must have a definite territory of its own for the exercise of its tenets and teaching, and for the observance of its sharia and adat laws.”¹⁴

In 1969, a group of Muslims from the MIM and the UIFO began military training in camps in the Malaysian state of Sabah, where they received the support of its then chief minister, Tun Mustapha, with the tacit agreement of the Malaysian government.¹⁵ Another group also apparently trained in Malaysia in areas close to the Thai border.¹⁶ One reason for the Malaysian government’s support was its desire to retaliate against Marcos’s sponsorship in 1968 of military training in Corregidor for an intended separatist rebellion in Sabah, which is claimed by the Philippines. This operation had fallen apart and became public when the trainees mutinied.¹⁷

This support from Malaysia has been crucial to the formation of the Moro rebel armies, for the Malaysian trainees returned and went on to organize and lead separatist guerilla armies. One of them, Nur Misuari, a former student at the University of the Philippines, founded the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1972. Misuari was able to capitalize on popular Moro resentment over the influx of Catholic settlers and the general economic poverty in the south. The MIM was dissolved in its favor, and the MNLF also succeeded in obtaining the support of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM), the Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC), and Libya.¹⁸ Large numbers of Muslims joined the MNLF as it launched a jihad against the central government.

The MNLF’s military arm, the Bangsa Moro Army, conducted a bitter guerilla campaign against the Philippine Armed Forces. Over 100,000 deaths occurred in a huge civil war, with over 500,000 fleeing as refugees.¹⁹ The scale of fighting was such that the Philippine government felt compelled to negotiate a settlement. The result was the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, which was brokered by the OIC. Misuari compromised by accepting autonomy for 13 of Mindanao’s 21 provinces, rather than outright independence. However, mutual recriminations saw the agreement break down almost as soon as it was signed, and the conflict resumed.²⁰

A split within the MNLF saw the setting up of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MNLF saw a number of setbacks, with top leaders defecting to either cooperate with the government or to join the MILF. In 1982, another split occurred when another MNLF leader established the MNLF Reformist Group (MNLF-RG) with its headquarters in Malaysia, reflecting the continued tacit Malaysian support for the Moros, a result of religious and ethnic identification and also a pressure tactic to dissuade the Philippines from actively pursuing its claim to Sabah.

The MILF has been critical of the leftist orientation of the MNLF, and has sought to emphasize its Islamic credentials and identity. Its eventual objective is an independent Muslim Moro state. Led by Hashim Salamat, a religious leader trained at Cairo’s Al-Azhar University, the MILF had, by the 1990s, become the main Moro rebel move-

ment. It is well organized and has several imams or Muslim religious leaders as its members. Its armed wing, the Bangsa-Moro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) has grown tremendously, eclipsing the MNLF.²¹

The BIAF is also militarily proficient, led by officers trained by ex-British Special Forces in Sabah in the 1960s, and bolstered by large periodic shipments of arms such as Russian-made RPG-2 rocket-propelled grenade launchers, mortars, and machine guns, and allegedly U.S.-made Stinger anti-aircraft missiles that were originally supplied to the Afghan mujahideen in their war of resistance against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Many members of the BIAF also gained combat experience in Afghanistan as volunteers fighting alongside the anti-Soviet mujahideen resistance forces.²² While the MNLF is confined to isolated Sulu and draws its support from the Tausug ethnic group there, the MILF has the support of 1.6 million Maguindanaos who live on the larger island of Mindanao, as well as the largest Muslim ethnic group, the 1.9 million Maranaos.²³

The MILF has clashed with government forces in over 100 incidents since 1986, with a major clash in December 1994 when the government challenged the MILF's arrangements to provide protection for a South Korean company working on an irrigation project in North Cotabato province.²⁴ However, most of the confrontations have been mostly small-scale clashes. The government has concentrated on negotiations with the more amenable MNLF, the most internationally visible group. On the other hand, it has largely left the MILF, which will not compromise on an independent Muslim Moro state, alone. The MILF had wisely avoided major clashes with the government, and had thus been able to concentrate on building up its strength throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s. Today, the MILF claims to be able to field 120,000 mujahideen in four fully armed divisions, a force numerically superior to the entire Philippines Armed Forces but one that top Philippine commanders conceded was possible.²⁵ Western military intelligence estimates put its standing army at 35,000, a still formidable force.²⁶

An effort on this scale stems from the MILF's ability to obtain funds from sympathetic Islamic organizations abroad, in Malaysia, Pakistan, and the Middle East, and the fact that it has the support of Moro religious leaders. The MILF today is in control of large swathes of at least seven provinces in Mindanao, with the present Philippine government unwilling or powerless to challenge the movement. In fact, local officials have little choice but to actively cooperate with it, given its control on the ground. The MILF has its own 80-strong Consultative Assembly and draws popular support from Muslims throughout Mindanao. In short, the MILF acts as a *de facto* government overseeing large areas of territory in Mindanao.

In contrast, the MNLF is more secular in orientation and more willing to compromise. The overthrow of Marcos in 1986 brought to power Corazon Aquino, who was prepared to grant a measure of autonomy to Mindanao. The MILF refused to participate, and the central government proceeded to negotiate only with Misuari's MNLF. Misuari was prepared to give up his demands for a separate state, but there were practical difficulties in defining what autonomy meant, as Muslims were now a majority in only 5 of the 23 provinces of Mindanao and Sulu. Moreover, the Philippine military opposed the peace negotiations. The MILF also launched attacks on the government and even attacked MNLF units in a bid to scuttle the negotiations.

In any event, Misuari broke off talks in mid-1987 after accusing the armed forces of violating the cease-fire agreement. It was also clear to him that Aquino was not prepared to fully implement the Tripoli Agreement. Nevertheless, Aquino proceeded to establish the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao in 1990, which was, however,

too limited in scope for the Moro rebels to accept, as it covered only four provinces and the city of Marani, where the Muslims are in a majority.²⁷

Misuari, however, has proved amenable to negotiations. In October–November 1993, with the assistance of the Indonesian government and the OIC, the central Philippine government met with MNLF representatives and signed an agreement to establish an autonomous region in Mindanao, as well as a cease-fire agreement. Several committees were set up to resolve the issues relating to autonomy. In a significant gesture, Indonesian President Suharto congratulated the participants and expressed his hope that the process would continue until a comprehensive peace settlement was reached.²⁸ However, the main obstacle had been the insistence of the government that it was bound by the constitution to organize a referendum on autonomy, something that the MNLF was opposed to since Catholics outnumber Muslims in most of these provinces.²⁹ The impasse weakened the MNLF, which suffered defections and the loss of a substantial support base to the MILF. Its military position also weakened following the surrender of a number of its military commands in response to the Philippine government's reconciliation efforts. In March 1993, for instance, as many as 500 MNLF rebels surrendered, citing their trust in President Ramos's programs.³⁰

The OIC and the Indonesian government have proven to be important moderating influences, and their consistent support for the MNLF led to its international prominence.³¹ The MNLF has thus been amenable to negotiation despite the fact that it involves autonomy and not outright independence. For its part, the Philippine government has welcomed the intervention and involvement of the OIC and the Indonesian government, recognizing their vital moderating role and also the reality that it could not defeat the rebels on the battlefield. In December 1993, the OIC secretary-general visited Manila to discuss the outcome of the talks and he took the opportunity to commend President Ramos's "sincere desire" to resolve the issue in a "just and lasting way." In a pointed snub to the Islamic-oriented MILF, he commended the efforts for peace made by "the sole legitimate representative of the Muslims of the southern Philippines, Nur Misuari."³²

However, a measure of the failure of Misuari to command popular support or even full support within his own ranks was reflected in the military attacks waged by renegade MNLF commands, which refused to accept the cease-fire agreement or the negotiations, launching a wave of bombings in southern cities in 1993 and 1994.³³

The peace process is also hampered by the activities of the extremist Islamic movement, the Abu Sayaff Group (literally "sword bearer"). Founded by Amilhussin Jumaani and Abdurajak Abubakkar Janjalani in 1991, this armed terrorist group is opposed to any religious accommodation with the Christians and believes that violent action is the only solution. A wave of violence broke out in 1993, with the Abu Sayaff targeting Catholic civilians in a number of atrocities.³⁴ Although it is estimated to be only about 500 strong and does not control territory or a regular army (unlike the MILF), it is well led by Muslim veterans of the Afghanistan conflict. In addition, it has proven skillful in waging urban terrorism. The group, which operates in Sulu Island and Basilan, suffered a setback when government troops attacked and captured its largest camp on Basilan in June 1994, killing 41 guerillas in the fighting.³⁵ However, the Abu Sayaff has been able to attract the sympathy and active support of a number of ex-MNLF supporters disillusioned with Misuari's leadership, particularly his willingness to negotiate with the government.³⁶

The Philippines Armed Forces concentrated on destroying the Abu Sayaff, claiming in August 1994 that it had been "completely annihilated."³⁷ However, on 4 April 1995,

200 guerillas of the Abu Sayaff arrived in the Christian town of Ipil and killed 57 people, setting the town centre on fire. The guerillas took hostages and retreated when government troops arrived. The attack also exposed the government's military ineptitude; after four battles, the pursuing and numerically superior government forces failed to defeat the retreating rebels.³⁸ The attack came at an awkward time for Ramos, with congressional and local elections to be held in May 1995, undermining Ramos's claim that the internal security situation was under control. For his part, Misuari condemned the violence and stated that the attack was meant to sabotage peace talks between the MNLF and the government.³⁹ Misuari, however, admitted that some of his top commanders had opposed the peace negotiations and had been attracted to Abu Sayaff. More pointedly, the retreating rebels in the Ipil attack took refuge in an MNLF camp registered under the peace talks and therefore could not be attacked by government troops.⁴⁰

More seriously, the Abu Sayaff has connections with international Muslim terrorist groups. Indeed, today's most wanted international terrorist leader, ex-Saudi Osama bin Laden, had sent the Pakistani terrorist Ramzi Yousef to train the Abu Sayaff in the use of sophisticated high explosives. Yousef had achieved infamy with daring terrorist acts, such as his bombing of the World Trade Center in New York in 1993. Bin Laden also helped to bankroll the activities of the group.⁴¹ With training and money provided by international Islamic terrorists, the Abu Sayaff was thus able to wreck havoc in the southern Philippines.

Thus, Misuari's willingness to compromise has been encouraged as much by the decline in MNLF strength as the Islamic international community's moderating influence. The MILF took advantage of the cease-fire to build up its own strength, to the point that it is now the dominant Moro rebel group, not the MNLF. The Philippine government has tacitly acknowledged the strategic reality by refraining from challenging the MILF on the ground, with local authorities making their own arrangements with MILF officials and commanders. Thus, concurrent with the growing strength of the extremist Abu Sayaff and the MILF in the 1990s, moderates such as Misuari have been increasingly sidelined by the strategic realities on the ground.

Realizing this, Misuari finally signed a peace agreement in August 1996, in which the MNLF would establish a council to oversee development projects in Mindanao, with a Muslim autonomous region to be established after a referendum in 1999. The MILF, however, denounced the agreement and declared that it was taking over the revolutionary movement.⁴² MILF Chairman Hashim Salamat stated that "the Ramos-Misuari agreement does not address the Mindanao Muslims' demand for self-rule. It is an outright violation of the Tripoli agreement."⁴³ To underline their aspirations, some 60,000 Muslims gathered in the southern town of Sultan Kudarat and issued a call for an independent Islamic state.⁴⁴ The majority Christians also refused to accept the agreement, mounting a number of public demonstrations against it to show their opposition to any concession to Muslims.⁴⁵ This obviously does not augur well for a lasting and durable peace.

After years of refusing to join the negotiating table despite overtures from the government, the MILF finally met with Philippine government representatives in January 1997 and agreed to begin formal peace talks. However, the MILF set a tough agenda, stating that the peace talks would discuss the "Bangsamoro problem," that is, an independent Muslim state.⁴⁶ After tough negotiations, all that was achieved was a tenuous cease-fire that officials hoped would create a more conducive atmosphere for talks on a possible peace agreement.⁴⁷

A large number of clashes in 1997, however, resulted in 44,000 refugees and an

unspecified death toll, with the Philippine military continuing to deploy 4 of its 6 army divisions in Mindanao.⁴⁸ By January 1999, full-scale fighting erupted after President Estrada declared that “if they want war, we will give them war.”⁴⁹ The Philippine armed forces launched a major offensive on 26 January, prompting the MILF to declare that “we will meet force with equal force.”⁵⁰ Underlying the outbreak of hostilities was the perceptible failure of Nur Misuari to bring about any development to the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, enabling the MILF to exploit pent-up frustrations and recruit even more members into its ranks. Indeed, Moro landlessness had been compounded by continuing poverty and unemployment, which was not helped by the corruption of the local bureaucracy, discrimination against Muslims, and the lack of regional development. Both sides have hardened their stance, with the MILF insisting on an independent Muslim state, and President Estrada stating his view in graphic terms—“over my dead body.”⁵¹

Despite the fighting, mediation by the OIC and the Muslim World League resulted in formal peace negotiations commencing in October 1999. Encouraged by East Timor’s independence in 1999, the MILF demanded an independent Islamic state. Maintaining a hardline stance, the MILF declared that “the same demand will be aired, 20 years or even 100 years from now because the Bangsamoro people believe that independence is the ultimate solution to the Mindanao problem.”⁵² However, the main stumbling block to this was not merely the central government’s opposition to an independent Moro state, but the fact that Catholics outnumber the Muslims in most provinces in Mindanao. The Catholics are not likely to acquiesce to this and would most certainly take up arms to oppose such an eventuality.

In spite of the ongoing peace talks, armed clashes have continued. Clashes in November 1999 left a number dead on both sides. In a show of force, the MILF also attacked a Christian village, taking over 100 hostages, although they were later freed unharmed. Predictably, both sides blamed the other for insincerity and for affecting the peace talks.⁵³

In late November 1999, new Indonesian president Gus Dur waded into the picture by suggesting a meeting with the MILF during his state visit to the Philippines. The meeting eventually failed to materialize following opposition from the Philippine government but it was unlikely that Gus Dur would have encouraged the MILF to secede, given a similar problem in Aceh in Indonesia.

However, the MILF is not likely to compromise over its long-term goal of an independent Islamic state. At some point in time, it could well press this objective through full-scale rebellion. The MILF is capable of doing so, given its increasing military strength, control of territory, and support of radical Muslims overseas. This would plunge the Philippines into a huge all-out civil war and reprise the earlier conflict with the MNLF, one that had caused over 100,000 deaths and a refugee crisis numbering over 500,000.

The Moro problem thus demonstrates all the classic characteristics of a civil war. The severity of it is beyond doubt although it has been interesting that this severity has not captured international attention in the manner that, for instance, Northern Ireland has. The second is its duration—the MNLF launched its struggle for independence in the late 1960s and early 1970s but after almost three decades of fighting, the Moro problem has remained as intractable as ever. Indeed, the third characteristic—that of resistance to negotiated settlement, appears to be present as well. Although the MNLF under Nur Misuari has signed a peace accord with the government, the MILF, which is the larger of the two organizations, appears determined to achieve the objective of an independent Moro state. Given the gravity and intractability of the situation, the Moro

problem is thus likely to continue to bedevil Philippines domestic politics and constitute a serious domestic security challenge for the foreseeable future.

Finally, there is also the added complication of considerable sympathy from co-religionists elsewhere, particularly from Malaysia. The Sabah chief minister, Tun Mustapha, was known to have supported training camps for Muslim Moro separatist rebels prior to his downfall in the 1976 elections.⁵⁴ However, the Philippines continued to allege Malaysian complicity in the Moro rebellion. In October 1980, the Philippines claimed that Malaysia was tolerating secessionist Moro training camps in Sabah, and that it was acting as a supply base.⁵⁵ In April 1982, a television program aired in Australia claimed that British and Australian mercenaries were training the Moro guerillas in Malaysia and that they were financed by Libyan leader Colonel Qaddafi.⁵⁶ There is therefore some evidence that certain Islamic groups in Malaysia have been involved in aiding the Moros, but it does appear that the Malaysian government had simply not actively prevented them from doing so, in recognition of the potentially serious domestic political fallout from its local Muslim constituency. In any case, the Moros have also attracted support from radical states and regimes in the Middle East, not just co-religionists in Malaysia.

The unofficial Malaysian support for the Moros has been the main stumbling block to the Philippines dropping its claim to Sabah, which could use the claim to put pressure on Malaysia to curb the activities of its Moro sympathizers. On the other hand, Malaysia believes that the Philippines had been assisting the Catholic Kadazans such as cooperating with the then Kadazan state government to import Filipino Christians to Sabah in the early 1990s to counterbalance the presence of Muslim refugees.⁵⁷ For their part, large numbers of Filipino Muslims have settled in Sabah, and have been given Malaysian citizenship in an attempt to maintain Malay Muslim dominance over the state. The Malaysian government has also simply turned a blind eye to the anti-Philippines activities of these exiles.

Relations with Malaysia have therefore been complicated, given Malaysia's alleged role in fomenting the present Moro rebellion during its crucial early years. Relations between the two countries have therefore been problematic at best. The mistrust has accentuated intra-ASEAN tensions and constitute a significant barrier to the development of cooperative regionalism.

The Aceh Rebellion in Indonesia

Armed separatism in Indonesia has been a significant internal security threat to that country. The Aceh rebellion has been significant for its duration, resistance to negotiated settlement, and sympathy from abroad, especially from co-religionists from Malaysia, southern Thailand, and Libya.

Although the rebellion is heavily Islamic in nature, there are also historical nationalistic, and economic factors at work as well. Aceh has historically been an independent kingdom and there exists strong local pride and traditions, with Islam as a strong unifying factor and a focal point for nationalist sentiments. Indeed, it was the last part of the Indonesian archipelago to fall to Dutch rule, which was not effectively consolidated until the early twentieth century. Despite that, however, local sentiments and pride have remained strong. This was reflected in 1953, when Aceh joined the abortive Darul Islam rebellion, which had spread from West Java to the Outer Islands and that wanted the creation of an Islamic state of Indonesia. More significantly, there has been much resentment over what the local Acehnese see as Javanese domination, corruption, and rapaciousness. The poverty, unemployment, and backwardness of the province contrasts

with the presence and exploitation of huge gas deposits by the Mobil Oil Company, which has benefited mostly non-Acehnese, with the bulk of the revenue siphoned off by Jakarta.⁵⁸ The resentments were exacerbated by the differences between the pious Muslim culture of Aceh that contrasted with the more secular, abangan culture and lifestyles of the Javanese who dominate the armed forces and bureaucracy. In addition, the transmigration program had also resulted in Javanese settlers establishing themselves in Aceh, much to the resentment of the local Acehnese.

The strong local Islamic identity and the resentment against Jakarta contributed to the founding of the Aceh Independence Movement (Aceh Merdeka) in 1976. This movement is distinguished from the earlier Darul Islam revolt in its desire for secession and independence. While the movement appeared to have been crushed by the Indonesian authorities by 1979, continued local resentment against Jakarta's rule resulted in the revival of separatist sentiments. What contributed to the resentment was the brutality of the Indonesian army's response, with many allegations of widespread atrocities. The movement thus sprang back to life. In 1989, Muslim secessionists of the Aceh Merdeka movement were able to launch a series of attacks on police posts and army installations, demonstrating its continued ability to threaten internal security as well as the continued potency of the separatist agenda. The movement is led by Hasan di Tiro, who has been able to effectively use economic and religious discontent to increase support for his cause. Hasan di Tiro obtained the support of Libya, which provided military training for some 600 Acehnese.⁵⁹

The Indonesian armed forces reacted swiftly and by all accounts in a brutal fashion. The military regarded civilian Acehnese to be possible sympathizers, and employed a level of force out of proportion to the actual threat. In late 1990, many headless bodies began appearing in prominent places in Aceh, a macabre military measure to dissuade the population from helping the rebels. The army destroyed homes and executed all those suspected of aiding the rebels.⁶⁰

In 1991, public executions of suspected rebels were held, and Acehnese refugees fled to Penang in Malaysia as a result of this crackdown.⁶¹ Malaysia's refusal to surrender those accused of rebelling against the Indonesian government belied considerable sympathy in Malaysia for its Acehnese co-religionists. While an estimated 600 Acehnese were seeking asylum in 1992, only small numbers have been deported back to Indonesia thus far.⁶² This has raised suspicions in Indonesia of at least passive complicity in the troubles in Aceh.

Despite international pressure over the crackdown in 1991-92, Indonesia refused the International Red Cross access to the province.⁶³ Sporadic violence continued, with armed clashes with the separatists as well as massive counterinsurgency sweeps. The Indonesian armed forces were able to keep on top of the situation, however, and the several hundred armed separatists were mostly on the run.⁶⁴

By 1992, the rebellion appeared to have been more or less contained, at a cost of some 2,000 lives. However, the underlying nationalist, religious, and economic factors that fueled strong separatist sentiments have remained intact. Sporadic clashes since then demonstrated that separatist sentiments remained alive.⁶⁵ Indeed, General Feisal Tanjung, then commander of the Indonesian armed forces, acknowledged in September 1994 that despite almost five years since the outbreak of the latest Acehnese rebellion, the province was still facing security problems.⁶⁶

What enraged the Acehnese and kept alive separatist sentiments has been the acknowledged brutality of the army's actions, which has embittered relations with Jakarta and alienated the local populace. In August 1998, Indonesia's own National Human

Rights Commission reported that 781 people in Aceh had been victims of military atrocities over the last nine years.⁶⁷

The end of the Suharto regime in May 1998 following massive street protests opened the way for more democratic expressions of dissent and emboldened the advocates of secession in various parts of Indonesia, especially in East Timor and Aceh. Not surprisingly, problems in Aceh erupted again in August 1998, when withdrawing Indonesian troops were pelted with stones. Widespread rioting also broke out. The troop withdrawal, which had been in response to accusations by human rights groups and local activists of serious human rights abuses during anti-separatist operations in recent years, was promptly reversed, with the armed forces commander declaring tersely that the length of the military's renewed security presence would depend on the province's people.⁶⁸ Indeed, continuing counterinsurgency operations have been characterized by brutality and fear.

Sensing that perhaps the time had come to more forcefully press their claim for independence, the separatists intensified their activities in early 1999. Numerous kidnappings, murders of military personnel, and frequent ambushes resulted in a very nervous military. In February 1999, the resulting military operations against the rebels caused some 2,000 people to flee a village.⁶⁹ In May 1999, heightened expectations of independence following the agreement to hold a referendum for self-determination in East Timor by the new Habibie government resulted in Acehnese campaigning for a similar referendum. The armed forces responded by killing some 41 civilians.⁷⁰ In retaliation, Aceh Merdeka stepped up its armed campaign, which included attacks on soldiers and the torching of hundreds of buildings. The spiraling violence led to a huge refugee crisis numbering some 100,000. This led to a predictably heavy-handed military response, including the massacre of civilians. Indeed, it was the discovery of mass graves and allegations of casual executions of civilians in Beutong Ateuh in West Aceh that prompted an outcry and the despatch of a special investigation team by President Habibie.⁷¹

In July 1999, Free Aceh leader Hasan di Tiro dismissed efforts by Indonesian officials for a dialogue. Describing the Javanese as "barbaric and uncivilised," he also stated that "there would be no solution until and unless the Javanese occupation army leaves Aceh."⁷² Emboldened by the result of the East Timor referendum on 30 August 1999, in which there was overwhelming support for independence, the Aceh separatist movement stepped up its own campaign. This was despite overtures from the new Indonesian president, Abdulrahman Wahid (better known as Gus Dur), who, upon taking office in October 1999 ordered the military to scale down its forces in Aceh and made inquiries into allegations of military abuse, although this stopped short of a full-scale investigation demanded by Acehnese community and Free Aceh leaders.⁷³ Gus Dur himself inadvertently contributed to the situation in Aceh, given his previous support to Aceh's right to self-determination when he was an opposition leader.

Demonstrating the enhanced influence and power of the Free Aceh Movement in the midst of heightened expectations of independence, local government in Aceh was shut down in October 1999 when the separatists ordered local employees to stay away.⁷⁴ This was followed by the burning of the state parliament on 2 November 1999.⁷⁵ On 4 November, a mass rally for independence was attended by some 100,000 people.⁷⁶ On 8 November, some 500,000 people rallied for independence.⁷⁷ Dismissing calls for dialogue, Hasan di Tiro stated that it was "stupid" because "Indonesia will become at least five different countries."⁷⁸

Indeed, given East Timor's successful bid for secession, there are now widespread fears within Indonesia that Acehnese independence would lead to a break-up of the Indonesian state, with others, such as in Riau, Maluku, and Irian Jaya demanding their

own independence in such an eventuality. Thus, the Indonesian Parliament on 18 November rebuffed President Wahid's proposal for a referendum in Aceh, even if it was only on autonomy and the imposition of Islamic law, and excluded the possibility of independence. The armed forces publicly pressed for the declaration of martial law to crush the gathering secessionist sentiments in Aceh.⁷⁹

Aware that such a move would inflame the situation and plunge Aceh into all-out civil war, Gus Dur immediately rejected this option. At the same time, an independent inquiry reported to Parliament that it had uncovered 5,000 cases of human rights abuses committed by the military in Aceh, such as summary executions, torture, abductions, arbitrary detention and killing, willful destruction of private property, rape, and sexual violence.⁸⁰ The response by the civilian authorities indicate a rift between the democratic civilian government and the military over how to handle the Aceh problem. While Gus Dur wanted a peaceful, political solution to the problem, the military wanted immediate military action to crush the Acehnese.

The Free Aceh movement has never really had the numbers or ability to hold on to large swathes of territory, unlike the much larger Moro rebel movement in Mindanao. In 1999, the Free Aceh rebels were estimated to number anywhere from 800 (a military estimate) to 5,000 men (according to Free Aceh leader Hasan di Tiro). It has only thus far been able to undertake sporadic terrorist attacks and has been mostly on the run from the Indonesian armed forces. However, there has been an external dimension similar to the Moro rebels, in that there exist Muslim support and sympathy from outside of Indonesia. Libya helped Hasan di Tiro in founding the movement and also trained the initial group of fighters. In recent years, there have been various allegations and reports of arms smuggled in from Thailand and Malaysia. Indeed, Acehnese sympathizers in southern Thailand and Malaysia are believed to be funding the rebellion.

It was reported, for instance, that the Muslim rebels in southern Thailand have been aiding the Free Aceh guerillas by helping channel assault rifles to them from black market sources in Kampuchea.⁸¹ In December 1999, the Indonesian home affairs minister publicly stated that Aceh rebels were smuggling in weapons from Malaysia, adding for good measure that friendly countries should be neutral with regard to Indonesia's problems and should avoid giving any assistance to those who sought to undermine the unitary state in Indonesia.⁸² This brought an immediate denial from Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, who declared that "what was said about our country is very difficult to believe" adding that "Malaysia had no role in any activities with the (Aceh separatist) movement."⁸³ Yet, it is clear that while the Malaysian government itself is not involved in aiding the Acehnese, considerable sympathy does exist in that country among co-religionists.

The prospects for a long-term resolution of the Aceh problem are not good. Although the situation in Aceh cannot be said to be that of a full-scale civil war, the characteristics of such a conflict are present. The conflict has been characterized by durability, resistance to negotiated settlement, and growing severity. Moreover, there is an external dimension present, in the form of a relatively stable arms supply and financial support from sympathizers abroad. More significantly, there is growing popular support, with wide sections of Acehnese society, including students, merchants, peasants, workers, civil administrators, village headmen, and religious leaders, joining in the cause in the wake of the heightened expectations generated by East Timor's independence and the promise of a referendum by the current president. In addition, there continues to be much anger and bitterness over the brutality suffered at the hands of the Indonesian military.

The Aceh problem will therefore be difficult to resolve. The newly elected civilian democratic government in Indonesia is unclear how it wants to solve the current crisis. What it does need to do is resolve the underlying grievances of the Acehnese, such as the recognition of hudud laws, measures to alleviate economic disparities, sharing of gas and other resource revenues, justice over the human rights abuses of the military, ending discrimination against Acehnese, and meeting the aspiration towards self-government. Much, however, depends on the ability of both sides to come to a compromise.

The Aceh problem has serious implications for both Indonesia and the region. If the momentum towards secession is not checked at Aceh, Hasan di Tiro's prediction of the break-up of Indonesia could well happen, given the heightened expectations of regional self-determination in the wake of East Timor's independence. The military, which sees itself as the natural guardian of Indonesia's sovereignty and integrity, is quite naturally opposed to any resolution that could result in independence. Indeed, it is opposed to a referendum on the grounds that separatism is unconstitutional, and has been openly pressuring the new government to declare martial law and send more troops into the troubled province.⁸⁴

There is also a serious economic dimension, given the fact that Aceh produces a third of Indonesia's liquified natural gas exports. The political uncertainties have already affected long-term contracts and operations at the Mobil natural gas facilities in Aceh, potentially affecting foreign currency earnings at a time of major economic stress in Indonesia.⁸⁵ The province also has other valuable resources, such as oil, gold, silver, pepper, rubber, and timber. Secession at a time when Indonesia badly needs these resources in facing a huge debt and economic crisis would have negative consequences on Indonesia's ability to recover.

More significantly, even if Aceh succeeded in obtaining only autonomy, that might lead to the implementation of Muslim laws. That could conceivably result in other regions of Indonesia, for instance, in Sumatra, insisting on the right to implement similar laws. This would challenge the secular basis of Indonesia, which is founded on Pancasila, with negative social and political consequences for a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state.

Another unintended consequence of the Aceh problem has been the attempt by the new government to prosecute human rights abuses committed by the military in the province. However, any attempt to charge senior military officers might lead to a military backlash against the new democratically elected government. Failure to do so, or limiting the investigation to low-level soldiers, on the other hand, would not satisfy the Acehnese demand for justice.

There are regional implications as well. The emergence of an independent Aceh would resonate in the Muslim states of Kelantan and Terangganu. The latter, with its rich oil reserves and low level of economic development, has uncomfortable similarities with the socioeconomic grievances of the Acehnese. It would have the effect of galvanizing these as well as other Muslims in southern Thailand and the southern Philippines to make greater efforts to realize their aspirations for a more Islamic form of the state. More seriously, the spectre of a brace of Muslim mini-states espousing fundamentalist Islamic values and having affinities with Libyan-style radicalism is viewed with great alarm by other states in the region. The strategic location of Aceh, at the northern entrance of the Straits of Malacca, one of the busiest sea-lanes in the world, has also increased concern over how the Aceh problem would be resolved. Should Aceh achieve independence, it would surely increase the demands for secession from other regions of Indonesia, demands that the armed forces could not possibly suppress all at once and

thus could lead to the break-up, Yugoslavia-style, of Indonesia, with the possible scenario of several unstable mini-states locked in religious Christian–Muslim conflict with attendant negative consequences for regional stability.

Conclusion—Persistence, Prospects, and Implications

Armed separatist rebellion has been a serious and persistent internal security threat to some of the states in the region. Religion, particularly Islam, has proved to be a unifying factor and a focal point for rallying some of the major regional resistance against central governments, which is identified with the dominant ethnic or religious group. It has in effect been a symbol of a deeper sense of national and ethnic identity on the part of these minority groups.

There have been several significant armed separatist movements in the region. The ethnic separatist movements in Myanmar broke out in 1948 but appear to be well under control in 1999, especially with the defeat of the long-running, predominantly Christian Karen rebellion. The Christian East Timorese achieved independence in 1999. However, while the Muslim separatist movement in southern Thailand has not made much headway and the situation has been relatively stable, the same cannot be said for the Moro rebellion in the southern Philippines as well as the Aceh rebellion in Indonesia. In these instances, the separatists have mounted credible challenges to the authority of the central government. Indeed, the Moro rebels have fought the Philippine army to a standstill and control large swathes of several provinces in Mindanao. Aceh has had a stubborn Muslim separatist movement that has resorted to taking up arms against the Jakarta government. The situation in Aceh has become more serious in recent months, with widespread support for an independent state amid heightened expectations brought about by the fall of the Suharto regime and the promise of a referendum.

Accompanying the persistence of Muslim armed separatism has been the greater significance of Islam of late, as reflected in the desire to impose hudud laws in Aceh as well as the northeastern Malaysian states of Kelantan and Terangganu following the electoral gains of the fundamentalist Partai Islam (PAS) in Malaysia in 1999. Indeed, even the governments of Malaysia and Indonesia have cited extremism arising from the Islamic religious revivalism as a sufficiently serious internal security threat to merit extraordinary administrative and military measures to contain it.

What accounts for the persistence of armed Muslim separatism in the region? The first reason is the problem of legitimacy in at least Indonesia and the Philippines. Indeed, after decades of nation-building, the present integrity of both Indonesia and the Philippines cannot be taken for granted, given the duration, severity (particularly in the case of the Moros), and resistance to negotiated settlement that have characterized their armed Muslim separatisms.

The persistence of armed separatist rebellions in these states clearly demonstrates the fact that they are multinational or multi-ethnic states, where the dominant ethnic group invariably holds the reins of power over other significant ethnic or religious minorities that are often located at the periphery. Not only are there further complications due to differences in religion, geography, and historical experiences, the nation-building efforts of the dominant group has often required the subordination of the minorities, creating grievances that often find expression in demands for separatism.

The lack of legitimacy has been a major cause of the armed rebellions that have taken place or are still in progress in some of the ASEAN states. The real fears of a break-up of Indonesia, Yugoslavia-style, in the wake of the ethnic, religious, political,

economic, and social fissures in that country in the post-Suharto era, as well as the persistence of significant armed Muslim separatism in the Philippines, have demonstrated that this problem of legitimacy is very real.

The second factor has been the enduring sense of community that provides a network of communications and a basis for leadership. This, in turn, has depended greatly on a consciousness of past importance as a state. The fact that the Muslim sultanates of Aceh and Sulu (in the southern Philippines) were historical power centers, enduring until recent times, provided self-confidence and a network of traditional leaders who have retained their prestige. Indeed, traditional Muslim scholars and clerics (the *ulamas*), prominent local families, and village and community leaders, have continued to wield authority and prestige in both Acehnese and Moro communities, thus maintaining local traditions and practices as well as a sense of separateness from the wider national community. The strength of regional identity in both Aceh and Mindanao is demonstrated by the fact that they were the last areas in both Indonesia and the Philippines to be defeated and pacified by the colonial powers.

A third factor driving armed Muslim separatism has been alienation from the dominant ethnic/religious centre. Indeed, in all cases of separatism, one can detect the clash between the dominant group and its cultural values and the subordinate one with its own religious-cultural identification. The national identity is invariably defined in terms of the dominant group's values and culture, with other groups in the periphery tending to be left out.

Thus, in the southern Philippines, the Moros are an anomaly in a country dominated by Catholics heavily influenced by Spanish and American culture. In Aceh, the sense of separateness is very strong, given the strong local identity that has been infused with Islam, the proud historical heritage of having being an important kingdom in the past, the sense of bitterness generated by the brutality of counterinsurgency operations by the Indonesian armed forces, and what they see as discrimination and rapaciousness on the part of the central Javanese government. In addition, there is also a clash of ethnicity and religious differences. The Acehnese resent the domination of the Javanese. Moreover, the Acehnese adhere to a much stricter form of Islam compared to the more abangan or nominal Muslim lifestyle of the Javanese.

The presence of large numbers of the dominant group in territory traditionally populated by these minorities, and the heavy-handed, often insensitive attempts by the central authorities to impose "national" values, that is, the values of the dominant group, on the minorities, have resulted in resentment and the fear of losing their own identity to what they see as foreigners and intruders. Accentuating the problem is the attitude of members of the dominant group, which sees minorities as inferior and therefore feels justified in taking advantage of them. Thus, Catholic Filipinos see the Muslims as inferior, and have proceeded, with the assistance of corrupt local officials and the police, to takeover vast tracts of land in Mindanao (since Muslims rarely record land titles), for the purpose of agriculture and plantation activities, thus depriving local minorities of their land, rights, and means of livelihood. In Aceh, the Javanese-dominated central government has taken the bulk of natural gas revenues from the province, where there is widespread poverty and unemployment. Not surprisingly, this has fueled anti-Jakarta sentiments. Random brutality by the Indonesian armed forces, which has acted more like an occupation force, has also alienated many Acehnese.

It is therefore not surprising that armed separatism occurs as a means of expressing frustration over their inferior positions, and to redress the situation through the use of force. Since peaceful secession is virtually out of the question in centralized nationalistic

states such as the Philippines and Indonesia, armed separatism is the only solution. The strong regional identity has also been infused with Islam, which has acted as a powerful unifying factor in the face of what appears to be a foreign imposition.

A fourth factor has been the presence of an external dimension. Indeed, armed separatists in the southern Philippines, Aceh, East Timor, and Irian Jaya have all benefited from external support of some sort, which, apart from very real grievances and separatist sentiments, may have played an important role in their sustenance. The Moros of southern Philippines, as well as the Acehnese in northern Sumatra, have the support of the international Muslim community, particularly the radical Islamic states such as Libya and others in the Middle East, as well as considerable sympathy from co-religionists in Malaysia. Moros and Acehnese have trained in Libya. The Moros have trained in Sabah as well, where significant numbers of Filipino Muslims reside. The Acehnese rebel leadership resides largely in Malaysia. The Malay Muslims in southern Thailand have helped to arm the Acehnese in recent years, who in turn have the support of the PAS state government across the border in Kelantan, where they have often sought sanctuary. The presence of ethnic kin and co-religionists in neighboring states has thus accentuated the problems of national cohesion and nation-building, as these brethren provide at least moral, if not actual, material support to bolster the sense of separateness on the part of these minorities. The external dimension of the Muslim separatisms, involving as they do Malaysia, has heightened mistrust among states in the region.

What are the prospects for the resolution of the armed Muslim separatist rebellions in Aceh and Mindanao? In general terms, armed rebellions in the region have tended to be fairly severe, of long duration, and resistant to negotiated settlement. Both the Aceh and Mindanao rebellions have not been crushed quickly or successfully despite considerable counterinsurgency efforts by the central government. Indeed, even when moderates eventually tired of fighting and agreed to a negotiated settlement, as Nur Misuari and the MNLF have done in the Philippines, the continued presence of deep-seated and fundamental political, social, and economic grievances have meant the continuation of armed revolt, in the case of Mindanao, by the more Islamic and more numerous MILF. The problems of Moro landlessness, the many Catholic settlers in Mindanao that outnumber Muslims in most provinces, and the long-standing religious animosities between Christians and Muslims cannot be easily solved. Moreover, the presence of international Muslim support for the MILF, particularly from radical Muslims, organizations, and states overseas, has helped encourage the Moros to continue to press their claims. However, the Philippine government cannot accede to the demands for a separate Muslim state even if it wanted to, given the objections of Catholics living in Mindanao and the strong nationalistic reaction such a course of action would engender.

Even if the Moros declared an independent state, it is unlikely that the rest of ASEAN, fearful of the precedent it would set for their minorities and the prospect of a balkanized maritime Southeast Asia containing fundamentalist or radical Muslim mini-states, would recognize such a state. Without international recognition, a separate Moro state will exist only in name. Moreover, Catholic settlers would never acquiesce to such a state and would take up arms to oppose the Moros. The Muslim separatist rebellion in Mindanao will thus continue to fester for the foreseeable future, with the chance of any negotiated settlement holding being a very distant prospect.

The situation in Aceh is not as severe as in Mindanao, where the MILF is already a *de facto* government controlling fairly large swathes of territory in several provinces. The scale of fighting has been much less, and the Acehnese rebels have numbered in the hundreds and have moreover been mostly on the run from the Indonesian armed forces.

It was only in recent months, following the overthrow of Suharto, the ascension of Abdulrahman Wahid as president (he had previously made promises of holding a referendum on Aceh's future), and the independence of East Timor that the independence movement has been galvanized.

Indeed, independence now appears to have the support of wide sections of Acehnese society. The Aceh problem will therefore be difficult to resolve. The newly elected civilian democratic government in Indonesia is unclear how it wants to solve the current crisis. What it does need to do is resolve the underlying grievances of the Acehnese, such as some recognition of hudud laws, measures to alleviate economic disparities, sharing of gas and other resource revenues, justice over the human rights abuses of the military, ending discrimination against Acehnese, and meeting the aspiration towards self-government. Much, however, depends on the ability of both sides to come to a compromise. This would be extremely difficult, given the bitterness that have been engendered by brutal counterinsurgency operations carried out by the Indonesian armed forces. Yet, the same armed forces, proud of its role as guardian of the Indonesian republic, is not likely to acquiesce to an independent Aceh, which would galvanize other separatist movements and lead to the break-up of Indonesia. Nor would the ASEAN community recognize such a state, for the same reasons as it would never recognize an independent Moro homeland. The Aceh problem has become and will remain a much more serious problem for Indonesia than in the past, given the recent heightened expectations of independence.

What are the implications for the region? First, what is worrying for the region is the possibility of a break-up of Indonesia should Aceh follow the example of East Timor and achieve independent statehood. This could result in a situation akin to Yugoslavia, with a number of squabbling mini-states, some of which could be of a fundamentalist Islamic orientation, characterized by instability and conflict.

Indeed, the mere possibility of independent Aceh and Mindanao, and perhaps a semi-autonomous fundamentalist Kelantan and Teranganu in Malaysia, conjure images of Central Asia and the northwestern corner of South Asia, where there are unstable and warring Islamic regimes and factions. This would also have negative consequences in terms of encouraging Islamic fundamentalism in Malaysia and the rest of the Indonesian archipelago, as well as galvanizing Muslim separatism in southern Thailand. Such a scenario would destabilize the entire region.

Second, the external dimension of the armed Muslim separatisms has regional implications. They have engendered a measure of mistrust among states in the region, despite the efforts and limited success in cooperative regionalism. Indeed, the principle of non-interference that has been a hallmark of ASEAN cooperative regionalism since 1967 rings hollow when set against the Sabah state government's sponsorship of training camps for Moro rebels, and the tit-for-tat response by the Marcos government in attempting to foster Sabah armed separatism through its own training program. The fact that Acehnese rebels and Muslim separatists from southern Thailand have been able to seek solace in neighboring Malaysia is also another indication that this principle is not as hallowed as it has been made out to be.

Third, the persistence of significant armed separatist rebellion, as epitomized by the situation in Aceh and Mindanao, demonstrates that internal security remains an important preoccupation for Indonesia and the Philippines, notwithstanding the end of the Cold War, China's rapprochement with the region, general economic development, and even the spread of democratization. Indeed, Indonesia's first Defence White Paper in 1995 recognized that threats to stability in the medium term were likely to stem from internal rather than external sources.⁸⁶

Fourth, the persistent and growing challenge of Muslim separatist rebellion, in the context of greater Muslim consciousness in the Malay archipelago, is an indication that the region cannot escape the consequences of the worldwide resurgence and radicalization of Islam. The Islamic factor has proven to be a unifying factor and a focal point for the rallying of armed resistance against the government in Aceh and Mindanao. The Muslim separatists have been able to attract the support and sympathy of co-religionists in neighboring Malaysia as well as the international Muslim community at large.

Moreover, the rise in Islamic consciousness in both Malaysia and Indonesia has raised fears in the region that extreme forms of Islam may be manifested, if the experience of the Middle Eastern countries, which have had to deal with violent extremist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, is any guide. As the Algerian and other Middle Eastern examples show, economic distress and inequalities could lead many to seek solace in more extreme forms of Islam. Worldwide, there already exists a loose network of extremist Islamic terrorists who have been prepared to use extreme force to achieve their aims.⁸⁷ In addition, there is the worrying presence of regimes such as Libya and Iran, which are ready to support Muslim terrorist/separatist groups.

Indeed, the growing links with international Islamic terrorist groups is an area of increasing concern. For instance, the Abu Sayaff had been trained and financed by Osama bin Laden, which indicates that the region cannot avoid the growing worldwide fears over the activities of such groups that are alleged to be on the verge of being able to conduct terrorist activities using weapons of mass destruction.

Finally, the extent that internal security challenges have remained serious and manifested themselves, for instance, in the form of armed Muslim separatist rebellions, are indicative of the failure to achieve legitimacy for post-independence political structures, as well as continuing internal weakness in at least Indonesia and the Philippines. This internal weakness means that the ASEAN ideal of a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality will be a distant prospect, as internal weakness by definition invites foreign involvement and intervention, as the East Timor case so graphically illustrated in 1999.

Notes

1. Charles W. Kegley Jr. and Eugene R. Wittkopf, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation* (New York: Worth, 1999), p. 369. For simple analytical purposes, we will equate civil war with internal armed rebellion.

2. Dan Smith, *The State of War and Peace Atlas* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 14.

3. See Ruth L. Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures, 1996* (Washington: World Priorities, 1996).

4. Temario C. Rivera, "Armed Challenges to the Philippines Government: Protracted War or Political Settlement?" in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1994* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994), p. 260.

5. Kegley Jr. and Wittkopf, *World Politics*, p. 369.

6. Sukhumbhand Paribatra and Chai-Anan Samudavanija, "Factors Behind Armed Separatism: A Framework for Analysis," in *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Lim Joo-Jock and S. Vani (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984), p. 32.

7. Donald Horowitz, "Irredentas and Secessions: Adjacent Phenomena, Neglected Connections," in *Irredentism and International Politics*, edited by Naomi Chazan (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991), pp. 9–10.

8. Ruth McVey, "Separatism and the Paradoxes of the Nation-State in Perspective," in *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Lim and Vani, op. cit., p. 12.

9. W. K. Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 178–179.

10. Paribatra and Samudavaniya, "Factors Behind Armed Separation," p. 41.
11. Eliseo R. Mercado, "Culture, Economics and Revolt in Mindanao: The Origins of the MNLF and the Politics of Moro Separatism," in *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Lim and Vani, op. cit., pp. 168–175.
12. Ibid., pp.160–161.
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