

## **Multidimensional Social Crisis and Religious Violence in Southeast Asia: Regional Strategic Agenda, Weak Civilian Government, Triune Crime, Wealth Gaps, and Coopted Journalism**

Ija Suntana\*<sup>1</sup> & Betty Tresnawaty<sup>1</sup>


1. UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung

\*Corresponding Author: [ijasuntana@uinsgd.ac.id](mailto:ijasuntana@uinsgd.ac.id)

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### **Abstract**

Five factors have contributed greatly to religious violence in the Southeast Asia: the regional strategic agenda of a great power; weak civilian government; triune crimes and scholar phobia; wealth gaps; and coopted journalism. These are the roots of the increase of religion-related violence in this region. Religious violence in this area is a psychological symptom of a society facing complex social situations related to power struggles and economic domination. As an evidence, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar is not caused by a clash of beliefs but by those five factors, thus it turns into a prolonged and complex humanitarian crisis that it also gives social impacts into surrounding countries. Therefore, solving the problem of religious violence in Southeast Asia must address these five causes.

*Keywords:* religious violence; islamophobia; peace journalism.

### **Introduction**

There are several factors that cause recent sharp increase of, and protracted, religious conflict in Southeast Asia. From several existing causes, there are five predominant causes of such hostility: regional political tension; weak government; organized crimes and anti-secularism; economic gaps; and media restriction. Not caused by a clash of belief, the conflict itself is a psychological symptom of people facing complex social situations related to power struggles and economic domination.

Almost all Southeast Asian countries are not exempt from separatism movements, both religious and other types separatism. Thailand, Philippines, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Indonesia are countries in this region that have been facing separatism with various roots (Legionosuko et al., 2020; Saidin & Yusoff, 2020; Nur & Susanto, 2020). In general, separatism in these

countries uses religion as its pretext and Islam is the most prevalent base of movement of separatism in the Southeast Asian region (Tan, 2020).

With a population that exceeds half a billion, Southeast Asia has some areas tens of thousands of people are killed and hundreds of thousands losing their homes because of armed conflict. Some researchers have assessed that the humanitarian crises taking place in almost all corners in Southeast Asia is due to economic and political problems (Hollenbach, 2020; Hussain et al., 2020). Meanwhile, conflicts between militant minority Islamist groups and the government are coloring the dynamics of socio-political countries in the country (Elonek, 2012).

How are these conflicts in Southeast Asia affected by causes but faith? It requires comprehensive explanation, with numerous theories stating that conflicts of belief has never existed in reality. On the contrary, conflicts of economy and politics between certain groups of people often take advantages of religious groups (Haider, 2005). Some researchers argues that religiosity is unrelated to the sensitivity of cognitive conflicts (Hoogeveen et al., 2020). The history of the Crusades is touted as the most phenomenal war of belief in human history, but they were mainly caused by the competition over the spice trade. The social capital that is very easy to trigger a movement and mobilization is belief. Hence, religion serves as a mobilizer for an ideological resistance or defense (Tench, 2020).

Researchers on religious violence in the Southeast Asia are completely wrong if they correlate religious violence with religious doctrines. There is absolutely no relationship between religious doctrine and cases of increasing religious violence. We argue that there are five problems to be the main sources that instigate the increase in conflicts in Southeast Asia: the regional strategic agenda of a great power; weak civilian government; triune crimes and scholar phobia; wealth gaps; and coopted journalism. In this regard, the review focuses on the five dominant factors and we will present the our claim that religious violence in Southeast Asia is not caused by a conflict of belief, but by conflict of interests. The mindset of this review is based on the findings of several studies that show that there has been a very large shift from issues of doctrine and radicalism assessment to socio-economic problems (Bejarano, 2017; Utomo & Wasino, 2020) and the tone of local media coverage played a significant role in unraveling specific and global conflicts.

## Discussion

### ***Regional strategic agenda of a great power***

The trend of Islamophobia, as a phenomenon of religious violence, in Southeast Asia has increased, although it is not as sharp as the rise in western and European countries. Islamophobia in Southeast Asia ensued with the occurrence of ethnic tensions, economic gaps, and the rise of the right-wing religious organization. Islamophobia in Southeast Asian countries is predominantly Muslim, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, especially when minority groups are dominant in economics (Osman, 2017).

Geopolitically in Southeast Asia, there is a regional strategic agenda of major forces in a region of China that is experiencing the peak of Islamophobic rise and gaining international world

highlights due to the act of discrimination on the Uyghur tribe (Han, 2020). Research conducted by Luqiu et al. (2018) suggests that Chinese news reports project the overall negative view of Muslims. An implicit association test conducted on the non-Muslim Chinese population reveals negative Muslim stereotypes. Also, a survey of Chinese Muslims showed that they received negative coverage of Muslims and Muslims in Chinese media, thereby implicating their real-life discrimination as the effect of these negative stereotypes. In this case, the Chinese power agenda does not want to be bothered by domestic terror problems which some of their politicians are indicated to be coming from the Muslims in their country. In previous decades, the Chinese government established harmony with the power of Muslims, so there was an Islamic figure given the political position in the government (Ma, 2019).

The phenomenon of Islamophobia that can be observed in Southeast Asia in particular and in Asia, in general, is the incidence of torture of the Muslim Rohingya in Burma by Buddhist fanatics inspired by Buddhist monks of extremists and Muslim persecution by the Sri Lankan nationalist group Buddha Bodu Bala Sena (Hafez, 2020). The increase of Islamophobia that appears epidemic in Southeast Asia is not widely researched by academics. This contrasts with the Islamophobic trend as a well-documented phenomenon in Western countries. Rising terror attacks in Europe, the refugee crisis on the same continent, and the strengthening of the right-wing nationalist parties that resulted in the emergence of Islamophobia in Europe and North America became a concern for many analyses.

Some Islamophobia figures mention that Islam as a religion has been problematic, because it is a doctrine in harmony with violence and radicalism, as the political platform of Donald Trump (Cury, 2019). Meanwhile, some of the analyses mentioned that Islamophobia was not separated from colonialism practices which regarded religion as a potential threat because in many colonial areas the power of religion always pioneered various revolts (Katz, 2018). Other analyses have mentioned that Islamophobia was born for its socio-economic reasons and historical reasons. Historically, Islamophobia is connected with the global conflict that has occurred hundreds of years ago, so that the form of historical conflict is not a conflict of faith (Safi', 2019). Some of these analysis frameworks can be used to study Islamophobia in Southeast Asia.

In general, the increase of Islamophobia in many regions, including Southeast Asia, is associated with the incidence of 9/11 in the United States. Since then, the escalation of Islamic phobia experienced a very significant increase in different parts of the world (Noor, 2006). Since the incidence of 9/11 Muslims in European and Western countries fought vigorously to confront negative views due to the irrational actions of extremists who contributed to negative stereotypes about Islam (El-Sayed, 2013). The terror of 9/11 created a global terror on the image of Islam and Muslims. In fact, in the Muslim-majority countries, Islamophobia developed as well as in countries where Muslims are a minority (Flag & Hafez, 2019).

### ***Weak civilian government***

Although Southeast Asia had civil administration, the military still received a large number of their national budgets, in addition to significant assets and economic activities. The military in

the region had enormous economic influences. This condition can become a barrier to achieving the freedom of civil control in the democratization process (Chambers & Waitoolkiat, 2017), especially in some countries ruled by military junta. Control of community freedom for expression and belief becomes very strong and strict.

In recent decades the trend of military-political domination in southeast Asia has decreased. Although it has not followed the Western model, significant developments have taken place and are approaching the agenda of the security sector reform, and show that the prospect of civil-military relations is stable and brighter than those believed to be skeptical by many observers (Beeson & Bellamy, 2012).

Military intervention in the civilian government remains highly resistant in the Southeast Asian region, although the trend of military domination in politics has decreased. In the late 1990s, civil-military researchers detected a decline in the political significance of the armed forces throughout Southeast Asia, but a decade later the trend was reversed. The Thai military staged a coup d'état in 2006, the Armed Forces of the Philippines expanded their political rights under the Arroyo presidency, and the Burmese junta engineered an apparent-democratic election in 2010. Replaying the trend of military intervention in Southeast Asia is highly determined by intra-civil conflicts and political leadership that tends to split the public (Mietzner, 2011).

People may prefer military government when civil government unstable and corrupt (Farooq, 2012). Separatism movement could lead to the instability of civil government di Southeast Asia, which may allow military power to perform political action through military coup d'etat.

### ***Triune crimes and scholar phobia***

There is an unholy trinity of interrelated crimes, namely corruption, terrorism, and transnational crime (Shelley, 2005). Several studies link corruption and political violence by questioning whether a country's domestic terrorism could be described as an attempt to suppress a regime's corruption or as a regime's attempt to exert influence when channel corruption is experiencing obstacles. In some countries, it is found that acts of terror have a very close relationship with the political behavior of the regime. Corruption practices in the management of natural resources have an unconditional effect on transnational and domestic terrorism (Ajide et al., 2020).

Simpson (2014) uses social opportunities theory to uncover the relationship between corruption and terrorism. Using a fixed effect of a longitudinal negative binomial regression, based on the domestic political hardness model developed by Muller, the Simpson study in 106 countries identified that corruption and terrorism run concurrently in an extra-legal structure and demonstrate that where the road of corruption has been restricted, countries are experiencing greater levels of terrorist violence.

The corruption relationship with terrorist violence in Southeast Asia has one of two competing effects. Based on secondary data obtained by the authors, there are two sets of hypotheses of corruption relations with acts of terrorism violence in southeast Asia. First, increased

perception of corruption over time leads to the development of disappointment manifested in the form of violent terrorism. The more corrupt the country in Southeast Asia, the greater the terrorist violence as an expression of disappointment. Secondly, groups that are already familiar with the extra-legal methods, such as corruption, will turn to other extra-legal alternatives to achieve their goals, such as terrorism, if the country in which they operate applies high enough control to corrupt practices. Greater levels of corruption control are correlated with higher levels of terrorism in southeast Asia. When certain lines of corruption cannot be used to gain political influence, those groups use alternative strategies in which terrorism became the top preference.

In addition to dealing with the regime's corruption problem, countries in Southeast Asia faced an incoming Al-Qaeda network movement from early to mid-1990 and built independent cells, which continued to establish connections with Islamic insurgency movements in the region which were initially believed to have only domestic agendas (Abuse, 2002).

In addition to dealing with ideological tension, the corruption effect of the regime on violence, and the threat of a network of Al-Qaeda Southeast Asia region faced with other threats, the piracy problem. The phenomenon of piracy has evolved in Southeast Asia over the past ten years, as a security threat in regional waters. Countries in the Southeast Asian region must formulate a comprehensive road to combat contemporary piracy in the region (Liss & Biggs, 2017), potentially exacerbating their safety and defense conditions.

The strategy against domestic and transnational terrorists in the Southeast Asian region has not been appropriate and has not produced the desired results. Southeast Asia is still doubtful to be a safer place for the future. Therefore, Southeast Asia should rethink or develop new strategies to control and manage terrorism and extremism threats (Acharya, 2015). Tensions-ethnic tensions and religion will still affect the political dynamics in the countries of the region, where tensions between fundamentalist Muslim groups with secular political groups continue to arise and demonstrate an alarming increase, along with increasing symptoms and political phenomena of the region's identity. The battle of secular nationalist politicians with fundamentalist groups will continue to influence the journey socio-political the countries of Southeast Asia, all of which will equally use the power of time to press each other. The provocation of ideology undertaken by secular and fundamentalist nationalist groups will further exacerbate the situation of Islamophobia.

The increasingly nourishing Islamophobia in Southeast Asia is the behavior of the political regime in the region that uses criminal threats to suppress its political opponents. The criminal threat made by the government regime in Southeast Asia has proven to pose an antagonistic attitude from the Islamic fundamentalist group against the country, which is sure to cause domestic tension and result in the polarization of society between the parties and anti on the regime. The two communities will build their political perception on their ideological identity and suspect each other, resulting in the effect of hatred on the ideology used by each. Consequently, Islamophobia would have increased in line with the increase in *Secular phobia*—a term used by Ray Comport (2016).

### **Wealth gaps**

Southeast Asia has a history of separatism conflicts that take a long and extreme time. There is one of the most enduring conflicts in the world, the Mindanao conflict, which affects millions of people and killed thousands of souls (Hutchcroft, 2018).

In Southeast Asia, separatism is always happening in the border areas, both in the south and north, except for separatism in Indonesia. The separatism Patani in Thailand occurs in the southern borders and the Mindanao region of the same Philippines occurring in the southern border area. This confirms that internal-state conflicts in this scale are not merely national political issues and the failure of the creation of peace prospects (Tan, 2018), but rather a fundamental problem in regional harmony. State and non-State actors have a role and influence on separatist conflicts in different ways and objectives. It became apparent that regional security concerns should be the concern of countries incorporated in ASEAN to be more proactive in the field of conflict management, as there is a potential for regional conflicts, due to suspicion of state intervention bordering separatism conflict areas (Rupprecht, 2014).

So far, Islamophobia is considered as one way of attacking the problem of terrorism, radicalism, and fundamentalism (Beshara, 2019). Islamophobia as a social reality seems to be a solution to eradicate hatred and terror (Gilks, 2020). The ideas of easing Islamophobia were developed, but still left confusion and questions, from where it started and how to (Poynting, 2020). The effort to suppress and advocate Islamophobia is the moral demands of scientists and has been the responsibility of policymakers where Islamophobia grows through the creation of ideas (Lewicki, 2017). In response to this advocacy, there are two views, which are pessimistic views and optimistic views. A pessimistic view sees that everyone is part of a social group that has exclusive boundaries. While the optimistic view sees that even the limitations of inclusion and exclusion are present in reality but advocacy is thought to still affect than to develop negative stereotypes, hate speech, and excessive suspicion (Roose & Turner, 2019).

Acts of terror have a causal relationship with economic growth. Growing positive economies in an area are an increasingly negative growth of violent incidents in the region. Data estimation between time and data between individuals (*pooled cross-section time-series*) revealed that several measures of welfare efforts reduced the incidence of transnational terrorism in countries that did. This suggests that strengthening the social policies inside and outside may not only correlate with the target re-distribution or equitable development but also help to combat acts of terrorist violence (Burgoon, 2006).

The above estimate can be used to confirm terror incidents in Southeast Asian countries. The country in high prosperity and its economy continues to grow relatively low in the incidence of domestic terrorism. They are only faced with the threat of transnational terrorism, such as Singapore and Brunei Darussalam. Unlike countries where low prosperity conditions and economies are slow to grow, they are faced with two forms of terror, which is domestic terror as an expression of frustration with the situation and the transnational terror conspiracy.

### ***Coopted Journalism***

Every day the mainstream media in Southeast Asia delivers messages to people, individuals, and groups about conflicts in the regional region. The newsroom in the mainstream media is filled with news of ethnic and religious violence, but it is very rare to make an effort to find a way to solve these social problems by asking sources who can contribute to the resolution of the problem.

It is often assumed that local media is a tool that has the potential to reduce global conflict. The manner and tone of local media coverage play a significant role in breaking down global and specific conflicts (Suleiman & Ishak, 2014).

The most important obstacle in compiling news items about the conflict in the Southeast Asian region is the language of journalism, where mainstream media dominates in this context. The mainstream media in Southeast Asia still articulates conflict data and facts in orthodox methodology, which should not be ignored.

The trend of Islamophobia in the world, specifically in America and Europe, has not decreased, even experienced an increase after Islamophobia was made via Donald Trump's political platform (Khan et al., 2019), causing psychological turmoil for Muslims (Amer & Bagasra, 2013), especially those who live in countries where they are a minority (Fadel, 2016). The trend of anti-Islamic statements has increased in cyberspace, even though it does not directly influence the behavior of Islamophobia in society. The increase in anti-Islam statements appears sporadically, especially if there are terror incidents reported by the media (Massey et al., 2020).

The upward trend in Islamophobia is inseparable from the contribution of the media which articulates the issue of Islam and Muslims (Chaudhry, 2016). In the case of gender rights, journalists are more likely to report women who live in Muslim countries when their rights are violated but report women in other societies when their rights are respected (Terman, 2017).

As the mainstream media in most Western countries perpetuate the stereotypical images of various minorities and influence the majority's attitude (Ahmed, 2017), the Southeast Asian local media can form peaceful journalism to suppress the usual views about Islam and Muslims, so as not to further enhance Islamophobia that does not benefit many regional aspects. Peaceful journalism departs from a balanced pattern and tone in narrating the diversity of views and religious behavior of Southeast Asian people.

Peaceful journalism does not mean that the media hides and ignores the elements of conflict. Instead, the mainstream media must uncover elements that can cause current and future conflicts. This can mitigate the true causes of conflicts and how they are resolved, through developing investigative habits, discussions, and dialogues to present various perspectives on conflict (Ersoy, 2017).

Peaceful journalism promotes contextualization of conflict narratives objectively and challenges dominant news conventions such as focusing on specific sources. Peaceful

journalism can be a potential strategy to fight Islamophobia through addressing issues about Islam and Muslims in a balanced way (Anderson, 2015).

The five factors of religious violence above can be confirmed in several clash incidents which have been described as religious conflicts. In fact, in some areas, there has been a social tension between Muslims and other Muslims related to economic and political interests. Muslims in the Southeast Asian region are increasing their power to enter the political and economic arena. The recent anti-Muslim violence in Burma is not as a spontaneous explosion of religious feelings among the general public, but it is a surprising repertoire that is deployed by organized social movements with clear political objectives (Of Jack & Aung, 2017).

The increasing political and economic activities of the Islamic minority in some Southeast Asian countries triggered an increase of hatred and radicalism among the majority of the religious believers, such as Buddhists in Burma and Sri Lanka, against his spirit people (Orjuela, 2020). The ongoing Rohingya crisis confirms that in detail that there is a potential revival of new fundamentalism beyond Islamic fundamentalism, Christian fundamentalism, militant Judaism that has been concerned with several international observers (Lehr, 2019).

The Rohingya crisis was not a religious conflict between Islam and Buddhism, as both had a long history of peaceful coexistence, but rather clashes between two views of nationalism for the claim of Burmese citizenship (Yusuf, 2018). The Rohingya faced the government's discrimination policy and discriminatory action since long ago, since its independence in 1948. The Burmese government excluded the Rohingya as part of the country, denied their identity, and stated that they were illegal Bengali immigrants. The political policy resulted in some anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya attacks by Buddhist monks and other Buddhist nationalists, backed by the military (Akins, 2018).

Today Rohingya Myanmar is one of the most persecuted minority populations in the world without citizenship. After the last exodus from Myanmar in 2017, no less than half a million Rohingya in Bangladesh lived in terrible camps, in conditions of poverty, malnutrition, and without proper access to shelters or work permits. Many of them were forced and forced to go to sea on a perilous trip to the countries of Southeast Asia to seek a better life. Once highlighted by the international world, the Burmese government asks them to return to Burma, but without the promise of citizenship or end discrimination (Chaudhury & Samāddāra, 2018).

The Rohingya crisis has a high level of complexity, in which the parties involved in it, both perpetrators and victims of persecution, claim to be harmed parties. The perpetrator felt harmed by an oppressed victim, so too the victim claimed to be the injured party. The military campaign was conducted against the Rohingya Muslims by soldiers in 2016 and 2017 similarly based on the feelings of harm by the party being targeted (Holt, 2019). And, the most corrupted of such a "conflict of loss" is religion, which is regarded as the source of violent behavior of the parties involved therein (Gier, 2014). Not just the happening in southeast Asia, the Sunni and Shi'a conflicts in the Middle East, Protestants, and Catholicism in Northern Ireland, Afrikaner, and the black churches of South Africa, where the accused causes are religions. So are the waves of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia increasing throughout Europe, the Israelites, and



Palestine in the Holy Land. The accused cause is the religion that encourages violent acts (Warner et al., 2018).

Burma's hatred of the Rohingya extends to the hatred of the religion that became their identity, namely Islam. Suspicion and violence on every person identified by Muslims have increased. The usual Rohingya community was also persecuted for allegedly and suspected of conspiring with the Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) (Fair, 2018).

The Government of Burma could not compromise security and defense disorders, especially after the attack on October 9, 2016, by hundreds of armed men, believed to be organized by the Rohingya, against the three border guards police posts in Rakhine state, which led to the death of nine police officers. In response, Burma's security forces launched a "regional cleansing operation, which many of the parties regarded as an act of genocide and no democratic transition process there" (Kim, 2017).

## Conclusion

Southeast Asia is a critical zone of islamophobia which can propagate poorly in all sectors of people's lives. Symptoms of Islamophobia in Southeast Asia continue to rise along with conflicts between fundamentalist Islamic groups and the government. Objectively, Islamophobia in the Southeast Asian region is not connected with the problem of evaluating religious doctrine but rather relates to the behavior of some regional political elites who utilize fundamentalist groups for political and economic targets. Besides, the mainstream media in Southeast Asia still articulates conflict data in orthodox methodology and does not develop a peaceful journalism approach. Mainstream media in Southeast Asia is no different from mainstream media in Western countries which perpetuates stereotypical images of minority groups.

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