

Conflict Dynamics and Transformations in Southeast Asia

Gunnar Stange & Iris O'Rourke

► Stange, G., & O'Rourke, I. (2014). Editorial: Conflict dynamics and transformations in Southeast Asia. *ASEAS – Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 7(1), 1-4.

The present ASEAS issue features a focus on 'Conflict Dynamics and Transformations in Southeast Asia'. It brings together topical works of researchers from various academic fields that offer a comprehensive perspective on current developments in some of the region's political, social, and environmental conflicts as well as on approaches to their management and resolution. The contributions include case studies from Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand, as well as analyses of the status and prospects of regional security cooperation within the framework of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The complex and interdependent nature of conflicts makes it inevitable to study their causes and potential solutions through approaches that transcend the borders of classical academic disciplines. In his comprehensive monograph *Peace by Peaceful Means*, Johan Galtung (1996), the 'father' of peace research, reminds us just how challenging and intellectually demanding peace research is. He argues that this is owed to the many spaces in which peace and conflict researchers have to search for causes, conditions, and contexts in order to understand their subject of study (Galtung, 1996, p. 1). Thus, the multi- and interdisciplinary character of area studies – here, Southeast Asian Studies – provides a suitable framework for deciphering the multilayered trajectories of conflicts, which, after all, might contribute to their peaceful transformation.

Despite its political, religious, and ethnic diversity, Southeast Asia is by no means more prone to inter- or intrastate conflicts than other regions of the world. On the contrary, especially with regard to interstate conflicts, the member states of ASEAN rightfully claim that the norm of non-interference in domestic issues and consensus diplomacy has largely spared the region the terrors of interstate armed conflict. Yet, the postcolonial states of Southeast Asia are still the arena of a significant number of domestic armed conflicts in which resistance and liberation movements (Dudouet, 2009) are challenging the respective nation states by striving for greater self-determination or even secession, with all the tragic consequences.

On the other hand, during the last decade, Southeast Asian governments have gradually moved away from military conflict resolution approaches. It appears that the mode of procedural conflict resolution (Elwert, 2004) through legitimate institutions is becoming the dominant norm in managing domestic violent conflict. Timo Kivimäki (2012, pp. 419–420), for example, shows that battle deaths related to violent conflicts in Southeast Asia have significantly declined since the mid-2000s. Indeed, since the formation of Southeast Asia's post-

colonial states following the end of the Second World War, the region has never been as peaceful as it is today (Vatikiotis, 2009, p. 28). Recent successful conflict mediation processes underline this trend, for example, that between the Free Aceh Movement and the Government of Indonesia in 2005 and the comprehensive peace accord between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Government of the Philippines in the southern Philippines in March 2014.

This issue begins with a regional macro-perspective, proceeds to a comparative national perspective, and finally offers thickly described empirical case studies at the micro-level. In the first two articles, the authors address one of the most hotly debated issues with regard to the increasingly integrating ASEAN: regional security cooperation. Henning Borchers ponders the possibility of the development of an ASEAN peacekeeping force despite member states' reluctance towards a regional conflict resolution mechanism, as this could challenge ASEAN's constitutive norm of non-interference in domestic politics of its member states. Borchers argues that the progress in institutionalizing regional cooperation regarding 'soft' security issues – such as environmental challenges – stands to facilitate a slow deepening of 'hard' security cooperation at the ASEAN level, which can deepen political trust among member states.

Similarly, Kathrin Rupprecht argues that the ASEAN operational norm of non-interference is insufficient to adequately address state-internal conflicts and impedes efficient security cooperation. She examines two cases of long-lasting and violent separatist conflict embedded in ethnic and religious sentiments: the cases of the resistance of the Patani-Malays in Thailand's Deep South and of the Bangsamoro in the southern Philippines. Rupprecht concludes that non-traditional security issues linked to state-internal conflicts demand a more proactive ASEAN role. Yet, the role Malaysia did play bilaterally in brokering the recently signed path-breaking peace accord between the MILF and the Government of the Philippines gives reason to believe that ASEAN as an organization will play a more proactive and institutionalized role in regional conflict management in the years to come.

Based on interviews with representatives of armed opposition groups in Myanmar, Sina Kowalewski analyzes their leaderships' perspectives on Myanmar's current multidimensional transition. According to the findings of her study, the government's top-down strategy in implementing political and economic reforms and the mistrust between the conflicting parties constitute severe challenges to the ongoing ceasefire negotiations and peace processes. The armed groups mainly interpret the government's efforts as a strategy to maintain the current status quo of power relations between the Myanmar central government and the country's ethnic minorities. The main issues at stake in this complex and rapidly proceeding peace process are political legitimacy, economic as well as political participation, and the improvement of the socio-political situation of the country's diverse ethnic groups.

In their contribution, Jeroen Adam and Boris Verbrugge challenge the rigid distinction between formal and informal actors in conflict mediation approaches. Based on an analysis of existing conflict management practices in Mindanao, the Philippines, they find this distinction may actually be counterproductive and lead to unintended consequences such as reinforcing existing power imbalances by favoring already well-connected elite actors. Also, they caution against overlooking that the

typically 'formal' may have significant informal traits or that presumed 'informal' actors may derive authority and legitimacy from the 'formal' political sphere.

In the context of a land conflict between the indigenous Batin Sembilan and an oil palm company in Jambi province, Central Sumatra, Indonesia, Barbara Beckert, Christoph Dittrich, and Soeryo Adiwibowo show how the Batin Sembilan used the concept of indigeneity to enhance their agency and empowerment. In their resistance against a multinational company, they have become empowered actors instead of marginalized victims. The authors show, however, that access to land is still contested and shaped by power asymmetries.

Within the frame of indigenous political strategies, Timo Duile analyzes socio-ecological conflicts arising around palm oil expansion in Kalimantan, Indonesia, and the conceptions of nature that are employed in the course of these conflicts. Duile demonstrates how the indigenous Dayak's concepts of nature differ fundamentally from hegemonic concepts that frame nature as opposed to culture or the human mind. Even though the Dayak in Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo, have to refer to some hegemonic epistemic premises in order to enter global discourses, indigenous knowledge is neglected by Western discourses on local knowledge in Kalimantan. In reference to Descola, Duile shows how Dayak concepts are negotiated and revitalized for political strategies.

In the 'In Dialogue' section, Ying Hooi Khoo offers an insider's perspective on extra-parliamentary opposition politics in Malaysia, in particular, the *Bersih* movement. Bersih comprises 89 non-governmental organizations whose aspiration is to push for a thorough reform of the electoral process in Malaysia through rallies and demonstrations. In her interview with Hishamuddin Rais, a prominent Bersih activist, she illustrates the linkages between grassroots political activism and the broader democratization process in Malaysia.

Last but not least, in the 'Southeast Asia Visually' section, Vera Altmeyer provides well-informed insights into the 2012 gubernatorial elections in Jakarta, Indonesia, with a thick visual description of the highly contrastive campaign strategies of the two main pairs of candidates: incumbent Governor Fauzi Bowo and his running mate Nachrowi Ramli on the one hand, and challenger Joko Widodo and his running mate Basuki Tjahaja Purnama on the other. With Indonesian presidential elections set for July 2014 and acting Jakarta Governor Joko Widodo as the most promising candidate, this visual report could not be timelier.

May peace prevail!



REFERENCES

- Dudouet, V. (2009). *From war to politics. Resistance and liberation movements in transition*. Berlin, Germany: Berghof Center.
- Elwert, G. (2004). Anthropologische Perspektiven auf Konflikt. In J. Eckert (Ed.), *Anthropologie der Konflikte. Georg Elwerts konflikttheoretische Thesen in der Diskussion* (pp. 26–38). Bielefeld, Germany: transcript.

- Galtung, J. (1996). *Peace by peaceful means: Peace and conflict, development and civilization*. Oslo, Norway: International Peace Research Institute.
- Kivimäki, T. (2012). Southeast Asia and conflict prevention. Is ASEAN running out of steam? *The Pacific Review*, 25(4), 403–427.
- Vatikiotis, M. (2009). Managing armed conflict in Southeast Asia: The role of mediation. In Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Ed.), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2009* (pp. 28–35). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Publications.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gunnar Stange is guest editor of this ASEAS issue. He is a research associate at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology and the Cluster of Excellence “The Formation of Normative Orders” at Goethe-University Frankfurt/Main, Germany, and a lecturer at the Department of Geography and Regional Research at the University of Vienna, Austria.

► Contact: stange@em.uni-frankfurt.de

Iris O'Rourke is managing editor of this issue and a member of the ASEAS Editorial Board. She studied law and social and cultural anthropology in Vienna, Oslo, and Canberra, and is currently working on her PhD in law at the University of Vienna, Austria.

► Contact: iris.orourke@seas.at