

Globalization and the Rise of Ethnic Conflict in Southeast Asia

Jobelle V. Abaya, University of the Philippines Diliman, The Philippines

The IAFOR International Conference on Global Studies 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The rise of ethnic conflict in Southeast Asia is a phenomenon brought by the tension coming from the assertion of cultural identity in the region vis-à-vis the forces of globalization. Globalization has a huge impact in the social, cultural, economic and political aspect of the countries in the region. The reconfiguration that it caused in the social structure has fragmented the society *inter alia* unequal distribution of resources and representation in the government. This had created “status resentments”, as what a scholar had argued, that in turn caused the birth of various ethnic groups conforming to a particular socio-political bond creating social cleavages and threat in the stability of Southeast Asia.

The ethnic conflicts that the countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and Philippines experience have long been a feature in their domestic setting, and although there were reforms taken by the respective governments to control the situation, there has been no concrete policy yet that would diminish the tensions in their respective domicile. Integration and holistic approach to the problem have been taken by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), but because of the principle of non-interference and non-intervention, every action were only made at a superficial level.

The conformity of the ethnic minorities towards their local organizations and to other civil society institutions, along with the assertion of individual and collective rights have reinforced their status causing decentralization of power and in the long run pronouncement for separatism and autonomy.

Keywords: Ethnic Conflict, Globalization, Economic Interdependence, Inequality, Social Fragmentation, Cultural Citizenship

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Southeast Asia (SEA) as a region is one of the most culturally-diversified continent in the world, with the intermingling of its traditional past until the influence from the colonial powers. Although its historical narrative is predominantly a Western perspective, it has definitely maintained the region's distinct character. SEA people are naturally-religious as being illustrated by the ceremonies and festivals that are celebrated annually and are part of their regular calendar, and also by the way how they profess their worship to their gods and spiritual beings, and later on how Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islamic teachings are being evident in their physical structures and social relationships.

SEA is also a region of conglomeration wherein aboriginal or native people, migrants and ethno-religious communities gather. There were periods of peaceful coexistence and also civil as well as tribal wars due to unsettled representation, labor, economic or land distribution issues. Then, skirmishes of conflicts between or among the minorities and the community and their local administrative unit can still be managed and somehow controlled by their central government. However, when they came in contact with the colonial countries, it paved the way to the permeation of their secluded territory and made them exposed to the changes that this period had brought them. This sudden exposure to foreign ideas and influences has forever reshaped the Southeast Asian way of life.

The influence of Western civilization under the guise of economic interdependence and political integration has continuously permeated almost every territory in the world. It has become more evident in almost all aspects of state activities and a normal individual life. Gone are the days when a person in a geographically-secluded area has a different set of experiences relative to the experiences of an urbanite since popular culture has spread through the rural areas and cities at the same time given the same availability of modern science and technology. The value of mass communication through all sorts of media disseminates information in a nanosecond through the facilitation of equipment like mobile phones and wireless internet connection. This had brought to a two-pronged phenomenon; either it has yielded to integration among individuals, communities and the central government or disintegration between individuals and the central government, between cultural groups, and between cultural groups and the central government.

Various scholars have presented their individual notions about globalization. The article on Globalization, Culture and Identities in Crisis by Lieber and Weisberg (2002) has defined it as the increasing integration of economies, information technology, the spread of popular culture and other forms of human interaction. This definition determines the factors that evidently make globalization tangible from the goods and services that are part of the daily consumption of an individual to the worldwide networking that transcend information across the globe. All these interconnections have led to a realization of being in a placeless, distanceless, borderless interactions that has unfolded the world as a single space or superterritoriality (Scholte, 1996).

The transcendental characteristic of globalization makes social relations not a matter of geographical boundary anymore but instead a transnational reality, like distant

learning education through an extension program offered by open or online-driven universities and social networking that reaches the universe and crosses the oceans. With the advent of internet or World Wide Web connection, it has the capacity to connect and integrate societies and even fragment traditional social structures (Cameron & Stein, 2000). The phenomenon has not really created a sweeping homogenizing effect in all the cultures of the world because of the attraction that it propelled, it has also created a force of resistance from the users. Although the foregoing definitions have illustrated a seemingly finality in terms of the triumph of liberal democracy under the guise of globalization, as what Francis Fukuyama had posited, and to put it in terms a “globalization backlash” according to Micklethwait and Wooldridge (2001) has seemed to depict the reverse of this wave of forces.

After presenting the nuances in the definition of globalization and how events revolve around it, its historical narratives and how the reverse side of this homogenizing force has trickled down into a concept of backlash, this paper will illustrate how ethnic conflict in SEA has emerged as a manifestation of the effect of the entry of globalization era.

Various scholars have subscribed and defended in their own perspective the effects of globalization on different vantage points. Some have argued that it has contributed to the general welfare of human beings and the developing countries at large, while on the other side, some have emphasized the fact that it has created a tension or resistance that disturbs the original order of the world. This is the two-pronged manifestation of this phenomenon, there are factors that would make people persuaded in terms of the positive effects that it has implicated in an ordinary human life. Also, there are existing literatures that would argue how globalization has built a force of cultural anxiety and turmoil (Lieber & Weisberg, 2002).

The main premise of globalization and how it has started is mainly through opening up of countries in international economic trading along with the development of mass communication. The elimination of territorial barriers has integrated financial markets and commerce among the developed and developing countries (Figini & Santarelli, 2006). The flexibility of state policy in terms of trading has permitted a great amount of capital inflow and foreign direct investments (FDI) especially in developing countries that relative to advanced Western countries has a huge population for human capital and labor force.

In another aspect, and what other literatures have argued as a positive effect of globalization, is the universal observance of civil and political rights of individuals across the world that are intended to protect the individuals from the state (Nadeau, 2005). The triumph of liberal ideology would also mean the eminence of individual rights, especially of those who are considered to be a minority of the population, like those of the region which has a very diversified group of population, from the Aceh people and Iryan Jayas in Indonesia, to the Malays, Muslims and Chinese in Thailand, the Karens in Myanmar, and Moros in the Philippines to name a few.

The transfer of liberal ideas as an implication of international trading and the empowerment among the individuals especially of the ethnic minorities has bridged the gap between the public administrators or politicians with that of the public (Stevenson, 1997). Public governance has indeed become a public good (which not at

all times is the situation) nowadays because groups of people have learned how to lead their own community. The growing ability of the people to manage their communal life is due to the pervasion of media that informs the people of their basic individual and collective rights, making the world better informed than ever before (Stevenson, 1997).

To sum up these aggregate positive aspects of globalization according to the pro-globalization schools of thought, the article Ethical Development and the Social Impact of Globalization has pointed out that countries that are engaged in trading also experience better health, smaller gap between the economically-rich and the poor, reduction in child labor rates, greater gender equality and improved environmental conditions (Davies & Quinlivan, 2003).

On the other hand, despite the promise of globalization towards economic growth and political integration, it has reached the point wherein people are becoming more assertive with the huge amount of information that they acquire from this openness. Because of the availability of almost all kinds of information from popular culture to politics, from advertisements to political elections, people have developed the capability to manage their individual selves. At present, education is not only confined to formal education in school but more so of the informal education in the community which is more accessible and unstructured.

Globalization promise of all-encompassing economic growth and benefits for the people of the member-countries has been a reality in a general sense because SEA economies became participants in international trading, their political system were enjoined with the international community and socially, the soft power of popular culture is felt in SEA countries. However the case may be, Ohanyan (2003) argues that forces of globalization tend to unfold selectively and are yet stronger in the urban areas creating an uneven industrialization effects overall.

Social inequality has been induced as opposed to the grand offering of integration by the idea of economic interdependence. Cameron and Stein (2000) postulated that two kinds of societies may develop from such inequality, first are the group of global citizens who are skilled, mobile, urban, autonomous of government, capable of exploiting the opportunities the global economy presents; and the group of unfortunate class whose members are impoverished and poorly-educated and whose status will be as the economic refugees in their own country (Cameron & Stein, 2000). Income inequalities have grown despite of the pronouncements of the other side of the spectrum that the total rate of poverty was reduced. The case wherein small scale industries are being eaten-up by multinational companies has worsened the situation because although these multi-corporations provide employment on a general scale, foreign aid tends to go to state actors, preventing the economic development of ethnic groups, and hence, perpetuating the cycles of violence by changing the domestic power balance and resource distribution (Ohanyan, 2003).

Cheap human labor and raw materials in Southeast Asia have become the targets of mass production by huge corporations in order to optimize their capital and still venture into another form of huge business through investment expansion. Even human services are being exported to other countries, as proven by the increasing rate of migrant Asian workers in the Western side of the Pacific and in some oil-rich countries in the Middle East, from the top scientists to the domestic workers, because

of the pull factor of these developed countries in the form of high wages and better employment privileges and opportunities.

This kind of an outward movement has weakened the region's national financial markets and made them dependent on international loans and debts. Another situation that according to some scholars who are in the opposition side is that it destroys the environment without any concrete action for sustainable development. The emission of an excessive rate of carbon dioxide and other chemical pollutants brought by manufacturing industries has aggravated climate change. This is used to be a natural occurrence but with the fast-paced advent of technological revolution, it reached a point wherein the propensity for a healthy human settlement is decreasing. Nowadays, for example, the Philippines experience more casualties and flooding during rainy season as what were experienced in the last few years of the present time. Although the geographical setting of the country is really at the center of natural disaster-prone area, being encircled by the Pacific and West Sea and at the ring of fire, the country have shown how unpreparedness and weak preemptive response have caused a thousand deaths in the super typhoons that plagued the country.

Rapid urbanization and migration of people into cities has made the ill-effects of climate change more averse and the central government has diminished its capacity to take a full control during disasters. Hence, the impacts of global environmental change which are felt in specific places and each case had elicited a particular local response (Scholte, 1996). There were hopes built in order to curb the depletion of the environment, that was when Kyoto Protocol and other international regimes for the protection of the environment were created but due to the lack of support from the developed countries, it was not ratified and enforced at all. The risk in the implementation of such conventions would entail a cut in the industrial production of the former which means a most likely decrease in their income, hence the foregoing's continued abeyance. Nevertheless, this did not serve as an impediment to the rising of individual concerns for the environment, for instance, how global tourism has intensified native sensibilities and how global deforestation has triggered indigenous activism have opened-up this tribal consciousness or what scholars would term as localized approach or global localization (Scholte, 1996) or glocalization for other scholars.

The kind of identification and shared belongingness that local communities ascribe to creates the principle of nationalism that according to Benedict Anderson is the imagined community. The new localism in a sense is a search for enclaves of familiarity and intimacy at a time when globalizing technologies have exposed the self to an infinity of locations, persons, things and ideas all at once (Scholte, 1996). The awakening of mininationalisms, in the term of Scholte (1996) has enhanced the capacity of the ethnic minorities to locally manage an immediate problem in their locality.

Leweller posited that with globalization, a reduction in state-centric power leads to increasing localization of power (Kwiatkowski, 2005). In Indonesia, the weakness of the state has prompted to a radical decentralization of power, exacerbated by the issues such as the decline of military discipline and massive corruption in the bureaucracy and the legal system (Searle, 2002). The rise of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), that for a very long time was the cause of domestic turmoil, was one of the

result of the social tension between their government and the marginalized sector. Another was the birth of Organisasi Papua Merdeka (Free Papua Government or OPM) which was the result of unequal distribution of resources in their area. These are both instances of social fragmentation, that is the inability of the government to cater equally to the needs of both economically-marginalized as well as empowered social groups (Ohanyan, 2003).

In Myanmar, social cleavage is evident in almost all the provinces of the country but this overt division has hindered the goal of the people to achieve autonomy and recognition from the military junta. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), as is called to the reigning military regime, has maintained an unchallenged power over the country because of the modernization of the armed forces and internal division among the ethnic groups like the Karen National Union (KNU) with that of the National League for Democracy (NLD) (Searle, 2002). Likewise, although Thailand is the only SEA country that was not colonized by the West, it has nevertheless been affected by the forces of globalization but relatively not as tumultuous as the Indonesian and Myanmar experience. The Malay separatist movement in its four-dominated Southern provinces was given concessions by the Thai government in the form of the following: tolerance of religious pluralism, improved education and socio-economic development packages in the South, and increased recruitment of Muslims into the state administrative structure (Searle, 2002).

Pro-globalization scholars have argued that the wave of liberal ideas would bridge the gap between the public administrators and the masses, however with the empowerment that the civil society has acquired across time and generation, it has even led to a seemingly disparity between the two parties. And because the state may lose its preeminence as the principal focus of political identity, it had become one among many, bidding for the loyalty of its members in a competitive political marketplace (Cameron & Stein, 2000). This relative decrease in the capacity of the state vis-à-vis the growing power of social, economic and cultural institutions had been named by Cameron and Stein (2000) as the “hollowness of the state”. The capacity of the state to control socio-economic activities has been devolved in the community, making implementation of national policies harder than ever, especially that policy-making does not only come from the government alone but with the involvement of international organizations like the United Nations (UN), financial institutions like the world Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), and regional associations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Social fragmentation, brought by the unequal effects of globalization, contributes to ethnic conflicts because it has created a plethora of policy-making structure in which access is not equally-available to all social groups within the state (Ohanyan, 2003).

In addition, the diminished role of the state and decentralization of power had further caused fragmentation within the community itself because of status resentments (Lieber & Weisberg, 2002). Suddenly everyone wants to be a stakeholder in the decisions made so as not to impede their traditional rights and be a beneficiary of the public resources. The country had experienced recently the opposing factions within the group of Moros in Mindanao making this place a hodgepodge of various political ideologies like those of the existence of groups like Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and more recently, the break-away group

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). From this, community then arise not from a dual process of homogenization of the inside, but in a communion of sameness and difference that are in constructive tension with one another (Scholte, 1996). The continuous assertion of an individual and a collective group identity has reshaped and even paved the way to the evolution of social relationships. There were organizations that have been created and are geared towards representation just to make sure that no sector would be left behind in public good and service distribution, civil society was strengthened and therefore creating their own perspective on public governance. On the other hand, fragmentation within groups is also evident because of the individualistic claims of right to self-determination. In Indonesia, ethnic Papuans and the people of Jakarta compete over the exploitation of natural resources, and how the economic and political interests of the people of Maluku and Kalimantan brought them into competition (Searle, 2002) same with the Myanmar case wherein ethnic wars continue to hinder their economic growth.

The varying assertions led to the rise of ethnic groups or more specifically the identity assertion of indigenous groups (Scholte, 1996). Likewise, contemporary resurgence of ethnic identities have often unfolded in the past as defensive reactions against intrusions of the other who threatens to erase the self (Scholte, 1996). But in which case, it is not only the risk of not being acknowledged nowadays that drives the ethnic groups to maintain or defend their rights, but also it is a product or manifestation of the dynamic that goes with the process of negotiating the effects of globalization at the local level (Kwiatkowski, 2005) or what Lieber and Weisberg (2002) termed as cultural anxiety and turmoil. There are two distinct causes of this circumstance, one is the material effects of globalization and modernity, including the consumer economy, the information revolution and the mass media, which provides both a window to the wider world and a challenge to traditional ways of doing things; the other is the influence of western values that is more profound in its impact like scientific reasoning, secularism, religious toleration, individualism, freedom of expression, political pluralism, the rule of law, equal rights for women and minorities and openness to change (Lieber & Weisberg, 2002). The soft power that globalization brings in into the territories of the countries makes the people become detached to their traditional ways of life and imbibe the modern ways, like how the rural people seek the most admired city life as proven by the increasing number of urban dwellers in Southeast Asian cities.

The influence of the very fast transfer of information and acquisition of knowledge shaped the power of the local groups to be part of the decision-making process or else be the local public administrators themselves. These ethnic groups have the access to the resources in their immediate environment making them utilize these resources to form socio-cultural organizations. Local history would then tell us that socio-cultural organizations ultimately developed and become political bonds that are now driven by political ideologies like how the ordinary ethno-religious and socio-cultural organizations in Myanmar, Indonesia and the Philippines vie for a position in the government. The allegiance to a particular group creating their own nation and further forming into political bonds has been expounded by James Der Derian as the traditional gambit of defining and unifying a national identity through alienation of others (Scholte, 1996). However represented the ethnic groups could be, concessions in the form of strategies to manage the tension through distribution of resources and decision-making power failed to endure because they lacked the long-term incentive

structures required to establish themselves in governmental circles and in the grassroots (Ohanyan, 2003).

The rise of supraterritoriality has helped to produce new diversities and alternative forms of self-other differentiation (Scholte, 1996) or how the scholars Cameron and Stein (2000) termed it as the distinction between “you” and “me”, between “them” and “us”. So the dynamic, or to accurately describe it, the tension does not only emanate now from the continuous bargaining of ethnic groups with the state but also among themselves as illustrated by stories of tribal competition and civil war in SEA. The division within cultural groups and disruption of their social relationships is not a natural occurrence but instead the result of how colonial forces have divided geographies and become their colonies, without acknowledging how divisions have demarcated limitations between and within cultural identities. The reconfiguration of social geography disrupted previously dominant patterns of group identity centered on frequent face-to-face contacts (Scholte, 1996). This circumstance was further examined and labeled by Lieber and Weisberg (2002) as a clash within civilizations, because the culture has become a central arena of contestation dwelling on identities of the personal, ethnic, religious, social and national. Hence, the ultimate clash is less between civilizations, as postulated by Samuel Huntington, but within them (Lieber & Weisberg, 2002).

The inexorability of the matter has dwindled the fight by some nationalist groups to really develop a one unifying identity amidst globalization, whereof the challenge for the state would presently emerge from. Globalization has indeed engendered the growth of aboriginal, racial and other sub-, trans-, and non-national group affiliations (Scholte, 1996), that are not only culturally-motivated, but also socially, economically, and politically-motivated as explained. Since the tension started from the marginalization of the original cultural identities of these people caused by the social demarcation that globalization made, contextualization of cultural rights as component of citizenship should be incorporated along with civil, political and social rights (Stevenson, 1997).

Scholars have recognized the struggle among politics, economics and culture, that according to some rather than assimilation or mere tolerance towards the ethnic and social groups, citizenship should be based on institutionally-embedded multicultural practices (Stevenson, 1997) since politics is part and parcel of the whole schema of culture. Because to infer the present day crisis as a "clash of cultures" seems more to render a service to fundamentalism on all sides than to help to gain a productive insight into the meaning of the existence of ethnic minorities in our current world (Houben, 2003). Therefore, long-term socio-economic policies with grassroots involvement in the decision-making can be a strategy, in this way, local and foreign services may tailor into the specific needs of each ethnic community, that may range from educational programs to agricultural business development (Ohanyan, 2003). Since the ASEAN is at the height of redefining the region's economic security policy, it could also be the high time to involve the plight of ethnic minorities in decision-making so as to tame ethnic tensions in the region that serves as a hindrance in the political and economic development of Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

Ethnic minorities are realities in the region, they play a significant role in terms of achieving economic outputs because they are mainly situated in manual production as low to medium wage earners. The change in their economic status enhances the quality of human capital in the region and at the same can make them actively-engaged in state activities. At the end of the day, although there are issues of state hollowness or legitimacy crisis, it is still the government as the machinery of the state has the control over decisions and policies. The effects of globalization might have forever changed how things occur, but the constancy of state authority never ceases in the picture, therefore the tension between the population and the external forces can still be overhauled by efficient public governance.

References

- Cameron, D. & Stein, J.G. (2000). Globalization, culture and society: the state as place amidst shifting spaces. *Canadian Public Policy / Analyse de Politiques*, 26, 15-34.
- Davies, A. & Quinlivan, G. (2003). Ethical development and the social impact of globalization. *International Journal on World Peace*, 20, 39-66.
- Figini, P. & Santarelli E. (2006). Openness, economic reforms and poverty: globalization in developing countries. *The Journal of Developing Areas*, 39, 129-151.
- Houben, V. J. H. (2003). Southeast asia and islam. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 588, 149-170.
- Kwiatkowski, L. (2005). Globalization, change and diversity in the Philippines. *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 34, 305-316.
- Lieber, R. J. & Weisberg, R. E. (2002). Globalization, culture and identities in crisis. *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 16, 273-296.
- Micklethwait, J. & Woolridge, A. (2001). The globalization backlash. *Foreign Policy*, 126, 12-26.
- Nadeau, K. (2005). Christians against globalization in the Philippines. *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 34, 317-339.
- Ohanyan, A. (2003). Nationalism in a globalizing context: governance-focused intervention in the developing world. *International Journal on World Peace*, 20, 29-53.
- Scholte, J.A. (1996). The geography of collective identities in a globalizing world. *Review of International Political Economy*, 34, 565-607.
- Searle, P. (2002). Ethno-religions conflicts: rise or decline? recent development in Southeast Asia. *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*, 24, 1-11.
- Stevenson, N. (1997). Globalization, national cultures and cultural citizenship. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 38, 41-66.

Contact email: jobelleabaya@gmail.com