A Square Peg in a Round Hole: Radical Islam in Insular Southeast Asia

by Major Andrés H. Cáceres-Solari, USMC

Introduction

Radical Islamic movements in the Muslim world are a critical threat to our nation and our allies. These have been present in continental Eurasia and Africa for various decades, and have become an emerging threat in Southeast Asia. This has been particularly the case in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, three regional neighbors with significant Muslim populations.

The severe impact of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis on these nations' economies, domestic ethnic and religious conflicts (1999-2001) and the popular opposition to the GWOT campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq seemed to create the right atmosphere for radical Islamic organizations to flourish. However, against expectation these three nations have instead gained momentum towards economic recovery, democratization and religious tolerance.

In this article I will discuss and analyze the diverse underlying reasons why the Indonesian, Malaysian and Philippine people have not been receptive to imposing *Shariah Law*, and reject the idea of establishing Islamic states and caliphates.

Malay Culture in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines

I define the Malay culture of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines as the Austronesian culture and people that forms the majority of the population in these three nations. Today these people encompass three different nationalities and speak different languages while composing one race.

Traditional Malay culture possesses more egalitarian characteristics across genders than in the rest of the Muslim world. Women enjoy a higher status in the Malay Southeast Asian societies while Middle Eastern societies are more patriarchic and authoritarian.[1] According to the United Nations mission to Indonesia in 2002, there is an interpretation of Islam which allows egalitarian education for both genders. Also, 48% of Indonesian primary, secondary and university students are girls, depicting a larger cultural acceptance towards education for women.[2] This reflects in the significant participation of women in these nations' Islamic organizations.

It is important to mention that matriarchic pre-Islamic cultures within these nations adopted Islam with minimal impacts to their customs. The Minangkabau people of coastal Indonesia, one of the largest ethnic groups in the archipelago, have maintained a heavily female dominated and influenced culture while practicing Islam.[3] It is important to note that Islam first arrived to these

1. REPORT DATE **SEP 2008**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2008 to 00-00-2008**
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **A Square Peg in a Round Hole: Radical Islam in Insular Southeast Asia**		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
		5b. GRANT NUMBER
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER
		5e. TASK NUMBER
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **Naval Postgraduate School,Center for Contemporary Conflict,1 University Circle,Monterey,CA,93943**		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**		
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
14. ABSTRACT		
15. SUBJECT TERMS		

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT **Same as Report (SAR)**	18. NUMBER OF PAGES **9**	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**			

coastal regions, establishing an earlier foothold in these areas prior to its spread in the inner lands.

In Malay cultures egalitarian treatment across the genders can be found at the children's age, where gender differences are virtually non-existent.[4] Many *Sufi* educational institutions across these nations have registered to have a 40 to 60 percent of female members.[5] Islamic boarding schools dedicated to the study of Islam and other secular studies show similar representation. This also includes equal gender access to secular and religious education within national secular institutions.[6] It is important to mention that Christians (Catholics and Protestant), Buddhists and Hindus are also entitled to religious education of their respective faiths according to national standards.[7]

Radical Islamic influences clash with cultural principles of the region which have extensive roots and a more extensive history. Indonesia, the largest Muslim populated nation in the world, has opted to form secular governments and constitutions which recognize more egalitarian practices across the genders. The Malaysian government has embraced political Islam to a larger extent than Indonesia while remaining secular. On September 29, 2001 the Malay government made a claim that Malaysia was already an Islamic state, while emphasizing the unnecessary implementation of *Shariah Law*. In the Philippine Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), the application of *Shariah Law* only applies exclusively to Muslims and in limited situations.

Arrival of Islam to Insular Southeast Asia

Islam arrived peacefully to Southeast Asia, unlike in Africa and continental Eurasia. Military conquest at the hands of Arabian armies (first wave of Islam) Islamized the societies of the Iberian Peninsula, the Middle East and North Africa while tolerating existing Christian and Judaic populations. Turkic tribes and the Ottomans spread the Islamic faith (second wave of Islam) through the Balkans, Central and South Asia in more ruthless expeditions across the continent.[8] The encountered Hindu and Buddhist populations did not receive the same protection as the Christians and Jews found by the Arabs, as the former believers are not considered to be *People of the Book* per the *Quran* (2:62; 6:69 & 22:22).

In the thirteenth century, merchants and traders from the South Asian subcontinent arrived in Southeast Asia with peaceful objectives of establishing commercial links. These continental merchants built mosques in the new lands and provided support for emerging Muslim societies. They became members of the local ruling elites via marriage, further spreading the faith into the local population. Once these ruling strata of society and the commercial circles were converted, it became an incentive for locals to convert to Islam, thus facilitating trade and other business relationships.[9]

Native tradesmen found it beneficial to convert to Islam, as lucrative trade became almost exclusive to Muslim communities.[10] Locals also found that sharing Islam would include them within a circle of trust among tradesmen, furthermore, interest free loans were only available among Muslims.[11] Local monarchs also encouraged Islamic conversion by promoting land ownership exclusively to Muslims.[12] The settling of South Asian Muslim immigrants in these archipelagos also contributed to the spread of Islam throughout present day Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

These new beliefs combined with already existing local traditions (Hindu, Buddhist and preexisting animist beliefs) introduced the present unique Islamic practices of these nations. This merging of foreign with domestic practices developed the "Southeast Asian version of Islam," a source of much debate and friction between Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian religious

scholars. Presently, most Islamic literature in Southeast Asia is locally produced and distributed, further strengthening its unique characteristics.[13]

Existing *Sufi* influences strengthen the traditional pre-Islamic mystic beliefs in the archipelagos.[14] Traditional, cultural and religious practices are still strong in the region even after years of exposure to stringent Islam as a result of Islamic NGOs and the more frequented pilgrimage to Mecca since the Industrial Revolution.

Islam in Insular Southeast Asia

The most common form of Islam in Southeast Asia is the *Shafii* school of jurisprudence, which derives from Sunni Islam. This school emerged as a result of conflicts between scholars who wanted to strictly adhere to the teachings of the prophet and those who emphasized the use of analogical reasoning. It identifies four legal sources also known as the *Usul al-Fiqh*. These are the *Quran*, the *Sunnah*, the community consensus (*ijma*) and analogical reasoning *(qiyas)*.

This *Shafii* understanding of community is the congregation of members of an actual community, not a designated body of Islamic scholars unlike in other forms of Sunni Islam, adding a key level of flexibility. This unique understanding of "community" permitted the inclusion of local pre-Islamic traditions in Islamic jurisprudence. This blend of pre-Islamic traditions and *Shafii* practices gave way to today's traditionalist Islamic school in Southeast Asia, which is significantly different from stringent African and continental Asian practices.[15]

Islamic Modernism

Southeast Asia experienced a pattern of Islamic revival which is reflected in the increasing number of mosques and the enforcement of Islamic attire for both men and women throughout these nations.[16] *Sufism* has been part of this revival, a mystical and inner-spiritual dimension of Islam which is considered by many Islamic Middle Eastern scholars as being outside of the true path of Islam.[17] This dimension of Islam has also experienced an increase in followers from all social strata and both genders.[18]

Islamic modernist movements allowed religious and secular education outside of religious institutions, undermining the position of traditionalist religious leaders. This education has also been characterized for fomenting pluralism, ethnic/religious tolerance, and English language education as well as technical and vocational skills.[19] Student body leadership positions within these institutions are obtained via elections, exposing the students to democratic processes at a young age.

It is imperative to mention that more radical Islamic *Wahhabi* influences did not arrive into the region until the end of last century.[20] However, important Islamic non-political organizations such as Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, and the present government in Malaysia were successful in cementing the belief that Islam needs modernization, as its applicability faces today's challenges of society's modernization and technological advancement.[21] Therefore, *Shariah Law* must be adjusted before it is applied to today's lifestyles. Malaysia, a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference with 57 other nations, professes the ability of Muslim nations to prosper economically while adhering to principles of religious tolerance and social development.

Islam and Political Activity in Southeast Asia

In Indonesia, post-Suharto era Islamic friendly parties vary in a larger spectrum of proposed Islam implementation policies. Within this new political range, newer parties intend to implement Islamic ideas in government policy without changing the secular foundation of the nation.

The fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 gave way to the emergence of several Islamic friendly parties. These are catalogued under Islamist, Islamic-inclusive and secular-inclusive parties, all three uphold Muslim aspirations.[22] Islamist parties pursue the formal adoption of *Shariah Law* into the Indonesian constitution, turning Indonesia into an Islamic state. Islamic-inclusive parties draw their support from Islamic organizations while not emphasizing an Islam-based agenda. These parties also reject the idea of adopting *Shariah Law* as part of the nation's constitution, however they still represent popular Muslim intentions.[23]

Secular-inclusive parties consider the Indonesian constitution as compatible with Islamic tradition. However, these parties emphasize the urge of the population to construct an Islamic society without declaring an Islamic fundamentalist state.[24] It is also worth mentioning the increasing political participation and acceptance of Christian parties within the Indonesian political environment. This more secular approach towards politics, while still embracing Islamic ideas to a very limited extent, allowed these more secular Islamic friendly parties in Indonesia to win over 40% of the votes in the 1999 elections. On the other hand, the more hardline Islamist parties captured 14% of the votes.

Indonesian voting history does not match expressed opinion regarding the implementation of *Shariah Law* and the establishment of an Islamic state. A national survey made in 2002 showed that 67% of Muslims desire an Islamic government, and 70.8% agree that the nation's Muslim population should abide by *Shariah Law*. However, less than 13% would like to see the state enforce fasting and the five daily prayers. This was further complicated by the popular desire to implement laws based on Islamic principles while simultaneously opposing Islamist proposals for women-restrictive measures.[25]

In Malaysia this is reflected by the Muslim population's desire to seek pluralism, social and economic modernity while simultaneously placing increasing value to Islamic practices and spiritualism.[26] Malaysia has declared itself as a democratic, secular multi-religious state while adhering to Islamic principles.[27] This is a result to the government's response to Malaysia's Islamic revival movement of the 1970s known as the *Dakwah*, which forced the government to adopt more Islamic oriented programs in the nation while promoting political and economic progress.[28] The government introduced Islamic friendly policy while simultaneously redefining national identity and culture around Islamic principles.[29] As a result, today's Malaysian society reflects firm beliefs that radicalism can be combated through good governance, democracy and the improvement of quality of life throughout the nation.[30]

In the Philippines, initial separatist movements such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) were able to engage in successful diplomatic dialogue with Manila, achieving their goal for more regional autonomy and renouncing to arms. Today, the majority of the ARMM's population agrees that this region should be ruled by an Islamic government while maintaining its present status within the Republic of the Philippines according to a survey conducted in 2008.[31] However, this same survey showed that 64% of the surveyed group understands the concept of an Islamic government as an administration which embraces Islamic values as opposed to a ruling body of Islamic scholars. Furthermore, this survey also found that 71% of the surveyed group is satisfied with the democratic governments of the ARMM and the Philippines.

Democracy and Economic Development

It is important to understand that Islamic radicalism did not become a threat to the West until the Iranian Revolution of 1979; until then, nationalist movements were common across the Muslim world. However, even as the Iranian revolution rallied under Islamic fundamentalist ideals, the overthrow of the Shah was mostly due to the regime's economic and political failures instead of theological rivalries.[32]

Central Asian, Middle Eastern and North African nations which have seen the emergence of radical Islamic movements have experienced political and economic turmoil, creating an ideal environment for these groups to flourish. In contrast Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have experienced a brighter history in economic and political development. The secular nature of these nations' Muslim populations has facilitated the formation and support of democratic regimes and high economic growth.[33]

Upon independence these nations embarked on a natural resource export economy, which evolved to industry, followed by manufacturing and have presently developed a strong service market. Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines were among the founding members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a community comprising the principles of political/security, economic and socio-cultural cooperation per the Bali Concord II of 2003.[34] The economic prosperity of the Southeast Asian region along with the strong and peaceful interstate relations have not provided the necessary soil needed for the acceptance and spread of radical Islamic ideology.

According to the Failed State Index of 2007, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines figure among the more stable nations with stronger institutions than fellow Muslim countries in Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.[35] Per the World Bank's list of nations according to Gross Domestic Product (Purchasing Power Parity), Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines are among the top 35 nations (out of 183 countries) along with several Western powers. Meanwhile, 27 fellow Muslim nations in Africa and continental Asia haves lower rankings, from Bangladesh (48) to Djibouti (161).[36]

Radical Islam, a Foreign Movement

Over one thousand Southeast Asians fought in Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet *jihad* from 1979 to 1989. Hundreds more were reported living in Afghanistan as fighters during the following Taliban regime and in Pakistan's madrassas as Islamic scholars.[37] Their time in Central Asia allowed these fighters to adopt more radical Islamic beliefs and establish connections with other radicals in Southeast Asia and the world. This developed necessary networks, facilitating funding and links with other regional extremists and Al-Qaeda.

These *mujahedeen* fighters who returned to Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines brought lethal training and radical rhetoric. They established radical Islamic schools and founded radical Islamic organizations, spreading their teachings in Southeast Asia. The Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) is a perfect example of this phenomenon; it was founded by Zainon Ismail, a former *mujahedeen* fighter in the Soviet-Afghan conflict.[38] Jemmah Islamiyah (JI) of Indonesia was founded by Abu Bakar Bashir, Hambali and Abdullah Sungkar, the latter two were former veterans of the Soviet- Afghan conflict. Al-Qaeda established its presence in Southeast Asia via the Philippines' Abu Sayaff Group (ASG), assuring a foothold in the region and expanding its *jihadist* efforts.

These organizations' recruits are students in madrassas where more radical forms of Islam are taught. These new students tend to come from lower classes, many of them from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds as well as the unemployed. The targeted individuals are easily convinced that their situation is due to the negligent attitude of their governments towards Muslims due to "anti-Islamic principles" such as democracy. These ideals are based on the principles that Islam is being subdued by a Judeo-Christian conspiracy via economic and political means, and current Islamic leaders have been polluted by non-Islamic ideals drawing them away from the pillars of the faith. Some of these Islamic radical groups desire to lead their nations into the "right path of Islam," establishing *Shariah Law* and recovering the true essence of Islam also known as *salafism*.[39]

Some of these regional radical organizations were founded outside of Southeast Asia such as the Philippines' Misuari Breakaway Group (MBG), which was founded in Egypt and Hizbut Tahrir (HT), an Indonesian radical group founded in Jerusalem by Palestinians and later exported to Southeast Asia.[40]

Conclusion

The strong Malay, Buddhist and Hindu traditions of Indonesia and surrounding nations have been able to remain deeply rooted in today's society. This was made possible through the late arrival of Islam, which favored conversion due to financial motives instead of violent invasions such as those that took place throughout continental Asia and Africa. A key factor is the tolerant and pluralist aspect of Islam in Southeast Asia, which reflects the characteristics of the *Shafii* school of jurisprudence. This school's definition of *ijma* rests the responsibility of this community reasoning on the local allowing pre-Islamic influences to have an impact on daily Islamic practices.

This is further reflected in the nature of the modernist and traditionalist Islamic movements which foster cooperation with members of other faiths.[41] Regional Islamic modernist organizations preach pluralism and the need to adapt Islamic practices to today's modern society. It is important to emphasize that the region's Islamic traditionalists are a relatively moderate movement when compared to more hard line traditionalists in Africa and continental Eurasia. Traditionalist movements such as Indonesia's Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) emphasize and promote the loving and peaceful nature of Islam, attempting to dissociate the faith from violent stereotypes. In September 2008, the NU rejected the potential sweeps at the hands of radical Islamic groups during Ramadan.[42] The NU emphasized that any police action against private establishments such as bars and nightclubs for not observing this holy month is the responsibility of local law enforcement agencies instead of religious organizations throughout the country.

Newly arrived radical Islamic groups faced this existing moderate and progressive Islamic base in Southeast Asia which has a longer and deeper history. Also, these groups are currently struggling to obtain support in progressive and democratic nations which have experienced economic progress. This was evident when the popular reaction in Indonesia, Malaysia and the southern Philippines against the American-led coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq failed to produce the same results as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1970s. The radical Islamic groups failed to recruit volunteers to fight abroad as *mujahedeen*.[43] The general sentiment among the population was against the American actions; however, this was demonstrated in a peaceful manner.

Even though the present situation in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines does not provide the support for radical Islamic movements, immunity is not assured. Economic decline in the resent past has fueled ethnic and religious tensions which have cost thousands of lives. While it is hard to change cultures and religious history, economic reality is still an important variable which could change these nations' governments. It is necessary to understand that these self-supporting factors may provide the needed stability in the future and become the basis for the further strengthening of secular governments in Southeast Asia. This may be a model which may be extended into fellow Eurasian and North African Muslim nations. However, a significant disruption resulting in the decline of living standards throughout Southeast Asia could tilt the balance in an unfavorable way, plunging these nations into chaos and providing the support radical Islamic groups have long waited for.

References

1. Lily Zubaidah Rahim, "Representing and Misrepresenting Islam: The Discursive Struggle Between Literal and Liberal Islam in Southeast Asia," *Nautilus Institute at RMIT*, *Australia Policy Forum 06-02A,* February 9, 2006.

2. Katarina Tomasevski, "The Right to Education," *UN Commission of Human Rights*, Report from UN Mission to Indonesia 1-7 July 2002, October 18, 2002.

3. Peggy Reeves Sanday, "Women at the Center, Life in a Modern Matriarchy," *LiP Magazine*, January 15, 2003.

4. Elizabeth Frankenberg and Randall Kuhn, "The Implications of Family Systems and Economic Context for Intergenerational Transfers in Indonesia and Bangladesh," *California Center for Population Research-UCLA*, August 2004.

5. Julia Fay Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (August 2001): 701-729.

6. Ibid.

7. Angel Rabasa, "Islamic Education in Southeast Asia," *Hudson Institute*, September 12, 2005.

8. Alain-Gérard Marsot, "Political Islam in Asia: A Case Study*," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 524, (November 1992): 156-169.

9. Ibid.

10. Jean Gelman Taylor*, Indonesia Peoples and Histories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 60-89.

11. "Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia," Course at Fudan University, Department of International relations, December 2004., http://china.sciences-po.fr/fr/actions/cours_bertrand_2004.pdf.

12. Jean Gelman Taylor*, Indonesia Peoples and Histories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 60-89.

13. Vincent J. H. Houben, "Southeast Asia and Islam," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588, (July 2003): 149-170.

14. Ibid.

15. Angel Rabasa, "Islamic Education in Southeast Asia," *Hudson Institute*, September 12, 2005.

16. Julia Fay Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (August 2001): 701-729.

17. Alan Godlas, "Sufism—Sufis—Sufi Orders," *University of Georgia*.

18. Julia Fay Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (August 2001): 701-729.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Anies Rasyid Baswedan, "Political Islam in Indonesia," *Asian Survey* 44, no. 5 (September/October): 669-690.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Saiful Mujani and R. William Liddle, "Politics, Islam, and Public Opinion," *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 1 (January 2004): 109-123.

26. Andrew T. H. Tan, "The Rise of Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia: An Emerging Security Challenge," *Panorama*, no.1 (2002): 83-102.

27. Lim Kit Siang, "Media Conference Statement," *Dap Malaysia*, April 3, 2004.

28. Colin Rubenstein, "The Role of Islam in Contemporary South East Asian Politics," Jerusalem Letter no. 436, *Jerusalem Center fro Public Affairs*, August 15, 2000.

29. "Islam In Asia," *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies*, April 16, 1999.

30. Mohamed Sharif Bashir, "Islam Hadhari: Concept and Prospect," *Islam Online*, March 3, 2005.

31. Ghandi C. Kinjiyo, "Islamic Government in ARMM Urged," *Sun Star*, April 5, 2008.

32. Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003). Excerpted introduction available for download at: http://www.rienner.com/uploads/47d9901874b3e.pdf.

33. Ibid.

34. "Declaration of ASEAN Concord II*," Association of Southeast Asian Nations*, October 7, 2003. Online at: http://www.aseansec.org/15159.htm.

35. "Failed State Index 2007," *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2007. Online at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3865&page=0.

36. "Gross Domestic Product 2007, PPP" *World Bank*, online at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GDP_PPP.pdf.

37. Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003). Excerpted introduction available for download at: http://www.rienner.com/uploads/47d9901874b3e.pdf.

38. "In the Spotlight: Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM)," Center for Defense Information website (CDI.org), August 12, 2005.

39. Greg Fealy, "Islamic Radicalism in Indonesia: The Faltering Revival?," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2004): 104-121.

40. Ibid.

41. "Abdurrahman Wahid, 4th President of Republic Indonesia," *ASEAN News Network*, March 19, 2005.

42. "East Java NU: Ramadan Sweeping Wrong," *The Jakarta Post*, September 2, 2008.

43. Greg Fealy, "Islamic Radicalism in Indonesia: The Faltering Revival?," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2004): 104-121.