VIOLENT INTERNAL CONFLICTS
IN ASIA PACIFIC

HISTORIES, POLITICAL ECONOMIES AND POLICIES

Editors:
Dewi Fortuna Anwar
Hélène Bouvier
Glenn Smith
Roger Tol

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Yayasan Obor Indonesia
Jl. Plaju No. 10 Jakarta 10230
Phone. 31926978; 3920114
Fax.: 31924488
e-mail: yayasan_obor@cbn.net.id
http://www.obor.or.id

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GLENN SMITH AND HÉLÈNE BOUVIER

Introduction

This is a time of heightened tension in many parts of Asia, with war, insecurity, terrorism and fear of nuclear proliferation haunting the Middle East, the Subcontinent and the Korean Peninsula. These imminently global crises, despite their gravity, do not entirely obscure a number of internal conflicts which—to focus on the Asia Pacific region alone—have significant impacts on human security, economic performance, and ecological sustainability. Struggles over the ownership and sharing of natural resources play a part in many conflicts with ethnic overtones (witness the long-running Bougainville conflict in Papua New Guinea). Mobilisation of ethnic and religious identities is a phenomenon found in nearly all Asia-Pacific countries, with Fiji providing a paradigm case of the fragile ethnically based political system. In many cases, such as the Philippines, ethnic and religious identity on the one hand and economic inequality on the other hand represent competing explanatory frameworks for understanding violent conflict. Democratisation can lead to conflict (Snyder 2000), as can its suppression (in Myanmar).

For Indonesia, a privileged focus of many of the chapters in this volume, violent conflict has rarely been absent from pre-colonial times to the present. Following the struggle for Independence, Indonesia's first five decades witnessed violent conflicts over separatist demands, over the role of religion in a secular state, and over access to power and resources—conflicts which observers have labelled communal, ethnic, social, political or religious. Although the conflict of 1965–66 was by far the most serious, the rhythm and magnitude of violent conflicts clearly accelerated from the mid-1990s, accompanying the demise of the authoritarian regime and followed by clashes in several parts of the Archipelago, including the separatist conflicts in Aceh and Papua and sectarian conflicts in Kalimantan, Central Sulawesi and the Moluccas. By August 2001, there were 1.3 million registered refugees, or internally displaced persons (IDPs), in Indonesia.

Although the risk of regional or inter-State conflicts has receded with the growth of interconnecting ties through globalisation, the attention has now focused on international terrorist networks. The so-called 'new security agenda'—which

concerns terrorism, organised crime, arms, drugs and human trafficking, environmental degradation, population and other security issues—has raised questions about its immediate and long-term ramifications for economic stability, democratisation and human rights.

The present volume, as the title suggests, deals with conflicts of a violent sort occurring within countries rather than between them. History informs many of the contributions here; indeed, neglecting history means writing off diachronic and comparative study, a move in our view fatal to any hope of a science of conflict. Political economy was chosen as an all-encompassing term to take into account a host of causal and contextual factors contributing to violent conflicts, though the implication that politics and economy are often more weighty factors than others was entirely intended.[1] Policy here refers to the measures envisioned to deal with violence and promote peace. That the plural is used for these terms reflects the multiplicity of contexts and solutions for different conflict situations, as well as a realisation that for the two sides of a conflict and one detached observer (at least), the facts of the case generally differ. Peacemaking does not necessarily require we impose one impartial and 'true' reading of a given conflict situation on protagonists, though we are inclined to believe that facts are discoverable and verifiable—that there is a reality 'out there'—and more often than not attempts to capture it can help parties arrive at solutions to their differences.

Internal conflicts include ethnic, religious, political, socio-economic, and other disputes based on group identity. Overlapping usually occurs between these categories. Conflicts are best viewed as evolving processes, lending them to comparison and prediction, though later stages may bear little resemblance to earlier stages (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Although ethnic conflicts (including conflicts over religion, between 'sons of the soil' and migrants or central authorities, or in relation to other group identity markers) currently take far more lives than any other form of political conflict, participants, politicians, public authorities, international agencies, and academic specialists lack consensus on the particular explanations for them (Tilly 2003:1).

Researching violently divided communities poses special difficulties. Obtaining accurate information is often a function of whose side the informant deems the analyst is on, where he or she fits in the informants 'geography of friends and enemies' (Armakolas 2001). Conflict researchers and policy-makers alike need to consider what their ideas of the conflicting parties are, where these ideas come from, how they affect the ways they work with the parties and the

[1] We are also attracted by Robert Hefner's use of the term to characterise his work 'combining multilocal ethnography with broader attention to national history and politics' (Hefner 1990:xv). Conflict studies, at least as much as any other domain, requires such a multilevel research strategy.

impact of the policies they propose. Conflict resolution is a cultural-specific process. Traditional legal proceedings in the Southern Philippines (as among the Subanun and Yakan described in Frake 1997) are as different from each other as they are from adversarial proceedings in the United States (Schellenberg 1996). Policies need to be sensitive to local conditions while at the same time upholding universal values.

The knowledge base

Ultimately, the policy options that will be available to deal with conflict depend on the knowledge base; most policy disputes (or lack of policy, and the resulting inaction) can be traced to disagreements over what the problem is, who the protagonists are, what cause-effect chains are in operation, and what solutions are appropriate. In this section we consider some of the key elements of the knowledge base that emerge as fault lines in policy disputes.

Causality. Even in countries fortunate to have a nominally free press, and despite some improvements in this area, too often media accounts present black and white pictures of violent conflicts. Even when a media account is unbiased, and simply presents the 'facts' of ongoing violence, the paucity of background and contextual information leaves listeners and readers to fill in the story with elements of their own experiences and prejudices. So much is human, a result no doubt of the political-economics of modern information systems coupled with limitations in our cognitive information-processing capabilities. Yet, it is only some time after the story has dropped off the front page and out of popular view that contesting analyses of the events and the complex interplay between background and proximate causes become the matter of informed debate among the smaller community of analysts and practitioners. Their analyses, regrettably, have little impact on the wider public perceptions already formed that the conflict was due primarily to a single precipitating factor or event, as often portrayed by correspondent's reports from the scene. As shorter news cycles and sound bites replace investigative reporting, media's role in educating citizens and policy-makers further shrinks.[2]

[2] The role of media in perpetuating images of conflict and legacies of violent solutions is frequently mentioned. Although in many countries audiovisual and print media have taken steps to regulate their portrayals of violence and prevent rumour mongering, the internet remains largely uncontrolled and has been increasingly used to advance narrow ethnic and religious goals in a number of international and internal conflicts. Researchers must also be cognizant of the agenda of certain NGOs and pressure groups, and aware that their messages may find their way, consciously or unconsciously, into scientific writings.

Policy-makers may fear being faulted if they do not take emergency action before all the facts are in, yet their decisions can have long-lasting implications for victims, refugees, and the future course of the conflict. There are no perfect answers here, but it does seem clear that careful study of past violent episodes, good intelligence on the background to ongoing troubles, and an ability to adapt policy in response to changing facts on the ground—all these are required for governments to be in a position to take positive and decisive action in times of crisis.

It can be argued that ultimately most conflicts are caused by struggles over access to resources: the background is a state of 'rising aspirations followed by dwindling expectations' (Atran 2003:11), and the outcome of conflict generally (though not always) affords 'winners' a greater share of land, capital, or influence in the short or long term. This can perhaps explain why resource unpredictability has been linked to warfare in various societies (Ember and Ember 1992, Rappaport 1984). Still, it is often a subject of controversy whether protagonists are motivated primarily by economic, political, cultural or ideological concerns, or by some combination of these.

Researchers often address causal levels further down the causal chain, at the level of groups and individuals, where material motivation may or may not be the determining factor. Even when material disinterest seems most obvious—as in the case of the suicide bomber, who displays remarkable willingness, at least when under the control of the group, to allow religious fervour and sacred values (Begley 2004), social bonds (Sageman 2004), or fictive kinship to trump rational self-interest—wider political-economic factors are far from absent (Atran 2004:51). Group as well as individual motivations are thus a necessary focus of study whenever participants are asked to take personal risks for the benefit of the group.

Most contributors to this volume would say that causes interact in a systemic way, thus one must look at the problem holistically. This does not mean that one cannot argue that specific causes are determinant and focus their energies on pursuing a specific line of inquiry as far as it will go. This is entirely defensible from a methodological point of view (in fact, scientific breakthroughs often occur through such single-minded focusing), and research teams may profit immensely from specific in-depth information on, for example, elite manipulation or ritual violence. Studies are most useful when they can estimate causal chronology, direction and force between the actors and events comprising the system.

Methodology. Social scientists from different backgrounds naturally differ on the relative importance of participant-observation (studying a group 'from the inside,' through long-term co-residence, if possible), case-study research, regional studies, or aggregate statistical studies. One's occupational or aca-

demic niche often determines the mix of quantitative and qualitative methods in the research toolkit. Much has been written about the so-called 'emic-etic' or 'insider-outsider' dichotomy (Headland, Pike and Harris 1990). Should we be collecting rigorously verifiable 'facts,' often aggregate and quantified data suitable for statistical analysis and comparison (usually considered a more 'etic' strategy)? Or should we be focusing as least as much on the lived experiences of individuals and groups of protagonists caught up in conflict, seeking a native view that could shed light on indigenous perceptions of their decision-making strategies in specific cases (a more 'emic' view)?[3] Most contributors to this volume would agree that studies should have both, and that the most valuable studies find creative ways to integrate both types of data in order to avoid what Gerald Berreman (1966) characterised as 'anemic and emetic' research. Collaboration and synthesis between researchers of different academic and practitioner backgrounds is useful in order to make the best use of specialised competencies.

History. The role of historical legacies of conflict is a subject of debate for researchers and as such it influences the actions of policy-makers. Past conflicts can provide models for future ones; or rather the unfinished business from one can represent a veritable tinderbox that is passed down as enduring trauma, juvenile delinquency, crime, or renewed communal conflict. When underlying conditions remain untreated, a return of conflict becomes essentially a question of time and intensity. Pessimists see historical legacies condemning groups to replay unending cycles of violence. The historians contributing here, however, suggest a number of ways in which such cycles may be broken if human agency is brought to bear, particularly during the crucial periods of transition like the ones many Asian and Pacific countries are currently experiencing.

Ethnicity. The role of culture and ethnicity in conflict has been the subject of many writings in recent years (e.g., Anderson 2004; Avruch 1998; Avruch, Black and Scimecca 1998; Colombijn and Lindblad 2002; Eller 1999; Ferguson 1995; Horowitz 1985, 2001; Kiefer 1972; Klinken 2002; Lan 1985; Schmidt and Schröder 2001; Smith 1997; Varshney 2001; Weiner 1978). The authors above, and in this volume, have all but discarded the notion current in popular literature and discourse that cultural habits alone are enough to explain violent practices. Rather, violent practices are linked to—and to a certain extent determined by—political economic processes (Rappaport 1984; Sharff 1995; Ferguson 1995; Ferguson and Whitehead 1992). The description and analysis of violence, however, is necessary for monitoring the violent exercise of power, and a basic

[3] The dichotomy has been somewhat simplified, as quantitative and qualitative methods may be used to collect both 'emic' and 'etic' data. Chronologies of conflict events, for example, can be considered 'etic' when they are subject to verification.