Is Democracy Still Relevant to Reduce Secessionist Conflict?

JACQUES BERTRAND

EAST-WEST CENTER
INDO-PACIFIC WEBINAR SERIES
The puzzle of secessionist conflict
Nationalist conflicts in Asia

- Persistent
- Characterized by violent conflict
- Occur in democratic and authoritarian settings
Key questions

- Does democracy reduce or exacerbate nationalist conflict?
- What explains the variance in conflict outcomes?
Argument

Southeast Asian cases show that democracy indeed reduces violent outcomes

But there are two caveats:
- In the short term, it can lead to spikes because of uncertainty
- Although violence subsides, conflict often remains deep
Nationalist violence is different. It strikes at the core of state sovereignty. Gap therefore is wide between their respective objectives.
Increase channels for mobilization
Dilutes claims to national group representation
Increases costs of violence over time

Why Democracy reduces violence?
Democracy’s impact: two stages

- Initial stage:
  - Raises uncertainty
  - Opens up opportunity for negotiation
  - Sets the terrain for the state to signal compromise

- Later stage: democratic stability
  - Institutions are set
  - They alter the parameters of group mobilization
What explains variance in outcomes?

- Five factors:
  - Mobilizational capacity
  - State concessions in transitional stages
  - Electoral coalitions supportive of concessions
  - Presidential systems with independent parliaments are more challenging
  - Credible commitments: democracy helps but only when institutions close doors for evading commitments
Southeast Asian cases

- Five groups had similar structures and initial trajectories:
  - Acehnese
  - Papuans
  - Moros
  - Cordillerans
  - Malay Muslim

- All shared:
  - Less than 4% of population
  - Territorially concentrated
  - Violent mobilization under authoritarian rule
Moros

- Authoritarian Regime:
  - Mobilization of MNLF from 1970s after Marcos’ martial law
  - MILF split from MNLF in 1984

- Democratization in 1986:
  - Initial period leads to brief lull in violence
  - Concessions made, but quickly diluted:
    - Opening from Cory Aquino to MNLF
    - Constitutional recognition of autonomy for “Muslim Mindanao”
    - Followed by creation of ARMM without negotiation
Trajectory explained by:

- Uncertainty significantly reduced by initial concessions and compromise
- Constitutional Commission was open process, democracy promised change from Marcos era
- BUT: Failure to deliver on expected concessions
  Congress diverged from initial expectations
Democratic Stability (post-1992):

- 1996 peace agreement with the MNLF
  - Difficulty in passing autonomy law
  - Law lapsed under Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, but diluted and modified peace agreement clauses
- MILF: continued warfare
- Several failures of negotiation with MILF (1998-2018):
  - 1998: General Framework of Intent
  - 2006 breakthrough:
    - Territory of Bangsamoro delineated
    - Recognition of the Bangsamoro
    - MOA-2008: was to recognize these and BJE

Canceled by Supreme Court
2012: “Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro”
  - Replaced BJE with "autonomous political “entity”"
  - The rest essentially the same

  - Result: stalled after 2015 Congress considered BBL
  - Mamasapano incident (2016): MILF shooting Special forces
  - Elections looming

2018 Bangsamoro Law:
  - Supported and pushed by Duterte
  - Reflected much of the 2012 agreement
Parliaments independent of executive can be a constraint

Electoral coalitions:
- Ramos Social Reform Agenda
- Duterte: Mindanao base

Credibility of commitment:
- Strong with constitutionalization of autonomy
- Difficult to sustain with repeated failures of the democratic process and limited ability to use constitutional process
Malay Muslims

- Authoritarian regime from the 1970s to 1980s:
  - Mobilization of BRN, BNPP, and PULO in 1970s.
  - Disbanded after “New Hope” campaign and formation of SBPAC (1981)
Transition to democracy, 1988-1995:

- Little mobilization
- State concessions: new university, response to language demands, Malay-Muslim parliamentary representation; Reform of pondok schools
- SBPAC: continued policy of providing assistance, seeking local conflict resolution, less assimilation than in past
- Some rise in violence toward end
Trajectory explained by:

- In large part, lack of mobilizational capacity

- State concessions:
  - moved away from assimilation and repression

- Electoral interest (inclusion of Malay Muslim, through wadah group) in coalition and cabinet

- But:
  - lack of any credible commitment to change (constitutional silence)
  - No signal of willingness to move beyond small concessions

- Escalation of violence after 2002: after Kru-ze and Tak Bai incidents
- Some additional concessions:
  - TAO, more decentralized administration (Tambon Administrative Organization)
  - Wadah maintained some influence until 2001
- Thai Rak Thai:
  - Reduced role of SBPAC 2002
  - Increased repressive approach
  - Erosion of legitimacy of Wadah representatives
- After 2006:
  - Brief democratic return, unstable under Abhisit and Yingluck
  - Small concessions to re-establish greater role of SPBAC and slightly less assimilation
Key Points:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low mobilizational capacity: underground organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of credible commitment:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No ability to negotiate, or influence concessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Absence of constitutional provisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral coalitions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• mostly against concessions to Malay Muslims (particularly Thaksin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Very little need to Deep South seats, but some role for <em>wadah</em> group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Democracy in both cases

- Reduced the ability of states to sustain repressive policies
- Made more difficult justification for groups to mobilize violently over the long term
- Opened up opportunities for negotiation or state concessions
- Created more credible environments for representation
What explains different outcomes under democratic periods?

Some structural features:
- different strengths and nature of nationalist organizations
- starting point of state nationalist histories and degree of centralization

Credibility greater in the Philippines with constitutional guarantees, but difficulties from high degree of legislative independence; no credible commitments for concessions made by Thai state

Strong electoral or political incentives for agreement under Ramos and Duterte; opposite political interests under Estrada, and Thaksin in Thailand
Democratic dividends more broadly

- Repression from violent suppression to assimilationist policies only reduce violence temporarily and fuel rather than eliminate grievances.
- Democratic governments often make effective concessions with short term gains.
- Uncertainty at times of transition create volatility: signaling compromise is key.
- Nationalist conflicts without deep accommodative strategies don’t go away.
- Democracy allows credibility of commitments made from constitutional guarantees to stable institutions that strengthen group autonomy.