



Is Democracy Still Relevant to Reduce Secessionist Conflict?

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Democracy and Nationalism in Southeast Asia

From Secessionist Mobilization
to Conflict Resolution

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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

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- ▶ 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

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- ▶ 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

Key points

- ▶ 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



- ▶ Democratic Stability (1995-2006)

- ▶ 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:

Low mobilizational capacity: underground organizations

Lack of credible commitment:

- No ability to negotiate, or influence concessions
- Absence of constitutional provisions

Electoral coalitions:

- mostly against concessions to Malay Muslims (particularly Thaksin)
- Very little need to Deep South seats, but some role for *wadah* group

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