

## Culture, Identity and Conflict in Asia and Southeast Asia

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### Summary

This essay analyzes cultural conflicts in Asia with particular emphasis on Southeast Asia. Cultural conflict is defined as those *domestic, inter-state or transnational political conflicts in which the actors involved focus on issues relating to religion, language and/or historicity*. The statistical analysis and the assessment of individual cases in this paper substantiate a number of conclusions. First, by global comparison, Asia is a region particularly prone to conflicts. Second, domestic conflicts about identity and especially historicity conflicts, predominate in the region. Third, the landscape of conflict in Asia is characterized by pronounced domestic conflicts of low intensities over identity. Fourth, conflicts in Asia are shaped by the dominance of "ethnic" actors. In recent decades the relevance of left-wing actors has declined, whereas the importance of religiously defined actors has increased. Fifth, compared with the rest of Asia, Southeast Asia is subject to a disproportionately large number of cultural conflicts. At the same time, however, it is important to note that in Southeast Asia there is no trend of further culturalization of conflicts in recent years. Rather, the identity conflicts in Southeast Asia seem to be very profound and as such are frequently quite resistant to de-escalation strategies. However, cultural conflicts in the region are almost exclusively of an internal nature and do not extend to inter-state relations.

Keywords: Asia, Southeast Asia, cultural conflicts, identity, actors

### 1 Introduction

This essay analyzes the phenomenon of cultural conflicts in Asia. By cultural conflicts we mean those domestic, inter-state or transnational political conflicts in which the actors involved focus on issues relating to religion, language and/or historicity. The adjective "cultural" does not refer here to the actors' motives in a conflict, but to the issue of the conflict. When defining a conflict as "cultural" it is not relevant "why" there is a dispute, but "what" is in dispute. The quantitative analysis relies on data from the "Conflict Information System" (CONIS) database established at the Heidelberg University's Institute of Political Science. CONIS evaluates information exclusively from news sources that are publicly accessible, assesses it qualitatively, and processes it with the aim to conduct an event data analysis.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Like other conflict databases, CONIS is based on an evaluation of *open sources*. The evaluation of the information is by procedures that interpret the content.

The remainder of this paper proceeds in five steps. As a first step, we define cultural conflicts. In the second step, we provide an overview of cultural conflicts in Asia. Next, we analyze cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia. The final section presents some tentative conclusions.

## 2 Cultural conflicts as conflicts thematizing culture

Any conflict analysis requires due theoretical foundations and clearly defined concepts. For the purposes of this study, we need a theoretically-informed concept of cultural conflict that can be deployed in empirical analysis. We have extensively outlined such a concept elsewhere (Croissant et al., 2009) and will therefore restrict ourselves to a few brief remarks here.

We start from the assumption that cultural conflicts are a specific type of political conflict. Like other forms of political conflicts, cultural conflicts are communicative situations involving two or more actors (“parties to the conflict”; see Gurr, 1970: 223ff.). The parties involved are communicating, and the measures in the conflict are means of communication, with the issue of the conflict being the content of the communications. The means of communication may not only be linguistic utterances, but can involve any form of social action.

We can further differentiate between political conflicts in two ways:

(1) With regard to the parties involved in communication and conflict:

- *Domestic* conflicts within a country between non-state actors or between the state and a non-state actor in that country.
- *Inter-state conflicts* in which states are the parties in the conflict.
- *Transnational conflicts* between non-state actors of different national origins or between a state and non-state actors from different countries.

(2) With regard to the substantive issue in the communication on the conflict:

- In *conflicts about political power*, the communication of the conflict hinges upon access to authoritative positions in government, society or the international system (“distribution of power”).
- In *socio-economic conflicts*, the distribution of material goods and economic rights within a society or between societies as well as the mechanisms underlying such a distribution form the content of the dispute (“economic participation”).
- In *cultural conflicts*, culture is the issue of the communication.

Culture is understood here as a matrix of meanings that plays a constitutive part in generating and preserving a collective identity (Geertz, 1994: 9). Everything a collective constructs in order to generate and preserve the collective identity and is then established by actors in a communicative situation as its context can be assigned to

the realm of culture.<sup>2</sup> Culture is always intertwined with meaning, as Max Weber (1988: 180) already pointed out: “From the human standpoint, culture is a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of occurrences in the world that has been imbued with sense and meaning.”

By restricting the concept of culture to the realm of identity and meaning, our understanding of culture can be described as a middle-range conception. It is thus distinct from sociological concepts of culture (culture as a set of standards, values and norms and their symbolizations) and from broader ethnological concepts of culture (culture as the epitome of human life-styles). The advantage of a concept of culture pegged to identity lies in its practicability: It focuses on precisely that section of reality that is of interest in the current discourse, namely identities.

Political conflict as communication is always embedded in a structural context which forms the framework for communication and standardizes it, as it makes certain themes and the use of certain media at certain times by certain actors more probable than conceivable alternatives (Krallmann & Ziemann, 2001: 249; Hansen, 2000: 39; Billington et al., 1991: 5).

First and foremost, it is the socio-cultural (sub-) context that is important for a focus on cultural conflicts. We can distinguish here between the social (political, economic, and demographic structures) and the cultural context (i. e., culture).

As communication, any political conflict refers to its context. Cultural conflicts stand out for a particularity: Cultural conflicts do not simply refer to the cultural context; in cultural conflicts the cultural context itself becomes the object of conflict. The especially contentious nature of cultural conflicts stems from the fact that they do not primarily hinge on a clearly definable, interest-based (and thus essentially negotiable) object. Rather, the actors perceive or assert a fundamental difference with regard to the framework in which the communication takes place. There is thus not only a contrast in interests, but Actor A discerns or thinks s/he discerns that Actor B's thoughts, feelings and actions are shaped by a fundamentally different (culturally and identity-related) context.

In conventional, non-cultural conflicts, confrontational communication addresses a conflict issue that is expressed in explicit demands as a clearly delineated interest-based conflict item. Cultural conflicts, by contrast, revolve around identity, not interests. The conflict issue is determined not by what the actors want or say they want, but by what they are or believe they are. Even if non-cultural conflict items almost always play an additional role, communication in a cultural conflict centers on one or several not explicitly formulated identity-related themes (conflict fields).

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<sup>2</sup> „Identity“ is the result of a self-referential attribution of meaning, i.e., the „self-image“ that arises from the combination of the coherence of the defining features („identity“ in the narrower sense) and difference as demarcation vis-à-vis others („alterity“) (Gleason, 1983).

The concept of “conflict field” seeks to take into account not only the “hard” claims, usually stated clearly in public debates, but also “softer” and more profound conflict issues. It must be emphasized that conflict fields represent issues, not motives: They express what the conflict is about, the subject of communication, and not why the conflict is taking place, i.e., what its causes are (Seul, 1999: 564). Addressing thematic conflict issues also leaves open whether actors authentically address these issues or instrumentalize them for purposes not stated (publicly).

Three domains of culture come into consideration as conflict fields: Religion, language, and historicity. The three conflict fields can be operationalized using the following indicators:

**Table 1: Operationalization of religion, language, and historicity\* as conflict fields**

Conflict field	Indicator	Example
Religion	Verbal or active reference to a religious symbol (person or object) that is understood as highlighting a religious issue.	A head of state visiting a temple or the assassination of a religious leader.
Language	Verbal or active reference to a linguistic symbol (person or object) that is understood as highlighting language.	Prohibition of a language at universities or linguistic segregation of dialects.
Historicity	Verbal or active reference to a symbol (person or object) in relation to distinctive historical events or to the factual/historicized history of origin such that this reference is understood as highlighting historicity.	Erecting a war memorial or public discourse on pre-colonial experiences of rulership.

\* The problematization of skin color and physiognomy, i.e., what has been debated as “racial membership” in the English-speaking world, has a place in the historicity conflict field. Owing to the slow disappearance of its distinctiveness, skin color is particularly suited to symbolically bring to mind the historicity of origin. The concept of historicity used here is not to be confused with that used in the study of history, where “historicity” is understood as the facticity of historical events.

In the identity-related conflict fields, both the message of the sender and the understanding of the recipient are important. The attribution of the conflict is dichotomous, meaning that we examine whether a conflict field is addressed or not. This leads to the following possible types of conflict:

**Table 2: Types of cultural conflict**

Religion	Language	Historicity	Conflict type
0	0	0	non-cultural conflict
1	0	0	religious conflict
0	1	0	linguistic conflict
1	1	0	religious-linguistic conflict
0	0	1	historicity conflict

To avoid a frequent misunderstanding, we must emphasize that this concept of cultural conflicts is to be clearly distinguished from other concepts such as “ethnic”, “racial” or “religious” conflict: “Ethnic conflicts” are political conflicts between ethnic groups or at least involving one such group. The actors are the defining feature of ethnic conflicts. Who the actors are does not, however, determine what they communicate about. The content of the dispute, the issue in conflict, largely remains unclear. The assumption that ethnic groups always and primarily struggle for their identity is wrong.<sup>3</sup> Thus, unlike concepts such as “ethnic” or “racial” conflicts, the conceptual system of cultural conflicts is geared not to the actors (“ethnic groups”, “races”) but again to the conflict themes (religion, language, historicity).

### 3 Cultural conflicts in Asia since 1945: Forms and Trends<sup>4</sup>

In this study we assign empirical conflicts to one or several conflict fields on the basis of the CONIS data. Conflict measures are analyzed in order to evaluate specific conflict fields, i.e., through interpretative content analysis of what actors do or say during a conflict we can identify the issue of the conflict.

With regard to the relevance and forms of cultural conflicts in Asia, our analysis produces four major findings.

#### (a) Asia is a region particularly prone to conflict

One of the uncontroversial findings of quantitative research on conflicts is that in the decades following World War II, by international comparison Asia, has been a region that has seen an especially high number of violent conflicts.

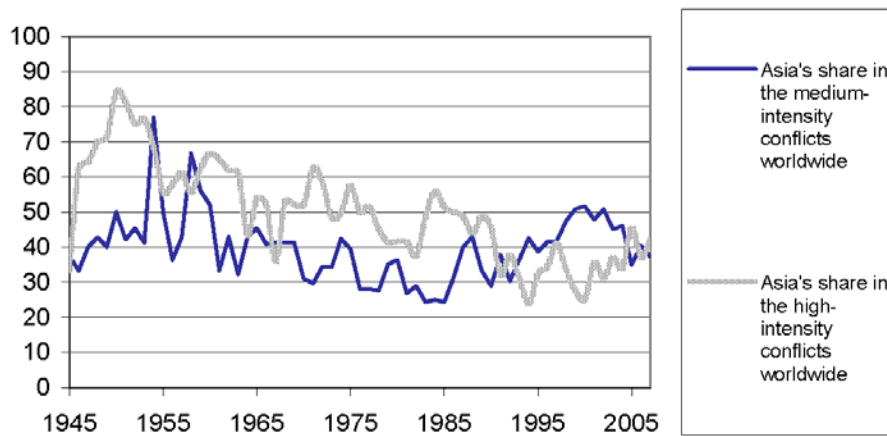
Our evaluation of the CONIS data confirms this assumption. From 1945 to the mid-1960s, the region accounted for well over 50 percent of warlike conflicts world-

<sup>3</sup> It is likewise implausible that a conflict can already be classified as „religious“ simply because one of the organizations involved consists exclusively of Hindus, Sikhs, Christians or Muslims.

<sup>4</sup> Asia as a region includes the following 42 states: Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, People’s Republic of China, East Timor, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Kribiti, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nauru, Nepal, New Zealand, North Korea, Pakistan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Taiwan, Thailand, Tonga, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, Vietnam.

wide. At the peak (1950), 16 of the 19 wars and limited wars world-wide took place in Asia.

**Chart 1: Crises (level 3 conflicts), limited wars (4) and wars (5) in Asia as a percentage of all conflicts world-wide (1945-2007)**



With the end of the Cold War and the ebbing of regional tensions at the end of the 1980s, Asia's share of warlike conflicts fell markedly. However, that trend has turned around in recent years: Compared with the historical low of 1994 (24 percent) and 2000 (25 percent), the (2007) level had risen again, namely to 42 percent. In addition, since 1945, Asia has almost always topped the list of world regions covered by CONIS with regard to "low-intensity" conflicts, i.e., conflicts with a sporadic, but not systematic use of violence (level 3).

(b) "Small wars" dominate the spectrum of conflicts in Asia

International comparative research has shown that in past decades there has been a successive shift of world-wide conflicts from the inter-state to the intrastate arena.

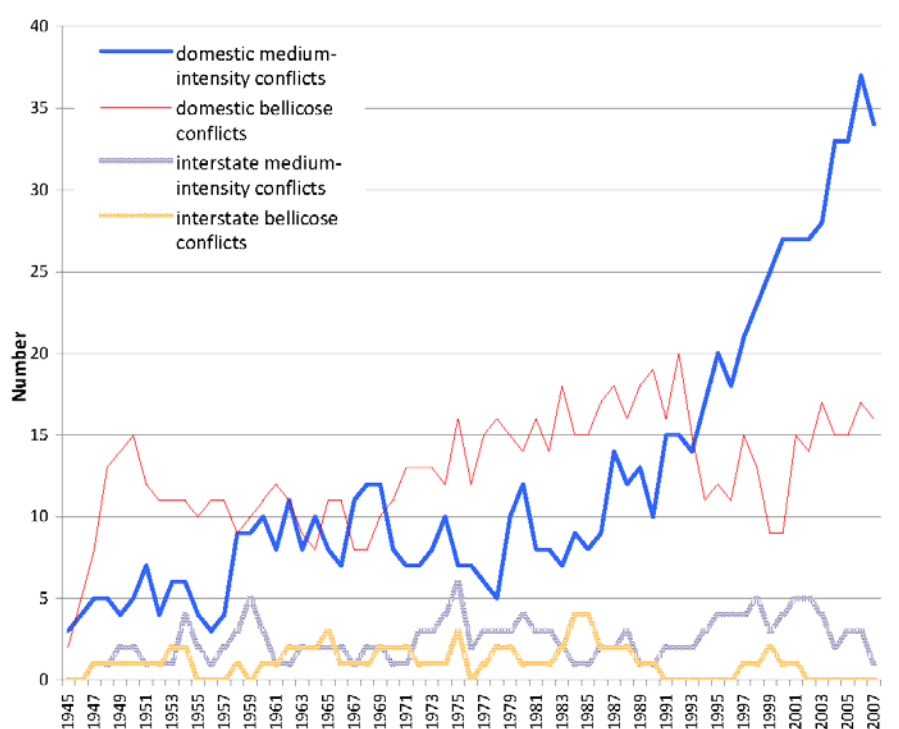
Our analysis also corroborates this finding for Asia. As in most other regions of the world, the number of international conflicts has steadily been below that for domestic conflicts.

In recent years, however, the gap between domestic and international conflicts has further widened. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the number of "low-intensity" conflicts (level 3), in particular, has drastically increased.

Thus, we can confirm for Asia the trend towards "minor wars" between state and non-state groups as well as among non-state groups discerned by other conflict researchers (Daase, 1999). That said, these conflicts of "low" and "medium-intensity violence" in which violence is deployed to a limited extent, in single cases or only sporadically and which one can therefore hardly describe as wars (Schwank, 2008)

are not a new phenomenon in Asia. Essentially they have shaped the face of conflict in Asia for decades now.

**Chart 2: Intra- and inter-state conflicts in Asia, 1945-2007**

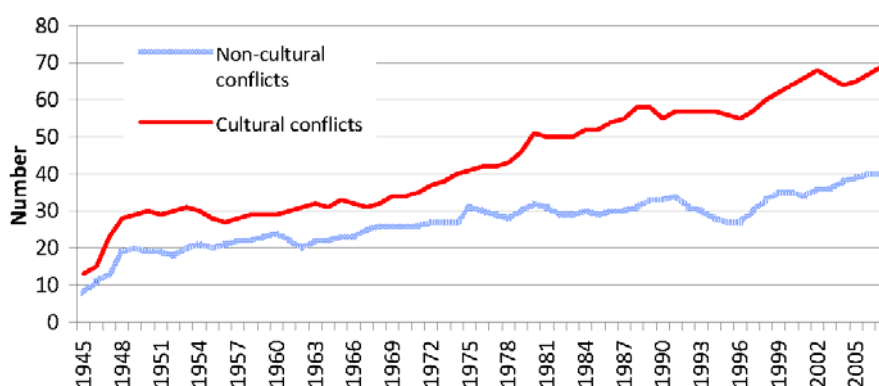


(c) The increase in identity conflicts and the special relevance of history-related conflicts

In global conflicts since the 1980s, those conflicts that take collective identity as an issue have been growing in significance (Huntington, 1997; Fox, 2000; Croissant et al., 2009). In Asia, cultural conflicts have predominated in conflicts since as early as 1945. We can, however, likewise identify an increase in identity-based conflicts in Asia since the end of the 1970s.

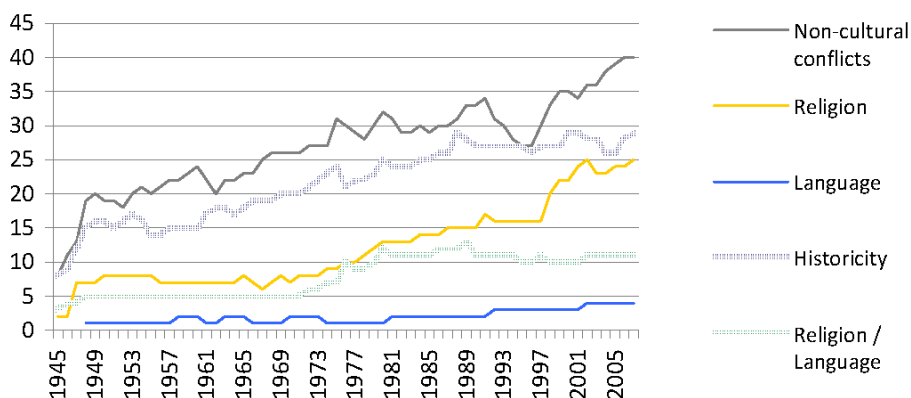
Of the different thematic types of cultural conflict, in Asia those related to history are most frequent, while purely language-related conflicts are very rare. The trend for those conflicts that hinge on both language and religion resemble the pattern for

**Chart 3: Cultural and non-cultural conflicts in Asia (all conflict levels), 1945-2007**



the purely religious conflicts, the number of which has clearly risen in Asia (as in other regions). The number of religious-linguistic conflicts has stagnated in Asia, i.e., “ethnic” conflicts are becoming less important than conflicts related to religion or ideology.

**Chart 4: Domestic and international conflicts by conflict type (all conflict levels), 1945-2007**



(d) Cultural conflicts in Asia are primarily domestic conflicts

Cultural conflicts in Asia are primarily, and to a greater extent than in other regions of the world, a domestic phenomenon: 9 of 10 cultural conflicts in Asia are domestic in nature (92% compared to 81% world-wide). Moreover, two out of three domestic conflicts (68%) in one or another way hinges on culture (world-wide: 56%).



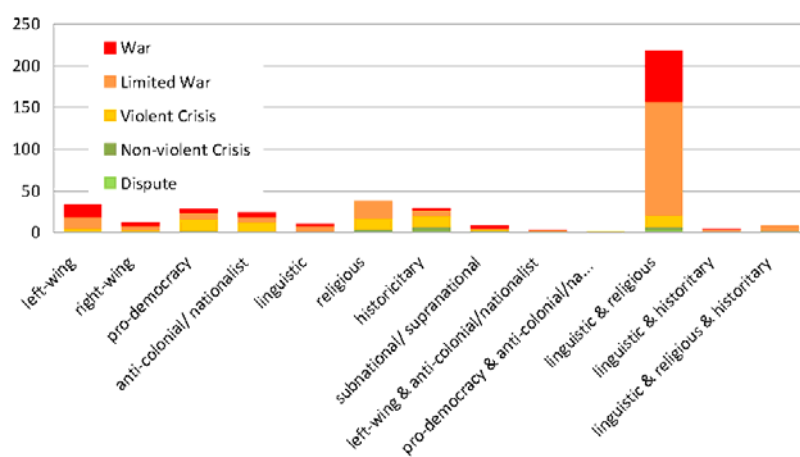
#### 4 Actors involved in conflicts in Asia

Given the large number of cultural and domestic conflicts in the region, we might assume that primarily non-state actors are involved in conflicts. In fact, quantitative and qualitative comparative conflict research on Asia highlights the special significance of three groups of actors in the region:

- In the decades after the end of World War II, left-wing actors shaped domestic conflicts in Asia. These actors were often involved in so-called “anti-regime wars”. They used to be the drivers of conflict in Asia in most intra-state, non-cultural conflicts in Asia.
- Also relevant are ethnic groups involved in separatist conflicts, in horizontal conflicts between communal groups or in vertical conflicts with the central government over cultural and political self-determination or the redistribution of economic rights. As most of the research literature on the subject agrees, ethnic actors were the drivers of cultural conflicts within societies especially in the 1980s and 1990s.
- Religious, often transnationally organized groups form a third relevant segment of actors involved in conflicts in Asia. Their importance has surged over the last one and a half decades (or so one hypothesis, and it is highly controversial among the specialist researchers). They drive cultural, transnational conflicts.

The CONIS data set is also well-suited for assessing the validity of these assumptions. On the basis of the systematic research methodology of the CONIS database, we can distinguish between several different categories of conflict actors. The following chart demonstrates the frequency of various categories of non-state actors who are involved in political conflicts in Asia:

**Chart 5: Frequency of involvement of different categories of non-state actors in political conflicts in Asia**



On the basis of this descriptive overview, we can discern five striking characteristics of the types of actors involved in Asian conflicts and specifically in cultural conflicts.

(a) The dominance of linguistic-religious (“ethnic” actors)

In the research literature, non-state actors that are defined by linguistic as well as religious features are often described as “ethnic” actors. According to the CONIS data, these “ethnic actors” took part in a total of 219 conflicts since 1945. They are followed, at some distance, by religious actors (38 cases) and left-wing revolutionary groups (34). Also worthy of note are traditional actors or those actors who have links to transmigration (historicity actors), such as the Bengalis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (29 cases), as well as those actors who in their respective countries demand democratization, for example the advocates of democracy in Hong Kong (28 cases).

(b) “Ethnic” actors are often particularly involved in violent conflicts

Linguistic-religious (“ethnic”) actors are involved most frequently in conflicts, especially in violent conflicts. Conflicts involving groups that share a transcendental world-view (“religious actors”) are likewise often involved in violence. At least in Asia, these conflicts have to date not crossed the threshold from a limited to a full-blown war. By contrast, conflicts with left-wing groups have a similar propensity for war as do conflicts involving linguistic/religious actors.

(c) The increasing importance of religious actors

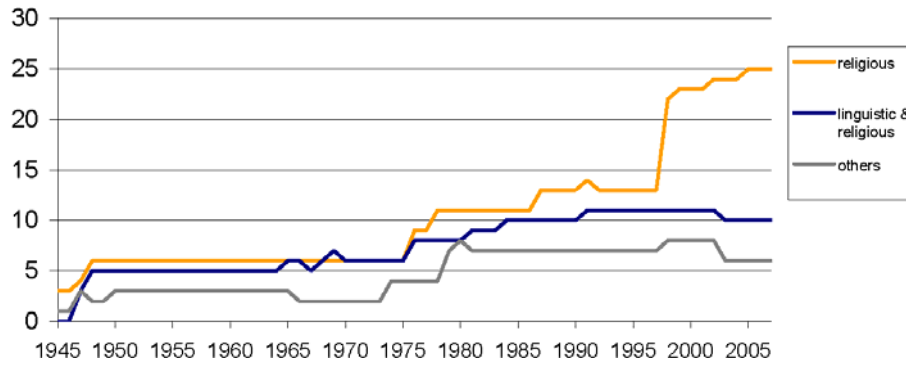
If we consider the involvement of the different groups of actors in the different types of cultural conflict<sup>5</sup> (across all five levels of intensity), we see that religious groups are most frequently involved in religious conflicts. Their involvement has risen dramatically in particular since 1998 (see chart 6). This is in line with the finding that the number of religious conflicts has clearly grown since that same year. Our findings thus indicate an increase in the importance of religious groups and the religious issues they thematize.

The second most frequently involved group in religious conflicts are “ethnic” actors. However, unlike religious actors, the number of these actors has remained relatively unchanged since the early 1980s. Actors who can be termed “ethnic” have, at least in Asia, thus not increasingly participated in religious conflicts over the last 25 years. If we define ethnic conflict as a conflict involving ethnic actors, we could deduce that the importance of “ethnic conflicts” in religious contexts has neither increased nor decreased in Asia since the early 1980s.

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<sup>5</sup> For reasons of space we will not discuss linguistic-religious, linguistic and historicity conflicts here.

**Chart 6: Involvement of non-state actors in religious conflicts by category of actor, 1945-2007**

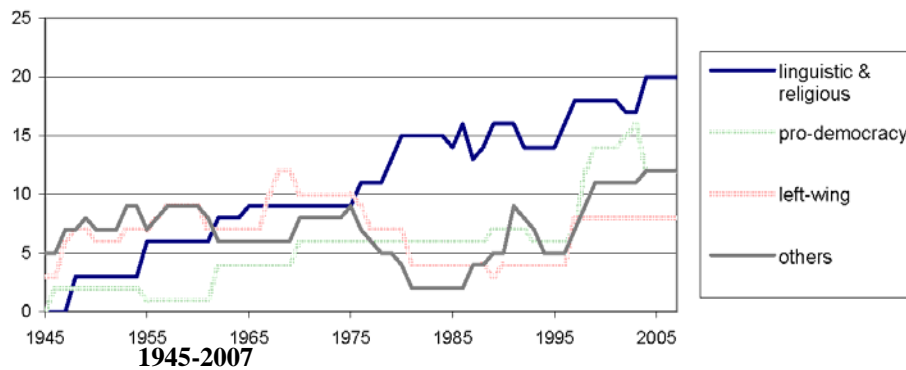


Note: The category “others” includes anti-colonialist/nationalist, historicitary, left-wing, pro-democracy, right-wing and subnational/supranational actors.

(d) “Ethnic” actors predominate in non-cultural conflicts, while the relevance of left-wing groups has waned

The analysis of actors involved in non-cultural conflicts produces a number of relevant findings. Again, the linguistic-religious actors predominate. Since the mid-1970s, these “ethnic” actors also shape non-cultural conflicts in Asia.

**Chart 7: Involvement of non-state actors in non-cultural conflicts in Asia, 1945-2007**



Note: The category “others” includes anti-colonialist/nationalist, historicitary, left-wing, pro-democracy, right-wing and subnational/supranational actors.

Thus, political conflicts about interest-based goods such as power or economic resources are often waged by actors who act from a “micro-“ or “sub-national” per-

spective. Even non-cultural conflicts are thus often influenced by interests which are embedded in cultural memories and concepts. In these cases, the fight over the distribution of power, resources, or wealth are often related to regional-particularist considerations.

By contrast, the erstwhile great significance of left-wing groupings has been dwindling since the mid-1970s – long before the end of the Cold War many of the battles had been fought and the front lines had become rigid (see chart 7). While the data since the end of the 1990s suggests there has been a “renaissance” in the involvement of such groups in conflicts, the trend is geographically limited. It almost exclusively extends to the Indian subcontinent. The demise of the leftist revolutionary groupings has persisted in the rest of Asia.

## **5 Cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia**

### **5.1 The regional perspective**

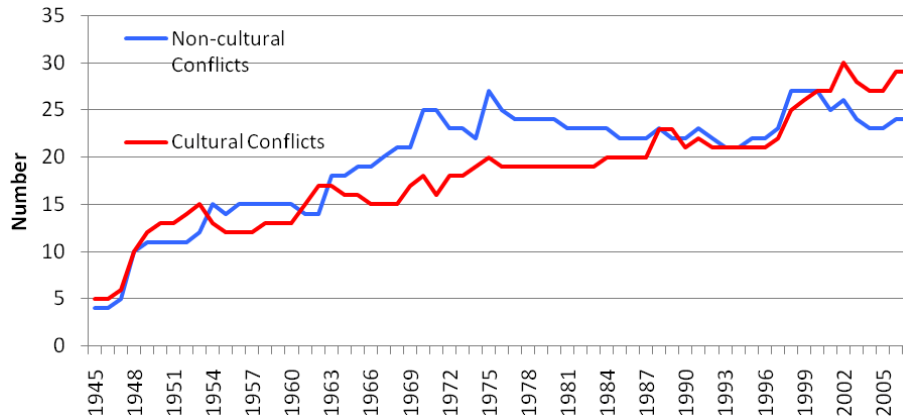
At a first glance, the patterns and trends of cultural conflict in Southeast Asia seem to parallel the overall findings for Asia. The share of overall political conflicts accounted for by cultural conflicts (at all levels of intensity) is almost identical. Thus, cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia as a proportion of non-violent conflicts total 33 (world-wide 38) percent, they account for a total of 58 (world-wide: 59) percent of medium-intensity conflicts and 59 (world-wide: 64) percent of wars. Yet, significant variations from the above findings for Asia arise in three different regards:

- (a) In contrast to Asia as a whole, in Southeast Asia there is no trend towards identity conflicts

Unlike Asia as a whole, the gap in Southeast Asia between cultural and non-cultural conflicts is not widening (see chart 8). Only between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s did cultural conflicts occur less frequently than non-cultural conflicts. During that time, regime conflicts dominated.

Admittedly, as the chart shows, the number of cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia has, more or less, grown steadily and now clearly exceeds the number of non-cultural conflicts. Still, it cannot be said that specifically cultural conflicts have “dramatically” increased. It is much rather the case that the overall number of conflicts has grown over the past six decades. Here, there is no pronounced growth in cultural conflicts. A closer analysis reveals that the increase in cultural conflicts, which started in 1998, can primarily be traced back to identity conflicts within the context of the process of democratization in Indonesia (for example, Sulawesi, Moluccas) that followed a phase of relative stagnation between 1991 and 1997, not to mention conflicts with Islamic groups in other states (e.g., *Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia* and *Jemaah Islamiah*).

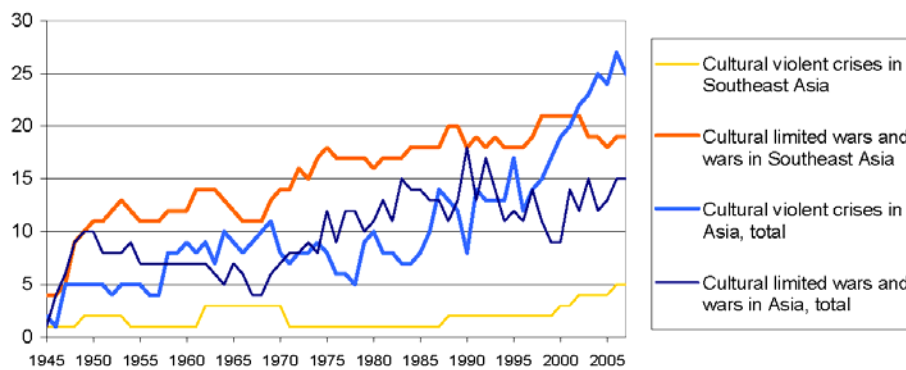
**Chart 8: Cultural and non-cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia (all conflicts, 1945-2007)**



(b) Cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia tend to escalate faster than in the rest of Asia

When looking exclusively at the development of cultural conflicts over the course of time, we can clearly see a difference between the region as a whole and Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, there are considerably more warlike conflicts than violent crises – while in all other parts of Asia the relation between the two types of conflict is more balanced. Unlike in other regions of Asia, cultural conflicts generally take the form of warlike disputes, whereas there is no distinct trend towards “small wars”.

**Chart 9: Domestic and international cultural conflicts of medium and high intensity in Southeast Asia and Asia, 1945-2007**



This finding indicates that in Southeast Asia, identity and cultural conflicts tend to escalate faster than in other parts of Asia. Identity conflicts in Southeast Asia seem to be deeply rooted, which means that hardly any strategic de-escalation can be effective. Good examples for this are the many conflicts in Myanmar and the Pattani conflict in the south of Thailand.

(c) Cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia are mostly domestic

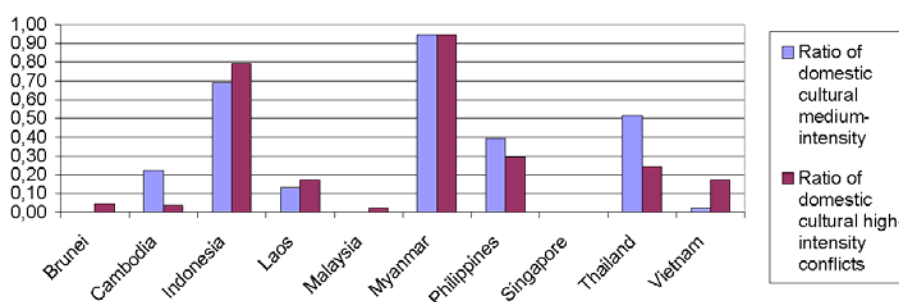
96 percent of cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia take place within states. By contrast, conflicts on cultural issues are rarely fought between states: the proportion of non-cultural conflicts among inter-state conflicts has reached 87 percent in Southeast Asia. Evidently, regional governments have succeeded in developing mechanisms that prevent existing cultural tensions and conflicts within communities from “spilling over” and thus turning into inter-state conflicts.

## 5.2 A glance at individual cases

The fact that identity conflicts in Southeast Asia tend to escalate into warlike conflicts faster than in other regions of Asia is particularly evident in Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand. On the other hand, Malaysia and Singapore provide evidence for the possibility of largely peaceful management of cultural conflict.

Viewed from an historical and more recent perspective, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand are the three countries in Southeast Asia that are the most exposed to violent cultural conflict.

**Chart 10: Ratio of domestic conflicts of medium or high intensity in Southeast Asian countries from their foundation until 2007**



It would therefore seem obvious to investigate the structures of the conflicts in these countries more closely. As we have seen, cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia primarily gravitate around the issue of historicity, followed by purely religious and religious-linguistic matters. From among the large number of individual conflicts once or now to be encountered in the countries in question, we will therefore select those current conflicts that could shed light on the mechanisms of thematizing culture in

political conflicts. Three specific conflicts seem particularly relevant: the Pattani conflict in Southern Thailand; the Aceh conflict in Indonesia; and historicity conflicts in Myanmar, otherwise described as “ethnic minority conflicts”.

### *The Aceh conflict*

Aceh – the northernmost province on the island of Sumatra – is the stage for one of the oldest domestic conflicts both in Indonesia and in Southeast Asia as a whole. The armed conflict in the strict sense, i.e., the struggle between the *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (*Movement for Free Aceh, GAM*) and the Indonesian government started in 1976 with the GAM’s foundation and its declaration of an independent Republic of Aceh.

In conflict research, Aceh is presented both as a war over resources and as an “ethno-nationalist” and “ethno-religious” conflict (Searle, 2002; Bertrand, 2004; Ross, 2005). These differing assessments point to different aspects of the conflict and the complex matrix of causal factors or influential factors behind the conflict. Cultural factors, in particular the strict interpretation of Islamic practices in Aceh, a shared language and the memory of the pre-colonial Sultanate of Aceh, and Aceh’s role in the struggle against the Dutch and for an Islamic Republic of Indonesia in the early days of Indonesian independence, are at the heart of the GAM’s national self-definition. However, economic factors are likewise crucial to an understanding of the conflict, as the GAM’s foundation co-incides with the beginning of extraction of the large oil and natural gas assets in the province.

In fact, there is broad consensus among scholars that the conflict results from factors and material grievances that can be located in the structural context of the conflict (Missbach, 2005; Schulze, 2006; Hadiwinata, 2006). However, a closer examination of the dynamics and development of the conflict shows that the Aceh conflict has transformed into an identity conflict in the three decades or so since the first outbreak of violence. This development reflects the thematization of existing political and cultural grievances in Aceh in cultural terms by GAM and the local population. Here, real problems were made the object of a culturally-defined construction of an Acehnese identity (*keacehan*; see Aspinall, 2007; McCarthy, 2007). In other words cultural factors are not primarily relevant as the cause of the conflict, but as a point of reference for constructing a new identity in the course of GAM’s political mobilization of the local population and GAM’s legitimation of its political goals and conflict strategies.

Economic inequality and discrimination, the lack of opportunities for political participation, and repression (the latter further tainted by an ethnic element) weakened Aceh’s once strong identification with the Republic of Indonesia. In this way, the basis was laid for the emergence of the GAM, in its beginning a marginal movement, as the representative of Aceh’s aspirations to national self-determination and the preservation of its cultural identity. By tacking up local dissatisfaction and mak-

ing it the point of reference for the construction of a cultural (“ethno-national”) identity of the Acehese population, the GAM played a crucial role in nurturing the existing social problems being given a cultural reading. The conflict over the distribution of economic and political rights in the region was in this way embedded in the broader process of identity construction (Aspinall, 2007; Brown, 2005; McCarthy, 2007). GAM’s political articulation of this identity primarily relied on cultural concepts and symbols.

Some authors argue that GAM merely instrumentalized the existing problems by abusing cultural issues as a basis for mobilization in support of its “real” interests in power and appropriation (McCulloch, 2005; Missbach, 2005). However, this interpretation of the situation underestimates the relevance of culture in the conflict. GAM is not a genuinely Islamic grouping, as the introduction of an Islamic social order and rulership is not an organizational goal but reflects the cultural identity of Aceh’s population (Hadiwinata 2006: 7). Yet, with a view to mobilizing support, the organization could hardly forgo identifying with the strict interpretation of Islamic practices that GAM itself points to as being part of the Acehese identity (Schulze, 2004: 9).

Ultimately, GAM was only able to mobilize support for its objective — Aceh’s national independence — because the existing grievances of the larger part of Aceh’s population were also perceived as an expression of disrespect of its own identity (Bertrand, 2004b: 173). The Indonesian government’s non-recognition of that identity serves as a central justification for the GAM’s drive for secession. The fact that the conflict in Aceh also pivots on specific conflict items, such as access to political power and the distribution of economic opportunities does not contradict the interpretation of the conflict as a cultural or “culturalized” conflict. The issue of the recognition and/or non-recognition of Aceh’s identity as a core area of dispute did not exist at the outset but first arose in the course of the conflict.

This constructivist view of the conflict suggests that the conflict, even if not attributable to cultural causes, is a “cultural”, or, to be more precise, a “historicitary” conflict. As with other political conflicts, cultural conflicts are rooted in a social context. In cultural conflicts, the struggle for tangible conflict items, such as control over a certain territory, access to resources or the distribution of political power may be of importance. However, the communication between the actors in the conflict in a cultural conflict gives identity-related topics, such as religion, language or history, center-stage in the conflict. The GAM’s “invention of traditions” (Sherlock, 2005) is by no means restricted to religious elements. Instead, the group advocates a strongly historized interpretation of Aceh’s identity that refers more than just to the strict adherence to Islamic practices, but also appeals to a common language, heritage, and the shared memories of the pre-colonial Sultanate and its resistance to the Dutch (Schulze, 2004: 7; 2006: 242). The GAM would seem to have successfully forged a plausible link between the political and economic marginalization of the Acehese,



on the one hand, and its cultural traditions and national identity, on the other. While it is correct to argue that these traditions are in part “invented” and that the GAM thus presents itself as the champion of an identity that it has itself created (Sherlock, 2005: 176, 187), it also has to be acknowledged that after 32 years of conflict, culture has become the theme of the dispute.

### *The Pattani conflict*

As in Aceh, the dispute in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand called Pattani is historically speaking an old one. Its roots go back into the eighteenth century. About 80% of the population of the three provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani, consists of Malay Muslims. Unlike the Buddhist majority of the Thai population, they speak Jawi, a Malay dialect that also predominates on the Malaysia side of the border (Gilquin, 2005; Bajunid, 2005). These two factors, namely religion and language, form the core of the cultural identity of the Malay-Muslim population in the Southern provinces and distinguish them as a cultural community from the Thai-speaking Buddhists in the Kingdom of Thailand.

The territories of the former Sultanate of Patani on the Northern side of the Thai-Malaysia border have since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century been under the administrative control of the central government in Bangkok. Yet the region’s cultural traditions have proved to be very resistant to the strong pressure to assimilate. Moreover, the southerners’ historical awareness of being a member of “Greater Patani” (and thus Malay culture) persists to this day.

There have been violent disputes between local Muslim groups and the government since 1902, the year when the Kingdom of Siam annexed the hitherto independent Sultanate of Patani. There has been a constant alternation of periods of relative calm and phases of escalating violence. The first secessionary group emerged as early as the 1940s. Above all in the 1960s and 1970s, militant actors fought for secession of the three provinces from Thailand.

Violence did not ebb until the mid-1980s. However, since 2004 the conflict has entered a new phase of escalation, with violence in the Southernmost provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala reaching the level of warlike conflict. From 1993 (the earliest year for which data is available) until 2000, there were a total of 468 violent incidents, above all violence against public facilities and security forces. Between January 2001 and April 2007, the figure had leapt to 6,965 incidents. For the period January 2004 to December 2007, the Thai Deep South Watch project reports that attacks of the insurgents and counter-insurgency measures by the security forces have left more than 7,000 persons injured or dead (Srisompob, 2008). While the number of victims in the first nine months of 2008 has dropped, the brutality of attacks on the civilian population has intensified. Moreover, the tension between Buddhists and Muslims has escalated at the local level.

Violent conflict in Pattani – as in most cases – has multiple causes. “Structural” factors including historical concerns, religious differences and socioeconomic and political marginalization resulted in local grievances and a latent crisis in inter-communal relations. The recent drift toward militancy, however, is caused by recent changes in the “enabling” environment of insurgency in Southern Thailand.

The Kingdom of Siam always considered itself a society consisting of different cultural groups such as Chinese, Mon, Khmer, Malays, Karen, and the Lao-speaking people of the Isaan in the northeast of the country. The situation changed when Field Marshal Phibun Songkram (1938-44 and 1948-57) came to power. The nation-building policies of Songkram’s government forced the assimilation of the kingdom’s linguistic and religious minorities into a culturally uniform Thai nation (Thanet, 2006: 97). The culture of Central Thailand became the “leitkultur”, while Theravada Buddhism became the national religion (Reynolds, 1989). The central justification for modern Thai nationalism was the reference to one religion (Buddhism), one language (Thai) and one monarchy as the nation’s highest political and moral authority. This was coupled with the propagation of the Thai language, the encouragement of the Buddhist orders, and the symbolic merging of state and Buddhism in the institution of the monarchy (Wyatt, 1969).

The bearers of this new nationalism were the Thai bureaucracy and the military. As a symbolic act of nation-building, the country’s name was changed from the culturally neutral term “Siam” to “Thailand” (*Muang Thai*) in 1939. The Muslim population of Pattani perceived the introduction of compulsory schooling with Thai as the sole teaching language, the abolition of Muslim holidays, the ban on wearing traditional dresses in public, and attempts to abolish Islamic law as an attack on their cultural identity and traditional way of life.

Since the 1980s, this assimilation policy had become more moderate. The Muslims were guaranteed the freedom to exercise their religion while the establishment of mosques and religious schools (*pondoks*) was encouraged by the State. However, a feeling of both cultural and political discrimination continued to prevail on the part of the Muslim Malay population, not least because Muslims remained starkly under-represented amongst civil servants and in the school system. Although a large number of Muslims do not have sufficient mastery of the Thai language, even today, Jawi has not been recognized as an official language. At the same time, very few civil servants, policemen, and soldiers posted to the South speak the local dialect. In this context, the arson of state schools and the numerous attacks on school teachers and Buddhist monks since 2004 also carries a symbolic meaning.

However, the politicization of cultural differences feeds not only on the conflict-torn history of the relationship between Pattani and Siam or the discriminatory policies of the past. It is also strengthened by socio-economic factors. Accordingly, in many areas a deterioration in the socio-economic indicators relative to the development in the local population’s fields of reference is observable – particularly, the Thai prov-

ince of Songkhla and the areas on the Malaysian side of the border. Earnings in the region are also unequally distributed to the detriment of the Muslims, since Buddhist Thais dominate the administration and Sino-Thais control vast sections of the local economy. This correlates with higher poverty incidence, less education opportunities, and the broad exclusion of Muslims from the formal labor market and employment opportunities outside the agricultural and services sectors.

Another factor is the unequal access to natural resources and the existence of an economy of violence that has for decades been closely enmeshed with state and political structures in the region (NRC, 2006; Askew, 2007). The region has moreover been infiltrated by a network of Mafia-like structures. Drugs dealing, arms trafficking and smuggling in the border region close to Malaysia are lucrative sources of income both for local criminals and for the military, the police and local civil servants (Croissant, 2007; Askew, 2007: 28-32).

These factors explain the conflict potential in the region, but not the escalation in violence over the past years. First, the factors and developments mentioned above are by no means new. Second, ethnic differences, political disadvantage, cultural discrimination, and relative deprivation are, in themselves, insufficient explanations of political violence. Accordingly, the most recent escalation phase in this conflict cannot be explained by the above-mentioned factors. Instead, situational factors come into play in this context. First, certain developments over the past fifteen years or so have contributed to widening the cultural divide between Buddhist Thais and Muslim Malays and between the Malays and the Thai state. Second, these developments have resulted in an enabling environment which favors the mobilization of support by local agitators and the justification of their violence. Three developments are particularly noteworthy: first, the increasing importance of Islamism in the region; second, policy changes by the Thaksin government when it came into power in February 2001; third, failed conflict management by this and following governments.

While the struggle of separatist groups against the Thai government is concerned with the conflict-laden subject of “secession” – or more exactly, with the question of legitimate political control over the area formerly known as the Sultanate of Pattani – on the Malay side both religion and language serve to generate identity and are issues of the conflict. This is also true, albeit to a lesser extent, on the “Thai” side. Quite obviously a large number of the rebels' attacks are targeted at establishments and groups of people that symbolically represent the Buddhist-Thai culture of mainstream Thailand. But on the Thai side, too, signs of a “cultural” interpretation of the conflict are to be found.

Of the three symbolic cultural dimensions identified as relevant in the concept of cultural conflict – language, religion, historicity – all three play a role. The first two mentioned, in particular, form the core of the Muslim Malay population in the conflict region's cultural identity. However, the history of their origins and their experi-

ences with the Thai state's nation-building policies (involving both marginalizing and discriminatory effects) was decisive. (Yusuf, 2006).

At the same time, the cultural identity (*kwam pen thai*) and the political self-image of the Thai majority of the population is determined by the three intermeshing elements of language (Thai), Theravada Buddhism, and the monarchy (Thanet, 2006). As culturally different *khaeck* – even today, the current term for the Muslim Malays in the south – Pattani's Muslims are not included in Thai culture or its political community. Even today, they are largely considered “foreigners” or “outsiders” (the literal translation of *khaeck*) by the Thai majority.

Both from a historical perspective and currently, the articulation of this distinct identity and the political justification of the violent struggle by the various rebel movements has recourse to linguistic, religious, and historical terms and symbols as is demonstrated by the way the groups refer to themselves, their mobilization rhetoric, the targets of their attacks, and the avowed objectives of their struggle, although the latter could be described as somewhat diffuse. In this respect, the close interaction of the different cultural components makes it difficult to choose one of them as decisive. However, the best definition of the Pattani conflict would be to characterize it as a religious-linguistic conflict type.

Defining Pattani as a “cultural” conflict does not mean that the conflict was triggered by cultural factors, particularly religious differences. Nevertheless, the actions of those involved take their orientation from cultural paradigms. The politics of the Thai government, seen by the Muslim side as discriminatory and threatening, the real disparities in income and power, and other grievances have been expressed principally in cultural terms. The fact that on top of this, political and material factors were originally at the root of the conflict is evident. And although it may be accurate to point out that the specific motivation behind the individuals or groups involved in the conflict, particularly, behind the insurgents, feeds on different factors, including economic and power-political reasons, none of these should be allowed to mask the cultural dimension of the conflict.

### *Conflicts in Myanmar*

As in the past, Myanmar<sup>6</sup> is currently by far one of the most conflict-torn countries in Asia. Because of the country's long conflict history, the large number of conflicts and the heavily interwoven, varied constellations of the parties involved, Burma's conflict landscape is one of the most complex, as well. Myanmar's conflict landscape can be analyzed from two major perspectives:

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<sup>6</sup> The name „Myanmar“ was introduced in 1989 by the country's government as the official English transcription. „Burma“ is the English variant developed in British colonial days. We use the name „Burma“ for the time before 1989 and „Myanmar“ for the time since then as a generic expression.

- (1) ideology and power-policy conflicts concerning the distribution of power and the ideological orientation of the political and economic systems can be distinguished from
- (2) ethno-nationalist conflicts involving groups defined by language or religion and characterized by a primarily “micro-nationalist” focus.

Both “conflict paradigms” appeared simultaneously in Myanmar's history, starting directly after Burma's independence from the British (1948) in a civil war which saw communist organizations and several ethnic groups rebelling against the central government. Both paradigms have always been closely intertwined.

*Ad (1) The ideological and power-political conflict paradigm*, a non-cultural conflict type throughout, was mainly represented by the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), established in 1939. The CPB played a central role in the resistance against the Japanese occupation and later against British colonial rule. It also represented the dominant opposition to the country's government, which was initially democratic and has been autocratic since 1962. However, the CPB was involved only to a limited extent in the large popular uprising of August 8, 1988 (“8888 uprising”) and with the end of the global east-west confrontation in 1989 virtually lost any importance.

Another conflict of this paradigm started in 1950, when troops of the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang were driven by the People's Liberation Army from the Chinese province of Yunnan to Indochina, Burma, and Thailand. The Kuomintang remained present in Burma until 1961, controlling parts of the Shan State. The start of the opium cultivation in the country's mountain regions is generally attributed to the presence of the Kuomintang. Drug cultivation and drug dealing are important sources of finance for various, primarily ethnic insurgents. Accordingly, drug cultivation itself has become a source of dispute, sometimes with the consequence that the conflicts have been economized to such an extent that the underlying political and ideational aims appear to have receded. The expansion of the shadow economy that accompanies the drug cultivation is destabilizing Myanmar, while the drug dealing across the border to Thailand, Laos, and China is destabilizing the entire region.

The conflict concerning democratization in Myanmar can also be viewed as ideological and power-political. In 1990, parliamentary elections were held for the first time in decades. However, the military government under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)<sup>7</sup>, formed two years earlier, annulled the results because the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the elections. Revisions in the 1992 constitution were only passed in 2008 and new elections have been set for 2010. In September 2007, the democracy conflict entered a new phase when the dissidents' concerns linked up with the protests of Buddhist monks against the eco-

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<sup>7</sup> Since 1997 the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

conomic conditions in Myanmar. However, after only a few days, the protests were crushed with violent means by the military government.

*Ad 2)* The overall constellation of the second, *ethno-nationalist conflict paradigm* is exceedingly complex, particularly because of the large number of different ethnic groups and the degree of splintering amongst their parties and armies. Whereas the country's central plain is inhabited by the Burmese majority population – the Bamar represent about 70 percent of the overall population – the “periphery”, the mountainous border regions in the west, north, and east, are peopled by numerous different ethnic groups speaking various languages. The Bamar are homogeneously Buddhist. Some of the minorities practice other religions, for example the Rohingya (Muslims) and the Karen (often Christians). The ethnic minorities with the largest numbers are the Shan, representing nine percent of the overall population, and the Karen at seven percent.

The ethno-nationalist conflict paradigm was directly present with Burma's independence. While the first constitution with its federal concept envisaged autonomous states for most ethnic groups, even before the abolition of this arrangement in 1962, there was discrimination against the minorities: The first democratic government under Prime Minister U Nu advanced a nation-building project also aiming at the “Bamarization” and “Buddhization” of the entire country (Sai Kham Mong, 2007). This cultural centralization policy, discriminating against the “ethnic minorities” with their divergent languages and religions and living on the geographic periphery, was continued by the post-1962 autocratic governments and is still valid under the military regime (Steinberg, 2007).

Consistent culturalist policy elements therefore belong to the causal factors in the emergence of the ethno-nationalist conflict paradigm. These go hand in hand with a second causal factor: the autocratic nature of the government itself. The lack of democratic possibilities for articulating opinions at either a central or a member state level leads to exclusion of the “ethnic minorities” from any opportunity of participating in the distribution of resources, goods, and power in Myanmar (see Smith, 2007). The country's specific constitutional setup thus conditions the political and economic marginalization and the cultural discrimination of minority groups. Not the cultural differences per se, but their application as points of reference for the political and military repression of groups who are anyway economically and politically deprived can be cited as one of the central reasons for the ethno-nationalist conflict paradigm in Myanmar.

In the “primordial” civil war after independence, the Karen in southeast Burma, in particular, rose up at the same time as the CPB. During the civil war, the Karen were supported by the neighboring Mon. Closely related to the Karen are the Karenni. Other than the CPB, the Karen, and the Mon, groups rebelling during the civil war have prominently included the Rakhine, the Buddhist population in the state of Rakhaing in western Burma (also known as the state of Arakan). Meanwhile, the

Rohingya are the Muslim population in the Rakhaing State. The latter have a particular status in that they are not recognized as an indigenous minority by Myanmar's government but are dubbed "Bengali immigrants" (see Smith, 2007).

The CPB disintegrated around 1988-9 into numerous rebel organizations with ethnic backgrounds. One of the most important is the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in the Shan State in the east of Myanmar. In 1989, the UWSA immediately agreed on a ceasefire with the central government and, since then, has been fighting alongside it and together with the National Democratic Alliance Army — Eastern Shan State (NDAA-ESS) — also emerging from the CPB — against yet another CPB successor, the Shan State Army — North (SSA-N), and its allies from the ranks of the Shan. In contrast to the other minority "states", the Wa State cannot be traced back to Burma's original federal constitution (Sai Kham Mong, 2007), but was part of a "trade-off" by the central government which granted the UWSA control over Special Region 2 in the Shan State. The UWSA is especially known for opium cultivation and, since the 1990s, for the production of methamphetamine.

Other organizations established in the 1960s and 1980s, plus their relevant armed wings, are to be found among the Chin in northwest Myanmar and the Kachin in the north of the country.

The conflicts of the ethno-nationalist conflict paradigm all belong to the cultural type of conflict: they are all, in different way and to various extents, concerned with collective identity, both that of the Burmese state as a whole and that of the ethnic minorities.

In this respect, a matter of particular discussion is the conflict with the UWSA (Kramer, 2007): In this case, drug production does not only play a role as a source of financing, but, in itself, represents a commodity to be defended. The autonomy demanded, and achieved, for the Wa State is thus of importance not only from the perspective of ethnic self-determination but also by economic criteria. It should be noted, however, that the two aims coexist: Even the heavily economized UWSA conflict has not lost its cultural and political dimensions (see Smith, 2007). In fact, it is a political conflict with three dimensions: an economic, power-political, and cultural dimension.

Most of the ethno-nationalist conflicts in Myanmar, carried on by groups defined in linguistic and religious terms, can be attributed to the historicity subtype of cultural conflicts. These cases are about the relationship, influenced by and related to history, between the central domain of the Bamar, which is centralized in linguistic, religious, and political terms, and the peripheral area of ethnic minorities, which is splintered with regard to the aforementioned aspects. The present ethno-nationalist conflict paradigm between the center and the periphery is, in a certain sense, no more than the continuation of an old "leitmotif" observable in medieval times and during the colonial era, as well.

However, the ethno-nationalist conflicts are historicity not only because they form a virtually “traditional” kind of structure in Myanmar, but also because they address the historical narrative – in other words, the “story” of “history”: They are concerned with the course of the country’s long, exceedingly violent history of political, military, economic, and cultural power, i.e., with the course of the conflict itself.

In this respect, the dispute between the Rohingya and the government represents a special case: This conflict is historicity not (only) because it addresses historical experiences, but because it thematizes the history of origin, i.e., the (actual or attributed) immigration of the Rohingyas from India. The Rohingya conflict also has an explicit religious dimension.

Even though language, and also religion, are the central criteria defining the different ethnic groups, language is hardly ever, and religion only rarely, a conflict issue. Although the linguistic and religious differences primarily serve to constitute the participating actors and although the linguistic-religious centralization policy of the Burmese government is an important original causal factor in the genesis of the ethno-nationalist conflict paradigm, alongside political exclusion and economic deprivation of the minorities, language and religion do not generally represent direct and independent conflict issues. The long conflict history in Burma, rooted in the pre-modern era (Taylor 2007) and shaped in the colonial days by Great Britain’s policy of “divide et impera” (Smith 2007), has thus become, with its different facets, an independent conflict issue and a focal point for collective identities. The length and intensity of the conflict history has thus the ultimate effect of superimposing the historicity dimension on the original causes of the conflict.

In the end, this leads to the situation that in Myanmar – and here parallels can be drawn to, for example, Sri Lanka – the conflict history is no longer only a conflict theme but also a perpetuating conflict cause. The original reasons for the conflict have faded – the conflict paradigm has become a quasi self-referential, “autopoietic” structural form.

### **5.3 Counterexamples: Malaysia and Singapore**

Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia illustrate the profound identity-related conflicts in Southeast Asia that are often extremely difficult to de-escalate. They demonstrate the importance of language, religion, and historicity for inter-cultural conflicts in the region.

That said, there are also counterexamples. We find some of them in the societies mentioned – for example, the successful accommodation of cultural differences between members of central Thai culture and the Khmer- or Lao-speaking groups in Eastern and Northern Isaan (Brown, 1994).

There are also examples at the regional level. As indicated above, conflicts in the region are primarily domestic disputes: 74 percent of all conflicts and even 94 per-



cent of all cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia takes place within nations. This is a strong indication that the *Association of Southeast Asian Nations* – originally conceived as a security community of five Southeast Asian nations and founded in 1967 at the height of the second Indochina conflict – has proven to be extraordinarily successful in conflict prevention and resolving conflicts between the members of the Association.

This is all the more remarkable given that in this culturally diverse region there is diverse potential for inter-state or transnational conflicts including conflicts over identity. Over four decades after the founding of ASEAN, there are unresolved conflicts between the member states: On the whole, they revolve around issues regarding the correct demarcation of borders (e.g., along the land and sea borders of Thailand and Cambodia, Cambodia and Vietnam) or competing territorial claims such as those of Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines to (parts of ) the Spratly Islands.

However, there is also a potential for conflicts, in the joint use of natural resources (e.g., dam projects for electricity generation along the Mekong) and the in treatment of cultural minorities in neighboring countries (e.g., the Khmer Krom / *Kho-me Crôm*, in South Vietnam and also discrimination against Vietnamese-speaking people in Cambodia). The current conflict between Cambodia and Thailand over the temple ruins of Khao Phra Viharn (Cambodian: Preah Vihear) demonstrates that various contentious inter-state issues can potentially erupt into military confrontations.

However, such tensions are the exception and as a rule not related to cultural topics. The example of Khao Phra Viharn/Preah Vihear clarifies this, even though there seems to be a cultural dimension attached to the conflict as the dispute actually revolves around a Hindu temple complex in the border area between the two states.<sup>8</sup> However, a closer look at how the temple issue is treated by political actors involved reveals that ultimately it is a conflict over political power that pursues specific domestic interests and has more to do with domestic politics rather than culture and identity.

Especially relevant are the examples of non-violent conflict management in Malaysia and Singapore. Similar to other societies in Southeast Asia, the internal conflicts in these two nations are highly complex. However, in both cases, nation-building stands under a “dictate of history” – the need to reconcile latent conflicts between various religious and language communities with different perceptions of their common history.

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<sup>8</sup> Typically, the conflict escalated following the application of the Cambodian government to have the complex registered as world cultural heritage by the *United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO).

As the result of British colonial policy, a “plural society” (Furnivall 1944) developed in both societies, in which the segmentation of society into two large, internally heterogeneous groups – immigrants and their descendants from the Chinese mainland and the Indian subcontinent, and indigenous Malays – has been the key aspect of intercommunal conflict until today.

What Malaysia and Singapore have in common is an agenda shaped by history. The manifestation of these conflicts is the controversy over the political concept of “bumiputera” (also: “bumiputra”).<sup>9</sup> The concept of Bumiputera is the attempt to create an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) of the Malay-speaking people of what today is Malaysia. Simultaneously, the concept creates a distinction between the “authentic” people of Malaysia and the Chinese and Indian minorities, respectively.

While post-colonial society in Singapore is primarily of Chinese identity (77% of the population is Chinese, 14 percent is Malay and some eight percent are Indians), the newly-born Federation of Malaya faced an even more complex mixture of cultural communities. In 1968, the bumiputra represented some 48 percent of the population, while Chinese (36) and Indians (9) jointly made up 45 percent. According to the state census in 1999, the bumiputra accounted for just under 58 percent of the population (49% Malay and 8.8% non-Malay bumiputra), while the share of Chinese stood at 24.9 percent and that of Indians at seven percent (Embong, 2001: 59).

Both Singapore and present-day Malaysia were affected in the 1960s by intercommunalism – in Singapore in 1964 and in Malaysia in 1969. Furthermore, in recent years Malaysia has witnessed a rise in communal tensions, especially between Malay and Indians. Increasingly, Chinese and Indians feel threatened by Islamization tendencies in Malaysian politics (Chin, 2007).

Nevertheless, both nations have been remarkably successful in preventing major eruptions of cultural violence since the late 1960s. Even more remarkably is that both nations have employed quite distinct strategies of intercultural conflict management.

In Malaysia, relations between different cultural groups are guided by a formula that essentially served as the basis for the constitutional compromise of 1957 (“The Bargain”). It can be summarized as follows: In exchange for being granted citizenship and full cultural and economic rights, the Chinese and Indians accepted the political dominance of the bumiputra and implicitly their cultural pre-eminence. In the social

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<sup>9</sup> The term comes from the Sanskrit *bhumiputra* (“son of the soil”). The bumiputras encompass Malays and other Malay-Polynesian sections of the population in Malaysia, who belong to Islam (Malay, Javanese, Bugis, Minang). Whether the term also covers non-Malay natives such as the Orang Asli (mainland Malaysia) and indigeneous groups in Sabah and Sarawak remains contentious. The bumiputras do not include the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups, precisely the ones it is designed to dissociate from. Just to what extent the discussion revolves around the perceived story of origin rather than the actual geographic origin is demonstrated by the fact that at the time of independence (1957) an estimated 75 percent of the Chinese and 65 percent of the Indians were born in the area of the Federation of Malaya (Crouch 1996).

and cultural area, this formula established an arrangement of “communal compartmentalization”: the preservation of particular cultural identities and traditions through the division of cultural communities that allowed symbolically established privileges for the Malay-Muslim bumiputra.<sup>10</sup>

In other words: the idea was to forego assimilation strategies destined to create a new, “pan-Malay” cultural identity in favor of an integrationist strategy of multiculturalism (Hefner, 2001). This formula guaranteed the protection of non-Malay interests and simultaneously recognized the need of the Malay population for recognition of their identity as the “indigenous” population of Malaysia as well as the attendant right to political pre-eminence. The integrative force of this strategy was bound to the capabilities of Malay, Chinese, and Indian elites to guarantee representatives of the various “ethnic” groups to participate in an inter-ethnic government alliance (up to 1969: Parti Perikatan, “Alliance”; since 1973: Barisan Nasional, “National Front”).

The strategy of de-escalating cultural conflicts in Singapore differs in key points from the Malaysian approach. Singapore has promoted a policy of “citizenship” and cultural pluralism, which aimed explicitly at the promotion of a culturally neutral concept of citizenship and the exclusion of cultural domains from the political realm. Singapore’s policy of multi-culturalism was to a large extent and over a long period a policy of state-promoted secularism and the privatization of religion and language. This approach was expressed, amongst other things, in the promotion of English as the commercial language and lingua franca in Singapore, and the Religious Harmony Act of 1990 (Hefner, 2001: 38).

In the past, Singapore’s vision of a “citizen multi-culturalism” (ibid.) was not without resort to particularistic cultural elements – such as the “Speak Mandarin” campaign (1979), the promotion of “Religious Knowledge” education in public and private schools as an attempt “to provide the cultural ballast to withstand the stresses of living in a fast changing society” (Strait Times, March 15, 1979, quoted in Chua, 1995: 27) or the promotion of so-called “Asian values” and “shared values” in the early 1990s (Chua, 1995).

As such, the multi-culturalism policy in Singapore can be described as a mix of legal instruments, monetary incentive schemes and the exertion of influence through the education system that borrows elements of Chinese culture both subtly but also directly – or as Brown (1994) puts it: an “assimilationist policy of amalgamation”. Comparable with the Malaysian “Barisan Nasional”, in Singapore the People’s Action Party has assumed the role of mediator between the cultural communities.

It can be argued that in both cases a continuation of two factors explains the success of peaceful management of cultural conflicts under the conditions of a plural society:

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<sup>10</sup> These privileges not only extend to the political realm but also the economy and the cultural area.

- The “invention” and implementation of a conception of “multicultural citizenship” (Hefner) based on the acceptance of cultural differences, which attempts to mitigate its political conflict potential by way of a compromise founded on integration through accommodation (Malaysia) or amalgamation (Singapore).
- The capacity of mutually committed ethnic elites and representatives of cultural groups to guarantee the inter-ethnic “Bargain”.

So far, this combination of political central ideas and political action has proven in both cases – notwithstanding all the challenges – to be highly successful. However, in both societies there is a price to pay. In Malaysia, it is “differentiated citizenship” (Parekh, 1991) – an institutionalized differentiated treatment of the citizens based on descent (which often, but by no means always, correlates with language and religion) and subjugation of individual rights in favor of group rights. In Singapore, the promotion of a Singaporean identity based on “shared values” is accompanied by “conservative statism” (Hefner, 2001: 44), which allows less scope for autonomous civilian societies, individual cultural self-determination, and values that lie outside what the state permits and regulates. Until now it seems as if both societies are willing to pay this price.

## **6 Conclusion**

This study on the cultural dimensions of Asian and Southeast Asian conflicts presents a range of core findings. First, by global comparison, Asia is a region particularly prone to conflicts. Second, domestic conflicts about identity and especially historicity conflicts, predominate in the region. Third, the landscape of conflict in Asia is characterized by pronounced domestic conflicts of low intensities over identity that began in the past and are of an enduring nature. The number of “ethnically” colored conflicts is stagnating while religious conflicts are gaining in importance.

Fourth, conflicts in Asia are shaped by the dominance of “ethnic” conflict actors. The majority of such actors are frequently involved in violent conflicts and dominate both the cultural but also the non-cultural spectrum of conflict. Whereas the relevance of left-wing actors has declined, the relevance of religiously defined actors has increased.

Fifth, compared with the rest of Asia, Southeast Asia is subject to a disproportionately large number of cultural conflicts. At the same time, however, it is important to note that in Southeast Asia there is no trend of further culturalization of conflicts in recent years. Rather, the identity conflicts in Southeast Asia seem to be very profound and as such are frequently quite resistant to de-escalation strategies. That said, they are almost exclusively of an internal nature and do not extend to inter-state relations.

All of this makes one thing clear: Asia and Southeast Asia in particular have a large potential for internal and inter-state conflicts over culture and identity. But the states

of the region also have an extraordinary potential for ensuring an enduring, peaceful coexistence of the numerous religious, linguistic, and other culturally distinct groups. As such, the nature of conflicts in Asia and in particular in Southeast Asia hardly serves to prove Huntington's famous theory of the "clash of civilizations" (1993). The struggle between diverse cultures is not the driving force behind international tensions in Southeast Asia. Analysis has shown that politically relevant conflicts within many Asian and Southeast Asian societies do not run primarily along religious but along other cultural divide lines. The severity of some conflicts and the parallelism of religion, language, and historicity tends to disguise the fact that the relevant issues of conflict are not of a religious but often of a history-related or a combined religious and linguistic ("ethnic") nature.

Admittedly, the examples of cultural conflicts cited here are all located in linguistically and religiously heterogeneous societies. But not all culturally fragmented societies are particularly affected by conflicts. Quantitative studies of political conflicts and cultural diversity demonstrate for Asia and elsewhere that a high religious heterogeneity would seem to some extent to impregnate against the violent conducting of conflict. Our findings (Croissant et al., 2009) and others (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998, 2004; Ellingsen, 2000; Hegre et al., 2001) support the assumption that while high religious fragmentation increases the number of cultural actors and the potential areas of conflict, the risk of violent internal confrontations decreases.

Furthermore, studies based on a large number of cases which examine "ethnic" and cultural conflicts both in Asia and worldwide demonstrate that aside from cultural variables, other factors such as political (type of political regime), economic ("resource curse") and demographic ("youth bulge") variables also impact the probability of conflicts.

Consequently, cultural structures are significant for settling conflicts; however, they do not determine the development of intercultural relationships. The cultural diversity of the region and its societies offers both challenges and chances for peaceful conflict solution strategies based on understanding and dialog. The non-violent handling of cultural tensions in Singapore and Malaysia and the fact that culture at the inter-state level in Southeast Asia hardly has any relevance for conflicts, but that rather, within ASEAN, forms of a joint identity creation are recognizable (Schuck, 2008), clarify that cultural diversity and conflicts within states and state regions in Asia need not necessarily assume violent forms.

These examples make clear the importance of sub-regional alliances and the strategies of Malaysian accommodation and Singaporean amalgamation as possible complements to the American assimilation and German (European?) "non-interlacing multi-culturalism" as mechanisms of conflict mediation in intercultural contexts. Culture might be fate, to take up a theory of Singapore's former Premier Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Cultural conflict is not.

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