

The Roots of Ethnic Conflict in Post-World War II Myanmar, Malaysia, and the Philippines

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Edited by Sophia Khiavi and Sophie Price

ABSTRACT

The impacts of colonial history on present-day ethnic relations in Southeast Asia, a region known for its cultural and ethnic diversity, remain significant in understanding the sociopolitical developments within the countries of the region. This paper examines the historical origins and contemporary implications of long-standing ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia, focusing on Myanmar, Malaysia, and the Philippines. I argue that these conflicts stemmed from colonial legacies and can be traced back to each country's respective colonial periods, which took place at different points in history. From the imposition of territorial boundaries to racial classification and differential treatment, colonial policies resulted in enduring tensions between ethnic populations, which continue to shape ethnic relations in these countries today. British colonial rule in Myanmar fostered tensions between the Bamar majority and non-Bamar minorities, while in Malaysia, disparities between Malays and ethnic Chinese were fueled by British migration policies. In the Philippines, conflicts involving the Muslim minority in Mindanao originated from attempts by the Spanish at Christianization and subjugation, further exacerbated by American imperialism. Despite variations in colonial experiences and timelines, ethnic conflicts underscore the lasting impact of colonization on these countries' present-day social and political dynamics.

Introduction

Western colonialism has had a profound and lasting impact on contemporary Southeast Asia, giving rise to several postcolonial problems that Southeast Asian states have been left to grapple with in their ongoing processes of decolonization and nation-building. Colonial European states imposed formal territorial boundaries with little regard for disparate local populations, introduced non-indigenous ethnic groups, and implemented policies that often favoured or elevated one specific group. Such changes and structures brought by colonial rule thus fostered pluralistic multi-ethnic societies and led to the development of ethnically fragmented states. Karl Hack asserts that “most Southeast Asian states originated not so much as nation-states, but rather as nations-states”, placing emphasis on the multiple fractured identities existing within a single overarching supranationalism (Hack 2012, 138). As such, one of the most salient legacies of the colonial period is ethnic conflicts. As defined by Ivan Ng, ethnicity “is a marker of difference between people” that inevitably demarcates members who belong in an ethnic group from non-members (Ng 2022, 189). The numerous impacts of colonialism on the immense and complex mosaic of ethnicities in Southeast Asia have therefore incited “histories of varying degrees of ethnic conflict” that continue to influence modern-day politics and society, as well as shape everyday life in the region (Ng 2022, 187).

In examining the roots of ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia following World War II, this paper will focus on the development of ethnic

conflicts occurring in the countries of Myanmar, Malaysia, and the Philippines. This paper will also examine the mechanisms behind conflicts that highlight deep divisions and tensions between an ethnic majority group and a regional minority group or groups. In all three countries, long-standing conflicts rooted in ethnic differences can be traced back to their respective colonial periods, which occurred in different points in history. In the case of Myanmar, British colonial rule beginning in the late 19th century along with Japanese wartime occupation forged a divide between the Bamar majority and non-Bamar indigenous groups. As for Malaysia and the Philippines, the colonial histories of both countries began much earlier in the 16th century. However, tensions between the Malay majority and Chinese minority populations stemmed from the expansion of the British into Malaya later in the early 19th century, while the Spanish colonial era in the 16th century had already laid the foundations for the continuous struggle of the Muslim minority in the southern Philippines against colonial and state intrusions. In the late 19th century, Southeast Asia entered the Age of Imperialism, an era that marked a shift in the motivations of the occupying colonial powers. The colonial policies and practices implemented during this period worsened ethnic divisions between groups in the countries of Myanmar, Malaysia, and the Philippines that persist today. This paper will therefore argue that ethnic conflicts in Myanmar, Malaysia, and the Philippines following World War II can be traced back to the onset of their respective colonial periods, and were further aggravated by colonial policies and

structures during the Age of Imperialism in the late 19th century until 1945. Delving into the colonial histories of Southeast Asian states may provide a better understanding of the development of the conflicts that continue to complicate ethnic relations in states such as Myanmar, Malaysia, and the Philippines today, and thus further uncover the legacies of colonial rule in Southeast Asia.

Myanmar

In Myanmar, ethnic conflicts between the Bamar majority and non-Bamar minority groups can be traced back to the conquest of Burma in the late 19th century by the British, who implemented colonial structures that resulted in the development of tensions across ethnic lines, manifested through racial classification and differential treatment. During this time period, major powers such as Britain focused on the conquest of overseas territories and the exploitation of the resources and populations of such territories. In their conquest of Burma, the British began demarcating the boundaries of their acquired territory, forcing different ethnic groups into existing as a single unit. The drawing of borders led to the classification of groups, which allowed the British to formally distinguish between different ethnic populations. In doing so, the British were able to introduce reform and more effectively develop and facilitate colonial rule over a “more governable” population (Ng 2022, 189). This led to the British imposing differing policies upon different ethnic groups, fueling resentment between them. For instance, the traditional political structures of the Bamar majority in

central Burma (Burma Proper) were abolished, resulting in strained relations with the colonial government. On the other hand, ethnic minority groups residing in more peripheral regions (Frontier/Scheduled Areas) were allowed to retain their traditional political structures and thus foster a better relationship with the colonial state. As such, minority groups such as the Karens and the Kachins were favoured by the British colonial administration, which provided them with positions in the military and the government as well as preferential treatment in education (Mukherjee 2021, 108). The distinction made by the British between Burma Proper and the Frontier Areas, or the center and the periphery, created physical and socio-ethnic divides between their respective populations that would be further problematized by the Japanese in World War II.

Under Japanese occupation, tensions between the Bamar majority and the ethnic minorities worsened as a result of the formation of a predominantly Bamar elite coupled with rising sentiments of nationalism and independence. The arrival of the Japanese into Burma led to the creation of the Burma Independence Army (BIA), a nationalist army that fought against British colonial rule. As such, those loyal to the British, mainly ethnic minorities, “found themselves at odds with the nationalist allies of the Japanese” (Than 2005, 72). Later on, however, the BIA would collaborate with the British to revolt against the Japanese, as they soon realized that the Japanese would not be granting them true independence (Selth 1986, 495). This would result in both a sense of betrayal amongst those who were loyal to the Crown, as

well as in the politicization of ethnic identities through the recognition of a Bamar-dominated elite as “the saviours of independent Myanmar” (Than 2005, 72), who eventually dominated the political landscape following independence. Under a Bamar-dominated state, ethnic minorities faced marginalization and discrimination, resulting in decades of armed rebellions, ethnic conflicts, and even persecutions, such as the ongoing Rohingya genocide (Kramer 2015, 355). Ultimately, ethnic divisions between the Bamar majority and ethnic minorities in Myanmar can be traced back to British colonial rule, which were then worsened under Japanese occupation, thus maintaining majority-minority relations that continue to be problematic until present day.

Malaysia

In the case of Malaysia, racialized divisions between the Malays and the ethnic Chinese first stemmed from the expansion of the British into Malaysia then later from the increase of the Chinese population, leading to economic rivalries and institutionalized racism. In the 16th century, Europeans entered Malacca and introduced the concept of a “Malay” identity to local populations (Ismail 2020, 176). The prospect of the development of a Malay nation and race was later introduced when Malaya fell under British control in the early 19th century, an administration which worked to construct forms of ethnic categorization and identification. While the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar mainly involved indigenous populations, ethnic divisions in Malaysia occurred as a result of the influx of immigrant populations that were en-

couraged by British migration policies. In order to meet the needs of the colony’s export economy, the expansion of the British into Malaya provided employment opportunities for the Chinese, attracting thousands of migrants. Hari Singh observes that “it was the British who, by conscious design but also inadvertently, implanted an anti-Chinese temperament in the Malay psyche” (Singh 2001, 46). As the rate of Chinese migrants and their economic involvement increased, the British decided to maintain a dual economy policy that would restrict indigenous Malays solely to the traditional sector, thus structurally segregating the two ethnic groups (Noor and Leong 2013, 716). The division of labour across ethnic lines resulted in little to no inter-ethnic contact as well as economic inequality, with ethnic Malays in unwaged sectors and non-Malays in waged capitalist sectors (Noor and Leong 2013, 716). This led to the ethnic Chinese being the first middle class to emerge in Malaysia (Montesino 2011, 117). The steady economic expansion of the Chinese began to pose a threat to the Malay population as well as the British colonial administration, resulting in the creation of pro-Malay policies that would mark the beginning of the institutionalization of Malay entitlement to statutory privileges.

Similar to what had occurred in Myanmar, Japanese occupation during the Second World War further increased animosities between the ethnic Chinese and Malay groups through mutual targeted attacks. Later on, the involvement of both parties became racialized, as a Chinese-majority group launched an insurgency campaign against the British while ethnic Ma-

lays began supporting the British (Opper 2019, 173; Belogurova 2014, 461). Prejudice and socio-economic inequalities continued to divide the ethnic groups for decades in the early 20th century, leading to the adoption of preferential policies in favour of the Malay race. This further reinforced ethnic rivalries, marginalized minority populations, and legitimized institutional racism. Thus, Western colonization incited inter-ethnic conflicts in Malaysia by bringing in immigrant populations and creating preferential policies that led to the institutionalized empowerment of the Malay majority, both of which continue to affect the country's social and political landscapes today.

The Philippines

Ethnic conflicts involving the Muslim minority in Mindanao, the southernmost island group of the Philippines, can be traced back to the Spanish colonization of the country and were later worsened by American imperialism in the 20th century. Upon their arrival in the archipelago, the Spanish began their mission to convert local populations to Catholicism, simultaneously ceasing the spread of Islam into the islands and attempting to Christianize and colonize local Muslim populations (Majul 1988, 897). However, despite never being fully subjugated by the Spanish, Muslim populations and their territories were still included in the territory ceded to the United States following the Spanish-American War. This is similar to what had occurred in Myanmar, where multiple groups were forced to coexist as a single society within borders established by colonial intruders.

Influenced by the widespread ideas of expansionism and imperialism, the Americans took control of the Philippines and implemented policies of reform and development. Under American rule, the othering of those in the South increased as a result of resettlement policies introduced by the American colonial government (Ferrer 2005, 116). Due to such policies, immigration into Mindanao by Filipinos residing in the North increased, given that the American colonial government systematized land ownership and granted resources and ancestral lands in the South to Christian Filipinos and American corporations (Tuminez 2007, 79). The Muslim population, once the majority in the South, thus became outnumbered. Similar to that of the Malays' perception of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, prejudice against Muslim minorities in the Philippines by Christianized Filipinos stemmed from the introduction of Spanish ideas and identities. Furthermore, the ethnic Malay and Christian Filipino populations both received preferential treatment as a result of their political dominance at the expense of ethnic minorities.

Policies under the American colonial government as well as the othering of Muslims in Mindanao continued to affect relations between Muslim and Christian Filipinos, even under the post-independence Philippine government. State administrations continued to perpetuate the disadvantaged and repressed existence of Muslims in the state, resulting in armed resistance movements and ongoing negotiations for self-determination of the Muslim population (Tuminez 2007, 79). Persisting ethnic relations involving Muslim minority populations

in the Philippines are thus evidently rooted in the Spanish and American colonial eras of the Philippines.

Conclusion

Despite differences in colonial masters and timelines, all three Southeast Asian countries have experienced and continue to experience the consequences of colonization, as evidenced by inter-ethnic relations. By examining ethnic conflicts in the countries of Myanmar, Malaysia, and the Philippines, it is evident that the roots of conflicts, both past and present, can be traced back to the beginning of their respective colonial periods. Upon entering the Age of Imperialism, colonial structures and policies, such as mapping, identity construction, and migrant resettlement, negatively affected ethnic relations in ways that further exacerbated existing tensions between ethnic populations. Such experiences under colonial rule still have lasting effects on the social and political landscapes of these countries today, which continue to be divided along ethnic lines. Additionally, the colonial timelines of these three countries exemplify the diverse experiences of colonialism in Southeast Asia, with the roots of conflict between the aforementioned ethnic groups being traced back to different points in history. Despite the differences in their colonial experiences, ethnic conflicts became a common consequence of colonization in the region of Southeast Asia. Understanding ethnic conflicts as a lasting colonial legacy is thus important in a region as diverse as Southeast Asia, where issues of race and ethnicity continue to be deeply ingrained within these states' societies.

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