



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

INTEGRATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: TRAJECTORIES OF INCLUSION, DYNAMICS OF EXCLUSION

Dilemmas of Diversity in Southeast Asia

In a study of how Southeast Asian states cope with diversity, this policy brief focuses on border areas and the politics of religion. Demands for development from border zone inhabitants reorient our thinking about marginal areas straddling the Laos-Vietnam border, while on the Cambodia-Thailand border domestic politics and international organisations play key roles in the production of nationalism-driven conflict over the Preah Vihear temple. Islam is viewed as a political force in Indonesian democratic politics, while Buddhism is viewed as an agent of inter-communal violence in Myanmar. These examples highlight one of the main dilemmas posed by the diversity of nation, ethnic group and religion in Southeast Asia. Because conflict is locally rooted and historically produced, it defies generalised analysis and requires policy formulation that is sensitive to local political context.



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INTRODUCTION

This policy brief addresses the production of tensions arising from conflicting national/transnational identities and examines how Southeast Asian states and other stakeholders cope with the region's diversity. It reviews evidence on two themes: borders and the politics of religion. Its findings reflect the value of trans-regional and decentralized approaches. The analysis yields no neat or uniform conclusions: rather, it shows that dynamics of integration and divergence play out differently in particular Southeast Asian contexts. Policy recommendations therefore emphasise the need for cultural sensitivity at the local political level – Southeast Asia is home to a range of socio-historical, cultural and political environments, each making pressing demands, each posing specific dilemmas.

The subject of diversity invites reflection on the quality of our knowledge. Our case studies highlight the region's complexity and the need to assess received wisdom in the light of specific historical contexts. Expressions of public opinion that impact on political calls for action are often

shaped by superficial generalizations. The task of scholarly investigation is to check these: providing balance to narrow depictions of identity conflict, ethnic friction and communal rivalry often articulated in the media; complicating the clichés and entrenched perceptions that may emanate from central state views. It seeks to produce legible perspectives drawn from on-the-ground research, recognising that these may be messy and complex.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Ambiguous borders, negotiated margins

The study of a Lao-Vietnamese border shows that while the modern state has the means to extend control over border zones, it also comes under increasing pressure to provide development to the people. Specific practices observed among border area inhabitants during the research include activities that seek economic and political resources from state and private agencies, including services, development opportunities, communications, markets, etc. These activities may, moreover, include cross-border mobility and migration. This demand for development from the margins poses a new set of specific challenges and dilemmas for state authorities, particularly at local levels.

This scholarship insists on rethinking marginal zones – hitherto seen as areas of unruliness and dissent from a central state perspective – because people at the margins operate a range of survival strategies, some of which involve compromise and negotiation without necessarily surrendering to assimilation or condoning confrontation. This is a welcome follow-up to earlier research showing how central state power tried to master socio-political problems through assimilationist and resettlement programs heedless of legally binding and institutionalized protection of minorities.

Research on the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear temple at the two countries' border emphasizes the production of rival discourses on the temple's identity, unclear territorial claims, and political gimmicking about "national heritage". While the contested area is tiny, the monument's symbolical significance has the potential to poison bilateral relations durably. Thai and Cambodian approaches to the issue include uncompromising nationalist postures as well as flexible and pragmatic attitudes. Domestic politics and nationalist discourses that pander to domestic audiences have tended to shape the two countries' international relations on this issue.

The conflict's international context is also central. For decades this border has been ill-defined, yet for decades it was the site of no tensions or dispute at all. The recent conflict resulted from UNESCO's grant of the temple's world cultural heritage status to Cambodia, thus implicitly recognising Cambodia's claim to the territory the temple stands on. The study underlines the point that in some border contexts ambiguity may be a political good.

It is clear that historical background helps explain the dynamics of confrontation. The second study, in particular, underlines the usefulness of historical knowledge of local politics (and not just of the history of the monument itself). Several contrasting sets of actors are recognised as agents for change. On the one hand, in Laos and Vietnam, we see that border dissensions are not necessarily troublesome if local voices obtain political and economic resources. On the other, in Cambodia and Thailand, we note that domestic political agendas and international/multilateral organisations have real power to shape international relations, both to promote peace and to disrupt it.

Religion and politics in Southeast Asia: Buddhism and Islam

Scholars have long noted that conflicts with religious connotations call for deep analysis to reveal their social and political underpinnings. Religious activities have political ramifications; political actors appeal to religious beliefs as ideological cover for political action. Media representations can

contribute to the difficulty of discussing religious dimensions to conflict, because their depictions are too constricted or agenda-driven.

Research on Islamist political parties reveals a striking difference between political Islam in Indonesia and the Middle East. Viewed in historical perspective, political Islam in Indonesia is in decline. Islamist parties display a full range of ideological and political orientations, but are divided, compete with each other and have, broadly speaking, lost out in recent elections.

The research focused on the PKS, a party linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, making the “Indonesian exception” very noticeable, as the recent Islamist wave in the Middle East stands in the tradition of the Brotherhood movement that originated in Egypt many decades ago. Islamist parties in Indonesia failed to channel popular resentment against the former Suharto regime and, unlike in other Muslim countries, failed to penetrate the upper classes and build empowering networks.

However, this does not imply that Islam’s role in the field of political rhetoric and programs is minor. Rather, religion is embedded in a variety of discourses that include the secular parties which share a broad consensus on the long established “pancasila” ideology that recognizes six religions equally. The conclusion is that religiously tainted ideological struggles take place within discursive limits that do not include the quest of a “proper Islamic state” central to Islamist movements elsewhere.

In Myanmar, the oppression of Muslims in Rakhine State (most of whom define themselves as Rohingyas) and anti-Muslim agitation in 2013 in various urban centres of the central region have tainted the country’s reputation for peaceful Buddhist piety. The violence has created an image problem for Buddhism in Myanmar, and has drawn attention to a variety of social issues from poverty, economic pressure and political immaturity to widespread anxiety and deep xenophobia.

The international reaction to these humanitarian and communal crises shows that the socio-historical complexity of these issues is often overlooked. Much media reporting is drawn from information gathered by international organisations and NGOs dealing with humanitarian challenges and united in their condemnation of government failures. While a critical review of media reporting on a country that has just reopened to the world is due, the key finding is that a general lack of commonly shared information and the absence of social and political research on the country has prevented balanced discussion of contemporary Myanmar issues.

This is particularly true of Buddhism in Myanmar. At times, their tradition of anti-colonial nationalist struggle has led Buddhist monks to be outspoken critics of authoritarian regimes, but in recent events they have appeared as leading xenophobic voices condoning anti-Muslim rant. The 969 movement has pursued legislation that would limit marriage of Buddhist women with Muslim men. This movement has ties with the anti-Muslim BBS organization in Sri Lanka, leading observers to note worrying similarities with Islamist networks. In fact, the situations of the Muslim communities in these predominantly Buddhist contexts are highly dissimilar and the potential for the monkhood to play a political role in the two Buddhist countries is also strikingly different. These differences are of greater significance than transnational Buddhist networks.

Problems of knowledge obtention notwithstanding, the dysfunctional role of many lay Buddhists in Myanmar has discredited Buddhism. This religion cannot be viewed, even by observers interested in religion per se, in the same seemingly naïve and often abstract way as it was in the past. This critical statement points to the need for academic and other observers to show greater awareness of contemporary politics as they proceed with their investigations of culture and religion. It also raises the need for Buddhists in Myanmar to position their views on a global level with regard both to international standards and shared systems of Buddhist values.

This religion’s practitioners have contributed to the promotion of nationalist and chauvinist ideas and actions. And this underlines a key finding of the research, that Buddhism is not the only political force in the field. Indeed, ethnic divisions override the Buddhist matrix that has formatted the culture of many groups here, Burmese, Shan, Mon, Karen and Rakhine. Ethnicity remains a

potent political force. Buddhism, both as a religion that promotes piety and peace and as a cultural marker, is only part of a bigger picture where critical issues within the peace-finding process are formulated along lines that are essentially political.

The transnational networks of world religions studied in these two cases reveal themselves in contexts of strong local contestation. As organisations they play an important role, but compete on the political scene with other forces and cannot be said to dominate. This observation is inconvenient: it obliges us to abandon easy generalisation and to examine complex local political configurations. It is reassuring too, in that global ideological differences appear as ideological covers to local political fault lines rather than driving forces of division.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Local and regional dynamics. Support decentralization in contexts where it may produce win-win solutions and where local state actors may best respond to demands for development. The poor reputation of marginal zones may not invite confidence in self-development, but the virtues and hidden profiles of local knowledge and experience would gain from greater recognition.
2. Promotion of human rights and standards of fairness and inclusion. Promote reflection on trans-regional approaches and inter-regional cooperation in the context of HR implementation strategies. The willingness for cooperation and peaceful development at the grass-roots level needs the support and involvement of central authorities. Local trans-border initiatives can create fertile grounds to counter political habits of non-interference. One element of border discussions is economically motivated migration that condenses overlapping problems of exclusion.
3. Cultural sensitivity. Invest in analysis of “thick contexts” through research on deeper social and political currents in Southeast Asian societies. Chauvinist and xenophobic rant and ideological discourses about national identities often conceal communal frictions and lingering grievances that have a basis in local politics. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations must thus be countered on the basis of local political knowledge. In-depth studies are antidotes to set against superficial cultural comparisons and are best undertaken through increased academic cooperation in research.
4. Political intelligence. Seek deeper understanding of changing political systems, party systems, ideological change and connectivities. The politics of Southeast Asia have undergone huge change in recent decades. Some places have launched processes of democratisation and integration (Indonesia, and lately Myanmar, as illustrated in the above research), others have resisted liberalisation and openness. Daily politics are messy; short- and medium-term rebounds are confusing; ambiguity may be a political good. Both in the local, national and international political arenas, Southeast Asian societies are moving through transformational processes that challenge traditional patronage systems and produce a diversity of responses to global trends.

Political action and the support of inclusive policies has to be anchored in long-term observations of the functioning of political systems, the mutations of political parties and movements, and the relative impact of ideological and religious values. Recognition of Southeast Asia’s diversity needs to be built into programmes of political action: goals such as social peace and inclusion need to be formulated flexibly with regard to dissimilar socio-historical, cultural and political environments.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Run by a consortium of five European and four Southeast Asian institutions, coordinated by the École française d'Extrême-Orient, SEATIDE aims to take a new look at the benefits and risks of integration processes in Southeast Asia.

Main scientific objective

Integrative processes offer the promise of economic and cultural development, the free movement of people, the promotion of citizenship and knowledge networks with extensive links with the wider world. At the same time, failure to take advantage of these benefits can result in processes of exclusion that undermine national/regional frameworks, and entail risks in the fields of human development/security, including the danger of framework disintegration.

In examining these processes, SEATIDE's research will be informed by an awareness that dynamics of exclusion should be studied in tandem with dynamics of inclusion to produce holistic analyses of integrative processes and their contemporary forms, which take into account long-term local perspectives.

Research capacity building

By reinforcing European research on SEA, the project will contribute to the coordination of EU-ASEAN scholarly exchange, the improvement of networking capacity, and the promotion of a new generation of field researchers on SEA.

Methodology

The project will conduct field research and produce analyses that take into account local knowledge as well as macroeconomic studies and expert perspectives. Qualitative and quantitative data will be presented in case studies structured by a common analytical framework, centred on but not restricted to four SEA countries (Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia), with a unifying focus on transnational issues.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Integration in Southeast Asia: Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion (SEATIDE)
COORDINATOR	Yves Goudineau, EFEO, Paris, France, direction@efeo.net.
CONSORTIUM	Centre for History and Economics – CHE – University of Cambridge, UK Chiang Mai University – CMU – Chiang Mai, Thailand Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient – EFEO – Paris, France Tallinn University – TU – Tallinn, Estonia Universitas Gadjah Mada – UGM – Yogyakarta, Indonesia University of Hamburg – UHAM – Hamburg, Germany Università di Milano-Bicocca – UNIMIB – Milano, Italy Universiti Sains Malaysia – USM – Penang, Malaysia Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences – VASS – Hanoi, Vietnam
FUNDING SCHEME	FP7 Framework Programme for Research of the European Union – Collaborative Project (small or medium-scale focused research project) for specific cooperation action dedicated to international cooperation (CP-FP-SICA) – Activity 8.4 Europe in the world

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FURTHER READING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Puangthong R. Pawakapan, <i>State and Uncivil Society in Thailand at the Temple of Preah Vihear</i>, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014. - Charnvit Kasetsiri, Pou Sothirak, Pavin Chachavalpongpun, Preah Vihear, <i>A Guide to Thai-Cambodian Conflict and Its Solutions</i>, Bangkok, White Lotus, 2013. - Rémy Madinier, <i>L'Indonésie, entre démocratie musulmane et Islam intégral. Histoire du parti Masjumi (1945-1960)</i>, Paris, Karthala, 2012. - Andrée Feillard, Rémy Madinier, <i>The End of Innocence? Indonesian Islam and the Temptations of Radicalism</i>, Singapore, National University Press of Singapore, 2011. - Jacques Leider, 'Domination and Dereliction: Exploring the State's Roles in Burma', <i>The Journal of Asian Studies</i>, 2012.