TERRORISM, INSURGENCY AND RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM
IN SOUTHEAT ASIA
Mohamed Jawhar Hassan

Introduction

Global discourse, terminologies and idioms are often defined and driven by the West, and especially by the United States. There are several reasons for this. They include superior academic and intellectual resources, domination of the global media, and the ability to project the West's own interests and agenda as the world's. Uncritical adoption by Asia and the rest of the world also aids this process.

This is certainly the case with regard to the discourse on issues such as terrorism, insurgency and religious fundamentalism. These have been described as "new" or "emerging" issues, simply because they are so for the United States following the September11, 2001 terrorist attacks. In fact however, terrorism, insurgency and religious fundamentalism are far from "new" or "emerging" issues in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

Indeed, terrorism and insurgency were much more acute problems in nearly all the Southeast Asian countries from the 1940s to 1980s. Similarly, religious consciousness and identity began to rise in Southeast Asia from the 1970s. While it is more visually pronounced among the Muslims, it is also evident among followers of other faiths, especially Christianity and Hinduism in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Religious "fundamentalism" is by no means limited to Muslims.

What is "new" or "emerging" is what has been termed "international terrorism", that is terrorism networks across borders such as the Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah, which may incorporate local or "national" terrorist movements or work with them, but whose political agenda goes beyond national borders and whose

targets are often the interests of third countries like the United States and its allies.

In keeping with the usual tendency for public and academic discourse to be defined by the West, Asians and others have also uncritically adopted the notion of "non-traditional security" as including terrorism, insurgency and transnational crime. We also accept them as "new" or "emerging" issues simply because discourse in the West says so.

There cannot be a more obvious distortion of realities. Terrorism, insurgency and transnational crimes such as piracy are as old as history. They are in fact very "traditional", and have been on top of the security agenda of many countries for decades now, long before countries like the United States found them to be the more important problems confronting them now. Perhaps the term "non-military" security problems may describe so-called "non-traditional" security issues more correctly and succinctly.

Working definitions of the terms "terrorism", "insurgency" and "religious fundamentalism" may also be similarly helpful for the purposes of this paper. "Terrorism" is understood here to mean organised violence against civilians in pursuit of a political objective. The fact that the violence is organised and has a political objective is what distinguishes terrorism from common crime. Occasionally terrorist movements also engage with government security forces, but their primary operational target is civilians.

"Insurgency" is an armed uprising against the state. Insurgent forces normally battle government security forces and do not carry out terrorist attacks against civilians. However, sometimes they do, when it is believed to be favourable to their armed struggle.

There can be – and often there is – controversy over whether a movement is a terrorist or insurgent movement because politics frequently steers categorisation. The United States for instance, would like to declare the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) a terrorist organisation, but refrains from doing so because it might complicate on-going peace negotiations with the Philippine government.

For the purpose of this paper, terrorist groups are those that engage mainly in attacking civilians and non-military targets, while insurgents are those who mainly battle government security forces. In other words, what distinguishes the two is essentially the balance of tactics, and a movement can move from a terrorist stage to an insurgent stage when it is stronger, and vice versa. "Militant" groups as used in this paper refer to both terrorist and insurgent movements

"Religious fundamentalism" is understood to describe religious, social or political groups that believe in the literal and total application of religious teachings. "Fundamentalism" was first used in the 1920s to describe Protestant churches in the United States that preached a literal, uncompromising understanding and practise of the teachings in the Bible. Every religion has a "fundamentalist" strain, and there are Christian and Hindu fundamentalists besides Muslim fundamentalists. Fundamentalist movements can pursue their interests through either peaceful or militant means.

Rather than provide an academic survey of terrorism, insurgency and religious fundamentalism in Southeast Asia, this paper addresses specific issues relating to them that are currently preoccupying the international and security community, or that require some elucidation in the view of the writer.

Terrorism, insurgency and religious fundamentalism in Southeast Asia in perspective: old problems, not new
Terrorism and insurgency in the region were at their peak following the end of World War Two and the emergence from colonial rule of regional states. It was a

time when fragile states and new-born nations had to contend with strong divisive forces from within as well as threats from the major powers and a Cold War which turned hot in the Indochinese countries.

Every country was wracked by violence, subversion, terrorism, insurgency and war for extended periods. The threats were mildest in Singapore and Brunei, and most serious in Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar. Compared to what Southeast Asia had to go through during this volatile period, the current situation is a vast improvement.

Singapore was exposed to essentially subversion from the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). Brunei was subject to insurrection from the Partai Rakyat Brunei (PRB) in 1962 when it launched a coup that was put down.

In Vietnam millions died in the insurgency and independence struggle against French colonial rule and American occupation, in the Indochinese wars, and in the conflict between the North and the South. Cambodia suffered tragically from insurgencies, civil war, terrorism and genocide, besides Vietnamese occupation. Millions died or were maimed. In Myanmar a bloody war was fought to hold the country together when its constituent ethnic groups and states launched insurgencies against the central Burman government.

Thailand, the only country spared colonial tutelage, was threatened by subversion and terrorist attacks from the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) as well as several irredentist movements in the south, the most prominent of which were the Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO) and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). Indeed, Thailand battled secessionist elements in Pattani off and on from the 1930s after annexing it in 1902 and attempting to assimilate the Malay Muslims into the Thai ethnic and Buddhist political culture.

Laos was the scene of much turmoil and Pathet Lao insurgency until the Pathet Lao formed the government in 1975. Malaysia was exposed to communist subversion, terrorism and insurgency from the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) from the 1930s to 1989, with the situation most serious between 1948 and 1955.

In the Philippines the Communist Party of Philippines/New People's Army (CPP/NPA) launched an insurgency from 1969 that continues to this day. In the south the local Muslim population has been fighting political domination for the last 400 years, first against the Spanish, then the Americans, and finally the independent Manila government. In recent times the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) started an insurgency and guerrilla war for independence and autonomy from Manila in the 1970s. A splinter group formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 1981. The Abu Sayyaf Group emerged in the early 1990s with the objective of creating a Muslim government in the south, but it degenerated into little more than a criminal organisation after the death of its leader Abdurajak Janjalani in 1998.

Indonesia fought insurgency mounted by the Darul Islam (DI) from 1948 to the 1960s and from the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) for three decades from 1976. It was also confronted with armed resistance and liberation movements in Irian Jaya and Timor Timor. Indonesia also had to contend with the political challenge from Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) until the 1960s.

Islam in Southeast Asia is more moderate than in West Asia or South Asia, despite the rise in religious consciousness and identity that began to gather strength in the region from the 1970s in response to various developments at home and abroad. For Malaysia the May 13 1969 racial disturbances involving mainly Muslim Malays and non-Muslim Chinese was a watershed. The competition for Islamic credentials between the two Malay-Muslim political parties (United Malay Nationalist Organisation (UMNO) and Parti SeIslam Malaysia

(PAS)) also stimulated Muslim consciousness. Externally the rise in oil prices which empowered Arab and Muslim countries and the Iranian revolution of 1979 brought greater awareness and confidence to the Muslims. At the same time, and partly in response, other religious groups became more aware of their faiths. Christian houses of worship began to mushroom in countries like Malaysia, and Hindu festivals gathered dramatically more devotees.

PAS, registered in 1955 in Malaysia and the Indonesian Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP), a merger of four Muslim political parties formed in 1973, were significant political forces in the two countries. They sought to come to power peacefully through the ballot box.

As for militant movements involving Muslims, the prime examples were DI and GAM in Indonesia, PULO and BRN in Thailand and the MNLF and MILF in the Philippines. All were essentially movements fighting for greater autonomy and independence and against perceived oppression and exploitation from the centre; some wanted to replace the existing political system with an Islamic polity based on the *Shariah*. These movements however, cannot be called "terrorist" movements. Often they championed the welfare and well-being of the local population much more than the administration and forces of the centre did.

Terrorism, insurgency and religious fundamental are therefore not "new" or "emerging" security issues for Southeast Asia. They are at least half a century old, and in many cases have declined in severity. Religious awareness however has grown substantially. It seeks political expression and fulfilment through essentially moderate and peaceful means, but militant extremism exists in some fringes. Its worst iteration is terrorism.

The present landscape of terrorism, insurgency and religious fundamentalism

The terrorist and insurgent groups currently active in the region have differing political objectives, ideologies and memberships. Their political goals range from independence/autonomy to replacing the existing system of government with a communist or Shariah-based system. Where they tip into the external sphere and are associated with the Al-Qaeda network, their primary targets are the interests of the United States and its allies. The membership of these groups ranges from Muslim to Buddhist and Christian. The identification of terrorism (and religious fundamentalism) with Islam and Muslims in the region –as elsewhere – is therefore a gross misrepresentation of the facts.

In <u>Myanmar</u> the military regime has successfully negotiated cease-fires with 17 armed ethnic-based armed groups that still allow them to keep their weapons and control some territory. It is now battling only three insurgent groups: the Karen National Union (KNU); the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP);and the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S). The goal of the insurgent groups is greater political autonomy or independence and an end to human rights abuses. All insurgent groups are Buddhist.

<u>Thailand</u> saw a resurgence of violent political activity in the south beginning in 2004. The reasons as well as the elements involved are not fully clear. The violence appears to be the cumulative consequence of Thai Muslim insurgent activity as well as criminal acts, and gained in virulence after confrontation with Thai security forces was brutally suppressed in Krue Se and Tak Bai. The primary insurgent groups are Bersatu (an alliance of PULO and New PULO) and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN, National Revolutionary Front). The insurgent forces are unlikely to gain autonomy, much less self government, but they may be able to induce an accommodation that gives greater political space and socio-economic empowerment to the Thai Muslim population. The Muslim irredentist groups are not linked to international terrorism or the Al-Qaeda. Their struggle is political and not religious, and Thai Muslims are not noted for being

extremists or "fundamentalists" although, as in the rest of the region, the Muslims are more conscious of their identity and their religious obligations.

Three militant groups emerged in <u>Malaysia</u> in recent years, all composed of Muslims. The first was the Al-Ma'unah, a small cult group that emerged in 2000, that sought to overthrow the government through violent means. It was quickly disabled. The Al-Ma'unah had no links with international terrorism or the Al-Qaeda.

The second group was the Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia (KMM – the Malaysian Mujahideen Group). It consisted of 84 members, and was dedicated to complementing the democratic path taken by PAS with militant means (PAS denied this, although the party's spiritual leader's son, Nik Adli bin Nik Aziz, was one of its leaders). Several of the KMM leaders had fought in Afghanistan and some members received training in the Philippines. The KMM was reportedly linked to the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and its regional agenda as well, but all its members were apprehended.

The third group was the Malaysian wing of the JI. In December 2001 22 JI members were arrested in a coordinated operation with Singapore police who arrested 13 in the state. Another 22 suspects were apprehended in <u>Singapore</u> in 2002. The JI in Malaysia and Singapore were part of the network in the region that straddles Indonesia as well, from where it originated and received inspiration from the DI movement of the mid-20th century.

The JI aspires to establish a Muslim caliphate in what it regards as the Muslim areas of Southeast Asia covering Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, southern Philippines, Singapore and conceivably southern Thailand. Beyond this local/regional political agenda, the JI has become the regional component of the loose Al-Qaeda global network. Some of its leaders and members were veterans of the mujahideen war in Afghanistan. The JI with its trans-regional goal and

network as well as linkage with the Al-Qaeda is the only genuine "international terrorism" movement in Southeast Asia.

The aborted JI plan in Singapore included truck bomb attacks on the American and Israeli embassies, the British and Australian High Commissions, commercial buildings housing US companies, a US vessel at the Changi Naval Base, and a pub frequented by American military personnel. Police interrogation also revealed that the JI plans included an attempt to sow conflict between Malaysia and Singapore by attacking key installations on the island, such as water pipelines linking the two countries, the Changi Airport and the Ministry of Defence, which would cast suspicion on Malaysia.

The JI has a heavy religious orientation, and may be said to be fundamentalist in that aspires for a Muslim polity based on the Shariah. Like the Al-Qaeda, it is strongly opposed to the United States, its policies in the Muslim world and its allies.

The JI's birthplace and stronghold is in Indonesia. The movement was initially suppressed by the Suharto government, and some of its leaders including Abu Bakar Ba'asyir fled to Malaysia in 1985 to avoid arrest. They then established the JI wings of Malaysia and Singapore. Abu Bakar returned to Indonesia after the fall of Suharto to be active in the more open political environment that ensued. He was appointed the head of the advisory council of a coalition of militant Islamic groups called the Majlis Mujahidin Indonesia.

The JI was responsible for all three terrorist bombings in Bali and Jakarta. All the targets were essentially Western tourists and interests. The JI has also forged tactical and training links with the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf Group in southern Philippines.

With the dissolution of GAM, Indonesia had four other militant groups until recently, and the JI had contact with all of them. The Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front) was formed in 1998 and was disbanded in 2002 following the Bali bombing. The Laskar Jihad was formed in 2000 and it too dissolved in 2002 after the Bali bombing. Both movements had their patrons and funding from elements in the Indonesian Muslim political and military elite (including Presidents Suharto and Habibie), and were formed to protect Muslims against Christians in Maluku and Sulawesi. In the process they became violent sectarian forces themselves. Their political agenda was national, and had little to do with international terrorism or the Al-Qaeda.

Similar in orientation and activity were the Laskar Mujahidin which operated mainly in Maluku and the Laskar Jundullah which focussed on Poso. They both drew from DI roots and had irregular connections with Indonesian military elements.

The militant groups presently active in the <u>Philippines</u> have already been discussed above. The militant groups are composed of both Christians (CPP/NPA) and Muslims (MNLF, MILF and the Abu Sayyaf Group). They are essential local insurgent movements with a domestic agenda. The MILF however has received funding support from Al-Qaeda after Libyan funding declined. It also accepted trainers to train MILF and JI recruits from Indonesia and Malaysia. The MILF is presently engaged in peace negotiations with the Philippine government.

Religious consciousness continues to gain strength among Muslims in the region as elsewhere. This however need not, and largely is not, a negative development from the political and security viewpoint so long as it does not undermine ethnic and religious harmony or turn militant. The overwhelming majority of Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia participate in peaceful democratic political processes. Muslim political parties that champion Shariah law have not done well in elections in Indonesia. In Malaysia PAS, which advocates Shariah law, poses a

strong challenge to UMNO, which has not championed Syariah law except in limited spheres; but PAS is unlikely to gain political power at federal level due to a lack of support among the substantial non-Muslim population.

Religious consciousness is also strong in Brunei, but it does pose a political or security threat to the nation, with the monarchy, itself strongly identified with Islam, in secure control. Brunei Malays are moderate Muslims, and do not engage in militant activities directed at home or abroad.

It is only in southern Thailand and southern Philippines that militant movements among Muslims are prominent and Muslim alienation from the government strong. This however has little to do with religion or religious fundamentalism, and everything to do with perceived occupation, displacement and political and economic disempowerment. Islam however helps define the opposition, and distinguish it from majority Buddhist ethnic Thais in Thailand and majority Christians in the Philippines.

Features of terrorism, insurgency and religious sentiment in Southeast Asia

Discourse on security issues is often heavily coloured by politics and culture. The discourse on international issues is greatly influenced by the dominant powers and their interests, whether in the government, academic or media spheres. Others take sides as it suits their interests. Often there is denial on all sides. An objective and balanced assessment is frequently difficult under these circumstances. This observation certainly applies to the current international security situation and threats such as militancy and terrorism.

The prevailing terrorist and insurgent threats in Southeast Asia cannot be understood, much less addressed successfully, without divesting them of the distortions and stereotypes. Each militant movement must be viewed in its own context, against the background in which it operates. But some general

observations can be made with regard to these movements, which are also applicable to movements elsewhere in specific instances:

1. Militant movements in the region are extremely diverse and can consist of Buddhists (Myanmar), Christians (CPP/NPA in the Philippines) or Muslims (the movements in the Muslim areas of the region). They cannot be sweepingly described as, or equated with, "Islamic terrorism", "jihadis", "Islamic fascists", etc. Most of them are not "terrorist" in the sense that their primary strategy is to attack civilians.

2. The movements are essentially home-grown, with a political agenda that is restricted to their homeland or country. They do not constitute "international "terrorism" except in the case of the JI. The JI is an "international terrorism" movement because its political objective, membership, network and activities transcend national borders. The JI is more correctly a regional terrorist organisation. In this sense it is unlike the Al-Qaeda which has a wider global reach.

3. The political objective of the movements in Myanmar, southern Thailand and southern Philippines is essentially independence, self-government or autonomy from the central government which is viewed as invader, occupier or oppressor. The same held for GAM in Indonesia. The political objective of the JI and KMM was different: it was to transform the political system in the targeted territories, from what was regarded as a non-Islamic system to an Islamic system based on the Muslim caliphate and the Shariah. The bulk of their "opponents" were fellow Muslims.

4. Substantive Al-Qaeda links with militant movements in the region are limited to the JI. In the case of the MILF it was confined to funding, training for JI elements and facilitation of meetings of a few Al-Qaeda operatives. Where the JI shares or has adopted the Al-Qaeda targeting of US and allied interests in the region (such as in Singapore), it has effectively become part of the Al-Qaeda international terrorism agenda. The JI

however is an independent actor and is not under the control of the Al-Qaeda.

5. The question of what constitutes "religious fundamentalism" and its linkage with terrorism and insurgency involving Muslims has been the subject of much politically and culturally driven distortion. Attention is often deliberately and conveniently diverted from uncomfortable focus on possible misdeeds and wrongful policies of governments by casting the problems as essentially a product of "religious fundamentalism", and internal to the Muslim community, between radicals/extremists and moderates. The problem is charmingly put as a "battle for the soul of Islam". This battle has been going on for ages, in every faith, and is not exclusively responsible for terrorism and militancy.

6. Religious consciousness has grown among followers of all the major faiths in Southeast Asia. It is most evident among the Muslims because it is visible in attire and ritual, and because Islam has a political component which is absent in other religions. Muslim political parties and movements that advocate a "Muslim" system of government based on the Shariah are legitimate and non-threatening when they pursue the democratic path in democracies and do not undermine relations between religious groups. Only when they advocate political change through violence, especially in democracies which provide them a peaceful option, do they become threats to security.

7. Terrorism is often associated with Islam and Muslims globally for several reasons. Some are due to the Muslims themselves. Movements carrying out terrorist attacks call themselves by Muslim names (for example, "Jemaah Islamiyah" and "Hizbullah"). A "Muslim" state is the goal of some militant movements. Islam is the organising ideology, and Muslim grievances (legitimate or not) are the primary area of exploitation to gain support. "Jihad" is misinterpreted by terrorist groups as permitting attack on civilians.

8. Other reasons however have little to do with Islam or Muslims as such. For instance, it just so happens that at this juncture in history many of the armed resistance and insurgencies against occupation and oppression involves Muslims or Muslim majorities – Chechnya, Palestine, Xinjiang, southern Thailand and southern Philippines. While many of them do not engage in terrorist attacks, or only do so occasionally because they are denied conventional armed choices, they are tarred as terrorist movements in order to de-legitmise, demonise and stigmatise them. Muslim countries and groups in conflict with themselves and with Western powers and their allies in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere also add to this general picture of "Muslim" violence, militancy and instability although the situation was triggered essentially by invasion, occupation and the coercive policies of Western powers. The media often does its part to emphasise and propagate these images.

Selected references
  1. International Crisis Group Reports.
  2. United Nations Report of the High Level Group on the Alliance of Civilizations, 2007
  3. Angel M. Rabasa, "Political Islam in Malaysia: Moderates, Radicals and Terrorists", Adelphi Paper 358
  4. Robert A. Pape, "Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism".
  5. Rohan Gunaratna, "Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror".
  6. Zachary Abuza, "Tentacles of terror: Al Qaeda's Southeast Asian network".
  7. Kevin P Clements, "Terrorism: Violent and Nonviolent Responses, Emerging Political Map of Asia", paper presented at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, September 21-23 2006.

8. Natasha Hamilton-Hart, "Terrorism in Southeast Asia: expert analysis, myopia and fantasy".

9. Farish Noor (ed.) "Terrorising the Truth: The Shaping of Contemporary Images of Islam and Muslims in Media, Politics and Culture".

10. David Wright-Neville, "Dangerous dynamics: activists, militants and terrorists in Southeast Asia", The Pacific Review, Vol.17, No.1 March 2004.

11. Conference Report March 25, 2003: "Political Islam in Southeast Asia", The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, John Hopkins University.

12. Mohamed Jawhar Hassan, "The Root Causes of International Terrorism – Factors that Drive Local Terrorist Movements and Induce Them to Network and Cooperate with the Al-Qaeda: The Case of Terrorist Elements in Malaysia", Paper presented at the First CSCAP Study Group on International Terrorism, Thailand, 26-27 April, 2005.