

Population Review

Volume 45, Number 1, 2006

Type: Introduction to Special Issue

Migration and Violent Conflicts in Some Southeast Asian Regions

Author: Aris Ananta, Ph.D. (aananta@iseas.edu.sg)

Affiliation: Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

Changing Ethnic and Religious Composition

As is well known in all demographic text books, population dynamics is attributed to changes in fertility, mortality, and migration. The change in fertility will immediately change the number of the young population, particularly those below five years old. Change in mortality can affect any age group of the population. In developing countries, change in mortality usually affects the young population more than the old population; while in developed countries change in mortality affects the number of old population more than the young one. In both fertility and mortality changes, there is almost no change in the “culture” of the population.

However, it is very different with migration. As described by Tirtosudarmo in this volume, the impact of changes in fertility and mortality will be seen in the long run, but the impact of changes in migration can be seen in a relatively short time.

Migrants are most likely to be young and productive. They may affect the working age group more than the non-working age group. Furthermore, migrants may come from very different cultures, and they are usually the winners in the economic and political fields. Social and economic jealousies appear and are often accompanied by a perception among the locals that the migrants will eventually wipe them out. Therefore, not only do migrants change the number and age-composition of the population, they may also alter the social, economic and political composition of the population. A society may not be necessarily prepared to face a fast change in population composition.

In particular, in this volume, Tirtosudarmo argues that change in ethnic composition is more likely to become an important issue with the rising flow of migration, especially during the current era of globalisation when people from various cultural backgrounds move around the world. Ethnicity and religion become very crucial factors in determining cultural markers among people. Ideological tension will appear in the more subtle politics of identity.

Sen (2006) argues that rising identity may have two opposing sides, one positive and the other negative. On the positive side, rising identity may be an asset for a society by increasing the sense of belonging in a community. On the negative side, rising identity may be detrimental to the society because a strong identity might mean that other people are excluded. A well-integrated community, with strong internal solidarity, might suddenly show its ugly side when migrants (strangers) enter the community. The adversity of exclusion might occur at the same time as the gifts of inclusion. Violence resulting from identity conflicts has occurred all around the world. Al Qaeda is a recent example of a group that has heavily cultivated and exploited a militant Islamic identity, with Westerners as its specific target.

Ananta, in this volume, asserts that economic distribution may be related to the ethnic composition of the society. An ethnic group with a very large number of people may have much greater power in determining the economic distribution through its powerful political

manipulation.

Also, in this volume, Tirtosudarmo shows that scholars did not become interested in the relation between migration and security threat until after violent conflict had erupted in Bosnia and Kosovo in early 1990s. People in north-rich countries began to perceive that migration to Western European and Nordic countries would pose a security threat to them.

White and Sessler (1995) showed how every wave of migration to the US raised the level of social tension among migrants and locals. The very large flow of migrants from southern, eastern, and central Europe at the beginning of 20th century was perceived as a threat that would weaken American character, as the migrants were seen as “inferior” to local Americans. In the modern time, the US has also seen a large flow of migrants from “non-traditional” countries. Concerns then emerged on the use of language other than English, familiarity with urban industrial life, and competition in the labour market. Would the migrants assimilate or compete with the locals?

Southeast Asia is not immune to migration-related social tensions and violent conflicts. As described in Hirschman (1995), the countries and regions of Southeast Asia are endowed with a rich and complex mosaic of people due to geographical and historical forces. It lies on the maritime crossroad in the middle of the great civilisations of India and China. Not surprisingly, the people in Southeast Asia have continuously faced various influences from inside and outside the region.

On the other hand, as discussed by Tirtosudarmo in this volume and Kingsbury (2005), violent conflict in the archipelagic Southeast Asia (the *nusantara*-“islands in between”) has a long history. The region has experienced high rates of migration and is marked by negotiation among various cultural groups. The archipelagic Southeast Asia seems to be more violent, fragmented, and prone to political and religious violent conflicts. The region is heavily influenced by competing economic and political global powers, as well as rising ethno-nationalist sentiment. Hence, Southeast Asia is an excellent place to study relationships among migration, changing ethnic-religious composition of population, and violent conflicts.

Migrant-related conflicts are not limited to international migration and inter-state conflicts. Indeed, as described in Akashi (2006) and Yeo et al. (2006), intra-state conflicts have resulted in greater casualties than inter-state conflicts. The number of intra-state conflicts has far exceeded that of inter-state conflicts. It is, therefore, also very urgent to examine the role of internal migration on intra-state conflicts.

Migration can also be sponsored or engineered by the government, as has happened in the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. This typically involves a large scale movement of people to sparsely populated regions within the country with the aim of developing new economic opportunities and strengthening central government’s control over outlying areas. Anwar (2005) argues that this kind of migration often produces serious political and security challenges. In a multi-religious and multi-ethnic setting, engineered migration is sometimes used to put the minority group under the control of the majority group. Though the government might not intentionally control the minority group, such a policy might be perceived by the minority group as an effort to dominate and marginalise them. The reaction of the minority group could range from non-violent resistance to armed struggle for independence.

This volume concentrates on violent conflicts, especially in relationship to migration and the changed ethnic-religious composition of the population. More specifically, the volume limits the discussion to the impact of internal migration on intra-state conflicts, rather than on inter-state violent conflicts. It specifically examines existing conflicts in the Southern Philippines and Eastern Indonesia (in Maluku) and potential conflicts in Western Indonesia (in the Riau Archipelago).

Southern Philippines, Eastern and Western Indonesia, and Southern Thailand

It is interesting and instructive to compare the nature of violent conflict in three separate regions in Southeast Asia: Mindanao in the Southern Philippines, Maluku in Eastern Indonesia and Riau Archipelago in Western Indonesia, and Southern Thailand. This is particularly true with respect to the role of migration on the changing ethnic and religious composition of the population. These three regions have experienced rapid changes in ethnic-religious composition of the population due to migration from other parts of the countries.

In the Philippines, a country with a dominant Christian majority, Muslims are a minority group primarily concentrated in the southern parts of the country. On the other hand, in Indonesia, a country with Muslims as the overwhelming majority, Christians are a minority group. But they are not concentrated in any particular region and reside in virtually all provinces. In the “old” province of Maluku, which split into Maluku and North Maluku in 1999, the ratio of the numbers of Muslims and Christians used to be almost the same.

As shown by Tigno in this volume, the percentage of Muslims in Mindanao has undergone a large decline, from about 75.0% at the turn of the 20th century to about 25.0% in late 1960s. He shows that the large flow of Christian migration from the other two groups of islands (Visayas and Luzon) in the Philippines has mostly contributed to the minoritisation of the Muslim in Mindanao. Voluntary, systematic and large-scale migration to Mindanao started in the early 20th century. The resettlement of the population to Mindanao rose after the Second World War as the post independence government continued to send landless poor from Luzon and the Visayas to Mindanao, which had been perceived as the “land of promise”. The official aim of the government resettlement program was to ease the population burden in Luzon and the Visayas and to develop the economic potential of Mindanao. The government sponsored migration had also been followed by the spontaneous flow of migration to Mindanao.

While not specifically addressed in this volume, Thailand is another country in Southeast Asia where ethnic conflict is a serious problem, particularly in the Muslim dominated south. Unlike in Mindanao, there has been no minoritisation of the Muslims in the Southern Thailand. In 2000, the Muslims were still the majority. They formed 81.97% of the population in Narathiwat, 80.62% in Pattani, 68.76% in Yala, and 67.55% in Satun,¹ though there was also government-sponsored migration to Southern Thailand. As described in Yegar (2002), the Sarit government (1957-1963) engineered a large flow of Buddhist migration to Southern Thailand. The purpose of this government sponsored migration was to facilitate assimilation and to strengthen government control over the region. Subsequently, there was a large flow of Buddhist Thais into Southern Thailand in early 1960s. In 1969, another larger flow of 15 thousand families or 60 thousand people were sponsored by the government to migrate to the Southern Thailand.

In both the Philippines and Thailand, migration has resulted in negative reactions from the locals. Cagoco-Guiam (2005) concluded that migration to the Southern Philippines, where the locals had a different religious, ethnic, and political history, could result in rising insecurities for both the locals and migrants. Yegar (2002) shows that the large flow of migration has been seen by the Muslim-Malay population in Southern Thailand as taking away their land ownership and a threat of an establishment of Buddhist majority.

Economic and political marginalisation of the Muslims occurred in both Southern Philippines and Southern Thailand. Tigno, in this volume, shows that as a result of the government resettlement program and spontaneous migration there are currently three clusters of population in Mindanao: the Lumads or indigenous people of Mindanao (neither Christian nor Muslim), the Moros (the Muslim ethnic groups in Mindanao), and the non-Mindanao (mostly Christian) settlers from the Visayas and Luzon. The Muslims and Lumads were then “forced” to

subsistence agriculture. On the other hand, as described in Yegar (2002), the Chinese controlled the economy while the Christians occupied the public services.

Margo (2006) asserted that, in spite of the fact that Muslims are still the majority in Southern Thailand, political and administrative power remains strongly in the hands of Buddhists. Yegar (2002) showed that the Chinese mostly occupied the business sector. Only a minority of Malay-Muslims worked in government bureaucracy and business. Most Malay-Muslims were poor farmers.

Unlike Southern Philippines and Southern Thailand, Muslims were not a minority in the “old” Maluku (and in Indonesia). In 2000, Muslims were the majority, forming 62.88% of the population in the old province of Maluku, rising rapidly from 49.88% in 1971. Ananta, in this volume, shows that after Indonesian independence a large flow of migrants from Sulawesi came to Maluku. They were mostly Muslims, and they worked in the informal sector. A large flow of Muslim migrants also came from Java—they were more educated and filled in bureaucratic and administrative positions. This large and relatively rapid change in the ethnic-religious composition accompanied by a change in socio-economic composition has scared the local Christian population who fear that the Muslim migrants, and their descendants, will take away their “cake” in jobs and bureaucracy and that they will be Islamised. The changing ethnic-religious composition and its socio-economic implication may have been one of the important determinants for the violent conflicts in Maluku since 1999. However, the changing population composition and the resulting violent conflicts in Maluku are relatively recent, in contrast to those in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines.

The province of Riau Archipelago in Western Indonesia is different from Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Maluku, because there have been no prolonged violent conflicts in the province until recently. However, what has been happening in the province may be similar to events in the three regions. Riau Archipelago is a new and dynamic province, receiving an increasing flow of migrants, particularly from all over Indonesia. The Malay in this province claim that the province belongs to them. The Muslim-Malay identity is very strong among the Malay, and they claim that they are the *putra daerah* (son of soil).

Nevertheless, Ananta, in this volume, finds that the current ethnic composition in the province is not dominated by the Malay. The Malay formed only 37.44% of the population in 2000. At the same time, the Malay, along with the Chinese, were always in the lowest socio-economic strata, while the migrants (mostly the Batak and Minang) were always in the highest socio-economic strata. Ananta concludes the paper with an early warning signal for the policy makers in the province of Riau Archipelago. The demographic condition of the province may be similar to that in the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Maluku. A wise development policy is needed to avoid the potential of prolonged and violent conflict in the Riau Archipelago. Policies and programs should be deliberately designed to take advantage of the rich ethnic and religious composition in a way that will foster peace and prosperity.

Concluding Remarks

This special volume of *Population Review* is an effort to contribute a better understanding on the relationship among internal migration, changing ethnic-religious composition of population, and intra-state violent conflicts in some regions in Southeast Asia. The three papers (“Population, Ethnicity and Violent Conflict” by Riwanto Tirtosudarmo, “Migration and Violent Conflict in Mindanao” by Jorge V. Tigno, and “Changing Ethnic Composition and Potential Violent Conflict in Riau Archipelago, Indonesia: an Early Warning Signal” by Aris Ananta) are the revised versions of papers presented at the International Conference on Population and Development in Asia: Critical Issues for a Sustainable Future, conducted by Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore in Phuket, Thailand, 20-22 March 2006, funded by the Wellcome Trust.

It should be noted here that migration and its impact on changing ethnic-religious composition of the population is not the only factor determining violent conflicts in Southeast Asia. It is only one, though important, determinant. It can be used as an early warning signal in a conflict prevention program. Further studies should be carried out to further improve the understanding of the complex relationships among migration, changing ethnic-religious composition of the population, and intra-state violent conflicts. Hopefully, as mentioned by Tirtosudarmo in this volume, such studies can make a significant contribution to the creation of sustainable development.

References

- Akashi, Yasushi. "Foreword" in *Special Report. Conflict Prevention: Actors, Institutions and Mechanisms. 4th Asia-Europe Roundtable, Berlin, Germany: 18-20 April 2005*. Edited by Yeo Lay Hwee, Bertrand Fort, and Axel Schmidt. Singapore: Asia-Europe Foundation, 2006.
- Anwar, Dewi Fortuna. "Human Movement and Emerging Non-Traditional Security Threats in East Asia". In *Development, Migration and Security in East Asia: People's Movements and Non-Traditional Security Challenges in a Changing East Asia*. Edited by Dewi Fortuna Anwar. Jakarta, Indonesia: The Habibie Center, 2005.
- Cagoco-Guiam, Rufa. "Internal Migration and Security Issues and Challenges Confronting Central and Southern Mindanao, Philippines". In *Development, Migration, and Security in East Asia*. Edited by Dewi Fortuna Anwar. Jakarta: The Habibie Center (THC), 2005.
- Chalamwong, Yongyuth. "Internal Migration and Security Issues in Thailand". In *Development, Migration and Security in East Asia. People's Movements and Non-Traditional Security Challenges in a Changing East Asia*. Edited by Dewi Fortuna Anwar. Jakarta: The Habibie Center, 2005.
- Hirschman, Charles. "Ethnic Diversity and Change in Southeast Asia". In *Population, Ethnicity, and Nation-Building*. Edited by Calvin Goldscheider. Boulder, the USA: Westview Press, 1995.
- Kingsbury, Damien (2005). "Introduction". In *Violence in Between. Conflict and Security in Archipelagic Southeast Asia*. Edited by Damien Kingsbury. Victoria, Australia: Monash University Press, 2005.
- Margo, Duncan. "Introduction. Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence" *Critical Asian Studies* 38:1, 2006.
- Sen, Amartya. *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.
- White, Michael J. and Sharon Sassler. "Ethnic Definition, Social Mobility, and Residential Segregation in the United States". In *Population, Ethnicity, and Nation-Building*. Edited by Calvin Goldscheider. Boulder, the USA: Westview Press, 1995.
- Yegar, Moshe. *Between Integration and Secession. The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/ Myanmar*. Lanham, Maryland, USA: Lexington Books, 2002.
- Yeo, Lay Hwee; Bertrand Fort; and Axel Schmidt. "Conflict Prevention: Actors, Institutions and Mechanisms". In *Special Report. Conflict Prevention: Actors, Institutions and Mechanisms. 4th Asia-Europe Roundtable, Berlin, Germany: 18-20 April 2005*. Edited by Yeo Lay Hwee, Bertrand Fort, and Axel Schmidt. Singapore: Asia-Europe Foundation, 2006.

End Note

ⁱ Calculated from Chalamwong (2005).