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**Realities of  
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in Southeast Asia**  
*Challenges and Responses*

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Report No. AU-ARI-CP-90-1

# **Realities of Revolutionary Violence in Southeast Asia**

## ***Challenges and Responses***

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Air University Press  
Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

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## Introduction

THE SUBREGION of East Asia known as Southeast Asia, sometimes labeled the 'Balkans' of East Asia, is a collection of linguistic, sociocultural, and political entities. Vast differences exist between the 10 countries in Southeast Asia, and the area has no single cultural or political legacy comparable to the Chinese (or 'Sinic') legacy in Northeast Asia. China's culture and social structure penetrated both Vietnam (thoroughly) and Thailand (to some extent), but the rest of Southeast Asia—which saw an intermingling of local, Indian, Moslem, Christian, and European influences—was never dominated by a single tradition or society. Consequently, numerous minorities and other groups in these countries have tended to remain outside the mainstream of social, political, and economic life. Furthermore, secession movements and political violence have been used as means of rectifying grievances. In the current terminology of the United States government, the more recent episodes of these revolutionary, violent patterns are called *low-intensity conflicts*. Revolutionary political violence has recently occurred, or is occurring, in eight Southeast Asian countries; Singapore and Brunei are the exceptions. These conflicts have exhibited a wide range of ethnic, political, ideological, and socioeconomic dynamics as well as complex patterns of external involvement.

Southeast Asia and its conflicts have drawn the attention of outside powers like the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. American and Soviet interests in Southeast Asia have tended to derive more from the subregion's location than

from its intrinsic importance (although the region now has nearly 425 million people, the equivalent of Latin America). Southeast Asia contains the Strait of Malacca—arguably the most important maritime choke point in all East Asia, and the key transit point between the Pacific and Indian oceans. Not surprisingly, the United States and the Soviet Union have invested money and prestige into military facilities in the area. For example, the United States has facilities at Subic Bay Naval Base and Clark Air Base in the Philippines, and the Soviets have installations at Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang in Vietnam, which they took over in the late 1970s. Of course, China, the largest country in East Asia, demonstrates its historic and intrinsic interest in Southeast Asia's problems by playing a continuing role in the region. Accordingly, some of the low-intensity conflicts in Southeast Asia are of particular interest to Washington, Moscow, and Beijing.

Indonesia, Southeast Asia's geopolitical and demographic heavyweight with 45 percent of the region's population, has experienced severe political instability in the past. The Philippines, critical to US strategic interests in the region, has never been without a guerrilla problem since World War II. And Cambodia, recently seeing an end to overt Vietnamese military occupation, nevertheless finds no comparable end to the violent political factionalism among Khmer groups. This investigation compares and contrasts these three countries' experience with and response to revolutionary political violence:

*Indonesia*—President Suharto leads a quasi-authoritarian regime braced by the armed forces, whose major element is the army. The latter came to power as a result of destroying an attempted Communist coup 25 years ago. Suharto seeks to smother incipient revolutionary outbreaks and other destabilizing tendencies with strong preemptory security actions and policies of economic redistribution.

*The Philippines*—With some indirect support by members of the Soviet bloc, 23,000 to 25,000 Communist insurgents of the New People's Army are part of a guerrilla and political warfare campaign against the Manila government. Under President Corazon Aquino, the government has responded with a mixed carrot-and-stick approach.

*Cambodia*—A Vietnamese-installed, Soviet-backed, minority Communist regime has gradually gained a degree of legitimacy and control. At the same time, a splintered Khmer resistance coalition headed by Prince Norodom Sihanouk has sought—unsuccessfully to date—to force a power-sharing arrangement with the Phnom Penh government.

In Indonesia, US policy monitors have little ability to influence the internal security practices of the Suharto regime and its security forces as they deal with a variety of potentially destabilizing challenges. In the Philippines, a country recovering from dictatorship but distorted by economic stagnation and political fragility, US policy supports the efforts of Aquino's reformist government to quell internal violence, including the Communist and Muslim insurgencies. In Cambodia, scene of the most complex political violence in Southeast Asia, US policy originally sided with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China in keeping the pressure on Hanoi but is now showing more flexibility in encouraging a Hun Sen/Sihanouk accommodation. This paper compares the Jakarta, Manila, and Phnom Penh governments' responses to the violence each has encountered and contrasts historical factors, strategies, and outcomes to discern what has worked and not worked in the peculiar sociocultural/economic environments of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Cambodia.

## The Historical Record

THE HISTORICAL record of political violence in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Cambodia is well documented. In the Indonesian islands, the Portuguese, Dutch, and British confronted repeated native uprisings. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the islands included independent agrarian and trading societies that were hierarchically governed and dominated by the Javanese, Malays, and Moluccans. These people held the trade of the archipelago largely in their own hands while also experiencing the deepening impact of Islamic missionaries. The story of Java's, Sumatra's, and the Outer Islands' fall to European colonialism is a tableau of politics, warfare, and trade as the Dutch and British gradually gained control of the islands' strategic corners. Eventually, the Dutch—through sheer endurance, ability, and luck—bested the British and then set about relentlessly and ruthlessly acquiring an absolute monopoly over the spice trade. The islanders fought back with swords, arrows, and what firearms they could collect. The natives' last attempt to oust the Dutch produced the great Java War of 1825–30, which accounted for 200,000 Indonesian deaths. In the twentieth century, the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), originating from a Dutch Marxist import, eventually became the largest Communist party outside of China and sought power by violence on three occasions, only to be ripped to shreds each time. The last episode in 1965–66 accounted for up to 300,000 deaths. Since then, Indonesia has been quiet on the surface.

In the Philippines, native unrest and warfare repeatedly challenged Spanish—later, American—authorities. But the underlying composition of Philippine society was very different from that of Java. When Spain encountered the Philippine islands, they had no central government, no national identity, and no notion of a historical past. They were

simply a collection of islands and villages whose basic social unit was the *barangay*, a small kinship group. *Barangays* also fought with each other. Ferdinand discovered the Philippines in 1521, but Spain needed 50 years and four military expeditions to bring the non-Muslim portions of the northern and central islands under nominal control. The Muslim domains to the south, especially in Mindanao and Sulu, were never conquered by the Spanish. Finally, in the 1880s and 1890s, native revolutionary agitation began to boil on a national scale. It was to culminate in Emilio Aguinaldo's faction-ridden war of independence at the turn of the century. Acquiring the Philippines from Spain, US authorities finally broke Aguinaldo's challenge but not until death had claimed 100,000 Filipinos (most killed by disease) and 4,200 Americans. Subsequent fighting after World War II against the Huk guerrillas claimed tens of thousands more lives, as has Manila's continuing campaign against the seemingly never-ending Marxist and Muslim insurgencies.

Cambodia and the Khmer population also have experienced violence almost continuously, both internally and externally. The oldest major civilization in Southeast Asia, the Khmers dominated the Mekong River Basin by the first century A.D. With their distinctive, Indianized culture and warlike attitudes, the Khmers expanded their territorial control. They eventually dominated portions of present-day Thailand and the northern Malay peninsula but continued paying tribute to China. In the eighth century, weakened by civil wars, the Khmers succumbed to conquest by a Javanese invasion. Throwing off the foreigners in the ninth century, the Khmers reunified, an act that brought on their golden age of "Kambuja" (or "Angkor"), which was to last until the middle of the fifteenth century. At Angkor's cultural zenith, the Khmers also went to war with all the surrounding peoples—Chams, Vietnamese, Lao, Thai, and even the Bur-

mese. When the Thai retaliated and sacked Angkor Thom in 1353, Khmer power collapsed, and they abandoned their revered kingdom. With the end of Kambuja, Cambodians began their long struggle for survival, broken only by 80 years of French protection. After World War II, Cambodia fell into an intensifying internal fratricide which was to see Prince Sihanouk ultimately lose power to Lon Nol, who in turn lost to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge and their hideous genocide. The Vietnamese invasion of late 1978 put a temporary end to Khmer anarchy but cost the Khmers their independence. Only now do we see the end of formal Vietnamese military occupation while attempts to find a political compromise among Khmer factions still founder.

Thus, under President Suharto's government, Indonesia is largely free from organized political violence. But the Philippines, led by the reformist government of President Aquino, is riven with political violence. And Cambodia shows no fundamental compromise among its warring factions, despite suffering 2 million deaths out of its population of 7 million. What explains the very different capacities of these governments to control political violence?

### Some Hypotheses

A COMBINATION of two key factors explains this question: (1) differences in the three societies' socioeconomic cohesion and tolerance of authority and (2) contrasts in the legitimacy and effectiveness of the three governments' responses. In brief, Philippine society is more fragmented, more mobile, and less compliant than Indonesian society, especially that of Java. And Cambodian society has been so traumatized and flattened that both the cohesion and administrative-economic skills needed to effect a recovery are almost completely absent. By contrast, the Javanese are comfort-

able with hierarchy and authority, and they also have great economic skills. Moreover, the Philippine government's recent responses to political violence have been inconsistent, poorly organized, undisciplined, and underfunded, compared to the Indonesian government's responses. And Phnom Penh's response has been almost totally dependent on the presence and security system of the Vietnamese army inside Cambodia. Jakarta, however, approaches Indonesia's internal security problems with a clear willingness to subordinate group and individual rights to the larger nationalism of "Greater Indonesia." Only the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia show that kind of determination, although they have none of the economic skills and obviously lack any of the social compassion of the Javanese. Filipinos, with more democratic values but little social cohesion, have been reluctant to force internal compliance. Cambodia, now split among four political factions, faces a future of renewed civil war. Finally, Manila's and Phnom Penh's responses are reactions to their revolutionary challenges, while Jakarta's are preemptory and more comprehensive in nature. The Indonesians have a *doctrine* of counter-revolutionary warfare. The Filipinos do not, and Cambodian authorities have simply done what the Vietnamese told them to do.

In a sense, the Indonesian regime of General Suharto had advantageous cards dealt to it following the nightmare of the attempted Communist coup in 1965. A shocked, compliant Moslem society—already devastated by the incendiary policies of Sukarno—did not want to see atheistic, Communist-inspired radicalism succeed. Indonesians are willing to tolerate intrusive—even dictatorial—government involvement in their lives if it preserves order and provides minimal levels of welfare. But the Philippines, led since February 1986 by a fragile democratic government, remains split between Catholicism and Islam, the politi-

cal Left and the Right, the rich and the poor. And Cambodia has been unable to control its own destiny, split as it is among four warring political factions that reflect the entire ideological spectrum as well as their dependence on and conflict with Vietnam and Thailand/ASEAN. Government legitimacy is seriously challenged in the Philippines and Cambodia. It is not in Indonesia.

A final consideration involves the three countries' very different emergence to political independence. After the Dutch left Indonesia in the late 1940s, the Indonesian armed forces went through a very tough sorting out of leadership and loyalties during the pacification operations against resistant ethnic and political groups. As a result, the army in particular became the custodian of Indonesian nationalism. The Philippines had nothing comparable to this in its post-World War II emergence from US tutelage. The transition was smooth, and the Filipinos did not have to fight Washington for independence. Cambodians have never had a cohesive government on the Right or a compassionate government on the Left since World War II. Prince Sihanouk—the ultimate political acrobat, although a veteran nationalist—was, nevertheless, not able to keep Cambodia independent. In short, there was no crucible of national, armed emergence to statehood in the Philippines, and Cambodia—caught between stronger forces and countries—has eviscerated itself in searching for that statehood.

## Findings

INDONESIA'S social cohesion, tolerance of authority, and legitimacy and loyalty of its armed forces contrast the social fragmentation and political fracture of the armed forces in the Philippines and Cambodia. These differences mean that responding effectively to revolutionary

political and social challenges has been possible for the Jakarta regime but much more difficult for the Manila and Phnom Penh governments. Again, the historical experience is revealing.

In the twentieth century, Dutch authorities—and later the Indonesian army—ruthlessly and determinedly put down Communist-instigated, revolutionary violence on three dramatic occasions. In the first two instances (1926 and 1948), the chaos within the Communist leadership and the party's premature ideological fervor played into government hands. The PKI also misjudged the society's readiness to rebel. In the third instance (1964-66), the PKI was much better organized and could call on over 2 million cadres and sympathizers. Nevertheless, the situation was "saved," if that is the appropriate word for the holocaust which followed, by a combined army/societal reaction. The army went after the PKI's leadership, while Muslim citizens went after Communist sympathizers in a frightening "holy war" that merged religious fanaticism with Javanese and Sumatran social compliance and authoritarianism.

In the Philippines, by contrast, American firepower and mobility extinguished Aguinaldo's faction-ridden insurgency at the turn of the century. A half-century later, however, Ramon Magsaysay's reforms, leadership, and legitimacy defeated the Huks, who—like Aguinaldo's forces—were ideologically splintered. The current Communist insurgency against the Manilan government, while showing factionalized rebel leadership, is not being combated by a government leader or reform strategy comparable to Magsaysay and his program. Nor are the guerrillas being confronted by Philippine armed forces capable of applying sufficient, cohesive, and steady pressure. Finally, Philippine society—in comparison to Indonesian

society—remains fragmented and mobile, without a sufficient national consensus. This means that although the government and armed forces have problems getting their act together, so do the insurgents! The result is a continuing, still modest-scale, shifting insurgency challenge matched by an often lackluster government response, without clear strategic direction on either side.

Like the Philippine society, Cambodia also demonstrates severe social and political fractures. The Khmer people—pacific in manners and countenance but often warlike and gratuitously revengeful when they see the chance to retaliate—have been caught in the jaws of a Vietnamese-Thai vise for centuries. They have also suffered from their own mistrust and violence. When the Second World War collapsed French authority in Cambodia, a variety of armed groups, gangs, and other elements roamed the countryside. Khmer Communist revolutionaries surfaced under Vietnamese Communist tutelage in 1950-51 but soon fractured into a murderous spectrum of Marxist-Leninists, Socialists, and Nationalists. At the same time, French, then Chinese, assistance was pitted against pro-Vietnamese factions, which later also received Soviet assistance. While Prince Sihanouk temporized, and in the 1960s and early 1970s sought to steer through the factionalism with his own highly personalized style of rule, in 1966-67 the Khmer Rouge declared their guerrilla war against him. When Hanoi sought to bring the Khmer Rouge leadership back under its control, Pol Pot's faction liquidated large numbers of pro-Hanoi Khmer revolutionaries. Once in power in April 1975, he then ordered genocide against all internal opposition and traditional classes. Hanoi's handpicked client regime in Phnom Penh, now led by Hun Sen and braced for 11 years by the Vietnamese army (50,000 of

whom were killed or died of wounds) has not been able to defeat Cambodia's guerrilla resistance or pacify the country.

### Implications for Policy

IT SHOULD BE obvious that no outside country can do much to affect the violence or its causes in the Philippines and Cambodia. US advisors to the Philippine government cannot impress upon Filipino authorities "lessons" from other successful counterrevolutionary operations unless the Filipinos are interested in them and can apply them to their own situation. Vietnamese cadres have experienced similar frustrations in Cambodia. For example, Phnom Penh's regular armed forces of about 35,000 men have only grudgingly taken up the security roles that Hanoi has relinquished. Moreover, the Phnom Penh army's poor competence and high desertion rates, as well as some units' compromise with the Sihanoukists, leave Hanoi with a shaky client in Cambodia. On the other hand, one should recall that General Suharto, the Indonesian army, and the Muslim extremists of Java and Sumatra destroyed the largest Communist party in the world outside of China with no direct help whatsoever from the outside. The Java power elite brooks no internal challenges.

In short, revolutionary political violence turns out to be culturally specific, nationally bounded, and deeply affected and constrained by the peculiar sociopolitical dynamics of the country in which it is occurring. Exporting revolutionary violence or trying to push revolutionary ideology and instability across borders often fails. Lenin found this out in Western Europe after 1919, as did "Che" Guevara in Latin America after 1962, and Hanoi when it went to war with Cambodia's "fraternal" Marxists in 1978. The same tends to be true of counterinsurgency lessons and advice: within

Southeast Asia, counterrevolutionary formulas seldom transfer from one country to another. The Soviets found that out in Afghanistan, and South Africa discovered it in Namibia.

Philippine officials know how to quell the insurgency of the Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army. That is, planning documents of the Armed Forces of the Philippines reveal much attention to causes and dilemmas, and internal security specialists and operators from Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and other countries have held seminars and consultations in Manila. From the secretary of national defense down, Philippine officials have plenty of information about other governments' doctrines and strategies in combating revolutionary political warfare. The problem in the Philippines is not lack of good intentions or brainpower. Rather, the problem is societal and structural: it is the political, cultural, and socioeconomic distortions of the Philippine society which constrain an effective response and perpetuate the violence. Central Luzon, for example, has been in periodic revolt against Manila for a century. The Muslim south has been in a state of unrest since the sixteenth century. And areas of the Visayan islands show some of the worst income distortions in Southeast Asia. Until a Manila government launches a *comprehensive* reform program along the lines of Magsaysay's, with multifaceted and reinforcing political and economic appeals, much of the rural Philippines will be in unrest or revolt. Finally, as the December 1989 coup attempt demonstrates, the Philippine armed forces have not come under sufficient national ideological control. Nor have they received sufficient resources to be able to bring cohesive pressure against the Communist guerrillas or replace the dangerous vigilante groups which, in the gap, provide local "security."

In Cambodia, the levels of violence have been low for the past three years, and Vietnamese and Phnom Penh forces

have sought to "harden" the borders against a return of the Khmer Rouge by laying millions of mines and booby traps. But the potential for a new civil war is heightened in the aftermath of the breakdown of the Paris talks. Unfortunately, no fundamental compromise among the warring Khmers is on the horizon. Hun Sen's Phnom Penh government has shown more resilience and staying power than was expected, but the opposition resistance (the Opposition Coalition Government for Democratic Kampuchea) also has shown a remarkable ability to endure. Still composed of a triad (now evidently becoming a dyad, as many of Son Sann's rightist forces move over to Sihanouk's *Moulinaka*), the resistance is based on Sihanouk's diplomatic agility (and about 12,000 troops loyal to him). It also relies on the grim, battle-hardened, Chinese-armed, and fanatically led Khmer Rouge, who control about 35,000 troops operating out of Thai border base camps. Finally, while external powers have pushed Hanoi and the four Cambodian factions toward the peace table, all players are hedging their bets: (1) Hanoi pulls its regular units out of Cambodia but leaves behind a quasi-military security system; (2) the Soviets push for a settlement as they deliver thousands of tons of fresh ammunition and equipment—including tanks, armored personnel carriers, and helicopters—to Hun Sen's government; (3) the Thai government, led by a prime minister who promotes trade with Cambodia and Vietnam, makes no move to disrupt Khmer Rouge base camps; and (4) China—whose aid to the Khmer Rouge allows Pol Pot's forces to stockpile up to five years' worth of ammunition, fuel, and weapons—signals no willingness to cut off the Khmer Rouge. Thus, no light appears, to date, at the end of the Cambodian tunnel.

Recent developments in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Cambodia illustrate the differences and dilemmas perfectly. On 7 February 1989, Indonesian army units assaulted a south Sumatran village in

Lampung province, ostensibly to break up an Islamic "extremist" group following the murder of an army territorial officer. However, reliable though nonofficial explanations of the unrest and violence in the area—perhaps 100 people died in the fighting—indicate a tangled story of forced land clearing, disputed communal ownership, loss of coffee and cocoa farming rights, corruption, and some ideological agitation. After the attack, Gen Tri Sutrisno, army chief of staff, went so far as to paint the rioters as "left-wing or right-wing extremists or a combination of both." Whatever the portrayal or the reality at Lampung, the incident shows that harsh and preemptive tactics still characterize the Indonesian government's generally uncompromising attitude toward social disturbances.

In the Philippines, though, President Aquino returned to Manila from Emperor Hirohito's February 1989 funeral in Japan just in time to find coup rumors spoiling celebrations that marked the third anniversary of the "people power" uprising which had tossed out President Ferdinand Marcos. Speaking to the cadets of the Philippine Military Academy at Baguio—who 18 months earlier had openly supported Col Gregorio Honasan's attempted coup d'état—Mrs Aquino addressed the government's enemies on both sides of the political spectrum:

To the enemies of freedom, the armed opponents of our government on the Left and Right, I address these words: Let us all sit down and try to settle our differences by talk. And if we cannot, by all means, let us do so by arms.

Then, in December 1989 came the sixth and most serious coup attempt against the Aquino government. After a week in which the presidential palace, armed forces headquarters, and Manila's financial district were all attacked, most mutineers did not surrender but simply returned to their barracks. Thus, President Aquino presides over a faction-ridden political system without adequate national consensus and an armed forces neither capable nor trustworthy enough

to bring order. She is now heavily dependent upon, indeed hostage to, the political vicissitudes of the armed forces.

Finally, Cambodia continues in its struggle for survival which began almost 600 years ago when the Khmer kingdom of Angkor was sacked by invading armies. Given the sorry history of Cambodia as a kind of punching bag between Thailand and Vietnam, the Khmers often have had to cast their lot with whichever outside power offered the best temporary protection. Nevertheless, Cambodians—not foreigners—have done the most damage to Cambodia. In early 1990, with the most recent foreign occupation ended in the wake of the Paris peace conference, the warring Khmer political factions have not yet brought peace to their tortured land.

### Conclusion

THESE BRIEF comparisons of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Cambodia show that the origins of revolutionary violence in these countries are fundamentally internal. Indeed, the roots of political violence in most Southeast Asian

countries spring from internal socioeconomic problems and dilemmas. In each of the three countries, we see how societal and cultural characteristics have aided or complicated each government's attempts to cope with violent challenges. President Suharto's "New Order" is a deliberate effort to distance his regime—including its stability and development policies—from Sukarno's deliberate disorder. Working in favor of the Suharto government is the Javanese habit of obedience. In the Philippines, President Aquino's "New Democracy" clearly contrasts to Marcos's "Constitutional Authoritarianism," but it also reflects the Filipinos' individualism, mobility, resistance to order, and resistance to national consensus. The attempted coup in December 1989 shows how the anarchy continues to affect the armed forces. And in Cambodia, political factionalism and political violence have brought the country to the brink of renewed civil war. In sum, the best-laid plans of governments for countering political violence—their doctrine, strategy, and tactics—make little progress unless they address the actual underlying causes and dynamics of the violence.

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- "Marlborough's Ghost: Eighteenth-Century Warfare in the Nuclear Age." Lt Col Dennis M. Drew, USAF. Public release. An essay examining the similarities between limited warfare in the eighteenth century and the age of nuclear weapons. (AU-ARI-CP-85-2)

- "Airpower in Small Wars: The British Air Control Experience." Lt Col David J. Dean, USAF. Public release. A brief examination of the concept of "air control" as practiced by the RAF in the Middle East between the two world wars. (AU-ARI-CP-85-1)