

Culture, Identity and Conflict in Asia and Southeast Asia

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1 Introduction

In the West, Asia is primarily seen as an arena of economic change. After all, for decades the continent has been one of the fastest growing economies worldwide. Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan are among the economically most developed societies in the world. They offer their citizens a degree of material security and opportunities in life that are comparable with standards in many Western societies, if not better. Furthermore, over the past 15 years India has emerged as a new economic power. World Bank estimates suggest that in 2020 the People's Republic of China will be the world's leading economy.

However, alongside the image of prospering Asia with its growth markets there is another perception of Asian developments. For many societies in the region are shaped by the outbreak of violent domestic conflicts. In particular since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, social conflicts and violence in Asia have been followed with concern by the political decisionmakers and media in the West. Specifically Southeast Asia, home to about a fifth of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims, has gained a reputation as being a seedbed of religious violence. Some observers (for example, Gunaratna, 2002) even discern an Asian zone of religious extremism, from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Xinjiang via Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh through to Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the South Philippines.

There are good reasons for both views, for there are great political and economic differences between the individual countries in Asia. Democracies in some contrast with autocratic systems of rulership in others, and some of the world's poorest developing countries exist alongside some of the world's fastest growing economies. The region includes the world's two largest countries in terms of population as well as various small countries that often feel threatened by their neighbors.

Culturally speaking, the region is also decidedly heterogeneous. First and foremost it has been Indian/Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic factors that have shaped South Asia both historically and culturally. Confucian culture is often cited as the defining element in Northeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, the cultural and historical influences of both regions mingle, with Continental Southeast Asia being more strongly defined by Buddhism whereas maritime Southeast Asia is more strongly molded by Islam and Catholicism (Philippines). Indeed, within the individual countries, different cultural and religious influences come to bear. Ethnically homogeneous countries such as Japan and Korea contrast with the linguistic and religious heterogeneity of South and Southeast Asian societies.

Against the backdrop of the complexity of historical and current processes of transformation in Asia, this essay seeks to focus analytically on a phenomenon that has of late received special attention, namely the phenomenon of culturally defined or culturally highlighted conflicts in Asia.

Cultural conflicts are *domestic, interstate or transnational political conflicts in which the actors involved focus in the conflict on issues relating to religion, language and/or historicity*. The focus on "cultural conflicts" does not imply assumption of a simplifying perspective on conflict theory that understands culture or cultural phenomena such as religion, language or historical experience as the triggers or causes of conflicts within society or between societies.

The adjective “cultural” does not refer here to the actors’ motives in a conflict, but to the issue of the conflict. When defining a conflict as “cultural” it is not relevant “why” there is a dispute, but “what” is in dispute.

The present study will concentrate on Southeast Asia, i.e., the ten member states of the Association of *Southeast Asian Nations* (ASEAN). The study seeks to establish empirically what shapes and patterns cultural conflicts in Asia and Southeast Asia have and how they have developed. Our analysis will be based on five steps. As a first step we define cultural conflicts. The second step leads from concept formation to the empirical level. In the third step, we provide a condensed overview of culturally-influenced conflicts in Asia. In the fourth step we concern ourselves with cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia. And finally we summarize our findings.

2 Cultural conflicts as conflicts treating culture as the disputed issue

Any sociological conflict analysis requires due theoretical foundations and clearly defined concepts. For the purposes of this study, we need a theoretically-informed concept of “cultural conflict” that can be deployed in empirical analysis. We have extensively outlined such a concept elsewhere (Croissant et al., 2009) and will therefore restrict ourselves to a few brief remarks here.

We start from the assumption that cultural conflicts are a special form taken by cultural conflicts. Like other forms of political conflicts, cultural conflicts are in the final analysis nothing other than communicative situations involving two or more actors (“parties to the conflict”; see Gurr, 1970: 223ff.). The parties to the conflict are partners in communication, and the measures in the conflict are means of communication, with the object of the conflict being the content of the communications (the issue). The means of communication may not only be linguistic utterances, but can involve any form of social action.

We can differentiate between political conflicts in two ways:

- (1) As regards the parties involved in communication and conflict:
 - *Domestic* conflicts within a country between non-governmental actors or between the state and a non-governmental actor in that country.
 - *Interstate conflicts* in which states are the parties in the conflict.
 - *Transnational conflicts* between non-governmental actors of different national origins or between a state and non-governmental actors from different countries.
- (2) As regards the substantive issue in the communication on the conflict:
 - In *conflicts of power policy* the communication on the conflict hinges on access to authoritative positions in government, society or the international system (“distribution of power”).
 - In *socio-economic conflicts*, the distribution of goods and rights within a society or between societies as well as the mechanisms underlying such a distribution forms the content of the dispute (“economic participation”).
 - In *cultural conflicts*, culture forms the content of the communication.

Political conflicts are communication situations. We can distinguish between them by actors in the communication (non-governmental, state, transnational) and the content of the communication (power, resources, culture).

Culture is understood here as a matrix of meanings that plays a constitutive part in generating and preserving a collective identity (Geertz, 1994: 9). Everything a society constructs to generate and preserve the collective identity and is thus established by actors in a communications situation as the context can be assigned to the domain of culture¹. Here, culture is always infused with meaning, as Max Weber (1988: 180) already pointed out: “From the human standpoint, culture is a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of occurrences in the world that has been imbued with sense and meaning.”

By restricting the concept of culture to the realm of identity and signification, it has a medium reach. It is thus distinct from the sociological concept of culture (culture as a complex of standards, values and norms and their symbolizations) and from the broad ethnological concept of culture (culture as the epitome of human life styles). The advantage of a concept of culture pegged to identity lies in its practicability: It focuses on precisely that section of reality that is of interest in the current discourse, namely identities.

Political conflict as communication is always embedded in a structural context. The latter forms the framework for communication and standardizes it, as it makes certain themes and the use of certain media at certain times by certain actors more probable than the corresponding conceivable alternatives (Krallmann & Ziemann, 2001: 249; Hansen, 2000: 39; Billington et al., 1991: 5).

First and foremost, it is the socio-cultural (sub) context that is important for a focus on cultural conflicts. We can distinguish here between the social (institutional/procedural, political as well as economic and demographic structures) and the cultural context (i. e., culture).

As communication, any political conflict references its context. Cultural conflicts stand out for a particularity: Cultural conflicts do not simply refer to the cultural context, as in cultural conflicts the cultural context itself becomes the object of conflict. The special explosiveness of cultural conflicts stems from the fact that they do not primarily hinge on a clearly definable, interest-based (and thus essentially negotiable) object, as the actors perceive or assert the existence of a fundamental difference as regards the framework in which communication takes place: There is thus not only a contrast in interests, but Actor A discerns or thinks he discerns that Actor B is shaped by a fundamentally different (as culturally and identity-related) context than is he as regards a core area of personal identity, thought, emotions and actions.

In customary conflicts, the confrontational communication addresses a “conflict issue” that as a rule is expressed in explicit demands as a clearly delineated interest-based “conflict item”. Cultural conflicts, by contrast, revolve around identity, not interests. The conflict issue is determined not by what the actors want or say they want, but by what they are or believe they are. Even if customary

¹ “Identity” is the result of a self-referential attribution of meaning, i.e., the “self-image” that arise from the interaction between the coherence of the defining features (“identity” in the narrower sense) and difference as demarcation vis-à-vis others (“alterity”) (Gleason, 1983).

conflict items almost always play an additional role, communication in a cultural conflict centers on one or several not overtly formulated identity-related themes (“conflict fields”).

Cultural conflicts do not simply refer to the cultural context – in cultural conflicts, the cultural context itself becomes an issue in the conflict: The framework of communication becomes the issue. Cultural conflicts are political conflicts between non-government and/or state actors in which the actors make culture the issue. Communication in a cultural conflict refers to one or more identity-related issues that are not overtly formulated. Cultural conflicts are conflicts of identity.

The concept of “conflict field” seeks to take into account not only the “hard” claims usually stated clearly in public debate but also “softer” and also more profound conflict issues. It bears remembering that conflict fields represent issues, not motives: They express what the conflict is about, the subject of communication, and not why the conflict is taking place, i.e., what its causes are (Seul, 1999: 564). Addressing thematic conflict issues also does not prejudice whether actors authentically address these issues or instrumentalize them for purposes not stated (publicly).

Three domains or facets of culture come into consideration as fields of conflict: Religion, language and historicity. They can be operationalized, i.e., rendered empirically tangible, using the following indicators:

Table 1: Operationalization of religion, language and historicity* as fields of conflict²

Conflict field	Indicator	Example
Religion	Verbal or active reference to a religious symbol (person or object) that is understood as highlighting a religious issue.	A head of state visiting a temple or the assassination of a religious leader.
Language	Verbal or active reference to a linguistic symbol (person or object) that is understood as highlighting language.	Prohibition of a language at universities or linguistic segregation of dialects.
Historicity	Verbal or active reference to a symbol (person or object) in relation to striking historical events or to historical/historicizing history of roots such that this reference is understood as highlighting historicity.	Erecting a war memorial or public discourse on precolonial experiences of rulership.

In the identity-related conflict fields, both the pure communication by the sender and the understanding by the recipient are important³. In addition to the actors’ actions, the actors’ interpretation

² The problematization of skin color and physiognomy, i.e., what has been debated as “racial membership” in the English-speaking world, has a place in the history-related conflict field. Owing to the slow disappearance of distinctness, skin color is particularly suited to symbolically bring to mind the historicity of origin. The concept of historicity used here is not to be confused with that used in the study of history, as “historicity” is understood as the facticity of historical events.

³ Thus, the destruction of Christina churches in Germany during World War II was not seen by the population or the government as the reference to a religious symbol (concurrent here with the Allies’ intentions) and the war was thus not understood as a religious conflict.

of the occurrences must also be taken into consideration. The attribution of the conflict is dichotomous, meaning that we examine whether a conflict field is addressed or not. This leads to the following possible types of conflict:

Table 2: Types of cultural conflict

Religion	Language	Historicity	Conflict type
0	0	0	non-cultural conflict
1	0	0	religious conflict
0	1	0	linguistic conflict
1	1	0	religious-linguistic conflict
0	0	1	history-related conflict

To avoid a frequent misunderstanding, we must emphasize that this concept of “cultural conflicts” is to be clearly distinguished from other concepts such as “ethnic”, “racial” or “religious” conflict: “Ethnic conflicts” are political conflicts between ethnic groups or at least involving one such group. The actors are the defining feature of ethnic conflicts. Who the actors are does not, however, determine what they communicate about. The content of the dispute, the issue in conflict, largely remains unclear. The assumption that ethnic groups always and primarily struggle for their identity is wrong. “Ethnic” conflicts can also entail conflict items relating to power politics or be socioeconomic in nature.

While it is at least conceivable in the case of ethnic groups that one takes the stage in its entirety as an actor, this is hardly plausible in the case of religions or “races”. Often, an organized (usually non-governmental) party to the conflict – with links to the respective religion or “race” – steps in as the substitute actor. It is implausible that a conflict can already be classified as “religious” simply because one of the organizations involved consists exclusively of Hindus, Sikhs, Christians or Muslims.

We can, in keeping with the thematic field of conflict communication, distinguish between three basic forms or “types” of cultural conflict: religious, linguistic and history-related conflicts. In terms of conceptual logic and empirically speaking, combinations (“hybrids”) of this basic type are possible. Unlike concepts such as “ethnic” or “racial” conflicts, this conceptual system is geared not to the actors (“ethnic groups”, “races”) but again to the conflict themes (religion, language, historicity).

3 From concept to empirical study. Data set and measurement

Theoretical and conceptual considerations are a necessary step en route to the scholarly analysis of real conflicts. A second methodological step is also necessary, namely to operationalize and measure the research concept.

In this regard, we rely on data material from the “Conflict Information System” (CONIS) database established at Heidelberg University’s Institut für Politische Wissenschaft. CONIS evaluates information only from news sources that are publicly accessible, assesses it qualitatively, and

processes it with a view to event data analysis. The CONIS data offers various comparative advantages of over data sources such as the Correlates-of-War data set (see Sarkees, 2000) or the Uppsala Conflict Database Project (see Urdal, 2006).⁴

1. For the period 1947-2007, CONIS covers both domestic and interstate wars and violent conflicts below the threshold of war as well as non-violent conflicts, and thus offers the basis for an overall perspective on global conflict.
2. The CONIS data enables the dynamics of conflicts to be identified and analyzed: Starting with the question what phases there are to conflicts before they escalate into violence, through to an analysis of how long violent conflicts last and how often violence and cease-fires/non-violence alternated before a conflict was enduringly settled.
3. The CONIS database studies the genesis of conflicts at different levels. Thus, the CONIS conflict model embraces five levels of intensity in total. The first (“dispute”) pinpoints the articulation of a difference in interests, the second (“non-violent crisis”) entails the threat of violence. The third level (“violent crisis”) involves the occasional use of violence and in the fourth (“limited war”) violence is used deliberately but without the goal being to overcome the opponent. The fifth level is “war” and signifies the systematic use of violence with the objective of overthrowing the opponent and imposing one’s own will on him (Schwank, 2008).
4. In addition to constellations of actors and the actors’ military, economic, institutional and socio-cultural characteristics CONIS primarily covers conflict measures, i.e., actions and statements by the actors involved of relevance to the conflict. CONIS thus covers precisely that data which is of relevance for the thrust of this study.

4 An empirical topography of cultural conflicts in Asia since 1945⁵

In this study we will assign empirical conflicts to one or several conflict fields on the basis of the CONIS data. As part of the study’ structure, we will draw on the conflict measures to evaluate conflict fields, i.e., starting from what actors do or say when conducting a conflict, by an interpretative analysis of the content of the occurrences we will identify the issue at the heart of the respective conflict. The analysis will take into account the following three aspects of Asian conflicts since 1945:

1. The relevance and forms of cultural conflict in Asia
2. The conflicting actors
3. The focal-point countries in the regional conflict

⁴ Like the other customary conflict databases, CONIS is based on an evaluation of open sources. The evaluation of the information is by procedures that interpret the content.

⁵ Asia as a region includes the following 42 states: Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, People’s Republic of China, East Timor, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizistan, Kribiti, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nauru, Nepal, New Zealand, North Korea, Pakistan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Taiwan, Thailand, Tonga, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, Vietnam. We would like to thank Nicolas Schwank for the statistical evaluations of the CONIS data-base.

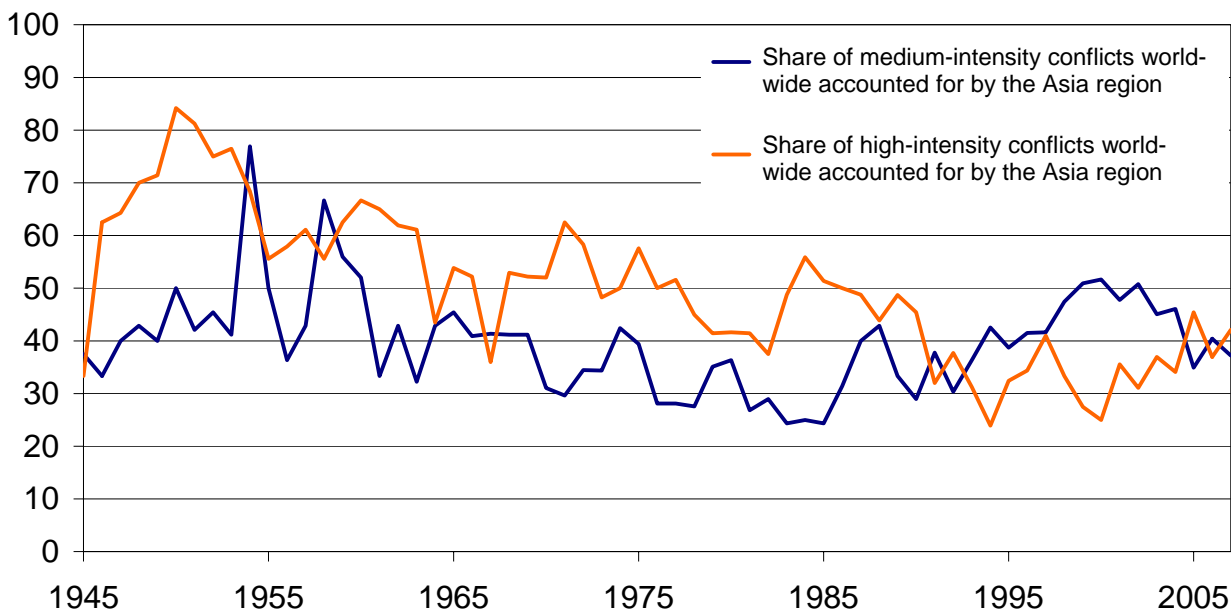
4.1 Relevance and forms of cultural conflict

4.1.1 Asia as a region with an above-average number of conflicts

One of the uncontroversial findings of quantitative research on conflicts is that in the decades following World War II, by international comparison Asia has been a region that has seen an especially high number of violent conflicts.

Our evaluation of the CONIS data confirms this assumption. From 1945 to the mid-1960s, the region accounted for well over 50 percent of bellicose conflicts world-wide. At the peak (1950), 16 of the 19 wars and limited wars world-wide took place in Asia.

Chart 1: Asia's share of crises world-wide (level 3 conflict), limited wars (4) and wars (5) (1945-2007, in %).



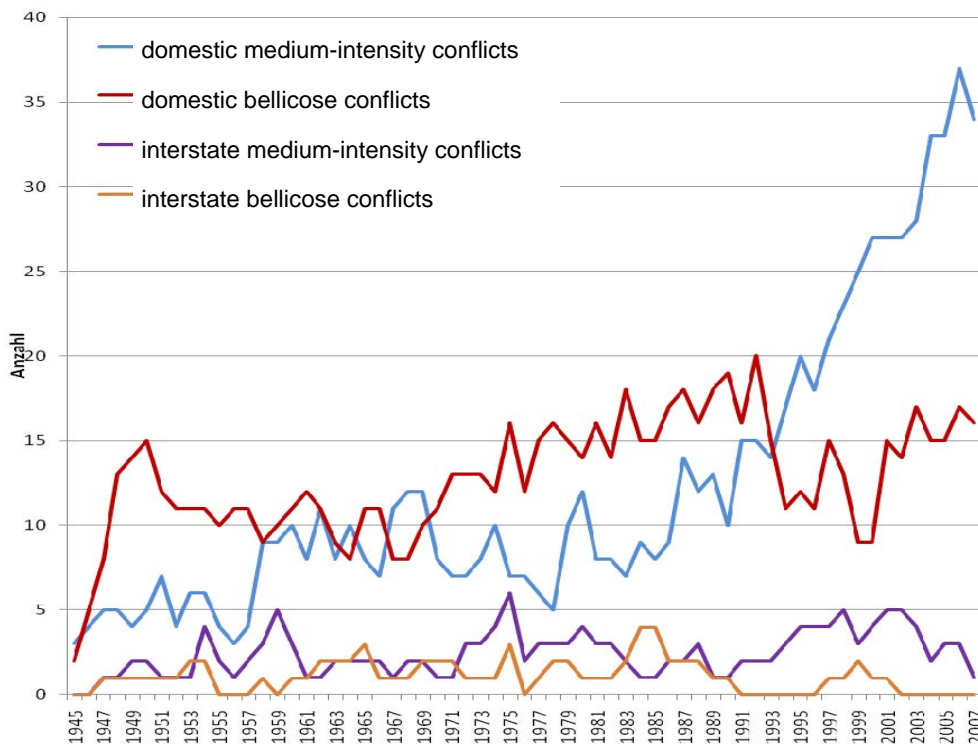
With the end of the Cold War and the ebbing of regional tensions at the end of the 1980s, Asia's share of bellicose violent conflicts and above all of highly violent wars (level 5 conflicts) fell markedly. However, that trend has turned around in recent years: Compared with the historical low of 1994 (24 percent) and 2000 (25 percent) the (2007) level had risen again, namely to 42 percent. Since 1945, Asia has almost always topped the list of world regions covered by CONIS as regards medium-intensity conflicts, i.e., conflicts with the sporadic, but not systematic use of violence.

4.1.2 Predominantly domestic "minor wars"

International comparative research has shown that in past decades there has been a successive shift of world-wide conflicts from the interstate to the domestic arena.

Our analysis also corroborates this finding for Asia. As in most other regions of the world, the number of multi- and bilateral conflicts has steadily fallen below that for domestic conflicts as of the start of data collection.

Chart 2: No. of domestic and interstate conflicts in Asia, 1945-2007.



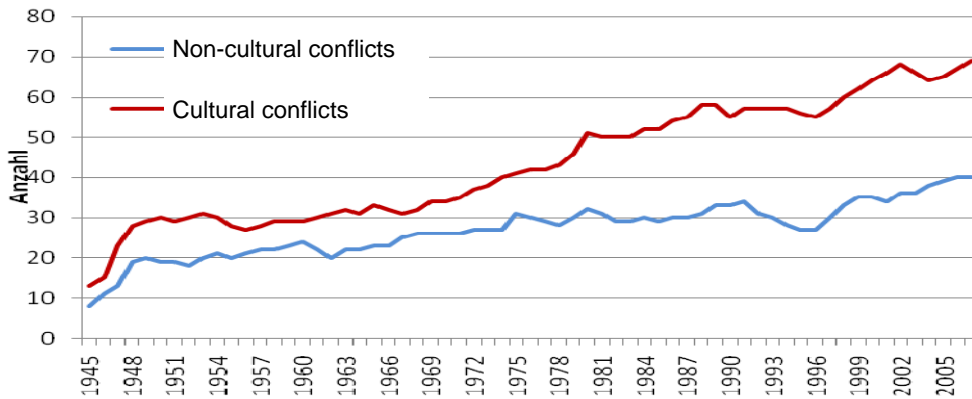
However, the gap between the two types of conflict has grown ever greater in recent decades and years. In this respect, the region can be considered representative of world-wide developments. Worthy of mention is, in particular, the freezing of domestic bellicose conflicts at a relatively high level as well as the drastic increase since the end of the Cold War in the number of domestic violent crises.

Thus, we can confirm the trend toward “minor wars” between state and non-governmental groups as well as among non-governmental groups discerned by other conflict researchers toward (Daase, 1999) in Asia. That said, these conflicts of “low” and “medium-intensity violence” in which violence is deployed to a limited extent, in single cases or only sporadically and which one can therefore hardly describe as wars (Schwank, 2008) are not a new phenomenon in Asia. Essentially they have shaped the face of conflict in Asia for decades now.

4.1.3 The increase in identity conflicts and the special relevance of history-related conflicts

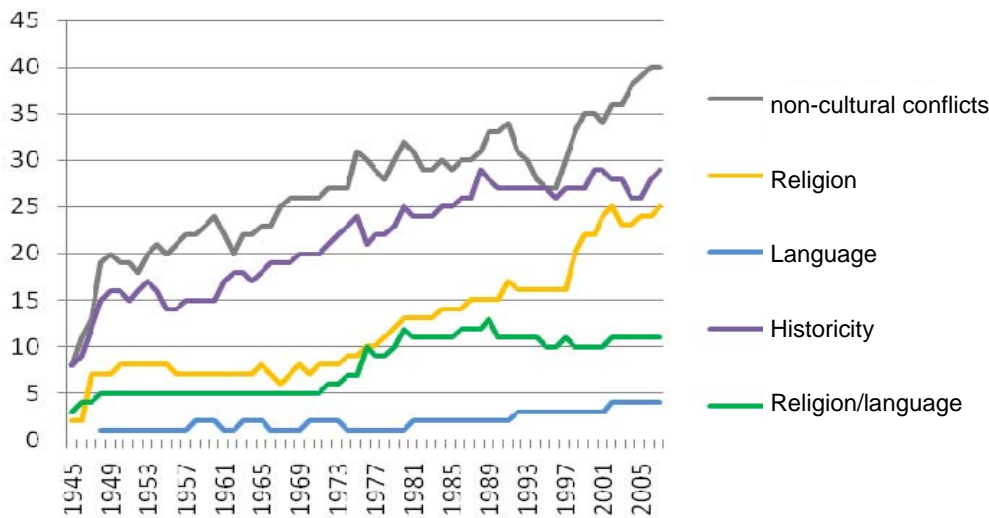
In global conflicts since the 1980s those conflicts that take collective identity as an issue have been growing in significance (Huntington, 1997; Fox, 2000; Croissant et al., 2009). In Asia, cultural conflicts have predominated in conflicts since as early as 1945. We can, however, likewise identify an increase in identity-based conflicts in Asia since the end of the 1970s.

Chart 3: No. of cultural and non-cultural conflicts in Asia (all conflict levels), 1945-2007.



Of the different thematic types of cultural conflict, in Asia those related to history are most frequent, while purely language-related conflicts are very scarce. The trend for those conflicts that hinge on both language and religion resemble the pattern for the purely religious conflicts, the number of which has clearly risen in Asia (as in other regions). The number of religious/linguistic conflicts has stagnated in Asia, i.e., “ethnically” colored conflicts are becoming less important than religious/ideologically colored conflicts.

Chart 4: No. of domestic and interstate conflicts by conflict type (all conflict levels), 1945-2007.



4.1.4 Cultural conflicts in Asia are primarily domestic conflicts

Cultural conflicts in Asia are primarily and to a greater extent than in other regions of the world, a domestic phenomenon: 9 of 10 cultural conflicts in Asia are domestic in nature (92% compared to 81% world-wide). Moreover, two out of three domestic conflicts (68%) in one or another way hinges on culture (world-wide: 56%).

4.2 The conflicting actors

Which actors or groups of actors are involved in cultural conflicts in Asia? Given the high number of cultural and domestic conflicts in the region we might assume that primarily non-governmental actors are involved in the conflicts. In fact, quantitative and qualitative comparative conflict research on Asia highlights the special significance of three groups of actors in the region:

- *Ideologically leftist conflict actors*, who in the decades after the end of World War II shaped domestic conflicts above all in continental Asia and Southeast Asia in the form of so-called “anti-regime wars”. They drove the domestic, non-cultural conflicts in Asia.
- Ethnic groups involved in uprisings or secessionary efforts and who engage(d) in horizontal conflicts between communal groups or in vertical conflicts with the central government over cultural or political self-determination or the redistribution of economic rights. A widespread hypothesis in the literature is that they shaped conflicts specifically in the 1980s and 1990s. They were and are the drivers of domestic cultural conflicts.
- Religiously defined, transnationally active organizations or groups that primarily make use of terrorist methods of engagement in conflict. Their importance has surged over the last one-and-a-half decades or so (or so one hypothesis, and it is highly controversial among the specialist researchers). They drive cultural, transnational conflicts.

The CONIS data set is also well suited for assessing the validity of these assumptions. On the basis of the systematic research methodology of the CONIS database we can distinguish between the following different categories of conflict actors:

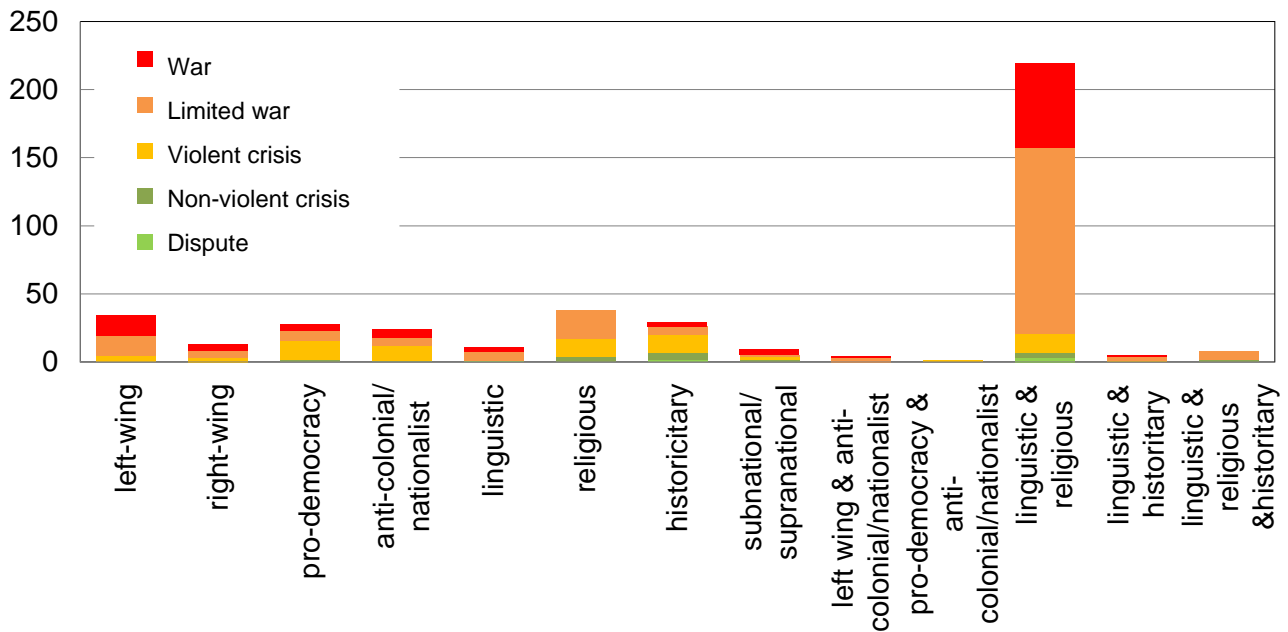
- The “non-cultural” actors include (1) leftist and (2) rightist political groupings, (3) actors seeking to democratize a regime, (4) anti-colonial and/or nationalist groups and (5) government-allied actors at the sub- or supranational level.⁶
- In line with the three cultural domains, we can divide the cultural actors into (1) religious, (2) linguistic and (3) history-related actors, with the latter category above all embracing groups concerned with transmigration, i.e., their roots, and traditional actors.⁷

Within the two segments – “cultural” and/or “non-cultural”, the categories can be combined. In real terms, this gives rise to 13 different categories. The following chart thus visualizes the distribution of the different non-governmental actors involved in political conflicts in Asia accordingly, assigned by the respective maximum intensity of a conflict.

⁶ The leftist groups, for example, include the Maoists in Nepal, and the pro-democratic actors includes the Reformasi movement in Malaysia.

⁷ The religious groups include, for example, Jemaah Islamiah (JI) and the Laskar Jihad in Indonesia, while the linguistic/religiously defined actors include the East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Xinjiang, China.

Chart 5: Frequency of involvement of different categories of non-governmental actors in political conflicts in Asia by the respective maximum intensity thereof.



On the basis of this descriptive/empirical assessment, we can discern five striking characteristics of the types of actors involved in Asian conflicts and specifically in cultural conflicts.

4.2.1 The dominance of linguistic/religious (“ethnic”) actors

Non-governmental actors that are defined by linguistic and religious features to an equal extent and owing to their characteristics have in research to date often been termed “ethnic” actors, took part in a total of 219 incidents of conflict. They are followed, at some distance, by religious actors (38 cases) and leftist ideological actors (34) as well as the Khmer Rouge, active until 1997 in Cambodia. Also worthy of note are history-related actors, i.e., above all traditional actors or those actors who have links to transmigration, such as the Bengalis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (29 cases) as well as other groupings who in their respective countries demand the democratization of government and ruling elites, e.g., the advocates of democracy in Hong Kong (28 cases).

4.2.2 The especially frequent involvement of linguistic/religious (“ethnic”) actors in violent conflicts

Linguistic/religious (“ethnic”) actors are involved most frequently in conflicts, and not only in absolute terms. They also take the stage to a disproportionately high extent in conflicts entailing violence. Conflicts involving groups that are defined purely by religion likewise often involve violence. At least in Asia, these conflicts have to date not crossed the threshold from a limited to a full-blown war. By contrast, conflicts with ideologically leftist groups have a similar propensity for war as do conflicts involving linguistic/religious actors.

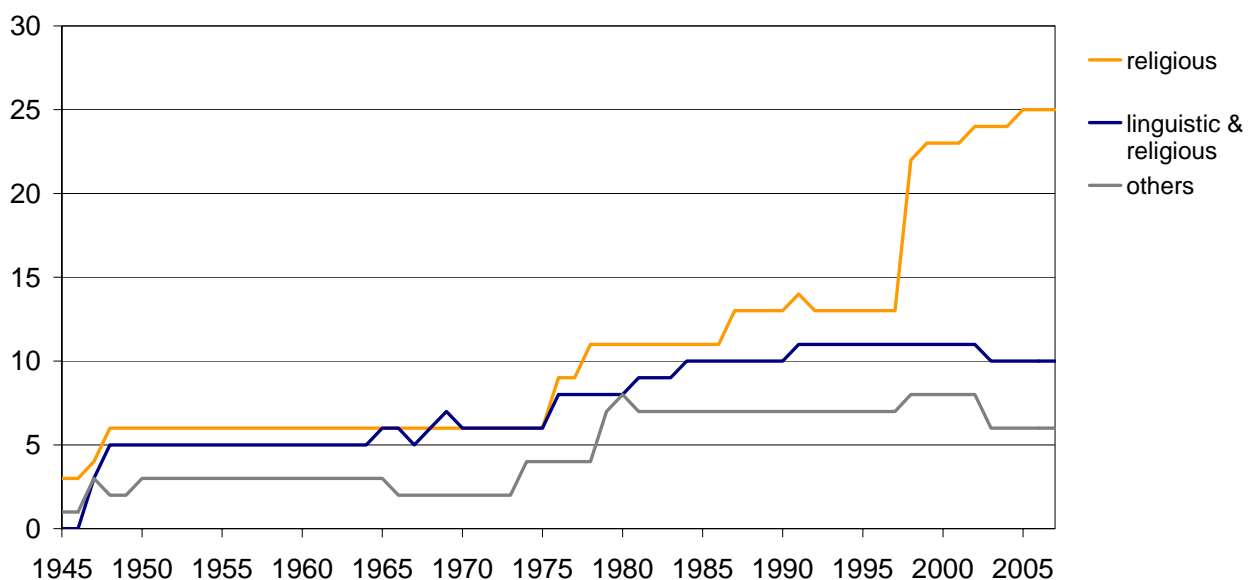
It does in fact appear that ideological actors, i.e., communities who share a this-worldly world-view seem to be more willing to fight a war “to the bitter end”, with all the suffering this may entail for the population, than religious actors, communities who share a transcendental world-view. While the

religious difference emphasizes a linguistically striking and possibly historical difference between groups within the population, in the case of ethno-nationalist actors the (defensive or offensive) motivation of “us-versus-them” often to be seen in the “micro-national” segment evidently strong enough to accept the price of escalation to the extreme.

4.2.3 The importance of religiously-defined actors is increasing, while the number of “ethnic” actors in conflicts has remained relatively constant

If we consider the involvement of the different groups of actors in the different types of cultural conflict⁸ (across all five intensity levels), then we see that religious groups (as was to be expected) are most frequently involved in religious conflicts. Their involvement has risen dramatically in particular since 1998 (see chart 6). This is in line with the finding that the number of religious conflicts has clearly grown since that same year. Our findings thus indicate a factual increase in the importance of religiously defined actors and the religious issues they highlight.

Chart 6: Involvement of non-governmental actors in religious conflicts by category of actor, 1945-2007.



NB: The category “others” includes anti-colonialist/nationalist, history-related, leftist, pro-democratic, rightist and subnational/supranational actors.

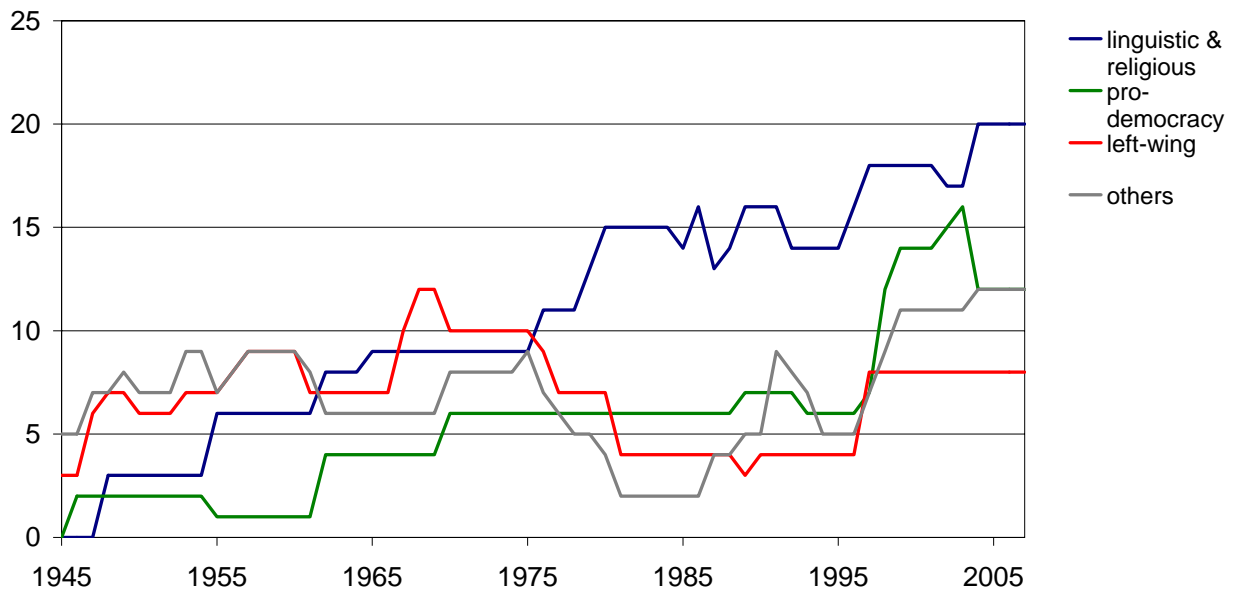
The second most frequently involved group in religious conflicts is that of linguistic/religious (“ethnic”) actors. This is likewise hardly surprising. What is significant, however, is that unlike the religious actors the number of these actors has remained relatively unchanged since the early 1980s. Actors who can be termed “ethnic” have, at least in Asia, thus not increasingly participated in religious conflicts over the last 25 years. If, as is customary, we define ethnic conflict as a conflict involving ethnic actors, then we would deduce that the importance of “ethnic conflicts” in religious contexts has neither increased nor decreased in Asia since the early 1980s.

⁸ For reasons of space we will not discuss linguistic/religious, linguistic and history-related conflicts here. In general those groups are present in political conflicts in which language is the primary issue as are defined by all three cultural determinants, namely language, religion and historicity. Linguistic/religious (“ethnic”) actors are by far the most frequently involved in history-related conflicts. History-related conflicts are thus primarily conducted by “ethnically” influenced groups.

4.2.4 “Ethnic” actors also predominate in non-cultural conflicts, while the significance of leftist groups has waned

The analysis of the range of actors involved in non-cultural conflicts is also highly revealing. Again, the linguistic/religious actors predominate. Since the mid-1970s, these “ethnic” actors also shape non-cultural conflicts in Asia.

Chart 7: Involvement of non-governmental actors in non-cultural conflicts in Asia by type of actor, 1945-2007.



NB: The category “others” includes anti-colonialist/nationalist, history-related, leftist, pro-democratic, rightist and subnational/supranational actors.

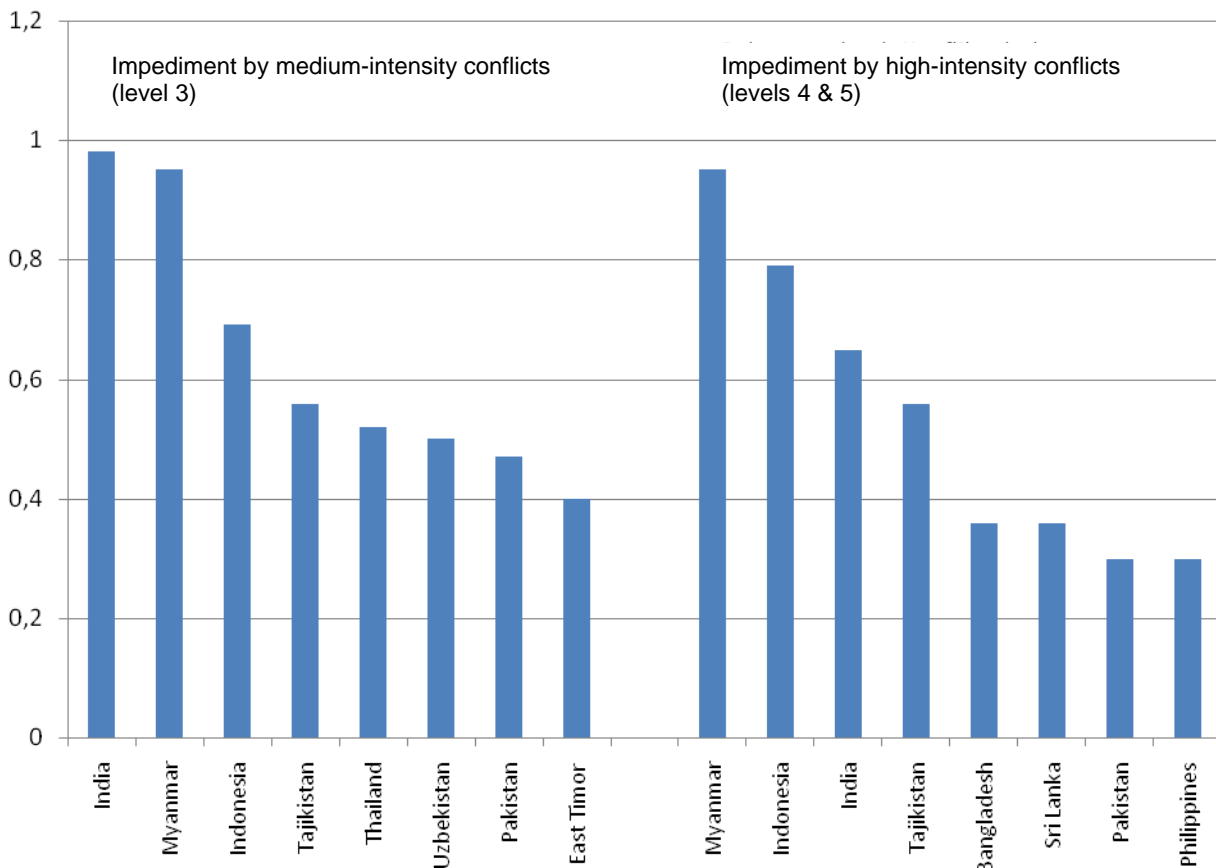
In other words, in Asia political conflicts over interest-based assets, usually involving power politics or economic assets, are frequently conducted by groups that usually act from a “micro-national” perspective. The non-cultural conflicts in Asia thus often prove to hinge on a set of interests based in cultural experiences and concepts: In these cases, the interest in the distribution of power in a state or of resources or prosperity is linked back to regional-particularist considerations.

By contrast, the erstwhile great significance of leftist groupings has been dwindling since the mid-1970s – long before the end of the Cold War many of the battles had been fought and the front lines had become rigid (see chart 7). While the raw data since the end of the 1990s suggests there has been a “renaissance” in the involvement of such groups in conflicts, the trend is geographically limited. It almost exclusively extends only to the Indian subcontinent. The demise of the leftist revolutionary groupings has persisted in the rest of Asia.

4.3 The focal-point countries in the regional conflict

If we analyze these findings once again by geographical location, then we can say that there is a core group of four Asian countries (Myanmar, Indonesia, India and Tajikistan) that historically speaking have been particularly affected by cultural wars and limited wars.

Chart 8: States in Asia subjected to the greatest impediment by cultural conflicts



N = 42; the conflict impediment index shows the relative impediment to each country by medium-intensity conflicts (level 3 conflicts) and high-intensity conflicts (levels 4 and 5). An impediment figure of 1 shows that a state in each year of its existence has faced at least one conflict in the respective category, while a 0 shows that in no single year can we discern such a conflict there.

A similar picture also arises for violent cultural crises, albeit here the group of states concerned must be expanded to include Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippine, East Timor, Thailand and Uzbekistan (see Annex 1).

5 Cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia

Four out of the ten Southeast Asian nations have the highest rate of violent cultural conflicts. Given the number of countries and the size of their populations, Southeast Asia is indeed encumbered to an above-average extent by cultural conflicts: Four of 13 Asian regional nonviolent conflicts of identity and seven of the 33 medium-intensity cultural conflicts take place in Southeast Asia, with 29 of the 68 militant cultural conflicts were fought in Southeast Asia.

5.1 From the regional perspective

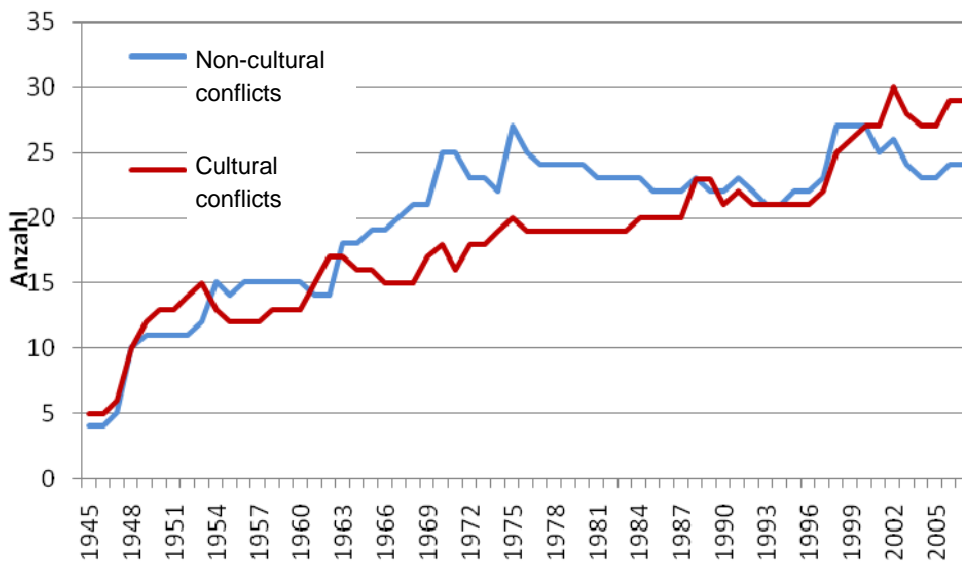
However, in view of the observable quantity of trends and patterns, the Southeast Asian region is essentially representative of all of Asia. The share of overall political conflicts accounted for by cultural conflicts (at all levels of intensity) is nearly identical. Thus, cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia (and Asia) as a proportion of nonviolent conflicts total 33 (world-wide 38) percent, they account for

a total of 58 (world-wide: 59) percent of medium-intensity conflicts and 59 (world-wide: 64) percent of bellicose conflict. Yet, significant variations from the above findings for Asia arise in three different regards:

5.1.1 In contrast to Asia as a whole, in Southeast Asia there is no notable shift of conflicts into the area of identity conflicts visible.

Unlike Asia as a whole, the gap in Southeast Asia between cultural and non-cultural conflicts is not widening – rather both individual trends are running along a similar course (see chart 9). Only in the period from the mid-1960s and mid-1980s is the observed deviation a little larger. During that time (which was not typical for Asia as a whole) not cultural but conflicts caused by secular ideologies predominated, i.e., primarily regime conflicts. Ultimately, this trend reversed as of the beginning of the new century.

Chart 9: No. of cultural and non-cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia (all conflicts, 1945-2007).



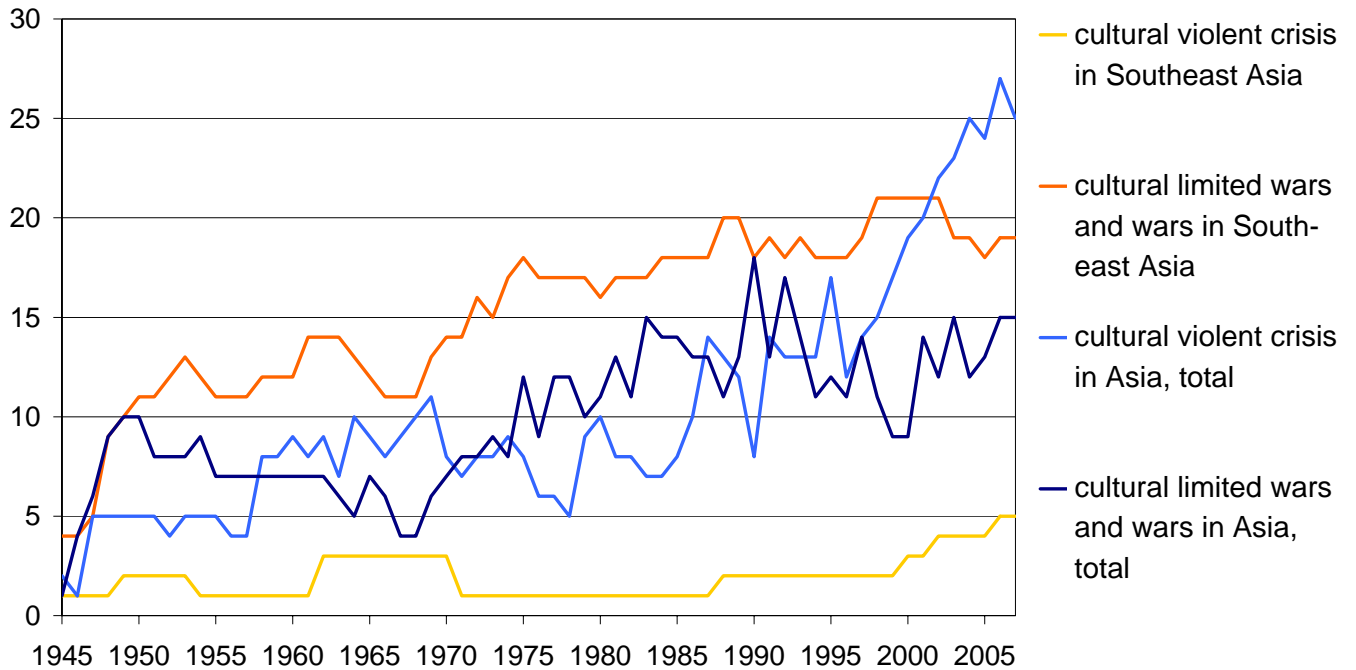
Admittedly, as the chart shows, the number of cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia has, more or less, grown steadily and now clearly exceeds the number of non-cultural conflicts. Still, it cannot be said that specifically cultural conflicts have “dramatically” increased. It is much rather the case that the overall number of conflicts has grown over the past six decades. Here, there is no pronounced growth in cultural conflicts. A closer look reveals that the increase in cultural conflicts, which started in 1998, can primarily be traced back to identity conflicts within the context of a process of democratization in Indonesia (Sulawesi, Moluccas) that followed a phase of relative stagnation between 1991 and 1997, not to mention conflicts with Islamic groups in other states (e.g., Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia and Jemaah Islamiah).

5.1.2 Cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia tend to escalate faster than in the rest of Asia

When looking exclusively at cultural conflicts over the course of time, we can clearly see a difference between the region as a whole and Southeast Asia. In the sub-region, there are considerably more bellicose conflicts than violent crises – while in all other parts of Asia the relation between the two is relatively balanced. Unlike the rest of Asia, in Southeast Asia limited wars and wars are do-

minant within the cultural domain, without there being any clear turnaround in favor of “small wars” to be seen.

Chart 10: No. of domestic and interstate cultural conflicts of medium and high intensity in South-east Asia and Asia, 1945-2007.



This finding indicates that in Southeast Asian, identity and cultural conflicts tend to escalate more strongly than in the rest of Asia. Identity conflicts in Southeast Asia seem to be deeply rooted, which means that hardly any strategic de-escalation can be effective. Good examples of this are the many conflicts in Myanmar and the Pattani Conflict in the South of Thailand.

5.1.3 Cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia are almost solely a domestic phenomenon.

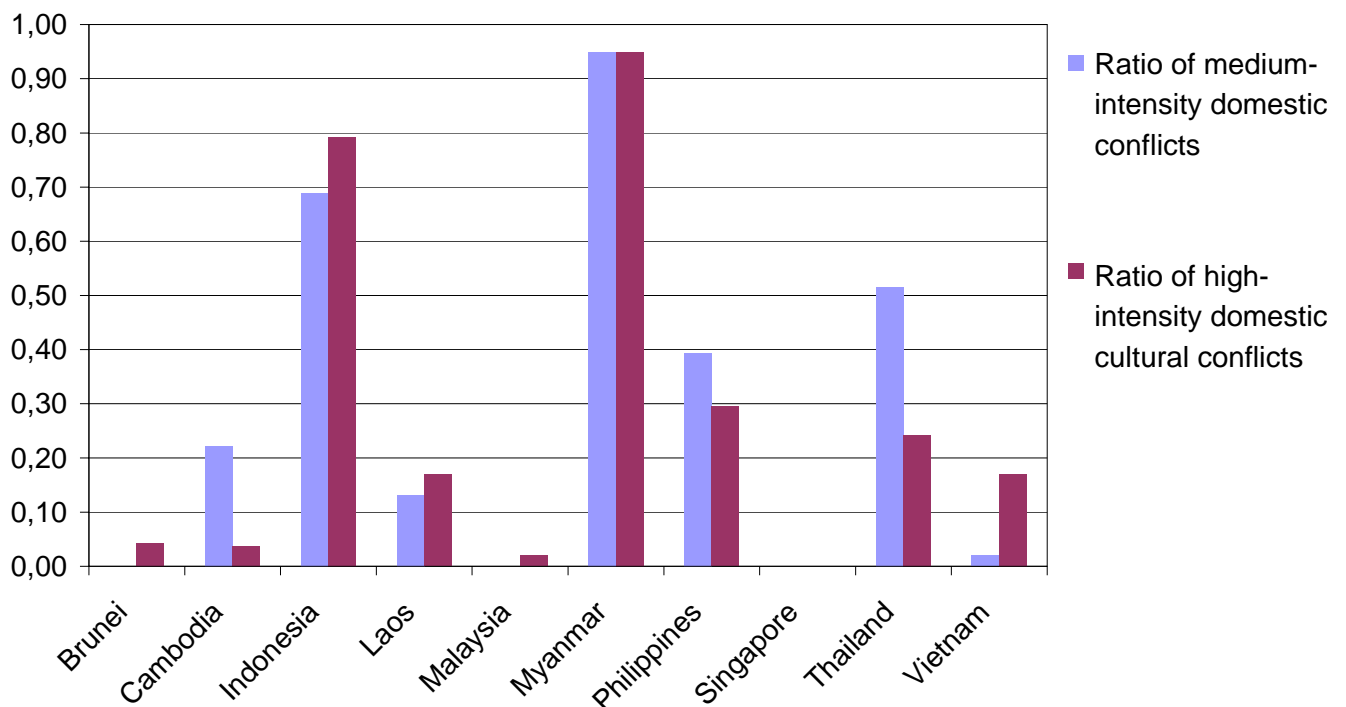
96 percent of cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia are carried out within states and are thus domestic. In this regard, the sub-region is four percent above the overall Asian level and a marked 15 percent above the world-wide level. This means that conflicts concerning cultural issues are almost only a domestic phenomenon in Southeast Asia. By contrast, conflicts on cultural issues are rarely fought out between states: the proportion of non-cultural conflicts among interstate conflicts has reached 87 percent in Southeast Asia and is thus 10 percent higher than the overall Asian average. This aspect must be emphasized since from the overall view the region of Southeast Asia is highly heterogeneous in cultural terms. We can expect that interstate cultural conflicts will be more likely here than in other Asian sub-regions that are less diverse or in other regions of the world. Evidently, regional governments have succeeded in developing mechanisms that prevent existing cultural tensions and conflicts within communities from “spilling over” and thus turning into interstate conflicts.

5.2 The single-case perspective

The more stronger propensity for Southeast Asian identity conflicts to escalate can be seen in particular in Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand. Malaysia and Singapore are contrasting cases where identity conflicts tend largely to be communicated in a peaceful vein.

A historical view that references contemporary life shows that in the Southeast Asian region, Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand are far harder hit than their peers by cultural conflicts that are violent. The stronger propensity for Southeast Asian identity conflicts to escalate emerges most clearly here (see ill. 11). Conversely, Malaysia and Singapore represent the largely pacific negotiation of identity conflicts in the region.

Ill. 11: Ratio of domestic conflicts of a medium or high intensity in Southeast Asian countries from their foundation until 2007.



It would therefore seem obvious to investigate the structures of the conflicts in these countries more closely. As we have seen, cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia primarily center on the issue of historicity, followed by purely religious and religious/linguistic matters. From among the large number of individual conflicts once or now to be encountered in the countries in question we will therefore select those current conflicts that could shed light on the mechanisms of cultural processing of political conflicts. Here, specifically the religious/linguistic Pattani conflict in South Thailand, the history-related Aceh conflict in Indonesia and the overall set of different history-related conflicts die in Myanmar that otherwise are usually subsumed under the label of “conflicts relating to ethnic minorities”.

5.2.1 The Aceh conflict as a history-related conflict

Aceh – the Northernmost province on the island of Sumatra – is the stage for one of the oldest domestic conflicts both in Indonesia and in Southeast Asia as a whole. The armed conflict in the

narrow sense, i.e., the struggle between the *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Movement for Free Aceh, GAM)* and Indonesia's central government started in 1976 with the GAM's foundation and its declaration of an independent Republic of Aceh.

In conflict research, Aceh is presented both as a war over resources and as an "ethno-nationalist" and "ethno-religious" conflict (Searle, 2002; Bertrand, 2004; Ross, 2005). These differing assessments point to different aspects of the conflict and the complex matrix of causal factors or influential factors behind the conflict. Cultural factors, in particular the strict interpretation of Islamic practices in Aceh, a shared language and the memory of the pre-colonial Sultanate of Aceh and the province's role in the struggle against the Dutch colonial powers and for an Islamic Republic of Indonesia in the early days of Indonesian independence are at the heart of the GAM's national self-definition. However, economic factors are likewise crucial to an understanding of the conflict, as the GAM's foundation coincides with the beginning of extraction of the large oil and natural gas assets in the province.

In actual fact, there is a relatively broad consensus in conflict research that the conflict results from material causes and grievances that can be located in the structural context of the conflict (Missbach, 2005; Schulze, 2006; Hadiwinata, 2006). However, a closer examination of the dynamics and development of the conflict makes it clear that the Aceh conflict has assumed clear traits of an identity conflict over the good three decades since the first outbreak of violence. The cause for this: the cultural spin GAM and significant sections of the local population has given the above-mentioned economic and political grievances in the province. Here, real problems were made the object of a culturally-defined construction of an Aceh identity (*keacehan*; see Aspinall, 2007; McCarthy, 2007). In other words: Cultural factors are not primarily relevant as the cause of the conflict, but as a point of reference for constructing a new identity in the course of GAM's political mobilization of the local population and GAM's legitimation of its goals and conflict strategies.

Economic inequality and disadvantaging, the lack of opportunities for political participation, and repression (the latter further tainted by an ethnic element) weakened Aceh society's prior strong identification with the Republic of Indonesia. In this way, the basis was laid for the emergence of the GAM, in its infancy a marginal movement, as the representative of the province's aspirations to national self-determination and the preservation of its cultural identity. Indeed, by locking into the population's dissatisfaction and making this the starting point for its construction of a cultural ("ethno-national") identity, the GAM played a prime role in nurturing the existing social problems being given a cultural reading. The conflict over the distribution of economic and political rights in the region was in this way embedded in the broader process of identity construction (Aspinall, 2007; Brown, 2005; McCarthy, 2007). And GAM's political articulation of this identity primarily relied on cultural concepts and symbols.

In the literature we occasionally come across the position that GAM merely instrumentalized the existing problems by abusing cultural issues as a basis for mobilization in support of its "real" interests in power and appropriation (McCulloch, 2005; Missbach, 2005) does not succeed in duly accounting for the status of culture in the conflict. GAM is not a genuinely Islamic grouping, as the introduction of an Islamic social order and rulership is not an organizational goal but reflects the cultural identity of Aceh's population (Hadiwinata 2006: 7). Yet with a view to mobilizing support, the organization could hardly forgo identifying with the strict interpretation of Islamic practices that it itself points up as being part of this identity (Schulze, 2004: 9).

However, GAM was only able to mobilize support for its objective, the Aceh's national independence, because the existing grievances of the larger part of Aceh's population was also perceived as an expression of the disrespect shown its own identity (Bertrand, 2004b: 173). The Indonesian government's non-recognition of that identity serves as a central justification for the GAM's drive for secession. The fact that the conflict in Aceh also pivots on real conflict items, such as access to political power and the distribution of economic opportunities for appropriation and life by no means stands in the way of interpreting the conflict as a cultural and/or "culturalized" matter. The issue of the recognition and/or non-recognition of Aceh's identity as a core area of dispute did not exist at the outset but first arose in the course of the conflict.

This constructivist view of the conflict would suggest that the conflict, even if not attributable to cultural causes, is a "cultural", or, to be more precise a "history-related" conflict. As with other forms taken by political conflicts, cultural conflicts are rooted in a social context. In cultural conflicts, the struggle for tangible conflict items, such as control over a certain territory, access to resources or the distribution of political power may be of importance. However, the communication between the actors in the conflict in a cultural conflict gives identity-related topics, such as religion, language or history, center-stage in the conflict. The GAM's "invention of traditions" (Sherlock, 2005) is by no means restricted to religious elements. Instead, the group advocates a strongly historicist interpretation of Aceh's identity that references more than just the strict adherence to Islamic practices (in contrast to the more syncretic Islam of the traditionalist version as is practiced above all in Java). It also appeals to a shared language, heritage, and the shared history of both the pre-colonial Sultanate and resistance to the Dutch (Schulze, 2004: 7; 2006: 242). The GAM would seem to have successfully forged a link (one that is plausible for many inhabitants of the province) between the political and economic marginalization of Aceh's population, on the one hand, and its cultural traditions and national identity, on the other. While it may be right to say that the elements of these traditions and this identity are in part "invented" and that the GAM thus presents itself as the champion of an identity that it has itself created (Sherlock, 2005: 176, 187), this does not in any way alter the fact that after 32 years of armed struggle the conflict hinges on culture.

5.2.2 The Pattani conflict: a religious/linguistic conflict

As in Aceh, the dispute in the South province of Thailand called Pattani⁹ is historically speaking an old one. Its roots go back into the 18th century. About 80% of the population of the three provinces particularly affected by the conflict, namely Narathiwat, Yala and, consists of Sunni Muslims of Malay extraction. Unlike the Buddhist majority of the Thai population, they speak Jawi, a Malay dialect that also predominates on the Malay side of the border (Gilquin, 2005; Bajunid, 2005). These two factors, namely religion and language, form the core of the cultural identity of the Malay/Muslim population in the Southern provinces and distinguish them as a cultural community from the Thai-speaking Buddhist majority population in the kingdom.

The territories of the former Sultanate of Patani on the Northern side of the Thai-Malay border have since the beginning of the 20th century been under the strict administrative control of the central government in Bangkok. Yet the region's cultural traditions have proved to be very resilient to the

⁹ "Pattani" is the official Thai designation for the region used by government agencies in Thailand. "Patani" is the Malay spelling for the region. We cannot go into the politically explosive debate on what spelling is "correct" here.

strong pressure to assimilate. Moreover, the population's historical awareness of it being a member of "Greater Patani" and thus Malay culture persists to this day.

There have been violent disputes between local Muslim actors in the conflict and the central government in Bangkok since 1902, the year when the Kingdom of Siam annexed the hitherto independent Sultanate of Patani. There has been a constant alternation of periods of relative calm and phases of escalating violence. The first secessionary group emerged as early as the 1940s. Above all in the 1960s and 1970s, militant actors fought for secession of the three provinces from Thailand.

Not until the 1980s and 1990s did the violence ebb. At the latest as of 2004 the conflict entered a new phase of escalation, with violence in the Southernmost provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala assuming a scale that justifies talk of a "limited war" in the region. From 1993 (the earliest year for which comparative data is available) until 2000, there was a total of 468 violent incidents, above all violence against state institutions and security forces. Between January 2001 and April 2007 the figure had leapt to 6,965 incidents. From January 2004 to December 2007, or so the Thai deepsouthwatch project reports, attacks or action by the security forces have left more than 7,000 persons injured or dead (Srisompob, 2008). The victims were primarily civilians and were more or less equally spread between the Buddhist and Muslim populations. While the number of victims in the first nine months of 2008 has dropped, the brutality of attacks on the civilian population has intensified. Moreover, the tension between Buddhists and Muslims has escalated at the local level, meaning that the conflict has now been expanded to include a communal aspect.

There is no monocausal explanation for the Pattani conflict, either for its historical dimension or its current shape. Instead, we should distinguish between socio-economic and historico-political factors and those that tend to impact on specific situations only. The former account for the cycle of the conflict as they have countered integration of the Malay/Muslim population into the Thai socio-political system and to this day create a fruitful seedbed for the separatist movement. The latter can help explain the most recent phase of escalation in the conflict cycle.

Be that as it may, the ancient kingdom of Siam always considered itself a society consisting of different cultural groups such as Chinese, Mon, Khmer, Malays, Karen and the inhabitants of Isaan in the North East of the country who largely speak Lao. The situation changed when Field Marshal Phibun Songkram (1938-44 and 1948-57) came to power. Songkram's government nation-building policies forced the assimilation of the kingdom's linguistic and religious minority into a culturally uniform Thai nation (Thanet, 2006: 97). The culture of Central Thailand was held up as a cultural identity and Theravada Buddhism as the national religion (Reynolds, 1989). The central justification for modern Thai nationalism was the reference to a joint religion (Buddhism) and a language (Thai) along with loyalty to a sociopolitical authority (monarchy). This was coupled with the propagation of the Thai language, the encouragement of the Buddhist orders and the symbolic merging of state and Buddhism in the institution of the monarchy (Wyatt, 1969).

The central pillars of this new nationalism were the administration and the military. Symbolic of the creation of the nation was the act of renaming the country, the move from the culturally neutral term "Siam" to "Thailand" (*Muang Thai*) in 1939. The Muslim population of Pattani saw the introduction of compulsory schooling with Thai as the sole teaching language, the abolition of Muslim

holidays, the ban on wearing traditional clothing in public and attempts to abolish Islamic law as an attack on their cultural identity and traditional way of life.

It is only since the 1980s that a moderation of this assimilation policy has become visible. The Muslims were guaranteed the freedom to exercise their religion and establishing mosques and religious schools (*pondoks*) was encouraged by the State. However, a feeling of both cultural and political discrimination continued to prevail on the part of the Muslim Malay population, not least because Muslims remained crassly underrepresented amongst civil servants and in the school system. Although a large number of Muslims do not have sufficient mastery of the Thai language, even today, Jawi has not been recognized as an official language. At the same time, very few of the administrative civil servants, policemen and soldiers posted to the south speak the local dialect. In this context, the arson of state schools and the numerous attacks on teachers and Buddhist monks since 2004 represents more than "only" an instrument of social destabilization and one for weakening state structures. Instead, they should be seen as targeted attacks on the religious and linguistic symbols of the dominant majority culture, the way they are also viewed by the Thai public.¹⁰

However, the politicization of cultural differences between the authorities and the Muslim Malay minority in the South feeds not only on the conflict-torn history of the relationship between Pattani and Siam and the discriminatory policies in evidence up to and into the 1980s. It is also strengthened by socio-economic factors. Accordingly, in many areas a deterioration in the socio-economic indicators relative to the development in the local population's fields of reference is observable – particularly, in the Thai province of Songkhla and the areas on the Malaysian side of the border. Earnings in the region are also unequally distributed to the detriment of the Muslims since Buddhist Thais dominate the administration and Thais of Chinese origin control broad sections of the local economy. This correlates with a vastly over-average poverty rate, considerably worse education opportunities and the broad exclusion of Muslims from the formal work market and the private employment sector outside agriculture.

Another aspect closely related to these factors is the difference in access to natural resources and the existence of an economy of violence that has for decades been closely enmeshed with state and political structures in the region (NRC, 2006; Askew, 2007). The region has moreover been infiltrated by a network of Mafia-like structures. Drugs dealing, arms trafficking and smuggling in the border region close to Malaysia are lucrative sources of income both for local criminals and for the military, the police and local civil servants (Croissant, 2007; Askew, 2007: 28-32).

These historical, economic and political factors explain the conflict potential in the region, but not the escalation in violence over the past years. Firstly, the fact must be taken into consideration that the factors and developments mentioned above are by no means new. Secondly, "ethnic" differences, political disadvantage, cultural discrimination and relative deprivation are, in themselves, insufficient explanations of political violence. Accordingly, the genesis of the most recent escalation phase in this conflict cannot be explained by the above-mentioned factors. Instead, other, situation-dependent factors come into play in this context. These factors are important for understanding the conflict in more ways than one. Firstly, certain developments over the last one and a half decades

¹⁰ Since 2004, more than 60 teachers have been murdered, at least 1600 teachers have left the region and several hundred schools have been closed down for fear of attacks or because of a lack of teacher.

or so have contributed to increasing the cultural divide between Buddhist Thais and Muslim Malays and between the Malays and the Thai state. Secondly, these developments have resulted in a chance structure which favors the mobilization of support by local agitators and the justification of their violence. Three developments are particularly noteworthy: firstly, the increasing importance of Islamism in the region; secondly a change of policy by the Thaksin government when it came into power in February 2001; thirdly, unsuccessful conflict management by this and following governments.

Since the turn of the millennium, Pattani has (once again) been the scene of a highly conflict-ridden situation. Cultural factors are responsible for this in no small measure. And although it is true that socio-economic exclusion, cultural marginalization and the resulting conflict potential can be traced back to the beginnings of Siamese/Thai rule in the early 20th century, it is only the specific mixture of factors in evidence since the start of this decade that has pushed the existing conflict potential into a new escalation phase.

Admittedly, the struggle of separatist groups against the Thai government is superficially concerned with the conflict-laden subject of "secession" – or more exactly, with the question of legitimate political control over the area formerly known as the Sultanate of Pattani. However, on the Malay side both the religious focus and the linguistic aspect serve to generate identity and are subject matter within the conflict. This is also true, albeit to a lesser extent, on the "Thai" side. Quite obviously a large number of the rebels' attacks are targeted at establishments and groups of people that symbolically represent the Buddhist/Thai-speaking majority of society. But on the Thai side, too, signs of a "cultural" interpretation of the conflict are to be found.

Of the three symbolic cultural dimensions isolated as relevant in the concept of this cultural conflict– language, religion, historicity – all three play a role as subjects of conflict. The first two mentioned in particular, form the core of the Muslim Malay population in the conflict region's cultural identity. However, the historical story of their origins and their experiences of the Thai state's national educational policies with their both marginalizing and discriminatory effects until well into the second half of the 20th century were decisive. (Yusuf, 2006).

At the same time, the cultural identity (*kwam pen thai*) and the political self-image of the Thai majority of the population is determined by the three intermeshing elements language (Thai), Theravada Buddhism and the monarchy (Thanet, 2006). As culturally different *khaeck* – even today, the current term for the Muslim Malays in the south – Pattani's Muslims are not included in Thai culture or its political community. Even today, they are largely considered "foreigners" or "outsiders" (which approximates to the literal translation of *khaeck*) by the majority of the population.

Both from a historical perspective and currently, the articulation of this independent identity and the political justification of the violent struggle by the various rebel movements has recourse to linguistic, religious and historical terms and symbols as is demonstrated by the way the groups refer to themselves, their mobilization rhetoric, the targets of their attacks and the avowed objectives of their struggle, although the latter could be described as somewhat diffuse. In this respect, the close interaction of the different cultural components makes it difficult to choose one of them as decisive. However, the best definition of the Pattani conflict would be to characterize it as a religious/linguistic conflict type.

Defining this as a "cultural" conflict does not mean that the conflict was triggered by cultural factors, particularly religious differences. Nevertheless, the actions of those involved take their orientation from cultural paradigms. The politics of the Thai government, seen by the Muslim side as discriminatory and threatening, the real disparities in income and power and other conflict situation are expressed principally in cultural terms. The fact that on top of this political and material factors were originally at the root of the conflict is evident. And although it may be accurate to point out that the specific motivation behind the individuals or groups involved in the conflict, particularly, behind the insurgents, feeds on different factors, including economic and power-political reasons, none of these should be allowed to mask the cultural dimension of the conflict.

5.2.3 Myanmar: the history-related overall constellation of "ethnic" conflicts

As it was in the past, Myanmar¹¹ is currently by far one of the most conflict-torn countries in Asia. Because of the country's long history of conflict, the large number of conflicts and the strongly interwoven, varied constellations of involved parties, Burma's conflict situation is also one of the most complex. Myanmar's conflict scenario can be divided up and seen from two main viewpoints:

- (1) ideological/power policy, i.e., conflicts concerning the distribution of power and the ideological direction of the political and economic system can be distinguished from
- (2) ethno-nationalist conflicts, i.e., conflicts conducted by groups defined by language/religion and with a primarily "micro-nationalist" focus.

Both "conflict images" made their appearance in Myanmar's history simultaneously, prove to have numerous points of contact, and started to become noticeable as long ago as directly after the start of Burma's independence from the British (1948) in a civil war where communist groups and several ethnic groups rebelled against the central government.

Ad 1) The ideological/power-political conflict situation, a non-cultural type of conflict throughout, was initially represented by Burma's communist party (CPB), established in 1939. The CPB played a central role in the resistance against the Japanese occupation and later against British colonial rule as well as representing the dominant opposition to the local regime that was initially democratic and, as of 1962, autocratic. However, the CPB was only to a limited extent involved in the great popular uprising of August 8, 1988 ("8888 uprising") and, with the end of the global East-West conflict in 1989, virtually lost any importance at all.

Another real conflict within this conflict scenario started in 1950, when troops of the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang from the People's Liberation Army in the Chinese province of Yunnan were banished to Indochina and Burma. The Kuomintang remained present in Burma until 1961, controlling parts of the Shan State. And the start of opium cultivation in the country's mountain regions is generally attributed to the presence of the Kuomintang. The cultivation of drugs and drug dealing have proved an important source of financing for various mainly ethnic insurgents. Accordingly, drug cultivation itself has become a source of dispute, sometimes with the consequence that the marketization of the conflicts is so well-developed that the political/idealistic objectives behind them have appeared to recede. The expansion of the black economy that accompanies the cultivation of

¹¹ The name "Myanmar" was introduced in 1989 by the country's government as the official English transcription.

drugs is destabilizing Myanmar and drug dealing has now crossed the border to Thailand, Laos and China and is destabilizing the entire region.

The conflict concerning the democratization of Myanmar can also be viewed as ideological/power-political. In 1990 parliamentary elections were held for the first time in decades. However, the military government formed two years earlier under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)¹² annulled the results because the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the elections. Announced in 1992, the revisions to the Constitution have still not taken place today. In September 2007, the democracy conflict entered a new phase when the dissidents' concerns linked up with the protests by Buddhist monks against economic conditions in Myanmar. However, after only a few days, the protest was forcefully crushed by the military government.¹³

Ad 2) The overall conflict setting within the second *ethno-nationalist conflict scenario* is exceedingly complex, particularly because of the large number of different ethnic groups and the degree of splintering involved amongst their parties and armies. Whereas the country's central plain is inhabited by the Burmese majority of the population – the Bamar represent around 70 percent of the overall population – the "periphery", the mountainous border regions in the west, north and east, are peopled by numerous different ethnic groups with various linguistic preferences. The Bamar are uniformly Buddhist. Some of the minorities practice other religions, for example, the Rohingya (Muslims) and the Karen (in many cases, Christians). The ethnic minorities with the largest numbers are the Shan, representing nine percent of the overall population and the Karen at seven percent.

The ethno-nationalist conflict scenario was already present directly after Burma's independence. And although the first constitution with its federal concept envisaged autonomous status for most ethnic groups even before the abolition of this arrangement in 1962 there was discrimination against the minorities. The first democratic government under Prime Minister U Nu advanced a "nation-building project" aimed at "Bamarization" and "Buddhization" of the entire country (Sai Kham Mong, 2007). This culturally centralist policy, discriminating against the "ethnic minorities" with their linguistic and religious differences on the geographic periphery was continued by the autocratic government and is still valid under the military regime (Steinberg, 2007).

Accordingly, consistent culturalist elements in political policy is one of the factors in the emergence of the ethno-nationalist conflict scenario. This goes hand-in-hand with a second causal factor: the autocratic nature of the government itself. The lack of possibilities for expressing democratic views at either a central or a federal level is causing the "ethnic minorities" to be excluded from any opportunity of participating in the distribution of resources, goods and power in Myanmar (see Smith, 2007). The country's specific political setup thus conditions political and economic marginalization and the cultural discrimination of minority groups. Not the cultural differences per se, but their ap-

¹² Since 1997 State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

¹³ It is a matter for debate whether the ideological/power-political democracy conflicts also displays cultural dimensions. Firstly, there is the matter of the demonstrations by Buddhist monks in fall 2007 and the surrounding of a large number of monasteries and temples. Secondly, the military government continues with the policy of Bamarization and Buddhization from the early days of Burma's independence, making use, amongst other things, of historicizing iconography. The government's centro-cultural efforts tend, however, to influence the ethnic conflicts. And although the historicizing tendencies can definitely be seen as a traditional justification strategy these aspects are not an issue in the democratization conflict. In the same way the visible participation of the Buddhist clergy does not make the conflict religious. The monks' actions had less of a religious dimension than a moral capacity, with their position in the religious structure lending them political authority.

plication as points of reference for the political and military repression of groups who are anyway economically and politically deprived can be cited as one of the central reasons for the ethno-nationalist conflict constellation in Myanmar. We would now like to throw some brief light on this conflict constellation.

In the "primordial" civil war after independence specifically the Karen rose up in South-East Burma at the same time as the CPB. During the civil war, the Karen were supported by the neighboring Mon.¹⁴ Closely related to the Karen are the Karenni. Along with the CPB, the Karen and the Mon, during the civil war, other groups that prominently rebelled were the Rakhine, the Buddhist population in the state of Rakhaing in western Burma (also known as the state of Arakan). The Rohingya are the Muslim population in the state of Rakhaing. The latter have a special status in that they are not recognized as an indigenous minority by Myanmar's government but are dubbed "Bengali immigrants" (see Smith, 2007).

The CPB disintegrated around 1988-9 into numerous rebel organizations with ethnic backgrounds. The most important is the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in the Shan state in the East of Myanmar. In 1989, the UWSA immediately agreed on a ceasefire with the central government and, since then, have been fighting alongside it together with another successor body to the CPB – the National Democratic Alliance Army – Eastern Shan State (NDAA-ESS) against another successor organization the Shan State Army – North (SSA-N), and their allies from the ranks of the Shan. In contrast to the other minority "states", the Wa State cannot be traced back to Burma's original federal constitution (Sai Kham Mong, 2007), but was part of a "trade-off" by the central government which granted the UWSA control over Special Region 2 in the Shan State. The UWSA is especially known for opium cultivation and, since the 1990s, for the manufacture of methamphetamine.

Other organizations established in the 1960s and 1980s plus the relevant armed forces are to be found with the Chins in north-west Myanmar and the Kachin in the north of the country. The most important organizations belonging to the different ethnic groups in Myanmar overall have been summarized in the following table 3.

¹⁴ The Mon are related to the Hmong in neighboring Laos.

Table 3: main organizations in the "ethnic" conflicts in Myanmar

Organization	Ethnic basis	Established	Notes
Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO)	Karen	1947	
Karen National Union (KNU)	Karen	1948	Fight for a Kayin state.
Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)	Karen	1948	Armed wing of the KNU.
Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)	Karen	1994	Since the leadership of the KNU consisted mainly of Christians, Buddhist Karen split off and formed the DKBA. Immediate ceasefire with the government, fight against the KNU.
God's Army	Karen	1997	Ceasefire with the government in 2001.
National Mon State Party (NMSP)	Mon	1958	
Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA)	Mon	1958	Armed wing of the NMSP.
Hongsarwatoi Restoration Party (HRP)	Mon	2001	
Monland Restoration Army (MRA)	Mon	2001	Armed wing of the HRP.
Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP)	Karenni	1955	Fight for a Kayah state.
Karenni Army (KnA)	Karenni	1955	Armed wing of the KNPP.
National United Front for Arakan (NUFA)	Rakhine		Fight for a Rakhaing state.
Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF)	Rohingya		In 1998 united with the RSO to form the ARNO.
Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO)	Rohingya		In 1998 united with the ARIF to form the ARNO.
Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO)	Rohingya	1998	Result of the unification of the RSO with the ARIF.
Wa National Organization (WNO)	Wa		
Wa National Army (WNA)	Wa		Armed wing of the WNO.
United Wa State Army (UWSA)	Wa	1989	Successor organization to the CPB. Immediate ceasefire with the government. Alliance with the NDAA-ESS.
Shan United Army (SUA)	Shan	1965	In 1985 united with the TRA to form the MTA.
Shan State Army (SSA)	Shan		In 1982 united with the SURA to form the TRA.
Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA)	Shan		In 1982 united with the SSA to form the TRA.
Tai Revolutionary Army (TRA)	Shan	1982	Resulted from the unification of the SURA with the SSA. In 1985 united with the SUA to formally MTA.
Muang-Tai Army (MTA)	Shan	1985	Resulted from the unification of the TRA with the SUA. In 1996 ceasefire with the government.

Organization	Ethnic basis	Established	Notes
National Democratic Alliance Army — Eastern Shan State (NDAA-ESS)	Shan	1989	Successor organization to the CPB. Immediate ceasefire with the government. Alliance with the UWSA.
Shan State Army – North (SSA-N)	Shan	1989	Successor organization to the CPB. Alliance with the SSNA and the SSA-S.
Shan State National Army (SSNA)	Shan	1995	Splinter group of the MTA.
Shan State Army – South (SSA-S)	Shan	1996	Splinter group of the MTA.
Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)	Kokang-Chinesen	1989	Successor organization to the CPB. Immediate ceasefire with the government.
Chin National Front (CNF)	Chin	1988	
Chin National Army (CNA)	Chin	1988	Armed Wing of the CNF.
Unabhängigkeitsorganisation der Kachin (KIO)	Kachin	1961	
Kachin Independence Army (KIA)	Kachin	1961	Armed wing of the KIO.

The conflicts that are part of the ethno-nationalist conflict scenario are all facets of a cultural type of conflict: they are all, in a different way and to a different extent, concerned with collective identity, both that of the entire Burmese state and that of the ethnic minorities.

In this respect, a matter of particular interest is the conflict surrounding the UWSA (Kramer, 2007): in this case, drug production does not only play a role as a source of financing, but, in itself, represents a commodity to be defended. The autonomy demanded/achieved for the Wa State is thus of importance not only from the viewpoint of ethnic self-determination but also by economic standards. However, it should be noted that the two objectives coexist: even the strongly marketized UWSA conflict has not lost its cultural/political dimension (see Smith, 2007). In fact, it is a political conflict with three dimensions: an economic dimension, a power-political one and a cultural one.

Most of the ethno-nationalist conflicts in Myanmar, carried on by groups defined by a certain linguistic/religious background can be attributed to the historicist subtype of cultural conflicts. In such cases there is a relationship with a historical background and a firm emphasis on history between the ruling central Bamar with their centralized domain in linguistic, religious and political terms and the peripheral area of ethnic minorities which is splintered for the above-mentioned reasons. The present ethno-nationalist conflict constellation between the center and the periphery is in a certain sense, no more than the continuation of an old "leitmotif" that was observable even before and during the colonial era.

However, the ethno-nationalist conflicts are historicist not only because they produce a "traditional" type of structure in Myanmar, but also because they address the historical narrative – in other words, the "story" behind "history" – they are concerned with the course of the country's long, exceedingly violent history, struggling for political, military, economic and cultural power, i.e., with the course of the conflict itself.

In this respect, the dispute between the Rohingya and the government represents a special case: this conflict is historicist not (only) because it addresses the history of origin, i.e., the (actual or at-

tributed) immigration of the Rohingyas from the Indian region. The Rohingya conflict, similarly to the conflict between the Karen and the government and the dispute between the KNA and the DKBA, also has an explicit religious dimension.

And although it is mainly language and also religion that are central criteria dividing the different ethnic groups, language is hardly relevant in the conflicts and religion plays a role only infrequently. Although the linguistic/religious differences primarily serve to define the participants from the ethnic groups and although the linguistic/religious centralization policies of the Burmese government represent an important original factor in the genesis of the ethno-nationalist conflict scenario, alongside political exclusion and economic deprivation of the minorities, in this conflict scenario language and religion are not generally considered direct and independent subjects of conflict. The long history of conflict in Burma rooted in the pre-modern era (Taylor 2007) and shaped in the colonial days by Great Britain's policy of "divide et impera" (Smith 2007), has thus become, with its different facets, an independent subject of conflict and a focal point for collective identities. The length and intensity of the history of conflict thus serves to superimpose a historicist dimension on the original reasons behind the conflict.

This had finally gone so far that in Myanmar – and here parallels can be drawn, for example with Sri Lanka – the conflict history is no longer only a matter of debate but also a self-perpetuating reason for the conflicts. The original reasons for the conflict have faded – the conflict scenario has become a self-referential, "autopoietic" structure, as it were.

5.3 Counterexamples: conflict management at the regional level and the mediation of cultural conflicts in Malaysia and Singapore

Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia illustrate the profound identity-related conflicts in Southeast Asia that are often extremely resistant to de-escalation efforts. They are representative of the central importance of language, religion and/or historicity for inter-cultural conflicts in the region. They represent the deviant constellations caught up in the conflict over culture and identity.

That said, there are also counterexamples. We encounter some of them in the societies mentioned – for example, the successful accommodation of cultural differences between members of central Thai culture and the Khmer- or Lao-speaking cultural groups in Eastern and Northern Isaan (Brown, 1994).

There are also examples at the interstate level, yet, as indicated above, conflicts in the region are primarily domestic disputes: 74 percent of all conflicts and even 94 percent of all cultural conflicts in Southeast Asia are conducted within states. This is a first indication that the *Association of Southeast Asian Nations* – originally conceived as a security association of several Southeast Asian nations and founded in 1967 at the height of the second Indochina conflict – has proven to be extraordinarily successful in conflict prevention and resolving conflicts between the members of the Association.

This is all the more remarkable given that in this culturally diverse region there is diverse potential for inter-state or transnational conflicts including conflicts over identity. Over four decades after the founding of ASEAN there are unresolved conflicts between the member states: On the whole, they revolve around issues regarding the correct demarcation of borders (e.g., along the land and sea

borders of Thailand and Cambodia, Cambodia and Vietnam) or competing territorial claims such as those of Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines to (parts of) the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea (Dosch, 1998).¹⁵

There are also conflicts, however, over the joint use of natural resources (e.g., dam projects for electricity generation along the Mekong) or the treatment of members of one's own cultural community in neighboring states (e.g., the so-called Khmer Krom / *Khơ-me Crôm*, in other words the indigenous Khmer minority in South Vietnam, and also the frequently discriminating treatment of Vietnamese speaking people in Cambodia (cf. Croissant, Peou et al., 2009) have the potential for conflict. The current conflict between Cambodia and Thailand over the temple ruins of Khao Phra Viharn (Cambodian: Preah Vihear) demonstrate that various contentious interstate issues can potentially erupt into military confrontations.

However, such tensions are the exception and as a rule not related to cultural topics. The example of Khao Phra Viharn/Preah Vihear clarifies this (Chambers, 2009; Croissant & Chambers, 2009). Though superficially a cultural dimension is evident the conflict actually revolves around a Hindu temple complex in the border area between the two states, and claimed by both sides¹⁶. However, a closer look at how the subject of contention is treated by the social and political actors involved reveals that ultimately it is a conflict over political power that pursues specific domestic interests and has more to do with the sharing of power between competing domestic policy actors and their legitimations strategies rather than making problems of identity an issue.

Similarly, in the tensions – ultimately restricted to the diplomatic level –between Malaysia and Thaksin's government in the years 2004-6 over the involvement of Malaysian actors in the conflict in Pattani or what can meanwhile be termed historical conflicts between Singapore and Malaysia in the 1960s, or the Indonesian Konfrontasi politics vis-à-vis Malaysia (1962-6) – there are visible signs of cultural symbols in the conflict communication. Ultimately, however, what we have here are undoubtedly conflicts of interest at the center of which there were specific domestic or regional power and territorial claims.

Especially relevant (precisely as a contrast to the examples discussed previously) are the examples of non-violent conflict management in Malaysia and Singapore. In common with other societies the internal conflicts in these two neighboring Southeast Asian states are highly complex. However, in both cases national policy stands under a "dictate of history" – the need to reconcile latent conflicts between various religious and language communities whose origin is colored by a different history.

As the result of British colonial policy a "plural" society developed in both societies, in which the segmentation of society into two large, internally heterogeneous groups – immigrants and their

¹⁵ Interest in the Spratly Islands can be explained in part from their strategic position on one of the world's most important shipping routes. In addition, they are thought to have substantial oil and natural gas deposits.

¹⁶ Typically enough the conflict escalated following the application of the Cambodian government to have the complex recognized as world cultural heritage by the *United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO).

descendants from the Chinese mainland and the Indian subcontinent, and indigenous Malays – remains the key field of social conflict until today.¹⁷

What Malaysia and Singapore have in common is an agenda of identity conflicts colored by history. What define them are that striking experiences in the past are highlighted as the issues, along with a historicized story or original roots. The visible manifestation of these conflicts is the controversy over the political concept "bumiputera" (also: "bumiputra") – a concept that essentially serves to create an imaginary joint story of origin for the Chinese and Indian immigrants (and their descendants) who largely migrated to the country in the 19th and early 20th century to distinguish them from the Malay-speaking population of Malaysia.¹⁸

While following the colonial era in Singapore the society that developed was primarily of Chinese identity, in the population of which over three-quarters define themselves culturally as Chinese, 14 percent as Malay and some eight percent as Indians, in the territories of the newly-born federation of Malaya¹⁹ an even more complex network of cultural communities developed. For example, in 1968 the bumiputra represented some 48 percent of the population, while Chinese (36) and Indians jointly made up 45 percent. According to the official census in 1999 the bumiputra accounted for just under 58 percent of the population (49% Malay and 8.8% non-Malay bumiputra), while the share of Chinese stood at 24.9 percent and that of Indians seven percent (Embong, 2001: 59).

Both Singapore and present-day Malaysia were hard-hit in the early years by violence between the cultural groups – in Singapore between Malay and Chinese (July and September 1964) and in Malaysia during the Communist insurgency (1948-1960/1989) and the "racial riots" of 1969. In the last ten years or so Malaysia has experienced a rise in local tensions – especially between Malay and Indians. Increasingly Chinese and Indians (but also bumiputras) feel threatened by Islamization trends in Malaysia's politics (Chin, 2007). Since then, however, in both countries potential for conflict between the cultural groups has been civilized to the extent that in the past four decades there have been no significant outbreaks of intercultural violence.

What is remarkable is that the political elite in both nations have applied quite different methods of intercultural conflict management.

In Malaysia, the political, economic and social relations of the various sections of the population continue to be guided by a formula that essentially served as the basis for the constitutional com-

¹⁷ The term "plural society" was introduced by British colonial administrator John Furnivall 1944 and related primarily to the relationship of the various "ethnic groups" (Europeans, indigenous Malays, immigrant sections of the population and "minorities") in the British colonial regions of Southeast Asia (Furnivall, 1970: 186). While politically these groups are formally united by an order, in actual fact they do not form a social or political community. Since nation-building in young post-colonial states is achieved by resorting to myths of the individual groups within the "plural society", nation-building leads to an open resolution of identity conflict ("anarchy", Furnivall 1944: 469).

¹⁸ The term comes from the Sanskrit *bhumiputra* ("son of the earth"). The bumiputra encompass Malays and other Malay-Polynesian sections of the population in Malaysia, who belong to Islam (Malay, Javanese, Bugis, Minang) There is contention over whether the term also covers non-Malay natives such as the Orang Asli (mainland Malaysia) and indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak. The bumiputras does not include the Chinese and Indian ethnic group, precisely the one it is designed to dissociate from. Just to what extent the discussion revolves around the perceived story of origin rather than the actual geographic origin is demonstrated by the fact that at the time of independence (1957) an estimated 75 percent of the Chinese and 65 percent of the Indians were born on the area of the Federation of Malaya (Crouch 1996).

¹⁹ The country was granted independence under the name Federation Malaya in 1957. In 1963, a new federation was established under the name Malaysia, which encompassed the Federation Malaya but also the British crown colonies of Singapore, North Borneo (today: Sabah and Sarawak). Singapore left the Federation in 1965.

promise of 1957 ("The Bargain") and can be expressed briefly as follows: In exchange for being granted nationality and the full cultural and economic rights of the Chinese and Indians explicitly the political dominance of the bumiputra and implicitly their cultural pre-eminence was established. In the social and cultural area this formula established an arrangement of "communal compartmentalization": the preservation of particular cultural identities and traditions through the division of cultural communities that allowed symbolically established privileges for the Malay-Muslim bumiputra).²⁰

In other words: the idea was to forego assimilation strategies destined to create a new, "pan-Malay" cultural identity in favor of an integrationist strategy of multiculturalism (Hefner, 2001). This formula but also the national ideology of "Rukunegara" (1970) guaranteed the protection of non-Malay interests and simultaneously recognized the need of the Malay population for recognition of their identity as the "hereditary" population of Malaysia as well as the attendant right to political preeminence²¹. The integrative force of this strategy was bound to the ability to duty-bind the Malay, Chinese and Indian elites and political representatives of the various "ethnic" groups to participate in an inter-ethnic government alliance (up to 1969: Parti Perikatan, "Alliance"; since 1973: Barisan Nasional, "National Front").

The strategy of deescalating cultural conflicts in Singapore differs in key points from the approach applied in Malaysia. Singapore has promoted a policy of "citizenship" and cultural pluralism, which aimed explicitly at the promotion of a culturally neutral nationality conception and the exclusion of cultural domains from the political realm. Singapore's policy of multi-culturalism was to a large extent and over a long period a policy of state promoted secularism and the privatization of religion and language. This approach was expressed amongst other things in the promotion of English as the commercial language and lingua franca in Singapore, not to mention the Religious Harmony Act of 1990 (Hefner, 2001: 38).

Admittedly, in the past the "citizen multi-culturalism" (ibid.) Singaporean style that did not consider language or religion was not without resort to particularistic cultural elements – such as the "Speak Mandarin" campaign (1979), the promotion of "religious knowledge" education in public and private schools as an attempt "to provide the cultural ballast to with-stand the stresses of living in a fast changing society" (Strait Times, March 15, 1979, quoted in Chua, 1995: 27) or the promotion of so-called "Asian values" and "shared values" in the early 1990s in which a fair number of observers detected a Chinese or "Confucian bias" (Chua, 1995).

As such, the multi-culturalism policy in Singapore can be described as a strategy that relies on legal instruments, monetary incentive schemes and the exertion of influence via the education system that borrows elements of Chinese culture both subtly but also directly – or as Brown (1994) puts it: an "assimilationist policy of amalgamation". Comparable with the Malaysian "Barisan Nasional" in Singapore since 1965 the People's Action Party has assumed the role of mediator between the cultural communities either directly or via its social organizations.

²⁰ These privileges not only extend to the political realm but also – since the systematic promotion of the economic situation of the Malay came into force as part of the New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1971 – business life, not to mention the cultural area. Consequently, Islam is Malaysia's official state religion and the King (Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy) is elected from the ranks of Muslim sultans.

²¹ Following the riots of 1969 Rukunegara was intended to create a "basic consensus on communal issues by establishing principles that could be invoked to restrain the more extreme demands of ethnic chauvinists" (Means 1991: 12).

Finally, it can be argued that in both cases the key to successful management lies in potential (and virulent) cultural conflicts under the conditions of a plural societies in two areas:

- The "invention" and realization of a conception of "multicultural citizenship" (Hefner) based on the acceptance of cultural differences, which attempts to mitigate its political conflict potential by way of a compromise founded on integration through accommodation (Malaysia) or amalgamation (Singapore).
- The pronounced integrative capacity and commitment capacity of mutually committed partial elites and representatives of various cultural groups and identities in the guise of political alliances (Malaysia) or "ethnic corporatism" (Singapore).

Until now this combination of political central ideas and political action has proven in both cases – notwithstanding all the challenges – to be extremely successful. However, in both societies there is a price to pay. In Malaysia it is "differentiated citizenship" (Parekh, 1991) – an institutionalized differentiated treatment of the citizens based on descent (which often but by no means always correlates with language and religion) and subjugation of individual rights in favor of group rights. In Singapore the promotion of a Singaporean identity based on "shared values" is accompanied by "conservative statism" (Hefner, 2001: 44), which allows less scope for autonomous civilian societies, individual cultural self-determination and values that lie outside what the state permits and regulates. Until now it seems as if both societies are willing to pay this price.

6 Conclusion

This study on the cultural dimensions of Asian and Southeast Asian conflicts has presented a series of central findings. For example, by global comparison it can be said that Asia is a region particularly prone to conflicts. There is a clear predominance of inner-state conflicts over identity. What needs to be emphasized is the fact that the conflict landscape is characterized by pronounced domestic conflicts of low violence over identity that began in the past and are of an enduring nature". The number of "ethnically" colored conflicts is stagnating while religious-ideological conflicts are gaining in importance.

On the actor side, conflicts in Asia are shaped by the dominance of "ethnic" conflict actors. They are particularly frequently involved in violent conflicts and dominate both in the cultural but also the non-cultural spectrum of the conflict. While the relevance of leftist-ideological defined actors has declined considerably the relevance of religiously defined conflict actors has increased by the same proportion as the importance of the religious conflict topics they support.

Compared with the rest of Asia, Southeast Asia is subject to an above-average number of cultural conflicts. The fact that the region accounts for such a high proportion of cultural conflicts in Asia cannot be explained by particular susceptibility of the culturally heterogeneous region to identity conflicts but from a historical perspective is the consequence of a generally high level of conflicts.

That said, in Southeast Asia it is not possible to identify a culturalization of conflicts in the sense of a move away from non-cultural to cultural conflicts. Rather the identity conflicts in Southeast Asian states seem to be very profound and as such are frequently highly resistant to deescalation strate-

gies. That said, they are almost exclusively of an internal nature and do not extend to inter-state relations.

All of this makes one thing clear: Asia and Southeast Asia in particular have a large potential for internal and interstate conflicts over culture and identity. But the states of the region also have an extraordinary potential for ensuring an enduring, peaceful coexistence of the numerous religious, linguistic and other culturally distinct groups. As such, the nature of conflicts in Asia and in particular in Southeast Asia hardly serves to prove Huntington's famous theory of the "clash of civilizations" (1993). The struggle between diverse cultures is not the driving force behind international tensions in Southeast Asia. Analysis has shown that the politically relevant conflict lines within many Asian and Southeast Asian societies do not run primarily along religious but along other cultural divide lines. The severity of some conflicts and the parallelism of religion, language and historicity tends to disguise the fact that the relevant issues of conflict are not of a religious but often of a history-related or religious-language ("ethnic") nature.

Admittedly, the examples of cultural conflicts cited here are all located in linguistically and religiously heterogeneous societies. But not all culturally fragmented societies are particularly affected by conflicts. Quantitative studies of the correlations of political conflicts with cultural diversity – operationalized say via indicators of language–religious fragmentation – demonstrate for Asia and elsewhere that a high religious heterogeneity would seem to some extent to impregnate against the violent conducting of conflict. Our findings (Croissant et al., 2009) and others (Collier & Hoefler, 1998, 2004; Ellingsen, 2000; Hegre et al., 2001) of quantitative conflict research to date support this theory that while high religious fragmentation increases the number of cultural actors and the potential areas of conflict – the risk of violent internal confrontations decreases.²²

Furthermore, studies based on a large number of cases which examine "ethnic" and cultural conflicts both in Asia and worldwide demonstrate that aside from cultural variables other factors of a political (type of regime), economic ("resource curse") and demographic ("Youth Bulge") nature have an equal impact on the probability of conflicts.

Consequently, cultural structures are significant for settling conflicts; however, they do not determine the development of intercultural relationships. The cultural diversity of the region and its societies offers both challenges and chances for peaceful conflict solution strategies based on understanding and dialog. The non-violent handling of cultural tensions in Singapore and Malaysia and the fact that culture at the interstate level in Southeast Asia hardly has any relevance for conflicts, but rather within ASEAN forms of a joint identity creation are recognizable (Schuck, 2008), clarifies that cultural diversity and conflicts within states and state regions in Asia need not necessarily take on violent forms.

²² In other words, contrary to the popular concept there is no linear connection between linguistic diversity and conflict intensity in a country ("the more linguistic groups the greater the number of conflicts"). Rather, it seems to be the case that from a certain level of linguistic diversity societies tend more towards violent conflicts, but beyond this threshold the number and size of language groups is not a good predictor of conflict. Similarly, a non-linear connection can also be detected with regard to religious fragmentation: Societies with a high level of fragmentation are not affected by violent conflicts at all, while societies with a more average level of fragmentation are more strongly affected, on the whole than those with lower heterogeneity. And as in other regions, the same can be said in particular for military conflicts.

These examples make clear the importance of sub-regional alliances and the strategies of Malaysian accommodation and Singaporean amalgamation as possible complements to the American assimilation and German (European?) "non-interlocking multi-culturalism" as mechanisms of conflict mediation in intercultural contexts. Culture might be fate, to take up a theory of Singapore's former Premier Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Cultural conflict is not.

7 Bibliography

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