

Radicalisation, Terrorism and Democratisation in Southeast Asia

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Introduction

In the past five decades or so, Southeast Asian societies experienced multiple transformations, which continue to have a deep impact on the social fabric. The region has been home of some of the most impressive success stories of economic growth and human development in the post-World War II period. Starting in Singapore in the early 1970s and followed by Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, the region as a whole achieved and sustained a remarkable rate of economic growth, faster than in any other regional grouping in the world in the same period, except for Northeast Asia. In the 1990s and 2000s, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia also made significant progress in terms of economic growth and human development. In the 2010s, even Myanmar has begun to recover from 50 years of military-imposed desolation (Coxhead 2018).

Growth and modernisation have improved the livelihood of hundreds of millions of Southeast Asians. At the same time, however, the “pursuit of rushed development” has resulted in a “compressed modernity” that has “strained the social fabric of the societies” and “neglected the democratic process” (Dragolov, Koch and Larsen 2018:100). For sure, Southeast Asia has seen transitions from authoritarian rule to democratic governance in recent decades and the number of democracies increased from zero in 1975 to four in 2005 (Croissant and Bünte 2012). This said, there is a growing concern that – after a period of political liberalisation and of democratic opening – democracy is backsliding in Southeast Asia as countries such as Cambodia, the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, and Indonesia exemplified a continued decay of democratic institutions, rights, freedoms and norms in the past ten years, or so (Croissant 2019).

In addition to socio-economic modernisation and political liberalisation, a third trend has shaped regional trajectories in recent decades. According to many analysts, Southeast Asia also became a breeding ground for militant Islam and “jihadist structures” with an international backing emerged throughout the region (Kurlantzick 2016). Terrorist groups in

Southeast Asia have been joining ranks with the so-called “Islamic State” (IS) since 2014 (Abuza and Clarke 2019). The five-month long fighting between Philippine security forces and Islamist militants affiliated with IS around the city of Marawi on the Mindanao Island in 2017 demonstrate what Islamist militants are capable of (Tigno 2018). According to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), there have been a total of 873 terrorist incidents in Southeast Asia in 2018, with 619 people killed and another 886 wounded, though not all of them can be attributed to Islamist militancy (START 2019).

Although conflict research has been dealing with intra-state conflicts in Southeast Asia for a long time, research on political radicalisation and terrorism in the region is of a more recent origin. Much of the literature on radicalisation focuses on Islamist extremism and jihadist terrorism, though many groups involved in the numerous ethno-nationalist or ideology-driven conflicts in Southeast Asia do not meet the standard definitions of terrorism (Croissant and Barlow 2007). As in other regions, the debate over so-called “counter-radicalization policies” (della Porta, 2018:462) brought about “the emergence of government-funded industries of advisors, analysts, scholars, entrepreneurs and self-appointed community representatives” (Kundani 2012:3). Despite its popularity, academic researchers find it hard to agree on what the concept of “radicalisation” actually means and on what causes radicalisation in general; therefore, our knowledge about the effectiveness of different measures of counter-radicalisation remains deficient, to a considerable extent.

In recent years, a strand of research has emerged which, in different ways, asks whether there is a causal link between democracy and the occurrence of terrorism. For example, Abidie (2006), Chenoweth (2013) and Magen (2018) investigate whether democracies are less vulnerable to the threat of terrorism than other types of regime and whether democracy has built-in advantages in preventing large-scale political radicalisation. Other authors, such as Huq (2018), examine possible causal paths along which acts of terrorism might lead to a decline in democratic practices and, related to this, how democratic recession deepens problems of political radicalism and armed violence.

What is the relationship between radicalisation into terrorism, democratisation and democratic backsliding in Southeast Asia? Building on recent contributions in the field of comparative politics and conflict studies, I argue that in parts of Southeast Asia, the rise of ethno-religious radicalism and political militancy correlates with the emergence of incomplete or electoral democracy and is a consequence of what I describe as the vicious cycle of political radicalisation and democratic backsliding. The

rest of my analysis proceeds in five steps. In Section 2, I clarify my key concepts and develop my theoretical argument. The following Section 3 provides a brief overview of the nature and recent trends in terrorist activities in the region and analyses patterns of democratisation in Southeast Asia. The fourth part of my chapter investigates Southeast Asian government responses to radicalisation. Furthermore, this section examines the causal mechanisms that link government responses to the occurrence of radicalisation and terrorism within a polity to that polity's democratic decline. The final section summarises the findings and presents some tentative conclusions.

Groundwork: Some Definitions

It is helpful to begin by clarifying three key terms – radicalisation, democracy, and democratic backsliding. Each is highly contested, in part because each depends not just on empirical, but on normative criteria.

Radicalisation

Recent reviews of the state-of-the art in terrorism and social movement studies together present several dozens of definitions of radicalisation (Schmid 2013; della Porta 2018). Yet, recent conceptual debates seem to converge around a few common themes, which suggest that radicalisation:

- a) Takes place at the micro-level of the individual, but interacts with conditions at the meso-levels of social groups, movements or organizations, and the macro-levels of the broader society;
- b) Denotes the adoption of some form of “non-moderate ideologies” (della Porta 2018) or worldviews by individuals, which legitimate the use of violent means as ultima ratio;
- c) Involves a process that stems from “complex and contingent sets of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutional actors” and which takes place “during encounters between social movements and authorities, in a series of reciprocal adjustments” (Malthaner 2011);
- d) Involves some element of repressive policing of protest or everyday experience of physical confrontation by some individuals, or solidarisation of individuals who do not have such personal experiences with groups that are considered to be victimised.

The Italian political sociologists Donatella della Porta, considered as the leading authority in social movement studies and contentious politics, defines radicalisation narrowly as a “process of escalation from nonviolent to increasingly violent repertoires of action that develops through a complex set of interactions unfolding over time” (2018:462). According to her understanding, radicalisation

“takes place during encounters between social movements and authorities, in a series of reciprocal adjustments. Repeated clashes with police and political adversaries gradually, and almost imperceptibly, heighten radicalism, leading to a justification for ever more violent forms of action. In parallel, radical groups interact with a supportive environment, in which they find logistical help as well as symbolic rewards” (op. cit.:463).

In contrast to della Porta’s “relational perspective” of radicalisation, the Dutch terrorism scholar Alex P. Schmid offers a definition that is more closely embedded in the scholarly discourse on terrorism. Based on an in-depth literature review, he “re-conceptualizes” radicalisation as

“an individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarisation, normal practices of dialogue, compromise and tolerance between political actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favour of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict-waging. These can include either (i) the use of (non-violent) pressure and coercion, (ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism or (iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes. The process is, on the side of rebel factions, generally accompanied by an ideological socialization away from mainstream or status quo-oriented positions towards more radical or extremist positions involving a dichotomous world view and the acceptance of an alternative focal point of political mobilization outside the dominant political order as the existing system is no longer recognized as appropriate or legitimate” (Schmid 2013:18).

While narrow definitions of radicalisation discussed here have the advantage of being able to make a clear distinction between “radicalised” and (not yet) “non-radicalised”, Gaspar and co-authors (2018) criticise that those concepts treat the use of violence as a defining feature of radicalisation. They argue that such a narrow understanding leads scholars to overlook long-term processes of (nonviolent) radicalisation leading up to violent behaviour. They argue that a distinction should be made between radicalisation *into* violence, radicalisation *of* violence and radicalisation *without* violence. Furthermore, they posit that radicalisation is not necessarily related to challenging of or fighting against an existing political order. Gaspar et al. (2018:7) therefore speak more generally of “normative orders”

against which radicalisation is directed, whereby this order can be political, social, economic, religious or otherwise.

Democracy

The age-old political science debate on what democracy is or should mean fills more than one library. For the purpose of this study, it is sufficient to acknowledge that actual empirical research on democratisation relies on a procedural understanding of democracy. Still, the debate is whether a minimal and essentially electoral understanding of democracy (“polyarchy”; cf. Dahl 1971) is sufficient or if democracy should also include the presence of more substantial elements, such as the rule of law and constitutionalism (Croissant and Merkel 2019). The analysis at hand builds on the differentiation of four types of political regimes – two democratic ones and two authoritarian ones – that have been proposed by scholars who are part of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg 2018). The two types of democratic regimes are the electoral and the liberal democracy. In “electoral democracies”, democratically elected “rulers are de-facto accountable to citizens through periodic elections” (Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg 2018:4). Following the V-Dem operationalisation of electoral democracy, only those regimes qualify as democracies that regularly hold sufficiently free and fair, de-facto multiparty elections (ibid.). In addition to fulfilling the criteria for electoral democracy, a “liberal democracy” is characterised by an additional set of individual and minority rights beyond the electoral sphere. Core components of a liberal democracy include legislative and judicial oversight over the executive providing checks and balances, as well as the protection of individual liberties, including access to, and equality before, the law (ibid.). Because the electoral democracies lack the liberal qualities of a liberal democracy, some scholars describe those political regimes also as “illiberal democracies” (Zakaria 1997; Merkel 2004).

In contrast, autocracies do not regularly hold sufficiently free and fair, de-facto multiparty elections. Again, there are two types of political regimes. The first type of “electoral autocracies” includes political regimes in which the chief executive and seats in the national legislature are subject to direct or indirect multiparty elections (Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg 2018). However, such elections are either unfree or unfair or both (Schedler 2006; Howard and Roessler 2006:367) and governments systematically abuse their powers and insulate their position against political challengers by imposing disadvantages on opposition parties, curtailing

the development of civil society and the media, and suppressing political dissent. In case of the second type (“closed autocracies”), the chief executive and the legislature are either not subject to elections, or there is no de-facto competition in elections such as in one-party regimes. That is, electoral autocracies are nondemocratic political regimes in which there are regular elections with limited competition, whereas in closed autocracies, the electoral arena is closed for competitors of the ruling party, or there are no national popular elections at all.

Democratic Backsliding

Finally, this study builds on Waldner and Lust’s definition of democratic backsliding as “a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime” (Waldner and Lust 2018:95). At the most general level, backslides are different from “autocratic reversals” (Haggard and Kaufman 2016) in that the decline in the quality of democracy is not required to coincide with regime change from (electoral or liberal) democracy to (electoral or closed) autocracy. Heuristically, we can think of democratic backsliding in the following way: Backslides are constituted by (a series of) signal events, such as restrictions on the freedom of the press or a removal of an incumbent by force, whose initiators can be either ruling elites, opposition politicians, the military or other actors with actual “veto power”. While instances of coups and executive aggrandisement can arguably only be the consequence of purposeful behaviour of the initiators, the same may not hold for reductions in democratic quality brought about by large-scale (ethnic) violence, political scandals or the intervention of international actors.

Conceptualizing a Potential Radicalisation-Democracy Nexus

As Axel P. Schmid (2013:1) notes, “the causes of radicalization are as diverse as they are abundant”. Much of the literature has focused on the micro-level of individual radicalisation. Such a narrow approach, however, deflects attention from the role of a wider spectrum of factors at the meso-level of the relevant radical milieu or network as the “space where micro-dynamics of radicalization take place” (della Porta 2018:4645) as well as the macro-level of the domestic and international political and socio-economic context. At the macro-level, potential explanatory factors include

the perceived closing of political opportunities as a result of repressive policies or cooptation strategies of governments; the polarisation of public opinion and party politics and the formation of counter-movements; tense minority-majority relations in a society; and missing socioeconomic opportunities for whole sectors of a society which can lead to de-legitimation of an existing order (Schmid 2013; Neumann, 2013; Süß and Aakhunzaada 2019).

Democracy and Terrorism

While a comprehensive analysis of radicalisation in Southeast Asia would have to take into account conditions for as well as dynamics of radicalisation that leads to political violence in general and to terrorism in particular, at all three levels of analysis, the aim of this paper is more modest. Its focus is on the relationship between radicalisation and terrorism on the one hand and democracy on the other. While most conflict scholars analyse how democracy affects international and, importantly, domestic terrorism, which is the far more common type, an emerging literature in comparative politics has turned its attention to the question of how terrorism affects democracy and, especially, democratic decay. With regard to the first strand, that is the impact of type of political regime on the occurrence of terrorist groups and the probability of terrorist incidents, there are two theoretical arguments, which posit opposite expectations (cf. Li 2005; Chenoweth, 2013; Gaibullov, Piazza, and Sandler 2017; Magen 2018). A first, dominant view until the late 1990s, posit that democracy encourages terrorism because more open and more liberal democratic regimes are more attractive targets for terrorists compared to less open and more repressive regimes (Eubank and Weinberg 1994, 2006). Since the early 2000s, a second, opposing view, has emerged. It argues that democracy reduces the risk for radicalisation and domestic or transnational terrorism, because democracy is a “method of nonviolence” (Rummel 1997): the openness of the democratic process and democratic rules of nonviolent conflict resolution incentivise groups in democratic societies to pursue nonviolent alternatives rather than costly terrorist activities to further their interest (Eyerman 1998; Abadie 2006).

Radicalisation into Terrorism and Democratic Backsliding

Academic works in the second strand of research are of a more recent origin. Building on the developing literature of democratic recession, decay, erosion or backsliding, some scholars focus on potential direct or indirect effects of terrorism on the democratic quality of political regimes. Assuming that in a polarised political environment not only non-state actors, but also the state can radicalise, scholars such as Azis Huq (2018) posit that the occurrence of terrorism within a polity can have corrosive effects on the democratic politics of that polity. There are at least three causal paths through which political radicalisation into terrorism might conduce to the democratic recession (Huq 2018). In the first two mechanisms, terrorism has a direct and immediate effect on the quality of democracy, while the third mechanism is more indirect.

First, an increase in terrorist attacks – especially when they are linked to a greater lethality and perceived by citizens as an immediate and massive threat to their individual security – creates a “window of opportunity” for so-called “executive aggrandizement” (Bermeo 2016). This causal path is most closely aligned with the weakening of judicial and legislative constraints on the executive, which constitute horizontal accountability (*accountability dimension*).

Second, the threat of terrorist attacks and fear of terrorism (let alone actual attacks) among democratic publics give governments incentives to weaken civil liberties and make it easier for authorities to intrude into private spheres (Magen 2018:122). This is especially the case when counter-radicalisation policies and strategies of terrorism prevention involve the introduction of new powers to surveil, investigate and detain people, a weakening of rule-of-law guarantees of the rights of physical integrity (i.e. freedom from torture), and a reconfiguration of the state’s repressive capabilities. The later may specifically target civil liberties, including freedom of expression, association (especially religious organisations) and freedom from internet censorship. This second causal path is most closely aligned with freedom of expression and association, the existence of alternative sources of information, deliberation and civil liberties (*rights and freedoms dimension*).

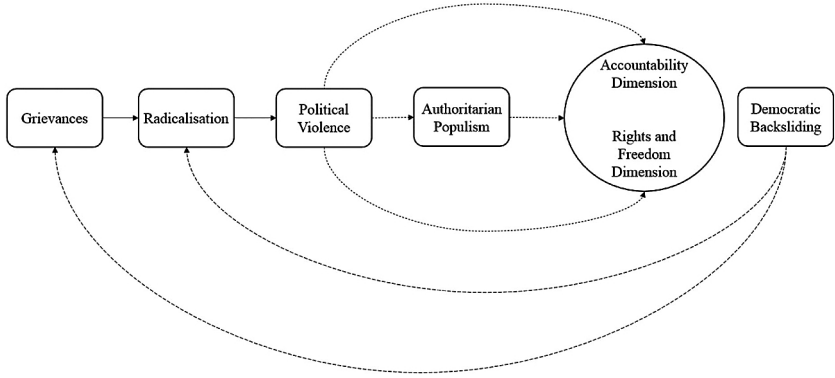
The third causal pathway between terrorism and democratic decline concerns a more indirect effect of terrorism on democratic backsliding. Particularly during times of rising political radicalisation and deteriorating public order and security, democratic publics become vulnerable to a variety of manipulations by democratic leaders. The fear-generating, violent nature of terrorisms can be a driver of populist nationalism, authoritarian

populism, and support for illiberal policies.¹ As Huq (2018:478) notes, the “eruption of terrorism, on this account, conduces to a new style of populist politics in the medium term. In turn, politicians selected by dint of their populist appeals tend to be averse to the main tenets of democracy.” This relationship can generate a medium-term dynamic that run concurrent to the process of anti-democratic institutional transformation discussed under the first and second mechanism (*ibid.*).

In fact, according to a recent study by Yasha Mounk and Jordan Kyle (2018), the backsliding of liberal democracy in many countries around the world is a consequence (at least to some extent) of the rise of authoritarian populist parties, leaders and governments. The two scholars built a global database of populism identifying 46 populist leaders or political parties that held executive office across 33 democratic countries between 1990 and 2018. They find that populists in government are about four times more likely than non-populist ones to harm democratic institutions. Particularly, populists frequently erode checks and balances on the executive: more than half of all populist leaders in the period 1990 to 2018 amended or rewrote their countries’ constitutions, and many of these changes extended term limits or weakened checks on executive power. Often, they aim to manipulate the rules of the electoral game in order to create an un-leveled playing field that disadvantages opposition parties and their candidates. The evidence also suggests that populists are prone to attack press freedom, civil liberties and political rights (*ibid.*).

1 In this chapter, I follow Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s conceptualisation of populism as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017:6). There is a large variation among populist movements, leaders and their thin ideologies. The most common differentiation is the one between “left” (economic) and right (authoritarian or xenophobic) populism. One common key feature of authoritarian, nationalist and right of the center or far-right populisms around the globe is the law-and-order appeal, usually linked to some kind of framing of minorities and foreigners as the “dangerous other”.

Figure 1: *The Vicious Cycle of Radicalisation and Democratic Backsliding*



Source: the author.

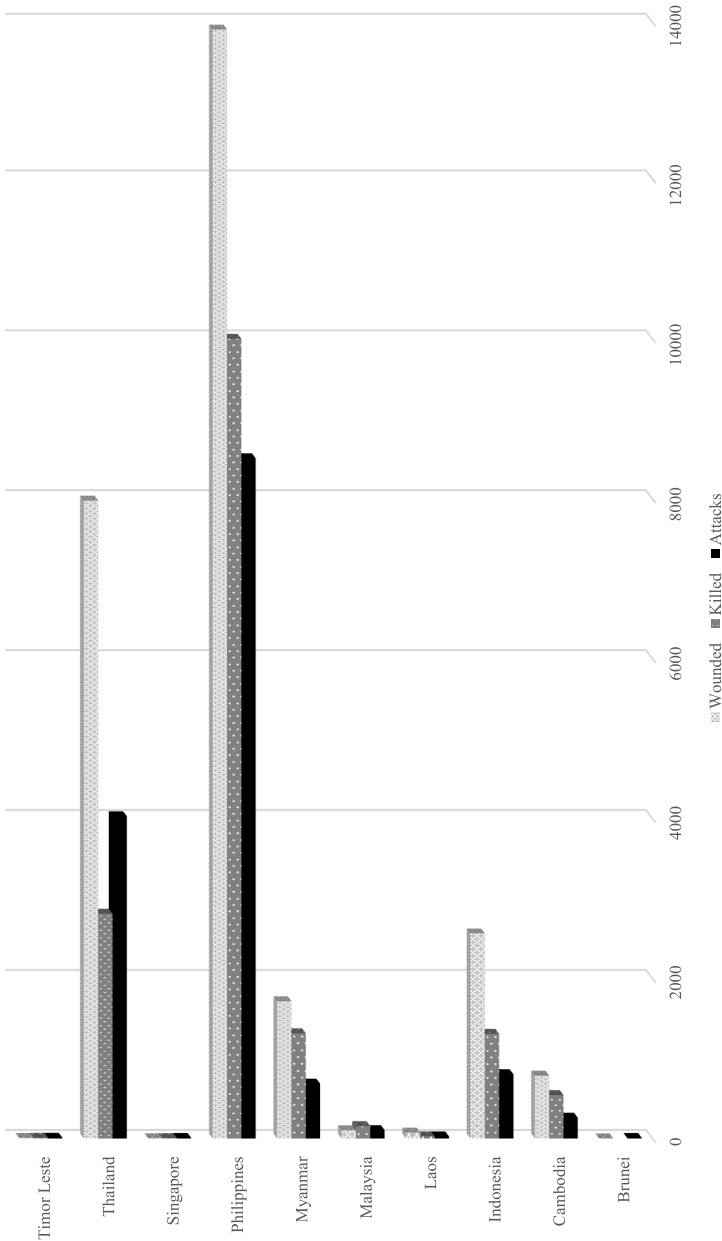
Figure 1 summarises these considerations in the form of a process model. It is referred to in the following as the “vicious cycle of radicalization and democratic backsliding”. This model starts at the point where political radicalisation into (terrorist) violence takes place. Socioeconomic or political grievances triggered a process of individual radicalisation and an escalation from nonviolent to increasingly violent repertoires of action that develops through a complex set of interactions unfolding over time. Terrorist incidents and/or fear of terrorist incidents is then countered by illiberal, repressive or anti-democratic measures (involving perhaps the rise of populist movements and leaders) which result in executive aggrandisement, repressive security policies and/or restrictions on the freedom of the press and internet media that cause democratic backsliding. This in turn initiates a negative feedback loop or a kind of slippery slope process, which increases grievances and contributes to further radicalisation.

Radicalisation, Terrorism and Democracy in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia has a tragic history of political radicalisation and long before the rise of Islamic militancy, large areas of the region had been hotspots of terrorism, insurgency or other forms of political violence. Although most groups involved in the numerous ethno-nationalist or ideology-driven conflicts in Southeast Asia do not meet the standard definitions of terrorism, these violent conflicts have contributed to the rise of terrorist groups in recent years in two ways. First, some Islamist terrorist organisa-

tions such as the Philippine Abu Sayyaf Group evolved out of an ongoing, armed conflict. Secondly, the shifting kaleidoscope of conflicts and their socioeconomic and political consequences create the appropriate operational environment for local and transnational terrorist groups (Croissant and Barlow 2007). Even though radicalisation in individual countries has consequences for the entire region and beyond, a closer glance at the data show that terrorism is concentrated in a small number of Southeast Asian nations: the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand (especially the three southernmost provinces) and, since 2010, Myanmar (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Hotspots of Terrorism in Southeast Asia, 1970-2018



Source: the author based on data from START (2019).

Research on conflict and terrorism in Southeast Asia has noted that most of the terrorist organisations traditionally operating in the regional theatre were local in nature and well entrenched in their social, political and economic environment, including major Islamist terrorist organisations such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Meanwhile, analysts see a shift in what is driving Islamist attacks in Southeast Asia. Where they often used to be triggered by local factors, fighters are now inspired by events in the Middle East, i.e. Syria and Iraq (CRS 2017). Members of al Qaeda-linked groups such as JI and Jamaah Ansaryusy Syariah (JAS) have become more dormant in recent years, but these groups still pose a threat (Taufiqurrohman et al. 2018; Nahdohdin et al. 2019). In contrast, IS-friendly groups, smaller cells and radicalised individuals have become increasingly threatening in the region since the mid-2010s. These include especially active groups such as the Jamaah Ansharud Daulah which is the largest Indonesian pro-Islamic State (IS) entity; another Indonesian pro-IS group, Jamaah Ansharul Khilafah, and the Lion of Allah. Similarly, the terrorist threat landscape of the Southern Philippines is also dominated by IS-linked groups, which includes the Maute Group or IS-Lanao (the Filipino state's main opponent in the siege of Marawi), Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and the ASG. While mainly recruiting locals, Islamist radical groups in the southern Philippines also attracts foreign fighters from Malaysia and Indonesia as well as non-Malays from Northern Africa and South Asia (ibid.; Chalk 2016).

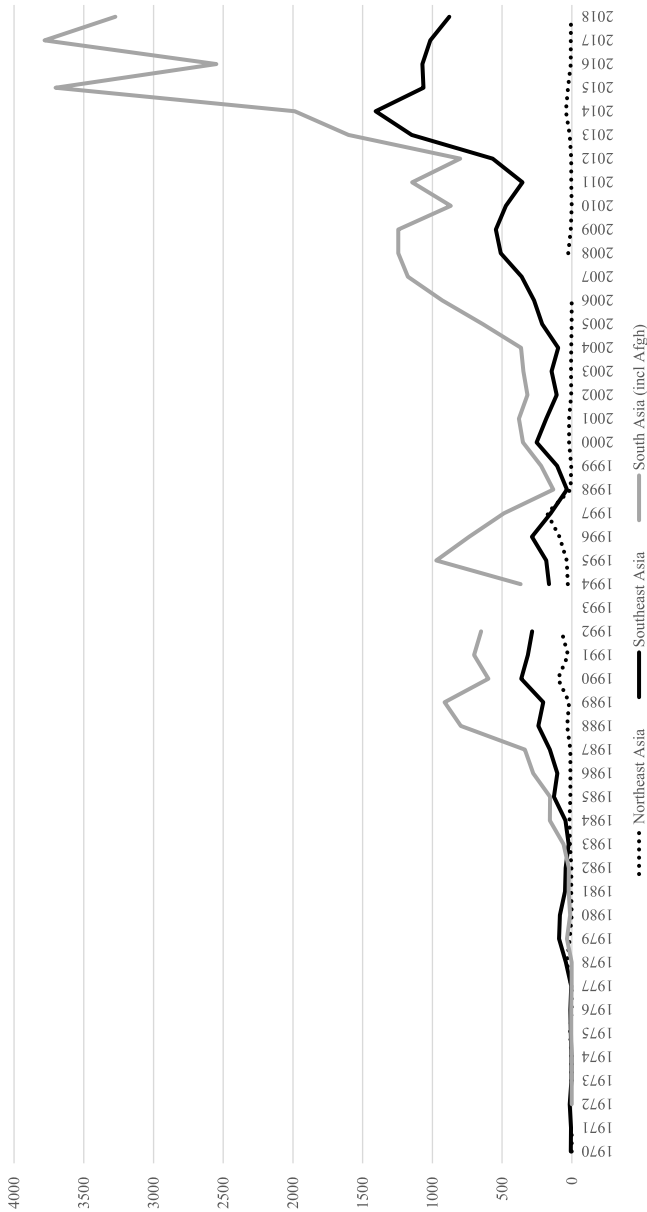
Malaysia also faces both homegrown and external terrorist threats (Nahdohdin et al. 2019). Local radicals include Malaysian nationals and returning fighters who have travelled to Iraq, Syria, and the Philippines and an increasing number of radicalised youth and women. Foreign terrorist fighters enter Malaysia especially from Indonesia and the Philippines, but also from the Middle East and South Asia (Barrett 2017).

Even in Myanmar, not previously known for Islamist radicalisation, militant groups may be forming. Particularly the persecution of the Rohingya and the refugee crisis, which has played out along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, has brought a spike in transnational criminal and terrorist activities in recent years: almost fifty per cent of all terrorist attacks (and an even higher share of fatalities) shown in Figure 2 took place in the 2010s. Related to this, transnational groups such as IS and, especially, al Qaeda, are making attempts at recruiting Rohingya refugees (Nahdohdin et al. 2019). However, it is important to mention that radical Buddhist nationalists throughout Myanmar have instrumentalised the Rohingya issue to promote their exclusivist agenda (International Crisis Group 2018). Finally, the century-old conflict between the Kingdom of Thailand and Mus-

lim-Malay separatists in the southern provinces of Thailand, which resurged since 2004, is ongoing. The organisation that controls the majority of the militants in Southern Thailand is Barisan Revolusi Nasional, though Malay militant groups in Southern Thailand have shown limited interest in forming links with other Islamist terrorist groups in Southeast Asia or beyond.

What is the relationship between regime type and terrorism in Southeast Asia and how does this possibly differ from patterns in other regions of the world? Answers to these questions can be found in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), a systematic, open-source database managed by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) that includes more than 190,000 terrorist incidents and casualties globally in the period 1970 to 2018 (START 2019). Building upon the V-Dem project's typology of four different regime types, described above, we can apply the GTD data to each regime category for the years 1970 to 2018. The GTD figures reveal an enormous increase in the number of terrorist attacks globally and regionally over the years. A glance at the Pacific Asia shows an increase in terrorist attacks by 1,111 per cent, going from 432 attacks in 2002 to 4,803 in 2017. This corresponds roughly to the global increase rate in terrorism in the same period. However, as Figure 3 shows, South Asia is the main terrorism threat theatre in Asia, whereas Northeast Asia now plays hardly any role in regional and global terrorism. The number of terrorist attacks has also increased significantly in Southeast Asia, from 109 incidents in 2002 to 1,407 in 2014 and 895 in 2018. Similar to South Asia, a decline was evident after an initial peak around 2008. From 2012 onwards, terrorism in Southeast Asia has increased again, similar to that in South Asia (and worldwide). Between 2016 and 2017 alone, Southeast Asia saw a 36 per cent increase in the number of deaths caused by terrorism; in 2017 alone, jihadist groups supporting separatist and insurgent causes committed 348 terrorist acts, killing 292 people (START 2019). As has been shown, this development is mainly concentrated on three or four countries.

Figure 3: Terrorist Incidents in Asia-Pacific, 1970-2018



Source: the author based on data from START (2019).

The number of terrorist events globally and in Asia-Pacific, moreover, rose across all regime types but the increase has been the most pronounced in the intermediate regime categories of electoral autocracies and electoral democracies. In contrast to the 1970s and 1980s, when some wealthy and advanced OECD-democracies such as the United Kingdom, the United States, West Germany, Israel, Italy and Japan, suffered from high levels of chronic terrorism, there has been a remarkable shift since the 1990s. Although the data presented in the following Table 1 seem to provide preliminary evidence that since 9/11, terrorism persists mainly in the middle range of regimes between unanimously autocratic and liberal democratic rule, it is increasingly prevalent also in closed autocracies. The overall pattern for Asia-Pacific is similar to the global trend, whereas GTD figures for Southeast Asia demonstrate that electoral democracies are by far the most terrorism prone political regimes in the early twenty-first century.

Table 1: *Terrorist Incidents Around the World, 1970 to 2018*

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2018
World					
Closed autocracies	61	965	356	241	1680
Electoral autocracies	61	954	903	439	4610
Electoral democracies	15	117	1926	688	2950
Liberal democracies	525	678	686	209	380
Asia-Pacific					
Closed autocracies	1	3	16	62	183
Electoral autocracies	8	85	127	31	556
Electoral democracies	0	10	823	504	1639
Liberal democracies	1	0	92	13	5
Southeast Asia					
Closed autocracies	8	1	11	8	182
Electoral autocracies		84	18	10	43
Electoral democracies	0	0	33	235	654
Liberal democracies	0	0	0	0	0

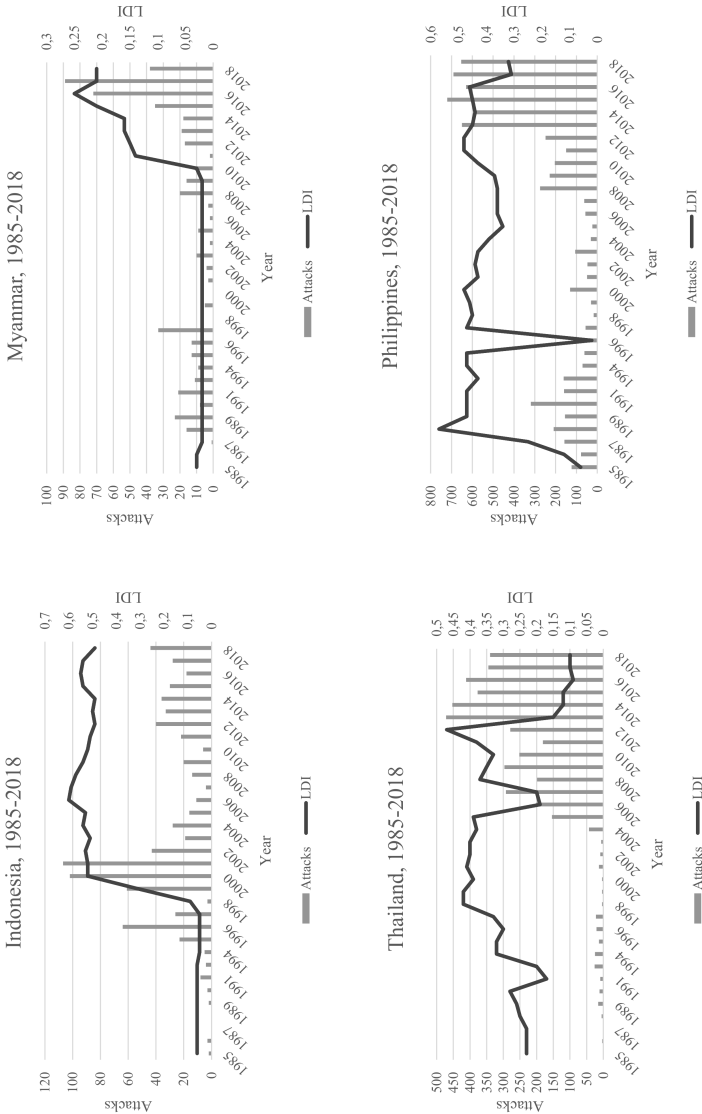
Source: the author based on data from V-Dem (2019) and START (2019).

A Vicious Cycle of Radicalisation and Democratic Backsliding?

Does the correlation between radicalisation, terrorism, and the quality of democracy also indicate a causal connection? Is it possible to find empirical evidence for a vicious circle of radicalisation and democratic recession in South East Asia? Numerous recent studies on national and transnational counter-terrorism policies point to national-level and ASEAN-level weaknesses (see Tan and Nasu 2016; Borelli 2017). Despite significant variance in the counterterrorism campaigns of individual countries, which produced different outcomes over time (Febrica 2010), it might be an accurate summary to conclude that governments in Southeast Asia have often adopted policies that are fuelling militancy by restricting freedoms and fostering authoritarianism.

Focusing in a more systematic fashion on the four most terrorism-prone countries in the region, the following Figure 4 provides preliminary evidence that the cycle of terrorist activities is linked to the trajectories of political liberalisation and democratic backsliding in Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia and the Philippines. The four countries experienced different forms of autocratisation or democratic recession in recent years.

Figure 4: Trajectories of Terrorism and Democratic Quality in Four Southeast Asian Nations, 1985 to 2018



Note: LDI is V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index. In addition to electoral democracy, it takes into account legislative constraints on the executive, judicial constraints on the executive, and respect for civil liberties. Source: the author based on data from V-Dem (2019) and START (2019).

Indonesia

Indonesia seemed to be an exception as the maturation of the nation's democratic institutions seemed to have allowed many groups to seek recourse to their grievances through electoral politics, while empowering the Indonesian president to utilise his or her popular legitimacy to rally public opinion against militant networks, "undermining the appeal of militant groups to the broader public" (Kurlantzick 2016:227). However, it is also true that it was not until after the democratic reforms that violent Indonesian Islamic organisations started to emerge (Laskar Jihad in 1999, Islamic Defenders' Front in 2000, Jemaah Islamiya in 2001). As Kivimäki argues, the organisation of terrorist groups required some democratic freedoms, or at least weakness of control in fragile states (Kivimäki 2007). The more liberal media environment, inter-party competition and the formation of new "identity coalitions" comprising religious, nongovernment, security, and party elites helped drive this development (Melchnik 2016). As Ziegenhain notes, all Islamic parties together have received only between 20 and 30 per cent of the votes in parliamentary elections since 1999 (Ziegenhain 2018). Despite their rather limited appeal with voters, Islamist actors have been fairly successfully in penetrating nationalist and secular, political parties. In recent years, Islamist organisations insisting that Islamic scripture is of higher value than the constitution, have been able to inject their view into the national mainstream, a development which to some analysts indicate the stealth Islamisation or radicalisation of the public (Assyaukanie 2016; for more detail, see Mietzner and Muhtdai 2018).

Even though democracy scholars praised Indonesia's democracy as healthy and stable, events since the election of President Joko Widodo, a.k.a. Jokowi (elected in 2014 and reelected in 2019) cast doubt upon this characterisation of Indonesia's democracy. According to Warburton and Aspinall (2019:256), "Indonesia is now in the midst of democratic regression." The presidential elections of 2014 and 2018 were marred by controversies and increasing political violence; defeated, populist challenger Prabowo Subianto initially declined to accept the results. Other symptoms of Indonesia's democracy malaise are an illiberal drift in the regulation of civil liberties and protection of human rights, and the government's manipulation of state. Adopting to socio-religious polarisation, as well as rising radicalisation and creeping Islamisation of the Indonesian society and political mainstream, the Widodo government, in turn, relies "on increasingly illiberal measures to contain the populist-Islamist alliance, undermining some of Indonesia's democratic achievements in the process" (Aspinall and Mietzner 2019:104).

Thailand

Thailand suffered from the most dramatic democratic reversal. Following the parliamentary election of January 2001, the Kingdom entered almost two decades of political turmoil, including two military coups in eight years (Croissant and Lorenz 2018). The gradual weakening of rights, freedoms and accountability mechanism by the Thaksin administration, from 2001 to 2006, led to a constitutional crisis and a military coup in September 2006. Following a military-led interim government, Thailand returned to some form of elected civilian government in December 2007. As an outcome of the 2011 election, a pro-Thaksin government under PM Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of ex-PM Thaksin, was formed, which sought to change the constitution to strengthen the executive and legislative branches vis-à-vis non-elected veto powers. By December 2013, anti-Shinawatra protestors occupied parts of Bangkok. Snap elections were disrupted by protest groups and eventually invalidated by the Constitution Court. Army Chief Prayuth Chan-o-cha declared martial law on 20 May 2014, and, two days later announced a putsch. The Kingdom remained under direct military rule until early 2019.

The rise of Malay-Muslim radicalism in the southernmost provinces of Thailand since 2004 is clearly related to these developments and, perhaps, the most striking example of the relationship between incomplete democratisation, unresolved national identity problems and radicalisation into terrorism. The Malay-Muslim insurgency in the four southernmost province conflict had been described as “waning” in the 1990s, but reemerged when in 2004, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra tried to impose greater central control over a region traditionally dominated by his main opponent, the Democratic Party (Croissant 2005). From 2004, when the insurgency had intensified to late 2016, almost 7,000 people were killed and at least 12,000 were wounded due to violence in the region (International Crisis Group 2017).

While the concrete causes are still contested, some scholars pointing to competition between pro-Thaksin Royal Police and the pro-Royalist Thai military as an additional factor that provoked, shaped, or exacerbated the operations of the state authorities and security forces in Thailand’s “Deep South” since 2004 (Croissant 2005; McCargo 2008: chapter 3; Chambers 2015). The origins of this competition between the two main armed agents of the Thai state reach back into the 1940s and early 1950s. Although this intra-bureaucratic conflict had been dormant for decades, the executive aggrandisement by PM Thaksin in the 2000s and the struggle between pro-Thaksin forces and the “Network Monarchy” (McCargo 2005) over control

of Thailand's "Deep State" in the early 2010s rekindled the conflict (Merieau 2019).

Politically, rising Buddhist extremism and anti-Muslim sentiments in Thailand are reflected in changes in the new constitution of 2017, which vow to guard Buddhism 'against all forms of desecration' (Tonsakulrungruang 2018). These as well as other policy-related measures suggest that Thailand has been hit by a wave of Buddhist extremism currently sweeping across Myanmar and Cambodia, led by the Myanmar-based Ma Ba Tha movement (see below). This could further result in socio-cultural marginalisation and political radicalisation of Thailand's southern Malay-Muslim population. Similarly, the enforcement of Martial Law, Emergency Decrees and the Internal Security Act in the Southern conflict areas, which has led to an increase of human rights violations and arbitrary violations of civil liberties in security operations, could bolster the erosion of the legitimacy and trust of the security forces (Nahdohdin et al. 2019:26-27).

The Philippines

The Philippines, despite having more experience with democratic institutions than any other country in Southeast Asia, is also no stranger to democratic backsliding. A first backsliding episode, from 2001 to 2006, saw the downfall of populist President Joseph "Erap" Estrada (1998-2001) and the rise of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (a.k.a. GMA) to the presidency (2001-2010). She was the Vice President to Estrada, who resigned under the threat of impeachment for corruption. President Arroyo herself faced down impeachment attempts motivated by charges of fraud in the 2004 presidential election, and she was accused of corruption as well. In 2006, she declared a state of emergency to prevent a rumoured coup attempt. Following the inauguration of President Rodrigo Duterte (elected 10 May 2016), the Philippines has entered a second, and perhaps more dramatic, democratic recession. Within weeks of his inauguration, the new president began his murderous war on drugs and ran roughshod over human rights, its political opponents, and the country's democratic institutions. The government weaponised the legal system to attack political opponents, disparaged or threatened the leaders of key accountability institutions, and threatened the mainstream media with lawsuits and nonrenewal of franchises.

Although Duterte, former mayor of Davao, the biggest city in the southern Philippines, has pledged to push through a peace deal, he has appoint-

ed to his cabinet many advisers distrusted by the southern insurgent groups (Kurlantzick 2016:231). The Philippines is the only Southeast Asian country which treated insurgency as terrorist threat and deals with it militarily, although Thailand also launched a military operation to deal with the southern insurgency, though it officially refrains from declaring it terrorism (Hafidz 2009). Different governments in Manila tried a mix of peace initiatives and harsh military-led security operations. Both strategies have yet to yield more durable results: peace initiatives of both the Arroyo administration and President Duterte collapsed due to complications in Manila politics. The Duterte administration has urged terrorists to surrender by promising safety for the asylum seekers and their families, albeit with mixed successes. The Philippines' inability to pass legislation designed to bring peace to the Muslim-majority southern provinces has only made it easier for the most extreme southern militants to keep fighting and foreign fighters have assessed the Philippines as an ideal location for their struggle.

Myanmar

Finally, the case of Myanmar is different from the other countries, because the country experienced a process of political liberalisation and a transition from direct military rule to a democratically elected government in the period 2010 to 2015, without ever surpassing the minimum threshold of democracy. So far, electoral authoritarianism à la Burmese did not turn out to be a transitional stage on the road to electoral democracy. And yet, the country experienced substantial democratic erosion, at least relative to the already achieved level of democratic quality (see Figure 4). The V-Dem data reflect the fact that, as Chew and Easley (2019) describe, the introduction of institutions of electoral democracy, most importantly free elections, has “increased political space for aggressive ethno-nationalists”, for “sectarian violence” and “hate speech” as well as for crimes against humanity. The struggle for national identity and how ethnic minorities should be accommodated, has been a key challenge to state-builders since the inauguration of the union in 1948. It contributed to the rise and persistence of a “praetorian state,” in which the Burmese military (Tatmadaw) dominated politics, the economy, and society since 1962 (Croissant 2018). In spite of the installation of a democratically elected government in 2016, the official concept of the nation-state still revolves around Buddhism, the Burman language, and the Bamar ethnic group, which accounts for roughly two-thirds of the population. Many ethnic minorities do not support this concept or even

reject it openly and have been fighting for the acknowledgment of their ethno-cultural identities for decades (for more detail, see Jones 2014). The transition from military rule to a civilian government unleashed dangerous majoritarian tendencies and anti-Muslim attacks, described by many international critics as attempted genocide. Especially since 2016, there has been growing mobilisation by ultra-nationalist Buddhist groups, such as the Patriotic Association of Myanmar (Ma Ba Tha) against the Rohingya (International Crisis Group 2018). Undoubtedly, political liberalisation since the end of military rule has allowed extremist groups to gain traction with their anti-Muslim platform. The case supports the hypothesis that political liberalisation and democratisation empower ethno-nationalist movements, religious extremism, and political entrepreneurs of ethnic violence.

Conclusions

The experiences of Southeast Asian societies suggest that radicalisation and terrorism do not only take place within the framework of newly established democratic institutions and procedures, but the ups and downs of terrorism cycles is closely related to trajectories of uneven liberalisation and democratisation. As shown in Figure 4, initially, political liberalisation and the increase in democratic quality led to greater radicalisation and frequency of terrorist violence, followed by its temporary decline.² Clearly, democracies with lower levels of legitimacy, poorer human rights practices, intermediate levels of political development, and unresolved conflict among ethnic, sectarian or political groups experience the most terrorism in Southeast Asia. In contrast, closed autocracies such as Vietnam, Laos, Brunei, but also electoral autocracies in Cambodia and Singapore, were able to escape the “vicious cycle of repression and radicalization” that is typical for authoritarian regimes (Storm 2009).

Even though conclusions must be tentative, it seems fair to conclude that the implementation of democratic procedures and practices in Southeast Asia has had an impact on the management of national identity problems. At the same time, the outcomes of democratisation processes in terms of the levels and quality of democracy have also been affected by issues (or problems) of national identity. Of course, it is true that the exist-

2 The exception among the recently democratised Southeast Asian nations is Timor Leste which has also the most democratic political system in the region and which did not experience so far a pronounced process of democratic backsliding.

tence of ethnic or cultural minorities who do not feel they belong to the national community pose a problem for the quality and stability of new democracies. Democratisation, in fact, encouraged the political mobilisation of ethnic and national identities among groups competing for power. At the same time, however, the opening of new liberal spaces in several Southeast Asian countries created a window of opportunity for the formation of new identity coalitions, often involving more radicalised, religious individuals and groups. While there is little empirical evidence to assume that the recent revival of political radicalism, religious extremism and Islamist (or Buddhist, for that matter) terrorism in Southeast Asia is primarily a consequent of democratic regime change, anecdotal evidence seems to justify the conclusion that incomplete transitions to a consolidated, liberal democratic regime have rekindled political radicalism. Weak political institutions and problems of national identity alter the incentives and opportunities of political actors, who may evoke extremist sentiments for political purposes. Even though the region is much more democratic now than it was just 30 years ago, democratic backsliding in the past ten years or so has contributed via the mechanisms of the radicalisation-backsliding cycle to further problems of radicalisation – especially in Thailand and Myanmar, but also in the Philippines and, albeit to a lesser extent, in Indonesia. However, it seems also evident that policy-related conclusions should not aim at further weakening of democratic qualities of the polities in the region, but on stopping and reversing democratic backsliding – not only as a tool to strengthen democracy, but also as a means to counter radicalisation. Yet, to effectively counter both the communist and Islamist insurgent threats in a deeply ingrained conflict such as the one in the Southern Philippines, attempts to address insurgency in the country must begin with socio-economic integration. As such, creating economic opportunities for the youth in Southern Philippines is key and can be achieved through vocational training and other similar initiatives. Finally, a viable solution is inextricably linked to Myanmar's domestic political situation. There is a dire need to counter the ultra-nationalist and extremist rhetoric from radical Buddhist elements, which continues to fuel and aggravate violence and discrimination against the Rohingya. However, as long as the Burmese military insists on defending its political power by fomenting nationalism and ethnic hatred against democratic demands from civilian actors, this would be highly unlikely.

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