
ANALYSIS OF ETHNIC CONFLICT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: A COMPLEX INTERDEPENDENCE PERSPECTIVE

^{1*} Jerry Indrawan, ²Tesiana Berlian Sari

¹Department of Political Science UPN Veteran Jakarta, Faculty of Social and Political Science, Pembangunan National University, Veteran Jakarta, Jakarta 12450, Indonesia

²Department of International Relations, Faculty of Philosophy and Civilization, Paramadina University, Jakarta 13880, Indonesia

*Corresponding E-mail: jerry.indrawan@upnvj.ac.id

Submission: March 26, 2025 | Accepted: April 14, 2025

ABSTRACT

Southeast Asia is a region characterized by diverse ethnicities and complex challenges. Despite ASEAN's long-standing existence, ethnic conflicts continue in several member states. This paper examines these conflicts using the theory of complex interdependence, focusing on three cases: Aceh, the Rohingya, and Mindanao. These cases are seen as clear examples that illustrate how interconnections across economic, security, and environmental spheres shape conflicts. The goal is to analyze how political, social, and economic factors interact within this framework. By exploring these interwoven relationships, this paper seeks to uncover the root causes and consequences of ethnic conflicts that remain difficult to resolve in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Ethnic conflicts; Southeast Asia; Interdependency Complex

ABSTRAK

Asia Tenggara merupakan kawasan yang memiliki keragaman etnis dan tantangan yang kompleks. Meskipun ASEAN telah lama berdiri, konflik etnis masih terus terjadi di beberapa negara anggotanya. Tulisan ini mengkaji konflik-konflik tersebut melalui teori complex interdependence dengan menyoroiti tiga kasus: Aceh, Rohingya, dan Mindanao. Ketiga kasus ini dianggap contoh nyata bagaimana keterhubungan di bidang ekonomi, keamanan, dan lingkungan memengaruhi dinamika konflik. Tujuan tulisan ini adalah menganalisis bagaimana faktor politik, sosial, dan ekonomi saling berinteraksi dalam kerangka tersebut. Dengan memahami hubungan yang saling terkait, makalah ini berupaya mengungkap akar penyebab dan dampak konflik etnis yang sulit diselesaikan di Asia Tenggara.

Kata Kunci: Konflik Etnis; Asia Tenggara; Interdependensi Kompleks

BACKGROUND

Southeast Asia is a region rich in ethnic and cultural diversity, but it is also often the stage for complex ethnic conflicts. Ethnic conflicts have a significant impact on regional security, political stability, and development in Southeast Asia. Therefore, a deep understanding of ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia is essential in efforts to realize sustainable peace and security, and also a Southeast Asian region that focuses on cooperation, not conflict.

In Southeast Asia, there are at least three major ethnic conflicts that have occurred or are still ongoing. First, the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar. The lives of the Rohingya ethnic group continue to experience decline, which is due to the refusal of the Myanmar government to recognize them as Myanmar citizens. As a result of the absence of citizenship status, the Rohingya ethnic group is not under state protection. The Myanmar government has repeatedly carried out military operations that have caused the Rohingya ethnic group to experience violence and flee en masse to other Southeast Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Budaya, 2017).

Second, the Aceh conflict in Indonesia. The conflict that occurred in Aceh was not only caused by ethnic conflicts, especially religion, but the disappointment of the Acehnese people towards the central government was also due to the lack of attention to the welfare of the Acehnese people, which led to poverty. The central government, which did not respond to the disappointment of the Acehnese people, caused a rebellion starting from DI/TII led by Daud Beureuh and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) led by Hasan Tiro (Nurpratiwi, 2019). Third, the ethnic conflict of Bangsamoro Mindanao in the Philippines, whose history of conflict is similar to Aceh. Bangsamoro is a Muslim ethnoreligion consisting of 13 Austronesian tribes inhabiting the southern Philippines. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is an Islamic militant group based in the southern Philippines. It was founded as a form of resistance against the central Philippine government, which was considered discriminatory against the Moro community in the southern Philippines. The area where the group is active is called Bangsamoro by MILF and includes the southern part of Mindanao, the Sulu archipelago, Palawan, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi and several adjacent islands (Chaidar, et al., 2018).

Jones and Kivimäki identified several factors that play a role in triggering ethnic conflict, such as political tension, social injustice, and economic inequality (Jones, 2019; Kivimäki, 2017). Several other studies highlight the role of identity politics and nationalism in triggering ethnic conflict (Jones, 2019; Sidel, 2013). While other studies emphasize the importance of economic factors and inequality in exploring the roots of the conflict (Kivimäki, 2017). In addition, there are also studies

that describe how ethnic conflict interacts with regional security dynamics, including territorial disputes involving countries in Southeast Asia (Emmerson, 2016; Acharya, 2014).

However, there is a need to complement the existing knowledge with a deeper analysis of the factors that influence ethnic conflict in Southeast Asia and how these factors interact with each other in the context of complex interdependence. It also includes the lack of understanding of how these factors are interconnected and interact in the regional context. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyze to understand ethnic conflict in Southeast Asia from the perspective of complex interdependence. From this perspective, the possibility of cooperation between countries experiencing ethnic conflict can be useful as one solution. The presence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a regional organization is also expected to play an important role so that ethnic conflict in its member countries does not have a negative impact on politics, economy, and security in Southeast Asia. This paper will analyze the underlying causes of ethnic conflict and expand the understanding of the complexity of ethnic conflict in the Southeast Asian region from the perspective of complex interdependence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In analyzing ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia, the perspective used by the author is the complex interdependence perspective. This perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding the complex relationships between countries in the region in the context of ethnic conflict. The complex interdependence perspective assumes that there is interdependence between countries in various aspects, including the economy, security, and environment. In the context of ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia, the complex interdependence perspective highlights how ethnic conflicts in one country can impact stability and security in neighboring countries (Keohane & Nye, 2001).

Ethnic conflicts that occur in one country can spread and affect ethnic tensions in surrounding countries, while threatening regional stability (Acharya, 2014). The complex interdependence perspective highlights the importance of regional cooperation in dealing with ethnic conflicts. Countries in Southeast Asia need to work together to prevent conflict escalation, resolve disputes, and build peace (Emmerson, 2016).

Regional cooperation can involve various aspects, such as information exchange, political dialogue, development assistance, and maintaining joint security. With effective regional cooperation, countries in the region can support each other in handling and reducing ethnic conflicts and strengthening regional security and stability. The complex interdependence perspective also emphasizes the need for Southeast Asian countries to build strong regional institutions in dealing with ethnic

conflicts. Regional institutions such as ASEAN can be a forum for dialogue, diplomacy, and dispute resolution between countries in the region. Regional institutions can also play an important role in facilitating regional cooperation in dealing with ethnic conflicts (Acharya, 2014).

In addition, the complex interdependence perspective also shows that economic and trade factors between countries in Southeast Asia can affect ethnic conflicts. Regional economic integration, for example, the ASEAN Economic Community, can create economic interdependence between countries in the region. In the context of ethnic conflict, these economic factors can affect ethnic stability and tensions in the region (Kivimäki, 2017).

In the analysis of ethnic conflict in Southeast Asia, the complex interdependence perspective provides a more holistic understanding and views ethnic conflict as a phenomenon involving complex relationships between countries. This perspective emphasizes that ethnic conflicts in one country cannot be separated from the regional context, and they can have widespread impacts.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper will use a descriptive qualitative research method with a case study approach. The qualitative method was chosen because it allows researchers to gain a deep understanding to analyze the complexity of ethnic conflict and its regional context from the perspective of complex interdependence. The descriptive qualitative method is a study to solve the problem to be studied by describing the subject and object to be studied. The subject and object can be in the form of institutions, communities, individuals, and others. The analysis carried out must be in accordance with the reality in the field, in the sense of factual and accordance with reality (Creswell, 2013).

DISCUSSION

Ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia have become a complex and important issue in the context of regional politics and security. Recognizing the importance of understanding and analyzing these ethnic conflicts, a regional approach and a complex interdependence perspective can provide deeper insights into the nature and factors that influence ethnic conflicts in this region.

The Southeast Asian region, which consists of various countries with ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic, and other diversities, inevitably gives rise to ethnic conflicts, which are also challenges that must be faced. Therefore, it is important to understand and analyze these ethnic conflicts in more depth. In a regional context, conflicts in one country can have an impact on the stability and security of one country and another.

Ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia have various root causes, including differences in religion, culture, language, and social and political injustice. These factors create tensions between different ethnic groups, triggering conflicts. Therefore, it is important to analyze these ethnic conflicts with a holistic approach, involving a regional perspective and a complex interdependence perspective. Through complex interdependence, we can see that ethnic conflicts in one country can have an impact on the stability and security of the region as a whole. For example, ethnic conflict in Myanmar can trigger border tensions that create waves of refugees that affect neighboring countries such as Bangladesh and Thailand (Emmers, 2016). This shows the importance of understanding ethnic conflict in a regional context, because its impact is not only limited to one country, but can also spread to neighboring countries. In addition, a regional approach also pays attention to collaborative efforts in dealing with ethnic conflict. Through regional cooperation, it is hoped that ethnic conflict can be managed more effectively and contribute to stability and peace in Southeast Asia as a whole.

Some Ethnic Conflicts in Southeast Asia

One example of a well-known ethnic conflict is the conflict between the Rohingya ethnic group and the Myanmar government. This conflict occurred because of discrimination against the Rohingya ethnic group, who are predominantly Muslim, by a government dominated by Buddhists. This conflict has caused thousands of people to die and millions to flee. In addition, ethnic conflicts also occur in Indonesia, such as the conflict between the Aceh ethnic group and the Indonesian government. This conflict occurred because Aceh fought for their autonomy and ethnic rights, including the right to implement sharia. After going on for decades, this conflict finally ended with a peace agreement in 2005. Then, in the Philippines, ethnic conflict occurred between the government and Muslim separatist groups in the southern region. This conflict has been going on for decades and has caused many casualties. Although the government has made efforts to achieve peace with the separatist groups, this conflict continues to this day. This conflict occurred long before the Philippines achieved its independence, namely from the Spanish colonization to the United States (US). The conflict began when the two colonizers had a mission to Christianize the North of the Philippines. Until the Philippines' independence, the conflict continued, namely with the migration of Luzon and Visayas residents to Mindanao, which was designed in a government policy program that caused the Bangsamoro to feel marginalized by the presence of these immigrants. This migration led to land disputes, shifts in power, economic shifts from Bangsamoro to immigrants, and stereotypes from immigrants towards Bangsamoro (Tandio, et al., 2017).

ASEAN as a regional organization in Southeast Asia, has played a role in promoting cooperation and peaceful resolution in overcoming ethnic conflicts. For example, in the case of ethnic conflict in Myanmar, ASEAN has facilitated dialogue between the Myanmar government and neighboring countries to find sustainable solutions (Acharya, 2014). In addition, the regional perspective also recognizes the importance of building trust and promoting understanding between ethnic groups in the region. Through intergroup dialogue and reconciliation initiatives, countries in Southeast Asia can work together to address the sources of ethnic conflict and promote social inclusiveness (Caballero-Anthony & Emmers, 2004).

The complex interdependence perspective emphasizes the interdependence of countries in political, economic, and security aspects. In the context of ethnic conflict, this theory shows how tensions and conflicts in one country can impact other countries in the same region. For example, the occurrence of ethnic conflict in Indonesia can have an impact on political stability and security in neighboring countries such as Malaysia or Singapore. Regional economies can also be affected because ethnic conflict in one country can disrupt trade and investment between countries. To resolve ethnic conflict, the complex interdependence perspective emphasizes the importance of dialogue, diplomacy, and cooperation between the countries involved. Through regional cooperation, countries can share experiences, resources, and best practices in dealing with ethnic conflict. In addition, this cooperation can also build trust between countries and create effective dispute resolution mechanisms. In the context of ethnic conflict in Southeast Asia, the complex interdependence perspective can help identify the cross-border impacts of ethnic conflict and encourage regional cooperation in dealing with the conflict. By understanding the complex interdependence between countries, efforts to resolve ethnic conflict can be carried out more holistically and sustainably.

The ethnic conflict in Aceh, Indonesia, is an interesting case study to analyze, considering the history of the conflict, its root causes, factors of escalation, and efforts to resolve it. In this analysis, factors such as social and political injustice, religious and cultural differences, and tensions between the central and regional governments will be considered in depth (Bertrand, 2004).

The history of ethnic conflict in Aceh can be traced back to the Dutch colonial era, where Aceh became the center of resistance for separatist movements in the struggle against colonialism (Kell, 2019). After Indonesian independence, Aceh continued to experience ethnic conflict driven by the desire for greater autonomy and social and political justice. The root causes of ethnic conflict in Aceh involve social and political injustices felt by the Acehnese people. Religious and cultural differences between the Muslim-majority Aceh and the central government dominated by the non-Muslim majority also influenced the dynamics of the conflict. Tensions between the central and regional governments also played a significant role in the escalation

of the conflict in Aceh. Strong nationalist sentiments and aspirations for autonomy in Aceh conflicted with the central government's efforts to maintain the integrity of the country (Bertrand, 2004).

Efforts to resolve the conflict in Aceh involve various steps, including peace negotiations and peace agreements. The signing of the Helsinki Agreement in 2005 between the Indonesian government and GAM was an important step in ending the armed conflict in Aceh and recognizing the right to special autonomy for Aceh. However, the evaluation of the success or failure of efforts to resolve the conflict in Aceh is still controversial. The implementation of special autonomy and the enforcement of justice still face challenges, including economic disparities, human rights violations, and the sustainability of long-term peace (Aspinall, 2005).

The ethnic conflict in Mindanao, Philippines, is another case study that is also interesting to analyze from a regional security perspective. This conflict involves ethnic, religious, and cultural differences between the Christian majority and Muslim groups, especially the Moro group in Mindanao. The history of ethnic conflict in Mindanao can be traced back to the Spanish and US colonial eras. The dissatisfaction and injustice felt by the Moro group towards the central government, as well as efforts at cultural and religious assimilation, are the driving factors of this conflict. The conflict is further complicated by the emergence of armed groups such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and MILF, which are fighting for autonomy or independence for the Moro region.

The ethnic conflict in Mindanao also has a widening impact on regional security. Tensions and violence in Mindanao can affect national and regional stability in the Philippines. This conflict creates vulnerabilities to economic development, investment, and tourism in the region. In addition, the presence of armed groups and terrorism in Mindanao also poses a regional security threat, with the potential to spread to neighboring countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia. Efforts to resolve the ethnic conflict in Mindanao have been carried out through negotiations and peace agreements between the Philippine government and the Moro groups. One of the most significant efforts was the signing of the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) in 2012, which was then followed by the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in 2014. This agreement aims to provide greater autonomy to the Moro region and end the armed conflict in Mindanao. However, the implementation of this peace agreement still faces challenges. Several armed groups that disagree with the agreement continue to commit violence. Economic and social problems also need to be addressed to achieve sustainable peace in Mindanao.

The case studies of the Acehnese ethnic group in Indonesia and the Mindanao ethnic group in the Philippines lead to the assumption that the relationship between countries and groups within them is not only based on economic exchange, but also

involves political, social, and security factors. In the case study of Aceh in Indonesia, the ethnic conflict involved the Acehnese people's dissatisfaction with perceived social and political injustice. These factors include the redistribution of resources, unfair cultural and religious treatment, and tensions between the central and regional governments.

From the perspective of complex interdependence, the ethnic conflict in Aceh can be understood as the result of tensions and dynamics in the relationship between the central and regional governments, as well as imbalances in the distribution of power and resources. This conflict also affects regional security with the potential for political destabilization and national division.

Meanwhile, the case study of the Mindanao ethnic group in the Philippines affects regional security with the presence of armed groups and the threat of terrorism. From the perspective of complex interdependence, the ethnic conflict in Mindanao can be understood as the result of tensions and dynamics in the relationship between ethnic groups, the central government, and external factors such as international support. This conflict also has widespread economic and social impacts, which can affect national and regional stability. In both case studies, the complex interdependence perspective can help understand how political, social, and security factors are interrelated and influence the dynamics of ethnic conflict. This perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding the complex relationships between ethnic groups, the central government, and external factors in understanding the conflict and finding sustainable solutions.

Factors that Influence

Political, social, and security factors are interrelated and influence the dynamics of ethnic conflict in Southeast Asia in several complex ways. Here are some examples of how these factors interrelate:

1. Political factors: Political dissatisfaction and inequities in the distribution of power and resources can be triggers for ethnic conflict. Lack of political participation and representation of certain ethnic groups can create tensions and hostility. In addition, political rivalry between political parties representing ethnic groups can exacerbate conflict.
2. Social factors: Differences in culture, religion, and ethnic identity can be factors in conflict. Social injustice, discrimination, and marginalization of certain ethnic groups can also trigger tensions and hostility. Inequality in the distribution of resources and access to public services can also be a source of ethnic conflict.

-
3. Security factors: Security tensions, especially those involving armed groups or separatist movements, can exacerbate ethnic conflict. The presence of armed groups that use violence to achieve political or ethnic goals can trigger a spiral of violence and threaten regional security and stability. In addition, external factors such as foreign support and intervention.

In addition to being interrelated, political, social, and security factors also influence each other in the dynamics of ethnic conflict in Southeast Asia. For example, political tensions between the central government and certain ethnic groups can trigger social and security tensions. Conversely, prolonged ethnic conflict and violence can affect the political stability and security of the region as a whole. The complex interdependence perspective allows us to understand ethnic conflict in a broader context, looking at the relationships between countries in the region and how ethnic conflict in one country can have a widespread impact on regional stability and security as a whole. Ethnic conflict in one country can have a widespread impact on neighboring countries, either through the spread of violence, refugee movements, or the influence of disturbing ideologies. In this perspective, it is important to understand that ethnic conflict in one country cannot be separated from broader regional dynamics.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia through the perspective of complex interdependence provides a more comprehensive understanding of ethnic conflicts in the region. The conclusion of the analysis of ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia with the perspective of complex interdependence is that ethnic conflicts in the region have complex root causes, including social and political injustice, religious and cultural differences, and tensions between the central and regional governments. These factors interact with each other and influence the escalation of the conflict.

Case studies of ethnic conflicts in Rohingya, Aceh, and Mindanao show that the history of conflict and the struggle of separatist groups have a significant impact on the escalation and resolution of the conflict. In efforts to resolve ethnic conflicts in these two regions, peace negotiations, peace agreements, and the implementation of special autonomy have been carried out. Evaluation of the success or failure of these conflict resolution efforts is important to understand the processes and challenges faced.

The perspective of complex interdependence helps to understand the relationship between ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia and regional factors, such as ASEAN's efforts to build shared security and conflict resolution. This involves efforts to strengthen shared understanding, promote peace, and build institutions that

support conflict resolution. Although resolving ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia can be a long and complex process, resolution efforts involving negotiations, agreements, and the implementation of special autonomy can provide hope for achieving peace and stability in the Southeast Asian region.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acharya, A. (2014). *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*. Routledge.
- Aspinall, E. (2005). The Helsinki Agreement: A More Promising Basis for Peace in Aceh? *Pacific Affairs*, 78(3), 409-430.
- Budaya, B. (2017). Dampak Kewarganegaraan Etnis Rohingya di Myanmar terhadap Pelanggaran Hak Asasi Manusia dan Negara Sekitar. *MAKSIGAMA: Jurnal Ilmiah Hukum Universitas Wisnuwardhana Malang*, 11(1), 106-120.
- Bertrand, J. (2004). *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Caballero-Anthony, M., & Emmers, R. (Eds.). (2004). *Non-Traditional Security in Asia: Issues, Challenges and Framework for Action*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Chaidar, Al, Akmal, M., Ali, S., Amalia, N., Effida, D.Q., & Sahrasad, H. (2018). Masyarakat Mindanao, Abu Sayyaf dan Masalah Keamanan Kawasan. *Cakrawala: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial*, 7(1), 1-44.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Emmerson, D. K. (Ed.). (2016). *Hard Choices: Security, Democracy, and Regionalism in Southeast Asia*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Emmers, R. (2016). *Understanding the resurgence of radicalism in Southeast Asia*. Routledge.
- Jones, L. (2019). *Ethnic Conflict and Security in Southeast Asia*. Routledge.
- Kadir, M. (2018). *Ethnic conflict in Southeast Asia*. Routledge.
- Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (2001). *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. Pearson.
- Kell, T. (2019). *The Roots of Conflict in Aceh: A Political History*. NIAS Press.

-
- Kivimäki, T. (2017). *Ethnic Conflicts and Power: A Cross-Regional and Comparative Perspective*. Routledge.
- Nurpratiwi, H. (2019). Dinamika Konflik dan Perdamaian Aceh. *Jambura, History and Culture Journal*, 1(2), 96-107.
- Sambuaga, R. (2016). The Aceh Conflict: A Brief History and Future Challenges. *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities*, 9(2), 121-139.
- Sidel, J. T. (2013). *The Philippines: Violence, Ethnic Conflict, and Governance*. UK: Routledge.
- Tandio, Y., Fasisaka, I., Priadarsini, N. W. R. (2017). Faktor Pendorong Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) untuk Menandatangani Framework Agreement of Bangsamoro (FAB) dengan Pemerintah Filipina pada Tahun 2012. *DIKSHI (Diskusi Ilmiah Komunitas Hubungan Internasional)*, 1(1).