

The forgotten front

Winning Hearts and Minds in Southeast Asia.

BARACK OBAMA'S planned visit to Indonesia this November is not only a sentimental journey to his childhood home. It also represents a long-overdue recognition that to recapture the admiration and respect of the world's Muslims, Washington should focus neither on the stalemated chessboard of the Middle East nor on the chaotic Afghan-Pakistani frontier. Rather, it should concentrate its efforts in Southeast Asia, an increasingly democratic and peaceful region that is also beginning to face the threat of Islamic fundamentalism.

The last time Americans took a sober look at Southeast Asia, military helicopters were snatching the last U.S. officials off Saigon rooftops as Vietcong soldiers marched on the panicked capital. Soon after the fall of Saigon, in 1975, Cambodia and Laos were toppled by their own domestic communist movements. Thailand trembled with the fear of North Vietnamese tanks churning across the Mekong River, and the other so-called dominoes shook, too. But the dreaded threat failed to materialize.

More than three decades later, Americans no longer concern themselves with this corner of the world. One day, the United States' future seemed inextricably bound to Southeast Asia's; the next, Southeast Asia was forgotten. This is an all-too-familiar pattern: Washington ignores a country or region until it blows up; then, it belatedly discovers such nations and obsesses clumsily over them; and finally, it relapses into a self-imposed torpor, allowing new threats to emerge. This was the case in Afghanistan during the 1990s after it ceased to be useful as a bulwark against Soviet expansion, and it may also prove true of Southeast Asia today if Washington does not awaken to the region's growing importance.

Southeast Asia is home to 250 million Muslims, concentrated in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand--the supposed dominoes of the Vietnam era. Indonesia has the world's single largest Muslim population: 220 million--three times as large as that of Egypt, the most populous Arab nation. Yet Indonesia remains truly unknown to most Americans.

For half a century, Indonesia was one of the world's most repressive military dictatorships. In July, the country pulled off a startling exercise in democracy, when an estimated 119 million voters, Muslim and non-Muslim, peacefully reelected President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to a second five-year term. Indonesian and international observers on the ground reported that the campaign and the balloting were largely free and fair. Considering Indonesia's recent history, this was a remarkable achievement. But events in Jakarta received little attention in the United States until a week later, when suicide bombers struck two American-owned luxury hotels, killing nine people and injuring more than 50.

With the fight against communism now a distant memory, all that Americans seem to care about is fighting Islamic terrorism, not the poverty and corruption that nurture it. But to the people of Southeast Asia, terrorism is a secondary issue, a side effect of rising religious fundamentalism among impoverished, uneducated young Muslims. The U.S. Congress remains largely uninterested in the battle between democratic reformers and religious extremists. The same is true about the savage ethnic fighting between Muslims and Christians in the southern Philippines and between Muslims and Buddhists in southern Thailand.

So long as the United States remains in an open-ended struggle against radical Islam, Southeast Asia will be a critical linchpin of that fight, and ignoring the region is a grave error. Washington needs to understand not simply the politics and economies of the regions governments but also the passions, hatreds, needs, and desires of its people.

The green tide

ALTHOUGH SOUTHEAST Asia's Muslims have for centuries stood apart from their Arab coreligionists, the differences are diminishing. In parts of Indonesia and Malaysia, fundamentalists are stepping up pressure for sharia to replace constitutional law. Thirty years ago, while the United States was busy fighting Vietnam's Communists, the Muslims of Southeast Asia were almost universally moderate. Back then, sharia was limited to family life, and constitutional law controlled the life of the nation. Men seldom grew beards, many drank and dined with non-Muslim friends, and some did not pray at all. Women tended to cover their hair, but none masked their faces. People greeted one another in indigenous languages, rather than using the Arabic salaam alaikum. They thought and spoke of themselves primarily as Indonesians and Malays and only parenthetically as Muslims.

All of that, and much more, is shifting dramatically as the Muslims of Southeast Asia turn to the Middle East to reaffirm their religious identity. Moderation is losing the moral high ground and is instead disparaged as a tool of Western manipulation. Increasingly, people are demanding that religion play a greater role in governance--a trend that Singapore's ambassador at large, Tommy Koh, and foreign minister, George Yeo, call a "green tide" of Wahhabi extremism.

For the last few decades, Saudi Arabia has taken the lead in educating and indoctrinating young Southeast Asian Muslims, thereby shrinking the distance between two of the centers of Islam. In Indonesia and Malaysia, the Saudis pour an unending stream of cash into building and operating Wahhabi-oriented madrasahs and mosques. Such institutions appeal to Southeast Asian Muslims, who have historically considered themselves the Arabs' inferiors and most of whom are unable to pay for secular or mainstream religious education.

In late 2007, we spent three months traveling through Southeast Asia while researching our book on Islam in the region. In approximately two dozen of Indonesia's poorest and most underserved districts, radical clerics, police, and local military officers have imposed religious law, eclipsing the secular legal system. In Bulukumba, on the orchid-shaped island of Sulawesi, the process is far advanced. All women are now required to wear headscarves, all wage earners are required to contribute 2.5 percent of their incomes as alms to the poor, and by age seven, children must be able to read the Koran in Arabic in order to enter elementary school. Street signs in the Roman alphabet, common in the rest of Indonesia, have been replaced by ones with an Arabic-based script. And beer, which had long been available at a few guesthouses and eateries catering to foreign visitors, is now banned. The central government, fearing a massive backlash, has looked the other way.

Draining the swamp

MILITARY FORCE directed at terrorist groups will not win over Southeast Asia's Muslims; instead, the U.S. government will have to address the poverty and lack of education that make the region fertile ground for terrorist recruiters and religious extremists. Those U.S. policymakers, academics, and journalists who are more wedded to missile defense systems than building new schools and are fearful of being labeled soft on terrorism may dismiss such thinking as pie in the sky. But these ideas are not our own; they were urged on us, frequently and forcefully, by presidents and prime ministers, soldiers and clergy, students and farmers, and even a few retired terrorists.

"I know that the idea of low-profile, high-performance help is very difficult for Americans to accept," Indonesia's defense minister, Juwono Sudarsono, told us in Jakarta prior to Obama's election. "But over time, by helping us without making us look like you're paying us off for doing America's bidding, you will help us and help yourselves." What poor, young Muslims in

Southeast Asia need, according to Sudarsono, is jobs. "Jobs will help them regain their identity and dignity. . . .Work will enhance their sense of individual self-worth."

Among Indonesia's terrorists, that self-worth is based on a certainty that they are fighting a just war to rejuvenate an enfeebled Islam and that the United States is their enemy. It is up to the Obama administration to alter this mindset, a regrettable legacy of the Bush administration. The most effective means of doing so is to help educate those whom Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, called "no hopers"--the poor, the young, and the unschooled--who are most susceptible to extremists' entreaties.

"President [George W.] Bush declared a crusade against Islam," a disarmed jihadist named Farihin Ibnu Ahmad told us at an outdoor cafe a few miles from Sudarsono's office. "That means the United States considers all Muslims to be terrorists and intends to kill us all." Farihin, who is 41, said that he studied jihad for three years in the 1990s at a military training academy on the Afghan-Pakistani border funded by Osama bin Laden. In 2000, Farihin and several other members of Jemaah Islamiyah, an Indonesian franchise of al Qaeda, set off a car bomb outside the Philippine embassy in Jakarta. The blast killed two people and severely injured some 20 others, among them the Philippine ambassador. Farihin's involvement went undiscovered until two years later, when he was captured while taking part in an anti-Christian pogrom. Released from prison in 2004, he is under police surveillance, but he still struggles against "U.S. hegemony," he said, through "propaganda and persuasion" rather than with bombs or guns.

Indonesian police officials say that monitoring activists such as Farihin is more effective than keeping them in prison indefinitely, where they are able to spread their views to other inmates. Singapore has developed a similar program, introducing mainstream Muslim clergy to jailed terrorists. A lengthy study by Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs indicates that the approach is producing some positive results.

Beyond frontier justice

DANILO BUCOY, a Roman Catholic judge serving in the heart of the southern Philippines' Islamist insurrection, urged the U.S. government to pay more attention to alleviating poverty and ignorance than to crushing the relatively small number of terrorists in his midst. Coming from Bucoy--whose no-nonsense record from the bench includes sentencing 17 members of the Philippines-based terror organization Abu Sayyaf to death--it was a particularly remarkable proposal.

"This place is something like your Wild West," he said, slipping his Colt .45 out of view as we spoke in the front yard of his home. "But things are much better now, since the Americans were here and helped build roads and development projects," he said, referring to the several hundred U.S. Special Forces troops who, alongside Filipino soldiers and marines, had recently completed a civic-action program aimed at eroding the appeal of radical Islamists. "That shows that you can't defeat these people just by military operations."

Many U.S. analysts, among them the Princeton economist Alan Krueger, the University of Minnesota anthropologist William Beeman, and the Stanford political scientist David Laitin, challenge the thesis that poverty engenders radicalism and are inclined to argue that, for real or imagined reasons, terrorists act out of hatred of the United States. They point out that none of the 19 suicide hijackers in the 9/11 attacks grew up in poverty. But in our discussions, indigenous and expatriate military and police officials, government leaders, and regular citizens who live among the terrorists of Southeast Asia countered that those analysts are missing an essential point: in their experience, a clear distinction separates the committed terrorist leaders from those who blindly follow them.

Although a few leaders of Abu Sayyaf and other Philippine Islamic fundamentalist groups are educated and middle class, their foot soldiers are for the most part illiterate, jobless, and drawn to violence by a desperate attempt to ease their wrenching poverty. "Very few are indoctrinated with an ideology, and it's rare that they know anything about Islam," said Bucoy. Even though he has sentenced those found guilty of heinous crimes to the full extent of the law, he believes that economic opportunity can direct many more away from terrorism. Bucoy's experience suggests that poverty and ignorance, rather than deeply held ideological beliefs, account for much of the steady rise of Islamic fundamentalism and most of the periodic outbursts of terror.

To find where the cause lies, an outsider need only walk the dirt lanes of Southeast Asia's Muslim villages and the fetid back streets of its big cities. There, far away from the tinted-glass towers that the financial and political elites delight in showing the world, is a dark and discouraging picture: young men loitering in doorways and on corners with nothing more to occupy them than sharing cigarettes and staring into the distance. It is these futureless young men that Washington must win over before fundamentalist imams do.

There are other factors behind the rise of fundamentalism in the region. With the exception of Malaysia--where many Muslims have benefited from the country's rapid economic growth--Muslims in the region feel humiliated over being left behind as the rest of the world presses on into the twenty-first century. They remain unable to speak out against the betrayal of their corrupt and despotic political leaders. And there is their anger at the United States in general, and the Bush administration in particular, for what they consider a double standard when dealing with Israel.

Fortunately, there is evidence that genuine displays of goodwill and attempts to alleviate poverty can go a long way. The massive outpouring of help for victims of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, even though it came from the Bush administration less than two years after the invasion of Iraq, won universal praise. But because the immediate humanitarian relief was not linked to more permanent assistance, its positive effect was short-lived.

A more promising initiative began five months after 9/11, when the Defense Department, under Donald Rumsfeld, launched an innovative military and civic operation on the Philippine island of Basilan, where Judge Bucoy lives. Since the Islamist insurgency began there in the early 1970s, an estimated 120,000 people have been killed throughout the southern Philippines, some 300,000 have been dislocated, and the property damage is estimated to be approximately \$3 billion. The Pentagon's objective was to undermine the Islamists by meeting the basic needs of the island's Muslim minority, which sees itself as exploited and threatened by the Philippines' Christian majority. Similar plans, stressing secular education, basic medical care, infrastructure improvements, access to clean water, and investment in small-business ventures that create jobs could be applied throughout the southern Philippines, across Southeast and South Asia, and even in the Middle East.

By helping deliver palpable results that al Qaeda and the Taliban cannot, such an approach could go a long way toward diminishing the attraction of terrorists and other religious extremists. In a broad sense, some of the "clear, hold, and build" tactics that General David Petraeus, then the top U.S. commander in Iraq, employed to capitalize on the 2007 "surge" of U.S. troops there and begin rebuilding the country were derived from the model developed on Basilan. Petraeus is an admirer of Greg Mortenson, a co-author of *Three Cups of Tea*, an account of Mortenson's firsthand assistance to impoverished Afghans and Pakistanis since 1993.

Regrettably, Basilan once again is threatened by extremists. Soon after the Americans shifted their attention to other, nearby islands, believing their achievements would stand the test of time, Abu Sayyaf returned. This relapse demonstrates that fleeting U.S. investment in the "build" phase will not help; the commitment must be open-ended.

The invisible insurrection

INDONESIA AND the Philippines are not the only Southeast Asian nations threatened by Islamist insurgencies. Across the South China Sea, a strikingly similar situation is developing in the Muslim-majority Pattani section of Thailand. There, along Thailand's southern border with Muslim-dominated Malaysia, more than 3,500 Thai Muslims and Buddhists have slaughtered each other over the last five years.

Many stories of postcolonial ethnic conflict--such as the bloodshed during the partition of India and Pakistan--are well known. But the plight of the six million Thai Muslims, who have fought for independence for a century, has never received much attention in the West. While they watch their friends and relatives prosper on the Malaysian side of the border, the Muslims in Thailand live amid poverty and violence. Hardly a day passes without shootings, stabbings, and beheadings perpetrated by both sides. Schools, temples, and mosques are regularly bombed or burned down. It is, by any definition, a full-blown insurgency.

Although the Thai Muslim rebellion can be traced to 1909, when Pattani was incorporated into Thailand, the most recent tensions emerged on April 7, 2001. Shortly after the inauguration of then Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, three deadly coordinated bomb attacks struck a railway station, a hotel, and a gas plant in the south. Thaksin demanded an immediate end to the violence. As a former senior Royal Thai Police official and a multibillionaire businessman, Thaksin was accustomed to getting results with a snap of his fingers. He believed that he could similarly snuff out unrest in the south with a burst of brute force. But he was mistaken.

In January 2004, a group of insurgents overran a military camp in Narathiwat and seized a large cache of weapons, dramatically shifting the equation. Then, on October 25, in the sleepy border town of Tak Bai, some 2,000 residents, most of them young Muslim men, gathered outside the local police station for what was supposed to be a peaceful protest. Without warning, Thai troops shot seven demonstrators dead at point-blank range. The soldiers subsequently seized 1,300 men, stripped them to the waist, bound their hands behind their backs, and heaped them face down, five and six deep, in open army trucks. Then, for six hours, they casually drove the convoy around in circles in the harsh sun. By the end of the day, 78 of the bound men had died of asphyxiation.

Thaksin ordered the crackdown at Tak Bai. Like many Thai Buddhists, he had little interest in understanding the source of the tensions in the Muslim south. And Thaksin only made a volatile situation worse by claiming on television that the Muslims in the trucks had died because they were weak from Ramadan fasting. The Tak Bai massacre, as it has become known, reignited the long-smoldering ethnic time bomb. Since then, revenge killings of Buddhists by Muslims and further retaliations by Buddhists on Muslims have become daily events. Thai governments have come and gone through a virtual revolving door since the army--which was then under the command of a Muslim general--overthrew Thaksin in September 2006. Even so, the killing continues unabated.

Washington awakening

FAR TO the north of Tak Bai, in Bangkok, Surin Pitsuwan--secretary-general of the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and an authority on the politics of the

southern upheaval--told us that it was up to the United States to help his country find a way out.

Surin is uniquely qualified to explain to Americans the circumstances of Thailand's Muslims. A member of an observant Muslim family that operated a pondok, a traditional Islamic boarding school, he set his sights on an American education. After earning a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1982, Surin worked for two years on the staff of the New York Democratic congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro. Following Ferraro's unsuccessful run for vice president in 1984, he returned to teach in Thailand. After being elected to parliament in 1985 and being appointed Thailand's foreign minister in 1997, he became secretary-general of ASEAN in 2008.

The first step the United States must take to understand what it faces, Surin said, is to recognize that Muslims in the region view themselves as "standing up in an active and dynamic realization that they have to defend and promote their interests against the fast pace of change that they can neither control nor stop." Like other small, weak communities, these Muslims consider the external forces of globalization unfriendly and threatening. Americans need to understand, said Surin, that their cultural exports and their presumption that the rest of the world wants U.S.-style liberal democracy give Muslims everywhere the clear impression that the United States is invading their space.

The next step concerns the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Washington, said Surin, will have to convince Muslims that the United States is striving to establish greater balance in its Middle East policies. Without exception, the Muslims we spoke with throughout Southeast Asia bitterly criticized what they perceived as the unremittingly pro-Israel bias of a decades-long succession of U.S. leaders. Yet remarkably few demanded or expected a dramatic turnaround. Most felt that the new administration could dampen passions simply by creating a perception of greater fairness. They view the application of U.S. pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to freeze the spread of Jewish settlements as a first test.

The election of a U.S. president with the name Barack Hussein Obama surprised and delighted Southeast Asian Muslims. It raised hopes of warmer relations with the U.S. government and greater understanding from the American people. It is now time for the Obama administration to heed the advice of Indonesian, Filipino, and Thai experts such as Sudarsono, Bucoy, and Surin.

The early signs from Washington are encouraging. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made two official visits to the region within her first six months in office. In Jakarta, she announced that after 34 years of absence, Peace Corps volunteers would return to Indonesia. In Thailand, she signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, a loose code of conduct drafted by the founding members of ASEAN in 1976. Under the Bush administration, the United States rejected the treaty, largely because ASEAN has been unwilling to apply meaningful sanctions against the military dictatorship of Myanmar (also called Burma). A meeting between the Myanmar junta's leader, General Than Shwe, and Senator James Webb (D-Va.) in August, shortly after former U.S. President Bill Clinton's rescue mission to North Korea, seemed to herald a new era of greater U.S. engagement with Asia's most closed, authoritarian regimes.

The principal element of a new U.S. policy in the region should be "smart power"--leaning less heavily on the use or threat of arms while melding military strength with the tools of persuasion and inspiration: diplomacy, private investment, free trade, financial aid, and, above all, education. Since 1997, the number of Indonesian students in the United States has dropped precipitously, from 13,000 to 7,700--mainly due to tightened visa restrictions. At a time when the United States is seeking to win the favor of young Muslims, barring them from studying in the United States sends the wrong message.

In addition to helping provide young Muslims with a quality, secular education, the United States should be expanding the Peace Corps and other U.S. civilian organizations operating in Muslim areas throughout Southeast Asia. Smart power would best be delivered by volunteers in sandals and sneakers who live, work, and teach among the people of the region, rather than by diplomats in wingtips or soldiers in combat boots. The State Department would do well to reduce the footprint of fortress-style embassies in capital cities and instead create more intimate consulates staffed by Americans fluent in local languages in smaller district towns. Although this would likely create new security risks, human contact at this level would go a long way toward draining the swamp that nourishes tomorrow's terrorists.

Surin rejected any suggestion that what is unfolding in southern Thailand and among Muslims elsewhere in the region is part of a global terrorist campaign. Rather, he argued, Muslims are simply experiencing the fear that the weak typically feel when facing the strong. In fact, the current Islamic backlash is one that Surin presciently anticipated in his doctoral dissertation in the 1980s. He wrote:

In many parts of the world today, civil strife, political violence and, indeed, international crises have risen out of [the] strong but conflicting ties of traditional symbols and modern institutions that are themselves going through a process of transformation. . . . Forming the largest part in terms of population, the Muslims in Southeast Asia will certainly draw attention from the Middle East to the issue of their "unredeemed brethren" in southern Thailand and thus accentuate the level of violence even more.

Today, said Surin, "it is incumbent on the United States most of all to defuse the boiling situation." After all, he added, "since 9/11. . . the East's problem is the West's."

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