

ROLES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN PREVENTING AND COMBATING TERRORISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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On behalf of our institute, the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research, an independent non-government think-tank, allow me to convey first my sincerest appreciation to the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation and the Nahdatul Ulama for the opportunity to share our thoughts in this conference.

Let me start by stressing that through serious counterterrorism measures, governments in Southeast Asia have successfully weakened the physical infrastructure of terrorism in the region. The Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), two major terrorist groups in Southeast Asia, are heavily factionalized and are severely damaged with the death, arrest and neutralization of their key leaders.¹

Though JI was able to mount the Jakarta bombing in July 2009 while the ASG continues to bomb churches in the Southern Philippines and wildly engages in kidnap-for-ransom activities including the beheading of some of its victims, security authorities in Southeast Asia have dealt a number of stern blows against the JI and the ASG.

The Mantiqi structure of JI has been dismantled while the original organizational set-up of the ASG has been disrupted. Some members and key leaders of JI and ASG are currently in jail while others have disengaged or have undergone rehabilitation programs.

The threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia has subsided because law enforcement authorities are better prepared now with their improved understanding of the virulent terrorist threats confronting the region. With the signing of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Convention on

¹For more discussions, see Rommel C. Banlaoi, *Counter Terrorism Measures in Southeast Asia: How Effective Are They?* (Manila: Yuchengco Center, De La Salle University, 2009). Also see Rommel C. Banlaoi, *War on Terrorism in Southeast Asia* (Quezon City: Rex Book Store International, 2004).

Counterterrorism in 2007, there is now a legal basis for increased collaboration among ASEAN governments to decisively counter the threat of terrorism.

However, there is no reason to be complacent as surviving elements of JI and ASG still have the capability to mount future attacks. Remaining leaders are still engaged in vigorous recruitment activities to lure younger Muslims to join their cause through open and discreet ideological indoctrination as well as vigorous material and financial inducement.

While the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia has no doubt diminished, it has not really disappeared because there are remnants who are still committed to wreak havoc.²

JI as a whole has not been totally neutralized as it maintains significant cells in Indonesia, particularly in Sumatra, where around 900 JI militants exist. JJ master bombers, Dulmatin and Omar Patek, are still hiding in the vast jungle Southern Philippines with the help of the ASG and some personalities associated with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Misuari-Break-Away Group (MBG) of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)

The ASG, on the other hand, continues to have at least 450 armed followers who are resorting to kidnap-for-ransom activities for both economic and political reasons. Remaining leaders ASG are taking advantage of the vulnerability and gullibility of young population in the countryside in their desperate attempt to find new recruits and replenish the lost of their members.³ Out-of-school and illiterate Muslim youths are being offered guns and money to join the ASG. Based on our profiling of the membership of the ASG, it has juvenile membership with almost 80% belonging to 30 years old and below while only at least 20% belonging to 31 years old and above.

While police and military operations against terrorist groups in the region have diminished the threat of terrorism, there is a larger challenge to address the underlying conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. This requires more than military solutions. It needs political, economic and social interventions that governments alone can not accomplish.

²See Daljit Singh, "Trends in Terrorism in Southeast Asia" in Daljit Singh (ed), *Terrorism in South and Southeast Asia in the Coming Decade* (Singapore and New Delhi: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and MacMillan Press, 2009), pp. 82-91.

³See Bilveer Singh, *The Talibanization of Southeast Asia: Losing the War on Terror to Islamist Extremists* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007).

In Southeast Asia, countering terrorism has always been mistakenly viewed as the sole responsibility of the government. The “whole-of-government” approach in counterterrorism now common in the region indicates this government-centered view.

But there is now a growing recognition that civil society organizations (CSOs) have an essential role in counterterrorism, particularly in addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. While the “whole-of-government” approach is important for the government to fulfill its mandated task in providing peace and order for its citizens, the complexity of problems facing society today requires all stakeholders to take part in the solution. In short, there is a need for the “whole-of-nation” approach that recognizes the vital role of CSOs in addressing the problem of terrorism. Because terrorist threats in Southeast Asia have regional dimension, counterterrorism measures also call for a “whole-of-region” approach, which in Southeast Asia, of course, is easier said than done.

CSOs in Southeast Asia have been involved in a variety of activities that have tremendous bearing in preventing and combating terrorism in the region. These CSOs are pursuing pertinent projects that aim to reduce poverty, protect the environment, promote human rights and the rule of law, uphold democratization, pursue good governance, and advocate against the harsh impact of globalization.

Though CSOs in Southeast Asia are not directly involved in counterterrorism operations of their governments, CSOs indirectly contribute to the implementation of Global Counterterrorism Strategy of the United Nations, particularly in addressing the underlying conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.

CSOs in Southeast Asia started to proliferate in the 1980s to promote democratization, uphold human rights and advocate for sustainable development. CSOs grew bigger in the late 1990s, particularly in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, to rally against the neo-liberal model of economic development in Southeast Asia. At present, CSOs in Southeast Asia have formed regional coalitions and networks, which led to the transnationalization of their programs and activities.⁴

There are three types of CSOs in Southeast Asia: community-based CSOs, nationally-oriented CSOs and regionally-oriented CSOs. These three types of CSOs have complex of web of linkages and interrelationships as they work together on a variety of converging issues to synergize their efforts.

⁴For an excellent discussion on this topic, see Mely Caballero-Anthony, “ASEAN and Civil Society: Enhancing Regional Mechanisms for Managing Security” in her *Regional Security in Southeast Asia: Beyond the ASEAN Way* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), Chapter 7, pp. 232-254.

Based on various sources of current estimates, there are at least 5,000 nationally registered CSOs in Singapore, 15,000 in Malaysia, 20,000 in Thailand, 70,000 in Indonesia and 80,000 in the Philippines. The number of regionally-oriented CSOs in Southeast Asia is not yet determined but based on the register of ASEAN affiliated-CSOs, there are 58 regionally-oriented CSOs carrying a wide-range of activities from bankers association, sports club, musicians groups and other professional associations.⁵ But most of the regionally-oriented CSOs working on “progressive issues” are not ASEAN-affiliated and largely based in Thailand, the Philippines and Malaysia. Among the regionally-oriented CSOs in Southeast Asia, the ASEAN People’s Assembly (APA) is the largest network of CSOs endorsed by ASEAN members.

In the area of counterterrorism in Southeast Asia, there is a great deal of effort to harmonize state and civil society efforts. Because of existing state-civil society tensions in most Southeast Asian countries, CSOs have become important critics of state-led counterterrorism activities. CSOs in Southeast Asia are playing the role of “watchdogs” to check the excesses of state in countering terrorism in the region. At the same time, some CSOs are in the government’s “watch lists” for having been suspected of providing legal covers or protection for some personalities accused of crimes associated with terrorism.

Many CSOs in Southeast Asia are critical of counterterrorism operations of their governments because of corrupt practices and poor human rights records of their security services.⁶ But with serious security sector reforms undergoing in most Southeast Asian countries, CSOs are in the better position to take an active part in formulating measures to prevent and combat terrorism.⁷

Thank you very much for your attention.

⁵Register of ASEAN-Affiliated CSOs at <http://www.aseansec.org/6070.pdf> <accessed on 7 November 2009>.

⁶John T. Sidel, *The Islamist Threat in Southeast Asia: A Reassessment* (Washington: East-West Center, 2007), p. 5. Also see David Martin Jones and Mike Lawrence Smith, “Southeast Asia and the War Against Terrorism: The Rise of Islamism and the Challenge to the Surveillance State” in Uwe Johanen, Alan Smith and James Gomez (eds), *September 11 and Political Freedom: Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2003), pp. 142-175.

⁷See Rommel C. Banlaoi, “Countering Terrorism in the Philippines: The Imperatives of Security Sector Reform” (On-going Research Project of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research, 2009).