

Pacify tensions before they boil over by Farish Noor

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The trial of Separiano, the young Indonesian man who was caught attempting to blow up the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta, has raised questions about the future of Muslim-Buddhist relations in Indonesia and across the wider ASEAN region. Coming so close to the formation of the ASEAN Community in 2015, incidents such as these put a damper on the spirits of those who had hoped that greater and closer ASEAN integration would also lead to better understanding, cooperation, and friendship between the various ethnic and religious communities in the region.

But as we have seen of late, those hopes and dreams may well be dashed upon the hard surface of present-day political realities, where rightwing ethno-nationalist movements seem to be gaining ground all around.

That a young Indonesian man and his accomplices would contemplate to blow up the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta in this day and age points us to the fact that globalization has become a reality in our part of the world. Separiano's motive was to avenge what he regarded as the wanton destruction of Muslim-owned property and businesses in Myanmar at the hands of Burman-Buddhist agitators and rioters, who had themselves been overcome by the rightwing hyperbole and rhetoric of their leaders.

Of course, part of the analysis of the problem has to look at Myanmar as well, where increasingly we see the rise of Burman nationalism couched in religious, i.e. 'Buddhist' terms. This has, thus far, had a negative effect on non-Buddhist minorities, including Muslims, Hindus, and Christians in the country, who are now being cast as "outsiders" and "foreigners" who are told to "go back" to where they belong.

The problem, however, is that many Muslims and Christians in Myanmar happen to be native Burmans, too, or like the Rohingya, have been living in Arakan for centuries. A Burman who happens to be a Christian is no less Burman compared with his Buddhist brethren, and this fact seems to have been lost in the heat of the moment.

But Separiano and his ilk also have to look at themselves and acknowledge that even if Muslims have been persecuted and victimized in Myanmar, the same can be said of non-Muslim minorities in Indonesia today.

Over the past few years, West Java, in particular, has witnessed a spate of Church burnings with alarming regularity

and Muslim-Christian antagonism has not truly subsided. Separiano may feel angered by the treatment of Muslims in Myanmar but as a Muslim, he also needs to extend his humanitarian concerns in a universal manner and look at how other minorities are being treated in his own country.

In the medium- to long-term however, we need to monitor these developments closely for we see a dangerous fault line appearing at present.

Buddhist-Muslim conflict in Myanmar cannot and will not stop at the border of that country for it also impacts Muslim-Buddhist relations elsewhere across ASEAN: Thailand, for instance, is a Buddhist majority country with a Muslim minority in the south, while Malaysia and Indonesia are Muslim-majority countries with significant Buddhist minorities in their midst. What has happened to ASEAN's much-lauded dream of presenting itself as a region of stability and prosperity for all, and where all religions and religious communities are protected by the rule of law and not victimized by the rule of the mob?

Complicating matters further is the communicative infrastructure that we have created that brings ASEAN and its people together. This has facilitated more movement of peoples, goods and ideas, but it also entails having borders that are more porous and inter-penetrable.

The anger of Muslims in Indonesia was sparked by what they saw on the Internet. But during my research in Myanmar, I also noted that Burmese Buddhists are also angered by what they see on the same Internet that feeds them images and stories of violence meted out upon Buddhists elsewhere. If this overflow of information is not managed well and with an even hand, we are likely to see more data overload that in turn creates the fertile ground whereupon radicals and extremists may feed.

Now, above all, there is the need for Muslim and Buddhist intellectuals, activists, and community leaders to come forward to play their role as mediators, educators, and, crucially, circuit-breakers in times of crisis.

It has to be stated again that ASEAN integration is due any day now, by 2015. So much effort and investment has been put into this process, to lay down the working parameters and guidelines for what may become a successful multi-state assemble of nations that can and will guarantee a conflict-free Southeast Asia for generations to come. But if this dream is to become a reality, then policymakers and security experts had better begin focusing on the simmering tensions we see around us today and put out the embers before they turn into a bonfire. That would render all the work of the past in vain and signal a moral failure on the part of the leaders of today.

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