

No clash of religions

Michael Waibel, Ralf Jordan and Michael Schneider (eds.):

Krisenregion Südostasien. Alte Konflikte und neue Kriege [Crisis region South East Asia. Old conflicts and new wars].

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Two main themes recur throughout this book. First, the essays investigate the extent to which theories about “new wars” help to understand violent conflicts raging in Burma, Aceh (Indonesia), Southern Thailand, the Philippines and the Solomon Islands. Reference is made mainly to scholar Mary Kaldor. She argues that several characteristics mark “new wars”. Among them are the brutality of warring factions towards the civil population – whose support is rarely sought – and the blurring of militias with organised crime. The second general topic of the book is whether events in Southeast Asia support Samuel Huntington’s theory of war resulting from culture conflicts, and of Muslim culture being particularly violence prone.

The response to Huntington is clear. His approach has no empirical base, as it is made very clear by one of the most powerful essays, which compares conflicts in Southern Thailand and the Southern Philippines. Both regions are home to Muslim minorities, but in neither case was religion the source of hostilities. In Thailand, the root cause was state pressure on the minority to assimilate, along with violent repression of their opposition. In the Philippines, the root conflict was about land use, following state-organised migration. Nonetheless, the US administration’s “war on terror” in cooperation with the governments concerned runs the substantial risk of provoking the very kind of Muslim radicalisation Washington pretends to be fighting.

Mary Kaldor’s work gets more approval in this collection of essays. Her theses make sense in the context of Aceh and some other conflicts. However, Kaldor’s elaborations tend to be more helpful for describing the course of wars than for analysing their causes. A core thesis of this book is that, in Southeast Asia, violence does not so much stem from the weakness or failure of states, but rather from tensions between a country’s political centre and the periphery. The editors thus consider conflicts side-effects of the transformation of pre-modern states towards modern nation states.

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