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Subnational Autonomy and Political Islam: A Comparative Analysis of Aceh, Bangsamoro, and Patani

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the different dynamics between subnational autonomy and political Islam in three distinct Southeast Asian contexts from a comparative perspective. The three cases studies concern Aceh (Indonesia), Bangsamoro (the Philippines), and Patani (Thailand). Through an analysis of historical grievances, political movements, peace agreements, and legal frameworks, the study reveals that the pursuit of self-governance is deeply intertwined with Islamic identity and aspirations. The paper aims to identify commonalities in the respective conflict trajectories and the centrality of Islam herein. However, it also highlights significant differences in the extent and nature of autonomy achieved, the specific objectives of political Islam, and the outcomes of the respective peace processes. As a general target, the study would like to offer insights into the broader implications for understanding state-minority relations and conflict resolution in Southeast Asia, which is known to be a religiously diverse region.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article discusses political developments in three Southeast Asian regions: Aceh (Indonesia), Bangsamoro (the Philippines), and Patani (Thailand). Aceh is an Indonesian province located at the westernmost part of Sumatra, the large and westernmost part of the Indonesian archipelago. Bangsamoro is now an autonomous region in the western part of Mindanao Island, which is part of the Republic of the Philippines. Finally, Patani is a province and city in southern Thailand whose spelling can vary. In this article, I use the Malay spelling because it refers to the historical Malay Sultanate of Patani and the territory in which Malay Muslim groups struggle for autonomy or independence from the Thai state.

The objective of this article to analyze and compare the complex and intricate relationship of subnational autonomy and political Islam in the three aforementioned regions, offering significant academic and practical insights into the dynamics of sub-national conflicts, peacebuilding, decentralization, and the role of political Islam herein. Despite their distinct national contexts, the historical trajectories, struggles for self-determination, and challenges of transitioning from conflict to sustainable peace of these three regions are strikingly similar. A comparative approach to Aceh, Bangsamoro, and Patani provides a nuanced understanding of how historical grievances, the nature of central governments, and the specific manifestations of political Islam influence the trajectory and outcomes of autonomy movements. Their respective paths to autonomy and the role of Islam have varied significantly. Thus, this comparative analysis enriches our understanding of regional conflict patterns and provides valuable lessons for policymaking and conflict resolution efforts worldwide.

There is already a significant amount of academic research and literature about the conflicts in Aceh (Aspinall, 2020), (Barter & Wangge, 2022), (Graf et al., 2010), (Lele, 2023) Bangsamoro (Agojo & Teehankee, 2023), (Clayton et al., 2025), (McKenna, 2023), and Patani/Southern Thailand (Chambers et al., 2020), (Jitpiromsri et al., 2020), (McCargo, 2010). However, comparative studies, which specifically refer to these three conflict areas, are relatively rare. Boonpunth/Saheem (2022), for example, compare the three conflicts, focusing on the contributions, advantages, and challenges of civil society organizations in peacebuilding. Buendia (2005) made a comparison between the peace processes in Aceh and Mindanao and Jitpiromsri, Srisompob, Md Mahbubul Haque, and Paul Chambers (2020) compared the roles of Muslim minorities in Thailand's Deep South with that in Myanmar. In my comparative study on institutional engineering and political accountability in Southeast Asia (Ziegenhain 2015), I focused on the subnational conflicts in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines from a comparative institutionalist perspective. Another study from Ahmad Norma-Permata (Permata 2006) identified the Islamic factor as a crucial element in all the three conflicts.

Many of the before-mentioned studies are somewhat outdated, however, since, for example, Aceh is more peaceful than it was 20 years ago, and Bangsamoro's autonomy is much broader than that of the ARMM (Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao) was back then. Thus, this article aims to update previous comparative research on these conflicts, focusing specifically on the role of political Islam.

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2. METHODS

In terms of methodology, the author conducted a careful and thorough literature review from academic and journalistic sources. To receive firsthand information, the author conducted interviews during several field trips to Aceh (specifically Banda Aceh), the latest in 2023, and Bangsamoro (specifically Cotabato) prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Aceh, the author interviewed local academics, for example at a two-day workshop at the Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry in June 2023 and government officials who preferred to remain anonymous and did not want to be quoted. Many of these individuals were active in the former separatist movement. During two field trips to Cotabato, the main hub of the Bangsamoro transitional government, the author interviewed several members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP), including Naguib Sinarimbo, who was the UBJP Deputy Secretary General at the time.

The authors' only visit to Patani was already more than 20 years ago. However, the author conducted several interviews in recent years with relevant academics writing on the conflict in Southern Thailand, among them most notably Dr. Paul Chambers (Naresuan University, Phitsanulok, Thailand) and Prof. Srisompob Jitpiromsri, a leading authority on the insurgency in Thailand's Deep South. He is a lecturer and research associate at the Center for Conflict Studies and Cultural Diversity (CSCD) at Prince of Songkla University in Patani, and the director of Deep South Watch (DSW), a prominent think tank monitoring the conflict in Southern Thailand.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Introducing the Three Case Studies

The cases of Aceh, Bangsamoro, and Patani provide a valuable basis for understanding the dynamics of subnational autonomy and political Islam in Southeast Asia. Despite certain basic similarities, their different paths emphasize important features of conflicts and conflict resolution. The three cases reveal a range of approaches to and achievements in subnational autonomy, showing how a state's willingness to devolve power can greatly affect conflict resolution.

Let us start with the case of Aceh. The Acehnese history of resistance dates to the Dutch colonial period in the late 1800s. After the War of Liberation, the Indonesian government in Jakarta conferred the title of a Special Region (*Daerah Istimewa*) on Aceh in acknowledgment of its contribution during the Struggle for Indonesia, but soon afterwards revoked this title. The combination of a sense of betrayal, the distinctive identity as devout Moslems and the economic mistreatment from Jakarta were the dominant triggers behind the separatist tendencies in Aceh (Aspinall, 2007) (Lele, 2023). Another main source of resentment was the management of natural resources, in which only a small part of the revenues from the oil and gas reserves remained in Aceh, while the large majority went to the national government. Thie grievances of the Acehnese became worse when Suharto took over power and established the New Order (*Orde Baru*). The general militarization of society and the ignorance of Acehnese grievances in Jakarta triggered armed resistance, which culminated in the establishment of the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) in 1976. Since then, the conflict claimed approximately 15,000 lives: combatants, regular soldiers but also thousands of civilians.

Following a nearly three-decade-long insurgency, Aceh achieved "special autonomy"

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(*otonomi khusus*) within the unitary Republic of Indonesia through the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2005 and the subsequent Law No. 11 of 2006 on Governing Aceh. This granted the province extensive powers over education, culture, religion, and, uniquely within Indonesia, the formal implementation of Sharia law across civil, criminal, and family matters. In addition, the province of Aceh was granted a far bigger share in the revenues from property tax but particularly from mining (80%), oil (15%) and gas (30%) revenues (Lele 2023).

The main insurgent group, the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) transformed from an armed separatist group into a political and social movement. Many former GAM combatants and leaders are now integrated into Acehnese society and hold significant positions in local government and political parties, most notably the Aceh Party (*Partai Aceh*). The level of politically motivated violence is very low nowadays.

There are obvious similarities to the situation in Bangsamoro. The Bangsamoro people's claimed history of independent statehood during the precolonial era served as the foundation for the discussion of their fight for self-determination, which started as an aspiration for an independent state and separation from the postwar Republic of the Philippines. However, the discourse turned into an armed conflict between the central government of the Philippines and several Bangsamoro secessionist organizations (Agojo & Teehankee, 2023).

For decades, the Bangsamoro people were involved in a protracted and often violent struggle for self-determination and recognition in their homeland in the Southern Philippines. This period saw the rise of armed groups like the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and later the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), engaging in conflict with the Philippine government due to historical grievances, perceived marginalization, and land disputes. The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was established in 1990 in response to the beginning of the democratization process and the new democratic constitution of 1987. The ARMM was run by a Manila-dependent local government, which was often criticized for its limitations and inefficiencies in addressing the core issues of the Bangsamoro people. Although powers for the local people were manifested in the formal and administrative structures of the ARMM, they were politically controlled by the central government (Buendia, 2005).

Decades of peace negotiations, punctuated by armed clashes and humanitarian crises, eventually led to the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro. The Mamasapano incident of January 2015, a violent clash between the Philippine Armed Forces and Muslim Mindanao fighters, created a temporary setback (Clayton et al., 2025). However, the subsequent establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in 2019 marked a significant step toward greater autonomy and a more peaceful future.

The establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) through the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in 2018, championed by then President Rodrigo Duterte and legislated by the Philippine Congress, represented a critical departure from the widely acknowledged shortcomings of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). This new framework, rooted in the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), significantly expanded autonomous governance by devolving 58 powers to the Bangsamoro government, a substantial increase from the 14 areas of limited autonomy previously afforded under the ARMM charter.

The former insurgent group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), now leads the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), demonstrating a profound shift in governance. The first

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elections for the Bangsamoro Parliament are now scheduled for October 13, 2025. Originally set for May 2022, the elections were first postponed to May 2025 and have now been officially moved to October 2025. Following the elections, the Bangsamoro Parliament will elect a prime minister, who will serve as the official head of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) government.

All these developments represent a far more comprehensive devolution of legislative and administrative powers compared to its predecessor, the ARMM, reflecting a genuine commitment from the Philippine government to address Moro aspirations for self-rule. Violence has not been completely eradicated, since there are radical splinter groups that do not want to subordinate to the MILF, but compared to previous years the level of violence went down significantly.

This is different in Patani in Thailands Deep South. Patani became a Muslim sultanate in the 16th Century and remained independent until it was militarily annexed by Siam in 1786. Afterwards, there were many rebellions against Bangkok rule, resulting in more brutal suppressions by Siam over the Patani region (Jitpiromsri et al., 2020). For more than 200 years, the Patani Malay-Muslim community has persistently sought autonomy, language and cultural rights, and the implementation of Islamic law in Siam, which was later renamed to Thailand. Nowadays, Thailand is a centralist, Buddhist-dominated, and authoritarian state in which the Thai Armed Forces play a dominant role.

A new escalation of the conflict took place in April 2004, when the Thai Royal Army killed more than 100 Muslim-Malays near the Krue Se Mosque, the so-called Tak Bai incident. This brutal event proved to be a major catalyst for the new and intensified phase of the South Thailand insurgency. The Thai government imposed a state of emergency in July 2005, which has been extended by all Thai governments to date. It allows Thai security forces to take extremely harsh action against any actions perceived as separatist (Ziegenhain, 2024). The conflict in southern Thailand is being waged with great brutality by both parties, which also significantly affects the civilian population. According to Deep South Watch, a civil society organization at the University of Pattani, there were 7,723 deaths and over 22,300 injuries between January 2004 and June 19, 2025 (Deep South Watch, 2025).

Some insurgent groups, such as the *Barisan Revolusi Nasional* (BRN), have demanded full independence or the establishment of an "independent Islamic state" (Means 2009). Unlike Aceh and Bangsamoro, however, Patani has not achieved a comprehensive autonomy agreement or significant political devolution. The Thai government's policy remains predominantly security-focused, aiming to uphold law and order in southern Thailand. Notably, it does not explicitly mention granting significant political autonomy or formally implementing Islamic law. This policy contrasts sharply with the negotiated settlements in the other two cases, illustrating the consequences of a central government's persistent reluctance to grant meaningful political autonomy and leading to a protracted, low-intensity conflict.

It could be argued that what is lacking in Patani is the right moment, or the window of opportunity, that, for example, opened for the Aceh conflict in early 2005 when a horrible tsunami devasted Aceh and at the same moment reform-oriented new Indonesian President started his term. Gerard McDermott called it a ‘bleeding stalemate’, which is the ripe moment, where the different internal and external factors are all favorable for the development of a bilateral ceasefire, leading to negotiations, and ultimately, the signing of an agreement. He argued that this stalemate period was been 2008 and 2013 and has passed in Southern Thailand, although another ‘ripe

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moment' may emerge in the future (McDermott, 2021).

3.2. Similarities and Divergences in the Three Case Studies

The three case studies share at least three major similarities.

a) Deep-Seated Historical Grievances: All three regions share a history of distinct ethno-religious identity, often rooted in a rich Islamic heritage, and a collective memory of perceived marginalization, forced assimilation, or oppression by a central, often predominantly non-Muslim or in the Indonesian case Pancasila-dominated state. In Aceh, for example, the legacy as Southeast Asia's first Muslim kingdom and its later incorporation into Indonesia has fueled persistent demands for autonomy, dating back to the 1950s. The Bangsamoro region similarly reflects longstanding resistance to centralized authority, with the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) historically failing to fulfill the Moro population's aspirations for genuine self-determination, leading to widespread dissatisfaction. Patani's grievances stem from its past as a Malay-Muslim sultanate, later annexed by Siam, and subjected to policies aimed at "Thaification," which suppressed both the Malay language and Islamic customs. These accumulated injustices are foundational to ongoing autonomy movements across these regions.

b) Persistent Economic Disparities: Economic marginalization is another key similarity. All three regions are among the least developed in their respective countries, a reality underscored by recent socio-economic data provided by the World Bank. Aceh's gross regional domestic product (GRDP) per capita in 2023 was approximately $2,500—significantly below Indonesia's national average of $4,680. With these values, Aceh is not the poorest region in Indonesia, because the provinces of Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) and Papua are still less developed. However, in the Western hemisphere of Indonesia, Aceh is significantly less advanced despite an abundance of natural resources, particularly oil and gas.

In Bangsamoro (BARMM), the situation is even more acute. In 2022, the BARMM recorded the lowest GRDP per capita among all regions in the Philippines, with 67,624 Pesos (approximately 1,200 US Dollar). This figure is less than half of the Philippines' national GDP per capita, which stood at 178,574 Pesos (approximately 3,170 US Dollar) in the same year. According to Yusoph and Ali (2022) expected life at birth in ARMM is only 52 years, in comparison to the national average of 71 years for the Philippines.

In Southern Thailand, the GRDP for the Southern Border Provinces, where the Muslim Malay minority lives, was approximately 60,378 Baht (around USD 1,700) in the year 2022. This is significantly lower than Thailand's national GDP per capita for the same year, which was 255,270 Baht (around USD 7,200), indicating that the income per person in the Southern Border provinces is more than four times lower than the national average

The cases of Aceh, Bangsamoro, and Patani highlight the critical link between prolonged conflict and economic deprivation. Despite unique post-conflict or ongoing conflict dynamics and varying levels of autonomy, these regions consistently exhibit alarmingly low GDP per capita figures when compared to their national averages. Furthermore, their geographical location on the periphery of their respective nations places them far from the centers of political decision-making in Jakarta, Manila, and Bangkok, often contributing to their historical neglect and delayed development. Addressing these structural inequalities remains a central challenge for national and local governments but is essential for fostering sustainable peace.

c) Challenges of Human Rights and Sharia Implementation: Even in regions like Aceh and

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Bangsamoro, where substantial autonomy has been granted, the application of Sharia law presents persistent challenges. In Aceh, human rights concerns have been consistently raised, particularly regarding corporal punishment like caning, and the criminalization of consensual sex outside of marriage. Additionally, questions persist about the applicability of qanuns (Islamic laws) to non-Muslims and whether the severity of punishments administered is truly proportional to the offenses committed. These issues underline the ongoing difficulties in balancing religious legal frameworks with broader human rights standards. In addition, there is the need to discuss and settle the question of women rights within the context of a Sharia-based society.

In addition to these similarities, the three case studies diverge in three major ways:

a) Extent and Nature of Autonomy: The most significant difference among the three regions is that Aceh and Bangsamoro have achieved significant, formalized autonomy, whereas Patani has not secured a comprehensive autonomy agreement and remains in a state of ongoing conflict with the Thai government, which is largely unwilling to devolve political authority. This comparison reveals a spectrum of autonomy as a potential conflict resolution tool. Aceh's autonomy resembles federalism, with Jakarta possessing limited power over the region (Isra, de Villiers, and Arifin, 2019), whereas Bangsamoro is more dependent on the national government, particularly in financial matters.

Aceh and Bangsamoro demonstrate that significant, formalized subnational autonomy, even with retained central control in key areas, can be a viable path to ending longstanding ethno-religious conflicts. The differences between the three case studies suggest that the degree and nature of autonomy offered by the national government are critical determinants of the trajectory of a conflict and its potential for peaceful resolution.

b) Insurgent Objectives: While all involve Islamic identity, the primary objectives and the evolution of these objectives among the insurgent groups are different. The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in Aceh shifted from seeking full independence to accepting substantial self-government within Indonesia, a crucial turning point in the peace process (Ziegenhain, 2010). The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Bangsamoro aimed for an Islamic homeland and successfully transformed into a political party, institutionalizing "moral governance" within the Philippine state (Yusof & Bagolong, 2023). In contrast, Patani's insurgent groups have more diverse and often uncompromised goals, ranging from independence to an Islamic state, and a unified political platform remains elusive, contributing to the protracted nature of the conflict (Jitpiromsri et al., 2020).

c) State Response and Political Will: A key divergence lies in the state's willingness to recognize and accommodate the ethno-religious grievances and political aspirations of the sub-national groups. In Aceh and Bangsamoro, the central governments eventually engaged in political negotiations that led to formal recognition of distinct identities and the institutionalization of Islamic law within autonomy frameworks. In Aceh, the most important shifts for autonomy to succeed were the process and who autonomy empowered, and not only the powers granted to the subnational government. The peace agreement was directly negotiated with GAM, a popular rebel movement, which later enabled the former rebels and civil society activists to assume leadership roles in provincial and district governments, replacing the previously pro-Jakarta provincial government (Barter & Wangge, 2022).

The Thai governments, conversely, have so far all maintained a more security-centric approach, demonstrating a persistent reluctance to criticize the military's handling of the

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insurgency, address the culture of impunity, or advocate for political autonomy (Chambers et al., 2020). The Thai government's refusal to acknowledge the protest movement's Islamic identity further exacerbates the conflict by misdiagnosing the core grievances and preventing effective political solutions (Jitpiromsri et al., 2020).

The success of peace processes in Aceh and Bangsamoro, contrasted with the ongoing stalemate in Patani, underscores the critical role of political compromise from both sides and genuine state engagement. In Aceh, GAM's willingness to set aside independence (Ziegenhain, 2010) met with Jakarta's willingness to grant substantial autonomy and formalize Sharia. In Bangsamoro, the MILF's commitment to the peace process was reciprocated by the Philippine government's commitment to replace a failed autonomous region with a more self-governing local entity (Agojo & Teehankee, 2023). In Patani, the absence of a similar political breakthrough, particularly the Thai government's reluctance to devolve power and acknowledge Islamic goals (Jitpiromsri et al., 2020), perpetuates the conflict. These findings highlight the importance of a two-way commitment to political solutions for achieving sustainable peace.

3.3. Comparing the Three Case Studies with Regard to Political Islam

In the following, I compare the role and manifestations of political Islam in each context. Although political Islam is a common thread, it manifests differently in each context. These variations reflect different objectives and outcomes shaped by historical trajectories and state responses.

In all the three case studies, Islam is not merely a cultural attribute but a core component of identity and a powerful mobilizational force. It provides a unifying narrative, a basis for collective action, and a source of legitimacy for resistance. In Aceh, Islam is the "common denominator of unification" (Ziegenhain, 2010) and foundational to Acehnese identity and resistance. Acehnese identity is derived from a combination of historical pride associated with the Acehnese Sultanate, the collective memory of the struggle against the Dutch colonizers, and a common and regionally specific form of Islam (Robert, 2008). This specific Islamic identity has been persistently retained throughout history and has become a center of Acehnese identity (Sustikarini, 2019).

While other more radical Islamist groups are demanding an Islamic State or Caliphate for all Indonesia, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) focused explicitly on secession and self-determination. Although GAM's objectives "maintained a clear political focus" on independence rather than an explicit Islamic state, "the Islamic character of GAM is inseparable from its identity" (Ziegenhain, 2010). In the aftermath of the peace agreement GAM who transformed into *Partai Aceh* became the dominant political force in Aceh, sometimes using extortion and intimidation as tools to enforce support, particularly in rural areas (Stange & Patock, 2010).

With the support of the GAM, the peace agreement formalized the implementation of Sharia law as a core aspect of Aceh's special autonomy. This law covers many aspects of life, from worship to criminal law. This represents a unique accommodation in which political Islam is institutionalized within a secular state's broader legal framework.

The role of political Islam is different in Bangsamoro. There, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) had an explicit and foundational objective: to create a moral government based on based on Islamic ethical values from the Qur'an and Hadith. This aspiration is reflected in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) government's commitment to "Moral Governance mechanisms," integrating Islamic principles into the region's administrative

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and ethical framework (Yusof & Bagolong, 2023).

Political Islam thus manifests as a guiding ideology for the newly established Bangsamoro autonomous government, which aspires to implement Sharia law comprehensively. However, it faces practical challenges related to the region's diverse interpretations of Islam, the stringent evidentiary standards required for certain Sharia punishments, and the complexities of jurisdictional boundaries, especially as they pertain to non-Muslims. In addition, concerns about violent and hateful Islamic extremism remain deep among the Bangsamoro people, as it could undermine stability and peace in the BARMM (Kelly et al., 2024).

Islam is central to the Malay-Muslim identity in Patani and serves as a primary driver of resistance against historical "Thaification" policies and perceived imposition of Thai-Buddhist cultural practices by the Thai state (McCargo, 2010). Insurgent groups, such as the *Barisan Revolusi Nasional* (BRN) and *Gerakan Mujahid in Islam Patani* (GMIP), have explicit Islamist goals, with some demanding an independent "Malay and Islamic state". Other authors like Albritton (2010) argue that although Islam provides appropriate symbols for political resistance against the government, culture represents more fundamental and challenging issues of national identity. According to him, language is the primary indicator of cultural identity. Muslims in Southern Thailand who speak Thai (rather than Malay) at home are significantly more assimilated into the Thai state than those who speak Malay (Albritton, 2010).

There might be some contacts with other Muslim insurgency groups worldwide, but it seems implausible that the international Islamic movement is guiding Thailand's southern insurgency (Chambers et al., 2020). The self-identity of southern Thai insurgents suggests a greater emphasis on establishing a Malay nation of Patani than on becoming part of a pan-Islamic state. Foreign Islamic operatives have actually been met with mistrust among Malay Muslims in southern Thailand (Chambers et al., 2020).

This diversity highlights that Political Islam is not monolithic across these cases. In Aceh, Islam is seen as a local identity marker that underpins the demand for unique legal autonomy (GAM). In Bangsamoro, it is a foundational ideology for establishing a new, self-governing entity with "moral governance." In Patani, Islam functions as a core element of identity, often fueling resistance against the Buddhist Thai majority, and, for certain groups, aspirations for an independent Islamic state. Still, without formal state recognition or a defined route toward institutionalization, these ambitions remain largely aspirational. It is important to note that, while Islam serves as a shared foundation, its political purposes and institutional impacts diverge significantly depending on historical circumstances, government responses, and internal dynamics within the movement.

CONCLUSION

This comparative examination of Aceh, Bangsamoro, and Patani illustrates the intricate and varied nature of subnational autonomy and political Islam across Southeast Asia. While these regions share longstanding grievances rooted in distinct ethno-religious identities and longstanding marginalization by central authorities, the trajectories they have followed are notably divergent.

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Aceh and Bangsamoro, for instance, represent scenarios where negotiated settlements between state actors and insurgent groups have resulted in substantial, institutionalized autonomy. These arrangements explicitly incorporate elements of Islamic governance, reflecting a willingness by central governments to accommodate local demands within a formal political framework.

In stark contrast, Patani remains mired in unresolved conflict. The region continues to experience low-intensity insurgency, with the Thai government demonstrating limited willingness to devolve significant political authority or to recognize the religious dimensions underpinning local grievances.

Ultimately, this analysis suggests that while historical grievances and Islamic identity serve as common motivational forces across all three cases, it is the variation in central government responsiveness, the ideological development of insurgent movements, and the strength and sincerity of peace processes that have led to markedly different outcomes. These factors collectively shape the extent to which subnational autonomy and political Islam become institutionalized within each context.

Political Islam in Southeast Asia defies any simple, monolithic description. Its manifestations vary considerably from one context to another. In some instances, it serves as a marker of cultural identity, underlying calls for distinct legal autonomy. Elsewhere, it emerges as a central ideology guiding the formation of new self-governing entities or fueling separatist and Islamist agendas, particularly in response to state repression. The actual goals and institutional results hinge on a complex interplay of historical backgrounds, state strategies, and the internal dynamics within these movements.

Subnational autonomy, as discussed here, stands out as a multifaceted and intricate phenomenon. Its effective realization depends not only on formal legal frameworks but also on the strength of political, administrative, and fiscal structures. Crucially, it demands sustained negotiation, compromise, and trust-building between central authorities and subnational actors. The durability of peace processes is closely tied to sincere political participation and the willingness to devolve meaningful power in order to address underlying grievances.

Future research might usefully explore the reasons for the long-term viability of autonomy arrangements in regions such as Aceh and Bangsamoro. Comparative research into the internal dynamics of Islamic political movements and their potential for adaptation and compromise could also be illuminating, especially where formal state recognition and accommodation are difficult to secure. Examining how these movements develop in the absence of structured peace processes may offer valuable insights into the persistence of conflict and possible avenues for resolution in areas like Patani.

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