

# American Foreign Policy Council



## EAST ASIA

### COUNTRIES

China  
Thailand  
Indonesia  
Malaysia  
The Philippines  
Australia

### Regional Summary

East Asia faces a growing problem with Islamist extremism, which has taken different forms and seen varying degrees of success across the region. In Thailand, the Philippines, and China, Islamist activism has largely paralleled ethno-religious separatism, while Indonesia and Malaysia, the only two countries with majority-Muslim populations, have grappled with powerful domestic Islamist political groups seeking the implementation of *sharia* law as well as violent *jihadist* groups with ties to Islamic terror organizations.

The region's southeast has a history of religious moderation and tolerance, with literalist forms of Islam largely rejected by its inhabitants. However, from the 1970s onward, pan-Islamist influences from Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood have been making inroads in Indonesia. By the 1990s, Islamist parties operating within the Indonesian political system were successfully challenging country's commitment to secularism, expanding the authority of religious courts, and abolishing bans on the headscarf in school. In the Indonesian province of Aceh, Islamists won a federal exception in 2002 to implement *sharia* as the official legal system for Muslims and in districts of West Java, *sharia* serves as the de facto law of the land. The most active and deadly radical Islamist group in Indonesia—indeed, in the region—remains Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). The group conducted a string of sensational terrorist attacks on civilian targets in Indonesia throughout the 2000s, prompting a fierce crackdown by Indonesian security forces and, as a consequence, a significant diminution of their leadership and capabilities.

Malaysia, with the second largest Muslim population in the region, has also experienced a slide toward religious conservatism in recent decades. After taking power in 1981, longtime ruler Mahathir Mohammad and his nominally secular UMNO party implemented wide-ranging efforts to elevate Islam's prominence in Malay society, restructuring education and banking to better conform with Islamic practices. The country's active Islamist opposition party, the PAS, has pushed for the expansion of *sharia* law, but recently abandoned efforts to convert Malaysia into an Islamic state. Two radical Salafist groups, the KMM and Al Maunah, remain active in Malaysia. The former has designs on creating an Islamic state in Malaysia; however, neither has engaged successfully in violent terrorist attacks, and each appears committed to a domestic religio-political agenda. They remain under close scrutiny by Malaysian security forces.

In the majority-Christian Philippines, radical Islamism has taken root in the form of violent secessionist insurgencies, focused in the country's southern islands. Three violent Islamist groups, the MNLF, MILF, and Abu Sayyaf, have been battling the Filipino state for decades, with some assistance from external Islamist groups such as JI. However, today the three groups remain divided and suffer from weak or fractured leadership. Their popularity among the Filipino Muslim population appears to have waned, while government security forces—aided by U.S. training and supplies as well as some 500 Special Forces personnel—have significantly diminished their capabilities. No broad-based Islamist movements, either societal or political, have taken hold in the Philippines, although Islam remains the fastest-growing religion in the country and Islamic NGOs remain small but active.

Much like the Philippines, Thailand's experience with violent Islamic groups has been in the context of a separatist insurgency, albeit one characterized by a stark ethnic-religious divide. This overwhelmingly-Buddhist country has been grappling with Muslim separatists in the country's three Muslim-majority, southernmost provinces since its borders were drawn in 1902. The insurgency is not an exclusively Islamist phenomenon, involving communists and secular ethno-nationalists. However, it is dominated by the BRN-C, a primarily-Islamist group fighting to establish an independent Islamic state for Malay Muslims. No Islamist party exists on the Thai political scene and no political parties endorse the insurgency or its goals. However, funds from Arab countries have supported Islamic educational institutions and NGOs in the country since the 1990s, and the Tablighi Jamaat, which is growing in stature in the Muslim south, constructed the largest mosque in Thailand in 2008.

The most populous country in the world, China, has a relatively small Mus-

lim population (just 1.6 percent), but an Islamist movement that carries disproportionate strategic and political significance. Beijing officially recognizes Muslims as one of China's "five peoples" and recognizes ten Muslim nationalities. Yet China suffers from a tumultuous relationship with its Muslim population. The country's westernmost province of Xinjiang, where most Chinese Muslims reside, is ethnically and religiously distinct from the Han majority which rule the country. Active in Xinjiang since the 1940s, a handful of Islamist separatist groups re-emerged with radical agendas in the 1990s, promoting separatism and/or greater autonomy for the region's predominant Uighur ethnic group. However, while some are known to have links to the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other transnational *jihadi* groups, terrorist activity against the Chinese state has been limited. Beijing has combated this perceived threat with strict controls on religious practice and education in Xinjiang, as well as the liberal use of state security forces in suppressing dissent and demonstrations.

As in China, Muslims constitute less than two percent of the Australian population. Unlike China, however, Australia has had relatively few problems with its Muslim population and Islamist groups have found Australia inhospitable for planning or conducting terrorist attacks, although they have made attempts at recruiting and fundraising on the island continent. Some Islamist civil society and charity groups, most notably Hizb ut Tahrir, remain active in Australia, but the population at large has expressed determined opposition to the most basic Islamist ideas and ideologies.