This paper identifies four important factors that help explain and understand the rise of identity movements in Asia, paying particular attention to Southeast Asia. I suggest that three broad structural conditions have provided the context for the emergence of identity movements: the existence of ‘ethnic peripheries’ on the geographical extremities of modern ‘nation-states’; state-sponsored migration processes that have brought ‘loyal’ subjects of the dominant ethnic group to the regions, and the consequent emergence of severe inequalities both between the region itself and the national level, and within the region between indigenous groups and migrants. But I suggest that the turn to violence has largely been predicated upon the state’s response to demands for autonomy and socio-economic development. When the state denies such demands violently or repressively, this has provided the trigger for violent conflict.

Ethnic Peripheries and Historical Processes of State Formation

The map of independent South and East Asian states that emerged from colonialism or consolidated their borders during the latter half of the twentieth century is largely a product of the happenstance of colonial consolidation in the latter half of the previous century. Working roughly clockwise round the South China Sea, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos map on to the French possessions; the Philippines, the Spanish and then American; Indonesia, the Dutch; Malaysia, Singapore and Burma, the British. Within this region, only Thailand remained formally uncolonized, although its room for independent manoeuvre was severely curtailed. Prior to the arrival of European powers, however, the nature of political power in the region was markedly different. Early Asian history is typically characterised not as a series of bordered states but of often overlapping mandala polities, or centres of political influence which claimed varying degrees of loyalty and suzerainty over a wide but amorphous geographical area (Wolters 1999). With large tracts of inhospitable mountains and jungles, political power in the pre-colonial period was less concerned with control over land – and hence territorial compartmentalization – than with control over people; slave-raiding rather than territorial conflict was the predominant form of military rivalry in the region.

Somewhere in between then and now, however, physical borders were drawn, much as they stand now, but these were not drawn with consideration of political or cultural logic of pre-colonial state formation, but rather according to the dictates of colonial policy and interaction between colonial powers. The expansion of the Dutch East Indies to include Aceh, for instance, was facilitated by an 1824 colonial carve-up which saw all of Sumatra designated a Dutch concern and, some fifty years later as Holland prepared to invade Aceh, Britain’s unilateral abrogation of its treaty with Aceh that guaranteed the latter’s independence (Lee 2006). As Reid (2003: p.1) notes, this arrangement was by no means a foregone conclusion: ‘If economic or cultural logic had had their way, Aceh would have been drawn loosely into the British-influenced world centred on the Straits Settlements éntrepots… But the logic of maps prevailed in Europe, the Straits being seen as a more natural boundary’.

A similar process occurred with regard to Thailand, or Siam as it was known until 1939. Siam maintained nominal independence throughout the colonial era, largely due to British and French agreement that some kind of ‘buffer-zone’ was desirable between their respective possessions to the south and west (British Malaya and Burma) and to the east (French Indochina). But this buffer-zone hardly mapped on to the extent of pre-colonial Siamese influence, which had spread well down the Kra Isthmus onto the Malayan peninsula, as far as what are now the Malaysian states of Kedah,
Kelantan and Terengganu. By the late nineteenth century, the two major pre-colonial Islamic polities of the border region, Pattani and Kedah, were both bifurcated by the de facto border between Siam and British-controlled Malaya. Pattani itself lay within the Siamese realm of influence, but through its control of Pattani, Siam also laid claim to areas of British controlled Kelantan and Terengganu. In contrast, Kedah lay by this stage under British dominion, with the exception of a small portion of territory in what is now the Thailand province of Satun. In 1909, this de facto border was legally settled through a treaty between Siam and the British, which saw Britain agree to drop its rights of extraterritoriality in un-colonized Siam in exchange for the latter’s agreement to drop its claim to territory under British control (Suhrke 1970).

In the Philippines, when the United States took possession of the colony from the Spanish following their victory in the Spanish-American War, colonial control over Mindanao was illusory, the Spanish having never established more than the slightest foothold in the region. As part of a concerted ‘pacification’ campaign, Mindanao – or Moro Province as it was then called – was placed under US military control, creating a ‘regime within a regime’ (Abinales 2000: p.18) with substantial financial and policy-making autonomy. Although designating them ‘uncivilized races’, the military administration in Mindanao was not unsympathetic to the Muslim population, or to their fears of domination by the Christianized Filipinos, and in the early years of the twentieth century, army officials in the province openly advocated the formal separation of Mindanao from the rest of the colony and its transformation into a ‘territorial possession’ of the United States. It was not local or US interests in Asia that determined the course of independence, however, but domestic political battles in Washington over reform of the US military that ‘sealed the fate’ (Abinales and Amoroso 2005: p.125) of the province, and Mindanao was brought under civilian rule in Manila and, ultimately, included in the independent Philippines in 1946. The US military control of Mindanao hence created precisely the kind of inconsistentness between physical and symbolic borders identified above. As Abinales and Amoroso (Ibid.) note, when the US army withdrew from Mindanao, the Muslim populations ‘were [physically] more firmly inside, yet now defined more intractably as minority outsiders’.

Post-Second World War geopolitics put the finishing touches on this inconsistent patchwork of geographical boundaries and historical and cultural linkages. Great Power involvement was still paramount, but the concern was less with divvying up the region to allow colonialists to go about their business without running afoul of each other, but rather to buttress the region against the dreaded Communist contagion. The first step here was the formation of Malaysia in 1963 through the amalgamation of already independent Malaya with the other British possessions in the region – Singapore, Sabah (then British North Borneo) and Sarawak. British considerations here revolved around a concern that Communist activity in Singapore was reaching dangerous levels and inclusion in the Malay Federation was seen as a way of diluting this danger. For the Malay elites in Kuala Lumpur, however, inclusion of Singapore alone would have tilted the ethnic balance too far in favour of the Chinese for their liking, and they thus demanded the additional inclusion of the native (though non-Malay) dominated possessions on Borneo as the price for accepting Singapore (Tilman 1963). While the formation of Malaysia thus included ethnic considerations, the significant historical, cultural and religious differences between the uniformly Muslim Malays of the peninsula and the mostly Christian or animist native groups of Borneo meant that rather than producing a closer ‘match’ between the nation state and historical and cultural state patterns, the new country instead complicated the picture further. This was particularly the case in respect of Sabah because of its pre-colonial status as a part of the Sulu sultanate, based in what is now the Philippines, and the close ethnic ties between the Islamized ethnic groups that populated the northern coasts with those of the southern Philippines. Indeed, the Philippines retains a nominal claim to Sabah, although this has largely been dormant since Marcos’ era (ARIFF 1970; PARIDAH ABD. SAMAD and DARULSALAM ABU BAKAR 1992).

While the Southeast Asian states that emerged out of this long process mostly contained some ‘core’ ethnic or religious grouping – the Malays in Malaysia, the Javanese in Indonesian, the Christianized Filipinos, and the ethnic Thais in Thailand – the mismatch between the geographic and geopolitical logic of western state-making on the one hand and the fuzzy nature of pre-colonial political power and the diasporic spread of cultural linkages on the other hand ensured that these modern Southeast Asian
states, without exception, also included ethnic peripheries, culturally and historically distinct from the dominant group.

Migration
Many of the post–Second World War states of Southeast Asia faced potential problems of ethnic peripheries, left over from the mismatch between colonial border-drawing and the patterns of precolonial settlement and state formation. A typical response of these newly independent states was to encourage migration into the ethnic peripheries by more ‘loyal’ representatives of the putative nation state, often in the name of development. As we shall see in this and the next section, however, far from undermining the likelihood of secession, such policies typically exacerbated local grievances by adding to the sense of marginalization among peripheral communities.

This ‘minoritization’ policy was most extreme in the southern Philippines. Migration of Christianized Filipinos into Mindanao had been promoted since the American period, largely as a means of ‘swamping’ the rebellious Mindanao population, as well as providing the colonialists with a bedrock loyal population from which to staff their administration. By the time of Independence, Christians already outnumbered non-Christians in Mindanao as a whole, although they were not evenly spread – Muslims remain until today the majority in the southwestern parts of the island, and in the Sulu archipelago – the provinces that now constitute the ARMM.

After Independence, however, the new governments in Manila began encouraging even faster Christian migration to Mindanao (Figure 12.1). During 35 years of American control, between 1903 and 1939, just short of 70,000 migrants came to Mindanao; during just 12 years between 1948 and 1960, however, more than 1.2 million Christian Filipinos migrated to Mindanao, an annual increase of 6.7 per cent (Wernstedt and Simkins, 1965). State-sponsored resettlement schemes, with the ostensible aim of promoting rice production, brought thousands of poor Christians from Luzon and the Visayas islands to Mindanao, particularly around the Cotabato area (Abinales, 2000; Gutierrez and Borras, 2004). Although the growth in the non-Muslim population slowed considerably following the outbreak of violence, it remained above the Muslim population growth rate between 1980 and 2000. The minoritization of the Muslims in Mindanao over the past century is stark. In 1903, Muslims constituted 76 per cent of the population; shortly after independence in 1948 they were already a minority with only 32 per cent of the Mindanao population; by 2000 this had decreased further to barely 20 per cent.

Similar population movement schemes were undertaken at various stages by the Indonesian and Thai governments. In Indonesia under the New Order, the largest state-sponsored resettlement scheme in history, the transmigration (transmigrasi) programme relocated hundreds of thousands of families from Java and Bali across the archipelago; many more ‘unofficial’ migrants followed. The ostensible justification for the transmigration programme was both developmental, based on the undoubted overpopulation in Java and Bali, and ideological, based on a nebulously defined need for ‘national integration’. Tirtosudarmo (1995), however, suggests an alternative motive – to provide a bedrock of Javanese support for the territorially organized army, particularly in troublesome regions. Transmigration sites often took prime agricultural land and displaced local populations in constructing amenities and infrastructure to service the new developments (Leith, 1998). Moreover, transmigration sites were not evenly spread, but clustered in ‘hot spots’, one of which was Aceh. The choice of Aceh as such a hot spot was acknowledged by the government to be driven by security concerns (Kell, 1995). In the 1990 census, over 10 per cent of the population of Aceh was born outside the province, and a further 4 per cent of those born in Aceh were identifiably Javanese.

We have thus seen that a typical state response to potentially troublesome ethnic peripheries was to encourage, to varying extents and with varying degrees of formality, migration into the region by peoples considered more ‘loyal’ to the central state. The next section examines how these demographic processes created or exacerbated socioeconomic horizontal inequalities and group grievances.
Inequality

Very often, inequality lies at the heart of the emergence of identity movements. In comparing the self-justification for secessionist movements across Asia, inequality emerges as the most common theme, particularly in the presence of localized natural resources which are perceived as being ‘exploited’ by the central government at the expense of local populations. The Free Aceh Movement’s Declaration of Independence in 1976, for instance, is quite explicit on the matter: ‘Acheh, Sumatra, has been producing a revenue of over 15 billion US dollars yearly for the Javanese neo-colonialists, which they used totally for the benefit of Java and the Javanese’ (ASNLF 1976).

In some cases, such inequalities have given rise to new forms of identity or strengthened existing but nascent identity forms. Some examples will illustrate. Naureen Talha’s innovative account of the emergence of the Pakistan movement in late colonial India takes to task the predominant historiography among Pakistani historians which postulates that ‘Indian Muslims were always a separate community right from the eighth century’ (Talha 2000: p.3). Instead, she argues that a prime factor in the emergence of Muslim nationalism in the region and the concomitant demands for partition was the growing realization of the relative socio-economic backwardness of Muslims vis-à-vis Hindus, particularly in terms of education and appointments in the civil services. Hence, she argues, the Indianization of the civil services from the 1920s onwards in fact exacerbated Muslim perceptions of neglect and a sense economic insecurity as the greater opportunities afforded for indigenous participation in governance were not equally distributed – a situation which they saw no hope for remedying ‘in the face of an economically superior Hindu community’ (Talha 2000: p.90). In Talha’s reading, then, socio-economic backwardness and perceptions of economic insecurity intertwined with the ideological ambitions of the Muslim League to generate a powerful movement for partition.

In the case of Pakistan, then, horizontal inequalities combined with and reinforced existing cultural differences – in this case along religious lines – to feed into the emergence of an ‘ethnic’ Muslim nationalism that promoted separation from Hindu-dominated India. In other cases, shared experiences of socio-economic and/or political marginalization have constituted a major factor in the emergence of ‘new’ identities, radically opposed to the dominant (national) identity. Such a process can be identified, for instance, in the unification of diverse ethnic identities into a broader ‘Bangsamoro’ identity in the mainly Muslim Mindanao region of the Southern Philippines, which has been the scene of a long-running secessionist movement since 1972. Proponents of Bangsamoro separatism postulate their current claims as a natural continuation of a centuries-long struggle to ‘regain’ their ‘national’ independence, curtailed first by the Spanish, then the Americans and now the Philippines government in Manila – a ‘nation under endless tyranny’ in the evocative phrase of Salah Jubair (1999). While there is no doubt that the Mindanao region has indeed been home to long-running resistance to both Spanish and American colonialism, Thomas McKenna (1998; 2002) has persuasively argued that these earlier phases of resistance were not unified struggles around a common identity and that the narrative of Salah Jubair and his colleagues is rather an atavistic re-interpretation developed to legitimate and mobilize separatist sentiments (cf. Wee 2002 on Riau separatism in Indonesia). Indeed, the very term ‘Moro’ which constitutes the root identity marker for separatist identities (Bangsamoro translates as ‘Moro Nation’) has its origins in an explicitly pejorative Spanish appellation for the southern Muslims (meaning ‘Moor’). The adoption of this terminology and its reversal into a positive form of self- and ‘national’-identification was largely premised precisely upon shared experiences of political and socio-economic marginalization in the post-1946 era.

From this perspective, then, horizontal inequalities constitute an important process in the formation and mobilization of ethnic identities, particularly where these identities emerge in ‘imagined’ (Anderson 1991) opposition to each other. This interpretation has the double advantage that it provides a more theoretically nuanced account of the interaction between inequality and ethnicity; and, it also provides a causal explanation of why such inequalities may lead to violent conflict, given the formative role of categorical opposition in these processes of inequality-driven ethnicization.

The disparity between Aceh’s oil-boom wealth and the continued impoverishment of large sections of its population is often cited as one of the root causes of the separatist struggle in the province (for
example Kell, 1995; Ross, 2003). Indeed, GAM’s declaration of Acehnese independence in 1976 was partially justified in such terms, claiming that the province’s revenue production was ‘used totally for the benefit of Java and the Javanese’ (ASNLF, 1976). In the three decades following GAM’s declaration, the human development situation in Aceh has shifted sharply adversely compared with other Indonesian provinces. In 1980, Aceh was a mid-income province, ranking tenth out of 26 provinces in terms of regional GDP, with very low poverty rates – only two provinces had a lower poverty rate than Aceh. As the exploitation of its natural resources progressed, Aceh’s GDP increased relatively more quickly than most other provinces. In 1998, more than 40 per cent of Aceh’s GDP was due to oil. But this increase in wealth generation was accompanied by a drastic increase in poverty. Poverty in Aceh more than doubled from 1980 to 2002; over the same period, poverty in Indonesia as a whole fell by nearly half. By 2000, Aceh’s regional GDP had risen to fourth out of 30 provinces, but its poverty rank had also increased to fifth.

The development of the gas and oil industry in Aceh was centred on the northern coast port of Lhokseumawe, which quickly developed into a major economic enclave, designated the Lhokseumawe Industrial Zone (ZILS). Migrant labour was brought in to staff the zone, which came ‘to assume the obtrusive character of a high-income, capital-intensive, urban, non-Muslim, non-Acehnese enclave in a basically low-income, labor-intensive, rural, Muslim, Acehnese province’ (Donald Emmerson, quoted in Kell, 1995: 17).

Far from attempting to reduce economic horizontal inequalities in Aceh, then, the Indonesian government has in fact been the prime agent in creating such inequalities. The dynamics of this process have been reinforcing: lacking trust in the ethnic Acehnese, particularly young males who were assumed to be GAM sympathizers, the Indonesian government brought in outsiders, particularly Javanese, to manage and safeguard its economic interests in the province. Agricultural migration was also encouraged to provide a bedrock of support for the military presence in the province. This immigration, however, only reinforced Acehnese grievances against the central government and its Javanese ‘agents’, thus solidifying support for the rebellion.

In the Philippines, during the 1950s and 1960s, substantial in-migration of Christians, combined with land laws alien to the Moro population, resulted in the emergence of significant horizontal inequalities in ownership of and access to land in Mindanao. At the same time, the paternalistic patron–client relationships that characterized the political make-up of the Philippines combined with monopolistic laws on commodity exports to allow a number of politically linked Christian families to gain vast plantation landholdings which tended to employ Christian labourers at the expense of Moros (Che Man, 1990; Gutierrez and Borras, 2004). Thus, not only were the Moro displaced from their ‘traditional’ lands, they were also denied access to the emerging money economy. By 1965, observers were already noting that Christian ‘penetration’ of Mindanao was causing ‘unrest and strife’, with the dispute settlement processes usually favouring the Christians as ‘the better educated Christian has been able to present a stronger case to the courts… while Muslim litigants have been viewed as obstructionists and anachronists’ (Wernstedt and Simkins, 1965: 101). A quantitative study of the geographical concentration of this preseparatist communal violence at the municipality level between 1970 and the declaration of Martial Law in 1972 found a measure of relative deprivation had the most significant correlation with the intensity of that conflict (Magdalena, 1977).

**State Repression**

While the structural developments outlined above provided the conditions for violent identity movements, the final turn to violence in many identity movements revolved around the response of the central state to minority identity demands. In the southern Philippines, even in the early decades of independence, migration and associated land tensions were the cause of increasing strife between Muslim Moros and Christian Filipinos in Mindanao, yet this did not yet take the form of a widespread rejection of the Philippine state by the Moro population. Conflicts remained localized and intercommunal, that is, community-versus-community rather than community-versus-state. Noble notes that while sporadic demands for Mindanao independence were made by Muslim leaders
throughout this period, this was largely used as a bargaining mechanism for political patronage from Manila: ‘Muslim leaders did not want to secede; they wanted rewards for not seceding’ (1975: 456).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, a series of events drove the politicization of Moro resentment towards the Christian state in Manila rather than the migrant population in Mindanao. The first of these was the ‘Corregidor Incident’ or ‘Jabidah massacre’ of 1968. Corregidor Island, in the Manila bay, was the site for the secret training of a group of Muslim volunteers recruited by the Philippine Armed Forces, apparently for a planned infiltration of Sabah, to which the Philippines retained a territorial claim. In March 1968, the trainees mutinied and were massacred by their Christian officers. Whether this mutiny was caused by their perception that the planned ‘invasion’ of Sabah was unjust or for the more prosaic reason that the recruits did not receive their promised pay cheques is unclear, but whatever the reason, the massacre of Muslim recruits by Christian officers raised Muslim resentment against Manila (Noble, 1976; 1981). Shortly afterwards, the Muslim governor of Cotabato province, Datu Udtog Matalam, announced the formation of the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM), explicitly in response to the Corregidor Incident, although the MIM manifesto also asserted the theme of historical separateness elucidated above (Lingga, 2004).

Subsequently, in 1970, ongoing disputes over land between Christian and Muslim groups escalated into fighting, with the Philippine Constabulary intervening on the Christian side. These fights themselves stemmed largely from the competing cultural perceptions of land, and thus the inability of the Christians and Moros to agree even on a suitable legalistic venue to resolve their disputes, ‘since their was no agreement on legal systems or judges’ (Noble, 1975: 455). Fighting intensified as elections drew near and rival politicians mobilized ethnic and religious militias to gather votes and intimidate their opponents. In 1972, with his second and constitutionally final term as president ending when Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law. This provided the trigger for the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which began the armed movement for a separate Moro state.

In southern Thailand, the turn to violence both in the 1940s and the ongoing episodes of violence can be linked to state policies which sought, to varying degrees, to force assimilation upon the Malay Muslims. Between 1938 and 1944, when Thailand was under the strongly nationalist regime of Pibul Songkram, the Malays were subject to severe restrictions on their cultural expression, including discriminatory language regulations, the revocation of shari’a law and even the banning of the Malay sarong dress (Forbes, 1982). Following Pibul’s fall in 1944, the new regime sought to placate the south with an ‘Islamic Patronage’ decree that reasserted their right to cultural distinctiveness. It was Pibul’s return to power through a coup d’état in 1947 and his subsequent refusal to guarantee the continuation of the Islamic Patronage policy that provided the spark for the initial episode of conflict.

The military leader Sarit Thanarat, who took over from Pibul’s in another coup d’état, continued a largely militaristic line towards the south, which was rewarded with continuing insurgency. After his death in office, however, a series of regimes sought a more conciliatory approach. Sarit’s successor, Thanom Kittikachorn, embarked on a programme of basic infrastructural development in the south, providing electrification and sewerage facilities, and increased cultural recognition for Muslims, including state funding for the construction of a large mosque in Pattani. These policies ‘worked well’, depriving the separatist organization of significant support (Forbes, 1982). Subsequently, the regime of Prem Tinsulanond (1980–1988), himself a southerner, although ethnically Thai, ‘brokered a kind of social contract in the area’ (McCargo, 2006a: 3). The Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) was established as a venue for Muslim grievances; development projects were increased and local Muslims promoted in the civil service. This policy was largely reversed by the Thaksin administration, which came to power in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis. Thaksin viewed the south with suspicion, not because of its separatist tendencies per se, but because of its strong links to Prem who, although having resigned power in 1988, remained a central figure in Thai politics as part of a bloc associated with the monarch (McCargo, 2006b). In order to undermine Prem’s continuing influence, Thaksin ordered a massive reorganization of security arrangements in the south. The SBPAC was disestablished, Thaksin’s old police comrades were promoted into key security positions in the region and Muslim protest was met with considerable force, in turn further
inflaming local sentiment. Most notorious here was the death of around 80 Muslims who suffocated in the back of military trucks after they were arrested at a protest demonstration. Amid escalating violence, Thaksin was deposed in a September 2006 coup d’état. The coup leader, General Soonthi Boonyaratglin, is a Muslim from the south, with strong links to Prem and the monarchy. Soonthi and his appointed prime minister, retired general Surayud Chulanont, have raised the prospect of negotiations with the insurgents.

In Aceh, the situation was rather more directly military. As already noted, the first insurgency in 1977 lacked widespread support – Kell (1995: 65) cites local sources suggesting the entire movement comprised less than 200 people. But the Indonesian military response was substantial and draconian. Following its experiences in East Timor and other trouble spots, the Indonesian military stamped down on Aceh, including the assassination of suspected GAM activists and forced mobilization of civilians. The oppressive and repressive Indonesian military reaction is largely credited for the drastic increase in support experienced by GAM following its re-emergence in 1989 (Aspinall, 2002; Robinson, 1998).

We have seen, then, that in the three separatist cases under consideration here, a combination of demographic transformation and the emergence of spatial and ethnic horizontal inequalities created conditions ripe for conflict. In the Philippines, violence did emerge, but in the form of sporadic intercommunal rather than antistate violence. In Aceh, a separatist movement was launched, but with little popular support, and was thus quickly suppressed. In each case, the mobilization of mass support for an explicitly separatist movement was linked to changes in government policy that were interpreted by the ethnic minorities in question as evidence of direct state discrimination. While horizontal inequalities generated occasionally violent communal tensions, violent antistate mobilization was directly linked to politicization of horizontal inequalities and their association with the state qua state, rather than the ‘other’ ethnic group.