Governments or minorities: who were the main obstacle in forging national unity in the independent Southeast Asian states?

Intro - aim 150 words

(Minority intransigence - aim 400 words)

B did not accept concessions at 1947 Panglong Conference and continued to demand for independence and rebel against the govt from 1948; formation of separatist groups; could not keep up to ceasefire with govt due to internal disunity

I Aceh viewed Javanese as practising neo-colonialism - a concept that hindered them from accepting/ the formation of a common national identity - form popular nationalist group (Free Aceh Movements)

T Pattani muslims - exclusivist attitude of Pattani rulers

(Govt policy - aim 400 words)

I harsh military oppression on Aceh led to all this

I forced transmigration led to conflict between transmigrant and indigenous minorities, adopted dominant javanese culture + mono-ethnic state in a multi-ethnic society marginalised minority → breakaway of East Timor

P transmigration and economic exploitation of Mindanao Muslims led to regular Muslim-Christian riots

P state violence in 1968 Jabaidah massacre led to the formation of separatist Mindanao Muslim Independent Movement/Moros National Liberation Front (MNLF)

P denied autonomous status of Mindanao Muslims as promised in Tripoli agreement which triggered guerilla campaigns by MNLF against Marcos regime

P failure to create a unifying ideology; Marco’s martial law alienated different sectors in the society and intensify insurgencies

T assimilative approaches, coercive impositions of state ideology onto Isan people/Northern Tribe coupled with economic exploitation but there were attempts to reconcile so no separatist yet

M failed assimilative policies led to higher minority consciousness among Orang Asli as seen from the growth of membership of the Peninsular Malaysia Orang Asli Association from 277 in 1989 to about 15000 in 1997

(Govt implementation - aim 300 words)

B intolerance of minority interest within Burmanization policies + economic exploitation provoked all above beside internal disunity; xenophobic policies and anti-foreignism resulted in constancy of ethnic identities and compounded stubborn sub-nationalisms

I assimilative at face value - state ideology to be enforced on everyone - flex implementation so integrative in nature (widely accepted Pancasila and Gotong Royong, adoption of neutral language Bahasa Indonesia as official language, minority religions are tolerated) compared to B which brought itself more limited success due to hardline policies

I ethnic discrimination against chinese continued in name of national unity

P attempts at reconciliation along class lines undermined by elite corruption and cronyism (1988 Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law and 1994 Social Reform Agenda)

P attempts at integration turned out to be assimilative in implementation e.g. common Filipino identity was Christian bias, marginalising the muslim minorities, neutral language Tagalog chosen as official language but not spoken by the majority

(Ext influence)

I breakaway of East Timor followed UN-led international pressure supporting East Timor nationalism

Governments or minorities: who were the main obstacle in forging national unity in the independent Southeast Asian states?

Most independent Southeast Asian states faced varying degrees of challenges when attempting to forge national unity within the state especially in terms of building a well-accepted national identity and maintaining the territorial unity of the state. These challenges could be a result of the nature of the government's approach to shaping national unity and the actual implementation of its policies; or it could be due to the intransigence of the minorities as they resisted to any form of concessions granted by the state or escalated their demands accordingly. Minority separatist movements indeed poses the most direct challenge to territorial unity in countries such as Burma and Indonesia, however, the fact that the formation of minority separatist group is most of the time provoked by the government’s use of force on them cannot be overlooked. The nature of the government’s approach to national unity in some countries, for example, Burma, Philippines and Thailand, also resulted in alienating the minorities and heightening their consciousness. Hence, the main obstacle in forging national unity is most likely the policies and the implementation by governments.

Minorities were the most direct obstacle in forging national unity as they were oppositions to the state ideologies promoted by the government. Due to inherent fault lines between the minorities and the majority which can be a result of ethnic, religious or geographical divide or historical animosity, minority groups in some states refused to be governed by the majority, let alone accepting the same identity tailored to the way of life of the majority, especially when it encompasses religion. The uncooperation from the minorities is inevitable given their distinct culture and religious beliefs from the majority. For instance, when Thailand government tried to assimilate the Pattani Muslims by prohibiting them from practicing Malay traditions as part of the ratthaniyom directives from 1938 - 1946 and mandate for state education to be conducted in Thai and on Buddhist ethics, there were frequent violent confrontation as seen in the 1948 Dusun Nyiur Incident between the Malay villagers and Thai police and in the form of persistent guerrilla activities. Just like the Pattani Muslims, the Mindanao Muslims in southern Philippines never wanted to be part of its state. As a result, the government’s attempt to assimilate the Muslims Minorities through transmigration is followed by frequent Muslim-Christian riots. It is worth noting that Pattani Muslims’ violence and rebellion continued even as Thai policies shifted towards a more accommodative stance in the 1960s, suggesting the intransigent nature of the minority was a bulwark to peace and national unity. Other instances highlighting how intransigence of minorities acted against the state’s interest of building a unified nation can be seen in how minorities in Burma rejected concessions offered by the government during 1947 Panglong Conference and insisted fighting for independence despite repeated military clampdowns and suppressions. Other than rejecting concessions made by the government, some minority militant groups also could not keep up to the ceasefire agreement because of internal disunity, as seen in how a faction of the Shan Mong Tai Army in Burma resumed its armed movements against the Rangoon government right after a ceasefire agreement in 1996. Thus, the intransigence and unreceptiveness towards majority culture of minorities were direct obstacles of forging national unity in most Southeast Asian states.

However, it is incomprehensive to hold the minorities entirely responsible for the limited success in the national unity project as many minorities insurgencies and separatists movements were in fact responses to the policies government made towards minority. In countries with the assimilative approach, a common identity tend to be coercively imposed on the entire population, marginalising the minority groups. Examples would be Burma’s Buddhist socialism in the U Nu administration that sidelined non-Buddhist minority groups. For instance, the declaration of Buddhism as the state religion for a short period of time in 1961 sparked off the Christian Kachin uprising. This period also saw the Shan state choosing to secede from the union in 1958 and the formation of a communist-minorities military alliance in 1959, showing how imposition of an assimilative identity that conflicts with the minorities’ interest would heighten their consciousness of their own identity and demand for self-governance. State violence and the use of military to suppress minority insurgencies aggravated existing minority insurgencies in Burma as they provoked the formation of armed separatist groups such as the Karen National Union in 1948. The use of military force against minorities also did not provide a political solution to assimilate them and instead worked against the government’s interest as some minority militants continued to fight despite repeated defeats and suppressions, and the incessant fighting only served to deepen the animosity between the minority groups and the majority.

Some states delineated an integrative approach that was supposed to be accepting towards all minority groups but when implemented turned out to be assimilative in nature. This is evident looking at the Indonesian state ideology of Pancasila. At face value, Pancasila encompasses the right of their citizens to worship their various religious belief which seem very accommodating. However, it requires the citizen to follow one of the six official religions and the notion that this state ideology is Javanese-based but enforced onto the whole population shows that the approach Indonesia adopt to forging national unity is in fact assimilative and Javanese-dominant. Coupled with economic exploitations of the minorities, the lack of unified national identity or consensus saw break away of East Timor and incessant rebellions from the Aceh. In Philippines, deep divide along the class line pose a challenge to social unity but the government could not implement substantial land reforms to mitigate the civil inequality because the interest of the elites are overwhelmingly represented in the parliament, curtailing the power of the government to redistribute their wealth. Thus, in these cases it can be seen how governmental policies when implementation could deviate from its intended purpose and become an obstacle in forging national unity.

(Eval - aim 250 words)