

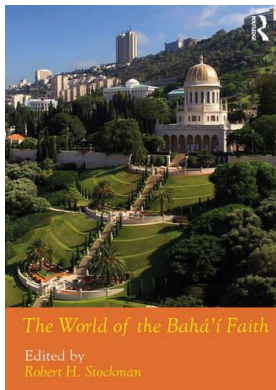
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The World of the Bahá'í Faith

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SOUTHEAST ASIA

Peter Smith

Southeast Asia is the region comprising the peninsulas and archipelagos south of China and east of the Indian subcontinent. Its populations are religiously diverse, and while most countries have a dominant religious tradition (Sunni Islam in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei; Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar [Burma], Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos; Mahayana Buddhism in Vietnam; Christianity in the Philippines and Timor-Leste; and a mix of Chinese religions in Singapore), minority traditions are found almost everywhere. In addition to the main traditions, there are also significant numbers of Hindus, Sikhs, and followers of various traditional and local syncretistic religions, as well as those who are consciously not religious. Internal ethnic and political disputes have sometimes taken on a religious aspect, but generally religious coexistence has been more common than in much of the rest of the world. Some governments have imposed restrictions on some religious practice in the recent past, but freedom of religion now generally prevails. Most of the region was under European, American, or (briefly) Japanese colonial control up until the post-World War II period, and is now experiencing often rapid economic and social change. Several countries were massively impacted by the spread of communism in the post-war period and the extended American war in Indo-China (1955–1975).

Up to c. 1923

The Bahá'í Faith originated in the 1860s, centring on the person of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892). The early Bahá'ís were almost all Iranians although there were also a few Ottoman subjects. Southeast Asian Bahá'í history began with the missionary journeys of Sulaymán Khán Tunukabuní, later better known as Jamál Effendi (d. 1898). A member of an elite Mazandarani family, Jamál was sent to India by Bahá'u'lláh Himself to propagate the new religion there. Jamál arrived in what was then British India in about 1875 and spent the next three years travelling extensively around the subcontinent, speaking on Sufi themes and attracting a small number of individuals to become Bahá'ís. One was Syed Mustafa Roumie (Rúmí) (1852–1942), a Middle Eastern Muslim from Madras (now Chennai) in India, who accompanied Jamál Effendi to Burma in 1878, remained there after his departure in 1886, married into a local Indo-Burman trading family, and became a mainstay of the developing Burmese Bahá'í community (Momen 2000). Apart from their activities in Burma, Jamál and Roumie also made a lengthy journey to Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, and Siam (modern Thailand) (1885–1886), selectively teaching

about the Bahá'í Faith and apparently gaining conversions amongst royalty on the great island of Sulawesi (then known as Celebes), albeit with no permanent results (de Vries 2007).

Initially, the only part of Southeast Asia to have Bahá'í activities was Burma, Bahá'í communities being established in Rangoon (modern Yangon) and Mandalay from 1878 onwards, both becoming very active (by the early 1900s, the Mandalay Bahá'ís even had their own meeting hall). Contacts were also made with the people of Kanjangoon and Daidanaw, two adjoining villages near Rangoon, which led to the mass conversion of around 300 of their inhabitants. Some of these early Burmese Bahá'ís made a unique contribution to Bahá'í history by donating a marble sarcophagus for the Báb's remains which they transported to 'Akká.

By 1920, there were around 500–600 Bahá'ís in the two villages and a similar number in the cities of Rangoon and Mandalay. The Bahá'ís had also started a school for boys and girls in the villages, which had received government approval. Most of these early Burmese Bahá'ís were of Muslim background, although there were also a few Buddhist converts. Iranian Bahá'ís found it noteworthy that in Burma, the men and women Bahá'ís did not meet separately but rather held joint meetings (Momen 2004: 85, 86).

1923–c. 1949

In 1920, an 'All-India Bahai Convention' was held in Bombay (now Mumbai), with participants from both Lower and Upper Burma as well as India proper, the first step in a process which led to the formation of a joint national Assembly for India and Burma in 1923. Coordination of Bahá'í activities across such a vast area proved difficult, and there was a tendency for the Indian and Burmese Bahá'ís to organize their own separate projects (Smith 2005, 2011). Between 1928 (the first year for which we have an official published list) and 1939, there was a slight increase in the number of localities in Burma where Bahá'ís resided (up from five to eight), but by the end of the decade the number of local Assemblies remained at three. Roumie continued to be the lynch-pin for much of the activity, including the production of a separate Burmese Bahá'í magazine, *The Dawn* (1923–1929), published in English, Persian, and Burmese. John E. Esslemont's *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* (1923), effectively the first international Bahá'í text book, was also published in Burmese translation in 1933.

The Burmese people suffered badly during World War II (1941–1945 in this region) as contending armies fought their way across the land, and localized violence and communal tensions created a chaotic state in many areas. Roumie was murdered by a nationalist mob during the chaos. He was posthumously honoured by Shoghi Effendi as a Hand of the Cause and one of the most preeminent Bahá'í teachers in the world.

As for the rest of Southeast Asia, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had mentioned various territories of the region as goal objectives for future Bahá'í teaching efforts in His Tablets of the Divine Plan (1916–1917), but the only initial response to this appeal seems to have been a lone Iranian Bahá'í who arrived in the Philippines (then under American control) in 1921 and remained for several years, seemingly without permanent result. During the 1920s and 1930s, several Western Bahá'ís visited the region, including the travelling Bahá'í missionary Martha Root, giving public talks, meeting dignitaries and distributing Bahá'í literature. So far, the only known result of this activity was the conversion of a Felix Maddela, who became the first Filipino Bahá'í in 1938 after chance readings of American Bahá'í literature. Returning to his home in the provincial town of Solano on the great northern island of Luzon, he attracted around 50 of his family and friends to the new religion.

Elsewhere, there was a seemingly solitary Bahá'í in the Dutch East Indies for some years up to the early 1930s, and one recorded locality in Siam (Thailand) in 1949. In contrast to global Bahá'í expansion during this period, Southeast Asia remained static (Smith, 2007, 2009, 2010).

1950–1975

The Bahá'í situation in Southeast Asia began to change dramatically after World War II. In May 1948, less than a year after Indian partition and the formation of the two new states of India and Pakistan, and only a few months after Burma had also become independent, Shoghi Effendi started to appeal for pioneers from the subcontinent to settle in Siam and Indonesia, goals which were later added to the 'Indian' Bahá'í teaching plan of 1946–1950. Malaya and French Indochina also came to be assigned as goals, the whole enterprise being seen as marking an important new phase in both South and Southeast Asian Bahá'í development. Southeast Asian objectives were again included in the Nineteen Month Plan of 1951–1953 of the now regional Assembly for India, Pakistan, and Burma. By then, the appeal had already resulted in a preliminary teaching trip to Siam by a Mr Sabit in 1950 and the departure of the Fozdar family (Dr Khodadad M. Fozdar [1898–1958], his wife Shirin [1905–1992], and their children) from Bombay to Singapore, where they soon made the city the first 'firm nucleus' in the region outside of Burma and the reemergent Bahá'í group in the Philippines. There was also a scattering of Bahá'ís elsewhere. Various members of the Fozdar family, particularly Shirin, already a well-known women's rights activist in the 1930s, were to play a major role in Southeast Asian Bahá'í developments for decades to come (Fozdar, 2016; Ong, 2000).

In 1953, Shoghi Effendi set the goals for a new Ten Year Crusade (1953–1963). These were to include the consolidation of existing outposts of the Faith in Borneo, Burma, Indochina, Indonesia, Malaya, Sarawak, and Siam, and the formation of a separate national spiritual Assembly for Burma as well as a regional Assembly for the rest of Southeast Asia, with its seat in Jakarta. He also called for the formation of an Asian Teaching Committee to coordinate the activities of the Plan. The committee should stimulate and assist activities in Southeast Asia, but strictly speaking, these activities were no longer under the jurisdiction of the Indian Assembly. Certainly, those parts of Asia that had not been previously assigned as Indian goals—such as the Philippines—were completely outside Indian jurisdiction. He expressed his pleasure at the news that an Indonesian translation of Esslemont's *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* was underway, and instructed the (Bahá'í) translator to have the completed work reviewed by a native speaker with some 'literary standing'. He hoped that a Malaysian translation would also be prepared (Shoghi Effendi 1995 346–347). Early achievements included the establishment of the first Bahá'í group in Cambodia in 1956 with the arrival of Indian Bahá'ís. The regional Assembly was established in 1957 (Shoghi Effendi 1995 403, 407).

Significantly, large-scale conversions of new Bahá'ís had begun to occur in several areas, including the remote Mentawai Islands in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. As a consequence, when combined with similar successes in India and (South) Korea, by the mid-1960s, Asia had become the continent with the largest Bahá'í population (*The Bahá'í World* 1974: 99).

By 1964 (one year after the ending of the Crusade), there were Bahá'ís living in some 905 localities across Southeast Asia, the largest numbers of localities being in Vietnam (295), the Philippines (280), Indonesia (132), and Malaysia (132). The Malaysian Federation had come into being in 1963, incorporating Malaya (Peninsula Malaysia) and the former British territories of Sarawak and Sabah in northern Borneo. Singapore was also briefly a member of the Federation (1963–1965). It is of note that almost four-fifths of the Malaysian localities were in Sarawak, and one-fifth of those in Indonesia were in the Mentawai Islands, both areas where there had been significant enrolments of Bahá'ís amongst the indigenous ('tribal') populations (for some details of the work of the Iranian pioneers Rahmatullah Muhajir [1923–1979] and his wife Iran in the Mentawai Islands (see Muhajir 1992). Muhajir was later appointed a Hand of the Cause by Shoghi Effendi, the second Southeast Asian Bahá'í so honoured). Of the localities, 60% (543)

had sufficient Bahá'ís (at least nine adults) to form local Spiritual Assemblies. Only 19 (3%) of these Assemblies had achieved legal incorporation, however (calculated from *Bahá'í World* 1974: 130–132).

Only four years later (in 1968), the situation had changed significantly. The number of localities had almost tripled to 2,665. There had been a major loss of local Assemblies, however (down to 503), but of those that had survived, almost a third (152) had achieved legal incorporation. The Philippines now had the largest number of localities (1,711), ahead of Vietnam (720), Malaysia (420), Thailand (106), and Indonesia (91). At this point, the veteran Burmese Bahá'í community only had 63 localities, whilst Laos had 36, Brunei 20, and Cambodia only one. There was in that year no recorded Bahá'í presence in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), Portuguese Timor (now Timor-Leste), or the Indonesian part of the island of New Guinea (here called West Irian, now known as West Papua)—nor was there any in Singapore, but that presumably was an administrative error in data collection (calculated from *Bahá'í World* 1974: 157–161). Although some parts of the region were clearly experiencing dynamic growth at this time, these statistics indicate a very uneven regional pattern.

As in other parts of the world, the regional Assembly was to be only a temporary institution. The process of establishing separate national Assemblies for the rest of the countries of the region began in 1964, with the formation of five national Spiritual Assemblies: for Indonesia (including responsibility for what was then still Portuguese Timor), Malaysia (to be also responsible for Singapore and Brunei), the Philippines, Thailand (including responsibility for Laos), and Vietnam (based in the South, and including responsibility for Cambodia). Cambodia and Laos were projected to form their own national Assemblies during the Nine Year Plan (1964–1973). Laos achieved this goal in 1967, but Cambodia did not elect its own Assembly until 1994. As supplementary achievements, Brunei also gained its own national Assembly in 1966 and Singapore in 1972.

The new Assemblies were all to seek legal incorporation and acquire their own national Bahá'í centres, sites for future Bahá'í temples, and endowment lands. Only North Vietnam had no Bahá'í presence. Two of the new national Assemblies were also given responsibilities outside of the region, with Indonesia being given responsibility for Manchuria and Vietnam for Hainan Island (*Bahá'í World* 1974: 106–109, 111). Of 55 Asian languages in which Bahá'í literature was to be translated into, most (37) were Southeast Asian (Indonesia [19], the Philippines [six], Malaysia [five], Vietnam [four], and Burma [three])—with only 18 for the rest of Asia. Of 29 Asian ethnic groups to be targeted for potential conversion, 22 were in Southeast Asia (ten in Malaysia, eight in Indonesia, and four in Burma). Four out of nine Asian Bahá'í teaching institutes to be established were in the region, and several national Assemblies were assigned the goal of extending the Bahá'í education of youth and children. Assemblies were also to try to gain official recognition of Bahá'í marriage certificates and holy days (*Bahá'í World* 1974: 112, 113, 114, 123, 115).

1975–present

Since this major period of growth, the various national Bahá'í communities have followed diverse trajectories. Reliable statistics are unavailable, but some communities seem to have had more success in sustaining growth than others. War and political change have had a complex and varied impact on the Bahá'í communities in some countries. Overall, however, we may say that the Bahá'ís are now fairly well-established across the whole region, and have gained a level of official recognition in several. There is now an extensive Bahá'í literature in all the major languages of the region. As with Bahá'í communities in other parts of the world, the Bahá'ís

in several places are promoting education, social development, and women's rights as well as promulgating their religion. It is of note that Southeast Asian Bahá'ís are of quite diverse ethnic and religious origins, with former Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus being joined by numbers of 'tribal' peoples with their own indigenous beliefs as with the Mentawaians and Iban. Unlike the earliest Burmese Bahá'ís, few of these newer believers have been of Muslim background.

Specific national developments

Cambodia

The first Bahá'í group in Cambodia was established in Phnom Penh in 1956 following the arrival of Bahá'í teachers from India. During the rule of the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979), millions of citizens died or were displaced in the regime's campaign of mass terror, and all effective contact with the Cambodian Bahá'ís was lost. Some of the Cambodians who had fled to Thailand were contacted by Bahá'í teachers, however, and Bahá'í Assemblies were formed by them in their refugee camps. Recent years have seen significant growth in the Cambodian Bahá'í community, particularly in the province of Battambang, which hosted a major regional Bahá'í conference in 2009, and saw the dedication of the first Bahá'í House of Worship in Southeast Asia in 2017 (this was also one of the first local rather than 'continental' Bahá'í temples in the world [Figure 50.1]). According to an American State Department estimate in 2010, there are around 10,000 Cambodian Bahá'ís (United States 2010).

Indonesia

Although the site of an early surge of activity in the mid-1950s, the Bahá'ís came to be subject to various government restrictions from as early as 1958 along with several other 'international'



Figure 50.1 The local Bahá'í House of Worship in Battambang, Cambodia. It was completed in 2017.

Source: Bahá'í World News Service.

groups. In 1972 all organized Bahá'í activities were banned, and it was only in 2000 that the religion was formally legalized (by President Abdurrahman Wahid). An active Bahá'í community has now reemerged. The Bahá'í International Community (BIC), the Faith's external relations arm, established a regional office in Jakarta in 2014. There is some opposition to the Bahá'ís from conservative Muslim groups.

Laos

The first Bahá'í pioneer arrived in Laos around 1955, and the first local Assembly was formed in 1958 in Vientiane. After a period of growth in the 1970s, including contacts with some of Laos's many ethnic minorities, the Bahá'í community numbered perhaps 8,000 by the 1980s, stabilizing at around that number (a recent estimate put the number of Bahá'ís at around 8,500). Although accepted by the communist authorities at a national level, as with other religious minorities, the Bahá'ís have been subject to local harassment in some provinces (United States 2008).

Outside of Laos, refugees from the Hmong ethnic group who were resettled in the U.S.A. included some 200 Bahá'ís who were helped by an outreach programme organized by the local Bahá'ís in Portland, Oregon.

Malaysia

The Malaysian Bahá'í community is large and active. In West (peninsular) Malaysia, most of the Bahá'ís are urban and drawn from the country's Chinese and Indian minorities (Malay Muslims are legally barred from changing their religion), but there is also a Bahá'í presence amongst the indigenous Asli peoples. In East Malaysia (Sarawak and Sabah), Bahá'ís from indigenous groups (Ibans, Kadazans) predominate. The Bahá'í community of Sarawak is particularly active, with perhaps 50,000 adherents living in over 250 localities.

Myanmar (Burma)

The modern Bahá'í community in Myanmar is quite large (over 20,000 members according to Ong and Foo 2008). Despite the country's relative political isolation from the rest of the world during much of its recent past, the Bahá'ís have remained an active and self-sustaining community.

The Philippines

The Philippines has had an active Bahá'í community since the late 1930s. By the early 1980s, there were already 64,000 Bahá'ís, and their numbers have grown since then to include members of various indigenous peoples. In late July 1972 three Iranian Bahá'í university students on the southern island of Mindanao were murdered, seemingly by religious conservatives. There have been a large number of officially recognized Bahá'í socio-economic development projects, including in education and rural development. A Bahá'í AM radio station was launched in 2002.

Singapore

The Bahá'í community in Singapore was established in 1950 by the Fozdar family (mentioned earlier). Although the total number of Bahá'ís in the island state remains modest (perhaps over 2,000), Singapore remains a major centre of Bahá'í activity. It is of note that apart from her

Bahá'í activities, Shirin Fozdar played a major public role in promoting women's rights, including the establishment of the Singapore Council of Women.

Thailand

Since a period of growth in the 1970s, the Bahá'í community in Thailand appears to have stabilized, with small but very active Bahá'í groups in the big cities of Bangkok and Chiang Mai and successful education projects—provided particularly for the rural poor—in the Omkoi area in the north (catering to the Karen ethnic group) and the government-recognized Santiham School in Yasothon (established by Shirin Fozdar) in the northeast.

Vietnam

The first Bahá'í group was established in Saigon in 1954 (by the Fozdar family). There was considerable growth despite (or perhaps because of) the ongoing war, but this was confined to the then non-Communist South. At the war's end (in 1975), there may have been as many as 130,000 Bahá'ís (Wagner 2001). With reunification, the government restricted activities by all religious groups and community numbers slumped. A few Bahá'ís were sent to re-education camps and others fled the country. These restrictions eased considerably in the early 1990s, and in 2007–2008 the Bahá'ís gained official government recognition. By 2010, there were reportedly around 7,200 Bahá'ís, mostly in the south, but including newly established groups in the north of the country (United States 2011).

Statistics

At present, the only comprehensive population estimates for the number of Bahá'ís in Southeast Asia are those produced by the Association of Religious Data Archives (ARDA) in association with the ongoing World Christian Encyclopedia project. These figures massively exceed other estimates (e.g. by the U.S. State Department). Thus, whilst the latest ARDA figure for the Bahá'ís of Vietnam is well over 400,000, the most recent U.S. State Department estimate is 7,200; a staggering difference. The ARDA figures do not appear to be credible. The ARDA estimates given for 2015 are as follows: Vietnam (413,312), Philippines (305,867), Myanmar (Burma) (86,878), Malaysia (73,072), Thailand (65,155), Indonesia (24,554), Cambodia (18,511), Laos (14,309), Singapore (3,730), Timor-Leste (1,467), and Brunei (209). These give a regional total of 1,007,064, that is 12.7% of their estimated world total of 7,919,063 Bahá'ís. Note that even if we take these figures at face value, the 'Bahá'í presence' in their host populations is generally tiny: all are less than half of 1%, and overall less than 0.16% of the total regional population of around 642 million. Over the past 70 years, the Bahá'í Faith has become an established presence across most of the region, but it is not yet a major one.

There is as yet no systematic study of the Bahá'ís of Southeast Asia, only a few local studies, memoirs, and academic papers.

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