

Southeast Asia  
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# Aspects of Islam in Thailand Today

**Thai Muslims and their co-religionists in Sri Lanka and Burma provide three examples of Muslim minority communities living in Theravada Buddhist majority countries. Two main groups comprise the Thai Muslim community: the 'native Muslims', or the Malays residing in the southern provinces, and the 'settled/naturalized' Muslims of different ethnic backgrounds residing across the country – hence the ethnic, linguistic, cultural and political variation within the Thai Muslim community. The southern Muslims make up the majority (approximately 700,000, or 80%) of the total current Thai Muslim population (approximately 5-7 million).**

Islam is the second main religion in Thailand, with Muslims constituting the largest religious minority. Thailand's history of Islam dates back to the Ayutthaya Dynasty (1350-1767), when the country was still known as Siam. The independent Malay kingdoms to the south had not yet been incorporated. They were not to become part of Thailand until 1902. Islam arrived from various directions: the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, Yemen (Hadramawt), Persia, India, Burma, China and Cambodia.

The establishment of Islam in Malacca, during the reign of Sultan Iskandar, led to the spread of the early syncretic Islam in the Southeast Asian archipelago, reaching Pattani by 1387. The upper southern Thai province of Songkhla marks the language border between Malay and Thai-speaking Muslims. There was minimal spreading of Malay Islamic religiosity beyond Songkhla. This was partly due to consolidation of the 'orthodoxy of Sinhalese (Theravada) Buddhism, which had been introduced into the Indo-chinese Peninsula by the Mons of Burma and was disseminated further by the Thai' already a century prior, following the decline of Hindu-Sanskrit culture and Mahayana Buddhism in the Menam and Mekong basins. One may remark that the encounter between Malay Islam and Thai Buddhism was one of two religious 'native type' orthodoxies founded on ethno-linguistic distinctions.

The other arrivals of Islam into Thailand were from various directions of the country, made up mostly of immigrant Muslims of different sectarian and ethnic backgrounds. The central plains of the country comprise Thai Muslims of Persian, Pakistani, Indonesian and Cham extraction. While those residing in the northern provinces of Lampang, Chiangmai and Chiang Rai are of Bengali, Burmese and Yunnanese (Chinese) origin, having migrated to Thailand for economic and political reasons (they were fleeing from religious persecution at the hands of the communists in China and the nationalists in Burma).<sup>2</sup> There are also converts to Islam either through marriage or religious conversion. Most Thai Muslims are Sunnis, yet there is also a small Shia community belonging to both the Imami and Bohras/Mustali Ismailis sub-groups.

Apart from ethnic differences, there is also linguistic diversity within the Thai Muslim community. The majority of Muslims in the south speak Malay, while those residing in other parts of Thailand converse in Thai, both at home and in public. They are no longer familiar with the languages of their ancestors.

## Islamic identity in Thailand

In Southeast Asia, religious identity is often linked to ethnicity: Malays are Muslim; Thais are Buddhist; and Chinese are either Christian or syncretic Taoist/Buddhist. Although ethno-religious constructs shape identities, it can be said that in Thailand, Muslims and Buddhists share nearly identi-

cal social manners, perspectives, formalities and practices. They share the Southeast Asian social demeanour and conventions of moderation, compromise and mutual consultation. Thai Muslims maintain, express and symbolize their identity through religious institutions such as the mosque, *pondok* or Madrasah and the office of the Chularachontri/Shaiikh al-Islam,<sup>3</sup> as well as through Islamic festivals celebrated at the national level, including *Maulid al-Nabi*.

## Islamic education in Thailand

Historically, the famous *pondok* system of Islamic education was instituted in Pattani and is noted for its celebrated scholars such as Ahmad bin Muhammad Zain al-Fatani and Daud al-Fatani, who played a pivotal role in the spread and development of Islamic education in Southeast Asia. Their intellectual influence has left a lasting mark on the development of Islamic scholarship. Initially, the Thai state considered the educational programmes implemented by the *pondok* to be out-dated. Not recognizing their moral-cultural relevance, the idea was to streamline them along modern-secular educational lines.<sup>4</sup> Finally, upon Muslim protest, the religio-moral aspects of this demand for an integrated form of education as a means of maintaining Muslim identity and preparing the youth morally for modern professional life were recognized. This led to the setting up of Islamic Private Schools.

Contemporary Islamic education in Thailand is cultivated through both the *pondok*, which offers solely religious education, and the combined educational programmes disseminated by the Islamic Private Schools. These latter are under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Both types of institutions are manned by graduates of religious seminaries and universities from Malay-Indonesian Archipelago, al-Azhar in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, India, Pakistan and Turkey.

## Thai Muslims on the political stage

The Thai Muslim minority participated in the national political process during both its democratic and non-democratic eras. This engagement has earned Thai Muslims recognition within the political system. Thai Muslim politicians have represented different political parties in the various parliamentary elections that have taken place in the country since its emergence as a constitutional monarchy in 1932. This era also witnessed the southern Muslim struggle against the policy of 'Thai-ization'.

Thai Muslim politicians representing Muslim majority constituencies have long been concerned about developmental problems facing Muslims such as: educational amelioration, economic progress, cultural-religious freedom, and political recognition.

The political engagement of Thai Muslims has also undergone transformation since the recent rekindling of the democratic process. Until 1988, Thai Muslim politicians represented various constituencies on a personal basis. But this is now changing. The Democrat Party of Thailand, representing the middle class, has been the most popular political party in southern Thailand and has long been the main political voice of Thai Muslims. However, several long-time Thai Muslim politicians aligned with the Democrat party have withdrawn, complaining

of the inadequate attention given by the party to specific Muslim matters and of the breaking of electoral promises. These disappointments caused them to form in 1988 a Thai Muslim political faction called the Wahdah (Unity), whose priority is to address developmental problems facing the Thai Muslim community. It has been described as an ethnic movement seeking to achieve the interests of the Thai Muslims from within the political system.<sup>5</sup>

The Wahdah sees itself as an independent political group ready to support any political party that promises to pay special attention to developmental issues and problems facing Thai Muslims. Since its inception, it has aligned itself with the New Aspiration Party (NAP) or Kuam Wang Mai (Thai) also known as Harappan Baru (Malay) established in 1990. The Muslim members of the parliament from the Wahdah have obtained cabinet posts for the first time in the three recently democratically elected coalition governments since 1992. However, the political alignment of the Wahdah could change in view of the implications that the current economic crisis may have for the next parliamentary election.

Despite differing approaches according to political party, the Thai Muslim members of the Parliament and the Senate agree upon the urgent need to address specific developmental matters such as the improvement of the infra-structure and economic development of the Muslim majority provinces within the IMT-GT (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand-Growth Triangle) programme. Other important matters include facilitating travel arrangements for Thai pilgrims to the Hajj, obtaining legal permission for Thai Muslim females to wear the *hijab* in public places (which has been granted) and the establishment of an Islamic bank as an alternative financial institution.

In the current Thai government led by the Democrats, the Foreign Minister is Dr Surin Pitsuwan, a prominent Thai Muslim member of the Democrat Party. Mr Wan Muhammad Nor Matta, member of the Wahdah and deputy leader of the NAP currently in opposition, is serving as elected speaker of the Thai parliament and is president of the National Assembly. Muslim support for the Wahdah faction is increasing in the south and is gaining popularity among Thai Muslims residing in other parts of the country. The next elections will be a test of the political popularity of the Democrat Party, the NAP and other parties among the Thai Muslims.

Over the decades, the Thai Muslims and Buddhists have come to understand and recognize their ethnic and religio-cultural identities. The enlightened of both communities have realized the need to move away from rigidity and exclusivity. Yet there remain several development issues, in the areas of education and economy of the Muslim sector, to be addressed – both publicly and privately.

The inter-religious dynamic in Thailand reflects the need for dialogue and negotiation. But most importantly, it reflects the ability on the part of the political authorities to recognize the ethno-religious variety. ♦



The 300 years old Masjid Talok Manok in Bacho district, Narathiwat, Thailand



A Surau ( Musalla / Prayer house) at Natanjong, Yaring, Pattani district, Thailand



An old Muslim house in Thailand



Masjid Saiburi, Pattani district, Thailand

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## Notes

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