

Contemporary Islam in Thailand: Religion, State and Society

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Thematic Summary

The workshop focused on how changes in the religiosity, identity and worldview of Thai Muslims were impacting on their relationship with the Thai state and its predominantly Buddhist society. The workshop was organised into three sessions: the first considered the ways in which Muslim religiosity, sense of identity and worldview had changed in recent years, including how changes in Buddhist religiosity and identity had impacted on the Muslim community; the second examined how these changes impacted on Muslim attitudes toward the Thai state and society at large; and the third session looked specifically at the role changes in religiosity, identity and worldview had had on the conflict in Thailand's southern border provinces. A final session considered some of the main policy and research conclusions that could be drawn from the discussion.

The following is a thematic summary of the discussion at the workshop. As the workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule, none of the discussion summarised below is attributed – or should be attributed – to particular workshop participants.

It was emphasised at the outset of the workshop that the conflict in the southern border provinces would, understandably, loom very large in the discussions. However, a key objective of the workshop was to get some sense of the attitudes and changing dynamics within the other diverse Muslim communities within Thailand. It was also stressed that while the focus of the workshop was on religion – broadly defined – this was without prejudice to the other non-religious factors that play a role in the dynamics of Thailand's Muslim communities, and specifically, in the conflict in the south. Indeed, it was clear in discussion of the southern conflict in particular that religion was just one factor in that conflict and one that could not be treated in isolation.

Key external factors in the changing religiosity of Thai Muslims identified during the workshop included the Iranian revolution in 1979, the jihad in Afghanistan and the perceived increasing influence of the West over Muslim culture. Key internal factors included greater discussion about Islam amongst Thai Muslims, better Muslim education, the activities of various *da'wa* organisations and the increasing number of Thai Muslim politicians. It was argued that the right of Thai Muslims to assert their identity has improved, but the Muslim community has had to struggle for this and it had not been an easy process. There was still strong prejudice against and ignorance of Muslims in Thai society generally and less acceptance of diversity, combined with unjust treatment of Muslims by the state. One participant recounted his personal experience of changing religiosity in Thai Muslim society, especially the trend toward greater piety and greater expression of Malay identity (such as Thai Muslims reverting to Malay names). Against the background of this discussion on religiosity one participant asked whether there was a 'correct Islam' which generated some debate among participants.

It was also clear that changes in Muslim religiosity had to be seen against the background of changes in Buddhist religiosity. Historically there has been a culture of 'live and let live' between the two religious communities of Islam and Buddhism. The discussion noted that there had, however, been growing religious intolerance in Thai society – especially towards religious minorities, notably Muslims and Christians. In part, this had been driven by the Buddhist religious establishment (the *Sangha*) that felt challenged on a number of fronts. Thais saw the Buddhist establishment as unconcerned with people's problems and irrelevant; monks had been involved in sex scandals which had undermined the *Sangha's* public standing; aggressive Christian proselytising and the emergence of Buddhist feminist voices had also increased the insecurity of the *Sangha*.

This intolerance was manifest in the opposition of the *Sangha* to the proposed establishment of a National Committee of Religion in Thailand. The *Sangha* and conservative Buddhists feared that such a committee would put other religions on an equal footing with Buddhism and weaken its dominant religious position in Thailand. While this Buddhist intolerance initially focused on Christians it was soon extended to Muslims. It was noteworthy that the strongest criticism of the National Reconciliation Commission's Report on violence in the southern border provinces and its recommendations for greater religious pluralism had come from the *Sangha*. Nevertheless it was important to contextualise the extent to which Buddhism felt challenged by the emergence of religious minorities given that Buddhism and the state had historically co-existed for 700 years and in that time Buddhism has enjoyed the state's total patronage. As one speaker noted, Buddhist monks have become like civil servants, incorporated into the state.

It emerged from the discussion that a feeling of persecution amongst Thai Muslims was not limited to those communities in the south. One participant noted that, historically, there had been no sense of religious division in Thailand's north, but this had changed in recent years, especially since the events of 11 September 2001 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Since 9/11 the Thai government had joined the international anti-terrorist agenda and this in turn had impacted on the ability of Thai Muslims to speak out freely. There had also been an increase in the general level of suspicion directed against Muslims which had not existed in the past. All of this was, in turn, exacerbated by the conflict in the south and the accusation in 2004 linking two members of a minority group in northern Thailand to terrorist groups (One participant noted, this had also led to a greater sense of solidarity amongst Thai Muslims across various communities). Mosques in the north were now being regularly searched by police and this specific targeting of Mosques had created animosity among other groups toward Muslims. In response local Muslims had now organised themselves to ensure that they would not continue be victimised by state authorities. They were also using their religion and their religious principles of Islam as an instrument through which to reach out to other communities.

The workshop underlined the diversity of Thai Muslim communities and the diverse ways that Thai Muslims identified themselves. Three categories of Muslims in Thailand were identified: Malay Muslim; Thai language speaking Muslims (who were ethnically Malay); and non-Malay Muslims of different ethnicities who had migrated to Thailand. But the different self-imposed labels that Muslims in Thailand employed also underlined their struggle with national and religious identity. Both Islam and Buddhism in Thailand had become politicised along ethnic lines. Overlaying these ethnic identities has been the impact of the global Islamic resurgence often mediated by Thais educated in religious institutions in the Middle East. Today four politico-religious trends could be identified: a religiously reformist trend which tended to be integrationist (in the state); a religiously traditionalist trend which had both integrationist and separatist strands within it; a Salafi/Wahabi trend which tended to be pro-dialogue and pro-negotiation with the government; and a radical Islamic Shafe'i trend amongst the Muslim youth.

The impact of policies and attitudes of foreign governments toward the Muslim community in Thailand was raised during the workshop. It was noted that that a number of western governments, including Australia's, had not publicly condemned the Thai government's handling of the Tak Bai protests that had resulted in the deaths of some 80 Muslims, most after they had been arrested. While some participants understood the need for quiet diplomacy, many thought it did not help when western governments remained quiet in these situations; it only served to give the Thai government and Thai Muslims the impression that they are not interested in issues unless they are related to terrorism.

The workshop discussed the implications of the recent military coup in Thailand and the possibility that the new government may adopt a more conciliatory approach. Reference was made to the recent apology of the new Prime Minister for the Tak Bai incident and his statement that the only precondition for dialogue with insurgents was that there be no discussion of secession (although he had not ruled out the south being given a special status). Some expressed skepticism about the ultimate value of the Prime Minister's gesture. Some argued that any dialogue, if it occurred at all, would not make rapid progress.

The relationship between Islam and the State was explored through a discussion of (the 2005) elections for provincial Islamic councils. These elections reflected both an effort by the state to manage Muslim communities in Thailand in a more bureaucratic manner and the ambitions of some Muslim politicians to use the Councils as a tool to mobilise popular support. While the elections may well have democratised these Councils they were also very divisive. The politicisation of these Councils has reduced their popular credibility and eroded their authority. One participant noted, however, that in the south local *ulema* had become more active in representing the people as the conflict grew worse. Another felt that the *ulema* and religious leaders had become pawns in a power game. They had been dragged into the political process unwillingly and in this respect the south was just one example of wider Thai political dynamics.

The role of the Bangkok government in the southern conflict was discussed. A number of participants noted the changes in policy and style with respect to the south under the Thaksin government and that these changes had aggravated the problem. One participant noted that under the Chawalit government southern Muslims had a sense their concerns were being represented and heard. By contrast the Thaksin government knew nothing about Muslim culture and tradition in the south, nor had they sought to educate themselves about it. Moreover, the way the former Prime Minister had talked about the south had had a negative impact on the situation. In some cases it had undone the good work of people on the ground. In other cases it had set a bad example which some local officials followed in their dealing with the Muslim population. Corruption and patronage networks, which it was claimed had grown under Thaksin, had also played into the conflict.

One factor was seen to be poor Muslim representation in the local bureaucracy. One participant argued that all Thais knew that the most important party in Thailand was the bureaucracy. Yet while Muslims were 80 per cent of the population in the south they comprised only 12 per cent of the bureaucracy. Those being sent to the south by the government knew little about the region and owed their allegiances to the government in Bangkok rather than the locals.

In discussing the role of religion in the southern conflict, a number of participants argued that it was basically ethno-nationalist (one noted that when even his most pious Muslim students gathered in discussion circles they talked about Pattani history rather than Islam). A number of participants emphasised that there was a limited or no connection between current events in the south and the Middle East or other international issues involving Muslims. The point was made that no-one blacklisted by the Thai authorities had been educated in the Middle East, although one participant argued that media reporting of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan had had an impact on the south. In particular, the discussion generally dismissed suggestions of links between southern separatist groups and *Jema'ah Islamiyya* (JI) in Indonesia (or with other global jihadist groups). It was noted that while JI had approached leaders of the southern groups it had been rebuffed – although it was felt that if the conflict in the south was allowed to fester or expand that this might change in the future.

Nevertheless it was felt that religion and religiosity were factors in some respects. Islam was integral to the Malay identity. Some also argued that the new generation of separatists was more religious (though many insurgents, it was argued, were still more traditionalist in their religious outlook than Salafist or Wahabist). The separatist struggle had also been recast in more Islamic terms (for example, in the more explicit use of 'jihadi language' in the *Berjihad di Patani* document). The global Islamic resurgence had also had some impact on Muslims in the south.

In its report the National Reconciliation Commission had tried to examine different layers of causality. Islam was a major component of the struggle, but other complexities were also part of it; these could be as parochial as the environmental concerns of local farmers and fisherman. Thus, the problem could not be solved in a simple way because of the many factors and layers involved. Another participant noted that the way the problem was defined was also critical to whether it might be solved. If the problem was seen solely as one of violence then it was difficult to see how the conflict might be brought to an end. But if it were seen as a problem of injustice then it was possible to start identifying solutions.

In concluding, a number of speakers endorsed the need for greater inter-disciplinary work in the field of contemporary Islam in general and Islam in Thailand. More could be done to expand existing Muslim exchange program with Australia and to promote intra-faith dialogue within the Islamic community. The workshop underlined the diversity of the Muslim community in Thailand and the fact that this had to be taken into account when considering policy responses. Indeed this was considered important not just in relation to Thailand but when looking at the Muslim world more generally.