

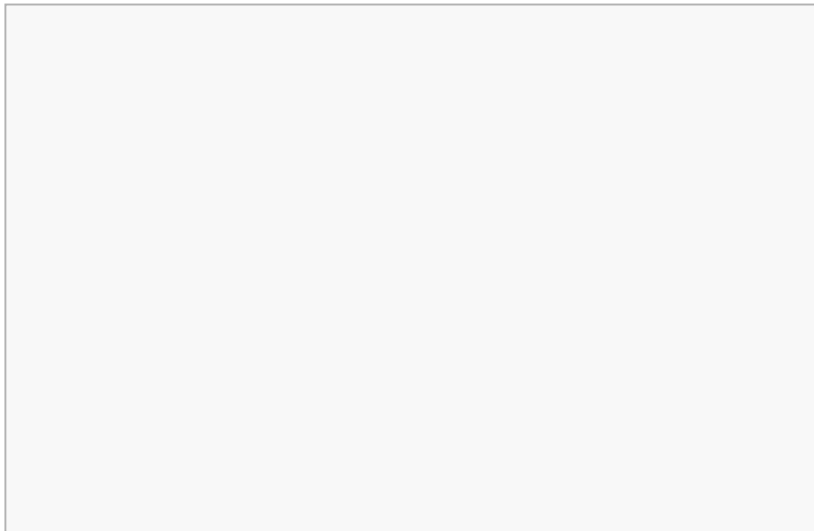
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**Faces of Islam in  
Southern Thailand**

*Imtiyaz Yusuf*



East-West Center  
Washington



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# Faces of Islam in Southern Thailand

## **Executive Summary**

Several commentators and analyst have talked about the on ongoing unrest in southern Thailand from the perspective of the engagement of international terrorism, security issues, center-periphery relations, organized crime and the drug industry. But none of them have written about the role of religion and ethnicity in the crisis. This monograph argues that the roots of the crisis in southern Thailand lie in the role of religion viewed from the point of ethnic identity. The phenomena of ethnification of religion is very much evident in Southeast Asia where religions function along ethnic lines; here a Malay is a Muslim, a Siamese/Thai a Buddhist and a Chinese either a Christian or Taoist/Buddhist syncretic. Thus ethnoreligious constructs shape identities. Hence, it is important to look into the blending of ethnicity and religion and how the constant transformation of these two factors alter the

shape of the ongoing crisis in southern Thailand.

For over a century, the southern Thai crises had been conducted primarily on the basis of Malay ethnic nationalism with religion as an additional cultural factor. But since 1980s export of Islam resurgence from the Middle East to all parts of the Muslim world and the subsequent impact of events such as the Iranian revolution, the American sponsored Afghan Jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the subsequent American war against the Taliban have had a transformative impact on Muslim world including Thailand. It has led to the increasing stress on the role of religion as part of solution to various conflicts concerning Muslims.

In the case of southern Thailand it has led to the viewing of the ongoing local conflict as ethnoreligious in nature with an increasing stress on the role of local Islam as a factor in the conflict. Hence, there are both local and

foreign influences shaping conflict in southern Thailand.

The global religious revival of Islam as political and militant factor has in the case of Thailand resulted in three developments: a) setting of local Thai Islam along the path of puritan reformism calling for the abandoning of local pre-Islamic practices which had survived within the grab of local Islam b) radicalization of Thai Islam in general and c) giving religious coloring to the ethnic crisis in southern Thailand without identifying it as a *jihadist* struggle along the lines of conflict interpretations of al-Qaeda or Jemaah Islamiyah.

This monograph looks into the variety within Thai Islam as practiced across different regions of the country, contributing to the differences within Thai Islam. It also illustrates the different faces of Islam in Thailand in general and not only in South.

The approach adopted in this monograph is rooted in the field of religious studies. The discussion in this monograph illustrates how a variety of Islamic features and trends impact the conflict and the general situation of Islam in Thailand. This is done by looking at the: overall profile of Islam in Thailand; the Thai Muslim view of Buddhism; the ethnoreligious character of Islam in southern Thailand; the impact of global Islamic resurgence on Thai Islam and its influence on the rise of Salafi-Wahhabi reformism amongst the Thai and Malay speaking groups of Thailand; the Krue Se *ji had*; the role of Muslim politicians in Thai politics and the southern Thai conflict and the Muslim world.

The key finding of this research is that there are two types of Islam in Thailand, the integrationist which is practiced in the provinces extending from the upper South to Chiangrai in the North and the volatile and unassimilated Islam in the deep South with its different variants. The difference between these two types of Islam lies in their backgrounds, history and the ethno-linguistic configurations. Both of them interpret Islam differently, the former sees itself as a part of a

Buddhist multi-religious country where Islam is the religion of a minority community; while the latter views Islam as a part of ethno-linguistic identity in a part of the country which was incorporated into Thailand.

This study concludes that the southern Thai conflict remains a local conflict between two ethno-religious identities of Thai Buddhism and Malay Islam in a modern nation-state setting. The ethno-religious extent of Islam in southern Thailand makes it difficult to negotiate an end to the conflict unless it is accompanied by recognition of ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity of southern Muslim and addressing their political complaints with a sense of justice. And that though southern Thai Islam is largely shaped by the local religious features, currently it is also subject to different Islamist trends both from the region and the Middle East.

## Introduction

Islamic attitudes towards state and society grounded in the main religious teachings of the Qur'an of monotheism (*Tauhid*), prophet (*Risalah*) and life after death (*Akrirah*) and the related moral values and social principles of mercy (*rahmah*), justice (*adl*), fraternity (*ikhwah*) and community (*ummah*) have been interpreted and applied variedly in history.

The period of the prophet Muhammad saw the establishment of the political entity of the *ummah* which was a composite sociopolitical unit—a community of members comprising of different religious faiths. The Constitution of Medina, an early document negotiated by the prophet Muhammad in 622 CE with the leading clans of Medina refers to Jewish and pagan citizens of Medina as members of the *ummah*.

This was followed by the period of Muslim caliphates of the Umayyads and the Abbasids which began as Muslim minority polities and gradually became Muslim majority communities. Similar was the case with the Indo-Malay sultanates of Southeast

Asia. The fall of the Abbasid empire of Baghdad in 1258 at the hands of the Mongols led to the introduction of the political concepts of *dar al-Islam* (Abode of Islam) and *dar al-harb* (the abode of war). This marked change in the geopolitical map of the Muslim world made it more confrontational in orientation. It was succeeded by a period of rule by petty states in the Middle East and Asia following which the Muslim world entered into the phase of European colonial domination. At the end of the Ottoman empire in 1924 the subsequent changes in the political map of the Muslim world were marked by the emergence of Muslim majority countries. This event at the end of the colonial phase had important ramifications on the development of Islamic political thought; it led to the rise of internal Muslim debate concerning the political nature of the newly established Muslim countries' choice to become a secular or an Islamic state.<sup>1</sup> The Asian and African Muslim countries established after the Second World War were mostly based on the ideology of Muslim nationalism and they either adopted a capitalist, socialist, or communist political-economic structure. While the political setup of these newly emergent Muslim countries was comprised of tribal monarchic, military dictatorships, socialist authoritarian models, most of them still belonged to either camps of the Cold War.

The emergence of the Muslim majority countries had an important political consequences on those Muslim communities which, due to colonial marking of the borders, suddenly became Muslim minority communities in majority non-Muslim states such as the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand, the Moros of southern Philippines, the Chechens, the Bosnian Muslims, and the Uyghurs of western China, who all desired to become independent political communities. They were now faced with the alternatives of integration with or separation from majority non-Muslim countries of which they had become a part. This development led to the rise of Muslim integrationist and also

separatist movements in these countries which interpreted and proposed their integration in or separation from the non-Muslim majority countries on the terms of Muslim nationalism or Islamist political ideology defined along the ethnoreligious difference with the majority non-Muslim ruling community. The case of Thai Muslims facing the options of integration or separation is one such instance, who, being an ethnoreligious majority in one part of the country seek to determine their identity and stipulate their conditions of political participation and social coexistence with non-Muslims in terms of their ethnic, geographic and religious terms.

### **January 2004—The Beginning of Southern Thai Unrest**

On December 14, 2004, Thai police arrested four *ustaz* (Islamic teachers) in the South as alleged masterminds behind the ongoing two years of unrest and turmoil in that part of the country. Two of the four Islamic teachers were graduates of Islamic University in Madina, Saudi Arabia. This has led to increased suspicion of the role of *ustaz* and the *pondok* (Islamic religious boarding schools both private and registered) behind the southern unrest. This is a new development in the southern conflict marking the entrance of religion as a factor.

Several commentators and analyst have talked about the ongoing unrest in southern Thailand from the perspective of the engagement of international terrorism, security issues, center-periphery relations, organized crime, and drug trafficking.<sup>2</sup> But none of them have written about the role of religion and ethnicity in the crisis. This monograph argues that the roots of the crisis in southern Thailand lie in the role of religion viewed from the point of ethnic identity. The phenomena of ethnification of religion is very much evident in Southeast Asia where religions function along ethnic lines; there a Malay is a Muslim, a Siamese/Thai a Buddhist, and a Chinese either a Christian or Taoist/Buddhist syncretic. Thus ethnoreligious

constructs shape identities. Hence, it is important to look into the blending of ethnicity and religion and how the constant transformation of these two factors alter the shape of the ongoing crisis in southern Thailand which has surfaced in a variety of aspects. Thus analyzing the conflict in southern Thailand in ethnoreligious terms can serve as one good approach.

This monograph also looks at the variety within Thai Islam as practiced across different regions of the country. In his 1988 study of Islam in Thailand, Omar Farouk distinguished between two types of Muslims in Thailand namely the, “assimilated” and the “unassimilated.” The former constitutes, “a whole diversity of ethnic groups such as the Muslim Siamese, the Thai-Malays, the Haw Chinese, the Bengalis, the Arabs, the Pathans, the Punjabis and the Samsams. The ‘unassimilated’ are predominantly Malay” who reside in the deep southern provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat.<sup>3</sup> The main factors responsible for this is their firm adherence to ethnicized religious identity and their strong attachment to the concepts of *nayu* (race), *baso* language and *agama* (Islam). And their aspirations are largely shaped and inspired by an ethnoreligious nationalism based on Malay ethnicity. Thus there are two types of Islam in Thailand, the integrated and the unintegrated.

The approach adopted in this monograph is rooted in the field of religious studies. The discussion illustrates how a variety of Islamic features and trends impact the conflict and the general situation of Islam in Thailand. This is done by looking at the overall profile of Islam in Thailand; the Thai Muslim view of Buddhism; the ethnoreligious character of Islam in southern Thailand; the impact of global Islamic resurgence on Thai Islam, and its influence on the rise of Salafi-Wahhabi reformism amongst the Thai and Malay speaking groups of Thailand; the Krue Se *jihad*; the role of Muslim politicians in Thai politics and the southern Thai conflict and the Muslim world.

### Religious Identities in Thailand

Thailand is a religiously pluralistic country with a Buddhist majority of 94%, Muslims constituting about 5%, and Christians and others 1% of the total population. Yet, the Thai constitution does not declare Buddhism as the official religion of Thailand.

Contemporary Thailand is a multiethnic and multireligious country with Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and traditional religions existing side by side. Religious identities and attitudes toward the state among contemporary Thais are determined by the modern concept of citizenship along with that of ethnic and linguistic identities.

Thai identity in contemporary times in the Rattanakosin era revolves around the concepts of “*Chat, Sassana, Pramahakasat*” — Nation, Religion (Buddhism) and the Monarchy. Buddhism is the majority religion of Thailand but it is not the official religion of Thailand and the Thai king is held as the patron of all religions. The non-Buddhist population of Thailand comprising Muslims, Christians, and others interprets the above three mentioned concepts of nationality in ethnoreligious pluralistic terms. Yet in the case of the Thai Muslims there are among the unassimilated Muslims of the South who contest this concept of national identity by pressing on the difference of ethnicity, language, and religion. The reason being that traditionally, ethnicity, language, and religion have served as important determinants of identity, whereby to be a Malay means to be Muslim only, just as being a Thai means being Buddhist only. Though in modern times, the terms Malay and Thai have also acquired religiously pluralistic identifications in terms of being identified as citizens of modern states of Thailand and Malaysia, the traditional identifications of the past have not disappeared but constitute the cultural basis of being a Thai Buddhist or Malay Muslim.

Thai Buddhism and Malay Islam also have distinctive political cultures; each of them has its own cultural understandings of



power, politics, and religion in an interconnected relationship. Here power, politics, and religion are culturally constructed from within the power and political dimensions of the Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim cultural environments. Hence, identities, religiosities and worldviews are rooted in the Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim political cultures institutionalized by religious-political symbolisms. Thus the Thai-Buddhist and Malay-Muslim religio-political cultures shape identities and attitudes towards state and society in Thailand.

The multiethnic and multireligious nature of the Thai state today demands equal loyalty from all its citizens irrespective of their ethnic or religious affiliations be they Chinese or Malay Muslims. This requires the Thai Muslims to reinterpret their Malay-Muslim political philosophy so that they can adjust to the political loyalty demands of a modernized Thai state. For the most part, Thai Muslims have responded to this demand positively through reinterpretation of Islamic political philosophy to fit with the demands of citizenship in a modern state. Yet, there are some who remain adamantly entrenched in the traditional Malay-Muslim political construction rejecting the legitimacy of the secularized Buddhist polity, leading to the clash between the Malay Muslim and Thai Buddhist political cultures, hence, their demand for the recognition of Malay language, religion and culture by the majority Thai Buddhist polity. In other words, their demands go beyond mere toleration of their group. They are asking the wider society what Bhiku Parekh states as, "treat them equally with the rest and not to discriminate against or otherwise disadvantage them...demand that it should also respect their differences; that is, view them not as pathological deviations to be accepted grudgingly but as equally valid or worthy ways of organizing the relevant areas of life or leading individual and collective lives."<sup>4</sup> In the case of the southern Malay Muslims the demand for recognition also involves demands for

changes in the legal arrangement of society and its ways of thinking. In other words, the southern Malay Muslims are demanding self-determination and dignity using both political and nonpolitical means.

Thus there is variety in Thai Muslim attitudes toward Thai state and society which is reflected in the Thai Muslim identification of themselves through the coinage and usage of terms such as, "Muslim Thai," "Thai Muslim" or "Malay Muslim." This marks their struggling with concepts of ethnicity, religion, and citizenship in determining their identity and terms of loyalty to a non-Muslim majority state and society. This internal struggle for self-understanding is also subject to influences from global Islamic resurgence taking place in different parts of the Muslim world.

### **Islam in Thailand**

Islam, like all world religions, operates at global and local levels. The global identity of Islam is constructed in pan-Islamist terms of *Ummah* or the world Muslim community while most of the local Muslim identities in the world are construed in tribal, ethnic, and communal terms as seen in Africa and the Middle East, Southeast, and South Asia.

Islam came to Thailand from three directions from the South, Central and North. It first arrived in southern Thailand in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries C.E. when it was brought by the Arab traders.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, Islam arrived in Central Thailand during the fifteenth century through Shia Persian and Sunni Indian traders stationed in Ayudhya. Cham Muslims migrated to Ayudhya due to the collapse of the Champa kingdom in 1491. While Indonesian Macassar Muslims settled in Ayudhya following the Dutch conquest of Macassar between 1666–1669 C.E. Thirdly, the Indian, Bengali and Chinese Muslims arrived in the North of Thailand between the 1870s and 1890s respectively.<sup>6</sup> The establishment of the new capital of Bangkok in 1782 by king Rama I of the Chakri dynasty saw the settlement of Iranian, Indian, Pakistani, Cham,

Indonesian, and Malay Muslims in different locations of the country.<sup>7</sup>

Islam in Thailand operates in three configurations defined by history and location: 1) the ethnic Malay-speaking Islam is practiced in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat of the deep South, these southern Muslims make up about 80% of the total Thai Muslim population of about 5–7 million; 2) the integrated ethnically Malay but Thai-speaking Islam is practiced in the province of Satun and upper South such as Songkla, Nakorn Si Thammarat, Phuket, Krabi, and Phangnga; and 3) the multi-ethnic Thai speaking integrated Islam of central Thailand provinces of Bangkok and Ayudhya and also that of North and northeast Thailand; this group comprises Muslims of Persian, Malay, Cham, Indonesian, Indian, Bengali, Pathan, and Chinese ethnic backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> These migrant Muslims from neighboring countries came to settle in Thailand for economic and political reasons. They also fled religious persecution at the hands of the communists in China and the nationalists in Burma.

There are also Thai converts to Islam either through marriage or religious conversions. The first type of Islam has been largely historically resistant to integration within Thai polity while the second and third types have been integrative. Thus the Thai Muslim community is made up of two groups: the “native/local Muslims” and the “immigrant settler Muslims.” Hence, there is ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and political variety within the Thai Muslim community.

The “immigrant Muslims” of Thailand also belong to different Muslim sects. For example, Persian Muslims belonging to the Shia sect served at the court of the Ayudhya Kingdom in different official capacities.<sup>9</sup> The majority of Thai Muslims belong to the Sunni sect but there is also the presence of a small Shia community belonging to the Imami and Bohras/Mustali Ismailis sub-groups from within the Shia sect.<sup>10</sup> Overall, the Thai Muslims make up the largest minority religious group in the country constituting “a

national minority rather than as a border minority.”<sup>11</sup>

### Thai Muslim’s View of Buddhism

I have referred to the history of relations between Islam and Buddhism in other venues,<sup>12</sup> I but present it here with additional new information. Religious encounters between Islam and Buddhism are as old as Islam.<sup>13</sup> The first encounter between Islam and *ashab al-Bidada* or the Buddhist community took place in the middle of 7th CE in the regions of East Persia, Transoxiana, Afghanistan, and Sindh.<sup>14</sup> Historical evidence suggests that some early Muslims extended the Qur’anic category of *ahl al-Kitab*—people of the book or revealed religion to include the Hindus and the Buddhists.<sup>15</sup> The second counter took place in Southeast Asia beginning around 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> CE.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> century of Islam or the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, Central Asian Muslims translated many Buddhist works into Arabic. We come across Arabic titles such as, *Bilawar wa Budhasaf* and *Kitab al-Budd*, as evidences of Muslim learning about Buddhism.<sup>16</sup>

Ibn al-Nadim (d. 995 CE), the author of *al-Firhist* in spite of being aware of the idol-worship of the Buddha comments that:

These people (Buddhists of Khurasan) are the most generous of all the inhabitants of the earth and of all the religionists. This is because their prophet *Budhasaf* (Bodhisattva) has taught them that the greatest sin, which should never be thought of or committed is the utterance of ‘No.’ Hence they act upon this advise; they regard the uttering of ‘No’ as an act of Satan. And it is their very religion to banish Satan.<sup>17</sup>

There is evidence of Buddhist survival in the succeeding Muslim era of this region, for example, the Barmak family of Buddhist monks who played a powerful administrative role in the early Abbasid dynasty. The Abbasids ruled from Baghdad during 750–1258 CE, governing most of the Islamic world. The Barmakids controlled the Buddhist

monastery of *Naw Bahar* near Balkh including other Iranian monasteries.<sup>18</sup>

There was also the survival of several Buddhist beliefs and practices among the Muslims of Central Asia. For example, the Samanid dynasty which ruled Persia during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries invented and modelled the *madrasah* or Muslim religious schools devoted to advanced studies in the Islamic religious sciences after the Buddhist schools in eastern Iran.<sup>19</sup> Similar may have been the case with *pondoks* or *pasenterens*—Muslim religious schools of Southeast Asia.

Muslim religious scholar and historian, Abu Ja`far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839–923 CE), who was born in Amul in Tabaristan, northern Persia mentions that Buddhist idols were brought from Kabul, Afghanistan to Baghdad in the ninth century. It is also reported that Buddhist idols were sold in Buddhist temple next to the Makh mosque in the market of the city of Bukhara in present Uzbekistan.<sup>20</sup>

Classical Muslim scholar of comparative religion al-Shahrastani (1086–1153 CE), in his section on ‘*Ara’ al-hind’* (The Views of the Indians) of his *magnum opus Kitab al-Milal wan-Nihal* (Book of Religious and Philosophical Sects) pays high spiritual respect to Buddhism. This was done by identifying the Buddha with the Qur’anic figure of al-Khidr, as a seeker of enlightenment.<sup>21</sup>

More recently, the late Professor Muhammad Hamidullah observes that in line with the Qur’anic view of prophethood, the Buddha can be regarded as one among the previous prophets. According to Hamidullah, the symbolic mention of the fig tree in chapter 95, verse 1 of the Qur’an alludes to the prophethood of the Buddha. He concludes that since Buddha is said to have received *Nirvana*—Enlightenment—under a wild fig tree, and because that fig tree does not figure prominently in the life of any of the prophets mentioned in the Qur’an, the Qur’anic verse refers to Gautama Buddha.<sup>22</sup>

By the fig and the olive,

By Mount Sinai,  
And by this land made safe;  
Surely We created man of the best stature  
Then We reduced him to the lowest of the  
low,  
Save those who believe and do good  
works, and theirs is a reward unailing.  
So who henceforth will give the lie to thee  
about the judgment?  
Is not Allah the most conclusive of all  
judges?

Qur’an 95:1–8

And indeed, [O Muhammad], We have sent forth apostles before your time; some of them We have mentioned to thee, and some of them We have not mentioned to thee.

Qur’an 40:78. See also Qur’an 4:164

And never have We sent forth any apostle otherwise than [with a message] in own people's tongue.

Qur’an 14:4

Hence, Islam’s position toward other religions is that of religious pluralism recognising the existence of different religions including Buddhism. The Qur’an states that:

To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah had so willed He would have made you a single people but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute.

Qur’an 5:48

The general Thai Muslim attitude towards Buddhism is that of “live and let live” drawn from the Qur’anic verse, “Unto you, your religion (moral law), and unto me mine.” (Qur’an 109:6)

Educated Thai Muslims view Buddhism with its concept of *Dukkha*—suffering and seeking of *Nirvana*—enlightenment—as philosophical and offering a methodological approach to life. And in their view, the popular Thai religious beliefs in spirits,

demons are strange and unwise. On the other hand, the educated Buddhists view Buddhism as philosophical and scientifically superior to Islam. In their view Islam's belief in monotheism makes it philosophically inferior and unscientific.

At the popular level, Thai Muslims see Buddhism as religion of *kufir*—disbelief in God and *shirk*—polytheism. They view Thai Buddhists as *kafirs*—unbelievers and infidels and *mushrik*—polytheists.<sup>23</sup> These two concepts are scorned by the Qur'an and opposed vehemently by the prophet Muhammad. As a result they adopt and apply a literal understanding of Qur'anic passages which talk of the conflict between *Tauhid*, monotheism, vis-a-vis *kufir* and *shirk* in the Thai context, without applying the tools of historical criticism. Hence, in charged conflict situations, Thai Muslims view the Thai Buddhists as *najis* (unclean, immoral and faithless) engaged in *kufir* and *shirk*—polytheism who are to be opposed by engaging in *jihad*—war. Such a view is the result of power politics and lacks the knowledge of classical Muslim scholars of religions view about Buddhism. Such a stance contributes to intensifying conflict by giving it a religious color.

### **Ethnoreligious Islam in Southern Thailand**

Analyzing the ongoing events in southern Thailand from ethnoreligious dimension confirms the need to understand how the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand perceive their identity in ethnic and religious terms. It is a matter of fact that the Malay Muslims place strong emphasis on the ethnic aspect of their adherence to the religion of Islam. The Malay Muslims of the South give primacy to their ethnic identity and view their life experience from within the context of the local practice of the *agama* of Islam. Thus the ritual, mythic/narrative, experiential/emotional, ethical and legal, social, material, and political dimensions of life are all interpreted and perceived through the lenses of ethnic identity. Here ethnicity and religion are

intermixed resulting in the formation of an ethnicized view of Islam.

With such a perspective, ethnicity is the defining characteristic of a group's identity which sets it apart from others in its own and others' eyes. It serves as the foundation for the interpretation of nationalist and religious aspirations of the group. Thus often religion can be used for ulterior ethnic interests as a tool or veil. Such ethnoreligious identification of identity is also evident in the conflicts in Sudan, Sri Lanka, Tibet and China, India, Nigeria, Lebanon, Bosnia, the Philippines and Northern Ireland.

The combination of ethnicity and religion often results in explosive conflicts in the political arena to which solutions are not easy to be found.

Religion and ethnicity, as social and political concepts, have many similarities. While ethnicity is not always congruent with a framework of belief, it is often associated with nationalism, which does provide such a framework. This framework can include rules and standards of behavior such as the requirement or at least the desirability of forming or maintaining a state for one's ethnic group. Even for ethnic groups which do not express such national sentiments, ethnicity is a basis for identity that can influence beliefs and behavior. Ethnicity, both in its nationalist and other manifestation, can provide legitimacy for a wide variety of activities and policies and ethnic symbols can be as potent a political and social mobilizing force as religious symbols.<sup>24</sup>

The above described phenomena of ethno-religiosity which gives primacy to ethnicity in religion is not exclusive to the Malays but similar tendency is also found in the other ethnic groups of Southeast Asia viz., the Thai, the Filipino and the Chinese communities settled here.

The Malay Muslims of southern Thailand view national integration as entailing their own cultural disintegration for, according, to them Thai Buddhism and Malay Islam belong to two different cosmological orientations.<sup>25</sup>

“They do not want to be integrated into the Thai state. They do not want to lose their religious and cultural autonomy. If the Thai state is the manifestation of the Buddhist cosmology, the Malay-Muslim do not want to be a part of it.”<sup>26</sup> The largely ethnic orientations of the two communities of the Thai Buddhists and the Malay Muslims have been described as “closed systems.”<sup>27</sup>

The Malay Muslims recoil from outsiders (even other Muslims) unless they are members of the same ethnic group or speak the Malay language. Similarly, mere religious conversion to Islam is not enough, rather, according to them, one has to “*masuk Melayu*” —become a Malay—to be accepted as a Muslim. This process is reinforced through loyalty to the historical memory and the role played by the *‘ulama* or *tok gurus* asserting and maintaining the ethnoreligious identity of the Malay Muslim community.

The network of the *‘ulama* and their role as custodians of religion and ethnic tradition makes them important players in the conflict as custodians of the Malay culture and local Islam. For example, the role of Haji Sulong who in 1947 made seven ethnoreligious demands to the central government. These demands centered on the issue of political freedom for the Malays and the preservation of Malay language, the only religious demand put forward by him concerned the recognition and enforcement of Muslim law.<sup>28</sup>

Since the 1980s the Thai government has undertaken several efforts to accommodate its Muslim population into the mainstream and also succeeded in this effort as seen through those who identify themselves as “Thai Muslims,” but there are still sections who see themselves differently in ethnoreligious terms. The unassimilated inspired by contemporary politicization of religion engage in “politicization of ethnicity” or “ethnoreligious nationalism.” They engage in what is referred to as, “regional or subnational reactions and resistances to what is seen as an over centralized and hegemonic state, ... to achieve their own regional and local sociopolitical

formations.”<sup>29</sup> And in their case, “Religion is not purely a matter of belief and worship; it also has social political resonances and communitarian associations. Likewise, language is not merely a communicative device but has implications for cultural identity and literary creation, educational advantage, occupation, and historical legitimation of social precedence. Similarly, territory has multiple implications, which go beyond spatial location to include charged claims about “homelands’ and “sons [and daughters] of the soil.”<sup>30</sup> A similar interpretation about the southern Malay Muslim identity was affirmed by a prominent southern Muslim scholar Dr. Ismae-Alee of Prince of Songkla University, when he recently remarked that ignorance about the Malay way of life and the role of religion in it is the cause of conflict. He also remarked that the southern Muslims have a different lifestyle and beliefs from that of Muslims in the other parts of the country. For example, identity, nationalism and history are rooted deeply in the psyche of southern Muslims.<sup>31</sup>

At the level of interreligious relations, the recent violent events and killings in southern Thailand show that the intermixing of religion and ethnicity has also resulted in destroying social relations between the Malay Muslims and Thai Buddhists who have been living as neighbors for centuries.<sup>32</sup> At present, Muslim-Buddhist relations are at their lowest level, with distrust and alienation on both sides.

### **The Impact of Global Islamic Resurgence on Thai Islam**

Contemporary Islam is witnessing a crisis of authority both in religious and sociopolitical arenas. This is being carried out by the clashing claims of the puritans (comprising fundamentalists, militants, extremists, radicals, fanatics, and *jihadists*) and the moderate (consisting of modernists, progressives and reformers) sections of the Muslim community all over the world.<sup>33</sup> The conflicting claims of both of these worldviews are having a worldwide impact on different Muslim

societies which are engaged in determining their own self-understanding in different contexts either as majority or minority Muslim communities, including Thailand.

The modern phenomenon of Islamic resurgence seeks to bring back Islamic values, practices, institutions, and law into the lives of Muslims. It seeks to “re-create an Islamic ethos, an Islamic social order, at the vortex of which is the human being, guided by the Quran and the Sunnah.”<sup>34</sup> This phenomenon is reflected in an increase in the use of Arabic religious terminology, wearing Arabized attire by males, donning of the *hijab* by women, segregation between the sexes, and a decrease in interreligious communication combined with an urgent urge to establish an Islamic state in the case of Muslim majorities and Islamic society in the case of Muslim minorities.

The global religious revival of Islam as political and militant factor has, in the case of Thailand, resulted in three developments: a) setting of local Thai Islam along the path of puritan reform calling for the abandoning of local pre-Islamic practices which had survived within the grab of local Islam; b) radicalization of Thai Islam in general; and c) giving religious coloring to the ethnic crisis in southern Thailand, without identifying it as a *Jihadist* struggle along the lines of conflict interpretations of al-Qaeda or Jemaah Islamiyah, though this possibility cannot be ruled out completely.

Historically, Islam in Thailand has been of syncretistic type which involved the intermingling of local practices with normative Islam. It had been tolerant toward the local Thai, Malay, Indian, Persian, Cham, Javanese, Chinese, Sufi, etc rituals, *adat or* customs and social etiquettes as long as these non-Muslim practices did not contradict Islamic monotheism. But this has changed gradually over the decades.

During modern and contemporary times, Thai Islam developed in multifaceted manner as it came under the influence of theological

trends developed in the region and the Muslim world. Since the 1920s Islam in Thailand has acquired different faces. These faces are those of traditional and reformist Islam. The traditional Islam or *Kuam Tua* (Malay) / *Khana kau* (Thai) represents Islam which is syncretist in orientation while the reformist Salafi-Wahhabi oriented Islam is known as *Kuam Muda* (Malay) / *Khana mai* (Thai) represents Islam which is puritanical in orientation.

#### The Rise of Salafi-Wahhabi Reformism

Amongst the Thai Speaking Muslims

Salafi reformism associated with Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1838–1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1855–1905), arrived in Bangkok in 1926 with the arrival of an Indonesian Muslim scholar by the name of Ahmad Wahab. Ahmad Wahab was a reformist Muslim who had studied in Mecca before his return to Indonesia and subsequent exile to Thailand. Ahmad Wahab was exiled to Thailand by Dutch authorities due to his involvement with the reformist Muhammadiyah movement and its political movement Sarekat Islam.<sup>35</sup>

In Bangkok, Ahmad Wahab along with like-minded Thai Muslims such as Direk Kulsiriswad and others formed the *Ansorisunnah* association in 1930s and also *Jamiyatul Islam* in 1950s. The religious influence of Ahmad Wahab’s reformist activities within Thai Islam extended to the north and south of Thailand within the Thai-speaking Muslims of Chiangmai and Chiangrai in the north and Pak Prayoon in Phatthalung province and Nakorn Sithammarat in the upper South.

Meanwhile, the Thai Muslim youth established the Young Muslim Association of Thailand (YMAT) in 1964.<sup>36</sup> The Salafist Islamic reform along with *Tabligh Jamaat* activity which had arrived from India started working at the grass roots level in different provinces of Thailand setting the direction for the religio-social reform of Thai Muslim society along puritan lines.<sup>37</sup>

Inspired by modernist ideas yet being religiously puritan, the Thai reformists were critical of the local folk Islam with its Hindu and Buddhist accretions and the practice of *taqlid* (blind following), thus they called for a return to the original sources of Islam, i.e. the Qur'an and the Sunnah. They published the translation of the Qur'an, such as the one by Direk Kulsirisawad, in Thai, and produced reformist/puritanical literature both original and in translation from foreign languages, which lay stress on assuming puritan Islamic identity.

As the Thai writings and publications of the reformist spread amongst the Thai speaking Muslim community, it led to a split and clash between the *khana kau* (traditionalist) and *khana mai* (reformist) sections of Thai speaking Muslim community.<sup>38</sup> Both criticized each other's practice of Islam as being less authentic.

In the 1970s, the spread of the Saudi petro-dollar sponsored program of Islamic resurgence led to the emergence of the Thai *Salafi* reformism with Saudi Wahhabism resulting in the gradual marginalization of the *khana kau* section of the Muslim community.

On the political front, the Islamic reformism of Thai-speaking Muslims favored political integration within the Thai Buddhist polity in the spirit of "live and let live."

The Rise of the Salafi-Wahhabi Reformism Amongst the Malay Speaking Muslims of Southern Thailand  
Pattani has a special place in the Southeast Asian Islamic history. Apart from its commercial importance in the past, Pattani has also been a seat of Islamic learning famous for its scholars and *pondoks*.<sup>39</sup>

The first instance of Salafi-Wahhabi reformist ideas coming to southern Thailand is associated with the personality of an Islamic cleric, Haji Sulong, who was a Malay Muslim reformist and political activist educated in Mecca. Upon returning to Pattani in 1930 he engaged in the reform of the Malay Muslim community and represented Malay Muslim

interests by seeking political autonomy within a federal system as proposed by the then Thai prime minister Pridi Phanomyong.<sup>40</sup> Since his death in 1954 under mysterious circumstances, Haji Sulong has become a symbol of resistance to the Thai state.

Islamic resurgence has been a continuing phenomenon within the Malay speaking Muslims of southern Thailand until today. Islamic resurgence in southern Thailand combined with ethnoreligious nationalism adopted different political attitudes towards the question of relationship with the Thai state. These attitudes have ranged from pro-integration based on the principle of the recognition of the distinct Malay Muslim ethnic identity to separatism.

The emergence of Islam resurgence in southern Thailand was the result of local and external influences. Several southern scholars came under the influence of Islamic resurgence trends from across the Muslim world leading to the emergence of local reformist trends. The coming of the reformist thought to southern Thailand led to the division of the local Muslim community along the "*Kuam Muda*" (reformists/puritans) and "*Kuam Tua*" (traditionalists) lines causing cultural dislocations within the community.

After Haji Sulong, an important southern Thai reformist was Abdullah Chinarong, also known as "Abdullah India," began a graduate from *Nadwatul Ulama* seminary in India. Abdullah Chinarong represented the *Kuam Muda* tradition and preached actively in the 1970s. He also set up a school named *Rongrian Islam Prasanwit*. But his influence did not last long due to his incorporating modernist practices such as watching TV which were seen as lax by the locals. Meanwhile, the *Tabligh Jamaat* and YMAT also started operating in southern Thailand by adopting Malay as the language of their communication in the South.

The beginning of the Salafi-Wahhabi assimilation through the of the Saudi government which in the 1970-80s "embarked on systematic campaign of promoting

Wahhabi thought among Muslim living in the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds,"<sup>41</sup> impacted southern Thailand through the rise of a local Salafi-Wahhabi movement with the aim of establishing pure Islamic society through religious activism and proselytism. Wahhabi reformers such as Dr. Ismail Lutfi and his Yala Islamic College, which is sponsored by Saudi benefactors, have engaged in undertaking the puritan reformation of the Malay Muslim community in the South through proselytism.<sup>42</sup> This is evident in Dr. Lutfi's concurrence with the main features of Wahhabi puritanism which are rigid literalism, intolerance toward differences, insularism, supremacist psychology, restriction of women's movements, opposition to rationalism, and a hostile attitude towards artistic expression.<sup>43</sup>

There is much compatibility between Wahhabism and the Malay Islam of southern Thailand. This is found in their shared parochialist and ethnocentric worldviews. Wahhabism lays stress on Arab ethnocentrism which is

"completely at odds with Islam's universal message."<sup>44</sup> Abdul Wahab, the founder of Wahhabism "held the old ethnocentric belief that only Arabs can represent the one and true authentic Islam ...was declaring the particulars of Bedouin culture to be the one and only true Islam and then universalizing these particulars by making them obligatory upon all Muslims ... in reality Wahhabism was a pro-Arab nationalistic movement that rejected Turkish dominance over Arabs under the guise of defending the one true Islam. Fundamentally, while the Wahhabis of the eighteenth century took the culture of the Bedouins of Najd and universalized it into *the* Islam, the Wahhabis of today take the culture of Saudi Arabia and universalize it into the singularly true Islam."<sup>45</sup>

Hence, there is much similarity between what the Saudi Arabs do and did with Islam in the Middle East and what the Pattani Muslims influenced by Wahhabism do with Islam in southern Thailand. The latter read and apply

Islamic sources in a way that supports Wahhabi-Malay cultural understandings and biases. Such insularity reduces Islam to ethnocentrism that betrays the universality of the Islamic message.

Interestingly, Lutfi shuns violent separatism and takes a pro-dialogue stand with the Thai state, laying stress on the Thai recognition of the Malay-Islamic identity of the local southern Muslim population. Lutfi's stand also differs from that of other religious school teachers or *ustaz* who have been inspired by the religious zealotry and the militancy of the neo-Wahhabist movements such as the contemporary al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

#### The Proto-Islamization of the Conflict

For over a century, the southern Thai crises had been conducted primarily on the basis of Malay ethnic nationalism with religion as an additional factor. But since the 1980s the export of Islam resurgence from the Middle East to all parts of the Muslim world and the subsequent impact of events such as the Iranian revolution, the American sponsored Afghan Jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the subsequent American war against the Taliban have had a transformative impact on Muslim world including Thailand.

In the case of southern Thailand it has led to the viewing of the ongoing local conflict as ethnoreligious in character with an increasing stress on the role of local Islam as a factor in the conflict. Hence, there are both local and foreign influences shaping conflict in southern Thailand. This is evident from the types and the degree of references made to Islam and Malay ethnicity by the various groups including the insurgents.

The Islamization of the southern conflict occurred in the 1980s through the external influence of Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan, and the impacts of global Muslim related events such as the wars in Bosnia, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq.



The arrival of Wahhabi Islam in southern Thailand resulted in rifts within local Islam which even caused theological splits within families. Its insistence on imitation of the puritanical version of Wahhabi Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia resulted in causing cultural dislocations within the Malay Muslim community. A majority of southern Thai Muslim identify themselves as the adherents of the Shafii school of Islamic law and shun Wahhabism. In their view the arrival of Wahhabi Islam in southern Thailand resulted in causing rifts within local Islam even leading to theological splits within families. Its insistence on imitation of the puritanical version of Wahhabi Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia resulted in causing cultural dislocations within the Malay Muslim community. They see compatibility between Shafite Islam and historic Malay identity. They have engaged actively in protecting ethnoreligious and social features of traditional Malay culture from being swept away by Wahhabi Islam. This ethnoreligious resistance is evident in the local Islamic religious discourse within southern Thailand involving the traditionalists and the Wahhabis, whereby the traditional Malay Muslims are resisting puritanical Wahhabi, viewing it as a threat to their culture and maintenance of their ethnic identity, while the local Wahhabis are insisting that it is their religious duty to wean the traditional Malays from traditional Islam to puritanical interpretation and practice of their religion. This contest between ethnic and religious identities has contributed to much confusion and raging debate about what constitutes ethnic, cultural, and religious identities amongst the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand. Presently, the traditionalists are more dominant than the Wahhabis. And they shape the contours of Malay ethnoreligious resistance to Thai political and cultural domination.

The coming of Wahhabism in southern Thailand has also contributed toward the formation of a new politico-religious trends

within southern Islam as represented by ethnoreligious Islamists of various types some of which are politically and religiously radical in orientation.

Besides the Wahhabi and other influences mentioned above, Islam in the deep southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, has always been also influenced by the Islamic intellectual and sociopolitical trends from across the border from Malaysia and Indonesia. In fact, Islam in southern Thailand shares much intellectual and cultural affinity with Islam in Kelantan from the past until today.<sup>46</sup>

The social, political, and intellectual influences of religious developments in Kelatanese and also Malaysian Islam flow across the border into the southern provinces. The Malaysian Islamic trends represented by the PAS (*Partai Se Islam Malaysia*), *Darul Arqam* and *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM) which stress on the socio-political role of the *ulama* and on Malay ethnicity and language have also influenced Islamic resurgence in southern Thailand.<sup>47</sup> This has been through raising cross-border awareness and sense of ethnic solidarity across Thai-Malaysian border.

#### Religion and Secrecy—The Krue Se *Jihad*

Since the January 4, 2004 event there has been an increase in the religious dimension of the conflict. As a result of the government installed martial law in the South, the situation peaked on April 28, 2004 with attacks on 15 security posts and police stations in Yala, Songkla, and Pattani resulting in the death of 107 Muslim militants, 5 security personnel and 17 arrests. 37 of the Muslim militants were killed in the blockade of the Krue Se mosque with shoot-to-kill orders. Those holding out in the mosques are reported to have engaged in mystical religious prayer services comprising recitation of sacred verses and drinking of holy water after the evening prayers. The militants were led into believing that these rituals would make them

invisible to the police and make them invulnerable to bullets fired at them.<sup>48</sup> These young militants are suspected to be members of a radical religious cell called *Hikmat Allah Abadan* or *Abadae* (Brotherhood of the Eternal Judgement of God) centered around a religious teacher by the name of Ustaz Soh. The members of this secretive cell were indoctrinated with ideology of hate for the Thai Buddhist and separatist aspirations cast in mystical Sufi interpretation.<sup>49</sup>

A 34-page Jawi/Malay language book titled, "*Berjihad di Pattani*" was found on the body of a dead militant. The book published in Kelantan, Malaysia uses the teachings of the Qur'an urging for *Jihad* to separate Pattani, extermination of people of different religious faiths, even one's parents if they leak information to the government.<sup>50</sup> Chapter one talks of "*jihad warriors*" to engage in a religious war against "those outside the religion" for the revival of the Pattani state. Chapter three talks of killing all opponents even it be one's parents, and to sacrifice one's life in order to go to heaven to be with Allah. It concludes by suggesting the formation of a constitutional state of Pattani based on Sunni Shafii school of law.<sup>51</sup> The reference to Shafii Islam refers to the traditional Islam of the Pattani Malays distinguishing it from the Wahhabi inspired Islam which is a later arrival. That is why Dr. Ismail Lutfi, rector of Yala Islamic College, criticized the book.

The instance of the text of "*Berjihad di Pattani*" is the first time that direct references to the Qur'anic verses were made in relation to the southern Thai conflict calling it a *jihad*. It may have been influenced by *jihadists* texts that have emerged in the Middle East such as the *al-Farida al-Gha'iba* by Muhammad Farraj which inspired the assassins of president Sadat of Egypt in 1981.<sup>52</sup> And also other similar *jihadist* texts such as those by Maulana Abul al-Maududi of Pakistan and Sayyid Qutb of Egypt. A section of text of *Berjihad di Pattani* reads as follows:

*From Allah we come and to Him we shall return.*

*Every soul will taste death ...*

The pen (writer) will also die, but the writing shall continue to survive. Carried over by religious preachers (*Da'wah*), they shall inherit words and take over the leadership. I name them as *Wira Shuhada* (martyrdom fighters). Imam *Shaheed*, the Radiance of Jihad. The *Wira Shuhada* will rise in Pattani with the radiance of *Jihad Fi-Sabilillah* (Struggle in the Path of Allah). *Wira Shuhada* will come to the children of the land (Pattani) who are in state of ignorance and obsessed with material wealth and power.<sup>53</sup>

The book inspired several Malay youth to fight for and die for their cause. The dead at the Krue Se mosque were treated by their relatives as martyrs (*shuhada*). Their corpses were buried unwashed following the prophet Muhammad's practice regarding the burial ritual of his companions who had died in the battles against the Meccans.

The *Chularatchamontri* or the *Shaikh al-Islam* of Thailand along with the Central Islamic Committee called for the destruction of the said book and appointed a nine member committee to write a rebuttal in Thai language.<sup>54</sup> The rebuttal titled, "*Facts about the Distortion of Islamic Teachings as Appeared in 'The Struggle for Pattani' (Berjihad di Pattani)*" was published and distributed widely.<sup>55</sup>

The Krue Se incident illustrates the practice of secrecy amongst sections in southern Malay Muslim community, a practice that is not new to religion but which has been implemented within many religions and their sects. This practice depicts, "the dialectic tension between the ideal of martyrdom or "witnessing" and the imperative of secrecy and discretion."<sup>56</sup> Though largely a practice sanctioned within Shia Islam, its adoption by the Malay youth of southern Thailand depicts how a group of youth which felt marginalized, disenfranchised and alienated adopted the practice of belonging to a secret society to challenge the existing power and building its own "hermeneutic space"<sup>57</sup> through the consoli-

dation of the group, ready for sacrifice and become symbolic martyrs.

The secretive nature of the Krue Se Jihad makes it a form of new religious movement within southern Thai Islam engaged in resisting structures of authority and power and also of rebellion against the socio-economic and political structures of modern Thailand. Here the charismatic group leader plays a crucial role, "in articulating cultural tensions and social conflicts, in mobilizing spiritual energies and material resources and in providing model(s) of ideal conduct."<sup>58</sup> And the group members are psychologically alienated from families, friends and careers.<sup>59</sup> The Krue Se event involving secretive religious activity concerned with development of one's inner power and practice of traditional Islamic medicine with the aim to overthrow incumbent political power is not new to the Malayan practice of religion. It has many antecedents in history and is similar to recent activities of like groups such as the *al-Maunah* and *Rufaqa* in neighboring Malaysia.<sup>60</sup>

The Krue Se incident and its aftermath have contributed to the further escalation of the southern conflict in the religious sense with demands for justice for those who died.

### **The Role of Muslim Politicians in Thai Politics**

The political expressions by Thai Muslims from all over the country, especially in relation to their religious, cultural, and group concerns both at the national and international levels, have been expanding over the decades and the Thai state in the spirit of "globalized communitarianism" rather than that of "clash of civilizations."<sup>61</sup>

The internal developments within Thai Islam have also affected its perceptions and relations with the larger Thai Buddhist population with whom it has resided together in a country described as a constitutional monarchy in the form of a "secularized Buddhist polity" with a "stable semi-democracy(tic)" political system.<sup>62</sup> Thailand follows the communitarian democracy model,

"a ... process ... characterized by stability, peace and order, the upholding of shared moral and cultural values, and the priority of communitarian interests."<sup>63</sup> This model has allowed the Thai Muslims to define their own communal development. Meanwhile, their relation with the Buddhists is that of mutual religious coexistence without socioreligious interaction or interreligious dialogue. This is evident from the history of the role of ethnic and religious communities as localized identities in the development process of Thai democracy.

Since the adoption of the model of constitutional monarchy in 1932, the Thai political system has undergone major shifts, advances, and setbacks along the democratic path. These were factored by the roles of the military, bureaucracy, ethnic groups such as the emergent Chinese middle class and the Thai Muslims.

The 1992 political uprising marked the end of the military rule. Since then Thailand has embarked upon, "a political system in which the military and bureaucratic forces largely determine the role as well as the mode of participation of the non-bureaucratic forces."<sup>64</sup> It is a system in which the parliament, "is only now becoming a new source of power, struggling to institutionalize its legitimacy."<sup>65</sup>

Amidst all these political developments Thai Muslims who are prodemocracy have acquired their own political space which has over the years allowed them to express their cultural and religious concerns on the Thai political stage.

The Thai Muslim minority participated in the national political process during both its democratic and nondemocratic 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.

Thai Muslim politicians representing Muslim majority constituencies of the South 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 in 1992. In 1988, the Malay speaking politicians from the South formed the *Wahdah* political faction whose priority was to address developmental problems facing the Malay speaking 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>66</sup>

The *Wahdah* saw 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 aligned itself with the New Aspiration Party (NAP) established in 1990. The Malay speaking members representing the *Wahdah* obtained cabinet posts follow the elections of 1992, 1995, 1997 and 2001. Prominent Thai Muslim member of the Democrat Party, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, served as Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister from 1992–1995, and as the Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1997–2001.

Following the resurgence of southern insurgency in 2004 and the *Wahdah's* alignment with the ruling Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party responsible for high handed handling of the southern crisis during the Krue Se and Takbai incidents, the *Wahdah* lost all its seats in the 2005 parliamentary elections. They were all won by Muslim politicians from the Democrat Party. The *Wahdah* faction resigned from the Thai Rak Thai party after the recent coup of 2006 which marked the end of Thaksin regime.

In the aftermath of the southern conflict, there is now a talk of forming a Muslim political party that will address the grievances of the southerners. But this move initiated by a former politician of the TRT party may not be welcomed in the South.

The recent military coup led by a Thai Muslim general viz., Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratkalin may be a more positive factor towards attending to the resolution of the conflict. During the Thaksin regime, Gen. Sonthi was the first to propose talking with the insurgents but he was sidelined. Gen. Sonthi and the interim prime minister Surayud Chulanont have recognized the need for dialogue with the separatists.<sup>67</sup> They have also recognized the role of the former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir in contacting the separatist leaders for peace talks with the Thai officials.<sup>68</sup>

It is expected that the interim government will pay more attention toward resolving the conflict in the South using dialogical method with the local Muslims. One such effort is post-Thaksin government's proposal to revive Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC)—a civilian-military-police task force which played a crucial role in offering forum for dialogue between the locals and the authorities but was dissolved by Thaksin.<sup>69</sup> The revived SBPAC under its new name of Southern Border Provinces Development Center (SBPDC) will in the aftermath of two years of violence play a crucial and a newly designed role towards resolving the southern conflict. It should work toward changing the prevalent hostile attitudes between the Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims of the South to one of mutual acceptance and trust and building of cooperation in managing their political and social affairs together.<sup>70</sup>

### **The Southern Thai Conflict and the Muslim World**

The Muslim world consisting of 1.3 billion Muslims is spread over Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. Muslims live in various countries both as majority and minority populations. The Muslim world sees itself as an *ummah*—worldwide community—bound by the fraternal spirit of *ikhwah*—brotherhood—related by faith and practice of Islam as religion.

The Muslim world is made up of different races and ethnic groups speaking different languages. The Muslim world can be divided into following lingual-cultural zones—Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Central Asia, Urdu, Sindhi, Punjabi, Bengali, Malay, Javanese, Maghribi, West African, and Swahili. In spite of this, the adherents of Islam see themselves as a brotherhood with a strong emotional attachment. The Muslims see themselves as a composite unit united by faith.

Muslim-related conflicts such as those in Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya and southern Thailand have drawn the attention of the worldwide Muslim community. These are generally interpreted by the worldwide Muslim community as instances as the result of the religious victimization of Muslims, and are thus open to varied worldwide Muslim interpretations ranging from instances of oppression of Muslims to exclusivist subjugation of minority Muslim populations by non-Muslim states. The Muslim world views these conflicts through the lenses of pan-Islamism, an ideology of worldwide unity of Muslims proposed by Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1838–97) during the colonialized era of Muslim history.<sup>71</sup> In addition to this, the southern Thai conflict is also viewed from the perspective of pan-Malayness referring to the regional ethnic fraternity of the Malay race. Hence, the worldwide Muslim conflicts are viewed from the perspectives of religion as well as racial identity.

The majority of the media reporting about the southern Thai conflict in the Muslim world view the conflict as religious, one between an oppressive Thai Buddhist state and its repressed Muslim minority. They do not view it as local conflict rooted in clash between two ethno-religiosities, those of Thai Buddhism and Malay Islam with the latter taking a Malay-Muslim nationalist and separatist stance. The southern Thai episode demonstrates that ethno-religious identity is a large determining factor in the forming, shaping, and consequences of the conflict. Yet

due to the Muslim component, the Muslim world views the on-going conflict as being purely religious.

#### Thailand-Muslim World Relations

Thailand has been successful in building dynamic and cooperative relations with several Muslim countries in the region and also outside the region. Presently, seventeen Muslim countries have established diplomatic relations with Thailand.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, Thailand has observer status at the main Muslim international organization of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) headquartered in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Thailand also has extensive trade and commercial relations with several Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian Muslim countries.

The nearly one-century old ongoing conflict in southern Thailand has attracted the attention of the Muslim world in different ways depending upon various factors such as ethno-religious similarity with neighbors—such as Malaysia and Indonesia—and religious similarity with the Muslim world in general. Thus the Muslim world's attention toward the unrest in the South is also factored by the sentiments of pan-Malayness and also pan-Islamism. A glance at the media reports on the events in the South reflect these two types of interests in the Muslim world.

At the religious and communal levels, Thai Muslims have established extensive relations with Muslim countries in the areas of educational and socio-religious relations both at the public and private levels. Thousands of Thai Muslims have obtained their religious and general education at educational institutions in the Muslim world in South, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Hence, there is a two-tiered relationship between Thailand and the Muslim world, one conducted at the official level and another at the level of inter-Muslim community relations.

The Islamic religious concepts of *ikhwah*—Muslim religious fraternity constituting an *Ummah*—have played an important

role in drawing the Muslim world's attention toward the southern Thai conflict at various levels in spite of the fact that it is largely a local domestic conflict

The problems in southern Thailand are the result of decades of economic neglect, lack of employment opportunities for the local Muslims in both public and private sectors, cultural insensitivity of the bureaucracy and the nonrecognition of the religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity within Thai polity. The solution requires greater efforts by the Thai government to respond and meet the demands of the local Muslim population. This will contribute to the building of peace and stability within Thailand. Otherwise, the Muslim world both in the neighborhood and beyond will be misinformed about the problems in the South and perceive them as being directed against a part of the Muslim *ummah* residing in Thailand, similar to the events taking place in Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Philippines, etc.

The southern Thai conflict has drawn the attention of the worldwide Muslim population and also international and regional *ihadists*, i.e. ideological militant Islamic groups engaged in armed struggles against Muslim and non-Muslim nation states. But as per the International Crisis Group Report on Southern Thailand, the conflict still remains local and has not yet involved the global or regional *jihadists*.<sup>73</sup>

### Conclusion

There are two types of Islam in Thailand, the integrationist which is practiced in the provinces extending from the upper South to Chiangrai in the North and the volatile and un-integrated Islam in the deep South with its different variants. The difference between these two types of Islam lies in their backgrounds, history and the ethnolinguistic configurations. Both of them interpret Islam differently; the former sees itself as a part of a Buddhist multi-religious country where Islam is the religion of a minority community; the

latter views Islam as a part of ethnolinguistic identity in a part of the country which was incorporated into Thailand.

Hence, there are six types of politico-religious influences that impact the Thai Muslims attitudes toward state and society, these are: 1) The integrationist attitudes of both the *Khana kau* (traditionalist) and *Khana mai* (reformists) of the Thai-speaking Muslims of the upper South, Central and northern Thailand; 2) The integrationists and the separatists attitudes among the *Kuam Tua* (traditionalists) of the Malay-speaking southern Thailand; 3) The pro-dialogue and pro-integration Islamic ideological attitude of moderate Wahhabis led by Dr. Ismail Lutfi and Dr. Ismae Alee representing the *Kuam Muda* (reformist) among the Malay-speakers of the South; 4) the radicalized Islamist—Shafiite perspective amongst the Malay militant youth represented by those who died in the Krue Se *jihad* and also other separatist youth movements; 5) the minority non-integrationist Islamist militant perspective of the neo-Wahhabists inspired by al-Qaida and the Taleban of Afghan veterans such as GMIP (*Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani*);<sup>74</sup> and finally, 6) the non-integrationist view of the secular Malay nationalists separatists.

The Thai Muslim reception towards the above mentioned politico-religious influences varies from region to region; with the integrationist stand being the dominant attitude in the upper South, Central plains, the North and northeastern parts of the country and pro-local autonomy political attitude being the majority trend in the deep South.

The southern conflict remains an ethnoreligious with its different Islamist trends. It remains a local conflict between two ethnoreligious identities of Thai Buddhism and Malay Islam in a modern nation state.

The ethnoreligious extent of Islam in southern Thailand makes it difficult to negotiate about the conflict unless it is accompanied by recognition of its ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity of southern

Muslim and addressing of their political complaints with a sense of justice.

The southern Thai conflict being an ethnoreligious conflict between the two exclusive ethnoreligious worldviews of Thai *sasana* and Malay *agama* has to be understood in cosmological and ethnocultural context which needs more than mere political and security response to solve it. It requires the mutual recognition of the Thai and Malay identities within Thai space. In other words, it also requires a degree of social engineering through reviving former efficient administrative body. One such effort is post-Thaksin government's proposal to revive Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) - a civilian-military-police task force which played a crucial role in offering forum for dialogue between the locals and the authorities but was dissolved by Thaksin.<sup>75</sup> The revived SBPAC under its new name of Southern Border Provinces Development Center (SBPDC) will in the aftermath of two years of violence play a crucial and a newly designed role towards resolving the southern conflict. It should work toward changing the prevalent hostile attitudes between the Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims of the South to one of mutual acceptance and trust and building of cooperation in managing their political and social affairs together.

From the perspective of the Muslim world which is observing the southern Thai conflict, the resolution of the conflict requires not only the effort and recommendations for reconciliation but deliverance of justice both as a symbolic offering and reality. For it is confession, atonement and forgiveness that seals reconciliation both psychologically and politically.

Furthermore, though Thailand prefers to handle the conflict on its own without outside assistance, the ground reality shows this is not strategically possible. Involving neighboring Muslim countries and international Muslim organizations such as the OIC cannot be ruled out, for their involvement can go a long way

to help Thailand get out of the southern sludge. Thus Thailand should do more than just concentrate its efforts and focus on the type of resolutions and press releases released by the OIC. That will contribute to a bettering of relations between Thailand and the Muslim world to the mutual benefit of all parties. The recent Thai invitations to the OIC and Indonesia to send fact finding missions and the former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir to intervene tell that international diplomacy and cooperation cannot be ignored or disregarded. Gen. Sonthi attended the Hajj pilgrimage of 2006 with the intention to explain Thai government's efforts in resolving the southern conflict in peaceful manner.<sup>76</sup>

The expectation of an immediate resolution to the conflict is to expect too much in a short time. Of recent, there has been an increase in attacks on schools and persons and protests against government authorities. The situation seems to be getting severe. Only mutual recognition of the two different cultural identities operating in a multicultural and multireligious environment can provide hope and space for long term solution. In other words, there is a need for transformation in the self-understanding of what it means to be a Thai Buddhist and a Thai Muslim.

The above, demands of the Malay Muslims of Thailand to sift through their ethnically defined perspective of Islam and the universal precepts of Islamic religion, for Islam encourages dialogue between religions and cultures as mentioned in the following verse of the Qur'an.

O mankind! We created you out of a male and a female and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another (not that you may despise each other). Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware. (Qur'an 49:13)

Thai Muslims as Asian Muslims are endowed with the opportunity to interact with

Buddhism as an Asian religion—a historical opportunity unavailable to the Muslims of the Middle East. This is an occasion which the Muslims cannot afford to miss or let go in the age of the global dialogue of religions. The situation in South Thailand is largely the consequence of local history and circumstance which need to be addressed with a multicultural approach. One possible solution for the conflict is through the sincere implementation of recommendations made by the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), especially those pertaining to recognition of the multiethnic nature of Thai society which must be implemented without political prejudice. But that itself may not be enough.



## Endnotes

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- <sup>4</sup> Bhiku Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) pp. 3–5.
- <sup>5</sup> Raymond Scupin, "Thai Muslims in Bangkok: Islam and Modernization in a Buddhist Society" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1978) p. 1–2.
- <sup>6</sup> Suthep Soonthornpasuch, "Islamic Identity in Chiangmai City: A Historical and Structural Comparison of Two Communities" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1977), pp. 37–75.
- <sup>7</sup> Raymond Scupin, "Thai Muslims in Bangkok: Islam and Modernization in a Buddhist Society" pp. 19–29.
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- <sup>9</sup> Raymond Scupin, "Islam in Thailand Before the Bangkok Period," *Journal of Siam Society* 68 (1980): 55–71.
- <sup>10</sup> See *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* s.v. "Ismailiya" and "Shi'a". And Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).
- <sup>11</sup> Omar Farouk "The Muslims of Thailand" in Lutfi Ibrahim (ed.) *ISLAMIKA* (Kuala Lumpur: Sarjana Enterprise, 1981) p. 97–121.
- <sup>12</sup> Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Religious Diversity in a Buddhist Majority Country: The Case of Islam in Thailand" *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture*, Vol. 3, September 2003 : 131–43.
- <sup>13</sup> Islam was founded in 611 CE when the Prophet Muhammad received the first revelation of the Qur'an in Mecca.
- <sup>14</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "Balkh." *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Buddhism."
- <sup>15</sup> The term "Ahl al-Kitab" or "the People of Book" is a Qur'anic and Muhammad's reference to the followers of Christianity and Judaism as religions that possess divine books of revelation (Torah, Psalter, Gospel) which

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gives them a privileged position above followers of other religions. See *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. “Ahl al-Kitab.”

<sup>16</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in S. M. Yusuf, “The Early Contacts Between Islam and Buddhism,” in *University of Ceylon Review* Vol 13 (1955): 28.

<sup>18</sup> Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 1999) p. 100. Also Richard Bulliet, “*Naw Bahar* and the Survival of Iranian Buddhism” *Iran* 14 (1976) : 140–45.

<sup>19</sup> Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, p. 100–101. See also *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Mircea Eliade, General Editor) s.v. “Madrasah.”

<sup>20</sup> Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, p. 100.

<sup>21</sup> Qur’an 18:64. See also Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), pp. 113–14.

<sup>22</sup> Muhammad Hamidullah, *Muhammad Rasullah*, (Hyderabad: Habib & Co, 1974), pp. 27, 107. See also David Scott, “Buddhism and Islam: Past to Present Encounters And Interfaith Lessons.” *NUMEN* 42 (1995): 141–55.

<sup>23</sup> This is different from a learned Muslim view about *kufir* and *mushrik*. Muhammad Asad, a translator and an exegete of the Qur’an comments that the meaning of the terms *kufir* and *kafir* in the Qur’an are determined by the meanings these terms had in Arabic language during pre-Islamic times and their meanings cannot be equated to “unbeliever” or “infidel” in the restricted sense as referring to one rejects the doctrine of the Qur’an and teaching of Muhammad as is being done by Muslim theologians of the post-classical times and also Western translators of the Qur’an. Rather, “a *kafir* is ‘one who denies [or “refuses to acknowledge”] the truth’ in the widest, spiritual sense ... irrespective of whether it relates to a cognition of the supreme truth – namely, the existence of God –or to a doctrine or ordinance enunciated in the divine writ, or to a self-evident moral proposition, or to an acknowledgement of , and therefore gratitude for, favours received.” Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980) p. 907.

The term *shirk* means, the ascribing of divinity to anything besides God and “is not confined to a worship of other “deities”, but implies also the attribution of divine or quasi-divine powers to persons or objects not regarded as deities: in other words, it embraces also saint-worship, etc.” Or, through “overstepping the bounds of truth.” *Ibid.*, p. 110, 160. In the case of Buddhism it would imply overstepping the *Dhamma*.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Fox, *Ethnoreligious Conflict in Late Twentieth Century A General Theory* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002) p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A case study of Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand* (Bangkok : Thai Khadi Research Institute Thammasat University, 1985), p. 8, 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Donald Tugby and Elise Tugby, “Malay-Muslim and Thai-Buddhist Relations in the Pattani Region: An Interpretation” in *The Muslims of Thailand* Vol. 2, eds. edited by Andrew D. W. Forbes, General Editor, Sachchidanand Sahai (Gaya, India: Center For South East Asian Studies, 1989) p. 73.

<sup>28</sup> M. Ladd Thomas, “Thai Muslim Separatism in South Thailand” ” in *The Muslims of Thailand* Vol 2, edited by Andrew D. W. Forbes, General Editor, Sachchidanand Sahai (Gaya, India: Center For South East Asian Studies, 1989) p. 21.

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- <sup>29</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, *Levelling Crowds Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) p. 16.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 22.
- <sup>31</sup> “Ignorance ‘cause of unrest’ ” *Bangkok Post*, May 12, 2006, p. 2.
- <sup>32</sup> “Buddhists, Muslims on path to mistrust and fear” *The Nation*, March 13, 2004, p. 6A; Sanitsuda Ekachai, “What can the generals have been thinking” *Bangkok Post*, August 5, 2004, p. 11; “Buddhists tell PM they live in fear” *Bangkok Post*, November 8, 2004, p. 1; “Violence doesn’t spare even peace-loving Buddhist monks” *Bangkok Post*, January 4, 2005, p. 4; Pradit Ruangdit “Stirring Religion into the cauldron” *Bangkok Post*, January 19, 2007, p. 12.
- <sup>33</sup> The above classification is borrowed from, Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005) pp. 16–18.
- <sup>34</sup> Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1987) p. 2.
- <sup>35</sup> Raymond Scupin, “Thai Muslims in Bangkok: Islam and Modernization in a Buddhist Society” pp. 19–29.
- <sup>36</sup> Raymond Scupin, “The Politics of Islamic Reformism in Thailand” *Asian Survey* Vol. 20, No. 12 (December 1980) : 1,223–35.
- <sup>37</sup> Ernesto Braam, “Travelling with the Tablighi Jamaat in South Thailand” in *ISIM Review* 17, (Spring 2006) : 42–43; Barbara Metcalf, “Living Hadith in the Tabligh Jamaat” *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 52, No. 3 (August 1993) : 584–608; Muhammad Khalid Masud, (ed.) *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jama`at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000).
- <sup>38</sup> Raymond Scupin, “Islamic Reformism in Thailand” in *Journal of the Siam Society* vol. 68, part 2, (1980) : 1–10.
- <sup>39</sup> Mohd. Taib Osman, *Islamic Civilization in the Malay World* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and The Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, 1997); Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004); Hasan Madmarn, *The Pondok and Madrasah in Patani* (Bangi, Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2002).
- <sup>40</sup> Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A case study of Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand* pp. 146–65.
- <sup>41</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, p. 87.
- <sup>42</sup> Dr. Ismail Lutfi prefers to refer his movement as, “*ahl as-Sunnah*” – the way of the tradition of the prophet Muhammad. The term Wahhabi is used here for the purpose of identification.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 86.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 54.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 52–53.
- <sup>46</sup> William Roff, *Kelantan* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1974).
- <sup>47</sup> For scholarly analysis about the ethnic dimension of Islamic resurgence in Malaysia see, Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*.

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- <sup>49</sup> International Crisis Group, “Southern Thailand Insurgency, Not Jihad” p. 21 available at: [www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/south\\_east\\_asia/098\\_southern\\_thailand\\_insurgency\\_not\\_jihad.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/south_east_asia/098_southern_thailand_insurgency_not_jihad.pdf)
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- <sup>52</sup> Johannes Jansen, *The Neglected Duty: The Creed of Sadat's Assassins and Islamic Resurgence in the Middle East*, (MacMillan Publishing Company, 1986).
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- <sup>56</sup> Maria Dakake, “Hiding in Plain Sight: The Practical and Doctrinal Significance of Secrecy in Shi’ite Islam” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 74 No. 2 (June 2006) : 335.
- <sup>57</sup> Term coined by Paul Christopher Johnson in his book, *Secret, Gossip and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) quoted by Maria Dakake above.
- <sup>58</sup> James A. Beckford, “New Religions” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 10: 392.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393.
- <sup>60</sup> “Al-Maunah” at [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com) and “Rufaqa” at [http://www.meta-religion.com/New\\_religious\\_groups/Groups/Islamic/rufaqa.htm](http://www.meta-religion.com/New_religious_groups/Groups/Islamic/rufaqa.htm).
- <sup>61</sup> Chai-Anan Samudavanija, *Thailand: State-Building, Democracy and Globalization* p. 185.
- <sup>62</sup> Chai-Anan Samudavanija, “Thailand: A Stable Semi-democracy,” in *Democracy in Developing Countries: ASIA*, eds. Larry Diamond, Juan Linz and Seymour Lipset (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 1989), p. 340. The term “secularized Buddhist polity” is borrowed from Somboon Suksamarn, “Buddhism, Political Authority, and Legitimacy in Thailand and Cambodia,” in *Buddhist Trends in Southeast Asia*, ed. Trevor Ling (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), p. 127.
- <sup>63</sup> Chai-Anan Samudavanija, *Thailand: State-Building, Democracy and Globalization* (Bangkok: Institute of Public Policy Studies, 2002) p. 36.
- <sup>64</sup> Chai-Anan Samudavanija, *Thailand: State-Building, Democracy and Globalization*, p. 136.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- <sup>66</sup> Suria Saniwa bin Wan Mahmood, “De-Radicalization of Minority Dissent – A Case Study of the Malay-Muslim Movement in Southern Thailand” Master’s thesis, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia, 1998.

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- <sup>68</sup> “Rebels signal they may talk to end unrest” *Bangkok Post*, October 5, 2006, p. 1; “KL promises not to interfere in South” *Bangkok Post*, October 8, 2006, p. 3; “Authorities seek two key rebel leaders” *Bangkok Post*, October 12, 2006, p. 2; “KL may host negotiations with militants” *Bangkok Post*, October 14, 2006, p. 4.
- <sup>69</sup> “SBPAC successor name agreed” *Bangkok Post*, October 17, 2006, p. 3.
- <sup>70</sup> “Experts hail revival plan for SBPAC” *Bangkok Post*, October 28, 2006, p. 1.
- <sup>71</sup> Jacob L. Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) p. 13–21.
- <sup>72</sup> These are: Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalaam, Egypt, Qatar, Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UAE and Uzbekistan.
- <sup>73</sup> International Crisis Group, “Southern Thailand: Insurgency, Not Jihad” pp. 37–38.
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**Background Information  
on Southern Thailand**





## **Background of the Southern Thailand Conflict**

The three “southern border provinces” of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat have an ambiguous status within the Thai nation and state. Officially part of Siam since 1909, the region roughly corresponds to the former Malay sultanate of Patani. The area remains around 80 percent Malay-speaking and Muslim, and has never been properly incorporated culturally or psychologically into Buddhist-dominated Thailand. Bangkok has largely pursued a policy of assimilation and standardization, making few concessions to the distinctive history and character of the region. Like the rest of Thailand, the southern border provinces are administered mainly by officials dispatched from the distant capital. The region has a long tradition of resistance to the rule of Bangkok, and political violence has emerged at various junctures in modern history. Some of this violence was perpetrated by the Thai state. Landmark events included the 1948 Dusun-yor incident (in which dozens, perhaps hundreds, of Malay-Muslim villagers were killed in Narathiwat) and the 1954 arrest and “disappearance” of prominent Islamic teacher Haji Sulong at the hands of the Thai police.

Radical “separatist” elements began waging a guerrilla war against the Thai state in the 1960s, and fighting reached its most virulent stage during the late 1970s and early 1980s. A number of groups were behind the fighting, including the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) and Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). By 1980 as many as 1,000 insurgents were carrying out regular attacks in the south, and had even staged a number of bombings in Bangkok. But the Prem Tinsulanond government (1980–1988) successfully reined in the violence, granting amnesties to former militants and setting up new security and governance arrangements in the area, coordinated by the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC). Prem’s policy was to co-opt the Malay-Muslim elite with a combination of political privileges and development funds, much of these brokered by the army. Though far from perfect, these policies were broadly effective for about two decades.

During the first term of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–2005), however, the security situation in the south deteriorated sharply. An overconfident Thaksin dissolved the Prem-era special administrative arrangements and placed the highly unpopular police force in charge of security in the Deep South. These politically motivated policy blunders coincided with a sharp rise in militancy and the reemergence of violent resistance to the Thai state. On January 4, 2004, more than 50 militants staged a daring raid on an army camp, seizing a large cache of

weapons and scoring an enormous propaganda victory. In the three years that followed, almost 2,000 people were killed in political violence in the region. The two worst days of violence were April 28, 2004, when more than 100 men died in simultaneous attacks on a series of security posts, culminating in a bloody siege at the historic Krue Se mosque; and October 25, 2004, when 78 unarmed protestors died in Thai military custody, apparently mainly from suffocation, following mass arrests at Tak Bai, Narathiwat. These two incidents greatly undermined the legitimacy of the Thai state and boosted the militant movement.

Nevertheless, the origins and character of the political violence in the south remained a highly contentious issue. At least some of the killings in the region were popularly attributed to extrajudicial murders carried out by, or on behalf of, the Thai security forces, while others were undoubtedly revenge killings or simply ordinary criminal acts. The militant movement has declined to make public statements of responsibility or to issue any demands, thus contributing to a growing climate of fear. Although there seems every reason to believe that the majority of incidents are being perpetrated by people with militant sympathies, the nature of the militant movement remains somewhat unclear. Some analysts insist that the movement is essentially a reconfigured version of earlier groups such as BRN-Coordinate, while others see the movement as a shadowy and largely ad hoc network. Whereas earlier political violence in the region used mainly “separatist” rhetoric, drawing on notions of Malay identity and history, anonymous leaflets circulated since January 2004 have invoked explicitly “jihadist” sentiments. Most analysts of the conflict remain skeptical about claims that the southern Thai violence is linked with transnational networks such as Jemaah Islamiya (JI); the causes of the conflict seem overwhelmingly homegrown.

Thaksin’s mishandling of the south was one factor contributing to the September 19, 2006 military coup d’état. Ironically, though Thaksin had favored security-based solutions to the violence, many senior army commanders advocated political solutions such as those advanced by the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC)—a high-level body established by Thaksin to propose new policies to address the southern violence, but whose conclusions the prime minister had spurned. The new military-backed Surayud Chulanont government adopted a more conciliatory approach to the conflict from October 2006, yet the violence continued unabated, and much vaunted “dialogue” with the militants failed to produce results.



- Capital Cities
- Cities and Towns
- ∩ Provincial Boundaries
- ∇ Country Boundaries

*Note: Map boundaries and locations are approximate. Geographic features and their names do not imply official endorsement or recognition by the UN.*



## **Project Information**



## **Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia Project Rationale, Purpose, and Outline**

Project Director: Muthiah Alagappa  
Principal Researchers: Morten Pedersen (Burma/Myanmar)  
Saroja Dorairajoo (southern Thailand)  
Mahendra Lawoti (Nepal)  
Samir Kumar Das (northeast India)  
Neil DeVotta (Sri Lanka)

### ***Rationale***

*Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia* is part of a larger East-West Center project on state building and governance in Asia that investigates political legitimacy of governments, the relationship of the military to the state, the development of political and civil societies and their roles in democratic development, the role of military force in state formation, and the dynamics and management of internal conflicts arising from nation- and state-building processes. An earlier project investigating internal conflicts arising from nation- and state-building processes focused on conflicts arising from the political consciousness of minority communities in China (Tibet and Xinjiang), Indonesia (Aceh and Papua), and southern Philippines (the Moro Muslims). Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, that highly successful project was completed in March 2005. The present project, which began in July 2005, investigates the causes and consequences of internal conflicts arising from state- and nation-building processes in Burma/Myanmar, southern Thailand, Nepal, northeast India, and Sri Lanka, and explores strategies and solutions for their peaceful management and eventual settlement.

Internal conflicts have been a prominent feature of the Asian political landscape since 1945. Asia has witnessed numerous civil wars, armed insurgencies, coups d'état, regional rebellions, and revolutions. Many have been protracted; several have far-reaching domestic and international consequences. The civil war in Pakistan led to the break up of that country in 1971; separatist struggles challenge the political and territorial integrity of China, India, Indonesia, Burma, the Philippines, Thailand, and Sri Lanka; political uprisings in Thailand (1973 and 1991), the Philippines (1986), South Korea (1986), Taiwan (1991) Bangladesh (1991), and Indonesia (1998) resulted in dramatic political change in those countries. Although the political uprisings in Burma (1988) and China (1989) were suppressed, the political systems in those countries, as well as in Vietnam, continue to confront problems of legitimacy that could become acute; and radical Islam poses serious challenges to stability in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The Thai military ousted the democratically-elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. In all, millions of people have been killed in the internal conflicts, and tens of millions have been displaced. Moreover, the involvement of external powers in a competitive manner (especially during the Cold War) in several of these conflicts had negative consequences for domestic and regional security.

Internal conflicts in Asia can be traced to contestations over political legitimacy (the title to rule), national identity, state building, and distributive justice—that are often interconnected. With the bankruptcy of the socialist model and transitions to democracy in several countries, the number of internal conflicts over political legitimacy has declined in Asia. However, the legitimacy of certain governments continues to be contested from time to time, and the remaining communist and authoritarian systems are likely to confront challenges to their legitimacy in due course.



Internal conflicts also arise from the process of constructing modern nation-states, and the unequal distribution of material and status benefits. Although many Asian states have made considerable progress in constructing national communities and viable states, several countries, including some major ones, still confront serious problems that have degenerated into violent conflict. By affecting the political and territorial integrity of the state as well as the physical, cultural, economic, and political security of individuals and groups, these conflicts have great potential to affect domestic and international stability.

### ***Purpose***

*Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia* examines internal conflicts arising from the political consciousness of minority communities in Burma/Myanmar, southern Thailand, northeast India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Except for Nepal, these states are not in danger of collapse. However, they do face serious challenges at the regional and local levels which, if not addressed, can negatively affect the vitality of the national state in these countries. Specifically, the project has a threefold purpose: (1) to develop an in-depth understanding of the domestic, transnational, and international dynamics of internal conflicts in these countries in the context of nation- and state-building strategies; (2) to examine how such conflicts have affected the vitality of the state; and (3) to explore strategies and solutions for the peaceful management and eventual settlement of these conflicts.

### ***Design***

A study group has been organized for each of the five conflicts investigated in the study. With a principal researcher for each, the study groups comprise practitioners and scholars from the

respective Asian countries, including the region or province that is the focus of the conflict, as well as from Australia, Britain, Belgium, Sweden, and the United States. The participants list that follows shows the composition of the study groups.

All five study groups met jointly for the first time in Washington, D.C., on October 30–November 3, 2005. Over a period of five days, participants engaged in intensive discussion of a wide range of issues pertaining to the conflicts investigated in the project. In addition to identifying key issues for research and publication, the meeting facilitated the development of cross-country perspectives and interaction among scholars who had not previously worked together. Based on discussion at the meeting, twenty-five policy papers were commissioned.

The study groups met separately in the summer of 2006 for the second set of meetings, which were organized in collaboration with respected policy-oriented think tanks in each host country. The Burma and southern Thailand study group meetings were held in Bangkok July 10–11 and July 12–13, respectively. These meetings were cosponsored by The Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University. The Nepal study group was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, July 17–19, and was cosponsored by the Social Science Baha. The northeast India study group met in New Delhi, India, August 9–10. This meeting was cosponsored by the Centre for Policy Research. The Sri Lanka meeting was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 14–16, and cosponsored by the Centre for Policy Alternatives. In each of these meetings, scholars and practitioners reviewed and critiqued papers produced for the meetings and made suggestions for revision.-

### ***Publications***

This project will result in twenty to twenty-five policy papers providing a detailed examination of particular aspects of each conflict. Subject to satisfactory peer review, these 18,000- to 24,000-word essays will be published in the East-West Center Washington *Policy Studies* series, and will be circulated widely to key personnel and institutions in the policy and intellectual communities and the media in the respective Asian countries, the United States, and other relevant countries. Some studies will be published in the East-West Center Washington *Working Papers* series.

### ***Public Forums***

To engage the informed public and to disseminate the findings of the project to a wide audience, public forums have been organized in conjunction with study group meetings.

Five public forums were organized in Washington, D.C., in conjunction with the first study group meeting. The first forum, cosponsored by The Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, discussed the conflict in southern Thailand. The second, cosponsored by The Sigur Center for Asian Studies of The George Washington University, discussed the conflict in Burma. The conflicts in Nepal were the focus of the third forum, which was cosponsored by the Asia Program at The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The fourth public meeting, cosponsored by the Foreign Policy Studies program at The Brookings Institution, discussed the conflicts in northeastern India. The fifth forum, cosponsored by the South Asia Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, focused on the conflict in Sri Lanka.

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