

# The Role of the *Chularajmontri* (*Shaykh al-Islam*) in Resolving Ethno-religious Conflict in Southern Thailand

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## Abstract

The century-old conflict in southern Thailand, which began with Siam's annexation of the former Malay sultanate of Negara Patani in 1909, reemerged viciously in 2004 – with no end in sight. The Thai state expected that its official head of the Muslim community at the national level, the *chularajmontri* (*shaykh al-Islam*), whose office was set up in 1945 to integrate all Thai Muslims into the new nation-state of Thailand (formerly called Siam), would play a significant role in resolving the southern conflict. Thus, this office was entrusted with tackling the issue of ethno-religious nationalism among the southern Muslims, an important factor lying at the root of this conflict. The office was expected to address the Thai nation-state's political and socio-religious needs via promoting a pro-integration religious interpretation of Islam. This paper contends that its failure to contribute toward the conflict's resolution lies in the differences in the two parties' historical, ethnic, and religious interpretations of Islam.

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## Introduction

The century-old conflict in southern Thailand, which began with the Siamese annexation of the formerly Malay sultanate of Negara Patani<sup>1</sup> in 1909, has reemerged viciously since 2004 – with no end in sight. Siam's occupation of Negara Patani (renamed "Pattani" in Thai) was sanctioned by the British government upon the signing of the 1909 Anglo-Siamese Treaty. The 2004 revival of southern unrest has also shown that the multiethnic Thai Muslim community does not think, act, or respond in concert when it comes to matters of national integration in multi-cultural and multireligious Thailand. There is a Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand, while the Thai Muslims residing in the other areas are well-integrated. The Thai Muslim community consists of southern Muslims, who are ethnic Malays, while the others belong to different ethnic groups, such as Persian, Indian, Burmese, Chinese, and Cham. The Thai Muslim population is about 5-7 million people, making up approximately 7.5 percent of the country's population. The Deep South's mono-ethnic Malay Muslims constitute about 44 percent of Thailand's total Muslim population.<sup>2</sup>

The former state of Negara Patani, populated by the majority Malays along with smaller communities of Siamese, Javanese, Chinese, Indians, Japanese, and Arabs, was located in the southern part of Siam and ruled by Malay sultans. The Portuguese arrived in 1516, and the Dutch in 1602.<sup>3</sup> When Patani fell under Siamese control in 1906, the seven Malay provinces of Patani (Tani), Yala, Sai Buri, Yaring, Nong Chik, Raman, Ra-ngae, were dissolved and united as *monthon Pattani* (subdivision of Pattani). In 1932, following the political system's transformation from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, the *monthon* system was replaced by the *changwat* (province) system in order to centralize the administration. Under this new system, *monthon Pattani* was divided into three *changwat*, namely, Patani, Yala, and Narathiwat, each of which was administered by a Bangkok-appointed governor. The current unrest in these three provinces combines factors of history, ethnicity, politics, and religion, as is clear from its nature and how it gradually came to affect the office of the *chularajmontri* (*shaykh al-Islam*), the official head of the Thai Muslim community at the national level.

The *chularajmontri*'s most important and difficult task has been to assist the Thai state resolve this ethno-religious conflict by weaning the community's Malay Muslim component away from the prevalent localized ethnic interpretations of Islam and directing it toward an integrative interpretation

compatible with Thailand's multiethnic and multireligious context. The Thai state expects this office to present Thai Muslims with an integrative interpretation of Islam in the context of the multireligious context of a Buddhist majority and Christian and other religious minority communities. In performing this task, it has had to respond to the appeals of both the prevalent local ethnic and global fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. This is evident from its rebuttal of the religious booklet *Berjihad di Patani* (*Jihad in Patani*), which inspired several Malay youths to engage in various insurgency activities, among them the Kruze mosque incident of 28 April 2004 (discussed below). Having been entrusted with tackling the southern Muslims' ethno-religious exclusivism, an important factor lying at the root of this conflict, the *chularajmontri* was expected to help bridge what Frances Stewart calls the "horizontal inequalities" between the center and the southern periphery.<sup>4</sup> Hence, Bangkok has expected this office to address both its and the Thai Muslims' spiritual and political needs through active communication with the parties concerned and to promote an integrative religious interpretation of Islam within the Thai national context to meet the nation-state's security needs.

This paper contends that the office's failure to contribute toward such a resolution lies in the different interpretations of Islam held by the two parties. In those areas where the Muslims speak Thai, the understanding of Islam is integrative; in the Deep South, Islam is interpreted in accord with ethno-religious perspectives. This paper also investigates the limitations that affect the *chularajmontri*'s attempts to resolve the conflict.

## Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study and analysis is of an interdisciplinary nature and benefits from religious studies and political science disciplines. It involves both documentary research and fieldwork, including interviews with relevant sources.

First, a note about the usage of *Thai Islam* in this research. Thailand's official "Patronage of Islamic Act of 1945" uses this term for the Muslims of Thailand. This term, however, is seen as ethnically offensive, especially by the Malay Muslims of the South, who view it as an imposition by the Siamese ethnic group from Bangkok. Hence they prefer to refer to themselves as *Malay Muslims*. But this term has its own ethnic, regional, and sectarian limitations because it overlooks the other (*viz.*, non-southern) sections of the Thai Muslim community, Muslims whose ethnic, provincial, and even sectar-

ian affiliations differ from those of the Deep South. These members do not find *Thai Islam* or *Thai Muslims* offensive. Therefore, I prefer to use *Thai Islam* and *Thai Muslims* when referring to the nation-state's Muslim community. I use *Malay Muslims* for those living in the Deep South and *Thai-speaking Muslims* for those residing between the Upper South and all the way up to the North.

In conducting this research, a total of thirty focus group interviews of about five to ten persons in each group were conducted over a two-month period in the Deep South (comprising Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani), the Upper South (Songkla, Satun, Nakorn Sithammarat, and Phuket), the Central Plains (Bangkok and vicinity), the North (Chiangmai and Chiangrai), and the Northeast (Khon Kaen, Kalasin, Sakon Nakorn, and Udon Thani). I chose these provinces for two reasons: (1) most of the studies about Islam in Thailand covered so far focus only on the Deep South, as if there were no Muslims in the other provinces; hence the need to highlight the community's geographic spread as well as its ethnic and sectarian variety and (2) to obtain cross-country Muslim views about the role and ability of the *chularajmontri* to resolve this conflict.

The focus group interviewees comprised Muslim scholars, community leaders, educators at public and private universities, imams, members of youth organizations, Muslim social activists, representatives of women, and those involved in official Muslim community organizations (e.g., the Provincial Council for Islamic Affairs) in the southern, central, and northern parts of the country. Interviewees were selected according to the socio-religious roles they play in society, and the interviews were conducted in mosques, offices, homes, and community associations. In view of the more open public space in Thailand, I faced no real obstacles in gathering information or holding interviews.

### **The Institution of the *Shaykh al-Islam*: History**

The institution of the *shaykh al-Islam* was established during medieval Islam<sup>5</sup> to streamline the religious hierarchy (the ulama) within the Islamic empire by appointing the Muslim scholar considered to be the most learned in Islamic religious sciences. The person would function as the chief mufti – the chief jurisconsult, an expert on Islamic law, and an advisor on matters of religious import to the state. He would also give legal opinions on private and public religious issues; however, his advice carried only moral authority and thus was not legally binding on the political authorities. The

objective here was to give the religious leadership a bureaucratic status within the empire's evolving and expanding political structure.

The Islamic world's first *shaykh al-Islam* office was established in Khurasan during the tenth century, and was soon adopted in Anatolia (the Ottoman Empire), Egypt, Syria, Safavid Iran, Central Asia, the Delhi Sultanate, and China.<sup>6</sup> Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, the functions that it fulfilled depended upon where it was located. For example, this official was the chief jurisconsult in the Ottoman Empire, a judicial official of some sort in Safavid Iran, the one who distributed gifts to the Sufis in the Delhi Sultanate, and an examiner of Islamic teachers' credentials in Central Asia and China.<sup>7</sup> Although officially abolished by the newly established Republic of Turkey in 1924, it continues to exist as a ministry, a council, or a person in such Muslim-majority countries as Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Bosnia, and Tanzania and also in Muslim-minority countries like Thailand.

## **The History and Contemporary Status of the *Chularajmontri***

In Siam, the Muslim community consisted of two different components: (1) native Malay Muslims in the southern border areas who lived in independent Malay kingdoms that managed their own political and social affairs, and (2) immigrant Muslims who had been living in Siam since the ancient kingdoms of Sukhothai (1228-1438) and Ayudhya (1351-1767).

### *Islam in Thailand*

Islam came to Siam from the south, the central regions, and the north. It first arrived in the south during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries via Arab traders.<sup>8</sup> Islam arrived in the central regions during the Sukhothai period, when Persian, Arab, and Indian traders visited Siam. These groups also were present in the royal court of Ayudhya, where Persian Shi'i Muslims played an influential role. The Cham Muslims migrated to Ayudhya after their kingdom, Champa, collapsed in 1491 and was incorporated into contemporary Vietnam. The Macassar Muslims settled there following the Dutch conquest of Macassar (in present-day Indonesia) between 1666-69. Indian, Bengali, and Chinese Muslims arrived in the north between the 1870s and 1890s.<sup>9</sup> King Rama I of the Chakri dynasty, who established the new capital of Bangkok in 1782, oversaw the settlement of Persian, Indian,

Cham, Macassar, and Malay Muslims in different part of the capital and also the country.<sup>10</sup>

Islam functions in Thailand according to three configurations defined by history, ethnicity, and location: (1) the ethnic-based Malay-speaking Islam practiced in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat; (2) the integrated ethnic Malay but Thai-speaking Islam practiced in Satun and the Upper South (e.g., Songkla, Nakorn Si Thammarat, Phuket, Krabi, and Phangnga provinces); and (3) the multiethnic integrated Thai-speaking Islam of the Central Plains (e.g., Bangkok and Ayudhya), as well as of North and Northeast Thailand, which comprises Muslims of Persian, Malay, Cham, Indonesian, Indian, Bengali, Pathan, and Chinese ethnic backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> These migrant Muslims settled in those areas for economic and political reasons; coming as refugees fleeing religious persecution from Maoism and Burmese nationalism. Very few Thai have embraced Islam either through marriage or religious conversion.

The first type of Islam has largely been historically resistant to integration within the Thai polity, whereas the second and third types have been integrative. Thus the Thai Muslim community is made up of two groups: “native/local Muslims” and “immigrant settler Muslims.” Hence there is ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and political variety within this community. The “immigrant Muslims” also belong to different sects. For example, Persian Shi`i Muslims served at Ayudhya’s royal court in various official capacities.<sup>12</sup> The majority of Thai Muslims are Sunni; however, there is also a small Shi`a community whose members belong to the Ithnai Ashari, Ismaili, and Bohras/Mustali Ismaili subgroups.<sup>13</sup>

### *The History of the Chularajmontri Office*

The *chularajmontri* office was established during the Ayudhya period, when a substantial number of Persian Shi`i Muslims migrated from Iran and lived alongside Sunni Muslims immigrants from Champa, Indonesia, and India as well as non-Muslim Chinese, Portuguese, and other non-Thais.

This period witnessed increased contacts with the Muslim world following the expansion of maritime trade in Southeast Asian waters. In the case of Siam, this resulted in Persian Shi`i Muslim settlements in and around the province of Ayudhya. The local Persian merchants and scholars in Ayudhya not only engaged in trade, but also served as ministers at the royal court and managed its navy and maritime trade as part of their professional expertise. There was also an exchange of embassies between

the Persian and the Ayudhya royal courts.<sup>14</sup> The Persian Shi`i scholar Shaykh Ahmad Qomi (1543-1631), the first *chularajmontri*, was appointed by King Phrachao Songtham (1620-28). In addition to serving as the minister of foreign trade, he was entrusted with overseeing the Muslim community's affairs.<sup>15</sup>

The first thirteen *chularajmontris* were Shi`i Muslims and descendants of Shaykh Qomi. Up until 1934, which marked the end of Shi`i dominance of this office, this official's religious jurisdiction did not extend to the southern independent Malay kingdoms. But with the incorporation of Patani in 1906, Islam became Thailand's largest minority religion and a new problem arose: how to integrate the southern Malay Muslims into the Siamese/Thai nation. Thailand, which became a constitutional monarchy in 1932, has continued to face new linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious problems relating to the region's Malay Muslim-majority provinces ever since. In 1945 Bangkok passed the Patronage of Islam Act, which sought to "institute a link between the central authority and the religious notables of the Muslim community."<sup>16</sup> This act officially established the Islamic Centre of Thailand (ICT), headed by the *chularajmontri*, and the Provincial Council for Islamic Affairs (PCIA). Since then, all *chularajmontris* have been Sunni Muslims. The present one, Mr. Sawad Sumalyasak, took office in 1997.

The 1932 transformation from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy and the subsequent brief embarkation on the path of participatory politics, interrupted by strong-man rule under Phibun Songkram (1938-44 and 1948-57), Pridi Banomyong (1946-49), and Sarit Thanarat (1957-63), have witnessed efforts to centralize the nation's Islamic affairs.

One of the act's goals was to break the political deadlock between the southern ulama and the government. These ulama were infuriated by the previous government of Phibun Songkram, which had declared the national policy of *rathaniyom* – asserting the superiority of the Thai race and forced minority assimilation through Thai-isation. This policy also emphasized the centrality of the Thai language, the adoration of the nation, saluting the national flag, and singing the national anthem. No space was allowed for cultural difference, and southern Malays were forbidden to wear Malay dress (e.g., sarongs), speak the local Malay dialect of Jawi, and celebrate Muslim festivals. The majority of Muslims in the Deep South speak Pattani-Malay or Yawi as the main language of communication. Pattani Malay, identical with the Kelantanese Malay spoken across the border, is an important identity marker for this community, which is not fluent

in Thai, and it has also served as a medium of education for Pattani Muslims.

The southern Malay Muslims did not welcome the Thai-isation policy, for it sought to remove their ethnic and cultural identity and turn them into Thais. This clash between the Siamese/Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim ethno-religious identities has been at the root of the conflict until now.

The *rathaniyom* policy further stirred the Deep South's separatist movement. The Patronage of Islam Act, while proclaiming the Thai king as patron of the nation's religions, sought to recognize the presence of religious diversity in the form of Islam's presence in the Deep South:

The Act stipulated that new institutions be established to serve as the mediator between the Muslim community and the government. One of these was the office of the Chularajmontri, which was the equivalent of the Shaykh al-Islam of the early Islamic empires. The occupant would be considered the spiritual leader of all Muslims of Thailand. He would advise the king and his government on the ways and means to assist the Muslims and their religious activities. The Chularajmontri would be "His Majesty's personal aide fulfilling His royal duties in the patronage of Islam" (Article III). Again, the office was established as [a] counterpart of the Sangharaja (the Supreme Patriarch) of the Buddhist religious hierarchy.<sup>17</sup>

The first *chularajmontri* to serve under the act was Chaem Phromyong, a Muslim senator from Bangkok appointed in 1945 by the then-prime minister Pridi Phanomyong. This marked the end of the Shi'i *chularajmontris*. The new one, appointed by the king upon the recommendation of the Ministry of the Interior, served for life and could be removed only by the king. Chaem Phromyong, a close associate of Pridi Phanomyong, held this office for two years and fled to China with him when the latter's government was overthrown by Phibun Songkram's second military coup.

The Royal Decree of 1948, proclaimed during Phibun Songkram's second reign, concerned the organization and administration of a mosque committee, the establishment of the National Council of Islamic Affairs (NCIA) and the Provincial Council for Islamic Affairs (PCIA),<sup>18</sup> and lowered the *chularajmontri's* status from advisor to the king to advisor to the Religious Department in the Ministry of Education (presently to the Ministry of Culture, after the recent reformation of the cabinet structure). It also stated that this official would from now on be elected by the presidents of the Provin-



cial Islamic Committees and hold office for life.<sup>19</sup> The next two *chularajmontris*, Nai Tuan Suwannasat (1948-81) and Prasert Mahamad (1981-97) were elected under this procedure.

The modern Thai state ideology is centered around the concepts of *chat* (nation), *sassana* (religion), and *pramahakasat* (monarchy) with the expectation that all parts of the country have to be integrated into the Thai nation. The Patronage of Islamic Act of 1945 made the *chularajmontri*, along with the NCIA and the PCIA,<sup>20</sup> responsible for integrating the nation's Muslims.

With the further democratization of Thailand during the 1990s, a move emerged within the Thai parliament to reorganize this office along democratic lines. The 1992 Islamic Administrative Bill proposed that:

- (1) the Chularajmontri, the head of the NCIA and the PCIA, who had so far held their offices for life, from now on be elected to their posts for certain terms<sup>21</sup>;
- (2) the term of office for members of the NCIA and the PCIA committees be limited to six years and that the Chularajmontri retire at the age of 70;
- (3) an election process be introduced to select the members of the NCIA and the PCIA, which would lead to greater efficiency in the functioning of Thailand's official Islamic institutions; and
- (4) the administrative structure of the NCIA, including the office of the Chularajmontri, be reorganized.

The bill, which became law in 1997, introduced the process of election for the *chularajmontri*, who would from then on be elected for a life term by all NCIA and PCIA members. The then-*chularajmontri*, Prasert Mahamad, died on 1 August 1997. A new election, held on 16 October 1997 and contested by nine candidates, was won by eighty-year-old Sawad Sumalyasak, who was confirmed in office by the king on 5 November 1997 and is still serving.

The *chularajmontri*'s main functions today are to represent Thai Muslims at the national level, provide notarial services, issue fatwas based on the Sunni tradition, regulate the administration of all registered mosques, distribute subsidies and grants to the mosques, publish Islamic religious literature, declare the celebrations of Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha, organize the annual *mawlid* celebrations marking the Prophet's birthday, coordinate all travel

arrangements for hajj, and grant a formal religious certification of *halal* status for the food items produced by Thai food industries (now managed by the Central Islamic Committee). In addition, it carries religious and social prestige at the national level and includes various socioeconomic benefits.

The southern Thai Muslims have always looked askance at this office, for they consider the *chularajmontri* a state official. Under Chaem Phromyong, they viewed Haji Sulong bin Abdul Kadir bin Muhammad al-Fatani (d. 1954), their local religious scholar who had been educated in Makkah, as their *de facto shaykh al-Islam*. Haji Sulong, a religious scholar influenced by the philosophy of Islamic reformism associated with Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahab (1703-92), Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1839-97), and Muhammad Abduh (1825-1905),<sup>22</sup> believed in “political cooperation without cultural interference.”<sup>23</sup> Upon returning to Pattani in 1930, he focused on reforming the local Malay Muslim community and represented its interests by seeking political autonomy within a federal system as proposed by the then-prime minister Pridi Phanomyong.<sup>24</sup> In 1947, Haji Sulong made seven ethno-religious demands to Bangkok, all of which centered on political freedom for the Malays and the preservation of the Malay language; the only religious demand concerned the recognition and enforcement of Muslim law.<sup>25</sup> This scholar served as chairman of the Provincial Council of Islamic Affairs of Pattani without ever getting a chance to become the *chularajmontri*. Since his death in 1954 under mysterious circumstances, he has become a symbol of resistance. There has never been a *chularajmontri* from the Deep South; in fact, since 1945 all of them have come from Bangkok and the surrounding provinces.

The *chularajmontri* is respected by the Muslims in other parts of the country; the southern Malay Muslims, however, see him as a Thai state official who does not have their interests at heart. For example, he was not welcomed to Pattani in December 1975 when there were demonstrations against the government, for the local leaders considered him an agent of the central government<sup>26</sup> and thus influenced by Bangkok. The local Muslims prefer to seek advice from their own religious scholars, such as the *tok guru* (owner of the local *pondok* or madrasah) and the *ustaz* (religious teachers). The *tok guru* and the *ustaz* receive their education in local *pondoks* (Malay religious schools); some of them go on to acquire higher Islamic education in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, or Indonesia. Accepted as authorities in matters having a religio-social dimension, they are more respected than those from other regions.

## Horizontal Inequalities in Thailand

Stewart, who has stressed the need to pay attention to horizontal inequalities when addressing issues of political instability, points out that the traditional approach of development specialists – paying attention to vertical inequalities between individuals – does not highlight the main causes of political instability.<sup>27</sup> She calls upon these specialists to understand that many conflicts are actually between cultural and ethnic groups bound by religion, race, region, or class (e.g., Rwanda, Uganda, Sri Lanka, South Africa, North-ern Ireland, Fiji, Malaysia, Brazil, and the United States). Opining that these are caused by horizontal inequalities due to political, economic, and social differences/gaps among the cultural groups, she comments that

... [u]nequal access to political/economic/social resources by different cultural groups can reduce individual welfare of the individuals in the losing groups over and above what their individual position would merit, because their self-esteem is bound up with the progress of the group. But of greater consequence is the argument that where there are such inequalities in resource access and outcomes, coinciding with cultural differences, culture can become a powerful mobilizing agent that can lead to a range of political disturbances.<sup>28</sup>

Such horizontal inequalities are exhibited through the unequal access to education, the distribution of public goods, and the open prejudice directed by the dominant group toward the dominated group. Thus, addressing the reduction of group inequality is indispensable for achieving social stability. Moreover, this needs to be done within short period of time if the horizontal inequalities are not to widen even further.<sup>29</sup> The presence of horizontal inequalities is a crucial factor and an important cause underlying the ongoing conflict in southern Thailand; hence it is an ethno-religious rather than a solely religious conflict.

Joel Selway has highlighted the presence of economic inequality in Thailand within the context of southern Thailand. Stating that its national policy has stressed the need for all Lao, Khmer, Malay, and other nationalities to assimilate into the central Thai identity (i.e., “to speak and act as a Central Thai”<sup>30</sup>), he further comments that “membership in Thai society is unequal, and exclusion buttresses the very structure of society.”<sup>31</sup> This has resulted in the southern Malay Muslims’ social exclusion in the areas of education and formal civil society participation in the bureaucracy.<sup>32</sup>

## **The *Chularajmontri* and the Southern Thai Conflict**

### *The Ethno-Religious Nature*

An important dimension neglected by the researchers of this conflict is its ethno-religious dimension. A serious consideration of this dimension will help us understand how these Muslims perceive their identity in ethnic and religious terms.

The Malay Muslims of the South place strong emphasis upon the ethnic aspect of their adherence to Islam. In fact, they give primacy to their ethnic identity and view their life experience from within the context of the local practice of Islam. Thus the ritual, mythic/narrative, experiential/emotional, ethical/legal, social, material, and political dimensions of life are all interpreted and perceived through the lenses of this particular ethnic identity. The subsequent intermixing of ethnicity and religion has resulted in the formation of an ethnicized view of Islam: to become Muslim means to become Malay (*masuk Islam masuk Melayu*).

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

This combination of ethnicity and religion often results in explosive political conflicts to which solutions are not easily 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>33</sup>

The above-described phenomena of ethno-religiosity, which gives primacy to ethnicity in religion, is not exclusive to Malays, for a similar ten-

dency is also found among the Thai, Filipino, Chinese, and other ethnic groups that have settled in Southeast Asia.

Overall, the Thai Muslims constitute Thailand's largest minority religious group, "a national minority rather than as a border minority."<sup>34</sup> One may say that Islam has two main local narratives distinguished by the geographic areas in which they live: the ethnic Malay-speakers who are the community's majority component, and the multiethnic Thai-speaking Muslims residing in Thailand's different regions. These two groups converge as adherents of the same religion, but diverge when it comes to giving prominence to ethnicity and language over other forms of identity. This distinction is not based on doctrinal differences, but according to the different practices and lived experiences of the religion and the country. In other words, the difference lies in being a Malay-speaking or a Thai-speaking Muslim.

The main distinction between them is that the southerners are mono-ethnic, whereas the others are multiethnic. This also affects their cultural orientation, for the Malays are attached to Malay culture and resistant to Thai sociocultural practices, while the non-Malays practice a syncretic culture of Thai social culture combined with Islam as religious belief and practice. In terms of political views, the southern Malays have participated in the Thai political process. Some sections among them aspire to self-determination, while the Thai-speaking Muslims are well-integrated into the Thai political process at the national level.

The phenomena of ethno-religious nationalism among the southern Thai Muslims is the result of merging an ethnically Malay viewpoint or local Malay Islam with both the puritanist Wahhabi and traditionally Shafi'i versions of Islam acquired through studying at local and foreign educational institutions in the Middle East and South Asia. Recent events in southern Thailand show that this intermixing is one dimension of the conflict that has destroyed social relations between those Thai Muslims and Buddhists who have been living as neighbors for centuries; this is evident in the killings of both Muslims and Buddhists, including monks.<sup>35</sup>

These Muslims 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>36</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-Muslims do not want to be a part of it."<sup>37</sup> The largely ethnic orientations of the two communities have been described as "closed systems."<sup>38</sup>

Since the 1980s, the Thai government has undertaken several successful efforts to bring its Muslims into the mainstream, as maintained by those who identify themselves as “Thai Muslims.” There are still sections, however, who see themselves differently in ethno-religious terms. The unassimilated Malay Muslims who are inspired by the contemporary politicization of religion engage in a “politicization of ethnicity” or “ethnoreligious nationalism,” 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>39</sup> And in their case,

[r]eligion 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>40</sup>

A similar interpretation was affirmed by Ismae-Alee of Prince of Songkla University, a prominent southern Muslim scholar, who recently remarked that ignorance about the Malay way of life and the role of religion in it are the causes of conflict. He also remarked that the southern Muslims’ lifestyle and beliefs differ from that of Muslims in the other parts of the country. For example, identity, nationalism, and history are deeply rooted in their psyche.<sup>41</sup>

At the level of interreligious relations, the recent violent events and killings in southern Thailand show that this religious-ethnic intermixing has been quite destructive.<sup>42</sup> At present, the revival of southern unrest since 2004 has caused Muslim-Buddhist relations to reach their lowest level and be characterized by mutual distrust and alienation.

### *The Role of the Chularajmontri in Resolving This Conflict*

As of January 2010, 4,068 people have died in the ongoing conflict.<sup>43</sup> The two violent events at the Krue Se mosque during April 2004 and the Takbai incident later on in November 2004 have become part of the southern Malay Muslim memory. This has only aggravated the situation further.

**THE KRUE SE JIHAD.** Since 4 January 2004, the conflict has acquired a more religious dimension. As a result of the government-installed martial

law in the South, the situation peaked on 28 April 2004: fifteen security posts and police stations were attacked in Yala, Songkla, and Pattani, resulting in the death of 107 Muslim militants, 5 security personnel, and 17 arrests.<sup>44</sup> Thirty-seven of the Muslims were killed in the Krue Se mosque blockade by soldiers with shoot-to-kill orders. Those holding out in the mosques are reported to have participated in mystical religious prayer services comprising Qur'anic recitation and drinking blessed water after the evening prayer. The militants were led to believe that these rituals would make them invisible to the police and invulnerable to bullets.<sup>45</sup> In addition, they are suspected of being members of a radical religious cell called Hikmat Allah (Wisdom of Allah) Abadan or Abadae (Brotherhood of the Eternal Judgment of God) centered around a religious teacher named Ustaz Soh.<sup>46</sup> The cell was secretive, members were indoctrinated with an ideology of hate for Thai Buddhists, and separatist aspirations were cast in mystical Sufi terms, such as acquiring power to resist live bullets. The violence at the Krue Se mosque shocked the nation and came to be interpreted in the Muslim world as clash between minority Muslims and a repressive Thai Buddhist state.

Immediately following the incident, the *chularajmontri* commented that “[t]he government tried to make them surrender but they fought back and they [the government] had to act to clean them out.”<sup>47</sup> In a following televised interview, the media reported that he had

sided with the government against the popular sentiment of Muslims by suggesting that the use of force against 32 suspected insurgents holed up at the historic Krue Se mosque in Pattani was appropriate.<sup>48</sup>

The majority of Thai Muslims in the South and other parts of the country was angered by such comments coming from their official religious leader. From then on the Thai Muslims have viewed him in a negative light. The Krue Se event and the *chularajmontri*'s response effectively ended this official's active role in resolving the southern conflict.

Ninety percent of the interviewees for this study criticized the *chularajmontri* for siding with the government and remarked that he should not have made such a statement. Being a religious leader, he should have refrained and remained independent. Some accused him of being no more than a rubber stamp for the government. His statement has resulted in the southern Muslims' distrust of him. Others have remarked that this official could have played a positive role; however, in light of his statement this does not seem to have been the case. Being more than eighty-seven-years old, he is seen as

an ineffective leader. The majority of Thai Muslim respondents commented that in view of the above-made statements, he has lost his legitimacy as the leader of the Thai Muslim community. As a result, the southern Muslims prefer to follow their own local religious leaders.

After the Krue Se incident, a thirty-four-page booklet written in Jawi/Malay, *Berjihad di Pattani*, was found on the body of a dead militant. Published in Kelantan, it uses the Qur'anic teachings urging jihad to separate Pattani and kill people of different faiths – even one's parents – if they leak information to the government.<sup>49</sup> Chapter 1 calls upon “jihad warriors” to engage in a religious war against “those outside the religion” to revive the Pattani state. Chapter 3 talks of killing all opponents, even if they are one's parents, and of sacrificing 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 the Shafi'i legal school.<sup>50</sup> The reference to Shafi'i Islam refers to the traditional Islamic practices of the Pattani Malays, which distinguishes it from the Wahhabi-inspired Islam that arrived later in southern Thailand. Hence, its criticism by Dr. Ismail Lutfi, rector of Yala Islamic College, a Wahhabi institution.

Significantly, this is the first time that direct references to Qur'anic verses in the context of the southern Thai conflict have called it a jihad. This may have been influenced by jihadist texts that have emerged in the Middle East, among them Muhammad Farraj's *Al-Faridah al-Gha'ibah*, which inspired the assassins of President Sadat in 1981,<sup>51</sup> and similar jihadist texts such as those by Maulana Abul al-Maududi and Sayyid Qutb. The *Berjihad* text 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>52</sup>

Those who died at the Krue Se mosque were treated by their relatives as martyrs (*shuhada'*) and their corpses were buried unwashed, as this was how



Prophet Muhammad buried his Companions who died while fighting the Makkans on the battlefield.

Along with the NCIA, the *chularajmontri* called for the booklet's destruction and appointed a nine-member committee to compose a Thai-language rebuttal.<sup>53</sup> Entitled *Facts about the Distortion of Islamic Teachings as Appeared in "The Struggle for Pattani" (Berjihad di Pattani)*, it was widely published and distributed.<sup>54</sup>

Incidentally, this event took place on the same date as that of the "Dusun Nyur" rebellion of 26-28 April 1948, the first major uprising against Bangkok after Pattani was annexed by Siam. That event also employed Islamic mystical elements such as bathing in holy oil for immortality and wearing holy robes.<sup>55</sup>

**THE TAKBAI INCIDENT.** The violent Takbai incident took place during Ramadan, coinciding with 25 October 2004, when a total of eighty-six Muslims died during a demonstration outside Takbai district police station. They were protesting the jailing of some local Muslims suspected of being behind the violent incidents in the South. Six persons died on the scene when soldiers and police moved against the rioters; seventy-eight more died of suffocation while being piled one on top of another in trucks and then transported to a military camp. This incident became a major point of controversy over the methods used to deal with the situation. There were charges of using excessive force and harsh methods, as well as neglecting the suspects' human rights.<sup>56</sup> The Thai public demanded that Prime Minister Thaksin apologize for mishandling the incident.<sup>57</sup> Not surprisingly, this incident only resulted in more violence and killings.

**THE DAI PROGRAM.** Given the appearance of localized mystical and radicalized versions of Islam, which were committed to jihad through the Krue Se and the Takbai incidents, the office of the *chularajmontri* initiated the Dai (Islamic propagation) program in the Deep South. The program, carried out in cooperation with local religious leaders, sought mainly to wean youths away from being recruited into the insurgent plot, which was being represented as a call to jihad.<sup>58</sup>

Another goal was to disseminate a correct religious understanding of jihad by means of local religious propagators and scholars. Their task was to present a non-violent interpretation of the southern unrest by explaining its historical, ethnic, and religious dimensions. In addition, it sought to end the

spreading popularity of a religion- and violence-based interpretation of the conflict. One-hundred-and-fifty imams participated in the program by visiting and propagating religious teachings about peace in the 1,700 mosques in the three deep southern provinces, especially after the Friday congregational prayers.<sup>59</sup> The program is now defunct.

## **The New Islamic Administrative Bill of 2007**

In view of the continuing violence and the need for the *chularajmontri* and the national and provincial committees of Islamic affairs to play effective roles, the Sarayud government (2006-07) set up an advisory team to advise its members on how to engage the PCIA chairmen more efficiently to deal with the southern crisis.

Among their recommendations was that the methods used for managing Thailand's Islamic affairs be reorganized. The team therefore drafted a new Islamic Affairs Administration bill designed to revamp and replace the current 1997 Islamic Organization Administration Act and the 1981 and 1989 Hajj Affairs Promotion Acts. The draft bill suggested setting up a national Islamic affairs office within the prime minister's office, one that would be similar to the status of the current office of national Buddhism.<sup>60</sup> In the team's opinion, all occupants of religious offices at all levels would be selected after screening. This would replace the current process of electing the *chularajmontri* as well as the members of the national and provincial councils of Islamic affairs.<sup>61</sup> One reason for this suggestion was the hope that it would eliminate the possibility of candidates resorting to vote buying and other corrupt practices during the elections for seats on these various councils. Another reason for reforming these committees at the provincial level is to check on those local southern religious leaders who may sympathize with the separatists.

The draft of the new Islamic Affairs Administration bill was submitted to the post-coup-appointed National Legislative Assembly on 6 April 2007 and called for:

- 1) The creation of a thirty-one-member National Islamic Council (*shura*) consultative body, chaired by the Chularajmontri, to oversee the selection of Islamic religious leaders nationwide. The Chularajmontri will be selected from among all NCIA members.

- 2) The NCIA will work as a legislative body to consider and interpret controversial religious issues. Members will consist of Islamic leaders and experts selected from registered Islamic religious schools nationwide.
- 3) The present Chularajmontri will remain in office for another 360 days after the bill becomes law. The bill does not stipulate his term of office, as this matter is to be decided by the legislators.<sup>62</sup>

The National Legislative Assembly, however, did not pass the bill. Surin Pitsuwan, a Thai Muslim member of the National Legislative Assembly, called for more public hearings and for putting it on hold until an elected government is in place. Other religious leaders opined that public participation cannot be overlooked in managing religious affairs at the provincial and national levels.<sup>63</sup> The bill remains on hold.

## Conclusion

The ongoing conflict in southern Thailand shows no sign of ending. In fact, its intensity has increased despite the interim government's apology and change of policy from that of using force to following a peaceful strategy.

In 2006, the interim prime minister Sarayud Chulanont offered a public apology for the previous Thaksin government's mistakes. But in spite of this, violence is on the increase and there are now more intra-Malay Muslim killings taking place than before. The insurgents have attacked or even killed many Malay Muslim government officials, such as village headmen or teachers and those suspected of being government informants.

The office of the *chularajmontri*, entrusted since 1945 with helping Bangkok devise and then implement some sort of reconciliation between itself and the southern Malay Muslims, as well as helping the former build horizontal equalities with the latter, has failed to achieve these objectives. The ensuing grievances concerning the cultural insensitivity of the non-local state officials posted in the South remains a major complaint.

Security will be restored only by adopting measures that allow, among other things, the option of self-governance and recognition of cultural diversity. The government and the *chularajmontri* should seek to build trust by working with local religious, political, and social leaders; promote civil society activities against drugs; and promote peace, education, and other positive trends. Electing a southerner as *chularajmontri* would help alleviate the distrust between the center and the southern periphery – an economically backward region of Thailand. This official should

maintain the moral independence of his status and not be a government mouthpiece, for this will improve his moral standing within the Thai Muslim community.

In order to win the southerners' trust, Bangkok should undertake measures to build horizontal equalities by implementing economic and educational programs. Due to current political instability at the center, the hands of the present Democrat-led government are tied; thus it has practically handed over the management of the southern Thailand conflict to the army. And the office of the *chularajmontri* is totally out of the picture.

## Endnotes

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3. Ibrahim Syukri, *The Malay Kingdom of Patani* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2005), 23 and 32.
4. The term *horizontal inequalities* is borrowed from Frances Stewart, *Horizontal Inequalities: A Neglected Dimension of Development*, Working Paper 1 (Oxford: Center for Research on Inequality, Human Security, and Ethnicity, 2003). More discussion on this below.
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7. *Ibid.*, 58-59.
8. Raymond Scupin, "Thai Muslims in Bangkok: Islam and Modernization in a Buddhist Society" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1978), 1-2.
9. Suthep Soonthornpasuch, "Islamic Identity in Chiangmai City: A Historical and Structural Comparison of Two Communities" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1977), 37-75.
10. Scupin, "Thai Muslims in Bangkok," 19-29.
11. Raymond Scupin, "Cham Muslims of Thailand: A Haven of Security in Southeast Asia," *Journal: Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, no. 10 (1989): 486-91. Also Seddik Taouti, "The Forgotten Muslims of Kampuchea and Vietnam," *Journal: Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, no. 4 (1982): 3-13. See also David Wilson and David Henley, "Northern Comfort: The Contented Muslims of Chiang Mai," *Bangkok Post* (Outlook Section), 4 January 1995, 33 and 40.
12. Raymond Scupin, "Islam in Thailand before the Bangkok Period," *Journal of Siam Society*, no. 68 (1980): 55-71.

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16. Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand* (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 1985), 100.
17. *Ibid.*, 104.
18. Wan Kadir Che Man, *The Administration of Islamic Institutions in Non-Muslim States: The Case of Singapore and Thailand* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1991), 4. Currently, there are forty-five members in the NCIA and PCIA in thirty-six provinces of the country.
19. *Ibid.*
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22. Ali Rahnama, ed., *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (London: Zed Books, 2005).
23. Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism*, 104.
24. *Ibid.*, 146-65.
25. M. Ladd Thomas, "Thai Muslim Separatism in South Thailand," in *The Muslims of Thailand*, ed. Andrew D. W. Forbes (General Editor) and Sachchidanand Sahai (Gaya, India: Center For South East Asian Studies, 1989), 2:21.
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27. Stewart, *Horizontal Inequalities*, 2.
28. *Ibid.*, 3. Italics are the author's.
29. *Ibid.*, 10.
30. Selway, "Turning Malays into Thai-men," 58.
31. *Ibid.*, 60.
32. These figures are from Selway, "Turning Malays into Thai-men," 56 and 61.
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- Bangkok Post*, 5 August 2004, 11; “Buddhists tell PM they live in fear,” *Bangkok Post*, 8 November 2004, 1; “Violence doesn’t spare even peace-loving Buddhist monks,” *Bangkok Post*, 4 January 2005, 4.
36. Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism*, 8 and 12.
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  38. Donald Tugby and Elise Tugby, “Malay-Muslim and Thai-Buddhist Relations in the Pattani Region: An Interpretation,” in *The Muslims of Thailand*, 2:73.
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  41. “Ignorance ‘cause of unrest,”” *Bangkok Post*, May 12 2006, 2.
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