

Southern Thailand : Some Grievances of the Patani Malays

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Abstract

The provinces of Patani, Yala and Narathiwat are witnessing waves of violence especially since January 2004. Many see the violence as a sign of the resurgence of separatism. There are many reasons for this. The Malay Muslims in these provinces are not happy with the government attempts to assimilate/integrate them into the mainstream Thai society. There is an inherent fear among them that government policies are meant to erode their Malay Muslim identity in the majority Buddhist nation. They want to retain a separate political, cultural and religious identity as Patani Malay Muslims. This paper discusses how some of the government policies have contributed to the Patani Malay Muslim grievances against the government in Bangkok.

Introduction

The southern Thai provinces of Patani, Yala and Narathiwat have become hot-spots for insurgency against the Thai security forces. This has become very obvious since January 2004 when killings of security personnel and civilians have become a daily affair. To date, more than 3,500 people has become victims of the insurgency. This include school teachers, government servants, farmers, Buddhist monks and even Thai Muslims. Despite various attempts to bring a peaceful solution to the problem, there has been no sign to a stop to these killings.

The southern Thai provinces of Patani, Yala and Narathiwat that border Malaysia, was once part of an independent Malay sultanate known as Patani Raya or Negara Patani Darussalam. It is populated by ethnic Malays and has by far the largest number of Muslims living in Thailand, although Muslim communities also exist all over the country. These provinces were first subjugated by the kingdom of Siam in 1786. Total annexation of Patani began in 1909 when Siam (Thailand), incorporated the three provinces which came to be known as *Boriween Chet Huamuang*¹ into the kingdom. (Tej Bunnag: 1976, Serajul Islam: 1998). The Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 recognized Siamese sovereignty² over Patani, Yala and Narathiwat (Nik Anuar Nik Mahmud: 1999). This treaty was a cause for concern for the Patani Muslims since the Malay Sultan was never consulted.

The disenchantment of the Muslim Malays in the South towards the Thais led to the emergence of many separatist movements in the 1940's fighting for the independence of Patani in the 1940s. Among them, was *Gabungan Melayu Patani Raya* (Union of Malay for a Great Patani) or GAMPAR founded in 1948 (Nik Anuar Nik Mahmud: 1999).

Following the establishment of the *Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani* (BNPP) in 1963 (Rahimmula: 2003 :), violent clashes between guerrilla and Thai security forces were common in the southern provinces. In the mid-1970s, there existed more than 20 separatist organizations operating on both sides of the Thai-Malaysian border.

However, the situation improved in the 1980s and 1990s under the new government of General Prem Tinsulanond (1980-88) that saw some changes in the government policies known as *Thai Rom Yen* or the Pacified South towards the Patani Malays. Muslim cultural rights and religious freedoms were assured and the rebels were given a general amnesty. An economic development program for the South was implemented and in this way the situation in the South was mitigated (Tan: 2003, Jones and Smith: 2003). A National Security Policy for the Southern Border Provinces (Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) was also formulated based upon the concept of "development as security" approach (Rahimmula: 2003). This development was partly attributed to the close cooperation between the Thai and Malaysian Government. Security along the border improved remarkably and this led to the decline in insurgency activities as well (Abuza: 2003). In the late 1990s most observers described the insurgency as fading and peace was seen to have been restored (Rabasa: 2003, Tan: 2003). However the new millennium witnessed the rise of violence once again.

Patani Malay Muslims

The Patani Malay Muslims are vastly located in Patani Raya, the southern provinces of Thailand. The census report of 2007 carried out by Thailand Survey Office or NTSO shows that there are approximately 2 million people living in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun and Songkhla. Another one million Muslims inhabit the central-southern provinces near Nakorn Sri Thammarat. Another million Muslims live in the area of greater Bangkok, in central Thailand. Many have settled in the Lower Isthmus of Kra, yet they have never willingly assimilated into modern Thailand (Teeuw & Wyatt, 1970). They have inhabited the area for a very long time and are not recent migrants.

Language and Education

The Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand can be divided into three groups based on the use of the Malay language: 1) those who speak Patani Malay dialect and use the Jawi/Arabic script. 2) Those who can speak Patani Malay but cannot read Jawi. This group can also read and speak Thai, the national language. 3) Those who cannot speak the Malay language at all but are proficient in the Thai language. The third category of Malays can be found in Satun (Setul). The majority Malay Muslim of Satun provinces speak Thai only. Only about 10-15% of the people in Satun have some command of the Malay language³. They are from the older generation. On the other hand those in Pattani have always maintained the use of the Malay language or *Yawi* as it is known to most Thais.

The government policy of compulsory education for primary/junior grade has resulted in a growing number of Malay Muslims becoming more literate in the Thai language. At the

same time the number of Muslim children who discontinue their schooling in government schools to further their studies in private religious schools has also increased significantly where they study a combination of Thai secular subjects and Islamic subject. The use of education as a tool to promote Thai language, culture and identification of “Khwamphentai” especially Buddhism is seen by the Muslim Malays as an effort to compel them into becoming Buddhist.

Socio-economic Conditions

The provinces of South Thailand are primarily rural with only about 12% living in urban areas. Even though the southern provinces are small they are rich in natural resources. This allows the Patani people to grow a variety of native crops, which include rice, rubber, coconut and tropical fruits. Although rice is the staple food, the local economy is not based on wet-rice agriculture. The southern provinces depend on rubber and fruit orchards and fishing. When the world price for rubber and tin declined in the 1970s, some Patani Malays went to work in neighbouring Malaysia and even to the Middle East. They also work in the rice fields in Malaysia, during the harvesting season. Many also depend on the sea for fishing. Unfortunately, both farming and fishing are seasonal. In addition, the fishing industry has been threatened by the large-scale fishing businesses that have developed recently. The southern portion of Thailand is also rich in minerals, such as tin, gold, wolfram, manganese, and natural gas. Yet, the economy in this region is struggling and poor in comparison to the rest of the country. As a result, the people of Patani lead a below or average kind of life.

Religion and Culture

The Patani Malays are mostly Muslims⁴ and belong to the Sunni sect of Islam and adhere to the Shafie school of thought. However, lately there are indications that the Wahabbi sect has also established some influence in the region. This is seen by their generous donations to the *pondok* and religious schools. Religious schools are an integral part of the Muslim society. Patani Malay Muslims of South Thailand traditionally live as close-knitted communities. They place high value on social acceptance within their community. Their society is organized along the typical Malay socio-political structure, due to the influence of Islam and Malay culture. The mosque and Muslim festivals and observances are integral part in the life of the Patani Malays. The mosque is a place not only for religious practices, but where cultural identity is expressed. It provides religious education and is the center of community celebrations. As a leader of the mosque, the *Imam* is often regarded as the leader of the village or community too. The *imam* not only acts as community leader, but also as advisor and the link between the Thai officials and the Malay community. Because of the distrust against some of the Thai government officials, many of the Patani Malay Muslims turn to their Muslim religious and community leaders to voice their problems and concern. The Malays of Southern Thailand share common and traditional values with the Malaysian

Malays. In fact both groups belong to the same ethnic descent. There are relatives across the border and this kin relationship still exists till this day. This can be observed during weddings and religious occasions such as the Muslim festivals of Aidil Fitri and Aidil Adha. Cross border travel had been made easy with the issuance of border passes that are only valid for the residents of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Perak.

Patani Malay Muslim Grievances

Thesaphiban (A Policy of National Integration)

Under King Chulalongkorn administrative reforms the kingdom developed a central administrative system and established authority over its vast territories, which stretches from the Burmese border in the Northwest, Laos and Cambodia in the Northeast and as far as the Malay States in the South. The system was officially known as *Thesaphiban* (The Local Administration Act,) in 1897, and was introduced by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. Thesaphiban was introduced as an administrative policy to diffuse the power of all local rulers in the provinces, including that of the Sultan of Patani. It was also an act of consolidation of the authority and a process at modernization embarked by King Chulalongkorn in the face of western colonial intrusion in the middle of the 19th century. However it was only in 1910 that the policy was implemented for the whole country (Nik Anuar: 1999, Haemindra: 1976). The central government in Bangkok at that time did not give any autonomy to the local Muslim Sultan in the Muslim provinces of Patani, Narathiwat and Yala. Instead the government replaced members of the local aristocracy with officials known as *Khaluang Thesaphiban* or Governor General appointed directly from Bangkok. (Tej Bunnag: 1977). The problem with the *Khaluang Thesaphiban* was that they were ignorant of the Muslim religion and culture in the Southern provinces and often acted against local sentiments. These officials were from different parts of Thailand and were not familiar with the local customs and most of the time regarded the Malays of the south as second class citizens and used the term *Khek*, meaning outsiders or in a pejorative term "slaves" to describe them. This led to distrust, hatred, and antagonism between the Malay Muslims and the officials from the Central government.⁵ This was the beginning of the Patani Malay Muslim grievances.

In the late nineteenth century, the government institutionalized, patronized and developed a top-down policy of nation-building, which emphasized the importance of *Khvamphenthai* or "Thainess", thereby compelling the transformation of the multiethnic society of Siam into a unified Thai nation. The situation in the Southern provinces aggravated when the government accelerated its effort to assimilate the Malay population especially after the bloodless coup by Phibul Songkram in 1932 when absolute monarchy was abolished. (W.K.Che Man: 1990)⁶. The ultra nationalist regime embarked on a policy of forced assimilation of the various minority groups into the mainstream Buddhist "Thainess" or *Khvamphenthai* in order to develop what David Brown described as "the mono-ethnic character of the state" (Brown :1994, Rahimmula:2003).

Thai nationalism was to some extent a replication of the concept of French nationalism, with the conscious attempt to transform all ethnic peoples within its geographically defined borders as Thais. It was a political decision that the state should manage political, cultural and social system and made it compulsory for those who sought to be in the *Ekkalat Thai* or the mainstream of Thai society to conform to the Central Thai culture and custom. Central Thai language was to be spoken and a Central Thai view of history was to be taught in all schools. By assimilation, anyone could become Thai if they learn to speak and act as a central Thai. There was not much of a problem in assimilating the Tai people of *Lanna* (in the north) and *Isan* (in the northeast), than with the other ethnic groups (Selway: 2005). This was because although the people of *Lanna* and *Isan* were culturally different from the central Thais they were however Buddhist by faith. Assimilation for the Muslim Malays in Patani, Yala and Narathiwat would however mean becoming Buddhist, which is considered against the fundamental teaching of Islam.

The Compulsory Education Act, 1921 (Primary Education Act, 1921)

Another grievance of the Patani Malay Muslims was the Primary Education Act of 1921 which was seen as an attempt to slowly do away with the Patani Malay Muslims religion and culture. King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910) introduced Western education into the Thai society. His half brother, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab designed a new system of education. Western teachers were engaged to provide assistance, and in 1921 compulsory education law was enacted. This law required all Thais including Malay Muslim children to attend Thai primary schools for four years in order to learn the Thai language, which included the inculcation of Buddhist ethics. To the Muslims of southern Thailand, this was seen as an effort to “stamp out their religion and culture”, as it was “crucial that their young children should not be exposed to the education that would divert their attention from the teachings of Islam.”⁷ The government attempt at assimilation of the Malay Muslim communities in the South was chiefly focused on removing the Muslim religious schools, which acted as a central medium in maintaining the continuation of Malay Muslim culture and identity. This led to a rebellion, resulting in many casualties including the execution of Muslim leaders responsible. This revolt caused the Thai government to take another look at their policies toward the Thai Muslims. At the same time efforts were made to win the loyalties of the people of Patani, through economic development and through political participation.

Thai Rathaniyom or Thai Custom Decree of 1939

The nationalist government of Phibun Songkram that came to power after the 1932 bloodless coup d'état that toppled the absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy had a fascist outlook similar to that of Benito Mussolini of Italy. In his effort to establish a nationalist outlook, Phibun endorsed various decrees to stem out other forms of social, cultural and political kinship and ethnic identities. One of the most dreaded and detested decree was the Thai Rathaniyom or the Thai Custom Decree of 1939. This decree banned many Muslim cultural and religious practices, as well as the use of the Malay language.

Muslims were even forced in some cases to worship Buddhist idols (W.K. Che Man: 1990). The most important aspects of this policy were: Malays were banned from serving in government offices; Thai names were “warmly” recommended; Traditional Muslim-Malay clothes in public were prohibited; Cultural mandates to assimilate ethnic minorities were enforced; Buddha statues were placed in every public school. This policy was met with violent resistance. This was because the central government in Bangkok failed to acknowledge and recognize the Malay language and culture, i.e., the main language and culture of the Muslims in Patani, Yala and Narathiwat. This was further aggravated by the local perception of Bangkok’s intention that the assimilation process was to make them become Buddhist⁸ (Suhrke: 1977).

The distrust towards the Thai government gave rise to resistance and violence. Violence reached its peak on April 16, 1948, when a revolt led by a religious teacher named Haji Sulong resulted in the death of 400 Patani Malays and 30 policemen and which also led to the “flight of some 2,000-6,000 Muslims to the Malay States. (W.K. Che Man: 1990)⁹. Violent separatist activity continued until the Anglo-Thai Agreement for joint control by of the Thai-Malaya border by the British and Thai governments were enforced.

Orang Patani not Thai Muslim

The process of re-branding Malays as “Thai Muslim” or “Muslim Thai” does not augur well with Patani Malays. Even today the Malays have never considered themselves as “*Thai Rao*” or “*Khun Thai Rao*”. Most Malays of Patani, Narathiwat and Yala never want to be known as Thai Muslim or “Yawi”, a term that was associated to the writing of the Quran but are proud to identify themselves as “Orang Patani”. In fact, most interviewees, despise the term “Yawi” and would prefer to be known simply as “Orang Patani”.

The Patani people always feel that their soul is embedded in their traditional, social and cultural institution that had played a significant role in the preservation of the orang Patani identity. The pondok system of religious education continues to play its functionary role of disseminating Islam and its values. The use of Bahasa Patani at home serves to strengthen their ethnic and cultural identity. Furthermore their affinity with the people of Kedah, Perlis, Perak and Kelantan that borders Thailand, who share the same culture, religion and language, and family affiliation tend to be a binding force that has enhanced their ethnic identity. Cross border trade and business with the Patani people is apparent.

For many reasons, it is very interesting to note that the Patani Malays have managed to resist attempts by the central Thai authority to assimilate them into Thai mainstream society. The government attempts to assimilate the Patani Malays into the mainstream “Thainess” or Khwamphenthai had only minimal effect. “Thaification or Siamization” by various means and strategies have been persistently resisted. Force and discriminative policies were introduced in order to coerce the Patani people into changing their ethnic and cultural identity, and to conform to that of central Thainess identity. This was intensely resisted with the formation of many resistance groups such as the Patani United

Liberation Organisation (PULO), Barisan Revolusi Patani (BRN), and Gerakan Mujahiddin.

In the 1960s the military dictatorship moved in Buddhist north-easterners (namely Thai-Lao from Isan) in the area in order to “strengthen and reinforce” the occupation of the South. Buddhist temples were built in predominantly Malay areas and villages, an act of encroachment into the Malay community. Encroachment into the Malay heartland of Patani is occurring even to this day. The Malays see this as an act of treachery by the Thai state authority with the consent and knowledge of the central government.

It is also noted that the Patani Malays have become very conscious of their identity. Although the Thai constitution has conferred ethnic and minority groups the same rights as the Thai people, this does not seem to be the norm in the South. The stereotyping of a nation of rebels and revolutionaries was and has always been imprinted in the mind of officials serving in the southern provinces. This again does not augur well with the people of these provinces.

Discrimination and Intimidation

The Southern border provinces have been neglected economically and when there is development it has not been the local Malay Muslims, who benefit, but the Central Thai and the Thais of Chinese. Unemployment is very high amongst the Malays. Discrimination still exists as seen by the fact that 95% of the civil servants, serving in the south are from different part of Thailand, especially the Central region. The Central Thai has always been the source of manpower since they are very close to the seat of power in Bangkok. The bulk of the military elite in the officers’ corps have always come from the central region.

The central education curriculum does not even teach Islamic values or the history of Patani. During the last 60 years or so, successive Thai governments have arrested religious leaders, banned the teaching of Bahasa Patani or *yawee*, stopped religious schools, forced students to learn the Thai language, forced them to say Buddhist prayers in schools, forced students to wear Thai clothes, encouraged people to change their names to “Thai” names and forcibly changed the names of local districts to “Thai-sounding” names. This has been carried and is still practiced by the Bangkok government.

The place names and names of people must adhere to the Thai words and vocabulary. The name Narathiwat was Thai corruption of the Malay province of Menara, Channak was Chenak, Satun, Setul, Tanyong Mah, Tanjong Emas and Yala was formerly Jala. Haji Ahmad bin Ismail would be spelt Hayee Mat Samae, Abdul Rahman Yusof would then sound Abdun Lohman Yusoh and corruption of place was evidently clear. There is also a ban on the usage of Bahasa Melayu or Bahasa Patani also known as Yawee or Yawi in schools, in offices and government agencies. Local *Pasa Patani* or *Yawee* is taught only in the religious schools or pondoks. This and many others attest to the insensitiveness of the Thais to the Muslim Malays and local culture.

Distrust of Malay Politician

The Patani Malay politicians are also a source of dissatisfaction. They appear to be close to the Muslims only during election times. Once they are elected to the parliament or provincial government they are absorbed into the main stream Thai society of Ekkalat Thai. They then tend to forget their people. This true as the Malay proverb “*lupa daratan*” meaning “you have forgotten your origin”. The Patani people are nation without full representation in the socioeconomic and political process. Islam and ethnic identity is seen as the cause for marginalization, injustices and mistreatment of the people of Patani, Yala and Narathiwat.

Some Solution to the Problem

Decentralization of Power

It is suggested that violence in the southern region could be addressed through a political solution not through military ways. This could be carried out by means of some decentralization policy. This would mean greater participation of Malays at all levels in the political and administrative structure of the provincial government. It is argued that decentralization of political power, enhancing administrative structure may promote better governance and result in peace and stability in the region. With local participation in the government insurgency could be reduced.

Muslim Malays as part of Thai Nation

Another major consideration that could diffuse tension is that the Patani Malay Muslim must accept the fact that they are an integral part of the Thai nation and being Thai Muslim will not erase their ethnic, social and cultural identity. Instead they should be made to feel that they are being part of the Thai nation. It will be a win-win situation for the conflicting parties. It is also suggested that the Central government in Bangkok must and without haste give due consideration to the principle that Malay language be adopted and recognized as a second official language for use in Patani, Yala and Narathiwat. Partial autonomy should also be part of the peace road map.

Economic Development

Another crucial element recommended to contain the south conflict is to bring economic equality and development to the area. A good example is to enhance the present structure of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) that was put forward by Malaysia. In the long-term, improving social and economic conditions in the south is crucial to alleviate the local potential for violent insurgency. Greater economic opportunities must also be given priority to Malay Muslim so that poverty may be ease and thus mitigate any dissatisfaction among the Malays.

Conclusion

The conflict in Southern Thailand has a long history of violence and has taken many tolls and has created distrust between the Malay Muslims of Patani and the and the Thai people. Various government policies at national integration and nation-building have been viewed as an attempt to erode Muslim Malay identity and culture of the Patani people. Ignorance to local sentiments by government officials were also responsible for these problems. However, it is also possible that the conflict can be mitigated through political means and through wise economic policies. At the same time the Patani Malays must also realize the realities of the times and accept the fact that they are an integral part of the larger Thai society.

¹ The sole purpose of dividing the province of Patani was to weaken the Sultan's power and to administer the provinces centrally from Bangkok, where local administrator was replaced with official from other part of Siam. This was also in view of King Chulalongkorn policy of *Thesaphiban*.

² The Burney Treaty was signed between Siam and the British in 1826, and acknowledged Siamese rule over northern Malay states of Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis and Terengganu. The treaty further acknowledge and assured British ownership over Penang and their rights to trade in Kelantan and Terengganu without the Siamese interfering in the state of affairs in those states. The Malay Sultans of the four Malay states were not represented during the treaty negotiation. However, in 1909 the Siamese and British signed a new treaty that void and superseded the 1826 treaty, and was known as the 1909 treaty, known as Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, also known as the Bangkok Treaty of 1909, transferred the four Malay states from Siamese to British dominion.

³ The figure was obtained when interview was conducted in 5 out of the 10 villages that were populated by Malay community in Satun.

⁴ The quotation on or how religious the Patani's now are matters of questionable remarks, in a sense that there seem to be a division on the religious affinity attached to the younger generation.

⁵ For a detailed insight on how the Thai society was organized, see Akin Rabibhadana, *The Organization of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period, 1782-1873*, Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1969. Cornell Thailand Project, Interior Report Series, No.12, Data Paper no. 74, ix.

⁶ W K Che Man. (1990). *'Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand'*, Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press.

⁷ W.K.Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: the Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand*, Singapore, Oxford University Press (1990): 62.

⁸ Astri Suhrke, "Loyalists and Separatists: The Muslims in Southern Thailand", *Asian Survey* vol. 17, no. 3 (March 1977): 241. Syed Serajul Islam, "The Islamic Independence Movements in Patani of Thailand and Mindanao of the Philippines", *Asian Survey* vol. 38, no. 5 (May 1998): 447.

⁹ Andrew D.W. Forbes, "Thailand's Muslim Minorities: Assimilation, Secession, or Coexistence?" *Asian Survey* 22 (November 1982): 1056-1073.

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