

Islam and Politics

Renewal and Resistance in the Muslim World

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Ethnoreligious and Political Dimensions of the Southern Thailand Conflict

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There are two groups of Muslims in Thailand. One segment is integrated into general society and has peaceful relations with the state; while the other, which resides in the deep South, is at odds with the state and shows separatist tendencies. The multiethnic, Thai-speaking Muslims in the North and the unintegrated, monoethnic, Malay-speaking Muslims in the South interpret Islam differently. The former see themselves as a part of a Buddhist multireligious country where Islam is a minority religion, while the latter view Islam as part of their ethnolinguistic identity in a region that was forcibly incorporated into Thailand.

Malay Muslims do not generally trust anybody who is not from their ethnic group, and consider themselves distinct from the larger Thai Muslim community. Malay Islamic identity is the result of a bonding between the Shafii school of Islamic law and Malay ethnic identity, where the *kaum*, or ethnic community, and *madhab*, or school of Islamic law, reinforce each other. Malay Islam was not originally radical, but developed a militant posture in opposition to Thai Buddhism.

The current separatists in the South are identified with the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate (BRN-C), which became active in 1990, recruiting a new and younger generation of soldiers.^[1] Malay militant youth are inspired more by a radicalized version of Malay Shafiite Islam than the *jihadist* Islam of international terrorists, and their agenda is local and national rather than religious.

The Muslim world is watching the Islamic fraternity in Southern Thailand very closely. The conflict there has also drawn the attention of international and regional *jihadists* (i.e., ideological militant Islamic groups devoted to armed struggle against Muslim and non-Muslim nation states). The possibility of links to the global Islamic struggle cannot be completely ruled out, and some Thai military officials have reason to believe that local insurgents have obtained training from foreign *jihadists*.

Islam in Thailand

Islam came to Thailand from different directions: Burma, Cambodia, China, India, the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago, Persia, and Yemen (Hadhramawt). Just like other South-east Asian Muslim communities, 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 belong to different sectarian and ethnic backgrounds. For example, Persian Muslims belonging to the Shia sect served at the court of the Ayudhaya kingdom in different official capacities.^[2] The majority of Thai Muslims belong to the Sunni sect; there is also a small Shia community belonging to the Imami and Bohras/Mustali Ismailis subgroups within the Shia sect.^[3] Overall, Thai Muslims make up the largest minority religious group in the country, constituting “a national minority rather than... a border minority.”^[4]

Islam in Thailand operates in three configurations defined by history and location:

- The ethnicized, Malay-speaking Islam is practiced in the provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala of the deep South. These southern Muslims make up about 44 percent of the total Thai Muslim population (which currently is between 5 and 7 million).
- The integrated, ethnically Malay but Thai-speaking Islam is practiced in the province of Satun and in the upper South in Krabi, Nakorn Si Thammarat, Phangnga, Phuket, and Songkla.
- The multiethnic Thai-speaking integrated Islam is practiced in the central Thai provinces of Bangkok and Ayudhaya and north and northeast Thailand. This group comprises Muslims of Bengali, Cham, Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, Malay, Pathan, and Persian ethnic backgrounds. These migrant Muslims from neighboring and far countries settled in Thailand for economic and political reasons, such as fleeing 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 conversion.

The first type of Islam in Thailand has been largely resistant to integration within the Thai polity, while the second and third have been integrative.

Political Context

Historically, the Thai political system has been described as a constitutional monarchy in the form of a “secularized Buddhist polity” in a “stable semi-democracy.”^[5] Thailand follows the communitarian democracy model, characterized by “stability, peace and order, the upholding of shared moral and cultural values, and the priority of communitarian interests.”^[6] This model has allowed Thai Muslims to define their own communal development. Meanwhile,

their relationship with the Buddhists is one of mutual religious coexistence, without much socioreligious interaction or interreligious dialogue. Since the adoption of a constitutional monarchy in 1932, the Thai political system has undergone major shifts, advances, and setbacks along the democratic path^[7] caused by the developing roles of the military, bureaucracy, and ethnic groups such as the emergent Chinese middle class and Thai Muslims.

Culture, Religion, and Politics

Thailand has successfully managed to produce a national Thai identity based on commonality of language, sociocultural tolerance, and assimilation through a growing economy. Yet underneath this lies a variety of religiocultural identities positioned along ethnic lines. Thailand is a multiethnic and multireligious country, with a Muslim population of 5 to 7 million out of 65 million people.^[8] The monoethnic Malay Muslims of the deep South constitute about 44 percent of the total Thai Muslim population,^[9] and they are the majority in that region. Malay Muslims call themselves *orae nayu* (Malay Muslim) who *kecek nayu* (speak local Malay), and consider themselves to be different from *orae siye*, ethnic Thai Buddhists who are the minority in the South. They feel offended if referred to as “Thai Muslim,” a term they interpret ethnically. According to them, a Malay cannot be anything other than Muslim, and a Thai is always Buddhist. They also see the term “Thai Muslim” as an indication of forced assimilation by the Thai state. Other Muslims, those who are multiethnic and reside mostly in the upper southern, central, northern, and northeastern provinces of the country, do not feel any offense at the term “Thai Muslim.”¹

The Thai Muslim community is further internally divided along denominational lines, and the spread of Islamic religious puritanical trends from South Asia and the Middle East further divides them. Recently, a Thai Shia Muslim community has emerged.

Historical Background of the Southern Thailand Conflict

In 1906, Siam annexed the Malay Muslim provinces of Nong Chik, Ra-ngae, Raman, Sai Buri, Yala, and Yaring, which were parts of the independent Malay Muslim vassal state of Patani. Next, Siam dissolved and united the provinces into what came to be known as “*monthon* Pattani” or a subdivision of Pattani.²

¹ The term “Thai Muslim” is seen as ethnically offensive by the Malay Muslims of the South because it was imposed by Bangkok after the declaration of the Patronage of Islamic Act of 1945. Deep southerners prefer referring to themselves as “Malay Muslims,” but this has an ethnic, regional, and sectarian flavor that overlooks the other sections of the Thai Muslim community spread across the country, which differ along ethnic, provincial, and even theological lines from those in the deep South. Therefore, this paper uses the terms “Thai Islam” and “Thai Muslims” when referring to the general profile of the Muslim community of Thailand, and “Malay Muslims” for those residing in the deep South.

² “Pattani” is the Thai spelling; the original Malay spelling is “Patani.”

The annexation was further strengthened in 1909 by an Anglo-Siamese treaty that drew a border between Pattani and the Malay states of Kedah, Kelantan, Perak, and Perlis. According to this treaty, the British recognized Siam sovereignty over Pattani. In return, Siam gave up its territorial claim over Kelantan and recognized British control over the other Malay states of Kedah, Perak, and Perlis.

After 1909, Siam embarked on a centralization policy, which led to the imposition of Thai administrative officials in the three deep southern Malay provinces. Most of these officials were Thai Buddhists and unfamiliar with the local language and Muslim culture, which led to social antagonism.

According to the centralization policy, the former *negara* Patani state was divided into three provinces— Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala—which now make up the three Malay Muslim majority provinces of the South. This period also saw the beginning of the Patani separatist movement, which was initially a royalist movement led by Tengku Mahmud Mahyuddin, a prominent Pattani leader and the son of the last raja of Pattani.

The era of World War II (1939–45) witnessed the beginning of the Pattani nationalist movement. Led by Haji Sulong, it was put down by the central Thai authorities. During the 1970s, the resistance evolved into a nationalist irredentism, and has become a form of ethnoreligious nationalism with a strong emphasis on Malay Muslim ethnic and religious identity.

The separatist movement in Southern Thailand seeks to sever the Malay region from the rest of the country, although official autonomy is an acceptable option. Over the last 50 years, numerous political groups and movements formed to support this cause, but the present insurgency is largely faceless. No single group has come out in recent years to claim leadership.³ The insurgents have blended into the local population, and it is said that they have a plan to resurface later, once they have gained enough strength on the ground and more support in local communities.

³ These groups were: the Association of Malays of Greater Patani (GAMPAR), the Patani People's Movement (PPM), the Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani (BNPP), the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO), and the Barisan Bersatu Mughideen Patani (BBMP). During the 1980s to 1990s, new groups emerged, including the BRN-C, which is suspected of being behind the current insurgency along with many other factions; most of them are filled by youth who are independent of former separatist groups such as the PULO. There is also the presence of the Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani (GMIP), established by Afghan veterans in 1995, and Bersatu, or New PULO, an offshoot of the former PULO. Source: International Crisis Group, "Southern Thailand Insurgency, Not Jihad," p. i, available at www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/south_east_asia/098_southern_thailand_insurgency_not_jihad.pdf; accessed January 24, 2009. See also International Crisis Group, "Southern Thailand: The Impact of the Coup," Asia Report No. 129 (2007), p. 6, available at www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/south_east_asia/129_southern_thailand_the_impact_of_the_coup_web.pdf; accessed January 24, 2009.

After a brief lull in the 1980s and 1990s, the Southern Thai conflict reemerged in January 2004. As of November 2008, more than 3,150 people have died in the ongoing crisis.^[10]

Ethnoreligious Dimension of the Conflict in Southern Thailand

It is important to understand the ethnoreligious dimensions of the conflict in Southern Thailand. Malay Muslims give primacy to their ethnic identity and view their life experience through the prism of their religion, *agama*.⁴ Thus the ritual, mythic/narrative, experiential/emotional, ethical, legal, social, material, and political dimensions of life are all interpreted and perceived through the lens of ethnic identity. Ethnicity is mixed with religion, resulting in the formation of an ethnicized view of Islam.

The majority of southern Muslims speak Pattani Malay, or Jawi, and are not fluent in Thai, the official state language. Pattani Malay, identical to the Kelantanese Malay spoken across the border, is an important identity marker of the local community. In the past, Pattani Malay was the language of traditional, conservative Islamic learning, and it is still the language of education for Pattani Muslims. During the 1930s and 1940s, the government decreed that *pondoks*, *madrassa*-like schools, should offer instruction in Thai instead of Malay and Arabic. Local Malay Muslims saw this as a threat to their identity, and *pondoks* began to encourage Pan-Malay nationalism and Islamic revivalism through their curricula.^[11]

The phenomenon of ethnoreligious nationalism in Southern Thailand is the result of the merging of Malay ethnic identity, local Malay Islam, the traditional Shafiite version of Islam, and the puritan Wahabbi acquired through study at foreign educational institutions in the Middle East and South Asia. Thousands of Thai Muslim youth, after completing *pondok* education, pursue further religious studies at Muslim universities in Cairo, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. Influenced by the religiotheological trends of Islamic resurgence during their educational stay, returning Thai students have promoted Islamic reform and the growth of local Thai Muslim communities along puritan and sectarian lines.⁵

The Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand view national integration as their own cultural disintegration for, according to them, Thai Buddhism and Malay Islam belong to two different cosmological orientations.^[12] According to Surin Pitsuwan, a southern Muslim and former foreign minister of Thailand, the Malay Muslims “do not want to be integrated into the Thai state. They do not want to lose their religious and cultural autonomy. If the Thai

⁴ The term *agama* means “religion” in the Malay language. Malays refer to Islam as *agama* in the reified sense. Its meaning is loaded, as it refers both to religion and to Malay ethnic identification.

⁵ It is important to note that not all such reformists are insurgents.

state is the manifestation of the Buddhist cosmology, the Malay Muslims do not want to be a part of it.”^[13] The largely ethnic orientations of the two communities have been described as “closed systems.”^[14]

In fact, the Malay Muslims could be called the most ethnicized community within the worldwide Muslim community. They are even suspicious of other Muslims, unless they are members of the same ethnic group or speak the Melayu language. From their perspective, converting to Islam is not enough: one has to *masuk Melayu*—become a Malay—to be accepted as a Muslim.

The network of the Malay *Ulama* and their role as custodians of religious and ethnic tradition makes them important players in the conflict. The first person to bring Malay Muslim nationalist ideas to Southern Thailand was the Islamic cleric Haji Sulong, who was a 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 its interests to the government by seeking political autonomy within a federal system.^[15] In 1947, Haji Sulong made seven ethnoreligious demands to the central government, focusing on political freedom for the Malays and the preservation of their language. His only religious demand involved the recognition and enforcement of Muslim law.^[16] Since his mysterious death in 1954, Haji Sulong has become a symbol of resistance to the Thai state.

An ethnoreligious interpretation of southern Malay Muslim identity was recently affirmed by a prominent southern Muslim scholar, Dr. Ismae-Alee of Prince of Songkla University. He remarked that state ignorance of Malay life and the role of Islam in it were the cause of the conflict. He also said that southern Muslims have different lifestyles and beliefs from those elsewhere in the country, and that identity, nationalism, and history are deeply rooted in their psyches.^[17]

The Southern Thailand Insurgency during the Thaksin Era (2001–06)

The reemergence of the southern insurgency, marked by bombings, kidnappings, beheadings, and shootings, was met with force by the then-ruling Thaksin government. Officials used excessive force and imposed martial law in the deep South. The violence continued, and the Krue Se (April 28, 2004) and Tak Bai (October 25, 2004) incidents became part of indelible Malay Muslim memory.

The Krue Se Jihad

In protest of the martial law, on April 28, 2004, insurgents attacked 15 security posts and police stations in Pattani, Songkla, and Yala. In all, 107 militants and 5 security personnel

died, and 17 were arrested. Thirty-seven Muslim militants were killed in the blockade of the Krue Se mosque with a shoot-to-kill order. They were suspected members of a radical religious cell called Hikmat Allah Abadan or Abadae (Brotherhood of the Eternal Judgment of God), centered on a religious teacher named Ustaz Soh.^[18] Cell members were indoctrinated with an ideology of hatred for Thai Buddhists and cast their separatist aspirations in mystical Sufi interpretation. Those holding out in the mosque were reported to have engaged in mystical religious prayer services, reciting sacred verses and drinking holy water after the evening prayer. The militants were convinced that the rituals would make them invisible to the police and invulnerable to bullets.^[19]

A 34-page Jawi/Malay language book, *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 to promote *jihad* to separate Pattani and exterminate people of different faiths. The book says that not even one's parents should be spared if they leak information to the government.^[20] Chapter 1 talks of "*jihad* warriors," and encourages readers to wage religious war against "those outside the religion," with the ultimate goal of reviving the Pattani state. Chapter 3 talks of killing all opponents, even family members, and sacrificing one's life to be in heaven with Allah. It concludes by promoting a constitutional state of Pattani based on the Sunni Shafii school of law.^[21] This book represents the first pairing of Qur'anic verses and the concept of *jihad* made in relation to the Southern Thai conflict. It may have been influenced by *jihadist* texts that 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,^[22] and texts by Maulana Abul al-Maududi of Pakistan and Sayyid Qutb of Egypt.

The dead at the Krue Se mosque were treated by their relatives as martyrs (*shahid*), and their corpses were buried unwashed, following the Prophet Muhammad's burial rituals for his companions who had died in the battles with the Meccans.

The Chularatchamontri, or Shaikh al-Islam, of Thailand, who, along with the Central Islamic Committee, is the chief official representative of Thai Muslims at the national level, called for the destruction of the book and appointed a nine-member committee to write a rebuttal in the Thai language.^[23] The rebuttal, "Facts about the Distortion of Islamic Teachings as Appeared in 'The Struggle for Pattani,'" was widely distributed.^[24]

The Krue Se mosque incident led to a large public media debate about the methods employed in dealing with the situation.^[25] It also led to a wider policy debate about how the government should address matters in the South. Some critics said that it was unwise for the Thaksin government to dismantle the Southern Border Provincial Administration Center (SBPAC) and the Combined 43rd Civilian-Police-Military Command (CPM 43), which were established in 1981 during the period of democratization of Thai politics. These two entities had played an important role in educating the Thai public about the culture and

lifestyle of southern Muslims. The SBPAC had also served as a sounding board for local ideas about how to implement national accommodation policies. Some also criticized the attitudes of government officials who had been sent to work in the South. Coming largely from majority Buddhist areas of the country, the officials were charged with being culturally insensitive to Malay Muslim values, resulting in conflicts and resentment.

Surin Pitsuwan criticized the Thaksin government's promotion of the tourist industry, which brought alien moral and cultural dimensions to the deep South. The government's actions were perceived as culturally and religiously insensitive to southern Muslims, and led to discontent and unrest. Pitsuwan observed, "The struggle in the deep South has a deeper cultural dimension that is being overlooked by the present national leadership."^[26] He also issued a seven-point plan for long-term development of the deep South that emphasized the need for the government's attitude to change, especially its "Bangkok knows best" posture. He called for a unified approach in analyzing the problems and seeking solutions that protected human rights, encouraged local participation, and made human resource development more of a priority than grand economic and materialistic schemes. In addition, he cautioned the government to be mindful of the foreign or external dimension of the problem, in the context of the Muslim world's sensitivity toward issues of minority Muslims.^[27]

The Tak Bai Incident

Violence continued after the Krue Se mosque incident. Six months later, during Ramadan, there was another incident in Tak Bai district of Narathiwat. Eighty-six Muslims died as a result of a demonstration outside the district police station against the jailing of a local Muslim accused of inciting violence. Six of these died on the scene; 78 died of suffocation in trucks they were piled on for transportation to a military camp. This debacle caused a major controversy. There were charges of excessive force, overly harsh methods, and human rights violations,^[28] and demands from the Thai public that Prime Minister Thaksin apologize for mishandling the incident.^[29] He refused.

The government set up an independent fact-finding commission to investigate how the protestors died. Its findings criticized the disorganized method of transporting them, which was supervised by inexperienced, low-ranking personnel; it did not find that the deaths had been caused intentionally. Some senior security officials were faulted, and the report suggested that families of the dead, wounded, and missing be compensated.^[30]

After the arrest of four Islamic teachers accused of complicity in these incidents, the government assumed that the pondoks were a breeding ground for insurgents and initiated a policy that the pondoks conform to the country's general educational system. But it has also been suggested that the government should concentrate on promoting a secular curriculum

rather than censoring religious education, which would enable the *pondok* graduates to pursue higher education within the Thai system instead of going to Middle Eastern and South Asian religious seminaries for further education.^[31] Finger-pointing at the pondoks is not enough. There is a need to address the educational problem without treading upon the cultural and religious sensitivities of the Malay Muslim population.

The Southern Thailand Insurgency during the Surayud Government (2006–07)

The 2006 military coup took a reconciliatory stance toward the southern conflict. The new prime minister, General Surayud, offered an apology for the mishandling of the crisis by the previous Thaksin government. He also announced an amnesty to those who withdrew from the insurgency movement.^[32] He was hoping to convince older generations of separatists of the PULO and BRN to play a mediating role between the government and the younger insurgents, who have a more radically violent approach. The BRN-C, which is the most active current insurgent group, rejected negotiations outright,^[33] and other groups did not respond.

The interim government also revived the SBPAC—a civilian-military-police task force which formerly offered a forum for dialogue between the locals and authorities.^[34] The revived SBPAC, under its new name of Southern Border Provinces Development Center (SBPDC), is playing a crucial role in resolving the southern conflict by working to create mutual acceptance and trust between Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims, and helping them manage their political and social affairs together.^[35]

This is a difficult task, as Muslim-Buddhist relations are at their lowest level ever, with feelings of distrust and alienation on both sides. Prime Minister Surayud’s apology and dialogue-based approach has to be supplemented with other measures, such as delivering justice, recognizing local language and culture, and letting locals manage their own affairs.^[36] While Prime Minister Surayud was sincere in finding a solution for the southern conflict, national politics (such as restoring democracy) occupied much of his time and energy.^[37]

The Southern Thailand Insurgency during the Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat Governments (2008)

As a result of the December 2007 general election, Palang Prachachon Party (PPP) leader Samak Sundaravej formed the new government. PPP was supported by Thaksin, who was in exile. The new government surprised the public when then–interior minister Chalerm Yubamrung announced it was time to find a new solution to the violence in the South, and that this could be achieved by instituting some form of autonomy.^[38] This announcement was received with much enthusiasm, but the proposal was soon shot down by the prime

minister, who warned his minister not to engage in loose talk.^[39] The Samak government then proposed studying the Aceh model in Indonesia and applying it to Southern Thailand.^[40] That idea was rejected the next day by a senior military officer and security experts, who said that the two situations were not comparable.^[41] After this debacle, the Samak government proposed initiating joint military and private business ventures in the South to boost the local economy and offset the insurgency.^[42] By this time, the central government was caught in political bickering with the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), an outside Parliament opposition group, which was bent on driving the PPP government out of office. The government transferred responsibility for the southern insurgency to the army, which has been heavy handed in quelling the violence. Though the military has reduced the number of violent attacks from militants, there have been assassinations, disappearances, human rights abuses, and shootings of Muslim religious teachers.^[43]

In July 2008, an obscure group claiming to be separatists came forward to announce a ceasefire. It was soon discovered that they were former separatist leaders who had no control over the new, young, and faceless insurgents.^[44] Samak was out of office by September 9, 2008, and he was succeeded by Somchai Wongsawat. Soon after came news that the Indonesian government was hosting talks between the Thai government and a group of southern separatists, but that the Thai general at the signing event was not an official representative of the government.^[45] Prime Minister Somchai made a visit to the South on October 28, 2008, but it was clear that the army was in full control, not the central government.^[46] The Somchai government allotted 8 billion Thai *baht* to the army to fight the insurgency in 2009,^[47] but Somchai was booted out of office on December 2, 2008.

Thai Muslim Attitudes toward the Conflict in Southern Thailand

Thai Muslims in the rest of the country view the conflict in the deep South as the outcome of the unique history of the region, and related to Malay ethnic sentiment. They sympathize with the suffering of the southerners but do not view the conflict as *jihad* or as religiously justified. In their view, the Southern situation does not fulfill the *shurut*—the conditions for *jihad* according to Islamic law and the Qur'an, which states: "Allah does not forbid you to be kind and equitable to those who had neither fought against your faith nor driven you out of your homes. In fact Allah loves the equitable" (Qur'an 60:8).

Islamic law describes the following preconditions for sanctioning military *jihad*:

1. There are aggressive designs against Islam, that the state prohibits the practice of Islam, and that there is oppression,
2. That there are concerted efforts to eject Muslims from their legally acquired property, and
3. Military campaigns are being launched to eradicate Muslims.

In the view of the non-southern Muslims, the conflict in Southern Thailand is about ethnicity, not religion. They see it as a political problem that needs a political solution, and they do not offer support to the southern insurgency.

Thai Muslims hold that the Thai state offers enough religious freedom for the practice of Islam as a religion and a culture. In fact, the religious freedom available to Thai Muslims may not be available in many Muslim countries. Thai Muslims cherish the religious freedom they enjoy in Thailand, which does not place restrictions on religious practices of cultural activities. Most are ready to help southerners learn how Muslims can coexist with others.

Majority Thai Muslim Attitudes and Participation in State Activities

Over the decades, Thai Muslims have become more politically engaged and outspoken at the national and international levels, especially in relation to their religious, cultural, and group concerns. Since the adoption of a constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thai Muslims have participated in national political activities during both its democratic and nondemocratic eras. This has earned them recognition in the political system, and Thai Muslim politicians have represented different political parties in parliamentary elections. Thai Muslim politicians representing the Muslim majority constituencies of the South have long been concerned with developmental problems facing Muslims, such as educational amelioration, economic progress, cultural and religious freedom, and political recognition.

In 1988, Malay-speaking politicians from the deep South formed the Wahdah political faction, whose priority was to address developmental problems facing the Malay Muslim community from within the political system. Wahdah has been described as an ethnic movement working to achieve the goals of Thai Muslims.^[48] Wahdah sees itself as an independent political group ready to support any party that is committed to Thai Muslim concerns. It first aligned itself with the New Aspiration Party (NAP), established in 1990. Malay-speaking members representing Wahdah obtained cabinet posts following the elections of 1992, 1995, 1997, and 2001.

Further Thai Muslim integration into the political system is apparent in the number of Muslim politicians who have won seats in provincial and national parliamentary bodies in areas that are majority Buddhist or have mixed constituencies. The appointment of Surin Pitsuwan further demonstrates the shifting political engagement of Muslims in Thai politics. Pitsuwan served as the deputy foreign affairs minister from 1992 to 1995, and as minister of foreign affairs from 1997 to 2001. Surin currently serves as the secretary general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In response to the increased political representation of Muslims, the Thai government has also adjusted its policies to accommodate the religiocultural demands of the community. For example, Muslim women are allowed to wear the *hijab* in pictures for official documents, such as identity cards and passports, and at official places of work. The government has also facilitated travel arrangements for Thai pilgrims to the annual Hajj in Saudi Arabia, granted official holidays in the South for the celebration of religious festivals such as the ‘Id al-Fitr and ‘Id al-Adha, supported the organization of the annual official Mawlid celebration (the birthday of the Prophet), and granted the religious certification of *halal* for items produced by Thai food companies. Additionally, the government recognized the office of the Chularajmontri, or Shaikh al-Islam, as the official head of the Thai Muslim community, and empowered the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand and the Provincial Councils of Islamic Affairs to manage Muslim affairs at the national and provincial levels.

However, these developments have not been without setbacks. After the resurgence of the southern insurgency in 2004 and Wahdah’s alignment with the ruling Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, which was responsible for using excessive force during the Krue Se and Tak Bai incidents, Wahdah lost popular support. As a result, in 2005, Wahdah politicians lost their parliamentary seats to Muslim politicians from the Democrat Party. After the coup in 2006, which marked the end of the Thaksin regime, the Wahdah faction resigned from the TRT party. In the 2007 parliamentary election, Wahdah aligned with the ruling PPP, but won only two seats in the deep South.

Nevertheless, the majority of Thai Muslims today see no contradiction between their religious affiliation and their status as Thai citizens. Many view the role of being a good citizen as compatible with the social teachings of Islam. For example, they enthusiastically joined the 2006–07 celebrations honoring King Bhumibhol Adulyadej in the 60th year of his ascension to the Thai throne.

Conclusion

The problems in Southern Thailand are the result of decades of economic neglect; lack of employment opportunities for local Muslims in the public and private sectors; the cultural insensitivity of the bureaucracy; and the nonrecognition of religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity within the Thai polity. A solution requires greater effort by the Thai government to meet the demands of the local Malay Muslim population. A peace process in Southern Thailand would allay concerns in the Muslim world about the treatment of this Muslim minority. Practical steps need to be taken to implement the recommendations resulting from recent discussions between the government and Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, secretary general of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), the recommendations in the communiqué issued at the end of the 34th Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign

Ministers (ICFM) in Islamabad, Pakistan, May 15–17, 2007. Recommendations call for accelerating the process of accountability to build confidence in the local Muslim population, and granting it authority to manage its affairs within the sphere of the Thai constitution.^[49]

At the national level, the government should also apply the June 2006 recommendations of the National Reconciliation Commission, which was chaired by former prime minister Anand Panyarachun. The commission recommended introducing Islamic law; making the ethnic Pattani Malay, or Jawi language, the official language in the region; and establishing an unarmed peacekeeping force and the Peaceful Strategic Administrative Centre for Southern Border Provinces. The report was submitted to the Thaksin government, but because of political instability, it has been on the back burner ever since, not receiving serious attention from any official quarter.

Thai Muslims have coexisted with Thai Buddhists for centuries, but the relationship has recently been put to the test. The state should initiate political dialogue with Malay Muslims and work toward mutual recognition of the inherent ethnoreligious and cultural diversity in Thai society. This will contribute to building an overall peace and religious pluralism. Both Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims should offer their full cooperation in this effort. Military means to solve the southern conflict are unwise, for they do not address the root causes of unrest.^[50]

The intermittent talk of giving autonomy to the South has been fruitless. The Thai government should act decisively, as delay only causes further strengthening of popular support for the insurgency. Political will on the part of the Thai state is needed to create a long-term political solution for the Thai deep South.

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