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Ethnic or Religious Cleavage? Investigating the Nature of the Conflict in Southern Thailand

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The provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat in Southern Thailand have witnessed a sharp spike in violence in the past few years. The unrest is threatening to tarnish Prime Minister Thaksin's period in office. The contemporary literature as well as the media tend to portray the strife as one between Buddhists and Muslims. This is markedly different from earlier studies which place less importance on religion and treat the discord as one between Thais and Malays. In this regard, this article aims to explain the transformation from a primarily "ethnic" strife to a predominantly "religious" conflict. It argues that despite the rise of the religious factor in the discord, it is flawed to treat the violence in Southern Thailand as entirely between Buddhists and Muslims. It further contends that the ethnic Thai-Malay divide is still deeply entrenched in the insurgency.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, religious strife, Thai-Malay divide, Buddhist-Muslim rift, South Thailand.

Introduction

The wave of violence in Southern Thailand[1] that began in January 2004 has continued unabated to date. Nearly 2,000 attacks have taken place in the region and the bloodshed has claimed almost 1,000 victims.[2] Media reports tend to represent the insurgency as Islamic in nature and portray attacks as revenge against the Buddhists. Increasingly, the perpetrators of violence in Southern Thailand are being depicted as suspected "Islamic" or "Muslim" militants. But is it accurate to suggest

that the adversaries in the Southern Thailand unrest have *always* been Buddhists and Muslims? Surveying the century-old conflict suggests that the rise of the religious factor in the Southern Thailand strife is only a recent occurrence.

Contemporary literature on the conflict in Southern Thailand has attempted to study the turmoil through the lens of international terrorism and this has led to an extensive analysis of the active terrorist groups in the region (Chongkittavorn 2004; Gunaratna, Acharya, and Chua 2005). Some analysts have further implicated the strife in the southern provinces of Thailand with "jihad" at the regional level (Sheridan 2004). Other recent inquires (Che Man 1990; Chalk 2001; Yegar 2002, pp. 73–181) too are predisposed towards emphasizing the role of Buddhism and Islam since the beginning of the conflict. They do not question whether religion has always been a factor since the inception of the unrest and if not, the *raison d'être* for the change.

Earlier studies on the Southern Thailand unrest place less emphasis on religion (Suhrke 1975; Haemindra 1976; Suhrke 1977). They instead consider the antagonists as chiefly Thai and Malay. A few studies recognize this change and make the analytical distinction between ethnicity and religion (Pitsuwan 1982; Christie 1996, pp. 173–90) in the Southern Thailand conflict. The notion of being Thai or Malay is identified primarily by cultural symbols such as language and education. The idea of being Buddhist or Muslim is established by references specifically to Buddhism or Islam. These attributes are located within local and global events, state policies as well as the aims, demands and actions of the rebel groups in the unrest.

This analytical difference between ethnicity and religion is significant to facilitate the accurate classification of the opponents in the discord. While some scholars highlight that the notion of being Thai is closely associated with being Buddhist and the idea of being Malay is synonymous with being Muslim (Farouk 1988; Che Man 1990), they do not acknowledge that being Buddhist is not limited to being Thai and the conception of being Muslim is much broader than being Malay. Loosely identifying the two warring sides in an insurgency can lead to the implementation of flawed policies and aggravate the violence.

The aim of this article is twofold. First, it seeks to explain the transformation of the Southern Thailand conflict from a primarily ethnic "Thai versus Malay" discord to a predominantly religious "Buddhist versus Muslim" strife. Second, it evaluates the consequences of dealing with the insurgency as a solely religious predicament.

However, it does not contend with the root causes of the conflict.[3] It is more interested in how these grievances are translated into framing the adversaries of the conflict.

The main argument of this article is that it is flawed to treat the Southern Thailand conflict as entirely between Buddhists and Muslims. Despite the rise of the religious component in the strife, ethnic divides are still deeply entrenched in the insurgency. The article is split into five parts. The first section briefly outlines the genesis of the conflict in Southern Thailand. The second segment will address the surfacing of ethnic Thai and Malay divides in the rebellion. The third part will study the emergence and development of religious Buddhist and Islamic partitions in the revolt. The fourth section explains the shift from Thai-Malay friction to Buddhist-Muslim hostility and also examines the media's portrayal of the conflict. The final part of this article will question the extent to which the conflict in Southern Thailand is purely religious and investigate the consequences of treating it as one.

The Origins of the Conflict

The provinces of Pattani,[4] Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun once constituted "Patani Raya" or "Greater Patani" (Che Man 1990, p. 32), wedged between the Siamese empire to its north and the Malacca sultanate to its south. Although it was the target of influence of both neighbours, their domains of authority diverged. Culturally, the people of Patani were aligned with Malacca but politically, they found themselves under Siamese suzerainty. The southward expansion of Siam, especially after the defeat of Malacca by the Portuguese in 1511, forced the Malay sultanate of Patani to enter into a tributary relationship with Siam. They were obligated to pay an accolade of gold flowers called *Bunga Mas* (Che Man 1990, p. 34). Although the Malay sultans viewed this gift as a sign of friendship with Siam, the latter regarded it as a symbol of allegiance (Yegar 2002, p. 74).

The Malay *raja* of Patani detested their vassal association with Siam and each time the latter was perceived to be weak, they stopped paying tribute. The initial revolts by Patani occurred between 1630 and 1633 (Che Man 1990, p. 34). Conflict once again erupted after the Burmese ransacked the Siamese capital of Ayuthya in 1767. Frustrated with these frequent rebellions by Patani, King Rama I decided to abolish its tributary status and in 1785 undertook a campaign to absorb it into the Siamese empire along with Malay sultanates of Kedah, Kelantan, and Trengganu (Haemindra 1976, p. 198). In the

process, the existing rulers of Patani were sidelined and leaders loyal to Siam were appointed. This led to revolts by Raja Tengku Lamidin during 1789–91 and later by his successor Dato Pengkalan in 1808 (Che Man 1990, p. 35). Bangkok managed to stave off these challenges and decided to divide the region into seven smaller provinces. Despite these measures, trouble in Kedah led to fresh bids for independence in 1832 and 1838 but these came to naught (Haemindra 1976, p. 200). This further caused the split of Kedah and the creation of present-day Satun province (Che Man 1990, p. 35).[5]

The nature of the resistance against Siam until the early 20th century was aristocratic. Matrimonial bonds were formed between the Siamese and Malays and their dealings were directed by concerns over power rather than notions of ethnic or religious solidarity (McVey 1989, p. 34). A united opposition was forged largely in the 19th century after King Rama I's decision to incorporate the Malay kingdoms directly under the Siamese that led to the isolation of existing elites. The joint confrontation was showing fledgling signs of ethnic Malay camaraderie but the revolts against Siam were still primarily a quest for political independence or, at the very least, autonomy.

The Emergence of the Thai versus Malay Conflict

Faced with an increasing threat from the British in Malaya (Farouk 1984, p. 236), King Chulalongkorn decided to accelerate the process of assimilation and centralize the administration of the southern provinces under Bangkok. The creation of the "Area of the Seven Provinces" administrative body in 1901 to govern the southern provinces was a key move in this strategy. This alienated the Malay *raja* and nobility in the region but most accepted the reparation offered by Bangkok. The then Raja of Patani, Tengku Abdul Kadir, was among the few who resisted the change and was jailed for his opposition but was released a couple of years later after he signed a guarantee to renounce politics (Haemindra 1976, pp. 202–3). The British also opposed the administrative rearrangement and concluded a treaty with Siam in 1909 in which Bangkok had to relinquish Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, and Trengganu. Although this resulted in the political segregation of the Malays, the broad cultural, commercial, and personal bonds between the Malay communities on either side of the border were sustained (Farouk 1984, p. 236).

The Siamese government began to emphasize the use of Thai language after 1910. There was a concerted attempt to educate the Malays in Thai (Dulyakasem 1991, p. 141) and this led to periodic

protests in the southern provinces. The elites feared that the introduction of Thai would lead to the erosion of the Malay language and culture. Soon after the introduction of the 1921 Primary Education Act which necessitated Malay children to attend Thai primary schools, there was a major rebellion in 1922. This revolt was orchestrated by Tengku Abdul Kadir from Kelantan, to where he had moved in 1915 (Pitsuwan 1982, pp. 57–58).

In 1932, monarchical rule in Thailand came to an end. Thailand became a fledgling democracy and during this period, the Malays obtained seats in the National Assembly and Senate (Pitsuwan 1982, pp. 80–83). These gains were short-lived, however, and Thailand soon fell under military rule when Marshal Phibul Songkhram came to power in 1938. In parallel with rising Thai nationalism at the time, Phibul began an exercise to assimilate the Malays into the Thai nation-state (Suwannathat-Pian 1995, pp. 102–62). He wanted to culturally integrate the Malays through the use of Thai language and education but did not seek to religiously convert them to Buddhism.[6] But the attempt to assimilate the Malays at the barrel of a gun failed.

During World War II, Thailand backed the Japanese while the elites of Southern Thailand supported the British in Malaya. Among the leading proponents of the British was Tengku Mahmud Mahyiddeen, the son of Tengku Abdul Kadir (Christie 1996, p. 178). Opposition to Thai authority was rising and in November 1945, Tengku Abdul Jalal, son for a former Saiburi *raja*, along with other Pattani elites, lobbied the British to liberate the southern provinces from Thai rule. The petition reasoned thus:

> Patani is really a Malay country, formerly ruled by Malay Rajas for generations, but has been Siam's dependency only since about fifty years ago. Now the Allied Nations ought to help the return of this country to the Malays, so that they can have it *united with other Malay countries in the peninsula.* (Christie 1996, p. 180, emphasis added)

This vision of unity of Southern Thailand with other Malay countries in Southeast Asia underscores the Thai-Malay divide in the conflict. After the war, the British wanted to penalize Thailand by annexing Pattani and Satun. But geo-strategic concerns such as the rising threat of communism and the need to stabilize fledgling Southeast Asian economies overrode the initial plan. American pressure also played a decisive role in Britain's decision not to support the creation of an independent Pattani state or its incorporation into Malaya (Wilson 1989, p. 62).

The increasing dissatisfaction with the Thai authorities led to the conflict in the southern provinces adopting a more structured form. In the 1940s, GAMPAR (Gabungan Melayu Pattani Raya, or the Association of Malays of Greater Pattani) emerged as a chief organization to campaign for the unity of the Malays in Southern Thailand. The group was led by Tengku Mahmud Mahyiddeen and other Malay elites who were marginalized during the centralization exercise in the early part of the century (Farouk 1984, p. 237). Some of the aims of GAMPAR were was "to unite all south Thailand Malays and their descendants who were now in Malaya" and "to improve education and revive Malay culture in south Thailand" (Haemindra 1976, p. 213).

GAMPAR's objectives clearly advocated the Malay cause in the conflict by calling for the merger of the southern provinces of Thailand with the Federation of Malaya. Islam was not high on its agenda. A tactical decision by GAMPAR led to its downfall. It decided to ally with leftist Malay nationalist parties and this led to a political opposition with the British. In 1948 an agreement was signed to contain communist activities in the border areas by the British and the Thai (Farouk 1984, p. 238). Many GAMPAR leaders were arrested and this led to the disintegration of the group.

Towards the end of the 1940s, Haji Sulong, then chairman of the Pattani Islamic Council, presented a list of demands on behalf of the provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and Satun to the Thai government. Among the cultural changes were petitions for Bangkok to "support education in the Malay medium up to the fourth grade in parish schools within the four provinces" and "use the Malay language within government offices alongside [Thai]" (Ibrahim Syukri 1985, pp. 71–72). The administrative changes put forth appealed that "the government of Siam should have a person of high rank possessing full power to govern the four provinces of Patani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Setul, and this person should be a *Muslim born within one of these provinces*" and that "[e]ighty percent of the government officials within the four provinces should be *Muslims born within the provinces*" (Ibrahim Syukri 1985, pp. 71–72, emphasis added). The petition did not want *any* Muslim in Thailand to become the administrative head of the southern provinces. The Malays were a majority in Southern Thailand and by emphasizing that the administrative chief should be Muslim born within the four southern provinces, they in fact wanted a Malay to be the leader. But the Thai government arrested Haji Sulong a few months later and dissolved the Pattani Islamic Council (Ibrahim Syukri 1985, p. 73). This led to

widespread protests in Pattani and surrounding districts. Haji Sulong was held without trial for many months and close to a year later, he was jailed for three-and-a-half years (Haemindra 1976, p. 224). After his release in 1952, Haji Sulong returned to Pattani but in 1954 he disappeared and was allegedly drowned by the Thai police (Pitsuwan 1982, pp. 163–64).

In the early 1960s, another group called the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) was led by Ustaz Karim Hajji Hassan (Che Man 1990, p. 99). The aim of BRN was broader than GAMPAR's goal of joining with the Federation of Malaya. BRN's objective was to incorporate the southern provinces of Thailand in a pan-Malay state across Southeast Asia (Farouk 1984, pp. 239–40). BRN aimed to unite the Malays of Southern Thailand and called for solidarity with other Malays in the region. However, factionalism in the BRN weakened its resistance against the Thai government. The *konfrantasi* waged by Indonesia against Malaysia led to some splinter blocs supporting Indonesia and others taking the side of Malaysia (Farouk 1984, p. 240). BRN also tactically supported the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) hoping to reap some gains in the event of a victory for the latter (Pitsuwan 1982, p. 231; Satha-Anand 1986, p. 15). But this gamble did not pay off and led to divisions within the group. Traditional leaders of BRN were against teaming up with the communists as the latter's ideology was not synonymous with the Malay cause. Moreover, alliance with the communists brought it in direct confrontation with almost all Southeast Asian countries which considered communism as a common threat (Pitsuwan 1982, p. 233).

The emergence of the Thai versus Malay conflict can be attributed to two key factors. First, the growth of Malay nationalism that gripped Southeast Asia, especially after World War II, greatly assisted the insurgent groups in their opposition to Thai rule. It allowed rebel organizations like GAMPAR and BRN to establish bases in Malaya and champion their irredentist cause. Second, the policies of the Siamese government, particularly on language and education, were perceived by the Malays of Southern Thailand as an encroachment of their cultural domain. In particular, the imposition of the Thai language in the southern provinces was viewed as a threat. There was an apprehension that it would lead to the dilution of the Malay tongue and their culture. But the ethnic nature of the conflict could not be sustained and began to wane towards the end of the 1960s. Religion began to play a more prominent role in the conflict which would lead to the surfacing of the divide between Buddhists and Muslims.

The Growth of the Buddhist versus Muslim Conflict

The collapse of GAMPAR and the failure of the BRN resistance facilitated the rise of the religious character of the strife in the 1970s. Islam began to emerge as a new rallying point for the insurgents in their struggle. The roots of this religious divide did not take place overnight. Events that unfolded in the 1940s led to the accentuation of the religious fault-lines in the conflict. As World War II raged, Bangkok was aware of the rising Malay nationalism in the region at the time (Che Man 1990, p. 64) and did not want the residents of Pattani, Yala, Narathwat, and Satun to succumb to the propaganda. Hence they embarked on a strategy to systematically erase the notion of being Malay from the southern provinces of Thailand.

In order to cultivate an allegiance to the Thai nation whilst recognizing their difference from ethnic Thais, the people of the Thailand's south were bracketed with other Muslims in the country and identified as "Thai Muslims" (Christie 1996, p. 182). The Free Thai government that came to power in 1944 reversed many of the restrictive policies under Phibul Songkhram and pledged religious freedom for the Muslims (Thompson and Adloff 1955, p. 159). In May 1945, a Patronage of Islam Act was passed that created a post known as the *Chularajamontri*, the foremost leader on religious affairs for *all* Muslims in Thailand (Yegar 2002, p. 95, emphasis added). Bangkok believed that the assimilation of the southern provinces would be better achieved if their residents are pigeonholed with other Muslims in Thailand. In short, it was an attempt to tie the future of the people of Southern Thailand along with Muslims in other parts of the country.

Along with GAMPAR and BRN, there was another group operating in Southern Thailand called Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani (BNPP) led by Tengku Abdul Jalal.[7] Islam was part of its policy and they wanted to use it to exploit support from the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Arab League (Pitsuwan 1982, p. 228; Farouk 1984, p. 241). Moreover, BNPP tried to shore up international Muslim support when they prepared a document titled "The Muslim Struggle for Survival in South Thailand" at the 7th Conference of Islamic Foreign Ministers meeting at Istanbul in 1976 (Farouk 1984, p. 241). But these attempts to garner backing from Islamic countries and organizations did not materialize in any tangible assistance and BNPP faded away. With the collapse of BNPP, the religious rebellion in Southern Thailand faced a hiccup but two decades later, it would again become prominent in the conflict.

The administration of the southern provinces was one of the key grievances of the Malays. Most of the bureaucrats in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat were Thais who spoke little Malay and their attitudes towards the Malay population was denigrating (Thomas 1975, p. 5). In a bid to alleviate this problem, the Thai government in the 1960s instituted policies that may have inadvertently emphasized the religious belief of the people of Southern Thailand. In 1961, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat introduced the Pondok Educational Improvement Program intended at imparting secular education to the students who studied at the *pondok* (religious schools). This gave the Thai government some degree of control over the *pondok* curriculum and hoped to generate people who could occupy administrative posts in the southern provinces. But this process of transforming the *pondok* into "private schools teaching Islam" upset the *tok guru*, the pious heads of the *pondok* (Dulyakasem 1991, p. 146), and the traditional process of generating elites in the Malay-Muslim society (Pitsuwan 1982, p. 194). A corollary to this policy was a decline of Pattani's position as a centre for Islamic education (Liow 2005, p. 128), as well as an exodus of students to Islamic countries in the Middle East to receive religious education (Madmarn 2002, pp. 80–83).

The military government in Thailand collapsed in 1973 and a brief interlude of democracy lasted for the next three years. During this period, the prejudice against the Malays in Southern Thailand in the previous decades was exposed (Pitsuwan 1982, p. 218). Furthermore, many of the students who returned to Thailand from the Middle East with Islamic credentials found themselves in a quandary. While their religious education and extensive links with Muslim movements in Islamic countries gave them a good reputation in Malay society, they were rebuffed from leadership positions in the state bureaucracy (Pitsuwan 1982, p. 220).

It was in this background that another insurgent group called the Pattani United Liberated Organization (PULO) or Pertubohan Persatuan Pembebasan Pattani emerged. It was officially formed in the late 1960s and led by Tungku Bira Kotanila (Satha-Anand 1986, p. 15).[8] Islam was an important concept in PULO's doctrine and they were "fight[ing] for the freedom of Pattani and the emergence of an Islamic Republic" (Satha-Anand 1986, pp. 15–16).[9] Unlike GAMPAR and BRN, PULO placed a greater emphasis on the notion of "Islam" than the idea of "Malay" in the conflict. This allowed it to maintain the uppermost hierarchy of its organization in the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia and also enlist members and sympathizers during the yearly *haj* pilgrimage (Pitsuwan 1982, pp. 234 and 236).

In December 1975, there was a massive demonstration outside the Pattani Central mosque protesting against the murder of five villagers by Thai security forces (Che Man 1990, p. 101). PULO, who was alleged to be behind this protest, manipulated the character of the victims as Muslims rather than Malays. They managed a turnout of around 70,000 protestors by playing up religious symbols like the intoning of verses from the Holy Qur'an and holding the rally on 11 December, an important Islamic holiday (Pitsuwan 1982, pp. 236–38). This incident clearly reflected the social clout of the organization.

In September 1977, PULO was involved in a bombing during a royal visit to *pondok* in Yala and orchestrated another bombing in October 1979 at a Yala railway station. These incidents received a lot of media coverage and according to a study by Chaiwat Satha-Anand, PULO was behind most insurgent attacks in Southern Thailand during the period October 1976–81 (Satha-Anand 1986, pp. 10 and 13). Two relatively minor but noteworthy incidents took place in 1980 that clearly indicated PULO's intention of manipulating the religious divide in the conflict.

> Early in July 1980, twelve PULO members held up a bus running between Narathiwat and Bangkok. The Buddhist passengers were separated from the Muslims. Four Buddhists were shot dead. One month earlier, PULO stopped several cars travelling through Pa-Lud Road. The unfortunate passengers were questioned one by one whether he/she was a Buddhist or a Muslim. The PULO freed the Muslims, while five Buddhists were killed. (Satha-Anand 1986, p. 13)

In the 1980s, BRN further split into BRN Coordinate, Congress, and Ulama. The aims of the splinter groups have not changed drastically but BRN Coordinate led by Haji M. has worked towards garnering support through the *pondok* (ICG Asia Report, 2005, p. 12). Furthermore, a split within PULO saw the creation of a group called New PULO in 1995 led by A-rong Muleng and Haji Abdul Rohman Bazo (Gunaratna, Acharya, and Chua 2005, p. 39). The goals of this faction appear to align with its parent. There also seems to be a tactical alliance between the PULO and BRN factions (ICG Asia Report, 2005, p. 13). The end of the Soviet-Afghan war also had an indirect impact on the insurgency in Southern Thailand. In 1995, the Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani (GMIP) was formed by Nasori Saesaeng, a Soviet-Afghan war veteran. Similar to PULO in its objective to create an Islamic state in Southern Thailand, the GMIP has also supported Osama bin Laden as part of its cause (Anthony Davis, cited in ICG Asia Report, 2005, p. 13). Reports of umbrella organizations like

BERSATU have also emerged but their goals are still unclear but do not seem to significantly deviate from its member groups (Gunaratna, Acharya, and Chua 2005, pp. 42–45).

With the rise of groups such as the PULO and GMIP, the religious nature of the conflict in Southern Thailand has become more prominent. They emphasized Islam in their struggle against Bangkok and hence viewed their adversary as Buddhists, not Thais. The violence in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat was no longer considered a "Thai versus Malay" predicament; it was increasingly regarded as a "Buddhist versus Muslim" problem. How did this transformation from a primarily "ethnic" strife to a predominantly "religious" discord occur?

Explaining the "Ethnic" to "Religious" Shift

There are four key reasons for the change. First, the Thai government attempted to expunge the notion of being Malay from the people living in the southern provinces. After World War II, there was fear among Thai authorities that rising Malay nationalism in Southeast Asia would erode the loyalty of the southern provinces to the Thai nation-state. In an attempt to eradicate the ethnic divide in Thailand, they embarked on a policy of tagging all Muslims in Thailand as "Thai Muslim". Despite the move to embrace religious plurality, it only accentuated the religious cleavage in the Southern Thailand conflict. Since Buddhism was intricately linked with the idea of being Thai (McVey 1989, p. 36),[10] the term "Thai Muslim" imposed on all Muslims in the country was one of "you are Thai *but* you are Muslim". In short, it was not possible to be called just "Thai" and be considered a Muslim.

Second, the lack of support from Malaysia to the insurgent groups diminished the ethnic Malay cause of the conflict. Tengku Abdul Rahman, then Prime Minister of Malaysia, stressed that it would not back the rebel organizations in Southern Thailand (Haemindra 1977, p. 86). While Malaysia's public stance to stay away from the insurgency was based on ASEAN's non-interference in the internal affairs of other member states, it also required Thailand's assistance to contain the communist threat to the country (Liow 2004, pp. 539 and 541). The only assistance in the form of support bases to the rebels in Southern Thailand came from Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and its predecessor, Pan-Malay Islamic Party (PMIP), the opposition party which controls Kelantan state. Many Malaysians also supported the interference of their country into the conflict (Gopinath 1991, p. 139).

But despite these pressures, the Malaysian government did not offer any tangible support to the Southern Thailand insurgents.

Third, the outflow of students to pursue higher Islamic education in the Middle East also amplified the religious identity of the younger generation in Southern Thailand. Influenced by the worldwide resurgence of Islam after World War II,[11] many wanted to study at the centre of Islamic education. Some of them were also enticed with scholarships from Islamic associations (Che Man 1990, p. 69). Since the 1970s, there has also been a surge of financial aid for Islamic education in Southern Thailand. For instance, the Yala Islamic College was set up with assistance from the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, Islamic Development Bank, International Islamic Relief Organization, as well as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar (Liow 2005, p. 138). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has contributed towards textbooks in Pattani *pondok* (Madmarn 2002, pp. 86–87). The Pondok Educational Improvement Program mentioned earlier also contributed towards many *tok guru* studying religious instruction abroad. These heightened the Islamic consciousness of the southern provinces of Thailand.

Fourth, the post–September 11 environment and the fear of global terrorism penetrating local conflicts has also facilitated in adding a religious colouring to the unrest in Southern Thailand. Although no definite links with external terror groups have surfaced, the arrest of regional terrorist organization Jemaah Islamiyah's (JI) operational head Hambali in August 2003 has heightened such a possibility. Moreover, the emergence of GMIP, led by alumni of the Soviet-Afghan war, has increased the risk of a wider religious conflict. On 28 April 2004, a battle at the Krue Se mosque in Pattani reinforced the religious nature of the conflict (ICG Asia Report, 2005, pp. 22–25). A group of men, after praying at the Krue Se mosque, attacked the nearest security checkpoint. After the security forces retaliated, the militants retreated to the Krue Se mosque. Thai army personnel, who had surrounded the mosque, decided to launch an assault on the militants. In the ensuing battle, coupled with attacks elsewhere across Southern Thailand on the same day, more than a hundred rebels and five security personnel were killed. The choice of venue and dates for this attack do not seem arbitrary. Krue Se is a historic mosque in Pattani and has been a witness to resistance from the southern provinces earlier (Satha-Anand 2005, pp. 60–77).

The Media's Portrayal of the Conflict

As the previous three sections have examined, the religious factor in

the Southern Thailand strife has increased over the last three decades. The rise of the religious facet has given rise to the perception that the conflict is one entirely between Buddhists and Muslims. The media has played an important role in sustaining this slant. When reporting on the violence in Southern Thailand, the religious angle is emphasized even though religion had very little to do with the incident. Two recent examples are described below.

One of the most tragic incidents of violence took place in Tak Bai district on 25 October 2004. It began as a demonstration outside a police station and ended with more than 80 people dead. About two weeks prior to this incident, four defence volunteers testified to the police that some men had stormed their homes and stolen their state-issued shotguns.[12] They were arrested about a week later.[13] The protestors at Tak Bai alleged that these defence volunteers had been unreasonably arrested and demanded their immediate release. The crowd swelled close to 1,500 within a few hours.[14] The police arrested more than a 1,000 protestors and hauled them into trucks to be taken to military camps for questioning.[15] During the journey, 78 protestors died, most due to suffocation.[16]

Other than the number of deaths, the Tak Bai protest is significant for two reasons. First, the demonstrators were not rallying against the arrest of community leaders or persons holding high positions in Southern Thailand; the six accused were "ordinary citizens". Second, unlike the Krue Se episode, religion did not directly influence the protestors. Despite this, reports of the incident have chosen to draw attention to the religious trait of the protestors as well as the accused. For instance, the *BBC News* reported that "nearly 80 *Muslims* [had] died"[17] protesting against the detainment of "six *Muslim* men".[18] Giving a background of the conflict, it unambiguously referred to the people of Southern Thailand as, "[t]hey speak Yawi, a Malay dialect, and *most importantly they are Muslims, abiding by Islamic rules and restrictions*".[19] Religious sentiment for this incident heightened when it became known that many of the demonstrators were weak because of the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.[20] Moreover, the continued media depiction of the tragedy as one between Buddhist and Muslims led many Islamic countries including Indonesia, Iran and Pakistan to express outrage at the incident.[21]

Especially after the Tak Bai protest, media reports on even relatively minor acts of violence have a religious spin to it. An insightful incident took place in December 2004 when a teacher in a district school was shot on his way to work and died en route to the hospital. The *Bangkok Post* gave an account of the episode with the

headline, "School teacher gunned down on way to work".[22] Reuters began its report with "Suspected Muslim militants killed a Buddhist teacher in Thailand's largely Muslim south ...".[23] The *Straits Times* went on to say that, "[the teacher] was among scores of Buddhists killed in apparent acts of revenge by Islamic militants after at least 85 Muslims died at the hands of Thai security forces, who dispersed a violent protest on October 25 in Narathiwat's Tak Bai district".[24] Factually, none of the news reports are inaccurate. But they vary in the way religion is woven into the conflict and how they sustain the perception that the nature of the Southern Thailand unrest is entirely religious.

After the 1970s, prominence has been given to the religious facet of the turmoil in Southern Thailand. Almost all acts of violence, whether proven to be related to the insurgency or otherwise,[25] are portrayed to be carried out by suspected "Muslim" or "Islamic" militants and the victims are usually depicted as "Buddhist". While some reports on the strife acknowledge that the people in Southern Thailand are ethnic Malays, they point to the significance of their religion. Such framing of the Southern Thailand conflict as completely religious is flawed.

The Undertones of a Religious Conflict

The treatment of the discord in Southern Thailand as a wholly religious conflict is imprecise and doing so has important connotations. First, there is a fear of a diffusion of the conflict. In the case of the Southern Thailand insurgency, the geographical reach of an ethnic conflict in Southern Thailand is far less compared with a religious unrest. Since Malays are a majority only in neighbouring Malaysia, an ethnic conflict could potentially only lead to support and sympathy from across the border. On the other hand, a religious conflict feeds the paranoia of the post-9/11 mindset. It conjures a picture of terrorists with religious motivations from the Middle East and Southeast Asia coming to the aid of their kin in Southern Thailand.

Historically, support for the insurgents in Southern Thailand centred on the Kelantan state in Malaysia (Suwannathat-Pian 1988, p. 160). It was the Kelantan-Patani axis that fervently endeavoured to rid themselves of Siam's authority. During the decades after World War II when Malay nationalism was prominent, backing came primarily from Kelantan. In this phase, external terrorist groups paid little interest to the strife. Increase in the intensity of violence or an escalation of grievances does not automatically imply external support.

It is the rising portrayal of the conflict as religious in nature that may bring assistance, possibly even uninvited, from external terrorist organizations. It is equally important to note that if outside backing does materialize, it again does not inevitably mean jihad is being waged in Southern Thailand.

On 3 April 2005, explosions at the Hat Yai airport as well as in front of the French-owned Carrefour supermarket in Songkhla province resulted in deaths of at least two people and 75 injured, including four foreigners.[26] Covering this event, CNN said that the incident "raised concerns that Muslim insurgents are expanding their field of operations".[27] However, these alarmist reports over the spread of the conflict failed to mention that this was not the first time the insurgents have targeted outside the southern provinces of Thailand. In June 1977, militants attacked the Don Muang International Airport in Bangkok and in July 1980, they bombed some transportation infrastructure in Bangkok (Satha-Anand 1986, pp. 11–12). Hence the association of "Muslim insurgents" with the geographical widening of the conflict is self-serving. On 20 September 2005, two Thai marines were taken hostage in Tanyong Limo village. During the failed attempts to have them released, the insurgents demanded that Malaysian reporters cover the incident,[28] reflecting that primary support for the rebels still originates from neighbouring Malaysia.

Secondly, the nature of a protracted conflict plays a part in supporting the social divisions in the local population. The repeated depiction of the insurgency as ethnic in nature serves to deepen the Thai-Malay divide. In a similar manner, frequent portrayal of the conflict as religious nourishes the Buddhist-Muslim cleavage. It is vital to note that a religious divide in society is not a problem per se. However, what is critical is an understanding on how the representation of the insurgency in Southern Thailand either deepens or smoothens the existing fault-lines in society. This is particularly true for the conflict in Southern Thailand because the repeated depiction of the strife as religious implicates other Muslims in the rest of the country who do not partake in the rebellion. Muslims in Thailand is not homogeneous as it is usually portrayed. The ethnography of Muslims in Thailand reflects a more heterogeneous picture, many of whom have successfully assimilated into the Thai-nation state. They include the Muslim Siamese, the Chams, the West Asians, the South Asians, the Indonesians, the Chinese Muslims, and the Samsams (Farouk 1988, pp. 5–12; Gilquin 2005, pp. 33–42).

Moreover, the conflict in Southern Thailand has largely been limited to the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. The province

of Satun, which has also historically come under the sultanate of Patani has not experienced any significant political resistance or major incidents of violence. Satun's divergence stems from the fact that it came more under the influence of the kingdom of Kedah rather than that of Kelantan. Although the people of Satun have Malay ancestry, they do not express any fondness for their ethnic Malay history and regard themselves as Thai (Dulyakasem 1991, p. 133). In addition, many of Satun's residents speak Thai and do not understand the Pattani-Malay dialect (Dulyakasem 1991, p. 133; Yegar 2002, p. 79).[29] Hence continuous emphasis on the religious aspect in the Southern Thailand conflict fails to account for the absence of violence in Satun and inadvertently incriminates residents of the province with the rebels. In addition, an entirely religious strife cannot explain the fact that most of the victims in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat were Muslim civilians.[30]

Thirdly, the character of the insurgency also provides insights into the main players. In addition to the Thai state and the insurgent groups in Southern Thailand, an ethnic conflict would include, for example, the role of Malaysia. However, a religious conflict might bring into the picture the role of Islamic NGOs as well as religious terrorist groups from outside Thailand. The questioning of the high-handed government response to the conflict by the chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, during his visit to Southern Thailand in March 2005[31] reflects how the religious nature of the insurgency is expanding the stakeholders in the conflict. In addition, the international Islamic organizations and militant groups may exaggerate the religious facet of the conflict if it serves their interests. The Organization of Islamic Conferences (OIC) expressed reservations over the violence in Southern Thailand and in June 2005 sent a delegation to the region on a fact-finding mission.[32] A month later, the Thai Foreign Minister, Kantathi Suphamongkon, claimed that the OIC understood that the strife in the southern provinces was not religious and would not get involved.[33] But in October 2005 the OIC said that they were concerned about the "continued acts of violence in Southern Thailand against Muslims"[34] and this led to a terse retort by the Thai government.[35] Another incident got the attention of United Nations. On 29 August 2005 a highly respected religious leader named Satopa Yusoh was killed and the next day 131 people fled to Malaysia. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has begun interviewing the asylum seekers despite efforts by the Thai government to prevent the international agency from getting involved.[36]

With the participation of such external actors in the conflict, any resolution of the Southern Thailand unrest will need to satisfy their concerns too. At present, the Thaksin government is preoccupied with preventing the internationalization of the conflict and has gone great lengths in attempting to convince the international community that the discord in Southern Thailand is an internal problem. This has led to a bitter war of words between Bangkok on one hand, and the OIC, UNHCR, and Amnesty International, on the other. This approach is fractional because it deviates time and resources away from resolving the conflict. The good turn-out in the southern provinces during the February 2005 national elections shows that the majority still prefer the ballot to the bullet. But they clearly expressed their displeasure with the Thaksin government's high-handed response by rejecting his Thai Rak Thai party. Instead of making use of this momentum, Bangkok has been engrossed with the external aspects of the conflict. In short, the repeated depiction of the unrest as religious has contributed to the internationalization of the strife and has inhibited an efficient response from Bangkok to the insurgency.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to explain the transformation of the Southern Thailand conflict from a Thai versus Malay strife to a Buddhist versus Muslim discord. The insurgency in the southern Thai provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat is not a recent occurrence, with the first major rebellion occurring during the 17th century. From the 19th century, the sultanates of Patani, Kelantan, and Kedah endeavoured to rid themselves of Siam's political authority. The opposition during these years was not driven by conceptions of ethnic or religious cohesion. The aristocratic challenge was motivated by power calculations among the various rulers. In the first half of the 20th century, ethnic solidarity slowly began to take root in the conflict.

Bangkok's policy of imposing the Thai language in the southern provinces was perceived as a danger to the Malay tongue and by extension, an intrusion into their ethnic Malay culture. During the 1940s, marginalized aristocratic elites manipulated the rising Malay nationalism in Southeast Asia to shore support against the Thai government. This allowed some of the insurgent groups to gain assistance from Malays across the border in Malaysia. This also led to more structured forms of resistance with the creation of rebel organizations like GAMPAR and BRN championing the Malay cause in the conflict.

During the 1970s, the religious character of the strife rose to the surface. The adversaries in the unrest were now increasingly portrayed as Buddhist and Muslim. This change was facilitated by a combination of internal and external factors. In an attempt to bind the future of the Malays along with other Muslims in Thailand, Bangkok created the notion of "Thai Muslim". But this only accentuated the religious divide in Thai society. The dearth of support from Malaysia also contributed to the waning of the Malay resistance. Furthermore, students who returned to Thailand after pursuing higher Islamic education in the Middle East sharpened the religious consciousness of the southern provinces. More recently, the post-September 11 milieu and the Krue Se mosque massacre have also contributed to the framing of the Southern Thailand conflict as religious in nature. The second half of the 20th century also saw the emergence of rebel groups like PULO and GMIP which have emphasized the Islamic than on the Malay cause in their struggle against the Thailand government.

This article has also sought to show that despite the rise of the religious facet in the Southern Thailand unrest, it is flawed to treat the conflict as entirely between Buddhists and Muslims and such an assumption has fallacious inferences. An ethnic Thai versus Malay discord in Thailand's restive south can spread at most to neighbouring Malaysia. Indeed, primary support and sympathy for the conflict has come from Kelantan state. However, a religious Buddhist versus Muslim conflict casts a phobia over the spread of the strife outside Southeast Asia. But such external assistance to the rebel groups in Southern Thailand has thus far been speculative. Despite this tenuous link, labelling the perpetrators as "Islamic" or "Muslim" militants only seeks to skew the conflict towards a more religious track. Moreover, repeated portrayal of a religious angle to the turmoil reinforces the religious gulf in Thai society. It also inadvertently shoves the other Muslims in Thailand, especially in Satun that was once part of the kingdom of Patani, to the side of the adversary. Lastly, a religious conflict also greatly increases the players in the unrest who will need to be appeased if peace is to be sought. The public statements by organizations like the OIC and the Nahdlatul Ulama show that their views will need to be taken into consideration when resolving the conflict in Southern Thailand.

The discord in Thailand's restive south is still between Thais and Malays. Notwithstanding the rise of religious rhetoric by insurgent groups, their core struggle is still on behalf of the Malays. It is important for the Thai government to recognize that the majority of Muslims have successfully integrated into the Thai nation-state. If the southern

insurgency is treated as conflict between Buddhists and Muslims, any policy to resolve the unrest will affect Muslims in other parts of the country. An accurate identification of the adversary is necessary for a more focused resolution of the conflict.

NOTES

* The author would like to thank Dr Joseph Liow for his comments and helpful suggestions.

1 In this article the Thai government will be referred to as "Siam" before 1939 and "Thailand" henceforth.

2 "1,900 Attacks in South of Thailand since Last Year", Straits Times Interactive, 3 October 2005.

3 For a discussion on the root causes of the Southern Thailand conflict, see Croissant (2005) and ICG Asia Report (2005).

4 In this article the Malay spelling of "Patani" will be used to refer to the kingdom of Patani whereas the Thai version of "Pattani" will be used to denote the Thai province after 1909.

5 The province of Satun is sometimes referred to as Setul (Haemindra 1976, p. 201).

6 There may have been some discrimination against non-Buddhists but these were not very widespread (Suwannathat-Pian 1995, p. 130).

7 There is some discrepancy among scholars on whether BNPP is a splinter organization from BRN or vice versa. See Farouk (1984, p. 240) and Che Man (1990, pp. 98–99).

8 Some sources list the formation of PULO in 1967 (Farouk 1984, p. 242).

9 Peter Chalk lists PULO's ideology as UBANGTAPEKEMA, one that constitutes Religion, Race/Nationalism, Homeland, and Humanitarianism (Chalk 2001, p. 243).

10 There was domestic pressure to make Buddhism the official religion of Thailand in the 1997 Constitution of Thailand. Although these demands did not succeed, Buddhism is still closely allied with the notion of being Thai (McCargo 2004, pp. 164–67).

11 For more information on the Islamic revival after World War II, see Ayoob (1981).

12 "South Flares Up as Sirichai Flies In", *Bangkok Post*, 13 October 2004.

13 "Shotgun Robbery Claim a Self-Defence", *Nation*, 18 October 2004.

14 It was later established that not everyone at the Tak Bai police station were aware of the arrest (ICG Asia Report 2005, pp. 27–28).

15 "81 Dead: Riot Toll Hits 87", *Bangkok Post*, 27 October 2004.

16 "Warnings of Bloodbath in Wake of Mass Deaths", *Bangkok Post*, 27 October 2004.

17 "Thailand's Restive South", British Broadcasting Corporation News, 26 October 2004, emphasis added.

18 "Thai Protestors Die in Custody", British Broadcasting Corporation News, 26 October 2004, emphasis added.

19 "Thailand's Restive South", British Broadcasting Corporation News, 26 October 2004, emphasis added.

20 "PM: Deaths Due to Religious Fasting", *Nation*, 27 October 2004.

21 "Tak Bai Crackdown: Global Outrage as Grim Details Emerge; PM Shows No Remorse", *Nation*, 28 October 2004.

22 "Schoolteacher Gunned Down on Way to Work", *Bangkok Post*, 15 December 2004.

23 "Buddhist Teacher Killed in Thai Muslim South", Reuters Foundation AlertNet, 14 December 2004.

24 "Buddhist Teacher Shot Dead in Thai South", Straits Times Interactive, 15 December 2004.

25 There are a significant number of violent incidents in Southern Thailand which are not associated with the unrest (Liow 2004, pp. 542–44).

26 "Thai Airport Raises Fear of Widening Insurgency", ChannelnewsAsia, 4 April 2005.

27 "At Least Two Dead in Thai Blast", CNN, 4 April 2005.

28 For a discussion on the Tanyong Limo episode, see ICG Asia Report (2005, pp. 15–17).

29 The Pattani-Malay dialect is similar to Kelantan Malay whereas Kedah-Perlis Malay in Satun has a noticeable Thai inspiration (Farouk 1988, p. 15).

30 E-mail correspondence with Dr Joseph Liow.

31 "Islamic Leader Queries Government Policy of Using Force", *Bangkok Post*, 31 March 2005.

32 "OIC Delegation Visits Southern Thailand", Thai News Service, 7 June 2005.

33 "OIC Believes Violence in South of Thailand Not Religiously Inspired", *Thai News Service*, 5 July 2005.

34 "On Recurrent Waves of Violence in Southern Thailand", OIC Press Release, 18 October 2005, http://www.oic-oci.org/press/english/october2005/thailand.htm, accessed 26 December 2005.

35 "Thailand's response to OIC Press Release on Recurrent Waves of Violence in Southern Thailand", Thai News Service, 19 October 2005.

36 "UN Agency Interviews Muslims", *Bangkok Post*, 7 September 2005.

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