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Many faces of ISLAM

IMTIYAZ YUSUF offers an in-depth analysis on Muslim religious and cultural traditions in Thailand

Mention of Islam in Thailand normally means focussing on the South of Thailand. My countrywide research shows that there are many faces of Islam in Thailand across the country covering the regions of the deep South (comprising Narathiwat, Yala, Pattani), the upper South (Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla, Phuket, Krabi, Phangnga, Ranong, Trang and Satun), the Central plains (Bangkok, Ayutthaya, etc), the North (Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai) and the Northeast (Khon Kaen, Kalasin, Sakon Nakhon and Udon Thani).

There were two reasons for choosing these provinces as areas of survey. One, most of the studies about Islam in Thailand focus only on the deep South portraying as if there is no presence of Islam in the other parts of the country. Second, these provinces have substantial Muslim populations, hence the need to highlight the geographic spread, ethnic and sectarian variety within Thai Islam.

The focus groups for the interviews were comprised of Muslim scholars, community leaders, educators, mosque officials, and those involved in official community organisations such as the Provincial Islamic Councils, youth, activists and women representatives. The objective of the interviews was to find out Thai Muslim opinions about:

- 1) The concepts of ethnicity, religion and Thainess
- 2) Religious divisions within the Thai Muslim community
- 3) Thai Muslim-Thai Buddhist relations
- 4) The role and status of Islamic education and Muslim attitude towards general education
- 5) Thai Muslim attitudes towards state and government policies
- 6) Practice of Muslim personal law
- 7) Ethno-religious dimension of the conflict in southern Thailand
- 8) General Thai Muslim attitudes towards the conflict in southern Thailand

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Thai Muslims outside a mosque in Pattani province.

9) What measures need to be taken by the government to promote security

My research revealed that the officially coined term of "Thai Islam" is seen as ethnically offensive, especially by the Malay Muslims of the South, due to its imposition from Bangkok after the declaration of the "Patronage of Islamic Act of 1945." Hence the deep southerners prefer to refer to themselves as "Malay Muslims." But the term "Malay Muslims" has an ethnic, regional and sectarian limitations for it overlooks the other sections of the Thai Muslim community spreading across the country who are of different ethnic, provincial and even theological variation from those in the deep South.



Thai Muslim women enjoy full freedom in Thailand.

The Muslims in the rest of the country do not find the term "Thai Islam" offensive, but are rather proud to identify themselves with this term, for it represents their national identity.

Thailand has been successful in producing a national Thai identity based on commonality of language, socio-cultural tolerance and assimilation in a growing economy. The Thai Muslim population is about 5 million, making up about approximately 7.5-8% of the total population, 44% of whom reside in the South and the rest in the different provinces of Thailand.

EARLY SETTLERS



Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont greets Dr Abdullah Bin Abdul Mohsin Al-Turki, secretary-general of the Muslim World League, in June.

Islam came to Thailand from three directions: from the South, Central and North. It first arrived in southern Thailand in the 13th and 14th centuries C.E., brought by the Arab traders. Islam arrived in Central Thailand during the 15th century through Shia Persian and Sunni Indian traders stationed in Ayudhya. Indian, Bengali and Chinese Muslims arrived in the North of Thailand between the 1870s and 1890s, respectively. The establishment of the new capital of Bangkok in 1782 by king Rama I of the Chakri dynasty saw the settlement of Iranian, Indian, Pakistani, Cham, Indonesian, and Malay Muslims in different locations of the country.

The history of Islam in Thailand also has two distinct dates: first, the Islamisation of Patani around the 1520s, and second, the arrival of non-Malay Muslims such as the Persians, Chams, Indians and others at the courts and the cities of the Ayudhya and the Chakri dynasties since the 14th century. Both of these merged into the nation-state in 1939, when Siam became Thailand.

Islam in Thailand operates in three configurations defined by history and location: 1) the ethnic Malay-speaking Islam is practiced in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat of the deep South; 2) the integrated ethnically Malay but Thai-speaking Islam is practiced in the province of upper South; and 3) the multi-ethnic Thai-speaking integrated Islam of central Thailand provinces of Bangkok and Ayutthaya and also that of northern and northeastern Thailand; this group comprises Muslims of Persian, Malay, Cham, Indonesian, Indian, Bengali, Pathan, and Chinese ethnic backgrounds. These migrant Muslims from neighbouring countries

came to settle in Thailand for economic and political reasons. They also fled religious persecution at the hands of the communists in China and the nationalists in Burma.

The first type of Islam has been largely historically resistant to integration within Thai polity, while the second and third types have been integrative. The former use Malay language as the means of social and religious communication while the latter use Thai for both social and religious purposes.

The interview surveys about the identity and religion conducted for this research revealed that Malay Muslims of the deep South prefer to view their identity as being that of Malays who are living in Thailand. They also lay strong emphasis on being the Malay speaking citizens of Thailand.

Thus ethno-linguistic identification tied with adherence to the religion of Islam is very strong in the provinces of the deep South. They give priority to their ethnic identity of Malayness over that of Islam, transnationally they identify themselves with the northern Malaysian provinces of Kelantan and Trengganu. On the other hand, the ethnically Malay but Thai speaking Muslims of the upper South who are the descendants of migrants from Kedah and Perlis in Malaysia while recognizing themselves as belonging to the Malay ethnic stock view themselves more as Thai Muslims and see no contradiction in their identities of being a Muslim and Thai citizen. Similar views about identity are found in the Thai Muslims of Central, Northeast and Northern regions of Thailand. Nearly all of them refer to themselves as Thais who follow the religion of Islam and speak the Thai language in spite of ethnic diversity within their groups.

SECTARIAN DIFFERENCES

There is also the presence of different Muslim religious sects within Thai Islam. The majority of Thai Muslims belong to the Sunni sect, but there is also the presence of a small Shia community belonging to the Imami, Ismaili and Bohras sub-groups within the Shia sect. Many Thai Sunni Muslims converted to Shiism after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. There are also Thai converts to Islam either through marriage or religious conversions. Overall, the Thai Muslims make up the largest minority religious group in the country.

The two major schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, namely Hanafi and Shafii, are both present within Thai Islam. The Shafii are in the majority and they are identified with the Malay ethnic group. The Hanafi school is practiced among the Chinese and sections of Indian Muslims in Thailand. There is also the presence of the Wahhabi or the Salafi school of thought also known as kaum muda (Malay) or khana mai (Thai) i.e. those who prefer to follow a more puritan form of Islamic religious interpretation, ritual and social practice. This puritan was introduced in Thailand around 80 years ago and is now spreading in the various parts of the country except in the deep South where Islamic practice is rooted in the Shafii school identified with Malay ethnicity. Initially, the coming of the Wahhabi Islam aroused a lot of tension and conflict within the general Thai Muslim community, which has now subsided and led to the spirit of intrareligious co-existence.

As a rule, Thai Muslims do not participate in those aspects of Thai culture which contain Buddhist religious elements. Educated Thai Muslims view Buddhism, with its concepts of dukkha (suffering) and seeking of nirvana (enlightenment) as philosophical and offering a methodological approach to life. But in their view, the popular Thai religious beliefs in spirits and demons are strange and unwise. On the other hand, educated Buddhists view Buddhism



The opening of a new branch of the Islamic Bank of Thailand on Sathorn Road.

as philosophically and scientifically superior to Islam. In their view Islam's belief in monotheism makes it inferior.

!Muslim-Buddhist relations in Thailand function on the principle of "live and let live", with the two groups engaging in diverse social and political interactions. It is not surprising to find Buddhist temples and Muslim mosques located side by side. Several Thai Muslim politicians in various provinces have been elected to the parliament or local and provincial bodies from majority Buddhist constituencies. Overall, there are good social relations between Buddhists and Muslims in nearly all parts of the country except the South, where the ongoing unrest is now taking on a religious colour marked by inter-religious attacks, mistrust, mutual suspicions and tensions on both sides.

EDUCATION AND POLITICS

The Malay Muslims of the deep and upper South pay a lot of respect to and are proud of the role of pondok schools, which play a central role in maintaining and transmitting Malay ethnic identity, language and religion. Thus they are very sensitive to any state-based efforts to transform the pondok into institutes of modern education. They also expect the "Islamic Private Schools", which are registered with the Ministry of Education and implement a combined religious and modern educational curriculum, to continue playing the role of maintainer and transmitter of Malay ethnic and religious identity.

In the case of the upper South and Central regions of Thailand, there is a general absence of the tradition of pondok education. Most of the younger generation go to the Islamic Private Schools and then onto university education. While in the case of the northern Thailand, the Chinese and Indian Muslims there prefer to send their children to modern Muslim, Christian or government schools to obtain their education and learn the religion of Islam as an additional subject. The Chinese Muslims of the North are the most professionally modernized among the Thai Muslim community. Many of them are engaged in modern profession such as engineering, medicine and politics. This professional advancement of the Chiang Mai Muslim community has brought them recognition and respect from members of the other religious communities in Chiang Mai and the North.

In the Northeast, where Muslims are a tiny minority, there are no private Islamic schools. Local Muslim organisations like the Foundation for Education and Development of Muslims in the Northeast Thailand (FEDMIN), located in Udon Thani, is engaged in providing Islamic education through non-formal educational activities such as madrasah education through the 36 local mosques in the region and holding youth training camps during the summer.

Besides the above described divisional system of educational among the Thai Muslims at the country level, it has been observed that many of the high school graduates from the South and other regions of Thailand cannot enter the local universities because they are unable to compete through the university entrance examination. These students then prefer to go the Middle Eastern, South Asian and Southeast Asian seminaries and universities to obtain further education in either religious or modern academic fields. Upon completion of their studies abroad they return home and either teach in the private Islamic religious schools or public universities across the country.

The majority of Thai Muslims see no contradiction between their religious affiliation with their Thai citizenship. In fact, many are proud of it and feel free to identify themselves as Thai Muslims. Some view the role of being a good citizen as being compatible with the social teachings of Islam. Thai Muslims have also enthusiastically joined in 2006-2007 celebrations honouring His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 60th year of ascension to the throne and the currently ongoing celebrations to mark his 80th birthday.

On the other hand, Thai Muslims cherish the religious freedom they enjoy in Thailand. The state does not place restrictions on Muslim religious practices and cultural activities. In fact, some hold the view that Thai Muslims enjoy more religious freedom in Thailand than is even available in some Muslim countries.

Over the decades, the Thai government has adjusted its policies to the religio-cultural demands of the Muslim community. For example, Muslim women are allowed to wear the hijab headscarf in pictures for official documents such as identity cards and passports, at official places of work, etc. 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 organisation of annual official Mawlid celebration (i.e. the birthday of the Prophet), granted religious certification of halal for food items produced by Thai food industries and recognised the office of the Chularajmontri, or Shaikh al-Islam, as the official head of the Thai Muslim community. This includes the Central Committee Islamic of Thailand and the Provincial Councils of Islamic Affairs to manage Muslim affairs at the national and provincial levels.

The Islamic Bank of Thailand with its 26 branches across the country is supported fully with Thai capital. So far, the bank has not received any investment from the Muslim world.

The political engagement of Thai Muslims has also undergone transformation since the recent rekindling of the democratic process in 1992. In 1988, the Malay speaking politicians from the South formed the Wahdah political faction, whose priority was to address developmental problems facing the Malay speaking Muslim community. It has been described as an ethnic movement seeking to achieve the interests of the Thai Muslims from within the political system. Its role in 2007 elections is still to be determined by the Wahdah leadership.

On the other hand, the Bangkok Muslim dominated political party Santiphrap Thai or Thai Peace Party formed in 2006 is also in the process of deciding as to which major political party to align with in coming elections.

Thailand allows the application of Muslim Personal Law in relation to the matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance in the four Muslim majority southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun through the court. Islamic law is applied in the court through a Muslim judge or Dato Yuthitham who participates in the trial and adjudication on cases and on points of Islamic law and has a power of casting vote.

Thai Muslims in the other provinces of the country apply the Muslim personal law either privately or through the provincial Islamic committees. My field work indicated that the Muslims in the other provinces strongly desire the application of Muslim personal law through the national judicial system.

This desire has also been expressed in the Thai parliament and also through direct representation to the political authorities. This need may emerge as a major demand on the Thai state in the future.

ETHNIC IDENTITY

Analysing the ongoing events in southern Thailand confirms the need to understand how the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand perceive their identity in ethnic and religious terms. It is a matter of fact that the Malay Muslims place strong emphasis on the ethnic aspect of their adherence to the religion of Islam.

They give primacy to their ethnic identity and view their life experience from within the context of agama (Malay) or Islamic religion . With such a perspective, ethnicity is the

defining characteristic of a group's identity, which sets it apart from others in its own eyes. The combination of ethnicity and religion often results in explosive conflicts in the political arena, for which solutions are not easily found.

The majority of southern Muslims in the deep South speak Pattani-Malay, or jawi , as the main language, and they are not fluent in Thai, which is the official language.

The recent events in Southern Thailand show that intermixing of ethnicity and religion is one dimension of the conflict which has resulted in destroying social relations between the Thai Muslims and Thai Buddhists who have been living as neighbors for centuries; this is evident from killings of both Muslims and Buddhists, including monks.

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

The Thai Muslims in the rest of the country view the conflict in the deep South as being the outcome of the unique history of the region relating to the Malay ethnic Muslim community of the South. The majority of the interviewees living in provinces other than the deep South are ready to help the southerners to learn about how to coexist with others in peaceful manner. And also that there are benefits in it for personal and social life, as well as for the image of Islam. They sympathize with the suffering of the southerners but do not view the conflict as jihad or religiously justified. According to them the southern situation does not fulfill the shurut - preconditions for jihad according to the Qur'an and Islamic law.

The Qur'an states that:

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 as pre-conditions for sanctioning of military jihad:

_ that there are aggressive designs against Islam, the state prohibits the practice of Islam; there is oppression and,

_ there are concerted efforts to eject Muslims from their legally acquired property; and,

_ that military campaigns are being launched to eradicate the Muslims.

In view of the non-southerners the conflict in the South of Thailand is about ethnicity and not religion. It is a political problem which needs political solution and they do not offer any kind of support to the southern insurgency. All the interviewees had a consensus that the Thai state offers enough religious freedom for the practice of Islam as a religion and culture.

The Surayud government has taken a conciliatory and dialogue approach in resolving the conflict. The prime minister has offered a public apology to the southerners for the mistakes committed by the previous government and has opted for dialogue with the local Muslims.

Deep southern Thailand is in a turmoil, it seems that it will take more time and it needs taking more effective practical measures for the recognition of the cultural diversity within the country before security can be restored. The implementation of the recommendations of the National Reconciliation Commission, which completed its work in June 2006, will go a long

way toward resolving the unrest in the South.

CONCLUSION

The country-wide field work undertaken in this survey indicated that the Muslim community of Thailand is a varied community. There are two types of Islam in Thailand, the integrated which is practiced in the provinces extending from the upper South to Chiang Rai in the North, and the volatile and the yet un-integrated Islam in the deep South. The difference between these two types of Islam lies in their backgrounds, history and the ethno-linguistic configurations. Both of them interpret Islam differently, the former see itself as a part of a Buddhist multi-religious country where Islam is the religion of a minority community; while the latter views Islam as a part of ethno-linguistic identity in a part of the country which was incorporated into Thailand.

The Thai Muslims residing in the upper South, Central, North and Northeastern part of the country appreciate the freedom of religion they enjoy in the country and see no problems of being identified as Thai citizens. They see compatibility in being Muslim and Thai.!

The problems in southern Thailand are the results of decades of economic neglect, lack of employment opportunities for the local Muslims in both public and private sectors and cultural insensitivity of the bureaucracy. Solution to this requires greater efforts to respond and deliver to the demands of the local Malay Muslim population. This will contribute to building of peace and stability within Thailand.

Thai Muslims have been co-existing with Thai Buddhist for centuries. This relationship has been put to test several times. The larger picture shows that Thai Muslims have become well integrated within Thai social-polity, they are proud of their national identity and relish the religious freedom they enjoy in the kingdom.

The need of the hour is that in these present times of tension the state, the general population and the Thai Muslim population should promote dialogue and work for mutual recognition of the cultural identity within the country. This will contribute toward the building of overall peace in the country in this age of religious pluralism.

Dr Imtiyaz Yusuf is a lecturer at the Graduate School of Philosophy and Religion, Assumption University Bangkok.

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