

Aspects of Islamic Revivalism in Thailand*

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Abstract:

How has Islamic revivalism changed the relationships among nation, ethnicity, and religion? How does each social context frame the way Islamic revivalism manifests itself? In this paper, I examine the case of Thailand as a starting point for further comparative analyses among minority Muslims in Asia.

Keywords:

Islamic Revivalism, Minorities, Muslim, Nationalism, Thailand

1. Introduction

Studies of Islamic revivalism cover a wide range of issues involving public perceptions and daily presentations of Islam, ranging from women wearing scarves, the rise of Islamic political parties and Islamic banking, to the militant groups espousing Jihadist ideology.¹ The Islamic revival in Thailand has been evident since the 1980s and continues to affect Muslim communities up to the present. In this paper, I first examine the representation of Islam in Thailand's modern nation-state building. Following this, I provide an overview of the current research on Islam and nationalism. Finally, I present insights into the various aspects of Islamic revivalism in Thai society.

Muslims consisted of 4.3 percent of Thailand's population in 2015 (National Statistical Office of Thailand). Muslims in Thailand are not a monolithic sub-group of the population, since they originate from various cultural and historical backgrounds including Malay, Arab, Persian, Javanese, Cham, Khmer, Indian, Pakistani, and Chinese.² However, the administrative control over Islamic affairs has mainly been aimed at strengthening governance in the southern border provinces of Thailand, where Malay Muslims comprise the majority of the population. The state once known as the sultanate of Patani has existed in the southern border provinces since the 15th century. It was incorporated into Thailand's administrative system at the end of the 19th century and became an integral part of Thailand's sovereign territory under the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909. The area of the former Patani sultanate, i.e., the current Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Songkla (partial) Provinces, has been experiencing separatist movements for more than a century.

2. Administration of Islamic Organizations

Since the absolute monarchy of Thailand was overthrown by the constitutional revolution of 1932, a new constitution has been enacted following every new military coup. Throughout the 19 constitutions, though, the status of religion has not changed significantly. The Thai constitution does not recognize an official state religion, and it guarantees religious freedom to citizens as a constitutional right. Nevertheless, a significant feature of the Thai constitution is that it has always stipulated that the Buddhist King is the upholder of all religions, including Islam. Although religious freedom is protected, Theravada Buddhism, which is practiced by more than 90 percent of Thailand's population, has a significant influence on both society and the state. Against this background, the state administration and national education systems continue to have a rough understanding of Islam or Muslims.³

In an effort to create a “new culture,” the “uncivilized” cultural and religious behaviors practiced in the Malay area of the four southern provinces (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun) became subject to reforms during the Phibunsongkhram administration (1938–1944). Under the cultural policies called rattaniyom, Buddhism and Thai culture were promoted as a national identity, and people were compelled to wear Western clothes. Harassment by the authorities frequently occurred, such as the forcible removal of Muslim women’s scarves and the turban worn by Muslim men.⁴ In 1941, the government prohibited Malay Muslims from studying the Qur’ān, as well as Malay and Arab languages⁵. Amidst the turmoil of World War II, the government attempted to destroy Islamic institutions. In 1943, the Thai government abolished the practice of Muslim judges specializing in Islamic family law and announced the application of the Civil and Commercial Codes⁶.

To address the deteriorating situation in Southern Thailand during the war period, the Royal Decree on Patronage of Islam was enacted in 1945 to create a hierarchical system, with the Chularatchamontri at the top and village mosques at the bottom. Chularatchamontri was once the title given to a high-ranking official who oversaw trade and domestic matters regarding Islam during the Ayutthaya period from the 14th to 18th century. With the 1945 decree, the Chularatchamontri position was restored as a representative of Muslims in Thailand as well as an advisor to the King with respect to Islamic affairs. Furthermore, the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand was established as an advisory body to the Ministries of Interior and Education. The decree also allowed the Ministry of Interior to establish Provincial Islamic Committees in those provinces having a certain scale of Muslim population.

In 1946, the Thai government implemented the Act on the Application of Islamic Law in the area of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala and Satun Provinces.⁷ The Act required each provincial court to deal with civil cases related to Islamic law on family and inheritance, and the trials and judicial decisions were supervised by the dato yutitham (Islamic judge) in addition to the secular judge. The Masjid Act of 1947 stipulated regulations such as the registration of masjid and the requirement of approval from the Provincial Islamic Committee for the appointment of imāms (Islamic leaders). After Phibunsongkhram returned as prime minister in 1948, the Royal Decree was amended to downgrade the role of the Chularatchamontri from a King’s advisor to an advisor to the Ministry of Education.

During the Cold War period from the 1950s to the beginning of the 1980s, communism presented a major threat to the Thai government. The Prime Ministerial Order 65/2523, issued in 1980, marked a major shift in government policies. Due to the change from using military actions to suppress militants to taking political measures, including amnesty, thousands of

communist guerillas surrendered and the communist threat gradually disappeared. The 1990s witnessed democratization measures that strengthened the political and social participation of Malay Muslims. In 1997, the Administration of Islamic Organization Act was enacted to replace the half-century-old Masjid Law and the Royal Decree on Patronage of Islam. A state-owned Islamic bank was established with the enactment of the Islamic Bank of Thailand Act in 2002.

The Islamic Organization Act of 1997, administered by the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Education, stipulated that the Chularatchamontri appointed by the King is the leader of Muslims in Thailand, followed by the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand. Provinces with a Muslim population and at least three Masjids shall establish the Provincial Islamic Committees. Each Masjid needs to establish a committee with an imām as a leader. Islamic institutions, including the Masjid, were granted juristic responsibilities, thus upgrading their legal status. The Chularatchamontri was granted responsibility for holding consultations with state agencies, appointing advisory committee members, announcing the beginning and end of Islamic events, in particular Ramaḍān, and issuing fatwās (legal opinions on specific points of Islamic law).

The Islamic Organization Act limited the term of the Provincial Islamic Committee to six years and introduced the election of committee members by the local imāms. The Provincial Committee selects a delegate to the Central Committee. The introduction of elections, however, caused factional conflicts within the organizations. Most notably, concern over Ḥalāl certification laid the foundation for the intervention of major political parties in the administration of Islam.⁸ After conflicts between the government and Islamic militants intensified in 2004, Islamic organizations and their leadership became an issue for the state from the national security perspective. The Krue Se Mosque and Tak Bai incidents, which both occurred in 2004, caused numerous casualties among Malay Muslims, including the deaths of unarmed citizens in the heavy-handed security responses of the Thai government. The Chularatchamontri and the Islamic Committees have been unable to mitigate the conflict between Malay Muslims and the Thai government. Consequently, the politicization of Islam has effectively undermined the legitimacy of Islamic administrative organizations.⁹

3. Nationalism and Islam

Surin Pitsuwan, former ASEAN Secretary General and a self-identified Muslim, mentioned that the question of legitimacy is even more crucial for Muslims, who constitute a

minority group within Thailand. According to Pitsuwan, “For Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand, the question has always been how to participate in the political process of a state based on Buddhist cosmology...the process of ‘national integration’ is synonymous with ‘cultural disintegration’ for Malay Muslims.”¹⁰

Scholars of the conflict in the southern border provinces mostly agree that the militant struggles are based on Malay nationalism, and the repressive policies of the Thaksin Chinnawat administration (2001–2006) triggered the intensification of conflicts. From the perspective of ethno-nationalism, the Thai government’s assimilation and integration policies are assumed to strengthen the sense of belonging among Malay Muslims.¹¹ Malay culture and Islam have also been deeply intertwined throughout the history of Southeast Asia. Islamic education based on the Malay language and Jawi (the Malay script based on the Arabic alphabet) at pondok (traditional Islamic boarding schools) and tadika (primary Islamic education institutions generally attached to the Masjid) played a significant role in creating the sense of belonging as Malay Muslims.¹² The Thai government’s control over pondok as well as the spread of the Thai school system after the 1960s are often mentioned as main reasons for the rise of the secessionist movement.¹³

Islamic revival in Muslim societies became evident worldwide in the 1970s, and in Thailand since the 1980s. Islamic revivalism as a socio-religious phenomenon should be viewed as a new wave in the research and distinguished from conventional studies on the conflict. There are two main themes regarding Islamic revivalism in Thailand. One is *Tablighī Jamā‘at*, a group with origins in northern India that focuses on spiritual elevation and missionary preaching.¹⁴ The other is Salafism, a movement that has been led by religious scholars who returned to Thailand after studying in the Middle East during the late 1980s.¹⁵ The growing presence of Salafism caused fissures between Muslim communities in Thailand’s Southern border provinces. This has manifested as a cleavage between reformists (*khana mai* or *sai mai*, i.e., new school) and traditionalists (*khana kao* or *sai kao*, i.e., old school). The former seek to return to the origins, the Qur’ān and the Sunnah (the practice of the prophet), and they often raise the call for abolishing traditional Malay practices. The latter tend to value the cumulative traditions of Islam and traditional local authority.

In wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, there was growing interest in Islam, especially Jihadism. Joseph Liow, a scholar of political Islam in Southeast Asia, concluded that in the case of Southern Thailand, the nationalist discourse is stronger than that of religion. He also highlights the fact that the Salafi movement is closely aligned with the Thai government and has no link to the armed struggle in southern Thailand.¹⁶ Shintaro Hara, a scholar of *shahīd*

(martyrdom in Islam), further notes that the motivations behind jihād, as well as the interpretations of the related violence, are nuanced. Based on in-depth interviews with the people who have fought against the Thai government, Hara explained how their struggles are grounded in the sense of belonging as Patani Malay.¹⁷

Malays, especially in rural areas, remain traditionalist in a way that emphasizes Patani Malayness. The new movements that surfaced in the course of Islamic revivalism are quite distinct from nationalism and pose no security threat to the Thai government. As Duncan McCargo puts it, “The old school/new school dichotomy is absolutely not a simplistic divide between separatist sympathies and ideas of loyalty to the Thai state, but it is possible to read the divide at some level in these terms.”¹⁸

4. Aspects of Islamic Revivalism

Islamic teaching covers not only the relationship between God and humans but also gives rules for human relationships and ideas of what is right and wrong. These teachings provide images of the punishments and rewards in the hereafter; accordingly, every human behavior in life is believed to be connected to life in the hereafter. The institution of pondok is said to have existed for more than 400 years. Pondok students generally live self-sufficiently in small huts built around the house of a babo (religious leader who hosts the pondok) and learn about the Qur’ān, Ḥadīth, and commentaries of distinguished Islamic scholars. There are no classes or grade systems, and the students cover a wide range of ages, from young children around ten years old to the elderly.

The Thai government has considered pondok an obstacle to the integration of Malay Muslims within Thai society. In 1961, the Thai government ordered the registration of pondok and reformed it into a private Islamic school that provides secular education and vocational training in Thai language alongside religious education. Moreover, since the late 1970s, the Thai government has gradually introduced Islamic education in public school in the southern border provinces. However, the number of pondok has been increasing even after the government maximized its control over pondok in 2004.¹⁹ Pondok is deeply rooted in Malay Muslim society, and it means more than just an educational institution.

The influence of Islamic revivalism, especially Salafism, since the 1980s can be seen in higher education institutions. One of the most influential Salafi leaders in Thailand is Ismail Lutfi Chapakiya (1951–). Lutfi, born into a family that owns pondok, returned to Thailand in 1988 after earning a bachelor’s degree from the Islamic University of Madinah and Master’s

and Doctoral degrees in comparative jurisprudence from Al-Imām Mohammad ibn Saud Islamic University, in Saudi Arabia. Lutfi is known for establishing the first private Islamic university in Thailand, Yala Islamic College (the present Fatoni University) in 1998 with the support of the Gulf states. Since the 1980s, national universities, such as the Prince of Songkla University's Pattani Campus, have also been providing Islamic education where students can earn degrees in Islamic studies.²⁰ The improvement and expansion of Islamic higher education have been supported by a growing number of academics who have obtained degrees from universities in Islamic countries in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia.

The judgement of whether someone is a Salafī reformist is made based on such information as whether the person 1) supports Salafī scholars such as Lutfi; 2) joins in activities organized by a Salafī group; and 3) denounces the local practices as *bid'ah* (new innovation). Salafī reformists often condemn as *bid'ah* the banquet held at the cemetery on the Hari Raya Puasa (festival of breaking fast), the celebration of Hari Raya Enam (six days after the Hari Raya Puasa), and Mawlid (birthday of the Prophet). Other offenses they cite include traditional ceremonies for circumcision, marriage rites, traditional rituals for funerals, and treatments by traditional healers. Furthermore, Salafī reformists give less importance to the Malay language and Jawi in learning about Islam compared with traditionalists. Salafī reformists also argue that Arabic is an essential discipline, but that otherwise any language, including Thai, can be used as an instrument to learn about Islam.²¹ These Salafī reformists manage to avoid problems with the Thai state by distancing themselves from Malay nationalism, but the Salafī-Thai alignment has caused a cleavage in the Muslim community. Traditionalists often call them Wahhabis, a name used here to imply a negative image, and view them as activists who disregard the local leaders and traditions.

When we understand Islamic revivalism as a phenomenon in which symbols and behaviors that are perceived as Islamic become more prominent in a Muslim's life, we also see words and expressions of Islam being more frequently deployed among those who advocate Malay nationalism. The current resurgence of violence is attributed to BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional), a separatist group that controls the militants deployed in the Southern border provinces. An imām of the BRN regarded the Southern border provinces as *Dār al-Ḥarb* (Abode of War) invaded by Thailand, and issued a fatwā calling for *jihād* against the Thai state to regain Patani's independence.²² Since 2004, most areas of the Southern border provinces have been under the control of Thai security forces based on the Martial Law Act and the Emergency Decree of 2005. Human rights violations by the security forces, such as arrest without warrant and torture, frequently occur. This situation makes the Islamist interpretation

of events sound more realistic.

During the Kru-ze Masjid incident in 2004, a booklet titled *Berjihad di Patani* (Jihād in Patani) was found near one of the dead militants. This booklet explains that a militant jihād against the kāfir (non-Muslim) Thai government and the traitor munāfiq (hypocrites) aligned with the government was an individual's duty. Some scholars have pointed out that this indicates the influence of Islamic extremism.²³ However, others have emphasized that Jihadism in the southern border provinces is restricted to this area and has a distinct characteristic from the types of extremism practiced by such groups as Al-Qaeda and Daesh.²⁴

Traditional religious leaders do not necessarily claim that local practices are compatible with the teachings of Islam, nor do they praise Malay nationalism. However, the rise of Salafism has revitalized the existing religious authority and created room for competition over interpretations of what is actually Islamic. In addition, the negative feelings among traditionalists toward Salafī principles are supported by the fact that Salafī reformists can evade security problems with the Thai government. The interpretation of Islam is also affected by the ongoing political situation.²⁵

5. Conclusion

In Thailand, the practice of Islam itself is not suppressed. Nevertheless, Malay Muslims in the Southern border provinces, with different historical and cultural backgrounds from the rest of Thailand, have always questioned the legitimacy of the Thai government. In the course of the assimilation and integration policies of the Thai government over the 20th century, protecting the Malay tradition meant protecting Islam at the same time, from the viewpoint of the Malay nationalist movements. However, the new wave of Islam, especially Salafism, keeps a certain distance from nationalism and seeks to expand its influence within the framework of the Thai nation state and its education system. Looking at Islamic revivalism since the 1980s in the regional context, Malay nationalism has become more commonly interpreted within the framework of Islam, and Salafism has become localized and thus more accepted in Thailand.

Notes

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- ¹ In this paper, Islamic revivalism is understood as a phenomenon in which symbols and behaviors that are perceived as Islamic become more evident and have a greater influence on various aspects of Muslim life than before. Islamic revivalism includes not only radical Islamist movements but also other moderate trends of religious revival”. Kazuo Ohtsuka *Islam teki Sekaikajidai no nakade* (NHK Books, 2000), 130.
- ² Piyanak Bunnak. “Prawatsaruamkhongmuslimthai: Mongphansaitrakun,” in *Lakmitimunmong: MuslimnaiphendinThai* (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2012): 25–41, 25.
- ³ Yano Hidetake, a specialist who has been studying the relationship between state and religion especially Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, argued that Islam has not been represented in the course of history. Yano Hidetake, “Fukashika sareru thai no muslim: Islam hyoushou kara mita thai bukkyou to kokyoshuukyuu” in *Asia no kokyoshuukyuu* (Hokkaido University Press, 2020), 193–232.
- ⁴ Chakemkiat Khunthongphet. “The Resistance against the Government’s Policy in the Four Southern Provinces of Thailand under Haji Sulong Abdul-Kadir’s leadership 1939–1954” (in Thai) (Master Thesis, Silapakorn University, 1986), 30-31.
- ⁵ Chakemkiat Khunthongphet, “The Resistance,” 31-32.
- ⁶ Chakemkiat Khunthongphet, “The Resistance,” 33.
- ⁷ For dato yutitham, see Shinya Imaizumi, “Thai sihousesaibansho niokeru dato yutitham (Islamhou saibankan) no yakuwari,” *Asiashokoku no funsoshoriseido*, (IDE-JETRO, 2003) 225–256.
- ⁸ Ekarat Mukem, *Cularatchamontri Prawatsaphunamthaimuslim* (Bangkok: Ruamduaichuaikan, 2006), 62–65.
- ⁹ For more detail, Duncan McCargo. “Co-optation and Resistance in Thailand’s Muslim South: The Changing Role of Islamic Council Election,” *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (January, 2010): 93–113, 112.
- ¹⁰ Surin Pitsuwan. “Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand,” (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 1982), 8.
- ¹¹ For example, see Duncan McCargo. *Tearing apart the land: Islam and legitimacy in Southern Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).
- ¹² Ibrahim Narongraksakhet and Numan Hayimasae. *Trisademai: Sathabankansueksamuslim changwatchaideanpaktai*, (Pattani: Salatan kanwichai lae wichakan, 2010), 78–80.
- ¹³ For the early leading study focusing on education, see Uthai Dulyakasem. “Education and Ethnic Nationalism: A Study of the Muslim-Malays in Southern Siam,” (PhD Dissertation, Stanford University, 1981).
- ¹⁴ Tablighī Jamā‘at is an apolitical religious movement founded by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas in 1927. This movement focuses on personal piety and missionary preaching to invite people to change their practices to get closer to the ideal life during the times of prophet Muhammad and his pious companions. For discussions on Tablighī Jamaat in Thailand, see Horstmann, Alexander. “The Inculturation of a Transnational Islamic Missionary Movement: Tablighī Jamaat al-Dawa and Muslim Society in Southern Thailand,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2007): 107–130, and Hisashi Ogawa, *Tadashii islam o meguru dainamizumu: Thainannbu muslimsonraku no shuukyuminzokushi*, (Osaka University Press, 2016).
- ¹⁵ Salafism, which was originally a trend in thought, appeared in the 19th century when the Islamic world faced colonialism by the west. It sought to overcome the crisis of the Muslim community by returning to the Qur’ān and Sunna, the original text of the times of the prophet Muhammad and his companion (Salaf, pious predecessors). It criticizes the act of following traditional schools of thought

blindly, and promotes activating the individual reasoning to derive Islamic legal rulings. Salafism later gained tendencies to interpret the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth literally. In the latter half of the 20th century, some trends connected with the ideology of militant jihadism. With the emergence of groups that use terrorism as means of changing realities to suit Islam, Salafism gained the connotation as extremism. Salafism has often been discussed with Wahhabism. Wahhabism is also a puritanical Islamic reformist movement that appeared in 18th century, and follows the interpretations of Muhanmad ibn ‘abd al-Wahhāb. Wahhabism played a significant role in establishing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and is the ideological pillar of the state. The leading study of Islamic reformism in Thailand is done by Muhammad Ilyas Yahprung in “Islamic Reform and revivalism in southern Thailand: A critical study of the Salafi reform movement of Shaykh Dr. Ismail Lutfi Chapakia al-Fatani,” (PhD Dissertation, Islamic University of Malaysia, 2014).

- ¹⁶ Joseph Chinyong Liow. *Islam, Education, and Reform in Southern Thailand: Tradition & Transformation*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009).
- ¹⁷ Hara Shintaro, “The Interpretation of Shahid in Patani,” *Asian International Studies Review*, Vol. 20 (June, 2019): 137–157.
- ¹⁸ Duncan McCargo. “Co-optation and Resistance,” 102.
- ¹⁹ For example, in Rueso district, Narathiwat province, 2 new pondok had been newly founded other than the 8 registered pondok. Interview, 10 August 2015.
- ²⁰ Ibrahim and Numan. op cit, 144–158.
- ²¹ Naomi Nishi, “Islamic Education and Sense of Belonging in the Deep South of Thailand,” (in Japanese) *The Journal of Thai Studies*, No. 18 (2018): 39–57.
- ²² Rungrawee Chalermripinyora. *Thotkhwamkhit Khabuankanekarapatani* (Pattani: Deep Book, 2013), 41–42.
- ²³ For example, Sugunnasil Wattana. “Islam, Radicalism, and Violence in Southern Thailand: Berjihad di Pattani and the 28 April 2004 Attacks,” *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2006): 119–144, 138.
- ²⁴ For example, International Crises Group. “Jihadism in Southern Thailand: A Phantom Menace,” *Asia Report*, No. 291 (2017).
- ²⁵ Naomi Nishi, “Conflicting Interpretations on Islamic Ideologies and the Notion of Radicalization: Focusing on the Acceptance of Salāfism in the Deep South of Thailand” (in Japanese) *The World of Monotheistic Religions*, Vol. 11, (2020), 34–52.