

Conflicts and Peace Initiatives between Minority Muslims and Thai Buddhists in the Southern Thailand

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Until the eighteenth century, the territory that is now Thailand was ruled in waves by Malays, Khmer, Mon, Burmese, Ayutthaya, and Thais. The history of contemporary Thailand begins in 1782 when the capital was established at Bangkok by Thais under King Rama 1. Over the next century, borders were in flux and territory was lost and gained in conflicts and treaties with neighbors, though Thailand boasts being the only nation in Southeast Asia to resist colonization by the French or the British. In 1909, the southern states of Songkla, Patani, Narathiwat, Yala, and parts of Kelantan, Perlis and Kedah were under the Sultan of Patani in Malaya but subject to the influence of the Thai. The Patani Sultanate was strong for a short time but at a later stage it become weak and was forced to pay homage to the Thai king in the form of bunga emas, a plant made of real gold. By the time of the Anglo-Thai agreement in 1909, Songkla, Patani, Narathiwat and Yala were given to Thailand by British colonizers who ceded the land without consultation with the people. Perhaps, the British believed they could obtain enough raw material, such as tin and rubber, from the remaining Malaysian states, which produced sufficient amounts for export of raw materials to Great Britain. Moreover, the Malay states of Kelantan, Kedah, and Perlis provinces on the Malay Peninsula accepted the British, but the people of Yala, Narathiwat and Patani held to their ethnic identity and customs as Malays and Muslims.^[1]

The ceding of Songkla, Patani, Narathiwat and Yala was followed by the imposition of

Siamese rule, which was accompanied by a range of measures aimed at strengthening Thai culture in the southern provinces. These were important causes of local discontent in the early and mid twentieth century, resulting in a number of rebellions. The use of education to promote Thai language and Buddhism and the key role of Buddhist monks in the new Thai rule emerged as particular causes of dissatisfaction. The effort to promote assimilation of Malay Muslim communities in the south was particularly focused on displacing the pondoks (Muslim religious schools), which traditionally performed a central function in the reproduction of Malay Muslim culture and identity. One of the most controversial elements of the assimilation campaign was the 1921 Compulsory Primary Education Act, which required all children to attend state primary schools for four years and to learn the Thai language. All Malay Muslims had to have Thai names as well. Naturally, this was not to the liking of Malay Muslims in the southern part of Thailand.

During the late 1930s, the rise to power of Field Marshall Plaek Phibulsongkhram (prime minister, 1938-1944 and 1948-1957) and the promotion of his ultra-nationalist pan-Thai agenda led to another round of confrontation between Bangkok and Malay Muslims. Phibulsongkhram instituted a harsh set of policies designed to force the assimilation of minorities in the newly named Thailand—including a ban on the use of minority languages (Patani Malay among them) in government offices, emphasis on Buddhism as the national religion across the country, and the requirement that everyone take a Thai name. These policies hit especially hard in the south where the practice of Islam also faced new restrictions, including an initiative to rescind statutes that had allowed the local application of Shari'a law in family and inheritance matters. The relevance of the abrogation of Shari'a law is highlighted by the fact that conflict has largely been limited to the territory of the former Patani Sultanate.^[2] Siam was renamed Thailand Muang Thai in 1939. Not only were the Thai language, the religion of Buddhism and the ethnic identity of Thai very vigorously enforced, but also anti-Thai activities were regarded as sedition and those who participated were frequently considered disloyal to the Thai nation.^[3]

In the Second World War, the Thai government aligned with the Japanese to avoid invasion by Japanese armies. But three states in the south with separatist tendencies—Yala, Narathiwat and Patani—sided with the British. These three states (with many similarities to Kelantan, Perlis and Kedah) supported the British with the hope they could join the Malayan states after the war.

After World War II, growing concern about Malay nationalist sentiments prompted Thai authorities to introduce a number of measures to appease Muslims in Thailand, such as once again permitting the limited application of Shari'a and integrating Islam within state structures. The Patronage of Islam Act of May 1945 created a set of state-aligned Thai Muslim institutions that, in effect, co-opted the authority of Muslim clerics. In particular, the act revived the post of chularajamontri, the highest Islamic authority in the country. The chularajamontri was now to be responsible for the religious affairs of all Muslims in Thailand. Nevertheless, the programme proved unpopular in the south and the new institutions were headed by Muslims from the capital Bangkok rather than Malay Patani. Complaints about the activities of the Thai security forces in the region increased at this time.^[4]

The years 1946 to 1948 marked a crucial new era in conflict between the Malay Muslims in the three states of Yala, Narathiwat, and Patani. In 1946, ethnic Malays rioted and consequently formed the Patani Peoples Movement in 1947. Thai Muslims of southern Malay origin also collected 250,000 names, petitioning to be allowed to use Shari'a law, speak Malay languages, and practice their religion and ethnic culture freely. They also demanded self-rule or autonomy. Confrontation between Thai authorities and Malay Muslims in Yala, Narathiwat and Patani led to several more riots, which created ethnic heroes and leaders for Malay Muslims in the three states, including Sulong bin Abdul Kadir bin Mohammad el Patani, the chairman of the Patani Provincial Islamic Council. Sulong's arrest was one of the factors behind an upsurge of unrest during 1948, most notably the April 26-28 Dusun Nyur rebellion in Narathiwat. Another religious leader, Haji Abdul Rahman, led hundreds of men against the police, resulting in the deaths of some 400 Malay Muslims. Thousands more fled to Malaysia. The uprising in 1948 is widely regarded as the onset of the modern violent struggle in South Thailand.

From 1950 to 1980 many organizations were formed to promote rights and independence for the three states in the south of Thailand, namely the United Greater Patani Malays Movement (Gabungan Melayu Patani Raya, GAMPAR) and the Patani People's Movement (PPM). In 1959, GAMPAR and PPM formed the Patani National Liberation Front (Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani, BNPP) to fight for the independence of Patani. Most of the leaders were elites—Imams from the mosques and utaz (teachers) from the madrasah. In the 1960s, BNPP was responsible for organizing activities against the Thai. As there was no

single dynamic leader among the Muslims of the south, other groups were also formed quickly. BNPP opted for guerrilla war. Formed in 1963, the National Revolution Front (Barisan Revolusi Nasional) was much more focused on political organization, particularly in religious schools. In 1968, another group, the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO), was formed and became very influential. The difference between these movements, however, when compared with Gerakan Achih Merdeka in Thailand, is that most members of the movement in the southern provinces are very pious Muslims but lack one capable leader who can unite all Muslims in the three Southern states. Another characteristic of these organizations is that although all members are Muslims, they are more ethno-nationalistic than Islamic.^[5]

In the 1960s and 1970s, guerrilla activity in rural Narathiwat, Patani, and Yala increased, primarily in the form of attacks on police posts and government buildings, including government schools. Then, in 1980, General Prem Tinsulanonda, a native of Songkhla province, took office as prime minister after almost two decades of intensive campaigns against separatist and communist insurgencies in the south. His government realized that its strategy had to be political as well as military, and in 1981 the new government overhauled security and governance structures to promote the new goal of political accommodation. Among the innovations under Prem's leadership was the introduction of a new administrative system in the south intended to promote a shift from confrontation to negotiation. A joint taskforce of civil police and the military (CPM 43) was created to coordinate security operations; it reportedly instructed officers and personnel to cease extrajudicial killings and disappearances of detained suspects. The government also launched the so-called Policy of Attraction, aimed at drawing sympathy away from separatist groups by increasing political participation and promoting development projects intended to strengthen the regional economy. Political matters were handled by the new Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) established in 1981. Broad amnesty offers were eventually taken up by hundreds of communist and separatist fighters.^[6]

Government policy, however, was still based on assimilation. Many officials continued to equate demands relating to cultural expression of Malay identity with demands for political separatism; their response was to suppress that identity. Promotion of the Thai language through education and the media was central to this effort. Teachers instructed their primary

and secondary students to identify themselves as Thai Muslims rather than Malay Muslims. Despite these difficulties, there was strong evidence that the rebellion was coming to an end by the close of the 1980s; sporadic violence continued, though it was relatively low. Meanwhile, the remaining rebel groups were increasingly discredited as they became engaged in extortion and other criminal activities to raise funds. By the 1990s, the Thai authorities dismissed these organizations as simply bandit gangs.^[7]

The measures introduced in the 1980s appeared to bring the insurgency to an end, yet the sense of historical grievance, manifest in ethno-national confrontation from the 1940s to the 1980s, continued to animate political leaders in the region and to shape popular conceptions of discrimination toward ethnically Malay Muslims. Complex political ties between Thai authorities and the region, which developed from the late nineteenth century, continued in the form of tense relationships between Thai security forces and the local population. Human rights groups have catalogued security force abuses of local human rights campaigners, failures to properly investigate killings by either side, detentions without trial, disappearances of detained suspects, and an ethos of impunity of army and police officials in the region.^[8]

The Religious Aspects of Conflicts in Southern Thailand

Interpretations of the Patani conflict that focus on its religious aspects are attracting considerable support. This has led to the frequent characterization of the current conflict as a religious one, one in which the motivation of insurgents is seen as shifting from mainly ethno-nationalist aims towards Islamist ones. Analysis has also increasingly focused on the links between the insurgency and international jihadist and terrorist organizations. A close examination of contemporary violence in the south of Thailand clearly points to the important role of Islam and religion in the conflict. At the same time, the place of Islam in the insurgency is complex and notions that the south is caught up in a religious conflict or that the insurgency has undergone a process of Islamization may be misleading.^[9] One author suggests that in fact the political goals of the Thai Malay ethno-nationalist movement have increasingly come to dominate the interpretation of Islam's political role in Thailand.^[10]

However the emergence of violent Islamism as the principal ideology of the insurgency in

southern Thailand has thus been viewed as a break with a tradition of moderation. It is also, in the eyes of some, a sign that regional and international jihadist groups are playing an important role in the current conflict. In either case, the precise role of Islam, in all its moderate and radical forms in the southern insurgency remains strongly contested and is at the heart of the contemporary debate about the nature of the conflict. This is because Islam spread to southern Thailand through peaceful means, particularly through nonviolent Sufism.

In Malaysia, Islam experienced a revival in the 1960s and 1970s, making it impossible to separate Islam from a national identity for Malays. As this is so in Malaysia, so it is true in the ethnically Malay Muslim communities of Yala, Narathiwat, and Patani. Of course, we cannot compare these three states to Thai Muslims in the northern part of Thailand and even some in the south of Thailand, as they were already assimilated to Thai ways, especially in terms of language and education.^[11]

For outsiders and many analysts, the violence in the sixties and seventies came to be seen as a conflict between Buddhism and Islam, between Buddhists and Muslims. Analysts forget, however, that an important feature of current religious tensions in the south have their origins in the 1940s when the Thai government altered its assimilation campaign in the south in response to rising Malay nationalism, which was connected to the anti-colonial movements of the time. One of the aims of Thai authorities over the next two decades was to weaken the identity links between Malays of Thailand and those in Malaysia. The policies introduced for this purpose may have inadvertently served to emphasize the religious identity of Malay Muslims in southern Thailand.

To weaken these identity links, Thai authorities at that time, still pursuing Phibulsongkhram's Pan-Thai agenda, sought to delicately balance measures that would cultivate allegiance to the Thai nation while recognizing the differences between Malay Muslims and ethnic Thais. The formula they developed was to bracket the Malay Muslims together with the country's other Muslim communities as "Thai Muslims." A number of reforms were introduced in order to encourage Malay Muslims to cleave to this new identity, including the 1945 Patronage of Islam Act. Language and education were key issues in the struggle over reshaping the identity of Malay Muslims and, from the 1940s on, were closely connected to resolving the conflict. Most government officials in Narathiwat, Patani, and Yala were Thais who spoke little Malay, which did little to strengthen loyalty of

the Malay Muslims to the Thai state in Patani. In 1961 Prime Minister and Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, launched the Pondok Educational Improvement Programme. This introduced registration of pondoks and gave the Thai Government a degree of control over their curricula. The pondoks had until then operated independently of the state education system. The policy was intended to ensure that pondok students received some secular education and Thai culture. It is important to note, however, that Thai officials in the south can barely speak the Malay language, making it difficult for them to understand the problems of the region.^[12]

National leaders hoped that the introduction of compulsory education would help produce Malay Muslims who could occupy administrative posts. Many pondoks upgraded themselves to become *rong rian ekachon sorn sassana* (private schools teaching religion), implementing the secular national curriculum and providing additional Islamic instruction. However, the policy met considerable resistance and was seen as upsetting the traditional process of generating elites in Malay Muslim society. In response, a number of *tok gurus* became more politically active and preferred to operate their schools underground rather than be incorporated into the state system. Two corollaries of the policy were: 1) a decline in Patani's position as a centre for Islamic education; and 2) an exodus of young Malay Muslims to study in Islamic countries in the Middle East. The stress laid on Muslim identity in Thai assimilation efforts and anger among Malay Muslims over perceived interference of Thai authorities in their affairs helped to create conditions in which the rhetoric and ideologies of the Patani insurgents took on a more religious character. The collapse during the early 1960s of the GAMPAR and the failure of the BRN to achieve its political goals facilitated this process, creating a space for religious ideologues to rise to the top of the organizations involved in the insurgency. Groups such as the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) and, later, the Patani Islamic Mujahidin Movement (GMIP) emphasized Islam in their struggle against Thai authorities. Thus, during the 1970s, Islam became a more important rallying point for the insurgents. This shift was important in further dividing the Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim communities in the south.^[13]

That is why the Patani began to change the names of their groups. In the late 1980s the Patani conflict was taking on a clearer Islamic character, as can be seen in the names of the insurgent groups formed at this time. Several leaders of the BNPP broke away in 1985 to form the United Mujahedin Front of Patani (*Barisan Bersatu Mujahidin Patani, BBMP*). In

1986 the Patani National Liberation Front (BNPP) renamed itself the Islamic Liberation Front of Patani (Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani, BIPP). The Patani Islamic Mujahidin Movement was formed in 1995 by some of the roughly 2000 Thai Muslims who are thought to have fought as mujahedin in the war in Afghanistan. Further, the political liberalization that Thailand underwent in the 1980s and 1990s is reported to have led to the return of many Malay Muslims who fled to the Middle East during security crackdowns in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of these returnees brought with them Salafist ideas that were then becoming popular in the Middle East. The insurgents had some success in trying to reframe the Patani conflict in terms of a religious war. As one scholar has noted, “The jihad became a focus of attraction, the solution for the Muslim community’s ills, and even ‘one of the pillars of Islam.’ In this way, the integration of the idea of violent jihad as an obligation into the broader revival of Islam became a means to mobilize militants and support, which was further strengthened by efforts to promote other key religious concepts, notably that of martyrdom.”^[14]

Thailand has been predominately Buddhist for 700 years. For much of that time, Buddhism has enjoyed the state’s patronage. With the rise of efforts to promote a Thai nation-state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Buddhism received an extra boost as a state religion. The symbiosis between Buddhism and the Thai state has been felt particularly acutely in the south where monks have frequently been instrumental in efforts to assimilate Malay Muslims, notably through education. These initiatives have included several policies under royal patronage. Although no Thai constitution has overtly specified a state religion, the monarch professes Buddhism.^[15]

In recent years Buddhism in Thailand has faced new pressures and this is reported to have promoted a “growing religious intolerance in Thai society— especially towards religious minorities, notably Muslims and Christians.”^[16] This change is thought to have been driven in part by the Buddhist monastic establishment (the Sangha), which has faced several problems in recent years: it has been viewed by rising numbers as “unconcerned with people’s problems and even irrelevant; monks have been involved in sex scandals which has undermined the Sangha’s public standing; and [it faces] challenges from aggressive Christian proselytizing and the emergence of Buddhist feminist voices.”^[17] There was strong opposition from the Sangha to the proposed establishment of a national committee of religion in 2005. Perhaps the Sangha and conservative Buddhists feared such a committee

would put other religions on an equal footing with Buddhism and thus weaken its dominant position in Thailand. While this Buddhist intolerance initially focused on Christians, it soon came to include the Muslim community as well.

The strongest criticism of the June 2006 report on violence in the southern border provinces, which was drawn up by the National Reconciliation Commission and recommended greater religious pluralism, also came from the Sangha. Strong pressure in 2007 by the Buddhist establishment to have Buddhism recognized as the state religion appears to have further accentuated the religious dimensions of the Patani conflict. Growing hostility between sections of the Buddhist establishment and Islamist elements in recent decades has been matched by a polarization between Thais and Malay Muslims in the Patani region. As a result, many common elements of southern culture—interfaith marriages, conversions between Buddhism and Islam, similar beliefs in spirits and ancestors (which were often more important than canonical rules), and mixed rituals—have been replaced by separate cultural practices. These changes suggest that causes of the conflict can be found in both communities in the Patani region, rather than in an increasingly violent Islamism alone.^[18]

Since 2004, there have been an increasing number of deaths as a result of the conflict between the Thai government and the three southern states of Yala, Narathiwat, and Patani. In 2004, the number of casualties reached 2000. Now, the conflict seems to be mostly a religious conflict, as the victims consist of monks, teachers, government officers, military and police officers. Moreover it seems public sympathy goes out to Muslim Malays of the three states, which is a reaction to a variety of events in the rule of Thayksin as prime minister but mostly produced by the rejection of Malay culture and religion by the Thai central government and the long dispute between the separatists and the Thai government. Two events related to these actions happened in 2004, shocking the world.

In one of those incidents, April 28, 2004, more than 100 militants carried out terrorist attacks against ten police outposts across Patani, Yala and Songkhla provinces in southern Thailand. Gunmen retreated to the 425-year-old Krue Sae Mosque, regarded by Muslims as the holiest mosque in Patani. General Pallop Pinmanee, commander of the Southern Peace Enhancement Center and deputy director of the Internal Security Operations Command, was the senior Army officer on the scene. After a tense seven-hour standoff, Pinmanee ordered an all out assault on the mosque. All the gunmen were killed. He later claimed, “I had no

choice. I was afraid that as time passed the crowd would be sympathetic to the insurgents, to the point of trying to rescue them.”^[19]

In October 2004 the town of Tak Bai in Narathiwat province saw the most publicized incident of the insurgency. Six local men were arrested for having supplied weapons to insurgents. A demonstration was organized to demand their release and the police called in army reinforcements, which resorted to the use of tear gas and water cannons on the crowd. Shooting started in which seven men were killed. Hundreds of local people, mostly young men, were arrested. They were made to take off their shirts and lie on the ground. Their hands were tied behind their backs. Later that afternoon, soldiers threw them into trucks to be taken to the Ingkayutthaboriharn army camp in the nearby province of Patani. Prisoners were stacked five or six deep in the trucks, so by the time the trucks reached their destination five hours later, in the heat of the day, seventy-eight men had suffocated to death.

This incident sparked widespread protests across the south, and indeed across Thailand, since many non-Muslim Thais were appalled at the army’s behavior. Thaksin, however, gave the army his full support. Those responsible for the ill-treatment and death of the detainees received the most minor of non-custodial punishments. Thaksin’s initial response was to defend the army’s actions, saying that the seventy-eight men died “because they were already weak from fasting during the month of Ramadan.”

Charges were filed against fifty-eight suspects accused of participating in the demonstration. The trials went on at a slow pace, and by October 2006, the court had finished questioning only two out of 1,500 witnesses in the case. Police were also unable to find thirty-two Tak Bai protesters who were still at large after fleeing arrest. Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont gave a formal apology for the incident on November 2, 2006.

Human Rights Watch cites abuses on both sides. The insurgents have attacked monks collecting alms. They have killed teachers, principals, and students and torched schools presumably because they represent the Thai Government. Government workers have been targeted for assassination. Buddhist villagers have been killed going about their routine work, such as rubber tapping. According to the Thai Journalists Association, there have been over 500 attacks resulting in more than 300 deaths in the four southern provinces where the insurgents were operating in 2008.^[20]

Meanwhile, Muslims have been beaten, killed, or “disappeared” while in police custody for questioning. Human Rights Watch has documented at least twenty such disappearances. Soldiers and police have sometimes been indiscriminate when pursuing suspected insurgents, resulting in civilian collateral damage.^[21] The 2010 World Report from Human Rights Watch highlights escalating human rights abuses throughout Thailand, with the south reflecting overall policies against individual human rights. Sharply increased powers for police and the military accompany a perceived lack of accountability.^[22]

The Asian Human Rights Commission accuses the military of beating and torturing suspected insurgents by burning their genitals with cigarettes, smashing beer bottles over their knees, and chaining them to dogs. Such abuses were alleged to have occurred in October 2006.

In December 2006, a group of twenty Muslims (nine males and eleven females between the ages of 2 and 55) sought political asylum in Malaysia. They claimed that the post-coup regime was more aggressive against civilians, and that they were continuously harassed by the army. The army admitted that the group sought refuge in Malaysia out of fear for their lives but that the threat was from military forces.

Another group of Muslims from Narathiwat fled to Malaysia in March 2007 claiming they were escaping intimidation and brutality by the military. The group complained that they had been beaten and that their sons had been missing or detained since 2005. They also claimed that some youths had died after they were poisoned during detention.

Hope for a Negotiated Peace

In May 2004, Wan Kadir Che Man, exiled leader of Bersatu (an umbrella organization for the PULO) and for years one of the key symbolic figures in the guerrilla movement, stated he would be willing to negotiate with the government to end southern violence. He also hinted that Bersatu would be willing to soften its previous demands for an independent state. The government initially welcomed the request to negotiate; however, its response was severely criticized as being “knee-jerk” and “just looking to score cheap political points.” But when it became apparent that, despite his softened demand for limited autonomy, Wan Kadir Che Man had no influence over the violence, the negotiations were

cancelled. The government then initiated a policy prohibiting official negotiations with the insurgents.^[23] After being appointed army commander in 2005, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin expressed confidence that he could resolve the insurgency. He claimed that he would take a “new and effective” approach to a crisis and that “the Army is informed of who the insurgents are and will carry out their duties.”^[24]

On September 1, 2006, a day after twenty-two commercial banks were simultaneously bombed in Yala province, General Sonthi announced that he would break with the government no-negotiation policy. However, he noted that “We still don’t know who the real head of the militants is that we are fighting with.” In a press conference the next day, he attacked the government for criticizing the negotiation efforts with anonymous insurgents, and demanded that the government “free the military and let it do the job.” His confrontation with the government made his call for negotiations extremely popular with the media. But afterwards, insurgents bombed six department stores in Hat Yai city, which until then had been free of insurgent activities. As always, the identity of the insurgents was not revealed. Sonthi was granted an extraordinary increase in executive powers to combat unrest in the far South. By September 19, 2006, after Sonthi overthrew the Thai government, the army admitted that it was still unsure who to negotiate with.^[25]

There have been several initiatives aimed at a negotiated peace with the Patani insurgents since 2004. Following the 2006 coup, Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont made clear his willingness to talk to representatives of the insurgency and sought to shift to a softer line in respect to the security situation in the south. During the summer of 2007, Defense Minister Boonrawd Somtas conducted an intensive round of meetings in Malaysia designed to promote bilateral cooperation and to help curtail the southern violence and prevent it from spilling over into that country. Boonrawd indicated that Thai authorities were even willing to consider enhancing the autonomy of the southern region: “Even China allows special administrative zones. If that can solve the southern problem, it is worth discussing.” At the same time, he cautioned that the idea of secession was “totally unacceptable.”^[26]

Malaysia has taken a particularly active interest in resolving the conflict, reflecting the fact that Narathiwat, Patani, and Yala are all on the Thai–Malay border. Although the Malaysian Government does not support the southern insurgency and has a vested interest in stability in the Patani area, between 2004 and 2006 there was a sharp, public deterioration in bilateral relations over the conflict. Malaysia responded angrily to a series of Thai allegations that

the insurgents were using bases and raising funds in Malaysian territory. It also complained about the heavy handed security regime in the south and refused to extradite suspected insurgents, citing concern that their human rights would not be respected in Thailand. However, in 2006 information emerged that former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed had mediated three rounds of peace talks between senior Thai military officers and exiled leaders of the older insurgency groups, including the PULO, in 2005. Although the talks were brokered by Mahathir's own peace foundation, both the Thai and Malaysian governments appear to have given their approval. The talks reportedly produced a joint peace and development plan for the south that rejected the idea of independence (or even autonomy) but called for an amnesty for exiled leaders, the restoration of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC), and the introduction of the Malay language in schools. However, this initiative had minimal impact because—as has since become clear—the exiled leaders have little influence over the new generation of insurgents.^[27]

The prospect for a peaceful settlement exists in southern Thailand if both the Thai government and Muslim insurgents adopt a moderate attitude in their policy toward settling their conflicts. Both Buddhism and Islam are religions of great mercifulness: Buddhism believes in killing only as the repayment for the taking of another's life, and in Islam, taking an innocent life is forbidden, as all human beings are created by the almighty God. Both religions must advocate for mercy as taught by their religions rather than resorting to violent conflict and unnecessarily sacrificing so many lives.

As Thai nationalism is very strong in Thailand, it is unlikely the Thai government would allow the three southern states to gain independence or even autonomy. Muslims in the southern part of the country should recognize that this is a reality of politics, especially knowing that overall Muslims make up only 3 percent of the population, including non-insurgent areas. It is also unlikely that the three states can rejoin Malaysia at the present time; thus, it is not realistic to prolong the conflicts and pain of the people in these three states. As for the Thai government's policy of assimilation, it is better to use voluntary assimilation than forced assimilation. To immediately impose a policy enforcing all people to be educated in the Thai language will not create any good result. Taking the history of assimilation of Muslims in northern regions of Thailand as a model, it is more practical to assume that assimilation will be more successful if done gradually than by force of

legislation. The emotional sentiments attached to a culture cannot be eradicated by force.

Buddhists and Muslims can coexist in peace, as in the case of Sri Lanka. But there is great danger that if parties prolong the conflict, the opportunity for a peaceful solution will be lost. The event at Tok Bak and the deaths of Muslims by suffocation when they were stacked in layers in the back of a truck could still trigger more revolt and more reprisals against Buddhists. If the situation gets out of hand and Muslim insurgents are able to get arms, the conflict could turn into civil war. This is only one scenario that could result from prolonged conflict. However, things are not so bad yet that a peaceful solution couldn't be salvaged. Both sides desire peace and must avoid committing serious human rights violations, especially killing innocent people, in order to make progress.

Civil war will happen only if the Thai government continues to inflict great losses of Muslim life and Muslims succeed in getting arms from external sources. Another disastrous possibility exists: suppose Thailand supports a policy maker who intends to erase Malay Muslims from the three states. This is also very unlikely. However, it could happen if future leaders from Thailand and the Muslim insurgency have ulterior motives. Thus mutual cruelty, which infringes on human rights from both sides, must stop.

The Thai government should form a joint committee of Buddhist and Muslim leaders in the southern states to discuss misunderstandings between their religions and unfortunate events, such as the disappearances of people who were simply going about their daily affairs. They should promote peace and mutual understanding. This is the twenty-first century. Nearly all nations, especially in Asia, are multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural. Take for example Thailand's neighbors Singapore and Malaysia. They have proved that multiple races, various religions, and more than one culture do not prevent peaceful coexistence. The Thai government should learn from these two countries about enduring peace. This will be the challenge to both the Thai government and the Muslim insurgency.

Finally, it is unfortunate that both sides have applied mindless and inhuman ways of killing, which are contradictory to themes of mercy in both Islam and Buddhism. The death toll now in fact is larger than the recent death toll from the army's crushing put down of the Red Shirt demonstrations. Nationalism is able to generate great love and loyalty among its citizens for its citizens; however, it can also arouse inhuman and irrational behavior, as can religion. Religion offers us peace and tranquility, but it can also blind our hearts and

motivate us to kill and brutalize others without any consciousness of wrongdoing. This is the case in Thailand. Both sides must reevaluate their resort to the senseless killing of innocent people, particularly when killing is carried out by Muslims or Buddhists, both of whom revere a merciful God.

The voice of peace and nonviolence is everywhere in the world. The Thai government must seize on the resources of the world to, for instance, encourage more non-governmental organizations of Buddhists and Muslims to work jointly at discussing their religions and understanding the daily lives of the people in these three states. Moreover, both sides, indeed the globe, would benefit from frequent forums and seminars on peacebuilding and nonviolence. Together they could jointly address their common goals of caring for the poor, the orphan, and the homeless, and giving food and shelter to the people in the three southern states instead of killing each other, which, above all, runs counter to the tenets of moderation and mercy in Buddhism and Islam.

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2. 2. P. Jumbala, *Nation-Building and Democratization in Thailand: A Political History* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 1992).
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4. 4. C. J. Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism* (London: Taurus Academic Studies, 1996), 182. One of these complaints was that security forces entered mosques without taking off their shoes, against the custom of the mosques. Besides, the security force did not understand Malay languages, and they were very corrupt.
5. 5. International Crisis Group, "Thailand: Political Turmoil and the Southern Insurgency," *Policy Briefing: Asia Briefing* 80 (28 August 2008): 8-9, 13,

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