CHAPTER 3

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

ETHNIC OR RELIGIOUS GROUP

"Religion is not the cause of the violence but the area's history - in the 19th century, Muslim sultanates ruled here - is used to legitimize the violence."

Thomas Fuller[13]

The genesis of the conflict in the South of Thailand is difficult and complicated to identify; whether it is an ethnic or religious conflict. This chapter, therefore, will present the studies of many authors who wrote the problem in Southern Thailand and see how those authors viewed this issue.

S.H Harish cited that earlier studies on Southern Thailand unrest place more emphasis on ethnicity. The studies consider the antagonists as chiefly Thai and Malay. The notion of being Thai or Malay is identified by cultural symbol.[14] The Muslim minority in the South of Thailand of approximately 6 million amounts to 4% of the total population of Thailand. They are ethnically, culturally and religiously distinct from the majority Buddhist Thai population. The majority of the Muslims are Sunnis though the Shias are also sizeable in some of the areas. About 10 % of the total Muslim population are Wahabis. Malay Muslims in Thailand also have strong cultural traditions; one of the most important is the *ponok* system of education, which is widespread in the region. *Ponoks* are Muslim boarding schools with a strong emphasis on religious teachings.

Many of Thailand's Muslims speak Malay and have more in common with the citizens of neighbouring Malaysia than with Buddhist Thais. Approximately 80% of the population in this region are ethnic Malay Muslims, who speak a dialect of

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[13] Thomas Fuller, "In Thailand, an insurgency rooted in ethnicity," *International Herald Tribune*, June 26, 2006.

[14] S.P. Harish, "Ethnic or Religious Cleavage? Investigating the Nature of Conflict in Southern Thailand," Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs 28, no. 1 (April 2006), p. 49.

Bahasa known as Malayu. The written form of the language, known as Jawi, uses the Arabic script. According to Muslim community leaders, many Malay Muslims do not speak or read Thai fluently, as Malayu is their first language. Harish further explained that the ethnic nature of conflict began to change 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.[15]

According to Joseph Liew, Thailand is only affected by the increasingly transnational phenomena of terrorist violence. There is already sufficient evidence pointing to Thailand's role as a favored meeting place and transit point for international Islamic terrorists. The notion that the ongoing violence in southern Thailand is being driven by radical Islamist and jihadi ideology or global jihad is misplaced. Based upon current evidence, the ongoing conflict appears to be driven more by political factors rooted in Malay-Muslim nationalist ideology rather than the abstract ideology of jihadi Islamism that underpins terrorism and violence elsewhere in the world.[16]

Wattana Sunnasil viewed that the separatist struggle was initially based on a Malay national liberation struggle but at present it has taken on undertones of a radical Islamist ideology because of the influence of Islamic radicalism abroad. The discourse of the separatist struggle has significantly shifted to that of radical Islamist politics by calling for a jihad against the Thai state, its local agents, and their Muslim allies. This shift is exemplified by a document entitled *Berjihad di Patani*, which appears to have helped inspire the violent incidents of 28 April 2004.[17] The document ,written in 2002 in the Malay language's *Yawi* script, was found on the body of one of the militants killed by Thai military forces at Kru-Ze.

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[15] Harish, p. 54.

[16] Joseph Chinyong Liow, "International Jihad and Muslim Radicalism in Thailand? Toward an Alternative Interpretation," Asia Policy, no. 2 (July 2006), p. 97.

[17] Wattana Sugunnasil, "Islam, Radicalism, and Violence in Southern Thailand; Berjihad di Patani and the 28 April 2004 Attacks," Critical Asian Studies 38, no. 1 (2006), p. 119.

For Ian Storey, Islam in reality cannot be separated from Malay identity. Islam increasingly serves as a "potent avenue to comprehend, rally, articulate, and express resistance against the central state". What adds credence to this view is that much of the violence being perpetrated today is Muslim against Muslim, whereas in the early stage of the insurgency it was Thai-Buddhist versus Malay-Muslim. [18]

There is a struggle by a demographic and cultural minority shaped by local resentment against an overbearing and exclusivist Thai majority. It also becomes possible to see this as an Islamic struggle against a Buddhist state.

The feeling of ethnic differences seems to cause more effect on this problem. Ethnic-Malays are considered in this paper to play an important role behind this problem in the South. These Ethnic-Malays present the sense of Ethnic nationalism since the movement has the combination of nationalism and ethnic awareness.

It can be concluded in this chapter that all the authors cited in this chapter agree that the root cause of the problem in the South can be identified as the problem of ethnicity. Hence, the next chapter will give a focus on the theory of ethnicity and social movement which will be applied later on in chapter 5.

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[18] Ian Storey, "Ethnic Separatism in Southern Thailand: Kingdom fraying at the Edge?," in Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, U.S. Department of Defense (March 2007), p. 1, http://stinet.dtic.mil/ cgibin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA462929&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf.