

CHAPTER 5

THAI-MALAYS AS ETHNIC GROUP

The historical roots of the problem in the South can be traced back to popular resistance to Thai rule from the Malay-Muslim population. They sought to preserve their cultural and linguistic practices against the assimilationist exercise of nation-building in the face of the denial of educational, economic and employment opportunities. The conflict in the South is therefore Nation-State versus minority group.

Thai-Malays live in the majority of the border provinces and can be referred to as an ethnic group. Thai-Malays can be described in term of ethnicity since they are a group with shared identity setting apart from others in their own and others' eyes. They can be differentiated from other people in Thailand by their race, religion, language and cultural heritage. 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 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 have strong cultural traditions; one of the most important is the *ponok* system of education, which is widespread in the region. Additionally, most of them speak Malay.

The characteristics of an ethnic group presented in Chapter 4 will be used here to explain the ethnic group of Thai-Malays in the South of Thailand. Firstly, Thai-Malays are external to the nation-state. They were primarily under Malaysian rule until 1902 when Pattani was formally annexed by Siam. Seven years later, under the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, the British colonial administration in Malaya forced the King of Siam to cede sovereignty over all except Pattani to Britain, while the British recognized Siamese sovereignty over Pattani, which became a monthon (region) of Siam. In 1933 the monthon was divided into the provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala.

Secondly, Thai-Malays have an ancestral tradition and its members share a sense of peoplehood and an interdependence of fate. The case of the South presents the interplay of history and politics in its origin and development. Even in modern times, the terms Malay and Thai have acquired religiously pluralistic identifications. In terms of being identified as citizens of modern states of Thailand and Malaysia, the traditional identifications of the past have not disappeared but constitute the cultural basis of being a Thai Buddhist or Malay Muslim.

Thirdly, the group has distinguishing values, behavioral patterns, and interests. Thai Buddhism and Malay Islam have distinctive political cultures; each of them has its own cultural understandings of power, politics, and religion in an interconnected relationship. Power, politics, and religion are culturally constructed from within the power and political dimensions of the Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim cultural environments. Hence, identities, religiosities and worldviews are rooted in the Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim political culture institutionalized by religious-political symbolisms. Thus the Thai-Buddhist and Malay-Muslim religio-political cultures shape identities and attitudes towards state and society in Thailand.

Finally, the group's existence has an influence on the lives of its members and membership in the group is influenced by how members define themselves and by how they are defined by others. In his 1988 study of Islam in Thailand, Omar Farouk distinguished between two types of Muslims in Thailand namely the, "assimilated" and the "unassimilated." The former constitutes, "a who;e diversity of ethnic groups such as the Muslim Siamese, the Thai-Malays, the Haw Chinese, the Bengalis, the Pathans, the Punjabis and the Samsams. The "unassimilated" are predominantly Malay" who reside in the deep southern provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat. The main factors responsible for this is their firm adherence to ethnicized religious identity and their strong attachment to the concepts of *nayu* (race), *baso* language and *agama* (Islam). Their aspirations are largely shaped and inspired by an ethnoreligious nationalism based on Malay ethnicity.²⁶

²⁶ Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Faces of Islam in Southern Thailand" (working paper, no. 7, East-West Center Washington, March 2007), p 8, <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/EWCWwp007.pdf>.

The emergence of ethnic Malay identity in the conflict can be attributed to two key factors. Firstly, the growth of Malay nationalism that gripped Southeast Asia, especially after the Second World War, considerably assisted the insurgent groups in their opposition to Thai rule. It allowed rebel organisations like GAMPAR and BRN to establish bases in Malaya and champion their irredentist cause. Secondly, the policies of the Siamese government, particularly on language and education, were perceived by the Malays of southern Thailand as an encroachment of their cultural domain. In particular, the imposition of the Thai language in the southern provinces was viewed as a threat. There was apprehension that it would lead to the weakening of the Malay tongue that was central to their ethnic Malay identity.

The two key factors responsible for the emergence of ethnic Malay identity can be explained by the complicated relations between the Nation-State and ethnic minority group. When the nation-State (this case is Thailand) seeks to unify and assimilate all people within its territory, people feel that their cultural and religious background are not recognized or respected. This attempt to homogenize the hybridity therefore leads to countering forces ranging from small disobedience to the desire for interdependence. States themselves have actively created and maintained national cultures and “imagined (national) communities” or the concept of mono-ethnic character of the State. However, the notion of “nation-state” has led to instability and is deeply problematic nature of such link. The reason for this is the desire of unified imagined nationalist community clashing with internal differences and power struggles within the territory. Also, in many cases, the state appears most clearly as working against the nation when “the people” becomes an object of fear and violence that the state wants to have absolute control over.

The problem caused by the creation of the nation-state can both directly and indirectly have an effect on an ethnic minority within the state. Thai-Malay groups experience dissatisfaction with its status and seek to strengthen their ethnic identity, their leading to a rebellion against the exercise of nation-building. To clarify this issue, a diagnostic formula proposed by Marvin W. Mikesell and Alexander B. Murphy describes these minority-group demands, ranging from recognition, access, and participation to separation, autonomy and independence. Based on these diagnostic devices, the Thai-Malay ethnic group illustrates the aspirations of “**rap**” to

demands for “I”. Each letter used in this diagnostic formula will be applied into the case of the South of Thailand.

The letter **r** stands for recognition. Not only does the Thai-Malay ethnic group welcome recognition of its linguistic, religious identity and cultural institutions, but they also desires the state to acknowledge the group’s existence. The example for this case is the protests in 1910. At that time the Siamese government began to enforce the use of Thai language. There was a concerted effort to educate the Malays in Thai and this led to periodic protests in the southern provinces. The elites in the South feared that this would erode the Malay language and culture, and invade on their ethnic Malay identity. Therefore, after the introduction of the 1921 Primary Education Act which stated that Malay children had to attend Thai primary schools, there was a major rebellion in 1922. In 1947 Haji Sulong²⁷ made seven ethnoreligious demands to the central government. These demands centered on the issue of political freedom for the Malays and the preservation of Malay language, the only religious demand put forward concerned the recognition and enforcement of Muslim law.

The letter **a** stands for access to employment opportunities with no discrimination and economic development assistance. The political articulation of ethnic consciousness in Pattani can be explained as a response to the economic, cultural and political subordination of the Muslim communities as a consequence of “internal colonialism.” Thailand is a paradigmatic case of internal colonialism in which the deepening economic disparities between the prime center (Bangkok) and the rural hinterland have resulted in economic underdevelopment of the south. Even though Thailand had an impressive record of economic growth between 1960-1997, regional imbalances deepened during this period. The available data shows a high level of absolute and relative deprivation among the local population in the south, especially the deep South. While the northeast is the poorest region, measured against core indicators of economic development, Satun, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat are among the least developed provinces of the Kingdom.

²⁷ Haji Sulong was responsible for bringing the Malay struggle at a time when the separatist movement was losing its momentum against the authoritarian military government of Phibun Songkram and has since been described as the father of the Pattani independence movement.

The letter **p** stands for participation in the state's government. In 1988, 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. The *Wahdah* saw itself as an independent political group ready to support any political party that promises to pay attention to developmental issues and problems facing Thai Muslims. Since its inception, it aligned itself with the New Aspiration Party (NAP) established in 1990. The Malay speaking members representing the *Wahdah* obtained cabinet posts following the elections of 1992, 1995, 1997 and 2001. A prominent Thai Muslim member of the Democrat Party, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, served as Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister from 1992–1995, and as the Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1997–2001. Following the resurgence of southern insurgency in 2004, and the *Wahdah's* alignment with the ruling Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party (responsible for high handed handling of the southern crisis during the Krue Se and Takbai incidents), the *Wahdah* lost all its seats in the 2005 parliamentary elections. They were all won by Muslim politicians from the Democrat Party. The *Wahdah* faction resigned from the Thai Rak Thai party after the recent coup of 2006 which marked the end of Thaksin regime. In the aftermath of the southern conflict, there is now a talk of forming a Muslim political party that will address the grievances of the southerners. But this move initiated by a former politician of the TRT party may not be welcomed in the South.

The Thai-Malay ethnic minority's aspirations of **rap** led to demand for **I** (independence) as the group would like to have its own independence and new state and seeks to have recognized secession. The demand was presented by Berjihad de Pattani. This Jawi/Malay language book was found on the body of a dead militant. The book published in Kelantan, Malaysia, uses the teachings of the Qur'an urging for *Jihad* to separate Pattani, extermination of people of different religious faiths, even one's parents if they leak information to the government.⁵⁰ Chapter one talks of "jihad warriors" to engage in a religious war against "those outside the religion" for the revival of the Pattani state. Chapter three talks of killing all opponents even it be one's parents, and to sacrifice one's life in order to go to heaven to be with Allah. It

concludes by suggesting the formation of a constitutional state of Pattani based on Sunni Shafii school of law.

Political separatism has been treated as one of the branches of rebellion against the state by groups of dissatisfied members or would be member of the nation. Most of these movements are based on ethnic identities, which have become minorities in their states after a struggle for independence. At present, ethnic group movements in the South of Thailand are often considered as social movements with the emergence of the social movement theory.

The problem in the South of Thailand is best described by the theory of collective behaviour. The theory of collective behaviour explains social movements as semi-rational responses to abnormal conditions of structural strain between major societal institutions, and argues that damage will eventually cause malfunctioning of the whole system.

The history of the South may well be written as a history of differentiated recurring patterns of Malay resistance and rebellion and state accommodation and pacification. Since the majority of the population in the border provinces are Malay-speaking Muslims, the Thai central state has been experienced as a foreign conqueror whose officials rarely speak the local language or understand local culture. Historically, Thai state officials were not only administrators but often agents of Thai-ification through the implementation of culture, education, and language policies.²⁸ Similarly to in the past, the ideologies of Thailand's southern insurgents are more ethnonationalist than Islamist, and the targets are primarily Thai officials, Muslim civilians suspected of being informants for the government, and Buddhist civilians and monks.²⁹ "The conflict is about reclaiming the homeland for ethnic Malay Muslims rather than any ambition to establish a regional caliphate" (Francesca Lawe-Davies, *Southeast Asia Analyst* for the International Crisis Group:2006)

The movements and protests in the South of Thailand show that Thai-Malays still feel alienated from Thai society which is ruled by Buddhist Thais. Many

²⁸ Michael K. Connors, "Review Essay on War on Error and the Southern Fire, How Terrorism Analysts Get it Wrong," *Critical Asian Studies* 38, no.1 (2006), p. 151.

²⁹ Paul Ehrlich, "The Southern Problem," *Asia Media*, 2006.

people in Thai society also have different identities in terms of ethnicity, religion, cultural heritage from the Thai-Malays. These feelings of alienation cause the strain on Thai-Malay minority group and lead them to form their own groups and movements.

In 1988, there was a movement from 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 realise the interests of the Thai Muslims from within the political system.

At present, There are four particularly significant groups emerging or re-emerging, and major violence erupting since early 2004. The major groups active today include:

- *BRN-C* (Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate, National Revolutionary Front-Coordinate) the only active faction of BRN, first established in the early 1960s to fight for an independent Patani state. Thought to be the largest and best organised of the armed groups, it is focused on political organisation and recruitment within Islamic schools;
- *Pemuda*, a separatist youth movement (part of which is controlled by BRN-C), believed to be responsible for a large proportion of day-to-day sabotage, shooting and bombing attacks;
- *GMIP* (Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani, Patani Islamic Mujahidin Group), established by Afghanistan veterans in 1995, committed to an independent Islamic state; and
- *New PULO*, established in 1995 as an offshoot of PULO and the smallest of the active armed groups, is fighting for an independent state.³⁰

The movements in the South cited above are in the form of organized movement. There have also been the protests conducted by groups of people. Protests

³⁰International Crisis Group, "Southern Thailand: Insurgency Not Jihad," ICG Asia Report, no. 98 (18 May 2005), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3436&l=1>.

organised by militants have long been a feature of the conflict in the South but a new pattern has emerged in the form of women leading actions to demand the release of suspects. This tactic has been used to particularly good effect since December 2006, when the government reviewed its policy of refusing bail for suspects in conflict-related cases and became more responsive to public pressure. Groups of women and children have blocked officials' access to villages or forced security forces to withdraw. Intelligence officials believe an active women's wing of the separatist movement has cells in hundreds of villages and is deployed systematically for these protests.³¹

³¹ International Crisis Group, "Southern Thailand :The Impact of the Coup," Asia Report, no. 129 (15 March 2007), p. 14, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4697>.