

# UNDERSTANDING ANTI-ISLAM SENTIMENT IN THAILAND

Don Pathan + Ekkarin Tuansiri + Anwar Koma

สัญญาณความหวาดกลัว  
อิสลามในสังคมไทย

ดอน ปาทาน, เอกรินทร์ ต่วนศิริ, อันวาร์ กอมะ

PATANI  
FORUM

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\*Don Pathan, Ekkarin Tuansiri, Anwar Koma

**2018**  
August

*REPORT*

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National Library of Thailand Cataloging in Publication Data

Don Pathan.  
Report understanding anti - Islam sentiment in Thailand.  
-- Pattani : Patani Forum, 2018.  
178 Page.  
1. Islamophobia  
2. Islam.  
I. Ekkarin Tuansiri, Co-author.  
II. Anwar Koma ,Co-author.  
III. Pipob Udomittipong, Translator.  
IV. Title.  
305.697  
ISBN 978-616-92457-9-7

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### Edition

: Published Thailand in 2018

### Printed

: SAMILAN PRESS  
3/202 M.1 Charoen Pradit Road,  
Rusamila, Mueang, Pattani 94000  
THAILAND

### Published

: PATANI FORUM  
112/21 M.5 Nong Chik Road,  
Rusamila, Mueang, Pattani 94000  
THAILAND

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The Asia Foundation



Australian Government

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

**Disclaimer:** This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union, Canadian Embassy in Bangkok, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and The Asia Foundation. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Patani Forum and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of these mentioned governments and organizations.

Patani<sup>1</sup> Forum is pleased to present the first report on Islamophobia in Thailand. It is the result of a joint effort by a team of dedicated researchers -- Buddhists and Muslims -- who came together to shed light on this extremely sensitive issue that has long been neglected for various reasons. The ambition of this report is to generate more meaningful discussions on the state of religious tolerance, state-minority relations and pluralism in Thailand, as well as the nature of the conflict in Thailand's far South where nearly 7,000 have died since this wave of insurgency resurfaced in January 2004.

Patani Forum would like to express our deepest gratitude to the Canadian Embassy in Bangkok for funding the first phase for the research of this report and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) for funding the second phase. With additional funding from the Asia Foundation and the European Union, Patani Forum was able to send this report to its final production stage and the printing press. This report would not have been possible without the dedication and commitment from Patani Forum staff members (Ekkarin Tuansiri, Don Pathan, Abdulloh Mad-adam and Arichah Kaikaew) and local/national researchers, academics, gender and civil rights activists, civil society organisation leaders, Thai government officials, members of the international community, artists, writers, and local and international non-government organisations. Special thanks goes to Ajarn Ngamsuk Rattanasathein, Ajarn Samak Kosem, Zakariya Amataya, Najib Ibn Ahmad, Praty Toh-itae, Nurulhuda Abru, Nurimah Beraheng, Nualnoi Thammasathien, Imron Zahoh, and Pipob Udomitipong for the translation work.

Last but not least, special thanks go to Rose McGovern, a US-based development and conflict resolution professional for her thoughts and for taking part in the field work with Patani Forum staff, Firdaus Abdulsomad, a Sweden-based researcher whose suggestions and input made this report possible and Thailand-based writer Michael Elmore for his fine editing.

<sup>1</sup> "Patani" spelled with one "t" referred to the Malay historical homeland that today constituted the three southernmost provinces and the four Malay-speaking districts in Songkhla province. Pattani - with two "t's" is a Thai province.



## METHODOLOGY

This study was divided into two phases with each adopting a slightly different set of methodologies. During the first phase (funded by the Canadian Embassy in Bangkok), Patani Forum conducted five one-day workshops with both Buddhists and Muslims in Thailand's four regions to lay the groundwork for deeper research into Buddhist-Muslim relations and gauge the extent of growing anti-Islam sentiment in the country. The cities included Songkhla, Udon Thani, Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya. The workshops were carried out with the assistance from local facilitators leading open discussions with small groups of Muslims and Buddhists separately. Community leaders, facilitators and members of the Patani Forum network were crucial in the recruitment of participants, who represented a wide and diverse spectrum of Thai society, from civil servants, health workers to homemakers and students. The number of participants varied per session but generally comprised between 12-16 local residents. Except for the first workshop, different facilitators were used for both the morning and afternoon sessions. Patani Forum met with facilitators before each workshop to discuss the objectives and format of the sessions. The main purpose of the sessions was to gauge participants' perception and understanding of Islam and Muslims.

The format of each session followed the same structure to enable a comparative study of the responses from participants of the four regions. After a brief introduction, each participant was asked to write down and/or draw what Islam meant to them and then share their responses with the group. A Patani Forum volunteer documented the responses on a flipchart during the session. Participants were encouraged to interject and share their own experience and perceptions related to the topic. In general, this approach enabled a guided discussion but prevented the session from veering too far from the heart of the issue, which was understanding their perception of Islam in relation to Thai society at large. The main points were summarized by the facilitator in the latter part of the session.

Methodology for the second phase of the study (funded by the Australian Government) involved a much bigger team of researchers who travelled with Patani Forum to various cities and regions throughout the country to conduct group and individual interviews with civic groups and key figures in their respective communities. Some of them identified themselves as "defenders of the Thai nation and nationhood" and "Thainess"; they justified their anti-Islam stance on the grounds that Islam is not compatible with the values of a Buddhist society. Others were community leaders, political and human rights activists. With the exception of the participants in Songkhla, the vast majority of the interviewees have never been to the Muslim-majority South, but all expressed great concern about the well being and future of the region.

Patani Forum's research team included Muslim and Buddhist academics from leading universities in Bangkok, and members of civil society organisations. Buddhists and Muslims from the far south and other parts of the country were included. Provinces and cities visited by the team for the second phase were Chiang Mai, Nan, Khon Kaen and Nakhon Si Thammarat. The aim of the second phase of the study was to obtain a deeper understanding of the connection between the conflict in the Malay-speaking Patani region and anti-Islam sentiment in Thailand. The interviews were conducted using the same set of questions as in the first phase, but followed up with more in-depth discussions about the factors that shaped the participants' perceptions towards Islam and Muslims.



## INTRODUCTION

Islamophobia is understood as the process of inciting and spreading fear and hatred against Islam and Muslims. The process is geared toward ratcheting up stereotypical biases. This process is combined with bigotry, discrimination, marginalization as well as exclusion of Muslims from economic, social and political activities and civic life.<sup>2</sup> Anti-Islam sentiment is not confined to Thailand; it has become a major challenge to pluralism, peace and peaceful co-existence for Muslims. This is especially true in communities where Muslims are a minority. Anti-Islam sentiment has helped governments around the world formulate national policy and justify discriminatory policies in the name of the global war against terrorism (GWAT). When one thinks of GWAT, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States often come to mind.

In some aspects, Islamophobia has become even more pronounced the past decade, more so than the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks. It has been driven by individuals, political parties and communities. Media coverage of the ongoing tensions is often biased resulting in stronger anti-Islam sentiment while the human side of the story gets overlooked. Even in tragic incidents like people fleeing war zones, human suffering does not seem to have the same effect as nationalistic sentiment that shaped a country's immigration policy. In many cases, Islamophobia and anti-Islam policies have become a convenient tool for populous politicians who have no qualm with exploiting the fear of their own people for political gains. By passing legislation that curb the growing Islamic presence in their respective countries and communities, national leaders can claim that they are tough on terrorism, specifically "Islamic terrorism". High profile terrorist attacks in major cities around the world by Muslim terrorist groups do not help the situation. And in some ways, knee-jerk reactions by various governments play into the hand of these terrorists whose narrative is to paint modern states as enemies of Islam. For Southeast Asian countries, the debate and discussion on Islamophobia and the "threat of Islam" intensified even further at the policy level in the wake of the attacks and seizure of Malawi in Southern Philippines.<sup>3</sup> The incident has been hailed as a warning sign of the rise of international terrorism in the

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พื้นที่เหนือมรดก



<sup>2</sup> Ali, Wajahat, Eli Clifton, Matthew Duss, Lee Fang, Scott Keyes, and Faiz Shakir. 'The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America'. Center for American Progress, 2011. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/religion/reports/2011/08/26/10165/fear-inc/>. referred to in <http://news.gallup.com/poll/157082/islamophobia-understanding-anti-muslim-sentiment-west.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> Tisdall, Simon. 'Isis-Backed Militants Struggle for Control in the Southern Philippines'. The Guardian, 29 May 2017, sec. World news. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/28/isis-backed-militants-struggle-for-control-southern-philippines-marawi>.



region<sup>4</sup> since its modus operandi emulates the operations of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. However, a leading Thai expert on security and international affairs, Prof. Dr. Surachart Bamrungasuk, argues that the model of the conflict in the Philippines' Malawi does not solely point at the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) influence in the region, but also indicates the growing prominence of "extremism" which has become a major challenge of governments in the region. Moreover, the Rohingya refugee crisis has not generated much sympathy from non-Muslim populations and governments in Southeast Asia because of the anti-Islam perception that has overshadowed the humanitarian concern. In short, the Rohingya crisis is not about a stateless minority being abused by a predominantly military government, but about a Muslim minority group that nobody wants to take in and take responsibility for. In this particular crisis, one can not ignore the connection between this anti-immigration policy and Islamophobia.<sup>5</sup>

Out of Thailand's 61 million population, there are approximately four million Muslims, half of whom identify themselves as Melayu and live in the southern border provinces (SBPs). A historically contested region where at least two generations of separatist insurgency have surfaced to take up arms to carve out a separate homeland for the local Malays. In spite of the fact that many interviewees in this report tended to point to the separatist violence in the far south to justify their anti-Islam position, it is difficult to pin down how Islam is connected to the separatist insurgency. Most experts and researchers would agree that, in spite of Islamic connotation and rhetoric, insurgency in Thailand's Malay-speaking South is essentially an ethno-nationalist struggle. But the Thai general public tends to ignore this analysis and blame Islam and all Muslims for their unwillingness to live peacefully with the rest of the people in Thailand. In other words, Buddhist nationalists generally disregard the argument the implementation of Thailand's assimilation policy of the Patani Malays in the past was a contributing factor to the conflict we see today in the South. The Patani Malays have long rejected the assimilation project and ironically, many Thais continue to put their hope on this policy as a solution to this ongoing conflict between the Thai State and Patani Malay minority.

It should be emphasised that Islamophobia in Thailand is an emerging phenomenon and has become more pronounced around the past four years (2014-

2017). This can be attested by reports of increased conflicts and opposition mounted by Buddhist nationalists against the construction of mosques in all four regions of Thailand in the recent decade. These incidents include the hostility and resistance to the construction of Halal Food Industrial Complex in Chiang Mai and the decision by teachers of a public school in Pattani to protest against elementary students wearing the Islamic headscarf (hijab). Islamophobia may not be a new phenomenon, but it has expanded its pressure on the social fabric and social cohesion of communities in Thailand. In this respect, the development of Islamophobia in the country is alarming, which is why it is utterly important to investigate and study this matter. The symptoms of Islamophobia in Thailand can be illustrated by at least five landmark incidents in the past four years that have drawn a great deal of attention. These include:

#### 1. Protests against the construction of a mosque in Nan province<sup>6</sup>

On 7 January 2015, villagers of Buppharam, Tambon Fai Kaew, Phu Phiang District, Nan, gathered at Buppharam Temple to protest against the construction of a mosque. It happened in the wake of the purchase of 284 square wah<sup>7</sup> of land in the village by a group of Muslims, purportedly for the construction of a mosque. Protestors accused the Muslim residents of having a unspecified hidden agenda that could turn the region into a conflict zone similar to the Malay-speaking southernmost border provinces, or introduce instabilities similar to what the media has widely reported about in other parts of the world. Efforts by local Muslims, including an imam, to clarify their intention behind the mosque construction to their Buddhist neighbours have done little to bridge the gap of mistrust. Independent observers said changing the position of the Nan's anti-Islam stance may be virtually impossible because it is tied to local and national politics between the Red Shirt and Yellow Shirt movements. When it was learned that the Red Shirts had endorsed the Muslims' plan to build a mosque, the Yellow Shirts responded with a province-wide protest against the plan. Prior to the Red Shirt endorsement of the mosque construction, there were no indications of Islamophobia in the province where no more than 15 Muslim families reside. But the fact that political groups pick on a religion so easily without much scrutiny suggest that Islamophobia can be a convenient political tool.

Another anti-mosque protest in Nan was carried out on March 3, 2015. The event was widely covered by the Thai media. The protest was led by a group of

<sup>4</sup> Surachart Bamrungasuk. 'Hot Peace! 2018 Landscape of World Politics' [สันติภาพร้อน! ภูมิทัศน์การเมืองโลก 2018]. Matichon Weekly, 1 February 2018, 26 January-1 February 2018 edition. [https://www.matichonweekly.com/column/article\\_79333](https://www.matichonweekly.com/column/article_79333).

<sup>5</sup> Osiewicz, Przemyslaw. "Europe's Islamophobia and the Refugee Crisis." Middle East Institute, 19 Sept. 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/content/article/europe-s-islamophobia-and-refugee-crisis>.; Bayrakli, Enes, and Farid Hafez. "2017 – European Islamophobia." European Islamophobia Report, 2017, <http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/executive-summary/2017-2/>.

<sup>6</sup> Prachachat Online. "Mosque construction tipped to yield local resistance, 'AEC can generate income', Imam" [ตั้งมัสยิด น่านสื่อเค้านาน ชาวบ้านฮือต้าน 'อิหม่าม' ชี้นำมัสยิดสร้างรายได้] Prachachat Online, 2015 [http://www.prachachat.net/news\\_detail.php?newsid=1425473263](http://www.prachachat.net/news_detail.php?newsid=1425473263)

<sup>7</sup> One square wah of land is four square meters.





■ Nan, We don't want mosques

■ Source: Editorial. "Nan people gathered to protest against Masjid." The Public Post, March 1, 2015. Accessed July 18, 2017. <http://www.publicpostonline.net/1466>.

Buddhist monks and about 300 villagers from Tambon Nam Kaen, Tambon Nam Kian, and Tambon Muang Tid, Phu Phiang District and Mae Charim District. They gathered at Wat Phra That Chae Haeng holding signs with messages opposing the construction of the mosque in Tambon Nam Kaen. They marched along with residents in Nan municipality, set up tables at Wat Phumin and collected 800 signatures from people who opposed the construction. The Deputy Governor of Nan, Chairat Tharasantisuk, was present to receive the letter demanding the suspension of the construction of the mosque. The protesters demanded they be told the decision within seven days and vowed to expand their protest to cover the entire province. Until now, no answer has been given to the protesters and Muslims in Nan province still have no other choice than to travel 130 kilometers to the nearest mosque, in Den Chai district of Prachin province. For the time being, Nan and Mae Hong Son are the only two provinces in Thailand that do not have a place of worship for Muslims. Efforts to resolve the dispute in Nan was handled through a vote in the concerned village Buppharam. It turned out that most of the villagers were against the construction of a mosque in their community and insisted on continuing to oppose it.<sup>z</sup>

2. Criticism of the construction of a building similar to a mosque in the premise of Wat Phra Mahathat Muang district, Nakhon Si Thammarat<sup>8</sup>

In September 2015, the Buddhism Protection Organization and a group of Buddhist monks in the South submitted a petition letter to the Ministry of Culture's Fine Arts Department noting that the construction of a new building, that would function as a souvenir shop, in the premise of Wat Phra Mahathat, Muang district, Nakhon Si Thammarat, resembled a "mosque" and should therefore not be located in a Buddhist temple. The Fine Arts Department issued a statement explaining that the building's architecture is influenced by Chinese and Portuguese arts. But the Buddhists still insisted that the building was too similar to a "mosque" and would therefore not be suitable in the Buddhist environment. Instead, every building should only be inspired by "Buddhist arts". This case showed the negative attitudes of villagers to architecture perceived to be Islamic. An explanation could be that the villagers are used to traditional Thai arts and find it difficult to accept reductionist architecture.

<sup>8</sup> Prachachat Online. "Investigating Phra Borommathat Dispute, Golden Dorm Rusted and Muslim's building in the Wat?" [เจาะปมพิพาท พระบรมธาตุนครฯ ยอดทองคำขึ้นสนิมและตึกมุสลิมในวัดพุทธ จริงหรือ?] Prachachat Online, 11 September 2015. [http://www.prachachat.net/news\\_detail.php?newsid=1441976036](http://www.prachachat.net/news_detail.php?newsid=1441976036).

### 3. Meetings and mobilization to oppose the construction of Halal Food Industrial Complexes in all districts of Chiang Mai<sup>9</sup>

In January 2016, a meeting chaired by Provincial Chief of Buddhist monks in Chiang Mai with other lay participants was held to express opinions about a plan to construct Halal Food Industrial Complexes in various districts in Chiang Mai.<sup>10</sup> The event led to a second meeting where the gathering met with the provincial governor to whom they submitted a petition letter against the plan for the construction of Halal Food Industrial Complexes in all the districts in Chiang Mai. The Buddhist groups said they were concerned about local impacts such as pollution and sewage from the manufacturing processes. They were especially concerned that the growing presence of Muslims would split their community because Muslims have a different lifestyle than Buddhists. Generally speaking, Muslims in Chiang Mai are viewed as non-locals and often perceived as migrants from other regions and/or foreign lands. The anti-halal camp also countered the argument that the project would boost local employment and economy. They argued the halal industry refuses to employ non-Muslims. Contrary to their assumptions, all the major producers of halal food in Thailand are owned by Buddhists.

In April the same year, the association of Kamnan and Village Headmen and villagers of four tambons (26 villages), about 1,000 people in total, from Doi Lor District, gathered in front of Doi Lor District office to protest against a plan to construct a Halal Food Factory Complex.<sup>11</sup> The villagers cited environmental impacts and overexploitation of water supplies essential for the community as the reasons for their opposition. During negotiations with the villagers, the Chiang Mai governor admitted that he was aware of the opposition of the villagers in regards to the the pilot project. He stated that these factories would help to boost local income and would become a marketplace for products from the farmers. But if the villagers were against it, he would suggest to the Committee to have the project scrapped with the motivation that the villagers wanted their right to live a self-sufficient lifestyle. The governor also promised to return the

<sup>9</sup> Niti Eawsiwong. 'Protest Islam in the Upper North [ต่อต้านอิสลามในภาคเหนือตอนบน โดย นิตี เอี้ยวศรีวงศ์]'. Maticchon Weekly (blog), 15 February 2016. <https://www.maticchon.co.th/news/38007>. Thairath Online. 'Doi Hlo happy after Halal Industry declined [ชาวดอยหล่อเฮ หลังได้รับพิจารณายกเลิกสร้างโรงงานฯ]'. [www.thairath.co.th](http://www.thairath.co.th), 9 April 2015. <https://www.thairath.co.th/content/492127>.

<sup>10</sup> Participants at the meeting included members of the association of Kamnan and Village Headmen in Chiang Mai plus more than 11 private religious organizations including the Chiang Mai Buddhism Protection Center, the Dhamma Dissemination Center, Buddhist Society, Maha Chulalongkorn Buddhist University in Chiang Mai Buddhist Society, and Chiang Mai Young Buddhists Association.

<sup>11</sup> The project was to be implemented by the Chiang Mai authorities, Chiang Mai Chamber of Commerce, Sheikhu Islam Office, the Provincial Islamic Council of Chiang Mai, Chiang Mai University, Chulalongkorn University's Halal Science Center, and the Department of Public Works and Town & Country Planning and the Treasury Department.



■ Public demonstration against the construction of Halal Food Industrial Complex in Chiang Mai, April 2016. Source: Thairath Online. 'Doi Hlo happy after Halal Industry declined [ชาวดอยหล่อเฮ หลังได้รับพิจารณายกเลิกสร้างโรงงานฯ]'. [www.thairath.co.th](http://www.thairath.co.th), 9 April 2015. <https://www.thairath.co.th/content/492127>.



land and keep it green and to inform the investors of the changed plans to the halal food manufacturing project.

4. Intimidation and public outrage against the construction of Mukdahan's Central Mosque<sup>12</sup>

In the mid afternoon on 12 May 2016, a group of six men pitched up a sign in front of the construction site of Mukdahan's Central Mosque in Muang district. One of the men approached construction workers and told them to stop working. The workers felt intimidated and called the Muang Mukdahan Police Station for protection. According to the testimonies of the caretaker of the mosque and the chief engineer, the incident could be interpreted as a response to reports about opposition to the construction of Pattani's Buddha Monthon. Nevertheless, no



■ A sign put up at the construction site of the Central Mosque in Muang district, Mukdahan. It reads: "We, people of Mukdahan, request a stop to the construction of the mosque. Pattani Buddha Monthon cannot be built because of Islam. Here there are only Buddhists. For whom are you building it? Here there are only Buddhists. Stop building Masjid, here we don't want it." Photo: Muslim Thai Post<sup>13</sup>



5. Public demonstrations, protests and petitions against the construction of mosque in Khon Kaen province<sup>14</sup>

On 5 June 2017, Chairperson of the Khon Kaen Buddhist Assembly for National Security led a march with about 70 people in the town of Khon Kaen to submit a petition letter to the governor demanding a revocation of the licenses allowing the construction of a mosque in Ban Lerng Pouy, Muang district, Khon Kaen. The group expressed their concern that the presence of a mosque would bring violent unrest like in the SBPs. Reports of the events featured an interview with Khon Kaen Buddhist Assembly for National Security Chairperson Pramuan Pimsen, who essentially claimed; "The construction of the mosque has been completed and activities have been organized in the building. Their religious activities have caused suspicion among local people making them feel worried that it is a call to use violence". Furthermore, it is mentioned in the petition letter that, "... local Buddhists and those in nearby areas deem that a call for terrorism has been lurking everywhere and even in people's emotions. Traditionally, people are not happy with the construction and establishment of a mosque fearing it might bring unrest to the area like in the three Southern Border Provinces... Therefore, all Buddhist organizations in Khon Kaen would like to make their position clear that is we want to 'nip it in the bud' and have the construction and establishment of mosque and Pondok School suspended."

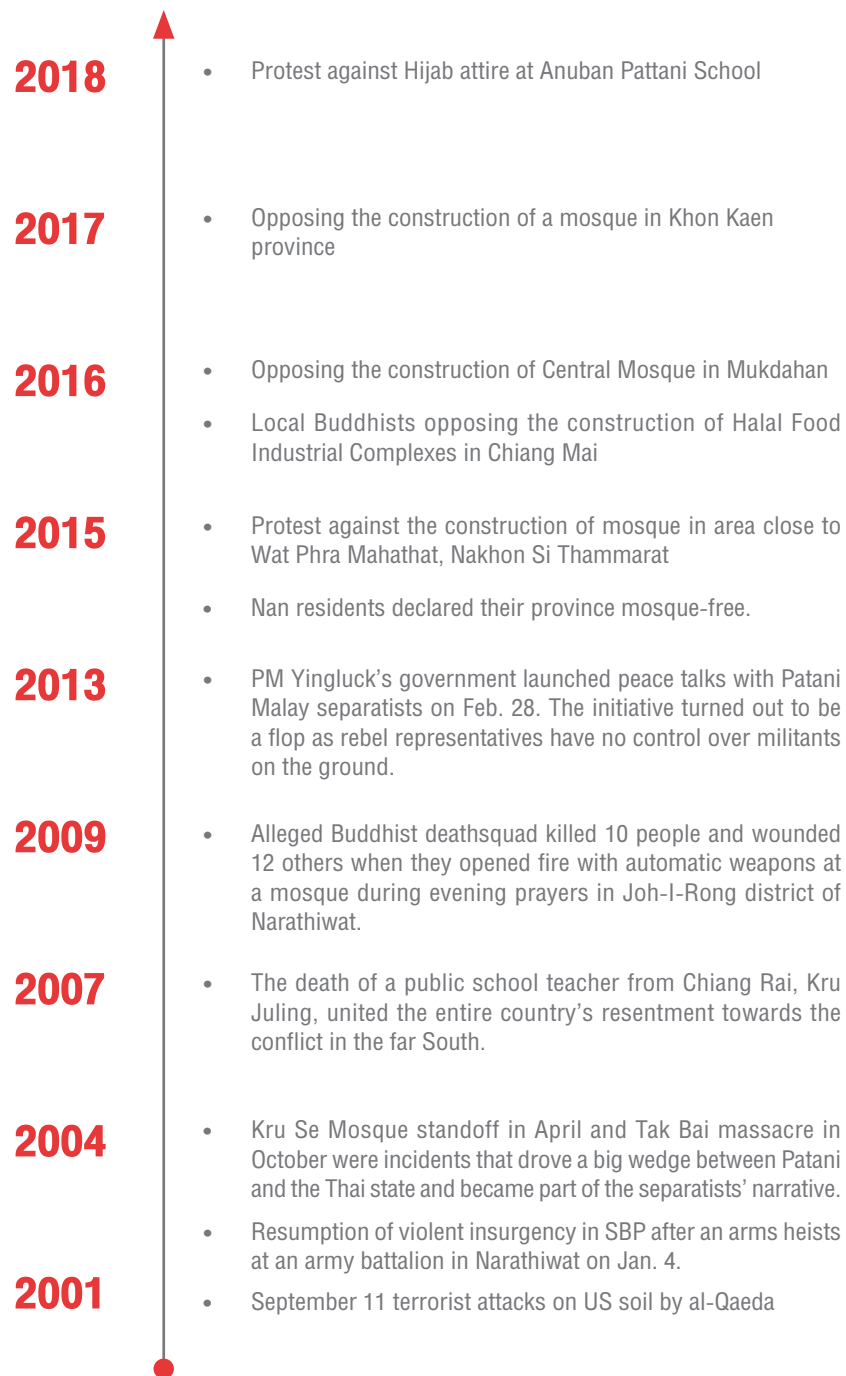
According to what the representative of the Islamic Committee of Khon Kaen told the press, the construction of the mosque is essential in response to the expansion of the Muslim community in Khon Kaen. According to a committee official, of 1.79 million people in Khon Kaen, there are over 3,000 Muslims. And the construction of the mosque has been carried out completely in compliance with the law. Furthermore, since the start of the project officials from the provincial authorities have regularly observed the construction site. Then all of a sudden, a group of villagers started to protest against its registration. There have been reports that such discontent could be attributed to grievances of some Buddhist Thai families whose children have been killed while working as security official in the far South. **PF**

<sup>12</sup> Muslimthai Post. 'Again! Mukdahans hail, protest Central Mosque's construction [อีกแล้ว! ชาวมุกดาหารขอ ปักป้ายต้านสร้างมัสยิดกลาง]'. muslimthai post.com, 13 May 2016. <http://news.muslimthai post.com/news/26352>.

<sup>13</sup> Source: Muslimthai Post. 'Again! Mukdahans hail, protest Central Mosque's construction [อีกแล้ว! ชาวมุกดาหารขอ ปักป้ายต้านสร้างมัสยิดกลาง]'. muslimthai post.com, 13 May 2016. <http://news.muslimthai post.com/news/26352>.

<sup>14</sup> Mariyam Ahmad. 'Khonkean villegers call authority to withhold Mosque's construction, afraid of Southern violence [ชาวบ้านขอนแก่นร้องจังหวัดระงับการก่อสร้างมัสยิด หวาดเหตุรุนแรงแดนใต้ตามมา]'. BenarNews, 7 June 2017. <https://www.benarnews.org/thai/news/TH-mosque-ban-06072017141226.html>.

## ISLAMOPHOBIA AND INSURGENCY IN THE FAR SOUTH



Timeline of major incidents related to Islamophobia in Thailand

Unrest in the SBPs, which resumed early 2004, has claimed nearly 7,000 lives and injured about 13,000 people with the majority of the victims being Muslim. Insurgency in Malay-speaking SBPs is essentially a separatist conflict and the banner for the struggle is still very much an ethno-nationalist one. There is no indication that the context has changed from a Patani Malay ethno-nationalist to a religious struggle. Nevertheless, those who support anti-Islam agendas continue to point to the southern conflict as one of their justifications in spite of the fact that the vast majority, if not all, of the Buddhist nationalists/activists who embrace an anti-Islam agenda have not been directly affected by the violence in the SBPs. In other words, their justifications have been based on assumptions of something that has yet happened. By "containing" the spread of Islam, these Buddhist nationalists believe they are saving Thailand from deterioration and destruction by Islam and Muslims. Islamophobia has posed a major challenge to Thailand and has asked its people what kind of country it wants to be. This question is not confined to people living in major cities across Thailand, but communities and villages in the rural areas as well. Already, a number of provinces have openly declared their area a mosque-free zone.

Apart from the effort to use Islamophobia to explain the current realities, there has been a growing interest among academics and researchers to comprehend its root causes. Attempts have been made to explore causes/motivations that have spurred such dread of Muslims in Thailand. Firstly, the protracted conflicts in the SBPs have exaggerated division and drove a bigger wedge between the Muslims in the Malay-speaking south to the rest of the country's people. The vast majority of Thais are Buddhists and make no distinction between the ethno-nationalist nature of the southern conflict and all the other things that they strongly disapproved of but done in the name of Islam. A manifestation of Islam-



ophobia was illustrated by the incident in Mukdahan province where opposition against the building of a mosque was deemed as a retaliation against the lack of public participation in the construction process of Pattani's Buddha Monthon. In addition, such protracted conflicts have fuelled the idea and stereotypical view that all Muslims in the SBPs support the use of violence.

Secondly, non-Muslims who live far away from the SBPs lack the insight about the Muslim communities there. Rather, they tend to easily accept information from sources, mainly national media, without verifying its authenticity. Similarly, some local Muslims in the SBPs attribute such Islamophobia to a lack of understanding about their situation; they also point at the media, which tends to focus solely on the violence instead of the historical grievances and root causes of the conflict. It goes without saying that media coverage shapes the context of the public understanding of the issue at hand. Too often, reports are either biased or unbalanced and the content does not always reflect the reality on the ground. Reporters themselves have inadequate understanding of the subject matter and instead of being part of the solution, the media becomes part of the problem. Indeed, how Islamophobia is reported can exacerbate the situation or help ease the tension between the conflicting parties. The fact that the topic itself has been attracting growing interest among policymakers, civil society organisations and members of the international community, is offering opportunities for Thai media personalities to observe more closely than they have in the past. As it stands, Thailand mass media's approach and scope tend to be somewhat superficial and continue to place much importance on the violent aspect of the issue, as well as the actors involved. Also, it has become a common practice for mass media to attribute such conflicts to the migration and expansion of the Muslim population who are regarded as "visitors" or "khaek" and pitch them against "local" people who are Buddhists. Mass media fail to dig into the root causes of the conflicts or to contextualize the situation with an transformative aim as a whole.

In spite of the fact that Islamophobia has been at the centre of discussion at various forums, it would be premature to conclude that a critical mass has been created. The scope of the topic is still very narrow and conclusions continue to be reached prematurely. As a result, the issue itself has become oversimplified and the prescribed solution can be constituted as another round of generalization without going into deeper understanding of the root causes for the insecurities of the various communities in the country. All the while, the tit-for-tat nature between Muslims and non-Muslims (Buddhist nationalists mainly) widens the gap of mistrust and give rise to more tension. This is because discussions

about Islamophobia often overlook the social and political context that allows the fear to thrive.

The 2018 Anuban Pattani School case is a good example of how much the discourse about the Islamic headscarf in public school was centered on rules, regulations and legislation, while lacking any input about the historical and political context between the Malays of Patani and the Thai State. It also became a tit-for-tat between Buddhist nationalists, in this case the 20 teachers who walked out on the first day of school to protest Muslim students wearing hijab, and the local Malay Muslims. For the 20 teachers and fellow Buddhist nationalists, it was an opportunity to "get back" at the local Muslims who are the vast majority of this historically contested region that was once the historical homeland of the Malays. The fact that the Patani Malays refused to embrace Thailand's state-constructed identity and historical narratives infuriates many Thai people across the country, especially the Buddhists in the far South, and the school's refusal to allow the students to wear Islamic headscarf is a reminder to all Muslims in this region that Thainess, or "kwam pen Thai", will not take a backseat to the local identity, be it Islam or Malay.

The avoidance of discussing Islamophobia in a more constructive manner has not helped to improve the overall situation in terms of reconciliation. Lack of clarity of what is at stake impedes efforts to monitor the depth of Islamophobia in a systematic and quantifiable manner. It is hoped that this special report from Patani Forum will help lay the groundwork for future research on this extremely sensitive issue. One practical outcome could be the establishment of a monitoring mechanism in which data can be collected and trends can be detected in order for policymakers and community leaders to plan and tackle issues accordingly. **PF**

This report is an attempt to answer three main questions, namely, which social

## TOLERANCE AND “OTHERNESS” IN THAI SOCIETY

พื้นที่ศาสนา =  
พื้นที่หม่อมมรดก



context in Thai society has nurtured the rise of Islamophobia, secondly, how Islamophobia in Thailand has expressed itself and lastly, what are the contributing factors to the fear and hostility?

Aforementioned incidents kicked-off a widespread debate and criticism of the situation in Thailand. The debate circulated around issues related to how people of different faiths can find a way to coexist peacefully amidst various forms of nascent tensions. Until now, harmony among people of different faiths has been possible by the cultural bedrock that encourages everyone to “look for commonalities and avoid confrontation”. Thai government officials have quietly expressed concern that the country may be drifting towards the disturbing situation in Myanmar where Buddhist nationalists are in the lead of a inhumane campaign to curb the expansion of the Islam. This move was realised with the backing of the government and security officers/military leaders and resulted in a bloody persecution of ethnic Rohingya people from western Rakhine State. While government officials acknowledged that Thai Muslims are just as patriotic as their Buddhist neighbours, they have not been able to convince the Thai Buddhists that their fear and concern are unfounded. Often, authorities take the easy way out and try to please both sides but in the end, fail and satisfy neither side.

In Thailand the handling of the dispute over the Islamic headscarf at the Anuban Pattani School is a good example of how the central government walked away from a problem. The government’s initial position was to permit Muslim students to wear their scarf, citing long standing ministerial regulation for public school. But after an uproar from Buddhist nationalists in the area, they changed their position. According to the new regulation, administrators of public schools situated on temple grounds will have the last say on what students can or cannot wear. Thousands of Thai public schools are situated on temple grounds.



## Alienation

Otherness has always been part of being a Muslim. Firstly, Islam draws a clear societal line between the faithful in Allah and the unfaithful (*kafir*) as indicated in the prophecy of Prophet Muhammad and in the messages of Allah and they shall be treated as “others” who have their own unique way of life.<sup>15</sup> A number of Islamic scholars who have participated in the workshops with Patani Forum concluded that Muslims have always been the “other” and have been possessing qualitative uniqueness since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Secondly, even though Muslims are permitted to conduct their living based on local culture, they are foremost obliged to adhere to Islam when it comes to fundamental principles, particularly, on the issue of faith and religious practice. In other words, local culture has been adapted to serve the purpose of Muslims’ social dynamisms as long as there are not major incompatibilities in terms of the practice and principles. Popular culture and practices that predated Islam in Southeast Asia have in many ways been incorporated into Islamic practices and rituals as long as they have not caused conflict with the sayings of the Quran. Interestingly, if such alienation and otherness have characterized the Muslim community since the beginning Islam, why did Islamophobia just manifest itself in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries? In “*Alienation of Muslims*”, Nidhi Eoseewong proposes that such predicament could be attributed to modern transformation as well.<sup>16</sup> In other words, owing to modern transformation (*particularly, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century*), Muslims and other believers found it more challenging to live peacefully side by side due to the growing divisions along religious lines. Believers of other religions were given room to adapt to the West. In Islam, on the other hand, traditional tenet (*or traditional teaching*) steadfastly hold on to the idea that certain elements of Western culture could be co-opted, as long as they are compatible with Islam. For example, women can play sports as it is not prohibited in the scripture, but they are required to dress in accordance to the Quran and Sharia. It is concluded by Nidhi that in an ideal life of Muslims, the laity way of life shall also play a secondary role to a religious way of life.<sup>17</sup> This lack of flexibility regarding religious principles and practices of Muslims vis-a-vis modern transformation process may not be as challenging as a the lack of understanding of the social transformation process. As one Buddhist participant noted at one of the group interviews,

*The Muslims strictly observe their religious practice. But they can make non-Muslims a bit frustrated by their rather strict behavior. This makes non-Muslims wonder why Muslims have to behave differently from other believers and why they are bound by many prohibitions. Like other religions, the Muslim community has to respond to changes in the modern world. Thai Muslims tend to respond to modern transformation by going back to their fundamental roots perhaps believing that their comfort zone can help them cope with the challenge of modernity.*

The Muslims’ “otherness” in the Thai context has not just been defined by religion; their social characteristics have been defined by “Thainess” (*kwam pen Thai*) as well. During the workshops organized by Patani Forum in the four regions, the Thai Muslims displayed the same patriotism and pride of Thainess as the Buddhists. But the Muslims also said they feel they have been increasingly subjected to a sense of “otherness” by their compatriots in Thailand and noted that the term “*khaek*” (*guest, outsider*) is being applied to them.<sup>18</sup> The same term, *khaek*, is also being applied to Muslim terrorists worldwide, from the Middle East and Afghanistan to insurgents in Thailand’s far South and the Rohingya refugees fleeing the atrocities committed against them by Burmese troops. Such racial perception has been created as a result of the process to construct Thai identity or “Thainess”, which is innately related to being Buddhist. In other words, any person who converted to Islam shall be automatically labelled “*khaek*”. As a result, in the view of Thai Buddhists, a Muslim can never become fully Thai and therefore, can never grasp and appreciate Thainess.

## The media

Based on information collected during the workshops in the four regions, it has been found that certain participants share the idea that mainstream media in Thailand has been instrumental in the perpetuation of fear toward Islam in Thailand. Most participants who voiced such statements did not hold any specific type of media or media outlet accountable for such a role. Rather, they alluded to structural problems created by mass media in Thailand and how it has led to the perpetuation of “otherness” of the Muslims. They also attributed such otherness to the undemocratic political structure and lack of tolerance. This is clearly supported by the fact that there have been no critical reports of

<sup>18</sup> Andre, Virginie. “Thai Cyber-Actors: Evidence of an Islamophobic Effect.” *Fear of Muslims?*, Springer, Cham, 2016, pp. 115-18. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-29698-2\_8.

<sup>15</sup> Satha-Anand, Chaiwat. “Muslim Studies: Radical Social Science and ‘Otherness.’” *Songklanakarinn: E-Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1998, pp. 1–10.

<sup>16</sup> Niti Eawsiwong. ‘Strangeness of Muslims (final)’. *Maticchon Weekly* (blog), 13 October 2017. [https://www.maticchonweekly.com/column/article\\_58920](https://www.maticchonweekly.com/column/article_58920).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

the policies that have led to the intensification of Thainess. In addition, under this quasi-democratic regime, it is challenging for alternative media to take the lead to critique Thai patriotism since they are vulnerable to intimidation and harassment by security agencies. As a result, both Thai Muslims and Thai Buddhists fail to come to terms with ethnic conflicts (*religion ethnicity*) and tend to jump to a convenient conclusion that the conflict in SBPs is Buddhism vs Islam.

“Otherness” of Muslim communities in Thailand has been is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it has been founded and cultivated in the same nourishing ground that has given rise to Islamophobia. Acceptance of the Muslim community tends to stay at the physical level, i.e., tolerance and acceptance of dress code, such as hijab, but not at the conceptual level, which calls for tolerance and acceptance of otherness. **PF**



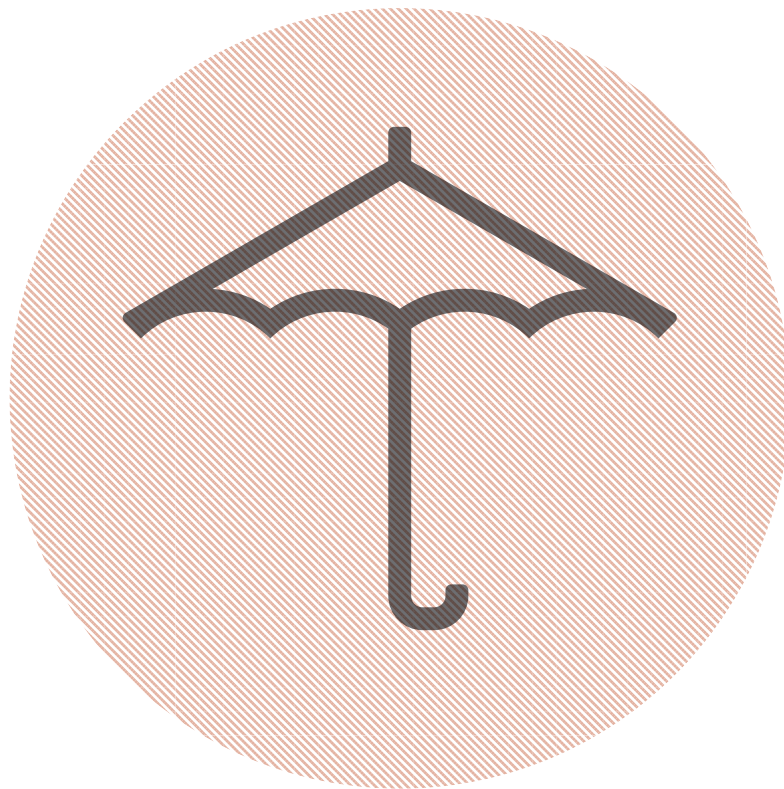
# WORKSHOPS



## WORKSHOPS

UNDERSTANDING ANTI-ISLAM SENTIMENT IN THAILAND

### SONGKLA



Bordering Pattani, the district of Chana in Songkhla province is a gateway to the Malay-speaking Southern Border Provinces. Most people, Buddhists and Muslims, in Songkhla use Southern Thai dialect for their day to day communication. They exist cordially, often side by side, throughout the entire region. But violence down the street in Patani, the historical name of the Malay historical homeland, has taken its toll on the social fabric that has kept Southern Thai Muslims and Southern Thai Buddhists together for centuries, ever since the arrival of Islam to the region.

Because of the violence in the Malay-speaking South, Buddhists and Muslims in Chana said they sense a growing mistrust in their community and said they are pretty certain that the relationship will deteriorate before it gets better. The workshop took place in Chana, Songkhla, at the Quranic and Languages Center of Chariyathamsuksa Foundation School on 12 December 2015. Both sessions - first with local Thai Muslims and second with Buddhists -- involved conversations about the political violence in the far South and relations between the communities.

Buddhists emphasized the cultural and psychological barriers that did not exist in the past, and pointed out, a growing number of Muslims are staying away from Buddhist social functions and events. There is a tendency, however, to make comparisons without understanding the restrictions Muslims have placed upon themselves. For example, Buddhists said they are willing to participate in any social events or religious ceremony of the Muslims if they are invited, but do not understand why Muslims do not reciprocate. One young young Muslim believes that relationships between Buddhists and Muslims in Chana and other parts of Songkhla will not deteriorate if the two sides continue with their dialogue. Other Muslims at the workshop believe that in order to overcome misunderstanding, Muslims have to demonstrate that they can be productive citizens and an integral part of the community that they share with the Buddhists.

Overall, participants of the respective communities had mixed feelings about the state of Muslim-Buddhist relations. Some thought relations between the two sides were sound, while others disagreed. Some participants believed that local Thai Muslims in this province were unfairly targeted and that their loyalty was unfairly questioned because of the ongoing insurgency in the Malay-speaking region, which is just south of Chana district. But local Buddhists and Muslims who interact on a daily basis said their friendship has not changed. Many Buddhist participants in Songkhla said they believe Muslims have been treated unfairly by Thai society but, nevertheless, they believed Muslim leaders could do a better job in engaging the non-Muslim communities to talk about the development taking place under their name and the changes within the Muslim community and society itself. Indeed, a number of Buddhists pointed to the rise of Islamic religiosity, as reflected in the dress code, especially among women, and suggested this trend may have created a psychological barrier between them and the Muslims. But they did not say the changes have affected their perception. Those with long standing relations with Muslims said their interactions and feelings have not changed because of a changed dress code. It may be harder to read the body language of their Muslim friends because the new face veil but they made it clear that it would take a lot more than clothing to rip the fabric of their society.

While day-to-day interaction between ordinary Muslims and non-Muslims may be strong, among the Buddhist elites in the city who have access to government security officials at the regional and national level, their understanding of the situation in the far South and their feelings about the “rise of Islam in Thailand” have been largely shaped by officials who are just as prejudiced against Muslims themselves. But, because of their official position, they do not have the luxury of airing their Islamophobia outburst in the same manner as the retired police officers and teachers who have often formed local Buddhist nationalist clubs of their communities. In fact, some business elites in Hat Yai, for example, equate the success in real estate in this commercial hub to the allegations that Buddhists were being chased out of the Malay-speaking South. For many of these Thai business elites in Hat Yai, the fact that Thai Buddhists control much of the economy in the far South, as well as the fact that municipalities and chambers of commerce in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat are in the hands of local Buddhists, doesn't seem to register much in their line of thinking. If anything, the fact that Patani Malays do not make race and economy political issues suggest that their grievances are with the state, not local and regional Thai Buddhists. Moreover, many among the business elites refuse to make distinction between Thai Muslims and Malay Muslims and see them in equally disturbing terms. In this

respect, it is easier for them to slip into bigotry and paint the religion of more than one billion people worldwide with a single brush instead of dealing with specific issues in a rational way.

Insurgency is a security problem for Thai security forces and the Malays' refusal to embrace Thai state-constructed narratives irritates Thai national leaders greatly. But instead of trying to understand why Muslims of Patani refuse to surrender their Malay identity for a “Thai” one in the same manner as the Chinese and South Asian immigrants, or the Lao from the upper Northeast, the Khmer from lower Northeast, Lanna and Shan from the North and Mon in the West - and let's not forget the Vietnamese migrants who were poorly treated by our security apparatus - had done just to be counted and accepted as “Thai”, we conveniently paint the Malays of Patani as a threat to national security and nationhood.

### *Melayu Muslim vs. Thai Muslim*

According to Muslim participants, Melayu people in Patani perceive Thai speaking Muslims as “foreign” or “outsiders”, and often see themselves as religiously superior than Muslims from other parts of Thailand. This complex identity means that adherence to Islam is not enough to be accepted on equal terms in Patani. In the view of Thai Muslims in Songkhla, Malay identity in Patani region has been used as a gold standard to gauge what constitutes a genuine “Muslim”. Needless to say, most Thai Muslims reflect that they find it uncomfortable being viewed from such a frame. In their view, the fact that they do not speak Malay does not make them any less Muslim. But for Malay Muslims in Patani, ethnicity and religious identity are two sides of the same coin. This powerful combination has resisted Thailand's policy of assimilation and permits the locals to maintain their unique identity and cultural-historical narrative that paints Thailand and Thai people as “the others”. Patani history, even long after it lost its independence to Siam, has shown that the natives have coexisted peacefully with people from other ethnic backgrounds. The current wave of separatist insurgency that surfaced in January 2004 may have taken its toll on race relations, especially among the younger generation. But essentially, the conflict is between an armed separatist movement, namely the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), and the state security apparatus, namely the police and military personnel. Moreover, Thai-Chinese in the far South continue to dominate the chambers of commerce in all three provinces, and municipality politics. This is a region where about 85 percent of the local residents identify themselves as Malay Muslims. **PF**

## WORKSHOPS

UNDERSTANDING ANTI-ISLAM SENTIMENT IN THAILAND

### UDON THANI



Udon Thani in the Northeast is quite diverse in terms of religion and ethnicity with Muslims being one of the minorities. That may be part of the reasons why people here tend to get along. But this does not mean the community leaders do not have to work at it; all sides make concerted efforts to reach out to one another and they do not have to wait for problems to surface to do so. A significant number of people from Udon Thani have worked in the Middle East, including ultra conservative Saudi Arabia, and are familiar with Islamic customs and traditions. Prominent ethnic groups in the province include Vietnamese and Chinese descendants. Christians also have a strong presence, thus, adding to the pluralistic characteristic of the province. During our workshop, non-Muslims talked about how respect for differences in Udon Thani helped serve as the guiding principle for peaceful coexistence between religious-ethnic groups, regardless how conservative one may be. Community relations was one of the major themes in this session.

Muslims participants, on the other hand, were third generation whose forefathers migrated to the region from various parts of South Asia, as well as other parts of Thailand. The setting of the discussion was at a private Islamic school where the majority of the students were Buddhists, not Muslim. One of the reasons why this school was able to overcome cultural-psychological barriers, according to Buddhist parents, was because the Muslim teachers displayed a strong moral example for the community and their children. Gambling and drinking (alcohol) does not exist among the Muslim teachers at the Santi Tham Wittataya School, the Buddhist parent said. Subject matters are secular and the Muslim teachers here come from various backgrounds in terms of education and ethnicity. If anything, this case demonstrates that being a religious minority in the area is not an obstacle should one maintain their integrity and see itself as an integral part of the community.

#### *A growing concerns*

Despite the strong foundation that permits cross-cultural relationships to exist, there is a growing concern that the heightening of Islamic religiosity among



certain stratas of the Muslim community has driven the two sides further apart. Some see the covering of head to toe by Muslim women as a “disruption to communication and interaction” with non-Muslims who don’t know what to make of the new conservative look but still may want to get to know the person. Muslims at the workshop said they were aware of the growing awareness among certain groups in their community who have become more conservative and less moderate. But none of the groups had an answer as to how both sides should resolve this concern. Buddhist participants tended to stress more dialogue between all sides to dispel any fear linked to the growing Islamic religiosity, the long standing recipe for peaceful coexistence for Udon Thani.

### *Biased media*

Participants, both Buddhist and Muslim, said reporting on the conflict in the far south and on Islam in general was biased, negative and unbalance. For that reason they were not surprised as to why the public would think Muslims would be perceived as troublemakers. This is not to say that there are no real concerns with global terrorism. But to associate their Muslim neighbours to the global war on terrorism would be too far fetched for the locals here. Participants at the workshops in Udon Thani argued that, in principle, all religion teaches people to do good. But religion itself is neither peaceful or violent; it’s what people bring into it. A common response from Muslim and Christian participants was that their Creator put people on earth with laws and commandments and blessed them with the ability to think for themselves. These instructions were not complicated; they are based on universal principles, they said. “But, unfortunately, many of us don’t employ these values in our decision making process,” one participant said.

### *Less friendly eyes*

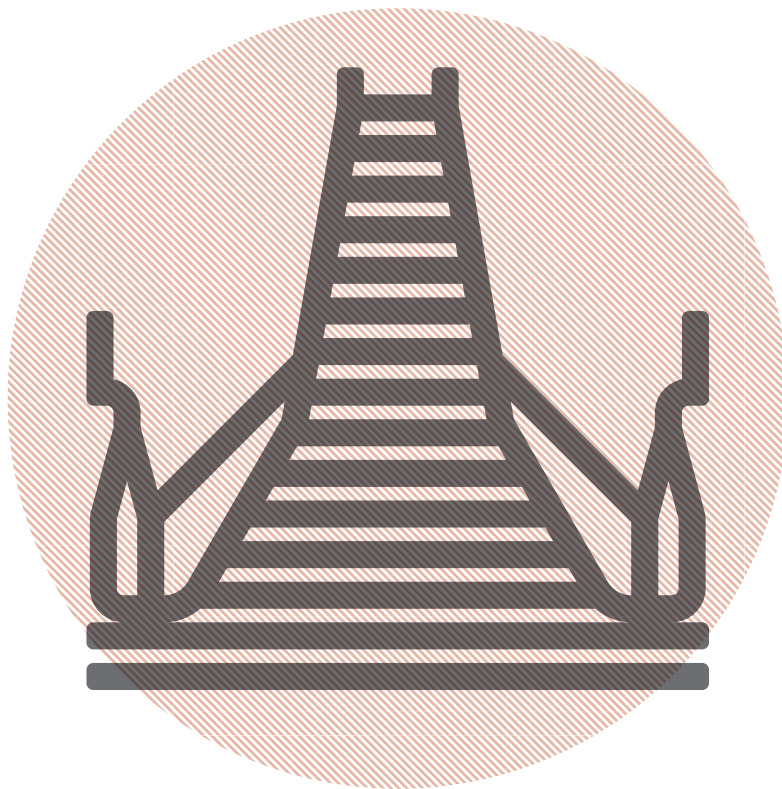
Many Thai Muslims recounted that they often had to explain the conflict in the far South, the Middle East and elsewhere to their Thai Buddhist neighbours. They were concerned that the conflict in the South could drive a bigger wedge between them and the Buddhists in their region if the conflict goes unresolved. The Muslims said they are just as clueless as the Buddhists over these conflicts. In spite of the soundness of the race relations in this province, Muslims noted that they are being perceived with a less friendly eye when compared to people from other faiths. **PF**

“ This is not to say that there are no real concerns with global terrorism. But to associate their Muslim neighbours to the global war on terrorism would be too far fetched for the locals here ”

# WORKSHOPS

UNDERSTANDING ANTI-ISLAM SENTIMENT IN THAILAND

## CHIANGMAI



Chiang Mai, a major popular tourist city in the North, has long been a melting pot of people from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Historically, this area has been a trade hub where local people from different faiths and ethnicities have lived together in harmony and mutual respect. There have been no major conflicts between ethnic groups. Nevertheless, in the past decade, Buddhists in Chiang Mai have noticed clear changes in the Muslim community. The emergence of Islamic religiosity and the growing number of Muslims concern many Buddhists in Chiang Mai. Both Muslims and Buddhists in Chiang Mai were uncertain about what the future holds for their society in terms of coexistence and whether these changes will have any negative impact on the current social setting.

### *Within the Muslim community*

Muslim participants at the workshop noted the growing tensions within their community and attributed the rift to how people interpret the holy scripture. The participants also expressed concern about certain Islamic clerics' conservatism and rigidity, and how this has produced negative stereotypes within their communities. They said it would be a positive step for Muslims to be adaptable, but noted that conservative clerics have made people feel they could not be flexible in their interpretations. In particular, they commented on the issue of women being the target of hostility due to the way they dress in public. The Muslims emphasized that they must unite to have one voice when speaking to the public or the media, in order to counter negative perceptions of Islam.

Likewise, many Buddhists felt uncomfortable with the rapid changes in the Muslim community. According to one Buddhist participant, an increasing number of Muslims have become more devout in the way they carry themselves. Such devoutness has created a "social distance", which has given rise to myths and speculations, and reinforced the notion of "otherness" for the Muslims. Despite the "social distance", many Buddhists still believed that peaceful coexistence is achievable and that race relations will be manageable. However, both sides

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Such devoutness has created a “social distance”, which has given rise to myths and speculations, and reinforced the notion of “otherness” for the Muslims.

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criticized the media for the growing tension.

### *Conflict in the far South*

Both Muslims and Buddhists participants expressed their confusion about the conflict in the Malay-speaking South and that, regardless of its causes, the violence gravely affected perceptions of Muslims in Thai society. They also felt that the violence dominated media coverage on Islam, and that these reports do not represent the religion in a positive light.

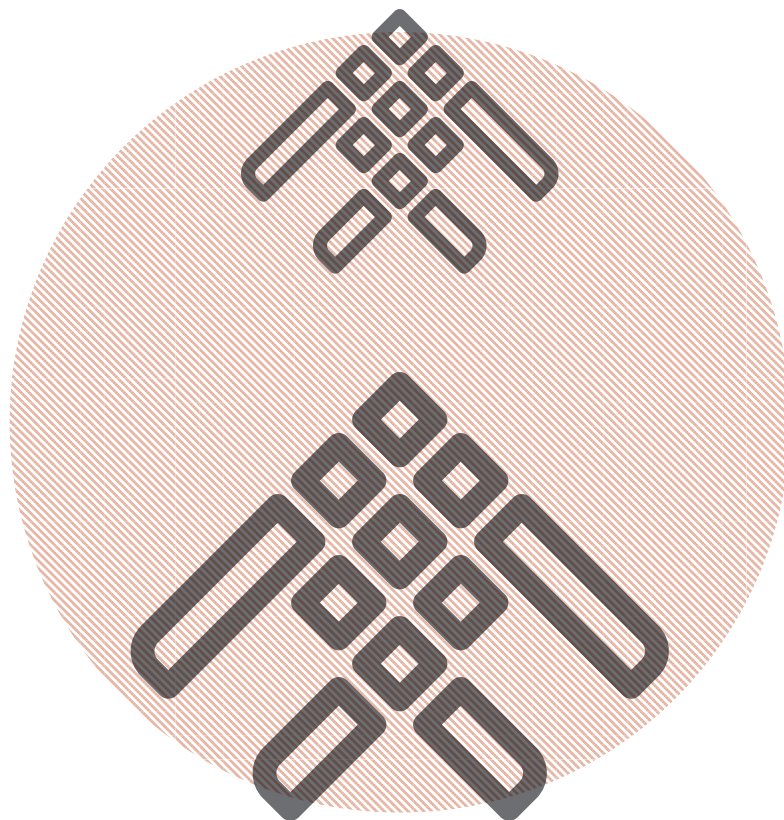
The participants also perceived Patani Malay Muslims as stricter and accused them of using Islam to advance personal and political interests. For example, women in this workshop pointed out that a significant number of men in the Patani region have more than one wife. They were also bothered by the unwillingness of Muslims from the far South to talk about the conflict and insurgency in the far South. **PF**



## WORKSHOPS

UNDERSTANDING ANTI-ISLAM SENTIMENT IN THAILAND

### AYUTTHAYA



Both Buddhists and Muslims said that communal conflicts stemming from religion do not exist in their community while the Muslims find Ayutthaya a society that genuinely and, with understanding, respect their dignity. Culturally and socially, Ayutthaya is a place where Buddhists and Muslims share close-knit relationships. They have built their houses close to each other and have sent their children to the same schools. Local Muslims see themselves as an integral part of the community and embrace and cherish the same historical narrative of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya as their Buddhist neighbours. Historically, Muslims played an important role in the Siam Royal Court; the first Shaykul Islam of Thailand<sup>19</sup> came from Ayutthaya. Furthermore, local political leaders have strong working relationships with Muslims whose voices contributed in shaping local politics. In fact, a significant number of Muslims hold various governmental offices, thus, allowing them to forge intimate relationships with local people. As a result, there is a sense of unity and pride in Thainess, identity and historical consciousness between the authorities and Muslims and they all share the same historical consciousness and feel that their role and contributions have been recognised.

#### *Maneuvering with an emerging relationship*

In spite of the peaceful coexistence, Ayutthaya is not an isolated entity. Connectivities permit flow of ideas and thoughts, including negative perceptions and attitudes about people and places. In this respect, Ayutthaya, like everywhere else, cannot divorce itself from the discussion on anti-Muslim sentiment at the local and global levels. For instance, some Muslim participants raised the issue of discrimination in the job market. In their opinion, this issue is caused by the negative stereotypes surrounding Muslims among potential employers. Many participants testified about being asked a lot of personal questions about the way they dressed and how they carry themselves socially. Such questions and the way they were asked made them feel somewhat uncomfortable. In response

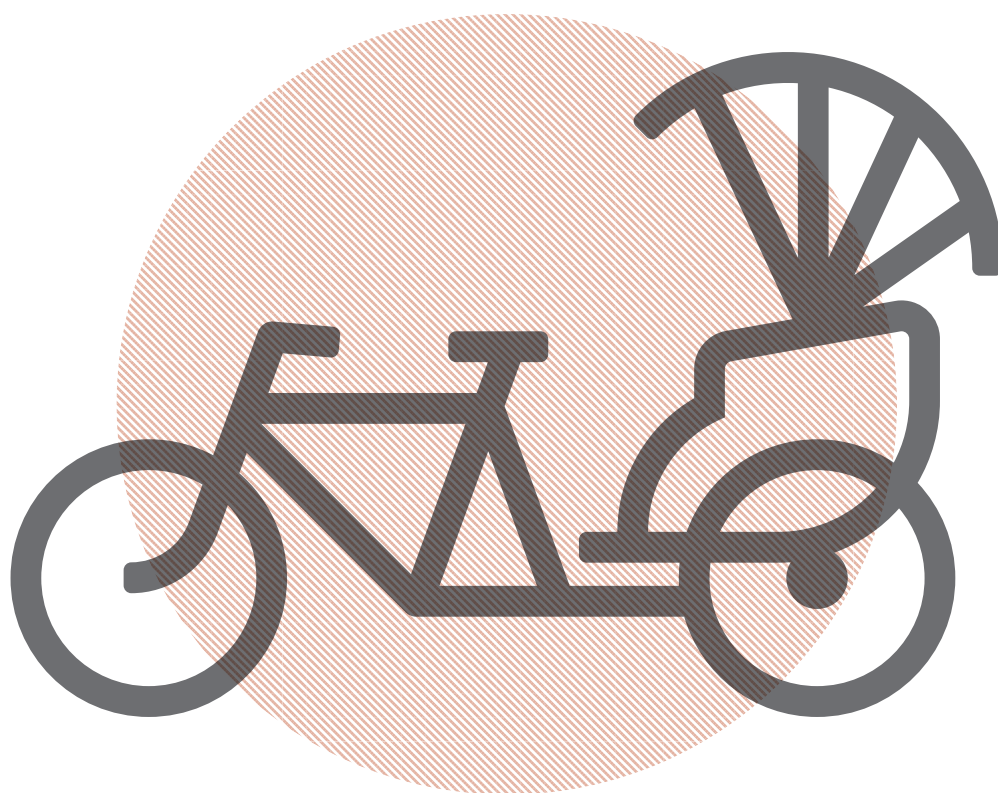
<sup>19</sup> Shaykul is an honorific title for Muslim spiritual leader of Thailand.

to the negative experiences, some Muslims formed support groups to share their feelings and talk about their daily challenges. They also believed that such biases accumulated as a result of the role of mass media in Thailand which tended to amplify a negative image of Muslims and to perpetrate the discourse that Muslims are extremists especially in the light of the violent conflict perpetrated by the Islamic State (IS).

### *The Far South*

Muslims in Ayutthaya said members of their community have organised trips to the Malay-speaking South, even after the conflict resurfaced 14 years ago. Long standing people-to-people relations resulted in a number of students from the Malay-speaking South studying in Ayutthaya. For this reason, Ayutthaya Muslims have closely followed the situation in the far South and many expressed sympathy and willingness to help. But they were not really sure how they could go about doing this. Participants believe the ongoing conflict has forced many Patani Muslims to turn to Malaysia for employment opportunities not able to fully grasp the fact that Malays of Patani embraced a totally different narrative from them and the rest of the Thai society. As a result, Muslims in Ayutthaya tended to take up conspiracies that give little credence to the fault in Thailand's policy of assimilation but more on specific issues, such as rivalries among government agencies and competition for budget allocations etc. Some pointed to the policy of the Thaksin Shinawatra administration and his heavy-handedness in dealing with insurgency. Others thought Malays of Patani want to break from Thailand and join with Malaysia where they speak the same language. But observers and academics working on the conflict said separatist separatism in the far South is not a new phenomena and regardless of Thaksin's policy, a new generation of separatist militants was long in the making, almost immediately after the previous wave of insurgency had subsided in the late 1980s. Thaksin's approach has made things worse but it is generally agreed upon that he was not the cause of the conflict. While the conflict in the far South is analysed in the context of state-minority relations, problems associated with Thai Muslims is more about race-relations. Moreover, Malay Muslims in the Patani region make up a vast majority of the local community while Muslims in other parts of Thailand is considered a minority. **PF**



**NAN**

Nan is a province that is out of the way and is not a place people pass by casually. Unlike Chiang Mai, there is no main route from Bangkok to Nan. In less than a decade, the province that borders Laos' Xayaburi has seen the development of tourism. Stories have been created to attract tourists who want to experience the feeling of being in Nan. Wat Phra That Chae Haeng is held in high regard as one of the most sacred places of worship in the province, whereas Wat Phu Min is renowned for its mural paintings. There is also the Rim Nan Art Gallery. All these have become attractions that appeal to many tourists. But in order to maintain the narrative and mystique, an identity that is unique to Nan was needed. Naturally, Buddhism became the point of reference for this narrative. Where Islam fits into this scheme of thing, on the other hand, has remained a major challenge. One Nan resident said that in the early days of Nan, no entertainment parlors existed in the province. Something that has certainly changed, now the province's border districts are crowded with entertainment venues. These entertainment venues have "devastated" the old Nan that he once knew. Interestingly, he also perceived the project to construct a mosque in Phu Phiang District in the same negative light.

***A constructed identity***

Prior to the proposed mosque project, Buddhists and Muslims in Nan were living peacefully side by side. This border province does not come across as a battleground for anything, at least not in post-Communist insurgency Thailand. But all of a sudden, a public campaign against the construction of the province's first mosque erupted. Muslims said the campaign was orchestrated and that it stemmed from political disputes. To understand this sudden move, according to local Buddhist leaders in the area, one has to be familiar with the conservative values that are deeply entrenched in Buddhism which has fuelled the notion that Nan should not be tainted by non-Buddhist religious practice. It does not matter if outsiders may consider this a constructed myth, but this leader who had taken part in the anti-mosque campaign believes local



Buddhists in Nan embraced this perception of their province wholeheartedly. But does this explanation capture the true attitudes of the people, or was the anti-Islam sentiment nurtured by local and national political groups, as some local residents suspected? Conversations about how Islam and Muslims would infiltrate Nan and dismantle the Buddhist way of life surfaced unexpectedly and gained traction immediately, thus, raising the suspicion of the possibility that the sentiment was engineered and shaped at the local, grassroots level.

Muslims have been slowly moving to Nan over the past three decades. Many have been employed by various government agencies and some married local Buddhists and scattered in various districts and villages. Judging from the recent tension, it seems that their three-decade presence was not enough to gain the needed respect from the locals. This is unlike Phrae or Mae Hong Son where the sizeable Muslim populations have long been a part and parcel of the pioneers who settled and helped to establish the provinces and build mosques and Islamic schools over much of the past century. But the majority of Muslims in Nan were recent migrants and some had come from as far south as Satun and Narathiwat some three decades ago. The time aspect might be a factor for the Buddhists in Nan to feel connected to the incoming Muslims. In addition, the current mistrust could also be attributed to the fact that the local Muslims did not inform enough Buddhist residents in advance of their plan to build a mosque. For local Buddhists, the mosque construction project was a surprise and it galvanized opposition and further complicated the situation. The unwillingness to allow the construction of the mosque was also linked to the fear of the unrest in the SBPs. Buddhist interviewees raised the conflict as a factor for not supporting the completion of this mosque as they believed their way of life and security would be compromised. Moreover, it was not clear how many soldiers from Nan had died in the far South, but it appeared that those who had returned had spawned prejudice against Muslims among the local people.

### *Smoking gun*

A native resident recounted that Buddhist monks, government officials, military officials, police officials or other individuals who returned to Nan after being stationed in the SBPs spoke of many tragic stories. After all, this wave of insurgency that erupted in late 2001 but was not officially recognized until January 2004, has so far claimed nearly 7,000 lives, most of them local Malay Muslims. Needless to say, this further deepened fear among Nan residents, leading to the conclusion that if a mosque and a Muslim community was to establish a strong foothold in Nan, instability and chaos would affect the region. The presence of a mosque would attract more Muslims to settle in Nan and it would

be like drawing enemies into your own home. Essentially, people in Nan have been bombarded by mainly one-sided and negative information coupled with no first hand experience of the situation in the SBPs other than those who had been stationed there as security officials. How their stories were received, along with the presentation of the issues in social and mainstream media, shaped the thinking of the local people who already deemed Muslims to be “enemies” of Buddhism and therefore, any mosque construction had to be stopped. The lack of critical discussion of this issue has led to the spread of an unfounded fear of Islam and Muslims.

### *Prior to that*

While Buddhist activists in Nan said their anti-Islam sentiment was a process in the making, local Muslims, on the other hand, gave a different account. According to them, prior to the mosque construction, attempts were made to keep local Buddhists informed about the plans and there was no opposition. The resistance began when the construction was about to start and tension has heightened since then. Efforts by the Muslims to organize an open forum to garner public understanding and reach out to provincial authorities for help failed to ease the situation. Some Muslims testified of being monitored and subjected to surveillance and pressure from security agencies, making them feel unsafe. Muslim still have to travel to about 200 kilometers to Phrae for Friday prayers. In all it is a journey of more than 400 kilometers return and takes up about four hours on the road. Having a mosque in Nan province is essential for Muslims living in the area. Not only as a place of worship, meeting and the exercise of their religious duties, it could also serve as a platform for religious studies for both children and adults. The Muslims in Nan also claimed that since Nan borders Laos, having a mosque there would help accommodate Muslims from the neighboring country. It could bring a positive image to this Thai province.

“Before, we could live in peace with the Thai Buddhist. We could enter any home. We could be invited to eat at any home. But the situation changed,” recounted a local Muslim about the emerging situation. Some Buddhists even decided to stay away from their fellow Muslims and sometimes avoided talking with them. Against all odds, the local Muslims are still hopeful. They try to maintain positive relationships with local Thai Buddhist by nurturing mutual respect and understanding, though it has not proven very successful. Some Muslim organizations and concerned government agencies have tried to look for solutions. Media coverage about the campaign for the mosque, as well as visits by foreign diplomats to the area, have done little to resolve the problem. The lack of progress, along with the sense that more coverage could drive a

bigger wedge between the Buddhists and Muslims in the area, has forced local Muslims to question the merit of discussing the matter with outsiders. Patani Forum researchers, during the field work to Nan, for example, sensed there was uneasiness among the Nan Muslims when asked about their confrontation with the local Buddhists.

### **Provocation**

*Attempts have been made to centralize religious power and to create a religious organization deviated from the genuine tenet of the religion. For example, a discourse has been formed and invoked by groups claiming to protect the religion. But actually, the genuine Buddhist tenet has nothing to do with expelling other believers or infringing on people's rights. Given their ignorance about the Muslims' intention, the villagers could easily be led to mobilize on the basis of bias and bigotry toward other religious practitioners. Also, groups benefiting from the construction including brokers, subcontractors and coordinators with the Islamic committee at the national level and even supporters of political factions should not be overlooked.*

Not all Buddhists in Nan were against the construction of the mosque. The statement above was presented by a local who disagreed with the opposition movement. This resident made reference to political factions and the role of Islamic council at the national level, suggesting that when conducting a political-economy analysis of the dispute, one should not overlook the role of these people, including the builders and brokers. The resident said that in beginning there was no opposition to construction of the mosque. But as news about the mosque construction broke out, it gave rise to more groups that emphasized the Buddhist identity of Nan and people who feared the loss of the distinctive image of Nan. Concerns about the presence of the mosque and the possible organization and expansion of Muslims in Nan province were at the core of the hostility. The fear and anxiety had reached a point of extreme exaggeration, people were convinced that the incoming Muslims were from the SBPs and that this group would grow to dominate the area. Buddhists were alarmed because they feared that the Muslims would enforce Islamic law and erase Buddhist identity. This is a typical stereotype of Muslims as violent individuals who cannot coexists with other people and integrate into the host society. Whenever Muslim representatives attempted to have a meeting with the provincial authority in order

to offer them an explanation, it was made into news to stir up opposition even further. The villagers submitted a letter to the District Chief Officer and clearly demanded that the construction of the mosque must be moved somewhere else. The Muslims respected that decisions and agreed to move to a new site in Phu Phiang District. The initiative is still a work in progress.

Even though the 'otherness' and exclusive identity of Nan was constructed by people looking to preserve the area's uniqueness, the consequences for the Muslims has been negative. There are many people here, including monks and ordinary people, who believe Nan's uniqueness and mystique will not diminish because of the presence of Muslims. They believe that Muslims have the right to build a mosque as a place of worship, just like believers of other faiths in Nan and other provinces in Thailand. In their view, the ongoing opposition benefitted no one and would simply keep people at odds with each other.

### **Alienation and exoticism**

The Muslims have been a part of the social fabric in Nan for 30 years and deeply care about the interreligious relations and the development of the area. Interestingly, this report touched upon why the relationships between Muslims and Buddhists were not strong enough to withstand the tension that some said have been "provoked and orchestrated". Another factor is the tendency of the Muslims to remain silent and seek comfort in their religious practice. But from the view of non-Muslims, such displays of pioussness drives a bigger wedge between the two sides as it suggests to the Buddhists that Muslims "don't want to associate with us". "Sometime it seems their practices are so stiff and rigid. They are so strict, so idiosyncratic. They are so fanatic...it is just like that," a Buddhist interviewee said.

For people in Nan, Muslims have thus become something alienated, and some time exotic. The question is "are Muslims ready for self-reflection?", one Buddhist interviewee said.

When they have to live in the midst of other cultures and they feel insecure, they tend to react defensively. In many instances, the Muslims simply hold on to their supposed exalted status, higher than other people. They may claim their religion is supreme and more honorable than other religions. Such unfounded and false explanation may have led to such hostility toward believers of other faiths. It could be surmised that Muslims in Nan still lack skills to relate to people from

a different culture. Most importantly, they are short of skills to help believers of other faiths to understand their being Muslims. Disputes that rest on such deficiency simply lead to a head-on collision and resistance to the mosque construction. Hence, the start of hostile conversation. **PF**

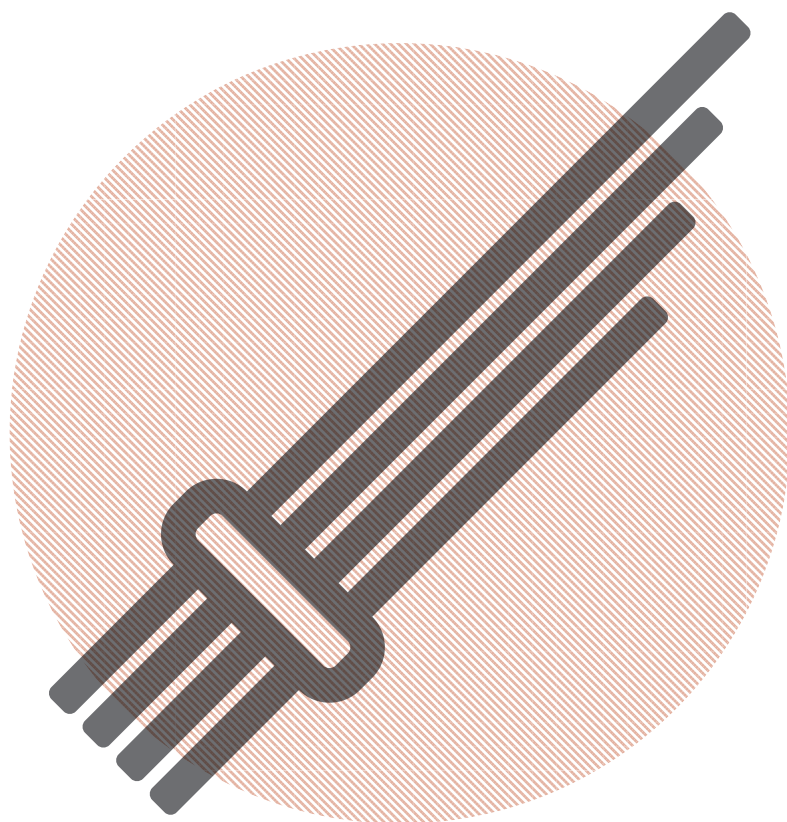
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To understand this sudden move, according to local Buddhist leaders in the area, one has to be familiar with the conservative values that are deeply entrenched in Buddhism which has fuelled the notion that Nan should not be tainted by non-Buddhist religious practice.

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## KHON KAEN



### Reproduction of fear

*“Are you afraid of it?” [Patani Forum]*

*“Do you think I’m afraid?”*

a Khon Kaen monk asked a researcher from Patani Forum when asked about his five years living in Narathiwat’s Sungai Padi district, one of the most violent-prone districts in the far South. While the monk did not exactly answer whether he was afraid of living in the far South or not, the back-and-forth questions and answers reflected the ambiguity of outsiders residing in the Muslim-majority far South. One would think that after living in this region for as long as five years, it would be enough for a person to be able to absorb, feel and even sympathize with local Muslims aspirations, needs and insecurities. But this was not the case. One can make the argument that Muslims don’t go to temple and thus, there was no or not much interaction between the monk and local Muslims. Such an excuse may be convenient but surely the monk had to interact with local Buddhists who may share their concerns and resentments towards the local Muslims. It is more likely that their inputs shaped his attitude of the ordinary people in Khon Kaen towards the Malay Muslims and shaped the context of his understanding of the conflict that is political in nature.

The monk used terms such as “Southern bandits” or “Islamic murderers” to describe the separatist combatants who he blamed for the violence that left a permanent impression on his mind. He spoke with conviction, having seen the conflict up close. He painted local Buddhists as victims of the violence despite the fact that most of the nearly 7,000 deaths since January 2004 have been Muslims. However, this factor did not have any crucial role in his analysis and probably not in his sermons either.

The Buddhist monk is not the first to encounter this experience, many Buddhist monks from the Northeast share similar experiences. These ordained persons have become an active agent in conveying such (mis)information to villagers, spreading from person to person, community to community. It has given rise

to unfounded stories where violent incidents in Myanmar have falsely been compared to the situation in Thailand despite their stark differences.<sup>20</sup>

Legally, Buddhism is not recognized as the national religion in Thailand despite strong lobbying by some Buddhist monks and people. But in practice, Buddhism has become part and parcel of Thai identity, Thai nationalism and Thainess through the historical timeline and in connection to the construction of the nation state. It is simply unimaginable to describe the Thai state without mentioning Buddhism. The sheer violence waged against symbols of Buddhism including the killings of Buddhist monks in the SBPs is tantamount to a forceful strike at the heart of nationalism of many Buddhist Thais. Such acts are not just a challenge and an attempt to delegitimize Thailand and Thainess, but also an attempt to irreversibly tear down individual relationships. Coupled with other sensitive issues including separatism, human rights violations, politics and infringement on religious freedom, the situation has become so extreme, complicated, and more painful for many to come to terms with. It has given rise to an emotional and social clash between Buddhists and Muslims which has expanded from the South throughout the country. This explains why disputes over headscarf for elementary school students in Pattani is not entirely unexpected. The Buddhist teachers who protested against the hijab cannot claim ignorance. The region is a Malay historical homeland and about 85 percent of the local residents are Muslims. Their decision to use their mandate to prohibit Muslims students from wearing hijab was their way of avenging the Muslims.

### *Living with differences*

Ake, a Melayu Muslim who resettled in Khon Kaen when he was a young man, lives in a neighborhood with a culture different from his. He had to learn how to adapt but remained true to his Islamic faith such as maintaining his diet in line with religious requirements and refraining from alcohol. The “negotiation process” was hard, he recalled, especially during his years as university student. But in the end, it all worked out for him. Friendships with the Buddhist classmates are still strong and he is quite successful in his business.

An imam at one of the mosque in Khon Kaen province said Muslims in his region must continue to engage with the local Buddhist no matter how hard it may seem at times. “We join them whenever we can and as much as we can as long as the activities do not conflict with our religious practices. We invite them to break fast with us during Ramadan. They ask us to visit Buddhist temple.

<sup>20</sup> Human Rights Watch. “Burma: Ethnic Cleansing, Repression, Denials.” Human Rights Watch, 18 Jan. 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/18/burma-ethnic-cleansing-repression-denials>.

We said OK but we can’t do the krab (pay homage to monks) but we will wai everybody out of respect,” the imam said.

### *Mutual respect*

Some Thai Buddhists in the Northeast and in new residential areas and condominiums in Bangkok consider the azan (call to prayer) a nuisance. But not this one community, about one hour drive from the city of Khon Kaen. Indeed, in some communities with long standing relationships between Muslims and Buddhists the day-to-day interactions between them have been quite heartwarming. In a district where the Muslim presence can be counted three generations back, a mosque was built last year not far from a Buddhist temple. The temple also relies on the mosque’s call to prayer to mark their daily chores, from waking up in the morning, to preparing to go out to receive alms, to the afternoon prayers that mark the beginning of new chores. Locals said they have known each other since they were children. They played together, grew up and aged together. “We have genuine concern for each other. For example,” said the imam, “the abbot would come by and ask if something was wrong because he did not hear the azan that morning.” The imam said he acknowledged that some other communities in the Northeast have problems and he contributed that to a lack of meaningful dialogue between the two sides. One Muslim leader from this community said the ongoing friction between Muslims and Buddhists throughout the country has to do with recent migration of people. He said recent arrivals of Muslims in the Northeast “comes with lots of money, a big sedan, and like to throw their weight around. They don’t speak Lao or Khmer and don’t really know how to connect with the local people (Buddhists).”

It is required by government regulation that prior to construction of a building in a community, local villagers must be informed and express their written consent. Construction of the first mosque in Khon Kaen began in 2004. Everyone was willing to allow it to happen. The establishment of a mosque seemed equally important as any other construction. The close and warm relationships between believers of the two faiths was even reflected in the way Buddhists contributed to the mosque construction.

And then there was the story of Izoh, who converted to Islam when marrying a Muslim who came from the SBPs. It was met with discontent by her family. They had the idea that Islam believers were prone to use violence and felt concerned that she could be harmed by accompanying him during his journeys. But there was a happy ending, the family and relatives of Izoh when they visited the SBPs learned it was different from what the media had told them. Now her family fully

accepted her choice. These are just a few examples of coexistence that can be realised despite a diverse cultural and religious environment.

Then there is the story of Zidyne who never saw himself as different from his friends of other religions. His dietary requirements do not pose any obstacle to his coexistence with other people and he has no problem with preparing his lunch at home. He did not even feel that he made any special effort to adjust, but rather he was happy with his life. What about how anti-Islam sentiment has been cultivated? According to Zidyne, it stemmed from media coverage through various outlets, particularly the stories of the violent ISIS portrayed in the media and situations in the SBPs. Of course, Northeastern Muslims were increasingly pressured by violent situations in the SBPs to explain themselves to the Buddhists in Khon Kaen. Zidyne said it was worth the effort - the explanation - but judging from the ongoing dispute stemming from Islamophobia, it might take a lot more than explanation to get a person to overcome his fear, prejudice and bigotry.

### *Social isolation*

In any heterogeneous society with numerous faiths, living in isolation would only render more negative effects than positive ones. In Bueng Kan, such social isolation and a lack of experience regarding coexistence with Muslims, plus being obsessed with reports on violence, has given rise to generalisation of Muslims. People in Bueng Kan continue to call Muslims “khaek”, a term Muslims deemed derogatory, as it referred to outsiders. But as the previous examples have shown, such sentiments did not happen out of the blue. The newly arrived Muslims have failed to adjust to the local environment. Being there in the past ten years has not helped them to address such alienation. The construction of the mosque was initiated by a closed group of four or five Muslim families. They fundraised to build the mosque in Khon Kaen and many of the donations have come from the Middle East including the United Arab Emirates, and SBPs. It has naturally stirred up resistance. Someone said that these newly settled Muslims have yet to...*“impress local people”*.

Elsewhere, in Khon Kaen, Muslims are composed of Melayu from the SBPs, Thais from the central region, and Pashtuns who arrived in the region four generations ago as merchants from Pakistan and Afghanistan. In spite of their long presence, opposition to the mosque construction in Khon Kaen has also taken shape. Local residents said local and national politics tied to Red Shirts vs. Yellow Shirts tensions also helped shape the way Islamophobia played out. It was pointed out that some of the leading Red Shirt members were Muslims and that was all the Yellow Shirts needed to justify their anti-mosque campaign.

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“The abbot would come by and ask if something was wrong because he did not hear the azan that morning,” said the imam.

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One local Muslim said the anti-mosque movement, in the beginning, was not strong. But activists have exaggerated the growing number of Muslims and confusing it with the conflict in the SBPs to make people believe a mosque would create violence.

At first, there were only three or four people who submitted a petition against the mosque construction. Incidentally, that submission took place at the same time of the submission of a petition by another group of farmers and the photos that appeared in the media made people think there were a large number of people. The resistance to the planned mosque construction spread like wildfire linking up different issues giving the impression that they all belonged to the same story. Such anti-Islam sentiment has given rise to unfounded concern that the Halal Food Complex would be another cause of violence, just like the mosque. The situation got so complicated a solution seems distant.

From the cases of misunderstanding, isolation, and alienation, it could be surmised that it is a duty of Muslims to reach out to other people and work for mutual understanding. Saying this sounds like all the burden has to be borne unilaterally by Muslims. A conversation can only start with having at least two parties present. Muslims in this community felt Buddhists themselves needed to be more open minded and to attain media literacy to understand the situation in the SBPs, news about terrorism, and violence in the Middle East. They need to understand that these are just one aspect of the situation and there are many more that they have failed to grasp. **PF**

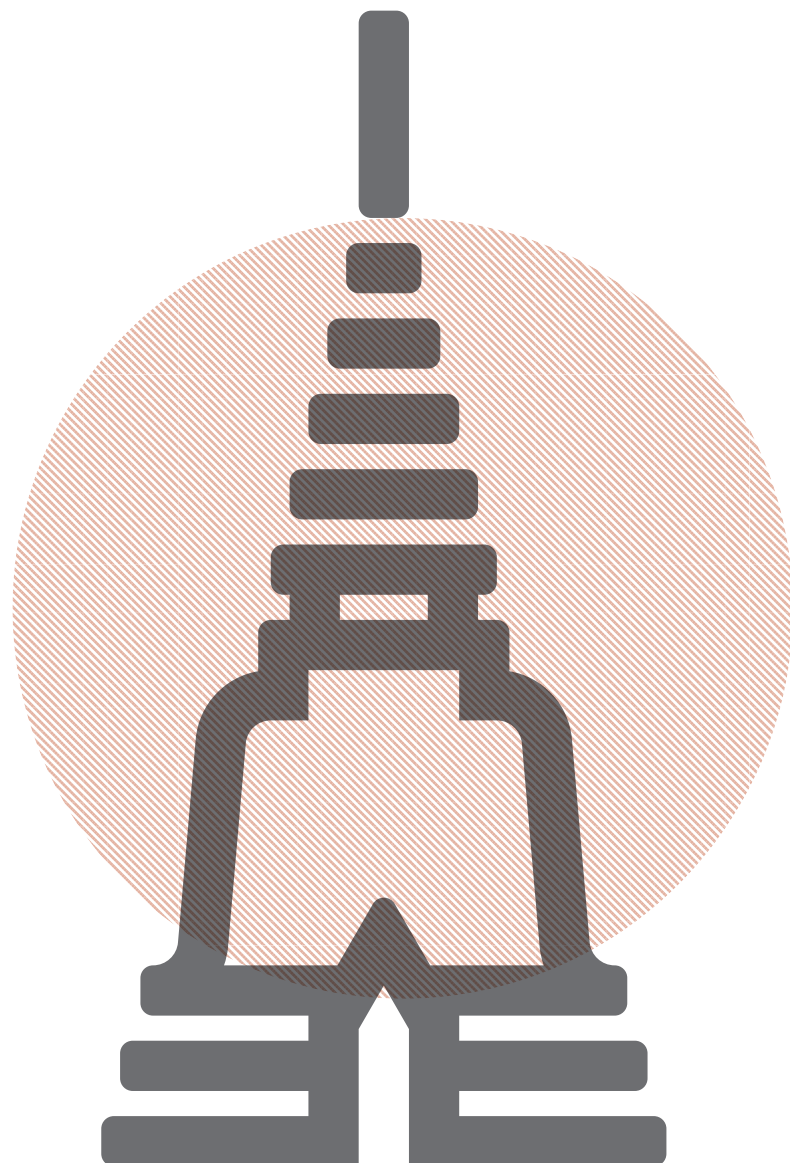


## NAKHON SI THAMMARAT

A gigantic stupa is situated against the blueish sky of the city of Nakhon Si Thammarat. The Muang Nakhon Phra Mahathat or Wat Phra Mahathat Worawiharn, also known as Phra That Muang Khon is a central symbol to all Buddhists in the South. Nakhon Si Thammarat has always been hailed as the kingdom of Buddhism in the South. Wat Phra Mahathat was also once a temple where an extremist Buddhist nationalist monk, Phra Maha Aphichat Pannachanthatho. At the time he was Phra Apichat and known for his unfair criticism of Islam and for inciting violence against Muslims. His “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” jolted many people, including the policy makers themselves who would eventually forced him to disrobe. He crossed the line when he called for the demolition of a mosque for every Buddhist monk killed in the far South. Geographically, Nakhon Si Thammarat is 285 kilometres north of Pattani. There are Muslim communities amidst the Buddhists ones and Muslims do not live in complete alienation, like in other regions of the country.

### *Resistance*

Five years ago, Nakhon Si Thammarat welcomed a new governor, Theera Mintrasak, who was a Muslim, a Malay speaker, and a native from the SBPs. His wife wore hijab, a open symbol and identity of a Muslim woman. In spite of being appointed by the Ministry of Interior with the support of central authority, his governorship was subjected to a rocky start due to resistance from local people. The opposition escalated and Buddhism was used as an identity-based and political tool to reinforce their demand that, “A person to be crowned Governorship of Nakhon Si Thammarat has to be Thai Buddhist only.” The response from local Muslims was intriguing. A representative of the Muslim Women Association recounted that on the day the governor was vested with his position, thousands of Muslims greeted him even though there was a heavy rain. The rousing atmosphere coupled with the sheer number of people sent a signal to the opposition groups and helped to prevent them from staging a protest that many people thought was imminent. The strong public support by the Muslims helped to quell the “show of force” by the hostile party, but not for long. Ac-



According to the same person, both the governor and his wife were instructed to adhere to their religious teaching regarding tolerance and believe in themselves. They had to ensure equal treatment and show their humility toward all people. Eventually, the governor and his wife would win over all local people. Today, long after his departure from his governorship, people still asked about him.

Anti-Muslim sentiment has not expressed itself in the appointment of Thailand's provincial governor. Rather, it has been manifested in other circumstances such as in educational institutions. Muslim students do not take part in a national ceremony that pays homage to their teachers because it breaches their religious code. It has prompted Buddhist teachers to criticize, and even make insulting remarks, Muslim students. Other cases included Muslim university students who refused to participate in initiation activities to welcome freshman students, and their declining to participate in any Buddhist activity. That has drawn the ire from their fellow students. Often, male Muslims would be late returning to classes on Friday after attending weekly midday prayer. Some teachers, as seen at the Anuban Pattani Elementary School incident, decided to call in sick on the first day of school in 2018 after seeing a group of Muslim female students wearing hijab. The 20 teachers were protesting their director for "giving in" to the Muslims, as much as they were directing their ire towards the local Muslims who accounted for about 85 percent of the local residents in the Malay-speaking far South.

One main issue here, is the lack of understanding and knowledge about pluralism and multiculturalism among Buddhist nationalists who see everything "foreign" as a threat to their nation-state construct and Thainess. They conveniently overlooked the fact much of the elements and components in this "Thainess" - including language, religion and theology - were borrowed from other cultures.

A number of administrators from various Islamic schools interviewed by Patani Forum said Muslim women graduates who wear hijab often have a tough time finding jobs since private companies refuse to recruit women wearing hijab. One teacher was denied employment at many workplaces simply because they did not allow their female employees to wear hijab. Local Muslims in Nakhon Si Thammarat said as Muslims become more visible in various sectors, it will prompt some Buddhists to feel insecure about their place in the society. It's about ownership, they said, and the end result could be a cause of concern.

The findings in this report indicated that the issue of anti-Islam sentiment in Nakhon Si Thammarat is serious. But according to local religious leaders, the overall situation is under control and people live together in relative peace, at

least for the time being. The good and long relationships between Buddhists and Muslims in Nakhon Si Thammarat help to keep them together despite the differences and concerns. In many areas, mosques and temples stand side by side and people from different faiths pursue their own way of life. Even among Muslims from different schools of thought, i.e., Sunni, Shia, Sufi, Salafi, etc., they manage to sit down to drink tea together and have an exchange by leaving out religion from their conversations. "We are basically blood relatives, whether you are Sunni or Shiite," said one Imam.

### *Self-reflection*

Coming to terms with criticisms from Buddhist nationalists and their negative views on Islam has been extremely difficult for Muslims. Too often, Muslims would not take the time to understand how these nationalists came to such conclusions and refused to enter into any meaningful dialogue. In the views of many Muslim discussants, not only did the media misrepresent the insurgency in the far South, rather the issue is that the media itself carries prejudice against Muslims and Islam. Beside the mainstream media, misunderstanding stemming from social media is even worse, according to Muslim participants in the workshop. At least traditional media have standards to adhere to while people who share news on different social media platforms are not bound by any rules or journalistic ethics. A representative raised the case of Phra Maha Aphichat as an example, and she admitted that as a Muslim she was angry by the monk's hateful statements. There is a tendency to consume such news without using any personal discretion, much less verification of the information or reflect on their own biases. Unfortunately, this simply helps to reinforce the misunderstanding, mistrust and acrimony toward each other. It could stem from a lack of understanding of the practice of Muslims among believers from other religions. They do not understand the reason behind the practice. And when it is impossible for Muslims to participate, it has simply given rise to a hostile attitude toward the Muslims. Muslim interviewees in this project said they believe the fact that a growing number of Muslims being appointed in key and high profile government positions have become a source of resentment among the Buddhists. The representative from Muslim Women Association recalls that as a result of the opposition to a Muslim governor, it has prompted the Association to think they need to take some action. They started to invite people to discuss and brainstorm to figure out ways to make Muslims become more acceptable and to embrace all religions for co-existence.

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One teacher was denied employment at many workplaces simply because they did not allow their female employees to wear hijab.

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#### *Way forward*

According to Muslim participants, the most viable solution is to facilitate and open up for interfaith dialogue. Some proposed education at the primary level in order to fill the knowledge gap in society, especially about different religious teachings and tenets. Media literacy must be taught to help prevent people from jumping to conclusions too soon when receiving information. As for the Muslims, they should adhere to their tenets and use them to explain their religion. As for the state, it was recommended that the state treat each religion equally. Some even went as far to suggest that media content should be subjected to censorship in spite of the acknowledgement that this will infringe on freedom of expression. Another critical point raised regarding unrest in the SBPs is that the state must ensure justice in all matters related to it. The Central Islamic Council of Thailand and Islamic Council at the provincial level are expected to come up with solutions to address the image of Muslims and the selection of Islamic leaders must be based on the ability to nurture understanding in society and to integrate all the efforts by various Islamic organizations and the state to engender understanding in the public about the realm of Islam. **PF**



# MANAGING OUR DIFFERENCES



## MANAGING OUR DIFFERENCES

### *Islam in the Buddhist's nation-state construct*

In a Muslim society, Islamic scholars are highly regarded. They are able to influence and guide entire Muslim communities with their fatwa, a decree handed down by an Islamic religious leader that carries more weight than the opinion of a scholar. But this does not mean that fatwas can go unchallenged. Muslim participants at these focus groups and interviews conducted by Patani Forum were quick to point out that interpretations of the holy Quran varies from one school of thought/jurisprudence (fiqh) to another and that there is some degree of competition among these communities. Some Islamic scholars, they said, tend to hinge on literal interpretation of the Quran, thus, making it extremely difficult to co-exist in a pluralistic society. Some leaders attack followers from other schools of thought, accusing them of mixing up religion with popular culture. And yet, they refuse to see their interpretation for what it is - an interpretation. For example, it has been interpreted that believers from other faiths are barred from entering mosques and that it is prohibited for Muslims to attend a Thai traditional ceremony. Such narrowed interpretations lead to a narrow presentation and understanding of both religion and worldview for both Muslims and Buddhists. Expression of Islamophobia in Thailand is not violent compared to Europe and other Western nations. There has been so far no report of physical assault perpetrated against Muslims because of Islamophobia. The same could not be said about the online community, however. Islamophobia in Thailand is rather complicated and multi-layered and occurs regularly as a way for Buddhists to express dissatisfaction against certain developments. Sabotaging billboards and signs that either belong or promote Islamic causes and Muslim establishment are some of the examples that are coupled with hate speech.

### *Lacking social foundation to cope with differences*

The national legal framework and political structure allow Muslims in Thailand to continue to freely practice their faith and to enjoy the protection of the state. Nevertheless, Islamophobia in Thailand has not developed out of a vacuum. According to findings from the four regional workshops by Patani Forum, Is-

lamophobia is possible due to the cultural context in Thailand. In other words, Thai society in general tends to perceive Muslims as a minority of the country and such perception does not lead to Islam as an equal status to Buddhism. The Buddhist religion has played a dominant role in Thailand's bureaucracy and formal education of the people. Due to the varying levels of acceptance and tolerance toward diversities, Thailand lacks a sound social foundation to cope with differences. Thus, it has given rise to discrimination against Muslims. Such discrimination has been continuing unabated and it seems unlikely that Thailand will learn to accept cultural diversities any time soon.

Particularly, when social transformation affects local interest, i.e., when there is a large influx of Muslims into an area and the expansion of immigrant Muslim community as well as the establishment of commercial enterprises and industrial factories by Muslim investors in various regions including the joint ventures between business and state sectors. There is also a rise and expansion of localism in various regions of the country, particularly in the North. Much of the criticisms are directed at government policy and strategy. One representative of Buddhist residents in the SBPs said many local Buddhists tend to wonder why suspected militants behind violent incidents are often released by security forces after their arrest and some time they are offered various forms of privileges, including being given a government job, grants to further their study or even receiving support from civil society organizations. Part of the reason why some hold such rigid view has to do with the unwillingness by the government to properly explain the nature of the alleged crime, if any, and evidence against the suspect. Moreover, government efforts to win hearts and minds of the local Malay Muslims in order to undermine their support for the separatist militants often translates into assistance, as mentioned by the Buddhist interviewees. Too often, government policy is not judged by its success or impact, but viewed by local Buddhists as how much the Muslims are getting and why the Buddhists are not getting these "handouts".

Other than government policy, there are other developments in the social sphere that irritate the Buddhists. For example, there are some housing areas in Yala that are exclusively for Buddhists. Security concerns are cited for this, but others think it's just pure prejudice of the community who want to minimize contact with Muslims. Some said the idea of living next door to a Muslim irritates them as much as seeing a Buddhist marrying a Muslim.

Chairperson of the Buddhist Ban Boon Tem reflected that as a Buddhist in the SBPs, being born and bred in the area with close relationships with local Muslims since young, he understands the way of life of the Melayu Muslims that are

overlooked by fellow Buddhists. In the current era of Islamophobia, such fear and hatred could be easily spurred by a lack of understanding. It has given rise to bigotry against the Muslims and to some extent other minorities, such as the hill tribes in the North, and it has been passed on through the process within each family. In other words, prejudice against Muslims is not only a structural problem that is hidden in Thailand's nation-state construct, but passed down from people to people as well.

Such phenomenon has made the generalization of Muslims even more worrying including how security agencies view Muslims since they have a decisive role in national policy making. Zakee Pitakumpol, the Prince of Songkla University's Peace Studies Institute, participated in a public meeting in 2017 in Bangkok and recounted the research by Col Pimolphon U-kosakit, a lecturer from the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy, titled "A home visit of a warrior: An experience from battlefield". It was a story of a military officer from the North-east deployed to the far South. Bounded by their 'E-san'- or linguistically and anthropologically, Lao, - identity and being a Buddhist and a military officer, the person's view was restricted and as other military officers, he tended to have certain perceptions about local conflicts and views the perpetrators as 'enemies'. Such a story in this context has often given rise to distorted realities that has been used to propel Islamophobia in Thailand. In some ways, the conflict in the far South is perceived as a war against "outsiders", as opposed to fighting against fellow citizens, because the combatants and their supporters in the far South don't share Thai historical narrative and identity. This explained why there was not much uproar or sympathy for incidents such as the Tak Bai massacre in Tak Bai and the storming of the Kru Se Mosque in 2004, or other heavy-handed incidents, like the beating death of a village imam, Yapa Kaseng, and numerous incidents against the Malay Muslims in the far South. In some ways, the cold shoulder towards the Patani Malays was Thai people's way of telling the Muslims in the far South that they deserved these punishments for rejecting the country's nationhood. Beside the Malays' refusal to embrace Thai identity, Buddhists in Ubon Ratchathani have a strong dislike and mistrust of the Muslims from SBPs partly because a number of military personnel from this region had been dispatched to the far South and killed while on duty. "For the villagers, for the Isan people, military officers are their 'heroes' meanwhile people in the SBPs tend to look at military officers as troublemakers," recounted one interviewee.

Patani Forum found it intriguing that Islamophobia in Thailand mirrors the global phenomenon. Islamophobia has been created systematically. Intentionally or

not, there has been no mechanism to monitor and gauge the level of understanding and tension between communities of different religions. And there are no remedies for the conflicts stemming from discrimination as a result of differences in religion. Moreover, it was noted by Patani Forum that there is a lack of a communication system to efficiently verify information and as a result, Islamophobia has been at times used to justify the opposition to Muslim community in the country without anyone trying to understand the dispute and particular event at hand.

Patani Forum also found that free media are expected by Buddhists and Muslims alike to help quell Islamophobia and to bridge the mutual understanding among religious communities in Thailand. Over the course of this research, lots of fingers from both Buddhists and Muslims were pointed at the media, blaming them for much of the problem. But is this a role of the media? While the media has the responsibility to be neutral and balance, wouldn't it be too much to expect the industry to play peacemakers?

Facts have been destroyed during the analysis process and information sharing and it has influenced the image of Muslim community. The roles of mass media are one of the greatest concerns shared by participants in the meetings organized by Patani Forum. For example, it was found that regarding the opposition to the construction of mosques in the North and Northeast, apart from Islamophobia that paints a scary image of the Muslims, a lack of understanding of Islamic practice and the way of life of Muslims and the distortion of information such as the Hor Kham Luang case, coupled with the image of violent conflicts in the SBPs, all of these factors have played a major role and given rise to mistrust and resistance by local Buddhists against Muslims. It happened in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Nan and Mukdahan. Meanwhile, the opposition to a Halal Food Industrial Complex that was initially attributed to Islamophobia, was in fact a result from a conflict of political interest among local factions. It had nothing to do with religious conflicts.

Similarly, Buddhists in the SBPs reflected that attempts have been made by both sides of the political divide to stir things up in the social media forum. Local activists said some of these "misinformation campaigns also came from the security officers as part of their effort to discredit local Muslim political activists calling for rights to self-determination. Some local Buddhists said they are extremely uncomfortable of these I.O. (information operation) and anti-Muslim campaigns in the social media sphere and added that more efforts are needed to clear the picture - even single out these instigators - so that they would not be lumped in the same group. Such tension has been exploited to spur the sense

of nationalism and used as a weapon to wage a cultural war by both sides. For example, attempts have been made to urge Buddhists to refrain from buying food in Muslim shops. There is a concern that if the fear of local Muslims among Buddhists is left unaddressed, the problem will spread to other areas. Indeed, it is necessary to monitor the situation and to make an effort to address and unlock causes that could intensify the situation. Asst. Prof. Dr. Suchart Setthamalinee from Payap University stressed the concept of a Catholic scholar, Hans Kung:

*“A peaceful society cannot exist without peace among religions and peace among religions cannot take place without an attempt to understand each other and to have an interfaith dialogue. And such interfaith dialogue cannot happen if believers of each religion do not understand the core teaching of their own religion.”<sup>21</sup>*

A solution proposed by a Buddhist who participated in a meeting with Patani Forum is to focus on working with youth. An attempt should be made to educate them particularly on their rights and to encourage Buddhist and Muslim youth to work together in activities and to learn to live with each other. It would be difficult for Buddhists in the SBPs to start this since they are a minority there. They need to rely on help from their Muslim sisters and brothers to help resolve the problem, he said. **PF**



# CONCLUSION

<sup>21</sup> Kung, Hans, and Karl-Josef Kusche. *Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 1993.



## CONCLUSION

### *Inputs and Recommendations*

Islamophobia is not only fatal for relationships between the communities of Buddhists and Muslims, it could also undermine national security as an all out conflict could pit one community against the other. In this case, it would be Thai Muslims vs. everybody who call themselves Thai. It should be noted that many people who call themselves “Thai” are not actually Thai but descendents of Lanna and Shan people from the northern border area, Lao in the upper Northeast and Khmer in lower Northeast, Siamese in the Central region, descendents of Malay slaves brought up from the far South and freed over a century ago, as well as descendents from China and other Asian races: Pashtun, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Vietnamese, and so on. In line with this concern, Patani Forum would like make the following points:

(1) There are signs that Islamophobia in Thailand will become more intensified in the future. If both Thai Buddhists and Muslims do not recognize such signs and fail to come up with ways and means to address the increasing conflicts, relations between the two peoples will continue to deteriorate. Issues concerning religion and ethnicity are sensitive and once they have been politicized such as the opposition to the Halal Food Industrial Complex in Chiang Mai, the conflicts can erupt and become difficult to solve. It is very important that both sides understand that the wellbeing and the future of the country is at stake.

(2) One important question for all Thais to consider is how can we collectively respond to such trends in the future? How can we secure peaceful coexistence amidst the rise of Islamophobia in Thailand. David Laitin and James Fearon point out that self-policing and punishment among members of the same ethnic and religious community helps to deter the exacerbation of conflicts and violence.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Robert Putnam points out that the accumulation of social capital in a particular society shall help to breed

<sup>22</sup> Laitin, David D., and James D. Fearon. “Explaining Interethnic Cooperation.” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 1996, no. 90, 1996, pp. 715–35.

more trust in such society.<sup>23</sup> When trust is restored, the sense of otherness shall decline and friendliness and acquaintance among the patriots shall increase. Findings from Patani Forum, from Khon Kaen and Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, can help set the foundation as to how existing social capital can be build upon to improve relationships. The coexistence of and warm relationships between a temple and a mosque does not rest on legal or official framework. Rather, it hinges on social capital and good relationships.

(3) The Buddhist community tends to interpret the meaning of ‘azan’ different from the Muslims with regard to the opposition to the construction of a mosque in Nan, Khon Kaen, Mukdahan and other provinces. They said the sound of azan is one of the most annoying as it wakes them up before sunrise. But for Muslims, azan can be one of the most calming things to hear. A person is called to bow before his creator lord and pray for his mercy and acceptance. But for many Buddhists, it is an unwanted alarm clock, especially the first of the five, and the rest do not invoke anything except a reminder that the Muslims are around them, like it or not. For many recently built condominiums and residential areas in Bangkok, this unwanted alarm bell has become a problem. Some Muslims have employed, “We were here first” card, while new neighbors argue, “I have just as much right to be here as you do”, is a testimony of the start of a not very constructive dialogue. Unfortunately, not every community could be as united and understanding as that one community in a Khon Kaen district where local Buddhists who not only helped build the mosque but depend on the sound of azan to mark the start of daily chores.

(4) In order to bring forth peaceful co-existence in a multicultural society, Muslims, as a minority, will have to re-examine their way of life in light of the changing social environment. But re-examine does not mean breaking with Islamic principles. Islam has always been expressed in the context of its

<sup>23</sup> Putnam, Robert D. “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital.” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 6, no. 1, Jan. 1995, pp. 65–78. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/jod.1995.0002.; Putnam, Robert D., et al. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton University Press, 1994. Chap 6; Putnam, Robert. “The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life.” *The American Prospect*, Spring 1993. *American Prospect*, <http://prospect.org/article/prosperous-community-social-capital-and-public-life>.

respective society. Islamic tenet in certain communities, for example, have been blended with Arab culture so much that at times Muslims tend to treat Arab culture as Islam. Arab dress code and design of mosque employing Arab architecture are some of examples of how religion and culture are fused into one. Anusorn Unno explains that Islam has successfully made a convenient inroad to Southeast Asia yielding minimal resistance because of the flexibility of its teaching and its ability to blend itself with local tradition and culture. By making an attempt to understand Islam through the view of the intent of Islamic law (Maqasid al-Shariah) and the respective school of thoughts (Fiqh Aqaliyat), it may help contemporary Muslims to adapt themselves and easily become part of Thai society without having to renounce their duties and practices. The Salafists and other orthodox communities who tend to interpret the scripture literally may have to review their strategies and goals in their religious activism, particularly on sensitive issues regarding the relationships between Buddhist Thais and Muslim Thais. It is certainly legal for them to make their case, but it is utmost that they employ the social-political context of their locality and the interpretation by other school of thoughts (fiqh).

### *Inputs specific to each region/religious group*

#### **Buddhists:**

1. A growing cultural and social gap between Muslims and Buddhists is shaped by media and events around the world involving Muslims and Muslim communities. While the media should take some of the blame for unfair and unbalanced reporting, their misrepresentations of the issue should not be an excuse for Muslims to refrain from serious dialogue with Buddhists and other non-Muslims.
2. Better understanding of the political context behind the violence and terrorism in the Middle East and other Muslim communities, as well as ongoing insurgency in Thailand's southernmost provinces, has to be achieved. An explanation may not necessarily have to come from Muslims but from knowledgeable people.
3. The context of understanding of the insurgency in the far South have been shaped by state agencies and national media but a general feeling that there is more to the conflict than what has been reported. Authorities must set aside their agenda for the moment and permit the truth to speak for itself.

4. Best practices and positive examples, such as the Muslim-owned school in Udon Thani that attracts Buddhist parents who are looking for good schools for their children, where ethnic diversity and integrity are important components, should be explored.

#### **Muslims:**

1. In spite of the frustration with being asked by Buddhist neighbors to explain the conflict in various Muslim countries around the world, including the Malay-speaking South being inevitable, Thai Muslims should make concerted efforts to understand these conflicts as well. They will see that not all conflicts around the world involving Muslim communities can be understood through a religious lens.
2. Thai Muslims said they would like to see Malay Muslims from Patani speak up more about their plight, predicament, wants and needs, and not to underestimate Thai Buddhists willingness to listen and attempt to understand.
3. Thai Muslims said their patriotism and loyalty are constantly questioned because of conflicts in far away places that are beyond their control.
4. Muslim participants said they are fully aware of the growing anti-Islam sentiment but political-economy analysis of the problem suggested that such sentiments are often generated and spread by people with vested political interest.
5. Many Muslims said they felt that media coverage of conflicts involving Muslims (nationally and internationally) is biased and does not provide fair and balanced reporting.

### *Inputs from each of the four regions*

The case of Muslim-Buddhist relations in Udon Thani is a source of hope for other regions. It is here where a private school run by Muslims won hearts and minds of the Buddhist parents. They cited the strong moral principles and guidance provided by the Muslim teachers at the school as the reasons for enrolling their kids there. This is not to say that other private Islamic schools do not stress these values. The decision by these parents to send their kids to this

particular school should be understood in the local context and social setting. In contrast to the society in the far South, crossing that cultural line does not exist for social reasons. Private Islamic Schools in the Malay-speaking South teach subjects in line with the curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education. But the second half of the day, these schools teach Islam using Malay language and Jawi script (Malay written in Arabic script) as the medium of communication. Non-Malay Muslim may see no need to learn or understand Islam or preserve Malay language while local Malays see the preservation of their cultural identity as a moral obligation.

Muslims in Ayutthaya negotiated their wants and needs through their political representatives and had no problem in exercising their rights in demanding that the goods and services obligated to them from the government agencies be provided to them accordingly. Unlike the Malay residents of the far South who may see these demands as part of the negotiation process between the state and minority, Muslims in Ayutthaya see this as their right as citizens. One thing that stood out about the Ayutthaya Muslims was their sense of shared destiny with the rest of the Thai people in their community. References to the ancient kingdoms and Siamese leaders by Muslims participating in the workshop stand in stark contrast to workshops in the Patani region where local Malay Muslims embraced an entirely different historical narrative, myth, legend and so on.

Buddhists in Ayutthaya, on the other hand, said they have always gotten along with their Muslim neighbours who have been a part of their community as long as they can remember. They pointed to the annual pilgrimage to the tomb of Tok Takia, a revered 16th Century Sufi master who was buried in the city. However, the Buddhists said they detect a social gap between what they referred to as Muslims who embraced a “new school of teaching” (Salafi/orthodox) to their long standing neighbours and added that the conservative attire, including the veil, and the personal manners, often served as a psychological barrier between them and the “new school” Muslims. While this has yet to generate negative reaction from the Buddhists, nevertheless, it has become a source of tension between them and what the local Buddhists referred to as the “new Islam”.

Muslims in the northern city of Chiang Mai, stressed the need for Malay Muslims in the far South to be more outspoken about their wants, desire and narrative to bring down the cultural barrier between them and Thai Muslims in other parts of the country. The end result could be a better understanding, acceptance and respect. Muslims in this region said they often found themselves having to explain to their Buddhist neighbours asking about the conflict in the far South, to which they admit to being as clueless as their Buddhist neighbours. They added

that such expectations are unfair and added that understanding the cause of the conflict serves everybody’s purposes, especially if it leads to a permanent solution and sound policy for peaceful coexistence. While they made a stern message to the Malays, Muslims here also strongly reflected on themselves, pointing out the competing natures about various leaders over interpretations of the religion that lead to bitter differences between individuals within the Muslim community itself.

Thai Muslims in Chana, suggested that the cultural differences between them and their Malay neighbours down the street remained an obstacle between the two groups. Muslims in Chana saw themselves as Thai Muslims who speak a southern Thai dialect and do not embrace the Patani Malay historical and cultural narrative. The ongoing separatist conflict between the local Malays and the Thai State makes crossing this cultural barrier even harder.

Buddhist in Chana appeared to have a cordial relationship with their Muslim neighbors. This is probably because Muslim made up the majority of the residents in the district. Day to day interaction is normal and the fact that the two peoples speak the same Thai dialect provides a common cultural ground. **PF**



## Recommendations



# RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Relevant government agencies and academic institutions should do more to address anti-Islam sentiment and explore ways and means to resolve the disputes, including at the local level.
2. Basic knowledge about Islam and other religions may help promote some understanding but knowing and grasping other people's religion does not necessarily reduce bigotry or prejudice. However, promoting and embracing basic principles and values surrounding the concept of mutual respect and diversity can help strengthen pluralism.
3. The misrepresentation of the conflict in the Patani region by the state and media has created an "us Buddhists and them Muslims" mentality among the country's people. This misrepresentation could inadvertently invite radical Muslim extremist and terrorist groups from outside to interfere and carry out attacks against Thailand's interests. The state and media need to address this misrepresentation.
4. Future projects for civil society organizations (CSO), donor community, the Thai government and academia need to take up multicultural education, pluralism, and stress peaceful coexistence at all levels of education from primary to university. Public schools should also include activities aimed at fostering awareness and respect of pluralism and multiculturalism to promote better understanding and reduce discrimination in the long run.
5. There is a need for regular consultations between the authorities and CSOs to come up with a sound strategy to tackle Islamophobia and counter violent extremism (CVE). Patani Forum urge the government to take up CVE seriously and understand that "extremism" is not exclusively a Muslim problem but people of other faiths and political ideologies as well. Inciting violence and promoting hate crime/speech by people of any religion must not be tolerated.

6. Work with local media, mainstream and alternative, on reporting on conflict affected areas and promote peace journalism, with special emphasis on the use of terminologies, proper context, and fair/balance content. In this respect, there needs to be a better understanding among the society, authorities and policy makers on the nature of the conflict in the Muslim-speaking southernmost provinces, and that they do disservice to themselves and the public by distorting Patani's ethno-nationalist conflict with radical Islam.

7. Policy makers and communities should work together in promoting local and regional identity in various areas of the country, as part of an overall strategy to enhance and widen the cultural space for ethnic minorities and to promote pluralism. **PF**



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Don Pathan + Ekkarin Tuansiri + Anwar Koma

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ISBN 978-616-92457-9-7



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