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Changing Conflict Identities:
The case of the Southern
Thailand Discord

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ABSTRACT

The current wave of violence in southern Thailand began on 4 January 2004 and is showing no signs of declining. The frequent attacks have become a thorn in the side of the Thaksin administration. Recent literature on the conflict as well as media reports tend to represent the insurgency in Thailand's restive south as Islamic in nature and portray attacks as revenge against the Buddhists. However, studies published in the 1970s and earlier do not represent the conflict in southern Thailand as such. Instead, they emphasise more on the ethnic Thai versus Malay character of the conflict. This paper attempts to explain the transformation of the southern Thailand conflict from a primarily ethnic discord to a predominantly religious strife. It argues that this change can be best explained by considering the role of identity in the conflict. The interplay and manipulation of the ethnic Malay and Thai identity on one hand, and the religious Islamic and Buddhist identity on the other, are key factors that will assist in explaining the change in the character of the unrest.

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Changing Conflict Identities: The case of the Southern Thailand Discord

Introduction

The current wave of violence in southern Thailand[1] began on 4 January 2004 with a raid on an army camp and the simultaneously torching of 18 schools. More than 2000 attacks have taken place in the southern Thai provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani[2] resulting in almost 1000 victims.[3] The violence is showing no signs of abating and the frequent attacks have become a thorn in the side of the Thaksin administration. Media reports tend to represent the insurgency in Thailand's restive south as Islamic in nature and portray attacks as revenge against the Buddhists. Increasingly, the perpetrators of violence in southern Thailand are depicted as suspected 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' militants while the victims are portrayed as 'Buddhists'.

Much of the recent literature on the conflict has primarily attempted to explain the contemporary upsurge in violence.[4] This has led to the study of the turmoil through the lens of international terrorism and an extensive analysis of the active terrorist groups in the region.[5] Some authors go further and implicate the strife in the southern provinces of Thailand with *jihad* at the regional level.[6] In short, these analyses tend to examine the violence primarily as a religious conflict between Buddhists and

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[1] In this article, the Thai government will be referred to as 'Siam' before 1939 and 'Thailand' henceforth

[2] In this article, the Malay spelling of 'Patani' will be used to refer to the Kingdom of Patani whereas the Thai version of 'Pattani' will be used to denote the Thai province after 1909.

[3] *The Straits Times Interactive*, "1,900 attacks in south of Thailand since last year", 3 October 2005

[4] See Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand and Western Burma/Myanmar* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002)., Peter Chalk, "Separatism and Southeast Asia: The Islamic Factor in Southern Thailand, Mindanao and Aceh," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, no. 24 (2001). And Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Thailand: International Terrorism and the Muslim South," in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2004*, ed. Daljit Singh and Chin Kin Wah (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004).

[5] See for instance Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya, and Sabrina Chua, *Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005).

[6] See for instance Greg Sheridan, "Jihad Archipelago," *The National Interest* (2004).

Muslims. However, studies published in the 1970s and earlier[7] do not represent the conflict in southern Thailand as such. Instead, they emphasise more on the ethnic Malay character of the conflict.

This paper attempts to explain the transformation of the southern Thailand conflict from a primarily ethnic discord to a predominantly religious strife.[8] In order to explain this change, this paper argues that the role of identity in the conflict needs to be considered. The interplay and manipulation of the ethnic Malay and Thai identity on the one hand and the religious Islamic and Buddhist identity on the other are key factors that will assist in explaining the change in the character of the conflict. Ethnic Thai or Malay is identified primarily by cultural symbols such as language and education. Religious identity is established by references specifically to Buddhism or Islam. These attributes are located within local and global events, state policies, as well as the aims, demands and actions of the rebel groups in the unrest. This paper is divided into five sections. The first part reviews the existing scholarship on the role of social identity in conflicts and identifies the gaps in the literature. The second section discusses the origins of the southern Thailand conflict. The third and fourth sections address the rise of ethnic Malay and religious Islamic identity in the discord. The final segment examines the reasons for the shift in the nature of the strife.

Social Identity in Violent Conflicts

The causes for secessionist and irredentist conflicts around the world have been dealt with at length.[9] They have ranged from issues of poverty, democracy and migration, to ideology and human rights. While these studies are rich and exhaust the various

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[7] See Nantawan Haemindra, "The Problem of the Thai-Muslims in the Four Southern Provinces of Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 7, no. 2 (1976)., Nantawan Haemindra, "The Problem of the Thai-Muslims in the Four Southern Provinces of Thailand (Part Two)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 8, no. 1 (1977)., Astri Suhrke, "Irredentism Contained: The Thai Muslim Case," *Comparative Politics* 7 (1975). And Astri Suhrke, "Loyalists and Separatists: The Muslims in Southern Thailand," *Asian Survey* 17, no. 3 (1977).

[8] This is of course not to say that religion has completely overridden the ethnic discord. Despite the rise of the religious facet in the conflict, elements of ethnic friction are still present. But an in-depth discussion of this aspect is beyond the scope of this paper.

[9] See for instance Michael E. Brown, ed., *The International Dimensions of Internal Conflict* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996). And Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly, eds., *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997).

tangible factors that initiate and propagate violent internal strife, they do not take into consideration identity issues in a conflict. In particular, they do not account for the reasons why certain identities have been more prominent than others at different points in time of the conflict. The role of identity in internal conflicts has been dealt with more prominently in the nationalism literature.[10] While accurately identifying the role of identity in many internal conflicts, these studies tend to treat these identities as static and subscribe to a primordial understanding of conflict identities.[11] Samuel Huntington, in his famous book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, also ascribed to the notion that primitive social identities can lead to conflicts at the international stage.[12] These studies are unable to explain changes in the nature of the conflict.

This paper will instead follow the works of Horowitz and Rothschild who allow for the existence of multiple identities[13] and hence more useful in explaining the transformation in the nature of the southern Thai discord. The notion of 'identity layering' has been employed by Saideman et al to discuss how secessionist groups manipulate conflict identities to sustain their rebellion by garnering domestic and international support.[14] This paper complements Saideman et al's work by showing that the state as well as global structural factors can play a significant role in altering conflict identities. Attempts by the state to influence ethnic identities may not necessarily be successful and can play a role, perhaps inadvertently, in assisting the rise of another identity. In that context, it presents a challenge to Daniel Byman's thesis that the manipulation of ethnic identities can result in lasting peace.[15]

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[10] See for instance Daniele Conversi, ed., *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World : Walker Connor and the Study of Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[11] See Robert D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy : Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War* (New York: Random House, 2000).

[12] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

[13] See Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).and Joseph Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

[14] See Stephen M. Saideman, Beth K. Dougherty, and Erin K. Jenne, "Dilemmas of Divorce: How Secessionist Identities Cut Both Ways," *Security Studies* 14, no. 4 (2005).

[15] See Daniel Byman, "Forever Enemies? The Manipulation of Ethnic Identities to End Ethnic Wars," *Security Studies* 9, no. 3 (2000).

The Origins of the Southern Thailand Conflict

The provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun once constituted 'Patani Raya' or 'Greater Patani'[16], wedged between the Siamese Empire to its north and the Malacca Sultanate to its south. Although it was the target of influence of both neighbours, their domains of authority diverged. Culturally, the people of Patani were aligned with Malacca but politically, they found themselves under Siamese suzerainty. The southward expansion of Siam, especially after the defeat of Malacca by the Portuguese in 1511, forced the Malay sultanate of Patani to enter into a tributary relationship with Siam. They were obligated to pay an accolade of gold flowers called *Bunga Mas*.[17] Although the Malay sultans viewed this gift as a sign of friendship with Siam, the latter regarded it as a symbol of allegiance.[18]

The Malay *rajas* of Patani detested their vassal association with Siam and whenever the latter was perceived to be weak, they stopped paying tribute. The initial revolts by Patani occurred between 1630 and 1633.[19] Conflict once again erupted after the Burmese ransacked the Siamese capital of Ayuthya in 1767. Frustrated with these frequent rebellions by Patani, King Rama I decided to abolish its tributary status and in 1785, undertook a campaign to absorb it into the Siamese Empire along with the Malay sultanates of Kedah, Kelantan and Trengganu.[20] In the process, the existing rulers of Patani were sidelined and leaders loyal to Siam were appointed. This led to revolts by Raja Tengku Lamidin during 1789-91 and later by his successor Dato Pengkalan in 1808.[21] Bangkok managed to stave off these challenges and decided to divide the region into seven smaller provinces. Despite these measures, trouble in Kedah led to fresh bids for independence in 1832 and 1838 but these came to a

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[16] W.K Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990) 32.
[17] Ibid. 34.
[18] Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand and Western Burma/Myanmar* 74.
[19] Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* 34.
[20] Haemindra, "The Problem of the Thai-Muslims in the Four Southern Provinces of Thailand," 198.
[21] Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* 35.

naught.[22] This further caused the split of Kedah and the creation of the present-day Satun province.[23]

The nature of the resistance against Siam until the early 20th century was aristocratic. Matrimonial bonds were formed between the Siamese and Malays and their dealings were directed by concerns over power rather than notions of ethnic or religious solidarity.[24] A united opposition was forged largely in the 19th century after King Rama I's decision to incorporate the Malay kingdoms directly under the Siamese that led to the isolation of existing elites. The joint confrontation was showing fledgling signs of ethnic Malay identity but the revolts against Siam were still primarily a quest for political independence, or at the very least, autonomy.

Rise of Ethnic Malay Identity

Faced with an increasing threat from the British in Malaya,[25] King Chulalongkorn decided to accelerate the process of assimilation and centralise the administration of the southern provinces under Bangkok. The creation of the "Area of the Seven Provinces" administrative body in 1901 to govern the southern provinces was a key move in this strategy. This alienated the Malay rajas and nobility in the region but most accepted the reparation offered by Bangkok. The then-Raja of Patani, Tengku Abdul Kadir, was among the few who resisted the change and jailed for his opposition, but was released a couple of years later after he signed a guarantee to renounce politics.[26] The British also opposed the administrative rearrangement and concluded a treaty with Siam in 1909 in which Bangkok had to relinquish Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis and Trengganu. Although this resulted in the political segregation of

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[22] Haemindra, "The Problem of the Thai-Muslims in the Four Southern Provinces of Thailand," 200.

[23] Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* 35.

[24] Ruth McVey, "Identity and Rebellion among Southern Thai Muslims," in *The Muslims of Thailand: Politics of the Malay-Speaking South*, ed. Andrew D.W. Forbes (Bihar, India: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 34.

[25] Omar Farouk, "The Historical and Transnational Dimensions of Malay-Muslim Separatism in Southern Thailand," in *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia*, ed. Lim Joo-Jock and Vani S. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984), 236.

[26] Haemindra, "The Problem of the Thai-Muslims in the Four Southern Provinces of Thailand," 202-3.

the Malays, the broad cultural, commercial and personal bonds between the Malay communities on either side of the border were sustained.[27]

The Siamese government began to emphasise the use of Thai language after 1910. There was a concerted attempt to educate the Malays in Thai[28] and this led to periodic protests in the southern provinces. The elites feared that the initiation of Thai language would lead to the erosion of the Malay language and culture, and impinge on their ethnic Malay identity. Soon after the introduction of the 1921 Primary Education Act which necessitated Malay children to attend Thai primary schools, there was a major rebellion in 1922. This revolt was orchestrated by Tengku Abdul Kadir from Kelantan, to where he had moved in 1915.[29]

In 1932, monarchical rule in Thailand came to an end. Thailand became a fledgling democracy and during this period, the Malays obtained seats in the National Assembly and Senate.[30] These gains were however short-lived and Thailand soon fell under military rule when Marshal Phibul Songkhram came to power in 1938. In parallel with rising Thai nationalism at the time, Phibul began an exercise to assimilate the Malays into the Thai nation-state.[31] Although Buddhism was intricately linked to Thai nationalism,[32] there were no sustained undertakings to convert the Malays of the southern provinces. But the attempt to integrate the Malays at the barrel of a gun failed.

During the Second World War, Thailand backed the Japanese while the elites of southern Thailand supported the British in Malaya. Among the leading proponents of the British was Tengku Mahmud Mahyiddeen, the son of Tengku Abdul Kadir.[33]

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[27] Farouk, "The Historical and Transnational Dimensions of Malay-Muslim Separatism in Southern Thailand," 236.

[28] Uthai Dulyakasem, "Education and Ethnic Nationalism: The Case of the Muslim-Malays in Southern Thailand," in *Reshaping Local Worlds: Formal Education and Cultural Change in Rural Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles F. Keyes (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1991), 141.

[29] Sarit Pitsuwan, "Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand" (Harvard University, 1982) 57-8.

[30] Ibid. 80-3.

[31] Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Thailand's Durable Premier: Phibun through Three Decades, 1932-1957* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995) 102-62.

[32] McVey, "Identity and Rebellion among Southern Thai Muslims," 36.

[33] Clive J. Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism* (London, New York: I.B.Tauris Publishers, 1996) 178.

Opposition to Thai authority was rising and in November 1945, Tengku Abdul Jalal, son for a former Saiburi raja, along with other Pattani elites lobbied the British to liberate the southern provinces from Thai rule. The petition closely identified with the Malay identity of Patani and reasoned that,

> … Patani is really a *Malay* country, formerly ruled by *Malay* Rajas for generations, but has been Siam's dependency only since about fifty years ago. Now the Allied Nations ought to help the return of this country to the *Malays*, so that they can have it united with other *Malay* countries in the peninsula.[34]

After the War, the British wanted to penalise Thailand by annexing Pattani and Satun. But geo-strategic concerns such as the rising threat of communism and the need to stabilise fledgling Southeast Asian economies overrode the initial plan. American pressure also played a decisive role in Britain's decision not to support the creation of an independent Pattani state or its incorporation into Malaya.[35]

With increasing Malay nationalist sentiment and dissatisfaction with the Thai authorities, the conflict in the southern provinces adopted a more structured form. In the late 1940s, GAMPAR (Gabungan Melayu Pattani Raya or the Association of Malays of Greater Pattani) emerged as a chief organisation to campaign for the unity of the Malays in southern Thailand. The group was led by Tengku Mahmud Mahyiddeen and other Malay elites who were marginalised during the centralisation exercise in the early part of the century.[36] The aims of GAMPAR were four-fold:[37]

(1)   to unite all south Thailand *Malays* and their descendants who were now in Malaya;
(2)   to establish closer contact with their homes and relatives in the Thai Malay provinces and to improve living standards and life there;
(3)   to cooperate with one another and help each other;
(4)   to improve education and *revive Malay culture* in south Thailand

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[34] Ibid. 180., emphasis added.
[35] H.E. Wilson, "Imperialism and Islam: The Impact of "Modernisation" on the Malay Muslims of South Thailand," in *The Muslims of Thailand: Politics of the Malay-Speaking South*, ed. Andrew D.W. Forbes (Bihar, India: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 62.
[36] Farouk, "The Historical and Transnational Dimensions of Malay-Muslim Separatism in Southern Thailand," 237.
[37] Haemindra, "The Problem of the Thai-Muslims in the Four Southern Provinces of Thailand," 213., emphasis added.

GAMPAR's objectives clearly advocated the Malay cause in the conflict by calling for the merger of the southern provinces of Thailand with the Federation of Malaya. But this is not to say that Islam did not play any role in GAMPAR's goals. Religious rhetoric was used to garner support from Islamic countries like Indonesia and Pakistan as well as international organisations like the United Nations and Arab League.[38] But no assistance materialised because the discrimination in southern Thailand was not perceived to be against Muslims. A tactical decision by GAMPAR led to its downfall. It decided to ally with leftist Malay nationalist parties and this led to a political opposition against the British. In 1948, an agreement was signed to contain communist activities in the border areas by the British and Thailand.[39] Many GAMPAR leaders were arrested and this led to the disintegration of the group.

Towards the end of the 1940s, Haji Sulong, then chairman of the Pattani Islamic Council, presented a list of demands on behalf of the provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and Satun to the Thai government. These included administrative changes that "the government of Siam should have a person of high rank possessing full power to govern the four provinces of Patani, Yala, Narathiwat and Setul, and this person should be a Muslim born within one of these provinces and elected by the populace" and "[e]ighty percent of the government officials within the four provinces should be Muslims born within the provinces".[40] Cultural changes were also demanded, such as the support of "education in the Malay medium up to the fourth grade in parish schools within the four provinces", and "use [of] the Malay language within government offices alongside the Siamese language".[41]

In response, the Thai government arrested Hali Sulong a few months later and dissolved the Pattani Islamic Council.[42] This led to widespread protests in Pattani and surrounding districts. Haji Sulong was held without trial for many months and close to a year later, he was jailed for three-and-a-half years.[43] After his release in 1952, Haji

[38] Ibid.: 214, 24.
[39] Farouk, "The Historical and Transnational Dimensions of Malay-Muslim Separatism in Southern Thailand," 238.
[40] Ibrahim Syukri, *History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani*, trans. Bailey Conner and John N. Miksic, *Southeast Asia Series* (Ohio: Centre for International Studies, Ohio University, 1985) 71-2.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid. 73.
[43] Haemindra, "The Problem of the Thai-Muslims in the Four Southern Provinces of Thailand," 224.

Sulong returned to Pattani but in 1954, he disappeared and was allegedly drowned by the Thai police.[44]

In the early 1960s, another group called the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) was created, led by a *pondok* (schools that impart religious education) teacher called Ustaz Karim Hajji Hassan.[45] The aim of BRN was broader than GAMPAR's goal of joining with the Federation of Malaya. BRN's objective was to incorporate the southern provinces of Thailand in a pan-Malay state across Southeast Asia (Farouk 1984, p.239-40).[46] With Malay nationalism as the driving force of BRN, it aimed to ignite the Malay identity of the people of southern Thailand and called for solidarity with Malays in other countries of the region. However, factionalism in the BRN weakened its resistance against the Thai government. The konfrontasi waged by Indonesia against Malaysia led to some splinter blocs supporting Indonesia and others taking the side of Malaysia.[47] BRN also tactically supported the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), hoping to reap some gains in the event of a victory for the latter.[48] But this gamble did not pay off and led to divisions within the group. Traditional leaders of BRN were against the communist partnership as the goals of the two movements were not synonymous. Moreover, alliance with the communists brought it in direct confrontation with almost all Southeast Asian countries which considered communism as a common threat.[49]

The emergence of ethnic Malay identity in the conflict can be attributed to two key factors. First, the growth of Malay nationalism that gripped Southeast Asia, especially after the Second World War, greatly assisted the insurgent groups in their opposition to Thai rule. It allowed rebel organisations like GAMPAR and BRN to establish bases in Malaya and champion their irredentist cause. Second, the policies of the Siamese

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[44] Pitsuwan, "Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand" 163-4.

[45] Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* 99.

[46] Farouk, "The Historical and Transnational Dimensions of Malay-Muslim Separatism in Southern Thailand," 239-40.

[47] Ibid., 240.

[48] Pitsuwan, "Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand" 231. and Chaiwat Satha-Anand, *Islam and Violence: A Case Study of Violent Events in the Four Southern Provinces, Thailand*, *Usf Monographs in Religion and Public Policy* (Tampa, Florida: Department of Religious Studies, University of South Florida, 1986) 15.

[49] Pitsuwan, "Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand" 233.

government, particularly on language and education, were perceived by the Malays of southern Thailand as encroachment of their cultural domain. In particular, the imposition of the Thai language in the southern provinces was viewed as a threat. There was apprehension that it would lead to the dilution of the Malay tongue that was central to their ethnic Malay identity. But the ethnic nature of the conflict could not be sustained and began to wane towards the end of the 1960s. Religion began to play a more prominent role in the conflict which would lead to the surfacing of the divide between Buddhists and Muslims.

Rise of Religious Islamic Identity

The collapse of GAMPAR and the failure of the BRN facilitated the rise of the religious character of the strife in the 1970s. Islam began to emerge as a new rallying point for the insurgents in their struggle. The roots of this religious divide did not take place overnight. Events that unfolded in the 1940s accentuated the religious fault lines in the conflict. As the Second World War raged in the region, Bangkok was aware of the rising Malay nationalism in the region at the time[50] and did not want the residents of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun to succumb to the propaganda. Hence they embarked on a strategy to systematically erase ethnic Malay identity from the southern provinces of Thailand.

In order to cultivate an allegiance to the Thai nation whilst recognising their difference from ethnic Thais, the people of the Thailand's south were bracketed with other Muslims in the country and identified as 'Thai Muslims'.[51] The Free Thai government that came to power in 1944 reversed many of the restrictive policies under Phibul Songkhram and pledged religious freedom for the Muslims.[52] In May 1945, a Patronage of Islam Act was passed, and that created a post known as the *Chularajamontri*, the foremost leader on religious affairs for *all* Muslims in

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[50] Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* 64.
[51] Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism* 182.
[52] Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *Minority Problems in Southeast Asia* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1955) 159.

Thailand.[53] Bangkok believed that the assimilation of southern provinces would be better achieved if their residents are pigeonholed with other Muslims in Thailand. In short, it was an attempt to tie the future of the people of southern Thailand along with Muslims in other parts of the country.

Along with GAMPAR and BRN, there was another group operating in southern Thailand called Barisan Nasional Pembebesan Patani (BNPP), led by Tengku Abdul Jalal. Islam was part of its policy and they wanted to use it to exploit the support from the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Arab League.[54] Moreover, BNPP tried to shore up international Muslim support when they prepared a document titled "The Muslim Struggle for Survival in South Thailand" at the 7th Conference of Islamic Foreign Ministers meeting at Istanbul in 1976.[55] But these attempts to garner backing from Islamic countries and organisations did not materialise in any tangible assistance and BNPP faded away. With the death of Haji Sulong and the collapse of BNPP, the religious rebellion in southern Thailand faced a minor hiccup. But two decades later, it would again rise and alter the nature of the conflict.

The administration of the southern provinces was one of the key grievances of the Malay-Muslims. Most of the bureaucrats in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat were Thais who spoke little Malay and their attitudes towards the Malay population was denigrating.[56] In a bid to alleviate this problem, the Thai government in the 1960s instituted education policies that may have inadvertently emphasised the religious identity of the people of southern Thailand. In 1961, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat introduced the Pondok Educational Improvement Program intended at imparting secular education to students who studied at the pondoks. This gave the Thai government some degree of control over the pondok curriculum and it hoped to generate people who could occupy administrative posts in the southern provinces. But this process of transforming the *pondoks* into "private schools teaching Islam" upset

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[53] Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand and Western Burma/Myanmar* 95., emphasis added.

[54] Pitsuwan, "Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand" 228. and Farouk, "The Historical and Transnational Dimensions of Malay-Muslim Separatism in Southern Thailand," 241.

[55] Farouk, "The Historical and Transnational Dimensions of Malay-Muslim Separatism in Southern Thailand," 241.

[56] Ladd M. Thomas, "Political Violence in the Muslim Provinces of Southern Thailand," in *Occasional Paper* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975), 5.

the tok gurus, the pious heads of the *pondoks*,[57] and the traditional process of generating elites in the Malay-Muslim society.[58] A corollary to this policy was a decline of Pattani's position as a centre for Islamic education[59] as well as an exodus of students to Islamic countries in the Middle East to receive religious education.[60]

The military government in Thailand collapsed in 1973 and a brief interlude of democracy lasted for the next three years. During this period, the prejudice meted out to the Malay-Muslims in southern Thailand in the previous decades was exposed.[61] Furthermore, many of the students who returned to Thailand from the Middle East with Islamic credentials found themselves in a quandary. While their religious education and extensive links with Muslim movements in Islamic countries gave them a good reputation in Malay-Muslim society, they were rebuffed from leadership positions in the state bureaucracy.[62]

It was against this backdrop that another insurgent group called the Pattani United Liberated Organization (PULO) or Pertubohan Persatuan Pembebesan Pattani emerged. It was officially formed in 1968 and led by Tungku Bira Kotanila.[63] The aims of PULO are as follows:[64]

1. PULO is a political organization for the people of Pattani. PULO aims to:
   a. unite all active political parties among the people of Pattani against the Thai imperialist
   b. unite and actively fight for freedom, world liberty against prevalent colonialists, both old and new. (We) will fight the imperialists in every way with strength and the force of weapons. (We) will especially fight the Israelis who occupy the Arabs' land
2. PULO has its own history and ideology which constitute a particular political, military, economic order which is most conducive to the hope, custom, and wish of the people of Pattani.

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[57] Dulyakasem, "Education and Ethnic Nationalism: The Case of the Muslim-Malays in Southern Thailand," 146.

[58] Pitsuwan, "Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand" 194.

[59] Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Islamic Education in Thailand: Negotiating Islam, Identity and Modernity," in *Southeast Asia Education Survey* (The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2005), 128.

[60] Hasan Madmarn, *The Pondok and Madrasah in Patani* (Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2002) 80-3.

[61] Pitsuwan, "Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand" 218.

[62] Ibid. 220.

[63] Satha-Anand, *Islam and Violence: A Case Study of Violent Events in the Four Southern Provinces, Thailand* 15.

[64] Ibid. 15-6.

3. The doctrine of the federation (sic) adheres to the concept of nation-state which is, in turn, defined by Islam, nationality and humanitarianism….

4. Liberation of Pattani from the yoke of the Thai imperialist is a matter of life and death for the Pattani people in every level at all times. With all our might, the people of Pattani will try and continue to fight for the freedom of Pattani and the emergence of an Islamic Republic.

Unlike GAMPAR and BRN, PULO placed a greater emphasis on 'Islamic' rather than 'Malay' identity in the conflict. This allowed it to maintain the uppermost hierarchy of its organisation in the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia and also enlist members and sympathisers during the yearly haj pilgrimage.[65]

In December 1975, there was a massive demonstration outside the Pattani Central mosque protesting against the murder of five villagers by Thai security forces.[66] PULO, who was alleged to be behind this protest, manipulated the identity of the victims as Muslims rather than Malays. They managed a turnout around 70,000 protestors by playing up religious symbols like the intoning of verses from the Holy Qur'an and holding the rally on December 11, an important Islamic holiday.[67] This incident clearly reflected the social clout of the organisation.

In September 1977, PULO was involved in a bombing during a royal visit to pondoks in Yala and orchestrated another bombing in October 1979 at a Yala railway station. These incidents received a lot of media coverage and according to a study by Chaiwat Satha-Anand, PULO was behind most insurgent attacks in southern Thailand during the period October 1976-81.[68] Two relatively minor but noteworthy incidents took place in 1980 that clearly indicated PULO's intention of making religion the primary driver of the conflict.[69]

Early in July 1980, twelve PULO members held up a bus running between Narathiwat and Bangkok. The Buddhist passengers were separated from the Muslims. Four

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[65] Pitsuwan, "Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand" 234,36.

[66] Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* 101.

[67] Pitsuwan, "Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand" 236-8. The holiday is most likely to be Day of Arafah. I would like to thank Muhammad Haniff Bin Hassan for this information.

[68] Satha-Anand, *Islam and Violence: A Case Study of Violent Events in the Four Southern Provinces, Thailand* 10,13.

[69] Ibid. 13.

Buddhists were shot dead. One month earlier, PULO stopped several cars travelling through Pa-Lud Road. The unfortunate passengers were questioned one by one whether he/she was a Buddhist or a Muslim. The PULO freed the Muslims, while five Buddhists were killed.

In the 1980s, BRN further split into BRN Coordinate, Congress and Ulama. The aims of the splinter groups have not changed drastically but BRN Coordinate led by Haji M has worked towards garnering support through the *pondoks*.[70] Furthermore, a split within PULO saw the creation of a group called New PULO in 1995 led by A-rong Muleng and Haji Abdul Rohman Bazo.[71] The goals of this faction also appear to align with its parent. There also seems to be a tactical alliance between the PULO and BRN factions.[72]

The end of the Soviet-Afghan war also had an indirect impact on the insurgency in southern Thailand. In 1995, the Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani (GMIP) was formed by Nasori Saesaeng, a Soviet-Afghan war veteran. Similar to PULO in its objective to create an Islamic state in southern Thailand, the GMIP has also supported Osama bin Laden as part of its cause.[73] Reports of umbrella organisations like Bersatu have also emerged but their goals are still unclear. However, they do not seem to significantly deviate from its member groups.[74]

With the rise of groups like PULO and GMIP, the religious nature of the conflict in southern Thailand has become more prominent. The strife is increasingly portrayed as one between Buddhists and Muslims. The violence in the provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat is less a 'Malay' predicament and more a 'Muslim' problem. How did this transformation from a primarily 'ethnic' discord to a predominantly 'religious' conflict occur?

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[70] ICG Asia Report, "Southern Thailand: Insurgency, Not Jihad," (Brussels: Crisis Group, 2005), 12.
[71] Gunaratna, Acharya, and Chua, *Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand* 39.
[72] ICG Asia Report, "Southern Thailand: Insurgency, Not Jihad," 13.
[73] Anthony Davis cited in Ibid.
[74] Gunaratna, Acharya, and Chua, *Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand* 42-5.

Explaining the Shift

There are four key reasons for the change. First, the Thai government attempted to expunge the Malay identity from people living in the southern provinces. After the Second World War, there was a fear among Thai authorities that rising Malay nationalism in Southeast Asia would erode the loyalty of the southern provinces to the Thai nation-state. In an attempt to eradicate the ethnic divide in Thailand, they embarked on a policy of tagging all Muslims in Thailand as 'Thai Muslim'. Despite the move to embrace religious plurality, the use of the term "Thai Muslim" only accentuated the religious cleavage. As Buddhism is closely associated with Thai identity,[75] the identity that was imposed on all Muslims in the country was one of 'you are Thai *but* you are Muslim'. In short, it was not possible to be called just 'Thai' and be considered a Muslim.

Second, the lack of support from Malaysia for the insurgent groups diminished the ethnic Malay cause of the conflict. Tengku Abdul Rahman, then Prime Minister of Malaysia, stressed that it would not back the rebel organisations in southern Thailand.[76] While Malaysia's public stance to stay away from the insurgency was based on ASEAN's non-interference in the internal affairs of other member states, it also required Thailand's assistance to contain the communist threat to the country.[77] The only assistance from Malaysia to the rebels in southern Thailand came from Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and its predecessor, Pan-Malay Islamic Party (PMIP), the opposition party which controls Kelantan state. Many Malaysians also supported the interference of their country into the conflict.[78] But despite these pressures, the Malaysian government did not offer any tangible support to the southern Thailand insurgents.

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[75] McVey, "Identity and Rebellion among Southern Thai Muslims," 36.

[76] Haemindra, "The Problem of the Thai-Muslims in the Four Southern Provinces of Thailand (Part Two)," 86.

[77] Joseph Chinyong Liow, "The Security Situation in Southern Thailand: Toward an Understanding of Domestic and International Dimensions," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, no. 6 (2004): 539, 41.

[78] A. Gopinath, "International Aspects of the Thai Muslim and the Philippine Moro Issues: A Comparative Study," in *Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. K.M. de Silva and R.J. May (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991), 139.

Third, the outflow of students to pursue higher Islamic education in the Middle East also amplified the religious identity of the younger generation in southern Thailand. Influenced by the worldwide resurgence of Islam after the Second World War, many wanted to study at the centre of Islamic education. Some of them were also enticed with scholarships from Islamic associations.[79] Since the 1970s, there has also been a surge in financial aid for Islamic education in southern Thailand. For instance, the Yala Islamic College was set up with assistance from the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, Islamic Development Bank, International Islamic Relief Organisation as well as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar.[80] Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has contributed towards textbooks in Pattani *pondoks*.[81] The Pondok Educational Improvement Program mentioned earlier also contributed towards many *tok gurus* going abroad for religious instruction. These heightened the Islamic consciousness of the southern provinces of Thailand.

Fourth, the post-September 11 environment and the fear of global terrorism entering local conflicts has also facilitated in adding a religious colouring to the conflict in southern Thailand. Although no definite links with external terror groups have surfaced, the arrest of regional terrorist organisation Jemaah Islamiyah's (JI) operational head Hambali in August 2003 has heightened such a possibility. Moreover, the emergence of GMIP, led by alumni of the Soviet-Afghan war, has increased the risk of a wider religious conflict. On 28 April 2004, a battle at the Krue Se mosque in Pattani reinforced the religious nature of the conflict.[82] A group of men, after praying at the Krue Se mosque, attacked the nearest security checkpoint. After the security forces retaliated, the attackers retreated into the Krue Se mosque. Thai army personnel, who had surrounded the mosque, decided to launch an assault on the insurgents. In the ensuing battle, coupled with attacks elsewhere across southern Thailand on the same day, more than a hundred rebels and five security personnel were killed. The choice of venue and dates for this attack do not seem arbitrary. Krue Se is a historic mosque in Pattani and has been a witness to resistance from the

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[79] Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* 69.
[80] Liow, "Islamic Education in Thailand: Negotiating Islam, Identity and Modernity," 138.
[81] Madmarn, *The Pondok and Madrasah in Patani* 86-7.
[82] ICG Asia Report, "Southern Thailand: Insurgency, Not Jihad," 22-5.

southern provinces earlier.[83] Moreover, the protests against the arrest of Haji Sulong in the late 1940s had taken place on 26-28 April 1948.[84]

Conclusion

This paper has sought to explain the change of the southern Thai conflict from a chiefly ethnic Thai-Malay discord to largely Buddhist-Muslim strife. Especially in the post-September 11 environment, this shift has deep implications. It has led to two common misperceptions. First, a religious conflict alludes to the picture that *mujahideen* from all around the world will come to the assistance of their Muslim brethren in southern Thailand. Second, it suggests that solutions for resolving the southern Thailand conflict can be found in Islam and Buddhism. Both these assessments unfortunately make the assumption that conflict identities are fixed.

The southern Thailand conflict is a clear case where conflict identities are neither primordial nor static. Many actors can influence these social identities. Usually, leaders of rebel groups play a significant role in determining which identities are to be exploited for maximum support.[85] But as this paper has shown, social identities in a conflict zone can be modified by the state by crafting specific policies to suppress a certain identity. In the process, it can lead to, sometimes inadvertently, the accentuation of some other identity. The Thai government's policy to do away with the Malay identity in southern Thailand by using the term 'Thai Islam' led to the emphasis on the religious aspect in the conflict. Globalization and specific global events can also reinforce conflict identities. The worldwide Islamic resurgence as well as September 11 attacks in the United States has highlighted the religious facet of the southern Thai strife.

The heavy handed response of the Thaksin government is playing into the hands of the insurgents. Human rights abuses in southern Thailand have been on the rise after

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[83] Chaiwat Satha-Anand, *The Life of This World: Negotiated Muslim Lives in Thai Society* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005) 60-77.
[84] ICG Asia Report, "Southern Thailand: Insurgency, Not Jihad," 5.
[85] See Saideman, Dougherty, and Jenne, "Dilemmas of Divorce: How Secessionist Identities Cut Both Ways."

the 4 January 2004 attacks.[86] These have included torture and detention by the security forces that have led to the use of 'blacklists', and random disappearances of civil society personnel. The imposition of martial law in January 2004 and the enactment of the new Emergency Decree in July 2005 have only served to increase concerns over human rights offences in southern Thailand. Such actions have been exploited by the rebel groups to garner more support for the insurgency. It enables them to portray any ill-treatment and neglect by the Thai government as being committed against Muslims. It is therefore imperative that the Thai government recognise the importance of conflict identities in its quest for resolving the insurgency in the southern provinces.

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[86] Amnesty International, "Thailand: "If You Want Peace, Work for Justice"," (Bangkok: Amnesty International, 2006).

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