

The Malays of Patani: Fighting for Identity Survival in the Thai State

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the conflict in Southern Thailand, and argues that the main force sustaining the violence is the Thai government's refusal to accept the Malay identity of the South. The article analyzes the policies of two Thai Prime Ministers; Phibun Songkhram and Thaksin Shinawatra. The various assimilation programs and policies were seen as a threat towards identity survival by the Malays. This paper concludes that this feeling of being threatened manifested in the separatist tendencies of the more radical elements in the Southern Malay population. Until a greater effort is undertaken to accommodate the uniquely Malay identity of the South, the conflict shall be ongoing.

Key words: identity, Southern Malay, Phibun Songkhram, Thaksin Shinawatra, Patani

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini membincangkan konflik di Selatan Thailand, dan berhujah bahawa keganasan berterusan kerana kerajaan Thailand enggan mengiktiraf identiti Melayu di Selatan. Makalah ini meneliti polisi dua Perdana Menteri; Phibun Songkhram dan Thaksin Shinawatra. Pelbagai program asimilasi dilihat oleh masyarakat Melayu sebagai ancaman terhadap kelangsungan identiti mereka. Kesimpulan makalah ini mendapati perasaan terancam ini adalah sebab utama kecenderungan kumpulan pemisah di kalangan golongan radikal di Selatan Thailand. Selagi usaha yang lebih jitu tidak diambil untuk memberi ruang kepada identiti unik bahagian Selatan Thailand yang berciri Melayu, konflik ini pasti berterusan.

Kata kunci: identiti, Melayu Selatan, Phibun Songkhram, Thaksin Shinawatra, Patani

INTRODUCTION

In 1785, the great cannon Sri Patani arrived in Bangkok (Ibrahim Syukri 1985: 45). It was part of the war booty brought back by the victorious Siamese army under the command of Phraya Kalahom. Two other great cannons, Sri Negara and Mahalela, were also captured, but fell into the sea and were lost. The capture of these great cannons, symbols of the strength and power of the Malay Sultanate of Patani, signalled the beginnings of Siamese formal involvement in this southern Malay frontier. Henceforth, Patani came under the suzerainty of Siam, and was forced to send tribute to Bangkok (Ibrahim Syukri 1985).

From the beginning, Siam's relationship with her southern Malay frontier can at best be described as uneasy. The history of the region had been marked by alternating periods of peace and violence. The southern Malay frontier would experience increased direct incorporation into the Siamese, and later Thai central administrative control. At the core of this strained relationship in the modern period is Thailand's failure to recognize and accommodate

the Malay Muslim identity of her southern population. The harsh policies adopted by the Thai government in their pursuit to assimilate the southern frontier into the Thai nation, enhanced the perception among the Malays that their homeland is currently being colonized by an oppressive regime. This sense of occupied existence prevented the southern Malay population from perceiving themselves as equal members within the Thai state, inhibiting unity with the rest of Thailand. Thus, the paper argues that the root cause of the conflict in southern Thailand is the harsh policies adopted by the Thai central government in assimilating the population; which created among the Malays an enhanced perception that they were being colonized and oppressed, and their survival and identity as a unique, distinct people from the Thais was under threat. The paper will analyze the Thai Central Government's attitude and policies concerning the southern frontier during the premierships of Field Marshall Plaek Phibun Songkhram (1938 to 1944, 1948 to 1957) (Montesano & Jory 2009: 7) and Thaksin Shinawatra (2001 to 2006), arguably the most volatile periods in the history of the southern conflict (Chalk 2008: 9, 21).

In the interest of clarity, the paper shall distinguish the use and definition of several key terminologies. The first distinction shall be made between the term ‘Siam’ and ‘Siamese’ with the term ‘Thailand’ and ‘Thai.’ The term ‘Thailand’ and ‘Thai’ shall be applied to refer to the state post 24th June 1939, when the first Cultural Mandate of Phibun’s government announced the name-change from ‘Siam’ to ‘Thailand’ (Craig 2006: 249). The term ‘Siam’ and ‘Siamese’ shall be applied to the state prior to the name-change, and the years 1945 to 1947, when Pridi Phanomyong’s government changed the state’s name back to ‘Siam’ (Craig 2006: 261). The name by which the state is called foreshadowed the policies of the regime; with ‘Thailand’ carrying nuances of Thai ethnic national aspirations (Craig 2006: 248) while ‘Siam’ carried connotations of an inclusionary state that promoted the interests of all her diverse ethnicities (Craig 2006: 261). The second distinction to be made concerns the term ‘Patani’ with ‘Pattani.’ The term ‘Patani,’ which is closer to the Malay pronunciation, shall be applied to indicate the entire territory of the ancient Malay Sultanate of Patani, prior to 1791. The term ‘Pattani,’ which is closer to the Thai pronunciation, shall be applied specifically to indicate the area of the province of Pattani, created in 1791 when the Siamese split the Sultanate of Patani, now a tributary, into seven provinces, called the *Khaek Chet Huamong* or the Seven Malay Provinces (Bunnag 1977: 31). Thus, the term ‘Patani’ shall encompass the whole area of the southern frontier, while the term ‘Pattani’ shall indicate a small, albeit very significant area of within this vast territory.

Before further discussion on the policies of Phibun and Thaksin is made, some background knowledge of the history of Patani and her relationship with Siam would be crucial to the understanding of the current southern conflict. The Malay Sultanate of Patani was established as an independent Muslim state in 1457 (Abuza 2009: 11). Patani is located proximally in the middle of the Malay Peninsula; which encompassed the Isthmus of Kra to the north, extending towards Singapore to the south (Ibrahim Syukri 1985: 3). The sultanate experienced her golden age during the reign of four consecutive queens of the Sri Wangsa dynasty, beginning with the reign of Raja Hijau (1584 to 1616) and ended with the death of her niece Raja Kuning without an heir in 1688. During this period, Patani enjoyed prosperity due to her strategic location and positive attitude towards commerce. The importance

of commerce was highlighted by the fact that Raja Kuning, the last of the Sri Wangsa monarchs, personally conducted trading enterprises. The Siamese from Ayutthaya launched several missions to subjugate Patani throughout the long history of the Patani Sultanate, but all were repelled and Patani held on to her independence (Ibrahim Syukri 1985). However, the end of the Sri Wangsa dynasty signaled the beginning of Patani’s decline. The founding of the Chakri Dynasty with her capital in Bangkok in 1782 strengthened and rejuvenated the Siamese (Abuza 2009: 11); and by 1785 they managed to subdue Patani, now under the Kelantan dynasty, forcing the southern Malay frontier into a tributary relationship with Bangkok (Bunnag 1977). Under Siamese suzerainty, Patani still retained a significant amount of autonomy within her domain. As long as the tribute of *bunga mas* (gold and silver tree) was paid triennially, Bangkok would not interfere with local authority (Thongchai Winichakul 1994: 82). Despite the degree of independence, resistance continued periodically. In order to weaken the rebellions, the Siamese had Patani divided into seven tributary provinces; collectively known in Thai as *Khaek Chet Huamong* or the Seven Malay Provinces (Bunnag 1977: 31). Local nobilities who cooperated with the Siamese were made rulers of the provinces (Ibrahim Syukri 1985: 49), similar to the *tusi* system under the Qing Empire of China (Giersch 2006: 2). However, the autonomy of the provinces was reduced, and they were placed under the supervision of the government administration at Songkhla (Bunnag 1977: 31). This reduced autonomy was resented by the local population, fortifying their perception that the region was under occupation by invaders.

The colonial ambitions of the European powers in Southeast Asia at the turn of the twentieth century worried the Siamese. With the French and British encroaching on her domain, Siam felt that it was urgent for her to consolidate her authority in her tributary provinces (Pitsuwan 1985: 29). “In 1902, the nobility was stripped of its power and all functions of the provinces were gradually transferred to the bureaucrats from the capital or provinces in the north” (Pitsuwan 1985: 33). These reforms, which were similar to the *gaitu guiliu* system of Qing China (Hostetler 2001: 119), were intensely resisted by the southern Malays, because it signalled a total loss of independence for the frontier. Rebellions occurred, such as that led by Sultan Abdul Kadir Qamaruddin, the last sultan and governor of Pattani,

in 1903 (Gunaratna et al. 2005: 4). The various rebellions were swiftly suppressed, and its leaders exiled to Phitsnulok, Bangkok and Songkhla (Bunnag 1977: 153). The removal of the leaders, who were mostly drawn from the traditional nobility, symbolized the loss of power and autonomy among the Malays, which enhanced their perception of being under an oppressive rule by an alien government. The hostile environment that resulted from the harsh suppression of the rebellion made it very difficult to administer the frontier. In a letter to Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, Minister of the Interior, King Chulalongkorn admitted the failure of the harsh policies implemented in the frontier.

“... We have rather perverted the administration of the *Lao* provinces and the Seven Malay Provinces from its true state. It can also be said that we have imported but have misused a foreign model of administration...”

When the British use this model of administration, they go to advise and supervise rulers whom they treat as the owners of the provinces... We, on the other hand, treat the provinces as ours, which is not true, for the Malays and the *Lao* consider that the provinces belong to them. When we say that we are going to trust them, we do not really do so, but send commissioners and deputy commissioners to supervise them. The commissioners and deputy commissioners are then empowered only either to manipulate them as puppets or, if that is not possible, to spy on them and to pass on their secrets. We cannot, however, really protect ourselves against anything in this way. I do not think that an administration, which is so full of deviousness, can result in our mutual trust and peace of mind.” (Bunnag 1977: 154-155).

King Chulalongkorn’s letter revealed his concerns about the existence of a wall that separated the frontier from the center, a wall that would cause many conflicts and threatened the unity of the nation. This wall had continued to exist till today. Despite the hostile relationship, the Malay frontier’s ties with the central government in Bangkok had been irrevocably cemented; when the British recognized Siam’s sovereignty over the region through the signing of the Anglo-Siamese Agreement in 1909 (Pitsuwan 1985: 31). Thus the subjugation of Patani was complete, and the Malays were fully conscious of their subjugated status.

The formal political incorporation of the southern frontier deeply distressed the Malay population. However, it was the forced nationalist assimilation

policies of Field Marshall Plaek Phibun Songkhram (1938 to 1944, 1948 to 1957) (Montesano & Jory 2009: 7) – policies that threatened the Malay cultural and religious identity of the south – which heralded the most volatile chapter in the modern history of Patani. “It is commonly believed that it was under both Phibun governments that Malay Muslims in the south suffered their worst political oppression” (Aphornsuvan 2009: 92). These policies were intensely resisted by the Muslim Malays; since they were based on a national conception of Thai ethnic supremacy and dominance of Buddhist spirituality. These policies discouraged the development and preservation of other cultural identities which were dominant in the frontiers.

“Pibul Songkhram instituted an integration policy that stressed Thai racial identity and national unity, and introduced a number of Western practices. It was a policy of total Thai domination of the country which, by its very nature, emphasized the fusion of Thai identity with Buddhism. It was a program of forced assimilation which had little patience for the unique Malay Muslim culture, or the culture of other ethnic minorities. The sole expressions of culture to be tolerated in the state were those of the Thai people who lived in the center of the country. Minorities would have to adapt to Thai norms and assimilate into the Thai people and its culture” (Yegar 2002: 90).

Phibun’s assimilation policies aimed to dictate and control almost every aspect of life (Yegar 2002: 91), leaving very little space for personal choices. Malay resistance to these policies was met by strict and harsh enforcement tactics by the Thai authority. “Those who broke the law were fined, at times even attacked by the police” (Yegar 2002: 91). Such forceful measures taken to eradicate the identity of another group could be perceived as a kind of cultural genocide in modern terms. This sense of threatened survival, and harsh treatment of the population, consolidated the perception among the Malays that they were under the yoke of Thai occupation. The promotion of the central Thai identity, at the expense of the Muslim Malay and other minority identities, made unity and peace within the Thai nation impossible in this period.

Among the controversial policies implemented by the Phibun government concerned the restriction on the style of clothing that can be worn in public. Malay men and women were forbidden to wear their traditional clothing in public (Yegar 2002). Instead,

they were required to wear form-fitting western clothing (Aphornsuvan 2009), which, under the heat of the tropical sun, was extremely uncomfortable compared to the loose and airy traditional garments. Comfort, however, was not the main reason for the opposition to western clothing. The form-fitting western clothing did not conform to the Malay sense of decency and decorum. Malay decency required that “garments shall be loose and as unsuggestive of bodily shape as can be” (Gullick 1991: 189). Thus, the wearing of traditional clothing was a vital component of the Malay sense of identity, which not only contributed a sense of decency and respectability, but also served to distinguish themselves from the ‘other,’ in this case the Thais. Furthermore, clothing had always been used as a symbol of privilege (Gullick 1991: 190) and social class distinction within the traditional Malay society. The aristocracy, and those who had performed the *haj* Pilgrimage, who were used to wearing special forms of clothing differentiating them from the common Malay population, were on several occasions “forced by the police to remove the distinguishing scarf worn around the head.” (Yegar 2002: 91). This humiliating treatment of the highly respected segment of society, together with the restrictions imposed on the common population, deeply injured the pride of the Malays and increased their sense of marginalization. The law on proper dress code essentially forced the Malays to abandon a part of their identity, and was seen among the southern population as a threat to their survival. Thus, the intolerant attitude of the Phibun administration towards Malay identity inhibited national unity, and caused further conflicts in the southern Malay frontier.

Another contentious aspect of Phibun’s policies in the south was his restriction on the use of the Malay language. The promotion of Central Thai as the national and official language for administration in Phibun’s ninth edict (Craig 2006: 251) effectively marginalized other dialects and languages, including the Malay language. The use of the Malay language was strictly forbidden in government offices (Yegar 2002: 91), making it extremely difficult for the Malay population to attend to official matters with the government. The impracticality of this policy resulted in extreme difficulty for the Thai officials to administer the frontier, and the mismanagement of their region increased the resentment the Malays had for Thai administration.

“This demand to make a transition to the Thai language was neither practical, nor, indeed, was it possible. The language of the Muslim population in the southern districts was Malay, especially in the rural areas, and the government did not possess the technical means to enforce the change... In any case, the decrees themselves were enough to arouse opposition and enmity among the Malays of the south, and to strengthen their religio-ethnic solidarity in the face of the external danger of an uncompromising, hostile regime.” (Yegar 2002).

The marginalization of the Malay language, and the difficulty in dealing with government officials due to this policy, exacerbated the grievances of the Malay population. Furthermore, as language was seen as a tool through which “pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined and futures dreamed” (Anderson 2006: 154), the marginalization of the Malay language was perceived as an attempt to destroy the Malay goal of increased national identity and autonomy. Exasperated by the situation, the Malay population could not see themselves as an appreciated component within the Thai state, increasing the sense of being oppressed by a foreign entity. This sense of marginalization created divisions within the region, a division that would set the stage for future conflicts.

The outright abolishment of the local legal practices, which were influenced by Islamic law, was deeply unsettling for the Malay population. The Phibun government’s meddling into the local legal system was interpreted by the Malay population as a direct attack to the Muslim component of their identity; an integral aspect that is considered a prerequisite to be called Malay (Bajunid 2005:9).

“The most sensitive change for Malay Muslims was the abolition in 1944 of Islamic laws relating to the family (especially marriage and divorce) and inheritance, which had been allowed to function since the annexation of the Patani region in 1902. By imposing Thai civil law in the four Muslim-majority provinces, the government also abolished the position of the Islamic judge, the *dato yutitham*, which had decided family and property cases among the Muslims. To make matters worse, the government intentionally forsook the promulgation of the newly completed codification of Islamic marriage and inheritance law, which had been undertaken in 1929 with the aim of bringing unity and understanding between Thai and Islamic law.” (Aphornsuvan 2009: 106-107).

The abolishment of the Islamic law system in Patani signaled the Phibun government's complete lack of interest in accommodating the needs and wishes of the minority populations. The lack of legal mechanism to address their religio-legal disputes forced the Malays of Patani to look across the border to the northern Malay states of what was then Malaya for mediation. "Because of their adjoining borders, Muslims in Satun went to Islamic courts in Kedah or Perlis, those from Yala went to Perak, and those from Narathiwat would travel to Kelantan for justice" (Aphornsuvan 2009: 107). The Malays of Pattani province, who did not share a border with the northern Malay states of Malaya, elected their own *kodi* (religious judge) to mediate cases. This situation resulted in no cases filed in the Thai courts by the Malay population in the region of Patani between the years 1943 to 1947 (Aphornsuvan 2009). This rejection of the Thai legal system created a dual effect on the psyche of the Thai government and Malay population. The Thai government viewed the Malays as untrustworthy and disloyal to the Thai state, since they looked abroad for justice, rather than utilizing the state-sanctioned civil courts. The Malays felt that their needs were not being addressed by the Thai government, thus confirming their perception of being marginalized by the state. This situation of mutual distrust and disappointment increased the alienation of the southern frontier. This sense of division, experienced by both parties, inhibited unity within the Thai state, and would cause further conflict between the frontier and the central government.

Of all the assimilation policies imposed by the Thai government in Patani, efforts promoting Buddhism among the population was deemed the most intolerable by the Muslim Malays. Phibun's brand of nationalism equated Buddhism with patriotism (Pitsuwan 1985: 89). The promotion of Buddhism was gravely alarming for the Malays, because it was "a conscious effort to convert non-Buddhists...through religious curricula of compulsory education" (Pitsuwan 1985). This was seen by the Patani Malays as an effort that threatened the young generation of Muslim Malays; the youth in whom lay the hope of the Malays to continue their struggle for autonomy or ultimate independence.

"Perhaps the most serious assault on the religious sensitivities of Malay Muslims was the attempt by Thai officials to project the superiority of Buddhism, which was the state religion, and turn it into a symbol of patriotism

in the framework of the government schools. Although this policy was directed at all ethnic minorities, not the Malay Muslims alone, the Muslims saw it as a direct threat to the foundations of their religion and ethnicity. There were rumors that Muslim children in schools were compelled to show obeisance to statues of Buddha. A particularly grave incident which caused shock waves throughout the Muslim community took place on 12 January 1944 when the Thai governor of Patani made a speech to an assembly of Malay dignitaries and *Ulama* in which he called on them to display honor toward statues of Buddha by virtue of their being symbols of the state, which, he explained, was a gesture of respect rather than a requirement that they convert." (Yegar 2002).

The Thai governor's speech exposed the ignorance and lack of sensitivity in Phibun's government when dealing with issues of religion. To the Muslim Malays, any outward display to honor symbols of other religious beliefs was sacrilege, leading to *murtad* or apostasy. The abolishment of Islamic law, the termination of Friday as the religious day of rest, and most gravely, the Buddhist proselytizing campaigns in Patani, "were all that was needed to justify, in Islamic terms, the call of jihad" (Yegar 2002). These incidents catalyzed the radicalization of Malay resistance and struggles in Patani. "There had always been resistance to Thai dominion in the southern districts but, from this point onward, modern separatist and irredentist movement made their appearance" (Yegar 2002). Thus, the Thai central government's failure to understand and exercise sensitivity towards the spiritual and religious tradition of the Malays aggravated the conflict in the southern Malay frontier.

At the conclusion of the Second World War, Thailand experienced a brief period of non-military dominated government from 1945 to 1947 (Abuza 2009: 15). Phibun's regime was replaced by Pridi Phanomyong's more liberal and moderate government (Yegar 2002), which immediately began efforts to repair the damage caused by Phibun's forced assimilation policies. One of the Pridi's earliest efforts at reconciliation was to change the name of the state back to "Siam," in order to create "a more genuine national consciousness that would include all peoples within the country's borders, whatever their ethnicity." The establishment of the Patronage of Islam Act of 1945 reversed Phibun's edicts through the abolishment of the dress restrictions (Yegar 2002: 95); establishment of Islamic schools

that addressed the public suspicions of the Buddhist centric education system of Phibun's regime; and establishment of the *Chularajamontri* office (Pitsuwan 1985), which was equivalent to the *Syeikul Islam* office of the earlier Sultanate, to mediate between the government and population and give advice concerning Islamic religio-legal matters. These efforts, which on the surface were seen as favorable to the Malays, were actually aimed to increase control over the southern frontier. By recognizing and integrating the various Muslim functionaries into the administrative system, Pridi's government hoped to win the hearts of the southern Malay population. The efforts were also aimed to "weaken the separatist movement which was under the leadership of traditional aristocratic families such as *Tunku Mayiddin* and *Tunku Abdul Jalal*" (Yegar 2002: 95).

This period of toleration saw the emergence of moderate leaders among the southern Malay population and renewed efforts to gain increased autonomy for the region of Patani. On 3rd April 1947, a commission of inquiry was sent by the Siamese central government to "listen and give sympathetic support" (Aphornsuvan 2009) to the people of Patani. Islamic leaders, headed by Haji Sulong Tomina, presented them with a set of seven demands.

1. The government of Siam should have a person of high rank possessing full power to govern the four provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun, and this person should be a Muslim born within one of the provinces and elected by the populace. The person in this office should be retained without being replaced;
2. All the taxes obtained within the four provinces should be spent only within the provinces;
3. The government should support education in the Malay medium up to the fourth grade in parish schools within the four provinces;
4. Eighty percent of the government officials within the four provinces should be Muslims born within the provinces;
5. The government should use the Malay language within government offices alongside Siamese;
6. The government should allow the Islamic Council to establish laws pertaining to the customs and ceremonies of Islam with the agreement of the (above noted) high official; and
7. The government should separate the religious courts in the four provinces and (give

the former) full authority to conduct cases." (Aphornsuvan 2009: 111)

These demands were aimed at increased autonomy, instead of independence, which were the aims of the separatist movements. The demands were discussed in cabinet, now under the leadership of Thawal Thamrong Savaswadhi, and it was deemed inappropriate; since such demands threatened the political unity of the Siamese state. The Siamese government was willing to recognize and accommodate the Muslim Malay identity of Patani, but not prepared to relinquish control of the region to local autonomous administration. However, discussions still continued between the central government and local leaders concerning suggestions to improve the southern frontier. These discussions would come to a halt, due to the military coup of 8th November 1947 (Aphornsuvan 2009), which brought Phibun back into leadership position. The coup ended the period of accommodation and negotiation between the central government and the Malay frontier. Thus, it reignited the sense of threatened survival among the Malay population.

The end of the Patronage of Islam policies reignited calls for an independent Patani and made the separatist movements relevant again in the southern frontier. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Khuang Aphaiwong's interim government used the seven demands of 1947 as a basis to arrest moderate Muslim leaders in Patani, among them Haji Sulong Tomina who was detained in January 1948 (Aphornsuvan 2009: 96). The reemergence of Field Marshall Plaek Phibun Songkhram as the Prime Minister of Thailand on 8th April 1948, was a development which deeply worried the Malays. This was especially true since the memories of the first Phibun government were still fresh. The imminent threat of survival, combined with the arrest of moderate leaders, resulted in widespread armed conflicts against the police and army throughout the frontier (Pitsuwan 1985). The most serious confrontation occurred in the village of Dusun Nyior in Narathiwat province on 28th April 1948, which lasted for 36 hours (Aphornsuvan 2009: 97) and involved "over a thousand men against government forces in an open battle" (Pitsuwan 1985: 161). The Dusun Nyior rebellion had since "become a symbol of the Malays' defiant spirit and continues to inspire independence movements at the present." The aftermath of the Dusun Nyior rebellion was the exodus of thousands of Malay Muslim families across the border to the northern Malay states of

Malaya, as increased military presence terrorized the frontier (Ockey 2009: 136). Haji Sulong, the moderate leader of the south, was released from police custody in 1952; but he was soon “disappeared” (Abuza 2009: 16) together with several close associates and his son Ahmad when they were told to report the police in Songkhla (Ockey 2009: 136). Their heavy-handed treatment by the Thai administration and the sense of lawlessness of the region frustrated the Malay population. Combined with the “disappearings” (Abuza 2009: 16) of local moderate leaders, the region was now fertile ground for separatist movements. The Thai government’s method of suppressing frontier opposition by eliminating local leaders backfired, as now the leadership void was filled by more radical factions. Thus, the Thai government’s ruthless methods in subduing the Malay frontier caused a heightened sense of oppression among the Malays. The consolidation of such self-perception among the Malay population sustained support for the separatist movement, which prevented unity within the Thai state.

The Phibun style policies, which were characterized by the brutal suppression of the southern population, had long-lasting legacies that persisted to the current period. To understand the ramifications of these policies in the twenty-first century, it is useful to include some discussion concerning the policies adopted during the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra (2001 to 2006). The Thaksin government, like that of the first and second Phibun governments, showed little compromise to the dissenting forces in Patani. Thaksin’s harsh policies towards the southern Malay frontier started very early in his premiership.

“On assuming power in 2001, the newly elected government of Prime Minister Thaksin dismantled the SBPAC – the one multiagency mechanism that had begun to demonstrate at least a partial track record in conflict resolution – and transferred internal security responsibilities in the south to the police, an institution that is generally regarded as being heavier-handed than the army” (Chalk 2008: 9).

SBPAC, established in 1981, stands for Southern Border Province Administrative Centre, and was charged to educate cultural awareness among the bureaucrats and security officials posted to the southern frontier. Thaksin’s policies in dealing with the insurgency in Patani followed a hard military track, preferring open confrontation and suppression

rather than to negotiate with the rebels. However, the weakness of these aggressive policies was that they neglected to make any concerted effort to win the support of the populace – a striking contrast to the policies of Pridi. There was “virtually no effort to address the poverty, underdevelopment, and general alienation that fuels Malay-Muslim discontent, paying scant attention to educational, cultural, and economic initiatives that could build community trust.” The goal was to suppress the south, rather than to win popular support. These harsh and uncompromising policies increased the sense of alienation and oppression in the psyche of the Malay population. The lack of effort by the Thai government to gain a moral legitimacy in the southern frontier exacerbated the conflict further. Two incidents, which illustrated the lack of sensitivity and sensibility of the Thaksin government in dealing with the southern conflict, shall be discussed here. The incidents were the Krue Se Mosque (*Masjid Kerisik* in Malay) siege and the Tak Bai incident, which both occurred in 2004 (Chalk 2008: 19). These incidents had a profound effect on the dynamics of the conflict.

The siege of the Krue Se Mosque, Pattani province, on 28th April 2004 (Chalk 2008: 10), exactly 56 years after the Dusun Nyior rebellion, was a tragic conclusion to a series of confrontations between the separatists and the Thai military. Running away from Thai army pursuit, several separatists seek refuge within the ancient Krue Se Mosque. Shots were exchanged, with grenades thrown into the ancient mosque (McCargo 2008: 108). The army then stormed the mosque and killed everyone within. The instruction was given by General Panlop Pinmani, who defied the explicit instructions not to attack from Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. In the aftermath, five rifles and thirty-one dead bodies (Chalk 2008: 10) were found in the mosque. The government was unapologetic, since officially Chavalit had given orders not to attack. However, there were speculations that Thaksin had authorized it (McCargo 2008: 109). The army too did not show any remorse, citing that not attacking the mosque would be tantamount to “agreeing to give up our Thai land.” This statement deeply alienated the Malays, because the term used was not “Thailand” – the name of the state, but “Thai land” – indicating that the land belonged to the Thais, something that the Malays cannot accept, as they believed Patani was “Malay land.” The Patani population, caught between the separatist and military forces, was used to daily violence. However, the attack on Krue Se

Mosque left a lasting impression on the Malay memory of the conflict. This is because the attack occurred on an ancient, sacred ground, which carried a deep “historical, emotional, spiritual and political resonance” (McCargo 2008: 109) among the Malays. “One former security official claimed that many... who died in the mosque were innocent victims, dawah (religious) teachers who had been caught up in events and were effectively hostages” (McCargo 2008). Based on the number of rifles found, this claim cannot be ignored. In the eyes of the Malays, the massacre at Krue Se Mosque was an unforgivable sin by the Thai army, as it was a physical and bloody attack on the sanctity of their religion (symbolized by both the mosque and the dawah teachers). Those who died were elevated to martyr status, and were regarded as heroes in the face of Thai brutality. Indeed, the sense of alienation among the Malays was so great, that no amount of cajoling could win them over. When the army made repairs on the mosque, in an effort to win the hearts of the Malays, the opposite effect was produced. As one vendor declared: “It is not decent for these soldiers, who are not Muslims, to repair our holy sacred mosque. There is no respect for our holy ground and religion... What can be worse?”

The Tak Bai incident on 25th October 2004 (McCargo 2008: 110) was another event that left a lasting imprint on the memory of the Malays. The incident started when demonstrators gathered in Narathiwat province to protest police injustices. The military was called to disperse the crowd. The army employed a highly brutal manner to deal with the demonstrators – they fired live ammunition into the crowd. About 1300 demonstrators were later transported to a detention camp (Chalk 2008: 19). It was the manner in which the detainees were transported that distinguished this incident from other protests, and left an enduring memory of Thai army brutality.

“...the victims had been put into the back of trucks, face down with their hands tied behind their backs, stacked there as many as five high, and spent several hours on the road to the Inkhayut army base in Pattani. Most trucks contained between sixty and eighty men; one contained ninety men, twenty-three of whom died. Most of those killed had apparently been suffocated, though relatives and community leaders insisted that many of the corpses contained bullet holes.” (McCargo 2008: 111).

The brutality not only angered the Malays, which was expected; but caused a division of opinions within the army. Some soldiers, especially the veterans who held the Malays in low regard, believed that the demonstrators fully deserved the treatment. Others were “appalled by the incompetence of the arrest.” (McCargo 2008). The perceived inhumanity of the Tak Bai incident was increased by the fact that it occurred during the holy Muslim month of Ramadhan. Such inhumane and brutal treatment of the detainees, all of whom were fasting, was seen among the Muslim Malays as a grave insult towards their religion. The Tak Bai dead, like those of the Krue Se Mosque, became symbols of Thai oppression. These symbols consolidated the perception of the Malays that their land is being colonized by the Thai. Thus, the alienation of the Malays, brought about by brutal actions by the police and army, prevented unity within the Thai borders.

The extreme violence in the southern frontier captured the attention of the international community and shocked the power center in Bangkok (McCargo 2008: 112). The military reviewed its hard-line approach to the southern conflict (McCargo 2008: 113). In subsequent conflicts, the military employed tactics that would not cause too much grievance among the population. When the coup of September 2006 brought down Thaksin’s regime, General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, who orchestrated the military operation, “immediately signaled that he was ready to negotiate with rebels in the south.” (Chalk 2008: 21). Prime Minister Surayud Chulanot issued a public apology for previous hard-line government policies, and pursued an approach to the southern frontier that emphasized reconciliation, security and dialogue. The policies mirrored those implemented in Pridi’s premiership. These measures represented a shift from Thaksin’s policies (Chalk 2008). This change in policy aimed at long term peace, rather than just the suppression and alienation of the ‘other’ to enhance self’ ethno-national superiority.

CONCLUSION

Based on the arguments presented, it can be concluded that the key to stabilizing the south is by approaching the frontier region with a certain sense of respect and recognition of her unique Malay Muslim identity. The extremely repressive policies of the Phibun and Thaksin regimes only served to alienate the Malay, creating a sense of injustice and

colonized existence. The oppression condition brought about by the mismanagement of their homeland forced them to fight for what they see as primordial rights. The Malay community had showed a willingness to cooperate under more civil governments, such as Pridi Phanomyong's administration, that took efforts to recognize the uniqueness of the Malay identity. Thus, it is correct to conclude that the Thai government's brutal treatment of the frontier population and their failure to recognize and accommodate their Malay identity is the root cause of the conflict. Like the great cannon Sri Patani, which lies today prominently displayed in front of the Ministry of Defense in Bangkok (Ibrahim Syukri 1985), a symbol of Thai domination of the Malay south; the Malay Patani self conception is that of an occupied and oppressed people. This self conception will not change unless accommodation and toleration of the unique Muslim Malay identity is employed by the Thai government in addressing the southern conflict. Hard-line policies will only make peace more elusive.

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