

# From “Patani Melayu” to “Thai Muslim”

PATRICK JORY

It would appear a simple question: *who* are the people at the centre of the conflict in Thailand’s southern border provinces? The Thai and Malaysian governments, the media, many academics, and the general public who have contributed to the mountains of words produced about the violence that has taken place over the last two years, seem to agree: “Muslims.” The Thai Government will often add an adjective to this collective name to affirm this group’s nationality, “Thai Muslims.”

Thus merely through the use of these religious labels to represent the actors involved in the conflict, it is difficult for many people to imagine it to be otherwise. The result is a depressing one. On Thai Internet web-boards—a useful source for gauging uncensored public opinion nowadays—one can read quite virulent anti-Muslim attacks.

Yet if the conflict were essentially religious then hundreds of thousands of “Muslims” all over Thailand outside the border provinces would surely rise up in mass revolt against the Thai state in a gesture of solidarity with their co-religionists. But they do not. If not, why then is this conflict consistently talked about today using religious terminology?

The answer can be found in the suppression of official references to the distinct ethnic Malay identity of the population of the border provinces, in favour of the generic term, “Thai Muslims.” The consequence of this re-labelling has been that the essence of the conflict, a clash between competing Thai and Patani Malay nationalisms, has been lost amidst explanations of the conflict in religious terms.

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## From “Malays” to “Thai Muslims”

Historically, both in the discourse of the Thai state as well as that of its adversaries in the South, the people of the former Patani sultanate were usually referred to as *melayu* (Malay). Even during the reign of the modernizing king Chulalongkorn, who oversaw the abolition of the Patani sultanate and the definitive absorption of the territories of the former sultanate into the Thai state under the 1909 Anglo-Siamese Treaty, the Thai court habitually and un-selfconsciously referred to the region’s inhabitants as Malay. The King once stated

that he hoped to eventually achieve a situation where “even though they are Malays and of a different faith ... [they] are Thais in sentiment and outlook just as any other Thai ...” Thus it seemed possible then, still under the Absolute Monarchy, for the Thai government to recognize dual ethnic identities within one state, “Thai” and “Malay.”

Likewise, the Thai state’s antagonists in the south following the Second World War also spoke of and for the “Malays.” Ibrahim Syukri, author of a popular nationalist history of Patani published in 1948 titled *Sejarah Kerajaan Melayu Patani (History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani)* called for the recognition of the “nationality [of the population of Patani] as a “Malay people.” Following the end of the Second World War, as Malay nationalism was gathering momentum across the border and Thailand was forced by the British to give up its irredentist annexations during the war, including the northern Malayan states, a group of Malay leaders in the Patani region submitted a petition to the British requesting the British Government to “have the kindness to release our country and ourselves from the pressure of Siam.” Patani, they pointed

**A violent insurgency in the ethnically Malay Muslim region of southern Thailand has claimed over a thousand lives since 2004. Although the conflict between the country’s southernmost provinces and the Thai state dates back at least a century, recently the ideology in which the conflict is expressed has changed markedly. Whereas a generation ago the goal was “liberation” of the ethnically Malay population from the former sultanate of Patani, today the spirit of the movement is expressed predominantly in Islamic terms.**

out, “is really a Malay country, formerly ruled by Malay Rajas for generations.” Moreover, the political ideology of the most prominent of the region’s separatist organizations that sprung up soon after has been the national liberation of the “Patani Malays.”

Until recently then, the majority population of this region was commonly referred to in ethnic terms—as Malays. It is indeed remarkable how little reference there was to their religious identity. How then, have the subjects of the

conflict been transformed from “Malays” into “Muslims”?

First, since the era of de-colonization and the rise of Malay nationalism in British Malaya, the Thai government has actively sought to avoid references to the Malay ethnic identity of the subjects of the region. It feared that with the new, post-colonial logic of nation-based states, recognition of the people of the region as “Malay” might give credibility to demands for a separate Malay state, either based on the territories of the old Malay sultanate of Patani, or through union with the other Malay states of British Malaya, which were now preparing for independence from Britain. Under the assimilationist policies of national integration, which began in Thailand from the beginning of the Second World War and held sway through to the 1990s, Malay ethnic identity as expressed in terms of language, dress, education, history, and custom has been consistently discouraged by the state. The government has attempted to replace it with a religious label, “Thai Muslims” or “Thai Islam” in the hope that this linguistic change would contribute to the overall goal of assimilation. Thus for Thai governments since the Second World War, the only possible identity officially acceptable for the “Patani Malays” within the Thai nation-state was as “Thai Muslims.”

## Islamization in Malaysia

Another contributing factor has been the politicization of Islam amongst the Malays in neighbouring Malaysia. Although this process first became clearly visible in the 1970s, its seeds were sown with the establishment of the state of Malaysia and the legal definition of Malayness. One of the components of Malay identity as defined by the Malaysian Constitution was “a person who professes the religion of Islam.” Following Malaysia’s independence in 1957, therefore, to be a Malay—and thereby eligible to the special privileges accorded to “Malays”—legally one must be a Muslim. Yet up until the 1970s Islam was marginal to most discussions of Malay identity. Reading Mahathir’s controversial book, *The Malay Dilemma*, first published in 1970, one year after bloody race riots, it is striking that Islam receives hardly any attention. The bulk of the book concentrates on Malay cultural traits that were supposedly responsible for the “dilemma” in which, according to Mahathir, the Malays now found themselves—that is, a majority in an ethnically plural country and politically dominant, but seemingly unwilling to use that dominance to improve their disadvantaged social and economic position because of a cultural predisposition for tolerance.

Ironically it was Mahathir who, upon becoming Prime Minister in 1981, began to implement a policy of Islamization. A year later he co-opted the former Muslim student activist Anwar Ibrahim into the government. Between them a policy emerged which viewed Islam as the answer to “social ills”—corruption, laziness, materialism, drug addiction, promiscuity, incest, child abuse—which appeared to be more prevalent among the Malays than the other ethnic groups, and which were blamed on the government’s policy rapid economic development. It is from this era the government began to promote Islam as a solution to these problems and to extol Malays to follow more closely the teach-

# Religious Labelling

ings of Islam. Islamic discourse in Malaysia, therefore, became dominated by the government, and the two key figures in the Islamization of Malay society were the Western-educated Mahathir and Anwar, rather than trained Islamic scholars. Thus when Patani Malays look today to their Malay brothers in Malaysia they see a more Islamized Malay identity.

A third factor behind the representation of the conflict in the south in religious terms has of course been the so-called global "Islamic revival" since the 1970s, and particularly the way in which Islam has become an ideology of resistance. Its prestige grew even further with the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and with its international communism, which dealt a deathblow to most Marxist-inspired resistance movements in the developing world. The extraordinary political and economic consensus we live under today that Fukuyama termed with a troubling sense of finality, "the end of history," that is, liberal democracy and

free market capitalism, means there is no longer a credible leftist programme of resistance available to groups for whom the existing status quo is unbearable. With the spectre of communism finally put to rest as an ideology of resistance, for certain groups of Muslims radical Islam has taken its place.

Despite the fact that some Patani Malays are known to have fought in Afghanistan, that some have been trained overseas in "jihadist" guerrilla warfare, and that people in the region have links with "Islamist" movements elsewhere in the world, almost every serious study of the conflict shows that the grievances that have given rise to the conflict are entirely local. The fact that Islam plays a much more prominent role in the rhetoric of the people of the region is certainly partly related to the global Islamic revival that has also influenced the Muslims of the southern Thai border provinces. But it is even more related to the critical problem of needing to find an effective ideology of resistance in the, post-Cold War, globalized environment, to help provide meaning and perhaps also a resolution to one of the region's most intractable conflicts.

## "De-culturalization" of Islam in Southern Thailand?

Amidst this Islamic discourse we might well ask, to what extent does a Patani Malay ethnic identity still exist among the local population of Thailand's southern border provinces? Anecdotally it is said that fluency in the distinctive Patani Malay dialect among the young has decreased compared to a generation ago, and that competence in Thai has increased. A half-century of assimilationist policies has certainly had some effect. Many people from the region travel to Malaysia and some to Indonesia for educational and employment, which exposes them to an alternative "Malay" cultural milieu. Another cultural influence in the region that has increased is Arabic, as students return from their studies in the Middle East, or as a result of funding provided by Arab states for religious and educational purposes.

Numerous studies point to social problems prevalent among the youth in the region, including drug addiction, and involvement in violence and petty crime. One wonders whether one of the sources of the violence might be an identity crisis among young men of the region resulting from the obliteration of Patani Malay identity over the last century, the resistance to the full adoption of a Thai identity given its association with discrimination and oppression, and the attraction of a radicalized Islam to fill the void. According to Olivier Roy,<sup>1</sup> one of the reasons for the turn to extremism among some young European Muslims is their rejection of the traditional culture of their parents, their inability to find acceptance in the mainstream cultures of Europe, and their refuge in a purified, reconstruction of an "imagined" Islam: "Islamic radicalization is a consequence of 'de-culturalization' and not the expression of a pristine culture." Roy's argument thus raises the question



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whether a similar phenomenon of de-culturalization, albeit caused by different factors, may be partly responsible for the radicalism in Thailand's south. His characterization of radical European Muslims could be equally applied to the militants of Thailand's south: "The generation gap, coupled with a sense of disenfranchising [...] individualization of faith, self-teaching, generation gap, rejection of authority (including that of religious established leaders), loosening of family ties, lack of socialization with a broader community (including the ethnic community of their parents), and withdrawal towards a small inward-looking group akin to a cult: all these factors show the extent of the process of deculturation of the radicals."<sup>2</sup>

If a Patani Malay identity is indeed in crisis, then that may also explain why the separatist organizations such as Patani United Liberation Organization, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional, and Bersatu, whose political ideologies were originally based, as argued above, on national liberation tinged with socialism rather than Islam, seem only tangentially involved in the conflict that has erupted since the beginning of 2004. Despite repeated claims by the government, it is quite unclear to what extent, if at all, separatism is a goal of the militants. Indeed, one of the most extraordinary aspects of the whole conflict is the ambiguity regarding the objectives of the militants, which is perhaps a symptom of the confused ideology of the movement in the midst of the void left by the obliteration of Patani Malay identity.

Thai national identity thus stands out from that of many of its Southeast Asian neighbours. Whereas Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, even Myanmar, have accepted the existence (at least conceptually, if not in practice) of dual identities, national and ethnic, since independence, Thailand maintains an essentially assimilationist model of national integration. It is revealing that one of the responses to the crisis in the south was to renew official nationalist campaigns to promote "Thainess." In the words of one of the most popular nationalist propaganda songs: "underneath the Thai flag the whole population is Thai." And within official discourses of Thainess while there is a place for Muslims, it appears there is no place for Malays.

**Students line up for morning exercises at Tadika Islamiyah School, Thailand.**

## Note

1. Olivier Roy, "A Clash of Cultures or a Debate on Europe's Values?" *ISIM Review*, no.15 (Spring 2005): 6-7.

Patrick Jory is Coordinator of the Southeast Asian Studies Programme, Walailak University, southern Thailand.  
Email: [jpatrik@wu.ac.th](mailto:jpatrik@wu.ac.th)