Elites, Conflicts and Violence: Conditions in the Southern Border Provinces

Surin Pitsuwan
Elites, Conflicts and Violence: Conditions in the Southern Border Provinces*

Surin Pitsuwan

1. Historical Background

The Malay Muslim population in the Southern border provinces of Thailand has a long history of alternate freedom and subjugation to one power after another which became predominant in the lower half of the Malay Peninsula.

It may nevertheless be said that no power could ever impose a stable rule over this region. Since the thirteenth century the Chinese, the Srivijaya islanders, the Thais, as well as the Portuguese and the Dutch, had claimed sovereignty over the land and its people.¹

But throughout this long period of time the latter sought to maintain their freedom by playing off one power against another, and in unfavourable circumstances by avoiding to be too closely associated with any one power; if necessary they accepted a sovereign rule by a foreign power.

Professors Wyatt and Teeaw have pointed out that this Golden Peninsula used to be under cross-cutting pressures from various directions from the Angkor or ancient Khmer empire, from the Pagan-based Burmese-

Mon empire, the Cholas from India, the Ceylonese, and the Srivijayans. All at one time or another encroached upon regional affairs, and the small native states persistently fought to remain independent. Some were successful in their struggle, while others met with extinction.  

International and regional circumstances were conducive to external influences which in turn came to determine developments in the internal affairs of the lower Malay Peninsula.

There is no evidence indicating precisely when the population of this region adopted Islam. But that important event was to have a decisive influence in shaping the subsequent direction of regional historical developments. With the introduction of Islam, power relations shifted their focus from racial, linguistic and cultural, to religious affairs, and a linkage was forged between the Peninsula and another region of the world—that which is the present-day Middle East.

Islam is the major determinant of ‘alienation’ among the Malay population in this part of Thailand. It has become what anthropologists refer to as an ‘articulating principle’, creating unity among fellow believers and alienating them from worshippers of other religions.

While integration of other parts of Thailand into a unified polity did not pose much difficulty, the Southern border provinces have not been fully ‘integrated’ into the country. Not only is Pattani a cultural and political centre of the Malays in this region; it is also, Professors Wyatt and Teeaw believe, a cradle of Islam in Southeast Asia. Some historians suggest that Pattani, not Malacca, as was formerly believed, was the point of entry of Islam into the region. Possibly, the strong religious conviction of the Malays Muslims in this part of Thailand owes its existence to this historical legacy, and community leaders have indeed sought to stress this point.

5. Mills, J.V. (tr.) “Eredia’s Description of Malacca, Meridional India and Cathay”.

With the advent of colonialism in Southeast Asia, there arose a need for administrative reforms in the territories populated by Malay Muslims. The aim was to prevent possible encroachments on their territorial integrity by the Western colonialists. Therefore, when Malacca was seized by the Portuguese in 1511, and especially from the seventeenth century onward, the area which is today Thailand's Southern region attracted the special attention of Ayuthya. The British established their rule in India and Burma, as well as in the Southern Malay States. The French, gaining a foothold in Indochina, made progressive westward encroachments. The history of Pattani and of the Malays of the region is one of closer and closer integration into the Royal Thai Kingdom.

However, there were persistent revolts and resistance by Pattani. In 1816 the State was divided into seven small townships and a Thai Governor representing the central authority was for the first time put in charge of its administration.

Disturbances in Pattani did not stop there. Nearly every decade throughout the following century riots and revolts were common, while the British progressively extended their colonial rule in Malaya northward. The Thai Government was once again under pressure to find an urgent solution to the Pattani problem.

Another major military and political action to put down the disturbances was taken during the reign of King Rama 3. The action, which was taken in 1835, was, according to the memoirs of 'Luang Udomsombat', aimed at a comprehensive ultimate settlement of the problem.

During the reign of King Rama 5 a major administrative reform, which combined the various inner and outlying townships to form Monton or administrative regions under a unified administrative system, led to the removal of local rulers and authorities. Pattani's rulers fled to Malaya after the abolition of their powers.6 Finally, all vestiges of identity were

---

obliterated when the townships became ‘provinces’ under the administrative control of the central government.

The Anglo-Thai treaty of 1909 stipulated that Britain recognised Thai sovereignty over territories formerly under Pattani’s authority. For the first time the people on both sides of the border began to realise that their destinies were following different paths. On one side British rule had been imposed, and on the other side the land and its people must definitely from then on be part of the Royal Thai Kingdom.

Comparison was made meanwhile between social, economic and political life under the different rules, leading eventually to attempts at secession from the Thai Kingdom and integration into the British Malay States. In 1948, for example, an appeal was submitted to the United Nations for that purpose.

During the Second World War, when the Japanese occupied the Malay Peninsula, the Thai Government was ‘persuaded’ to collaborate with the occupying forces in fighting the British, the Japanese pledging to return the Malay townships the British had annexed to Thailand. The British in fact withdrew to hold out in India until the end of the war.

During the Japanese war-time occupation, descendants of the former rulers of Pattani joined forces with the British in pressuring the Thai Government to cede Pattani to British Malaya, hoping that it would eventually become independent together with the other Malay States.

This policy was eagerly welcome by British officials, and preparations were made for clandestine infiltration, hoping that Malay nationalism on both sides of the border would be an impetus to revolts against the Japanese. Tengku Muhaiyiddin, the youngest son of the former ruler of Pattani, was greeted by the British officials in Delhi with “Long Live the King of Pattani”. That attempt was nevertheless unsuccessful. The war ended with the Allies’ victory. Britain maintained her commitment to the 1909 treaty recognising Thai claims over the townships formerly under Pattani’s authority. She retained only Kelantan,

The interval between the war and the independence of the Malay States in 1957 was characterised by persistent attempts by the Southern border provinces of Thailand to secede from the Kingdom. Racial, religious, cultural and linguistic differences were highlighted as a means of raising popular solidarity and unity.

During Phibun's Government solidarity among the various ethnic and religious communities was promoted under the ideological banner of rathaniyom ('statism') 'Cultural rules' were decreed to clearly define and strengthen Thai national attributes. The Thai Muslim population was also under an obligation to adhere to the new rules and regulations.

Violence and conflicts began to spread throughout the Southern border provinces. Especially for the ethnic Malay Muslims, cultural and religious traditions and customs were inseparable. The call for behavioural adherence to the new rules and regulations, such as adoption of Western dressing style, wearing hats, refraining from chewing betel nuts, and eating with fork and spoon, was an intolerable interference with their social, religious and cultural affairs they were proud of and jealously guarded.

At the same time, the learn-Thai campaign and compulsory use of the Thai language as a medium of communication with the authorities, as well as the encouragement of 'resettlement' of Thai Buddhists from other parts of the country in the three Southern border provinces, were all interpreted by the native Muslim population as an attempt to 'assimilate' them. This they had always resisted.

Many Thai Muslim leaders were eliminated. A very important example, and one which the Thai Muslims would never forget, is the mysterious disappearance of Haji Sulong Abdulkader, former chairman of Pattani's provincial Islamic committee. He was accused of instigating Muslim riots in demanding secession from the Royal Thai Kingdom. Professor Dr. Pridi Phanomyong was of the opinion that Haji Sulong was drowned by the police, perhaps in 1954 after the Nakhon Si thammarat court had delivered its final verdict.

The disappearance of Haji Sulong caused widespread conflict.

8. Ibid., p.11.
There was no longer unity among the moderate Muslim leaders. The Government proceeded with its various economic, social and political projects, further consolidating its power. Government officials played a more active role. The Islamic educational institutions called Pondok were transformed into Islamic private schools. Apart from religious subjects, such as Islamic law or fiqh, Islamic theology or tauhid and translation and interpretation of the Koran (tafsir), general as well as vocational education and the teaching of the Thai language were introduced into their syllabus.

The attitude of the government towards Islamic religious leaders, as well as its attempt to play a greater part in the social, economic and educational affairs of Thai Muslims, led the younger generation of their leaders to explore alternative ways of protecting and maintaining their distinct identity. Many of them chose to cross the border and took refuge in the Malaysian territory—where they are still staying. Some of these expatriates remain active in their struggle for greater autonomy, co-ordinating their activities with various groups on both sides of the border.

Those leaders remaining in Thailand had to assume a low-profile role. Several of them participated in the country’s political life, including electoral contests, in order to take part in policy-making and act as spokesmen for their community in Parliament. Amin Tomina, Haji Sulong Abdulkader’s son, was one of those who participated in parliamentary politics. He sought recognition of autonomy of the Muslim population in the border provinces. In 1954 there were five Muslim Members of Parliament. They were elected to the National Parliament with the hope that they would help the four Southern border provinces obtain some degree of autonomy as set forth by Haji Sulong Abdulkader. His proposals included religious freedom, bilingual use of Thai and Malay as official languages, authority over religious affairs as well as the determination and levying of zakat tax to be placed under the exclusive control of religious organisations, permission for Thai Muslims to

increase their participation in the administration of the four Southern border provinces to an 80-20 Malay Muslim-Thai Buddhist proportion in the administrative system and appointment of a Muslim high-ranking official to be in charge of the four Southern border provinces.

Thai Muslims, however, were bitterly disappointed when Amin Tomina and his colleague, Adul Na Saiburi, were arrested on a charge of instigating riots in the Kingdom and attempting secession. They were imprisoned for four years before the government decided to release them for certain political reasons.10 With the departure of Adul Na Saiburi and Amin Tomina's abandonment of all political activities, the struggle of the Thai Muslims for some measure of autonomy seemed to have shifted from parliamentary means to an unconventional path with no specific form or operational procedures. Their activities tended to be more and more violent, as the older generations of leaders were gradually disappearing from the political arena.

During the past decade, while Thailand has been undergoing fundamental changes in various fields, especially in the political sector, there has been change also in the Muslim community in Southern Thailand. An entirely new generation of leaders with different educational backgrounds, experiences, and ideological commitments has succeeded the older generations of leaders descending from former rulers and religious leaders.

2. Elites, Changes and Violence

An interesting issue in the question of the Southern border provinces and Thai Muslims is the relationship between social elites at each particular period of time and the policies and strategies they adopt in communicating and negotiating with government authorities. If we understand this vital issue, a new State policy may emerge and perhaps lead to increasing mutual acceptance of each other's rights and scope of powers and eventually to a form of government and power relations that would

10. Ibid.
lessen existing tensions.

Evidently, since the provincial administrative reform in 1902 during the reign of King Rama 5, Thai Muslim elites have changed their character in accordance with different periods of time. In analysing this problem, this writer proposes the following periodisation:

1. From the provincial administrative reform to the Revolution led by the People’s Party (1902-1932)
2. From the Revolution to the end of World War 2 (1932-1945)
3. From the end of World War 2 to the downfall of the Government on 14 October 1973 (1945-1973)
4. From 14 October 1973 to the present.

The four periods mark important changes in Thai society in both its social and economic aspects. In their effort to gain some measure of autonomy, the Thai Muslims have periodically adjusted themselves to these changes in power structure and political values. Remarkably, Islam is an important symbol - a common thread that unifies various parts of their society amid periodic changes.

During the first period (1902-1932), when a provincial administrative reform was launched with the removal of local rulers and appointment in their place of government officials directly responsible to the central authority, the first stage in the struggle for autonomy of the Thai Muslims followed the major crackdown on the uprising during Rama 3’s reign as recorded in Luang Udomsombat’s memoirs mentioned above.

The leaders of this period were mainly ‘Royalists’ who lost power as a consequence of the administrative reform. In an attempt to legitimise their campaign they emphasised religious, ethnic, linguistic and historical differences. And following the Revolution in 1932, the principles of ‘rights, liberties and equality’ were invoked to support the call for a unified demand for certain rights. At any rate, as the political system became more open, there was greater participation in parliamentary politics. This had the important effect of somewhat alleviating the strong current of religious politics. Attention was shifted to politics at the national level and to the prospect of transforming the system of government through the administrative structure.
During the second period, with internal as well as external turbulence brought about by war-time and post-war developments, the leaders of the older generation sought Great Powers', especially Britain's support in their negotiations with the Thai government on their demand for autonomy. During the war, when the Thai government was under Japanese influence, closer relationship developed between British officials and the Thai Muslim elites. Anti-Japanese activities were encouraged throughout the Malay Peninsula, perhaps as a quid pro quo for freedom from Britain as demanded by the Malay States. Religion played a dominant role in such activities in Indonesia and Malaya. Its influence in this respect was also felt in the four Southern border provinces of Thailand, where religious leaders assumed a more prominent role and eventually succeeded the 'Royalists' as political leaders. It was during this period that Haji Sulong was most politically active.

The third period covers the whole span of time from the end of the Second World War, or slightly thereafter when Field Marshall Phibun Songkhram was back in power with his 'Statist' ideology and 'cultural rules', through the independence of Malays, to the dramatic change of power in Thai society on 14 October 1973. The elite group which played an important role during that period was composed of religious leaders, who had developed themselves from religious scholars with limited secular interests and activities to social elites with more well-rounded intellectual outlooks. A greater number of these elites gained their experience and knowledge from their studies abroad and thereby acquired a greater understanding of the dynamism and directions of political change. They belonged to a much younger age-group with greater enthusiasm for an increased role in determining the direction and shape of their own social, economic and political affairs.

This period also marked the beginning of the country's accelerated development under Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat's leadership. The government assumed a more dominant role in the educational and economic affairs of the Thai Muslim community. General education was rapidly expanded throughout this community, leading to the formation of a newer generation of Muslim élites- the present generation.
The post-1973 period has witnessed rapid change in Thai society as a result of the uprooting of a dictatorial power clique which had consolidated its political control since Phibun’s régime. Various social and economic forces were let loose and put in violent confrontation with one another. Political awareness and enthusiasm were widespread among the people of all walks of life, including students and other youth groups; and their activities were not just confined to the capital city but were evident in every sector and layer of society. The Thai Muslim community in the three Southern border provinces were no exception.

It may thus be argued that since 1973 conditions in the three provinces have undergone fundamental change, especially in terms of the character of the leadership - its social class, quality, as well as ideology governing the organisation and form of its activities; the degree of violence and the extent of internal as well as external support. The elites in the Thai Muslim community, in particular, have reached yet another stage in their development - more subtle and with a more specific sense of direction.

All events and developments, and all stages in the development of the Muslim elites, did not take place in a vacuum. They were in fact associated with all other developments, in Thai society as well as abroad, which had cultural and historical linkages with the Southern part of Thailand. The Thai Muslim religious leaders became politically active at the time when conditions in Indonesia and Malaysia were favourable to the increased role of their counterparts there. Social, economic and political changes, as well as the thrust of certain ideologies in some Middle Eastern countries and the resurrection of Islamic consciousness, have had a direct impact on events in the Muslim community in Southern Thailand.

If we look back into the past - at the various stages in the evolution of the Thai Muslim elites, we will see that this evolutionary development followed a specific direction. The role of Muslim religious leaders was shaped by various internal as well as external social, economic and political conditions. Their ability and opportunity were somewhat pre-determined by leaders of earlier generations, either local or extra-regional, who had set a model or path for them to follow. Modern education, including the study of both Thai and English and other secular subjects incorporated into its
syllabus, has had direct influence on the development of the role of modern Thai Muslim elites. The Government has had its share in the development and formation of these elites. Whether it is aware of its role in this respect is uncertain.

3. Observations, Suggestions, and Concluding Remarks

The Central problem thus does not lie in eradicating violence or all social and political currents indulging in it. Violence is simply a product of the historical development which has followed the various stages mentioned above. To attempt to eliminate violence, to suppress active political leaders and movements, is tantamount to trying to cure the symptoms rather than the causes of current violence disturbances, conflicts and injustices.

Social injustices, economic exploitation and political oppression are common in every part of Thailand. The stages of social change in Thai society are in essence stages in the popular demand for greater participation in the country's problem-solving process, resource management and allocation, as well as in determining society's goals and directions. Violence and conflicts exist in every part of the country.

The level of violence, the forms of the response and struggle by the people to protect their interests, differ from one region, or one community, to another. In this respect, the Muslim community in Southern Thailand is an exceptional case, in that there are conditions other than those prevalent in the Thai society as a whole - the linguistic, religious, historical and cultural distinctiveness of the population in this region, its geographical location, as well as the consequences of its relations with extra-regional communities, especially the Middle Eastern countries. All these exceptional conditions have made the problems of the four Southern border provinces more complicated and difficult than those of other parts of the country.

But the nature and causes of conflicts and violence are not that much different: they are all in one way or another connected with social injustices, economic exploitation and political oppression.

The change in the role and activities of the Thai Muslim elites in the
four Southern provinces at the various stages of their development has been stressed by this writer to emphasize that conflict in this region could be resolved only by a greater awareness and acceptance of the role of these elites, because this role could have a significant impact on the direction of society.

However, the government’s policy so far has reflected its recognition of the role of Thai Muslim religious and social elites only in the confine of religious and social affairs. Acceptance of their political and administrative roles is still very limited. Of course, there is now a greater number of ‘district deputy-chiefs’ who are members of the Muslim community. Their number, however, is much smaller at the policy-making level; and of this very small number some are often posted in non-Muslim regions. The problem is that there is a conflict between popular expectation and official requirements from personnel at this level. It is thus difficult for high-ranking Muslim officials to maintain a position responsive to both popular demands and official requirements. Often, they are trusted by neither their own people nor their superiors in the bureaucratic service.

Most significantly, the governments attempt to share in the administration of Muslim education in the Pondoks (Muslim private schools) has been regarded not as assistance in the training of a new generation of social elites, but rather as interference in Muslim educational and religious institutions. Moreover, government-approved bureaucratic leaders at the ‘district deputy-chief’ level are entirely government products in character; they do not retain any vestige of the traditional and religious education in their outlooks. They are therefore rejected or distrusted by their own people. Some of them might of course have had Pondok training background, but they have had also to undergo further training at government’s higher education institutions until their qualifications meet requirements for entry into the Department of Local Administration.

Under the circumstances, there have emerged ‘counter-elites’ as a counter-balance to ‘official elites’, whose number is growing. These elites reject the State educational set-up and have opted for traditional training in religious subjects, after which they go abroad to further their studies. They are, as a consequence, further alienated from the State and its system of
government.

Many Muslim youths, who have been immersed in traditional education in Thailand or abroad and have become religious and social élites, or, by that very fact, even political leaders, have attracted no official interest whatsoever. They are not under the category of élites to be promoted by the State; there is thus no budget for them.

In an open democracy, in which the rights and liberties as well as identity of minority communities should be recognised and encouraged by the larger whole, ways and means should be worked out where by the government sincerely provides support and training for social and religious élites. Such an initiative must be based only on respect for, and acceptance of, belief systems, life styles and cultural patterns of the various groups which have been alienated from the majority of the population.

In a true democracy there is always what sociologists call 'the circulation of the élites'. The question that must be raised in considering the conflicts and violence in the four Southern provinces is: Is there a social or political mechanism for 'the circulation of the élites'? More importantly, what level, type, and category of élites should be allowed to 'circulate' - that is, to have turn in the governing and in shaping the direction and goals of society?

A study should be made of the current number of Thai Muslim students in foreign countries, including the neighbouring and Middle Eastern countries. There should be a special annual allocation for the training of future élites, especially those studying religious subjects. The annual budget could be very small. The study in this area is normally provided by charitable, non-profit institutions; tuition fees are therefore very low. Maintenance expenses for students in a foreign country are nevertheless much higher.

Most students studying religious subjects do so at their own expense or else under grants or scholarships provided by the host country or its religious foundations. Were the Thai government to support partly or entirely these youths' religious educational activities it would not only reflect true 'religious patronage' and religious tolerance and freedom in the country but also create ties and friendship with these newer generations of
elites. It would at the same time convey to all Muslim governments in the world the Thai government’s positive attitude to the Thai Muslim community. In short, it would be both a step towards creating internal bonds and a measure for reducing possible misunderstanding with foreign governments which might lead to external interference in our internal affairs.

But all this must be based upon sincerity and mutual trust, on recognition of each minority community’s identity and its right to maintain that identity, on the faith in democratic government in which everybody has his share and the opportunity to participate in its problem-solving process, and finally on a serious recognition that the roots of the conflicts and violence are social injustices. The campaign against injustices, and the encouragement of justice based on the principles of equality, rights and liberties, is a common obligation of all the Thai people. Restraints on this search for justice and indifference to the roots of conflict are conducive to more violent disruption in the future.

The government should devise a way in which it could participate in the formation of ‘a new generation of elites’ and extend the scope for their meaningful role in society. Thus far the government has failed to do either. We should start anew, while conditions are still favourable to such an effort.