

RESEARCH BRIEF

Names of Malay Muslim Men and the Internal Conflict in the Southern Provinces of Thailand: Some Notes

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Thailand, a predominantly Buddhist country, has a small number of the Muslim population, most of whom are concentrated in the country's southernmost provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, and Satun. Around 70%–90% of the total populations in these provinces are Thai Muslims who are ethnic Malay and Sunni Muslims (Minority Rights Group International, 2018). These geographic areas of the Deep South have had a long but generally low-intensity violence (Burke et al., 2013) occurring between some ethno-nationalist Thai Muslims of Malay ethnicity on the one hand, and the central Thai government on the other. The Deep South's violent unrest, which was re-ignited in 2004, has continued up to this day, and so are its dire effects on the quality of life of several millions of provincial populations thereat. Nationally, much has been reported on the violent incidents and casualties in southern Thailand, including some mainstream attempts at addressing or resolving it, such as through international aid (Burke et al., 2013) and peace dialogue (International Crisis Group, 2016). In contrast, the nation knows little about the authentic culture of the Malay Muslims living in the Deep South, let alone how it can be utilized as a resource to help address the continuing conflict. Several studies have shown that although it is acceptable to be Thai Muslims in Thailand, it is not the case for Malay Muslims (Aphornsuvan, 2007).

Towards exploring a package of solutions to this multi-layered subnational conflict, a “soft”

approach—in the way of fostering knowledge of the Malay Muslim culture throughout the Kingdom of Thailand—would probably constitute one important pathway. In the published literature, knowledge promotion or education is recognized as an innovative teaching method towards building a culture of peace (Guetta, 2020) instead of a culture of violence and war. If Thailand were made much more cognizant of the local Malay Muslim culture, within which elements such as collective identity and collective norms are integral, and are key to peaceful negotiation and accommodation, there could be a transformation in the ways the central government would address the state-minority contestation in particular, and the state-Malay Muslim population relationship in general. Note that the resolution to Thailand's conflict in the Deep South is more achievable, albeit not in any foreseeable future, if the general Malay Muslim population thereat would be effectively engaged as well in the key processes, especially for the long haul. The engagement would demand, though, that it be couched on the central government's authentic knowledge, appreciation, and acceptance of the religious minority's culture.

Culture is very broad, but one aspect of the Malay Muslim culture that I am pursuing in this report—for its potential utility in understanding as well as addressing the relations between the national government and the Malay Muslims in the southern provinces—would be the latter's cultural norms, in particular, that related to their names. Personal names

help Malay Muslims, like the other categories of Muslims, establish an individual identity. However, names also help link these individual Malay Muslims to their collective identity. Such an identity, which establishes common group norms, relationships, and roles, is shared not only with immediate individuals, groups, and communities but also shared with parallel Muslims living in other towns, cities, provinces, the entire nation, and other countries. Thus, individual lives are entangled—via their personal names—in the life histories of other Muslims (Nigro, 2015); therefore, there exists a common bond of experiencing, sharing, and celebrating the culture of Islam between and among individuals and groups.

That Islamic culture is founded on the most fundamental and important expression of Islamic belief, the profession of faith or the *shahada*, which states that “there is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet” (Lewis, n.d.). This profession of faith, along with daily prayers, has helped build and strengthen the inner fulfillment and peace in Muslims, both individually and collectively (Garcia, 2020). Contrary to the popular view that it condones violence, Islam is a peace-loving religion, and the overwhelming majority of the Muslim followers are similarly peace-loving. I argue, though, that in the grand scheme of things in Thailand, the violence caused by a small group of Malay Muslims is drawing more national attention than the religion-based peace-loving character of the numerical majority of Malay Muslims. I also contend that it is high time for Thailand to cast its focus and attention to those many Malay Muslims who are very pious, and therefore, peaceful followers of Islam because, as earlier mentioned, they can be tapped towards resolving the conflict in the Deep South.

The piousness of Muslims—that is their acceptance of Allah’s law and teachings—is not because of the strictness of Islam, but because of the simplicity of *shahada*, where all it takes for every one of them to become a follower is for him or her to believe in God who is the creator of all things, and in addition, for him or her to engage in daily prayers. The presence and influence of the critical masses of homogeneously-religious Muslims likewise have a crucial role in propagating and sustaining the Islamic faith. Thus, with forces emanating from within the individual and their social environment, Muslims are inherently predisposed to embrace practices that would serve to

further express or solidify their professed faith, their Muslim identity, and their day-to-day behavior.

One such practice involves bestowing their new members names that are richly related to the historical and moral legacy of the Holy Qur’an (Sharma, 2020). These names reflect the names or attributes of Allah and the prophets, including those of the descendants or immediate family members of the prophets. Regardless of where these names are embraced in various parts of the world, including in Thailand, these names are generally indicative of rich Arabic influence (Sharma, 2020).

A variety of beliefs surround the sociocultural practice of giving Qur’anic-rooted names to Muslims. For example, male children are named Muhammad, or any of its variants, as a gesture of commemorating the Prophet and belief that the persons so named will follow the Prophet’s footsteps in terms of character and practice—that they would be Godly and prayerful for example. Names have been regarded as having the power to form a child’s identity and self-esteem, and to impact how he is seen, regarded, and treated by others (Miller & Harrison, 2007). Children named after the Prophets could also be regarded as the followers’ gift to God in exchange for the graces received or in anticipation of the graces coming forth “from above.” For most pious Muslims, though, to be named alone based on the Qur’an, which is in itself the source of moral norms of Islam and the foundation of Sharia, is sheer joy (Sharma, 2020). Those with Qur’an-based names tend to handle their lives so well and constrain themselves from behaving badly to avoid degrading Allah or the prophets and their descendants. Therefore, there walk on earth so many Muslims who are truly morally upright. As could be gleaned from the foregoing, Qur’anic names, including their possessors, are inherently linked to God-decreed moral order and celestial peace, and can potentially be useful for strategies aimed at resolving conflict in the Deep South.

I discuss in the following paragraphs some data on the names of Malay Muslim men in Thailand’s southern provinces. Although Muslim men’s names have been the subject of scientific inquiry and discourse elsewhere (Sharma, 2020), the local Malay Muslim men have yet to be given due research attention and thoroughly understood in the public sphere (one Thai study that dealt with names was conducted by Manee-in (2000), but this took place in northern Thailand). The sparse information on Malay Muslim names in Thailand is not

coincidental but reflects the country's overall stance on domestic Malay Muslims (Aphornsuvan, 2007).

I am a Thai ethnolinguistic specialist by training and profession, which means that I study human languages of ethnic groups and communities in Thailand. I am currently a faculty member at Mahidol University in Salaya in Nakorn Pathom, Thailand, where I am continuing my analyses of the three linguistics-related data sets that I had gathered in the Deep South for some years. My usual intellectual products (e.g., research articles) would typically dwell on analyzing, for example, the structures and patterns (Frake, 1962)—in particular, the sounds, words, phrases, and meanings—of languages from the vantage of linguistics alone. For the present report, I have chosen to leave my comfort zone for a bit by discoursing my data on Malay Muslim men's names within the purview of the ongoing conflict in Thailand's southern provinces. I contend that I cannot divorce my research problematique from the prevailing conflict in the Deep South. Doing so would be unjust to the region's entire Malay Muslim population, particularly that almost all of them are law-abiding, bonafide Thai nationals. Moreover, I believe that language, including names, is both social and political, which means language affects the collective identity of Malay Muslims and their access to community participation and resources. I add, though, that language can also serve as a tool to help resolve a long-standing social and political conflict of Malay Muslims in the Deep South.

Some Facts on Names of Malay Muslim Men in Southern Provinces

Using a questionnaire, I collected data from 300 Malay Muslim households in the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. On average, a household in these provinces had 9–11 family members, most of whom (9 of every 10) were men. In each household, the household head—the father or the husband—was interviewed. The 300 household heads interviewed were aged between 40 and 60 years, original residents of the said provinces, and were bilingual, speaking both Malay and Thai. Note that the survey covered a range of topics regarding Malay Muslim names, but for this report, just a few aspects of these data are discussed here. Moreover, the survey was accompanied by in-depth interviews, some of whose findings are included in the ensuing discussion. Overall, a total of

2,058 names were collected from the 300 surveyed households; of these names, 90.6% (n=1,864) were names of men while the remainder were women's.

Based on my analysis of the data, I found that:

- 70% of the Malay Muslim men's names were rendered in a Malay dialect and 20% in Arabic;
- Historically, because of the predominance of the Arabic language, the Malay Muslim men's names were essentially Arabic.
- Very few names of Malay Muslim men were in Thai (5%), and the few names that were in Thai were found to have Malay, and therefore, Arabic roots.
- 70% of the names were directly related to Allah and 20% to Prophet Muhammad.
- Examples of the names pertaining to Allah were Abdullorh, Abdulkareem, Abdulkareem, Abdurromarn, Abdulsamud, Abdulwahub, and Abdulhafaet. The prefix Abdul means "servant of."
- Examples of the names pertaining to the Prophet were Muhammad, Ibrorheem, Yousoub, Daawood, Arbuubucks, Hamid, Ahmed, and Sullaman. The person bearing the name Muhammad or its variants is thought to be praiseworthy and possess fine qualities.
- Being named after Allah was anchored on the belief that those named would be closer to God and would feel happier and more secure and protected, especially during times of suffering.
- Being named after Prophet Muhammad was similarly regarded as a way of protecting their family members from harm and from doing bad deeds.
- Almost all household heads reported that they lived together in harmony with people from different religions and beliefs in their areas.
- Almost all household heads viewed that their strong faith helped them feel peaceful and secure amidst the violent unrest in their areas.

Some Ways Forward

The predominantly Malay Muslim-populated southern provinces of Thailand should be a great concern to its central government, not solely because of the continual violence that the few citizens thereat are causing the State, but likewise because of the several millions of Malay Muslims who are living in these areas as law-abiding and peace-loving Thai nationals. Like the rest of the Thais throughout the country, the Malay Muslims in the Deep South are similarly aspiring for a better life, such as owning a house, earning a stable income, having access to basic amenities, and educating their children. Unfortunately, relative to their Buddhist counterparts, the Malay Muslims in the southern provinces are economically deprived, politically subordinated, and socially discriminated (Chachavaipongpun, 2015). Simply, Malay Muslims are effectively othered in their own country, which, by all accounts, would only further deepen the Deep South's conflict, including its resolution.

Undoubtedly, the Thai state must exert utmost efforts to contain the violent unrest in the southern provinces, which has already shifted from its ideological stance to being outrightly ruthless and terroristic, and also, has now caused more Muslim than Buddhist casualties, thereby transforming the conflict into Muslim-to-Muslim violence (Srisompob & Panyasak, 2007). However, the State must never use the violent and terroristic acts of the few Malay Muslims to justify its othering of the far overwhelming numbers of peace-loving Malay Muslims. The appropriate response is for the State to systematically terminate its othering of Malay Muslims. First, the State must accept in authentic terms that the Malay Muslims in the Deep South are bonafide Thai nationals. Second, the State must accept, also in genuine terms, that these Malay Muslims cannot easily be changed, let alone fully transformed into becoming blue-blooded Thai Muslims or Thais. Maybe they become so someday, but maybe not. Third, the State must tolerate or even accept cultural diversities, tantamount to letting all the one thousand and one flowers to bloom, which is especially important when local Malay Muslims would preserve their Malay-ness rather than gravitate towards Thai-ness, which is not a likelihood for the time being. Fourth, the State must provide economic growth and socially empowering opportunities for the southern provinces and their Malay Muslim citizens

so that the quality of life becomes pervasive at the larger society and the social and individual levels. Research in 14 Islamic countries suggests that urban poverty is key to the Muslim citizens' support for terrorist acts (Mousseau, 2011). All of the foregoing recommendations are nothing new but are strategic to any structural efforts that are seeking to reduce or eliminate the othering—or conversely, the fostering of the social inclusion—of the minorities in general.

When peace-loving Malay Muslims are now equally and fully embraced as nationals by the central government, are celebrated for their ethnic culture and diversities, and are self-actualizing as a consequence of the upliftment of their quality of life—in other words, the Malay Muslims are already on the central stage and are seeing themselves as co-main actors and part of the “us” rather than the “they” or “others”—the State can tap these vast numbers of Malay Muslims to organize and mobilize themselves as community-based groups in their respective localities to help find ways for the peaceful resolution of the conflict. The terroristic and destructive acts of a small number of Malay Muslims are expected to be rejected by the mainstream Malay Muslim population. The core Malay Muslims' solid, unwavering collective identity and collective norm that are rooted in their faith in Islam, Allah, and Prophet Muhammad—mirroring their high moral uprightness and peace-loving character—would more than suffice to enable them to act against violent terrorist attacks. The fact that this terrorist violence is similarly causing an increasing number of deaths among innocent Malay Muslims in the Deep South is an added impetus for Malay Muslims in general to nix the violent acts of a small fraction of rogue citizens in the areas. Rejection of terrorism among Muslims in various parts of the world is widespread. For example, almost all of the Muslims in the U.S. and the U.K. do not see the use of terrorism (i.e., suicide attacks) as justified in defense of Islam (McCauley et al., 2009).

Rather than for the central government of Thailand to directly lead the Malay Muslim population in the southern provinces into forming their own community-based groups, it would be wiser for the local Malay Muslims to be left on their own to spearhead all the processes needed to actualize the formation of such groups. An authentic and organic community organization and participation are imperative. However, during the formative phase, the State may aid the local Malay Muslims with a conceptual frame.

Moreover, the police and military personnel, from either the central or the local government, must refrain from taking the role owing to their dearth of social and psychological wherewithal to carry out the tasks. Social scientists from the local areas, who are Malay Muslim men themselves, would be the right sources of support during the formative stage. Among others, these community-based groups must judiciously select, among the Malay Muslim men in the provinces, their leaders and members using a set of internally-defined criteria—for example having broad education, sphere of influence, and unwavering commitment to the cause of eradicating the violent unrest in the Deep South and of replacing it with peace and order. Faith or *shahada* should not be a criterion anymore because Muslims are homogeneously pious, practically coming from a solid ethnic stock (with nary any wide variations in the level of religiosity within and across the Muslim populations). The closer or the more approximate the attributes of the group leaders and members to Islam, the Qur'an, Allah, and Prophet Muhammad, the more impactful the influence of these leaders and members would be. These individuals with *shahada* would be naturally seen as coming from their own ranks, and therefore, can be trusted, which is a vital element for effective community-based advocacies against terrorism. The names of leaders and members could be an added consideration in the process of selection and membership, for these names are not just mere personal names but are extensions of all things that are Islamic, holy, and good. The most common names among Muslims, in general, are Allah-based names that are prefixed with Abdul, Abdel, or Abd, the meaning of which is “servant of,” as well as Muhammad and its variants Mahmud, Ahmed, Hamid, and Hamdi (Sharma, 2020). These names may be considered as a screening criterion for leadership and membership, for they also speak volumes about the Muslim identity and norm (e.g., peace-loving), both of which are founded on the unshakeable Islamic faith.

Concluding Remarks

The State-minority conflict in the Deep South is more than political; as well, it underscores a cultural dimension that is equally compelling—a clash of disparate cultures. The progressive response towards resolving strained relations is to understand, recognize,

and accommodate the minority's culture as part of the nation's authentic respect for cultural diversities. At the heart of this accommodation is the structural support for the minority to enable the latter to improve their quality of lives at a level comparable to the national threshold. The betterment of the minority's lot would be key to their mobilization against a fractious few of their members who have been waging violent attacks against their very nation. The Islamic faith of the minority, the Malay Muslims in this case, which is very well embedded within the personal names of the followers as a collective identity and a collective norm, would be a central element in how the terroristic attacks can be addressed, foremost with the central engagement of the Malay Muslims themselves rather than of the police and military authorities. Much more studies are needed to explore the Malay Muslim men's names—for instance, have the links between names and faith among these Muslims remained uneroded over the years due to the forces of urbanization and globalization? Definitely, studies are needed to examine the extent of effectiveness in utilizing interrelated cultural elements (i.e., language, personal names, and faith) for conflict resolution such as those occurring in Thailand's southernmost provinces.

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Declaration of ownership

This report is my original work.

Conflict of interest

None.

Ethical clearance

The study was approved by the institution.

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