

# The Politicization of Ethnic Sentiments in Southern Thailand: The Case of the Malay Muslims

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**Dr. Shamsuddin L. Taya** is a Senior Lecturer of International Relations and Diplomacy at the Department of International Affairs, College of Law, Government and International Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia (Northern University Malaysia). He has published a book *The Strategies and Tactics of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Southern Philippines*, Universiti Utara Malaysia Press, 2009, co-edited a book *Dynamic of ethnic relations in Southeast Asia*, **Cambridge**, 2010 and several articles in internationally reputed journals. His areas of specialization include International Relations, Ethnic Conflict, Nationalism and Islamic Political Movements in Southeast Asia. His Latest publications are “The Politicization of Ethnic Sentiments in the Southern Philippines: The Case of the Bangsamoro”, *Journal Muslim Minority Affairs*, **Routledge**, 2010 and “Political Legal Perspective: Evaluating Human Rights in Malaysia”, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, **BRILL**, 2010. E-mail: [shamsuddin@uum.edu.my](mailto:shamsuddin@uum.edu.my)

## ***Abstract***

*This study analyzes the politicization of ethnic sentiments in Thailand with particular focus on Southern Thailand. It is divided into six parts. The first part examines the relationship between the Thailand's political system and the minority groups within it. The second part explains the impact of ethnic politics in the Thailand's political system. The third part discusses the function of ethnic politics. The fourth part examines the organizational base of ethnic politics in the region. The fifth part discusses the patterns of ethnic politics that have developed over the years. And the sixth part synthesizes the theories and practices of ethnic politics in the region. The data for this analysis came from both primary and secondary sources. The study found that the politicization of ethnic sentiment was by product of structural inequalities in the socio-political and economic domains of the Thailand's society which play important role in intensifying conflicts. As a result, the Malay Muslims ethnic group established their own ethnic associations or organizations which are responsible for the development of strong group identification leading to the emergence of secessionist groups in Southern Thailand that threaten the core values of the Royal Kingdom of Thailand.*

## **Introduction**

It is seldom to find example of a more timely or relevant study than the one we offer the reader in the following pages. Our subject is one for which the reader can find illustrations from each day's newspapers and political discussions. We hope that this analysis will help the reader in understanding the most acute decades old domestic problem that the Kingdom of Thailand's society confronts today.

In the 1980s and 1990s there was relative peace and stability in the region under General Prem Tinsulanond (1980-1988).<sup>1</sup> As a result, many analysts and leaders of both the Malay Muslims and the Buddhist-Siamese people erroneously thought they were about to close the chapter of ethnic/religious politics in Southern Thailand from politics to history, as something of the past, when they all thought that the melting pot or integration had made remarkable progress towards its goal, where the Malay Muslims were assured of their cultural and religious freedoms and rebels were given general amnesty that would lead to the co-existence of ethnically divided society.

However, as the failure of the policy of national integration or *Thesaphiban* and Thainess or *Khwamphethai* displays a surprising persistence of discord and tension in the Kingdom of Thailand, in general and, in Southern Thailand in particular. In this respect, Philips reveals it as one of the great unfinished tasks of nation-building the Bangkok government must pay attention to with urgency:

In the most general terms, the people of Bang Chan are like almost all ethnic Thai peasants (excepting on some counts Thai Moslems and some of the economically disenfranchised people of the Northeast)in that they have a keen sense of membership in the nation-state with a deep loyalty to the Crown, speak the Thai language, are Theravada Buddhists, are outwardly highly deferential to the authority of the Central government, and have a conception of the good life that stresses fun, physical comfort and security.<sup>2</sup>

The distinctions that men make may be drawn along regional, economic, occupational, and ideological lines; they may involve clearly defined material and psychological interests which we readily identify as “political”.<sup>3</sup> Among the common distinctions that have brought men together are those which we designate as “ethnic” that is, those distinctions based on race, tribe, religion, language and other broadly defined cultural attributes. If we look outside Thailand, the bonds of blood and faith in most of the world strongly define political interest and conflict, thereby aggravating the fissures, and fortifying the fusions, that obtain in the polity. Such bond has natural and universal character as discussed in Ibn Khaldun’s “theory of *assabiyah*.” On the other hand, sometimes, they cut across such divisions and provide unity where none seemed possible. This is natural since affiliation, not only would ensure one’s protection and safety, but also provide an avenue of respect and recognition from other existing ethnic groupings.

Ethnic politics should not be viewed as a parochial phenomenon, for there are few places on earth, developed or underdeveloped, where ethnicity is not presently of political significance. Even if we confine our attention to these distinctions that exist principally within national boundaries and say nothing of the usual animosity between nations, we are left with an imposing list. For instance, Bangsamoro versus Christian Filipino; Singhalese versus Tamil, Achenese versus Javanese, Tibetan versus Chinese, Turk versus Greek Cypriot, Arab versus Jew; Christian versus Jew; Muslim versus Christian; Protestant versus Catholic; and so on. This list merely scratches the surface. This is more particularly true of Southeast Asian region, in general, and the Philippines, in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmad Amir Bin Abdullah, “Southern Thailand: Some Grievances of the Patani Malays,” *The Journal of International Studies*, Vol, 4, 2008, 102-111.

<sup>2</sup> Philips, Herbert. (1965). *Thai peasant personality*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Taya, Shamsuddin L. (2010). Ethnic politics in the Philippines, In. *Dynamic of ethnic relations in Southeast Asia* edited by Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, Rie Nakamura and Shamsuddin L. Taya, pp. 41-61. United Kingdom: Cambridge.

The Kingdom of Thailand is a cultural, linguistic and religious conglomeration, a fact that has led its polity to experience some share of ethnic politics. This paper is an investigation of that kind of politics in Thailand, in general, and Southern Thailand, in particular. It purports to be neither an exhaustive compendium of every study on the topic nor a historical account of every ethnic group that has ever expressed a political need or desire in this country. We are not motivated in this study by any intent to demonstrate the desirability or undesirability of ethnic politics. The primary questions guiding us are: what have been the impacts, styles, and conditions of ethnic political behavior? In other words, how can we best describe and account for ethnic politics and locate the causes and consequences of such politics? The key factors in the analysis of such questions appear to be the following:

1. The Thai socio-cultural system and how does it orchestrate and provide a means for the inculcation and achievement of ethnic values, beliefs, and symbols.
2. What are the components of ethnic politics and what basic patterns dominate?
3. What are the pervasive consequences of ethnic politics for the functioning of the Thai political system?
4. How do the values, predispositions, and social positions of ethnic members and groups influence the varieties of ethnic politics in the region?

### **The Factor of Ethnicity**

Before attempting to assess the impact of ethnic politics in Southern Thailand, we must direct our attention to the relationship between the Thai political system and the minority groups that are part of it. First, it must be noted that the number of minority groups viable in the Thai society is extensive. However, for the purpose of this paper only a few will be discussed as they have, over the years, had the most obvious effect on the Thai political system.

Next, we must ask such questions as: Is the Thai socio-cultural system a unique blend of the multifarious groups that compose it, as the melting pot thesis argues? Or is this society really less a blend than a patchwork of ethnicity, held together by the necessary minimum of common loyalties but retaining more or less distinct sub-cultural groupings, as the cultural pluralism thesis would have it? Or should one speak of a dominant Siamese-Buddhist core socio-cultural system, in which ethnic groups enjoy more or less marginal status? Analysts of the Thai society have adhered firmly to one or the other of these ostensibly mutually exclusive models. Here we will briefly examine all three.

#### *The Melting Pot*

In the early 1930s when the government's institutionalized, patronized and developed a top-down policy of nation-building which emphasized Thainess known as *Khwamphenthai*<sup>4</sup> and before the cultural question had reached crisis point, some educated and secular urbanites conceived of the congested cultures of Thailand as a bubbling melting pot that would eventually simmer into an invigorated and uniquely Thai product. For some groups the pot would understandably bubble more slowly. The Malay Muslims, for instance, would retain distinctions in language, custom, and religion, but only for some time. Whatever the varying rates of assimilation, however, most marginal groups eventually will disappear and merge

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<sup>4</sup> Ahmad Amir Bin Abdullah, "Southern Thailand: Some Grievances of the Patani Malays," *The Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 4, 2008, 105.

into the larger Thai cultural totality. These were the basic assumptions held by these groups of optimists which time has ever since invalidated.

### *Cultural Pluralism*

History and the passing of time and the intensive and extensive rural-urban mobility have diminished ethnic uniqueness, but what is striking, some argue, is not the scope and rapidity of assimilation, but rather the persistence of unassimilated ethnic identities of the Thai society. To this school of thought the melting pot has never eradicated ethnic politics in the country. To these elements, Thailand still retains rather clear, long-standing ethnic distinctions which are operative in the country's social and political life, and which show, every evidence of persisting.

Rather than a melting pot, Thailand is a patchwork of ethnic enclaves. The dominance of the Buddhist-Siamese culture should not force us to overlook the great variety of sub-cultures and sub-communities, and minority group ties that still exist. Some argue such proponents of cultural pluralism as Muslim traditional politicians, who consider Thailand to be a democracy of nationalities, cooperating voluntarily and autonomously but within a united Thailand, in the enterprise of self-realization through the perfection of men according to their own kind. Such has been the official stance of Malay Muslim politicians within the political establishment of the Thailand with respect to the issue of Southern Thailand problem.

During the regime of General Prem Tinsulanond (1980-1988), there was concerted effort to accommodate and pacify the Malay Muslims through assuring the Malay Muslims of their cultural and religious freedoms- plus economic development for the south through National Security for the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC). Amir argued that SBPAC was formulated based on the concept of development as security approach.<sup>5</sup>

The failure of the Bangkok government to implement this policy effectively plus addressing cultural and religious sensitivities of the Malay Muslims clouded the prospect of attaining genuine integration (accommodation?) in the region and thus vindicated the separatist approach.

### *The Core Culture*

In attempting to address the extent of assimilation in Thailand, one should not overlook the question: assimilation into what? Indeed, assimilation had started already during the kingship of King Chulalongkorn when he annexed other territories including territories of the Sultanate of Pattani. He established authority over them through administrative reforms and has continued up to the present. However, it was intensified during the ultra-nationalist's regime that embarked on a policy of forced assimilation of different minority groups into the mainstream Thainess or *Khwamphenthai*.<sup>6</sup> The Thai government aimed to absorb the cultures, religions, and languages of other minorities more specifically, the Malay Muslims, into the dominant Siamese-Buddhist culture. The Thai government has used government establishments such as schools, universities, the media and so forth to carry this forward.

However, the assimilation process was even more thorough and quick for those who chose to move to Bangkok in search of education and jobs. One may speak of a new blend

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<sup>5</sup> Ahmad Amir Bin Abdullah, "Southern Thailand: Some Grievances of the Patani Malays," *The Journal of International Studies*, Vol, 4, 2008, pp. 102-111. UUM Press.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, 1994. See also Rahimmula 2003. See also Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (May, 1971), pp. 551-567.

pouring from the Thai crucible or a pluralistic patchwork of ethnic cultures, but adherents of this school of thought have explicitly or implicitly assumed that there is a “core culture” in Thailand, composed of essentially Siamese-Buddhist values, life styles, and identifications, to which a great number of ethnic cultures- except perhaps for the South- are in some way related. Such is the stance of most Monk leaders who take pride in Thailand as one of the Buddhist countries in Southeast Asian region.

Using language as an index of cultural diffusion (as the medium by which cultural forms are transmitted and social relations conducted,), one can see that Thai language is prevalent all over the Kingdom of Thailand. A measure of ethnic influence is found in the wealth of foreign words that have been osmosed into a language that remains Thai. While the pluralists may point to multilingual communities in Thailand, from the far north to the extreme south, these exceptions prove the rule: in Thailand both officially and in practice, the most prevailing language is Thai language.

Furthermore, to operate acceptably in the mainstream of Thai society extending beyond the confines of his/her group, an ethnic group must achieve a certain minimal (maximal?) proficiency in and adaptation to the linguistic skills, behavioral patterns, and attitudinal values of the dominant Siamese-Buddhist community, as well as a certain minimal acceptability by that community. Indeed this school of thought presupposes a majority identification and standard in a core culture.

### *Comparing the Three Approaches*

That all three approaches - melting pot, cultural pluralism and core culture - have enjoyed some currency is partly because each expresses longstanding value preferences; each claims not only to describe what actually is, but what ethically and ideally ought to be. Clearly, each approach has some political implications. The melting pot refrains and discourages the organization of distinctly ethnic political organizations and interest groups such as found in Southern Thailand and also equally true to some other parts of the country. Under this theory, ethnic politics is viewed as the perpetuation of divisive factions and parochialisms inimical to the best interests of a “united Thailand”. On the other hand, the recognition of cultural pluralism enhances the mosaic of groups woven into the fabric of distinct ethnic entities within Thailand. Cultural pluralism provides ample flexibility to the different ethnic groups to express their grievances and present their respective interests and preserve their cultural identities. It is the most viable way to guarantee peaceful co-existence among groups.

The implications of the core culture idea are probably more subtle. In essence it suggests a unified political elite working for the good of the total community with the tools of “good government” centered in Bangkok. This theory provides broad criteria for detecting and curtailing the influence of “alien” politics that threaten the stability of the society. Radicals importing foreign ideologies and group efforts to promote ethnic pride have been seen as undermining the core values of Thai society.

As might be evident, one reason why all three models may seem plausible is because each enjoys some kind of empirical base. For instance, there is evidence that some groups disappear in a larger cultural totality, and insofar as members of these groups contribute to a distinct Thai life, the melting pot idea has empirical support. The scattered linguistic and culturally autonomous ethnic communities in Thailand lend some support to the idea of cultural pluralism. Nevertheless, over and above such pluralism, there exist dominant and basic standards, values and living styles, while not free of contradictions and variations, still seem to represent established patterns that are far more than merely federations of quasi-autonomous cultures, a fact that substantiates the core culture theory.

## The Politicization of Ethnicity in Thailand

In Thailand, perhaps, ethnic politics has started shortly after King Chulalongkorn's annexation of the territories of the Sultanate of Pattani through administrative act officially known as *Thesaphiban* in 1897.<sup>7</sup> The Malay Muslims resisted their incorporation into the Kingdom of Thailand, but to no avail. For instance, the Malay Muslim expressed their rejection to any plan to integrate the region into the Thai-body politic. In this sense, Nik Anuar Nik Mahmud argued that as early as 1940s the Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand have been disenchanted against the Bangkok regime which led to the emergence of Gabungan Melayu Pattani Raya (Union of Malay for Great Pattani) known as GAMPAR as an independence movement in Southern Thailand.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in 1948, some 250,000 Malay Muslims asked the United Nations to oversee accession of the Thai provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala to the Federated States of Malaya.<sup>9</sup>

With the passage of time conflict of interests have ensued and seem no signs of ending soon at the time of the writing of this paper. The instituted Thai national regimes find themselves face to face with formidable problems of scarcity of resources and a legacy of distorted patterns of economic, social and political development. Competition over scarce resources creates antagonisms and conflicts among different groups and regions or provinces. Under such pressures politics for traditional political parties is reduced to retention of power, bringing personal gains through ability to control the process of allocation of funds and capital.<sup>10</sup> In most cases the groups that had a head start in education and other indicators of modernization usually had custody over politico-military power. To the disfranchised Malay Muslims, independence meant a change of masters with favoritism and nepotism dominating the social, economic, military and political scenes in Southern Thailand, specifically, the provinces of Pattani, Narathiwatt and Yala. As one source aptly puts it "if political institutions etc. do not possess institutional integrity and appear to be in the control of particular religious or communal interests, these communal groups lacking power and position will tend to question the legitimacy of the institutional order and will be encouraged politically to 'go in alone.'"<sup>11</sup> This is exactly what is happening in Southern Thailand. For instance, the separatist movement in Southern Thailand emerged because many Malay Muslims turned inward, creating their own institutions to replenish social, psychological, and cultural values that cannot find fulfillment in the larger Thai society.<sup>12</sup> As a result, distinct organizations and cultural practices were developed to compensate for disenchantment with the ongoing socio-political and cultural order.<sup>13</sup> Politically, economically, culturally, and socially, the Malay Muslims were/are deprived and burdened with a deep feeling of socio-economic and political inferiority and deprivation.

On the other hand, there is substantial evidence to believe that the emerging middle class intelligentsia provides the cultural entrepreneurs which give ideological form to sub-national communities.<sup>14</sup> Lack of resources in the face of ever increasing demands dictates

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<sup>7</sup> Amir, 105.

<sup>8</sup> Nik Anuar Nik Mahmud, *Sejarah Perjuangan Melayu Petani*, Penerbit UKM, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Melvin, 2007, 14.

<sup>10</sup> H. Moddick, *Democracy, Decentralization and Development*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1969.

<sup>11</sup> R. Nelson and H. Wolpe, "Modernization and the Politics of Communication," *Journal of American Political Science Review*, Vol. 64, 1970, 1120..

<sup>12</sup> Shamsuddin L. Taya, "The Strategies and Tactics of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)," *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> C. Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism*, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976.

claims on behalf of small regional or ethnic groups.<sup>15</sup> To lobby effectively for its interests, such groups have to organize. The stage is set for ethnic politics. This is typically the situation in Thailand.

There are also objective factors which have made the issue of ‘ethnic identities’ one of decided relevance to the Thai society. Most important among these are:

1. Social pluralism: It is believed that more than 30 distinct ethnic groups coexist in Thailand.
2. Linguistic pluralism: Together with the dominant Thai language, several additional vernaculars are spoken in Thailand.
3. Religious pluralism: The people of Thailand are categorized as Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and Hill tribe people.
4. Administrative boundaries: These have sometimes provided reference point for identification for some groups.

Such factors, though important, are not sufficient by themselves to evoke ethnic stirrings. We should seek for other causal factors. Structural inequalities in the socio-economic domain played an important role in intensifying conflicts and grudges.<sup>16</sup> A core area of heavy investment was centered on the capital of the country. This part was the major source of the country’s commercial production and was favored in terms of social services. The same unevenness was discernible in the area of communication and transportation, a fact necessitated by the need for efficient and profitable undertakings of the Thai royal families and other countries centered at Bangkok, the country’s capital city. The same policy dictated similar disparities in the educational field, where the Thai administration adopted an elitist approach in this respect in order to supply Siamese Buddhist civil servants.

Rather than attempting to engender balanced processes of modernization, the Bangkok government selected instead to nurture highly centralized modernizing patterns with an eye to their own needs. In the process the outlying areas of the country were neglected and victimized. It was natural that cities such as Bangkok and others branched out rapidly as commercial and industrial centers. Collateral with that development was a sustained pace of social and political consciousness; a bourgeois class was in the making. The uneven distribution of socio-political, economic and educational facilities produced relatively large numbers of young educated people, who later constituted an important layer in the national political and administrative set-up.

### *The Khwamphethai Process*

What we practically have as a result of these developments was a gradual emergence of the “Simaese Buddhists” of the center with virtually full monopoly over economic, administrative and political powers in the capital city, Bangkok. The Thainess policy was intensified when the ultra-nationalist’s regime took over power and embarked on a policy of forced assimilation of different minority groups into the mainstream Thainess or *Khwamphenthai*<sup>17</sup> as pointed earlier. The Thai government aimed to absorb the cultures,

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<sup>15</sup> See N. Glazer and D. Moynihan, ed. *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.

<sup>16</sup> David N. Balam and M. Veseth, *Introduction to International Political Economy*, London: Prentice Hall, 2001. See also Shamsuddin L. Taya, “The Strategies and Tactics of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF),” *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> Brown, 1994 See also Rahimmula 2003

religions, and languages of other minorities more specifically, the Malay Muslims, into the dominant Siamese-Buddhist culture. The Thai government has used government establishments such as schools, universities, the media and so forth to carry this forward.

The assimilation process was even more thorough and quick for those who chose to move to Bangkok in search of education and jobs. One may speak of a new blend pouring from the Thai crucible or a pluralistic patchwork of ethnic cultures, but adherents of this school of thought have explicitly or implicitly assumed that there is a “core culture” in Thailand, composed of essentially Siamese-Buddhist values, life styles, and identifications, to which a great number of ethnic cultures- except perhaps for the South- are in some way related. Such is the stance of most Monk leaders who take pride in Thailand as one of the Buddhist countries in Southeast Asian region. By intentionally laying the foundation for these structural inequalities, the Thai elites were leaving behind a ticking time bomb. They rendered Thailand an area of potential ethnic cleavages between the haves and the have-nots.

However, this political development was very promising and beneficial to the Siamese Buddhists. They saw and considered this as their golden opportunity for their future political control which may lead to their dream that Thailand should a Buddhist country. Nevertheless, *Khwamphethai* was indeed, a serious blow to the Malay Muslims. It was very disappointing and devastating to their aspirations. The Great Kingdom Pattani (now provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala) was incorporated without their consent into the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the modern Thailand. Worse than that was the fact that the Malay Muslims were excluded from the public governance of their nation. Many Malay Muslims leaders resented this gross injustice, discrimination, oppression and marginalization.

### **The Functions of Ethnic Politics**

Many people in Thailand have united from time to time by ethnic bonds and used politics to secure material goals, to satisfy psychological needs, and on occasion, to bring about fundamental changes in civic values. We shall now take each of these functions in more detail.

#### *Material Goals: Economic and Patronage*

Economic deprivation does explain the political pull of ethnicity. Ethnic groups, in Thailand and elsewhere, have turned to politics in order to provide essential social services and economic advancement. Ethnicity in Southern Thailand and perhaps elsewhere, is practically synonymous with low socio-economic status members who occupy minority positions of deprivation and discrimination, their aim being to wrest material benefits and values from the centre. These peripheral groups knew that the dominant political groups would not voluntarily relinquish material values to the deprived areas at the same time these marginalized groups cannot live on the crumbs from the table of the dominant power holders. Obviously the onus of poverty, neglect and economic deprivation has led ethnics in the south to seek political redress throughout the political history of Thailand.

#### *Psychological Goals: the Self Esteem of the Victim*

Ethnic groups of Southern Thailand felt that their lack of status is due to discrimination and other structural inequalities designed and perpetuated by the Bangkok government. Most of the Malay Muslims went to the extreme of calling attention to the existence of an internal colonial system” which has led to resource allocation along “ethnic or religious lines.” For an



ethnic group's failure to achieve status, one could blame a discriminatory society, a society dominated by the Buddhist elements, who also profess Buddhism. Thus the ethnic group does not place the onus of poverty and material success on the individual.

While concerned with the pursuit of material goals as primary objective, ethnic politics has also stressed compensatory efforts to acquire honor, dignity, respect, and self-esteem. These feelings of rejection, led some to withdraw from Thai politics, cultivate studied apathy, and create social situations in which one was esteemed despite his ethnic affiliation. This was the case, for instance, with some Malay Muslims who had attained material success and education and opted to live in Bangkok. These are then some of the non-political ways in which ethnics of Thailand coped with the problems of group and individual self-esteem. However, ethnic group members could not always resort to this sense of withdrawal and resignation. For the majority of ethnic groups in Southern Thailand, political organization provided an avenue for the stormy expression of emotions, acute resentment, and the longing for recognition of one's human worth. Politics also provided ethnic groups of the region with a means of seeking recognition and respect. A typical example is the establishment of the GAMPAR as an avenue to protect and advance the Malay Muslims groups in Southern Thailand. This politics of recognition and respect was in most cases a search for confirmation that public officials in Bangkok would listen to the marginalized Malay Muslims, and thus it has symbolic value to group members.

This feeling of neglect by ethnics was perhaps behind the blunt refusal of many Malay Muslims groups to be part of the Thai system. Because of the lack of recognition, and admittedly, by way of reaction, many of the aspirants for power fell back on their ethnic and regional constituencies, leading to the emergence of several ethnically-based and possibly ethnically-biased political movements.

### *Civic Values as Ethnic Political Goals*

Ethnic political behavior has conditioned basic Siamese Buddhists civic values that are the root ideas about the form and content of the controversial permanent constitution of the country and the structure and purposes of the government itself. Such critical effects fly in the face of a core culture interpretation that holds inherited political values as sacrosanct and enduring. Three major examples will help to clarify this point:

First, the cumulative opposition to traditional political elites and leadership group based on family and property. Most ethnic groups have strenuously fought against this monopoly of power by the privileged few, placing the problems of the country in widest political context and by calling for a radical restructuring of power, promotion of self-determination, and an end to the conscious and subconscious prejudices that have marred Thai political life. Most leaders of ethnic political groups are drawn basically from achieved rather than ascriptive elites. Second, great emphasis on government as an agency of collective benefits and the demand for the fair distribution of wealth and opportunities. It is natural that a concept like class exploitation has been introduced into the main stream of Thai political life by the ethnics. As one scholar put it the ethnics have developed a "new liberation philosophy" which reflects a shift in emphasis by the underprivileged groups from purely political and cultural demands which characterized that movement till now, to the more encompassing emphasis on socio-economic and political demands. Under this new philosophy, it now seems crystal clear that the future of a peaceful united Philippines no longer rests on granting the marginalized regions and groups token and symbolic political powers over their local affairs, but a genuine autonomy or self-determination so as for them to shape their own future. Third is the vehement and mounting opposition by the Siamese

Buddhists settlers in Southern Thailand against any Bangkok government's offer to grant self-determination to the people in Southern Thailand.

### **The Organizational Base of the Thai Ethnic Politics**

If ethnic politics is based on strong group identification, then it is ethnic associations which are responsible for the initial development of these identifications. The first political impact of marginalized areas and groups was channeled through diverse fraternal societies based on common ethnic ties. That initial step promoted the formation of an ethnic consciousness that would later burst forth into the Thai politics. Responding to the needs of uprooted individuals, the ethnic social associations provided renewed strength for the common ties that had been loosened during the struggle for independence and the phase directly following its attainment. Group consciousness was quickly turned into "group nationalism" and political loyalty. The associations and social clubs formed by ethnic groups laid the framework for ethnic politics in another way. The heart of the ethnic association was in the provision of mutual aid and welfare. That welfare was not confined to the material domain, but it was in certain instances of ideological nature as exemplified by the role of various groups in Southern Thailand.

So, ethnic organizations have perpetuated ethnic politics by providing identification, political styles, and core values for their members.<sup>18</sup> However, the political impact of social associations based on ethnic ties was tempered by circumstances of organizational strength and position. Organizational resources are most readily mobilized for defensive politics, that is, when a basic tenet of the ethnic group, ultimately its survival, is threatened. Social clubs were least likely to enjoy political impact when divisive political and social policies, such as the promulgation of the constitution, were at issue. New and divisive political and social policies could only be supported by a secure and imaginative political leadership, hence the transformation of these ethnic associations into political parties, revolutionary groups and many others serving the interests of a specific ethnic or regional constituency. The popular uprising of 1990s furnished that opportunity. That period witnessed the resurgence violence.

### **The Pattern of Ethnic Politics in Thailand**

Any general effort to account for ethnicity's persistence in Thai politics raises the question of the dominant forms ethnic politics has taken. We can identify three main responses adopted by the various Thai ethnic groups, namely, accommodation, separatism, and radicalism. Each pattern represents an attempt to secure certain values under certain structural and cultural conditions with certain political consequences.

Each of the three patterns is significantly influenced by the cultural framework of ethnicity and the availability of political institutions to express ethnic claims on the polity that is one ethnic group may strongly desire to accommodate itself to prevailing political styles, while another may have strong cultural traditions tending to keep it separate.

The dominant politics of accommodation requires that political and economic benefits are available to assuage ethnic demands, and that these benefits are distributed evenly. Accommodation also requires the recognition on the part of power holders concerning the right of the underprivileged groups in power sharing. The essence of recognition politics is,

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<sup>18</sup> Shamsuddin L. Taya, "The politicization of ethnic sentiments in the Southern Philippines: The case of the Bangsamoro", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, (30) (1) (2010) pp. 19-34. Routledge.

therefore, a psychological reconciliation of the ethnic groups to the existing political structure. In other words, recognition politics is a means of providing evidence that the political organization has honored the group and taken account of its accumulated grievances by symbolic mass incorporation into the governance process. As might be expected the major groups in the capital of Thailand to whom the reigns of power have fallen and whose culture has pervaded the Thai society, have been accommodated. These groups are represented by former Thai Foreign Minister and currently ASEAN Secretary General Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, former Royal Thai Army Chief and Council for National Security retired General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, current head of the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand Asis Pitakkumpol (Abdul Aziz Bin Ismail), etc. As to the marginalized groups in Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala provinces, a few of their claims were met, the most urgent were side-stepped or given only symbolic recognition. As these claims were not met, either fully or at all, the other alternatives came into play.

The independence movements in the Southern Thailand represent the antithesis of the accommodation model. Separatism occurs when an ethnic group turns inward, creating its own institutions to replenish social, psychological, and cultural values that cannot find fulfillment in the larger society.<sup>19</sup> In secessionist politics, distinct organizations and cultural practices are developed to compensate for disenchantment with the ongoing political and social order. The base of political separatism is the ethnocentrism that animates ethnic group existence. Politics of separation is not mainly confined to Southern Thailand, but also in some other regions of the country. Economically and socially, the Malay Muslims are deprived and burdened with a deep feeling of racial inferiority, many of whom lived in desolation and squalor, beset by every known kind of social pathology. The corresponding reaction from certain groups in southern Thailand to these various forms of discrimination was armed violence and crises promoting separatism of the Malay Muslim homeland against the Thai government.

For its part, ethnic radicalism may stress ideology because the promises of the existing ideologies have become hollow and redundant. The current and active violent secessionist movement in the south best illustrates this mode of political behavior in contemporary Thailand. The movement has performed an important function in dramatizing racial, political and religious discrimination in Thailand. According to its Manifesto the movement has a nation-wide goal and a definite ideological objective of socio-economic and political development for the whole Thailand. To conclude, the long-term dilemma is that if public institutions do not grant some power and recognition to deprived groups, the nihilistic option of violence and disorder in Thailand is unlikely to abate.

### **Synthesizing the Theory and Practice of Ethnic Politics**

The major effort of this study has been to synthesize the theories and practices of Thai ethnic politics. Currently, the Thai government is engaged in a critical struggle to accommodate the demands of peripheral groups who are seeking a larger share in the national resources. Although little in these pages provides prescriptive guidelines for experts and policymakers, this analysis ought to at least clarify the variety of issues at stake in the present ethnic struggle in the region. For every ethnic group operating under given political conditions, particular political mechanisms will produce responses designed to award group members

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<sup>19</sup> Shamsuddin L. Taya, *Strategies and Tactics of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Southern Philippines*, (Sintok: UUM Press, 2009), 53.

various human values. Which one of the three models is more capable to bring peace, unity and prosperity to Thailand: accommodation, separatism, or radicalism? It is a question yet to be answered.

In its emphasis on divisible benefits and on the awarding of particular political positions to representatives of designated groups, the accommodation framework would accomplish several things. It would provide some necessary goods, services, and recognition to the minority groups struggling for survival in Southern Thailand. It would also restrain the divisive proliferation of class and ideological politics that would arouse public passions. By carefully absorbing ethnic political organizations and their leaders, while providing mass recognition and services, it would promote a genuinely liberal social policy within the framework of generally conservative religious and nationality attitudes. By recognizing the existence and claims of discernible ethnic groups, accommodation politics would infuse considerable stability into Thai political system. Founded as it is on the rapport between the centre and its autonomous region, accommodation politics is suited to handle mass collective claims for the Malay Muslims self-determination so as to shape their socio-economic and political destination within the framework of Thai integrity. The essence of accommodation politics and ethnic “recognition” is an underlying consensus on the enduring stability of pluralistic politics. By channeling discontent into legitimate political forms, accommodation politics could reduce the level of political tension, the importance of political ideology, and the excesses of political passion.

Separatism, the antithesis of accommodation, is the popular choice of many ethnic groups in Southern Thailand at the present time. In the absence of pragmatic accommodation politics, separatist tendencies have developed and ethnic political drives are converted into social and psychological forms as group members further withdraw from the dominant political system in order to find a stronger foundation for cultural and personal identity. This development (feeling of withdrawal from the Thai system) is a real and imminent threat to the Thai sovereignty and territorial integrity. It seems reasonable to assume that the question of separation arises in the minds of many Malay Muslims from time to time, to deal with “Bangkok intransigence.” Yet another approach based on radical politics that is best represented by the current active violent secessionist movement is gaining ground. It believes in the transformational method to radically restructure the political process in Southern Thailand by using violent methods such as bombing etc.

## **Conclusion**

In the light of the above analysis one really wonders whether separatist and radical politics would have arisen in the first place in Southern Thailand, had there been an elaborate accommodation system operative in the country that takes into consideration the legitimate grievances of the marginalized Malay Muslims people. In this respect, it is therefore important to recognize that the Bangkok government must accommodate urgently the grievances of the marginalized and oppressed Malay Muslim people through granting them meaningful, substantive and responsive self-government in Southern Thailand.

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