Southern Thailand: A Cosmic War?

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Abstract

In the 1970s secessionists in Southern Thailand described the Thai state as "colonialist" constituted by "Siamese fascist officials"[1] who had "illegally colonised Patani". The flavour of this discourse shows the importance of historical context in shaping the way resistance movements interpret their own struggles. In the case of the resistances groups in Southern Thailand, it reflects the influence of the wider international anti-colonial movement and its embrace of nationalism and socialism. Translating these concepts into a political agenda was complicated by the centrality of Islam in defining the grievances of the Patani Muslims. Islam was the reason they were considered marginal by wider Buddhist society and hence it was Islam that become a core identity marker and the fulcrum upon which the resistance movement grew. Merging the predominately secular themes of anti-colonialism with Islam was complex, and as a result for much of its existence the insurgency failed to define clearly an ideology beyond the general maxim of 'liberating the homeland' to create the *Republic of Patani*. By the onset of the twenty first century situation had changed and although the goal remained the same for many Thai Muslims it was based on firmer ontological ground. By defining itself in Islamist terms, the separatist movement managed to distance itself from the secular concepts that defined the Thai state ('nationalism') and which precluded support for its struggle from other states ('sovereignty'). The objective now is the creation of *Al Fatoni Darussalam* [Islamic Land of Patani] by *"purging all Siamese infidels out of our territory to purify our religion and culture"*[2] (HRW, 2007: 45). In short, the shift in terminology indicates an ideological shift in the way the insurgents frame the conflict but also, more importantly, in their identification of the 'enemy'.[3] The 'liberation of the Republic' has now evolved into a 'struggle to liberate an Islamic Land'. From being a 'colonialist' and 'fascist' state, the Thai state has assumed the status of 'infidel'. The insurgents' embrace of Islamism as the organising principle of their resistance is progressively transforming the conflict into what Juergensmeyer has called a 'Cosmic War' (Juergensmeyer, 2003).

This paper will further explore this ideological shift by analysing for the first time primary sources such as propaganda leaflets, interviews and insurgent interrogation reports that were collected during recent fieldwork in Southern Thailand between 2006 and 2008.

From December 2001 (but accelerating after 2004), the three Southern border provinces of Thailand, popularly called the *chaidaen paak tai* ('southern frontier'), have seen an expansion of violence against civilians with the more recent killings (including the beheadings of monks and attacks on Buddhist temples) reflecting a level of brutality never before witnessed in the century long conflict. The brutal killing of both Buddhists and Muslims, arson attacks against schools and systematic violence against teachers, coupled with the emergence of an exclusivist Islamic discourse and the refusal of all parties to engage in meaningful peace negotiations suggest the conflict is passing through a transformational stage and that over time it

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[1] Press release by Patani Republic Liberation Front, 10 December 1970. Public letter addressed to President of Republic of Korea by National Liberation Front of the Patani Republic, 7 November 1970. Press release No. 14, Patani Republic Liberation Front, 28 November, 1971.

[2] Statement written by separatist militants and published in HRW 2007 report.

[3] Interview with former separatist leader, May 2008.

could depart from traditional patterns of violence characteristic of ethno-nationalist struggles in Southeast Asia in the post-colonial period and evolve into a more broad-based violent campaign with a greater blurring of the distinction between civilian and combatant. The failure in late 2001 of the Thai state to anticipate the resurgence of violence in the three southern provinces, and its parallel failure to develop a sustainable peace process, stems from two principle sources; its poor understanding of Southern Muslims as a distinctive people with their own sense of a separate identity and culture, and secondly a failure to grasp the capacity of external forces to re-energise and rejuvenate secessionist sentiment that is based on these distinctive patterns of culture and identity.[4]

To this end, the growing sense of global Islamic consciousness has given new meaning to the struggle that many Thai Muslims believe confronts them. The Muslim community in Southern Thailand has always had a sense of supraterritoriality (Horstmann 2002) because of its bonds to global Islam and, more locally, to the regional Malay world. This sense of supraterritoriality is increasingly encroaching into the political discourse of the new insurgent groups as they strive to differentiate themselves and their communities from wider Thai society. The new generation of terrorists in Thailand has embraced radical Islam[5] not only as its ideology of resistance, but also as its identity. (Jory 2006: 46)

In sum, from a traditional ethno-nationalist struggle the insurgency in Southern Thailand has morphed into a local Jihadist movement that is inspired by global forces but which is focused on local injustices.

Hameed's Journey

Hameed's journey is a composite account built on various interviews, interrogation reports and insurgent propaganda leaflets that were collected in Southern Thailand between the years 2006 and 2008. While one can easily travel and investigate the

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[4] For a discussion of this phenomenon as a feature of the contemporary world see Bauman, 2001.
[5] Using Peter Mandaville's (2008: 239) definitions of Islamism and radicalism, in this paper radical Islam will be defined as an aspiration to national liberation and the institution of a political order that reflects the norm of Islam within a single state, with an emphasis on violent struggle as the primary legitimate method for the pursuit of political change.

region, it remains difficult to have a clear picture of the conflict in Southern Thailand; a difficulty that stems not only from the absence of clear insurgency leadership with whom to negotiate, their sworn secrecy and religiosity but also from fear of retaliation from either the Thai state or the insurgency if one does speak up.

Nonetheless, while this story may not be a complete one, it informs us about the transformation of the movement and its general dynamic on the ground. Hameed's singular journey[6] is of particular interest to this paper as it sheds light on the new generation of militants engaged in the upsurge of separatist violence in Southern Thailand since late 2001; a generation that distinctively distances itself from the early separatists of the 1960s by its unprecedented use of extreme violence and its instrumentalization of Islam.

One Nation Under One God

Hameed is one of the many countryside workers of Southern Thailand, making his living by selling fresh cane sugar. Like most young men in the region, he lives in the family home with his parents and numerous brothers and sisters. As is the tradition among Muslim families in the South, Hameed's education comprises both the Islamic and the secular curricula.

In 2001, while pursuing his religious education (year 7), Hameed, aged 20, is approached several times by Ahmad to join the separatist insurgency. Each time, Ahmad would evoke the glorious history of the Patani state. Eventually, after three months, Hameed agrees to join the insurgency and agrees to take the oath of allegiance to the separatist movement.

Just before the ceremony of the oath taking or *supoh*, Hameed is summoned to attend a meeting.[7] When he arrives at the meeting place, he finds an older man already

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[6] This particular story is fictional, although the main elements of it are drawn from the real experiences of several different insurgents. Hameed himself is a fiction, although he could very easily be a real person.

[7] The word *supoh* is a derivation from the Malay word *sumpah* (oath). In the context of the insurgency in Southern Thailand the term *supoh* is used in the same way as the Arabic word *bayat*, meaning "oath of allegiance".

sitting in the room and a small group of younger men carefully listening to him. Hameed has never met this man before but he can guess from the man's accent and use of local dialect that he is most probably from one of the neighbouring provinces. The man does not disclose his name but simply asks to be called by the nickname of Abu. Abu is an *Ustaz*, an Islamic religious teacher in a *pondok*[8]. Upon his invitation, Hameed carefully takes his place without disrupting the others and the meeting starts.

Once more, the glorious past of the former Patani Sultanate is recounted to Hameed and the other young men but this time with much greater length and detail than when he was recruited. During the old man's narration, important emphasis is given to the oppression of the Melayu people by *Sia'*[9] (Siam) and to how their ancestors had been captured and enslaved by the Siamese. Their Achilles tendons were pierced and chains run through them in order to prevent them from running away and they were then sent to Bangkok to dig the *Khlong* (canal) *Saen Saeb*[10]. In the past, before the arrival of *Sia'*, Patani was a very prosperous state. But their ancestors were bullied, beaten and killed by *Sia'* and forbidden to wear their sarongs, or to chew betel and would have to change their Muslim names to Thai names. This oppression by *Sia'*, the old man concludes, continues today with the killing by the military and police authorities of their Muslim brothers and sisters of Southern Thailand. Hence, it falls upon them to restore the independence of Al Fatoni (Patani). By the end of the narration, Hameed feels deep feelings of anger, hatred and revenge against Siam but also courage. He is ready to fight for the restoration of an independent Patani state.

Hameed is then invited to proceed to the *supoh* ceremony. Another Ustaz brings the Holy Quran in front of Hameed. He is then asked to put a hand on the scriptures and to repeat after the Ustaz the following sentence: *"I will sacrifice myself for religion, I will restore the Patani state, [and] I will not disclose anything concerning the insurgency to anyone"*. Once the ceremony is finished, the Ustaz informs Hameed

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[8] A *pondok* is a traditional Islamic boarding school in Southern Thailand, similar to a madrasah or a *pesantren* in Indonesia (Liow, 2008, p.182-183; Madmarn, 2002).

[9] The word *Sia'* (meaning Siam in the local dialect) is used by the insurgency to designate Thailand and its people. The use of the former country name is not only aimed at reinforcing the remembrance of the past oppression of the Melayu people by Siam but also to set a formal distance from (opposition to) the 'Other' (the Other being Siam).

[10] The *Saen Saeb* canal, which runs from the western part to the eastern part of Bangkok, was built in the 19th century on order of King Rama III. Nowadays the canal has become the most popular ferryboat route of Bangkok.

that he will have to abide by a new set of rules. These consist of the obligation to observe daily prayers, to resolutely study the Holy Quran, to unconditionally trust and obey the leaders and to participate in all activities. Also, they forbid drug consumption, adultery, patronizing places of entertainment, disclosing any secrets pertaining to the movement, questioning the movement and disobeying orders. Finally, Hameed is informed that his progress will be constantly monitored.

Hameed then returns home and attends to his daily activities until a few months later, when he receives a phone call from a man. The man's voice is unfamiliar but Hameed listens carefully. The voice announces that he is now ready to begin his military training and summons him to travel to the training facility where he is expected. When Hameed arrives at the designated location, he recognises some of the young men who had attended the meeting preceding the oath taking ceremony. The trainers, two men in their mid-forties, are not familiar but Hameed later on learns that they are religious teachers in a nearby *tadika[11]*. His training commences with simple physical exercises. In fact, as Hameed will find out later on, the training program is progressive. Initially, the group has to reach and maintain a certain level of physical fitness and endurance. From then on, for about three years, Hameed will train for three hours once or twice per month with the same group of men at various locations. Once the first stage of his training is completed, Hameed is incorporated into a smaller cell of 6 men, resulting from the split of the original group into smaller ones. Together with his fellow men, Hameed starts his weapons training, which consists of learning basic weapon manipulation and different body posture alignments. In addition, he has to familiarize himself with military tactics of offensive and disengagement. This phase of the training is an intensive one-month course, known as RKK (*Runda Kumpulan Kecil*) training[12]. Upon the successful completion of his training, in late 2003, Hameed's courage and loyalty is put to the test. He is ordered to distribute propaganda leaflets and to leave spikes on the road, in preparation for eventual ambushes against security forces by militants. To his knowledge, similar to his induction, others had to prove their pledge by defacing road signs, burning traffic

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[11] A *tadika* or kindergarten is responsible for the early religious education of young children in Southern Thailand (Mardman, 2002; Somboon, 2006; Liow, 2008, 188; McCargo, 2008).

[12] RKK or Runda Kumpulan Kecil in Malay is a small combat cell whose training consists of guerrilla warfare tactics for small combat unit.

lights or committing larceny. By this rite of passage, Hameed has formally become a fully operational member of the insurgency in his area.

In 2003, Hameed, aged 22, is issued with an active arrest warrant by the authorities. As a result, he is designated by his peers as the head of his cell, which is responsible for monitoring the movements of the security troops and staging violent attacks in his assigned area[13] (all activities under constant scrutiny and evaluation by his peers).

On October 15th 2005, Hameed receives a phone call. He and his unit will take part in the attack on a *Wat*, Buddhist temple, as an act of revenge for the extra judicial killing of a religious teacher by the Thai authorities. The following day, on 16th October, at about 12:30am, Hameed and his men enter the periphery of the Buddhist temple and pause briefly to observe any sign of activity in the perimeter. One of the annexes closest to their position is the quarters of the young novices. Hameed can clearly distinguish the sound of singing and guitar playing coming from the abode. A first group of men armed with an M-16 storms into the *kuti*[14] (novitiate) and opens fire. In the attack, one young novice, aged 15, is shot dead while another two manage to escape through the window of the *kuti*. One man positioned outside starts running after the two escapees, firing at them. One of the two boys succeeds in avoiding capture. The pursuer, instead, eventually catches the other young novice (aged 17), who was hiding beneath the novitiate, shoots him dead and drags out his body to place it next to the first lifeless novice in front of the *kuti's* entrance. Then a third man carrying an oil drum pours petrol on the two novices' bodies and sets them on fire. In the meantime, armed with a long handled knife, Hameed heads towards the *Ubosoth*[15]*,* hall of images of the temple, in order to destroy everything inside it. Once inside the premises, with the help of his knife, he defaces the images of Buddha and decapitates a statue of Buddha until the handle breaks. Then, once more outside the temple, Hameed picks up a rock and uses it to hit the statues guarding the sanctuary's entrance until their heads fall off. Later on, all the men gather in front of the temple

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[13] Hameed's assigned area corresponds to the size of a district or *Amphoe* in one of the three southern border provinces. It incorporates over 50 villages.

[14] The *kuti* is the living quarters of a Thai monastery composed of small rooms usually with a front porch.

[15] The *Ubosoth* is the ordination hall within the main religious building of a *Wat*, only accessible by the monks, where sacred images and statues of Buddha are displayed.

and set it on fire.

Meanwhile, a second group of men attacks the monk's quarters, shooting and beating an old monk. Hameed can hear him screaming from where he is positioned. The injured monk is now lying unconscious, face down on the floor. A man approaches him and with his knife repeatedly slashes the monk's head and neck until the head is almost detached from the inert body. The body of the lifeless monk is then dragged in front of the *kuti* and set on fire.

Hameed regroups with the rest of the men and they quickly pull out from the perimeter. Once they are at a secure distance from the site, they split and go their separate ways. For Hameed, this represents the first major successful operation, accomplished within 15 minutes, without any loss and well away from any disruption from the security forces. He will be arrested two days later.

A Cosmic War

The adoption of a more violent form of confrontation by Hameed's generation illustrates a rupture within the discourse of resistance between activists and militants. While activists, such as former senator Den Tohmeena, son of Haji Sulong[16], continue to negotiate within the legal boundaries of the state apparatus, the violent forms of resistance utilised by more radical forces effectively negate Bangkok's sovereignty over the southern provinces. For the new generation, clustered around the non-elitist traditional religious leaders (imams and *tok gurus*), resistance is less about re-establishing the traditional elite privileges of the old Patani Sultanate system than about forging and policing an identity boundary behind which there is greater freedom to structure their community according to Islamic religious and cultural practices without interference from Bangkok (Jory, 2006: 42).[17]

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[16] Haji Sulong Tomina was one of the most prominent religious leaders of the separatist movement. Following the submission of his seven demands to the Thai government in 1947, designed to facilitate greater political autonomy for the three provinces, Haji Sulong was arrested and then later died under mysterious circumstances in 1954.

[17] Separatist leaflets are replete with Islamist discourse. The ICG reports, that "a leaflet shows Premier Surayud leading a Muslim official, a *ponoh* (religious boarding school) student and an imam by chains through their noses like buffaloes with passages from the Qur'an written below stating that Allah will reject the struggle of non-believers and punish those who help them, implying that those who help the

While the older generation of Muslim secessionists in Southern Thailand were reluctant to use international concepts (such as *ummah*) or global and regional connections to enhance their power vis-à-vis the Thai state, this parochialism is clearly receding. For example, the current insurgency not only replicates the rhetorical flourishes of jihadist movements in Afghanistan, Iraq and even Chechnya, but there is now a stronger tendency to associate their own plight with other Muslim groups in places such as Palestine and Kashmir. This reflexive repositioning of their own struggle within a larger transnational Islamic context has not only raised their own international profile in global Islamist circles but it has helped revitalize the struggle for a new and more internationally savvy generation of Patani Muslims, allowing them to feel as though they are part of a larger global movement.[18]

In the 1970s, secessionists in Southern Thailand described the Thai state as "colonialist" constituted by "Siamese fascist officials"[19] who had "illegally colonised Patani". The flavour of this discourse shows the importance of historical context in shaping the way resistance movements interpret their own struggles. In the case of the resistance groups in Southern Thailand, it reflects the influence of the wider international anti-colonial movement and its embrace of nationalism and socialism. Translating these concepts into a political agenda was complicated by the centrality of Islam in defining the grievances of the Patani Muslims. Islam was the reason they were considered marginal by wider Buddhist society and hence it was Islam that became a core identity marker and the fulcrum upon which the resistance movement grew. Merging the predominately secular themes of anti-colonialism with Islam was complex, and as a result for much of its existence the insurgency failed to define clearly an ideology beyond the general maxim of 'liberating the homeland' to create the *Republic of Patani*. By the onset of the twenty first century situation had changed and although the goal remained the same for many Thai Muslims it was based on firmer ontological ground. By defining itself in Islamist terms, the separatist

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government are motivated by greed, are traitors to their religion and their people, and deserve to be punished" (ICG, 2007: 12).

[18] Interview with reporter for The Nation, Don Pathan, November 2007.

[19] Press release by Patani Republic Liberation Front, 10 December 1970. Public letter addressed to President of Republic of Korea by National Liberation Front of the Patani Republic, 7 November 1970. Press release No. 14, Patani Republic Liberation Front, 28 November, 1971.

movement managed to distance itself from the secular concepts that defined the Thai state ('nationalism') and which precluded support for its struggle from other states ('sovereignty'). The objective now is the creation of *Al Fatoni Darussalam* [Islamic Land of Patani] by *"purging all Siamese infidels out of our territory to purify our religion and culture"*[20] (HRW, 2007: 45). In short, the shift in terminology indicates an ideological shift in the way the insurgents frame the conflict but also, more importantly, in their identification of the 'enemy'.[21] The 'liberation of the Republic' has now evolved into a 'struggle to liberate an Islamic Land'. From being a 'colonialist' and 'fascist' state, the Thai state has assumed the status of 'infidel'.

This re-identification of the 'enemy' is important for helping our understanding of the changing nature of the insurgency, especially in terms of patterns of violence and scope of action. Thirty years ago the goal was to liberate the South from the yoke of the Thai state wherein the ordinary "people of Siam" might be encouraged to rise up "against the fascist military regime [of Thanom Kittikhachon and others]"[22]. Among those committed to violence, the sense of solidarity with ordinary non-Muslim Thais has now largely disintegrated. Indeed, it has become a personal obligation (*fard ayn*) for all Malay Muslims to protect and liberate their 'sacred' land from the Thai infidels. Furthermore, by re-defining the Thai state as *kufir*, the insurgents have proclaimed violent jihad not only against the Thai state but also on its ontological essence, its 'Thai-ness' (Thongchai, 1994), including *chart* (nation)*, satsana* (religion)*,* and *phramahakasat* (the monarchy). The new generation of insurgents' stated goals to purify their religion and culture requires a purge of 'Siamese infidels' and is the *raison d'état* behind the movement's recent expansion of its targets to include civilians, including children, women and elders.

It is at this level that it is possible to identify the links with global jihadism. Although many of the issues which motivate groups such as al Qaeda, such as driving the US from the Middle East, have only a peripheral appeal among the insurgents in Thailand, the activities of the larger global jihadist groups speaks to their consciousness as Muslims; it inspires and strengthens them in their own struggle. In

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[20] Statement written by separatist militants and published in HRW 2007 report.
[21] Interview with former separatist leader, May 2008.
[22] Press release No. 14, Patani Republic Liberation Front, 28 November, 1971.

truth from the very beginning the Thai state has viewed the Islam of the Patani Muslims as a complicating factor in its attempts to build a unified Thai nation centred on a royal family that is seen to epitomise the essence of Buddhism. Attempts to impose a single homogenous concept of 'Thainess' (Thongchai, 1994) has marginalised many Muslims and thereby provided the insurgents with their legitimacy, motives and goals.

The new generation of insurgents' embrace of Islamism as the organising principle of their resistance is progressively transforming the conflict into what Juergensmeyer has called a 'Cosmic War' (Juergensmeyer, 2003). Such a transformation has been made possible by a "coalescence of a peculiar set of circumstances (political, social, and ideological) [or in other words], when religion becomes fused with violent expressions of social aspirations, personal pride, and movements for political change" (Juergensmeyer, 2003: 10). A set of circumstances that found its essence in the "injustices and suppression of the people of the region [Pattani]" as it was explained to the author by an overseas graduate. It is a conflict that can only be solved through the religious way: *the answer to the people's grievances is a religious one. The answer to a hundred years of oppression can only be a violent response. Don't push the Muslims to go for their God. He* [God] *has the answer already prepared for them. Violence is a punishment of God and a corrupt state should be punished*".[23] This fusion between the religious and the use of extreme violence becomes, in fact, only operational when a certain degree of alienation is reached, a process departing from a previous generation of militants and giving birth to a new generation of terrorists. This constitutes the point of fracture between the old guard and the new one, where there is an important divergence in regards to the role of Islam and the use of extreme violence in pursuing the struggle. Whereas the first generation dedicated itself to undermining the first pillar of 'Thai-ness' (the nation) by targeting representatives of the Thai state in the three Southern border provinces, the two other main pillars, religion and monarchy, were left untouched. However, for the new generation the pure religious dimension compels the 'good Muslim' to extend their struggle to the last two pillars. Hence, recent years have seen an expansion of violence against civilians with the more recent killings (including the beheadings of monks and attacks

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[23] Interview with overseas graduate, Patani, November 2006.

on temples) containing a dimension of brutality never before witnessed in the century long conflict.

It is important to stress that although the embrace of the concept of 'Cosmic War' has led to greater violence against the state and Thai society; it remains largely bounded by a conventional notion of territory. For the more extreme elements of the insurgency movement, the *darul harbi*[24] ('region of war'), in which their part of the cosmic battle is waged, is the geographically bounded area of the three southern provinces. (Bubalo and Fealy 2005:xix; HRW 2007:6) As long as the insurgents pursue the liberation of their homeland through a 'defensive jihad', their scope of action will be limited to the geographic area where the injustices against God occur. If they were to consider expanding it to other parts of the country where Muslims are a minority, including the capital Bangkok, the conflict would immediately be inscribed into a new register, one characteristic of an 'offensive jihad' (Sageman, 2004:2). This would in turn imply a wider goal, namely the submission and potentially the conversion of Thailand to Islam. In short, the *darul harbi* is not only a geographical space but also a psychological one within which terror reigns. It is not so much about the control of geographic space but rather mental space. It is not so much the use of terrorism in itself but rather the audience at which terrorism is aimed (Jenkins in Nacos, 1994: 75). The purpose of the violence is to frighten the oppressors and beat back their power (which is anathema to God) while at the same time inspiring other 'victims' of the oppression to either join the struggle or stop collaborating with the enemy. It has been estimated that the success of the second objective can be measured by the estimate that two out of three of the 1,574 villages in Southern Thailand today host an insurgent cell (HRW, 2007: 8).

De/Sacralization of A History

The History of the Sultanate of Patani – a history of a golden past and of victimhood – has been instrumental in Hameed's recruitment and indoctrination as for many like him who have chosen to fight alongside the insurgency for the restoration of the independence of their ancestral homeland. It is a historical narrative with a purpose

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[24] To reflect the usage of the Arabic term Dal Al-Harb by the community, the Indonesian Malay transliteration of the term has been kept.

and which continues to be a remarkably powerful political force in the region. It is a storytelling that has been perpetuated through oral tradition from one generation of Pattani Muslims to another, inspiring earlier generations of militants up to the more contemporaneous generation of Hameed.

The instrumentalization of this History provides an aura of legitimacy to the separatist insurgency, which claims that it is fighting a defensive war on behalf of an oppressed people. However, this defensive war can no longer find its sole impetus within the locus of historical nationalism, a concept that resonates very little with Hameed's generation.[25] Nationalism *per se* cannot appeal to and ideologically sustain this new generation of militants. With the advent of the Internet and satellite television, the new Muslim youth have entered a new borderless world; become part of a global cosmopolitan community in which traditional boundaries and national identities (such as the Melayu identity) are progressively blurred.

The growing supraterritorial experience of Southern Muslims, measured in terms of increasing awareness, linkages and identification with the *ummah*, and more particularly with fellow Malays in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines with whom they share religious, ethnic and linguistic roots, allows these youths to inject new meaning to their own history of national struggle. They have now entered into the discourses of marginalised groups in other parts of the world such as the Middle East, Western Europe and elsewhere. Conflicts involving Muslims, such as that in Southern Thailand, are generally interpreted by many in the wider international Muslim community as yet another example of the worldwide victimisation of Muslims.

While globalization weakens the degree to which the insurgency can inspire and unite a younger generation of Muslims under the banner of Melayu nationalism, the separatist leadership had to search for a new binding force; a cement that it has found in Islam.[26] Despite Islam's early centrality within the struggle, the religious impetus was not as instrumental as it is today. At present, Islam has penetrated every aspect of the separatist insurgency, starting with the taking by the young recruits of the *supoh*,

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[25] Interview with Patani Ulama, June 2008.
[26] Interview with Patani Ulama, June 2008.

the oath of allegiance to the movement. When Hameed swore his allegiance, he was asked by the religious teacher to swear over the Holy Quran while repeating the Ustaz words.[27] There exists another variant of the oath-taking rite, which consists of asking the young recruit to hold both hands together with the *Ustaz* and to repeat in Arabic an *Ayat* (verses) from the Quran which binds him religiously to the insurgency and its secrecy.[28] Although the practice of oath taking, by which recruits swear secrecy and their allegiance, is not uncommon in Southern Thailand or among terrorist organisations (such as the IRA[29] or Al Qaeda), its religious dimension is.[30] By swearing over the Quran, Hameed pledged himself to a sacred commitment whose breach could imperil his soul and draw upon him the divine wrath (Masliyah, 1990: 84). In addition to their exposure to an eventual divine punishment, recruits are also told that if they break their oath, they will not go to heaven, or simply will be executed (ICG, 2005: 21).

When arrested in the aftermath of the attack of the Buddhist temple, Hameed refuses to disclose any information to the security forces about the insurgency, as he is concerned about the repercussions of breaking his *supoh*. The use of a religious authority by the insurgency to administer the oath further reinforces the sacral legitimacy of the rite in the eyes of the young recruit. The role of the religious figure in this process is pivotal as within the traditional local structure of power it is the *Phu Ru*, or 'the one who has the [religious] knowledge' that represents the legitimate incontestable authority. Hence, the oath can only be revoked by a legitimate religious figure.[31] In the case of Hameed, the Thai authorities find a locally respected Imam who annuls the oath.[32]

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[27] Interview with military officer, Patani, June 2008. Antony Davis from *Jane's Intelligence Review* (2007) refers very briefly this practice by which an oath of secrecy is sworn on the Quran by the insurgents.

[28] Interview with military officer, Hat Yai, 2007.

[29] In a similar fashion, as explained by Horgan (2005: 128), the Provisional Republican Irish Army expected from their members their total allegiance without reservation.

[30] In the Malay world, there are sporadic records of oath taking over the Quran among coastal Sumatrans but only in the cases of settlement of heritage or debts (Marsden, 1966: 239-243).

[31] However, according to Masliyah (1999: 84), if one has taken an oath to commit a sin, therefore the breaking of the oath becomes a duty in Islam. He goes further in arguing that depending on the views of some Muslim scholars, the oath may not even be valid and would annul itself.

[32] Interview with military officer, Hat Yai, 2007. The International Crisis Group when investigating the Krue Se Mosque incident in April 2004 recorded a similar case. In the case of oath annulment, it is important to point out that the recourse to a religious authority, who will free the suspected militant from his vow, may appear to be efficient in the process of interrogating suspected militants. However,

In this respect, the phraseology of the oath is particularly meaningful. In fact, by evoking God, the oath not only reinforces the religious character of the vow but more importantly allows the recruit, by pledging his unconditional devotion to God, to enter the area of the 'sacred' and by the same token sanctify his promise to God to liberate the homeland and preserve the secrecy of the movement. Hence, this particular oath subtly creates an imperative personal bond between the recruit and God and from which withdrawal is extremely difficult. At the same time, the cultivation of this 'sacred' bond is sustained by the very precepts that the recruits are instructed to follow once the ritual is completed, particularly the observance of daily prayers and the resolute study of the Quran.

The ordering of the words of the oath - *"I will sacrifice myself for religion, I will restore the Patani state, [and] I will not disclose anything concerning the insurgency to anyone"* – suggest an order of priority in terms of allegiance. The recruit swears his allegiance first to religion, then to his nation and finally the movement. Forceful priority is given to religion over the nation and its liberating movement, which further illustrates the instrumental use of Islam by the insurgency in their struggle. Finally, the emphasis on religion, nation and movement reinstates the importance of the ontological essence of 'Melayu-ness', which has its own distinctive *agama* (religion), *negara* (nation) and *kesultanan* (sultanate). As the focus of this new generation is on the Islamic liberation of its nation rather than the restoration of the privileges of the former sultanate, the *kesultanan* pillar is shadowed by the more predominant role of the traditional religious leaders.

In addition to the religious dimension of the oath, the rite serves another purpose: social group cohesion. The oath is a process by which single individuals become members of a group or a 'tribe'. In his exploration of radical Islamism, Lee Harris (2007: xii) explains, "when everyone around you is a member of a tribe, you must either belong to a tribe or be an outcast". By becoming a tribal actor, the recruit thinks

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as an informant explained, this requirement can be a manoeuvre on the part of the insurgency, in tricking the authorities to believe that by having successfully annulled the oath, the suspected militant will speak more freely without fear of being exposed to divine punishment. Nonetheless, it appears that the lifting of the vow can only be administered by a religious authority recognised by the insurgency which would make the annulment obsolete and therefore cast upon the confession a considerable amount of doubt on its sincerity and reliability.

with the tribal mind and cannot envisage acting differently from the rest of the tribe. The rite fulfils this purpose and therefore ensures social cohesion among the Patani Muslim youth. Indeed, by becoming a member of the 'tribe', the disenfranchised youth, torn between two socio-cosmological worlds, finally find a sense of belonging, which in turn reaffirms their Malay Muslim identity, pitting them against Thailand and all that represents it.

Thainess Under Attack

When Hameed participated with his men to the attack of the Buddhist temple, he didn't question the rationale behind the action nor the legitimacy of his act. Like many of his ancestors, the Thai authorities had arbitrarily murdered one of his people and Hameed had to avenge him. The act of violence naturally draws its legitimacy from the historical imprint of Melayu oppression by the Siamese.

The account of this attack is based on a real incident that took place at 1:45am on 16th October 2005 at the Wat Phromprasit temple at *tambon* (sub-district) Bannok of Panare district in the province of Pattani. This carefully planned lightning strike took place the way it was described in the earlier account. The militants brutally killed and burnt the bodies of the monk *Phra* Phisu Kaew Phanjaphet (aged 76) and the two temple boys Harnnarong Kham-on (17) and Sathaporn Suwanrat (15) in their respective living quarters. Together with another monk, the third novice Bancha Na Soros managed to escape the incident. Then, after having ransacked the sanctum and damaged the religious images, the militants set the temple alight and fled the scene.

Police examine the chapel of Wat Phromprasit at Ban Ko in tambon Ban Nok of Pattani's Panare district while

A ranger talks to monks at their living quarters at Wat Phromprasit in Panare district of Pattani. Soldiers and

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The choice of target is particularly useful in understanding the ideological shift experienced by this second generation of militants. Beyond the act of revenge, the attack of the Wat Phromprasit is a direct attack on Thailand's ontological essence, Thainess, and more particularly its religious pillar, *satsana*. The re-identification of the Thai state as the infidel enemy against which war must be staged entails the Islamic duty to protect and liberate the 'sacred' homeland from all Thai infidels. Therefore, the time when Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims could live together peacefully is gone. Hence, the symbolism of the Wat Phromprasit incident is particularly significant. By targeting a Buddhist sanctuary, in an area where both Muslims and Buddhists had coexisted peacefully together for many years, the insurgency is forcing people 'to take sides' and thereby widening communal tensions between the two ethno-religious communities that live in the Panare district. Similarly, tensions between the Malay Muslim majority and the Thai Buddhist minorities that make up most of Southern Thailand have reached fresh heights and even if the insurgency were to be solved immediately, intra-community hostilities would linger for many years. Many Thai Buddhist families have fled the region, leaving co-religionists living in a constant climate of fear.

A climate of fear is carefully maintained by this new generation of militants. The extreme brutality that the militants have shown in the killings of the monk and the temple boys, their carefully planned shooting, beating, slashing and burning, is a major part of the insurgency's campaign of terror. The purpose of the violence is to frighten the oppressors and beat back their power (which is anathema to God) while at the same time inspiring other 'victims' of the oppression to either join the struggle or stop collaborating with the enemy.

The use of extreme violence by the insurgency and the sentiments that it provokes in its audience highlights the significant role of the affective dimension in the 'exponentialisation' of the violence. A Thai academic recently wrote that the conflict in Southern Thailand was a *songkhram khwam rusuek*, a "war of emotions"

(Srisompob, 2008). It is a war about who will be the most effective in drawing its audience towards them by affectively inspiring them. The more brutal the violence, the more affectively inspired the audience, the more violence there is.

In a similar way, affectivity plays an important role in the psyche of the militants as it gives, to a certain extent, legitimacy to their use of violence. As mentioned earlier, the national history of Patani has inspired many generations of militants in their struggle for independence but has recently experienced a decline in its ability to mobilise which subsequently required from the leadership the addition of an Islamic religious dimension to the conflict. However, the nationalist historical and religious dimensions of violence legitimacy are functional of an affective dimension. By combining the Islamic duty of liberating the homeland to the history of oppression of a people, the insurgency relies on affectivity as a catalyst for militant violence, banking on the feelings of hatred and revenge of its youth against the Thai state. The use of extreme violence is aimed at provoking strong state retaliation and the subsequent increase of the affective dimension of the conflict, in a spiral that further strengthens the instrumentalization of both history and religion, and eventually legitimizes the use of violence.

Conclusion

In light of the instrumentalization of Islam by the separatist insurgency (embodied in their belief that they are fighting a 'cosmic war') and the government's claim that it is fighting to maintain the integrity of the Thai Buddhist state, there needs to be a greater space for Islamic and Buddhist leaders to enter the debate. Their first order of business should be to rescue their respective religions from the narratives of conflict perpetuated by the insurgents and the state and open a dialogue that recognizes the legitimate aspirations of the Muslim minority as well as the concerns of the Buddhist majority. Such steps were contemplated in 2007 when Muslim leaders in the South discussed the possibility of issuing a religious edict (*fatwa*) outlawing the use of violence.[33]

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[33] The event which took place on 26 March 2007 in Satun brought together representatives from the Chularajamontri's office, the Islamic Centre of Thailand, the provincial Islamic committees, the regional Ulama as well as Thai officials and military.

However, the religious landscape in Southern Thailand is so divided that the difficulty of declaring a fatwa against the insurgent violence would lie not so much in the act itself but in identifying the religious leaders who hold enough authority and credibility in the eyes of Muslims for it to carry any weight. At present, for it to be recognised as legitimate by the government such a ruling could only be issued by the King-appointed *Chularajamontri* (Sheikul Islam), the formal head of Islamic Affairs in Thailand.[34] Unfortunately, in the eyes of the local community the counsellor holds very little or no legitimacy.

Which returns to the need for compromise; Bangkok needs to recognise that it can no longer control the form of Islam practiced by the Muslims who live within its borders. It needs to reconcile itself to the reality that the world has changed and that the cultural and identity-based aspirations of minorities can no longer be ignored or repressed with the ease that they once were. At the same time, the Muslim minority is naïve if they assume that Bangkok can be forced through violence to abrogate control over the three southern provinces – too many people have prematurely predicted the death of state sovereignty only to be disappointed at its resilience. Despite recommendations formulated by the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) on Southern Thailand (see NRC report, 2006) and the failed Langkawi negotiations of 2005[35], the concession of greater political autonomy, if not independence, becomes pressing. In response to this, practitioners in the country increasingly evoke the case of the East Timor referendum[36] or the South African model of reconciliation.[37] Nonetheless, the road to sustainable peace in the southern border provinces of

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[34] The question of a fatwa in the hope of bringing a cease-free in the three southern border provinces was discussed during interviews with various Imams in Bangkok in October and November 2007. Although, most imams in the capital recognize the authority of the Chularajamontri in Islamic Affairs, they emphasized that the counselor has no influence in the three southern border provinces.

[35] In 2005, when former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahatir invited the old leadership to partake in the peace talks, there was some hope that it would bring the new generation to the table of negotiations. For this strategy to be effective, it would have needed a stronger base support of the old guard from the new generation and their readiness to negotiate, which remains absent until this day.

[36] Interview with NGO workers and other civil society representatives, Bangkok, October and November 2007.

[37] The set up of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission along the South African model of reconciliation was discussed by former MP Jon Ungpakorn during a seminar -*'Two Years of Takbai Incident: Issues on Accessing to Justice and Human Rights Violation in the Three Southern Most Provinces of Thailand'* - organised by the Working Group on Justice for Peace at Chulalongkorn University, October 25, 2006.

Thailand will necessarily be a long one, navigating a way through the morass of competing interests requires actors who are less wedded to redundant ideals. To this end, there is a space for dialogue into which religious and community leaders will need to step, as has successfully taken place in Southeast Asia (see Heijmans et al., 2004) and in other parts of the world. Hopefully for Thailand they will take this step sooner rather than later.

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