A Deep Chasm? Ethno-cultural Diversity and Nationalism in the History of Malay-Muslim-Dominated Southern Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Undoubtedly, ethno-cultural diversity in the contemporary era has been a social reality that cannot be denied. However, promoting multiculturalism and interculturalism is not always a straightforward process: there tends to be a gap between these concepts as discourses at the state or elite level and their practical implementation at the societal level. This article attempts to examine why such a gap still exists by analysing the ethno-cultural tensions in the Malay-Muslims-dominated Deep South of Thailand. The Deep South provides an illuminating example of a non-Thai minority culture living inside the Buddhist-dominated Thai state, and presents a challenging case study in the management of ethno-cultural diversity. This article aims to elucidate how different state elites have dealt with the Malay-Muslims in varying ways, and to examine why state formulations of Thainess have remained neither fully multicultural nor intercultural despite the ruling elites' recognition of ethno-cultural diversity and their publicly articulated commitment to promoting equal citizenship.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, interculturalism, Thai nationalism, ethno-cultural diversity, Deep South.

INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL INQUIRIES

Cultural diversity has become inextricably interwoven with our everyday lives particularly in this globalising epoch. The establishment of a multicultural society, both as an ideal official policy and as a pervasive practice, seems to become the *sine qua non* for liberal nation-states. Promoting multiculturalism is useful in ethno-culturally diverse societies because it is, in principle, an approach that seeks equality between the national majority and minorities, and promotes political and social stability while allowing national minorities to have self-government (see Kymlicka, 2001; Kymlicka, 2016)

The Nobel laureate in Economics Amartya Sen (2006, p. 150) argues that there are two distinct approaches to multiculturalism. One is to promote cultural diversity as a value in itself. The other focuses on "the freedom of reasoning and decision-making, and celebrates cultural diversity to the extent that it is as freely chosen as possible by the persons involved" (Sen, 2006, p. 150). Thus, in order to accommodate cultural minorities as part of a nation which celebrates cultural diversity as a value, state elites need to provide national minority groups with the freedom to choose their own identity. As the leading theorist of multiculturalism Will Kymlicka (1991, p. 192) also argues, minority rights "help to ensure that the members of minority cultures have access to a secure cultural structure from which to make such choices for themselves, and thereby promote liberal equality".

Yet, how can state elites formulate the *nation* in a way which allows national cultural minority groups to make their own choices? Kymlicka regards the historical development of the relationship between minority and majority groups in ethno-culturally diversified societies as a "process of mutual accommodation in which each group's sense of rightful expectations has played a role in redefining the interpretations of liberal democratic norms and

institutions" (Kymlicka, 2001, p. 52). Under this process, minority groups do not need to efface their own cultures and traditional authenticities. Kymlicka tries to locate "minority rights *within* liberal theory" (Kymlicka, 2001, p. 21), and points out that: "there are compelling interests related to culture and identity which are fully consistent with liberal principles of freedom and equality, and which justify granting special rights to minorities" (Kymlicka, 2001, pp. 21-2).

In such a context, equal relationships between national majority and minority groups rest on two interweaving principles. One is the principle of group-specific rights, including those which promote local autonomy. The other is difference-blind common rights, which provide citizens, be they majority or minority, with equal status despite their different ethno-cultural backgrounds. There is likely to be a tension between these two principles because, if state elites promote distinct ethno-cultural identities or minority cultures, this may cause a risk that the nation-state – founded on equal citizenship and other liberal principles such as freedom – will be fragmented or destabilised, potentially even leading toward the separation of national minority groups from the nation-state. This tension parallels the classic debates between multiculturalism – which emphasises the recognition of cultural differences and the accommodation of minority group rights – and interculturalism, which seeks to foster intercultural dialogue, promote the integration of different cultural groups, and create shared values within culturally diverse societies (see Meer, Modood, & Zapata-Barrero, 2016). One of the criticisms raised by interculturalism is that multiculturalism potentially risks cultivating separate lives rather than shared public spaces. On this point, Ted Cantle (2012) argues that multiculturalism may promote segregation rather than social and national unity, exacerbate ethno-cultural tensions, and reinforce social distrust and instability, since it emphasises the protection of group rights. Similarly, Zapata-Barrero (2017) contends that multiculturalism's recognition-based approach can unwittingly increase the risk of separation if it neglects everyday dialogue among people from different cultural backgrounds.

However, recent arguments from both camps generally concur that these two tenets are not dichotomously antithetical but are, rather, mutually complementary (see Kymlicka, 2016; Zapata-Barrero, 2017; Mansouri & Tariq, 2021). Interculturalism seeks to promote face-to-face micro-level practical interaction and everyday communication among people from different cultural backgrounds while multiculturalism provides macro level normative policies and institutional frameworks for anti-discrimination, equality, recognition, and rights-based inclusion. Thus, although multiculturalism and interculturalism cannot be strictly synthesised in practice, "multi-inter-culturalism" – by which I mean the simultaneous promotion of multicultural policies and intercultural practices – can effectively provide state elites with a legitimate approach to managing ethno-cultural tensions and conflicts, and to minimising the risk of galvanising separatism and social disintegration.

This article aims to explores how state elites attempt to manage ethno-cultural tensions by examining historical patterns of elite attitudes towards multi-inter-cultural promotion. Empirically, this article looks at the prolonged and protracted ethno-cultural conflict in the Deep South of Thailand, with special reference to the problematic relationship between the Thai state and the Malay-Muslim minority residing there. The Deep South of Thailand, once belonged to an independent kingdom of Patani, consists of the present-day provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat and four Malay-speaking districts of Songkhla. The Deep South and the Malay-Muslims residing in the region provide illuminating and long-lasting examples of non-Thai minority cultures living inside the Buddhist-dominated Thai state. Since the early twentieth century, when the region was incorporated into Siam (present-day Thailand) owing to negotiations between the Kingdom of Siam and European powers, the Thai ruling elites have tried to assimilate, eliminate, integrate, isolate and accommodate those Muslims into the Thai nation. Accordingly, there is a colliding ethno-cultural tension between the centrifugal forces of the Malay-Muslims that have promoted struggles for local autonomy and the centripetal force of the state that has attempted to – sometimes forcefully – incorporate those Malay-Muslims into the national community. As a result, the century-old conflict in the Deep South still lingers.

While there is no scholarly agreement as to the root-cause of the conflict in the Deep South, almost all scholarly accounts do not eliminate the possibility that historical grievances linked to the ethno-cultural identity of Malay-Muslims may be at the heart of the conflict. Srisompob Jitpiromsri, a Pattani-based political scientist, and Duncan McCargo, a leading specialist on Thai politics, for example, argue that the conflict was propelled by politico-historical grievances (Srisompob & McCargo, 2010, pp. 169-70). By translating the current violence as a 'renewed or reconfigured version of the older separatist struggle of the 1960s and 1970s', the conflict in the Deep South shows the character of an ethnic uprising. The recent uprising in the Deep South has essentially been mobilised by Malay-Muslims' perceptions of the central government's assimilationist policies. The Malay-Muslims are likely to regard the assimilation as ethno-cultural hegemonic force which may direly efface local culture, identities and traditions. Similarly, Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian argues that by ascribing its origin to the new centralised provincial administrative system of *thesaphiban* officially introduced at the end of the nineteenth century, the separatist struggle was evoked by "the historical experiences based on the ethnic and socio-cultural identity of the Malay Muslim community" (Kobkua, 2013, p. 241).

Hence, we may come to conclude that the conflict in the Deep South can be attributed to the Thai ruling elites' failure to recognise and uphold the legitimacy of multi-inter-culturalism. This view may resonate with that of the existing literature on multiculturalism in Thailand. As historian Patrick Jory (2000, p. 22) argues:

> For a century the Thai state has attempted to transform a multi-ethnic kingdom into a mono-cultural nation-state. Vigorous efforts to construct a homogeneous national culture and impose a narrowly defined national identity were accompanied by a process of political centralization. … Yet some of the key demands, including local elections for the powerful position of provincial governor …, were ignored. It seems that multiculturalism in Thailand has yet to fully flex its political muscle.

As a result, the status of the ethno-cultural minority in Thailand is ambivalently distressed, and installing multiculturalism as a policy and interculturalism as a practical reality may have not been readily straightforward in Thai society (see also Horstmann, 2013).

However, there is evidence to suggest that Thailand has by no means been abominably antithetical to multi-inter-culturalism. The multicultural environment and the preservation of ethno-cultural diversity have historically been integral to and gradually evolved within Thai society. As the noted historian Craig Reynolds argues, "[T]he policies, at least in the nineteenth century, did not subjugate the minority cultures to the point where they were extinguished, [and] … central Siam in the nineteenth century was accustomed to a polyethnic population long before the term 'multiculturalism' was invented" (Reynolds, 1998, p. 121). In the context of the Deep South, the Thai authorities have taken heed to the sensitivity of ethno-cultural diversity and, at least since the 1980s, have attempted to build the Thai nation bolstering multiculturalism and interculturalism. As I argue below, the government in the 1980s attempted to promote multiculturalism, by supporting ethno-cultural diversity and group-specific rights, such as the use of local language. The ideology and discourse of multiculturalism and cultural interaction have officially been a significant part of the government's security policy toward the South at least since the end of the 1990s. The government's security agencies have also paid significant attention to cultural diversity and interaction. After the unrest in the Deep South re-intensified in 2004, the Office of National Security Council recognised that "in order to solve the ongoing unrest in the Deep South, it is necessary to correctly understand the meaning of multicultural society, which has been developed throughout history", and aimed to establish a multicultural society in order to "seek coexistence and peace in the Deep South" (Khrongchai, p. 1).

By considering these historical backdrops, we can observe a palpable gap between the still-immature development of multi-inter-culturalism in Thailand and official state discourse promoting it. This article aims to examine why the ruling elites' efforts have failed to bridge this gap. In order to address this guiding concern, it looks at the historical pattern of transformation of Thai nationalism over the course of the last century, from one, which is based on "ethno-cultural nationalism" or ethno-cultural homogenisation, to one that at least incorporates some aspects of "civic nationalism" promoting a community of equal citizenship and "multi-inter-cultural nationalism" espousing inter-ethno-cultural equality, promoting inter-ethno-cultural dialogues, and celebrating ethno-cultural diversity.[1] This article explores the historical transformation of the ways by which Thai elites have formulated Thai national identity through interacting with the Malay-Muslims in the Deep South and their culture and tradition, and examines why the state-formulation of Thai national identity has not fully embraced multiculturalism despite the fact that the Thai ruling elites have tended to recognise the significance of ethno-cultural diversity and promote equal citizenship.

In order to address these primary questions, this article examines three specific periods during which the Deep South witnessed critical moments in its history and its relationship with the Thai government. The first section deals with the early efforts of assimilation implemented by the government to the 1960s. The second section focuses on the relatively peaceful period of the 1980s when the government worked on reconciliation between the government and the Malay-Muslims. The third section looks at the period from 2001 to 2006, when the government employed repressive measures to suppress crimes and insurgencies, emphasising security enforcement over conciliation (see for example, Chaiwat, 2005; Thanet, 2007; Srisak, 2007; Askew, 2007; Jory, 2007; Funston, 2008; McCargo, 2014; Helbardt, 2015; Liow, 2016, pp. 99-134; Nguyen & Oishi, 2016; Rungrawee, 2021). By examining these three periods, this article seeks to identify the overarching continuity in government discursive attitudes toward multi-inter-culturalism and to explain why the Thai state has been unable to fully embrace it in

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[1] My understanding of these nationalisms is based on and developed from David Brown's informative classification (Brown, 2000, p. Chapters 2 & 3). Ethno-cultural nationalism promotes ethno-cultural homogenisation based on the belief in myths of common descent of the nation's core population, emphasising distinctive ethnic, historical, linguistic, religious, and traditional attributes as being parts of the shared culture of this community of descent. Promoters of this nationalism try to assimilate and/or eradicate aberrant cultural identities. Civic nationalism, in contrast, promotes a community of equal citizenship based on a common territorial homeland, a unified legal system, and a civic culture. Promoters of this nationalism can ignore ethno-cultural differences. They aim to integrate ethno-cultural minority groups into a common territorially-based civic culture. Multicultural nationalism promotes a social justice community which celebrates ethno-cultural diversity as a value of the community and which guarantees inter-ethno-cultural equality. Promoters of this nationalism seek the coexistence – without fierce cultural assimilation or extensive national integration – between national majority and national minority groups within the nation.

practice. The article analyses the language that national leaders, especially prime ministers, have used when discussing the Deep South, and what this language reflects about the changing nature of official versions of Thai nationhood. When analysing the language, I look at ruling elites' perceptions of the Deep South and the Malay Muslims residing there. In talking *about* and *to* the Deep South and the Malay-Muslims, those elites disseminated various ideas of Thainess and various relevant themes, concerning ethno-cultural homogeneity, national development, national integration, national harmonisation, and moral supremacy. Analyses of the language of those elites show the links between their perceptions of the Deep South and their policies toward the region. These analyses reveal what kind of Thainess ruling elites constructed while dealing with the Deep South and the Malay Muslims living there.

Early Assimilationist Efforts: Ethno-cultural and Civil Nationalisms

The cultural assimilation policy was primarily promoted by the then Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram[2] from the early 1930s to the late 1950s. Although the detailed analysis of his assimilation policy is beyond the scope of this article, Phibun, suffice it to say, conducted systematic measures to codify Thai culture (Barmé, 1993). For Phibun, it was inevitable that the Thai nation would advantage the 'Thai' over other ethno-cultural groups (Prayurasak, 1996, p. 273). Thus, his fierce assimilation (or Thai-fication) badly affected the Malay-Muslims since it forced the Malay-Muslims to transform themselves into Thais by prohibiting them from using the Malay language and adhering to Malay-Muslim cultures (Phraya Rattanaphakdi, 1966, pp. 45-6). On this point, Ibrahim Syukri, a local Malay nationalist, explicitly argued that Phibun's national assimilation amounted to an attempt to eradicate Malay-Muslim culture and tradition (Syukri, 1985, p. 87). Phibun's assimilation, thus, implanted an us-versus-them mentality in which the Malay Muslims felt that they were the "them" in Phibun's national culture. They became culturally non-Thai as a product of Phibun's codification of the Thai national culture through the State Conventions.[3]

By inheriting the tradition of cultural assimilation, Sarit Thanarat, who was prime minister from October 1958 to his death in December 1963, attempted to assimilate and integrate the Muslim dominated Deep South into the national community as part of his "development" programme, which he started in 1961. Sarit's effort to assimilate the Malay-Muslims can clearly be seen in one of his development programmes, called the Self-Help Settlement (*nikhom sang ton eng*) project, which specifically targeted the Deep South. In the period between 1961 and 1972, the project established five Self-Help Settlements: one each in Yala and Satun provinces, and three locations in Narathiwat province (Saengphet, 2004, p. 97). The project's goal was to bring Malay-speaking Muslims closer to the rest of the nation and to promote national development by making use of resources available in the Deep South. About 300,000 Thai-Buddhists from the North-East moved to the Deep South through this project (Saengphet, 2004, p. 97).

The motive behind this project was ethno-culturally nationalistic. When Sarit spoke to ethnic Thais in other parts of the country and tried to mobilise them to participate in or support the project, he defined Thainess in explicitly ethnic and primordial terms. The nationalist discourse he used to promote the Self-Help Settlement project highlighted "Thai blood" inherited from Thai ancestors as a significant part of Thai nationalism. In 1960, Sarit made his first official inspection trip to the South and found out that the economy of the South was controlled by non-Thai people, the Chinese and the Malay-Muslims (Thak, 2007, pp. 131-2). He also regretted that people in the South were not Thai as they were unable to speak Thai (Thak, 2007, pp. 56-7). During the inspection trip, he gave a speech to stress the significance of building Thai national identity around an ethnic core[4]:

> I would like to urge and incite you to consider your love for the Thai nation. Our nationalism should flow thick in our blood … . I want my Thai brothers from Isan [North-East], the North and South to pour to the South to settle and work there … Bring down Thai blood and the love of the nation to spread there (Khana rathamontri, 1964, p. 172 cited in Thak, 2007, p. 132).

Not surprisingly, some intellectuals point out that the development policies introduced by Sarit intruded into the social, religious and cultural institutions of the Malay-Muslim community and posed a threat to their identity and social values (Surin, 1982, p. 172; Che Man, 1990, p. 163).

Yet, assimilation had limitations. The former Provincial Election Commissioner in Yala and a Chinese-Muslim argued that Sarit's assimilation effort through the Self-Help Settlement project was far from successful. He argued that:

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[2] Phibun Songkhram was Prime Minister twice from 1938 to 1944 and from 1948 to 1957.

[3] In response to the state's assimilation, Malay-Muslim religious leaders, such as Haji Sulong, called for autonomous self-government based on local traditions and religious practices (Surin, 1982, p. 152; Thanet, 2008, p. 11).

[4] The source does not clarify who was in the audience during Sarit's speech. Yet, as he made this speech in Thai, it can be assumed that they were mostly government officials.

Most people who moved to the Deep South through the project could not continue to live here and returned to the North-East because of cultural and customary differences. … Some Thai-Buddhists who moved from the North-East became Muslims. They married local Muslims and converted to Islam. The religion of Islam allows everyone to be Muslim if he/she learns to be Muslim.[5]

In the cultural milieu of the Muslim-dominated Deep South, the assimilation of Malay-Muslims into the Thai ethno-cultural hegemony through intermarriage was virtually impossible. Instead, what assimilation took place in the Deep South mostly went in the opposite direction: incorporation of some Thai-Buddhists into the loaded Muslim cultural hegemony.

Sarit did not only rely on the ethno-cultural nationalist strategy of assimilation. Integration also became an important strategy since it was discursively plausible to incorporate Malay-Muslims as part of the Thai nation. Integration did not require Malay-Muslims to discard their ethnicity, language, religion or tradition. Under this integration scheme, Sarit was ambivalent when he talked about the official place of religion. Sarit's strategy was to *nationalise* Malay Muslims as Thai, allowing them to have religious freedom, as long as they paid loyalty to the nation. At the opening of the Pattani Central Mosque on 25 May 1963, for example, he said:

> Every inch of our land belongs to the property of Thailand. … I wish my brothers and sisters to cooperate to protect our nation-state and develop the country together. The religious doctrine is about faith and the mind. Anyone can believe in any religion; it is up to you. But as for the nation, every Thai brother and sister will not separate forever (Khana rathamontri, 1964, p. 1104).

Sarit was rhetorically receptive to Islam as a religion that people could choose freely: "it is up to you". Thus, when addressing Southern audiences, Sarit repeatedly stressed that Thai people could believe in *any* religion. Although he regarded Buddhism as an important source of morality and legitimacy, he did not stress this idea when he gave speeches at religious ceremonies in the Deep South. On these occasions, he stressed that Thailand provided religious freedom, and he did not define 'religion' in official ideology as referring exclusively to Buddhism. On 25 May of the 1963 Islamic New Year, for example, Sarit addressed his speech to Muslims, saying that:

> Thailand will provide religious freedom equally to Thais and foreigners. … Religious difference is not problematic because the principle of every religion tells us to develop ourselves to be good people and to stop behaving badly. Therefore, if people have their own religion and behave following religious principles, people will be meritorious (Khana rathamontri, 1964, pp. 1101-2).

Sarit needed to re-define the notion of Thainess so that it could have an integrative effect on the Malay-Muslims in the Deep South. Mostly, Sarit called the Malay-Muslims in the Deep South "Thai-Muslims" or "Thai-Islam" *(chao thai islam)* and "Thai-Islam brothers and sisters" (*phi nong chao thai islam*) (Khana rathamontri, 1964), regarding them as nationally Thai, though religiously they were non-Buddhists.

Instead of re-inventing the meaning of what and who the Thais were, Sarit tried to sidestep the issue by focusing on what the Thais should *not* be. A main thrust of his official ideology was to construct a notion of the "un-Thai". The enemies Sarit especially singled out were communists who destroyed national security. Sarit repeatedly stated that the national enemy of communism was operating in the Deep South, and the Malay-Muslims should not cooperate with communists. For example, when Sarit visited Yala on 8 February 1963, he said that:

> What I hate the most is a group of people who do not believe in any religion. These people are, for example, communists and those who always take advantages of religion in order to seek their own benefits. This is because these people will destroy our nation and religion in the future (Khana rathamontri, 1964, p. 937).

By bracketing communists in the Deep South as non-believers, who were the worst enemies of Thailand, Sarit was trying to create a concrete shared enemy without ethno-religiously classifying the Malay-Muslims as Thai or un-Thai. The Malay-Muslims were part of the Thai nation since neither ethnically being Malay nor religiously being Muslim was an element of Sarit's definition of un-Thainess.

To classify un-Thainess, Sarit repeatedly developed the notion that political infiltration from foreign countries was a major threat to Thailand. He believed such infiltration could easily occur in the border areas, and disturb national development and integration. The National Economic Plan clearly stated that: "Self-Help Settlements have political significance … in the border areas or the places where there is danger of political infiltration from foreign countries, especially in the Deep South and different provinces in the North-East" (NESDB, 1964, p. 145).

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[5] Interview with author in Yala on 24 September 2009.

The "political infiltration" highlighted in the plan refers to the propagation and penetration of communism into Thailand (Thak, 2007, pp. 209-10). Until 1960, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) members, who had at first crossed the border to Thailand to hide from the Malaysian government and to train Malaysian guerrillas, gradually altered gears to search for supporters among Malay-Muslims in the Deep South, and asserted that the party was working for the independence of the South (Khajadphai, 1976, pp. 274-5). [6]

Similarly, the separatist fronts tried to promote Islam, Malayness, and the independence of Patani among local villagers.[7] Whereas these fronts differed in many aspects, they all aimed to promote Islam and Malay identity and culture, and shared animosity against the Thai government. They regarded "the Thai administration as a colonial power with which no compromise [was] possible and stress[ed] independence through armed struggle" (Nanthawan, 1977, p. 87). Sarit saw Malay nationalism and the goal of the restoration of an independent Patani as another form of "political infiltration" which needed to be eradicated (Khajadphai, 1976, p. 275). However, the government did not accuse the entire Malay-Muslim community of harbouring separatist goals. On the contrary, the government did not even label the guerrilla groups as forming a "separatist movement" (*khabuankan baengyaek dindaeng*), but called those groups terrorist movement or insurgency (*khabuankan jon ko kan rai*) (Khajadphai, 1976, p. 276). The government tried to criminalise them, stressing that they employed tactics usually used by "normal bandits" (*jon thammada*), such as kidnapping for ransom (Khajadphai, 1976, p. 276).

Here, again, the Malay-Muslims rhetorically fell outside the circle of Sarit's national enemies. While the separatist fronts consisted of ethnic Malays and promoted Malayness, the government did not emphasise these facts when it denigrated them. The borderline was drawn instead between those who were engaged in terrorism or insurgency that would disrupt national development and integration, and those who did not participate in such activities. The government did not charge people engaged in the separatist movement with being "Malay nationalists", but with being communists or terrorists.

This section has looked at early assimilationist or Thaification efforts primarily made by Sarit. He attempted to incorporate the Malay-Muslims into the field of Thainess by eliminating, and ignoring ethno-cultural differences, or at least their significance. His efforts involved two approaches. On the one hand, assimilation which was prominent in Sarit's Self-Help Settlement project had ethno-cultural nationalist underpinnings. Under this assimilation, the government required the Malay-Muslims to be culturally Thai. Assimilation was promoted in the direction of ethno-cultural nationalism. On the other hand, Sarit's definition of un-Thainess as being communist and separatist did not have ethno-cultural connotations. Thus, even though the Malay-Muslims had undesirable attributes of Thainess, being Malay or Muslim *per se* was not equivalent to being communist or separatist, which was the officially designated national enemies under the Sarit regime. As Sarit de-essentialised the notion of un-Thainess, by implication, he also de-essentialised Thainess. This de-essentialisation pointed in the direction of civic nationalism. The de-essentialised idea of Thainess could sidestep the issue of ethno-cultural differences between the Thai-Buddhists and the Malay-Muslims. The Malay-Muslims could, thus, be Thai as long as they did not become communists and separatists. Sarit straddled the contradictory forces of ethno-cultural and civic nationalisms in the process of incorporating the Malay-Muslims into the Thai nation. However, both approaches rejected the legitimacy of ethno-cultural autonomy demands by Malay-Muslims. As I will argue in the next section, the task of the government in the 1980s was to carefully deal with these autonomy demands.

Toward Reconciliation?: Civic and Multi-inter-cultural Nationalisms

When Prem Tinsulanond came to office in 1980, his government used different approaches to deal with the Deep South than those of his predecessors. Prem was born in the Songkhla province of Southern Thailand and served in the Fourth Army Region in the South, becoming Army Commander-in-Chief in 1978. Prem used his personal background in the Deep South to stress his familiarity with the area and tried to develop policies that were characterised by his support of Muslims' equal citizenship as Thais and their ethno-cultural distinctiveness.

In dealing with the unrest in the Deep South, Prem employed the strategy of accommodation rather than the harsh suppression used by previous regimes. As exemplified in the case of combating communists, he extended a "political offensive" policy to the Deep South.[8] The strategy of combating national enemies with military force

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[6] The MCP, particularly its tenth unit, might also have come into close contact with secessionist groups (*khabuan kan baeng yaek gin daen* or *khabuan kan jon ko kan rai*) based in the Deep South. The MCP helped train separatists, sometimes fought together with them, and propagandised about the future independence of Patani (Khajadphai, 1976, pp. 295-6).

[7] The separatist fronts that emerged from the end of the 1950s are: the National Liberation Front of Patani or Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani (BNPP) in 1959; the National Revolutionary Front of Republic of Patani or Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) in 1963; and the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) in 1968.

[8] The idea of dealing with the communist threat was epitomised in Prem's prime ministerial order 66/2523. The order was well known as a symbolising a "political offensive" or "politics to lead military" policy (*kanmuang nam kanthahan*), which was a strategy of negotiation between government officials and communists.

was replaced by one using political means. In relation to the Deep South, Prem issued Prime Ministerial Order 8/2524, in January 1981, which established two important institutions in the region. One was the Civil-Police-Military Task Force 43 (CPM 43), aiming at ending extra judicial killings and disappearances, which were military tactics prior to that time. The other was the Southern Border Provincial Administration Centre (SBPAC), established in 1981 under the Fourth Army Region Commander, and later the Interior Minister. The SBPAC included many local officials from the deep South, and emphasised that its work encompassed "socio-psychology, political administration, development, efficiency of government officials, socio-economic development and the local people, and cooperation with the local people and with neighbouring countries" (So Oo Bo To, 2002, p. 31). As McCargo (Thaksin and the Resurgence of Violence in the Thai South, 2007, p. 41) explains, "the Centre [SBPAC] was a beacon for ideas of administrative justice, symbolizing the Thai state's sincerity and goodwill". Prem's creation of the SBAPC became a symbol of harmony and reconciliation between Thais and Malays in the deep South. Prem charged both institutions with solving unrest in the deep South, and ordered them to do so by using political means, as well as military ones (Panitan, 2004, p. 25).

Prem's approach to the Deep South was to seek national unity within ethno-cultural diversity. In doing so, he tried to re-classify the idea of Thainess, by establishing the idea of the "Thai-Muslim" which would bridge the gaps between the Thai-Buddhist and the Malay-Muslim culture. This idea of the Thai Muslim did not aim to assimilate the Malays but to seek coexistence between the Thai Buddhists and the Malay-Muslims. At the same time, he regarded Muslims in the South as equally Thai citizens. Prem bolstered two notions in constructing this idea of the Thai-Muslim. One was the notion that the government needed to promote the ethno-cultural distinctiveness of the Deep South, and to diversify or liberalise the notion of Thainess. This involved the promotion of local culture, religion, and language in the Deep South. The other was to provide Muslims with equal access to Thai citizenship despite their ethno-cultural differences from the mainstream Thai-Buddhist culture. Prem recognised ethno-cultural diversity but, at the same time, tried to make the idea of Thainess ethno-culturally difference-blind so that even Malay-Muslims could be equally Thai.

In term of the promotion and integration of ethno-cultural diversity, Prem promoted the use of local language as well as the Thai language. The SBPAC's report emphasises that:

> The SBPAC pursued the project of Thai language development in order to promote the use of the Thai language among the Thais who are Muslim, [and] … arranged the project of Malay language training for government officials who had direct contact with local (Muslim) people. … The mutual understanding will lead to the development of the region (So Oo Bo To, 2002, pp. 122-3).

The SBPAC accepted Malay as an important language for the development of the deep South (see also Chichanok, 2004, p. 61). Although Prem tried to encourage Malay-Muslims to use the Thai language (So Oo Bo To, 2002, p. 177), he never discouraged them from utilising Malay in the local community. Prem told the Malay-Muslims to use Malay freely as long as they also learned Thai. Prem's promotion of the Malay language helped liberalise or pluralise the notion of Thainess. The cultural distinctiveness of the Malay-Muslims could be incorporated as a secondary part of Thai hegemonic culture. Whereas previous governments were obsessed with identifying and eliminating elements which could damage national development, Prem identified non-Thai elements, such as the Malay language and culture that could be incorporated into his notion of Thainess. Hence, Malay-speakers in this period were entitled to be Thai without experiencing intervention in their religio-cultural affairs.

Prem also sought a symbiosis between the promotion of ethno-cultural Thainess and the preservation of Islamic education. To do so, the government under Prem tried to reduce promotion of Thai culture in favour of the preservation of Islamic culture. The Secretary of the National Security Council, Suwit Suthanukul, warned in 1988 that too much emphasis on the development of Thai language education might have undesirable effects:

> … The transformation of private Islamic schools into normal private schools in the future may be a correct idea to develop Thai language knowledge among Thai Muslim youth. However, to change the status of Islamic schools to normal ones will destroy Muslim culture and we have to abolish Islamic schools with great care, by paying attention to the intentions of the owners and administrators of the schools (NR 0506/799, 1988).

According to Suwit, the only way that the government could satisfy the Malay-Muslim population (or Muslim parents who sent their children to study in the Private Schools for Islamic Education) was to increase Islamic subjects in the school curriculum (NR 0506/799, 1988). The Ministry of Education changed the curriculum for junior high schools in the South in the early 1980s, aiming to reduce Buddhist elements and increase Muslim subjects. For example, the Ministry reduced the amount of physical education and replaced it with religious

subjects. It also ordered that religious element be introduced to secular subjects. For example, in music classes, students needed to sing Islamic songs, such as *Anasid*, or to read the Qur'an.

As well as the promotion of the ethno-cultural distinctiveness, Prem attempted to provide the Malay-Muslims with equal access to educational and economic opportunities, which Thai citizens living in other parts of Thailand enjoyed. One strategy of the SBPAC from 1981 to 1988 was to implant awareness among Muslims in the Deep South that they were not a minority (So Oo Bo To, 1989, p. 84). For example, Fourth Army Commander, Harn Leenanond who used a policy called *Tai rom yen* (South in the cool shade), pointed out that:

> Even some high-ranking military officials have misperceptions that the Thai-Muslims are the minority. In this regard, the Thai-Muslims were Thais, the same as other Thais living in other regions. [Differences] in religion, language and cultural tradition will not make them a minority at all (Harn, 1983, p. 50).

It was clear that Harn de-essentialised the notion of Thainess, suggesting that language, religion, and culture were irrelevant to Thainess. The difference between the Prem government and the previous ones was that Prem and other government officials, including Harn, at least recognised ethno-cultural differences, and rhetorically gave them equal status to the Thai mainstream, even if they then trivialised such differences. Harn ignored the fact that Muslims were a religious and ethnic minority and that Muslims in the deep South were ethnically Malays not Thais. The key was that even if the government ignored ethno-cultural differences, it also did not try to eliminate non-Thai cultures and traditions, or imply that they were un-Thai. Instead, it claimed that the Malay-Muslims were equally able to be Thai citizens irrespective of their ethno-cultural distinctiveness.

Looking at government policies on national development under the Prem regime, we can also witness an attempt to accommodate the local populace into national projects and to create awareness of Thainess among the populace there. The official government discourse on national development can be explicit in the realm of economy development. The Prem government encouraged the people in the Deep South to participate in national development. One government policy which specifically addressed the development of the region for the people of the Deep South was the so-called New Hope Policy (*Harap-pan baru*[9] in Yawi) which was established by the Military Commander, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, in 1988. Chavalit was very explicit about the problem in the Deep South. He argued that the primary problem in the Deep South was the distance between the Thais who believed in Buddhism and people who believed in Islam and between government officials and the people living there (Chayakorn, 1991, p. 71). The New Hope policy encouraged locals to participate in national development, by trying to find them employment, and by establishing cooperation between the military and local villagers.[10] The spokesman of the fourth army region, Banchon Chawalasil, provided a stronger statement, which requested cooperation from the people:

> The project [of New Hope] is a scheme of cooperation between the government and the people, and emphasises that to solve socio-psychological problems is the most significant priority. … It uses the method to create a harmonious image of the southern region by making the region a special economic zone (Bunkalom, 1989, p. 206).

Banchon identified the southern region as an area of cooperation for economic development, ignoring ethnic and religious differences there, and not even explicitly saying that the area was the "Muslim-dominated Deep South" or an area of insecurity – descriptions which had been very common in rhetoric security officials had used in the past to talk about the area. The southern region was discursively transformed from an area of cultural specificity or national insecurity to an area of harmonious cooperation for the sake of economic development. As the project states, "[The aim] is to remove mutual animosity between government officials and the people, and among the people themselves, and to create understanding, affection, and harmonious unity in the region" (Phanaek amnuaikan khrongkan khwam wan mai harap-pa, 1992, p. 2). The government, through this project, tried to bridge the gap between government officials and ordinary Malay-Muslims.

Moreover, government discourse on development emphasised unity of the nation by ignoring ethnic and religious differences between Thais and Malay-Muslims. Chavalit said that the project was aimed to develop the region of the Deep South as a whole, and did not focus on the development of religiously or ethically demarcated segments, such as the Malay-Muslims (Chayakorn, 1991, p. 71). This regional development rhetoric strategically ignored the fact that the Thai-Buddhists were the majority and the Malay-Muslims were the minority. The notion of what constituted being Thai was not exclusively derived from primordial factors, such as ethnicity, blood or Buddhism. The project promised to accommodate different ethnicities and religions into the pride of Thainess. The project stated that:

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[9] *Harap-pan* means hope and *baru* means to be new.
[10] Author's interviews with the Muslim scholar, Muhammad Omar Japakiya in Yala on 23 September 2009 and with the former Election Commissioner in the Yala Province in Yala on 24 September 2009.

> The project to develop New Hope of the Thai people in the five provinces of the Deep South … aims to solve the problems in the Deep South in order to create an attitude of pride in being Thai, affection, harmony and peaceful coexistence without denying ethnic and religious differences. The project implants the recognition of being Thai and the responsibility of being Thai, and upholds the democratic form of government with the king as head of the state (So Oo Bo To, 1989, p. 60).

As we have seen, government policies under the Prem regime transformed the notion of Thainess into one that emphasised an ethno-culturally difference-blind notion of equal Thai citizenship and that promoted ethno-cultural diversity as a value of the Thai nation. Prem and other government officials utilised civic nationalism to integrate Muslims in the Deep South as equal citizens of Thailand. They promoted equal and difference-blind common rights, such as rights to participate in national development projects, saying that ethno-cultural difference did not make Muslims a minority. At the same time, Prem used multi-inter-cultural nationalism, by integrating ethno-cultural diversity and promoting group-specific rights, such as the use of local language. His idea of the Thai-Muslim functioned as bridging the gap between the Thai-Buddhists and the Malay-Muslims. Being "Thai-Muslim" provided Muslims in the Deep South with more options to lead their lives, such as participating in national development and national education, and being bilingual.

However, it should be noted that Prem's policy was neither fully multicultural nor substantively intercultural. In a multi-inter-cultural context, individuals are allowed to make free choices about how to lead their lives. In a fully multi-inter-cultural environment, the Malay-Muslims would have been allowed to choose to stay as "Malay" without being required to speak Thai. Prem's goal was, as in the case of Sarit, national unification. Thus, being consciously Thai was important to citizens in Thailand. For example, in a meeting of the special research committee on Thai language development held on 8 September 1986, Prem emphasised the advantages of knowing the Thai language and explained how it should be used and learned in the Deep South and other border areas:

> People in the three provinces (of the Deep South) prefer to speak the local Malay language which they called Yawi. [They speak Yawi] because these three provinces are close to Malaysia. In fact … people prefer to use local languages in other border areas, too. Yet, when they come to talk to government officials, they use Thai which is the official and national language. … What is most important is that if people are born in Thailand, they need to speak Thai and should be proud of our national language (Prem, 1988, pp. 140-1).

The way Prem promoted the cultural distinctiveness of the Malay-Muslims was not ethno-culturally neutral but Thai-centric. His support for the use of the Malay language made it clear that it remained subservient to the promotion of the culturally hegemonic language of "Thai". The cultural distinctiveness of the Malay-Muslims could only be incorporated as a secondary part of Thai majority culture.

The More Things Change, The More They Stay the Same: (Anti-?) Multi-inter-cultural Nationalism

The Muslim-dominated Deep South under Thaksin Shinawatra's prime ministership (2001–2006) warrants critical attention since it presents a sharp break from the Prem period. The most obvious change was the sudden escalation of violence in the region in 2004 (Funston, 2008; Arianti, et al., 2022, p. 43). From 1993 to 2003, the average number of violent incidents in the South was 68 per year. In 2003 the number was 84, but in 2004 it jumped to 1843 (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2005; Srisompob & Panyasak, 2007, p. 91).

To deal with the unrest, Thaksin and his government used security forces to suppress it whereas pre-Thaksin governments had adopted more conciliatory approaches to disputes in the Deep South. Thaksin decided to dissolve the SBPAC and the CPM 43, established by Prem, in May 2002.[11] When dissolving them, Thaksin announced that the situation in the Deep South was 'normal' like in other provinces. He argued that 'bandits there are *jon thammada* (normal bandits) as in the case of other border provinces. Therefore, the special administration … is no longer necessary (*Nayok thaksin kui kap prachachon lem 3*, n.d., pp. 5-6). Here, by deliberately avoiding labelling the southern unrest as a separatist struggle, Thaksin trivialised security threats in the Deep South and ethno-cultural sensitivities that previous ruling elites tried to deal with. Thus, it might be assumed that the violent response that Thaksin encountered arose because he denied ethno-cultural sensitivities in the Deep South and regressively de-multiculturalised Thai society.

Yet, Thaksin never tried to return to the old strategies of earlier forced assimilation policies. When he – interactively – spoke to Muslims in the Deep South or to a wider audience, his discourse of Thainess was similar to Prem's, guaranteeing religious freedom in Thai society. In his rhetoric, Thaksin promised to treat Muslims equally as "Thai citizens", and to support Islam-specific programmes and activities. His radio programme on 15th May 2004 shortly after the battle of Krue Se Mosque, which resulted in the deaths of 107 militants and five security officials, was typical of the rhetorical style he came to develop in dealing with the crisis in the South:

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[11] *Matichon Sudsapda* 26 March-1 April 2007: 6

We think that everyone is Thai and belongs to the Thai family that has experienced a traumatic event. Even though some are evil, and others are good, Thai people have to die as Thai. … The government has to take care of every Thai. … Although it must be that the people who died at the Krue Se incident were evil, we will take care of their families by relying on mercy and a sense of humanity to solve the problem (*Nayok thaksin kui kap prachachon lem 7*, n.d., pp. 37-8).

Thaksin did not start from an explicit assumption that Muslims were culturally alien and thus try to assimilate Muslims. Instead, he asserted that everyone living in Thailand was integratively Thai.[12]

In parallel with his assertion that "everyone is Thai", Thaksin tried to intervene in that crucial institutional bulwark of the Malay-Muslim community: the Ponoh schools[13]. In a sense, if viewed generously, Thaksin's attempt to reorganise the Ponoh school system can be interpreted as promotion of multi-inter-culturalism, as it enlarged opportunities for Muslims by introducing subjects beyond religious studies and by enabling relatively freer interaction with non-Muslim cultures. He aimed to introduce secular subjects to Ponohs where previously only religious subjects were taught. His wider purpose was to standardise the Ponoh school system,[14] by trying to require all Ponoh schools to register with the government[15] and to open more government-funded Islamic educational institutions.[16] Thaksin explained that his purpose was:

To transform Ponoh into the schools where children can become knowledgeable and ethical. Children should have knowledge of both religion and secular subjects. Then if they are grown up, they can move on to study further, find jobs, and have a good future. It should not be like this: even though they finish their studies, they cannot find jobs and do not have a future (*Nayok thaksin kui kap prachachon lem 7*, n.d., p. 421).

Thaksin's reorganisation of Ponohs certainly did not aim to abolish Islamic education. Instead, it introduced secular subjects to the curriculum so that Muslim children could have more opportunities to expand their future life choices. Arguably, this move can, in theory, be seen as a multi-inter-cultural initiative.

However, there is another side to Thaksin's political discourse. It is plausible to argue that Thaksin used ethnically neutral discourse, reiterating simple slogans such as "we are all Thais", and embarked on programmes such as the reorganisation of Ponohs, in order to camouflage the fact that Thaksin built his approach to the South on a foundation of Thai-centric ethno-cultural nationalism. One sign of this was his continued refusal to acknowledge the seriousness of Malay-Muslim grievances. Thaksin often promoted superficial solutions to the crisis. For example, he thought that encouraging citizens to fold paper cranes and then dropping them in the area would be a symbolic apology for the mistreatment of Muslims at Tak Bai on 25th October 2004 and a symbol of the peace which everyone was seeking (*Nayok thaksin kui kap prachachon lem 8*, n.d., p. 90). After the air force dropped paper cranes on 5th December 2004, Thaksin said that:

[In the past] most people [in the Deep South] felt that they were second class citizens, and that they were not accepted as Thais. Some of them were treated badly by government officials. … After the paper cranes, as symbols of peace and freedom, were dropped, poor cooperation with the government became a story of the past. More than 150 million paper cranes were folded even though the population of the country is 62 million. The Thai-Muslims in the three southern provinces feel warm, and feel that Thai people understand them. They also think that they are equally Thai, loving kindness and peace (*Nayok thaksin kui kap prachachon lem 8*, n.d., pp. 257-8).

It was very unlikely that simple symbolic gestures like dropping paper cranes could resolve the deeply-felt grievances in the South (see for example, Lewis, 2006, p. 176; McCargo, 2007, pp. 60-1). Arguably, he trivialised the problem and infantilised Muslims in the Deep South by adopting such superficial symbolic gestures.

Thaksin's assertion that "we all equally Thai" can be viewed through different prisms. Viewed in one light, such a statement indicates Thaksin's openness to Muslims' membership in Thailand's national community. Viewed in another way, however, the constant reiteration points to an anxiety about whether this was indeed the case, and

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[12] The Thaksin government also recognised that ethno-cultural diversity was part of Thai identity. This idea was epitomised in Prime Ministerial Order 68/2547 on the 'Policy of Consolidating Peace in the Three Provinces of the Border'. This order also established a new security agency, the Southern Border Province Peace-Building Command (SBPPC), whose functions resembled Prem's SBPAC, and appointed local community and religious leaders as consultants to the SBPPC.

[13] Ponoh, a Patani Malay corruption of the standard Malay word pondok, refers to a traditional Islamic boarding school.

[14] At that time, there were three types of Islamic educational institutions. Firstly, there were privately owned Ponohs, which did not receive financial support from the government (traditional Ponohs). A second group was registered with the government and received financial support. Thirdly, there were "Private Schools for Islamic Education, which had already been transformed from traditional Ponohs through the 1965 Ministry of Education project.

[15] In October 2004, the then education minister, Adisai Bodharamik, said that the Ministry of Education had registered 214 Ponoh schools, but there were still about 50 Ponohs to be registered in the south. See *Khaw Sod* 8 October 2004.

[16] *Matichon* 16 February 2004

suggests that, for Thaksin, the Malay-Muslims remained a site of unsettling ethnic difference and questionable loyalty. Remembering that Thaksin often made such comments in his regular radio programmes, in which he addressed the entire population of Thailand, it is also possible to view them as a form of "dog whistle" politics (see for example, Goodin & Saward, 2005), in which by stressing that "all" were Thai, he was sending a coded message to the so-called ethnic Thai majority that the problems were indeed with those who were ethnically different.

Moreover, Thaksin's ethno-culturally difference-blind discourse – "we are all Thai" – skilfully obscured his old fashioned ethno-cultural nationalist tendency to locate the source of the security problems in the South in the backwardness of the Malay-Muslim minority. Thaksin's view on Ponoh schools is a case in point. Although Thaksin's reorganisation of Ponoh schools can be interpreted generously as an attempt to transform a traditional environment that isolates itself from the outside world into one open for opportunities to interact with other cultures, there is no escaping that Thaksin repeatedly located Ponohs as a central source of the conflict in the South. Thaksin stated that:

> [In the south,] many Ponoh schools have been established. … Apparently, Ponohs only teach religion. They teach only a few secular subjects. … Bandits burnt [government-run public] schools in order to instigate children to enter Ponoh schools. … In the end, children [who completed their studies in Ponohs] do not have jobs. … If people are not knowledgeable, they cannot study and cannot find jobs. This is the problem in the three provinces of the South (Jaras, 2006, p. 21).

Here Thaksin attributed the source of the security problems to Ponohs. Not only were these backward, taught in a language and on religious doctrines that were – to borrow from James Scott (1998) – "illegible" to the Thai majority and to the state. Thaksin's reiteration of "we are all Thai" pointed to underlying anxiety and uncertainty about Malay-Muslim identity and the cultural difference that they possessed. Yet, Thaksin trivialised and refused to acknowledge the possibility of the serious grievances of Malay-Muslims which could be linked to their ethno-cultural and religious identity and could be at the heart of the conflict in the South. Therefore, the Thaksin government's attempts to reorganise the Ponoh system can be viewed in a very different light: as an effort to intervene and enforce a change in an institution of a minority culture, an effort that demonstrates the supremacy of the Thai nation over the religion and cultural autonomy of the ethno-cultural minority.

Thaksin's nationalism was still fundamentally defined around an ethnic core. In relation to the conflict in the Deep South, he used superficially civic and multi-inter-cultural nationalist discourses. Thaksin only paid lip service to ideas of multi-inter-culturalism, such as equality of all citizens and ethno-cultural diversity. But, in other contexts, his idea of Thai nation still rested its foundation on the Thai ethno-cultural majority. Thaksin repeatedly used ethno-culturally neutral discourse, in order to camouflage the fact that he promoted standards and values of the majority Thai culture. Thus, Thaksin was unable to recognise, or willing to trivialise, the reality of difference in the Thai nation, and misjudged the possibility that Malay-Muslim grievances might be linked to their identity and could be at the heart of the conflict in the South. Instead of acknowledging cultural differences, he constantly reiterated the paramount importance of Thai national identity and unity.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude this article by illustrating the patterns of how the Thai ruling elites dealt with ethno-cultural differences and diversity exhibited by the Malay-Muslims, and formulated their ideas of Thai national identity. The government under Sarit Thanarat formulated Thai national identity as a process of "assimilation", by trying to erase un-Thai cultures and ethnicities. The emphasis on assimilation was a result of those elites' use of elements of *both* ethno-cultural and civic nationalisms, which are often described as mutually antagonistic in typologies of nationalism. In the 1960s, Sarit tried to integrate Malay-Muslims as Thai, the conception of which was still defined through essentialised attributes, such as lineage. He saw Malayness as a threat, as an ethnically mobilised conception spread from Malaysia to instigate Muslims in the South to secede. Yet, he used ethno-culturally difference-blind conceptions such as communism and separatism to define their national enemies. In this definition, Malay-Muslims *per se* did not fall into the category of a national enemy. This definition rhetorically avoided ethno-cultural characteristics. Malay-Muslims were, in principle, entitled to be Thais as long as they eschewed communism and separatism. This was a civic nationalist motif. Sarit's strategy was to sidestep his essentialist definition of Thainess by advocating what Thais should *not* be in ethno-culturally difference-blind terms. In his approach, ethno-cultural and civic nationalisms were mutually reinforcing. He promoted both nationalisms in order to eliminate un-Thai attributes which those Muslims possessed. He presented those nationalisms in an "illiberal" direction, since both ethno-cultural and civic nationalisms were "articulated by insecure elites and …

constitute[d] *ressentiment*-based reaction against [un-Thai] others who [were] perceived as threatening" (Brown, 2000, p. 67).

In the 1980s, Prem Tinsulanond approached the deep South differently. He formulated Thai national identity as the product of a process of "association". He and his allies represented Thai national identity as being able to accommodate ethno-cultural diversity and as valuing the cultures of national minorities. Thainess as a process of association was linked to the continued use of civic nationalism and the rise of a new form of multi-inter-cultural nationalism. Yet, Prem's Thainess was not fully multi-inter-cultural. By discursively making the idea of Thainess ethno-culturally difference-blind and emphasising the significance of ethno-cultural diversity, Prem tried to sidestep the fact that the Thai-Buddhists were the majority and the Malay-Muslims a minority, and tried to associate Malay-Muslims with the Thai ethno-cultural core. Prem still required Muslims to speak Thai, to have Thai consciousness. His emphasis on the significance of being Thai still pointed to the centrality of an ethnic core in his vision of nation.

When the violence re-intensified in 2004, Thaksin Shinawatra formulated national identity as a process of "repression". Thaksin's repression of the allegedly un-Thai was a product of his nationalist discourse, which combined ethno-cultural, civic and multi-inter-cultural elements. Thaksin's idea of Thainess was ethno-culturally Thai centric, regarding the Malay-Muslim minority as being illegible to the Thai majority. Yet, in order to obscure his ethno-culturally Thai centric idea, he superficially and symbolically paid lip service to civic and multi-inter-cultural discourses. He avoided ethno-cultural language when he talked about security problems in the South, and presented them as stemming from amorphously-defined "evil un-Thai" elements. Thus, Thaksin trivialised the Malay-Muslim grievances which were linked to their ethno-cultural and religious identity. Moreover, by discursively showing that he was aware of the significance of promoting equality and integrating ethno-cultural diversity and that the source of the problems in the South was not Malay-Muslim culture but normal bandits, Thaksin legitimised the way he employed repressive measures in the deep South.

The historical pattern of how the Thai ruling elites dealt with the Malay-Muslims and their ethno-cultural differences does not demonstrate a linear progression toward a liberal direction that helps to recognise and incorporate ethno-cultural diversity. Instead, it reflects constant efforts to camouflage the fact that the Thai ethno-cultural majority promoted its own culture and values, and that the Thai nation and identity were defined by an ethnic core. Each typology of nationalism – ethnocultural, civic and multi-inter-cultural – is not an end in itself, a version of Thai national identity for its own sake, but a strategic tool used by the Thai ruling elites to deal with the ethno-cultural tension in the Deep South and the ethno-cultural differences represented by the Malay-Muslims living there. Those elites have often utilised themes associated with civic and multi-inter-cultural nationalism almost as lip service, as a means to sidestep or obscure their reliance on ethno-cultural nationalism. Hence, as the case of Thailand illustrates, the gap between the immature practices of multi-inter-culturalism and the official government discourse on its promotion is unlikely to be bridged as long as the ruling elites insouciantly and naïvely espouse a lip-service form of multi-inter-culturalism that enables them to circumvent the centrality of an ethnic core in their visions of the nation.

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