

**STRUGGLE FOR PRESERVATION OF  
ISLAMIC VALUES:  
THE CASE OF PATTANI MUSLIMS  
IN THAILAND**

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Pattani is the historical name of the southern part of Thailand, formerly known as Siam. This area consists of four provinces. Tala, Pattani, Norathiwat and Satun. Indeed the name Pattani came from the Pathan inhabitants who had settled in the area in 16th century(1). These people came from the Northern Areas of Pakistan. The Pattani area has a population of about three million people. Ninety percent of these people are Malay and believe in Islam. Due to this religio-ethnic background they are culturally nearer to Malaysian Muslims than to Thai Buddhists(2).

Historically, the records of the Langkasuka state in southern Thailand are traceable in 2nd century A.D. It was a famous trade centre in Malay Peninsula with its people believing in Buddhism(3).

In 13th century this state had relations with the northern part of today's Thailand. Meanwhile Islam was spreading in the

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Pattani area. Arab and Indian merchants, who were Muslims, introduced Islam to it and it soon became the focal point of Pattani culture(4). Pattani at that time became the wealthiest state because of the pepper trade with China and Europeans. The Kingdom became a Muslim sultanate and from 1584 to 1688 it was ruled by women, the "queens of Pattani".(5) Their role was just ritual and all political power was vested in the hands of their ministers from Bendahara family. The most glorious period in the Pattani history was from 1584 to 1624 when Raja Ijan and Raja Bira, ministers of two queens, were the administrators. It was an independent Muslim state. From 1688 to 1785 the area was directly under the control of weak Rajas and as a result things deteriorated here. In 1785, Siam's King Rama-1 annexed this area in his state and its first ruler from Bangkok was appointed in 1791(6).

In 19th century a new political development occurred in the area, the Muslims stood up against their Thai Buddhist rulers. As a result of this rebellion, Pattani was divided into seven parts and governors from royal Muslim families were appointed to control the situation. These rulers were named Rajas instead of Sultans as a recognition of Siam's sovereignty (7). This title was a symbolic tribute to Bangkok. The last decade of 19th century witnessed an open aggression of British colonialists in the area. They had a secret treaty with Siamese government. Under this treaty the British colonialists got the upper hand in the area and the Siamese government was empowered to subjugate and control its allied independent states. In this way, the Rajas were provided Siamese advisors who gradually took over more and more administrative powers(8). In the first two years of 20th century, the Malay elite were replaced by the Siamese civil servants in the guise of administrative reforms. Raja of Pattani, Tenku Abdul Kadir, refused to sign a document which was to render him powerless. He was arrested and put into jail(9). This was followed by continuous demonstrations. In 1909, both Thailand and Malaysia were asked by the British to sign a border treaty. Consequently the four

southern provinces of Thailand came in the hands of Bangkok. This was something unnatural(10).

It is, perhaps, the universal psychology of colonialists that they take to the policy of assimilation and intergration by diminishing their minorities in the specific areas of their colonies. They encourage the majority people to migrate to the minority areas. On the one hand, this reduces the chances of minority rebellion and, on the other hand, they take in their hands the natural resources of that particular geographical setting. In Thailand this wicked tactic is exactly employed for its Muslim dominated southern area. This policy of assimilation and suppression was adopted by Field Marshal Songkram in 1938 and Buddhist Thais were encouraged to migrate to the Pattani area(11). This influx caused the clash of two different languages, cultures and faiths. Soon this encounter changed into the armed rebellion and in September 1947 and January, 1948 in districts of Bacho and Ranget respectively hundreds of Malay Muslims were killed and their homes were razed to the ground(12). We may mention here that not only the Thais migrated to the north but Songkrams forces compelled Muslims to give up their culture. They were asked to wear clothes like Thais, speak like Thais, adopt modern ways and observe weekly holiday on Sunday instead of Friday. The Muslim family laws were abolished in the area (13). The rebellion under reference was not a local affair but smacked wide reawakening in the area. Malays began the struggle for their freedom and self-sovereignty. Haji Sulong, President of Majlis Ulama Islam, was the man who led this campaign. In April, 1947 he demanded from Bangkok to grant them the right of self-determination. He submitted a list of seven demands to the government as under(14).

1. Administrator General of the southern Pattani area should be an elected Muslim of the area.

2. Eighty percent of the major and minor administrative posts should be given to local Malays.
3. Malay should be recognized as an official language.
4. Medium of instruction, at least at primary level, should be Malay.
5. Islamic laws should be implemented in the area with Islamic Qazi court system.
6. Taxes levied in the area should be spent for its betterment.
7. An Islamic Council should be established with the full authority to supervise Muslim affairs.

Yet this was considered by Bangkok as a demand for an autonomous free region/state in south. In 1948 Haji Sulong, along with three of his companions, was arrested on charges of rebellion. Consequently there were riots and demonstrations against the Thai administration. Hundreds of people were killed and thousands took refuge in Malaysia. In 1954 Haji Sulong was killed by Thai police(15). These happenings led to the demand of an independent Pattani. Some people, however, were in favour of joining the Federation of Malaysia. This rift within the Muslim community cooled down the momentum of the movement for the time being (16). During 1957 polls another incident took place. Haji Sulong Dato's son contested for a seat and he published a booklet written by his late father. Its message was to call upon Muslims to fight for their rights. The government thought it to be another seed for freedom movement being sown (within) Pattani. All copies of the

booklet were confiscated and burnt by Thai police (17). It again created unrest in the area.

### **Organized struggle**

Pattani Muslims were forced to wage an organized struggle for their rights. In 1960 Tunku Jalal and Bapa Idrees set up a liberation front called National Liberation Front of Pattani (NLFP). Its objectives are:

1. To liberate the homeland of the Muslim people from Thai control.
2. To re-establish an independent and sovereign Islamic state of Pattani.
3. To uphold and protect Islam as well as the Malay Muslim race, culture and language.
4. To identify with other Muslim countries for advancement of world peace (18).

The Front established a liberation army and military council. Bapa Idrees, a companion of Haji Sulongm, was its commander. Religious teachers of Pondok schools, graduates from Indonesia, are the supporters of the Front. The liberation army consists of 1000 fighters, divided into the operational groups of 1025 Mujahids.

Another militant group called 4P's (Petubohan Persatuan Penbebasan Pattani) or PULO (Pattani United Liberation Organization) was founded in 1968(19). Tenko Biro and Alias Kabir Abdul Rahman organized his strongest faction of separatist movement. It extended its area of operation into Bangkok. PULO claimed the responsibility for bomb explosions in Bangkok's public places. PULO is said to be supported by several Muslim governments. PULO's deputy secretary general Hashim Abdullah and Tenku Biro spend much of their time in touring Arab countries to enlist support for their cause(20).

### Direct Confrontations

After the establishment of these militant groups the international press reported a number of riots and clashes between Thai army and the guerrillas. Especially from 1969 onwards press reports have persistently spoken of widespread unrest and skirmishes in southern Thailand. The Muslim freedom fighters started their offensive tactics in early 1969. In December 1970 Thais counterattacked them in the south (21). Thai troops arrested guerrillas sympathizers, claimed killing one Muslim guerilla leader and captured arms factories and training camps which were an alarming evidence of growing Muslim revolt. A month before this army action an Australian journalist reported that the separatist guerrillas had gained the upper hand over Thai forces in the area(22).

In August 1973, NLFP passed a resolution calling for reforms in the Muslim areas. Particularly it required to improve the state of Muslim educational institutions. They demanded (23):

1. That Islamic studies must be introduced in Thai national schools, colleges and university in the four provinces of Pattani.
2. That since the vast majority consists of the Malays, the Malay language should be used as media of communication in daily life, besides its introduction as a medium of instruction, in educational institutions of the area.
3. That provisions should be made in the annual budget for the payment of salaries to teachers in Islamic schools since revenues are collected from Muslims.

4. That the government should think about reversion to thursday and Friday as public holidays (23).

NLFP also threatened that if the Thai government is reluctant or refuses to put the proposal into effect, it will be forced to close down or burn down the Thai national schools.

It was not a verbal threat, the NLFP did burn down two Thai national schools on 18th April and 5th May, 1973. It resulted in clashes between Thai security forces and Muslim guerillas. Thirty Thai men were killed and seven injured, while five Mujahids were martyred and three wounded(24).

This Thai-Pattani conflict converted into a bloody scene in December 1975 when a bomb was thrown at a Malay rally in front of Pattani town hall. About eleven protesters were killed and 43 wounded according to official reports. In Narathiwat four villagers were shot dead by Thai troops. These incidents led to wide-spread demonstrations. The Muslims refused to negotiate with anyone except the Prime Minister. In February 1976 eight Muslim leaders discussed the situation with the Prime Minister and an agreement was announced that the government would pay compensation to affected families and arrest the security officials responsible for killings(25).

NLFP's bulletin 'The Voice of Pattani' in its November 1976 issue reported that the houses of local Muslims were searched out and some of them arrested by Thai police on the suspicion of anti-government activities. Most of them were detained without trial for 180 days. In Batu Baru village a Muslim was shot dead by police while offering prayer and others were arrested(26).

On the occasion of its 8th Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference in Tripoli on March 1, 1977, NLFP appealed to OIC to take notice of the plight of Pattani people. The Front told the conference that during the period 1948-73 about 10,000 Pattanis had been killed or arrested by Thai police and security forces. Thai authorities have already moved about 60 to 70 thousand Thai Buddhists to the southern Malay Muslim area and they have the target to shift at least another 250,000 to change Muslim majority into minority. It was reported in the appeal that between 1973 to 1976 no less than 500 Muslims were arrested and shot at without trials. Some of them burnt alive to terrorise their supporters. Even Mosques and mausoleums have been destroyed by official forces(27).

In late 1979 a 27 member official fact-finding committee was appointed by Thai government. The committee did admit that economic conditions in the Pattani region were gloomy, saying that, to make matters worse, local authorities often misbehaved towards people. It also suggested the introduction of Islamic subjects in schools and to support schools run by Muslim community in the area(28).

In Narathiwat province four Imams were secretly executed by Thai Buddhists in July 1980. PULO retaliated by hijacking a bus in the Bajor district and most of the kidnapped passengers were Thai Officials(29).

In February 1981 a school building in the Human district, in the Yala province, was burnt by terrorists. In another incident 14 travellers were killed and wounded in the same province. Now Thai security forces began to punish these terrorists. They distributed pamphlets in villages warning them of an oncoming drive against Muslim separatists. One night Thai soldiers went out on a shooting spree in the Yala Town. Muslims were called out of their houses



Students will only be charged one Baht as compared to normal fee of 25 Bahts on the condition that they obtain a letter of certification from their schools, qualifying for the reduced fee.

1. **Name of this Project is as above.**
2. **Objectives**
  - 2.1 To encourage Thai Muslims to adopt Thai names.
  - 2.2 To avoid error in writing and reading when one applies for government documents.
  - 2.3 To save Thai Muslims from paying the normal high fee on the change of names.
3. **Method to encourage Thai Muslims to change their names.**
  - 3.1 The District Officer should hold a seminar to ensure that people get full information about the proposal.
  - 3.2 To visit at least one school a day to give information.
  - 3.3 To direct all education officers to plan a programme.
  - 3.4 Encouraging Muslim students to change their names.

and shot dead. This terrorism caused Muslim to flee to Malaysia(30).

In July 1981 the Yala based 5th infantry Regiment attacked one of the biggest camps of NLFP guerillas. There was a six-hour shootout. Thai troops claimed that NLFP suffered heavy casualties. The camp could accommodate about 150 people but the troops could not find any dead body or wounded guerilla in the camp(31). Meanwhile, in Bangkok a Thai court sentenced two Muslims to 25 years imprisonment on charges of secessionism(32).

Thai authorities alleged that Syria and Libya were behind Muslim guerillas(33). An official newspaper also accused Malaysian politicians of backing guerilla activity in southern Thailand. Lt. Gen Thanom who led a mission to Libya in 1983 to seek the cooperation of Libyan authorities in solving the south problem, stated that Libya had assured the Thai government of her non-involvement in the Pattani issue. He further said that Libya was going to help the Thai government, by funding the establishment of a Muslim Foundation in Thailand(34).

### **Consolidated Project of Assimilation**

In March 1985 the Thai government ventured upon aiming to change Muslim names. It was the second case after Bulgaria to rob away the Islamic Identity of Muslim people. The project was started in schools. The detail of the Project is as under(35):-

#### **Proposal to change Muslim names to Thai names Pattani Province 1985**

To satisfy the conditions imposed by the District of Pattani all Muslims are advised to adopt Thai names and the Government will reduce the fee.

4. **This Project will commence from 1st March, 1985.**
5. **Venue**  
All Primary and Secondary Schools and District Offices in the District of Pattani.
6. **Officers Responsible**  
Chief District Officer
7. **Estimated expenses for this Project**  
The Ministry of Internal Affairs and heads of departments are to reimburse the Chief District Officer and the District Officers.
8. **Why should we finance this Project?**
  - 8.1 With the aim to encourage Thai Muslims to adopt Thai names.
  - 8.2 To enable Thai Muslims to use simple names in their official correspondence.

That was not all. The Primary Education Officer in Pattani issued instructions to all primary schools to install large idols of Buddha by the end of 1985. The purpose of this installation was explained that the Ministry of Education had launched a campaign to raise religious and ethical standards among Thai youth and that was to be achieved by installing the images of Buddha in Primary schools all over the country(36). Obviously, Thai government knew that they could not convert Muslims to Buddhism in this way. The aim was to provoke them into violent protests and thereby to provide them an excuse for the pogrom of Muslims, forcing them to leave their hearths and homes.

A Bangkok newspaper reported in December 1985 about the formation of a separatist group named Barism Berasatu Mujahideen Pattani(37). The Paper wrote that the movement had its headquarter in Malaysia, saying that about 40 leaders of separatist groups had met and decided to operate as a collective and well organized

group. They agreed to a common constitution and Ustaz Mufti Abdul Rahman was appointed as President of their administrative division and Ustaz Haji Karim as the President of Military Division.

### **Armed struggle suppressed but.....**

After two years of the formation of this United Front the world learnt about the surrender of Muslim insurgents to Bangkok authorities. It was learnt that about six to seven hundred armed Muslim fighters accepted the amnesty offer of the government by renouncing their past and promising to turn a new leaf in their life(38). The news conveyed the idea that all groups of freedom fighters had been finished and the government policy of assimilation and integration had succeeded. Thai government claimed that Muslim countries had been assured that there was no problem in the Muslim dominated area.

But in spite of all these claims none could deny religious, cultural and economics differences and disparities which could any time stir up separatist sentiments. The facts and figures show that for many Thai Muslims the central issue is the lack of significant role in local administration. All southern governors and their senior staff are Buddhist. While teachers are mostly Buddhist(39). Whereas a good number of unemployed qualified local teachers are available Malaysian Muslims who qualify from abroad in professional courses are required to requalify in Thailand(40).

These Muslims in South also face serious economic problems. Rubber prices, important to the local economy, have fallen while staple food--rice, prices are on the rise.(41).

Such an unjust social set up speaks out from time to time in the country. In early 1988 there were violent protests in the country

when female Muslim students were prevented from wearing Hijab(42).

From 9 to 11 May 1990 an estimated 20,000 Muslims gathered for a peaceful protest against official inaction over the killing of a young woman and her daughter in Yaha, Yala province, by a locally based Army Ranger.

On June 2-3 1990(43) there were a number of violent incidents against the official decision of banning Muslims to worship in an ancient Kruze Mosque in Pattani. It is another example of Babri Mosque incident in India and the attitudes of both Indian Hindu and Thai Buddhist governments are indetical. Paul Handley, a representative of Far Eastern Economic Review, has described the historical significance of this ancient mosque in these words.

"Pattani's Kruze mosque is a brick superstructure without a roof, which was abandoned half-built in the 17th centurey. But the emergence on the site of a popular Chinese shrine based upon an ancient myth, and difference between Muslims over the proper use of the mosque, have turned it into a potent symbol and a source of ethnic and religious conflict"(44).

Kruze is believed to have been started at a time when Pattani, standing on Thailand's eastern coast near the Malaysian border, was a regional hub of commerce and Islam. Some historians say mosque's completion was put off because of the fighting involved in Pattani's fierree resistance to the Bangkok rule, which continued until the last serious rebellion was put down in 1902. But popular legend attributes the mosque's abandonment to a curse which descended on Kruze due to Lim Ko Niaw's self-immolation when she failed to bring back to her mother in China a brother who had converted to Islam and married a Muslim woman. Over the past decades, the local Chinese established a shrine to the

memory of Lim Ko Niaw abutting against the mosque, as well as a temple in nearby Pattani city. With the help of Thai tourism authorities, the two buildings have become a major stop for ethnic Chinese, mostly Thai, Malaysian and Singaporean. A growing annual temple festival brings thousands of tourists, pumping a large amount of money into the hands of the temple association.

Year ago Thai government's Fine Arts Department (FAD) gazetted Kruze mosque as an historical site and built a low concrete wall around it. At about the same time, southern Muslims began to gather at the Kruze mosque for the annual Hari Raya observance. Yet recently as people have started gathering at Kruze daily, using it for prayers except the Friday midday worship, which they observe at the official local mosque.

There are differing accounts as to what will be done with the mosque. According to Viroj Rateharak of the Southern Provinces, Administration Centre, the government will build a small butter road on the abutment of the mosque and shrine. The FAD will relinquish responsibility and return the mosque to the Pattani provincial committee, which will open it as a functioning mosque, he said. But the governor of Songkhla province, Nipon Boonyapataro, said that the mosque would be treated as an historic monument.

Meanwhile, Pattani Provincial Islamic Committee member Nilek Suleiman says that no decision has been taken on the mosque's future status.

Meanwhile, the Chinese managing the shrine plan additional construction and development in the area to accommodate more tourists. However, the apparent decision by local officials strengthens the apprehension that the mosque will continue to be an issue.

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