

CHAPTER IV

ISLAMIC IDENTITY ARTICULATION IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

The wave of separatism initially began as an ethnic movement but became an Islamic movement due to external factors imposed on the southern provinces. Both religious and economic factors played key roles in the inflamed situation in the south. There were obvious economic gaps between the different ethnic groups in the south; Malay-Muslims were mostly poor farmers while the Chinese and Buddhist Thais made up the majority of landowners and merchants. Under the martial law of Sarit Thanarat (1957-1963), Thai Buddhists (mostly poor farmers from the Northeastern provinces) were encouraged to settle in the "troubled" southern provinces and guaranteed seven to ten acres of land per family. "The policy was undertaken to encourage assimilation and to increase government control of the area, a policy which the government assumed would be useful in its war against the terrorists."²⁸ During the 1960s and early 1970s, approximately 160,000 Buddhist Thais migrated to the southern provinces the Malay-Muslim population objected to this encroachment and attempted Thai-icization of their homeland.

Also at this time many Malay-Muslim students were returning from receiving Education overseas due to government mandates that Thai be the language of instruction and that the curriculum in all schools, including *pondoks* (Islamic

²⁸ Ibid., 125.

school), teach aspects of Thai-Buddhist culture. The majority of these students studied in neighboring Malaysia or Middle Eastern Muslim countries. Upon returning to Thailand, these students found that the Thai government would not employ them causing more animosity; it was these disenfranchised, foreign educated young men who would eventually take jobs as teachers in local *pondoks*.

Other external factors included the spread of leftist ideology during the late 1960s and early 1970s, mostly as fall-out from the Vietnam-American War but also due to the student led democracy movements in Bangkok during the 1970s. Student leaders, some inspired by leftist ideology, were labeled Communists and traitors by the government. This caused hundreds of students to flee to the jungle and border areas, which included the Thai-Malay border where separatist violence had already created tension. The government's reactions to these student protests showed the southern separatists that it was dangerous to be identified with left political groups. An Islamic identification appeared to be safer.

To the south of Thailand in Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim and other student activists inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood formed the Islamist movement Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) in 1971. In 1974 ABIM rallied impoverished rural youth in Baling to protest conditions similar to those experienced by the Malay-Muslims poverty, government discrimination, and lack of political representation. The 1979 Iranian Revolution may also have inspired Islamist ideology within the Malay-Muslim separatists, as this was the first successful Islamist movement that would later inspire many more around the world.

The encroachment of traditional Malay-Muslim territory by Northern and Northeastern farmers at the insistence of the central government coupled with disenfranchised, well-educated youth helped to spawn the second wave. The Islamic identity of the second wave was not initiated in the southern provinces but introduced and encouraged by the external actors and events that I have described above. Education abroad allowed Malay-Muslim students to network with other students in these predominantly Muslim countries to which they traveled. Through these networks links were formed with Islamist groups such as the Arab League, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Islamic Secretariat, and Partai Islam.

A. Articulation of Islam Based Military Movement

1. Mujahideen Pattani Movement

The Mujahideen Pattani Movement (BNP) was established in 1985 with the ideology of liberating the southern provinces. The BNP's original goal was to consolidate the separatist organizations in the south into a single group. BNP placed emphasis on military training and political work. This movement is headquartered in Malaysia and most of its activities are confined to the Thai-Malaysia border area. The majority of the BNP's leaders were originally members of the BIPP a factional group of the BNPP.

2. *Runda Kumpulan Kecil*

This group was founded by young members of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Koordinasi that had received military training in Indonesia. Therefore it is still considered by some analysts as an offshoot of the Pejuang Kemerdekaan Patani connected to the BRN-C, and not as an independent organization.²⁹

The RKK outfit is based on well-trained, ruthless and effective commando-style groups, named 'small patrol unit' (Runda Kumpulan Kecil) after the description of their month-long military training course. It works in a loosely-organized system of cells named ayoh of five to eight members, dependent on local hard-line religious leaders for direction and indoctrination. Owing to the amorphous nature of this clandestine cell network, the command structure and extent of the organization are not known to its members. Estimates range from 500 to a total of 3,000 RKK members, including women.³⁰

RKK members have confessed to the Thai authorities that they routinely flee to Malaysia after carrying out violent attacks in Yala, Pattani or Narathiwat Province. Although several RKK's members have been arrested or killed by the Thai military in the past decade, it is very difficult for those involved in counter-insurgency to penetrate the structure of the group owing to its secrecy and great mobility.

²⁹ "Thailand: Islamist Insurgency with No End, Part 2". Retrieved 28 November 2014.

³⁰ Rohan Gunaratna & Arabinda Acharya, *The Terrorist Threat from Thailand: Jihad Or Quest for Justice?*

B. Articulation of Islam Based Social and Political Movement

1. Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani

The beginnings of the Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani (BNPP or Patani National Liberation Front) are somewhat uncertain. Dates range from 1947 to the late 1960s,³¹ while the founder may be Tunku Abdul Jalal (Hajji Sulong's former student) or Tunku Yala Naser (grandson of Abdul Kadir Qamaruddin).³² The majority of my sources contend that the original leader of the BNPP was Tunku Abdul Jalal, who formed this underground organization after the alleged assassination of Hajji Sulong in 1954. Whereas GAMPAR supporters were primarily traditional aristocrats and PPM leaders were religious elite, the BNPP was able to draw support from both of these groups as well as popular support. The BNPP's objective was complete independence and the establishment of an Islamic state.³³ GAMPAR and the PPM relied mostly on political activities, whereas the BNPP's preferred strategy was a combination of both political activities and armed guerrilla warfare.

The BNPP is the most veteran of the second wave of separatist groups and counts large numbers of foreign-educated Malay-Muslims in their ranks. Through these students, an international network of relations with Islamic countries was formed (including the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the Islamic Secretariat, the Arab League, and the Partai Islam) ultimately introducing more radical ways of thinking. The BNPP organized a provisional army, Tentara Nasional

³¹ Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*; Joseph C. Liow, "The Security Situation;" W.K. Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*; Syed Serajul Islam, "The Islamic Movements;" Andrew D.W. Forbes, *Thailand's Muslim Minorities*; David Brown, "From Peripheral Communities."

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Syed Serajul Islam, "The Islamic Movements;" Michel Gilquin, *The Muslims of Thailand*.

Pembebasan Rak'yat Patani (TNPRP or National Liberation Army of the Patani People) that at its peak had 200-300 armed men. The BNPP also relied on the written word to spread their message, publishing materials in Malay, English, French, and Arabic that were circulated worldwide.³⁴ The BNPP is considered a conservative Islamic group and eventually splintered because of disagreements between the conservative members and the more moderate and progressive members. One such member, Abdul Karim Hassan (aka, Ustadz Karim Hajji Hassan), who studied in Cairo and admired Indonesia's Sukarno, formed his own group in 1963.

2. *Barisan Revolusi Nasional*

Abdul Karim Hassan formed the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN or National Revolutionary Front) in 1963, drawing support from foreign educated young Muslims and intellectuals, particularly those educated in Malaysia and Indonesia. The BRN is yet another example of an elitist separatist group considering that only wealthy families are capable of sending their children abroad for education. However, the BRN targeted *pondoks* as their support base. Since Abdul Karim Hassan was the headmaster at a *pondok*, it was fairly easy for this group to gain a stronghold within the education system. The BRN aimed at establishing an Islamic Republic in which the Patani region seceded from Thailand and formed a united front with the entire Malaysian Archipelago.³⁵

³⁴ Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*; Omar Farouk, "The Historical and Transnational Dimensions."

³⁵ Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*; W.K. Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*; Syed Serajul Islam, "The Islamic Movements."

The BRN established a leftist reputation because of its Socialist platform and radical revolutionary aims. This deterred the conservative majority and religious leaders from joining. At some point the front split into three factions. The first, the BRN Coordinate has ceased activities in Thailand and concentrates more on political activism in Malaysia. The second, the BRN Congress headed by Rosa Burako is primarily concerned with conducting military actions. Abdul Karim Hassan headed the third, BRN Uram, until his death. The BRN Uram focused on political and religious work. Of the three, it appears the BRN Congress is the most active and carries "out political and military activities in the southern border provinces. Its main headquarters are located in Malaysia."³⁶

3. Pattani United Liberation Organization

Kadir Abdul Rahman (aka Tunku Bira Kotanila), of the former Patani nobility formed Malay Pertubohan Persatuan Pembibasan Patani (Pattani United Liberation Organization or PULO) in 1967. During PULO's inception, Kadir Abdul Rahman was finishing his studies at Aligarh Muslim University in India and the organization's platform was formulated a year later in Mecca with a group of Pattani students from the same university. While the previously mentioned organizations were formed on the bonds of aristocracy and religious leadership, "PULO attempted to speak to all elements in the Malay-Muslim population and took a position which could unite all parts of the community."³⁷ The ideology of PULO is based on UBANGTAPEKEMA (*Ugama, Bangsa, Tanach, Air, and Perikemanusiaan*), which stands for Religion, Race/Nationalism, Homeland, and

³⁶ U.S. Commander in Chief, Pacific's (USCINCPAC's) Virtual Information Center (VIC), "Primer," 10.

³⁷ Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*, 146.

Humanitarianism. While PULO is concerned with liberating the Malay-Muslim provinces of Thailand and establishing an independent Islamic state, they are also aware of the need for a long-term strategy to prepare for the goals of secession. This has included the need to improve the standard of education as well as fostering a local political consciousness among the southern Malay-Muslims.³⁸ PULO “made a great effort in public relations throughout the Muslim world to make its cause known, and avoided referring to pan-Malay rhetoric.”³⁹

PULO advocates violence as part of its struggle. The military wing, which is known as PULA (Pattani United Liberation Army), has claimed responsibility for several bomb and arson attacks against government establishments in the south. The majority of PULA members have received their military and political training abroad. Thai intelligence believes PULA has training facilities in Syria and Palestine. In 1995 Thai police claimed to have found evidence that “PULO were co-coordinating their operations with radical Shi’ite Muslims trained in the Middle East.”⁴⁰ New PULO emerged in 1992 as a dissident faction of the original PULO. Ar-rong Moo-reng and Hajji Abdul Rohman Bazo established New PULO with the intention of pursuing Pattani’s self-autonomy through less dramatic but more consistent actions than its parent organization.

New PULO’s focus has been on “carrying out minor attacks that are intended to constantly harass and pester police, local authorities and other

³⁸ Peter Chalk, “Militant Islamic Separatism;” Omar Farouk, “The Historical and Transnational Dimensions.”

³⁹ Michel Gilquin, *The Muslims of Thailand*, 81-82.

⁴⁰ Peter Chalk, “Militant Islamic Separatism,” 173.

symbols of Thai socio-political suppression, particularly schools.”⁴¹ It is believed that New PULO uses young drug addicts to carry out many of their missions conserving human resources and limiting the chances of compromising group security. In general, PULO and New PULO have refused to coordinate their efforts due to differences in strategy. However, a combined effort in 1989 was seen between PULO, New PULO, and several other splinter groups in a coalition known as Bersatu.

⁴¹ Ibid., 174.