



World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Thailand : Malay Muslims

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Estimated population: 1.5 million

Ethnicity: Malay

First language/s: Yaweh/ Yawi/ Jawi

Religion/s: Mainly Sunni Muslim

Profile

In 2016, Thailand's population was estimated to be 68 million: between 5 and 10 per cent of this population is Muslim, but only 18 per cent of Thai Muslims are ethnic Malays. Most ethnic Malays are Sunni Muslims and live primarily in the four southernmost provinces (Yala, Narathiwat, Satun and Pattani) where they constitute more than 70 per cent of the population (and close to 90 per cent in the province of Pattani), near the border with Malaysia, though some live around Bangkok. Their language is a variety of Malay, of the Malayo-Polynesian family of languages, and is closely related to Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Indonesia. Theirs is one of the country's poorest regions.

Historical context

Some 4,000 years ago, a group of people moved into the Malay peninsula area from what is generally thought to be south China: these are known as the first Malay people - or Proto-Malays. Today's Malays of Thailand are in the main the descendants of a later Malay influx around 2,300 years ago. More advanced technologically than the Proto-Malays, they appear to have come across the sea, perhaps from Borneo. Islam probably first arrived in the region with Arab traders before the tenth century. Islam's progress from this point on accelerated, with the state of Terengganu becoming the first Malay state in 1303. The conversion of Malacca's Hindu prince Parameswara in

1414 (thus becoming Sultan Megat Iskandar Shah) was a milestone in the Islamification of Malaysia.

The Kingdom of Siam was however able to exert at various times some degree of control over the northern part of the peninsula from about the sixteenth century. This for the most part did not directly impact on the Malay Muslim population which was ruled by local leaders. This changed dramatically after 1902, when what was then known as Pattani was formally annexed as part of Siam. Later, Pattani was divided up into the provinces, Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala. After 1938, Thai authorities adopted policies forcing the adoption of Thai names and the assimilation of the Malay minority by making the Thai language the exclusive language in all schools and government business.

It was, at least partially, as a reaction to these discriminatory policies that the first incidents of violent insurgency against the Thai state appeared from the 1930s onwards. Rebel and separatist groups began to make their appearance, especially after 1948 following a further drive to centralize administration and have Thai officials replace local leaders. It was also the drive by Thai authorities to close down traditional Malay schools in the 1960s if they did not switch to Thai-medium instruction and teach the national secular curriculum which led to the creation of the separatist BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional) by a former headteacher of one of these *pondok* traditional schools.

More conciliatory policies towards the Malay Muslims in the 1980s were followed by a marked decrease in the level of violence for much of the 1990s, but promised measures in the areas of the language of education and development did not materialize. The election of Thaksin Shinawatra as prime minister in 2001 was followed by the dismantling of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre, which had been set up in 1981 under General Prem. Following these and other measures, seen as leading to a centralization of control over the region, together with a series of broken promises, the level of discontent increased and resulted in renewed insurgent attacks. The ensuing aggressive crackdown by state authorities, and in particular the October 2004 incident in the village of Tak Bai, where 85 Malay Muslims suffocated to death after being stuffed into army trucks, ended up pushing new segments of Malay Muslim society into the insurgency.

Current issues

The conflict between the Thai state and Malay Muslim insurgents continues unabated. The human cost of the conflict runs high: between 2004 and September 2016, more than 6,670 people were killed and 12,231 wounded. Thailand has made few concessions to address historical grievances, such as language and identity rights, and has failed to seriously pursue political solutions such as genuine devolution or autonomy for the region.

In 2013, the Yingluck government initiated the first official peace talks with the insurgents, represented by the BRN led by Hassan Taib, facilitated by Malaysia. While it was momentous that the Thai state was willing to acknowledge that the deep south's issues were not only those of poverty or criminality, and dialogue was needed to end the conflict, they lacked the wider support of the population. As talks were initiated, the BRN presented a number of preliminary demands that they required the government to fulfil in order to initiate the real substance of talks: these demands were difficult for the Thai government to fulfil, and the whole process came to an abrupt end with the military's seizure of power from the democratically elected Yingluck government.

In 2015, General Prayuth took it upon himself to continue the peace talks that Yingluck had initiated, despite the well known position of the military opposing the peace talk process. This renewed round of negotiations has taken place between the regime's NCPO and MARA Pattani, an

umbrella group of southern independence groups, including some members of BRN. While both sides have met multiple times in Malaysia, which is acting as an unofficial facilitator, they have yet to move past the confidence-building stages, despite the government negotiators moving very close to officially accepting the pre-talks Terms of Reference. Issues stalling the talks include establishing safety or ceasefire zones and the official recognition of MARA Patani as a negotiating group. Many do not have great faith in the talks, as they doubt the sincerity of the government, particularly as Prayut has gone on record saying that any sort of autonomy arrangement was out of the question.

The Malay Muslims' demands for greater autonomy and language rights still remain largely ignored. Most government jobs - including teaching positions in state schools - continue to be occupied by ethnic Thais, despite Malay Muslims representing the vast majority of the population in the southern provinces. Many Malays choose to send their children to private Islamic schools or schools outside Thailand rather than to state schools, which continue to use Thai as the only medium of instruction. This is despite a demand to use Malay as a language of education going back to the 1940s. Only after 2005 were recommendations by the National Reconciliation Commission (established to address some of the grievances of the Malay Muslims) to have Malay taught in state schools seriously considered. Unfortunately such initiatives have made little progress. In 2016, General Prayut announced that the NCPO was aiming to impose Thai language education in the deep south, a blatant disregard of one of the main seeds of conflict in the south.

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