

## BOOK/ARTICLE REVIEW

### THAI BUDDHISM, THAI BUDDHISTS AND THE SOUTHERN CONFLICT



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The article written by Duncan McCargo gives a personal view on the conflict and prevailing problems in Southern Thailand. Duncan's article begins with the assertion that Thailand's southern border provinces are the site of fiery and political violence characterised by daily killings. This factor sets the scene and gives an impression that this province is problematic and 'entangled' as in a fisherman's net (Duffey 1998) in view of the myriad of issues and value-based problems related to the insurgents. As the title of this article suggests, much of the problem in this province is related to the roles played by the Thai Buddhists as one of the major actors. Although the title would suggest religion as one of the divisive issues in the conflict, it also gives an overall picture of the emotive issues that continue to be the sticking point to the elusive peace in this region.

The historical perspective in this article would provide readers, unaware of the problem, with a glimpse of the issue and the reasons for the escalation of violence that has led to the current situation where daily killings and violence remain a daily occurrence. However, this perspective, as with most others, seem to only represent the Thai perspective that does not evaluate the other reasons behind the complexity. As highlighted by Brown (1993)... "until recently, international relations analysts paid comparatively little attention to the causes, effects and international implications to the causes, effects and implications of ethnic and other forms of communal conflict."<sup>1</sup> This notion could also be attributed to Edward Azar's theory of 'protracted social conflict' which state "preoccupation with the domestic social roots and conflict and failures of governance." (Whyte 1990) where interpretation of the conflict may differ from the perspective of others.

The period of time then relates to the instance when the violence in Southern Thailand escalated in terms of the daily frequency of violence. Here Duncan's assertion is that this came in 2001 where there was growing evidence of a resurgent militant movement. It then went on to relate the dramatic raid of an army camp in Narathiwat in January 2004 and further coordinated attacks the same year. However, the three-year gap was not covered where there were indeed significant events which contributed to the escalation from both sides.

The article describes the Thai conflict as an 'invisible war' to the outside world where there seems to be little report in the global media. This is however partially true because it is coming from the European perspective. In the ASEAN

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<sup>1</sup> As highlighted in Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse and Hugh Mall (Eds.) 2007. *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*. Second Edition, Polity Press, Cambridge, p. 80.

fraternity though, there are some implications affecting Thailand's immediate neighbours especially Malaysia. As such the generalisation of not giving this conflict enough coverage seem biased. Contrary to that, there was much coverage particularly when atrocities were allegedly committed by both sides of the conflict.

There are many prevailing uncertainties in the conflict. Although no parties have thus far claimed responsibility for the atrocities, there is much generalisation being made to link the conflict with 'Islamic militancy'. This however needs to be further substantiated since there is no direct link between the modus operandi of the insurgents and the Al-Qaeda activities. Furthermore, many of the casualties on the Thai's side were Muslims namely the 14 Thai policemen killed in a violence in 2002.

This article looks at the involvement of Buddhism and can be divided into three major parts. Firstly, it looks at the resurgence of the conflict and the causes of the violence. It then tries to explain the complex and enduring issues that have been plaguing the conflict- the inconsistency of the Thai authorities. Finally it gives an overview on the concern raised by the Thai Buddhists in the southern provinces. The situation involving the Thai Buddhists and the Muslims in the South has been an emotive and divisive issue amongst the Thai population. It also justifies the fear and concern of the Buddhists over potential expansion of an assertive Muslim minority and its implications on the southern region.

This article states Thailand as a predominantly Buddhist country and wishes for itself to be known as a peace loving nation. In the Buddhist religion, followers are often taught to worship Lord Gauthama Buddha and practice tolerance and patience in their daily life and to avoid violence altogether. This article correctly points out that Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim neighbours in Thailand's southern region face a daunting task of managing their everyday life amidst the surging insurgency. This factor is further complicated by the fact that many civilians became victims to unidentified perpetrators. This has only enhanced animosity and distrust even amongst the closest neighbours.

It is interesting to note how this article actually highlights the resurgence of an aggressive Islam concentrated in the southern provinces. This has deeply affected the Thai Buddhists where cruel attacks have been directed against the Buddhist monks, temples and those disciples of Buddhism in those temples. There seems to be a contradiction of opinion here because such an opinion has not been substantiated with concrete evidence and facts. That many of those responsible for the violence on both sides have yet to be identified, plainly stating that this violence was caused by the Muslim radicals would be speculative if not biased.

The structure of power and legitimacy that the State Buddhism promotes can actually condone violence. Duncan McCargo himself made a revelation that in southern Thailand, monasteries and temples once served as focal and converging areas for different communities' activities. Since the outbreak of the continued violence, and when martial law was declared in 2004, Muslims have not frequented these places for fear of being victims themselves. This article observes that soldiers and police now occupy monasteries and temple buildings and protect these areas from attacks. Another interesting fact is there are now military monks (soldiers ordained as monks). These monks are then given the role to protect the monasteries. This article critically views the Thai state's militarizing monasteries and the role of Buddhist monks further add the religious dimension to the ongoing conflict in Southern Thailand.

It is relevant to note the three main categories of Buddhists which this article describes as problematic. Yet this assertion has some substance in view of the

differing socio-economic dimensions of these groups. The *Sino-Thai* community have lived and traded in the region for centuries, Thevada Buddhists (local Buddhists) who were born and grew up in the region and *Buddhists outsiders* who moved to the region only as adults due to government and military assignments. In categorising the types of Buddhists, this article has actually differentiated the religion into mainly the type of people and not the type of religion itself. That said, it could be due to the fact that all these types of Thais actually enjoy long standing peace with their Muslim community with constant reciprocal gestures of goodwill. However, it was clearly pointed out the particular type of Buddhists the majority of the Muslim community enjoy better relations with. This article is correct to note on the polarization where inter-marriages and growing mobility further blurs the distinction between the major groups of Buddhists.

Of particular importance in understanding the southern Thai conflict is the understanding of how the Thai Buddhists have been largely responsible for the murder and violence. The Buddhist practice in other parts of the world and particularly in Malaysia rarely gets involved in political activities. They prefer to regard their religion as a way of life in order to get good *Karma*<sup>2</sup> and prepare themselves for the next life. This article further engages readers to understand how Thai Buddhism had been dragged into a nationalist agenda after the revered leader Bhuddadhasa Nhikku died in 1993. His replacement in leading the Buddhist agenda, Prayudh Payutto was seen as an able-intellectual with a more conservative approach. After this changeover, it was believed that Thai Buddhists had also been an instrument of the nation's ideology.

The article also states that Thailand is a profoundly violent society with the second highest murder rate in Asia after Mongolia. One alarming assessment made is on the Thai Security forces where they are said to be notoriously incompetent and incapable of performing any proper military function. The same assessment further criticizes the Thai Army as being primarily concerned with meddling in politics, engaging in smuggling and other business activities. Although substantiated with references this assessment is obviously full with ulterior motives. One thing for sure, most of these statements are not concrete as the sources are mainly from western scholars who may not have exact access to actual facts.

This article addresses another issue where the police force are described as widely mistrusted with some senior police officers being dubbed as criminals. There is no doubt that the Thai security forces have been guilty of manslaughter and human rights abuses in southern Thailand. Of prominence is the Tai Bak incident in 2004 where 78 Malay Muslim men were suffocated. Here this article correctly pointed out the religious implications on the problem. This is because the Thai security forces involved in most of the killings were mainly Buddhists who committed the heinous crime all in the name of the King and the country. This in itself is contradictory to the idealistic belief that Buddhists should not kill which is enshrined in the holy scriptures of the Buddhist teachings.

This article also features the relationship between the Thai government and Buddhists where Thai Buddhism has long served as an instrument of state power and a central pillar of national legitimacy. In this case, it highlights the traditional roles of

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<sup>2</sup> *Karma* is the term used for good deeds and the 'value' which a practicing Buddhist collects in his life time that will enable him/her to be 'reincarnated' in the next world. Buddhists believe that what humans/animals are today was a result of their past deeds in their previous life. They seek to do good deeds in their lifetime with the hope that they will have divine intervention in their next life and be in a better social standing.

the monks as well as the non-traditional roles where the monks might use their high social standing for radical and revolutionary causes. This article is thus correct to note that rather than executing their traditional religious obligations on the Thai society, Thai Monks have instead been involved in carrying out duties not related to their existence mainly on orders from the military. A case in point to substantiate this is the term *sangha* (monastic order) where there have been many cases of the involvement of monks in military activities. It was also alleged that there had been cases of the *sangha* being related to structural violence such as the decree in 1976 stating “Killing communists is no sin.” Further on to this, there was a statement that Buddhist temples were extensively used in Thailand as military installations. However, the comparison of the similarities in the regimented lifestyle of the monks and Thai soldiers lack substance and seems a mere simplistic explanation of their involvement in the violence.

There is another facet of this article to substantiate that Thai Buddhism has seen radical changes to their mere existence and greater diversity in its actual practice. The article highlights the insecurities Thai Buddhism faces and goes further to state that because of fear of being overwhelmed by other religions, the Thai government had made it their moral right to constitute what is ‘correct’ Buddhism. These same reasons had been used to suppress and regulate both Islam and Christianity in Thailand which, in a way, reflects the absence of religious freedom.

The insecurity of the Thai Buddhists is further exposed when baseless claims of threats to Buddhism were accentuated namely the alleged conspiracy between Christians and Muslims to undermine security and stability of the Thais society. These threats supposedly came from the creation of new radio stations catering for Muslim needs and ablution facilities in railway stations. Another factor was the proposed creation of the national committee of religious affairs under the Prime Minister’s office that would include both Muslim and Christian representatives. The prevailing concerns by Thai Buddhists on these issues reflect the actual practice of Buddhism as being sidelined to mere sentiments of being influenced on what they perceive to be intrusion in the daily lives of the other religious groups. This in fact contradicts all sacred teachings of Buddhism of living peacefully with all human beings regardless of creed and colour. There were even recorded writings of the dangers to Buddhism from respected Buddhist scholars such as Prayud Payutto which narrates the alleged intolerance and aggression by the Christians and the Muslims. Such claims only fuel the sentiments of Buddhists and the non-Buddhists alike and do not help in easing tensions between them.

The central theme of this article consistently relates the prevailing conflict on the southern region as a result of ethnic and religious tensions. The inclusion of the Buddhist monks and places of worship as military installations has further undermined the Buddhists and their genuine intentions for peace in this region. Although the Muslims in the south have been guilty of transgression as well, the majority of them do not condone acts of violence or the use of the term *Jihad* as this article suggests. Contrarily, there are other issues such as the economic deprivation where the majority of the Muslims are illiterate and lack proper education. They are also not able to voice their problems and grievances to the government directly which has been a constant stumbling block in containing (let alone ending) the violence. The use of Buddhism, Thailand’s national religion, to facilitate military activities only further complicates the issue. This is because the ordinary citizens who visit these places for worship would be implicated as being supportive of the military activities as well as condoning the violence.

It is appropriate that the final segment of this article covers the plight of the Muslims in southern Thailand. It is important for the perspectives of the Muslims to be taken on board. Whilst they are often portrayed as being hostile to the Thai authorities, there are those who also work and cooperate with the Thai security forces and in some instances are victims of the violence themselves. On this note, it is correct to divide the Muslims in this region as those who are victimised, those who live in defiance and the pragmatists who constantly look at ways to improve the situation there. One distinct factor correctly pointed out is that the majority of Muslims and Thai Buddhists in the southern region have been living peacefully and have even undertaken countless measures of goodwill throughout their daily lives. These strong bonds and friendships could have averted any potential violence which might occur in their daily dealings. It is correct to state that anti-Muslim sentiments are more prevailing over the Thai Buddhists (outsiders who come from other parts of Thailand).

In conclusion, Duncan McCargo's article correctly relates the racial and religious connotations that have engulfed the conflict in southern Thailand. The central theme of this article relates the prominent roles played by the Thai Buddhists and Buddhism in this conflict. It reflects the misguided use of Buddhism as an extension of government enforcement. This in itself contradicts the very notion of the Buddhist religion which actually offers peace to everyone. This article highlights some of the reasons why mistrust and suspicion continue to influence the Muslim majority in view of the involvement of monks and temples used for military activities. In short, this article has correctly stated the evolution of Thai Buddhism where it has become increasingly nationalistic and less tolerant hence contributing to the never-ending violence in the southern region of Thailand.