

# Islamophobia as Represented by Thai Buddhist Organizations\*\*

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## Abstract

Scholarly works on Islamophobia in Thailand always focus on the state's marginalization of Islam in Thai historiography and ultimately makes Muslims become strangers. I argue that the negative labeling of Islam has not only been adopted by the Thai state to support its militarization in the three southern provinces, but is also reproduced by conservative Buddhists to seek supports from the government and Buddhist followers themselves. Therefore, Islamophobia in Thailand cannot be understood without scrutinizing Buddhist groups who reproduce hatred and anti-Islam campaigns. This phenomenon occurs under the condition that the Thai state fails to promote secularism. While the government chooses to assimilate and satisfy Muslims with many projects in order to avoid giving in to their demands for an autonomous or independent state, Buddhists criticize the government for being biased in serving Islam. Interestingly, justice in the Thai Buddhists' perspective is not secularism, but to prioritize Buddhism in the state's identity. This paper also provides the concept of peace in the eyes of institutes of peace studies in Thailand, who work to promote multiculturalism without intensively discussing equality and the secular state.

**Keywords:** *Islamophobia, separatism, secularism, southern Thailand*

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\*\*Received August 26, 2019; Revised November 25, 2019; Accepted September 30, 2020

# โรคเกลียดกลัวอิสลามที่ถูกนำเสนอโดยองค์กรชาวพุทธไทย\*\*

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## บทคัดย่อ

งานวิชาการด้านการเกลียดกลัวอิสลามในประเทศไทยมักพุ่งข้อสนใจไปที่การเขียนประวัติศาสตร์ที่ไม่ให้พื้นที่กับอิสลามซึ่งส่งผลให้มุสลิมกลายเป็นคนแปลกหน้า/แขกของสังคม บทความนี้เสนอว่าภาพลบเกี่ยวกับอิสลามไม่ได้ถูกสร้างโดยรัฐเพื่อสนับสนุนการขับเคลื่อนการทหารในสามจังหวัดชายแดนใต้เท่านั้น แต่ยังถูกผลิตซ้ำโดยกลุ่มชาวพุทธอนุรักษ์นิยมเพื่อให้ตนได้รับการสนับสนุนจากรัฐและกลุ่มชาวพุทธด้วยกันเอง ด้วยเหตุนี้ กระแสเกลียดกลัวอิสลามในไทยจึงไม่สามารถเข้าใจได้โดยปราศจากการศึกษาจากกลุ่มชาวพุทธผู้ซึ่งผลิตซ้ำความเกลียดกลัวและนโยบายในการต่อต้านอิสลาม ปรัชญาการณีนี้อาจเกิดขึ้นภายใต้ไทยที่ปฏิเสธรัฐโลกวิสัย ในขณะที่รัฐเลือกที่จะหลอมรวมและเอาใจมุสลิมเพื่อจะหลีกเลี่ยงเขตปกครองอิสระดังที่ถูกร้องขอ ชาวพุทธได้วิจารณ์ถึงความไม่เป็นธรรมของการสนับสนุนจากรัฐและเรียกร้องให้ตนต้องได้เช่นนั้นบ้าง ซึ่งความเป็นธรรมในนิยามของกลุ่มชาวพุทธไม่ใช่การแยกศาสนาออกจากรัฐ หากแต่เป็นการที่รัฐต้องสนับสนุนศาสนาพุทธมากที่สุด กระบวนการสร้างภาพอิสลามว่าเป็นผู้ร้ายจึงเกิดขึ้นเรื่อย ๆ บทความนี้ยังได้นำเสนอกรอบแนวคิดเรื่องสันติภาพของสถาบันสันติศึกษาต่าง ๆ ในประเทศไทย ซึ่งมักส่งเสริมพัฒนาธรรมโดยละเลยการถกเถียงถึงความไม่เท่าเทียมและรัฐโลกวิสัยอย่างจริงจัง

**คำสำคัญ:** การเกลียดกลัวอิสลาม, แบ่งแยกดินแดน, รัฐโลกวิสัย, สามจังหวัดชายแดนใต้

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## Introduction

The fear and hatred of Islam or Islamophobia have begun since the event of 9/11. In fact, Muslims in the Christian and Buddhist worlds have been viewed as strangers before that. In general, causes of Islamophobia in Asia are probably not different from those in Europe and America. Islam, according to the Western perspective, is not only a religious doctrine that people have rights to choose some of its aspects and then their lives, but also a way of life that covers all dimensions, namely, food, clothing, culture, education as well as political views. Consequently, Islam came to be accused as a main factor to destroy western culture as well as secular democracy (Bakali 2016, 43; Wright 2016, 45; Gould 2016, 191; Pratt 2016, 213; Larsson 2005, 29). Also, scholars who conducted fieldwork in southern Thailand such as Don Pathan, Ekkarin Tuansiri, and Anwar Koma (2018, 12), Chaiwat Satha-Anand (2009, 18), Jerryson (2009, 35), Keyes (2009, 19), and

McCargo (2009, 11) have clarified that the Thai state fails in dealing problems of violence, there in a situation where certain groups of Thai Buddhists perceive Muslims as strangers who destroy Thai culture and Buddhism. However, those scholarly works did not study the Buddhist movements which have been playing a significant role in initiating various campaigns to protest against Islam, thereby lending support to the violence that has been committed by the Thai authorities.

Based upon the 2015 census, there are 2,892,311 Muslims in Thailand or 4.9%, while the Buddhist majority that comprises 63,620,298 or 94.50% of the total population. 2,227,613 or 24.33% of Muslims are in southern Thailand, a region where the conflict is going on.<sup>1</sup> Though Islamophobia in Thailand has a long history, it became evident again on January 5, 2004, after 17 schools and three police stations were burnt down and four soldiers were killed in a military camp.<sup>2</sup> As a result, martial law was declared in the three southern provinces; Narathiwat, Yala

<sup>1</sup> This data was collected in 2010 and 2015. However, it is questionable why all of other religious members are decreasing, only Buddhists are increasing during these five years. See more details on the website <http://web.nso.go.th/en/survey/popchan/data/2015-2016-Statistical%20tables%20PDF.pdf> (Accessed February 5, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Many Muslim informants claim that various incidents were conducted by the military themselves, by robbing and killing soldiers in a military camp in Narathiwat (2004). According to an interview with Yusuf in 2018, he said that it is impossible that bandits or civilians would do that in the place where many thousands of soldiers dwell and the security is extremely strong. I do not argue that this information given by Yusuf is right, non that the news declared by military is false. However, this alternative opinion clearly reveals that Muslim locals consume information differ from Thai Buddhists in other regions who consume news from national TV channels.

and Pattani. These events, according to national TV Channels, were believed to have been done by Muslim separatists who wanted to free Patani, the old name of those provinces formerly ruled by the Sultans, from Thai state. However, though many Muslims disagree with the separatists, they are still generalized by Thai people as their supporters because of their religion. The phrase “not all Muslims are bandits, but all bandits are Muslims” is often used by some groups of Buddhists to claim that Muslims must be held directly responsible for the conflict. Therefore, in the eyes of the Thai state and some Buddhist groups, this is an ethno-religious conflict. Besides employing the military forces, the Thai government also adopted an assimilation policy emphasizes nationalism and has reformed schools for many decades. Yet the conflicts persist.

During 2004 – 2019, more than 7,000 people have been killed (all civilians, authorities, as well as the make-believed separatists). Moreover, banning mosque-construction projects and protesting the wearing of hijab by Muslim students who study in Buddhist schools were often evident in this decade. Protest campaigns conducted by Buddhist groups such as the Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand (BPCT), Dhammakaya followers, and Thailand Buddhist Federation (TBF), are discussed below.

Methodologically, in-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted in southern Thailand in 2015 and 2016, while Facebook Pages of various Buddhist movements were scrutinized from 2015-2019.

This article is organized into five parts, 1) Introduction: providing some background on the conflicts in southern Thailand, mentioning some previous studies, setting out my argument that will fill the gap, and briefly explaining the methodology. 2) Marginalization of Islam in Thai historiography: elucidating how Muslim histories have been replaced by the national history and Thai state’s suppression of Muslims in southern Thailand, which eventually made Muslims become strangers and separatists. 3) Buddhist Movements against Islam: demonstrating some efforts initiated by Buddhists themselves (not only the government) in portraying the ghost of Islam as the destroyer of Thai identity and Buddhism. In addition, in this part, some advantages they gained from Islamophobia are also discussed. 4) Peace in Thai People’s Perspectives: analyzing the concept of peace found in religious universities, institutes of peace studies, as well as some NGOs. This section also discusses why these organizations seem to be very passive and conservative. And finally, 5) Conclusion: all significant arguments will be briefly restated.

### Marginalization of Islam in Thai Historiography

Muslims are marginalized even though they have been playing a significant role in Siamese or Thai history. In Ayutthaya Kingdom (1350-1767), Muslim Arabs and Western merchants already existed in Siam as in many other Southeast Asian countries. People in this region are therefore diverse and difficult to claim to be pure blooded. Many Muslims, based on the chronicles, helped Siamese kings to run commerce and the army, while some Muslims were sultans, and also civilians. In terms of politics, King Naresuan (1590-1605) began to conquer an area of the Malay Peninsula, south of the Siamese outpost of Nakhon Sri Thammarat. This area included several Malay sultanates. However, it is important to note that the statelet was like a colony, not a province of Siam. Its duty was to send tributes (golden and silver flowers) to Ayutthaya in order to express loyalty and avoid warfare, but it retained some sovereignty (Kriangkrai Honghengseng 2018, 40).

Notably, one of the many soldiers who helped the King Taksin to fight with Myanmar and established the new Siamese dynasty, Thonburi (1765-1782), was General Mud or Chaopraya Chakri Sri Ongkarak. He was a Sunni

Muslim from Persia (Silpa-Mag 2020). However, this kind of information is found in academic books only, but not in school textbooks. Adis Raksamani (2019), Ali Suasaming (Alisuasaming Channel 2015), Amin Lona (2015, 167) and Thithimadee Arphattananon (2013, 107) claim that the government prefers to emphasize the (re-written) national history in order to assimilate its citizens rather than to provide them room for local and ethnic histories. This eventually made Muslims as well as other ethnic groups become strangers in Thailand, even though they had been living here for a long time.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Muslims in ancient Siam were called Khaek, which also meant strangers, signifying the status of visitors on the one hand, on the other, differentiating them from other ethnics who were Europeans and Chinese, for instance (Julispong Chularatana 2007, 92-94). In addition, Islam had also been referred to as a fake religion by Thai elites, just because of its theistic aspect, which is different from non-theistic Buddhism (Thongchai Winichakul 2015, 91-92). In this regard, Muslims as well as their religion have in general been viewed negatively.

In 1785, three years after the establishment of the new Siamese dynasty named Chakri, the Sultanate of Patani did not send tributes (golden

<sup>3</sup> Not only in the past, but also nowadays, national holidays in Thailand are based on important Hindu-Buddhist days and royal ceremonial days only, while a Christmas, Idulfitri, Chinese New Year, and so on are not so considered.

flowers or Bunga Mas) to Bangkok. General Maen (Phraya Rachabangsan), with a command from King Rama I, led the navy and was able to defeat Patani in 1808. At that time, Songkhla province was an important outpost of the Siamese empire. Songkhla's governor had been given authority over the Malay vassal sultanates of Patani and Trengganu. Administratively, the sultanate of Patani was therefore divided into seven small statelets and these would later be reconfigured as the three provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala of today (Krongchai Hattha 1998, 112-113).

Negotiations between the Sultanate of Patani and Siam (Bangkok) occurred many times in 1901 and in 1902, Siam abolished the Sultanate of Patani. This particular year is therefore considered as the complete defeat of Patani by Siam (Ibrahim Syukri 1998). In 1934, Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram declared "the national identity" in order to assimilate Malay Muslim ethnic groups into Thainess (Thanet Aphornsuvan 2007, 35). In 1944, the national school curriculum was revised to be Thai Buddhist-centric, and Thai language has been used to replace local Jawi (Melayu).

In 1947, Haji Sulong Tohmeena, a political iconic figure who campaigned for the rights of Muslims, was labeled as a Muslim reformist and separatist, and sought greater recognition of

Melayu community or Patani. He ran a campaign of petition for Patani autonomy, Melayu language, cultural rights and Islamic law. However, in the following year, his action was seen as rebellious. In 1955, he and his eldest son, Ahmad Tohmeena, faced enforced disappearances, believed to be done by the Thai authorities. A Muslim group in southern Thailand initiated a foundation named "Haji Sulong" but this name was not allowed by the Thai state in an attempt to delete from the Muslim locals memorize of him (Ockey 2011, 92-94).

Condemning Muslims for their religion and language is always conducted by some Buddhist groups. Based on my fieldwork in Pattani in 2017, many Buddhists refused to learn Jawi or Melayu language for the reason that it is the language of Malaysia. Therefore, while most Buddhists in southern Thailand can speak only Thai, Muslims are bilinguals. Moreover, religious difference contribute becomes another gap separating them in their daily lives. In fact, these two factors are not important as long as they respect each other, and not employed to marginalize another ethnic group. Nowadays, many Thais still believe that the poverty in these provinces motivates separatists to negotiate with the Thai state. However this does not make sense because the purpose of gaining autonomous status was very clear from the very beginning.

Such confirmation can be found even today, as a 64-year-old man in Barat Laut, Patani, declares<sup>4</sup>

“The conflict is not about poverty, it is an ideological and political struggle for self-determination. Even if Bangkok develops this place into the richest part of the country, our struggle will continue.”

It should be mentioned that the Thai nationalist history is written to convince its citizens of the “lost territory discourse”, not only of provinces in northern Malaysia, but also some parts of Laos and Cambodia (Thamrongsak Petchlertanan 2014, 68-70). Therefore, according to the Thai national anthem, Thai people should dedicate their lives to protect the nation. This seems very normal in every country, but it is really effective in Thailand where the government and many Thai people cannot agree to an autonomous state as demanded by the separatists in southern Thailand, because it makes them feel that they are going to lose a part of their nation’s territory again. In consequence, the assimilation policy and brutal fighting are deemed more desirable on the ground that they are protecting their territory from Muslims who migrated from

other places. To sum up, nowadays, though the Thai government cannot succeed in solving the conflicts in southern Thailand, it really succeeds in convincing Thai people that Muslims are not really Thai, which ultimately helps to legitimize the violent strategies adopted by the government. The next section examines the anti-Islam movements that have been run by Buddhist nationalists.

### **Buddhist Movements against Islam**

This part discusses the three Buddhist movements, namely, Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand (BPCT), Dhammakaya Sect, and Thailand Buddhist Federation (TBF), in order to show their activeness in reproducing hatred of Islam. It also elucidates some advantages that those organizations have gained from Islamophobia. However, modern technologies, satellite TV, YouTube, as well as other social media have been used to spread their information. These media became the powerful tools in communication among their followers and also led to protests or marches against Muslims in a number of areas.

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<sup>4</sup> This statement was quoted in “Freedom to Decide Future Patani People Call for a Peaceful Settlement” posted on Facebook page “The Patani” on February 1, 2019. An interview with Sothee Chhun revealed that Muslims are very diverse, not all Muslims in southern Thailand agree with the separatists. In the 2016 seminar arranged by Patani Forum at Prince of Songkhla University, Pattani campus, many Muslim scholars disagreed with the autonomous state demand.

**Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand**

The Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand (BPCT) is initiated by a group of monks at Wat Rachathiwat, Bangkok, in 2001.<sup>5</sup> Monks are the main players in driving various programs such as DDTV, radio station, as well as online news. Its main purpose is to have Buddhism become the state religion in the constitution. According to its mission, Thai Buddhism and culture are attacked by western globalization. Various social reforms are alleged to have been proposed by western-educated people who do not understand the Thai context and Buddhism. Therefore, it is important to establish the Buddhist organization to wake Buddhists up and to provide them with the right news and the right ways in reforming Thai society (SIAM1932 2010). Notably, BPCT in the first period was afraid of Western culture and Christianity, as were many other Buddhist groups. This means that Islamophobia became a new ghost just after the case of Muslim rebellion in Southern Thailand in 2004.

BPCT always campaigns to promote Buddhism as the state religion. Commonly, marches were conducted during the processes of drafting constitutions anew. This phenomenon occurred in 1997, 2007, and 2016 (Nanchanok

Wongsamut 2019). In 2007, I, a Buddhist monk at the time, was persuaded by a lecturer from Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU) to join the march. At that time, a total of 500 monks and lay Buddhists gathered in front of Parliament. Photographs of monks killed in southern Thailand were distributed to all participants. However, the monk who was speaking on stage denied that those photos were from the march's leaders. Having referred to them, he mentioned that monks would not be killed anymore if Buddhism became the state religion because Buddhists would have more power and then more security would be available to protect them.

In 2018, Toh Silly Fools, a Muslim scholar, logically criticized the concept of statue worship on a Muslim TV Channel (White Channel). His talk was also put on YouTube (Khaosod 2018). In fact, there is nothing wrong with that because Toh just discussed the uselessness of statue worship, and notably he aimed at Muslim audiences. He did not persuade anyone to destroy sculptures of other religions. However, Buddhists could not accept this. They began to share his talk and condemned him as a destroyer of Buddhism. Many comments clearly expressed the opinions that Toh should be harmed or ultimately killed. Some Buddhists also sought

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<sup>5</sup> Its page is followed by 46,467 Facebook users. See more details on <https://www.facebook.com/bpct2556/> (Sun Phithak Phraphutthasatsana Haeng Prathet Thai 2019).



court punishment to be slapped on Toh for blasphemy. However, the court rejected the case.<sup>6</sup>

BPCT was one of many Buddhist groups that protested against Toh's behavior. The Facebook Page of BPCT opened up opportunities to criticize and blame Toh. In general, not only Toh, but Islam, Muslims, as well as the prophet were also slandered. However, response from Muslims was rare, perhaps because of their awareness of being in a minority. In this decade, it is important to note that BPCT, compared to other Buddhist groups, is quite tolerant and does not directly condemn Islam or the government. It mostly shares news from other websites, and opens for comments. Of course, many rude words from Buddhists can still be found in the comments, but not from the page's admin. To sum up, Islamophobia is still reproduced by BPCT in order to promote Buddhism as the state religion only, which is less complicated than in the case of the next two organizations.

### Dhammakaya

Dhammakaya Sect has the biggest and richest Buddhist temple in Thailand. Because of huge receipts from donations and its teaching that differs from main stream Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, Dhammakaya has been accused of corruption especially during 2014-2017. At the very beginning, many Buddhists supported the military government in dealing with Dhammakaya because they viewed Dhammakaya as heresy vista is Thai Theravada. For example, Theravadins believe that the Buddha Gotama is dead and no one can see him anymore because *Nibbana* in Theravada refers to the cessation of body and mind (anupadisesanibbana: Pali), while Dhammajayo, the previous abbot of Dhammakaya, claimed that the Buddha was staying in the land of *Nibbana* and could receive food offered by Dhammakaya followers. Therefore, the ritual of offering food to the Buddha(s) in *Nibbana* every Sunday is very famous and believed to produce a lot of merit for the donors. Dhammajayo also claimed that he knew everything, such as where

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the highest leader of Muslims in Thailand (Sheikhul Islam) issued a statement to apologize to all Buddhists and clearly mentioned that Toh's behavior was not in line with Islamic teaching. Criticism should not be done in order to propagate one's own religions. Of course, from the perspective of many Thai scholars, Toh's expression of opinions should be supported, because it is impossible to teach one religion without referring to other beliefs. Religious leaders must falsify the old beliefs by providing rational arguments. However, this case shows how Thai people choose to solve the conflict. Stopping people from speaking out is more desirable than supporting them to engage in a discussion in the public sphere. This particular way is considered by Thai people as accepting multiculturalism, which ultimately leads to sustainable peace.

people would be born after death, and could send merit to help them in order to elevate their status. It cannot be denied that these ways of teaching can attract Thai people who are familiar with stories of miracles and the afterlife.

About four decades after the establishment of Dhammakaya temple, many books, theses, as well as articles criticizing the heresy of Dhammakaya have been published. The most famous one entitled, *The Case of Dhammakaya*, written by the scholar monk P.A. Payutto in 1998 (2008).<sup>7</sup> In turn, Dhammakaya also responded by publishing the book "Revealing the Process of Destroying Buddhism," written by Ben Barakun (1999). This particular book claims that Payutto received money from Christians and established the College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University, in order to destroy Buddhism. That is because its (secular) curriculum is different from the other two (conservative) Buddhist universities in Thailand and many lecturers are from Europe and America. Similarly to BPCT, before 2004, Dhammakaya also viewed Christianity as a ghost rather like Islam is deemed nowadays.

In 2014, Dhammakaya was re-investigated by the military government, for not only its ways of teaching, but also for many cases of corruption in the form of donations. In the same year, a Facebook Page "Wake Up Buddhists" has been established by Dhammakaya followers and started to criticize the military government and Islam.<sup>8</sup> It claimed the not only condemning that all murderers in Southern Thailand were Muslims, but also that many important persons especially in government are Muslims. Of course, this accusation is easier when the politicians' biographies in Wikipedia would be edited by everyone, and some of them were edited in order to support those claims.

Interestingly, Dhammakaya does not do this in the name of Dhammakaya itself. However, by scrutinizing the contents, it becomes clear that Dhammakaya's concepts as found in the main website of Dhammakaya are referred to. Many cases in the book written by Ben Barakun were aimed to protect and defend Dhammakaya temple. Similarly, the posts on Wake up Buddhists also portray some contributions by Dhammakaya,

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<sup>7</sup> This particular book has been translated into many languages including Bahasa Indonesia "Kasus Dhammakaya" published in 2017 by Yayasan Sammasayambhu, Tangerang. In 2015, Sangha Theravada Indonesia (STI) also announced a statement to ban Dhammakaya in Indonesia due to its heretical teaching. Notably, many STI members are monks who were ordained in Thailand, at Wat Boworniwes Vihara, which emphasizes Theravada teaching. As a result, the new interpretation by Dhammakaya is unacceptable.

<sup>8</sup> This page is now followed by 204,257 Facebook users, see more details on <https://bit.ly/2HpWevT> (Tuen Thoet Chao Phut 2019).

in parallel with criticisms of the government and Islam. On May 7, 2016, Ven. Praiwan, a famous monk, criticized that Facebook Page by saying that Dhammakaya should not turn around the hatred of Dhammakaya into one of Islam. Some Dhammakaya followers replied that the page does not belong to Dhammakaya temple. They added that the temple had a huge number of followers, so it was sometimes out of control.<sup>9</sup> However, though Dhammakaya denies all involvement with that page (as well as other pages), that page is undeniably the biggest platform used to protect Dhammakaya and to condemn Islam in these five years.

Ven. Phasura Dantamano also gave an interview to BBC Thai that Dhammakaya temple never supports hate speech or portrays the ghost of Islam as claimed by someone. Dhammakaya has been helping monks and teachers in southern Thailand by providing some financial support for thirteen years (BBC 2017). However, according to my fieldwork in 2016, Dhammakaya monks in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, southern Thailand, always talked about “Vulnerabilities of Buddhism.” It mentioned that Thailand and Buddhism would be swallowed by Islam, similarly to what was found by McCargo (2009, 11). One of many solutions suggested by those monks

was that Buddhists should encourage their sons to live the monastic life, at least for three months (in the ordination program arranged by Dhammakaya). It can be said that Islamophobia has been employed to persuade Buddhists to support Dhammakaya’s program as well. However, it is also possible that such kind of reproduction of Islamophobia is not from the policy of Dhammakaya temple, but from individual Dhammakaya monks themselves.

In 2018, the government began to investigate the Buddhist temples’ property. Unfortunately, it started with Dhammakaya. This policy focuses on the very rich temples that gained a lot of donations. All temples were required to declare their records of income and expenses, which ultimately causes dissatisfaction in most monks. The Facebook Page Wake up Buddhists (and other pages) urged Buddhists to protest against this policy so as to protect their own temples. Unsurprisingly, many temples agreed. Dhammakaya projected itself as the strongest fortress functioning to protect Buddhism. It argued that if the government could destroy Dhammakaya, the biggest temple, needless to think about all small temples throughout Thailand. In so doing, Dhammakaya aims to convince Thai Buddhists who previously hated Dhammakaya

<sup>9</sup> See the original post and comments on the page of Ven. Praiwan Wannabutr (Praiwan Wannabut 2016).

teaching to agree with them, at least during this particular period, by arguing that Buddhists must help each other to prevent themselves from the state's investigations. Recently, this page has a daily post, focusing on various factors that would destroy Buddhism namely, Islam and the government, and also positive information about Buddhism around the world, especially Dhammakaya's projects, and so forth.

#### **Thailand Buddhist Federation**

Thailand Buddhist Federation (TBF) was initiated in 2014. Its main platform in communicating with Buddhist followers is the Facebook Page using the same name, TBF.<sup>10</sup> Banjob Bannaruci and Korn Midi, the founders of federation and ex-monks, claim that Buddhism is in crisis. Therefore Buddhists should form a Buddhist political party in order to change the national law and protect Buddhism by themselves. Though its political party named The Land of Dharma Party came true in 2019, Banjob claimed in an interview with NHK Japan on October 31, 2017. That forming the Buddhist political party was his intention from the very beginning. Facebook Page TBF became popular in 2016, when many Buddhist scholars were accused of

being Muslims because of their criticisms of Thai Buddhism. These were Dr. Mano Laohavanich, Surapot Thawisak, Jaturong Jong-asa, as well as Jesada Buaban (the author). This page posted photos of the people who participated in the interfaith conference that was attended by some Muslims, and mentioned that these scholars helped Muslims to destroy Buddhism.<sup>11</sup>

My case was the most elaborate example in 2016. At that time, I was a Buddhist monk, and published many talks in YouTube. Each topic persuaded the audience to study Theravada Buddhism logically. For example, one of my talks entitled: Was the Buddha Gay? It explained that gender is socially generated, therefore, men, woman, as well as transgender were equal. It was not necessary to identify the gender of the Buddha, because, based on Buddhist concepts, all people can develop their wisdom and become a Buddha. My kind of interpretation was unacceptable in Theravada tradition, which based its teaching on patriarchy and insulted women and LGBT people as people with mental disorders.

Korn Midi shared my talk to his page with the caption "this Muslim guy became a monk in order to destroy Buddhism, he insulted the

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<sup>10</sup> The page is now followed by 30,853 Facebook users, see more detail on <https://www.facebook.com/BuddhistsNews> (Samaphan Chao Phut Haeng Prathet Thai 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Read the full post and comments on Praiwan Wannabut's page <https://bit.ly/2GKMcq2> (Praiwan Wannabut 2016).

Buddha as being gay, and he is now staying in southern Thailand, where my university is located, in which Korn wanted to imply that I was a Muslim separatist.” Korn also told his followers not to watch my talk.<sup>12</sup> More than a thousand shares and comments supported harm and murder to be done on me. Interestingly, when my friends helped to confirm my real-monk status, and my teachers persuaded Korn to debate with me in the public sphere, all those comments were deleted by admin, and only the violent comments remained. Three days later, he deleted that post and made a new one to apologize to me, however, there were about a hundred likes and less than ten shares.

It can be said that TBF became popular when many pro-Muslim projects such as the Act of Hajj and Halal industry were issued by the Thai government to satisfy Muslims in southern Thailand. At the same time Buddhist monks and monasteries were investigated and accused of corruption. Therefore, in such an atmosphere, it seemed that forming a Buddhist political party was needed. At present, the party has only 5,400 members, and is thus considered as a small party with little opportunity of being elected.

Unsurprisingly, the national election in 2019 revealed that only 19,825 people voted for this particular party. It indicates that Buddhist extremists in Thailand are very few.

Nevertheless, the anti-Masjid campaigns in central, northern, and northeast Thailand in 2017-2018 have been driven by TBF. Korn, as an ex-monk who graduated from a Buddhist University, has some connections with abbots in many provinces, so he is often invited to speak at various seminars. Of course, the topic, as posted by him on Facebook Page, is “Vulnerabilities of Buddhism.” Similarly, Banjob Bannaruci, a professor in Buddhist Studies, and a committee member of the Institute of Peace Studies in Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya (MCU), also agreed with the genocide of Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar and proposed that such kind of policy should also be adopted in southern Thailand, as interviewed by NHK Japan. Notably, TBF organization receives donations from Buddhists throughout Thailand who see Islam as dangerous in line with the arguments in these Facebook pages.

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<sup>12</sup> In 2015, Ven. Aphichat proposed the campaign “one Buddhist one Masjid” meaning that if a Buddhist monk would be killed, a Muslim mosque would be burned. He declared that this idea is motivated by what has been done by the Burmese monk, Wiradhu, who has been protesting Muslims in Myanmar (Prachatai 2015). At that time, I protested Aphichat’s idea by giving a talk on Facebook and YouTube. Since then, I have been accused of a Muslim monk.

## Peace in Thai People's Perspectives

This part discusses the meaning of peace in perspectives of institutes of peace studies, Buddhist and Islamic Universities as well as some important people in Thailand. It finds that their understanding of peace is not based on equality and individualism. Moreover, they choose not to discuss secularism and the autonomous state. In terms of interfaith dialogue, only some dimensions of religious teaching such as compassion, forgiveness, and respect of other people are emphasized, while warfare, insulting other religions and so on are not radically questioned. It can be said that these institutes do not consider other aspects of religion and conflict. The role of Fatoni (Islamic) University, the Institute of peace studies in Mahidol University and Mahachulalongkorn (Buddhist) University, and the Buddhist Network for Peace are prime examples.

### Fatoni (Islamic) University

Yusoh Bunga studied the role of Fatoni (Islamic) University in supporting peace in Southern Thailand by mostly elucidating texts from the Quran. He mentioned that peace and unity would be possible if everyone followed the teaching of Muhammad. In this short sentence, he did not say how peace could arise if people had different beliefs. He continued to demonstrate

that, in Islam, warfare must be the last choice, meaning that it could be done when crisis was unavoidable. From this, it could be said that resurgence of violence by Muslim separatists in southern Thailand does not correspond with Islamic teaching. Interestingly, he added that warfare was allowed only in the case that its aim was to protect the rights and freedom of those who wanted to practice the religion of Allah (Yusoh Bunga 2015, 113).

Shole, an M.A. student from Yala in 2018, said that separatists in southern Thailand also agreed with what has been mentioned by Yusoh Bunga. That is because Thai Muslims had to break many Islamic codes in order to follow Thai norms, such as during national military conscription, Muslim draftees do not have break-times to pray as usual, and are provided with non-halal food. In addition, female students must not wear hijab in Buddhist schools. It means that, based upon the reference to the Quran, the rebellion of Muslim separatists in Southern Thailand should be seen as legitimate. Yusoh Bunga's thesis is one of many pieces of research that do not want to radically criticize and question relationships between the state and religions or between Islam and other religions. Undoubtedly, the conclusion of these kinds of research is that all religions bring peace to the world.

### Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University (MU)

Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP), Mahidol University was founded in 1998 and the research center for peace-building in 2004. IHRP receives a budget from Mahidol University as well as from institutions overseas. One of its significant roles is to deal with conflicts in Southern Thailand. In 2015, I was invited to visit Buddhist communities in Southern Thailand with IHRP members. Our team comprised about 20 people. It is important to note that though most IHRP members work in central Thailand, they are some southern-born staffs who do fieldwork in the South. They led us to various villages they were familiar with. However, Muslim groups were inaccessible at that time. In Yala Province, a Buddhist minority is surrounded by Muslim communities, but nobody had been killed since the crisis in 2004. Therefore, this particular village became one of the many case studies of the IHRP.

Temple X, as we were told, was surrounded by Muslim communities. Surprisingly, there was not any conflict between Buddhists and Muslims, and nobody had been killed since 2004. The main reason, we were told, was that the abbot and the Imam had been close since they were kids. When both of them became religious leaders, they remained friends. We

arrived at the temple at noon on a Friday. After greeting with us, the abbot immediately called his friend, the Muslim Imam, and asked him to come to meet the IHRP team. 40 minutes later, the Imam arrived and paid respects (Wai: in Thai tradition) to the abbot. Of course, the abbot did not pay respects to him, because Thai monks, according to Theravada monastic code, could not pay respects to laypeople.

By paying respects to the Buddhist monk, the Muslim Imam impressed many IHRP members. This was so until someone uttered “this is the real peace.” The Imam apologized for his lateness by saying that he had to lead Muslims to pray and also to give a Friday sermon. However, this case clearly shows that the abbot did not have Islamic practices at the top of his mind. In fact, does believing that danger would not occur if Buddhist abbots and Muslim Imams were close friends, imply that all killers were Muslims and would listen to Imam’s advice? Of course, it could be wrong to conclude this. Imams have been killed much more than were Buddhist monks.

In that village, the leader is also a Buddhist woman. It is interesting to find that the majority Muslims voted for the Buddhist woman in the local election. On the day of our visit, a small seminar on peace and multiculturalism was arranged by the village head. According to her

speech, both Buddhists and Muslims were invited, but we found that 95% of the participants were Buddhists. Can we still be sure that there is no any conflict behind such make-believed peace? Therefore, according to some IHRP members and Buddhists in southern Thailand, peace will occur when the Muslim majority are led by Buddhists, and furthermore, those Muslims should pay respects to the Buddhist monks, because this is Thai culture. Nowadays, the IHRP team still believes that the unity between Buddhists and Muslims in those provinces would bring peace. Threefold unity such as eating together, learning together, and working together, was the key concept in dealing with conflicts proposed by the IHRP team in 2016. It meant that Halal cafeterias, Pondok (Muslim) schools and workplaces that separate Muslims from Buddhists should not be supported. As a result, various activities were always arranged by inviting villagers of both religions to participate. Unfortunately, IHRP does not want to discuss the concept of power, equality, and the autonomous state, but prefers to employ Thai traditional beliefs and Buddhist manners to deal with conflicts.<sup>13</sup>

Multiculturalism in Indonesia is probably an excellent example where Buddhists and Muslims stay separate. Maya, my Muslim friend from Southern Sumatra knows nothing about Buddhism, not even the name of Buddha Gotama. She also never goes to the Buddhist temple near her home. I first met her in the library of Islamic university in Indonesia. She does not hate me because I am non-Muslim. Nowadays, we are so familiar with each other and are able to share personal experiences and to discuss whatever we want to without hesitation. Of course, she never invites me to join Muslim rituals, to have lunch or dinner in her home. Therefore, our relationship is based on respect for each other's rights. Religion is a private matter that can also be discussed. This particular case shows that eating together, learning together, or working together are not the necessary factors to build peace. Maya grew up in the environment of respecting others' rights, not in a multi-religious school. Undeniably, learning other religions is good, but if rights and privacy are not emphasized, other religions will be taught in order to confirm that one's own religion is the best, as found in Buddhist universities in

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, IHRP also publishes an academic journal. Many papers on secular state and social injustices can be found. Unfortunately, those topics have not been raised in seminars or when the institute communicates with people in fieldworks. Possibly, it is normal for institute of peace studies that the local wisdoms and beliefs must be prioritized rather than persuading participants to discuss equality and rights.



Thailand (and maybe elsewhere). The Institute of Peace Studies of the Buddhist University dealt with the next section is a good example.

#### **Institute of Peace Studies (MCU)**

The Institute of Peace Studies, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU), was established in 2013 and is mainly run by educated monks. The classic book written by its director, Ven. Hansa Dhammaso, is entitled *Buddhist Approach to Peace* (2011). Academic articles published by the institute are mostly from M.A. and Ph.D. candidates of the institute. In addition, the theme of all of them is the same, that is, elucidating on some outstanding persons, methodologies for peace, and linking them to Buddhist teaching. Examples are “The Peace Strengthening Role of Dr. Ambedker according to the Buddhist Peaceful Means” by Kritsana Thaworn (2016, 209) and “The Way of Peace Building of Nelson Mandela according to Buddhist Peaceful Means” by Narongrit Arayachaikul (2016, 234). Though some works, such as Weerapot Phonjun (2018, 76), deal with the conflict in southern Thailand, they do not discuss the causes of and solutions to the conflicts. The conclusion of Weerapot’s article is that though Buddhist women in southern Thailand were affected by the conflict, they could forgive and empower each other to work for

peace in their villages. Specifically, the work of the director, Hansa Dhammaso (2016, 3-7), demonstrates different kinds of peace in Buddhism and portrays the ISIS as violence in Islam.

Perhaps, it is common to find that the mission of each religion is to appreciate one’s own doctrine. Phee Phongpipatthanapan (2018) criticizes the role of the Institute of Peace Studies of MCU for never getting involved in any conflict. As a Buddhist organization, it says nothing when Rohingya in Myanmar have been killed by Buddhists. In fact, Thai Buddhist scholars are not different from Muslim scholars as studied by Yusoh Bunga. Peace, in their opinion, will be gained when all people in the world follow their religion only. According to those cases, it can be said that religions in Thailand cannot respond to the modern world, which is more complex and diverse.

#### **Buddhist Network for Peace in Southern Thailand**

Buddhist Network for Peace in Southern Thailand (BNPST) has been founded in 2013. Its objective is to help Buddhists, the minority in those provinces, who were also affected by the conflict to seek a peaceful solution. According to my fieldwork in 2016, though some members of this group support violence conducted by the

Thai state, Rakchart Suwan, the leader of network, totally disapproves of all kinds of violence, including hate-speech. However, this particular network seems to employ nationalism and Buddhism as their (newly-invented) identity to differentiate themselves from Muslims.<sup>14</sup> As a result, many campaigns, such as anti-hijab in Buddhist schools, run by BNPST in order to intensify Buddhist identity seem to violate the human rights of other ethnics.

Wearing hijab by Muslim students was protested against by Buddhist monks and lay people in many places of Thailand, especially in the case where those schools are in temple areas. Muslims try to fight by claiming religious freedom, which is guaranteed in the constitution and by human rights principles. However, in 2018, the Ministry of Education supported the Buddhists' demand by referring to the Sangha Act 1962, clarifying that, schools in Buddhist temples are considered as the Buddhist property. Therefore, authority is that of the abbots and his instructions should be respected. Rakchart Suwan, the leader of BNPST, as reported by BBC Thai, stated that it was important to protest hijab-wearing in Buddhist

schools in order to maintain peace and prevent separatism. Muslim students, he added, should not distinguish themselves from Buddhists, the majority of this country. If we allowed them to wear hijab, they would ask for halal kitchen next (BBC 2018). According to Rakchart and other Thai officials, religious peace can be gained through unity, not diversity.

However, not only Buddhists seek support from the government, Muslims themselves also engage in such behavior. Supporting Muslim pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia, initiating halal industry, salaries for Muslim leaders, and so on, are also demanded and later supported by the government. Conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims occur when one religion gained support while another did not. Unfortunately, both of them never wanted to find solutions by discussing secularism, in which all religious organizations must be regarded as private ones and find donations by themselves. Therefore, human rights and democracy are discussed only when they lose some advantages but not for the sake of other religions. Compared to Indonesia, NU and Muhammadiyah Muslim groups denounced the verdict in the unjust case of Ibu Meiliana in

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, previously, there is no any greeting word in seminar or conference to identify oneself as a Buddhist, while Muslims already have their traditional greeting by saying "Assalamualaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh." Since 2016, in order to respond to Muslims' identity, Buddhist Network for Peace began to say "Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambudhassa."

Medan, a Buddhist who was sentenced to jail for 18 months (Kumparan 2018). Such a denouncement by the Thai Sangha Council, Thai Buddhists, as well as Thai Muslims, to protect minority rights never occurred. When religious organizations and religious leaders in Thailand receive salaries from the government, their activities therefore mainly respond to state policy.

## Conclusion

This paper argues that Islamophobia in Thailand has been reproduced for many reasons. Primarily, Muslim history is replaced by Thai national historiography in order to assimilate the different ethnic groups. However, when it does not succeed in the three southern provinces, the label of separatists helps to legitimize the state's militarization with a discourse on protecting territory. In addition, while the government rejects the autonomous state and has been trying to satisfy Muslims with various projects, Buddhists began to feel

injustice and portray the ghost of Islam to unify their members in order to access the national budget as well as political power. The Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand (BPCT) raises Islamophobia to promote the campaign to make Buddhism the state religion. Dhammakaya is successful in convincing Buddhists who protested against it, while arguing that Islam should be seen as the most dangerous destroyer of Buddhism (not Dhammakaya). And the Buddhist Federation of Thailand (BFT) persuades Buddhists to donate and support its activities and political party, which aims to prevent Thailand from Islamization. More interestingly, institutes of peace studies in Thailand fail to discuss in the public sphere freedom and equality, while religious universities such as Fatoni and MCU also mainly emphasize religious texts and fail to appreciate the complexity of Thai society. As a result, it is normal to find that these scholarly and activist organizations are not able to get at the root causes of the problem.

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