The Religious and Ethnic Issues in Thailand: Impacts to Sustainability in South East Asian and Implications for Vietnam

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ABSTRACT
Ethnic and religious conflicts in Thailand is one of the complex political phenomenons which bring the significant impacts to the region of South East Asia, incluing Vietnam. Over the past decades, the Government of Thailand has adopted a number of policies to tackle ethnic-religious conflicts and regard them as an internal affair of this country. However, in the openness of the region, such conflicts has gradually become a concern for those countries in the rgion. This has forced countries in the region to have critical research, assessment and interpretation in order to propose the appropriate responded policies to maintain the sustainability and security of the region in general and of each country in particular.

Keywords: ethnicity, conflict, Thailand, Islamic

IDENTIFY SOME ISSES IN THE ETHNIC-RELIGIOUS RELATIONSHIP IN THAILAND

Thailand has very special geo-political conditions and greatly affects to the stability, security and development of the whole region of South East Asia, including Vietnam. It is estimated about 75% of the population are Thai, and 14%, 5% are Chinese and Muslums respectively, and the rest belong to other ethnic groups (Secretariat General of The Administrative Court, 2017:p.40). It shows that Thailand is a country of a diversed ethnic culture and is a center of some ethnic transnational relationships in the region. Over 90% of Thailand population is Budhhists, 5% of them is Muslims, while 1.2% is the Catholics (Secretariat General of The Administrative Court, 2017:p.40). Buddhism is the national religion of Thailand and has a profound influence on the social, economic and cultural life. Apart from Budhhism as the majority religion, Thailand has other ones that account for a relatively small percentage of believers but also have a great impact on social-political life, especially those Islamic people do. Almost these people are Malay Muslims origins; live mainly in Southern provinces of Thailand as Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun and some districsts of Songkhla province. These Islamic communities have been adapted to Thailand society, but a part of the South has always wanted to remain distinct from the Thailand culture and society, as they are origins of Malaysia. They still use their own language of Yawi, dress and live with their own traditional customs. In the aspect of political and ethnic sense, they show the aspiration of independence and anti-Buddhist policies through the unrest creations in the Southern provinces of Thailand in recent decades (Englehart, 2008: pp.98-110).

It can be seen that in a country where Buddhism is considered as a religious of Thai people, the implementation of the Buddhist policy and the requirements for the Islamic people, known as religious minority, on renounce their own religion, customs and traditions is unacceptable to them. Moreover, the development of anti-state movements by the Islamic people in the Southern of Thailad was inevitable, and it turns this area into a hotbed of ethnic religious conflicts in the region of South East Asia. In recent years, research about such conflict

phenomenon in the Southern of Thailand has shown that there are four main points of such movement as the following:

Firsly, the ethnic-religious conflict in the Southern of Thailand is closely linked to the separatism and its ultimate goal is to fight for the independence. Through the violent activities, the Muslims want to force the Thai government to sit down at the negotiating table to discuss the automony of Islamic communities/people in the four Southern provinces. However, they did not easily achieve this goal because the government only reagarded the opposition organisations as the rebels and need to punish them (Trinh Buu and Nguyen Kim Minh, 2006).

Secondly, the ethnic-religious conflicts in Southern of Thailand was happened and organized by mostly the Malay Muslims. A number of separatist organisations have been established in this arear such as Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani (BNPP), Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), etc. In which PULO is the most important organization in the separatist movements of Muslims in the Southern of Thailand since 1970s.

Thirdly, the conflict in the Southern of Thailand is linked to the religious factor, directly to Islam. The difference in religions among the majority of Muslims and those Thai of Buddhists is both the cause and focus of ethnic conflict in the region. Although the religious factor, presented in the ethnic conflicts, is not the unique or prominent (Do Quang Hung, 2003), it plays a significant factor in resolving the ethnic conflicts in the Southern of Thailand. Islam has contributed to the consolidation of the ethnic identity and the promotion of separatist movements that demanded the national and religious independence. It can be seen that the movement of Islamic struggles in the Southern of Thailand always have the religious goals. They required the separation and independence to maintain and develop their religious identity. Thus, the leaders and members of such movements here are Malay Muslims. They were educated and trained in the Islamic schools at their homeland or abroad. The spirit and philosophy of Islam is the driving force and a source of encouragement for them. Simultaneously, they also take the advantage of the differences between Buddhism and Islam to deepen further difference between those Muslims and those Buddhists; thereby it increases the national hatred (Luong Manh Hoa and Mai Thi Hanh, 2008).

Fourthly, the ethnic-religious conflicts in the Southern of Thailand tend to transform into the terrorism. Many separatist groups operating in this area, especially in the Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat privinces, have tended to develop into the crime and terrorist organisations. Although they still hold the banner of separatism and self-government to put pressure on the Thai government, these organisations are moving away from their original polital purposes, and becoming the criminal organisations to do the arm sales, drugs and terrorism. Such development has become a threat to the stability not only in the Southern of Thailand but also to the significant political and security impact of the South East Asia.

The brief summary from the above review shows that the problem of ethnic-religious relations in the Southern of Thailand is very complicated. Its causes may be originated from historical, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds, from the specific policies of the Thailand governments and the concret international conditions as well. These conditions are summarized as following:
1. In terms of history and and culture, the Muslims in the Southern of Thailand always claim that they are Malay and do not accept them as Thais. They do not consider themselves as Thailand citizens and do not accept this area as an unified part of the Kingdom of Thailand according to the idea of Buddhism;
2. In term religious, Islam is not majority, it has itself created a national identity that both serves a cohesive community and increase the distance and difference in politics and

societal life between the Malay Muslims and Buddhist community in the Thailand in general and in the Southern of this country in particular. The way in which Thailand named the inhabitants of the Southern is Khaek also make them to be discriminated by the other ethnic groups. In particular, in some periods in the history, in order to erase the ethnic and religious difference, the Thailand government has advocated and implemented a policy of sanctifying its inhabitants by separating Islam from Malaysian national identity. Therefore, Malay Muslims in the Southern have been formed and acted against the Thailand Government. Through the armed activities, their stated purpose is to require the Thailand government to return their nationality of Malay and religious of Islam (Chistinie, 2000);

3. Mistakes in the religious policies of the Thailand government also make the significant causes to increase this conflict. Although Thailand does not recognized the one state religious, the promotion of the position and the role of Theravada Buddihism in compared to other religions, including Islam, has also made the division of the society. In order to unity the nation, Thailand has implemented a number of policies that are constrated to the aspiration of the Muslims in the Southern, such as implementing an unified administrative structure, abolishing the Islamic Law; banning the Islamic practices; no recognition of Islamic education and qualifications; using the Thai language as the official language; all Thai people, regardless of religion, must learn the Buddhist morality, history and Thai language, etc. Such policy which raises the position of Buddhism in social life inadvertently aroused the racial consciousness, formed the separatist ideologies in the Muslim community. Besides, the policies, solutions to the religious and ethnic conflicts in such area bu the government are not consistent. On the one hand, Thailand wants to take peaceful measures, with compromise through economic investment and development, share the power and increase the Islamic participation in the governmentt. On the other hand, Thailand wants to use military measures to a certain degree to quickly establish the order and to stablise the whole country. It is the policy conflicts that make the resolution of the ethnic-religious issues in the Southern of Thailand less effective and become more complex. The lack of consistency and faith in the policy implementation has not only been failed to create the national unification and harmony, but also pushed some Islamic politician and activists into the status of opposition and anti-government. In aspect of economic and society, there is the prominence of corruption and power abuse by the Thai Buddhists in along with poverty and social inequality, which increasingly make the Muslims lose their confidence and present their dissatisfied. The Muslims in the Southern of Thailand tend not to cooperate with the government in social administration, which also forces the detections and preventions of violent conspiracies to be even more difficult;

4. *On international conditions:* the separatist movement in the Southern of Thailand was also encouraged by the birth and the development of new separatism, liberalism and deterritorialism (Do Quang Hung, 2003). A number of separatist struggles have occurred in the South East Asia, such as the movement in Mindanao (Philippines), in Ache (Indonesia), in East Timor, which has become a direct source of support for Malay Muslims in the Southern of Thailand. The sympathy, supports and backups from various models of Islamic community in the region and all over the world are fundalmental factors that further promote the separatist movement and conflicts in the Southern of Thailand, and its outbreak intensified in the early years of the 21st century.

THAILAND'S POLICIES ON RESOLVING THE ETHNIC-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

In order to manage the Islamic community, especially in the southern region, the Thai government has adopted a variety of measures, both rigid and flexible: to establish the The Central Islamic Council of Thailand which is responsible for advising the government about the

Islamic policies. In particular, with the hope of ending long-running conflict in the South, the Thai government signed an agreement with the National Revolutionary Front (NRF) on 28 February 2013 to communicate and understand the aspiration of the Muslims, from which there is backround for the developing and implementing effectively the policies resolving the conflicts, the religious and ethnic relations in the are.

Regarding to the religious policy, the Thai Constitution establishes the principle of protecting the religious freedom (Constitution of The Kingdom of Thailand, 2007: article 37, part 2, chapter iii) and makes the statement that there is no discrimination between religious (Constitution of The Kingdom of Thailand, 2007: article 30, part 2, chapter iii). At the same time, the Constitution also highly regards the values of each religion in promoting the understandings, making the national harmony, and encouraging the application of religious principles in creating the good moral values, and the national development. Although, in principles, Thailand has no national religion, Theravada Buddhism is very important and receive a significant support from the government. The Consitution in 2007 retains the requirement that the King is Buddhism follower (Constitution of The Kingdom of Thailand, 2007: article 9, chapter ii). At the same time, there is the government responsibility on protecting and supporting Buddhism as the religion that most Thai people follow for a long time (Thailand Department of Public Welfare and Ministry of Interior, 1968: p.28). Such preferences to Buddhism has shown that Thailand is built and developed according to the state secular model. However, in addition to the positive effects, this model also present two major challenges in resolving the ethnic-religious issue in this country, as:

Firstly, the Buddhist preference has led small religions to believe thay are discriminated against, leading to religious conflicts (Englehart 2008: pp.98-110). This awakened national separatism, urged the establishment of an independent Islamic Malays in the Southern of Thailand in last decades.

Secondly, once giving the priority to Buddhism, the Thailand Government has also faced the challenges on creating a balance on the secular principle (religious freedom). The Article 79, Section 4, Chapter V of the Thailand Constitution has asserted that the State shall take measures to prevent any violation of human rights and dundamental freedoms to harm the Buddhism, to encourage the Buddhists to participate in the dissemination and implementation of these measures (Constitution of The Kingdom of Thailand, 2007: article 79, part 4, chapter v). On the one hand, the State allows other religious follwers to convert to Buddhism, while oppose the practice of converting Buddhism followers to the others. The main purpose of thiss policy is to control religious life throughout the system, maintain the true position of Buddhism in the social and political life.

On the recognition of such complexity and danger from the violence and terrorism in the Southern area, the Thailand Government has been taking steps to calm down the situation. They are summarized as the five following aspects, such as:

(1) Force based intervention policy*:* The Thai Government has consistently affirmed that terrorism activities in the Southern part are just its internal affairs and has a hard perspective on the issue. In some periods, the Thai government has determined that it is the first priority of firmly fighting to remove the "radical Islamics" (Trinh Buu and Nguyen Kim Minh, 2006). However, the Government's tough actions in suppressing the insurgency movements in these Southern provinces not only solved the problems but also generated a wave of reaction from the Muslim organisations and leaders (Pham Thi Thuy, 2007). The number of these organisations and the separated forces is increasingly developed and clustered together. From the movements of anti-Thailand government, the insurgents in the South have gradually shifted their targets to attack Buddhism

monks and nuns. This situation has made the differences and rifts increasingly in the relationship between Buddhism and Islam in this area. Thus, from the issue of ethnic conflicts that have transformed into ethnic-religious conflicts, this makes the resolution of the conflict in this area more complicated and difficult to solve.

(2) The policy of assimilation: Thailand government always considers the diversity of ethnic, religious and ethnic cultures as the potential threats and becomes the barrier to stability and development of the country. Thaiization is one of the important policies aimed at creating the unity among the different ethnics and religious groups in which the focus is based on the Malay Muslims in the Southern provinces. To achieve such goal, Thailand government has undertaken a series of policies to assimilate Islamic peoples in the region by imposing Buddhist education programs, using Thai language and learning its history. Thai became officially the national language and other languages are banned from the official use in the administration and schools. Many contents of marriage, inheritance in Islamic practices and rituals are limited and abolished. The division of ethnic groups is based mainly on religions with less emphasis on the ethnic identity. Muslims in the Southern are considered as ethnic minorities and referred to ethnic groups with the potential harms to the national security.

(3) *Strengtherning the national religious reconciliation:* In addition to the military solutions, Thailand has also advocated and implemented a policy of national reconciliation to resolve the ethnic religious conflict in the Southern. In term of religious, it is a nation with multi-religious and Buddhism is the State religion, the Thailand Constitution also established the principle of protection of religious freedom and declared no discrimination against other religions. Simulteneously, the Thailand Constitution also recognizes the religious values, promotes the national understanding and harmony and encourages the application of religious principles to the creation of good moral values, and improving the life quality for Thailand people.

In order to implement the openness and less political and religious biases, Thailand has adopted a policy for Muslims to participate in the state apparatus. The government has coordinated and supported to build the churches and religious schools, open the fund for Mecca pilgrimage, and willing to engage the opposition groups and organisations in the diaglogues to address the unrest in the Southern. Through such diaglogues, the Government would understands the aspirations and demands of the separatist forces, by which the proposal to deal with the solutions should be suggested. In particular, Thailand has built and gradually implemented a peace plan for the Southern provinces, setup a National Mediation Committee in March 2015 with various members from religious leaders. This committee has its responsibilities on advocating the policies for Government, which also makes the good conditions for Muslims intellectuals to work in the central and local governments.

(4) Implementing the investment policies for the economic development and social welfare*:* The Thailand Constitution recognizes the State responsibility in ensuring the social welfare for all social classes (Constitution of The Kingdom of Thailand, 2007: article 80, part 4, chapter v). For last few years, Thailand has paid great attention to social economic development in the Southern in order to reduce the political and social tension. On the once hand, Thailand maintains anti-insurgency activities and on the other hand it implements policies to improve the social-economic situation of the Muslims in the Southern with specific priorities, such as infrastructure buildings, economic development, education, poverty and social inequality reduction. Thailand has also taken steps to help young generation to become closer and more integrated, such as respecting, protecting and encouraging the local cultural traditions, treating equally among Buddhists and Islams.

Despite the efforts made to improve social welfare, reduce the inequalities and conflicts, the social economic development policies, which were adopted by the government in the Southern area, have not only taken the sympathy of the Muslims but also made them discontent. Because the minority Islamic community in this area is worried that the Thailand government's interventions could undermine their traditional cultural and religious values. Since then, a new fury began again due to they were feared to be a minority on their own land (Pham Thi Vinh and Nguyen Huu Nghi, 2006).

(5) *Seeking supports from regional countries:* The purpose of these measures is to limit the external support for anti-government forces, thereby facilitating the Thailand abilities on handeling the situation internally more easily. The Governments of Thailand and Malaysis have jointly implemented a number of measures to limit the situation, such as: doing the economic development policies in the border area; to share the concerns about the problems of Islamic community that could be harm to the interests of both cointries; continuing to discuss measures addressing the historical issues; strengthening the closed supervision of dual citizenship, tightening the immigration; do not support the separatist movements as not allowing the Malaysian territory as the training camps.

THE IMPACTS OF ETHNIC RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN THAILAND TO THE STABILITY OF SOUTH EAST ASIA AND THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS TO VIETNAM

In the context of regional integration, the issues of ethnic-religious relations have a great impact on the political stability and security in the South East Asia. The problem of such conflict in Thailand can easily break the peaceful and cooperative environment that the member countries of this region have been trying to maintain. The unrest in Thailand goes along with the establishment of the ASEAN community has also created the favorable conditions for terrorist organisations to expend their power and admint members in other countries in the region. The situation will become more complicated as some Islamist militant groups in Thailand have very closed links with the major international terrorist organisations that have emerged in several South East Asian countries for last decades (Bergin 2016). For those countries in the South East Asia, the unrest in Thailand had always posed great challenges to ensure the security, stability and prosperity in the region. These countries must always be alert about the terrorist threats, as they have been presented in several countries such as Myanmar, Phillipines, Indonesia and Malaysia. If the ethnic and religious conflict in Thailand is upheighted and long-lasted, it would affect and influence negatively to the image of ASEAN, its role and its member countries. Especially, while Thaland only wants to look at and resolve the ethnic-religious issues as internal affairs, and this country does not make this conflict to be regionalised and internationalised, it would be the test of credibility about the role of ASEAN, its mebers on looking for the political solutions to the current issues in Thailand.

It is predicted that the South East Asia would be a geo-political area of the great importance in the 21st century. Although there are many difficulties to be resolved, generally, it is considered a peaceful, friendly and stable region in the future. In such context, both Vietnam and Thailand have real needs for cooperation to explore the comparative advantages to develop together. Vietnam plays an important role in the Asia-Pacific belt. As located in the strategic position between North East Asia and South East Asia, with a long territorial sea and the land border with China, Laos and Cambodia, Vietnam is at the center of economic, political and social issues in the South East Asia. Thus, the issues of ethnic-religious conflict in Thailand have had great impacts on the political and security situation of the ASEAN region in general and of Vietnam in particular. As a natin with many similarities and interests in terms of politics, economics,

security and national defense, Vietnam should continue to take initiatives in implementing some solutions to dealth with ethnic problems effectively as some following implications:

Firstly, good handling of relations among ethnic – religious and state is the basis for building credibility and diaglogue: for political stability, the lowest possible risk of such relation needs dealig well with the connection between ethnic, religion and state. In which the State must have a policy of respecting all peoples, religions and real attentions in the ethnic-religious affairs. In Thailand, in the past years, the struggle for separatism has come to a head with the main cause of existed inefficacy policies on ethnicity and religions. Many policies also caused the grievances, negative reactions from the Muslim communities in the Southern provinces. From such experiences, the recognitions to the cultural and religious diversity and respectation to the ethnic identity demonstrates the unity in diversity and the precondition for the stability and development of the country.

Secondly, resolving the conflicts and contradictions in peaceful way is the basic principle: The military solutions are not effective to solve such problems. As looking back on history, the problem of ethnic-religious conflict in the Southern of Thailand can be solved by political pathways and in peaceful diaglogue. The ethnic-religious must be culturally sensitive, politically transparent, empowered sufficiently in large scale and equitable for local factors. Especially, in the process of resolving ethnic-religious conflicts, the engaged actors need concessions, cooperations and a credible diaglogue mechanism with a neutral organization with high reputation in order to narrow the gaps between them.

Thirdly, considering to social-economic and cultural development is the key to maintaining the political stability: Although there are always separatist or destabilizing activities, most people in the Souther provinces of Thailand do not want to separate from the Thailand to form a separate Islamic country. Their aspirations and expectations are mainly to have good life and peace, their ethnicity and religion are recognized and respected. They are also oriented towards national equality, regional autonomy, cultural and social security for all. The practices of solving such problems in this area shows that respect for ethnic cultural identity is at the core of peaceful and stable coexistence. In the multi ethnicity nation, it is not possible for military measures to solve the social and political problems; it should to provide the public with accepted minds and ideology to the regime and administration, and the legitimate injustice (Institute of Social Sciences Information 2001). Addressing the ethnic-religious differences with military strength only increases the conflict among ethnic groups. Therefore, the key solution to limit the ethnic conflict boosting is to reduce the social inequalities and to ensure that ethnic minorities get the benefits from social and economic development.

Fourthly, strengthening regional and international cooperation is the basic condition for a stable political and security environment: In the context of regionalization, globalization and cross-border ethnic relations in general and the Muslims in the Southern of Thailand in particular are becoming stronger. At the same time, the resolution of ethnic-religious conflict is no longer as an internal work of a nation that has become a regional and international issue. Thus, the supports from countries in the region and from over the world is an indispensable factor in resolving ethnic-religious conflict in the present condition.

In summary, it can be said that the issue of ethnic-religious conflict in the Southern of Thailand as well as the general solutions that the Thailand Governmen has actively made are very implicated and meaningful for Vietnam. The reality in Thailand shows that in dealing with similar problems, there must be the comprehensive, practical and sustainable measures through economic, cultural and religious policies. They are legimated and equal among the

peoples in the coutry. By which, the risk of instability and conflict will be minimized and resolved effectively./.

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