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Co-optation and Resistance in Thailand's Muslim South: The Changing Role of Islamic Council Elections¹

SECURING THE LOYALTY OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY LEADERS HAS LONG been a priority for many states. Where these leaders head a community characterized by violent division and conflict, the imperative to keep them on board seems all the greater.² Although 'but one cultural component of the ethnic or nationalist mindset',³ religious differences may serve as an important trigger for tensions that brim over into violence. In the post-9/11 world, many nations have been especially anxious about the need to monitor, to placate and to manage potentially restless Muslim minority populations whom they see as a threat.⁴ At the same time, Muslims often view matters very differently. L. Carl Brown argues that 'quietism' and 'pessimism' characterize the views of many Muslims towards the state, even in Arab societies: a feeling that the state has little to do with them, and that they lack any influence over it.⁵ This feeling is only compounded where Muslims form a minority community. As such, they may be

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² For an example from a British context, see Rachel Briggs, Catherine Fieschi and Hanna Lownsborough, *Bringing it Home: Community-based Approaches to Counter-terrorism*, London, Demos, 2006.

³ Jeff Haynes, *Religion in Third World Politics*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 1994, p. 151.

⁴ See Pnina Werbner, 'Divided Loyalties, Empowered Citizenship: Muslims in Britain', in Michael Waller and Andrew Linklater (eds), *Political Loyalty and the Nation-state*, London, Routledge, 2003, pp. 105–22.

⁵ L. Carl Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 68–75.

deeply wary of government attempts to monitor or control their activities.

For the most part, Western social scientists remain deeply attached to ideas of secularism and appear reluctant to engage in close critical readings of the messy interactions between secular and religious forms of authority and power.⁶ Such a state of affairs is mirrored in developing countries such as Thailand, which has no official national religion, yet for most practical purposes is de facto a Buddhist nation. The relationship between politics and religion remains largely a no-go area, both for media commentary and local academic research. Yet the presence of a virulent insurgency in the country's southern border provinces – which has claimed the lives of more than 3,400 people since 2004 – makes these issues extremely salient.⁷ As Greg Fealy has argued in relation to Indonesia and Malaysia, increased 'religiosity does not, of itself, necessarily lead to more overtly Islamic politics'.⁸ He draws a clear distinction between Islamism – in essence, greater piety – and Islamicization. In his view, the politicization of Islam arises from factors such as 'the complexity of the *umma*, the nature of the political system and the dynamics between Islamic parties'.⁹ In the context of Thailand, which has no Islamic parties, it could be deduced that a more Islamicized politics may only emerge if and when 'secular' political forces – such as the army, the bureaucracy and national political parties – seek to enlist Islamic institutions for their own political projects.

Thailand has long sought to manage religious affairs through a centralized, top-down system that enforces orthodoxies of belief and practice. This approach is epitomized in the administration of Buddhism by the Office of the Prime Minister – until recently by the Ministry of Education. Buddhist movements that adopt non-mainstream beliefs and practices are subjected to official harassment

⁶ See John Keane, 'Secularism', in David Marquand and Ronald L. Nettle (eds), *Religion and Democracy*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2003, especially pp. 14–19.

⁷ For classic accounts of the background and origins to the current conflict, see Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand*, Bangkok, Thai Khadi Research Institute, 1985; and Wan Kadir Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1990.

⁸ Greg Fealy, 'Islamicisation and Politics in Southeast Asia', in Nelly Lahoud and Anthony H. Johns (eds), *Islam in World Politics*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 167.

⁹ Fealy, 'Islamicisation', p. 167.

of the kind used against the Santi Asoke group in the late 1980s, and against Wat Thammakai a decade later. Although the Thai constitution enshrines the freedom of religion as an individual right, religious organizations are subject to constant monitoring and regulation.¹⁰ For example, one Christian organization – the Hope of the Thai People Foundation – was refused permission to set up a church, after the Thai government's Religious Affairs Department consulted five major Christian organizations in the early 1990s. In effect, Christian churches such as the Baptists and Seventh-Day Adventists were permitted to veto the establishment of a rival sect.¹¹ As Erick White argues, the Thai state has also waged a long-standing war on spirit mediums, a mission often subcontracted to 'self-appointed guardians and arbiters of the collective good: virtuous monks, public intellectuals and zealous reporters'.¹²

A broadly similar approach has been applied to Islam in Thailand. As leading Thai historian Nidhi Aeusrivongse has argued, Thai Buddhist monks are effectively *kharatchakan*, government officials. The Thai state has sought to make imam, the official heads of registered mosques, into a form of government proxy, answerable to the Chularajamontri (often misleadingly referred to as the 'spiritual leader' of Thai Muslims, who is also a royal adviser on Islamic affairs) through a national-level Islamic council. Since 1999, local imam have elected members of 29 provincial Islamic councils, who in turn nominate members of the national Islamic council and send delegates to select the Chularajamontri.¹³

The intention here is to nationalize Islam in Thailand, curbing its dissident tendencies and linking it to the legitimacy of the state. The

¹⁰ David Streckfuss and Mark Templeton, 'Human Rights and Political Reform in Thailand', in Duncan McCargo (ed.), *Reforming Thai Politics*, Copenhagen, NIAS, 2002, pp. 73–90.

¹¹ 'Panel Probes Christian Group: Den – Irregularities in Registration', *Bangkok Post*, 21 January 1999.

¹² Erick White, 'Fraudulent and Dangerous Popular Religiosity: Moral Campaigns to Prohibit, Reform and Demystify Thai Spirit Mediums', in Andrew C. Willford and Kenneth M. George (eds), *Spirited Politics: Religion and Public Life in Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Southeast Asian Program, 2005, p. 90.

¹³ See Imtiaz Yusuf, 'Islam and Democracy in Thailand: Reforming the Office of the Chularajamontri/Shaiikh Al-Islam', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 9: 2 (1998), pp. 277–98.

Islamic council system is part of what Keyes and Swearer have portrayed (in the parallel Buddhist context) as ‘civic religion’ or ‘civil religion’ in Thailand;¹⁴ in Hefner’s term, it constitutes an attempt to institutionalize a ‘civil Islam’ in which religion is intimately linked to the wider agendas of Thai society and integrated into notionally representative political structures.¹⁵ Writers such as Omar have argued that the involvement of Muslims in different forms of electoral politics is a positive development, reflecting wider agendas of democratization and political reform.¹⁶ On the face of it, ‘opening up’ previously remote and unaccountable religious bodies to processes of free selection would seem to be a positive step for Thailand.

At the same time, the administrative structure of Thai Islam is highly problematic. Islam in Thailand is by no means monolithic. Shiites, though making up only 1 to 2 per cent of Thai Muslims, continue to play important roles.¹⁷ Yet the most significant divide is between the Malay Muslims of the southern border provinces, and the more heterogeneous Muslims in the rest of Thailand, who are typically much more integrated into the wider Buddhist-dominated society. Gilquin argues that there are around 5 million Muslims in Thailand, between 3.5 and 4 million of them in the south.¹⁸ The overwhelming majority of Thailand’s Muslims are in the south, primarily the far south; and yet the office of the Chularajamontri has long been monopolized by Muslims from central Thailand.

Islamic councils have limited functions. Officially, they exist to advise the provincial governor on Islamic affairs, and are thus

¹⁴ Charles F. Keyes, ‘Buddhism Fragmented: Thai Buddhism and Political Order Since the 1970s’, keynote address, Seventh International Conference on Thai Studies, Amsterdam, 4–8 July 1999; Donald K. Swearer, ‘Centre and Periphery: Buddhism and Politics in Modern Thailand’, in Ian Harris (ed.), *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth Century Asia*, London, Continuum, 1999, p. 225.

¹⁵ Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

¹⁶ Omar Farouk Bajunid, ‘Islam, Nationalism and the Thai State’, in Wattana Sugunnasil (ed.), *Dynamic Diversity in Southern Thailand*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm, 2005, pp. 1–19.

¹⁷ Michel Gilquin, *The Muslims of Thailand*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm, 2005, pp. 19–20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

intimately tied to the power of the Thai state. It is clear that co-optation is a central plank of the Islamic council system: one newly elected member of the Yala Islamic Council proudly showed me his certificates of appointment from the governor and army commander, which he had already framed.¹⁹ Islamic councils have a role in resolving religious disputes (mainly over inheritance and divorce) that are beyond the expertise of imam; they also preside over the appointment of imam, collect *zakat* (Islamic taxes) to support their activities, and play a role in issuing halal food certificates, a complex, controversial and potentially lucrative area.²⁰

Given the current political violence in the southern border provinces, the leadership of Muslim communities in the subregion has become a matter of considerable interest to the Thai state and its security forces.²¹ The government would like to see provincial Islamic councils in the three provinces take a strong stand against violence, rejecting separatist ideology and the spread of radical or militant strains of Islamic thinking. Since January 2004, the Thai authorities have been seeking to enlist provincial Islamic councils in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat as allies in its struggle against violent movements calling for the creation of an independent state in the area. Pattani Governor Panu Uthairat explained that if a particular imam was suspected of militant sympathies, the governor would ask the provincial Islamic council president to host them both for dinner, and deliver a warning to the suspect.²² Andrew Cornish has argued that the more the Thai state interferes in the running of Malay villages in the region, the more resistance will be generated, and the more violence is likely to result. His argument has been clearly borne out by developments since 2004.²³

¹⁹ Interview, 25 January 2006.

²⁰ Thirteen functions of the provincial Islamic councils are laid out in Article 26 of the Islamic Organizations Act of 1997.

²¹ For discussions of the violence, see several recent reports by the International Crisis Group (www.crisisgroup.org); Duncan McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2008; and Marc Askew, 'Thailand's Intractable Southern War; Policy, Insurgency and Discourse', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 30: 2 (2008), pp. 186–214.

²² Interview, 25 May 2006.

²³ Andrew Cornish, *Whose Place is This? Malay Rubber Producers and Thai Government Officials in Yala*, Bangkok, White Lotus, 1997, p. 118.

ISLAMIC COUNCILS AND RESISTANCE: THE CASE OF PATTANI

The Pattani Islamic Council, formed under new legislation in 1999, was widely perceived by the Thai authorities as a site of resistance to the power of the state. The Pattani Council was dominated by Den Tohmeena, a member of the Thai Senate, a former MP and deputy minister, and founding father of the Wadah group of Muslim MPs from the deep south.²⁴ Den's importance in the southern Thai context derives from his family background as a representative of the Tohmeena *trakun* (literally, dynasty). His father was Haji Sulong, an Islamic leader and an outspoken critic of Thai government policy in the south.²⁵ Haji Sulong disappeared in 1954, along with his son Ahmat, after reporting to the police in Songkla. Den's brother, Ameen, then took up the cudgels of the Malay Muslim cause, only to be forced into exile in Malaysia in 1980. Trading on widespread local sympathy for the treatment of his father and brother, Den was able to secure long-standing political support in Pattani province. Den saw himself as articulating ideas of Malay Muslim identity and rights, but has consistently denied that he harbours any sympathy for political violence or separatist causes.²⁶

Den was not simply a local politician. As a member of parliament in the late 1990s, he chaired the House Religious Affairs Committee and was instrumental in introducing the legislation that instigated the current system of provincial Islamic council elections. Den himself insisted that the process was not one of election, but of selection, since some critics argued that Islam contains no provision for elections.²⁷ Previously, 30-member provincial Islamic councils were appointed by a rolling, papal-style system of self-perpetuation – when one member died or resigned, the remaining members would invite someone to take his place. Den's reforms limited the terms of

²⁴ On Den's family and political career, see James Ockey, 'Elections and Political Integration in the Lower South of Thailand', in Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory (eds), *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on a Plural Peninsula*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2008, pp. 124–54.

²⁵ Chalermkiat Khunthongpetch, *Haji Sulong Abdun Kadir: kabot ru wiraburut haeng si jangwat phak tai* (Haji Sulong Abdul Kadir: Rebel or Hero of the Four Southern Provinces), Bangkok, Matichon, 2004.

²⁶ Den Tohmeena, *Leut nua chai chua fai* (My Family (Flesh) is not Behind the Southern Fires), Bangkok, Samnakngan Working Experience, 2005.

²⁷ Conversation with Den Tohmeena, 24 November 2005.

Islamic councils to six years, and gave all imam one set of voting rights: each imam can cast 30 votes for the slate of his choice. Pattani has around 600 imam, of whom 592 cast their votes in the 2005 elections. These reforms gave individual imam considerable influence, in view of the very small size of the electorate.

In theory, the new system was much more open and democratic than the previous scheme, since the old structure excluded those who lacked good personal connections to the existing council members, and in practice often led to dynastic politics: new members would often come from the same important religious families as those they replaced. It is difficult to offer any robust intellectual or moral defence of such a system. The new system was also fraught with problems, since it had the potential to replicate many of the shortcomings of Thailand's electoral politics. Thai elections at all levels – from village headmen to the national parliament – have long been vitiated by problems of vote-buying and electoral manipulation.²⁸ Thailand struggled to curtail these abuses during the 1990s, and in 1997 agreed a new constitution that established an independent Election Commission and a range of other new agencies and regulations. Yet these reforms failed to prevent the continuing centrality of 'money politics', as illustrated by the fact that in 2001 one of Thailand's richest men – billionaire telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra – successfully bought his way to the premiership. Vote-buying was based on networks of *hua khanaen*, or vote-canvassers; securing election was all about ensuring support from these local power brokers, who often sold their services to the highest bidder.²⁹

For his opponents, Den's creation of an election system for Islamic councils was hardly a disinterested move, but one that reached far beyond Muslim issues. By incorporating imam – a politically influential group, since their views could sway voting decisions, especially in rural communities – into a political network to support a particular team of Islamic council candidates, Den planned to create a network

²⁸ See Sombat Chantornvong, *Leuktang wikrit: panha lae thang ok* (Elections in Crisis: Problems and Solutions), Bangkok, Kobfai, 1993; William A. Callahan and Duncan McCargo, 'Vote-buying in Thailand's Northeast: The July 1995 General Election', *Asian Survey*, 36: 4 (1996), pp. 376–93.

²⁹ On vote-canvassers, see Anyarat Chattharakul, 'Networks of Vote-canvassers in Thai Elections: Informal Power and Money Politics', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2007.

of *hua khanaen* that would strengthen his family's political base in Pattani. In effect, this was a continuation of his long-standing political strategy, seen in the 1980s in the creation of a group of Islamic leaders (*ali ulama*) as a core component of his Wadah political faction.³⁰ Mobilizing imam was important for elections at all levels, but in November 2005 the main target in view was the April 2006 Senate elections. The 1997 constitution limited senators to a single six-year term, but Den was determined to pass on his seat to his daughter, Pechdau, a Malaysian-trained medical doctor and social activist. Though highly educated and well-qualified, Pechdau faced various obstacles in her pursuit of a Pattani Senate seat. She was a woman – a major electoral handicap in such a conservative area – and she had spent her entire adult life working and studying outside Pattani. Den faced a struggle to ensure that she could inherit his seat, and the support of imam would be crucial. The 2005 Pattani Islamic Council elections were a crucial stepping-stone in locking in that support. Also important were the forthcoming national elections for the Islamic Council of Thailand, of which Den was then the secretary.

Many of Thailand's senior military and security officials regarded Den with deep suspicion, believing that his role both in Pattani and at the national level was inimical to the country's broader interests. In April 2004, Den was openly accused of harbouring active separatist sympathies and supporting the campaign of violence that flared up in Thailand's deep south from January 2004. A highly detailed confidential 97-page intelligence report prepared for the prime minister early in 2004 identified Den as one of the major culprits behind the renewed insurgency, along with other members of his Wadah group, including some sitting Thai Rak Thai MPs. Matters were not helped by the fact that the president of the 1999–2005 Pattani Islamic Council, Waeduramae Maminiji, came under strong suspicion when Abdullah Pahsee, aged 20, was arrested and charged with the murder of Rapin Ruang, a Pattani judge, on 17 September 2004. Abdullah had been living at the Triam Sueksa School owned by Waeduramae. The Pattani Islamic Council president, who was widely perceived as a

³⁰ Phichai Kaosamran, Somchaet Naksewi and Worawit Baru, *Kanluaktang Pattani pi 2529 suksa korani krabuankan hasiang lae rabop hua khanaen* (1986 Elections in Pattani: Case Study of the System of Campaigning and Vote-canvassing), Bangkok, Foundation for Democracy and Development Studies, 1988, p. 29.

front man for Den, insisted that he was horrified to find that his school had housed someone accused of such a crime.³¹

While no compelling evidence ever emerged to suggest that Den and leading members of the Pattani Islamic Council were themselves implicated in the violence, a second source of frustration for many Thai government officials was the apparent passivity of the Islamic council in the face of a deteriorating security situation. The authorities wanted the Islamic council to speak out against the violence, criticizing it from a religious perspective or even issuing a fatwah denouncing political violence as unIslamic. The Pattani Islamic Council showed little interest in such ideas, preferring to avoid confrontation by sitting on the fence. An activist supporting the challengers on the day of the Islamic council election argued that the studied silence practised by the Pattani Council amounted to a de facto support for those behind the violence: neutrality was just a cover for tacit sympathy for separatism.³² He claimed that the Pattani Islamic Council chairman simply ignored instructions from the Chularajamontri to speak out against violence, and to instruct all imam to do the same. Yet the council's passive stance was understandable to many Muslims: as one prominent Muslim who had no personal sympathy for Den or the Pattani Islamic Council argued, any Muslim leader who expressed overt criticism of the violence would not be able to survive in post for long: he would either be killed, or be forced to flee.³³ In some respects, the criticisms made by the authorities reflected their inability to empathize with the impossible situation faced by Muslim leaders in the deep south.

Opposition to Den was not confined to the Thai authorities, and was not solely concerned with the question of his allegedly ambiguous stance towards political violence. For many devout Muslims in Pattani, Den was simply not the right figure to play a leading role in Muslim politics, at either national or provincial level: he was a lawyer by training and a politician by profession, and lacked the deep knowledge of religion that ought to be a prerequisite for leadership in a Muslim society. Den had never studied Islam systematically, and presented himself first and foremost as a Malay. In this sense, he

³¹ Anthony Davies, 'School System Forms the Frontline in Thailand's Southern Unrest', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, November 2004, p. 14.

³² Interview, 24 November 2005.

³³ Fieldnotes, 15 March 2006.

represented what is often termed the 'old school' of Pattani Malay Islam, a more traditionalist, syncretic form of religion. This was in contrast to the 'new school' of Islam that had grown more popular and influential in the previous couple of decades, reflecting more strict forms of practice brought in by Muslim teachers who had studied in the Middle East. The differences between these schools are debatable and elusive, but can be symbolized by small details such as the wearing of different coloured caps: black Malay caps vis-à-vis white Turkish caps.

The majority of rural Malays in Thailand's southern border provinces remain traditionalist adherents of the 'old school', but 'new school' thinking is dominant among academics and well-educated Muslims. In some areas, conflicts between different schools of thought have led to the creation of second mosques in quite small villages, and resulted in considerable tensions over the election of imam. Den had sought to mobilize rural voters to resist the encroachment of the 'new school', partly as a way of securing his own political power base. So long as traditionalist Muslims continue to outnumber 'new school' ones in Pattani and neighbouring provinces, the influence of a politics that emphasizes 'Malayness' will be impossible to eradicate. To many Muslim intellectuals, Den represented all that was wrong with Islam in greater Pattani: a sentimental attachment to *barami cheung prawatisat* (literally, historical charisma), localist and villagist sentiment that overshadowed the centrality of Islamic doctrines and practices.³⁴ For Den, by contrast, the 'new school' was an attempt to impose alien notions of Islam that were inappropriate for Pattani, and which failed to recognize the distinctive history and culture of the region. He argued for a set of principles based on historical consciousness and a sense of Malay identity, accusing the new school of destroying Malayness by wearing Arab-style clothing and speaking Thai. The old school/new school dichotomy is absolutely not a simplistic divide between separatist sympathies and ideas of loyalty to the Thai state, but it is possible to read the divide at some level in these terms.

In the Pattani Islamic Council elections of November 2005, a concerted attempt was made to oust the incumbent membership of the council. This challenge was led by three major figures, all of them principals of prestigious Islamic private schools: Nideh Wabah, a very

³⁴ Interview, 24 January 2006.

prominent and outspoken Muslim leader from Saiburi, who had close ties to the military and the monarchy, via his long-standing patron, privy councillor Palakorn Suwannarat; Asamad Kamae Waemuso, an Indian-educated and highly respected ulama; and Abdulwahab Abdulwahab, who had served as president of the Pattani Islamic Council before Den's 1999 reforms had seen him ousted from his post. The 30-member slate assembled by the challengers was full of intellectual heavyweights. The contenders argued that they represented a much more modern understanding of religion: to be an imam, you needed a wide range of skills, a determination to change the ideas and thinking of the society, and the ability to promote a modern form of development.³⁵ Above all, members of Islamic councils needed to be religious experts, rather than people with secular backgrounds who assumed these posts for the purpose of supporting political positions. In the past, Den had been able to control the Islamic council because there were not enough well-organized and articulate religious leaders in Pattani: most of the prominent Islamic scholars were not proficient in Thai, and lacked the range of skills needed to deal with the Thai state.

The challengers issued a series of 10 leaflets setting out their ideas and proposals and trying to 'educate' imam about the issues behind the election and the importance of the choices they were making. The first of those called for the selection of a capable and knowledgeable team, who would ensure that the Islamic council provided good services for people, based on principles of justice and using transparent budgetary practices that could be checked.³⁶ Some of these points reflected criticisms of the unprofessional and antiquated way in which the Islamic council worked in Pattani. They campaigned on the slogans 'Distribute power back to imam' and 'Give imam their rights'. They argued that the previous team had made use of the votes of imam, but had failed to recognize or appreciate them. The challenging team included 22 imam on its 30-man slate, whereas the incumbents fielded only two imam. Even the incumbent president himself was not an imam, but a *khatib*, or deputy imam.³⁷ Many of the

³⁵ Interview, 24 January 2006.

³⁶ Details from a copy of a leaflet produced by the challenging team, headed '24.11.05'.

³⁷ Formally speaking, the *khatib* was responsible for leading Friday prayers and the *bilal* for making the call to prayer, but in practice these roles were often interchangeable and both men were regarded as deputy or assistant imam.

incumbents were *tadika* teachers.³⁸ The challenging team also included many teachers, but most of them were prominent figures with more than one role, combining teaching with serving as imam.³⁹ This new opposition depicted the incumbents as a lacklustre team in terms of education, religious credentials and standing in the community: they were a team of second-raters distinguished largely by their loyalty to Den and their subservience to his own political agendas. By contrast, the incumbent team argued that they were dedicated to improving the quality of education and information for imam. A central plank of their campaign was the creation of an ‘imam college’; other policies included improving the curriculum for *tadika* schools to prevent instruction from supporting separatism, and bringing these schools under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education.⁴⁰

In theory, the 2005 Pattani Islamic Council elections were a struggle over principles about religion and identity, and about the relative qualifications of the candidates. Two slates of 30 candidates stood for election, and both sides sought to persuade the electorate of imam to support only one slate. The process of persuasion soon spilled over into forms of money politics and electoral manipulation that were all too familiar to long-term students of Thailand’s secular politics. Accusations of vote-buying were rife, with many arguing that both sides sought to secure the support of imam with monetary incentives. Islamic council elections were not subject to regulation by Thailand’s independent Election Commission, and so the normal procedures for registering complaints about irregularities – which could lead to the disqualification of candidates, or even to elections being declared null and void – did not apply. Apart from allegations of vote-buying, there were also rumours of intimidation, and a general acceptance that both sides had invited groups of imam to attend ‘seminars’ during the run-up to the election, events that some saw as an indirect form of electoral lobbying or vote-buying.

³⁸ *Tadika* are privately-run schools offering supplementary elementary education about Islam, mainly to children, rather like Christian ‘Sunday schools’.

³⁹ Interview, 24 January 2006.

⁴⁰ ‘Peut wisaythat prathan isalam pattani: tang wittayalai imam, dung tadika khao rabop’ (‘The Islamic Leader of Pattani’s Vision: “Establishing an ‘Imam College’ and Bringing *tadika* into the system” ’), Sun Khao Issara (Issara News Centre), 1 December 2005, at www.tjanews.org/cms.

Matters were further complicated by claims that one or both sides received moral and even financial support from elements of the military. Other rumours suggested that sources close to the ruling Thai Rak Thai Party were funding certain teams. Some fingers pointed at Pichet Sathirachawala, who hoped to replace Den as secretary-general of the Islamic Council of Thailand. He was a recent convert to Islam and a former minister who had been barred from holding political office because of asset-declaration violations. According to some theories, Pichet's interventions were bankrolled by Khunying Potjaman, wife of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. In the crudest version of the theory, Pichet was primarily backing the incumbents on behalf of Thai Rak Thai, while the military and democrats were backing the challengers on behalf of the monarchy.

Since 2005, Thailand's national politics have involved clashes between two main power networks, those aligned with Thaksin Shinawatra (later the 'red shirt' movement that staged violent protests in Bangkok in April 2009) and those aligned with 'network monarchy' (later the 'yellow shirt' movement that seized Bangkok's airports in December 2008).⁴¹ In more sophisticated readings, Pichet was, in typical Thai fashion, supporting both competing teams in the Pattani elections, as a sure-fire means of firming up his own support base. And in yet more elaborate interpretations, the military was also backing both teams, using funds from its secret budget, in the hope of then co-opting whoever won.

The Pattani Islamic Council elections resulted in a split: the incumbent team loyal to Den secured 19 seats, while the challengers secured 11 seats. Many imam failed to cast all their votes for one slate or another, preferring to split their votes among preferred candidates from both slates. The positive interpretation of this vote-splitting was that these imam were seeking to select the best-qualified candidates; a more cynical view was that they had been subjected to lobbying – or taken payments – from both sides, and sought to assuage their consciences by dividing their votes. A leading member of the challenging team argued that the 592 imam could be roughly divided into three groups of 200: one group firmly loyal to Den, a second group strongly supportive of the challengers and a third

⁴¹ For a relevant discussion, see Duncan McCargo, 'Thai Politics as Reality TV', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 68: 1 (2009), pp. 7–19.

group of waverers, on whom the outcome hinged.⁴² This argument is broadly but not precisely supported by the election results: the top-ranked candidate, the incumbent president, won 329 votes, and the lowest-ranked candidate, number 30 on the list of challengers, won 200 votes. The top-ranked challenger came in at number 7, with 310 votes – only a few votes less than the president. The lowest-ranked incumbent was placed number 50 in the rankings, with 235 votes. This suggests that the core vote of the incumbents was 235, the core vote of the challengers was 200 and that the remaining 158 votes were available for the taking. Some imam were resentful of attempts to get them to vote for whole teams of candidates, rather than for the most capable and respected individuals on the ballot paper. As one argued: ‘We’d like to select the whole team but can’t because we also know people from the other team. I believe in the individual.’⁴³ Seng Mali, one of the members of the challenging team in Pattani, acknowledged that voting for individuals was actually a wise way of voting.

The challengers accused Den of paying waverers up to 10,000 baht each to support his team (at the time 40 baht = approx. US\$1).⁴⁴ Those supporting the incumbents argued that the challengers had used funds from the military to buy support from the same group. Even the challengers admitted that on 23 November, the night before the election, they had taken over 200 imam to stay in a ‘safe house’, a hotel in Hat Yai, to ensure that Den’s ‘Republican Guard’ could not get to them during the ‘night of the howling dogs’ and persuade them to change their minds.⁴⁵ In fact, the challengers invited 400 imam to join them, but half of them declined. Some actually boarded the buses to go to the hotel, but got off after receiving threatening phone calls. The imam who went to the safe house were taken directly from the hotel to the polling station in buses provided by the challenging team the following morning. The challengers claimed they had actually consulted Panu Uthairat, the governor of Pattani province, about this and he had assured them it was perfectly legal and above board.

⁴² Interview, 24 January 2006.

⁴³ ‘Kanmuang saek katleuk kammakan islam’ (‘Political Interference in the Islam Council Elections’), Sun Khao Issara (Issara News Centre), 24 November 2005, at www.tjanews.org/cms.

⁴⁴ Interview, 24 January 2006.

⁴⁵ Interview, 24 January 2006.

The challenging team also admitted that many imam from the three provinces had been invited to a series of seminars organized by the military in places such as Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Phang-na, Krabi, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Tak. Some leading members of the challenging team had been among the speakers at these seminars, but they had also included other community leaders as well as imam. These seminars reflected the close ties between Nideh Wabah and senior army officers, but the challengers argued that they did not involve any vote-buying and were perfectly legitimate training activities. Critics suggested that these events were part of an orchestrated attempt to buy support from participants in the run-up to the Islamic council elections, and in some cases the content had been entirely tokenistic – participants were taken to a resort, given a sum of money for ‘expenses’, and urged to vote for certain candidates. According to some rumours, the military donated up to 10 million baht to the challengers to try and oust Den’s team;⁴⁶ the challengers claimed, however, that they had used a total budget of only 500,000 baht, which they had raised from their own resources.⁴⁷ Other sources suggested that the challenging group was closely allied with the Democrat Party – rivals of Den’s for political power in the province – and made use of their canvasser networks to try and secure a successful electoral outcome. The main campaign manager for the challengers was said to be a well-known Democrat Party political organizer who had previously served as secretary to a couple of MPs.⁴⁸

The aftermath of the election was intriguing. The bitterly contested Pattani council was the last in the southern border area to select its chairman. There was no surprise when the incumbent was reappointed, but many observers were disappointed that all the other administrative posts on the council were monopolized by the old team. Had the incumbents extended an olive branch to the challengers by giving them at least one token post as deputy chairman, relations between the two sides would have been placed on a better footing. Instead, the incumbents chose to dominate power, making no concessions to the fact that a large proportion of Pattani’s imam had favoured the other team. Many observers argued that this was not

⁴⁶ Interview, 6 January 2006.

⁴⁷ Interview, 24 January 2006.

⁴⁸ Interview, 6 March 2006.

a proper Islamic way of behaving,⁴⁹ but instead treated the council as if it were a national parliament divided into government and opposition groups.

ANALYSING THE ELECTION OUTCOMES

The Pattani Islamic Council elections were illustrative of widespread problems in the way Islamic councils were selected, problems that assumed different forms in different provinces. In Narathiwat, for example, a new team assumed control of the council, led by the former vice-president. The former president and two of his associates retained their seats, but the remaining 27 seats were taken by the challengers. The Narathiwat victors handled matters differently, appointing the ousted president to the honorary position of adviser to the council. This proved insufficient to placate the ex-president, Abdul Rahman Abdul Shamat, however, who had been completely taken aback by his defeat; he complained that his opponents had spread malicious rumours about him and his team, and had threatened imam in the area and had claimed that some of the religious teachers among his allies were not socially accepted – apparently code for harbouring separatist sympathies.⁵⁰ He refused to attend meetings of the new council, and would not meet the new president.

One imam from Narathiwat admitted that he had been paid around 300 baht to attend a seminar organized by the challenging group, but argued that this was normal procedure at such meetings.⁵¹ Another religious leader from the province argued that the winning team had made use of political networks created by an influential former MP, and that both sides bought votes extensively.⁵² The challengers were reportedly unhappy with some of the outspoken political statements made by the former president, who was the most vocal of the Islamic council leaders in the three provinces.⁵³ Some believed that the military was also behind the victory of the new team in

⁴⁹ Conversation, 7 March 2006.

⁵⁰ 'Wikrit khropkhrua kansuksa satsana sam teumpanha faitai' ('Crises in the Family, Education and Religion Worsen the Situation of Violence in the South'), Sun Khao Issara (Issara News Centre), 22 November 2005, at www.tjanews.org/cms.

⁵¹ Interview, 21 February 2006.

⁵² Conversation notes, 15 March 2006.

⁵³ Conversation notes, 7 March 2006.

Narathiwat,⁵⁴ and that their goal had been to remove all three of the incumbent Islamic councils in the southern border provinces. They were successful only in Narathiwat, however, because there was no powerful politician in the province capable of shaping the outcome. Nevertheless, in an interview the former Narathiwat president insisted that he did not believe that the military had supported the moves to oust him.⁵⁵

In Yala the contest went more smoothly: a few independent candidates challenged the incumbent group, but none of them was successfully elected. The winning clique was close to former Interior Minister Wan Muhamad Nor Matha, another leading figure in the Wadah group. These connections were mediated through a key Wan Nor ally, the chair of the Yala provincial administrative organization, who was also a member of the Yala Islamic Council.⁵⁶ In Songkhla there was no contest at all: only 30 candidates stood for the 30 seats on the council. In Satun, control of the Islamic council was seized by a group of *se*, businessmen involved in the business of organizing haj tours who enjoyed close beneficial relations with local imam.

Overall, Islamic council elections in the southern border provinces were heavily politicized, and became inextricable from power struggles involving local politicians. The military clearly sought to displace incumbent members of the council in Pattani, and possibly elsewhere, lending direct or indirect support to the challengers. These developments led to extensive debate among Muslim academics and commentators in the deep south. Ahmad Somboon Bualuang, a leading Muslim academic, argued that the politicization of Islamic councils dating from the 1999 Act was undermining respect for them, and was disappointing for many people.⁵⁷ Worawidh Baru declared that the Wadah group had won most of the Islamic council elections in the three provinces, and called upon the government to find ways of reducing political interference in the system. Various interviewees argued that respect for imam was declining rapidly:

⁵⁴ Interview, 3 December 2005.

⁵⁵ Abdul Rahman Abdul Shamat interview, 7 June 2006.

⁵⁶ Interview, 25 January 2006.

⁵⁷ 'Wat radap khluenkanmuang sanam leuktang kammakan islam' ('Measuring the Political Involvement of the Islam Council Elections'), Sun Khao Issara (Issara News Centre), 20 November 2005, at www.tjanews.org/cms.

villagers were well aware that their religious leaders had sold their votes in Islamic council elections, and increasingly saw them as figures who lacked integrity and moral standing.⁵⁸ One secular community leader even argued that the introduction of more and more elections was part of a deliberate plan by the Thai authorities to create internal division within Muslim communities, allowing them to exercise a policy of divide and rule.⁵⁹ Some Muslim leaders argued for the use of a *shura* system, which would nominate Islamic council members by consensus rather than by voting.

Facing a chorus of criticism over the election outcome – most of it implicitly directed at him personally – Den responded by giving an interview in which he accused other forces of politicizing the elections for their own purposes.⁶⁰ In an earlier interview he had argued that any process of selecting the Islamic councils would involve some politicization – the new system was the best way forward.⁶¹ Similarly, an imam in Narathiwat argued that elections were unavoidable – Islamic council members could not be selected by some sort of village-style consensus.⁶²

CONCLUSION

In theory, electing provincial Islamic council members in Thailand was supposed to promote and secure a form of civil Islam, with socially engaged Muslim communities working within a democratizing political order to represent their interests to the Thai state. In practice, the 2005 elections illustrated the extent to which this experiment was going awry. On the one hand, especially for Pattani political veteran Den Tohmeena, Islamic councils could offer a site of resistance to the power of the Thai state, an area within which an alternative mode of politics could be constructed. This resistance was

⁵⁸ Interviews, 7 December 2005, 3 March 2006; conversation, 15 March 2006.

⁵⁹ Interview, 7 December 2005.

⁶⁰ 'Wadah song sanyan kanmuang saek onkon islam' ('Wadah Gives a Signal of Political Interference in Islamic Councils'), Sun Khao Issara (Issara News Centre), 27 November 2005, at www.tjanews.org/cms.

⁶¹ 'Samruat leuktangkammakan islam sam jangwat tai' ('Scrutinizing the Islam Committee Elections in the Three Southern Border Provinces'), Sun Khao Issara (Issara News Centre), 24 November 2005, at www.tjanews.org/cms.

⁶² Interview, 21 February 2005.

largely rhetorical; this article does not suggest that the Pattani Islamic Council had become a direct source of militant or separatist activity, but that the council involved a part of the political arena that resisted subordination to the will of Bangkok. In the context of the growing political violence in the southern border provinces since January 2004, this resistance was highly salient.

In response, other political actors, ranging from local Muslim leaders of other persuasions, to rival political parties and elements of the security forces, moved to plan counter-measures to oust Den, the Wadah group and other local 'players' from positions of influence over Islamic councils in the southern provinces. The military sought explicitly to 're-co-opt' Muslim leaders on behalf of the Thai state. The determination of these actors to suppress the 'resistance' represented by Den and others was played out in the use of vote-buying, intimidation and electoral manipulation by both sides. The result was an unravelling of civil understandings of the nature of the selection process. Provincial Islamic council elections ceased to be mainly about choosing the best Muslim leaders for the area, and became essentially a power struggle between actors aligned with the state, and other actors who wished to maintain a degree of distance from Bangkok's political suzerainty.

But having won re-election, Pattani President Waueramae Mamingchi turned on Den, himself taking the province's reserved seat on the national Islamic Council – a prize that Den had demanded for his own nephew. As Waueramae explained, the two men had gone their separate ways.⁶³ The Pattani president had discreetly forged close ties with Pichet Sathirachawala, and once he won re-election, he moved explicitly into Pichet's camp. Pichet took over from Den as secretary-general of the Islamic Council of Thailand.⁶⁴ Den then failed to secure his daughter Pechdau's election to the Senate in April 2006; he believed he was undermined by the president of the Pattani Islamic Council, who failed to deploy the patronage resources under his control to support her. Den was also

⁶³ The Pattani president stressed that he still respected Den, who had been close to his father. Interview, 1 September 2006.

⁶⁴ Den has accused Pichet of using 'an enormous amount of money' to secure election to this position, including having 'bought' the Pattani chairman with a million-baht bribe. He stated that he no longer has anything to do with Waueramae. Interviews, 12 and 22 August 2006.

unsuccessful in his bid to regain election to parliament from Pattani in the December 2007 election. The Pattani Islamic Council elections were not just a simple clash between two rival groups of Islamic leaders, but a multilayered contest involving forces aligned with Thai Rak Thai (Pichet), Den Tohmeena's bitter personal struggle to preserve his political base, links to the monarchy and the Democrats (through Nideh Wabah) and the ongoing machinations of the military. As the Pattani president argued, the elections eventually became 'a sporting matter' (*ruang kila*).⁶⁵

The Islamic council elections of 2005 illustrated several disturbing trends in the deep south: a breakdown in relations between the Thai state and Muslim leaders; the subordination of religious issues to partisan political agendas; the commercialization of the process by which Muslim leaders were selected and the unravelling of an imagined 'civil Islam' as previously construed on the basis of Thailand's 1997 process of political reform. After the Thai military staged a coup d'état on 19 September 2006, the Pattani Islamic Council president was appointed a member of the National Legislative Assembly, a sham parliament: having apparently failed to block his return to the post, the military now sought to bring him on board. Overall, the elections contributed to a process of dividing and undermining Muslim communities, reducing popular confidence in their leaders and themselves.

The elections also illustrated the close relationship between secular electoral politics and the politics of religious organizations. Where religious organizations are obliged to adopt representative structures and systems that parallel those of the wider society and political order, parallel shortcomings seem likely to emerge. The introduction of elections for members of religious bodies such as Islamic councils may open the door for increasing politicizations of these bodies. This politicization may have the effect of undermining the credibility and legitimacy of the religious organizations concerned: precisely the opposite of the purported aim of the reforms. In the end, replacing an unaccountable and remote religious body with one selected through problematic mechanisms did not amount to a democratic gain for Thai society. At times of violent conflict, Muslim leaders whose loyalty to the state has been openly questioned may be particularly vulnerable; they are torn between top-down

⁶⁵ Interview, 1 September 2006.

pressures to conform to state demands and the need to retain the respect and support of their own communities. As the example of Thailand's Islamic councils shows, politicizing the bodies that mediate between states and religious communities is a short-sighted and potentially dangerous step, especially during times of national division.