

## The Politics of Buddhist identity in Thailand's deep south: The Demise of civil religion?

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*This article sets out to criticise arguments by scholars such as Charles Keyes and Donald Swearer, who have framed their readings of Thai Buddhism through a lens of 'civic' or 'civil' religion. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in the southern border provinces, the paper argues that religious tolerance is declining in Thailand, and that anti-Muslim fears and sentiments are widespread among Buddhists. Some southern Buddhists are now arming themselves, and are creating militia groups in the face of growing communal violence. In the rest of Thailand, hostility towards Muslims, coupled with growing Buddhist chauvinism, is being fuelled by developments in the south.*

The fact that Buddhism is the national religion of Thailand should be accepted and declared, for the sake of the security of the nation, religion and monarchy, which would make it possible for Thailand to have enduring peace and security.<sup>1</sup>

In a well-organised campaign of protests and demonstrations in the early part of 2007, Buddhist monks and organisations pressed for Thailand's new constitution to proclaim Buddhism as the country's national religion.<sup>2</sup> Yet the above quotation predated this campaign by almost 18 months: it was part of a 20-point declaration issued by the Pattani Sangha Council in response to the violent October 2005 attack on Wat Phromprasit in Panare, Pattani. The national religion campaign of 2007 reflected a growing sense that Buddhism – the religion of more than 90 per cent of the Thai population – was under threat from a resurgent and militant Islam concentrated in the south. The recent rise of Buddhist chauvinism in Thailand illustrates the shortcomings of earlier claims that Thai Buddhism is essentially inclusivist and tolerant — in short, that it constitutes a 'civil religion'.

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1 *Thalaengkan khanasong jangwat Pattani ruang khwam mai sangop nai 3 jangwat chaidaeen phak tai, karani Wat Phromprasit, Tambon Bannok, Amphoe Panare, Jangwat Pattani* [Declaration of the sangha council of Pattani province on the subject of the unrest in the three southern border provinces, case of Wat Phromprasit, Tambon Ban Nok, Panare district, Pattani province] (2 page faxed document), 20 Oct. 2005, point 18.

2 Leaders of the movement to make Buddhism a national religion (whom I interviewed at their protest site opposite the National Assembly in Bangkok on 17 May 2007) were a disparate group pursuing their campaign based on a range of political and religious motives.

To demonstrate the growing implausibility of the ‘civil religion’ perspective, this article reviews a number of issues relating to the politics of Buddhist identity in Thailand’s southern border provinces, which have been the site of renewed violent conflict since January 2004, claiming more than 2,000 lives.<sup>3</sup> Issues addressed include the militarisation of Buddhist temples, the formation of Buddhist militias, and the arming of the region’s Buddhist population. Following the Wat Phromprasit incident, prominent monks in the three provinces launched public attacks on the stance of the National Reconciliation Commission, a body created by the Thaksin government to propose a peaceful solution to the southern crisis. These interventions by senior monks were apparently prompted by past and present senior military chiefs, but also testified to deep misgivings in wider Buddhist society. Underlying the abbots’ uncompromising statements lay widespread Buddhist fears that they could ultimately be ‘swallowed’ by Muslim neighbours and driven from their land. Drawing on a period of extended fieldwork based at Prince of Songkhla University (PSU), Pattani,<sup>4</sup> the article uses interview materials and other texts to explore the fears and aspirations of the region’s Buddhist community.

Thai Buddhist studies are too often pervaded by a set of simplistic and rarely challenged assumptions: Buddhism is a peaceful religion, Thailand is a tolerant country guided by the exercise of *metta* (loving-kindness) and characterised by religious freedom, while Thai Buddhists enjoy harmonious relations with people of other religions. Charles Keyes has been at the forefront of these claims. Indeed, he presses the idea of Thai Buddhism as a ‘civil Buddhism’ so far that he even characterises top-down interventions in the *sangha* carried out by the Thai monarchy as ‘revolutionary’ and progressive in intent.<sup>5</sup> In his keynote address to the 1999 International Conference on Thai Studies, Keyes actually compared Thailand’s ‘civil religion’ with that of the United States, and drew parallels between the Thai term, ‘*satsana*’ (religion), and the ubiquity of the word ‘God’ in American public discourse.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, he glossed over the Thai state’s suppression of dissident Buddhist movements, and ignored the ways in which Islam and other religions were subordinated to the demands of a Buddhist hegemony. Trying to obscure the distinction between a

3 For background information on and analysis of the southern Thai conflict in English, see primarily the five reports published by the International Crisis Group since 2005, at [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org) (last accessed on 5 Sept. 2008) — as well as *Rethinking Thailand’s southern violence*, ed. Duncan McCargo (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007, a revised version of the Mar. 2006 special issue of *Critical Asian Studies*, 38, 1), and Duncan McCargo, *Tearing apart the land: Islam and legitimacy in southern Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008). Two invaluable studies in Thai are Supalak Ganjanakhundee and Don Pathan, *Santhiphap nai plaew phleung* [Peace in flames] (Bangkok: Nation Books, 2004) and ed. Chaiwat Satha-Anand, *Paendin jintonakan: rat lae kankhaekhai panha khwamrun-raeng nai phak tai* [Imagined land: The State and solutions for the southern violence] (Bangkok: Matichon 2008).

4 Core fieldwork was conducted from Sept. 2005 to Sept. 2006. Thanks are due to the Faculty of Political Science, PSU, for hosting my stay, and especially to my dedicated and endlessly supportive Pattani colleagues Srisompob Jitpiromsri and Wattana Sugunnasil.

5 Charles F. Keyes, ‘Buddhist politics and their revolutionary origins in Thailand’, *International Political Science Review*, 10, 2 (1999): 121–42.

6 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, see especially pp. 24–5.

civic and ethnonationalist understanding of religion and identity is a highly misleading enterprise. As Jerry Muller argues:

There are two major ways of thinking about national identity. One is that all people who live within a country's borders are part of the nation, regardless of their ethnic, racial, or religious origins. This liberal or civic nationalism is the conception with which contemporary Americans are most likely to identify. But the liberal view has competed with and often lost out to a different view, that of ethnonationalism. The core of the ethnonationalist idea is that nations are defined by a shared heritage, which usually includes a common language, a common faith, and a common ethnic ancestry.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars who suggest that Thai Buddhist ethno-nationalism has somehow quietly transformed itself into a harmless civic religion are engaging in some very wishful thinking indeed. Enraptured by the great philosopher-monk Buddhadasa's distinctive but potentially subversive liberal universalism, Donald Swearer similarly presents Thai state Buddhism as a benign 'civil religion of the centre', which he contrasts with the 'new movements on the periphery'.<sup>8</sup> Both Keyes and Swearer adopt a romanticised view of Thai religion, and skate over ample evidence of the ways in which Thailand's Buddhist institutions refuse to tolerate diversity, and view other religions with ill-concealed wariness.<sup>9</sup> At bottom, they imply that because movements such as Santi Asoke and Wat Thammakaya still exist, there is *de facto* freedom of religion in Thailand. Yet comparisons between Thai religion and American religion are dangerously misleading; while the legitimacy of the American state is based on a set of ideas enshrined in the constitution and a bill of rights, in Thailand state legitimacy derives from a set of national myths organised around the shibboleth 'nation, religion, king'. Religion in Thailand is national, particularist, and deeply uncivil. Robb Stewart's provocative assertion that 'Freedom of religion does not exist in Thailand' has yet to be convincingly refuted.<sup>10</sup>

As Suwanna Satha-Anand has recently argued, there has been a shrinking space for tolerance in Thai Buddhism, especially in its relations with Islam and Christianity. Muslims have become increasingly threatening in the eyes of conservative Buddhists, who look askance even at such minor changes as the provision of Muslim prayer facilities at Bangkok's main railway station.<sup>11</sup> Anti-Muslim sentiment amongst Thai Buddhists is growing, and the conflict in the south is sparking a heightened sense of Buddhist chauvinism both locally and nationally. Evidence of widespread

7 Jerry Z. Muller, 'The Enduring power of ethnic nationalism', *Foreign Affairs*, Mar./Apr. 2008.

8 Donald K. Swearer, 'Centre and periphery: Buddhism and politics in modern Thailand', in ed. Ian Harris, *Buddhism and politics in twentieth century Asia* (London: Continuum, 1999), p. 225. See also, Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist world of Southeast Asia* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 63–105; despite devoting a whole chapter to Buddhism as 'civil religion', he fails to clarify what he really means by the term.

9 For an outline critique, refer to Duncan McCargo, 'Buddhism, democracy and identity in Thailand', *Democratization*, 11, 4 (2004): 155–70.

10 Robb Stewart, 'Defending the faith(s): Buddhism and religious freedom in Thailand', paper presented at the Seventh International Conference on Thai Studies, Amsterdam, 4–8 July 1999, p. 1.

11 Suwanna Satha-Anand, 'Buddhist pluralism and religious tolerance in democratizing Thailand', in *Philosophy, democracy and education*, ed. Philip Cam (Seoul: The Korean National Commission for UNESCO, 2003), pp. 193–213.

anti-Muslim sentiments can be readily found on popular Thai language internet bulletin boards such as panthip.com.<sup>12</sup> Buddhist temples and monks are becoming a central element in the struggle against Malay Muslim militants in the southern border provinces. On the ground, there is very little communication between Buddhist and Muslim clerics, let alone any sense of a shared desire to normalise the situation and to avert further violence. Clerics from both religions have been targeted in the conflict, and the Thai state – led by the Queen – has initiated moves further to militarise the Buddhist community through the creation of armed militias.<sup>13</sup>

As a majority group within Thailand as a whole, but a minority (roughly 20 per cent) of roughly 300,000 people in the southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, Buddhists find themselves in both a privileged and a threatened position. Buddhists hold a disproportionate degree of economic and administrative power in the southern border provinces – they control most businesses, and hold most senior bureaucratic positions – yet are also becoming increasingly marginalised by an assertive Malay Muslim community. In the historically Malay southern border region, there has long been considerable resentment against Thai rule, which was only formally established in 1909. Violent movements with ‘separatist’ aspirations emerged regularly during the twentieth century, but an uneasy peace had been created in the region since the early 1980s, which saw a *de facto* social compact between Malay Muslim elites and the Thai state. However, Malay resentment grew during the heavy-handed administration of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–06), which coincided with the emergence of a revitalised militant movement that actively targeted Buddhists, both government officials and civilians. Between January 2004 and July 2007, nearly half of those killed in political violence in the border region were Buddhist, though Buddhists constituted only around 20 per cent of the population.<sup>14</sup> Though only a small minority of Malay Muslims were actively engaged in violent struggle, a larger proportion gave some tacit support to the movement, rejecting the Buddhist-dominated Thai state, for example, by removing their children from government schools. Some Buddhists have quit the area (estimates range between 35,000 and 100,000), while others with nowhere to go – especially the more impoverished rural dwellers – are feeling increasingly encircled. In certain areas, southern Buddhists are arming and training themselves in preparation for what they fear might become a real battle for future survival.

A series of attacks on Buddhist monks and civilians lie behind such fears, beginning with the murder of a 64-year-old monk in Bacho, Narathiwat on 22 January 2004, and the killing of two monks and a 13-year-old novice in Yala two days later. These attacks served as a trigger for the rise of more militant Buddhist

12 See, for example, discussions in Thanyporn Kunakornpaiboonsiri, 2004. ‘Web forums host hot debate on the south’, *The Nation*, 2 May 2004, and Patrick Jory, ‘From “Pattani Melayu” to “Thai Muslim”’, *ISIM Review*, 18 (Autumn 2006): 43.

13 See International Crisis Group, *Southern Thailand: The Problem with paramilitaries*, Asia Report no. 140, 23 Oct. 2007, at [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org) (last accessed on 5 Sept. 2008), pp. 16–21.

14 See International Crisis Group, *Southern Thailand: The Problem with paramilitaries*, Asia Report no. 140, 23 Oct. 2007, at [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org) (last accessed on 5 Sept. 2008), p. 20 and footnote 168, quoting statistics compiled by Srisompob Jitpiromsri. He estimates that 1,101 Buddhists and 1,281 Muslims were killed during the period in question.

sentiments towards Muslims. A psychological turning point was reached with the 16 October 2005 attack on Wat Phromprasit in Pattani, during which an elderly monk and two temple boys were killed. Although only a tiny number of monks had actually been attacked, the Wat Phromprasit incident was taken as signalling the onset of a systematic militant policy of targeting Buddhist religious institutions, and triggered a wave of reactions on the part of the Buddhist community in the southern border provinces.<sup>15</sup> These reactions ranged from the creation of armed militias, to protests against the policies of the Thaksin government. Attitudes among the Buddhist community were further hardened by unprovoked attacks on civilians. At the Narathiwat village of Kuching Rupa on 19 May 2006, two female Buddhist teachers were taken hostage in a room at the village nursery and beaten with sticks; one teacher, Khru Juling Pongkunmul, went into a coma and eventually died in January 2007.<sup>16</sup> The Khru Juling case evoked a great outpouring of national grief, tinged with growing overtones of Buddhist chauvinism.<sup>17</sup> A March 2007 attack on a minibus in Yala province produced even more intense reactions: eight Buddhist passengers were shot through the head in broad daylight, in an incident that triggered demonstrations across the country.<sup>18</sup> After the van attack, the Queen was quoted as saying: 'We have to help people there to survive. If they need to be trained, train them. If they need to be armed, arm them.'<sup>19</sup> When a young Buddhist woman was shot and burned alive in Yala the following month, 300 outraged local Buddhists paraded her charred body around the town and carried it to the provincial hall, where army commander and coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin (himself a Muslim) was forced to view the corpse.

### **Muslims could swallow Buddhists: Minority fears**

In November 2005, while visiting friends in Bangkok, I was passed a copy of a DVD then circulating among upper-middle-class Thai Buddhists. Entitled 'Muslims swallow Buddhists', the DVD featured a monk giving a lengthy oration on the subject of Muslim-Buddhist relations in Thailand.<sup>20</sup> The sermon began rather mildly, but gradually assumed an increasingly alarmist tone. The monk argued that separatism

15 It should be noted that at the time of writing, only four monks had been killed in the southern Thai conflict, three in 2004 and one in 2005, though there had been several other attacks on monks and temples.

16 Exactly why the two teachers were taken hostage, and why one was fatally injured yet the other emerged relatively unscathed, remains unclear and contested. Some have speculated that Juling was viewed as an informer for the security services, though such claims have never been substantiated and may be entirely unfounded.

17 The Khru Juling case is the focus of *Citizen Juling*, a compelling documentary film by Ing K, Manit Sriwanichpoom, and Kraisaak Choonhavan; for a review, refer to Kong Rithee, 'The Human face of tragedy', *Bangkok Post*, 27 June 2008.

18 Provinces where protests were staged included Buriram, Phuket, Chumphon, Satun, Nakhon Phanom, Uttaradit, Phayao, Si Sa Ket, Roi Et and Rayong.

19 Rungrawee C. Pinyorat, 'Distrust, brutality and glut of guns puts Thai south at risk of communal combat', *Associated Press*, 27 Apr. 2007.

20 *Muslim kluen phut* [Muslims swallow Buddhists], undated DVD of Buddhist sermon, apparently produced in late Oct. or Nov. 2005. No details concerning the identity of the monk or his temple were included.

in the south was a hellish doctrine, as illustrated by terrible incidents such as the attack on a temple that killed monks and temple boys.<sup>21</sup> This attack was a violent action against Buddhism, yet in the 2,500 year history of the Buddhist religion, there had never been any violence in Buddhism and no killing on behalf of the Buddha. Ironically, roles had now been reversed in the southern provinces: whereas in the past soldiers had sought amulets from monks to protect them, now monks needed to have soldiers with them for their own protection during the morning alms round.<sup>22</sup> For all the talk of ‘rule of law’ and ‘reconciliation’, ‘they’ did not care about such ideas, and only valued the use of force. The King and Queen were extremely worried about the situation, and the Queen had created a ‘widows’ village’ to accommodate those who had lost their husbands in the violence.

The monk had been told by military officers that the situation in the south was growing very serious: the separatists planned first to eliminate monks and temples, then make the region a forbidden area for Buddhists, who would be driven out of their homes and forced to move to other parts of the country. Eventually the south would be like Afghanistan, where huge ancient Buddha images had been blown up. The aim of the movement was to occupy not just the three provinces, but the whole country. It was essential that Buddhist land be protected so that the *phaendin* (Thai land and country) would not be divided. The strategy of the separatists was to rule the whole country using their religious laws. Muslims were now moving to many parts of the north and Isan and setting up *surau* and mosques everywhere, which would soon be as ubiquitous as Buddhist temples. He declared: ‘I don’t talk about this without evidence, but I heard it from many respected senior people who told me the same message and they are quite worried about the problem.’

The speaker painted a picture of Thailand 20 years hence, transformed through political changes. The three pillars of nation, religion and monarchy would be weaker. The nation consisted of land and human resources, but these people would occupy the land by buying it. Land was being bought up all over the north and Isan on the pretext of planting rubber trees, which were now appearing everywhere. But the real purpose was to occupy the land legally first, so that their people could be moved in later. The next stage of the plan was to make their religious law into common law. He claimed that while the Supreme Patriarch was only the head of around 350,000 monks, the Chularajamontri was the head of a much larger community of 3–4 million Muslims. The monk referred to a 1997 law requiring provinces to set up provincial councils, which could be used to manipulate the budget and get whatever they wanted.<sup>23</sup>

21 The speaker was apparently referring to the attack on Wat Phromprasit on 16 Oct. 2005, in which a monk and two temple boys were killed.

22 In 2007, the Internal Security Operations Command announced a programme to provide southern Buddhists with special protective Jatukham rammathep amulets. ‘Amulets to help “protect Buddhists” in the south’, *The Nation*, 14 Mar. 2007. These amulets first appeared in 1987, and were supported by well-known police officer and occultist Khun Phantharak Rajjadej, who died in July 2006, aged 108. They commemorate two mythological princes of the Krung Srivijaya kingdom in southern Thailand. For details, refer to Ekarong Panupong, *Yonroi damnan Jatukham Rammathep* (Bangkok: Siam Inter Multimedia, 2007).

23 The speaker was clearly referring to the 1997 Islamic Organizations Act, although he made no direct mention of Islam.

The speaker went on to complain about the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC),<sup>24</sup> which he asserted had scored a notable 'own goal': some members had argued that the three provinces actually belonged to Malaysia, while the Thais had only come later to the area from China. He declared that Thailand was suffering from enfeebled national institutions: the monarchy was growing weaker as the King and Queen grew older, and the religious institution was also weakening. There were an estimated 6,000 abandoned temples,<sup>25</sup> and a declining number of monks and novices. Buddhists had actually failed to realise that they were being invaded; rather than accepting terrible incidents such as the murder of monks and of two marines, Buddhists and Buddhist institutions should start to speak out against what was happening, condemning these incidents and pointing out how they violated religious doctrines. Otherwise, opportunists would capitalise on public weariness with the violence to occupy territory, make demands and bargain, not just for control of the three provinces, but for the entire country. The aim of the movement was to turn the conflict into an international issue and bring in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which had helped East Timor to gain independence.<sup>26</sup>

If we move too slowly, the conflict in the South will turn into a conflict between religion and the government, and they will call for justice and ask for a referendum, and finally the area will be separated. This phenomenon will happen if we are careless; at the moment Buddhists should not keep silent, but should help protect religion and the monkhood. We should be aware that Buddhism is our national religion.<sup>27</sup>

The sermon highlighted a number of recurrent themes in conservative Thai Buddhist discourse relating to the south. These included: an essentialised and idealised view of Thai Buddhism as peaceful, a reading that overlooked structural and other violence used to maintain the Thai state; a visceral fear and mistrust of Islam; and anxiety about the future of Thailand, inseparable from overtly expressed fears about the post-succession monarchy. Other key themes included the important role played by the Queen in boosting Buddhist morale in the region, a deep suspicion of the National Reconciliation Commission, and a parallel mistrust of the provincial Islamic councils and the Chularajamontri. Underlying this mistrust were fears concerning the institutionalisation of Islamic law; apprehension concerning long-term demographic spread and growth of Muslim populations; and fears about Muslim land ownership – real or imagined – in other parts of Thailand. In addition, many conservative Buddhists were dubious about the mediating role of international organisations, especially the OIC, and a deep-rooted belief that a referendum on the south could be a prelude to the division of the Thai nation. These themes together pointed to declining tolerance towards Islam on the part of Buddhists.

24 The NRC was an independent commission created by the Thaksin government in Mar. 2005. Chaired by former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, the 50-member body was tasked with proposing policy solutions to address the southern violence.

25 The Office of National Buddhism puts the number of abandoned temples at 6,040; see statistics as of 31 Dec. 2007, at <http://www.onab.go.th/data/06.pdf>. Thanks to my colleague Martin Seeger for locating this information.

26 There seems little evidence that the OIC played much of a role in the independence of East Timor (Timor Leste), a country with a Catholic majority population.

27 In fact, Buddhism was not officially Thailand's national religion under the 1997 or previous constitutions, a source of resentment among conservative Buddhists.

The DVD was passed to me along with a CD-Rom containing a number of documents, slide sets and PowerPoint presentations: one PowerPoint was about royally sponsored programmes to support and defend the Buddhist community in the south (complete with some horrific pictures of beheadings),<sup>28</sup> while another featured a graphic presentation of photographs showing the attack on Wat Phromprasit, including images of the bodies of the victims. Taken together, these visual texts constituted a highly emotional call for action, a call being heeded at the highest levels of Bangkok Buddhist society. The texts clearly illustrated the degree to which Buddhist ‘tolerance’ was beginning to unravel in the face of perceived threats from a resurgent and aggressive Islam.

### Leaflets and anonymous messages

In the southern Thai conflict, formal and public statements form only one element of the popular discourse about the ongoing violence. Equally salient is the informal discourse to be found in anonymous messages, often posted on village notice boards, thrown over garden walls, left in markets, or passed from hand to hand. Many of these messages explicitly allude to the religious divide between Muslims and Buddhists. Some of the messages appear to come from anti-state militants or their sympathisers, while others resemble ‘black’ propaganda distributed by state officials. In some cases, militants may be distributing ‘pro-Buddhist’ leaflets which are actually intended to inflame communal tensions and provoke violent reactions from the Buddhist community.

Warning leaflets are among the most common variety: some are left at the sites of violent incidents, while others urge local Buddhists to leave the area. One leaflet read simply:

Hey! All you Thai Buddhists. If you still stay on our land, we will hunt you down and kill you all. Get out from my territory, or you will have to eat bullets again.<sup>29</sup>

Another, addressed to a principal, read:

Dear Principal of the school,<sup>30</sup>

About what happened, we have no intention to hurt anyone. This land belongs to us. It’s time for us to get it back. Leave now if you don’t want any more damage to lives and property. If you continue to stay, we will not guarantee your safety. Take your family away as well.

From Patani State Liberators

28 General Naphol Boontap, deputy aide-de-camp to the Queen, performed important roles in many such activities in the south. For example, he arranged for 30 senior monks from other parts of Thailand to spend the rainy season in the southern border provinces in 2004, and presided at *kathin* ceremonies at 38 temples in the region in Oct. 2006. These programmes were explicitly aimed to boost the morale of local Buddhists who had been faced with militant violence. Previously known as Rawat Boontap (Class 13), the general was a close friend of Surayudh Chulanont, and formerly commander of the second army region, and assistant army commander. He retired from active military service in 2001 before becoming a royal aide-de-camp.

29 Leaflet found in Kha Pho, Pattani, 29 Oct. 2004.

30 Typed letter addressed to a school principal in Panare, Pattani. Fax sheet dated 13 June 2005.

Another, left at the site of a shooting incident in Yarang, read simply:

YOU KILLED INNOCENT MEN  
(TANYONGLIMOR)  
I KILLED INNOCENT BUDDHISTS!!!<sup>31</sup>

Leaflets purporting to come from the Buddhist side were typically much more long-winded, containing catalogues of complaints against the Muslim community and its leadership. One particularly interesting leaflet called upon Buddhists to boycott trade with Muslims:

Dear the Beloved Thai People,<sup>32</sup>

The violence that broke out in the three provinces has been intensified since January 4, 2004, and shows no sign of stopping. The reasons are ranging from the national and local politicians protecting their stakes, to drugs, the illegal oil trade, and separatism. The government policy to diminish the violence has resulted in more than five hundred deaths. People called the insurgents 'five-hundred bandits',<sup>33</sup> and it soon will be 'a thousand bandits' or more, since they won't stop in the near future. They killed innocent Thai Buddhists. For their fellow Muslims, they picked only policemen, soldiers, kamnan, phuyaiban, MPs, or whoever gets in their way. They also bring in foreigners to kill our people. Look at the Tak Bai incident; they had the intention to kill the officials and burn down the police station. They armed themselves with heavy weapons in the sacks that they placed there in advance. During the moment when they all marched to the police station, they shouted, "I'm here to kill!"

It was the right thing to do that the Fourth Army Commander dispersed the mob, because they posed a serious treat. They are clearly rebels and terrorists (international terrorists as well). We, the people, agreed with the authorities as the number of mobsters could have increased from 3,000 to 10,000–20,000. They were coming from all the districts in Narathiwat, Yala, Pattani, and some parts of Songkhla. They wanted to create chaos that would lead to separatism. The Tak Bai protesters were not ordinary teenagers. They were trained since they were three years old from domestic and international terrorist schools. On that day, they didn't expect that the officials would take things so seriously and be able to seal off the area. Up until now, *so many Thai Buddhists have been killed*, but the news was concealed. Our lives are not normal any more. We are the targets of murder and robbery. Academics are protecting the bandits. The innocent are neglected. We are living in constant horror. As soon as they can't take it any more, civil war will surely break out. Respected academics, how would you feel if your parents were killed?

On the night of 16 November 2004, Her Majesty Queen Sirikit has ordered the NGOs and the university academics to stand up for the innocents that were killed or hurt. Hopefully, they would take it to your hearts and do accordingly, unless they are too brainless to do so. In the past, these people are always protecting the criminals.

31 Dated 14 Oct. 2005. The word 'I' is written in green, and 'killed' is written in red. The Tanyonglimor incident of 20–21 Sept. 2005 began with the shooting dead of two Muslim men at a teashop, after which two marines were taken hostage by villagers and later beaten to death.

32 Leaflet distributed in Yala, Dec. 2004.

33 Bandits who killed 500 people, *jon ha loi*; *jon nung pan*, bandits who killed 1000 people.

The Prime Minister said they know who's behind the insurgency, but he never made that clear to us. As an old man of 65 years, I'm telling you the truth that even Her Majesty the Queen who is seventy-two years old knows who's behind this separatist scheme...<sup>34</sup>

May all of you publicly make this known among friends, relatives and business owners, merchants and people, so we can get rid of these people simply by:

- Bursting all the tires of any car belonging to Muslims that enters the areas outside the three provinces.
  - Not accepting any job applications. Some of them might be from terrorists.
  - Not selling some merchandise such as nails in the three provinces, because they can be used to make metal spikes or bombs.
1. Uric fertilizer should not be allowed in the three provinces, because it's a component of explosive. Propose to return all of it to the Ministry of Agriculture.
  2. No delivery of crucial merchandise such as rice, or limit it to the top-quality brand so that they<sup>35</sup> cannot afford to buy it.
  3. Spit on all those MPs and Senators who are involved, that you come across.
  4. Show your disdain towards the Muslims in the three provinces who side with the movements
  5. Organise a demonstration in each province nationwide. Terrorists bring down the economy. In 2004, the expected economic growth rate was 8 per cent, but we only achieved 2.5 per cent. Billions of baht were lost.

They caused troubles to innocent people. We will not cooperate with them, and will chase them all away. Currently, there are about eight members of the movement in each village. That makes 10,000 altogether in the three provinces, plus hundred of thousands more 'naeo ruam'. We must stop them from spreading. At this time, they are sending women and the elderly to map official locations and the residences of some important figures. There's no safe place anymore in Thailand. We must do something other than being afraid. We give full support to the Fourth Army Commander and the government.

From innocent people of every religion

(except for those filthy politicians, separatists, drug dealers, arms dealers, illegal oil traders, piracy traders ... etc.)

Leaflets such as this cannot be taken as literal statements of the views of ordinary Buddhists in the southern border provinces, but they were carefully crafted to provoke emotional reactions: the sentiments expressed here would resonate with large numbers of people, and testify to the deep-seated anxieties of the minority community. Themes that emerge include the untrustworthiness of both local and national politicians, fears that Muslim employees and customers could be supporting militant

34 The leaflet goes on to list local politicians Den Tohmeena, Areepen Uttarasint, Najmuddin Ummar, Kamnan Tohdeng, as well as religious teachers, Somchai Neelapaichit and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh as prime movers behind the violence.

35 The Thai term for 'they' here is *'phuak man'*, a very insulting term.

activity, and the notion that only the Queen and the military could be trusted to defend Buddhists in the region. According to the leaflets, the only effective response to the continuing violence was the kind of hard-line security tactics employed at Tak Bai. Such leaflets, some possibly written by military intelligence officers, aimed to strengthen the determination of local Buddhists to resist violence caused by Muslims. In fact, however, these leaflets also created a heightened sense of paranoia, thereby playing into the hands of groups intent on terrorising Buddhist populations. A subtext of such leaflets was an attempt to discredit prevailing norms about the importance of mutual tolerance between the two major religious communities of the region, and to foster an alternative discourse based on enmity and fear.

### **Buddhist temples and Thai territory**

Buddhist temples in the southern border provinces represent enclaves of Thailand's majority religion, outposts of 'nation, religion and king' that need to be defended from physical, religious, ethnic, cultural and political incursions by the Malay Muslims who comprise most of the area's population. Each functioning temple is a visible assertion of the Thai Buddhist state's continuing suzerainty over this rebellious region. For this reason, the Thai state has invested considerable moral and military capital in securing Buddhist temples for symbolic reasons. In practice, however, the definition of a 'functioning temple' has to be modified and adapted to the security context of the southern border. In a normal Thai Buddhist temple, there is an intimate relationship between the monks who reside there and the immediately surrounding community; monks perform a daily alms-round, walking around their own community to receive donations of food. Villagers who provide this food typically visit their local temple regularly, and receive religious services from the monks in a *de facto* exchange. However, in the southern border provinces the performance of the alms round is often impossible – at one point in November 2006, some Narathiwat monks suspended the practice completely<sup>36</sup> – or it takes place only with the backing of armed military guards. Monks are often transported by their minders to carry out alms-rounds at some distance from their actual temples, so breaking the connection between temple and community. Many Buddhist temples in the southern border provinces exist only nominally: monks are imported from elsewhere, alms are collected at a distance, and there may be no real interaction between monks and the mainly Muslim villagers whose homes adjoin the temple. Even a senior royal aide acknowledged the scale of the problem:

Gen Naphon noted that every group – police, military and civilian – must cooperate with each other. He said CDs showing beheaded victims are currently distributed in Pattani province to intimidate people.<sup>37</sup> Those involved in their distribution are not known at

36 Refer to <http://thereport.amnesty.org/eng/Regions/Asia-Pacific/Thailand> (last accessed on 3 July 2008).

37 Ironically, the CD-Rom I received containing a PowerPoint presentation apparently from this same press conference also included numerous horrific images of beheading victims; such images could be of use to both sides in the conflict.

this time. If the situation persists the country's image will deteriorate. He appealed to everyone to help restore peace in the region. Even monks are afraid to stay in the region. For monks who remain, people have been asked to feed them at the temple so that monks do not have to leave the temples by themselves. Gen Naphon said he would persuade monks from elsewhere ... to come to the region to give spiritual uplift to local Thai Buddhists.<sup>38</sup>

The example of one southern temple nicely illustrates the point.<sup>39</sup> The monks at Wat Ban Lek<sup>40</sup> had no communication at all with the surrounding community, which was 100 per cent Muslim; when they performed their alms round each morning, they were taken by soldiers to a nearby Buddhist area about 3 kilometres away. A team of 12 soldiers provided round-the-clock security for the monks; this was not far from another temple where a serious militant attack has taken place. Previously, the temple had only two or three monks, but when I visited there were seven, their ranks boosted by volunteer ordainees from outside the area. The abbot confirmed that these volunteer monks came from Lopburi,<sup>41</sup> but when I pressed him as to whether any of them were soldiers, he told me he had never asked them. Wat Ban Lek dated back to the Ayudhaya period and had a couple of very fine old buildings; however, after the remaining Buddhists left the locality, the temple was abandoned around the early 1980s. The temple grounds had become an area where local Muslim villagers grazed their animals. The current abbot had been appointed in 1998, with a mission to re-establish the temple in order to ensure that this land remained a Buddhist area. Yet his life there was extremely fragile; the temple had very few visitors.

Wat Ban Lek was an interesting example of how a temple can exist without a surrounding Buddhist community; the abbot explained that there were only two temples like this in the province. He had reclaimed the temple himself from Muslim encroachment, encouraged by a neighbouring abbot who was his mentor. The reclamation of Wat Ban Lek was a highly political act: when I suggested to him that temples with no Buddhist communities simply might have to be abandoned, or converted to other uses, he could not accept the idea. This abbot had clearly adopted the preservation of this Buddhist enclave within a Muslim community as a personal life mission, and was being strongly supported by the military. Without a commitment by the nearby community and the state, this temple could not continue to function. Even so, its activities were largely symbolic, since it had no real parishioners.

Wat Ban Yai, another isolated temple in the region, was also guarded round the clock by a contingent of soldiers. Only a single monk – the elderly abbot – was in residence. When asked their function, the NCO in charge of the 12 soldiers based at the temple explained that protecting the abbot was their primary task. The abbot was too infirm to conduct an alms round himself, and his food came from the alms collected by monks from neighbouring temples. A local middle-aged woman

38 'Thai official says Queen's projects not aimed at dividing Buddhists, Muslims', translated from *Daily News*, 8 July 2005, BBC Monitoring International Reports, 8 July 2005.

39 Fieldnotes, temple visit and abbot interview, 12 Jan. 2006.

40 Temple names in this section are pseudonyms.

41 A central Thai province well known for its high concentration of military bases and main home to the Army's Special Forces.

whose family had been victims of the violence had been hired to assist the abbot. As at Wat Ban Lek, elaborate mechanisms had been established to ensure that an essentially non-viable temple could continue to have a symbolic existence. However, Wat Ban Yai had far larger numbers of visitors than Wat Ban Lek, since the abbot was well known for producing much-valued amulets, and was skilled in de-hexing: removing spells cast by others. The abbot was still in great demand among Muslims as well as Buddhists for his de-hexing services, activities attesting to syncretic modes of religious activity, in which local Buddhists and Muslims had overlapping traditions and beliefs. Such shared religious and community space had now diminished, and Buddhists and Muslims in the area no longer attended one another's festivals, or exchanged much more than cursory greetings.

Wat Ban Lek and Wat Ban Yai were extreme examples of the plight of Buddhist temples and their associated communities in the region. Such temples had ceased to function as religious centres in any normal sense; largely stripped of civil dimensions, they existed primarily as symbolic outposts of a hollowed-out and de-legitimised Thai state, their continuing existence only secured through military force.

### Temples and security

While few temples were as dependent on the military as Wat Ban Lek and Wat Ban Yai, many Buddhist temples were used as improvised army camps, housing troops who were performing duties such as escorting teachers to and from school, patrolling adjoining Muslim areas, and protecting the monks at the temples — including during their mornings alms rounds. At a farewell party for troops who had been based at one Narathiwat temple for a year, a Buddhist community leader declared that people would be very sorry to see the soldiers depart because they had become a familiar sight around the village — even though they had never really spoken to them.<sup>42</sup> In recent months, local people had been largely excluded from the temple, which had become primarily an improvised army base housing more than a hundred soldiers. One Pattani abbot was very dubious about the security value of housing soldiers in his temple — sometimes more than two hundred at a time — and refused to travel with a military escort.<sup>43</sup> He explained that many of the soldiers and monks were on bad terms.

Phra Paisal Visalo, a Chaiyaphum-based peace activist monk and NRC member, argued that it was not really appropriate to allow soldiers with guns into temples, and noted that some abbots did not permit armed men to enter their grounds, since they believed this could make the temple more vulnerable to attack. However, there had been little protest against the policy of assigning troops to temples, in view of the difficult security situation. He was concerned that matters might escalate, however, and felt that monks should not take defensive steps such as wearing bullet-proof vests.<sup>44</sup> Phra Paisal argued that although Buddhism was actually a non-violent religion, relatively few Buddhist monks clearly understood non-violent approaches. Paisal's point was confirmed during my interview with one abbot, who lamented that it was no

42 He stated that the soldiers were like their brothers (*phi nong*), and looked familiar (*khunkuey*) although they never talked to them. Fieldnotes, Tak Bai district, 5 Oct. 2005.

43 Abbot interview, 11 Aug. 2006.

44 Interview, 19 Feb. 2006.

longer possible for the security forces simply to eliminate ‘bad guys’ who caused problems in the community, which they used to do regularly. He was quite clear that a return to a policy of selective extra-judicial killing would be the best option to address the worsening violence.<sup>45</sup>

After 2004, there had been a drive to encourage soldiers from other parts of Thailand to ordain as monks in southern temples: a batch of 75 soldier-monks (*phra thahan*) were ordained at one Pattani temple in 2005, then assigned to various temples around the province, in a project supported by the Queen.<sup>46</sup> It was a longstanding tradition for government officials – including those serving in the military – to be granted periods of leave during which they could ordain as monks. But the practice of ordaining serving soldiers in the southern border region produced a backlash, increasing the likelihood that monks would be targeted for attack by militants. In theory, soldiers ceased to perform any military duties once they ordained, but local practices varied. One abbot claimed that some *phra thahan* actually carried guns in their shoulder bags while out on their alms rounds.<sup>47</sup> He was highly critical of the government’s security strategy, arguing that large troop deployments were completely ineffective in ameliorating the southern conflict. During 2006, there was a policy shift away from basing troops in Buddhist temples, which Muslim Army Commander Sonthi Boonyaratkalin viewed as a one-sided posture that was likely further to alienate local people. Soldiers were now often based in smaller units posted at more neutral locations, but many remained stationed inside Buddhist temples. The intimate connections between the security forces and the *sangha* demonstrated that Thai Buddhism was far from civil; it was not even essentially civilian, but an additional arm of the security state. By militarising Buddhism, the authorities arguably risked exposing monks, temples and civilians to further attacks; at the very least, they further reinforced the equation between nation, religion and Buddhism which alienated many Malay Muslims from Thai rule.

### Local Buddhist militias

Security for temples was not provided only by full-time soldiers and police officers, but also by local militias. Crucial among these was *Or Ror Bor*, which operated in Buddhist communities and came under the patronage of the Queen.<sup>48</sup> A senior royal aide-de-camp, General Naphol Boontap, played a key role in establishing this programme and training the volunteers.<sup>49</sup> *Or Ror Bor* drew inspiration from a controversial speech made by the Queen on 16 November 2004, in which she had called upon the 300,000 Buddhists in the southern border provinces to learn how to shoot — adding that she herself would learn to shoot without wearing her glasses.<sup>50</sup>

45 Abbot interview, 2006.

46 Abbot interview, 11 Aug. 2006.

47 Ibid.

48 Interview with an *Or Ror Bor* supervisor, Pattani, 23 Apr. 2006. *Or Ror Bor* stands for *asamak ratsadorn raksa muban*, or civil volunteers for village protection.

49 International Crisis Group, *The Problem with paramilitaries*, p. 19.

50 Details of the speech were given in *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*, 17 Nov. 2004. The full Thai text may be found at <http://www.manager.co.th/Home/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9470000083177> (last accessed on 31 July 2008).

Volunteers were generally better equipped and organised than the more widespread *Chor Ror Bor*,<sup>51</sup> and more highly motivated. *Or Ror Bor* was also quite well funded: the 46 volunteers in one Pattani scheme received 100 *baht* for every shift they worked, and eight people were on duty each night, operating in two shifts. Around 30 of them had their own guns, and 20 had been trained to shoot by rangers. Whereas *Chor Ror Bor* was rather vague in focus, *Or Ror Bor* was clearly organised to defend Buddhists from Muslim assailants, and security teams were often based in temples. Volunteers worked alongside soldiers and police officers, and constituted a *de facto* paramilitary force. In the face of criticism that village defence projects exacerbated tensions between Buddhists and Muslims, General Naphol gave a press conference in July 2005:<sup>52</sup>

General Naphon said the purpose of the news conference was to refute misinformation by adversaries, who charge that the training of village defence volunteers is aimed at pitting Thai Buddhists against Thai Muslims. He denied that the project had such a motive; [he said] it aims to enable people to protect themselves. Regarding the project's origin, villagers in Tan Yong Limo subdistrict called on the Queen to ask for assistance because their villages were attacked by motorcycle gangs at night. Gang members shot into their homes and viciously attacked villagers when they were working on fruit farms. Some victims were beheaded. Such vicious acts never occurred [before] in Thailand. The Queen told them that as they were born here and their ancestors earned their livelihood here, they should not migrate elsewhere. They should find ways to protect themselves.

General Naphon said: 'The Queen often said that everyone has a right to defend himself in the face of danger. The training is not aimed at encouraging people to arm themselves to attack others. There is no intention to divide people who have different religious beliefs. The Queen said she would ask the Fourth Army Region commander to send troops to supervise local people on their defence. When people group together, adversaries cannot hurt them. They assist each other to tap rubber and work on farms. Strangers have not breached village perimeters since villagers received arms training. There have merely been occasional shootings to intimidate, not to kill. The training is aimed at giving villagers a capability to protect their property. After the training was launched, two villagers were killed while they were going to the city for business.'

General Naphol's statement illustrated the pressures placed on rural Buddhists: they had been instructed by the Queen, no less, to remain where they were and to defend themselves at all costs. The assertion that local Buddhists had been born where they were currently living was a problematic one; while many did have deep roots in their localities, some Buddhists in the southern border provinces had migrated there quite recently, as indeed had many Muslims. During the 1960s, the National Economic and Social Development Board sought to boost the Buddhist population of the region through schemes to encourage migration into the area.<sup>53</sup> In districts such as Bannang Sata in Yala, development projects had led to large-scale movements of

51 *Chor Ror Bor*, a programme of rotating teams of nightwatchmen in all villages across the southern border provinces, was administered by village headmen and supported by the Interior Ministry.

52 'Thai official says Queen's projects not aimed at dividing Buddhists, Muslims', translated from *Daily News*, 8 July 2005, BBC Monitoring International Reports, 8 July 2005.

53 For details of some of these schemes, refer to *Sarupsarasamkhan phaen pattanakansethakit lae sangkhom haeng chat chabab thi song (1967-71), samnakngan saphapattanasthakit haeng chat karakadkhom*

population. To complicate matters further, land originally allocated to Buddhists from the upper south in the 1970s had later been sold, often to Buddhists from Pattani or other nearby areas.<sup>54</sup>

While the creation of *Or Ror Bor* was on one level an extremely logical development on the part of a threatened minority community, organising militias along communal lines was also replete with dangers. For some prominent figures in the southern Buddhist community, *Or Ror Bor* was just a small step in the important direction of preparing for the day when Malay Muslim militants would attempt to drive Buddhists out of their homes *en masse*. Huge numbers of local Buddhists had bought guns. One district officer did a roaring trade in gun permits; he had a collection of gun catalogues in his office, and would take orders for the weapons at the same time as he issued the licences. A low-ranking government official and shooting instructor who had trained dozens of local Buddhists on a firing range never actually carried a gun,<sup>55</sup> believing that possessing a gun could actually put an individual in greater danger. But every single Buddhist in this rural community knew how to shoot. According to this informant, the purpose of training local Buddhists to shoot was not so that they could protect themselves while travelling to and from work, as popular understandings suggested. Rather, weapons training formed part of the preparations for a future civil war, during which Buddhists might need to defend their communities from large-scale attacks and attempts at ethnic cleansing. The villagers had discussed among themselves how they would defend the community to the last house. The violence had brought Buddhist villagers closer together because of their sense of a shared threat.

During our interview, the shooting instructor pointed to Muslims taking a motorcycle shortcut along a nearby road, and explained that some locals favoured creating their own checkpoint here to keep Muslims out of the Buddhist area, especially after dark.<sup>56</sup> The two communities already enjoyed substantial *de facto* separation: Buddhists did not send their children to schools – even government schools – in Muslim areas, and vice versa. One local high school which formerly had 1,000 pupils now had less than 200 students. This resulted from Muslim parents moving their children to private Islamic schools, and from local Buddhist parents sending their children to better and safer high schools, either government or private, in the nearby town. The older practices whereby members of the two communities would attend one another's festivals and religious ceremonies had now greatly declined, as had other forms of communication and trade. Only two Muslim traders still visited local Buddhist communities, while no Buddhist now dared play their wares in adjoining Muslim areas. Inter-religious marriage, never practised by more than 2 to 3 per cent of the local population was now extremely rare. Resentment against Muslims was strongest among less educated Buddhist villagers, many of whom harboured intensely negative feelings.

1968 [Summary of the Second National Economic and Social Development Plan (1967–71)] (National Economic and Social Development Bureau, Bangkok: July 1968), pp. 32, 63–7.

54 Conversations with Buddhist villagers in Bannang Sata, Yala, July 2007.

55 Interview, 13 Apr. 2006.

56 *Ibid.*

During 2007, informal Buddhist militias became more and more widespread. A senior Yala police officer, Colonel Phitak Iadkaew, was the leading figure behind a movement called '*Ruam Thai*', which by mid-year had trained some 6,000 members in security awareness and the use of weapons.<sup>57</sup> *Ruam Thai* had established 23 groups across the three provinces and from parts of Songkhla.<sup>58</sup> While the movement operated from a private rented house and received no formal government support, *Ruam Thai* was clearly condoned and abetted by elements of the Thai state. Allegations that *Ruam Thai* members were taking part in anti-Muslim vigilante attacks led to an abortive move by the regional police commander to transfer Phitak out of the area in June 2007. Even more alarming was the apparent growth of clandestine Buddhist militias not operating under the umbrella of formal organisations such as *Ruam Thai*. An informant involved in such a militia explained:

Lots of people are ready to fight. Some people will run away, not everyone will fight, but in the end we will be able to fight. Even some Muslims are leaving the area because they can't do business here. There's a network of local Buddhists, we have guns, we are trained, we have radios. The purpose of the weapons and equipment is to defend ourselves if the army is pulled out or they send in Muslim rangers who turn their guns on us. We are prepared.<sup>59</sup>

In some areas, there had already been concerted attempts to drive out Buddhist villagers. This was especially true in the Bannang Sata and Than To areas of Yala,<sup>60</sup> following a spate of leaflets and violent incidents, in November 2006, some 227 villagers from two adjoining communities in the area fled their homes and took refuge in a temple in Yala town. While some 33 villagers later returned to their homes, most of the others had no intention of doing so. One of the returnees explained that for Buddhists to abandon their homes would be to abandon part of the land of the Thai nation (*phaendin*), and could ultimately lead to the map of Thailand being changed.<sup>61</sup> Some Buddhists were willing to make the brave, arguably foolhardy decision to stay in high-risk areas, partly for the sake of a passionately held nationalist ideology. Other villagers who had remained in the area expressed growing anxieties about their predicament when I visited them a few months later; some were ready to leave if the Thai government would offer them compensation and help them to resettle elsewhere.<sup>62</sup>

The potential dangers of arming Buddhist militias were clearly illustrated on 9 April 2007, when a group of village defence volunteers opened fire on a group in Ban Pakdi, Bannang Sata, Yala, killing four Muslim students who were returning from the funeral of a local politician killed earlier that day.<sup>63</sup> The defence volunteers had apparently been attacked with sticks and rocks by funeral goers, who blamed the

57 Interview with Police Colonel Phitak Iadkaew, 23 July 2007.

58 International Crisis Group, *The Problem with paramilitaries*, pp. 20–1.

59 Interview, 24 Aug. 2006.

60 The two villages concerned are in different districts, but closely about one another.

61 Interview with villagers, Than To, 20 Jan. 2007.

62 Interview with villagers, July 2007.

63 International Crisis Group, *The Problem with paramilitaries*, pp. 17–18. Interview with local Border Patrol Police commander, July 2007.

Thai authorities for the death. Incorporating ordinary citizens into the defence forces could have alarming consequences, leading to further violence and escalating tensions on the ground.<sup>64</sup>

While from the outside it might appear that Buddhists were receiving preferential treatment from the state – through measures such as basing army units at temples – rural Buddhists in the three provinces felt largely ignored by the authorities, whom they believed were preoccupied with trying to placate the more vocal and aggressive Muslim majority. Nevertheless, not all Buddhists shared the dark, even apocalyptic views of the interviewees cited here. When one of my most outspoken informants took me to meet a group of his friends, explaining to them that he had been filling me in on their preparations for civil war, another prominent local Buddhist responded ‘Oh, it’s not to that point yet.’<sup>65</sup> In one small Narathiwat town, I met a Chinese woman in her eighties whose family had been living and trading in the town since the nineteenth century. Her children had insisted that she move to Bangkok with them following the outbreak of violence in 2004, but after eight months she had returned to Narathiwat, where she continued to sit in the entrance to her shophouse, spending each day chatting to passers-by.<sup>66</sup>

As one prominent Sino-Thai businessman in another part of Narathiwat explained, the key to making a good living was maintaining good relations with local Muslims, who comprised the great majority of both the customers and employees for Chinese-owned businesses.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the category of ‘Buddhist’ needed to be unpacked; typically, government officials and villagers who identified themselves as ‘Thai’ were much more likely to feel alienated from the Muslim community than their Sino-Thai, business-oriented counterparts. Similarly, urban Buddhists who lived alongside Muslims in relatively integrated provincial towns were much more tolerant than rural Buddhists, who typically felt ‘surrounded’ and outnumbered by Muslim neighbours.

### **Monks and the National Reconciliation Commission**

The National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) was established by the Thaksin government in March 2005, under the chairmanship of the respected former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun. The Commission’s brief was to investigate the conflict in the south and make recommendations for alleviating it. Anand was given complete discretion to select the 50 members of the NRC, and he invited a number of prominent southern Muslims to join the Commission, including the heads of the Islamic Councils in the three provinces. He did not, however, invite any of their Buddhist counterparts, the chief monks of the southern provinces. Only two Buddhist monks joined the NRC: Phra Paisal Visalo, a nationally prominent peace activist and Isan-based abbot; and Phra Khru Dhammadharanipala Jotako, the abbot of

64 For a discussion, see ‘Thailand: Government backed militias enflame violence’, Human Rights Watch, 18 Apr. 2007, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/04/18/thaila15729.htm> (last accessed on 14 May 2008).

65 Fieldnotes, 24 Aug. 2006.

66 Fieldnotes, 6 June 2006.

67 Interview, 25 Aug. 2006.

Wat Thoongkoi, Pattani, who had been born in Nakhorn Si Thammarat and was a long-time advocate of inter-faith dialogue in the south. Anand's decision not to include the chief monks of the southern provinces was entirely understandable, since some of these individuals were highly inimical to ideas of conflict resolution and reconciliation — but their exclusion opened up the NRC to criticism that the body was excessively pro-Muslim.

Such complaints surfaced on 20 October 2005, four days after the Wat Phromprasit attacks. Phra Maha Thawin Khemkaro, chief monk of Pattani province and the abbot of Wat Lak Muang, organised a declaration by the provincial monastic council containing detailed 20 proposals concerning the southern violence, for consideration by the government. The points in the declaration had something of the character of a random wish list, ranging from a demand for all temples in the three provinces to be provided with secure gates,<sup>68</sup> to a request that the government establish a Buddhist university in Pattani.<sup>69</sup> In a subsequent interview elaborating on the declaration, he called for the NRC to be abolished because it was taking sides with the terrorists and exacerbating religious differences.<sup>70</sup> When asked whether this declaration might encourage division between Buddhists and Muslims, he replied that the two communities had already been divided for a long time. He attributed the growing problems to weak leadership and lack of government action, and argued that any organisation set up to address the southern issue should be composed of local people or those with experience of working in the region. Phra Maha Thawin perhaps revealed something of his real agenda when he also remarked that General Panlop Pinmanee and General Kitti Rattanachaya — both well known for their hardline views on the conflict — should be given a role in addressing the problems in the south.<sup>71</sup>

The interview with the chief Pattani monk quickly became headline news in the Bangkok press, and other comments followed. A group of Mahanikai monks explicitly criticised the lack of representation for local monks on the NRC, and asked how the Commission could reach an informed and balanced view when it included so many Muslims and outsiders.<sup>72</sup> One local monk, Phra Chaiyut Chotiwoangso from Wat Buraphuram in Pattani, complained that the authorities often convened meetings of 'religious leaders' to which only Muslims were invited. He was later quoted as saying that Buddhists were now being treated as second class citizens by Muslims in the three provinces, and some monks had left the areas, leaving the remaining monks

68 *Thalaengkan*, point 3.

69 *Thalaengkan*, point 20.

70 *Thalaengkan*, point 12, elaborated in *Peutjai 'jaokhana jangwat pattani', kor or sor aojai faitrongkham* [The Head of Pattani monks speaks out: The NRC is pleasing the aggressors in the south], *Sun Khao Isara*, 23 Oct. 2005.

71 See also, *Thalaengkan* point 5. In the declaration, Panlop, Kitti and former fourth army commander Phisan Wattananongkiri are described as really understanding the problems of the area [*khao jai panha nai phunthi yang thae ching*] and sufficiently decisive [*khla thatsinjai*]. Of course, Panlop was known primarily for his decisiveness in ordering the fatal storming of the historic Kru-Ze mosque on 28 Apr. 2004, while Phisan was forced out of his post after the deaths of 78 unarmed Tak Bai protestors in military custody on 25 Oct. 2004.

72 *Phramahanikai yon kor or sor rathaban peut wethi rapfang khwamhen khanasong* [Mahanikai monks ask National Reconciliation Commission and the government to listen to the views of the *sangha*], *Sun Khao Isara*, 26 Oct. 2005.

unable to conduct Buddhist activities properly.<sup>73</sup> He argued that it was now time for monks in the three border provinces to get involved in politics, since they had kept quiet for a long time, with no results. Phra Khru Sankarm Somjai of Wat Prachumthara in Narathiwat questioned just who the NRC was working for, and pointed out that monks had been forced to change the way they performed their religious duties. In the past they often used Muslim-owned vehicles, but now had to be taken everywhere by Buddhists, make sure they returned to their temples early, and think carefully about the routes they took when travelling.

In response to this chorus of criticism, Anand and other NRC members visited Phra Maha Thawin on 11 November 2005, to listen to his views and assure him of their sympathy and sincerity. Somewhat to their surprise, they found that the senior monk's main complaints were actually directed at the government rather than the NRC.<sup>74</sup> The NRC also visited Wat Phromprasit on 13 November; Anand and other senior commissioners talked to the abbot, other local abbots, and to a gathering of Buddhist villagers. On 19 February 2006, the NRC visited another Buddhist temple in Narathiwat, and the following day hosted an inter-faith dialogue meeting between senior Muslim clerics and local monks. Yet despite these gestures, hostility to the NRC remained widespread among the monastic and lay Buddhist communities in the Southern border provinces. One abbot involved in the preparations for the February 2006 meeting criticised the event as meaningless, and the NRC as ineffective. At the meeting, religious leaders from both sides had agreed to control their disciples, but Muslim leaders had not kept their side of the bargain:

We can control our disciples so violence doesn't come from Buddhists, but they cannot control their disciples. They don't keep the agreement.<sup>75</sup>

Anusart Suwanmongkol, a Sino-Thai hotelier who topped the polls in Pattani's April 2006 Senate election, acknowledged that expressing support for the NRC was not a vote-winner with local Buddhists: fortunately he had not been invited to join the Commission, membership of which might have cost him dearly in the Senate race. He certainly had no enthusiasm for raising the issue of the report in parliament:

As a Buddhist senator, it would be very difficult for me to raise the issue, because most of the Buddhists disagreed with the report. To me, there's no core constituency in the report. Most Muslims don't really care. The only people who do are the academics. The Buddhists voters don't care at all. Would it be prudent for me to raise the issue?<sup>76</sup>

73 *Mua phra thong phut, siangsathon jak chaidantai* [When monks have to speak! Reflections from the southern border], *Sun Khao Isara*, 27 Oct. 2005.

74 Fieldnotes, 11–12 Nov. 2005. Anand suspected that monks were somewhat suspicious of him because he had never been ordained himself, on account of his bad back. But a close reading of the 20 Oct. declaration shows that the NRC – which is mentioned only in the twelfth of 20 points – was not the monks' main target; the call for its abolition seems to have been a strategy to grab media attention.

75 Abbot interview, 11 Aug. 2006.

76 Anusart interview, 28 Aug. 2006. Because of the 19 Sept. 2006 military coup, Anusart was not able to take up his Senate seat. However, in early 2008 he was made an appointed Senator under the terms of the 2007 constitution, which had transformed the Senate from an all-elected body to a part-elected, part-appointed one.

For the most part, the NRC was regarded by Buddhists in the south as selling out their interests to the Muslim majority, part of a broader process of marginalisation. Only the Queen, Panlop, Kittti and a few other outspoken conservative Thai nationalists were seen as consistently sympathetic regarding Buddhist fears and concerns.

NRC member Phra Paisal was sceptical about the 20 point 'anti-NRC' declaration of 20 October 2005, saying that the declaration had been agreed by a show of hands, and only about five of the 20 points had been debated and agreed by the provincial *sangha* council members.<sup>77</sup> The outcome was emotional rather than rational. Another well-informed figure pointed out that very few of the senior monks in Pattani actually signed the declaration,<sup>78</sup> which was organised by two or three prominent figures in the monastic community, including Phra Maha Charat of Wat Chang Hai.<sup>79</sup> He believed the declaration had actually been orchestrated by a group of conservative military figures, including former Fourth Army Commander Phisan Wattananongkiri, and some of General Panlop's subordinates. They had tried to use the monastic order as a means of discrediting the current military leadership of army chief Sonthi and Fourth Army Commander Ongkorn Thongprasom, who were committed to a 'softly-softly' approach to the southern conflict. In other words, the declaration had little to do with the NRC, and much more to do with internal power struggles between hard-line and liberal factions inside the army. The overlap between the monastic order and Thailand's state security structures was clearly illustrated by the somewhat spurious 'NRC' controversy, which nevertheless illustrated some real anxieties on the part of southern Buddhists.

### Conclusion

This article has challenged notions that Thai Buddhism is a form of 'civil religion', by focusing on the precarious position of Thai Buddhists in the Muslim-dominated southernmost provinces of the country in the period following January 2004. Buddhists in the region were deeply apprehensive, faced with regular militant attacks and a propaganda campaign aimed at driving them out of the area. Many temples were barely functioning, and some had been transformed into *de facto* military bases. Relations between Buddhist and Muslim communities had sharply deteriorated, and many Buddhists were deeply suspicious of Muslim political and religious leaders. They were also extremely sceptical about attempts by outsiders – ranging from the National Reconciliation Commission to human rights groups and the OIC – to play a role in mediating or monitoring the conflict. Some Buddhists feared that such interventions could form the prelude to a sell-out of their interests on the part of the government. Encouraged by the Queen and by some elements in the security forces, Buddhists were undertaking weapons training and forming their own militias, partly for their immediate self-defence, but also in preparation for what some feared could degenerate into an all-out civil war.

By no means all Buddhists were preparing for Armageddon, and most Buddhists in the south demonstrated considerable restraint in the face of intense provocation.

77 Interview, 19 Feb. 2006.

78 Interview, 11 June 2006.

79 Phra Maha Charat's handwritten name and mobile phone number have been added to my faxed copy of the declaration, which bears no signatures at all.

Norms of reciprocity and mutual tolerance that had endured for generations did not vanish overnight. Many Buddhist reactions to their growing sense of physical danger, marginalisation and encirclement were entirely reasonable and understandable. Nevertheless, the position of Buddhists in the region offers significant challenges to received and outmoded understandings of Thai Buddhism as a tolerant and diverse form of 'civil religion.' Buddhist chauvinism was on the rise in Thailand, both in the south and elsewhere, and popular responses to violent incidents such as the March 2007 Yala minibus attack revealed the extent to which hardline nationalist discourse and anti-Muslim sentiments were becoming increasingly overt and mainstream elements of Thai Buddhist identity and thinking.

As collective national anxieties rose about the royal succession and the future political direction of the country following the anachronistic 19 September 2006 military coup, many Thai Buddhists were turning inward. One response was to look towards popular religion and superstition, illustrated by the extraordinary cult of Jatukham Rammathep protective amulets in the first half of 2007. A second response was to see Buddhism as under threat from Islam, a threat epitomised by – and yet by no means confined to – the southern violence. While Buddhist individuals and communities in the south began arming and militarising themselves under royal patronage, elements of the *sangha* joined a nationwide campaign to enshrine the place of Buddhism in Thailand's next constitution. Thai Buddhism was becoming increasingly particularistic, more and more national and very markedly less civil. In the light of these disturbing developments, new, more critical and more empirically grounded approaches to the study of Thai Buddhism are urgently needed.