Religious Tolerance and Muslim Minorities in Thailand: A Ta'ayush (Coexistence) Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Religious tolerance and the ethos of coexistence "ta'ayush" require the acknowledgement and acceptance of religious differences without resorting to discrimination. These attitudes are fundamental to every faith, and freedom of religion must be upheld by all states. Yet, Muslim minorities today face persistent challenges in many of the countries where they reside. In Thailand, Muslims have endured restrictions imposed by the state that curtail their religious freedom. This article traces the historical trajectory of Thailand's Muslim minorities, identifies the issues and obstacles confronting them, and evaluates initiatives that aim to support these communities. Employing a qualitative case-study design, the study collects and analyses data from journals, scholarly articles, and monographs. The findings demonstrate that Thailand's state-building project designed to promote a unified national identity has adversely affected Muslim minorities. Deep seated distrust and discriminatory practices have further marginalised these communities. The study concludes by offering practical recommendations for a more equitable and effective framework of religious tolerance for Muslim minorities in Thailand.

Keywords: Muslim minorities in Thailand; Ta'ayush; coexistence; religious tolerance

INTRODUCTION

Religious tolerance is of paramount importance in any nation comprising people of diverse ethnicities and religious backgrounds. It can be understood as an attitude and practice that allows and accepts religious differences within a society without discrimination. A religiously tolerant society is capable of fostering cooperation and unity, contributing to the development of a stable and harmonious nation. Conversely, societies that lack tolerance toward religious differences are at risk of engaging in interethnic conflict, oppression, and even bloodshed, which can destabilise regional peace. Minority communities often face significant challenges in such conflict-prone environments, particularly in the form of prejudice, discrimination, or violence by the dominant and ruling groups. Although most religions advocate peace and compassion, in practice, minority groups in several countries continue to experience oppression and marginalisation at the hands of the majority population, often supported by governments that lack a spirit of tolerance toward those perceived as different from themselves. Southeast Asia offers a compelling context for the study of majority–minority interactions, given the region's high levels of ethnic and religious diversity (Thomas Sealy et al., 2022). Thailand is one such country with a significant Muslim minority population. Despite the emphasis in Buddhist doctrine on peace and tolerance, Muslims in Thailand still face various issues and challenges in preserving their religious identity, freedom of worship, and, at times, even their basic human rights. This reality indicates that the level of religious tolerance in such countries still requires improvement. Conflicts can be avoided if members of different faiths mutually respect each other's freedoms and recognise that differences need not hinder the development of brotherhood and peaceful co-existence. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the state of religious tolerance in Thailand with regard to its Muslim minority communities.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND CO-EXISTENCE (TA'AYUSH) IN MUSLIM–NON-MUSLIM RELATIONS ACCORDING TO ISLAM

In broad terms, tolerance may be characterised as a disposition of acceptance toward diversity. Kamus Pelajar (2nd ed.) defines it as "a patient, accommodating, or lenient attitude one that recognises and respects the views, thoughts, and beliefs of others." Historically, tolerance has functioned as a social mechanism by which individuals and communities avert conflict and foster peace through the acknowledgement of difference. Etymologically, the term derives from the Latin tolerantia, later adopted into English as tolerance, and connotes gentleness, leniency, voluntariness, and open-mindedness (Apriliani & Ghazali 2016). The Arabic equivalent, al-tasāmuḥ, carries comparable meanings of forbearance and broad-mindedness. Ahmad Tarmizi Talib (2010) defines religious tolerance as the attitude and behaviour that permit religious diversity to be practised within a plural society without prejudice or discrimination, even where one possesses the authority to reject such diversity. Tolerance, therefore, manifests both as a mental posture and as concrete social conduct.

Islam provides an instructive model of religious tolerance. Far from merely permitting it, Islamic sources positively exhort believers to act tolerantly toward others (Khadijah Muda & Siti Nor Azhani 2020). Such conduct is exemplified in gentle interaction, equitable treatment, and the observance of neighbourly rights. Qurʾān 60:8 explicitly praises Muslims who behave justly toward non-hostile non-Muslims:

"Allah does not forbid you from being kind and just towards those who have not fought you on account of religion and have not expelled you from your homes. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly."

Beyond tolerance, Islam advances the principle of taʿāyush co-existence grounded in shared humanity reflected in the Qurʾānic imperative li-taʿārafū ("so that you may come to know one another," 49:13). Although the noun taʿāyush is absent from the Qurʾān, its semantic field permeates verses such as al-Ḥujurāt 49:13:

"O humankind! We created you from a single pair of male and female and made you into nations and tribes so that you might know one another. Surely, the most honoured of you before Allah is the most righteous; Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware."

Ibn Kathīr (1999) notes that this verse situates human dignity in piety rather than lineage, thereby fostering solidarity across ethnic and social boundaries. The verbal form taʿārafū conveys reciprocity—mutual recognition, respect for difference, and a readiness to seek the common good (Alwi Shihab 2005).

Islam further demands courtesy toward other faiths. Qurʾān 6:108 forbids reviling the deities of others "lest they abuse Allah in hostility without knowledge." Thus, Islamic tolerance does not imply doctrinal relativism; it affirms religious plurality as part of divine wisdom while proscribing coercion in matters of faith (Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman & Khadijah Mohd Khambali 2013). Central to this ethic is maḥabbah compassion and benevolence which instructs Muslims to treat non-Muslims with empathy and goodwill. Indeed, maḥabba transcends mere tolerance by encouraging genuine affection despite theological divergence (Khadijah Mohd Khambali & Herzali 2008). The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) epitomised this universal mercy, as affirmed in Qurʾān 21:107: "We have not sent you except as a mercy to all worlds."

Accordingly, tolerance must be rooted in justice and expressed through active engagement, cooperation, and mutual respect in the pursuit of a harmonious society (Muʾālim, Jaffary Awang & Ibrahim Abu Bakar 2015). Marginalising or antagonising religious minorities, by contrast, constitutes clear intolerance.

These principles are equally pertinent to Muslim minorities living under non-Muslim governance. Such minorities communities of Muslims residing in states where another religion predominates (Wan Kamal Mujani 2002) encounter diverse historical contexts yet commonly suffer economic, social, and legal constraints. Discriminatory employment practices, restrictions on worship, and enforced cultural assimilation

(e.g.language, education, attire) can strain relations between Muslim minorities and the majority population (Wan Kadir Che Man 2002).

Multiple factors fuel intolerance toward Muslim minorities, including entrenched prejudice, historical grievances, and perceptions of Muslims as cultural outsiders. In some regions, nationalist narratives cast Muslims as erstwhile colonisers, exacerbating exclusion—as witnessed in parts of India and the Balkans. Post-9/11 securitisation further intensified anti-Muslim sentiment, as global media often conflated Islam with terrorism and regression, thereby amplifying Islamophobia (Ke Li & Qiang Zhang 2021).

Consequently, hardships that impede the religious life of any Muslim community warrant serious attention from Muslim leadership worldwide (Wan Kamal Mujani 2002).This principle of religious tolerance and co-existence must also extend to Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim-majority countries. Muslim minorities refer to Muslim communities residing under non-Muslim governance and living alongside a religiously different majority (Wan Kamal Mujani, 2002). The history, context, and challenges faced by each Muslim minority group vary depending on their geographical location. However, they often face similar economic, social, and political issues, particularly concerning their interactions with the majority population. For instance, some Muslim minorities suffer economic and employment discrimination, while others face legal restrictions on their religious practices (Wan Kamal Mujani, 2002). In certain cases, Muslim minorities are pressured to abandon their Islamic identity and assimilate entirely into the majority culture, including language, education, and dress (Wan Kadir Che Man, 2002). Such circumstances strain relations between Muslim minority communities and the state or majority population.

Numerous factors contribute to intolerance toward Muslim minorities, including prejudice against Islam, historical conflicts, and the perception of Muslims as outsiders who bring differing values and beliefs. Ethno-nationalist or anti-colonial sentiments may also fuel resentment, as seen in India and the Balkan region, where Muslims are portrayed as former colonisers. Moreover, anti-Muslim narratives intensified after the September 11 attacks, where hijacked planes allegedly by Muslim terrorists struck the World Trade Center in New York. These events severely damaged the image of Muslims worldwide and exacerbated tensions between Muslim and Western nations. Western media began to equate Arabs and Muslims with terrorism, oppression, and backwardness. Selective media coverage reinforced negative stereotypes and contributed to the rise of Islamophobia (Ke Li & Qiang Zhang, 2021). Challenges confronted by Muslim minorities are not isolated anomalies but a collective concern for the wider ummah. The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) likened believers to a single body:

“The believers, in their mutual kindness, compassion, and sympathy, are but one body; when any limb suffers, the whole body responds with sleeplessness and fever.”

Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology is a vital component of any research, serving to structure the inquiry and ensure that its objectives are clearly defined and attainable. In this study, a qualitative research design was employed to explore the issues concerning the Muslim minority community in Thailand. This approach was selected in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the historical, social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of the challenges faced by this community.

The qualitative method allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the research topic through the collection, interpretation, and analysis of secondary data from a variety of credible sources. These included academic theses, dissertations, journal articles, scholarly books, conference proceedings, and official documents relevant to the subject matter. The richness of the data obtained from these sources enabled the researcher to construct a well-rounded and evidence-based narrative of the Muslim minority experience in Thailand.

Two primary analytical techniques were utilised in this study:

i. Historical Analysis

This technique was used to systematically examine the historical evolution of Islam and the Muslim minority community within Thailand. Through historical analysis, the researcher traced the origins, transformations, and key events that shaped the identity and status of Muslims in the region, particularly in southern Thailand. The historical approach enabled the study to situate the present-day challenges of the Muslim minority within a broader socio-political and cultural context, thereby uncovering the root causes of ongoing tensions and marginalisation.

ii. Deductive Analysis

This method was employed to extract general patterns and themes from the collected data and subsequently draw specific conclusions. Deductive reasoning allowed the researcher to begin with broader theoretical frameworks and existing literature on religious tolerance, minority rights, and Muslim socio-political dynamics, and then apply these concepts to the specific case of Thailand. Through this process, the study identified core challenges faced by Muslim communities and evaluated the extent to which state policies and societal attitudes have contributed to their exclusion or inclusion.

By integrating these two analytical methods, the research was able to produce a nuanced and scholarly account of the issues concerning the Muslim minority in Thailand. This methodological framework ensured that the findings were not only descriptive but also interpretative and analytical, contributing meaningfully to academic discourse on minority rights, interreligious co-existence, and the application of Islamic principles such as ta'ayush in modern nation-states.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Definition of Muslim Minority

To meaningfully discuss the issue of Muslim minorities, it is essential to first examine the meaning and defining characteristics of the term minority, particularly as it relates to Islamic identity. Among the key academic references addressing this topic is the book Muslim Rights in Non-Muslim Majority Countries, edited by Abdul Monir Yaacob and Zainal Azam Abdul Rahman, and published by the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM). This compilation brings together ten scholarly articles by contributors from around the world, focusing on the conditions and rights of Muslim minorities residing in non-Muslim-majority states.

In the foreword to this volume, Dato' Sri Ahmad Sarji outlines the general challenges encountered by minority communities in relation to the policies of local governments. These include assimilation strategies that erode minority identity, insensitive state approaches that disregard minority-specific needs, and overt discrimination. The foreword also highlights how cultural differences and economic underdevelopment pose further obstacles for minority communities. In response, Ahmad Sarji refers to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Minorities, which stipulates that the security and rights of individuals must be protected by the state. Likewise, the cultural, ethnic, and religious aspirations of minority groups who are citizens of the state must be respected and safeguarded.

In Minoritas Muslim di Dunia Dewasa Kini (2005), M. Ali Kettani offers an extensive treatment of the term minority and discusses the emergence and dynamicsof Muslim minority communities across the globe. Kettani argues that a community's minority status must be recognised by its members themselves—this self-awareness of difference and marginality often fosters intra-group solidarity and prompts efforts to preserve collective identity. Moreover, Kettani posits that size alone does not determine minority status; political and social power are also crucial indicators. A small group that holds significant political or social influence cannot be

considered a minority. Conversely, a numerically large Muslim community may still qualify as a minority if the non-Muslim majority dominates the political and social spheres, thereby rendering the Muslim group politically ineffective or socially marginal. Kettani further proposes three main pathways through which Muslim minority communities have historically come to exist in non-Muslim-majority states:

Migration from the Middle East

Muslim individuals or groups migrated from the Middle East for economic, missionary, or military purposes and eventually settled in new regions, spreading Islam and establishing local Muslim communities. Some of these outlying regions initially became Muslim-majority areas but, due to the later decline of Muslim political power in the major Muslim power centres, these outer regions fell under non-Muslim rule, thereby converting their Muslim populations into minorities. This scenario is applicable to the case of Muslims in Thailand.

Short-lived Muslim rule or ineffective da'wah (proselytisation):

In some regions, Muslim governance was established only briefly or the spread of Islam was insufficiently established and thus incapable of forming a majority population-wise. When Muslim political power eventually collapsed, the small Muslim population was swiftly marginalised. This pattern can be observed in India.

Formation of new Muslim minorities through cultural assimilation:

New Muslim minority groups emerged through the conversion of non-Muslim populations in non-Muslim-majority countries, followed by intermarriage and cultural integration with Muslim immigrants. These communities, while adopting local cultural traits, retained a distinct Islamic identity.

Another important reference is Minoriti Muslim: Cabaran dan Harapan Menjelang Abad ke-21, edited by Wan Kamal Mujani (2002), which compiles several articles providing a general overview of the challenges and historical development of Muslim minorities in different parts of the world. The various forums, conventions, and academic discussions documented in the book have contributed greatly to the scholarly understanding of Muslim minorities, particularly in Southeast Asia.In this regional context, Muslim minorities often face severe challenges living under non-Muslim governments. They are sometimes perceived as foreigners whose loyalty to the state is questioned. For instance, Muslims in Thailand are occasionally labelled khaek (a Thai word meaning "guest" or "foreigner"), suggesting that they are outsiders with no legitimate claim to permanent residence or distinct cultural practices (Goodman, 2020). This form of "othering" delegitimises the presence of Muslim minorities and undermines their right to preserve and practice a way of life that differs from that of the dominant population.

The Historical Background of the Muslim Minority in Thailand

Thailand, officially known as the Kingdom of Thailand, is a Southeast Asian nation bordered by Myanmar to the west, Laos to the northeast, Cambodia to the southeast, and Malaysia to the south. The country spans an area of approximately 513,000 square kilometres and is divided into six primary geographic regions: Northern, Northeastern, Central, Eastern, Western, and Southern Thailand. The Central Region, dominated by the Chao Phraya River Valley, serves as the country's economic and agricultural heartland and is home to the national capital, Bangkok. Meanwhile, the Southern Region comprises the peninsular strip that separates the Andaman Sea from the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea. Owing to its coastal geography, fertile land, and numerous islands, Southern Thailand's economy is significantly shaped by tourism, agriculture, and fisheries.

According to the International Religious Freedom Report for 2022, Thailand's population was estimated at 69.6 million. As of December 2021, approximately 92.5% of the population adhered to Buddhism mostly of the Theravāda traditionwhile Muslims made up 5.4%, Christians 1.2%, and the remaining 0.9% practiced other faiths, including animism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism, and others. In terms of ethnic

composition, more than 80% of the population is ethnically Thai, with the rest comprising ethnic Chinese, Khmer, Malays, and other minorities. Thailand's Muslim population consists of various ethnic groups, including Malays, Thais, Khmers, South Indians, Chinese, and others. Ethnic Malay Muslims form the majority in four southern provinces Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun located near the Thai–Malaysian border. These Malays are indigenous to the region and have inhabited it for centuries, having once established their own administrative structures before being incorporated into the modern Thai state, particularly after the 1909 Anglo-Siam Treaty (Goodman, 2020).

The Muslim community in Thailand is not homogenous in terms of ethnicity or culture. Scholars and government officials generally categorise Thai Muslims into two main groups: Malays and non-Malays (Che Man, 1998; Scupin, 2012). The signific ant presence of Malay Muslims in Thailand is largely a result of the spread of Islam to the Malay ethnic group in the Malay Peninsula since the 15th century. The adoption of Islam by the ruling elite and royal courts led to the formation of Malay Muslim sultanates. The southward expansion of the Thai kingdom eventually resulted in the conquest and incorporation of some of these sultanates, such as the Patani Sultanate, into Thai territory.

Historically, the southern provinces of Thailand, especially those with a Malay Muslim majority, were closely linked to the ancient Malay kingdom of Patani. The Patani Sultanate was a prominent Malay kingdom in the eastern part of the peninsula. According to The History of the Patani Malay Kingdom by Ibrahim Shukri, one of the early rulers from the Kota Mahligai area (whose exact location is uncertain) founded a coastal settlement that developed into the Patani Kingdom. Although the exact date remains unclear, by the 12th century, Indian and Arab merchants had begun trading and settling in Patani, which played a role in the introduction of Islam. With the conversion of the royal family, Patani is believed to have adopted Islam as its official religion by 1457 (Che Man, 1998). The Islamisation of Patani fostered a renewed sense of ethnic Malay identity among its people. Islam became the unifying element of the Malay Muslim community, reinforcing a distinct identity that resisted assimilation into the dominant Thai-Buddhist cultural sphere. Over time, Patani grew into an Islamic learning centre, earning the moniker Serambi Mekah ("The Verandah of Mecca").

As a smaller polity overshadowed by the more powerful neighbouring Thai kingdom, Patani's status alternated between independence and vassalage to Thai authority. During periods of subordination, Patani maintained diplomatic relations with the Thai kingdom and paid tribute in exchange for relative autonomy. It was also required to provide economic and military support when called upon. Patani's full autonomy ended in 1786, when it was conquered by the Thai kingdom. The 1909 Anglo-Siam Treaty, signed between Thailand and the British colonial authorities, formally incorporated Patani into Thai territory. The province of Satun, which had formerly belonged to the Kedah Sultanate, was also annexed as part of Thailand. Today, the provinces of Patani, Narathiwat, Yala, and Satun continue to be predominantly inhabited by Malay Muslims (Goodman, 2020).

In 1906, the Thai government abolished the traditional Malay-Islamic administrative system in Patani and replaced it with the Thai bureaucratic structure, excluding matters related to marriage and inheritance. This move deeply disappointed the ulama, Islamic teachers, and the broader Muslim community, who viewed it as an erosion of their religious and cultural identity. Many religious scholars believed it was obligatory to resist the Thai state—either through armed struggle or peaceful means. Two notable rebellions, led by Tok Tae in 1910 and Haji Bulo in 1911, were quickly crushed by the Thai military. In response, many religious leaders focused on establishing Islamic schools (pondok) and mosques to preserve religious education and Malay Muslim identity (Che Man, 1998).

From the Thai government's perspective, its assimilation policies were deemed successful, as the intensity of armed resistance in the south diminished over time. Nonetheless, periodic violent clashes between the Thai authorities and Malay Muslims persisted into the 2000s. One particularly infamous incident was the Tak Bai massacre of 2004, in which Thai police and military forces used excessive force against unarmed Malay Muslim protestors, resulting in the deaths of nearly 100 individuals.

Challenges Faced by the Muslim Minority in Thailand

Minority communities in any country inevitably face the challenge of maintaining a dignified and distinct identity while integrating within a broader national framework. For religious minorities, the practice of religious teachings and rituals is often contingent on the tolerance extended by the majority population. In the context of nation-states, minority groups that differ in ethnicity, culture, and religion from the majority are frequently viewed as outsiders with divergent agendas and questionable loyalty to the state. This dynamic is exacerbated when such communities are economically disadvantaged, making them vulnerable to discrimination, systemic marginalisation, and negative stereotyping. Such pressures can erode cultural confidence, leading to generational insecurity and internalised inferiority (Lily Zubaidah, 1998).

Psychological assaults of this nature can undermine the long-term sustainability of Muslim communities living as minorities in non-Muslim-majority nations. Furthermore, Muslim minority communities are often confronted with a range of pressing issues that, if left unaddressed, may jeopardise their social stability and religious continuity.

Challenges to the Recognition of Islamic Identity

While the practice of Islam in Thailand is permitted, it is often limited by the parameters set by the Thai government. The holistic implementation of Islam as a way of life may at times clash with dominant Thai-Buddhist cultural norms (Imtiyaz Yusuf & Pham Thuy Quynh, 2023). The Buddhist majority in Thailand often perceives the refusal of minority communities to assimilate or adopt Thai culture as a sign of disloyalty to the state (Goodman, 2020). Some argue that if minorities wish to reside in Thailand, they must conform to the national culture, which is rooted in Thai ethnicity and Buddhism. This attitude overlooks the historical reality that many of these minority groups especially the Malay Muslims in the south have ancestral ties to the region that long predate the formation of the modern Thai state.

Another critical issue is the general ignorance among the Thai majority regarding Islamic teachings and practices, such as the obligation to perform the five daily prayers, the requirement to cover the aurah, the necessity of halal food, and the prohibition against participating in Buddhist rituals. As a result, Muslims may face suspicion or rejection when attempting to observe these religious obligations in public settings including administrative offices, schools, workplaces, or public spaces (Chaiwat Satha-Anand, 2005).

This lack of understanding is partly due to the geographical concentration of Muslims in the southern provinces, which are relatively isolated from the rest of Thailand. Language barriers and economic constraints have also limited the ability of southern Muslims to interact with other Thai communities, thereby exacerbating ignorance and reinforcing negative stereotypes promoted by mainstream media (Goodman, 2020).

A notable example of this tension was the hijab controversy in Yala during 1986–1988. Muslim female students at Yala Teachers' Training College demanded the right to wear the hijab and observe Islamic modesty codes. Thai-Buddhist administrators and bureaucrats were generally dismissive of these demands, and public debate ensued between the Malay Muslim and Thai-Buddhist communities. Muslim advocates insisted that the hijab was a fundamental religious right based on the Qur'an, while Thai officials countered that national school regulations required uniform compliance without exceptions. They further argued that religion should remain a private affair and should not be brought into public institutions. Muslim students and teachers who insisted on wearing the hijab were labelled as defiant, threatened with disciplinary actions, or denied access to national exams.

Following protests by the Muslim community, the Thai Ministry of Education on 2 March 1988 amended the uniform regulations to allow for compliance with Islamic dress codes. The authorities also launched investigations into the conduct of certain administrators and agreed not to punish students who advocated for the right to wear the hijab. However, Thai media outlets responded negatively, portraying the Muslim community as separatist and disrespectful of national laws and cultural norms (Chaiwat Satha-Anand, 2005).

This incident illustrates a broader pattern of Muslim minority advocacy for recognition and accommodation within the state. Previously, Thailand's constitution does not formally declare Buddhism as the official religion, although it is commonly held that in practice Buddhism holds a privileged position. It is embedded in the monarchy, royal ceremonies, state functions, and public holidays. In 2017, the latest Thailand constitution amendments does grant Buddhism a special and protected status (Imtiyaz Yusuf & Pham Thuy Quynh, 2023). Section 67 of the Thailand Constitution (2017) clearly states the favoured position of the Buddhism as the religion of the majority in the country; "The State should support and protect Buddhism and other religions. In supporting and protecting Buddhism, the religion observed by the majority of the Thai people for an extended period, the state should promote and support education and dissemination of the dharmic principles of Theravada Buddhism for the development of mind and wisdom. It shall have measures and mechanisms to prevent Buddhism form being undermined". For the minority groups, the more the orientation of the state leans towards Buddhism, the more likely they are to be alienated.

Nation-building efforts in Thailand have often pursued an assimilationist agenda, emphasising cultural homogeneity and marginalising ethnoreligious diversity (Goodman, 2020). As a result, minority communities frequently find themselves compelled to make cultural and religious concessions in order to navigate interactions with the state and majority population. Negotiations for minority rights must therefore be approached with sensitivity and a commitment to mutual tolerance to prevent escalation into violence and deeper conflict (Chaiwat Satha-Anand, 2005).

Challenges in Preserving Malay Cultural Identity Among Muslim Minorities

The preservation and practice of cultural identity which includes clothing, language, script, and religious rituals presents a significant challenge for Muslim minorities in Thailand. For the Malay Muslim community, their cultural identity is deeply interwoven with the Islamic faith, creating friction when it intersects with the dominant Thai culture, which is itself closely aligned with Buddhism.

For instance, in the Thai workplace particularly in industries with strict dress codes such as the service and aviation sectors Muslim women often find it difficult to obtain exemptions to wear the hijab. Additionally, communal events such as staff celebrations and office parties typically involve the serving of non-halal food, creating further discomfort for Muslim employees. These cultural norms place Muslims in a dilemma between religious observance and social participation.

Another significant challenge is the exclusivity of the Thai language as the sole official language used in all governmental and administrative matters, extending from public offices to the national education system. Government-appointed officials are assigned from central authority and rotated periodically. Therefore, even in predominantly Malay Muslim southern provinces, all government-related matters must be conducted in Thai. As a result, the Malay language holds a subordinate position and is increasingly marginalised in daily life, particularly in formal and institutional settings (Chaiwat Satha-Anand, 2005).

Furthermore, many government officials in the south are reported to lack empathy and often behave harshly toward the local Muslim population (Chaiwat Satha-Anand, 2005; Goodman, 2020). Some have even been accused of insulting Muslim traditions and neglecting the community's needs (Mutsalim Khareng et al., 2016). Islamic celebrations such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri are not recognised as national public holidays, making it difficult for Muslim workers to celebrate with their families. Compounding this, some Muslims are required or feel pressured to participate in Buddhist rituals, whether in schools, workplaces, or during national ceremonies (Chaiwat Satha-Anand, 2005; Mutsalim Khareng et al., 2016). Such pressures contribute to deep-seated feelings of resentment and mistrust toward the Thai government among Muslims in the southern provinces, especially during the late 20th century. As a consequence, separatist movements in the region have often adopted the slogan "defending Islam" as a rallying cry to legitimise their struggle (Wan Kadir Che Man, 2002).

Cultural nationalism is a powerful force in Thailand. The Thai state strongly upholds the notion of a unified national identity, where all citizens are expected to embrace Thai culture and demonstrate unwavering loyalty to the state. This nationalist sentiment downplays the historical reality that Thailand's current borders were only finalised in 1909. As part of the modern state-building process, numerous non-Thai ethnic groups were incorporated into Thailand including the Malays in the south, the Lao in the east, the Khmer along the Cambodian border, and the Mon in central Thailand.

Despite this ethnic diversity, the government remains firm in enforcing policies that prioritise Thai cultural identity, even in areas where the majority of the population is not ethnically Thai. For example, a 2006 proposal by the National Reconciliation Commission to grant official language status to Malay in southern Thailand was firmly rejected by General Prem Tinsulanonda, the President of the Privy Council (Goodman, 2020). This decision highlights the Thai state's resistance to recognising cultural pluralism, even in regions with long-standing non-Thai populations.

Socio-Economic Challenges Faced by the Muslim Minority

Although Thailand has experienced commendable economic growth since the 20th century, this progress has not been evenly distributed across its regions. Economic development and investment activities remain heavily concentrated in Bangkok and its surrounding areas, while the southern provinces especially those with a majority Muslim population have lagged behind in terms of infrastructure and income levels.

Efforts to improve development in the south have been hindered by prolonged conflict between the Thai government and separatist movements. Since the 1970s, the southern region has been regarded as one of the poorest and least developed in Thailand. Both the Muslim and Thai populations in the area rely primarily on small-scale agricultural activities such as rubber tapping, coconut farming, rice cultivation, and coastal fishing (Kobkua Suwannathat-pian, 2002). The lack of urbanisation has resulted in most Muslims living in rural villages, with limited access to commercial economic opportunities. As a result, the average income among southern Muslims is significantly lower than that of the Thai majority in Bangkok and other urban centres.

Recognising the urgency of addressing poverty and promoting economic integration, the Thai government has launched various development initiatives targeting the southern provinces. These efforts aim to improve the region's image, reduce socio-economic disparities, and weaken the appeal of separatist movements by fostering greater national unity. For example, during the administration of Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat (1958–1963), several development projects were introduced, including the establishment of industrial development zones and medium-scale port construction in Pattani and Narathiwat. These projects achieved a degree of success.

However, despite these initiatives, many southern Malay Muslims remain suspicious of the government's motives. There is a prevailing belief that these development efforts serve as a façade for cultural assimilation and identity erosion. This perception has fuelled resistance from separatist movements and further entrenched distrust towards the state (Kobkua Suwannathat-pian, 2002).

Moreover, the rise of large-scale commercial enterprises has negatively impacted traditional economic practices in the region. For example, the deep-sea fishing industry once dominated by local Muslim coastal communities has increasingly been taken over by large fishing corporations with more resources and capital, pushing small-scale fishermen out of the market. Similarly, Muslim smallholder rubber tappers have suffered from plummeting rubber prices due to overproduction and declining global demand. Rubber prices fell from 198.55 baht per sheet in 2011 to just 58.60 baht in 2019.

The situation is further complicated by political dynamics. Southern Thailand has traditionally been a stronghold of the opposition Democratic Party, which has not held power since 2003. Consequently, government agricultural subsidies have largely been directed to northern and northeastern provinces areas

dominated by the ruling party. This political marginalisation has exacerbated the economic hardship faced by Muslim communities in the south (Goodman, 2020).

In response to these challenges, many Muslims from the south have migrated to other parts of Thailand or abroad in search of better economic opportunities. Aside from Bangkok, Malaysia is a particularly attractive destination due to its cultural and religious similarities, as well as the promise of higher wages. In terms of education, a significant portion of the Muslim population still lacks access to modern schooling, often due to poverty or a preference for religious instruction in madrasahs managed by the Muslim community. Many students pursue higher Islamic education in the Middle East or Indonesia, eventually returning to southern Thailand as religious teachers and scholars.

To close the income gap between the Thai Buddhist majority and the Malay Muslim minority, there is an urgent need to increase Muslim participation in higher education institutions—particularly in fields related to skilled labour and professional careers beyond religious studies. Greater access to technical and professional sectors would enable Muslims to achieve upward economic mobility and reduce their reliance on traditional occupations (Goodman, 2020).Muslim minorities in the region are also exposed to social problems commonly associated with conflict zones, such as drug trafficking across the border, illegal goods smuggling, prostitution in urban areas, and school dropouts. However, many within the Muslim community blame the Thai government's weak governance and lack of effective enforcement as key factors contributing to these issues (Goodman, 2020).

The Thai Government's Efforts to Protect Muslim Minority Rights

As Thailand gradually transitioned toward a more liberal and democratic political system, both the government and political parties introduced several economic and social policies aimed at improving conditions for the Muslim minority in the south. One of the most notable initiatives was the "New Hope" project, introduced by General Chavalit Yongchaiyuth in 1989, which focused on uplifting the southern region through targeted development programmes.

Efforts to support the Muslim minority also came from Thailand's monarchy. During the 1970s, King Bhumibol Adulyadej significantly increased his visits to the southern provinces and actively supported regional development. His administration implemented a series of Royal Projects (Phraratchadamri) aimed at empowering the agricultural sector. These included water drainage systems to mitigate flooding and improve crop yields, as well as other initiatives to boost productivity and economic resilience among rural farmers.

During the peak of the separatist insurgency in the 1980s, the military, which controlled the region, also launched a peace-oriented development strategy known as the "Peaceful South Project" (Tai Rom-Yen). This initiative, led by General Harn Leenanond of the Fourth Army Region, was designed to promote understanding between Muslim communities, the Thai government, and local Thai Buddhists. By encouraging dialogue and implementing community-level development efforts, the military aimed to weaken insurgent influence and integrate the Muslim population more closely into the national fabric.

By the 1990s, Thailand had largely eliminated the threat posed by communist elements within its borders. This allowed the state to refocus its attention on economic development, particularly in the southern provinces, and to reduce Muslim involvement in armed separatist movements. Although the level of development in the southern region has improved and now aligns with that of many other provinces in Thailand, it still lags behind the Central Region, particularly Bangkok, which continues to dominate in terms of economic investment and infrastructure.

International Involvement and Cooperation

Apart from domestic efforts, international actors have also played a role in managing the conflict in southern Thailand most notably Malaysia and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). While Malaysia shares

strong cultural and religious ties with the Malay Muslim population in Patani, its government has generally maintained a neutral stance, acting as a mediator rather than an advocate. Thailand has accepted Malaysia's involvement as a facilitator and has participated in dialogue sessions involving leaders of the Patani liberation movement. However, the Thai government has consistently rejected broader international interference, preferring bilateral engagements over multilateral diplomacy. To date, these peace negotiations have not produced any lasting solutions, though they have helped to temporarily reduce tensions.

Malaysia has also served as a refuge for displaced Malay Muslims, including both political activists and ordinary civilians fleeing oppression in southern Thailand (Nik Anuar, 2002). Meanwhile, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), despite having significant experience in resolving conflicts in places like Aceh (Indonesia) and Mindanao (Philippines), has struggled to make a meaningful impact in the Thai context. This is largely due to the economic interests of several OIC member states including Malaysia, Indonesia, Bahrain, and Pakistan in maintaining favourable relations with Thailand. Moreover, since becoming an observer member of the OIC in 1998, Thailand has been able to limit the organisation's influence over its internal affairs and has blocked attempts by Patani liberation groups to seek formal support or assistance from the OIC.

As a result, the OIC's involvement has been limited to issuing periodic statements, conducting fact-finding visits, and voicing general concern without intervening directly in Thailand's governance of the southern provinces.Nevertheless, one positive outcome has been the role of the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) a financial institution affiliated with the OIC. Through various initiatives, the IDB has supported education and economic empowerment programmes for Muslim minorities in Thailand. For example, the bank has provided scholarships for Muslim students from Thailand to pursue higher education in various fields, including science, technology, and Islamic studies.

The Importance of Fiqh Ta'ayush in Promoting Harmony with Minority Groups

Fiqh Ta'ayush or the jurisprudence of co-existence addresses the ethical and legal principles governing harmonious intercommunal relations based on the spirit of ukhuwwah insaniyyah (human fraternity) among people of different religions and ethnicities. This concept offers a framework for interreligious harmony within the context of Islamic law (shari'ah), especially in pluralistic societies. As a universal religion, Islam encourages Muslims to engage with others, rather than isolate themselves. Islam teaches that non-Muslims should be treated with compassion, and Muslims bear the responsibility of conveying the message of Islam (da'wah) through respectful and sincere interactions. Furthermore, Islam upholds freedom of religion and protects this right by instructing Muslims to respect the religious beliefs of others without compromising their own faith (al-Qaradawi, 2015).

The practice of ta'ayush offers a way to demonstrate Islam's commitment to justice, tolerance, and shared humanity. Through this concept, Islam's principles of human rights and dignity are highlighted encouraging mutual understanding and reducing hostility between Muslims and non-Muslims (Mohd Zuhdi et al., 2023). For ta'ayush to be effective, it must be grounded in a balanced jurisprudential framework that avoids both extremism and liberal relativism (al-Kubaysi, 2013). According to Mustafa al-Kubaysi (2013), approaches to interfaith relations can be categorised into three orientations:

1. **Liberal Orientation** which excessively embraces other faiths to the point of neglecting the foundational principles of Islam.
2. **Extremist Orientation** which rejects any notion of ta'ayush and isolates Muslims from non-Muslims, disregarding Islam's merciful and inclusive spirit.
3. **Moderate Orientation** – which promotes mutual respect, cooperation in shared matters, and faithful adherence to Islamic teachings without compromising core beliefs.

In the context of modern nation-states, promoting ta'ayush begins with official recognition of religious and cultural diversity. Every citizen, regardless of their religious or ethnic identity, deserves respect, freedom, and equal treatment. A pertinent example of this can be found in Malaysia, where Islam is the official religion of the federation, yet the existence of other religions and cultures is acknowledged and protected.

In Malaysia, religious festivals such as Chinese New Year, Deepavali, and Wesak are recognised as national public holidays. States are also empowered to declare public holidays based on the demographic composition of their populations. For example, Hari Gawai celebrated by the Dayak community in Sarawak is designated as a public holiday in that state. Such recognitions promote awareness and respect for minority religious practices and create opportunities for media coverage and interfaith engagement.These practices align closely with the spirit of ta'ayush and the Qur'anic call to "li ta'ārafū" so that human beings may come to know, appreciate, and understand one another despite their differences. Through these means, interreligious communication is encouraged, and social harmony is cultivated.

CONCLUSION

Given the circumstances presently confronting Thailand's Muslim minorities, it is clear that their civic standing requires substantial enhancement if their long-term survival and meaningful participation as empowered, respected citizens are to be secured. The central dilemma they face is how to pursue integration without lapsing into assimilation and how to remain steadfast in their religious identity while being fully accepted by the wider society within a genuine culture of tolerance. Successive Thai administrations have adopted assimilationist policies designed to erode these communities' distinctive cultural and religious markers in the hope of producing loyal citizens who conform to a homogenised national norm. In a political landscape where democratic institutions remain fragile and military influence endures, coercion and intolerance are often deployed as instruments of nation-building. Such strategies have compounded the social, cultural, and economic challenges already experienced in Muslim-majority regions. The spectrum of problems identified in this study therefore demands urgent and good-faith attention. Neglecting them risks further diminishing the capacity of Muslim minority communities to function effectively, safeguard their rights, and embody Islamic values in peaceful and constructive ways. Fiqh Taʿāyush offers a principled and humane framework for sustainable coexistence one grounded in justice, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to the Thai nation.

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