

THE PROBLEMS OF MUSLIM MINORITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstrak

Artikel ini membincangkan tentang persoalan bagaimana dan bila Islam mula datang dan berkembang di Asia Tenggara, serta permasalahan-permasalahan yang ditemphi oleh golongan minoriti Muslim di rantau tersebut.

INTRODUCTION

The term Southeast Asia is of recent origin. It became popular during World War II when the territories south of the Tropic of Cancer were placed under Lord Mountbatten's Southeast Asia command and made the world aware of the political significance of this region.

Geographically speaking, Southeast Asia can be seen as two regions: "mainland" Southeast Asia, which includes the countries of Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, Kampuchea (Cambodia) and Vietnam, while the "insular" Southeast Asia, comprises Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines.

One of the advantages of this categorization is that it corresponds to religious criteria as well. All of the mainland countries practice Buddhism, while the people of the archipelagic nations practice a form of Islam. The Catholics of the Philippines are an exception, although important Muslim minorities are found in the southern most islands of that country. Singapore practises Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity.

In the course of its long history, the Southeast Asian region has been influenced by different external forces. In the first centuries of the Christian era the two principal civilizations of the East, Indian and Chinese, appeared in the region and left a deep mark upon the social and cultural life of the people. Due to those influences also, Southeast Asia gradually was practically divided into two spheres of influence - one under the influence of Indian culture and the other under the influence of Chinese culture.

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The Indian sphere included modern Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and the Malay peninsula. It was much larger than the Chinese influence, which consisted of Tongking and Annam and extended to Cochin China after the fall of the Indianized kingdom of Champa in Cambodia. However, the Indian influence in this region was in origin a commercial influence which was confined to the social and cultural life of the Southeast Asian communities, unlike the Chinese influence which survived for a long time in the form of tributary relations.

Islam, which was regarded as the second stream of culture, influenced not only the social life of the people but it also gave rise to a political force. The influence of Islamic politics is very much in evidence even to this day in three Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. In general, we can say that Muslim communities in Southeast Asia have always regarded the principles of their religion as a frame of reference within which their individual, social and political life should be attuned.

The thrust of Islam in Southeast Asian countries is more natural once the countries concerned achieved independence, and also because Islam is the religion of the majority population, especially in the Malay World, while in Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Philippines, there is a significant Muslim population. However, due to different development of the various countries, the role and position of Islam in those countries, their relations with non-Muslim groups, as well as with the state and government have given rise to a number of varying characteristics. This writing is to discuss how and when Islam came to this region, and what are the problems faced by Muslim minorities in this region.

HOW AND WHEN DID ISLAM COME TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

Although it is impossible to fix the precise date of the first introduction of Islam into Southeast Asia, however, in the second century B.C., the trade with Sri Lanka was wholly in the hand of Arabs. At the beginning of the seventh century of the Christian era, the trade with China, through Sri Lanka received a great impulse, so that in the middle of the eighth century Arab traders were to be found in great numbers in Canton (China),¹ while from the tenth to fifteenth century, until the arrival of the Portuguese, the Arabs were undisputed masters of the trade with East Asia in particular, and Southeast Asia in general. Therefore, it is certain that the Arabs must have established their commercial settlement on some of the islands of Southeast Asia as they did elsewhere, at a very early period.

Although no mention is made of this island in the work of the Arab geographers earlier than the ninth century, yet in Chinese annals, under the date 6774 A.D. an account is given of an Arab chief, whom from later notices is conjectured to have been

¹T.W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (Lahore, 1979), p.367.

the head of an Arab settlement of the west coast of Aceh Sumatra.² After Islam had spread in Saudi Arabia, it was brought to the eastern part of Aceh Sumatra, that is Peureulak (Malay, Perlak) as early as the seventh century A.D.³ According to the Malay chronicles, the honour of being the first missionary to Perlak fell to an Arab called Abdullah Arif, who is said to have visited the island about the middle of the twelfth century⁴ and one of his disciples Burhanuddin is said to have carried the knowledge of Islam down to the west coast of Sumatra as far as Pariaman (modern, Padang) in west Sumatra.

Describing other kingdoms in Aceh Sumatra, Marco Polo mentioned Samara, which has been identified as Samudra Pase (modern, Lhokseumawe) in the northern part of Aceh.⁵ From the Annals we come to know that the king was named Meurah Silu.⁶ It is said that according to the traditional account of the city Samudra Pase, the custodian of Mecca sent a mission under the leadership of Shaikh Ismail to convert Meurah Silu and the people of Samudra Pase to Islam. After his conversion the king assumed the title of Malik al-Salih, and married the princess of the neighbouring kingdom of Peureulak which had already adopted Islam. By this Queen he had two sons, Malik al-Zahir and Malik al-Mansur.

If we observe the name the king of Samudra Pase which he took his conversion to Islamic, i.e: Malik al-Salih and the names of his two sons, Malik al-Zahir and Malik al-Mansur, they remind us of the great Ayyubid and Mamluk kings of Syria and Egypt of the same names who were practically contemporaries of this first Muslim king of the Samudra Pase, Ayyubid's Malik al-Salih, who resigned between 1240-1249 A.D. was responsible in 1244 A.D. for the restoration of Islam in the city of Jerusalem, and for the imprisonment of the leader of the Sixth crusade, King Louis IX of France⁷ While Mamluk's Malik al-Zahir, who reigned from 1260 to 1277 A.D. was the hero of the battle of 'Ayn Jalut which took place in 1260 A.D., where the Mongols received a crushing blow and turned the course of the history of the two continents of Asia and Europe, which finally broke the backbone of Frankish opposition and led to the final victory over the crusaders,⁸ which was won by his successor, Malik al-Mansur, who resigned from 1279 to 1290 A.D.

This fact shows that the king of Samudra Pase (Malik al-Salih) was well aware of

² Lukman Thaib, *The Politics and Governments of Southeast Asia*. (Kuala Lumpur, 1997), p.32.

³ T.W Arnold, *op.cit.*, pp.267-360.

⁴ S.Q. Fatimi, *Islam Comes to Malaysia*. (Singapore. 1963), p.8.

⁵ Lukman Thaib, *op.cit.*, p.33.

⁶ Sir Henry Yale, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*. (London, 1957), vol. 1, p.103.

⁷ F.J. Moorhead, *A History of Malaya and Her Neighbours*. (London, 1957), vol. 1, p.103. See also E.H. Parker, "The Island of Sumatera", *Asiatic Quarterly Review*. (1900), vol. 3, no.17, p.131.

⁸ Lukman Thaib, *Political Dimensions of Islam in Southeast Asia*. (Bangi, 1996), p.9.

the happenings in the distant levant and was inspired by the victories won by his co-religionists abroad in the fields of both war and peace. This awareness of the universality of Islam was fully inherited by his son, Malik al-Zahir. According to Ibn Battutah who visited Samudra Pase in 1345 A.D., the Sultan of Samudra Pase, Malik al-Zahir was a man of wisdom who loved knowledge and encouraged learning.⁹ Consequently, Samudra Pase developed into a centre of Islamic studies and also became the meeting place of Islamic scholars from the Muslim world, such as Qadi Amir Sayyid Shiraz from Iran, Taj al-Din from Isfahan, Amir Daulasa from Sultanate of Delhi, and Abdullah Muhammad al-Muntasir from Baghdad who passed away in Samudra Pase in 1407 A.D.¹⁰

The above facts reveal to us that with the Islamization of Samudra Pase in Aceh Sumatra, it can be regarded as the first centre of Islamic culture in the world from where the teaching of Islam spread to other parts of Southeast Asia.

For Malaysia, it is possible to say that a dramatic chapter in Islamization was the founding of Malacca around 1400 A.D., and the conversion of its first ruler and the founder of this kingdom, that is Parameswara in 1414 A.D. It is said that through Muslim persuasion, the king of Malacca married the daughter of the Sultan of Samudra Pase and became a Muslim, naming himself Sultan Iskandar Shah.¹¹ When Malacca was captured by the Portuguese, the Muslims moved to Banda Aceh (Aceh Darussalam). Thus Samudra Pase, Malacca and Banda Aceh in turn became centres of international trade.

The ruler of Brunei Darussalam became a Muslim after the founding of Malacca, since the Brunei salasilah states that the first Muslim ruler of Brunei received some of the symbols of royalty from Malacca.¹² Brunei itself probably became Islamized by the middle of the fifteenth century, if not earlier. It was said that Islam was introduced into the Kingdom of Sukadana, in the western part of the island in 1550 A.D. by Arabs coming from Palembang in South Sumatra.¹³

In the Philipines islands (Sulu and Mindanao) we find that Islam had reached the Philipines Archipelago well before the arrival of Villalobos force in 1542 A.D., who named the islands "the Philipines" in honour of Philip, the son of Emperor Charles V and heir to the Spanish throne.¹⁴

⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago*. (Kuala Lumpur, 1996), p.15.

¹⁰ T.W Arnold, *op.cit.*, p.372.

¹¹ S.Q.Fatimi, *op.cit.*, p.65.

¹² Cesar Adib Majul, *Muslim in the Philipines*. (Quezon City, 1973), p.41. See also T.W Arnold, *op.cit.*, pp.382-391.

¹³ T.W Arnold, *op.cit.*, p.392.

¹⁴ D.G.E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia*, (New York, 1981), p.272.

Chinese sources dating from the Yuan Dynasty (1280-1368 A.D.) has recorded that Arab traders had established their settlements in the Mindanao region at the end of the thirteenth century.¹⁵ And according to the Sulu geneology, the first person to introduce Islam to Sulu island in the Philippines was Tuan Mashaika, who was estimated to have arrived in Sulu in the 13th century,¹⁶ and whose descendants contituted the core of the Muslim community in Sulu. By the second half of the 14th century, a later missionary found ready acceptance among the Muslim community in Buansa. His religious activities thus served to reinforce the growing Islamic community established by the descendants of Tuan Mashaika.¹⁷

At the end of the 14th century, another Muslim teacher came to Sulu bearing the title of Rajah Baguinda, a Minangkabau honorific prince of western Sumatra. At first, he was met by a hostile force of local people who tried to sink his boats but their behaviour dramatically changed when it became known that the Rajah Baguinda was a Muslim. At this point, it is worthwhile noting that Islamization process in Sulu at that time had reached a stage where being a Muslim had become an acceptable passport into the community. Fifty years later, the Maquindanao Sultanate was established around the mouth of the Pulangi river on Mindanao island,¹⁸ and under the direction of Qadi Abu Bakar, an Arab trader who has married Rajah Baguinda's daughter, Paramisuli, the study of Islam was begun, political institutions were shaped along Islamic lines, and Islamic teachers were sent out from Buansa to convert the people of surrounding areas.¹⁹ These facts reveal that the Moroland in the mid sixteenth century was involved in the process of becoming part of the wider Muslim world of Southeast Asia.

As for Thailand, the majority of Muslims in this country live in the southern provinces which originally belonged to the Sultanate of Patani. Tom Pires, a Portuguese who passed through Malacca in 1511, wrote of the Patani as though they have been in existence before 1370 A.D.²⁰

The kingdom of Patani grew both in population and in prosperity, as Newbold writes: "*Patani was once the largest and most populous of the Malay states on the Peninsula.*"²¹ According to Dr. Wan Kadir, the Kingdom of Patani was considered as

¹⁵ Cesar Adib Majul, *op.cit.*, pp.63-64.

¹⁶ Carmen Abu Bakar, "Islam in the Philippines - The Moro Problem" in *Islam in Asia* (Lahore, 1986), pp.39-74.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Lukman Thaib, *Political Dimension*, p.75.

¹⁹ Carmen Abu Bakar, *op.cit.*, p.42.

²⁰ Taken from Lukman Thaib, *op.cit.*, p.97. See also Andries Teeuw and David K. Wyatt, *The Story of Patani*, (The Hague, 1970), pp.1-2.

²¹ T.J. Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca*, (London, 1971), p.670.

an important commercial center for Asian as well as for European traders, especially those who sailed directly across the gulf of Siam from the south of Vietnam to the Malay world.²²

The initial contact of the Patani with Islam was undoubtedly a by product of Arab trade with China. With intermarrying of the foreign traders with the indigenous people, the nucleus of the Muslim community came into existence in the Kingdom. It is said that with the conversion of the founder of the Kingdom of Patani, i.e. Raja Tu (King Tu) at the hand of Shaikh Saif from Samudra Pase in Aceh Sumatra in June 15th, 1457 A.D.,²³ the kingdom of Patani was officially declared as an Islamic state in Southeast Asia.

It is believed that the adoption of Islam by the Patani kingdom might have also been because of aspirations by the Patani people for new values and life-styles which the new faith offered, as Prof Sayyid Hussein al-Attas stated: "*That Islam has an individuality of its own and that, therefore, it served to satisfy some of the deep aspirations of the people.*"²⁴

With the Islamization of Patani a break from the existing dominance of Hindu-Buddhist culture took place. Instead, Islam replaced many of the old cultures and institutions based on Islamic values. It was through Islamic institutions that the teaching and values of Islam spread in the country and at the same time the Muslim scholars (ulama) gradually emerged and became an influential elite group in Patani society.

THE PROBLEMS OF MUSLIM MINORITIES

Muslims live as minorities in several different countries of the world today. In some countries they are quite visible such as in Thailand and Philippines, in others they are very insignificant in number. This part of the writing aims to highlight problems faced by Muslim minorities in some countries of Southeast Asia with particular attention given to minorities in Indo-China and Myanmar.

THE COUNTRIES OF INDO-CHINA

Indo-China comprises three countries: Vietnam, Kampuchea and Laos. The former kingdom of Champa, located in the southern part of Vietnam, was gradually incorporated by the latter during its expansion southwards. (Vietnam only assumed its present form in 1910). According to the latest census figures, there are 84,440,00 people:

²² W.K. Chee Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand*, (Singapore, 1990), p.34.

²³ David Wyatt, *op.cit.*, p.75. See also Ibrahim Shukri, *History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani* (Kelantan, n.d), p.34.

²⁴ Cesar Adib Majul, "*Theories on Introduction and Expansion of Islam in Malaysia*" in *Association of Historians of Asia*, (1964), p.381.

70,905,000 in Vietnam, 9,300,000 in Kampuchea, and 4,235,000 in Laos.²⁵

KAMPUCHEA

Formerly known as Cambodia, the country got its independence from France in 1953. In 1975 Kampuchea had an estimated 7.1 million inhabitants but by mid-1996 the population increased to 9.3 million. The vast majority of the population are of Khmer (Cambodian) stock. Before 1975, other major ethnic groups included the Chinese (350,000), Vietnamese (200,000), Cham-Malays who are traditionally Muslims (90,000) and various tribal peoples (90,000) and Europeans. The Chinese were the most important minority before 1975 for they controlled the country's economic life and retained a high degree of cultural distinctiveness.²⁶

Kampuchea was administered between the date of its independence in 1953 and the early 1990s by four political regimes, "and experienced a failed socialist revolution and two major foreign invasions"²⁷ Since the 1991 U.N. cease-fire, the four contending groups are paving the way to a more stable political future with the prospects of democratic elections in April 1993.

These are estimated to be about 400,000 Muslim (4.3%) living in the country. In 1975 there were about 350,000 Muslims which was about 5% of the population. It is possible that as many as half of the Muslim population was killed during the Khmer Rouge period. Few Muslims have higher degrees as most professional people were either killed or escaped from the country and have not returned.

In 1975, Muslims made up about 35% of the population of Kampong Cham province, which has the largest concentration of Muslims, 20% are in the neighbouring province of Kampong Chenang. Thirty thousand Muslims now live in the Phnom Penh area. In February 1994, the government sponsored the formation of a national representative body called the Majlis Shaikul Islam Cambodia, and in April of the same year also the Cambodia Islamic Association (CIA) was established with the support of many Muslims who hold high office.²⁸ The address of CIA is as follows: Cambodian Islamic Association, 94, Rue 592, Krom 2, Sangkat Boeungkok 2, Khan Tual Kork, Phnom Penh.

The fight of the Kampuchean Muslims under Communist oppression in the last two decades was most heart-rending and therefore it is hoped that the beginning of the democratic process which is underway would open up new avenues for Muslim reha-

²⁵ RISEAP, *Muslim Al-Manac*, (Kuala Lumpur, 1996), pp.27,99,229.

²⁶ Muhammad Kamal Hassan, *Facet of Southeast Asia Constituting the Socio-Cultural and the Socio-Political Context for Islamic Da'wah*, (Jakarta, 1995), p.38.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ RISEAP, *op.cit.*, pp.30-32.

bilitation and survival and new opportunities for the mission of da'wah. Currently the Muslims are in urgent need of educational material and religious support from the Muslim countries.

LAOS

Laos had been a French protectorate for a period of 61 years beginning in 1893. At the end of the period of Japanese occupation from 1940 to 1945, Laos declared itself independent. France, however, did not accept this fact until 1954.²⁹ Ninety six percent of the population are ethnic Lao. The remaining 4% are Vietnamese and other minority ethnic groups.

These are only 1,000 Muslims in the country. Most, about 950, live in the Vientiane area. About ten Muslims live in Savanakhet, another ten live in Luang Prabang. The majority of the Muslim population, about 750, are of Indian origin. The remainder, about 200 are Cham and Loatian. Indian Muslims live in Vientiane city. Loatian Muslims live up to 5 km away from the city centre. The Indians are traders and are generally well off. The Loatians are traders, farmers and also work for various companies. They are poorer than the Indian Muslims.

Islamic knowlegde is very poor. Only Muslims above 60 years of age are familiar with the beliefs and practice of Islam. The middle generation (25-45 years old) is as badly educated as the general population. Their knowlegde of Islam is almost zero. These is a need for reading materials and some local Muslims to be trained as teachers. The possibility some of these young Muslims being able to study abroad is being examined.

The government has no interest in or involvement with the Muslims as they are such a small community. The Lao Muslim Association is registered with the Interior Ministry. Most restrictions ended in 1990. Open contact with foreign organizations is not encouraged. Under this circumstances the scope for Islamic da'wah remains extremely bleak.

VIETNAM

Vietnam became a French protectorate in 1883. It was united with Cambodia and Laos in the Union of Indo-China in 1887. Japan occupied Vietnam in 1940. The communist led Viet Minh was established in 1941 to fight the Japanese. After the Japanese surrendered, the Viet Minh declared Vietnam independent. The Paris agreement of July 1954 divided the country into the north controlled by Ho Chi Minh, and the south ruled by Emperor Bao Dai. France withdrew from the country. The country was formally reunited in 1977. Since then there has been a war with China in 1979 and military action

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.100.

in Cambodia between 1979 and 1989.³⁰

Nearly all Vietnamese Muslims are ethnically Cham. Some of the Muslims who live in Ho Chi Minh city are ethnic Chinese or have Arab or Indian ancestry. A small number of Muslims are ethnic Vietnamese who have converted to Islam, mainly in the Phan Rang area. There are about 41,000 Muslims in Vietnam. There is also a sizable number of rural Chams who are known as "Old Muslims".³¹ Their Islamic practice is so unorthodox, containing a large proportion of Hindu and Buddhist belief and practice, that they cannot be referred to as Muslims at all. However, in recent years there has been a steady rate of conversion from the "Old Muslim" faith to Islam.

The period of the 1960s was not an easy one for the Muslims of Vietnam. Many restrictions were imposed on Muslims and Islamic practice, but in 1978 the government decided that the Muslims were not a threat, and removed some of the restrictions. Since 1989 Muslims have been allowed to receive foreign funds for the purpose of repairing or expanding mosques. The building of new mosques does not appear to be allowed. There is a need for reading materials and some local Muslims to be trained as teachers. The possibility of some of these young Muslims being able to study abroad is being examined.

MYANMAR (BURMA)

Myanmar is a mountainous country which has a long history as an independent nation of Burma. The British granted limited self-government in the 1930s, but the **Nationalist Dobama Asiayone** pressed for complete independence. From 1942 to 1945 it was occupied by the Japanese, and a nominally independent Burmese state was set up at that time under Japanese auspices. The British returned in 1945, and full independence was achieved in January 4, 1948.³² In March 1962, after a period of parliamentary democracy, a military coup took place and Burma became a one-party socialist state with an isolationist policy. In August 1988 there was an uprising in several cities. This led to another military coup which left many people dead. The country's name was changed to Myanmar in May 1989. The military government allowed a general election in May 1990, but the new Parliament has never met.

The country is divided into seven provinces and seven autonomous states with the population around 45 million according to the 1993 census. At present the country has eight major ethnic communities (Burman, Shan, Kachin, Karen Kayah, Chin, Mon and Rakhine) recognised by the present rulers which are further subdivided into some 135 ethnic Mongolian races. The ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) categorically denies that Myanmar has an indigenous ethnic race of Arian

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.230-231.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.232.

³² Moshe Yegar, "The Muslim in Burma", in *The Crescent in the East: Islam in Asia Major* (London, 1982), p.102.

stock including the Rohingya (Arakanese Muslim), although it was an independent Muslim kingdom for more than three and half centuries (1404-1784 A.D.) whose first king was Sulaiman Shah (Narameikhla) and the last one was Salim Shah (Min Raza Gyi).³³ According to the new Burman citizenship law of 1982 the Muslims of Rohingya have been classified as either foreigners or stateless, although in terms of population the Muslims are not less than 5.55 millions. Therefore, the new constitution does not even mention the Rohingyans let alone help protect their rights as an ethnic or religious minority.

Ignoring historical realities and the Rohingyas' centuries-old presence in Burma, the SLORC has turned Arakan into a big concentration camp where Rohingyas are being denied their human rights. They face arbitrary arrests, forced labour, torture, custodial killing, curtailed movements even for cultural and religious activities, rape, forcible marriage of Muslim girls to Buddhists, ban on wearing hijab, turban and sporting beards, etc.³⁴

The issue of the persecution of Muslim minorities in Myanmar has been highlighted in the international media and as a result, Muslims outside of Myanmar are becoming more aware of the plight of their coreligionists there. The Far Eastern Economic Review (Jan 28, 1993, p.23) reported that "there are now more that 20,000 Rohingyas in the United Arab Emirates alone, as many as 200,000 in Saudi Arabia, between 1500-2000 in Qatar, some 3000-5000 in Jordan and more than 200,000 in Pakistan".

An appeal, addressed to the United Nations, the organization of Islamic Conference, Muslim World League and other World bodies and forums, has been made by Salim Ullah; central committee member of the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF).³⁵

In a statement to Arab news in Saudi Arabia, Salim Ullah stated that the problem of Rohingya Muslims "will never be solved by simply repatriating the refugees. The deeprooted and complicated issue requires a lasting political solution".³⁶ It is indeed strange that "while the persecution of Muslims by Buddhists may have been commonplace over the past five decades, the two communities coexisted amicably for the previous 1000 years" (F.E.E.R., p. 24).

Given the current atmosphere of persecution of Muslim minorities, it is difficult to envisage the form of da'wah that should take place under the circumstances. The issue of physical survival for Muslims in Myanmar will continue for some time to be the top-most priority.

³³ Lukman Thaib, *Political Dimension*, p.51.

³⁴ RISEAP, *Al-Nahdah* (Kuala Lumpur, Dec. 1995), Vol. 15, pp.52-53.

³⁵ *Ibid*, Vol. 13, 1993, p.51.

³⁶ *Ibid*.