

Thai Muslims and the Royal Patronage of Religion

Yoneo Ishii

Thailand in the late 19th and early 20th centuries transformed its legal and administrative structure from one based on the principles of sacred kingship to one based on the symbols of a constitutional monarchy in a Western-style nation-state. This transformation had important implications for the status of the Muslim minority population residing primarily in the four southernmost provinces of Thailand. Traditionally, one of the most important responsibilities of the Thai king was to uphold and protect Thai Buddhism and to oversee and purify the Buddhist clergy. In the new nation-state, these governmental responsibilities were generalized to some extent to include other religions of Thai citizens, such as Islam. This process of generalization, however, was associated with certain conceptual and political problems, whose analysis in this article sheds light not only on the status of the Muslim minority in contemporary Thailand but also on modern concepts of religion, law, and kingship in the Thai polity.

This article points to a structural constraint of the official Thai policy for the administration of the Muslim minority. The successful experience of the Sangha administration laws for the Buddhist church is emulated, but I argue that a disregard of the institutional differences between monastic Buddhism and nonmonastic Islam prevents administrative measures for the Muslims from functioning fully.

Thailand is a Buddhist kingdom, 95% of whose populace professes that faith. This statistic should not blind us, however, to the historical fact that Thai rulers have long been faced with the problem of governing non-Buddhist peoples. The influx of Muslims into the country might be traced back to the 15th century, if not earlier. In the late 17th century the existence of a sizable Persian community in the Siamese capital of Ayutthaya was noted by a contemporary observer, who describes the "Muslim Street" as one of the most beautiful streets in the city (Choisy 1930:156).

The governor of Bangkok, the gateway to the royal capital upstream, was a Muslim Turk (Tachard 1981:134).

Christianity, in its turn, was introduced into Siam by the Portuguese in the early 16th century, soon after the fall of Malacca in 1511. An early 17th-century ecclesiastical report refers to a Catholic church in Siam, where as many as 400 Japanese Christian immigrants received the sacrament on one occasion (Iwao 1966:196). The Christian presence in Ayutthaya was augmented when the French launched their missionary activities in 1662. Twenty years later, Asian youth, including Chinese, Japanese, Tonkinese, Cochin Chinese, and Peguan, as well as Siamese, were studying Catholic theology at a seminary or college established on the outskirts of Ayutthaya (Choisy 1930:145).

Both non-Buddhist populations seem to have enjoyed considerable freedom in practicing their respective religions, with little harassment by the authorities. Here I would like to review the policy of the 20th-century Thai government vis-à-vis Thai Muslims against the background of the official attitude of the premodern Siamese state toward non-Buddhists and its modern development.

Religion and Kingship in Premodern Siam

A late 17th-century French observer was impressed by the high degree of commercial liberty enjoyed by the foreign merchants in Siam, who came from every corner of the world in hopes of participating in a lucrative trade. In Ayutthaya the Thai authorities assigned to each ethnic group a specified area for residence, where the foreigners lived under the supervision of their compatriot chief. He, in his turn, reported to the Siamese minister for trade and foreign affairs—popularly known among the Westerners as Barcalon or Phra Khlang (La Loubère 1986:112). Simon de la Loubère, the French ambassador sent by Louis XIV to the Siamese court, counted 3,000 to 4,000 “Moors,” belonging most probably to the Shiite sect, and nearly the same number of Malay Sunni Muslims (Omar Farouk 1980:114). The Muslim merchants who had settled in Siam were generally well received by the trade-minded Siamese kings, who found that they contributed greatly to the enrichment of the royal treasury. To please Muslim merchants settled in Ayutthaya, King Narai (r. 1656–88) even sponsored the construction of a mosque. The religious tolerance of the Siamese monarchs was so broad that a visiting Persian ambassador almost tried to convert the Buddhist king to Islam (La Loubère 1986:112). The French ambassador spoke highly of “the publick [*sic*] protection which the King of Siam gives to their Religion, as to all foreign religions” (ibid., p. 126).

Nevertheless, the religious benevolence of Ayutthayan kings as witnessed by contemporaries must be distinguished from the

traditional concept of *sasanupathamphok*, or the “royal protection of the Sacred Religion”—a solemn politicoreligious duty that no Buddhist king could disregard. A Thai king could promote a religion other than Buddhism that was professed by his subjects as long as doing so would expedite the administration of the multiethnic population of his realm. Motivated by pragmatism, he might show his royal benevolence to non-Buddhist subjects—to foreign merchants, for example, as in the 17th century. But *sasanupathamphok* could be suddenly withheld when a certain religious act of non-Buddhists proved harmful to the religious order of the kingdom. The following is a case in point.

In 1730 the Siamese authorities discovered some religious documents written in Thai and Pali by a Catholic clergyman. Being aware of the possibility of harm to the religious faith of the Buddhist subjects, the king issued a royal order with which to prohibit the Catholic clergy from (1) writing any book on Christianity in either Thai or Pali, (2) evangelizing in Thai, (3) attempting to convert the Siamese, the Laotians, or the Mon, who were all Buddhists, or (4) casting aspersions on the religion of the kingdom (Pallegoix 1854:201-3). The message leaves no ambiguity: the Buddhist subjects being adversely affected by the Christian religion were the ones who concerned the Siamese authorities.

In the mid-19th century, when Western powers began encroaching on Siam with the hope of establishing free trade, Western diplomats confronted Siamese kings with the demand for religious freedom. Unlike in the 17th century, the demand was not for royal tolerance of non-Buddhist religions but for a legal right. It was met by the enlightened King Mongkut when he eventually agreed to stipulate the right to religious freedom in the first Treaty of Friendship and Commerce that Siam concluded, in 1855, with Great Britain. Article 6 of the treaty reads: “All British subjects visiting or residing in Siam shall be allowed the free exercise of the Christian religion, and liberty to build churches in such localities as shall be consented to by the Siamese authorities.” Here the diplomatic consideration comes to the fore.

In some premodern Thai texts, we find, among the epithets of Siamese kings, the term *akkhasasanupathamphok*. It is used in a series of royal decrees issued in the early years of the reign of King Rama I (r. 1782–1809), collectively known as the Kot Phra Song, or Royal Degrees on the Buddhist Sangha. Here *akkha* means “supreme,” and *upathamphok* means “he who supports, promotes, or encourages.” The term *sasana* (religion) in all eight decrees, issued between 1782 and 1783, is tantamount to *Phutthasasana*, or Buddhism. In short, *akkhasasanupathamphok* in the traditional context invariably means “the supreme supporter of the Buddhist religion”; it does not refer to religion in general.

As an old law notes, the Siamese king, who is *akkhasasanupathamphok*, is always expected to spare no effort to “make Buddha’s religion prosperous both in its canonical studies [*phrapariyat*] and in its disciplinary practice [*patibat sasana*]” (*Kot Phrasong* 1).¹ This definition of the term was never challenged until 1932, when Siam was to adopt a modern constitution for the first time in history.

Transformation of the Royal Duty to Support Religion

In June 1932 a coup d’état was successfully staged by a group of Western-trained military officers and civilians to end the time-honored absolute rule of the king of Siam. The political change naturally led the revolutionary government to draft a constitution after Western models. In preparing the text of the fundamental code, the legislators were confronted with the task of reconciling the traditional concept of the Siamese kingship with the modern one. The point at issue in redefining *सानुपथมพุก* was how to coherently juxtapose the traditional idea of the royal promotion of Buddhism with the modern concept of religious liberty. A wise solution eventually emerged by semantically expanding the traditional connotation of the term *sasana* to include all religions with followers in the Kingdom of Siam, not just Buddhism. While necessarily keeping the king a Buddhist—the provision reads, “[T]he Siamese king *must* be a Buddhist”—the king was at the same time made *सानุपथมพุก*, with the expanded meaning of the term *sasana*; that is, he became the protector of all religions in Siam. In a booklet entitled *Aphiprai Rang Ratthathammanun* (A contention on the draft constitution; 1932), Prince Wan Waithayakon, presumably asked to comment on the relevant portion of the proposed draft constitution, makes an interesting remark on article 4:

It is appropriate that the chairman of the [drafting] committee explains that the king “extends his *upatham* (support) to the religions of all Siamese people. And the wording in the Thai text is also appropriate. But the term “The Faith” appearing in the English text seems to me too narrow, since it refers only to Buddhism, at the cost of other religions [of the realm]. . . . I would therefore suggest amending the wording as follows: “[The king] professes the Buddhist *Faith* and is the upholder of *Religion*.”

The prince’s advice was taken. With the introduction of the modern constitution in 1932, the Thai king, for the first time in history, came to shoulder constitutionally the burden of supporting (*upatham*) not only Buddhism but every other religion in his realm so far as they are adhered to by his subjects.

¹ *Kot Phrasong* is a name in Thai given to the law quoted here.

Following adoption of the constitution came the institution-ization of the expanded concept of *sasanuphatham*, or religious promotion. Within the Department of Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Education a new division called Kong Sasanuphatham (Division of Religious Promotion) was created to help administer the Buddhist church, or Sangha. One official report explains the Department of Religious Affairs as being commissioned with the following double duties: “i) to foster [*thamnu bamrung*], to promote [*songsoem*], and to propagate [*phoeiphrae*] Buddhism and ii) to uphold [*upatham*] other religions whose faith the Thai citizens living in Thailand profess” (Krom Kan Sasana 1988:59). The latter aim shall be pursued to generate mutual understanding among peoples of different religious affiliations in the kingdom (*ibid.*, p. 62).

Royal Patronage of the Thai Muslim Minority

The Muslim population is concentrated in the four southern provinces adjacent to Malaysia. According to the Religious Report of 1988, the number of Muslims living in Thailand was 2,173,019, of which 1,663,536, or 76.6%, live in the peninsular region. In and around the Bangkok metropolitan area live 297,091 Muslims, surrounded by the overwhelming Buddhist majority, whose social pressure seems to be increasingly felt by the religious minority. In Thailand today the Muslims constitute the largest minority group (4.0%), followed by the Christians (0.6%).

In the reign of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910), the Siamese government confronted strong resistance from Malay Muslims when it extended its integrative effort to the south; the provinces there had for a long time enjoyed the status of loosely controlled vassal states of Thai dynasties located in the Chaophraya Delta. The southern Muslim minority thereafter became the recipient of a policy of benign neglect (Surin Pitsuwan 1985:101). The policy changed when Pridi Phanomyong, in his capacity as regent, proclaimed the issuance of a royal decree on the religious patronage of Islam on 3 May 1945. The royal decree was an expression of the intention of the Thai government to extend the now modified religious support of the king to the Muslims in the sensitive south. The preamble of the decree reads:

Whereas the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand grants full freedom of religion to the people, with the King as the Great Upholder of Religions [*akkhasasanupathamphok*]; and remembering the Muslim subjects living in a certain region, it is appropriate that assistance and protection be given to these Muslims so that they may be able to follow their religion.

When we read the text of this historic decree carefully, we soon find that the new legislative measure is nothing but an adaptation of the concept by which the government of King Chulalongkorn successfully administered the Buddhist Sangha in the beginning of the 20th century. With the first Sangha Administration Act, introduced in 1902, together with its drastic amendments in 1942 and 1963, the Thai Buddhist fraternity with the royally appointed patriarch (*sangkharat* or *sangharaja*), and his administrative machinery, was placed under the indirect but effective administration of the Department of Religious Affairs. The director of the department is the ex officio secretary general of the Mahatherasamakhom, or Council of Elders—the highest organ of the Thai Sangha. The application of the concept of administrative control established in the Sangha acts to Islam seems to be based on an assumption that the approach may perhaps work for Islam should a Sangha-like institution be successfully identified, thereby organizing the Muslim population in Thailand. The Ayutthayan title *chularachamontri* has hence been revived. This royally granted title used to be given to a high-ranking Muslim official during the Ayutthaya period (1351–1767) (see Tamnaeng Na Phonlaruan in Thailand 1938–39). According to the royal decree of 1945, the holder of this title is expected to play the exalted role of proxy of the Thai king in the promotion [*upatham*] of Islam. Article 3 of the decree specifies that the chularachamontri is “His Majesty’s personal aide, fulfilling the royal duties in the patronage of Islam.”

A political upheaval that took place in 1947 made this original scheme impractical, however. Pridi Phanomyong, who was sympathetic to the Malay Muslims in the south, was ousted, and Chaem Phromnyong, the first chularachamontri appointed under the royal decree of 1945 and Pridi’s trusted Islamic affairs adviser fled the country (Surin Pitsuwan 1985:157). Soon afterward the provision that had made the chularachamontri the royal proxy was abolished by the issuance, on 14 December 1948, of Royal Decree No. 2, which has an identical name. In the amendment, the titleholder was degraded from a respectable proxy of the Thai king to a mere adviser to the Department of Religious Affairs with the humble rank of a division chief.

Parallel Administrative Structure for Muslims and Buddhists

In October 1949 a new set of regulations was issued in accordance with article 7 of Royal Decree No. 2 to create the National Council for Muslims in Thailand. This regulation is known today as Rabiap Kantaengtang Thotthon Kammakan Itsalam Pracham Matsayit (surau) lae withidamnoenkan an kiawkae Sasanakit khong Matsayit (surau) Pho. So. 2492 (1949) (Regula-

tion concerning the Appointment and Dismissal of the Mosque [*surau*] Committee, Together with the Procedures Concerning Religious Rites to Be Performed in the Mosque [*surau*]). Despite the humble appellation, these regulations deserve careful scrutiny, for they are important in understanding the attitude of the contemporary government toward Muslims in Thailand. Their significance might be comparable to that of the Sangha Administration Act of 1902 and its successors. The outline of the would-be Muslim organization in Thailand parallels the organization of the Thai sangha (fig. 1).

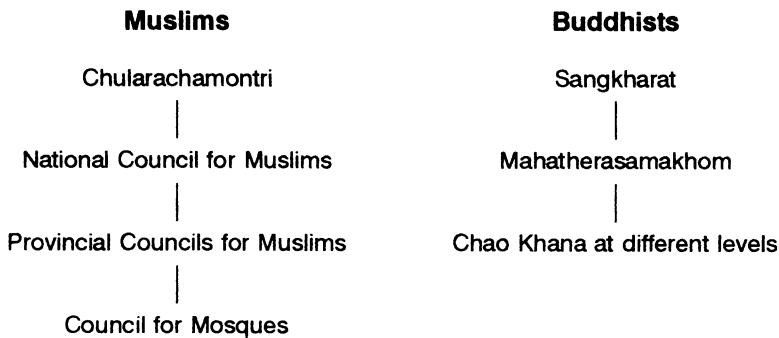


Figure 1. The official organization of Muslims and Buddhists in Thailand

At the top of the hierarchy stands the chularachamontri, who is the *ex officio* chair of the 10-man National Council for Muslims, which might be compared to the Buddhist Mahatherasamakhom. According to the scheme, each Muslim is obliged to register at a particular mosque (Narong Siripachana 1975:66-69); the underlying idea is analogous to that of the Sangha act of 1902 (art. 15), which required each monk to register at a particular temple—the measure whereby the whole monkhood was placed under the control of the central authority.

The newly introduced system does not seem to operate as originally intended. We read in the minutes of the National Council that complaints are being filed on the difficulty or even impracticality of registering for *surau* members (Narong Siripachana 1975:82-86). The complaints are not without validity, for the legislation was made in flat defiance of the differences in the administration of the two religions. Whereas Theravada Buddhism is essentially a monastic religion with an ecclesiastical hierarchy, Islam characteristically has no distinction between clergy and laity. “[T]o speak of ‘laity’ and ‘clergy’ within the community of Islam is to introduce categories that are more likely to distort than to illuminate the religiousocial dynamics of this tradition” (Lusby 1987:428-29). To organize a Muslim clergy into a hierarchy, thereby placing it under a central authority, might not be

impossible, but to do the same for ordinary lay people would be a far more difficult task.

Conclusion

Thai Muslims are not a homogeneous group. Even without counting the Shiite minorities, at least three types of Muslim community can be discerned in Thailand. Malay Muslims living in the provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani in eastern peninsular Thailand have a strong Malay identity. Their integration has been a perennial issue in the Bangkok government's policy toward religious minorities. The Thai-speaking Muslims in Satun, in contrast, seem to be integrated smoothly into Thai society, probably owing to their proficiency in Thai. Muslims in the last group are found among the overwhelming Buddhist majority in and around the Bangkok metropolitan area, where they are tightly integrated into the larger urban milieu and more or less adapted to Buddhist social customs. These three Muslim groups each pose different problems. But they all share the same cultural identity as followers of Islam, whose organization is radically different from that of Buddhism. This structural difference must therefore be given the highest consideration when formulating a successful religious policy toward the Muslim minority—all the more so because the Thai government is constitutionally expected to fulfill its duty to promote every religion on behalf of the king, who is *akkhasanuphathamphok*, the great upholder of all religions followed by his subjects.