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Virtue and Violence: Revealing the Nexus between Political and Domestic Violence in Thailand’s Deep South

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People passing through a security checkpoint in Yala, Thailand on 14 August 2023. Yala is the southernmost province of Thailand and the administrative centre for the deep south region. Photo by Matt Hunt/ANADOLU AGENCY/Anadolu Agency via AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- There are several types and levels of violence to be mindful of when we frame an analysis on these issues where Thailand's Deep South is concerned. In the three southernmost provinces, macro-level violence refers to the confrontation between the insurgency and the Thai state authorities.
- At the same time, micro-level violence can refer to domestic violence that can happen in any family, household or village. Micro- and macro-level violence might be classed differently, but they are strongly linked.
- Patriarchy is deeply ingrained in the minds of many Malay Muslim women, and they consider themselves inferior to men. In accepting male social dominance, they tolerate—and rationalise—domestic violence. Often, they choose to remain silent despite suffering abuse.
- Besides macro-level violence, the way some Malay Muslims understand Islamic virtue—whether as ethics (*akhlaq*), as conformity to a standard of righteousness, or as moral excellence—contributes to domestic violence in the region.
- Peace talks held between the Thai state and the insurgency had not brought socio-political problems such as domestic violence to the table. Eliminating the deeply entrenched patriarchal culture within the Malay-Muslim community presents a formidable challenge for women in the region, particularly when religious institutions have failed in their role as mediators.

INTRODUCTION

Religious leaders (including Imams) play an essential spiritual role in the Malay Muslim communities in Thailand's three southernmost provinces. However, when addressing marital disputes, many of them often overlook the struggles of women, and frequently suggest that women should remain loyal to their husbands as a matter of honour. In 2022, during a visit to the Women's Majlis at the Islamic Council in Yala province, a staff member shared several concerning cases with the author. In one instance, a woman arrived to file a complaint. Her face was covered in blood, and she was crying and screaming angrily that her husband had bludgeoned her with a hard object. Rather than reporting to the police, the Imam sought to mediate between the husband and wife, urging them to forgive each other. This recollection hits me intensely; as someone who merely researches on the Thai insurgency, I have come to fathom the profound importance of bringing this type of violence to public attention.

This article does not wish to repeat what most articles have covered: how the conflict and violence between the Thai security forces and the separatist movements in the southernmost provinces erupted, and the progress of the peace process. The goal, instead, is to bring attention to a different type of violence, namely domestic abuse and the ways Islamic institutions deal with it. Different forms of abuse against Muslim women in the southernmost provinces include emotional and psychological pressure, physical violence, early marriages, forced sex, and (marital) rape. According to Oxfam's project on Violence-against-Women (VAW) in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand, "domestic violence is far more severe, widespread, and complex but remains underreported and underrated."¹ The project aims to reduce violence against women through collaboration between the Women Networks (WNs), local civil society, the Thai government and Provincial Islamic Councils in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat.

In 2019, VAW reported 240 cases of violence against women in Narathiwat province alone. The common causes of violence are illegal drugs and gambling (48%), followed by polygyny (33%), and other reasons (19%). In 2020, the Narathiwat and Yala Provincial Islamic Counselling offices reported 3,030 such cases.² The high figures may be alarming, but on a positive note, it may show that victims are now more willing to report incidences of abuse to the Provincial Islamic Council. Whether the rise in reporting is due to an upsurge in incidents, or a greater willingness of victims to come forward, is unclear. This complexity arises from the dual legal system, which combines Thai and Islamic laws.³

ONGOING VIOLENCE IN THAILAND'S DEEP SOUTH

Conflict and violence have plagued the southernmost region of Thailand for almost two decades, rooted in historical tensions between the Thai state and the Malay-Muslim population. Since January 2004, clashes between the Thai security forces and insurgent groups such as the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), a Malay-Muslim separatist organization, have resulted in over 7,000 lives lost and more than 10,000 injured. Conflict management and peace negotiations between Thai authorities and rebel peace negotiators are ongoing, but the BRN continues pursuing independence violently. Concurrently, there are reports of human rights abuses in the region, with the 2005 Emergency Decree enabling Thai security forces to conduct cordon-and-search operations without a warrant, monitor people by taking photos without permission, and detain suspects with reports of torture and ill-treatment.

The case of Abdullah Esomuso, a 34-year-old suspected leader of an insurgent cell, demonstrate the ongoing tension in the area. On 21 July 2019, Abdullah was found unconscious in an interrogation centre at Fort Inkayuthaboriharn, an army camp in Pattani province. He died at a hospital two months later. Relatives claim Abdullah was in great health before the military interrogation. In May 2022, two years after his death, the Thai court ruled that his death resulted from natural causes, specifically oxygen deprivation to the brain and heart failure during detention.⁴ No military interrogators were convicted.

This tragedy is just one of many that have occurred in Thailand's three southernmost provinces over the past 19 years. Although overall violence and conflict have decreased since 2013, when peace talks began, data from the Deep South Watch database indicates a 44% increase in violent incidents in 2021 compared to the previous year.⁵ This suggests that despite efforts at peace, violence remains prevalent in the region.

THE DISCOURSE ON ISLAMIC VIRTUE, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, AND WOMEN

As there are different types and levels of violence, we must be mindful of which of these we use to frame our analysis. Confrontation between the insurgency and the Thai state authorities is well-known in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. Because of its immense scale covering the whole region, including spillover violence affecting civilians, I describe this as macro-level violence. Micro-level violence, meanwhile, illustrates domestic violence that can happen in any family, household or village. Micro- and macro-levels of violence might be classed differently, but they are nevertheless strongly linked. To decipher the structure of violence in the southernmost provinces of Thailand, both have to be examined seriously.⁶

In those provinces, significant gaps persist in the implementation of the specialized protective measures outlined in the Victims of Domestic Violence Protection Act B.E. 2550 (2007). These shortcomings become even more evident when intertwined with the Muslim Family Law and the Law of Inheritance Code of 1941. Malay-Muslim women's local culture, deeply rooted in patriarchy, is strongly shaped by traditional interpretations of Islamic teachings.⁷ Female victims of violence in the Deep South endure in silence. Their suffering is exacerbated by cultural resistance, unequal access to justice, and significant under-reporting of domestic violence stemming from inadequate governmental responses and insufficient engagement from religious institutions.⁸

There have been many misconceptions pertaining to women's rights in Islam. According to the World Health Organization website, statistics collected between 2000-2018 reveal the prevalence of domestic violence against women aged 15-49 by intimate partners. Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country, ranked fourth globally at 50%, while Afghanistan took the sixth spot at 46% (WHO, Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018, 2021). Data from some Middle Eastern countries is absent, possibly due to the reluctance of victims to come forward. This raises the question: Why does violence against women persist in Muslim societies when Islam fundamentally promotes peace and justice?

Islamic teachings and principles underscore equal partnership between men and women. The Quran does not specify particular characteristics of any gender or suggest how either gender should behave towards the other. For example, the Quran does not teach that women are

naturally inferior to men.⁹ In fact, there are mosques for women in China, Lebanon, and Scandinavian countries like Denmark, where Sherin Khankan became the first Denmark's first female Imam, who lead the prayers.¹⁰ A section that is heavily debated between male proponents and feminists would be Surah *An-Nisa*, which makes references to women's role vis-a-vis men. Experts have diverse views on the chapter, especially verse 34:

Men are the caretakers of women, as Allah elevated men above others, and men financially contribute from their wealth. Good women are loyal and safekeep everything behind their husbands according to what Allah has preserved. As for those women, whose disobedience intimidates you, reprimand them, leave them alone in the bed, and whip them. When they become obedient, then punish them no longer. Truly Allah is the Highest, the Greatest of all.¹¹

Meanwhile, the text from the same surah on the website www.quran.com which carries translations of the Qur'an by Dr. Mustafa Khattab, in English and many other languages is as follows:

Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially. And righteous women are devoutly obedient and, when alone, protective of what Allah has entrusted them with. And if you sense ill-conduct from your women, advise them first, if they persist, do not share their beds, but if they still persist, then discipline them gently. But if they change their ways, do not be unjust to them. Surely Allah is Most High, All-Great.¹²

The Thai translation based on Abu Israfil Al-Fathoni leans towards men with an oppressive tone to women, while the English version by Dr. Khattab is more neutral. Dr. Khattab's translation mentions no whipping. Many feminists view that most men who translate the teaching in this verse, do so to justify domestic violence for themselves without breaking their religious rules.¹³ Thus, it leads to the discussion on what being a true Muslim means. The debate continues with many trying to secure power, and to claim that their interpretation is the correct one for true Muslims.

CAN ISLAMIC VIRTUES EMPOWER WOMEN AND AID THAILAND'S PEACE PROCESS?

The prolonged political conflict in Thailand's southernmost regions is conflated with other challenges such as economic underdevelopment, extreme poverty, high illiteracy rates, and widespread illicit drug use. At the micro-level, patriarchy strongly influences the power dynamics between Malay Muslim men and women, further exacerbated by conventional Islamic interpretations by religious leaders. It is this that has led to the proliferation of domestic violence.¹⁴

Besides macro-level violence, some Malay Muslims' orientation towards Islamic virtues—whether ethics (*akhlak*), conformity to a standard of righteousness, or moral excellence—play a crucial part in sustaining domestic violence in the region. For example, if there is an incidence of rape in a village, the community might arrange a force-marriage between the rapist and the victim instead of reporting the incident to the police. Another example is a child marriage case

in 2018 involving a 41-year-old man from Malaysia and an 11-year-old girl from Narathiwat.¹⁵ Under Thai civil law, a woman cannot marry without her parents' permission if she is under 20. However, some male religious leaders approve of such marriages in the southernmost region of Thailand. They cite a hadith that states that Prophet Muhammad (saw) married Aisha, who was only 9 years old, even though there are other narrations that dispute Aisha's age upon her marriage to the prophet.

Patriarchy is deeply ingrained in the minds of many Malay Muslim women, and they consider themselves inferior to men. As a result, they accept male social dominance, tolerate and rationalize domestic violence, and often remain silent despite being abused. Sociologist Randall Collins suggests that the emotional dynamics of a confrontation play a crucial role in the outcome. He states, "Emotional dominance of the confrontation is the main prerequisite for successful violence; one must dominate emotionally to dominate physically".¹⁶ This insight highlights the psychological barriers that prevent women from resisting or escaping abusive situations, as the emotional dominance exerted by their abusers keeps them subjugated which is relevant in Oxfam's cases in the three southernmost provinces.

My fieldwork findings in the Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces confirm that domestic violence happens to women and even young boys. At the very least, Muslim women have an outlet to report to the Provincial Islamic Council in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat Provinces. One of my acquaintances shared a story of a 15-year-old boy that he met while filming a documentary in the region. The teenage boy was raped continuously by his uncle. Coping with trauma, the boy was helpless and vulnerable. His uncle threatened to kill him if he disclosed his ordeal to anyone. The boy could neither report to the police because he was afraid of his uncle nor report to the local Islamic Committee because sexual acts between males are considered a major sin in Islam. Cases of boys whose family members are raped can easily slip through the cracks; even if their mother or other relatives know about them, they are unwilling to file a complaint. They are concerned with the humiliating social stigma these acts may bring to their families. In other words, victims of domestic violence in the Deep South suffer silently under cultural resistance, unequal access to justice, and explicit discrimination.

The prevalence of domestic violence in the southernmost region has largely been ignored by both the Thai security forces and the rebel peace negotiators. Ngamsuk Ratanasatian, a Thai human rights advocate and a lecturer at Mahidol University's Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP) in Bangkok, observed that women in the region engage in peace-building efforts. However, the peace talk between the Thai state and the insurgency had not brought socio-political problems like domestic violence to the table.¹⁷

An effective conflict resolution involves more than just peace talks between the insurgents and Thai state securities; it necessitates transforming the domestic violence issue into a robust conflict management plan, recognizing it as being integral to the structural conditions and regional dynamics of violence. This involves considering both macro-level and micro-level violence concurrently in peace process discussions. However, the question remains: How can both parties contribute to alleviating domestic violence, instead of solely concentrating on ending combats?

Don Pathan, a senior programme officer for Regional Security Cooperation at The Asia Foundation, Thailand, noted that *Juwae* (militant fighters) are devout Muslims, and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) is likely to treat women respectfully.¹⁸ Given the extensive reach of the *Juwae* networks at the grassroots and village level, insurgent groups can potentially participate in preventing violence against women. *Juwae* could serve as first responders for women seeking assistance.

Eliminating the deeply entrenched patriarchal culture within the Malay-Muslim community presents a formidable challenge for the women of the region, particularly when the Islamic institution has been unsuccessful in its role as mediator. A significant power imbalance exists between the sexes, and having the *Juwae* as a support system can potentially counteract male or husbandly dominance, thereby helping to reduce domestic violence.

CONCLUSION

Violence in the southernmost region of Thailand is not only about constant battles between Thai security officers and insurgents, but also domestic violence within Malay-Muslim communities. The dominance of the Malay-Muslim patriarchal culture has desensitized violence-against-women to a certain degree. Many religious leaders and village councils tend to look away or are indiscreet when settling marriage disputes, which puts the burden more on the women.

In the case of the southernmost provinces of Thailand, the social significance of what some Malay-Muslim communities believe to be an Islamic virtue, in fact nourishes violence. While clashes between Thai state authorities and insurgents cost lives, domestic violence has a long-lasting effect on people in the community. The first step is to recognize the problem. The most promising way forward will inevitably involve collaboration between Women Networks, the civil society groups, Thai state authorities, religious leaders, and even insurgency groups.

In conclusion, it is imperative for peace negotiators and others to understand that the issue of domestic violence in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand is as severe as the clashes between Thai security forces and insurgents. It is impossible to achieve peace in the conflict-ridden region without systematically addressing the issue of domestic violence within the Muslim communities.

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