RELIGIOUS PIETY AND MUSLIM WOMEN IN THAILAND

Amporn Marddent

Introduction

One prominent feature of Islamic revivalism on the part of women in Thailand is Muslim women's active participation in the debate about veiling. There have been demonstrations calling for the right to wear the hijab (women's veil)—a campaign initiated by young Muslim activists in Yala, the southern province of the country, in 1987/88. This so-called ‘Yala Teacher's Training College Incident’ was a result of a greater self-awareness in the Muslim community. Many of the demonstrators involved were Muslim youth who demanded that the Thai authorities grant Muslim women the right to wear the veil at the college, eventually emerging successful. This spawned a hijab movement in Thailand, where various styles of veiling had already become fashionable among Muslim women in the course of the preceding decade.

In Thailand, the practice of voluntary veiling as an expression of commitment to Islamic values emerged among the cohort of women who took their undergraduate education both in Thailand and Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s. By then, women in the southernmost provinces of Thailand—Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat—had already been strongly influenced by the dakwah (propagation of the faith) movement, which had left its mark, in terms of visible religious activities, upon Muslim youth in various Islamic boarding schools (pondok). Besides, there are groups devoted to religious studies (halqoh) and small solidarity groups (usrah) in which women religious activists who graduated from Kelantan, Malaysia, have come together to continue their activities, keep up their networks, and teach the messages regarding Islamic women's dress and women's roles.

Among Muslim women in central Thailand, the headscarf is one of the most powerful symbols of identity, particularly after the Muslim Women Organization of Thailand (MWOT) joined efforts for Islamic revitalization at the state level. In the wake of the ‘Yala Teacher's Training College Incident’, MWOT became active. Cooperating closely with other Islamic organizations, women's organizations, and Muslim politicians, they strove to achieve
consensus between the Thai state authorities and the Muslim community with regard to a bill that would allow Muslim women to wear the hijab in public places of work and education, in official ceremonies, and on the pictures of their ID cards and passports.\(^1\)

It should be apparent that the hijab movement in Thailand provided a space that was conducive to the emergence of Muslim women's movements calling for religious freedom. At the same time, there were some trends towards re-Islamization among young women and men in central and southern Thailand, as well as a movement of Muslims against the Buddhist dominance that has existed in Thailand ever since the early modern era, a dominance that still continues today. In this context, the impact of modernization on the development of Thai society is of particular importance as well. The nation-building programme of King Vajiravudh (1910–1925) can be summarized by the essential slogan of loyalty to ‘nation, religion and king’. He, the King, promoted the notion of nation through this slogan. For him, nationalism and the modernization programme were inseparable from Westernization. When a modern national identity was being promoted, it led to efforts to assimilate Thailand's ethnic minority groups. The confrontation between the first Muslim Women Organization of Thailand (MWOT) and other related Muslim groups, Muslim politicians, and activists on the one side and the Thai nation-state and traditional and religious authorities on the other gave rise to a huge Islamic movement in Thailand.

This contribution begins with a discussion of the historical background of Muslims in the Thai context, and then proceeds to the Muslim women's movement. The movement originated in Bangkok, in spite of the fact that Muslim women's issues, for example the hijab movement, first came up in the Deep South of Thailand. The last part of the essay analyses Muslim women’s interpretations of Islam and gender, which have moved toward positions taken by a neo-orthodox Islamic group in Bangkok during the 2000s. In that context, I will discuss the case of Nahdatul Muslimat, the women’s wing of Al Jama‘at, a currently active salafi-based reformist movement. The members of this movement interact with other Muslims in public life, striving to develop a Muslim model of society. They have tried to develop a contemporary approach to Islam by undertaking a reappraisal of Islamic meaning. The majority of the new members recruited by Nahdatul Muslimat are young Muslim students who are facing difficulties in dealing with modern Thai society. They are impressed by the movement’s style of debate with regard to

\(^{1}\) Interview with Sawvanee Jitmoud, 14 May 2009. See also, for example, Scupin (1998); Satha-Anand (1994); Jitmoud et al. (1994).