IDSS COMMENTARIES (32/2004)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

The *Pondok* Schools of Southern Thailand: Bastion of Islamic Education or Hotbed of Militancy?

Joseph Liow*

25 August 2004

Though they are part of the predominantly Buddhist nation of Thailand, the inhabitants of the southern provinces of Songkhla, Satun, Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat share historical, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic characteristics with the other Malay-Muslim peoples in the Malay Archipelago. Their distinct identity has been a source of tension with the Thai national identity. This Malay-Muslim consciousness has been fed and nurtured by the Islamic system of education that has been prevalent in southern Thailand for over a century, and that is built around *Pondok* schools.

The *Pondok* Tradition

Patani was a regional center for Islamic learning in the 19th Century; Muslim students from archipelagic Southeast Asia would sojourn at the *Pondok* in the province before going to the Middle East to further their Islamic education. Patani Muslims were also prominent educators in major Islamic institutions in the Arab-Muslim World, most notably the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Patani scholars and *Tok Guru* (religious teachers and principals of *Pondok* schools) were also instrumental in translating religious commentaries and sermons from Arabic to Malay(in Jawi).

In the *Pondok* tradition, teaching is done in Malay and Arabic, and the emphasis is on religious learning. There is no system of assessment in place, and hence these schools are not accredited by the government. Lessons revolve around prayer and memorising the scripture (Koran), commentaries and exegesis provided by *Tok Guru*.

There are nevertheless two lingering misconceptions regarding *Pondok* education in Thailand. First is the mistaken assumption that southern Thai *Pondok* schools teach only Islam. This is not necessarily the case as many *Pondok* do integrate secular and vocational subjects into their syllabus as well, even if *Tok Guru* generally privilege religious education. Second is the popular perception that Muslim parents prefer to send their children to *Pondok* rather than state schools. This too, is not entirely so. Recent research conducted by the Prince of Songkhla University (Pattani) has found that up to 64% of the people desire general education for their children. Nevertheless, they also want secular education to be balanced with religious instruction from the *Pondok*.

"Siamizing" the system

Given the important role that *Pondok* schools play in reinforcing Malay-Muslim identity

through religious and language training, these institutions have posed a major challenge to the Thai government which views education as the central instrument for assimilating and integrating minorities into the nation-state.

In the 1930s and 1940s, attempts were made by the government of Phibun Songgkram to assimilate the Malay-Muslim community into Thai society by changing the medium of *Pondok* education from Malay-Arabic to Thai. These policies sparked an immediate reaction from the Malay-Muslim community, which viewed them as a threat to their identity and way of life. Consequently, rather than transforming into channels of national consciousness envisaged by the government, *Pondok* schools were mobilized to disseminate ideas of Pan-Malay nationalism and Islamic revivalism.

Similarly, policies of later Thai governments to transform Pondok schools to private institutions eligible for state funding but subject to government regulation were met with resistance. Such policies of the Sarit Thanarat administration towards Pondok schools in the early 1960s laid the ground for two decades of separatist violence, with *Pondok* schools choosing to disband themselves and move underground rather than be absorbed into the Thai education system.

Aside from cultivating separatism and the mushrooming of a host of underground religious institutions, another critical consequence of forced assimilation policies was that it impelled many potential *Pondok* students to pursue religious education overseas, primarily in the Middle East and South Asia. Furthermore, up to 85% of Muslim students from southern Thailand studying overseas are believed to be sponsored by their host institutions. Returning students nourish the *Pondok* system by proceeding to establish their own schools in various *Kampung*, with some registering as little as three to four students.

Thaksin's *Pondok* "policy"

Today, there are more than 500 *Pondok* operating in southern Thailand, but only about 300 of them are registered with state authorities. It is no secret that the Thai government suspects that some of these traditional schools are fostering religious extremism and harbouring militants. About 30 of these 500 are suspected to be preaching violence in the name of Islam.

Since the January 2004 resurgence of violence in the south, government security forces have instituted regular searches of various *Pondok*, particularly in Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala. These raids however, are increasingly undertaken without warning, and are viewed as violations of their religio-cultural space by the Muslim community.

The government has also revived attempts to register these schools in order to regulate *Pondok* education. Yet given the arbitrary way by which *Pondok* schools are created, this policy is proving increasingly difficult to implement. Moreover, many *Pondok* have gone underground for fear that registration will encourage further government incursion into Muslim education, and through that into Malay-Muslim society. On the other hand, government funding to the *Pondok* system remains paltry, a mere fraction of the budget allocation for southern provinces.

Of greater concern though, is the belief among the Malay-Muslims of the south that since the 28 April 2004 massacre at the Krisek Mosque, the government has pursued a policy of abducting and murdering *Tok Guru* suspected of teaching separatism and violence. This

perception, fuelled by the fact that several *Pondok* teachers have gone missing since 28 April, only serves to further fan the climate of suspicion and distrust in the south.
The traditional *Pondok* remains central to Malay-Muslim identity and lifestyle in southern Thailand. Like other such institutions in Southeast Asia however, the *Pondok* of Thailand is confronted with the challenge of making themselves relevant in the context of social, political, and economic changes taking place in their environment. Some have chosen the path of greatest resistance and preach the message of separatism and Jihadi violence against the "oppressive" Thai government.

The vast majority of *Pondok* are however significantly less threatening, and have chosen to focus primarily on encouraging a deeper knowledge of Islamic scripture among their students while acquiring secular skills. In this respect, the challenge for the Thai government will be to refrain from approaching the *Pondok* "problem" with a "one-size-fits-all" policy that will only serve to further alienate the Malay-Muslim community and heighten the legitimacy of radicalism and separatism among the religious teachers in the south.

---

* Dr Joseph Liow is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.