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BASELINE STUDY

Tradition- & Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators (TFIMs)
as Crucial Actors in Conflict Transformation

Case Study: **Southern Thailand**



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Background of this case study

In mediation processes, usually an *outsider* and *impartial* third party mediator is sought. In certain contexts, especially in traditional and high-context societies, an insider mediator who is intrinsic (geographically, culturally and normatively) to the conflict context, and thereby *partial*, often gets more legitimacy to mediate than an outsider. Tradition- & faith-oriented insider mediator (TFIMs) are those who take an assortment of concepts, values and practices from culture, tradition and faith (among other sources) as inspiration, motivation, guidance and as methodological support towards mediation. TFIMs may include traditional and religious leaders/ authorities, but also other actors who may, on principle and/ or strategically, draw tools and inspiration from (multiple) faiths, cultures and traditions, as well as from non-religious (secular) and non-traditional concepts/ values. This case study is part of the empirical research that was carried out to understand the mediation roles, potential and constraints of TFIMs.

About the author

Jularat Damrongviteetham works as a consultant for Berghof Foundation's Asia projects. Based in Bangkok, Thailand, she implements a range of activities related to peace support, especially in the area of dialogue and mediation. Prior to joining Berghof she was a Programme Officer at the Asia Foundation and had previously worked for the Peace Information Center, conducting research and organising cultural fluency workshops. Jularat has a BA in Political Science from Thammasat University and an MA in Anthropology from Chiang Mai University and is currently preparing for a PhD.

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Availability

All case studies, the main study, and a synopsis are available at www.peacemakersnetwork.org/tfim.

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1. Introduction

The conflict in Southern Thailand is not about religion; it is essentially about ethnic identity. Nevertheless, one of the explanations for this deadly conflict is the misuse of religion to create violence. Thailand's religious landscape comprises more than 80% Buddhists and 3-5% Muslims, the latter primarily constituting 80% of the population of the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun and Songkla.¹ After 11 years of deadly conflict in the southern border provinces of Thailand, more than 6,000 people have been killed and around 11,000 wounded. While the majority of those killed have been Malay-Muslims, the majority of the injured have been Thai-Buddhists. Tit-for-tat tactics are occasionally applied by both ethnicities. In such an environment, some have questioned the role of religious leaders in resolving the violent conflict.

Interestingly, religion- and tradition-oriented actors are not able to play a significant role as mediators in this conflict. There are two reasons for this: the first is related to the limits placed on religious leaders. Since the movement challenging the Thai state is Malay-Muslim, this has led to a perception among state officials that Muslim religious leaders are key actors in the movement. They believe that Muslim leaders indoctrinate young people and encourage them to resist the state. These Islamic leaders are also often owners of religious schools. This led to the introduction of a policy in 2004 requiring all traditional pondok schools to be registered. Likewise, those Muslim leaders who work closely with the state are often perceived by some militants as traitors. As a result, many Muslim leaders have been targeted by both sides. Although pondok schools are more acceptable to the authorities at present, there is still an air of mistrust between the schools and the state. In this situation, religious leaders face a dilemma, which limits their ability to act as mediators in the region. The second reason

relates to the concept of mediation itself. In the last few years, the role of Muslim leaders and Buddhist monks vis-à-vis the conflict in the South has changed. Muslim leaders have come to play a more prominent role in conflict resolution, following a number of cases in which high-ranking state officials have signalled their approval and respect for such leaders through frequent requests for advice or invitations to sit on relevant committees. Buddhist monks in the South have also played a role. A Thai Buddhist network for peace was established with the support of local Buddhist monks following the official peace talks (KL-process) on 28th February 2013. Nevertheless, both Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders have acted more as peacebuilders than as mediators. Though mediation is generally considered an effective tool for conflict resolution, in Thai society mediation is better known as a tool for dispute settlement, particularly in courts or in the family. There is therefore no experience and limited knowledge of mediation as a means of settling ethno-political conflicts.

The following overview is a study of the role of tradition- and faith-oriented insider mediators (TFIMs) in the conflict in Southern Thailand. Due to the limited role of TFIMs in the country, it would be more practicable also to include tradition- and faith-oriented insider peacebuilders (TFIPs). The paper is based on field research conducted between 7th and 15th May 2015. The research consisted of semi-structured interviews and a focus group, and was conducted in the four southern border provinces (Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, and Songkla) and in Bangkok (for those working on the conflict in the far South but based in the capital). The interviewees comprised not only Muslim leaders and Buddhist monks, but also NGOs, local CSOs, and women's groups whose work contains religious and faith-based elements.

1. The Inter-Religious Council for Peace. accessed in June 2015.

2. TFIM roles and engagement

The roles and engagement of TFIM/Ps were categorised by the researcher on the basis of these mediators' activities in relation to the conflict.

2.1 Bridge-builder or connector between parties

The absence of trust between conflicting parties necessitates the involvement of additional parties to support conflict resolution. There are two types of bridge-builders/connectors. Direct connectors intervene in the conflict themselves. As direct connectors, TFIMs invite the Muslim leaders (imams), village headmen, district heads, or natural leaders who are often the main conflict parties in local communities, to participate in a workshop or forum together, where the TFIM takes on the role of a facilitator. During the workshop, they will discuss issues concerning community development, but the main focus is to strengthen and build bridges between the local parties. Mediators believe that establishing good relationships among the latter can reduce tension in the community and protect young people from recruitment by insurgent movements.

One advantage possessed by insider mediators is their close relationship to stakeholders. Sometimes, however, they lack sufficient trust and credibility. Such a scenario requires additional mediators who are accepted by both parties, especially in tense, time-constrained situations where there is little time to build trust. Here, TFIMs act as indirect connectors by facilitating the involvement of an additional mediator. One interviewee, for example, was caught in a confrontation between Malay-Muslim villagers and the military. Following a violent incident, the soldiers were prevented from entering the crime scene because the villagers thought that the soldiers had caused the violence. The confrontation escalated when more soldiers were called to the scene. To avoid further escalation, the interviewee asked both sides whom they would accept as a mediator. They immediately contacted the individual named and requested that he witness the investigation. The subsequent de-escalation was a result of the TFIM acting as an indirect connector/bridge-builder.

2.2 Knowledge and information provider

Based on the assumption that conflicting parties need to know how to deal with conflicts, the majority of the interviewees have also functioned as knowledge providers. They have provided training for officials on applying non-violent tactics with demonstrators, on peaceful third-

party intervention, and on conflict and religion. A Buddhist monk from Bangkok spoke to Buddhist monks in the South about fostering peace in daily life and how to reduce hate speech, particularly against Muslim people.

In the event of religious conflicts, TFIMs explain or clarify issues that might create frustration. In addition, Muslim TFIMs also share information with local communities about developments in the peace process or regarding violent incidents. The killing of four suspected militants by security forces in a district in Pattani on the night of 25th March became news because relatives claimed that the victims, two of whom were students, were innocent. A committee was established to investigate the incident. One interviewee, a member of the Provincial Islamic Committee, was appointed to this investigative committee, which conducted a fact-finding mission to establish the facts of the case. The example is a case in point of a TFIM acting as an information provider.

2.3 Direct mediation

As mentioned earlier, the role of TFIMs as mediators in conflict resolution is not explicit in the southernmost part of the country; nevertheless, they do engage in dispute settlement, mediating in domestic conflicts or interfaith conflicts. Ulamas and imams normally play an active role in settling disputes within Muslim families. They employ religious principles as a tool for mediation. Some say they only advise parties without making judgments, while others state that, as religious leaders, they are justified in passing judgement on the basis of their religious knowledge. Their involvement is confined to civil or inheritance cases.

With respect to interfaith dispute settlement, TFIMs are part of the Inter-Religious Council for Peace, which includes representatives of five religions – Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism – and whose work is focused primarily on the South. The main work of the Council is to promote mutual understanding and compassion when grievances arise in the region. When a violent incident occurs, for instance, often the victim's relatives will automatically assume the act has been committed by a person of a different faith. The council's committee will visit victims, express empathy and kindness, and clear up misunderstandings where the religious dimension is concerned.

3. Approaches and tools

The majority of faith-based insider mediators described religious teachings and their faith as guiding their approach to their work and as the entry point for their involvement in conflict mediation. This was particularly true of the Muslim interviewees. They indicated that Islam is a part of daily life and so cannot be secularised. When they were asked about conflict tools, their first response was thus always to point to Islamic principles. Yet the most effective method for dealing with conflict was identified as the Shura principle (consultative principle). Similar to the democratic principle in Western political thought, it states that all persons in society are equal and that the view of the majority should be the main method for deciding on public issues. Aside from religious teachings, the following were highlighted as additional key principles that guided their approach:

- **Sincerity (Ikhlas) and trust.** Although they are all insiders, they recognised that effective mediation must involve building confidence and trust. Since violence destroys horizontal relationships among people, building trust takes time. Most mediators had therefore spent long periods of time working in a specific area/community. Even TFIMs who were well-known public figures in the region acknowledged that it takes time to demonstrate their sincerity or “Ikhlas.” They support the conflicting parties as much as they can, yet ensure that they manage expectations appropriately. Ikhlas, for them, is a fundamental condition of gaining the trust of the different parties.
- **Inclusiveness** was another principle often raised by interviewees. As a responsible third party, TFIMs have to work with all parties/stakeholders. In order to reach agreement, insider mediators have to engage with all actors to ensure that they do not feel excluded and end up becoming potential spoilers. Some interviewees stated that the advantage of inclusivity was that it made it possible to give a sound analysis and so come up with

the right solution. In addition to fostering inclusiveness in conflict resolution cases, some interviewees also worked directly with the opposing parties.

- **Human Rights** was defined as basic rights and respect for all people. The mediators believed that bringing peace to the South requires respect for those that are of different opinions and faiths. One interviewee mentioned that he uses **comparative religious studies** to understand the basic rights posited by different religions. Studying other religions helps to increase one’s understanding of the perspectives of each faith and tradition, which in turn enables greater acceptance of different religions.

In addition, the use of specific tools was also highlighted by some interviewees. These included:

- Peace communication
- Group counselling used by Buddhist monks with local Buddhists and monks who feel a great deal of fear and hatred toward Muslims
- Nonviolent action/ third party intervention
- Reconciliation
- Community management

4. Successes and challenges

Between them, religious leaders and faith-based CSOs have demonstrated several ways to solve either ethnic conflicts or local (and personal) conflicts in the region. So far, a number of achievements have been made:

1. Having created space for all parties/stakeholders to get to know one another, the recommendation presented to policy makers that compensation be paid to victims was taken into account and ultimately **influenced national policy**. Another recommendation taken up by the previous government was to set up a sub-committee on healing as a unit within the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC). Aspects of the nonviolent intervention training run by faith-based CSOs were also taken up by the Border Police and **incorporated into the police training curriculum**.
2. Connectors and bridge builders have served to prevent **conflicts turning violent**. As described earlier, third parties who are able to connect with outsiders or designated persons can build bridges between conflicting parties and relieve tension, thus avoiding unnecessary violence arising through misunderstanding and mistrust. Moreover, a Buddhist monk from Bangkok claimed that if there had been no training such as the one he conducted in the South, local Buddhist monks could have ended up becoming more aggressive, like the monks in Myanmar.
3. Connectors and bridge-builders have also been successful in **creating networks and building relationships** among these parties.
4. Using religious principles to strengthen community relations, as demonstrated in the Bugeta community, Waeng district, and Narathiwat Province, has prevented recruitment by militants and resulted in an **absence of violent incidents** in the community.
5. One achievement of the imam in Songkla has been to ensure that his community can **have its own curriculum**, by revising the national curriculum on the basis of religious principles and the local context. In addition, the community can punish wrongdoers on the basis of its own customs without applying the normal law.
6. Another achievement has been **gaining acceptance from local people and state officials**. This is demonstrated by the fact that a lot of people contact TFIMs to ask for advice or invite them to sit on important committees dealing with fact-finding and healing. One interviewee was asked to be the coordinator for the Sheikhul Islam office, and another was asked to act as the representative of the Sheikhul Islam minister for the southern conflict.

Alongside these successes, some challenges were also noted:

1. **Language limitations**: a lack of Malay language skills is an obstacle faced by Thai Buddhist activists when

they need to communicate with Malay people or local people who cannot speak Thai, especially during crises that require rapid intervention. In addition, after official peace talks started, TFIPs who wanted to know more about experiences from other countries were unable to benefit from resources that are largely available only in English. A lack of language skills thus served to limit their expertise in this area of work. One interviewee said that this meant she could only do support work.

2. **Resistance toward community empowerment projects** by the local administrative officers is a phenomenon that occurs throughout the country. Some TFIPs in the South aim to strengthen communities to enable them to protect themselves from violence, drugs, and the insurgency, but for local state officials, this can lead to a loss of power or influence in the community. In some areas, local officers therefore oppose TFIP-organised activities.
3. Some TFIM/Ps, despite being on the Provincial Islamic Committee, actually have **no real power** to decide on any issues.
4. **Misperception**: TFIM/Ps involved in mediation or the peace process may be perceived by the state as supporting the insurgency, especially those insider peacebuilders whose work involves helping young people or victims of violence who are wrongly perceived by the military as being involved in the insurgency. This is also the case for those who work at pondoks and private religious schools.
5. **Partisanship** of religious leaders: some religious leaders' strong support for local political parties creates challenges for their peacebuilding work.
6. **Lack of sufficient financial support**: this was an issue raised by all interviewees. In addition, episodic support from donors who funded short-term projects resulted in a lack of continuity.
7. **Lack of human resources**: low salaries and funding shortfalls meant it was difficult to attract and retain full-time staff. Where the Buddhist monks were concerned, after 10 years of violence there were no longer enough monks in the region due to security concerns.
8. **Internal conflict**: the Buddhists for Peace Network raised this issue as an obstacle to its work. The group is also constrained by a lack of dynamism, since the majority of its members are quite elderly. This makes the movement slow to act and limits its creativity and proactive capacities.
9. **Unfulfilled potential**: Muslim women are not aware of their potential as peacebuilders. They only see themselves as mothers or wives and stay at home. TFIM/P women stated that women in the region need to be supported, since they have the potential to be the most effective mediators.

5. Support: needs and risks

The interviewees mentioned the following types of support and resources that would help them to overcome these challenges:

- 1. Capacity building and knowledge exchange:** particularly important here is knowledge relating to peace studies and peace processes, as well as the lessons learned in other countries about peace dialogue and negotiation. Requests were made for assistance with capacity building and training on peace processes for all actors, including those in the armed movements. Alongside peace and conflict-related issues, organisational management was also cited as a potential training topic.
- 2. Financial support:** following the coup d'état, some international donors decreased their funding as a form of sanction against the military government. Furthermore, the domestic budget is normally allocated for development issues and is only granted to state agencies. Despite the need for increased financial support from outside donors, two issues were of concern to interviewees:
 - **Misuse of funds:** one source of conflict among local people is the misappropriation of funds. Effective monitoring tools thus need to be in place to ensure that funds are used properly.
 - **Sources of funding:** according to religious principles, one cannot accept money derived from sin tax.² Funding from the US or terrorist-supported donors were mentioned and, according to the interviewee, would warrant careful consideration. The source of funding must be transparent and must have a clear purpose. (An interviewee stated that some projects only created more conflicts). In addition, some recommended that the flexible regulation of funds was a more practical approach.
- 3. Actor mapping:** one interviewee said that it would be very useful to know more about actors/stakeholders and supporters whom she could contact if necessary.

6. References

The Inter-Religious Council for Peace, Thailand. 2009. "Concept Paper." Research Center for Peace, Mahidol University. Accessed 9 June 2015. http://www.peace.mahidol.ac.th/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=82&Itemid=76.

2. Sin tax is a tax on items considered undesirable or harmful, such as alcohol or tobacco.

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