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Participation with (out) hesitation: An examination of youth political participation during the conflict in southern Thailand

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Abstract

The struggles between Malay-Muslim separatists and Thai authorities in the southernmost provinces of Thailand, namely Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and the four districts in Songkhla, have occurred for more than a century and there seems to be no end in sight. Interestingly, despite the ongoing attacks, the political roles of youths in the conflict areas have significantly increased. The conflict and ensuing violence have built a sense of belonging for the younger generation and motivated them to participate in political activities during the conflict without hesitation. Although there was concern with Malay-Muslim youths being vulnerable and naive, there were still many young Malay-Muslims who were politically active but not convinced easily by the militants. However, youth political participation during the conflict in southern Thailand is complex and risky and that possibly explains why some members of the younger generation were cautious about participating actively and non-violently. The youths in the various conflict areas have attracted the attention of the Thai state as they can either be constructive forces or destructive forces perpetuating conflict and violence. This paper argues that conflict can be seen as a form of participation, albeit a violent form. Based on interviews with 35 university students in the conflict areas of southern Thailand, this paper suggests that youth experiences in the conflict and violence have an additional impact on their desire for political participation and differently affect levels and patterns of participation. This article also emphasizes that when youth political participation is interrupted, for example, by the Thai state, the militants, or even other religious groups, it may cause hesitation to participate non-violently, and this can potentially lead to more conflict and violent participation among youths.

The definition of political participation varies among scholars and can mean different things to different people. Traditionally, the definition of political participation has focused on political activities that aim to influence government policies (Huntington and Nelson 1976; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978; and Traut and Emmert 1993). The definition of political participation was later expanded and to include not only political acts but also non-political forms of activity such as membership or participation in civic and religious groups, or educational and work-related organizations (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; and Prinat 2002). Political participation, then, can refer to many activities, legal and illegal, electoral and non-electoral activities; all of these forms of participation can be recognized as a means for influencing public policy.

In a culturally and politically diverse and divided society, political participation is particularly essential for civilized behaviour in order to express different views non-violently through dialogues where differences are discussed and compromised (Belloni 2001: 168). Although participation can lead to discussions of alternatives that some consider to be an unpleasant resolution, "it is, and has long been, an effective means of integrating the [Thailand's southern] region into the national polity" (Ockey 2008: 153-154). When there are greater demands for participation, rather than considering that democracy may be at risk, the increase of citizen participation brings an opportunity to enrich meaningful changes to the society (Dalton 2008: 94).

In recent studies, the issue of youth political participation among young people has drawn much attention from academics and political scientists. The "life-cycle" model (Milbrath 1965, Glenn and Grimes 1968, Nie, Verba, and Kim 1974, Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Jennings and Markus 1988) indicates that there is a relationship between age and level of political participation. According to Lester Milbrath (1965: 134), "Participation rises gradually with age, reaches its peak and levels off in the forties and fifties, and gradually declines above sixty." So, from this theory, the middle age group is the most likely to be active politically, while the young and the old are less likely to engage in the community.

A number of studies have examined the correlation between age and level of political participation and the results are diverse and varied. Stithorn Thananithichot (2011) studied changes in patterns of political participation and engagement in Thailand from 2001 to 2007. He argued that in case of Thailand the relationship between age and level of political

participation is unclear. According to his survey, political participation of young Thai people is not less but manifests in different forms than the older Thais. He indicated that although the young Thais are less active in formal electoral politics, than the older geneation, the youths tend to be more active in protests and demonstrations (Stithorn 2011, 142-143).

A research on young Europeans and political participation by James Sloam (2013) revealed similar results. He found that young Europeans favored to participate in issue-based participation rather than voting. The young Europeans are not ignorant about political participation, they are just purposely selective about participating in some issues and they are more active than the older generation in this mode of participation.

A recent study of young citizens' participation in Turkey by Emre Erdoğan & Pınar Uyan-Semerci (2017) illustrated an interesting result. They asserted that being young does not matter for the decision to participate. Being young is not a noteworthy factor that leads to a different pattern of participation between the younger and older citizens, even in conventional forms. They believed it is, instead, the "self-defined collective identities" that play a significant role rather than age (Erdoğan and Semerci 2017: 69).

For the aim of comprehensive analysis and clarity, the term youth political participation in this article will refer to those political actions, both individual and collective, undertaken by young people, aged between 15-24 years old[1], that are intended either directly to influence governmental decision-making of public policy or indirectly to affect social change. However, since the minimum voting age in Thailand is 18 and the majority of interviewees have never voted, this article will rather focus on non-electoral participation, both individually and collectively.

Violent conflict in the Deep South of Thailand

The conflict and violence in the southernmost provinces of Thailand, Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and the four districts of Songkhla have occurred for more than a century. The area has a long history of resistance to authority of the central government since being incorporated by the kingdom of Thailand in 1902. The majority ethnic community in these provinces is Malay and their religion is Islam, whereas Thailand (then called Siam) is a Buddhist-dominant nation. The takeover of territory provoked a kind of hostility, especially

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[1] This study defined youth based on the UN statistical system, as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years old.

among Patani[2] elites who were loyal to the Sultans of Patani. As a result, the occupation of Siam without mutual consent of Patani residents brought about a national security problem resulting in uprisings and violence in the former Patani, mostly led by the local elites and traditional leaders against Siamese control. After the change from an absolute monarchy to a modern democratic form of government with a constitutional monarchy in 1932, the Thai state provided opportunities for the Malay-Muslims to participate in the Thai political process. The new political system opened more channels, not only for Thai citizens but also Patani traditional elites and separatists, some of whom had violently fought against the Thai state, to participate in Thai politics in order to pursue their goal of autonomy through the new political system.

However, the feeling of exclusion among the Malay community prevailed and was intensified when the Thai government promoted the concept of Thai-ness during the premiership of Field Marshal Plaek Phibulsongkram. The government believed that promoting common identity of being Thai would make all minority groups in the country enhance their sense of belonging to the Thai kingdom. The sense of belonging would attach the minority groups to the country and remove any threat that they could possibly cause against the nation (Christie 1996: 186). The assimilation policies, instead, caused negative attitudes towards the Thai state among the minorities, especially Malay-Muslims in the Far South. Their pessimism was worsened by oppressive actions of some heavy-handed, corrupt, and abusive government officials as well as some greedy and deceitful residents, both Muslims and non-Muslims, who took advantage of this vulnerable situation for their own private interests (Gowing 1975: 31). Many complaints and petitions from the local Malay-Muslims concerning the unjust behavior of Thai officials were passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth inciting distrustful feelings and resentment simmered during the conflict in the Muslim south (Thanet 2004: 31).

After Thaksin Shinawatra came to power as prime minister of Thailand in January 2001 and employed hard-line policies as well as limited popular participation in political activities, the security situation in the Deep South of Thailand deteriorated. Among other problems, the government's declaration of a war on drugs and the decision to remove the military from its security responsibilities in the Malay Muslim provinces and hand over

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[2] "Patani" refers to the Malay Sultanate of Patani, and was known as Greater Patani or Patani Raya, before the annexation by Siam, which included the present provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun, and parts of Songkhla. "Pattani" (with two "t") refers to the Thai province of Pattani in the present day.

authority to the police created more distrust and worsened the situation (Ockey 2008: 149-150). However, during Thaksin's first few years as prime minister, there was no sign of an increase in violence but tensions continued to build up quietly. In 2004, the situation deteriorated and went downhill very suddenly.

The conflict and violence in the Malay-Muslim provinces have existed for longer than the oldest living people in the South and have now become a fact of life for people in the conflict area. In the past, the conflict and violence occurred as a consequence of other factors. Nowadays, since the conflict has existed have for very long time, it has become a cause of other problems, not a consequence. Although the recent number of violent incidents in the Deep South seemed to have decreased[3], the violence is still intense, uncontrollable and shows no sign of ending.

Initial youth participation in conflict

Young Malay-Muslims in southern Thailand have taken part in the struggles with the Thai state since earlier times before the re-emergence of conflict and violence in 2004. The racist and centralized policies of the Thai state, exacerbated by the mistreatment of corrupt and unjust Thai government officials, incited antagonism and contributed to the Malay-Muslim rebellions. Some groups originated with and gained support from the old, less educated elites, including traditional religious leaders and teachers from the village, whereas other groups were established from the younger, higher educated Muslims who had graduated from overseas universities in countries such as Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt (Suhrke 1975: 199). Although these groups and movements were different and complicated in terms of members and their operations, their aim was generally the same, that is, to declare an independent state of Patani, or at least gain more autonomy from the Thai state.

When the political system of Thailand became more democratic, the goal and strategy for the struggles of young Malay-Muslims gradually changed. A now-legendary figure in the Malay-Muslim society, Haji Sulong (1895-1954)[4], sowed the seeds of future participation for the younger generation through non-violent forms of participation. Even though his-initiatives proved short-lived, the political participation of Sulong became a model for the new

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[3] According to the Deep South Incident Database (DSID), the number of violent incidents decreased from 1,832 incidents in 2004, to 807 incidents in 2016. For the latest statistics on the Deep South unrest, see www.deepsouthwatch.org.

[4] For more details on Haji Sulong, see James Ockey "Individual imaginings: The religio-nationalist pilgrimages of Haji Sulong Abdulkadir al-Fatani," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,* 42, no 1 (2011): 89-119.

generation. There were many young Malay-Muslims who followed Sulong's trail of participation within the Thai political system.

During the 1960s to 1980s, despite the expansion of separatist movements, more youth organizations were established and non-violent participation was promoted through the collective actions of the younger generation. The first example of a successful Muslim youth organization that still has a major role in Muslim activities nationwide nowadays is the Thai Muslim Student Association (TMSA)[5]. The TMSA was established in 1965 by a group of Muslim students from various universities in Thailand to help and educate Muslim youths in the country[6].

Since the activities of the TMSA did not involve political matters, members of the TMSA, mostly Malay-Muslim students from the three provinces who received government scholarships to study in universities in Bangkok, such as Areephen Uttarasin and Chusak Maneechayangkul, set up a new group called Selatan in 1972. Unlike the TMSA whose activities excluded political matters, the Selatan group organized political activities promoting democracy and justice in the three southern provinces and had a prominent role in the Pattani protest in 1975 to bring justice to the five Malay-Muslims victims, who were killed by Thai marine soldiers (Areephen 2015).

The emergence of political participation among the Malay-Muslim students influenced and inspired more young people in the Deep South to participate in politics to preserve their political rights and justice. For example, the PNYS group, was formed in 1979 by the Muslim Ramkhamhaeng university students from Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala, Satun and Songkhla; and the Yala Young Muslim Group, was established in 1981 to coordinate with other Muslim clubs in schools and academic institutions in Yala.

During the late 1980s, another example that highlighted the increasing youth political participation in Thailand's southern border provinces is the Hijab Movement in Yala province from December 1987 to March 1988. The movement started when a group of female Muslim students at Yala Teachers' Training College made their demands to the College to allow Muslim women to wear the hijab. The demand of the Muslim students to wear hijab in the College led to demonstrations at the Central mosque of Yala in February –

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[5] For more information on the Thai Muslim Student Association, see http://www.thaimuslimstudent.org

[6] Important and successful Muslim politicians who used to be a member of the TMSA were, for example, Wan Moohammad Noor Matha, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, former Minister of foreign affairs and Secretary General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Areephen Uttarasin, the long time MP of Narathiwat, and former Deputy Minister of Education, and Secretary to the Minister.

March 1988 and more than ten thousand people joined the protest (Preeda 2001: 109). The Hijab Movement not only raised concerns among Muslims in Yala but there were discussions and debates on the hijab issue throughout the country.

As Erdoğan and Semerci (2017: 69) mentioned, self-defined collective identity importantly affected political participation. When Malay-Muslim youths felt that their collective identity was violated, they became involved in the conflict. The conflict inspired participation and the movement strengthened student networks of the Muslim student groups in southern Thailand. There was collaboration between the Muslim student groups at Yala Teacher's Training College and the national Thai Muslim Student Association. The College's Student Club for the Promotion of Islamic Virtues responded and liaised within the College and the Yala Young Muslims Group was responsible for finding more support and coordination from people in Yala, whereas the Thai Muslim Student Association, based in Bangkok and with its networks in other regions, played a major role in bringing attention to this issue and finding more support groups and cooperation in Bangkok and other regions (Chaiwat 1994: 285). Eventually, participation and various collaborations of young Muslim groups brought about success for the Muslim students at the Yala Teachers' Training College. The College eased its regulations and allowed the Muslim students to wear the hijab.

Despite the feeling of being a deprived minority, some young people chose to remain in contact with the state to increase minority consciousness in the eyes of the state (Brown 1988: 65). Some Malay-Muslim youths decided to participate collectively as groups through, for example, civil society organizations and political movements and demonstrations to pursue their political demands. Although non-violent collective action was sometimes hindered by the state's negative perceptions towards Malay-Muslim political activities, the role of student organizations, such as the Thai Muslim Student Association (TMSA) and the Selatan group, illustrated productive results in pressuring the state to change its policies.

Conflict as a driver for youth political participation

After the re-emergence of the violence in 2004, youth political participation in the Deep South became more complicated. For some youths, direct experiences of conflict and violence created a deep scar in their hearts. They decided to pay no interest in politics and hesitated to get involved in any political activities since the conflict and violence have destroyed trust and created more fear. On the contrary, some youths were motivated to participate violently by supporting or joining the rebels to fight against the Thai state. Some

Malay-Muslim youths were induced by drugs or money to join violent operations[7] while others were persuaded by the ideologies of Patani nationalism and religious belief[8]. Yet others decided to join the militants after they were unjustly accused of involvement in separatism by the Thai authorities[9]. So, for this group of people, the conflict acts as a driver for more conflict and violence by pushing them to violent political actions.

Nevertheless, as this paper argues, the same factors that lead to conflict and violence can also be a pathway leading young people to peaceful political participation. Although there was concern with Malay-Muslim youths being vulnerable and naive, there still were many young Malay-Muslims who were politically active but not convinced easily by the militants. The conflict and violence have triggered their desire to play a part in solving the conflict through non-violent means of participation, either collectively or individually, without hesitation. However, the different experiences of conflict and violence have differently affected their forms of political participation.

This paper would like to raise three sample cases from the interviews[10]. Student A had direct experience of aggressive treatment by the military. Although it was not a serious case, the incident left a scar on his mind and he started to question his own rights as a Thai citizen. Due to considering himself at high risk of being a suspect, he then chose to participate in a human rights organization and quietly helped the local community with cases of human rights violations without public recognition. Student B had a negative experience with the Thai state; he did not confront the military himself but witnessed his relative being harmed and arrested. He decided to join a political student organization and acted openly as a leading member to promote the self-determination of Patani and speak out against the state's human rights violations. While the former two students had incentive to participate as a result of negative experiences toward the Thai state, student C, who did not have any direct experience of the state's abuse, had positive attitudes toward the Thai state and actively participated in a

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[7] Two interviewees in Pattani revealed that they were offered a hundred thousand baht by their Malay-Muslim friends who became militants to take part in violent operations when they were high-school students. Another interviewee from the conflict areas of Songkhla mentioned that "I had friend who was a drug addict, he was enticed to become addicted to drugs and to then join a separatist group when he was 16-17 years old. Since he decided to join, I do not hear about him anymore." Interview, university students in Pattani and Songkhla, November 2012 and March 2013.

[8] Interview, a military officer in Songkhla and a university student in Pattani, November 2012.

[9] Interview, university students in Pattani, September and November 2012.

[10] The author conducted semi-structured interviews with these three university students in Pattani in November 2012.

state-funded student organization. The three sample cases are not meant to be definitive, but are intended to illustrate different patterns of political participation that occur from different experiences of conflict and violence.

Moreover, the youth organizations in the Deep South seemed to be polarized not only between youths of different religions but also between those funded by the Thai state and those not funded by state institutions[11]. The two distinct groups had different political opinions and they were difficult to merge. The divergent standpoints among youth groups might discourage political participation of some people who do not wish to take sides, or at least do not want to show their stance. In conflict areas, expressing political opinions might be sensitive and risky. Participating in some youth groups would imply that participants supported or did not support the state. When their choices of participation could be seen as dangerous, some might be afraid that participation might bring them more harm than good. They then hesitated to become involved in collective participation[12].

For young people who feel uncomfortable participating in communal or collective activities, political participation through online channels can be another choice for them to take part in politics individually and more safely. With the emergence of digital media, many political activities were transformed to new forms of political participation that enabled new political activities to function in the conflict and violent areas of the Deep South[13]. Joining the militant groups and participating in violent acts were no more the only way to show their standpoint against the state's policies. Some Malay-Muslim youths used online channels of political participation as a substitution for a political involvement that was prohibited in the Deep South under the Martial Law. Some sensitive political campaigns, such as self-determination and human rights issues, were promoted through social media, such as Facebook pages, and the message was shared at social media platforms. The online network helped in increasing the impact of their political campaign and establishing a bond among young Malay-Muslims, not only within their friend networks in the region but also with people outside the conflict areas.

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[11] Interview, student activists in Pattani, November 2012.

[12] Interview, university students in Pattani, September and November 2012.

[13] For example, the InSouth, a group of Patani intellectuals, demanded for justice of a Malay-Muslim suspect, Abdullayi do-lah, who died during detention at the military camp in Pattani by persuading people who disagreed with the unjust practices of Thai military to like, share, and change their Facebook profile pictures. See: Insouthvoice's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/182849845081663/photos/a.467856536580991.114442.182849845081663/1084043498295622/?type=3&theater>, accessed 25 August 2017

However, there is concern that the Thai government does not pay much attention to this channel of participation, so voices of the young people may not be heard and harsh comments and opinions without discretion may not be monitored. Without careful strategies implemented quickly, political participation through social media can be useless and even more destructive if employed by villainous users to serve their hostile objectives, such as broadcasting false facts or instigating division and violence. Therefore, in the digital age, not only are the militants dangerous and cause the violence, internet users, who carelessly use internet to serve violent objectives, can also increase tension and cause more conflict and violence in the area.

Conclusion

The conflict and violence have built a sense of belonging for the younger generation and motivated them to participate in political activities during the conflict and violence. Being young might make them less inexperienced and unpractised in political activities but being young did not cause indifference in conflict and participation. However, the different backgrounds and accumulated experiences the youths have added along the way as they grew up have differently impacted their political participation. Normally, youths are a politically sensitive group that might easily be convinced to join militants but the study shows that youths in the conflict areas of southern Thailand disregarded the militants' violent methods and participated non-violently without hesitation. However, youth political participation during conflict in southern Thailand is so complicated and risky and this has possibly frightened some young generation from participation.

However, the internet technology has offered opportunities for the younger generation to participate more safely and easily. Despite its unexpected and destructive consequences if used with malice, online channels of political participation can expand more participation and political engagement from young people in conflict areas who fear or feel uncomfortable to have a face to face participation. Therefore, although the prolonged conflict in southern Thailand wears away social trust of local youths, the conflict pushes them to be more active in politics through peaceful means as they receive too much suffering from the violence. The younger generation plays a major role in shaping paths of political participation and the current path of political participation of young Malay-Muslims in the conflict areas of southern Thailand seems to be just the beginning of the long road in resolving the conflict.

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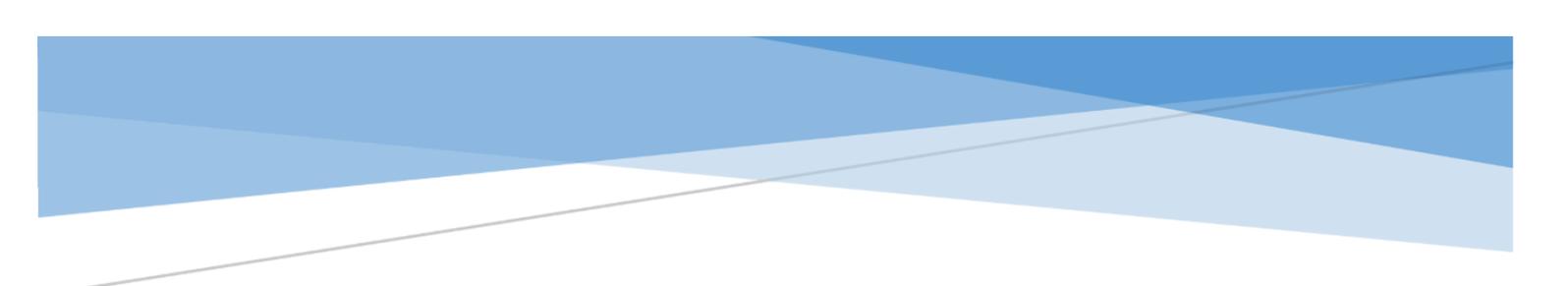
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