

## Muslims in Thailand under Royal Benevolence

It was in 1964 that Their Majesties King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great and Queen Sirikit The Queen Mother first presided over the Maulid Nabi Celebration held by the Central Islamic Council of Thailand. At first, it might appear to be just another social event. But upon closer examination of the royal presence, one will realise that the monarchy and Muslims in Thailand have developed a lasting bond throughout history, one much deeper and meaningful than what may appear at first glance.

By tradition and constitutional requirement, the King of Thailand must be a Buddhist. This is not surprising for a country whose population is overwhelmingly Buddhist, with 93 percent having registered as so, while Islam and Christianity constitute for 5.45 and 1.15 percent of the Thai population respectively. However, tradition also calls for the monarch to be the royal patron of all faiths, and successive Thai Kings have carried on this important practice until today.

Long before the modern nation state, religions brought people from all walks of life and bound them together. It was indeed a unifying factor of ancient Thai Kingdoms. While Buddhism was embraced by the majority, others enjoyed freedom of religion and were freely allowed to preach, trade, serve the throne or settle down in this land. The astute policy of rulers to accord equal treatment to all segments of the society has contributed to the stability and prosperity of the Kingdom from many centuries ago.

Islam has been welcomed and supported by the royal court since its arrival in the 9<sup>th</sup> century through various groups of Muslims such as Arab sailors, Persian merchants and Javanese migrants. Many Muslims were appointed to senior posts in the royal court during the Ayutthaya Kingdom and Muslim communities were granted land for settlement. It was also noteworthy that the position of “Chula Rajamontri” was first established to oversee the affairs of Muslims in the Kingdom.

Several centuries later, Muslims in Thailand still enjoy patronage from Kings of the Chakri Dynasty, who are themselves descendants of multi-ethnic ancestors. Plots of land were royally bestowed for the construction of mosques and administration policies were carried out with awareness and respect for cultural and religious values. For instance, King Chulalongkorn permitted the use of Islamic law for family and inheritance legal cases among Muslims in the southern areas. A *kadi* will assume the function of a judge in such cases. This practice continues today and provincial Juvenile and Family Courts in the Southern Border Provinces still have *kadis* who sit in court with the judge.

Another impressive feat underlining the role of the Thai Monarch as patron of all faiths is the translation of the Holy Quran from Arabic into Thai. After King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great received an Arabic copy of the Holy Quran from a Muslim dignitary in 1962, His Majesty had the magnificent thought that a Thai translation of the Holy Quran could aid Thai Muslims to develop a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings. This noble task was assigned to Tuan Suwannasat, the then Chula Rajamontri or Sheikhul Islam of Thailand, who spent one year, seven months and eight days to finish the translation in 1964. The Thai Quran with the royal cypher of King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great on its green cover was published by the Religious Affairs Department in 1968 and distributed to mosques nationwide.

Today interests of different ethnic, religion and political groups mesh together to form a modern, multicultural and complex society. States often juggle along the thin line to formulate public policy for the benefits of all. The monarchy, with deep and consistent contribution to development for the benefits and well-being of all Thais has proven to be a great balancer, adept stabilizer and promoter of social cohesion in diversity.

Although history, economics and geography have influenced the sentiments of Muslim communities in some parts of the Kingdom of being disenfranchised and excluded from the reach of mainstream development, stories that suggest otherwise have emerged in the past few decades and have echoed far and wide. Decades prior, Muslim communities in the Southern Border Provinces would refer to the King of Thailand as “Raja Siam” or King of Siam. After numerous Royal Projects were implemented which have uplifted the quality of life of those in the area by addressing problems of flooding, acidic soil, low agricultural productivity, and improvement of livelihoods, people from the area started calling the King “Raja Kita” or Our King. This reflects the sincere love and acceptance that have surfaced from their hearts.

The stability and strength of the Thai people emanate from the three pillars of the country: nation, religion and monarchy. They are represented in the tri-colour national flag adopted since the reign of King Vajiravudh. The bonds of respect and affection between the monarchy and the Thai people including Muslims in Thailand are an integral part of the reinforcing relations between its people and the national pillars. The bonds have indeed strengthened unity among diversity in the Kingdom.

To this day, His Majesty the King remains faithful to his royal duties as upholder of religions and continues to preside over the annual Maulid Nabi Celebration and to promote amongst Thai Muslims, a deeper connection to their faith. For people to live together in harmony, one must be able to practice his or her faith without hindrance. If religions are empathetic and supportive of each other, then peace and stability of the nation will prevail.

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