

## Patani's Malay Muslims and the Future Impact of the Kra Canal<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Patani is a historical Malay homeland located at the connecting point between the Malay Peninsula and the Siamese mainland. The region was ceded to Thailand through the Anglo-Siamese Treaty signed in 1909, and since then, reunification with Malaysia has not been possible. The long-standing and often-discussed Kra Isthmus Canal project, planned for the Patani region, could potentially alleviate the economic and political challenges faced by local Muslims. However, the possibility that the canal might bypass Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia in maritime trade has led these countries to adopt contradictory positions regarding the project. It is alleged that some of these countries have covertly provided financial support to radical groups in the region, thereby contributing to making Patani an insecure and unstable area. This situation presents one of the most significant obstacles preventing Patani Malay Muslims from benefiting from domestic

democratization, and ironically, two of the countries involved are composed of peoples who are religiously and ethnically close to the Patani Muslims. Thus, Patani Malay Muslims find themselves at the heart of a major contradiction within the context of the Kra Canal. While the most distant and culturally different power, China, is the strongest advocate for the canal's realization, the countries trying to prevent it are the closer, supposedly fraternal nations of Malaysia and Indonesia. The Patani Muslims are striving to build a liveable homeland in the midst of this conflict between close and distant cultural actors.

**Keywords:** Patani, Muslims of Thailand, Kra Canal, Malaysia, Singapore.

**JEL Codes:** F18, R11, R23

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## 1. Introduction

This study aims to explore the historical roots of the Malay people living in the Patani region, the political entities they have established in the past, and their demographic and social structures. It also examines the cultural dynamics of the community and attempts to develop a projection regarding the future of the Patani region within the context of its strategic importance. In this regard, an assessment is made on how the proposed Patani Canal, or Kra Canal, which may pass through the region, could potentially impact the future of the region and, consequently, the future of the Malay Muslims in Thailand. Additionally, as will be discussed later, the realization of the Kra Canal may, as in the cases of the Suez and Panama Canals, represent the final stage in the emergence of a new power onto the world stage.

## 2. Literature on Patani and the Kra Canal

The Patani region in southern Thailand historically existed as an independent Malay sultanate but came under Thai sovereignty with the signing of the Anglo-Siamese Treaty in 1909. This historical rupture lies at the root of the conflict between the Malay Muslim identity in the region and the Thai majority (Che Man, 1990). Today, the Malay Muslim population is concentrated in the southern provinces of Pattani<sup>2</sup>, Narathiwat, Yala, and Songkhla. Due to their ethnic and religious differences, they maintain a tense relationship with the centralized Thai state.

Malay Muslims have long been disturbed by the Thai state's assimilationist policies. The dominance of Buddhist Thai culture in education, language, and public services makes it difficult for the Muslim population to express their identity. The mandatory use of the Thai language in education and the marginalization of Islamic education are significant examples of social exclusion (Liow, 2006). This situation deepens structural inequalities such as violations of cultural rights and a lack of political representation.

Economic inequalities in the Patani region are also noteworthy. Compared to other segments of Thai society, Malay Muslims generally have lower educational attainment and face serious disadvantages in civil service employment, university access, and healthcare services when compared to Buddhists (Funston, 2008). These disparities reveal that the state's development policies in the region are largely unresponsive to the needs and demands of the local population.

In this socio-political context, a low-intensity resistance movement has emerged in Patani. Most of the resistance is shaped by demands for local autonomy or cultural recognition against the secular-centered Thai state. However, in some cases, incidents of violence have occurred, which have been met with increased security-oriented policies by the Thai government (McCargo, 2009). Such security-based approaches fail to address the structural roots of the issue and therefore do not offer sustainable solutions in the long term.

In conclusion, the problems faced by Patani Malay Muslims constitute a multi-layered issue shaped by ethnic identity, religious affiliation, and the hegemonic nature of the centralized state structure (Aras & Sert, 2025). The critical literature agrees that Thailand must build a rights-based and inclusive political system grounded in cultural pluralism (Harish, 2006). Today, the political, social, and economic future of Patani has become closely tied to the existence of the Kra Canal.

The Kra Canal Project is a strategic infrastructure initiative aiming to create a direct passage between the Andaman Sea and the South China Sea by dividing the Malay Peninsula of Thailand along a north-south axis. Although the project was first proposed in the 17th century, it gained renewed geopolitical importance in the early 21st century through its association with China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) (Chachavalpongpun, 2018).

Sukma (2017) argue that the canal will become as economically significant as the Suez and Panama Canals, reduce excessive maritime traffic in the Strait of Malacca, and accelerate regional trade. Among the positive expectations are that it will boost Thailand's economic growth and attract increased foreign direct investment (Thanapisitikul, 2020). However, academic literature frequently emphasizes that such benefits remain largely potential and that, in practice, the project carries serious geopolitical, environmental, and socio-economic risks.

First and foremost, the construction of the Kra Canal would physically divide Thailand into two parts, potentially endangering national unity. Some studies suggest that the separatist movements already present in Southern Thailand could be strengthened by this division (Che Man, 1990; Funston, 2008). Additionally, since the canal's construction would rely on Chinese capital, there are concerns that China's influence over Thailand's sovereignty could increase. This could weaken Thailand's neutral position within ASEAN (Storey, 2017; Aras & Kandemir, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> While the name Patani refers to a Malay Sultanate that existed for five hundred years, from the 14th to the 19th century, in what is today southern Thailand, as well as to the Malay population and culture that lived—and continue to live—in this region; the name Pattani is merely the designation given by the Thai administration to only one city within this historical region. It is possible to argue that this constitutes an imperialist practice, similar to the case in which the name Turkestan was assigned by Soviet Russia to a city located in Kazakhstan.

From an ecological perspective, it is highlighted that the canal's construction would destroy tens of thousands of hectares of forest, severely harm biodiversity, and irreversibly damage coastal ecosystems (WWF, 2019). The region's mangrove forests, and marine life would be at serious risk. Moreover, the industrial zones planned along the canal could threaten the livelihoods of local communities (Thapapisitikul, 2020).

On a socio-economic level, the project's estimated cost ranges between \$28 and \$35 billion, and its return on investment remains uncertain (Yoshikawa, 2016). The "growth illusion," commonly seen in large-scale infrastructure projects, applies here as well; the anticipated economic benefits are mostly based on assumptions and carry the risk of deepening social inequalities (Flyvbjerg, 2007; Turhan, 2025).

### 3. Methodology

The documentation method was used in the writing of this text, and the information and data obtained through this method were refined and interpreted within the framework of the interpretive social science paradigm and based on the historical analysis method (Neuman, 2006). The content was structured in accordance with the subject and purpose of the text.

Historical sociology focuses on understanding how social institutions and structures come into being, change, and acquire their distinctive forms through time. It does not treat history as a simple timeline of events but as a dynamic and interactive process, molded by human relationships and shifting balances of power (Skocpol, 1984). By integrating historical records, archival findings, and sociological interpretation, this approach seeks to explain how societies undergo deep and enduring transformations (Abrams, 1982). From this standpoint, one can more clearly grasp the ways in which earlier political and social arrangements continue to shape contemporary life. In the present study, historical sociology provides the main framework for analyzing the Patani Malay Muslims' three-hundred-year struggle for survival, with particular attention to both the elements of continuity and the moments of rupture in their collective history.

In addition, the method of historical analysis aims to trace how social facts, institutions, and collective processes have evolved and to uncover the conditions under which they assumed their current forms. It draws on a broad range of primary and secondary sources—archival documents, historical narratives, memoirs, literary works, and visual materials—to reconstruct social reality as it unfolded over time. Rather than arranging events in a simple chronological list, this method attempts to uncover causal relationships, the motivations of historical actors, and the

broader social environment in which those actions took place (Skocpol, 1984). Within sociology, historical analysis has become a crucial tool for studying change, the state–society relationship, and deep structural shifts. Connecting the past to the present enables researchers to recognize patterns of persistence as well as the critical turning points that define moments of transformation (Mahoney & Rueschmeyer).

### 4. Historical Background

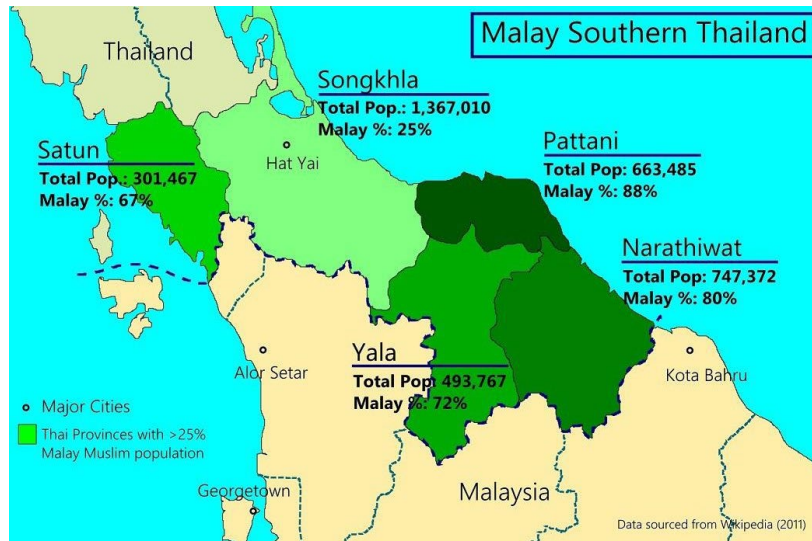
The provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani in southern Thailand where Malay Muslims constitute the majority have been collectively known since the 15th century as the Patani region or Greater Patani (Patani Raya) (Funston, 2008, p. 8). This name is still used today to advocate for freedom or autonomy. Precisely for this reason, referring to the region as Patani is often perceived by Thai authorities as separatism or sedition.

According to many sources, one of the earliest Malay Sultanates on the Malay Peninsula was the Patani Sultanate. Chinese records refer to a Malay state in the region as early as the first century AD under the name Langkasuka (in Chinese, Lang-ya-hsiu). Langkasuka eventually disappeared and was replaced by the Patani Kingdom (Che Man, 1990, p. 32). Other sources suggest that the Patani Kingdom was the earliest Malay state, established in the 14th century (Nik Mahmud, 2008, p. 1). Indeed, the Portuguese traveller Tom Pires, who passed through Malacca in 1511, noted that the Patani Kingdom existed before the year 1370. At one point in history, the Patani Kingdom was the largest Malay local state on the Malay Peninsula in terms of both population and economy (Che Man, 1990, p. 32, 34). The region's historical prominence may be attributed to its proximity to the mainland, where resources were more abundant during a period when transportation options were limited.

In 1782, a new expansionist kingdom was established in Siam (present-day Thailand), centred in Bangkok. With its superior military strength, it quickly brought present-day Cambodia, several Malay principalities, and nearby semi-independent states and communities under its control. In 1816, the Patani Kingdom was divided into seven regions by Thai administrators as part of a "divide and rule" strategy. Over time, all administrative functions of these seven regions were gradually transferred to the central government (Che Man, 1990, pp. 34, 35, 63). As in many parts of the world, this "divide and rule" policy appears to have been used as a soft transition strategy for permanent and comprehensive occupation. About a century after Siam's rise, France invaded Vietnam in 1883, and Britain colonized Burma in 1886. Shortly thereafter, both powers turned their

attention to Siam, pressuring it to cede parts of its northern territories to France and its southern territories to Britain. This pressure yielded results within two decades, and both colonial powers acquired parts of Siamese territory. With the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, the Kedah region, including the Malay states of Terengganu, Kelantan, and Perlis, came

under British control, while the Patani Sultanate, located at the furthest edge, remained under Siamese rule. This agreement effectively defined the current borders between the two countries and laid the foundation for the modern nation-state boundaries (Arya, 2006, p. 22).



Map 1. The Five Regions in Patani and Their Demographic Structure<sup>3</sup>

The formation of the nation-state in Thailand reached a significant stage during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910), when a centralized administration was established, accompanied by new policies related to religion, language, and education. This process was later reinforced by a series of legal decrees issued by Phibul during the 1930s and 1940s. One of these decrees stated that the future of Thailand depended on the use of the national language and script. Although Phibul was unable to completely remove other languages from the education system, he succeeded in making the Thai dialect, spoken by a relatively small portion of the population, the language of instruction across the country (Arya, 2006, pp. 34–35).

Today, Patani nationalists consider 1786 as the year Patani lost its independence, when the Siamese (Siam-Thailand) army occupied the region. Since then, although local Malay Muslim administrations continued to exist, overall governance has remained in the hands of Thailand. Ultimately, in 1902, Patani was directly incorporated into Siam. With the 1909 agreement signed between the British and the Thais, Siam relinquished Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Terengganu, forming the modern-day borders (Funston, 2008, p. 8).

However, imperial powers carried out colonization without concern for the unity and integrity of future

nation-states, focusing solely on economic interests. As a result, they were not disturbed by the separation of the Patani Sultanate, an integral part of the ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and social unity of the Malays, from the other Malay Sultanates, nor by the fragmentation of Malay unity and the victimization of millions of people. Clearly, in the 1909 Anglo-Siamese Treaty, the Patani Sultanate should have been included in the British-controlled territories, just like the other sultanates. Indeed, many sources refer to this separation and fragmentation as a “historical accident” (Bajunid, 2006, p. 204). After the region was occupied by the Japanese and Thailand collaborated with them, the leaders of the Patani Malays hoped that the British would punish Thailand and incorporate Patani into the other Malay territories under British rule. They even submitted requests directly to the British administration in Malaya. However, the British repeatedly rejected these appeals, primarily because of the United States’ stance against creating additional conflict and because Thailand supplied a significant portion of the rice needed in British colonies (Nik Mahmud, 2008, pp. 47–61). This situation once again confirmed that there is no place for sentimentality or revenge in international relations; instead, national interests prevail. It also highlighted that Britain was the last country one should rely on for such matters.

<sup>3</sup>Five regions in Patani and their demographic structure, Last Accessed: 13.05.2025. [https://www.reddit.com/r/LinguisticMaps/comments/17yldse/malays\\_in\\_southern\\_thailand/?rdt=43190](https://www.reddit.com/r/LinguisticMaps/comments/17yldse/malays_in_southern_thailand/?rdt=43190)

### 5. Language and Ethnicity in Thailand

As agreed, upon by many studies, the root cause of tensions between minority groups and dominant populations is primarily language (Aphornsuvan, 2006, pp. 111–112). Language is not merely a means of communication, but also a tool for both unification and division.

In modern Thailand, languages belonging to the Tai language family are spoken by 87% of the population. The remaining 13%, or approximately 8 million people, speak languages outside of the Tai family. Among those who speak Tai languages, 0.6% speak languages such as Phu Tai, Puan, So, Shan, and Lue. Within the main body of Tai speakers, 19.5% speak Standard Thai, 27% speak Central Thai, 22.9% speak the Lao language, 9% speak Kammuang, and 8% speak Paktai. The largest non-Tai language spoken in Thailand is a Sinitic language, accounting for 6.8% of the population. This is followed by Khmer at 2.1% and Malay at 1.9%. In total, approximately 70 languages are spoken in Thailand (Arya, 2006, pp. 37–38).

Toward the end of the 19th century, Central Thai was spoken by only 15% of the population within Thailand's borders. About 55% of the population, particularly in the northern and northeastern regions, spoke Kammuang and Lao. Those who spoke Malay made up around 9%. Education at that time was religious in content and centred around religious institutions for all ethnic and linguistic groups. Buddhists were educated in temples, while Muslims primarily received education in mosques. Muslim primary schools were called as Pondok or Pondoh at past and Tadika in modern times. In 1902, the Thai script Tua Tham was made mandatory for Buddhists,

and schools were gradually transformed into secular institutions (Arya, 2006, pp. 34–35).

### 6. Social and Demographic Structure

More than 90% of Thailand's population is Buddhist, while the majority of the remaining population is Muslim. Although Muslims are scattered throughout the country, they are heavily concentrated in southern regions such as Patani, Narathiwat, Yala, Songkhla, and Satun. These areas are referred to by Thai authorities as the "Deep South." Malay Muslims distinguish themselves from the Thai majority not only by their religion but also through their ethnic identity (Funston, 2008, pp. 6).

In the 1990 census, the Muslim population was recorded at 4.1%, rising to 4.6% in 2000. However, these figures are debated, and a clearer picture emerges from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' estimate of 7.5 million Muslims, which corresponds to approximately 12% of the total population (Funston, 2008, pp. 7).

In Narathiwat, Patani, Yala, Songkhla, and Satun, Muslims make up a significant portion of the population. For example, Muslims constitute 82% of the population in Narathiwat, 81% in Patani, 69% in Yala, and 68% in Satun. The total Malay Muslim population in these five provinces is approximately 1,775,000. Across all 14 southern provinces, the number reaches around 2,345,000 (Narongraksakhet, 2006, p. 131).

The population numbers and proportions of Malay Muslims living in the five provinces of southern Thailand (historically known as Patani) are presented in Table 1 (Narongraksakhet, 2006, p. 131).

Table 1. Demographic Status of Muslims in the Patani Region

Bölge Adı	Count of Muslim Population	Ratio of Muslim Population %
Pattani	1,230,750	% 81
Narathiwat	1,135,050	% 82
Yala	1,088,500	% 69
Songkhla	1,036,000	% 25
Satun	514,500	% 68
<b>Toplam</b>	<b>5,004,800</b>	<b>% 77</b>

This region was historically part of the Patani Sultanate. However, in areas like Satun, which has a 70% Muslim population, acts of violence have not occurred (Funston, 2008, p. XIII). This situation is thought to be related to the region's urbanized and educated structure.

Southern Thailand is a socioeconomically underdeveloped region. The majority of the population earns a living through agriculture, fishing, and manual labour. Only 9% of Muslims have completed second-

ary education, and the rate of those able to attend university is just 1.7%. In contrast, these rates are 13% and 9.7% among Buddhists. The rate of public sector employment among Muslims is 2.4%, whereas it is 19.2% among Buddhists. The region also has the highest levels of poverty and unemployment (Funston, 2008, pp. 7–8).

Some Malay Muslims living in Southern Thailand, due to the unrest they have experienced, migrated to Malaysia and acquired citizenship there, beco-

ming dual citizens. Most of these migrants live in Malaysia's northwestern states such as Kelantan, Perlis, Kedah, and Perak (Bajunid, 2006, p. 218; Alptekin, 2015).

On the other hand, between 1960 and 1980, the Thai government resettled 100,000 Buddhist Thais in the Patani region and aimed to expand this policy to 650,000 people. This demographic engineering policy increased the perception of identity threat among Malay Muslims, and in some groups, it led to a turn toward acts of violence (Che Man, 1990, p. 38).

## 7. The Emergence of Patani-Malay Nationalism or Separatism

The historical tension between Patani Malay Muslims and the Thai state began with the establishment of the Patani Sultanate in 1457 and was shaped by resistance against Thai expansionism (Funston, 2008, p. 70). In the modern sense, separatism became more pronounced particularly from the early 20th century. The uprisings that began in 1921 with the closure of Islamic schools in the south by the Thai government peaked in 1922 under the leadership of Tengku Abdul Kadir Kamaruddin, with support from local leaders and some "Turks". However, these uprisings were suppressed (Nik Mahmud, 2008, p. 15; Che Man, 1990, p. 64).

From the 1930s onward, assimilation policies intensified under the Phibun regime's nation-building project. These included the banning of the Malay language, the closure of Islamic courts, and the enforcement of respect for Buddhist symbols, which further entrenched separatist sentiments (Aphornsuvan, 2006, pp. 102–103; Che Man, 1990, p. 65). During this period, the Thai state attempted to redefine the Malay identity by labeling them as "Thai Muslims," which provoked widespread backlash.

In the post-World War II period, Muslims from Patani attempted to unite with Malaysia, but these efforts proved unsuccessful (Funston, 2008, p. 9; Che Man, 1990, p. 42; Bulut & Aras, 2023, p.30). Political leader Tengku Mahmud Mahyideen's appeals for international support failed, and in 1947, even Soekarno refused assistance (Nik Mahmud, 2008, p. 34). In the same year, religious leader Haji Sulong bin Abdul Kadir issued the "Seven Demands" advocating for Muslim autonomy. However, he was soon arrested and mysteriously killed in 1954 (Arya, 2006, p. 26; Che Man, 1990, p. 68; Bajunid, 2006, p. 203).

The absence of any concrete action on the Patani issue during Malaysia's independence in 1957 led to great disappointment among Patani Muslims. Many leaders opted either to integrate into Thai society or join the diaspora (Che Man, 1990, p. 158). Malaysia's Kelantan state, in particular, became a settlement area for Patani migrants. Political actors like PAS in this region supported the Patani cause. In 1969, PAS

leader Asri Haji Musa openly discussed the idea of a new united Malay state that included Patani. By 1977, 81% of the Malaysian public believed that the government should support the Patani liberation movement (Che Man, 1990, pp. 159–160; Alptekin, 2015).

Nevertheless, the Malaysian government refrained from directly intervening in the Patani issue, as it did not want to strain relations with Thailand. Parliamentary efforts were blocked by the ruling party. This stance is thought to have stemmed from both realpolitik considerations and post-colonial political attitudes.

Malay Muslims in southern Thailand have faced not only systematic assimilation policies but also structural exclusion. Underrepresented in civil service, Muslims have been ethnically marginalized and treated as second-class citizens (Funston, 2008, pp. 9–10). Their political representation has also been extremely limited. A Muslim was elected to parliament for the first time in 1933, followed by a few others, though none held influential positions (Nik Mahmud, 2008, p. 17). In 1995, Wan Muhamad Nor Matha became the first Muslim minister; although Surin Pitsuwan later became foreign minister, he was not of Patani origin (Funston, 2008, p. 15). Between 2001 and 2005, there were only 14 Muslim MPs and a few senators, highlighting the inadequacy of representation (Sugunnasil, 2007, p. 115).

Patani's political elites have been marginalized in Thai politics, while religious leaders have been reluctant to participate in political processes. This stems from not only linguistic and economic barriers but also a lack of belief that political participation could benefit the region (Che Man, 1990, p. 133). As a result, in an environment where legitimate political channels are closed off, it becomes inevitable that some turn to violent forms of resistance.

## 8. Major Violent Incidents in the Patani Region

Following the violent events in Thailand during the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by a relative minimization of violence in Patani. However, the sudden and intense resurgence of violence starting in 2004 prompted widespread debate. One of the most frequently cited factors in these discussions is the approach of Thaksin Shinawatra, a former police chief who became Prime Minister in 2001. Thaksin attempted to establish security through police-driven, militarized methods and an authoritarian style of governance. As McCargo emphasizes, Thaksin's administration sought to build a centrally controlled modern security network by sidelining the long-established and locally respected authorities in the south (McCargo, 2007, pp. 37–38). This move caused widespread dissatisfaction and

provided a significant catalyst for the resurgence of violence in the southern provinces.

On March 4, 2004, Thailand's most well-known Muslim lawyer, Somchai Neelaphaijit, disappeared after reportedly being last seen in police custody. His body was never found as dead or alive. Neelaphaijit was known for defending Muslims detained in connection with incidents in the south (Funston, 2008, p. 2). This was neither an exceptional case nor unique to Malay Muslims. According to Human Rights Watch, since Thaksin came to power in 2001, 18 human rights activists have been either openly or covertly killed in Thailand. These are high-profile national cases, and in addition to them, there have been numerous local reports of disappearances by individuals reporting their relatives or friends missing. The families of the disappeared believe that they were likely killed by security forces (Yusuf, 2006, p. 197).

Two major incidents in 2004 stand out as the most significant episodes of unrest in southern Thailand. The first occurred on April 28, 2004, when approximately 200 insurgents launched attacks on police and military posts in Pattani, Yala, and Songkhla. Five security personnel and 107 insurgents were killed in the clashes. That day became known as the bloodiest in modern Thai history. During this operation, 32 Malay Muslims were killed inside the historic Krue Se Mosque, which drew harsh criticism from human rights organizations. The second major incident took place in October 2004. During a protest by Malay Muslim villagers, 1,300 demonstrators were detained. While being transported to a military base in Patani, 78 of the detainees died from suffocation due to overcrowding in the trucks. Although the government acknowledged the use of disproportionate force by security personnel, no measures were taken to punish those responsible or to resolve the issue (Funston, 2008, pp. 2–3).

The number of casualties in the conflict was recorded as 400 in 2004, 500 in 2005, 900 in 2006, and 870 in 2007. From 2004, when the violence reignited, to March 2008, more than 3,000 people lost their lives (Funston, 2008, p. 5).

### 9. New Administrative Arrangements in Patani

After decades and even centuries of unrest and resistance in Patani, a new constitution was adopted in 1997, granting significant rights to local populations. The constitution, which envisioned a major devolution of power from the centre to the local level and the establishment of a regional senate, was implemented with great hope. In essence, this system represented an unnamed form of autonomy. However, it is well known that in such countries, written documents alone do not lead to substantial change; the true measure lies in their implementation. Inde-

ed, the same year the constitution was proclaimed (1997) elections were held for the first time in the Patani region to form a local senate and elect local government administrators with expanded powers. In many municipalities in the south, Muslims gained the opportunity to hold local administrative positions.

Although the 2007 constitution continued to uphold similar rights, it introduced a significant difference from the previous constitution by stipulating that half of the senate would be appointed rather than elected (Funston, 2008, p. 15). With this approach, Thailand clearly demonstrated its lack of trust in both democracy and its own Muslim citizens. By ensuring that half of the senate would be appointed by the central government, the state aimed to guarantee its control, but this move only deepened mutual distrust.

### 10. What Do the People of Patani Want?

According to a 2005 survey conducted with 2,730 people, the people of Patani expressed three main demands: first, improved governance through local participation; second, respect for cultural diversity and local identity; and third, the provision and guarantee of justice and equality (Arya, 2006, p. 27).

Following the violent events in 2004 and the establishment of an investigative commission a year later, several commissions articulated common demands: the implementation of Islamic law, recognition of cultural differences, and, finally, the adoption of the Malay language as either a second official language or a second working language in government offices (Yusuf, 2006, p. 169). The National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), formed by the government on March 28, 2005 after the events at the Krue Se Mosque in Tak Bai, Narathiwat province, submitted its report to the government only on June 5, 2006. Although the report was generally well received, senior statesmen such as General Prem Tinsulanonda objected to the proposal of using the Malay language as a working language in state offices (Yusuf, 2006, pp. 188–189).

As can be seen, neither in Haji Sulong's seven demands, nor in later requests, nor in recent public opinion polls, have the people or leaders insisted on full independence as a non-negotiable condition. The demands primarily revolve around political, social, and cultural autonomy.

Thailand declared a new constitution in 1997, and it was believed that the democratic atmosphere it would usher in would bring an end to Muslim-led violence in Patani. However, as some sources point out, no such positive developments have occurred since 1997 to confirm these expectations (Sugunasil, 2007, p. 114). On the contrary, since 2004, the

most violent clashes and highest casualties of the past two decades have been recorded. Therefore, the extent to which the constitution addresses local demands and more importantly, how effectively it is implemented remains critically important.

## 11. Economic Value of the Kra Isthmus Canal Project, the Strategic Importance of Patani, and the Future of the Region's Muslims

The Kra Canal Project in Thailand has been primarily supported by military bureaucrats. Whenever the military bureaucrats have gained influence in national politics, the project has once again become a prominent topic of public discussion. "In 2017 a group of businessmen and retired military officers formed the TCASD to advocate for the construction of the canal (which they prefer to call the "Thai canal" rather than the Kra canal). Led by a retired general, Pongthep Tesprateep, the TCASD proposed TAMS' Route 9A—a 120-km long canal from Krabi on the west coast to Nakhon Si Thammarat on the east coast. The proposed eastern terminus of the Thai canal would, they argued, complement the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), a US\$40 billion high-tech innovation and transportation hub spanning three provinces across the Gulf of Thailand which is due for completion between 2021 and 2025.<sup>13</sup> To discuss the proposal further, the TCASD hosted a conference on the canal in Bangkok in September 2017" (Storey, 2019).

According to Sulong, construction of the Canal will make an important economic contribution to the Thailand. "The development of the canal through the isthmus of southern Thailand will not only provide benefits directly to those that will use the canal for transport, but will also stimulate related industries that support it; thus it has the potential to transform Thailand into a centre for trade and economic growth. According to the GIF feasibility study, "the Kra Canal will benefit from an annual trade turnover estimated at 280 billion USD as it straddles a region of 1.2 billion people within a radius of 2,400 kilometres". The Thai government would be able to generate revenue from activities related to the use of the Kra Canal such as from navigation and toll fees, income tax and export tariffs, and shipyard activities (Sulong, 2012).

The Kra Isthmus Canal Project, which aims to connect the Andaman Sea with the Gulf of Thailand in southern Thailand, is a geopolitical and economic initiative that has been debated for centuries. If constructed, the canal would provide an alternative maritime route to the Strait of Malacca and would have significant implications not only for Thailand's economy but also for regional and global trade networks (Chachavalpongpun, 2015).

As Sulong stated, "If the Kra Canal is built, increased maritime traffic would boost business and trade in the region. Another perceived benefit of the development of the Kra Canal is the projected spillover of trade benefits to neighbouring countries, particularly Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam. The increased international trade activities brought about by maritime shipping and other businesses and services around the canal will also support the development of the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC). The SEC, which covers Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand, will transform the coastal regions of these countries through the increased commercial, industrial and tourism activities along the eastern seaboard of Thailand" (Sisovanna 2012 cited in Sulong, 2012). The Strait of Malacca, one of Asia's most heavily used sea passages, is an economic lifeline for countries like Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. However, the high density of traffic in this strait leads to delays in shipping, increased piracy, and security risks. The activation of the Kra Canal would significantly reduce these problems by shortening maritime routes by approximately 1,200 kilometres annually and reducing shipping times by 2 to 5 days (Rattanavich, 2014). In this context, the canal would lower global maritime transport costs and increase trade efficiency.

From Thailand's perspective, the project has strong potential to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). The construction and operation of the canal would stimulate many auxiliary sectors such as ports, shipyards, logistics centres, and industrial zones. This would strengthen Thailand's position as a regional logistics and transportation hub (Wongruang, 2020). In addition, regional development, infrastructure improvements, and increased employment are expected in the areas through which the canal would pass. According to World Bank estimates in 2020, if the canal project is realized, Thailand's GDP could experience an annual increase of 1% to 1.5% (World Bank, 2020).

Despite its economic potential, the project's cost and strategic balance raise serious debates. The estimated cost ranges from \$28 billion to \$35 billion, with financing largely expected to come from China under the "Belt and Road Initiative" (Zhao & Liu, 2019). This has sparked concerns that the project could increase Thailand's economic and political dependence on China. On the other hand, countries such as Singapore, which benefit economically from the Strait of Malacca, oppose the project on the grounds that it could negatively impact their trade volume (Chachavalpongpun, 2015).

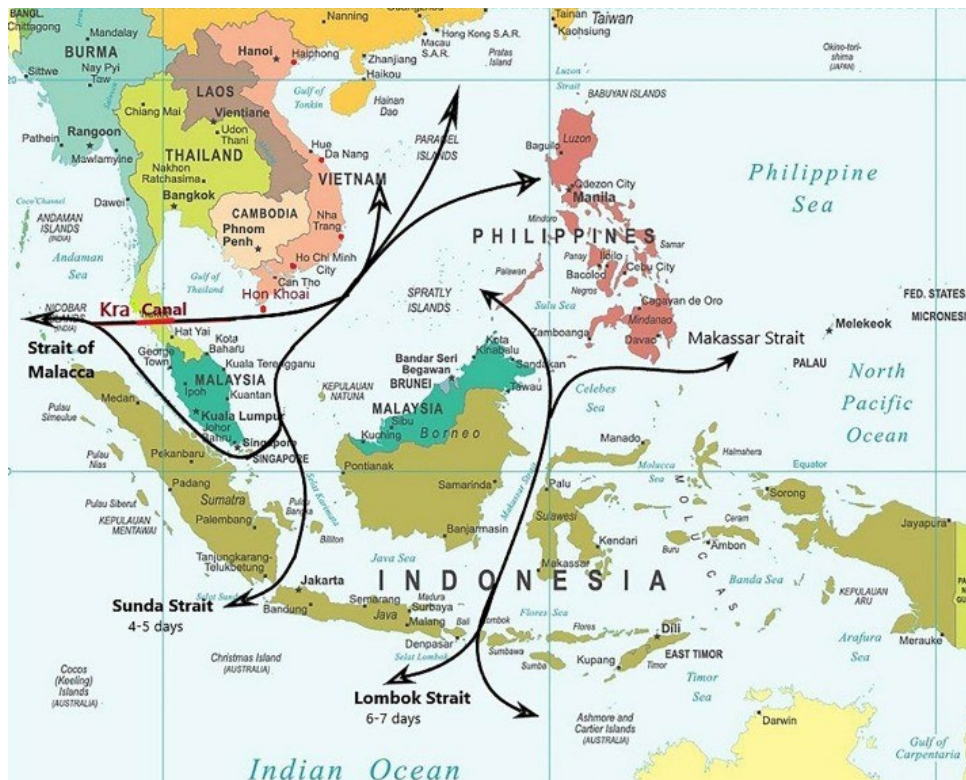
Patani is a small but extremely important region in Southeast Asia. Firstly, it has coastal access that connects it to both China and India, giving it significant strategic positioning. Secondly, it lies at the intersection of Muslim Malaysia/Southeast Asia and Budd-

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hist Asia, further adding to its geopolitical importance. Thirdly, it is located on the strait that connects the Malay Peninsula to the Asian mainland. However, its most notable strategic importance stems from a potential future project: the canal. This project is comparable to other canal projects around the world, such as the Suez and Panama Canals, which have radically transformed the economies, and consequently the politics, of their respective regions.

For example, the Suez Canal eliminated the need to sail around Africa to reach Southeast Asia and the Far East, significantly reducing transportation costs

and shortening trade routes, thereby making global trade more profitable. However, it also diminished the importance of the Cape of Good Hope, reducing South Africa from a globally significant state to a more regionally significant one. Meanwhile, Egypt rose from regional to global importance. Similar observations can be made about the Panama Canal. Should the Kra Canal materialize, Patani could likewise evolve from a peripheral conflict zone into a strategic economic hub, redefining not only southern Thailand's prosperity but also the future trajectory of its Muslim population.



Map 2. Possible Route of the Patani (Kra Isthmus) Canal and Existing Maritime Routes<sup>4</sup>

Just like the examples of the Suez and Panama Canals, a roughly 44-kilometer-long canal in Thailand's Patani region inhabited by Muslim Malays and connecting the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea, could produce even more impactful results than the first two examples (Rouillard & Saito, 2013, pp. 16–24; Tuhdi & Turan, 2022). The construction of such a canal would first and foremost elevate the lands inhabited by the Muslim Malays to a region of immense strategic importance. As a result, the Malays would gain bargaining power. In the short term, the Patani region could obtain fundamental rights, and in the long term, it could gain broad autonomy. This is because it would not be possible to continue governing a region through an "iron fist" and in isolation from the world when it lies along one of the world's most critical maritime trade routes. This canal would open doors for many sectors, including

tourism. Tourism does not flourish under despotic regimes. As tourism activity develops, the problems faced by the Patani people would become more visible and known to the global community. Over time, due to concerns about maintaining a positive international image, the resolution of these issues could become achievable.

On the other hand, there will be countries negatively affected by this canal. At the top of this list is Singapore. This country earns billions of dollars annually simply from ships stopping at the Port of Singapore for rest, refuelling, shopping, and logistics while passing through. If the "Patani Canal" were opened, Singapore could lose almost all of this income (Heng and Yip, 2018). In other words, this would mark the end of the Singaporean "legend." The two other countries that would be significantly impacted are

<sup>4</sup>Possible Locations for the Passage of the Patani (Kra Isthmus) Canal and Current Shipping Routes, Last Accessed: 13.05.2025, <https://ars.els-cdn.com/content/image/1-s2.0-S2590198222000847-gr1.jpg>

Malaysia and Indonesia. While Malaysia might partially compensate for its losses due to its proximity to the canal region, Indonesia would not be able to do so and could end up as a total loser, much like Singapore.

Today, the canal project is not frequently mentioned. This is because its economic and political consequences would be vast and far-reaching. Therefore, not only Thailand, but also China and other countries refrain from speaking openly about the project. However, the possibility of the project being realized one day in the future was clearly stated as early as 1943 by Sir George Maxwell, the British administrator of Malaysia. In a secret memorandum titled "The Future of the Kra Isthmus" addressed to the Colonial Office, he suggested that the region should be annexed by Britain due to its strategic importance. He noted that this region was Britain's weakest point (the heel of Achilles) and that if such a canal were constructed by Thailand or any other power, Singapore would be directly affected (Nik Mahmud, 2008, p. 158).

The Kra Isthmus is the narrowest land strip connecting Thailand to Malaysia. With the inclusion of the Kra River, the length of the canal would be reduced to 44 kilometres. The highest elevation along the proposed canal route is 75 meters above sea level. The canal idea was first proposed in 1677 when the Thai king asked a French engineer about the feasibility of such a project. It was concluded at the time that it was not possible with the existing technology. The idea was raised again in 1793 by the Thai king's brother, but again, no action was taken. After Britain colonized Burma in 1863, a negative report was issued regarding the project. Eventually, in an agreement signed between Britain and Thailand in 1897, a mutual non-aggression pact was established, a promise of protection against third-party nations was made, and an agreement was reached not to bring the canal project to the agenda in order to protect Singapore's position in the region (Nik Mahmud, 2008, p. 5). It is likely that Thailand pledged not to build the canal in exchange for Britain's commitment to not annex the region and to respect Thailand's territorial integrity.

In Thailand, the Kra Canal is supported by hardline factions that advocate hawkish policies, and they argue that it should be realized. Leading this support are military circles and security forces. Indeed, during the term of Thaksin Shinawatra, an ex-police chief and the most security-oriented and hardline prime minister ever elected in the country, the canal became a prominent topic on the national agenda in 2000. Similarly, in 2014, the military government that came to power through a coup reintroduced the issue at the highest levels (Storey, 2019, p. 4).

It appears that all segments of society are convinced that the canal's construction would generate eco-

nomical income for the country. However, democratic and liberal segments, those in favour of international cooperation, oppose the project, arguing that it would first cause internal security vulnerabilities and then negatively affect global balances. On the other hand, hardline factions believe they can maintain domestic security with iron-fist policies and show a disregard for international equilibrium.

Opponents of the canal raise various objections to its construction. The most prominent of these objections are as follows: 1. The canal will physically divide the country and pose a security risk. Its construction is expected to create a conducive environment for separatist movements in the region, potentially leading to the region being severed from the rest of the country (Thongsin and Looney, 2012). 2. The volume of ship traffic will not be sufficient, and the canal will fail to recoup its costs. In other words, it is claimed that the project is not economically viable enough to pay for itself (Chen and Kumagai, 2016; Yuan et al., 2020). 3. The enormous amount of soil excavated during construction will need to be transported elsewhere, which is considered an almost impossible task. Lastly, 4. It is believed that the excavation of land, the opening of the canal, and the transportation of debris will trigger a chain of environmental disasters in the country (High Beam Research, 1998; Surtyati Sulong, 2012; CCEA, 2015).

If the Ottoman Empire had completed its 1569 project to connect the Don and Volga rivers as a way to secure the Caucasus, it might have reasserted its influence in the region. However, due to the technological limitations and resources available at the time, only one-third of the project could be completed. The construction of the Suez Canal in Egypt reflected the colonial pragmatism of the 19th century. The Panama Canal, constructed in the following century, symbolized the rise of American power. U.S. control over the canal only came to an end with the Torrijos-Carter Treaties in 1977 (Gandásegui, 1993). In the 21st century, the Kra Canal could become a symbol of China's rapid rise. Similarly, in addition to China, countries with coastlines along the northeast and west of the canal, especially Thailand, could become major beneficiaries of this project.

It is believed that China is willing to cover the construction and development costs of the canal, which is expected to take ten years and involve a Chinese contractor employing 30,000 workers. If this expectation is realized, China will naturally seek to become the port operator and exert effective control over the route. Meanwhile, Singapore, anticipating that open opposition could negatively impact the process, is adopting a passive stance and argues that future port and shipping operations will focus more on smart technologies rather than physical location (Kit, 2012; Tseng and Pilcher, 2022; Abdul Rahman et al., 2016; Peng Er, 2018; Lau and Lee, 2016).

## 12. Conclusion

The Patani Muslims have lived under the direct or indirect power, influence, and rule of Siam/Thailand for nearly three centuries, during which they have been subjected to various forms of obstruction, intimidation, coercion, and suppression. Despite all demographic engineering efforts, the Malay population still maintains its majority in the region. However, neither of the neighboring Muslim-majority countries—Malaysia and Indonesia—has made any realistic or sincere effort to ensure the safety and security of the Patani Muslims. Although autonomy for Patani seems like a distant prospect, meaningful breathing space could at least be achieved through democratization and the empowerment of local governments. Yet, none of these Muslim countries have taken the initiative in this regard.

Realpolitik in global affairs appears in several distinct forms, each leaving, unfortunately, a significant mark on the everyday lives of the Malay community in Patani. Although the international system, realpolitik, and de facto situations have so far developed to the detriment of Patani, it is entirely possible that this could be an exception in the future, and the Kra Canal project could very well initiate such a different process.

To begin with, the modern international system—largely shaped and dominated by major powers and institutions such as the United Nations—rests on the principle of state sovereignty. This de facto model frequently neglects the realities of ethnic and religious minorities who exist beyond fixed national borders and overlooks the fragmented identities of those excluded from them. Around the world, many such communities have been separated from their ancestral territories, forced to persist as small minorities rather than as integral members of their historical nations.

A second manifestation of realpolitik lies in the dominance of economic priorities in world politics. The current global order seeks above all to maintain stability in international trade and to ensure the uninterrupted functioning of global capitalism. Within this framework, the preservation of economic continuity often outweighs questions of moral justice or historical belonging. Stability, in practice, becomes the ultimate measure of political success.

The third dimension concerns the potential regional and international repercussions of the proposed Kra Canal—a massive maritime route envisioned to link the Andaman Sea to the Gulf of Thailand. In contrast to the first two dynamics, which have largely disadvantaged the Muslims of Patani, the successful completion of this canal might actually serve their interests by altering the region's economic and geopolitical configuration.

For nearly two centuries, the mechanisms of global politics have rarely operated in ways favorable to the Patani Malays. However, the shifting regional environment surrounding the Kra Canal project may present them with an uncommon strategic opportunity. Despite this, Malaysia—a neighboring Muslim-majority nation with deep cultural ties—remains hesitant to endorse the initiative, fearing that the canal could weaken its own economic and geopolitical position within the prevailing world order. Consequently, the Patani Malays find themselves caught in a complex and painful dilemma: positioned between past and present, between the pressures of global politics and the constraints of local governance, and between the authority of the state that rules them and the aspirations of the nation to which they feel they truly belong.

The decades- or even centuries-long delay in resolving the issue and the normalization of this unresolved state naturally gives rise to conspiracy theories. According to local rumours circulating in the region, the construction of the Patani Canal would negatively affect both Malaysia and Indonesia. Therefore, it is alleged that, led by Singapore, these three states are covertly supporting radical fringe groups in the Patani region to foster unrest, disorder, instability, and rebellion rather than peace and stability.

This approach effectively hinders the efforts of sensible and politically realistic Malay Muslim movements that strive for democratization and the devolution of power from the central Thai government to local authorities. While Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia try to justify their actions by citing the logistical delivery of humanitarian and social aid to sensitive groups, such explanations are unconvincing. According to the conspiracy theory, this state of turmoil and unrest sustains the status quo, ensuring that the Patani Canal will never be built, thereby preserving the existing economic interests of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Since global international relations are governed not by human rights and justice but by national interests, oppressed nations like the Patani Muslims often fall victim to the insincere and contradictory policies of their own neighbours, relatives, or even religious brethren. The Patani Malay Muslims are among the victims of such pragmatic politics and remain largely unknown to much of the world.

In conclusion, the existence of the Patani Canal project has been perceived by the trio of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia as a commercial and economic threat, overshadowing the humanitarian, religious, and cultural rights of the Patani Muslims. The Patani Muslims find themselves in the midst of a deep contradiction. While the Kra Canal Project, which could offer significant relief and even a long-

term solution to the region's problems is supported by China, a distant country with a different religion and culture, the project is opposed by Singapore, a neighbouring country on the same peninsula, and by Malaysia and Indonesia, which are both religiously and ethnically close.

China, though distant in terms of culture and religion, stands as a potential (albeit unintended) savior for the future, whereas Malaysia and Indonesia, despite their religious and national closeness, serve as obstacles driven by self-interest. The Patani Muslims are trying to build a homeland where they can live with their identity, culture, and beliefs, even at a minimal level, caught between the potential friendship of distant and foreign cultures and the economic whims, contradictions, and duplicity of culturally close nations.

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