

Research Article

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Contextualizing Discrimination of Religious and Linguistic Minorities in South Thailand

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Abstract: This article explores how scholarship can be put to work by specialists penning evidence-based policies seeking peaceful resolutions to long-standing, complex, and so-far intractable conflict in the Malay-Muslim dominated provinces of South Thailand. I contend that more is required than mere empirical data, and that the existing analysis of this conflict often lacks theoretical ballast and overlooks the wider historical context in which Bangkok pursued policies impacting its ethnolinguistically, and ethnoreligiously diverse citizens. I demonstrate the utility of both interacting with what social theorists have written about what “religion” and language do—and do not—have in common, and the relative importance of both in sub-national conflicts, and comparative historical analysis. The case studies that this article critically introduces compare chapters of ethnolinguistic and ethnoreligious chauvinism against a range of minorities, including Malay-Muslim citizens concentrated in the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. These include Buddhist ethnolinguistic minorities in Thailand’s Northeast, and Catholic communities during the second world war widely referred to as the high tide of Thai ethno-nationalism. I argue that these revealing aspects of the southern Malay experience need to be contextualized—even de-exceptionalized.

Keywords: discrimination, ethnic minorities, ethnoreligious, South Thailand

1 Introduction

Particularly in comparison to other parts of what Iselin Frydenlund and Michael Jerryson have referred to as “Theravada World” (Frydenlund and Jerryson 2020),

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Thailand's Muslim minority has been extensively studied. Be that as it may, most are concerned with chapters of violence in the Malay-dominated southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat between the late 1940s and 1980s, and since 2004. A comprehensive inventory of these chapters of violence is well beyond the scope of this short paper.¹ There is, however, broad agreement that the general context of this conflict is the Thai state that Marc Askew describes as chaotic (Askew 2007, 2008). Related to this, southern dynamics are some of the severest symptoms of a wider political crisis (McCargo 2009a). In the Malay far-south, Bangkok lacks political legitimacy (McCargo 2008)—yet refuses to explore any form of regional autonomy (Jitpiromsri and McCargo 2008; McCargo 2010). In addition to political dysfunction, uncivil constituencies exist among both Buddhists and Muslims in South Thailand and beyond.² Some studies also appear hamstrung by the post-9/11 discursive *milieu* in which they were conducted (Abuza 2009; Gunaratna, Acharya, and Chua 2005).

In this article, I explore how social scientists and historians, who make no claims to be conflict studies specialists, might assist policymakers preparing evidence-based approaches to peacefully resolving the conflict in these Malay-Muslim majority provinces. There are many reasons for differences between the to-do lists of scholars sharing my desire that scholarship be “put to work” in this manner. Those profiling themselves primarily as empiricists presumably share my aversion of stepping too far from their primary area of academic expertise—a task that resembles wondering/wandering out onto thin ice, too close to the spring thaw, and without a wetsuit. Some could conceivably compensate by collaborating with colleagues whose areas of expertise compliment theirs. After a decade living and working in one of the provincial capitals in the Malay-dominated far-south (Joll 2011), one of my primary professional objectives since 2012 has been prioritizing fieldwork in both rural Malay communities where trust of Bangkok is low, and support for violent resistance is high. In addition to this, I have conducted fieldwork among a range of monolingual Thai-speaking Muslim communities in parts of the “Upper South” where Southern Thai is spoken, and in Ayutthaya, and Bangkok (Joll 2017). Despite having intentionally conducted long-term, and “slow”, ethnographic fieldwork, I am increasingly of the opinion that more is required than merely further data. Although no proposals can claim to be “evidence-based” without being empirically grounded, these also need to be theoretically sophisticated, and historically informed. In this article, I argue that historically contextualizing Bangkok's

¹ The most recent analysis has been provided by the following: (Chambers, Jitpiromsri, and Waitoolkiat 2019; Engvall et al. 2020; Jitpiromsri 2019; Jitpiromsri and Kaewnuy 2019; Jitpiromsri, Waitoolkiat, and Chambers 2019).

² On Buddhist agency see (Jerryson 2009, 2011; Joll 2010; McCargo 2009b) For an analysis of Muslim actors see (André 2012, 2014; Askew and Helbardt 2012; Helbardt 2011; Liow 2009).

policies impacting Thailand's Malay-Muslim minority permits, what I refer to as, de-exceptionalizing both recent chapters of Thai ethnolinguistic and ethnoreligious chauvinism. My desire is that this critique of what some conflict studies specialists have missed will provide grist in the mill for others committed to offering theoretically sophisticated and historically grounded approaches committed to human rights and peace-building.

I begin by interacting with how social theorists have interrogated both the similarities between “religion” and language, and differences between discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation, and linguist repertoires. While this material provides some (much needed) theoretical ballast, I introduce case studies of linguistic discrimination and religious persecution in Thailand gleaned from the secondary literature. In other words, one of the ways that an evidence-based approach to peace-building in South Thailand can be achieved is to “walk into the future backwards.” These case studies compare the southern Malay experience of Thai chauvinism with those of Buddhist ethnolinguistic minorities in Northeast Thailand, and Christian minorities in the central provinces. What these interactions with the historical record reveal is that Thailand's large southern Malay-Muslim minority is not the only minority historically impacted by policies promulgated in Bangkok. Furthermore, the most notorious chapters of discrimination of minorities at the margins of the nation-state occurred at times of *political* instability at its centre.

Given my comparative approach, before introducing this theoretical material, and case studies of discrimination against linguistic, and religious minorities, a short description of comparative historical analysis (CHA), and its utility in peace research, is required.³ Whether representative, deviant, or extreme, CHA is based on *case studies*. These units of analysis may include a range of social, cultural, linguistic, religious, and political phenomena—all of which are temporally and spatially contingent. David Snow notes that while comparative approaches supply insights about defining characteristics and distinct dynamics, these are less of a research methodology than a “research strategy associated with a number of data-gathering methods or procedures.” Richly detailed and contextual understandings are generated by triangulating multiple sources of (mainly qualitative) data (Snow 2013, 89). Stephen Ball adds that, while many quantitative studies seek statistical generalizations, *qualitative* case studies generate theory. Furthermore, the robustness of these increases in proportion to the number and heterogeneity of the case studies considered. Adopting this approach demands a historian's diligence, both in interpreting primary sources, and judiciously interacting with the secondary literature. While it is tempting to gather more empirical data, comparative historical

³ For introductions to comparative historical analysis, see (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003; Ritter 2014).

analysis sheds light on old problems by re-examining existing evidence, provided that the case studies are of sufficient quality and quantity (Ball 1996, 130). The following comments need to be added about comparative projects relying too heavily on secondary sources, which James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Scott 2009) has been criticized for. Researchers should not select sources supporting their theoretical preferences, and historians must demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the secondary literature produced by researchers, who have pursued a range of approaches, and reach different conclusions.

2 Revisiting the Role of Religion and Language in Ethno-nationalism

What are the similarities and dis-similarities between “religion” and language, and why have these seldomly been studied together in a sustained and systematic manner? For specialists of each, these are too different. In ethnic studies, these are viewed as too *similar*. Rogers Brubaker argues that when construed in certain ways, language and religion are similar enough to make comparison possible—yet different enough to make these compelling—while ethnic studies specialists treat these as functional equivalents, representing examples of ‘cultural stuff’ that provides “grist for the mill of ethnic classification and boundary formation” (Brubaker 2013, 16). Brubaker refers to the “flattening effect” that this has on the discourse, which overlooks differences in the social organisation and political expression of language and religion (Brubaker 2013, 4).

Revisiting assumptions about relationships between language, religion, and ethno-nationalism involves acknowledging temporal and spatial variations. William Safran comments that while secular societies might have marginalised religion, many forms of ethno-nationalism resemble religious affiliations. Both possess a “shared ideology, celebrate common festivals, hold shared symbols, acknowledge common saints, and are associated with a community” (Safran 2008, 172). Furthermore, some ethno-nationalisms resemble secularised religions. Both can be changed—through (religious) conversion, or (successfully) applying for citizenship. Not all countries permit dual citizenship, and membership to more than one religious community is more common among Hindus and Buddhists, than Christians and Muslims. In other societies, language and religion *feed* on one another. Language has become a substitute to religion in some contexts. In others, religion has trumped language. Religions and languages are spread over more than one ethnic group. It is common among some *ethne* for its members to “adhere to more than one religion”, and bilingualism

among younger generations is eroding loyalty to the language of its older members (Safran 2008, 172).

One of the most substantive similarities between religion and language is that both are resolvable. New languages can be acquired, and new religions adopted. Johns (Johns 1975, 37) Although acquiring *new* languages requires effort, linguistic minorities have proven their ability to survive changes in literacy and orality. These claims are corroborated by studies among immigrant communities demonstrating changes in linguistic preferences which have led to the extinction of either their “culture”, or corporate identity.⁴

Language can be likened to religion as they both *complement* other ways individuals and communities establish, maintain—as well as pragmatically tweak—commonality and difference. Languages can be added to an individual’s linguistic repertoire without giving up their mother tongue, cultural beliefs, culinary habits, and religion. Some individuals have instrumentalist motivations for learning a language or changing religion. In many contexts, marriage is the most common reason for religious conversion, and some learn languages to obtain a taxi license. What are the ways that language is not like religion? The most important is that language repertoires are less exclusive than religious affiliation. While individuals claiming membership of more than one religion is rare, multilingualism is globally normative. Languages are not changed on a whim. Over and above these requiring effort, David Laitin argues that changes in literacy and (spoken) fluency almost always have permanent intergenerational consequences (Laitin 2007, 59). For Laitin, conflicts fuelled by disputes over *language* are associated with lower levels of violence. This is due to linguistic minorities being less capable of mobilizing collective action. Should discriminatory language policies be promulgated, local language entrepreneurs such as “poets, philologists, lexicographers, and international activists” might be mobilized, but these are almost always positioned at the peripheries of modern nation-states (Laitin 2000, 113). Media savvy language entrepreneurs might articulate some powerful collective grievances, but Laitin argues these typically encounter a range of problems. Collective refusal to assimilate might be in everyone’s interests, but it would be “individually rational” for members of these minorities to assimilate due to the relative ease of “linguistic defection.” In other words, particularly in comparison with religious entrepreneurs organizing against “religious” discrimination, it is more difficult for language entrepreneurs to mobilize collective resistance against specifically linguistic discrimination (Laitin 2000, 115). The most important reasons are that language activists lack access to the mosques, temples, and churches available to religious leaders. In addition to

4 For an excellent recent study of the role of language in Asian migrant communities, see Roxby Harris’ study of British Asians, or “Brasians” (Harris 2007).

religious organizations being better organized, there is widespread aversion to bi-religiosity, and in some contexts converts pay a high social cost for changing religious affiliation. In other words, language entrepreneurs are incapable of punishing defectors, something which converts in some contexts are unable to avoid.

William Safran has recently analysed a range of case studies exploring some of these dynamics. For centuries, Roman Catholicism in Europe left no room for ethno-nationalism for the simple reason that the world could be divided between Christians and Infidels, and Catholics and (Protestant and Orthodox) heretics—not French, English, Germans, Slavs, and Italians (Safran 2008, 178). Furthermore, the generation and dissemination of knowledge was in the hands of the clergy—who wrote in Latin. Since the Renaissance, language has trumped religion, and both now intersect. In Poland, for example, it was not language, but religion—specifically Catholicism—that was central to nationhood. To be Polish is to be Catholic, and in Poland national mythologies invoke notions of Poland having heroically defended Catholic Christendom against Turks (Orthodox) Russians, (Swedish) Protestants, and (Atheist) Bolshevism (Safran 2008, 182). In the image of an “arch-Catholic Poland, language did not seem to play a major role because the clerical language was Latin” (Safran 2008, 182).

The popular appeal of Christianity in Europe often required a particularly ethno-linguistic presentation. Joan of Arc was a religious ‘liberator’, and a nation-building heroine who spoke *French* (Safran 2008, 177). She was one of a number of religious personalities central to the formation of ethno-national identities. This is one example of the wider phenomenon of religious identities based on narratives expressed in specific languages. Safran points out that the Danubian St. Stephen, the Bohemian Hus, and the Serbian King Lazar all spoke vernaculars. Slavic Orthodoxy differs from Greek Orthodoxy in its language, style of praying, and the saints that it appeals to, and no one confuses Persian Shi’ism with the Sunni Islam of the Ottomans. The complexity of connections between language and religion is demonstrated in the role of Urdu in North India and Pakistan. Despite being closely related to Hindi, Urdu developed in northern India but was written in a modified Arabic orthography—not Sanskrit. Most Urdu speakers were Muslims, and it became the national language of Pakistan, yet the civil war that led to the creation of independent Bangladesh was not over religion (specifically Islam), but language, specifically Bengali (Safran 2008, 177). Furthermore, while religion had the “upper hand until the Renaissance, and language from then until the present”, *both* now continue to intersect with nationalism. From the nineteenth century, religion was “eclipsed by cultural populism and linguistic exclusivism.” Today, traditional religion has been replaced by civic religion which worships the “sovereign people, if not the state.” Language remains important in all states, but not necessarily in the same way. The relationship to religion is strongest in

languages closely tied to ethnic communities, and weakest in trans-ethnic languages (such as English, French, and Spanish). The “religious element may sometimes be so dominant in a given language that it cannot easily ‘desacralise’ itself” (Safran 2008, 178–179).

The preceding discussion provides theoretical ballast to the exploration of discrimination against linguistic and religious minorities in Thailand, that we have argued represents one of the weaknesses in how conflict studies specialists have approached this sub-national conflict. Before interacting with case studies of how Bangkok has historically sought to limit the linguistic and religious diversity of its citizens, readers should be made aware of the similarities and dis-similarities between “religion” and language that have seldom been studied together in any sustained and systematic manner. In light of the new chapter of violence in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat beginning three years into the infamous “war on terror”, there was what can only be described as an obsession with religious agency—specifically the role of trans-national jihadism.⁵ Safran, Brubaker, and Laitin take different positions on the relative importance of language and religion in “ethnic” conflicts. Between them, the two clusters of case-studies will reveal the role that otherness vis-à-vis language and religion played in historic cases of state-sponsored discrimination.

3 Comparative Historical Analysis of Discrimination against (Buddhist and Muslim) Ethnolinguistic Minorities

This is the first of two treatments pursuing a comparative historical approach to discrimination of minorities in Thailand. Below, I compare policies which have impacted Bangkok’s southern Malay subjects in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat with Chinese immigrants and with Lao- and Khmer-speaking Buddhist minorities in Thailand’s Northeast. Chris Baker has argued that Malacca and Ayutthaya share a number of characteristics. The most important is that both were cosmopolitan maritime city-states possessing only loose control over their vassals. A decade into the reign of Rama I, which began in 1782, this new Siamese dynasty controlled more territory than Ayutthaya ever did. Nevertheless, no shared language or corporate identity existed. Andrew Simpson and Noi Thammasathien point out that at least

⁵ See (André 2014, 2015; Gunaratna and Acharya 2013; International Crisis Group 2015; Sungunnasil 2006) For alternative views, refer to the following (Helbardt 2011; International Crisis Group 2005; Liow 2006).

half of Bangkok's subjects spoke Lao and Khammueang. Furthermore, following Siam's treaty with the French in 1893, "almost 80 percent of the total ethnic Lao population" in Indochina resided within the borders of Northeastern Siam (Simpson and Thammasathien 2007, 392). Assertions about Thailand's ethnolinguistic homogeneity are, therefore, "very much a social construct, ideologically serving at certain times to mask and at other times to highlight the internal diversity of the Thais" (Rappa and Wee 2006, 106). In Thailand, more than 70 languages belonging to the Tai-Kadai, Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Sino-Tibetan, and Hmong-Mien language families are spoken. Central Thai might be the only official language in Thailand, but its northern (Khammueang), northeastern (Lao), and southern (Phak Tai) dialects function as local vernaculars. Differences in grammar, pronunciation, and lexicon among these vernaculars resemble the differences that can be found among languages in the Romance or Germanic language families. Speakers of a number of displaced languages, and languages such as Chinese and Vietnamese, also exist. Finally, Shan and Khmu in the North, Khmer in the Northeast, Mon in the Northwest, and Malay in the Deep South are cross-border languages (see Figure 1).

At a time when European influence in Southeast Asia was on the rise, Bangkok viewed its survival as requiring the establishment of a unitary state. Having avoided direct colonization by either the French or the British, Siam became a colonizer itself. Following the 1932 coup that deposed King Prajadhipok, Siam's new military rulers emphasized the role of Central Thai as a national language. The military governments, led by Field Marshal "Plaek" Phibulsongkhram (1938–1944, 1948–1957) (Suwannathat-Pian 1995), promulgated a series of state decrees (*ratthaniyom*). The first, on June 24, 1939, changed the name of the country from *Prathet Siam* to *Prathet Thai* (The Royal Gazette 1939 [2482]-a, 810). A third, issued on August 2, 1939, reinforced the first by forbidding the use of "any regional or ethnic/religious modifier of the word 'Thai,' so that terms such as 'Southern Thais,' 'Northeastern Thais,' and 'Islamic Thais' should not be used." All inhabitants were simply "Thais" (The Royal Gazette 1939 [2482]-b, 1281). These decrees are an example of what Amri Baharuddin Shamsul has referred to as "authority-defined labels" (Shamsul 2001, 78) that he compares to everyday ethnonyms. Terms such as "Lao" and "Shan" were to be replaced by the word "Thai." The ninth *ratthaniyom*, which I discuss in more detail below, was specifically concerned with the Thai language.⁶ The 10th stated that Thai

⁶ The decree specified: "1. Thai people must extol, honor, and respect the Thai language, and must feel honored to speak it; 2. Thai people must consider it the duty of a good citizen to study the national language and must at least be able to read and write; Thai people must also consider it their important duty to assist and support citizens who do not speak Thai or cannot read Thai to learn it; 3. Thai people must not consider place of birth, residence, or regional accent as a marker of division. Everyone must hold it to be true that all born as Thai people have the same Thai blood and speak the same Thai language. Place of birth or accent makes no difference; 4. Thai people must

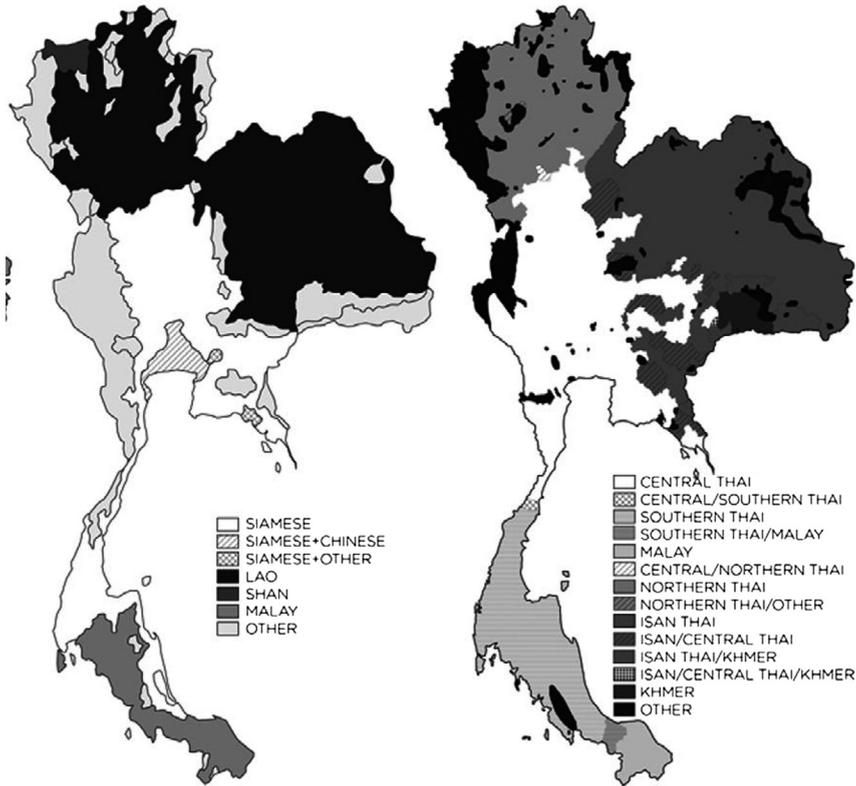


Figure 1: Mapping Multi-ethnic (left) and multi-lingual (right) Thailand (Source: Ferrara 2015: 253).

people should not appear at public gatherings, in public places, or in city limits without being “appropriately dressed,” which included not wearing any untailored wraparound textiles such as sarongs (The Royal Gazette 1939 [2482]-d, 151). Elsewhere, I have argued that these decrees represent a state-sponsored project of ethnogenesis indiscriminately imposed upon the state’s ethnolinguistically and ethno-religiously diverse population (Joll 2017, 319). Notwithstanding the fact that many of these measures specifically targeted Siam’s large and economically influential Chinese population (whose newspapers were banned, and schools closed), Malays were also impacted. They were now “Thais” who had to speak Thai and only wear sarongs at home or while performing *salat*. Malays assessed the term

consider it their duty to conduct themselves as good Thai citizens should and to urge and instruct those who do not yet know and understand their duty as to the duties of a good citizen of the Thai nation” (The Royal Gazette 1939 [2482]-c).

“Thai-Muslim” as indistinguishable from the oxymoronic “Buddhist-Muslims” (Joll 2015, 99). Even today, rural Malays of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat do not refer to Buddhists—let alone themselves—as Thais. They refer to them as Siamese, or *Orae Siyae* (Joll 2017, 331).

In what ways have Bangkok’s interactions with Malay-dominated South Thailand resembled policies toward the Chinese minority, widely referred to as Thailand’s largest non-Buddhist ethnic minority? Duncan McCargo’s comparative analysis of state policies toward Malays and Chinese is one of his many contributions to scholarship on Southern Thai politics. McCargo explores the concept of informal citizenship and challenges the widespread assumptions that citizenship relates to nationality by demonstrating how both the Malay and Chinese minorities have experienced what he refers to as “graduated citizenship.” While Thailand is often cited as a positive example of Chinese assimilation, “the reality is rather more nuanced and complicated” (McCargo 2011, 837). For example, Chinese have occasionally been denied the right to vote. As for Malays, they are not viewed as meeting all the “informally understood criteria” needed to vote (McCargo 2011, 833). Extant definitions of citizenship, such as T. H. Marshall’s notions of “formal” citizenship, inadequately capture the Thai realities. Equally deficient are alternatives such as “cultural citizenship,” a concept developed by Western nations assimilating immigrants (McCargo 2011, 835).

According to McCargo, during the early decades of the twentieth century, Thai laws on naturalization and nationality were comparatively liberal. For example, locally born Chinese were automatically granted Thai citizenship, and after five years in Thailand Chinese immigrants of good character and financial means could apply to be naturalized. After the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, however, Chinese were forced to meet “stringent educational or employment requirements” before they were entitled to either vote or stand for electoral office. They were also excluded from various trades and professions. Between 1953 and 1956, children born to two Chinese parents were not considered Thai citizens, even if they were born on Thai soil, while anyone with a non-Thai father was not eligible for military service. These were examples of “contingent and graduated rights, [...] not identical with the holding of Thai nationality,” which could also be revoked (McCargo 2011, 837). McCargo cites G. William Skinner’s fascination with the fact that, despite widespread prejudice against the Chinese, Thai psychology prevented the outright rejection of Chinese who spoke and behaved like Thais. Thai citizenship therefore possessed a “legal dimension based on formal status and rights” and an “informal dimension based on attitude, self-presentation, and behaviour,” which Kasian Tejapira has referred to as “Thai deficiency syndrome” (McCargo 2011, 838, 839, 842).⁷

7 See also (Tejapira 2009).

McCargo's case study elucidates a range of issues. The first is that theoretical approaches to citizenship erroneously assume that minority groups enjoy full citizenship. Many Malays in Thailand only reluctantly participate in a "broader society from which they feel alienated" (McCargo 2011, 835). Second, in South Thailand, the Malay language creates and maintains "identity cleavages" between Buddhists and Malay-speaking Muslims. Many of Thailand's Buddhist majority question Malay loyalty to what they perceive as a benevolent state. In addition to language, religious practices, such as veiling (Satha-Anand 1994), perpetuate the Malay agenda of "differentiation and separation." For McCargo, Malays perceive Bangkok as "unwelcoming, suspicious, patronizing, and deeply unsympathetic" (McCargo 2011, 836). Another point that confirms the relative importance of language (over religion) in Thailand is that Thai-speaking Muslims have enjoyed long-standing close ties with political elites in Bangkok. For example, the Bunnag family, descended from Persians, held a number of influential positions in Ayutthaya's courts (Pitya Bunnag 1995). The first Thais to hold the (royally appointed) post of Chularajamontri (*Sheikh al-Islam*) were from this family, as is General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, who led the September 2006 coup that ousted Thaksin Shinawatra.

The Thai state might officially advocate an "undifferentiated citizenship" in which no "explicit ethnic privileges" exist, yet the reality is that Thailand is characterized by "sharply differentiated modes of (albeit informal) citizenship that privilege certain groups" (McCargo 2011, 836). These resemble the dynamics in Malaysia and (more particularly) Indonesia. McCargo is one of the few to have pointed out the importance of South Thailand's proximity to Malaysia. The significance of this is that ethnic minorities geographically concentrated near international borders are "more likely to develop secessionist movements" (Brown and Ganguly 2003, 420). However, there need to be (real or perceived) economic and political advantages to "separatism." This explains the absence of Thailand's northern Khmers seeking to join Cambodia, or ethnic minorities in North Thailand joining Myanmar's Shan, Mon, or Karen States. By contrast, southern Malays live in close proximity to Malaysia, where a model of "differentiated, consociational citizenship" has been implemented in which ethnic Malays and *bumiputera* ("sons of the soil," or indigenous peoples) are privileged as part of the policy of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay Supremacy) (McCargo 2011, 836). Under Malaysia's New Economic Policy (NEP), Malays enjoy economic and employment privileges. The discourse of "Thai-ness" pursued by Thailand's nation-building elites sought to suppress ethnic differences complicating their ethnonationalist project. The construction of Thai identity has been a "quietly repressive process" that has forced ethnolinguistic and ethno-religious minorities to "conceal, deny, or play down" their origins (McCargo 2011, 836). For instance, most Muslims residing north of the southern provinces of Satun

and Songkhla have cooperated with Bangkok's project of ethnogenesis. They are "Thai Muslims." I hasten to add that this is also true for an increasing number of Malays raised and educated in the provincial capitals of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat (Joll 2011, 66–78). Nevertheless, many resist the "hegemonic discourse of Thai-ness," in which there is a place for Muslims but not for Malays. Therefore, anyone wishing to become Thai must subsume one's "ethnicity, language, and religious identity" to this "dominant discourse and mind-set" (McCargo 2011, 839).

The impact of policies promulgated by Bangkok on Malays and Chinese is the most obvious starting point for comparative historical analysis of state interactions with ethnic minorities in Thailand. These are Thailand's two largest minorities, followed by the northern Khmer of southern Northeast Thailand (commonly referred to as *Isaan*), whom Peter Vail has estimated to number one million (Vail 2006). Malays and Chinese are viewed as non-Buddhist minorities, despite most Sino-Thais attending both Buddhist and Chinese temples, observing events in the Buddhist ritual calendar, and ordaining male family members. A proportion of Chinese in Thailand are incapable of communicating in Thai, and some second- and third-generation Chinese still speak the dialects of their parents and grandparents. Despite most of Thailand's southern Malays now being bilingual, they are widely viewed as a religious—not linguistic—minority. Bangkok's (often fraught) relations with Khmer-speaking and Lao-speaking Buddhists in Northeastern Thailand challenge assumptions that religious differences contributes to contact which leads to conflict.

Siam's policy of assimilation has impacted educational institutions and the organization of Buddhism in this region. Peter Vail relates that, from 1898 Bangkok began the "slow process of instituting mass education" (Vail 2007, 125). Before this, state and temple schools coexisted. Dismal exam results among the northern Khmer confirmed that, compared to Lao-speaking students further north, Khmer speakers faced many obstacles in learning Thai. The Sangha Act of 1902 forbade Khmer monks from teaching the Lao and Khmer scripts in temple schools. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, who at the time held the influential post of minister of the interior, permitted local languages to be taught. However, only education in the Central Thai dialect was funded. The pace with which Siamese schools spread in *Isaan* increased after (often violent) resistance to the Sangha Act. The primary driver of local resistance was that the form of Buddhism mandated by the newly established Sangha differed from the ritual and doctrinal idiosyncrasies of Buddhism in *Isaan*. Between 1947 and 1973, four members of parliament from *Isaan* were assassinated for leading protests against Bangkok's discrimination and interference. The most notorious of these incidents occurred in 1949 during Phibun's second tenure as prime minister. In what is referred to as the Kilo 11 incident, four MPs were killed by the police while two others were subsequently—

and unsuccessfully—tried on charges of separatism (Ferrara 2015, 137). A detail that commentators have failed to mention is that this incident occurred around the same time that Muhammad Sulong bin Abdul Kadir bin Muhammad al-Fatani (Haji Sulong) (1895–1954) disappeared in Pattani, after being summoned to the Songkhla police station, in 1954 (Lamato, Sumarno, and Umamah 2017; Ockey 2011).

To summarise, the case studies presented above reveal that some of the interactions between Bangkok and Malays in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat can—and should—be de-exceptionalized. I have shown that Malays are neither the first nor only ethnolinguistic minority viewed by Bangkok as either suffering from “Thai deficiency syndrome” or presenting a threat to national security. Furthermore, although some of these minorities were Buddhists, this did not prevent them from being targeted by a range of assimilationist policies that resemble bulldozers from Bangkok intent on razing linguistic and—to a lesser extent—religious landscapes. This important theme is developed in the following section that supplies more insights for scholars committed to walking into the future backwards.

4 Case Studies of “Religious Persecution” against Christian and Muslim Minorities in Central and South Thailand

Having pursued a comparative approach to how Thai ethnolinguistic chauvinism impacted southern Malays, (mainly urban) Chinese immigrant communities, and Lao-, and Khmer-speaking Buddhists in Thailand’s Northeast, this section introduces case studies of ethnoreligious intolerance toward religious minorities—most of which occurred during the Second World War. The policies of Thailand’s war-time military dictator Field Marshal “Plaek” Phibul Songkram and its impact in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, are relatively well known, but I also introduce case studies about how these affected Muslim and Catholic communities in central Thailand. The latter has recently been brought to light by Shane Strate (Strate 2011, 2015), and Thongchai Winichakul (Winichakul 2015), who have provided compelling historical accounts of uncivil chapters of Bangkok’s attitudes to Christianity (particularly Catholics), associated with French colonial aspirations.

Despite Thailand deserving its reputation for providing freedom to religious minorities since the late 1940s, Thongchai Winichakul’s treatment of Buddhist polemics against Christianity documents a series of conflicts between Siamese rulers and the Catholic Church since the 1680s. Those occurring in 1730 and 1779, followed refusals on the part of the Catholics to participate in Buddhist rituals

venerating the monarchy, and disputes over the status of local converts. In both cases, some priests were jailed, publicly admonished, and deported. Catholic books viewed as attacking Buddhism led to legal interventions (by the Siamese) and formal apologies (by Catholic priests) (Winichakul 2015, 81–82). Offensive material was destroyed, and a ban was imposed on Christian texts—and even sermons—being produced in Thai, although Winichakul adds that it was unclear “how long these orders remained in effect or to what extent they were enforced” after these incidents (Winichakul 2015, 81). Shane Strate’s analysis of the persecution of the Catholic Church during Phibul’s wartime administration begins with a description of an earlier incident in 1885. He relates Catholic converts storming Wat Kaeng Mueang, in the central province of Nakhon Phanom, where the temple’s sacred statues and relics were desecrated. Following this, several homes owned by the Church and inhabited by converts were destroyed, and “Catholic civil servants were arrested and flogged.” Other converts were “threatened or blackmailed until they promised to end their membership in the foreign religion” (Strate 2011 #22615). A massive boycott was organized against local clergy. With the assistance of the French embassy, clergy agreed to discontinue their interference in the collection of taxes and the imposition of *corvée* labour on Catholic communities: Bangkok was aware that its exploitation of minorities was having the unintended and equally undesirable effect of driving them into the arms of the priests.

Strate argues that, prior to 1893, the religious mission of the Church relied on the support of the French consulate rather than the “consulate making use of the clergy to extend French political influence.” In other words, the Catholic priesthood was not an integral part of France’s strategy to annex Siam. After the Franco-Siamese crisis of 1893, the Church became a more important part of France’s plans in Siam. This included offering “diplomatic protection to ethnic and religious minorities.” All “Asiatic Catholics” were encouraged to register as “French protégés so that France could capitalize politically from the growth of the Bangkok mission” (Strate 2011, 67). Although by the 1940s the Catholic Church had enjoyed four decades of peaceful coexistence with Bangkok, the roots of Phibul’s anti-Catholic policies lay in the political struggles between missionaries and Siamese monarchs that began in the late nineteenth century. As early as 1878, King Chulalongkorn had granted Catholics permission to work in Siam’s northeastern region. Siamese reluctance in later decades grew from concerns over how Catholic activities would complicate their agenda of increasing control over the semiautonomous Lao vassal states, and concerns that French priests might function as spies. From the 1880s, priests leveraged their extraterritorial status by seeking to protect their communities. They avoided Siamese law and acted as intermediaries between Bangkok and their constituents through patron-client relationships with Vietnamese and Lao ethnic minorities located at the lower rungs of Siam’s social hierarchy. The Vietnamese in

Siam associated conversion to Catholicism with “protection from taxes, *corvée* labour and debt bondage” (Strate 2011, 63).

Winichakul notes that during 1914–1915, King Vajiravudh (r. 1910–1925) delivered a series of sermons later published as *Thetsana Suapa* (Sermons to the Wild Tigers Corps) (Winichakul 2015, 89). At a time when he could not rely upon the support of Siam’s military establishment, this corps functioned as his personal paramilitary force. The objective of the sermons, comprising a comparative examination of other religions, was to explain reasons for Buddhism’s superiority. Although accounts of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam are included in these sermons, the subject of over half was Buddhism. For Vajiravudh, in Siam, Buddhism was “central to national identity” (Winichakul 2015, 89). His first sermon argues for the superiority of Buddhism, and while perhaps advocating religious tolerance, Theravada Buddhism was central to his “royalist nationalist project” representing an “inseparable and indispensable element of Thai national identity.” Buddhism was more than one religion among many, but a “shared treasure,” the “first [religion] among [...] equals” (Winichakul 2015, 90).

There were a range of reasons why Thais viewed Christianity—particularly Catholicism—as a symbol of Western intervention. Catholic priests and missionaries were widely accused of appropriating political power to protect their converts from the “demands of Thai feudalism,” and Bangkok exploited their history of collective victimhood to “redefine national identity” in which being “Catholic”, and “Thai” were incompatible. Once the Phibul government declared war against France, Catholics became soft targets against whom popular opinion could be easily mobilized. Members of the Catholic clergy were arrested, and some local clergy were martyred. Catholic churches and schools were closed, and property seized. Catholics were also required to attend re-education meetings, where they were required to return or revert—rather than convert—to Buddhism. Some did, while others paid the price of economic ruin for refusing to do so.

I have interacted with Shane Strate’s scholarship at length for a number of reasons. While the Phibul government was specifically concerned with Thailand’s Catholic community, they were far from the only denomination that suffered during the Franco-Thai conflict. Rather, the Phibul government created an “atmosphere of religious nationalism designed to pressure all religious minorities to conform to the majority faith.”

As religion became an indicator of one’s civic allegiance, Muslims also found their religion subject to state interference. In fact, Muslims were an ideal target for this type of irredentist movement, as they also inhabited the border of regions deemed lost to Western imperialism. Unlike Catholics, [...] Muslims were not [...] labelled a danger to the nation’s well-being. There were two important reasons for this difference. The southern territories in question had been transferred to Britain, not France, and Phibul had no interest in stirring up animosity

towards the British. Also, Islam did not fit within the discursive framework of National Humiliation, since no Islamic imperialist power had intervened in Thailand. Thus, although discrimination against Muslims did occur, its intensity did not match that of the state campaign against Catholics (Strate 2015, 92).

Just as a comparative historical approach to Thai ethnolinguistic chauvinism reveals that southern Malays were far from the only minority impacted, Strate provides some of the pieces of the puzzle that reveal how Thai policies impacted Malays during the Second World War. Just as anti-Catholic sentiment in central Thailand has had a long history, Siamese attitudes toward their southern subjects were noted by a British observer in 1902. R. D. Davies commented how the Siamese had “managed to make themselves extremely objectionable” (Davies 1902, 23). A local member of the Malay nobility petitioned the British government in Singapore. The noble documented attempts to “[d]o away with the old Mohammedan customs relating to law, justice, crime, property”; “introduce Buddhist teachings”; abolish punishments on “Malays [for] not attending Mohammedan prayer”; and terminate “contributions to the upkeep of mosques.” Furthermore, when “cases of non-attendance at prayer have come up, the Siamese officials have remitted the fines and punishments, and have endeavoured to divert the subscriptions for mosques.”

Siamese soldiers have smeared the Malay gravestones with lard and have dragged men from the mosques whilst at prayer to do “*kra*” work; whilst the Siamese Commissioner whom at least one would have thought would have been above desecration and sacrilege, is building a house on a Malay cemetery, in order to accomplish which all the grave marks have been removed and the ground levelled. [...] Beside such an example other incidents pale, and the efforts of the Siamese to force Buddhism on the natives, and their endeavours to get the natives to divorce their wives by the charmingly simple process of handing them a betel leaf, seem very trivial; and yet as everyone knows it is always little troubles piled on to big wrongs which cause oppression and later on rebellion (Davies 1902, 23).

Margaret Koch enumerates other ways that Siamese officials offended the local Malay population. Siamese law was employed to “adjudicate inheritance and divorce.” Malays were forced to forego congregational prayers by court hearings being scheduled on Fridays and to “take oaths which were contrary to Islamic beliefs.” Malay men were forced to work long hours in the sun during the fasting month and to carry pigs. Others were pressed to carry Buddhist images in ceremonies. Koch adds that “the seizure of women was made more onerous,” as they were often converted to Buddhism. Another complaint made to British colonial officials by several local elites was that some Siamese ceremonies, intended to demonstrate allegiance to the king of Siam, involved kneeling before his picture “before which joss sticks were burning and around which stood certain idols” (Koch 1977, 73–74).

Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian has referred to Phibul as a “crusader” possessing “burning ambition” to create a homogeneous community based on Thai identity and Buddhism. This caused “considerable resentment among his multiracial compatriots,” but among southern Malays, the damage this failed agenda caused was “enormous and long-lasting.” The “socio-political fuel” that these policies added to the “fire of Malay Muslim discontent” is seen in how Malay elites leveraged the local escalation of “hostility and mistrust” (Suwannathat-Pian 2012, 240–242). The first published ethnography of Patani Malays, written by American anthropologist Thomas Fraser, contains details about some of the legislative initiatives mentioned above. All men were forced to wear long trousers, schoolchildren were to be dressed in uniforms, and chewing betel nut was to be prohibited. Loads were not to be carried on the head (in Malay style) but on the shoulders (in Thai style) (Fraser 1966, 90). Chavivun Prachuabmoh adds that, in addition to being forced to wear trousers and hats, students were ordered to utter Buddhist prayers. Some policemen chased down Muslim women who wore long hair, forcibly cutting it short, in the style of Thai women at the time. This led to some markets closing in protest (Prachuabmoh 1980, 60).

At this juncture, it is important to add that these policies were also enforced in central Thailand. Uri Tadmor’s study of Malay-speaking Muslims in central Thailand contains anecdotes about the depredations Malays endured. The Malay language could not be spoken in public, and children who spoke Malay in school were beaten by their teachers. The practice of Islam was also severely restricted. One of Tadmor’s elderly informants reported that his father had been arrested for teaching the Qur’an at a small religious school, although, after his release, he continued to teach clandestinely. The ban on wearing sarongs in public was strictly enforced. Those too poor to afford trousers, when leaving their village, avoided arrest by wearing improvised trousers made by joining together two empty rice sacks (Tadmor 2004, 525). In a parliamentary assembly in 1940, Arun Thongpatchot (who represented a Bangkok constituency) expressed concerns about the National Culture Act and its impact on Muslim communities, noting that they followed both Islam, and a range of traditional practices. Muslims made some concessions, but Winyu Ardruga claims that this led to some Muslims in central Thailand deciding to renounce Islam (Ardruga 2012, 83–84).

More serious than these insults on local Malay culture in both southern and central Thailand were perceived assaults on the specifically *religious* sensitivities of Malay Muslims in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Thai officials attempted to project the superiority of Buddhism. Although Buddhism was the state religion, there was also a desire to present Buddhism as a symbol of patriotism in government schools. The policy was directed at all ethnoreligious minorities, but Muslims conceived this as threatening the foundation of their religion and ethnicity.

Rumours spread that Muslim children and schools were compelled to show obeisance to Buddhist statues. Tamara Loos observes that Malays in Pattani protested Phibul's abolishing of the office of the *dato yutitham* and Islamic family law courts in the Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat in the early 1940s. Haji Sulong and other Muslim leaders demanded that these be reinstated, which was achieved two years after the fall of Phibul in 1944 (Loos 2006, 94).

A particularly grave event sending shock waves throughout the Muslim community took place on January 12, 1944. The Thai governor of Pattani made a speech to an assembly of Malay dignitaries, calling on them to display honour toward statues of the Buddha as symbols of the state. This was explained as a gesture of respect, rather than a requirement that they convert. On February 14, Tunku Abdul Jalal bin Tunku Abdul Mutalib sent a letter protesting this insult to Islam, demanding action. He received a reply on April 29 that officially supported the actions of the governor. In December 1944, he sent another letter to the prime minister, but fled to Malaya when this was not answered. The government's campaign against the status of Islam in the southern provinces ceased with the surrender of the Japanese and fall of the war time military government (Yegar 2002, 91). An anonymous tract published in Kelantan in 1948, cited by Omar Farouk, might also be describing these incidents during the height of Thai ethnoreligious chauvinism. The author claims the following rationale to have been given.

The act of paying homage to the image of the Buddha, which I ask you, and Hajjis, to do just now, is not an indication that [we] want you to be Buddhists, but because the idol is the national symbol of the state religion and held in high esteem by all Siamese. There are many religions observed by the Siamese; Buddhist, Muslim, Protestant, Roman Catholic and other religions respected by the Chinese [...]. The total population of Siam is about 19 million, out of which 12 million are Buddhists, 2 million are Muslims and others of various religions. Because the majority of the Siamese are Buddhist, so Buddhism must be the state religion and must be respected by all Siamese, though they may not necessarily be Buddhists themselves. You must pay respect to the image of the Buddha as we Siamese do, because it is the thing respected by the Siamese. When you respect things held in high esteem by the nation, you honour the nation, it will strengthen your morals and increase your own value and that of the nation (Farouk Bajunid 1980, 174).

Surin Pitsuwan also makes specific claims to Phibul's attacks on *religious* liberties, which he asserts were motivated by a desire to "obliterate the very identity of the group." Under his leadership, all citizens would become "Thai-speaking Buddhists" who lived in accordance with the aforementioned cultural mandates, which included listening to the radio and reading or listening to the preaching of the Dharma (Buddhist preaching). Pitsuwan contends that Phibul was determined to "convert all minority groups into Thai-speaking Buddhists" (Pitsuwan 1985, 91).

Anyone familiar with the extensive secondary literature analysing the southern Malay experience of Thai ethno-nationalism during the Second World War, will presumably be familiar with the events described above. I have revealed that when (particularly Catholic) Christian minorities and Thai-speaking Muslims in Central Thailand were impacted by the war-time policies, described above, this was also the experience of Thailand's southern Malay-Muslim minority. To my knowledge, I am the first to have provided the wider context of Malay-Muslim experiences of this chapter of specifically ethnoreligious chauvinism in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, which demonstrates the utility of comparative historical analysis.

5 Conclusion

The topic of Buddhist-Muslim relations has recently begun to receive the attention it deserves (Horstmann 2004; Ikeda and Tehranian 2004). This development is perhaps related to Islam being more widely acknowledged as an overwhelmingly *Asian* religion (Formichi 2020), meaning that most Muslims primarily engage with Hindus and Buddhists. While Muslim interactions with the former are concentrated in India and Bangladesh, the latter are located in the “Theravada World” of Cambodia, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka (Frydenlund and Jerryson 2020). David Gilmartin and Bruce Lawrence refer to their analysis of interactions between Muslims and Hindus actively avoiding a range of (conceptual) *cul-de-sacs*. Among the “historical fictions” they identify are contentions that differences in belief determine “all other patterns of exchange” and that religious communities are not “fixed as oppositional groups, [...] pitted irreconcilably against the other” (Gilmartin and Lawrence 2000, 1). Furthermore, as all history is present-minded, even “fair-minded” historians have erroneously read “fixed religious categories back into history laden with modern valences” (Gilmartin and Lawrence 2000, 4). Even when these categories no longer fit the empirical evidence, many are reluctant to jettison them.

One of the central arguments of Elizabeth Hurd's *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*—which deserves to be widely read—is that whilst discrimination comes in a number of forms, many of these are too readily referred to as (specifically) “religious” (Hurd 2015). Privileging religious differences obscures broader fields of enquiry in multifaceted subnational conflicts, and advocates for religious freedom to be brought “into history.” It is misguided to single out groups as specifically *religious* collectives, ignoring as it does a wide range of equally important differences—including language. What are the most important inadequacies of conceptualizing discrimination as primarily religious? First of all, there is often no consensus about what can be designated as “religion”,

and how groups—including *religious* groups—are to be distinguished from each other. It cannot be assumed that these are either “discrete faith communities with identifiable leaders and neatly bounded orthodoxies,” or “static bodies of tradition and convention” able to become “objects of state and transnational legal regulation(s).” Governments must therefore identify and engage with “official spokespersons,” with whom they are almost always already on “friendly relations,” over “dissenters, doubters, those who practice multiple traditions, and those on the margins of community.” This relates to an additional concern of Hurd’s about privileging religion, namely that this almost always favours forms of religion led by religious elites, who write “laws, control resources, and govern societies”, some of which marginalize “other modes of belief, being, and belonging” (Hurd 2015, xii).

To my knowledge, I am the first—but hopefully not the last—to have compared how Christian and Muslim minorities were impacted during chapters of religious chauvinism. In ways resembling how specifically *Buddhist* ethnolinguistic minorities such as the Khmer- and Lao-speaking minorities in the Northeast, I have pointed out that it was not only mono-lingual Malays of South Thailand who were impacted during the Second World War, but other Muslim minorities and Catholic communities in Central Thailand. These case studies, furthermore, provide some long-overdue wider context for some of the most egregious episodes of the incidents in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat which have been assumed to have specifically targeted Thailand’s southern Malays. These are some of the reasons forwarding the argument that discrimination of ethnolinguistic and ethnoreligious minorities in South Thailand needs to be de-exceptionalized, and that chapters of Thai chauvinism occurred in chapters of political instability in Bangkok.

No credible claims can—or have—been made that the role of Malay language has been entirely overlooked in studies of conflict dynamics in South Thailand. Nevertheless, interrogations of the role of language in social cohesion and sub-national conflicts are dwarfed by studies of religious factors. More importantly, few have examined both. The reasons for this are many but include discussions of language in Thailand today being politically sensitive. This could conceivably explain the lack of analysis of language dynamics in Thailand appearing in the synthesis report which concluded a UNICEF funded four-year project examining the role of language in social cohesion in Myanmar, Malaysia, and Thailand (UNICEF 2014a, 2014b). Notwithstanding Thailand having a reputation for providing religious freedom for its religiously diverse citizens, its (deeply entrenched) monolingual mind-McCargo 2010; set and discriminatory language policy— which I have placed in its regional context— has led to widespread language loss. Malay remains the most viable minority language in present-day Thailand, which is due in no small part to its geographic proximity to Malaysia and the wider Malay-speaking world.

Although language loss among urban Malays is widespread, this is less widespread among rural Malays (See Joll 2011, 61–64, 74–78). Furthermore, language loss is gendered: Malay women are more comfortably bilingual than rural Malay men—who are the primary focus of recruiters for the BRN, or *Barisan Revolusi Nasional* (National Revolutionary Front). Those questioning local Malay concerns about the future viability of the Malay language in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat might well be reminded about Malay language loss in Malay families residing in these provincial capitals where younger generations are either not able or unwilling to communicate with relatives living in communities where Malay language loyalty is high. Following the chaos unleashed in the Middle East since the Arab Spring, there has been a significant increase in the number of Malay parents sending their children to schools and universities in Indonesia, where the *Barisan Revolusi Nasional* (National Revolutionary Front) enjoys more operational freedom (Askew and Helbardt 2012; Helbardt 2011). Notwithstanding southern Malays having many legitimate grievances, the case studies of discrimination against a range of ethnolinguistic minorities introduced above reveal that no credible claims can be made that these were specifically targeted against Malays in Thailand's far-South. The treatment of southern Malay, and the forms of resentment, resistance, and rebellion against Bangkok therefore needs to be de-exceptionalized. As I have demonstrated above, one of the ways that this can be achieved is through both increasing the theoretical ballast of analysis, and intentionally walking into the future backwards.

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