

International Symposium

Bangsa and Umma: A Comparative Study of People-Grouping Concepts in Islamic Areas of Southeast Asia

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[C-03] Abstract

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Bangsa and Umma: The Malays of South Thailand

The Malay Muslims of south Thailand face a dilemma few Malays faced anywhere else in the world. They find that in the light of the Thai government's insistence on imposing Thai cultural norms on them, they feel that it is difficult to maintain their identity as a *bangsa*. Their dilemma began when they fell under Thai control in 1903. With the rise of Thai nationalism attempts were made to eliminate other focus of loyalty such as Islam and Malay culture.

The Malays of southern Thailand are not allowed to speak their language and indulge in their customs. They are not even called *Melayu* but *Yawi*. This is done deliberately with the purpose of eliminating any vestiges of Malay identity and to make it difficult for the Malays of Thailand to identify with their Malay brethren in Malaya. As much as the Malays of southern Thailand would like to maintain their *bangsa* and culture they are unable to do so. The Malays of Malaya see them as *orang Siam* (Siamese people). The reason is because the Malays of southern Thailand speak a different dialect of Malay that is more akin to what is spoken in the Malay state of Kelantan but is not acceptable as standard Malay which is spoken widely in other states.

Even among themselves, the Malays of southern Thailand are careful a fear and political intimidation is very apparent. Officially they will not admit that they are *Melayu* but their *Melayu* identity is maintained by the traditional school, limited cultural practices and religion. The concept of *umma* to them is a double edge sword. If they stress too much on the *umma*, it would mean identifying and accepting other Muslims which the Thai nation state frowns upon. Thus the idea of the *umma* is not actively promoted in Thailand.

Since the *Melayu* of south Thailand feel that they are subjected to political, cultural and religious persecution by the Buddhist state, there has been a series of rebellions which have plagued the Thai nation.