



AL-SHAJARAH

ISTAC Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization

Published by IIUM Press

2023 Volume 28 Number 1

AL-SHAJARAH

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BRIDGING TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN THAI ISLAM

The Political and Religious Roles of Surin Pitsuwan (Abdul Halim)

Imtiyaz Yusuf¹ and Pham Thuy Quynh²

Abstract

Dr Surin Pitsuwan (Abdul Halim bin Ismail Pitsuwan) (28 October 1949 – 30 November 2017) was a prominent Thai Muslim politician of national and international stature with a colorful career as a journalist, an academic, a member of the Parliament and served first as Deputy Foreign Minister and next as the Foreign Minister of Thailand from 1992 to 2001, culminating in his career as the Secretary General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) between 2008 and 2013. Born and bred in a traditional Malay family in Nakhon Si Thammarat, he acquired the pondok and modern education in Thai and American universities. He played an important role in bridging tradition and modernity in Thai Islam by promoting the Thai Muslim community's educational, intellectual, and political upliftment, thereby constructing its integrative face of Islam in Thailand - a Buddhist-majority country. Dr Pitsuwan was an ardent promoter of democratic practice, human resources development and upholding human rights through peaceful means. This article employs qualitative and subjective approaches by drawing data from the speeches, writings, and personal interactions with Dr Pitsuwan. It highlights that peaceful coexistence between the Thai Muslims and the Thai Buddhists is a reality and not an exception.

Keywords: Pitsuwan, Islam, Thailand, Democrat Party, ASEAN, pondok.

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1. Background

This paper is probably the first academic paper in English to document and discuss the role of Dr Surin Pitsuwan (Thai: สุรินทร์ พิศสุวรรณ; also known Abdul Halim bin Ismail Pitsuwan) (28 October 1949 – 30 November 2017), a prominent Thai Muslim politician of high national and international stature. Pitsuwan was born and bred in a traditional Malay family from Nakhon Si Thammarat in southern Thailand. He acquired the *pondok* (traditional Malay *madrasah*) and modern education in Thailand and American universities. This unique educational background enabled him to play an important role in bridging tradition and modernity in Thailand's Muslim minority community by engaging in efforts for the Thai Muslims' educational, social, economic, intellectual, and political upliftment, thereby constructing an integrative face of Islam in Thailand.

This article employs both qualitative and subjective approaches. It draws information from speeches, writings, and personal interactions with Pitsuwan during his lifetime.

2. The Faces of Islam in Thailand

Like all other world religions, Islam operates at global and local levels. The global identity of Islam is constructed in pan-Islamist terms of *ummah* or the world Muslim community. In contrast, most of the local Muslim identities in the world are construed in tribal, ethnic, and communal terms, as seen in Africa and the Middle East, Southeast, and South Asia.

Thailand is a religiously pluralistic country with a Buddhist majority of 92-94%, Muslims constituting about 5-7%, and Christians and others 1% of the total population of 70 million. However, the Thai constitution does not declare Buddhism as the official religion of Thailand.

Apart from the Malay Sultanate of Patani (1457-1902) in the south of Siamese kingdom Islam came to Thailand from the South, Central and North directions. It first arrived in southern Thailand in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with the Malay, Indian and Arab traders.³ Secondly, Islam arrived in Central Thailand during the

³ Raymond Scupin, *Thai Muslims in Bangkok: Islam and Modernization in a*

fifteenth century through Persian Shias, Indonesian Sunnis, Cham, and Indian Muslims stationed in Ayudhya. Cham Muslims migrated to Ayudhya due to the collapse of the Champa kingdom in 1491, while Indonesian Muslims from Makassar settled there following the Dutch conquest of the island between 1666-1669. Thirdly, the Indian, Bengali, and Chinese Muslims arrived in the North of Thailand between the 1870s and 1890s respectively.⁴ With the establishment of the new capital Bangkok in 1782 by King Rama I of the Chakri dynasty and consolidation of control over Pattani there emerged Malay, Iranian, Pathan, Cham, Indonesian, and Malay Muslims communities in the new capital.⁵

Islam in Thailand operates in three configurations defined by history and location:

1) The ethnic Malay-speaking Islam is practiced in the deep South's Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat provinces. These southern Muslims comprise about 44% of the Thai Muslim population of about 5-7 million.

2) The integrated ethnically Malay but Thai-speaking Islam is practiced in the upper Southern provinces of Satun, Songkhla, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phuket, Krabi, and Phangnga, the majority of whom were migrants from Kedah and Perlis in Malaysia.

3) The multi-ethnic Thai-speaking integrated Islam of central Thailand provinces of Bangkok and Ayudhya as well as those of North and Northeast Thailand; this group comprises Muslims of Persian, Malay, Cham,⁶ Indonesian, Indian, Bengali, Pathan, and Chinese ethnic backgrounds. Overall, Thai Muslims make up the largest

Buddhist Society, PhD Dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1978, 1-2.

⁴ Suthep Soonthornpasuch, *Islamic Identity in Chiangmai City: A Historical and Structural Comparison of Two Communities*, PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1977, 37-75.

⁵ Raymond Scupin, *Thai Muslims in Bangkok*, 19-29.

⁶ Raymond Scupin, "Cham Muslims of Thailand: A Haven of Security in Southeast Asian." *JOURNAL Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 10 (1989): 486-491. Also, Seddik Taouti, "The Forgotten Muslims of Kampuchea and Vietnam," *JOURNAL Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 4 (1982): 3-13. See also Suthep Soonthornpasuch, *Islamic Identity in Chiangmai City*. Also, David Wilson and David Henley, "Northern Comfort: The Contented Muslims of Chiang Mai," *Bangkok Post Outlook Section*, 4 January 1995, 33, 40.

minority religious group in the country, constituting "a national minority rather than a border minority."⁷

Despite constant pressure from the hardline and Buddhist fundamentalists, the 1997, 2007 and 2014 Constitution of Thailand did not recognize Buddhism as Thailand's official religion. However, coming under further immense pressure from Buddhist fundamentalists, Thailand's 2017 Constitution gave a prominent constitutional position to Buddhism. This move was mainly in response to both the rise of new Buddhist religious movements such as Santi Asoke and the Dhammakaya Temple, which are regarded as heretical sects by the Sangha Supreme Council, the rise of scandals involving sex, drugs, money, murders and other mischievous deeds within the Buddhist religious community and moral laxity at large. It was also a response to Muslim separatism in the deeper south region of Thailand in Pattani and other provinces.

Section 67 of Thailand's 2017 Constitution states:⁸ "The State should support and protect Buddhism and other religions. In supporting and protecting Buddhism, the religion observed by the majority of the Thai people for an extended period, the State should promote and support education and dissemination of dharmic principles of Theravada Buddhism for the development of mind and wisdom. It shall have measures and mechanisms to prevent Buddhism from being undermined. The State should also encourage Buddhists to

⁷ Omar Farouk "The Muslims of Thailand" in Lutfi Ibrahim (ed.) *ISLAMIKA* (Kuala Lumpur: Sarjana Enterprise, 1981), 97–121. See also Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Muslims as Thailand's Largest Religious Minority" in Syed Muhammad Khairudin Aljunied, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Islam in Southeast Asia* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, and NY: Routledge, 2022), 234–49.

⁸ Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, "Buddhist Politics and Thailand's Dangerous Path", *New Mandala*, 2016, <https://www.newmandala.org/buddhist-politics-and-thailands-dangerous-path> [accessed 17 October 2022]; Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, "Thailand's Constitution Capitulates to Buddhist Domineering", *East Asia Forum*, 2018, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/01/24/thailands-constitution-capitulates-to-buddhist-domineering> [accessed 17 October 2022]. Méricau, Eugénie, "Buddhist Constitutionalism in Thailand: When Rājadharmā Supersedes the Constitution," *Asian Journal of Comparative Law*, 13 (2018), 283–305, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/asjcl.2018.16>

participate in implementing such measures or mechanisms.⁹

Overall, Thai Muslims make up the largest minority religious group in the country, constituting "Thailand's largest religious minority."¹⁰

3. Thailand's Muslim Leaders

Thailand has two types of Muslim leaders: the Malay-speaking Muslims of the deep south who converse their religio-social discourse in the Kelantan-Patani Malay dialect, while the rest discourse about Islam in Thai.

Thailand, formerly known as Siam, has produced its crop of Muslim scholars and political leaders, the most prominent among them being Shaykh Daud bin 'Abd Allah al-Fatani (1740-1847),¹¹ Shaykh Wan Ahmad bin Muhammad Zain Mustafa al-Fatani (Shaykh Ahmad al-Fatani) (1856-1908), Haji Sulong¹² (1895-1954) from the Patani region in the south, who discoursed in Malay and Arabic. While in upper and central Siam, the Thai-speaking Muslim religious leaders who discoursed in the Siamese language emerged.

The first *Chularajmontri* or *Shaykh al-Islam* of Siam appointed by the Ayudhya King Phrachao Songtham (1620-28) was the Persian Shia scholar Shaykh Ahmad Qomi (1543-1631). Shaykh Qomi also served as the King's Minister of Foreign Trade. He was entrusted with the task of Muslim community affairs.¹³

The first thirteen *Chularajmontris* were Shia Muslims, who

⁹ Thailand's Constitution of 2017, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Thailand_2017.pdf?lang=en

¹⁰ Intiyaz Yusuf, "Muslims as Thailand's Largest Religious Minority," 234-49.

¹¹ Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian & Middle Eastern "Ulama" in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth* (Crow's Nest, and N.S.W.: Univ of Hawaii Press, 2004), First Edition, 112, 122-126.

¹² On the significance of Hj Sulong in Thai Islam, see Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Religious Education and Reformist Islam in Thailand's Southern Provinces: The Roles of Haji Sulong Abdul Kadir and Ismail Lutfi Japakiya," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 20, no. 1 (1 January 2010), 29-58.

¹³ Omar Farouk, "Shaikh Ahmad: Muslims in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya," *JEBAT – Journal of the History Department, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*, 10 (1980/1), 206-14. Also, Raymond Scupin, "Islam in Thailand Before the Bangkok Period," 63-64.

were the descendants of Shaykh Qomi. From those times until 1934, which marked the end of the last Shia *Chularajmontri*, the religious jurisdiction of *Chularajmontris* did not extend to the southern independent Malay kingdoms. However, with the incorporation of the Malay kingdom of Patani in 1906, Islam became the largest minority religion in Thailand; this also created the problem of integrating southern Malay Muslims into the Siamese/Thai nation.

Thailand became a constitutional monarchy in 1932; it faced new linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious problems relating to southern Thailand's Malay Muslim majority provinces. In 1945, the Thai government passed the Patronage of Islam Act which sought to "institute a link between the central authority and the religious notables of the Muslim community."¹⁴ The Patronage of Islamic Act of 1945 marked the official establishment of the Islamic Centre of Thailand headed by the *Chularajmontri/Shaykh al-Islam* and the Provincial Council for Islamic Affairs. Since then, the last five *Chularajmontris* until the present have been Sunni Muslims.

Since Thailand entered the Constitutional Monarchy Era in 1932, many new Muslim religious and political leaders have emerged, such as Chaem Phromyong (1910-1989), who was appointed the first Sunni *Chularajmontri* under the Islamic Patronage Act of 1945. He was a close associate of Pridi Phanomyong, who became Prime Minister in 1946.

The main function of the *Chularajmontri* was to help resolve tensions in the deep South by assisting in the integration process of the southern Malay Muslim provinces into the Thai nation. Chaem Phromyong held the office of the *Chularajmontri* for two years (1945-47) and fled with Pridi to China when Pridi's government was overthrown through the military coup led by Phibun Songkram (1948-1957).

The first Thai Muslim to be appointed to the Thai cabinet since the establishment of the constitutional monarchy was Phya Samantharathaburin, also known as Tui Samantharath or Bin

¹⁴ Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand* (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute Thammasat University, 1985), 100.

Abdullah (1871-1963) from Satun province in southern Thailand. He was appointed as a cabinet minister twice by Prime Minister Phya Phahonpayuhasena during the fifth and seventh Assembly terms between 1933-1934 and 1937, respectively.

Another prominent Muslim appointed to the cabinet was Che Abdullah Langputeh (1898-1986) from Satun province. He became a member of the Thai parliament for five terms between 1943 to 1973. He was appointed as a minister three times, first as a minister in the cabinet of Prime Minister Phibun Songkram between 1948-1949 and as Deputy Minister of Public Health in the cabinet of Prime Minister Pote Sarasin in 1957. And again, in the same position during the era of Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn in 1958.

Che Abdullah stood up for the defense of the cultural rights of the Malay Muslims and prevented the implementation of harsh government policies from being implemented in Satun. He also served as a member of the Central Islamic Committee from 1947 onwards. He is remembered for wearing the *songkok* (Malay hat) in Parliament and taking time from the Cabinet meetings to perform prescribed Islamic prayers. He also called for recognizing the *Jawi* dialect of Malay spoken in southern Thailand as an additional national language.

The Democrat Party, which is the oldest existing political party, founded in 1945, also had prominent Muslim politicians such as Lek Nana, a Thai businessman from Bangkok who had served as Deputy Foreign Minister in the Government of Seni Pramroj (1975-1976), and as Minister of Science and Technology in 1985 during the term of the Prem Tinsulanonda Government (1980-1988). Lek Nana had also served as Secretary of the Democrat Party during the party leadership of Bhichai Rattakul. Another member of the Democrat Party, Mr Siddig Shareef, was appointed Deputy Minister of Education during the reign of the earlier mentioned Prime Minister Seni Pramroj for one year in 1976.

Den Tohmeena (1934 –) of Pattani province and the son of the famous Pattani scholar Haji Sulong who disappeared in 1954, has been elected to the Parliament seven times since 1976 and once as a senator. Den Tohmeena served as the Deputy Minister of Public Health in the cabinet of Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan from 1990-1991 and as Deputy Minister of Interior between 1992-1995 in the cabinet of

Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai.

Den Tohmeena and Wan Muhammad Nor Matta, both from the southern provinces of Pattani and Yala, respectively, and other southern Malay Muslim politicians founded the *Wadah* political faction in 1988. In 1996, Wan Muhammad Nor Matta was elected first as the Speaker of the Parliament and later as the President of the National Assembly. He also served in the positions of the Minister of Transport, Minister of Interior, and Deputy Prime Minister in the cabinet of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra between 2001-2005. Further on, as Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives again in the Thaksin government between 2005-2006.

Another Muslim bureaucrat cum politician from Bangkok, Aree Wongaraya, was appointed Deputy Minister of Education in the 2005-2006 Thaksin cabinet. Subsequently, in the interim government led by General Surayud Chulalanont set up after the military coup in 2006, Wongaraya was appointed the Minister of Interior.

Among Thai-speaking Muslim religious scholars are Direk Kulsiriswad, also known as Ibrahim Qureshi (1922-2005); Marwan Sama Onn; Professor Hassan Madmarn (1941-2012), former Director of the College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani campus; Ajarn Shafii Napakorn and Dr Ismail Lutfi Japakiya, the Rector of Fathoni University, in Yarang District of Pattani, who is well versed in both Malay, Arabic and Thai languages.¹⁵

¹⁵ Imtiyaz Yusuf, *Faces of Islam in Southern Thailand* (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center Washington, 2007), accessed December 13, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/3536>; Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Religious Education and Reformist Islam in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces: The Roles of Haji Sulong Abdul Kadir and Ismail Lutfi Japakiya," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 21, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 29–58.

4. Dr Surin Pitsuwan (28 October 1949 – 30 November 2017)



The most famous and internationally renowned Thai Muslim politician and leader was Dr Surin Pitsuwan from the Democrat Party, a person of Malay descent from Nakhon Si Thammarat. His father built the Pondok Ban Tan in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, which continues today. Pitsuwan had dreamed of making it modelled on the Oxford model, which initially combined religious and general education.

Pitsuwan received his primary and secondary education in a Buddhist temple school in his home province. He was awarded the American Field Service (A.F.S.) exchange scholarship and was a high school exchange student in Minnesota, U.S.A., from 1967-1968. He returned to Bangkok and attended Thammasat University for two years before winning a scholarship from Claremont Men's College, Claremont, California, to complete his B.A. in Political Science (cum laude) in 1972. He then went on to Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A., where he received his MA and PhD in 1974 and 1982, respectively, in the field of Political Science and Middle Eastern Studies.

The Winston S. Churchill Association and Rockefeller Foundation Fellowships supported his Harvard career. He also spent a year and a half studying Arabic and conducting research at the American University in Cairo from 1975-1977. He was concurrently a fellow at the Higher Institute of Islamic Research, Cairo, Egypt. He

worked as a columnist for *The Nation* and the *Bangkok Post*, the two leading English daily newspapers in Bangkok, from 1975-1992.

From 1978-1983, Pitsuwan taught at the Faculty of Political Science at Thammasat University, and from 1984-1986 he was an assistant to the Deputy Dean for Academic Affairs. While teaching at Thammasat University in 1984, he ran for a Parliamentary seat in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, his hometown.

Pitsuwan won and was returned to Parliament eight times since 1986. As an MP, he was appointed Secretary to the Speaker of the House of Representatives (Chuan Leekpai), Secretary to the Deputy Minister of Interior, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs during 1992-1995, and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1997 to 2001. When Thailand was the Chair of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and the ASEAN Regional Forum (A.R.F.) in 1999-2000, Foreign Minister Pitsuwan played a central role in building peace and security in East Timor. As the Foreign Minister, he also helped the UN negotiate peace during the Aceh conflict in Indonesia.

He was nominated by the Royal Thai Government and endorsed by ASEAN Leaders as the ASEAN Secretary-General for 2008-2013.¹⁶ During this period, he played a central role in relief operations in Myanmar in the aftermath of the devastating Nargis cyclone forcing it to open to receive humanitarian aid and relief services. He once told us Southeast Asia has states not yet nations and that the ASEAN group of nations moves at a speed comfortable to all.

Pitsuwan was a Deputy Leader of the Democrat Party Thailand. He also served on the National Reconciliation Commission (N.R.C.), which brought peace and security back to Thailand's deep South. He had a brilliant and sharp mind of excellent intellectual capability, eloquence, and political perceptiveness. His active role as the Secretary-General of ASEAN and internationally renowned public figure had taken a toll on his health, though he did not have any major disease except hypertension. He died suddenly of heart attack on 30 November 2017 at the age of 68. There was talk that he

¹⁶ "Secretary-General of ASEAN Surin Pitsuwan," *ASEAN / ONE VISION, ONE IDENTITY, ONE COMMUNITY*, accessed February 3, 2019, https://asean.org/?static_post=secretary-general-of-asean-surin-pitsuwan.

could even become Thailand's next prime minister in the elections in February 2019. Pitsuwan was a giant of man, both respected nationally and internationally and always available to help every section of the society he loved. The motto of his *alma mater*, Thammasat University, where he also taught for a while, is "where we learn to love the people."

Posthumously in 2019, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) of Sweden and the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University jointly set up "Dr Surin Pitsuwan Fellowship." The fellowship is open to PhD candidates or Master's students from any of the ten ASEAN countries at Thammasat University.¹⁷

5) Pitsuwan's Historic Achievement – Solidifying ASEAN

As Secretary-General of ASEAN, Pitsuwan's historic achievement was to raise the organization to a global profile as a "networked secretariat." He travelled nearly every day. He once told Supachai Panitchpakdi, the former commerce minister, finance minister and Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand who also served as Director-General of the World Trade Organization and Secretary-General of the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development, "My office is in the sky."¹⁸ And he once told us, "I rarely sleep on earth, mostly in the skies."

Pitsuwan was acknowledged as a person of high caliber, and he moved easily among the top Thai and international statespersons, kings, queens and people like Henry Kissinger, Kofi Annan, Madeline Albright, Sadako Ogata, Hillary Clinton, Tun Mahathir, Suharto, Anwar Ibrahim and others.

His entry into national politics and world level was unique; he used to say he was a child of the *pondok*, a Buddhist temple school and Harvard. Before embarking on his political career, he told us

¹⁷ "Dr Surin Pitsuwan Fellowship: International IDEA and Thammasat University Seal the Partnership | International IDEA," accessed 27 July 2022, <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/dr-surin-pitsuwan-fellowship-international-idea-and-thammasat-university-seal>.

¹⁸ "Surin Pitsuwan: Memories of a True Comrade in Arms," *The Nation*, accessed 3 February 2019, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/opinion/30333446>.

once that he had sought the advice of the former Thai Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun. Anand told him that in Thailand, people become politicians because of wealth and connection, so he had to prove that he had good credentials and could work hard. He proved that *anak/dek pondok* could rise to world-level recognition through sheer hard work. His success story has become an inspiration and role model for many young Thai Muslim youth.

Visiting U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton once asked Pitsuwan how serious he was about implementing the ASEAN Charter with its three pillars of political, security, economic and socio-political community. Pitsuwan answered that he was dead serious and gave America's top diplomat an extended explanation comparing the ASEAN Charter to the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Impressed, Clinton quipped, "Yes, Professor", as Pitsuwan ended his exposition.¹⁹



Anand Panyarachun (the former Prime Minister of Thailand, (left), with Henry Kissinger, the former U.S. Secretary of State at a meeting with Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai during a visit to Thailand in 1998. Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan, a future ASEAN Secretary-General, is standing right.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "A Low-Key Meeting in 1991 Gave Rise to the ASEAN Free Trade Area,"



UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (right) meets with Surin Pitsuwan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, at Bangkok International Airport.²¹

6. Pitsuwan's Religious, Political and Social Views – A Man of Glocal Stature and Perspectives

Pitsuwan was a pious practising Muslim who managed excellently in bridging tradition and modernity in Thai Islam. He could converse with Thai Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians around the country. He was at home in both Thailand and the world.

7. Traditional and Reformist Islam in Thailand - *Kaum Tua* (Malay) / *Khana kau* (Thai) and *Kaum Muda* (Malay) / *Khana mai* (Thai)

Thai Islam developed multifacetedly during modern and contemporary times as it came under the influence of theological trends developed in the region and the Muslim world. Since the 1920s, Islam in Thailand has acquired different faces. These faces are those of traditional and reformist Islam. The traditional Islam or

Nikkei Asia, accessed 16 August 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/A-low-key-meeting-in-1991-gave-rise-to-the-ASEAN-Free-Trade-Area>.

²¹ "United Nations Photo - F0b.Jpg," accessed 16 August 2022, https://dam.media.un.org/asset-management/2AM9LO55E9MO?FR_=1&W=1366&H=600.

Kaum Tua (Malay) / *Khana kau* (Thai) represents Islam which is syncretic in orientation. At the same time, the reformist Salafi-oriented Islam, known as *Kaum Muda* (Malay)/*Khana mai* (Thai), represents Islam, which is puritanical in orientation. Pitsuwan, while being able to converse with different Muslim groups within Thai Islam, was partial to traditional Islam or *Kaum Tua* (Malay)/*Khana kau* (Thai), which he viewed as the historically and culturally rooted face of Islam in Thailand.

8. Southern Thailand Crisis

Pitsuwan was well-versed in the situation in southern Thailand, and he wrote his PhD thesis at Harvard, which he turned into a book titled *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study Of Malay-Muslims Of Southern Thailand* (1985). This is a classic work and an essential introduction to understanding the southern Thailand crisis. In his book, he clearly stated that the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand view national integration as entailing their cultural disintegration because Thai Buddhism and Malay Islam belong to two different cosmological orientations.²² “They do not want to be integrated into the Thai state. They do not want to lose their religious and cultural autonomy. If the Thai state is the manifestation of the Buddhist cosmology, the Malay-Muslim do not want to be a part of it.”²³ The predominantly ethnic orientations of the two communities of the Thai Buddhists and the Malay Muslims have been described as "closed systems."²⁴

9. Reforming the Office of the Chularajmontri/Shaykh al-Islam of Thailand

With the establishment of democracy in Thailand after the Black May, or Bloody May protests of May 1992 and being appointed as

²² Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism*, 8, 12.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴ Donald Tugby and Elise Tugby, “Malay-Muslim and Thai-Buddhist Relations in the Pattani Region: An Interpretation” in *The Muslims of Thailand* Vol. 2, eds., Andrew D. W. Forbes, General Editor, Sachchidanand Sahai (Gaya, India: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 73.

the Deputy Foreign Minister of Thailand, as a Democrat, he went along with his party to start the process of reforming the office of the *Chularajmontri/Shaykh al-Islam* of Thailand along democratic lines. Formerly, the Thai King appointed the *Chularajmontri/Shaykh al-Islam* of Thailand for a life term. In light of the changing political situation in Thailand, which was moving towards greater democratization and the entrance into the age of globalization, Pitsuwan and the Democrat Party introduced in 1992 the Islamic Administrative Bill into a law which was aimed at reforming the institution of *Chularajmontri/Shaykh al-Islam* of Thailand along more democratic lines. The 1992 Islamic Administrative Bill proposed that:

(1) the *Chularajmontri*, the head of the National Council of Islamic Affairs and the Provincial Council for Islamic Affairs who had so far held their offices for life, from now on to be elected to their posts for certain terms;

(2) the term of office for members of the National Council of Islamic Affairs and the Provincial Council for Islamic Affairs Committees be limited to six years; and that the *Chularajmontri* retire at the age of 70;

(3) an election process be introduced to select the members of the National Council of Islamic Affairs and the Provincial Councils for Islamic Affairs, leading to greater efficiency in the functioning of the official Islamic institutions in the country;

(4) the administrative structure of the National Council of Islamic Affairs, including the office of the *Chularajmontri*, be reorganized.

The bill became law in 1997; it introduced the election process for the *Chularajmontri*, who would, from then on, be elected by all the members of the National Council of Islamic Affairs and the Provincial Council for Islamic Affairs and hold office for life.²⁵

10. Pitsuwan – A Global Personality

Pitsuwan delivered keynote addresses at several conferences I

²⁵ Intiyaz Yusuf, "Islam and Democracy in Thailand: Reforming the Office Of "Chularajmontri/Shaykh Al-Islam," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 9, no. 2 (1998): 277-98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26198065>.

(Imtiyaz Yusuf) had previously organized at the Assumption University of Thailand, Bangkok and the College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University, Salaya. Here are some of the views he presented on these occasions.

In a keynote address titled, "Civic Religion, Secular State and Democracy: The Taming of Religious Sentiments in Thailand", delivered in 2008 and on being appointed as the Secretary-General of the ASEAN group of nations, Pitsuwan lamented there was the bankruptcy of democracy in the region despite constitutions. At that time, a military coup had taken place in Thailand, and the country's most democratic constitution of 1997, also known as the "people's constitution", was suspended. Pitsuwan remarked that:

“So, we have had a period of tremendous anxiety and tension because we forgot that there is something more fundamental than just the rules and the system at the ballot box and the elections. That there is something called ethics and morality. What do we have when we pitch individuals against individuals and communities against communities? We have ethnic chauvinism and a sense of insecurity within our body-politic... I am very inspired and enthusiastic about ASEAN. I have to operate from Thailand as my base, and if this country cannot put together a more effective system of democracy with participation and equality with confidence to every constituent part, I will be undermined at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta.”

“So, it is important to curb extremisms of all types with solidarities across differences,” he remarked. “We seek to defend each other from the extremes of our own emotions and weaknesses, and we seek to respect everyone and coexist peacefully to achieve a harmonious collective life called a true democracy. And if there is any extremism lurking on the horizon from any community, it is our collective responsibility to try to tame it, to reason and rationalize about it and seek a better way out rather than pitching one extreme against

the other, rather than stepping on each other's sensitive points. And if we cannot achieve that here in Thailand, it will be very difficult to achieve it within ASEAN."²⁶

In another seminar in 2014, Pitsuwan remarked on the challenge of development facing the different ASEAN religious communities. He said that the hallmark of the 600 million people of ASEAN was its ethnic and civilizational differences. However, some communities were taking full advantage of development and growth while others were not:

Communities, sub-communities, and sub-cultures may need more time to take full advantage and move along the road of integration and progress. Some of them may feel insecure about losing their own identity. Some may enhance their confidence in their prosperity, and ethnicity is peculiar. It can be very daunting, it can be very peaceful, it can be very calm, but once the landscape loses its balance, whether that balance comes because of the prosperity of some, or the disadvantage of others, or even of the shared prosperity for all, the delicate balance among and between ethnic themes—ethnic groups, religious groups, civilization groups—may be affected. We have to be extremely careful to manage the new grounds that we need to keep the land safe, secure, stable, calm and progressive into the future.

This is the challenge for the 600 million people of ASEAN, this is the challenge for the leaders of ASEAN, of how to make sure that all religious groups, all civilization groups, and cultural entities inside can fully benefit or equally benefit from this new dynamism that is going on at some 6.7% per year, 2.4 trillion U.S. dollars combined G.D.P. with, trading with the world and among ourselves, 2.6 trillion U.S. dollars a year. Who will take full advantage of all those opportunities?

²⁶ Surin Pitsuwan, "Keynote address: Civil religion, secular state and democracy: the taming of religious sentiments in Thailand" in Imtiaz Yusuf, *Religion and Democracy in Thailand* (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2008).

About 100 billion US dollars are coming in from the outside onto the landscape of ASEAN in the form of foreign direct investments. Who shall be the beneficiary of those jobs and those Euros and those amounts of money coming onto the landscape when our communities are not equally ready to take advantage properly?

The political and economic context of each of the member states of ASEAN will need to be more convincing for them to believe that growth and development will also be enough. I am not quite sure that people in the southern part of the Philippines, the southern part of Thailand, and even the Muslim Rakhine in Myanmar now are genuinely committed to growth, growth, growth; they are looking at something else, growth plus the freedom, space, sense of origin and belonging.²⁷

Pitsuwan's fears and foresight about the vulnerability of violence in ASEAN seem to be coming true today in the pandemic and the post-pandemic era of COVID-19. In order to address this challenge after his tenure as ASEAN Secretary-General, Pitsuwan embarked on domestic and world missions to contribute to the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), an "initiative of the United Nations that aims to build bridges between societies, promote dialogue and understanding, forge collective political will to address growing divisions between societies and restore mutual respect between peoples of differing cultures."²⁸ Moreover, to different governments around the world and ASEAN region and Asia as Muslim citizens of the world committed to building a future of peace.

²⁷ Surin Pitsuwan, "Keynote Address" in Imtiyaz Yusuf, ed., *ASEAN Religious Pluralism: The Challenges of Building a Socio-Cultural Community* (Bangkok: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2014), xvi-xvii, xx .

²⁸ "United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and International Dialogue Centre Join Forces to Promote Dialogue for Peace," *United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC)*, 8 May 2017, accessed 4 February 2019, <https://www.unaoc.org/2017/05/unaoc-and-international-dialogue-centre-join-forces-to-promote-dialogue-for-peace/>.

Our last cooperative act with Pitsuwan took place at the Conference we organized on "Multiculturalism in Asia – Peace and Harmony" on 25-26 August 2016 at the International Center for Buddhist-Muslim Understanding at the College of Religious Studies (CRS), Mahidol University. It was one of Pitsuwan's last activities where he delivered another keynote address aptly titled, "One Thing in Common Is Our Common Humanity – The Contemporary Challenges of Multiculturalism, Integration, Assimilation and Interfaith", which was published posthumously. Pitsuwan once again reminded that:

"If you start to count from the shores of the Mediterranean, the Middle East and as you move eastwards to the islands of the Pacific, this vast region is full of contradictions, full of diversity and full of fault lines for creating misunderstanding and conflicts if we are not careful."²⁹

Pitsuwan commented that globalization is not making all the 193 countries of the UN the same but is strengthening diversity among us and encouraging each one of us to maintain our separate group identities. So, the challenge is how to maintain, create, and accommodate identities that individuals carry. He further remarked that "There is not one Surin Pitsuwan; there are many dimensions of Surin Pitsuwan. I think the challenge for all of us is how to handle all such dimensions and be true to ourselves at the same time, which is very difficult. But such is the challenge of globalization, maintaining your diverse identities, being true to yourselves and your traditions, and being instrumental in connecting the diversity you have found in your life, career, and work. That's the challenge.... So, I guess all of us in the ASEAN group of nations and East Asia will have to begin with identifying what the core of our identity is and what are the other identities that we carry within ourselves so that we can be connected with the rest of the region within ASEAN, within East Asia and find that we have something in common. And then we try to create a platform or a network of cooperation and relations which

²⁹ Imtiyaz Yusuf, *Multiculturalism in Asia: Peace and Harmony* (Salaya, Nakorn Pathom: College of Religious Studies, C.R.S. International Center for Buddhist-Muslim Understanding, Mahidol University, 2018), 13.

will draw the strength of the diversity rather than having to live in conflicts because of those differences we have among us."³⁰

Referring to religious diversity and the idea of common humanity, Pitsuwan emphasized, "So, I think the secret is how to manage the diversity within yourself and find the commonality among those diversities that you have in yourself in order to connect with others who happen to have similar dimensions and diversity within themselves. Only then can we talk about peace; we can talk about harmony. After all, we are all human beings; after all, we are human; we have been placed here as one group among 7.3 billion people to make sense of our existence; what are we here for? Are we here just for ourselves, myself, and my family, or for a larger group of humanity? ...So, we must try to identify what we have in common with others and why we are different and how we can reconcile those differences so that we can find certain dimensions of commonality among us as Thais, Chinese, Indians, Buddhists, Muslims, Confucianists, Shintoists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims...Why? Because we need it. Why? Because of the diversity that we must understand among us and between us. So more than just identifying what we have or who we are, we need to find what is really deep down in us, what is the core of our existence and what we have in common, and how we are diverse from others. We also need to reach down to our own cultures and civilizations."³¹

Pitsuwan ended this speech by quoting Ernest Hemingway's novel titled "*For Whom the Bell Tolls*."³² And He said, "With all the diversity we have among us, with all the misunderstanding that we have among us, with all the differences, the suspicion, the mental suspicion, the disrespect, with all the prejudice we have for each other, at least we have one thing in common, that is our common humanity. So do not ask, "For Whom the Bell Tolls," for it tolls for everyone."³³ He suddenly passed away young at 68 on 30 November 2017, leaving us shocked until today. However, he has conveyed that Muslims have to gear up to live with diversity within and without and

³⁰ Ibid., 17.

³¹ Ibid., 18.

³² Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bells Tolls* (London: Arrow Books, 2004).

³³ Yusuf, *Multiculturalism in Asia*, 21.

that world peace and understanding lie only in recognizing that “ONE THING IN COMMON IS OUR COMMON HUMANITY.” As a glocal Muslim, Pitsuwan has left the adherents of all religions with the challenge to work for peace and reconciliation from within their traditions.

11. Conclusion: *Adieu to the World*

Pitsuwan was a Thai Muslim scholar-politician of international stature. Being a child born in a *pondok/pesantren* environment and in a family of Nusantara *ulama* in the Malay-Muslim minority community of southern Thailand, he had achieved great heights of success as a scholar and politician of local, regional, and international stature through sheer hard work and dedication through education and high ambitions.

As a representative Thai Muslim, Pitsuwan was a man who was proud of his Muslim religious identity from the Thai minority Muslim population and dedicated his life and devotion to Islam and humanity. He has inspired many young Thai Muslims as a role model who has reached heights even in a Buddhist-majority country. He has left behind a legacy and a lesson about facing the challenges faced by Muslims and humanity at large through achieving educational merit and how personal integrity and knowledge can bridge the gap between religious identity, tradition, and modernity.

Lastly, he has left a message that we all share a common humanity, that the bell is tolling for everyone, and that within human diversity, there are roots on which we can either build or tear down our shared present and future. As a Thai-Malay Muslim, he drew this message from his origins in a *pondok/pesantren* environment in southern Thailand, sourced from the Qur'an and the universality of its teachings and principles.

Pitsuwan was buried on 1 December 2017 in Bangkok with an honored funeral ceremony. Thousands of people from all faiths, important political personalities, and local and international groups attended his funeral. And the King Vajiralongkorn (Rama X) of Thailand, as per the Thai political tradition, who is as per the Thai constitution the patron of all the religions in Thailand, sent royally blessed soil, gifts and a wreath of flowers to the funeral, which the

King's representative delivered. The three Thai royal princesses viz., Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, Her Royal Highness Princess Chulabhorn and Her Royal Highness Princess Soamsawali also sent wreaths to honor this distinguished and illustrious Thai Muslim at his funeral.³⁴



Dr. Surin Pitsuwan delivering a keynote speech at the international seminar on “Multiculturalism in Asia – Peace and Harmony” on 25-26 August 2016, organized by the C.R.S. International Center for Buddhist-Muslim Understanding at the College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University.

³⁴ “King Sends Royally Blessed Soil to Surin’s Funeral Rites,” *Bangkok Post*, n.d., accessed 16 August 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1370887/king-sends-royally-blessed-soil-to-surins-funeral-rites>.



The coffin is carried from the mosque to a cemetery for the burial.³⁵



His Majesty, the King Vajiralongkorn's representatives, lay royally blessed soil on the grave and wreaths of

³⁵ Photo credit: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1370887/king-sends-royally-blessed-soil-to-surins-funeral-rites>.

flowers at the burial ceremony of former ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan at Tha-It Mosque in Nonthaburi's Pak Kret district.³⁶

³⁶ Photo credit: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1370887/king-sends-royally-blessed-soil-to-surins-funeral-rites>.

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	ب	پ	پ	ز	ز	ز	ز	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	ب	ب	ب	ژ	—	—	ř	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	پ	پ	پ	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	m
ت	ت	ت	ت	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h ¹	h ¹
ث	th	th	th	ص	ş	ş	ş	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ی	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	—	-a ²
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al ³	—	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	—	—	—	—	—
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğh	—	—	—	—	—
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	—	—	—	—	—
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	q	—	—	—	—	—
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	—	—	—	—	—

¹ – when not final

² – at in construct state

³ – (article) al - or l-

VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iy (final form i)	iy (final form i)
	و	uww (final form ū) uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	ا	u	u or ū
	ا	i	o or ö
	ا	i	i

URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. جھ jh گھ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

AL-SHAJARAH

Vol. 28, No. 1, 2023

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WoS-Indexed under Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Current Contents/Arts and Humanities and Scopus

ISSN 1394-6870



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