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AGENT FOR CHANGE & PEACE: PROGRESS AND CHALLENGE OF CSOs WORKING TOWARD PEACE ADVOCACY IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

Abstract

There are increasing studies globally about the constructive role and engagement of civil society actors in peace-building process at the different phases. Local civil society groups can either play constructive or destructive role in conflict context. Inclusion of civil society actors is widely acknowledged among international peace scholars in contributing to peace-building efforts through engaging local participation and create legitimacy for the peace process. While protracted violence and insurgency in southernmost Thailand has not yet been resolved, Thai government took the groundbreaking step of official peace dialogue with the insurgent groups in 2013. Nevertheless, amid the national political unrest within the country, military has seized power from civilian government in 2014. Peace dialogue process under junta administration has been slowly moving forward, local civil society actors are gradually perceived as significant influent players for local buy-in for the peace talks. This study attempts to find the explanation about opportunities and challenges of local civil society actors advocating for peace in southernmost Thailand; whether they are successful to enlarge public sphere and promote more civic participation under the constraint of political conditions in the. To acquire such information, data is collected from literature, documents and the interviews with civil society members advocating for peace in southern Thailand. At least three thematic topics are explored: civil society actors working toward peace in southernmost Thailand, civic participation and public sphere.

In this study, I argue that despite the current political constraint under the ruling of military government, civil society actors in three southern border provinces of Thailand manage to advocate peace mobilization to their constituencies, even if in different preferential non-violent approach. They seek out local participation by organizing public forums and other public events. In the meantime, while peace resolution does not prevail, local civil society actors have significant role as agent for change to create constructive social awareness and support non-violence political transition.

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keywords: Civil society in southernmost Thailand, public sphere, civic participation

Introduction

After thirteen years of conflict and violence in three southern border provinces of Thailand - Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat - and four districts of Songkhla province, civil society organizations (CSOs) have been relatively active in addressing the impacts from violence and existing socioeconomic issues in southern conflict areas. Annually, huge amount of national budget and security forces are provided to this region aiming to solve conflict and violence problems, yet sporadic violent incidents are commonly occurred, signifying the greater challenge to state-centric security approach.

This study focuses on opportunities and challenges of civil society organizations working in southern border provinces, their peace advocacy efforts to enlarge public sphere, and engagement more civic participation under the constraint of political conditions, particularly after the official peace talks between Thai government and a group of insurgents in 2013. Information is gathered through available documents, websites, and interviews with four young local leaders of active civil society organizations advocating for peace in southern Thailand.

Based on acquired information, I argue that despite the current political constraint under the ruling of military government, local civil society actors in the southern conflicted provinces manage to advocate peace mobilization to their constituencies, even if in different preferential non-violent approach to peace. They seek out local participation by organizing public forums and other public events. These activities organized by local civil society organizations provide opportunities for local people to debate, discuss and sharing together their political ideas and thoughts, which help enlarging public sphere of civil society. This may transform and/or tone down the anticipation of local people who might have extreme thoughts in using violence in settling the conflict in southern Thailand to rethink about other possible non-violence and political approach in solving problems in their localities. Local civil society actors are able to mobilizing peace advocacy on the account of two observations. First, local activists and civil society organizations started to formed networks and alliances, which has increased their capacity and assertive role to lead and influence public opinion, particularly their peace advocacy and mobilizing movements. Second, the shifting of Thai government's orientation and policies toward southern conflict region, especially since the first official peace talks in 2013,[2] has opened a window of opportunity for local civil society actors to advocate on several issues which are

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[2] Thai government officially uses the phase 'groups of people who have different political and ideological thoughts' to tone down any relevance of Patani separatism.

relevant to peace-building. However, the contestation over legitimate representation aspects of civil society actors in southernmost Thailand to define local people whom they are representing and whether what they are advocating for are met with local needs still need to be identified in further study.

Civil Society, Public Sphere and Participation

Civil Society is the concept originally from western countries and can be traced back to Greek and Roman ancient time. Kocka (2003) pointed to the conception of *societal civilis* by Aristotle which have continued to have influence on political and social thoughts of western philosophers. Civil society assumed the modern meaning when the movements of members of bourgeois society and the enlightenment ideas emerged in Europe societies in the 18th century. As Lang (2013) observed civil society became a platform for aspiring bourgeois men who anticipated to see society without censorship nor oppression, and demanded the state to value citizens' participation. Since the late 1980s, civil society has been popularly used by the activists, state officials, politicians, policy makers, academics, funding agencies and etc. Nevertheless, Civil society is still one of the most contested concepts in social science because of its various implications and understandings (Edward, 2011; Boulding, 2014).

This paper will follow the thinking of civil society as the public sphere, of which introduced by Jurgen Habermas. From Habermas's view of public sphere, it was the existence of space where citizens can together discuss about their common problems freely, equally and rationally with the purpose in finding common agreement to solve that particular problem (Samoh & Komolnimi, 2013).[3] The concept of public sphere and this problem-solving approach are considered important to democracy because, at the minimal, it induced members in the society of all sides, from the wide-range of extremist views on political spectrum to engage in non-violent approach (Edward, 2014).

Civil participation in political decision-making process is a common practice in democratic societies which there are increasing discussions among scholars and development practitioners on positive interrelation between strong civil society to promote democratic system through citizen participation. According to the report '*Civil Participation in Decision-making Processes: An overview of Standards and Practice in Council of Europe Member States,*' Rosenzweigova and Skoric (2016), described about the three level of civil participation: 'access to information, consultation, and active partnership,' which can be during the elections, policies and laws development stages (p.3).

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[3] This report is part of summary of public lecture by Mr. Norbert Roper under the theme, 'Jurgen Habermas: The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere' as part of the activities at 'Southern Alternative Media Day' Public Event, held on 12 March 2012.

Later in this paper, I will explain background of the violence, the shifting of government's orientation and policies toward the violence problem in southern Thailand, then investigate the opportunities and challenges of civil society groups and their works of public engagement to address local problems and their searches for peace in this region.

Background of Conflict in Southernmost Thailand

The violence in southernmost provinces of Thailand - Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, and the four districts of Songkhla province - has reemerged in January 2004 when a group of insurgents stole weapons from the armory of military-base camp in Narathiwat province. Then on 28 April, 2004, thirty-two local people, mostly young men, got killed at the historic Mosque, Krue Se, of Pattani province during the exchange of gunfire with Thai security officers. On 25 October 2004, the mishandling operation by Thai military during the arrest of local protesters in Tak Bai district of Narathiwat province caused the death of 78 local people. These three incidents pointed out to the reemerging insurgency in southernmost Thailand since the violence's last decline in 1990s. Updated information revealed the number of 19,012 violence incidents since 2004, which killed 6,442 lives and 12,289 injured (Deep South Incident Database, 2016). The protracted conflict in southernmost region has led to the feeling of distress and fear among local residents, while Thai government confronted the challenge of national security issue.

The majority of local population in three southern border provinces of Thailand are ethnic Malays (Patani) whose religious faith is Islam. Violence and insurgency in southernmost region of the country is not a new phenomenon. The primary explanation could be dated back to separatist movements of Malay Patani descendants who found themselves involuntarily integrated to Siam, after Patani Kingdom was annexed to Siam (or Thailand) in 1909. Historically, political and social movements led by local Patani leaders were unsuccessful to attain their political demands from Thai state. Following these attempts of local people, some of them decided to form separatist movements, calling for Patani independence.

For Thai state, insurgency and violence problem are threat of national security. To stabilize to violence situation in southern Thailand, security forces from other parts of the country were deployed to this region. According to the National Statistical Office (NSC), Thai Government has spent 264,953-million-baht budget (approximately 8,831 million US dollars) to 'resolve and develop Deep Southern provinces' over this last thirteen years since 2004 (Isranews, 2016). Thai state has relied on using security forces to stabilize the violence situation in southern Thailand and put its best effort to keep this problem as mere domestic affairs; however, international donors gradually entered to southern region, providing financial and technical assistances for social and economic development, including

peace-building empowerment projects, through implementation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations.

Policies of Thai State, Civil Society, and Networks of Peace Mobilization in Southern Thailand

Shifting state's orientation and policies toward peace dialogue process

Along with the protracted conflict and violence in this region, a wide-range concerns of socio-economic and cultural issues were raised by members in civil society groups. Human rights abuse, Patani historical and cultural education, unemployment and poverty, drug addiction among youths, vulnerable groups of women and children, local mafia, culture of impunity, accountability from state officials are some existing problems to be named.

Apart from those socioeconomic and cultural challenges, one of the key concern in relevant to evolving conflict in southern Thailand is Patani separatist groups who have been fighting against the power of Thai state or Siam since 1960s. In the past, government of Thailand has always emphasized on socioeconomic development approaches in the policy of local administration for southernmost region, along with the military's security measure. Nevertheless, shifting of Thai government's contemporary orientation toward the conflict in southern Thailand and peace-building efforts are demonstrated through official policies. According to the Southern Border Provinces Administration and Development Policy (2012-2014), one of the objectives in this Policy was to 'enable appropriate environment for dialogue of the conflict resolution and more participation from the stakeholders in peace-building process' (p.17). This policy document also emphasized on more participation from local residents and civil society which could lead to mutual trust and constructive changes in society. Thai government under the administration of Prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra held the first formal meeting with Hassan Bin Toyib, the senior representative of the National Revolutionary Front or commonly known as BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional). BRN was believed to have an active role and most responsible to the unrest situation of southern Thailand after 2004. Some media reported that the meeting, held on February 28, 2013, was happened due to the request of former Prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra to Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak (Nanuam, Ashayagachat & Jikkham, 2013).

Even after PM.Yingluck's administration was overthrown power by military coup d'état led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha in May 2014, the military government has continually proceeded the peace dialogue process. Under Prime Minister's Order Number 230/2557, three-level mechanism for peace dialogue were established (Office of the Prime Minister, 2014). First, The Steering Committee for Peace Dialogue, chaired by PM. Prayuth himself with other senior official members to oversee at the policy level. Second, the negotiation team of Thai government called 'The Peace Dialogue Panel,'

headed by General Aksara Kerdphol. At the local level, the Area-based Inter-agency Coordination Working Group, headed by commander of the 4th Army Region, Lieutenant General Wiwat Pathompak (International Crisis Group, 2016).

The recent Southern Border Provinces Administration and Development Policy (2017-2019), drafted by the Office of the National Security Council (NSC), clearly stated the aim to provide a framework for relevant state agencies to handle problems in southern border region in a systematic manner. NSC (2016) has written clearly about supporting peace dialogue process in the fifth objective:

'to build confidence and continuation of peace dialogue process under the national agenda and preparation to bring in the participation from all stakeholders under the appropriate environment to seek the solution of the conflict.' One of the objectives of this policy is to 'build confidence in the peace dialogue process.' (p.6).

Formation of local civil society networks in southernmost Thailand

In the conflict situation, the most vulnerable people affected from violence are usually women and children. In the case of southernmost Thailand, women have transformed their role from being the victims to active citizens. After the reemerging violence in 2004, local women in violence-affected areas have demanded for their rights and supported program of reparation from Thai authority. Gradually, women groups in southern border provinces became proactive, working to address problems in various social dimensions (Pluemjai and Sungkharat, 2015). Another problem arising at the earlier period after 2004 was the local complaints on human rights violation by security officers in many forms of abduction, torture and interrogation. The local actors who championed to address injustice issues was Muslim Attorney Centre Foundation (MAC) and groups of young Patani activists They have actively worked on social justice and state's accountability in the past decade, explained by a young Patani activist whom I interviewed him in Bangkok, 2017.[4]

According to a study by group of academic researchers, since 2004 development of civil society in southern border provinces can be identified in three stages. First, limited role of civil society between 2004 to 2005. Next, from 2006 to 2013 is the period when activist groups and civil society organizations started to form their networks and alliances, such as the women's network, Civil Society Council of the Southernmost Thailand, and Civil Society for Peace and Network.[5] Last but not least, from 2013 until the present is the period when civil society has its role of creating public debate on the

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[4] Coordinator of the organization in membership of the Civil Society for Peace and Network, interviewed on May 16, 2017
[5] Names in Thai language: สภาประชาสังคมชายแดนใต้ และ เครือข่ายภาคประชาสังคมเพื่อสันติภาพ

importance of the on-going peace dialogue process (Civil Society Council of the Southernmost Thailand, 2017).

In the current trend, there are at least two prominent alliances that both working around their supports and skepticism on peace dialogue process. First, Civil Society Council of the Southernmost Thailand is a network of 20 Malay and Thai civil society organizations and their members who came together to form their alliance in 2011. As of now, there are 28 organizations in membership. Following the development of peace dialogues process, the Civil Society Council of the Southernmost Thailand has rigorously showed the support of ongoing peace dialogue process. Muhammad Ayub Pathan, the current president of the Council, strongly advocates for the role of members in civil society to create such a friendly atmosphere for public dialogue, open space for people at the grassroots to deliberate their needs and deliver recommendation to people of decision-making levels. From his observation, the last three to four years people have had more space to express their political opinions and possible approaches in handling violence in this region. He insisted the more spaces for local people to debate and exchange their political views were created, the greater constructive atmosphere and non-violent practices would be incubated in local communities. (Kenmee, 2017)

Second, the Civil Society for Peace and Network, which was formed by 20 Patani activist groups and organizations. In 2011, a group of young Malay (Patani) Muslim activists worked together demanding Thai government to lift the special laws – the Martial Law Act 1914 and State of Emergency Decree 2005, which have been enforced in southern border provinces for many years. From their point of view, these laws were problematic since they allowed some local officials to use state's power abusively. Later on, members of these groups decided to form the Civil Society for Peace and Network together and had its officially launch in 2013 (DeepSouth Journalism, 2016a). Muslim Attorney Centre Foundation (MAC) and Southern Para-legal Advocacy Network (Span) are main coordinators in allying these young Malay(Patani) activist groups and organizations to work together toward peace, human rights and justice. Members of the network will gather each month for a public forum update event, they agreed that the right way of communication and openness of more spaces for people to express their political opinions would contribute to local participation and reflect the truth about conflict phenomena in southern Thailand (Jena, 2017). Regarding the current peace dialogue process since 2013, the leader of one organization in membership of the Civil Society for Peace and Network has raised the skepticism on military government's political will and its sincerity. [6]

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[6] Leader of one organization in membership of the Civil Society for Peace and Network, interviewed on December 4, 2016.

Public engagement and participation.

One observation on development of civil society in southernmost Thailand to the direction of engaging local participation in addressing violence problems and constructive dialogues for conflict resolution was the establishment of National Reconciliation Commission of Thailand (NRC) in 2005.[7] During that time, human rights violation, justice, and reconciliation programs were main public discourses. Several public forums and meetings were organized for the open dialogues between stakeholders, state officers, religious and local leaders, including civil society organizations in three provinces - Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat.

Execution of the special laws, the Martial Law Act 1914 and State of Emergency Decree 2005, has been the state's security instruments to maintain peace and order in southern conflict area. Albeit, the protest of approximately 10,000 local residents, led by a network of Malay (Patani) youth called 'PNYS' (Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala Students), occurred at the Central Mosque of Pattani province in 2007. Local demonstrators were calling Thai authority to formally remove these special laws, withdraw security troops from southern region, and investigated 21 cases of local people who were tortured to death (Civil Society Council of the Southernmost Thailand, 2017). After the 5-day gathering, seven Malay (Patani) youth leaders have met with the Prime Minister General Surayud Chulanont. Even though their demands did not achieve thoroughly, this mass protest led by Patani youth reflected the collective local action and their participation to address existing problems of abusive authorities and the need of state's accountability. (Wantanasombat, 2014).

In 2008, decentralization discourse proposed by academic sector, to some extent, created further discussion among some local people and civil society actors as a political alternative of conflict resolution for southernmost Thailand. Notwithstanding, members of the Malay (Patani) youth groups reflected the necessity for civil society members to examine the real needs of people in local communities (Civil Society Council of the Southernmost Thailand, 2017). The Civil Society Council of the Southernmost Thailand and King Prajakdhipok's Institution collaboratively organized 200 public forum events, of which feedbacks from local participants were later on subsumed and proposed in the forms of possible special administrative models for southernmost Thailand (Phuengnet, 2013).

The official peace talks in February 2013 highlighted the new episode of Thai government in responding to violence problem in southernmost region of the country, implying that apart from military's solution, Thai government has considered the political approach to end the violence and protracted conflict of this region. A sudden move of Thai government and its political deal of peace

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[7] The mission of NRC was to study on the conflict and violence in southern border provinces and proposed their finding and suggestion for reconciliation to the government under Prime Minister Thakin Shinawatra's administration at that time.

talk caused a certain level of disorientation and diversity of public opinions. Reaction from local civil society actors who regularly kept up with political situations of the southern conflict were quite varied from optimistically supportive or reservedly skeptical. On the other hand, not all local residents could comprehend the peace dialogue context nor how this peace dialogue initiation would affect to their lives. For this reason, local civil society actors advocating for peace have realized the importance of taking action in providing accessible information about peace dialogue to their constituencies. Hosted by Patani-based organizations, LEMPAR and Wartani media, 'Bicara Patani' was public forums aiming to provide criticized information about peace dialogue process and exchange political opinions with local Malay(Patani) people in and outside the southern conflict region. There were in total of 62 events which mainly held in three southern border provinces (Prachatai, 2014). In addition, some events were held in other southern province, central Bangkok, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia (Tuwaemaengae, 2014). Interestingly, one of the 'Bicara Patani' event was able to held at Pattani Central Prison where fifty inmates under the charge of crimes against national security were able to participate (Deep South Journalism, 2013).

Some local actors have considered this official peace talks meeting in 2013 as an important entry point for them to act as a catalyst of social cohesion. The constructive role of civil society organizations at this point is to use this window of political opportunity to advocate and ensure that policy-decision makers are aware of the local voices. Following this approach, the Civil Society Council of the Southernmost Thailand has organized public forum events which engaged local stakeholders to discuss and share their political views in various dimensions toward sustained peace-process, particularly advocacy of the important role of local civil society actors to function as 'the safety net' in supporting peace talks process. Last year, Civil Society Council of the Southernmost Thailand in collaboration with the Office of Private Education Commission organized 12 public dialogue events, where almost 1,000 Ustazs (Islamic religious leaders) of Private Islamic Schools in three southern border provinces and 4 districts of Songkhla province participated (Deep South Journalism, 2016b). Another activity supported by Local Development Institute (LDI) was the program to provide knowledge about peace process through advocacy, public relations and other local and mainstream media. This program aimed to create the common space for citizens to debate and discuss about peace talk process, of which the output would be part of the policy recommendation report to government.

Enabling Environment for Civil Participation: Opportunity and Challenges in Peace Work in Southern Thailand

Challenges: Military government and constraint of CSOs

Despite the three years of junta government's ruling, peace talks between Thai state and Mara Patani[8] are still slowly moving forward. There are various challenges for local action groups, non-governmental organizations and civil society actors to work freely. First and foremost, the political condition under military government does not give many opportunities for local actors to express their political opinions without hindrance. The enforcement of three special laws in southern conflict region still give a certain degree of power to state's security officials, especially the army, to take actions, as considered appropriate, to maintain social order in this region.[9] The limitation in working toward peace is confirmed by young Malay (Patani) activists who shared his view for any activism and works of civil society under civilian government could might have been more easy than working under military government regime.[10] In addition, civil society organizations which were established or supported by Thai government may not be able to work independently. (Civil Society Council of the Southernmost Thailand, 2017). Last but not least, the recent two offensive explosions at Big C Supermarket in the city of Pattani town last May reflects the fact that some insurgent members or 'those people who have different political and ideological thoughts from Thai state' might perceive 'violence' as the power contestation with Thai government.[11]

Opportunities: enlarging public sphere through collaborative works with stakeholders and social media utilization.

The shifting of state's orientation and policies toward violence problem, particularly the first official peace talks in 2013, gave civil society more space for political debate and discussion on peace process in southern Thailand. Even though there are both sides of civil society actors who have either supportive view or skepticism on dialogue progress, local actors and civil society networks, to some extent, are able to create more public engagement and opportunities through their organized public

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[8] Majlis Syura Patani, or Mara Patani in abbreviation is the umbrella organization of Patani movements (BRN Action Group, BIPP, Pulo-P4, Pulo-dspp, Pulo-mkp, and GMIP) which formed in 2015. Apart from participate in peace talk, Mara Patani aim to gain international recognition and support for the Right to Self-determination from Patani people. See more information: Al-Hakim, A. (2015). What is Mara Patani? [online] Deepsouthwatch.org. Available at: http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/node/7211

[9] Three special laws which are currently enforced in southernmost conflict region: (1) Martial Law Act 1914 (Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat), (2) State of Emergency Decree 2005 (Pattani – except MaeLan District, Yala, and Narathiwat), (3) Internal Security Act 2008 (MaeLan District of Pattani)

[10] Three interviewees from the leading members of the Civil Society for Peace and Network: First interviewee whom I interviewed in Pattani province on December 4, 2016. Second interviewee was interviewed in Bangkok May 16, 2017. Last one was interviewed in Pattani province on May 22, 2017.

[11] See more information of the latest bombing incident in Pattani town: The Straits Times (2017). *At least 51 injured in double bombing at department store in Pattani*. Available at: http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/bombs-explode-at-department-store-parking-lot-in-pattani

forums, including increasing capacity of local media in providing accessible information, broadcasting their public events in real-time from the actual venue. Civil society actors have used social media, especially Facebook as the platform to advocate their peace mobilization to public. There is no doubt that social media has enlarged civil society's public sphere of communication process through internet platform. Undeniably, information technology and internet help connecting people regardless the boundary of distance and time. Social media is low-cost and friendly-user tool which could help civil society actors to promote their works and advocate for their peace agenda. Nevertheless, civil society groups and networks should be aware to give priority to encourage more public engagement and participation in the actual actions. Constructive public debates which bring people of pluralistic political opinions to actually discuss and comprehend the ideas of others could help civil society members altogether to send their powerful messages of how the violence problem in southern Thailand could and should be resolved from the bottom to reach people at the top policy-making level as the stimulus for change.

Conclusion

On the contrary of political situation and monitored political freedom under the military government regime in Thailand, civil society actors in southern conflict provinces are able to grasp the opportunity when Thai state shifted their orientation toward political solution on peace talks approach with the Malay (Patani) insurgents who are living in exile in Malaysia in 2013. While there are different views among civil society actors about the prosperity of peace talks under military regime, both supportive and skeptical groups of civil society interactively communicate to local residents, particularly their constituencies. In forming network alliances among civil society organizations in southernmost Thailand has made them to have more credibility and negotiation power. Civil society actors in southern conflict region seek out more public engagement and local participation through organizing public forums and other public events. They have created common space where people could access to information, discuss and seeking consultation together about local real needs for peace. Through such organized forums, public sphere of civil society has gradually expanded.

This study explores the general information to gain background knowledge of civil society's progress and dynamics of local civil society actors advocating for peace in southernmost provinces of Thailand. Nevertheless, researcher realizes that in order to have more comprehensive understanding on the dynamics of local civil society and peace movements in this region, there are still many surrounding contexts which needed to have further study and investigation, for example political factors at both regional and national levels or influence of international and domestic donors. Knowledge gained from this study can be a reflective mirror on internal challenges of CSOs

advocating for peace in the south; on the other hand, it can be useful to policy-makers to strategize and create more constructive conditions in order to draw collaboration from local civil society actors and active citizens for long-lasting peace solution. Inarguably, ending violence in southern Thailand will require shared willingness and political actions from Thai government and Patani insurgent groups.[12] In the meantime, while the conflict resolution does not prevail, local civil society actors have significant role as an agent for change to create social cohesion and non-violent socialization.

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[12] In this research, I determine to distinguish the meaning between 'Patani' and 'Pattani.' The former word is based on Malay local spelling referring to the Patani Kingdom of Malay Peninsular prior to the annexation to Siam in 1902. As for the word 'Pattani' refers to one of the southernmost provinces of Thailand. These distinguish spelling of the two words became the ethnopolitical concern in academia since 1980s. See also, Satha-Anand, C. (1992). Pattani in the 1980s: Academic Literature and Political Stories. *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 7(1), pp.1-38.

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