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The Muslim Minority in Contemporary Politics: The Case of Cambodia and Myanmar

メタデータ	言語: English 出版者: 公開日: 2023-02-22 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: BAJUNID, Omar Farouk メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://hiroshima-cu.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/284

The Muslim Minority in Contemporary Politics: The Case of Cambodia and Myanmar¹

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The role of the Muslims as a minority community in mainland Southeast Asia, where the Buddhists constitute the majority population, in general, has not been sufficiently and satisfactorily studied and documented. This paper on the role of the Muslim minority in the contemporary politics of Cambodia and Myanmar is a modest attempt to fill that void. The paper argues that the Muslims are not an insignificant minority in Cambodia and Myanmar and have indeed traditionally been part and parcel of these two polities. In fact, contrary to common assumptions, the Muslims in these two Buddhist countries have consistently shown that their commitment to their faith is not necessarily irreconcilable to their citizenship responsibilities.

It was, however, the different political experiences that Cambodia and Myanmar had to go through in the post-independence era that had undermined the position of the Muslim minority in their respective countries. The rise to power of the Khmer Rouge with its genocidal policies, for example, had threatened to eliminate the Muslims completely from the Cambodian political scene. The civil war that followed had also severely dislocated further the political role of the Muslims in Cambodia. It was the reconstruction of democracy in the post-UNTAC period in Cambodia that had significantly rehabilitated the political role and visibility of its Muslim minority. Likewise, in Myanmar the political marginalization of the Muslims is essentially a consequence of the constraints imposed by military rule which contrasts greatly from the democratic era of the first decade of independence when they used to enjoy considerable political latitude disproportionate to their minority status. In the final analysis, it is obvious that the contemporary political role of the Muslim minority in Cambodia and Myanmar is not just a function of the community's socio-religious peculiarities but also the wider political system that it belongs to.

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I . Introduction.

It seems to be in the nature of Muslim communities

and perhaps more so when they exist as minorities, wherever they are, to have to perpetually attempt to reconcile the particularistic characteristics of their faith to the broader demands of their national citizenship. Indeed, the

whole evolution of Muslim history, across time and space, seems to be the history of the continual interaction, interplay, conflict and accommodation between the universal and unchanging ideals of Islam and the contextual and practical realities in which Muslims live as communities. While the main corpus of existing academic literature on Islam and the Muslims seems to focus primarily on the situation in the Middle East which has for a long time been regarded as the traditional heartland of the Muslim world, increasingly there is a growing recognition of the need to seriously reassess the unique position of Islam in Southeast Asia, which has hitherto been considered relatively marginal to the Muslim world. Nevertheless, this trend still seems to be confined to reviewing the role of Islam as a majority religion in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei whereas the role of the Muslims in the other countries of the region where they exist as a minority continues to be lightly viewed or, at best, little understood.

The role of the Muslims in the Buddhist countries of mainland Southeast Asia is still hitherto unsatisfactorily explored and analyzed. This is even more true of the situation in Cambodia and Myanmar, where, for a variety of reasons, comprehensive information on the Muslims is still extremely scarce. The significance of the ethnic and religious diversity that characterizes mainland Southeast Asia can never be fully understood or appreciated as long as the role of the ethnic and religious minorities in the region is not systematically studied and documented. The role of the Muslims, for example, who have traditionally been part and parcel of both Cambodia and Myanmar since historical times have not been seriously examined. The significance of this paper is that it tries to fill in this void. The paper attempts to trace, locate and analyze the role of the Muslims in the modern Buddhist polities of Cambodia and Myanmar.

The paper begins with an introductory profile of the Muslims in Cambodia and Myanmar. It then proceeds to examine how the Muslims have tried to maintain their identity as a socio-religious minority against the background of the political changes that were unfolding in Cambodia and Myanmar. Subsequently, an assessment of the role of the Muslims in the contemporary politics of Cambodia and Myanmar is given. The conclusion highlights the main findings of the paper.

II . Country Profile.

1. Cambodia.

Cambodia is now officially designated as a Buddhist kingdom.² However, Islam, which has been a feature of the Cambodian historical landscape for centuries is now the second largest religion in Cambodia enjoying official patronage. The Muslims represent around 5 per cent of the Cambodian population which is now estimated to be around 11.5 million people. There are more than half a million Muslims in Cambodia today making them indeed a sizable community in the kingdom.³ The overwhelming majority of the Muslims are Sunnis following the Shafiee school of Islam. Within this category however there are some differences between the reformist-minded Muslims, the "modernist school" or the *Kaum Muda*, as they are called and the preponderant majority who subscribe to the traditionalist school of Islam, who are also commonly identified as the *Kaum Tua*. The Cham Muslims who practise a syncretic form of Islam which attempts to integrate ancient Cham culture with mystical or Sufi teachings are referred to as *Jahed*. Their number however is small and dwindling as a result of efforts undertaken by the mainstream Muslim groups to re-integrate them into mainstream Islam. In terms of the number of mosques, in 1998, in all of Cambodia there were 282 mosques in the various stages of reconstruction and the figure was growing [Omar 1998 : 36] On the basis of the geographical distribution of mosques in Cambodia [See Map 1] apparently the Muslims are to be found in virtually every province in Cambodia today although they seem to predominate in Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang and to a lesser extent, Kampot. Thus, in the geographical sense, the Muslims can be considered a national minority in Cambodia.

The Muslim community in Cambodia too is actually heterogeneous. Officially the Muslims are designated as Khmer Islam although many Chams detest this label as an attempt to submerge their Cham identity and deny them of their rightful place in Cambodian history and society since the Chams are the largest and the most important ethnic category within the Muslim community. All the Chams in Cambodia are Muslims and Cham identity is invariably seen as being inseparable from Islam. But they are far from being a monolithic group either in

their ethnic make-up, religious practice or even linguistic orientation. The *Jahed* or *Kaum Hakekat* who are also known as *Kaum Jumaat* would appear on one extreme end of the continuum of the Chamic identity. They are normally both Cham as well as Khmer speaking. Although on account of their ancient culture this is a very important group, they are however considered by orthodox Islam to represent syncretic or even deviationist Islam.

In terms of numbers there can be no doubt that the *Cham Shariat* or the Chams who observe the Sharia, or Islamic law in the Shafiee school of Islam constitute the biggest group. The principal denominators of their identity are basically knowledge of the Cham language, continued practice of Cham culture, a common Cham ethnic ancestry and a strong sense of attachment to orthodox Islam. Their Islamic identity has become an inseparable part of their psyche and ethnic identity. The Chams are among some of the most devout Muslims in the world. The Islamic facet of their identity has also helped create a co-optional mechanism which makes it possible for "outsiders" to gain entry into their community to become Chams. In Cambodia, it is possible for one to be Chamized or to become Cham just as in Malaysia it is possible for people to "*masuk Melayu*" or become Malay. The Chveas or Jvas are another important ethnic group within the Muslim community in Cambodia. The term Chvea in the context of Cambodia is used to refer to Malays in a generic sense. According to Po Dharma, there are actually three categories of Malays, namely Jva Krap, Jva Iyava and Jva Melayu. Jva (Chvea) Krap refers to Jva Kerbau which indicates Malays who are from Sumatra including those from Aceh and Minangkabau. Jva (Chvea) Iyava specifically refers to Malays from the island of Java while Jva (Chvea) Melayu refers to those from the Malay Peninsula (Po Dharma n.d. : 9)

Numerically as well as politically the Chveas are a significant group. Nevertheless, in view of the nature of the overlapping contacts between them and the other Muslim groups especially the Chams, they are not completely and irreversibly insulated from the other Muslim groups. But it is the Khmer language, rather than Cham or Malay that is the principal language of daily interaction among them although it is almost certain that there would also be a good number of Cham as well as Malay speakers in their ranks. The Friday sermon in their

mosques is also usually delivered in Malay and Arabic with Khmer gaining wider currency in recent years.

The Khmers are also an important ethnic category within the Muslim community in Cambodia. There are many Khmer individuals and families who have blended extremely well with Muslim society in Cambodia to the point that they are seen as being part and parcel of that society. The attempt by some members of the Muslim population to abandon their original ethnic identity in exchange for Khmer identity, logically implies that the number of Muslims among the Khmer or people who wish only to be considered as Khmer, must be growing.

Finally, the presence of Muslims who are non-Cham, non-Chvea and non-Khmer in background has also to be highlighted. Although their number may be small and although they may have a tendency to assimilate into the main Muslim groups such as the Chams and the Chveas, the role of immigrant Muslims from Afghanistan and Pakistan and indeed other countries should also not be ignored. The Arabs, notably the Sayyids, who have generally assimilated into the local Muslim society are also a significant group.

The Muslims are basically a rural people in Cambodia. The overwhelming majority of the Muslims represented here are primarily engaged in farming and fishing. Vending is also a common occupation among the Muslims. This is especially so when they have to market their produce. Most morning markets especially in areas where Muslims predominate in the provinces are conducted almost entirely by Cham Muslim women. This is usually done when their men folk are away fishing or tilling the land.

In the Cambodian wet markets, Muslim women would almost certainly operate beef stalls since, in all of Cambodia, Muslims tend to monopolize the cattle and beef trade as the Khmer Buddhist majority shun this trade on religious grounds. Many Muslim women also sell fish or chicken in the market. There are also Muslim textile vendors, food-stall operators and provisions-store retailers especially in the Muslim villages or provincial markets. Petty trade is common among the Chvea Muslims. In Phnom Penh there are also a few Muslim auto-parts dealers. Some Muslims, especially those living in remote provinces like Kratie also make a living collecting and selling jungle produce. There are also Muslim blacksmiths and carpenters in many Muslim enclaves.

There has also been an increasing number of Muslims in government service especially in the lower ranks of the police and military. There are also Muslims in the clerical and technical services of the bureaucracy although the number is still very small [Omar, 1998 : 43-44]

The educational level of the Muslims is generally very low with a very high rate of illiteracy. This is largely due to two main factors. First, the Muslims traditionally depended on religious education which was essentially confined to learning the basics of Islam including everyday rituals and Quranic literacy. Secular education was generally not popular with the Muslims. The genocidal policies of the Khmer Rouge regime had virtually eliminated a whole generation of Muslim religious teachers in Cambodia undermining the most common form of education for the Muslims. Second, the long and bloody civil war that had taken place in Cambodia for a few decades since the 1970s had severely undermined the educational foundations of the modern Cambodian state with schools and other physical facilities, all over the country, being destroyed and teachers, eliminated. It is only recently, following the reconstruction of the Islamic socio-religious infrastructure in Cambodia and the concerted attempts made to re-build the whole secular education system, in the post-UNTAC period, that a new generation of educated Muslims is beginning to be created.

2. Myanmar.

In terms of size Myanmar is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia with a total area of approximately 676,550 sq. km. but population-wise with an estimated 48.8 million people in 1999, it ranks third after Vietnam and Thailand. Like Cambodia, Buddhism is the official religion in Myanmar but unlike the situation in Cambodia which has now become a democratic polity, the military regime in Myanmar, has since the overthrow of civilian rule in 1962, used Buddhism as its legitimizing ideology ignoring the realities of Myanmar's multi-ethnic and multi-religious character. Although Islam still maintains a visible presence in Myanmar today and has historically assumed an integral role in Burmese national life its present position has been severely restricted by the closed and often repressive political system in existence today. Officially, the population of the Muslims is said to comprise 3.9 per cent of the total population in Myanmar but this figure has been disputed by several

Muslim sources which claim that the Muslim population in official sources has been grossly understated. According to one Muslim account the Muslims make up between 14 per cent to 15 per cent of the total population in Myanmar.⁴ Another published source suggests that there are 5.55 million Muslims in Myanmar or 12.4 per cent of the total population [RISEAP 1996 : 132]

By virtue of the above the Muslims also claim that they are the second largest religious community after the Buddhists. The Muslims are to be found in all the seven Divisions and the seven States of Myanmar but their biggest concentration is in the Arakan region where they constitute the majority, reversing the national trend elsewhere. In the districts of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Yathegyang, they make up almost the absolute majority with a population of between 95% to 98%. Besides the Arakan region the Muslims constitute a sizable community in most of the urban areas of Myanmar including Yangon and Mandalay. Other areas where Muslims exist in large numbers include Mergui in the Mergui coast and Mawlamyine on the Gulf of Martaban. In central Myanmar large Muslim communities exist in Pyawbwe, Meiktila, Thazi, Kyaukse, Mandalay and Maymyo. In the northern Shan State Muslims live in Kyaukme, Lashio, Hsipaw, Tangyan, Namsam, Namkhan and Mogoke while in the southern Shan State they may be found in large number in Taunggyi, Kalaw and Loilem. In Kachin State the Muslims are concentrated in Myitkyina, Mogaung and Bhamawk.

In all there are about 2,620 mosques all over Myanmar. Yangon alone has 78 and Mandalay 68. Additionally there are 1,960 madrasahs or religious schools, most of which are attached to mosques [RISEAP 1996 : 134-135] The Muslims are also represented by a few hundred organizations although only a few of them are recognized by the government. Some of these organizations include the Islamic Religious Affairs Council [IRAC], Jamiat Ulama al-Islam [JUI], Muslim Central Fund Trust [MCFT], the All Myanmar Maulvi Organisation and the Myanmar Muslims National Affairs Organization [M.M.N.O.] The Muslims in Myanmar are not only a numerically large national minority but also appear to maintain a dynamic cultural and religious life despite the enormous constraints placed on them by the political system.

The Muslims in Myanmar, like their counterparts in

Cambodia, are not a monolithic group. Although the majority are Sunnis following the Hanafi school of Islam with a Shafiee minority especially in Mergui, the Shias also constitute a significant group in many areas of Myanmar. Ethnically, the Muslims are represented by diverse groups including the Indian Muslims or Kala-Pathees, those of Indo-Burmese admixture or Burman Muslims who were formerly designated as "Zerbadee" during the British colonial rule until 1941 when that term was substituted for "Burman Muslim" or "Bamar Muslim" in deference to the wishes of the Muslims, the Panthays or Chinese Muslims, the Rohingyas and Kamans of the Arakan region and the Pashus or the Malay Muslims. There is also a small number of Chin, Kachin, Karen, Mon Muslims in Myanmar along with other ethnic minorities. The Burman Muslims are culturally almost indistinguishable from their Burman Buddhist counterparts except in religious observances [Omar 1987 : 3] They have adopted Burmese names and appear to identify more positively with the State although not necessarily with the regime. The Indian Muslims appear distinctive culturally although there are also sub-cultural differences between them too.

Occupationally the Muslims are generally engaged in agriculture, business, trade, industry and the professions. On account of their prevalence in the retail trade, commerce and other economic activities, a noticeably large percentage of the Muslims, especially those in the urban areas are quite well-off economically. One source suggests that between 15 per cent to 25 per cent of the Muslims are quite affluent.⁵ The majority of the Muslim masses, like their Buddhist counterparts belong to the lower income group.

III . The Maintenance of Socio-Religious Identity.

Socio-religious identity matters greatly to the Muslims. This is even more so when they live as minorities in preponderantly non-Muslim environments like Cambodia or Myanmar, where other markers of identity between them and the majority community overlap or become blurred particularly as a consequence of their assimilation or integration into the wider polity. As Islam is both a personal as well as a communal religion, the preservation of its identity becomes the primary task not

just of the individual believer but also the community through the communal or organized practice of Islam. For this to happen, community space is necessary not just to house religious institutions but also to create a viable communal living environment to support religious life.

1. Cambodia

In Cambodia, invariably it is the mosque or the *surau* that serves as the focal point of the community life of the Muslims. The mosque is usually used for a whole range of religious activities including the conduct of daily congregational prayers; Friday prayers; prayers during the month of Ramadan; funeral services; Quranic classes; religious instruction; religious festivities and even marriage ceremonies. It is also common for a mosque to double up as a religious school. The mosque is the basic communal unit which undertakes the constant and continual socialization function meant to promote Islamic community life and preserve the Islamic communal identity.

Nevertheless, since not all the Muslims are Chams and neither are all Chams followers of orthodox Islam, it is Cham identity that constitutes the most potent aspect of the Cambodian Islamic identity. The Chams in Cambodia also express their ethnicity through Islam. There is an obvious symbiotic relationship between Islam and the Chams. Since Cham culture is both a distinctive and viable cultural entity within Cambodia, the maintenance of this culture also serves to consolidate the position of Islam.

The overwhelming majority of the Chams in Cambodia are essentially orthodox Muslims. They generally adopt Arabic names including the use of "bin" and "binti" to designate parentage; use the Arabic script to write; lead a communal life-style in villages and enclaves throughout the kingdom utilizing the mosque as the focal point of their daily religious activities; share a strong sense of collective memory of their Islamic past; and draw cultural and religious inspiration from the Malay world. They also attempt to maintain their ethnic identity by establishing or sustaining links with their communities beyond the national frontiers of Cambodia, in Thailand, Malaysia, Laos, Vietnam and even beyond.

The existence of their cultural belt in the form of a large territory within Cambodia [and extending into

areas in Vietnam where Chams predominate], in the provinces of Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Kandal and Kratie, where most of the Cham villages are situated and where their numbers are sufficiently large, creates a semblance of the Cham homeland. This in turn has facilitated the preservation of the close-knit nature of their community. The Chams have been greatly helped in their attempts to preserve their culture and religious identity by the fact that they are both a "community of memory" or a historical community as well as a "community of faith" or a religious community. The potency of their pivotal position within Cambodian Muslim society can be seen in the fact that it is through them that the re-orientation of the *Jaheds* into mainstream Islam and the Chamization of new converts to Islam take place.

The Chams also see themselves and generally are seen as being an indigenous minority whose place in the Cambodian polity has been essentially determined by history. But as a minority community which has had to co-exist with the Khmer majority, the Chams too, despite being able to preserve their particularistic ethnic and religious identity have also been subjected to all kinds of Khmer influence. Hence it is common for the Chams to possess proficiency in the Khmer language in addition to their knowledge of Cham. The expansion of the school system which uses Khmer as the language of instruction also ensures a growing linguistic orientation towards Khmer. The recent development of Islamic literature in Khmer is also making Khmer a more relevant language of religious learning in many Cham villages and enclaves. The attempt to give Islam a national role has also led to the Khmerization of the Islamic identity in Cambodia. Particularly in the post-UNTAC era, where the reconstruction of Islam has been pursued most vigorously, new Islamic Associations such as the Cambodian Muslim Development Foundation, Cambodia Islamic Association, Cambodian Students' Union and Islamic Teachers Association, all of which, in their different but complementary ways have helped reinforce the position of the Muslims as a national minority in Cambodia. Activities undertaken by the Ministry of Cults and Religions to bring about the re-organization of Islam in Cambodia, through lectures, courses and seminars, have not only elevated the profile of Islam in Cambodia but also rehabilitated the role of the Muslims in the national life of the kingdom. The institution of Sheikhu-Islam or

Mufti has been created to provide the official leadership of Islam in Cambodia.⁶ For the first time in decades a Mufti has been officially appointed by the Royal Government of Cambodia.

Tabligh groups from India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia and other countries in the region regularly visit Muslim villages and enclaves to promote spiritual solidarity with the Cambodian Muslims. The tabligh movement in Cambodia today is not only strong but also has a permanent base with strong local leadership. International Muslim organizations such as Islamic Relief Organization, Ar-Rabithah, RISEAP and Kuwait Society have also been extending assistance to the Cambodian Muslims as part of their effort to help in the reconstruction of Islam in Cambodia. All these developments have helped strengthen the national position of Islam in Cambodia. Although the development of Khmer-based Islamic identity appears to shift the cultural orientation of Islam from Cham to Khmer, this phenomenon is not necessarily mutually exclusive. The process of the Khmerization of Islam does not seem to have diminished the relevance or the role of the Chams in the Muslim society of Cambodia. The consolidation of the national position of Islam in Cambodia is also almost certain to strengthen further the foundations of Cambodian Cham culture even further.

2. Myanmar

Islam assumes a highly visible profile in Myanmar. It is probably a combination of historical and physical factors including the size of the Muslim community, their concentration in the urban areas, their trade, their relative wealth and the existence of Muslim institutions and buildings like mosques, waqfs, orphanages, schools and business-houses that has helped project Islam's visual presence in Myanmar. The ubiquitous sight of Muslim men and women in the streets of the major towns of Myanmar in their traditional Indian attire also serves as a constant reminder of the presence of Muslims in Myanmar. The existence of Muslim towns, villages and enclaves throughout Myanmar also creates the sufficient condition for the preservation of the Islamic identity to take place.

The large number of mosques that exists in Myanmar today and the madrasahs which are usually attached to them constitute the fundamental framework which supports Islamic community life. Islamic education in its

various forms, with all its limitations, is universally pursued by the Muslims in Myanmar. The existence of 18 Darul U-Loom or Islamic Colleges for the purpose of training Imams producing 600 graduates yearly helps to develop a constant pool of religious leaders in Myanmar⁷ [RISEAP. 1996 : 131] The maintenance of Islamic identity in Myanmar is without doubt a function of the universal role of Islamic education.

Beyond the mosque or the madrasah level, perhaps the most important channel for the preservation of Islamic identity in Myanmar is through Muslim organizations. Unofficially, a few hundred Muslim organizations are supposed to exist in Myanmar but officially the recognized organizations are limited to a handful. Of these the most significant are 1) the Islamic Religious Affairs Council (IRAC), 2) the Jamiat ul Ulama al Islam (JUI), 3) Burmese Muslim Organization (BMO), 4) All Myanmar Maulavi Organization, 5) Myanmar Muslim National Affairs Organization (MMNO), and, 6) the Muslim Central Trust Fund (MCTF). All the above organizations, with the exception of BMO, which seems to be inactive now, play a major role in maintaining and resuscitating the Islamic identity in Myanmar. Of these, IRAC, which was established in 1954 and which now has a network of 285 branch offices throughout the country and JUI, which was established as a splinter of IRAC in 1957 and which also has a national network of branches in Myanmar are the two most important organizations in the country, which while sharing the same goal of wanting to consolidate the position of Islam in Myanmar, have contrasting orientations. While IRAC appears to be more liberal in wanting to develop an Islamic identity with a Myanmar outlook, JUI, is decidedly conservative retaining a pronounced Indian influence. Thus, essentially the tussle for the religious leadership of Islam seems to be polarized along the two poles, one distinctly indigenous or indigenized and the other representing Muslims of immigrant background. Another Islamic organization which has also been playing a critical role in re-orientating the Muslims towards Myanmar is the Islamic Centre of Myanmar (ICM) which is a structure-less activity-based modernist Muslim movement. Since the Muslim community in Myanmar is also cosmopolitan, even more so than the situation in either Thailand or Cambodia, there also exists other foci of Islamic identity in Myanmar reflecting the peculiarities of the various Muslim

groups. The Shias, for example, with between 20,000 to 30,000 followers spread over 10 to 15 towns in Myanmar also try to safeguard their own identity through their communal life centred around Shia mosques as well as the All Myanmar Shia Muslim Organization. The Ahmadiyahs too protect their identity in their own way through their Association. Broadly, within the Indian tradition of Islam in Myanmar, there are further divisions along ethnic lines. The Panthays and the Pashus, non-Indian minorities basically safeguard their identities through their respective communities.

In Myanmar, unlike Cambodia, where the State patronises Islam, the position of Islam is unprotected and vulnerable. The Muslims, irrespective of their outlook, have to operate under all kinds of difficult constraints to organize their communal religious activities. They appear to have freedom of worship in Myanmar but very limited opportunity to organize themselves at the national level. Although the Muslims are a national minority in Myanmar they have not been able to secure for Islam either a national status or a national role. Despite its high visibility, the role of Islam appears fragmented and limited. Since the establishment of military rule in 1962 no new mosques have been permitted by the authorities. Instead, many religious buildings have been demolished [Zam Zam 1999 : 16] There exists a strong censorship of Islamic literature. Only one Islamic newspaper, the *Light of Islam*, published in English and Burmese, has been allowed. Even the practice of the Haj was disallowed between 1962 and 1980, although since then a limited number of Muslims have been permitted to perform this religious duty.⁸

The virtual confinement of the Muslims within the boundaries of Myanmar has apparently undermined the development of Islam in Myanmar. The repressive measures that the State took against its Muslim population has not only led to the outflow of Muslim refugees fleeing Myanmar but has also fuelled the emergence of Muslim insurgency in Myanmar. Although the above two phenomena have, in a way, highlighted the plight of the Burmese Muslims, they have, however, not helped the position of Islam within Myanmar, whose full potential remains underdeveloped.

IV. The Muslims in Contemporary Politics.

1. Cambodia

It was the re-introduction of democracy in Cambodia in the post-UNTAC period that created the environment which enabled the Muslims to re-assert a prominent public political profile. In the first government that was formed following the general elections of 1993 there were several Muslims. The Minister of Education, Youth and Sports, Tol Lah and the Under Secretary of State for the Ministry of Cults and Religion, were Muslim representatives from the FUNCINPEC Party, while Saboo Patcha, another Muslim figure from the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party was made the Under Secretary of State for Environment. There were three other Muslim Members of Parliament, two from FUNCINPEC and the third from Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP). The secretary of the Speaker, then was also a Muslim. There was a number of other Muslims working as support staff for several senior Members of Parliament [Omar 1998 : 53]

The 1998 general elections consolidated further the position of the Muslims both in Cambodian politics as well as the new government. The Muslims now have two Senators in Saboo Patcha representing FUNCINPEC and Mohamad Marawan representing the Cambodian People's Party. There are ten Muslim Members of Parliament at present, five from the CPP, namely, Math Ly [Kg. Cham], Othman Hassan [Phnom Penh], Sales Sen [Kampot], Sman Teat [Pursat] and Paing Punyamin [Kg. Chhnang], four from FUNCINPEC, namely, Tol Lah [Phnom Penh], Ismail Yusof [Kg. Cham], Sou Zakarya [Battambang] and Nan Cy [Kg. Chhnang] and one, Sith Ibrahim, representing the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP). What is interesting to observe here is that the Muslims are represented in all the three major political parties that make up the present Parliament. In the elections too, there was also a political party, called Salvation for Women, which was founded and headed by a Muslim lady.⁹

The Muslims in Cambodia have never been polarized along a single political party but give their political affiliation to the spectrum of parties that exist. In fact, there were even Muslims in the ranks of the infamous Khmer Rouge in the early years of the revolution before

they became the target of the movement's policy to exterminate them. It was, however, the genocidal policies of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 until their defeat by the Vietnamese army in January 1979, that not only dislocated the political role of the Muslims in Cambodia but also almost wiped out the Muslims completely. Ben Kiernan suggests that the Khmer Rouge regime killed at least one third of the Muslim population [Kiernan 1996 : 461] According to a Cambodian source, out of an estimated Muslim population of 700,000 people before the Pol Pot regime, less than 150,000 had survived.¹⁰ Tens of thousands of Muslims fled Cambodia in search of refuge in neighbouring countries in Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Malaysia. Many Muslim refugees were resettled in third countries like the United States, France, Australia and New Zealand.

This was the most traumatic period for the Muslims. It was only when the Khmer Rouge was defeated by Vietnam which installed a new government under Heng Samrin in 1979 that the Muslims began to be slowly rehabilitated. The Constitution of the People's Republic of Kampuchea which was adopted on 25 June 1981 guaranteed religious freedom and ethnic equality making it possible for the Muslims to reestablish themselves within Cambodia. It was under those circumstances that there were Muslims who became members of the Cambodian Communist Party which was set up under the aegis of the Vietnamese. But even then since the new government was a communist regime the Muslims had to live within constraints. The civil war which ensued in Cambodia as a consequence of the Vietnamese invasion had also created an atmosphere of instability in the country. The large number of Cambodian Muslims who had fled the country as refugees still could not return to their own country. Thus, it was only after the United Nations intervention in the form of UNTAC that the Muslim refugees were able to return safely to Cambodia. The Muslim leaders from FUNCINPEC came from the category of Muslim refugees who returned to Cambodia in the post-UNTAC era, as such the party itself was seen as representing the interests of Cambodians who had fled the country during the civil war. The CPP, on the other hand, actually evolved from the Cambodian Communist Party. In this sense, as far as the Muslims are concerned, their political affiliation and representation encompass all the main political parties.

For a community that was the target of annihilation and that had suffered greatly in terms of the loss of lives of its members as well as the destruction of property and livelihood, their re-emergence on the national scene today is indeed remarkable. The present Cabinet under the coalition government of Prime Minister Hun Sen has an unprecedented number of Muslim representatives. The CPP is represented by two Muslim Under Secretaries of State, namely, Msas Loas, in the Prime Minister's Office and Mr. Zakaryya Adam, in the Ministry of Cults and Religions. FUNCINPEC has one Under Secretary of State in the Ministry of Cults and Religions in the Cabinet and another Secretary of State, Ahmad Yahaya, in the Ministry of Works and Transport. But the highest office that a Muslim has achieved in modern Cambodia is now held by Tol Lah, who is the Minister for Education, Youth and Sports as well as the Deputy Prime Minister.

A major reason why Muslims become crucial in the new democratic arrangement that Cambodia has developed is that the Muslims are numerically significant in Cambodia and under a proportional representation system no political party can afford to ignore the electoral strength of the Muslim votes. The Muslim leaders in the major parties which they represent also have qualities which have an appeal to these organizations. Math Ly, of the CPP has been a long-time ally of party leader Hun Sen and loyal supporter of the government established in the post-Khmer Rouge era. Tol Lah was the secretary-general of FUNCINPEC until recently and was one of the most trusted aides of party leader, Prince Ranaridh. All the Muslim MPs are also believed to have wide international contacts especially among neighbouring as well as Muslim nations which is seen as useful in the process of the reconstruction of the Cambodian polity. But above all, it is the practice of democracy that has made all the above developments possible which have given the Muslims not just a tangible stake in the new Cambodia but also a challenging role to help rebuild a devastated nation.

2. Myanmar

The situation in Myanmar in respect of the political role of the Muslims is the complete opposite of that in Cambodia. The Muslims had a visible political role in the early years of the post-Second World War era when

they participated directly in the struggle for independence particularly through the BMC [Burma Muslim Congress] Muslim leaders also played a significant role in the AFPFL [Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League] and at the Panglong Conference. After the first general elections held in 1947 in preparation for independence there were 30 Muslim Members of Parliament. At various times in the early independence era Muslims were appointed to the Cabinet. U Khin Maung Lat served as the Minister for Judicial Affairs in 1950, Minister of Health in 1952 and again as Minister for Judicial Affairs in 1956. Sultan Mahmood was appointed Minister of Health in 1958. U Rashid became Minister of Housing and Labour in 1952 and Minister of Trade, Development and Labour in 1954, Minister of Mines in 1956 and Minister of National Planning in 1958 and again in 1960 as Minister of Industry, Mines and Labour [Omar 1987 : 5] Apart from Cabinet representation Muslims were also appointed to high-ranking government jobs. But most important of all, the democratic system that was in place in the first decade of independence created for the Muslims ample opportunities to pursue their legitimate political and cultural interests in a free and liberal atmosphere. Economically the Muslims were also doing very well in business and trade. The existence of Muslim constituencies in Burma virtually assured them of political representation at the highest levels of office. The size of the Muslim community in Burma also made them an important national group whose support was always solicited by politicians and political parties.

The collapse of democratic rule following the military coup in 1962 and the subsequent introduction of military rule in Burma had a direct impact on the fate of the Muslims. Under an authoritarian system of military government which sought to redefine Burma within its own ideological perspective which tried to blend Marxist-Leninist ideology with Buddhism, was not only disclosed the established political role of the Muslims but they also became one of the primary targets of governmental harassment. Thus, the displacement of democracy in Burma brought about the political, economic, cultural and religious dislocation of the Muslim community in Burma. Although there were Muslims who were co-opted to serve the military regime their number was small and role negligible. The majority of the Muslims bore the brunt of a repressive regime The closed political

system that the regime introduced gave the Muslims virtually no public space at all to articulate their grievances. Instead, the law was used to deprive many Muslims of their nationality and citizenship. Under these circumstances Muslims had very little choice over the course of actions that they could take. Some formed or joined secessionist groups to wage a guerrilla war against the ruling regime. Many fled the country as refugees but most stayed behind to live in very difficult conditions. When the military regime established SLORC in 1988 promising to end military rule and introduce democratic reforms, the majority of the Muslims once again aligned themselves with the democratic forces, especially the National League for Democracy in the 1990 elections. Many contested and won the elections whose results the ruling regimes has refused to recognize. In November 1997 SLORC changed its name to State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) promising to pursue peace, development and modernization rather than just maintaining law and order. Myanmar, under SPDC has indeed been introducing limited economic liberalization, which in some ways have also benefited the Muslims. Myanmar also became a member of ASEAN in 1997, which many Muslims hoped would lead to the softening of official attitudes towards them. But there have been no clear signs as yet of any major political changes that are about to occur. The dilemma of the Muslims, if anything, has only been sustained. Only a return to democratic rule, which seems not so improbable under the present circumstances, can restore the Muslims their legitimate political rights and pre-eminence in Myanmar.

V. Conclusion.

The Muslims have always been part of the historical and political landscape of Cambodia and Myanmar for centuries. Their role was extremely significant in the traditional period. As a religious community they were different in many ways from the majority communities in Cambodia and Myanmar but yet they were easily accommodated by the traditional systems which they belonged to. They virtually grew with these polities despite their cultural, ethnic and religious differences. The colonial period was almost an aberration of the earlier historical trends because it transformed the way in which traditional states was organized dramatically. This was true for

Cambodia and most so for Myanmar. But even then, as far as relations between the Muslims and the others were concerned they were still generally amenable.

There is something in the nature of local Buddhist societies that seem to make them extremely tolerant of others who were different from them in terms of beliefs, origins or outlooks as if these did not matter. There is also something about Islam in these countries that has allowed it to co-exist with other religions and other cultures without difficulty. It was the period of the reconstruction of these states in the post-colonial era which tried to seek and to adopt their own formula in their search for political legitimacy and viability that created the most unsettling circumstances for their populations. It was within the framework of the political modernisation of both Cambodia and Myanmar that the Muslims had to re-define their role.

In view of the fact that the paths and patterns of political changes differed greatly between Cambodia and Myanmar, the role of the Muslims in these two countries was also influenced great by the different contexts they were in. In fact, even within the same country, the contexts were never always the same. Myanmar experimented with parliamentary democracy in the first decade of its independence era. This was evidently the period when the Muslims enjoyed a lot of freedom and were enthusiastic participants of the political system. Subsequently, when military rule was imposed and severe political constraints placed on civil liberties, the public space for the Muslims to assert their political presence also became drastically constricted. It is no surprise therefore that they constitute some of the most fervent supporters of the movement to restore democracy in Myanmar. The National League for Democracy, (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, which is spearheading this movement, has naturally attracted a large Muslim following.

The post-independence democratic transition in Cambodia also created opportunities for the Muslims to assume a constructive role in the nation's development. It was, however, the collapse of democracy and the outbreak of civil war that greatly displaced the role of the Muslims. The rise to power of the Khmer Rouge with its extreme policies had seriously threatened the existence of the Muslims in Cambodia as a community. They were among the major targets of Khmer Rouge persecution. Tens of thousands of Muslims were executed and most

of the remaining fled the country. It was, paradoxically, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 and the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge by the Cambodian communists aligned with the Vietnamese that created fairly conducive conditions for many displaced Cambodian Muslims to return to Cambodia to re-establish their livelihood within the severely fractured polity. It was not until the United Nations' intervention in Cambodia and the subsequent democratic reconstruction of the Cambodian nation that the Muslims once again began to re-discover their role in the kingdom.

Whether it is in Cambodia, which has recently undergone a new phase of democratic transition or in Myanmar, which seems more serious in its search for a 'functioning democracy' now than the last few decades, the full potential of the role of the Muslims in these two countries has yet to be systematically harnessed for their benefit as well as that of their nation. What seems clear is that despite all kinds of difficulties that they had to go through, they have demonstrated that their commitment to their faith is not necessarily irreconcilable to their citizenship responsibilities even under the most trying circumstances.

End-Notes.

- 1 . I would like to thank my three anonymous referees for their very useful comments and suggestions which I have tried to incorporate wherever possible in the process of finalizing the draft of this paper. For practical reasons, I have not been able to accommodate all of them. I remain, however, solely responsible for all its remaining weaknesses and imperfections. I am also very grateful to Hiroshima City University for supporting my research in Myanmar and Cambodia by extending me leave for the purpose as well as awarding me a generous grant.
- 2 . See the 1993 Constitution of Cambodia, p.3. Article 43 of the Constitution of Cambodia also expressly states that Buddhism is the state religion in Cambodia.
- 3 . The issue of Muslim statistics is also unresolved in Cambodia. Almost all recent Western literature on Cambodia downplays the number and even significance presence of the Muslims in Cambodia. Local publications and local sources on the ground especially among the Muslims tell a completely different picture. See for example the discussion in Omar Farouk Bajunid, "The Reconstruction of Islam in Cambodia" in Imanaga Seiji (ed.) in *Tohoku Tai, Laos, Kanbojia no Muslim Kyodotai no gakujutsu chosa*, Hiroshima : Mon-

busho,1998, pp.35-36. Even in the article a rather conservative estimate of the Muslims was suggested. The new figures here are updated figures based on the latest information obtained.

- 4 . This rather very high estimate was made by a Muslim source. It is impossible to verify the claim which appears exaggerated. See Survey World Muslim Minorities, Yangon : Mimeo 1996, p.2.
- 5 . This is also a general claim made in a Muslim source. Based on my own field work in Yangon and Mandalay it was also my impression that the Muslims appeared to be an affluent community certainly, if compared to their Buddhist counterparts. See also See Survey World Muslim Minorities, Yangon : Mimeo 1996, p.15.
- 6 . For a discussion of the recent development of this institution see Omar Farouk Bajunid, op cit. p.70.
- 7 . The weaknesses of the Darul-U-Loom as well as other Islamic educational institutions in Myanmar have been highlighted by many quarters. See for example, Survey World Muslim Minorities, Yangon : Mimeo, 1996, pp.7-10 and Zam Zam, Situation Report Myanmar, Yangon : Mimeo.1998, p.17.
- 8 . See Survey World Muslim Minorities, Yangon : Mimeo, 1996, p.12.
- 9 . The party however lost badly in the elections. Nonetheless this development showed that at least one Muslim woman had asserted a very important political role at the crucial period when Cambodia was undergoing a lot of changes.
10. See *Islam in Kampuchea*, Phnom Penh : National Council of the United Front of Kampuchea for the Building and Defence of the Homeland, 1987, p.11.

List of Abbreviations.

- AFPFL = Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
 ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations
 BMC = Burma Muslim Congress
 BMO = Burmese Muslim Organization
 CPP = Cambodian People's Party
 FUNCINPEC = National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia.
 IRAC = Islamic Religious Affairs Council
 JUI = Jamiat Ulama Islam [Islamic Council of Ulama]
 MCFT = Muslim Central Fund Trust
 MMNO = Myanmar Muslim National Organization
 NLD = National League for Democracy
 SLORC = State Law and Order Restoration Council

SPDC = State Peace and Development Council

SRP = Sam Rainsy Party

UNTAC = United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia

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MAP 1
DISTRIBUTION OF MOSQUES IN CAMBODIA
IN 2001

