

Conclusion: Sovereignty in Crisis

This book is about how the Malay Muslims of Guba, a village in Thailand's Deep South, live their lives in the wake of the ongoing insurgency that was reinvigorated in 2004. It argues that the unrest is the effect of the way in which different forms of sovereignty converge around the residents of this region. It also argues that the residents at the same time have cultivated themselves and obtained and enacted agency through the sovereigns. As such, rather than asking why the violence is increasing and who is behind it, like most scholarly works on the topic, I examine how different forms of sovereignty impose their subjectivities on the residents, how they have converged in so doing and what tensions have followed, and how people have dealt with these tensions and cultivated themselves and obtained and enacted agency through the sovereigns.

The question of sovereignty in southern Thailand dates back for many centuries. Between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, the question revolved around the ambiguity of sovereignty over the region. On the one hand, the region was composed of Malay sultanates, whose sovereignty had to be realized. On the other hand, the region was regarded by successive Siamese kingdoms as vassal states whose sovereignty needed to be recognized as well. A suzerain-vassal relationship was attempted, in order to address the ambiguity, but to no avail, resulting in wars between the Malay sultanates and Siam that recurred over the course of centuries. The question of ambiguous sovereignty was put to an end when the sultanates were incorporated into Siam in a process that began in the late eighteenth century and was only completed at the turn of the twentieth century. Now, Siamese sovereignty was the only form of sovereignty to be realized over the clearly demarcated territory.

However, singular sovereignty over the territory did not put the question to an end. Rather, it generated a new question and a new form of conflict — a question of sovereignty over subjectivity, which led to the emergence of separatist movements. That is to say, although Siam's nation-building project was first launched inclusively, it was later carried out exclusively, associating the nation with Thai ethnicity and Buddhism at the expense of other ethnicities and religions. Alienated by the state's ethno-religious

ideology and subsequent assimilation policy, people in the Deep South were later inspired by the rise of independence movements across Southeast Asia after World War II, especially the pan-Malay nationalist movement. This provided Malay Muslims in the region with a strong sense of separatism and led to the emergence of clandestine movements in the 1950s through the 1980s that fought the Thai state, citing Malay identity and later also Islam as causes.

The recent unrest, which primarily began in 2004, shares the same question but frames it differently. On the one hand, although differing from the separatism of earlier decades in terms of anonymity, casualties, and the intensity of Islam as a motivating factor, the recent unrest is largely rooted in the question of sovereignty over the subjectivity of the people who live in the region. On the other hand, how this question is posed is more pressing than before, and it involved more forms of sovereignty that people need to answer. Guba is one place where various forms of sovereignty imposed subjectivities on the residents in such a manner.

The return of Babo from his religious study in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s, the younger generation's acquisition of religious education from outside and abroad, and the advent of the New Group and Dakwah exposed Guba residents to various kinds of "correct" Islam, which they consequently felt obliged to practise. Largely refraining from the "sinful" activities they had previously indulged in, the residents began to live the lives of "good" Muslims. The Thai state, on the other hand, forged citizens out of Guba residents through various means, primarily education in the case of children, conscription in the case of young men, and "help and care programmes" in the case of the population at large. At the same time, royal initiatives and royal recognitions were implemented in the region to win the "hearts and minds" of the people as royal subjects.

These subjectification processes had long taken place in Guba to some degree, but they were intensified after 2004 in light of the recent unrest. Schools have become part of security force operations through special activities such as Children's Day fairs and through the building of temporary military camps in school compounds. The military along with government agencies also expanded their scope of mission to cover "help and care programmes" and development projects to discourage people from supporting the insurgents. Likewise, the monarchy provided special assistance to the residents, especially those suffering from the unrest, to ensure their loyalty. Meanwhile, the insurgency led to the breakdown of law enforcement in the region, enabling local influential figures such as powerful administrators and leaders of crime rings to exert power of life

and death over common citizens. In addition, the insurgents' invocation of Islam has rendered the question of what is “correct” in Islam and what is a “good” Muslim more pressing for the residents.

The intensification of these processes increased existing tensions. The insurgents' claim that they could kill with impunity, and their alleged prohibition of work on Friday mornings, led to conflicting responses among the residents. Some were inclined to agree with the insurgents' claims, believing them to be better educated in Islam than they were themselves. But others disagreed, especially when their ability to work at certain times (and thus their livelihoods) came into question, and they cited the Koran in making their counterarguments. Although tensions among different strands of Islam — the New Group and the Old Group, Dakwah and the mosque group — did not increase, as the insurgents did not subscribe to any school of Islam in particular, the insurgents' invocation of Islam in general concerned the practitioners of these different schools, who did not want their practice to be at variance with that of the insurgents. Likewise, although the recent unrest did not directly increase the tension between Islam and Malay culture, Malay beliefs and rituals that were in conflict with Islam lost support among the insurgents.

Most evident are the tensions that arose between Islam and Malay on the one hand and the Thai state on the other. The transliteration of Malay words and names into the Thai alphabet — part of the Thai state's effort to support “Malayness” — was met with criticism; some said that the transliterations were often inaccurate and led to misunderstandings, whereas others claimed that the practice would ultimately lead to the extinction of the Malay language in Thailand. As for Islam, the royal grave-soil laying ceremony generated discontent among religious leaders as well as local administrators, who deemed that the ceremony was not in line with Islam. But they felt powerless to raise the issue lest they fall under suspicion of being against the state or on the side of the insurgents. How to live the lives of multiple, and often conflicting, subjectivities is therefore the pressing question faced by residents of the Deep South in the wake of the recent unrest.

As Muslims, people in Thailand's Deep South seek to negotiate with Allah, and to select from and interpret Islam, as a means of coping with questions and necessities in everyday life. By “making a promise” with Allah, some felt that they could continue to engage in sinful activities, confident that they could quit those activities at some future time. Women negotiated with and reinterpreted Islamic precepts to make them fit their everyday necessities, especially when it comes to controlling their own

bodies in matters such as contraception and in managing their family's earnings, such as by tapping rubber on Friday mornings. Those who were engaged in dubious businesses and activities countered strict versions of Islam by subversive interpretations. As Malays, people in Guba, especially *bomohs*, modified their Malay beliefs and rituals to align with Islam so that they could continue to offer their services. As Thai citizens, Guba residents on the one hand observed state rules and regulations and on the other hand outsmarted the state in subversive ways. And when dealing with the insurgents and other influential figures, people mostly cooperated and conformed so that they could lead their lives as normally as possible in the "territory" of these de facto sovereigns.

However, the residents' engagement with their sovereigns is far more complex than simply balancing resistance with surrender. Sovereigns can be a means through whom people can craft subjectivity and obtain and enact agency. Through the strict observance of religious duties, one woman in Guba earned herself a reputation as a pious Muslim ascribed with agency to act in the name of Allah in religious and other matters. By inscribing the sentence "We love Mr King" on a ceremonial footed tray, a group of Guba residents crafted themselves as royal subjects ascribed with agency to engage state officials under whose authority they are otherwise discontent.

While enabling people to act with some measure of authority, the agency mediated through the sovereigns is limited. Allah-mediated agency can be enacted only among Muslims who recognize Allah's sovereignty, not among state authorities, most of whom are Thai Buddhists. This is particularly the case for the sovereign monarch, because to craft subjectivity and enact agency through the monarch in a state of exception is self-contradictory — the subjectivity is crafted by stripping the king of his god-like features, whereas agency is enacted by treating the king as the sovereign. Moreover, the central feature of the king's sovereign power, his ability to suspend the application of law and to exist outside the law, implies privilege and inequality, whereas what Malay Muslims of southern Thailand have been demanding is equality and justice. As such, rather than the sovereign monarch, who is the embodiment of the Thai state in a state of exception, it is the Thai state with its fragmented sovereignty that should serve as the means through which the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand can address their ethno-religious concerns and realize their political aspirations.

But how possible is this? In 2012, local academics proposed "southern border administration models" as an attempt to solve the southern unrest, but these proposals were rejected by the government and especially by

the military for fear that they would lead to autonomy and even talk of independence, despite their emphasis on decentralization as a primary goal. The 2014 coup d'état that ousted Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra closed a window of opportunity for reconciliation in the South, as it replaced the “politics leads the military” policy in the region with a renewed emphasis on national security — an overall strategic direction that has prevailed across the country, which has been under military rule since then. In this political climate, it is unity, not fragmentation or flexibility, of state sovereignty that is emphasized, which consequently makes it extremely difficult if not impossible for the southern insurgency to be resolved. This is quite a different situation from, for instance, that of the Moros in the southern Philippines, for whom the central government created the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, thus resolving at least part of that conflict.

Importantly, the political conflict that began to gather steam in 2005, one year after the eruption of the recent unrest, only exacerbated the situation. In dealing with the political unrest and other issues that arose after the 2014 coup, Thailand's military leaders invoked Section 44 of the Interim Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand of 2014 to create a “state of exception” — enabling the leader of the newly established National Council for Peace and Order to suspend the application of laws, rules, and regulations and free himself of responsibility for any actions undertaken in the name of state security. Another sovereign was created. Section 44 of the 2014 constitution was retained as Section 265 of the transitory provisions of the 2017 constitution. However, the creation of “sovereigns” in this sense is not in line with the fundamentals of democracy (in which sovereignty belongs to the people) or the rule of law (in which everyone is equal before the law) — basic rights that many Thai citizens have demanded. This is a crisis of sovereignty, which has led to heightened unrest not only in the Deep South but throughout Thailand as a whole, and it cannot be resolved unless sovereignty is exercised following democratic principles.