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IN SOUTH SULAWESI: ENCOUNTERING THE LOCAL,
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Raihani

Exploring Islamic School Leadership in a Challenging Southern Thailand Context

Abstract: *This study explores leadership practices in different Islamic schools in Southern Thailand, an area where already for decades an ethno-political conflict has been ongoing between Malay Muslims and the Thai Buddhist government. Using a multiple-case study approach, this research selected three Islamic schools one each in the provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala selecting their principals, teachers, and students as informants. The findings suggest that the principals, in their planning activities, tend to think strategically for the benefit of their schools, their students, and the community at large, that they are willing to compromise with the government so long as not contradicting their religious beliefs and principles, and that they have a strong vision for the school improvement. Under difficult conditions, they always consider the need to establish immediate and more extensive cooperation with various stakeholders to help further improve the school conditions and their output.*

Keywords: Islamic School Leadership, Conflict Area, Strategic Leaders, Southern Thailand.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan menggali praktek kepemimpinan di beberapa Sekolah Islam di Thailand Selatan, sebuah wilayah di mana konflik antara kaum Muslim Melayu dan Pemerintah Buddha Thailand berkelanjutan sejak beberapa dekade ini. Menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus, penelitian ini memilih tiga Sekolah Islam masing-masing di Propinsi Pattani, Narathiwat dan Yala, dan menjadikan kepala sekolah, guru dan siswa sebagai informan. Ditemukan bahwa para kepala sekolah, dalam kegiatan perencanaan, cenderung berfikir strategis demi kemaslabatan sekolah, siswa, dan masyarakat yang lebih besar, bahwa mereka mau berkompromi dengan pemerintah selama itu tidak bertentangan dengan keyakinan dan prinsip agama, dan bahwa mereka mempunyai visi yang kuat untuk peningkatan kualitas sekolah. Dalam kondisi yang sulit, mereka selalu berfikir untuk membangun kerjasama dengan banyak pemangku kepentingan untuk lebih jauh meningkatkan kondisi-kondisi sekolah dan hasilnya.

Kata kunci: Kepemimpinan Sekolah Islam, Area Berkonflik, Pemimpin Strategis, Thailand Selatan.

ملخص: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف ممارسات القيادة في بعض من المدارس الإسلامية في جنوب تايلاند، وهي المنطقة التي استمرت فيها الصراعات بين المسلمين الملايويين والحكومة البوذية التايلاندية منذ عقود. وباستخدام منهج دراسة الحالة تم اختيار ثلاث مدارس إسلامية في كل من محافظات فطاني وناراثيوات ويالا، مع إشراك مديري المدارس والمعلمين والطلاب كمُخبرين. وقد تبين أن مديري المدارس في أنشطتهم التخطيطية يميلون إلى التفكير بشكل استراتيجي لصالح مدارسهم وطلابهم والمجتمع ككل، بحيث إنهم على استعداد للتوصل إلى حل توفيق مع الحكومة طالما أنه لا يتعارض مع معتقدات ومبادئ الدين، وإن لديهم رؤية قوية لتحسين جودة المدرسة. وفي ظل الظروف الصعبة يفكرون دائماً في بناء التعاون مع العديد من أصحاب المصلحة لمواصلة تحسين الظروف المدرسية ونتائجها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: قيادة المدارس الإسلامية، منطقة الصراع، الزعيم الاستراتيجي، جنوب تايلاند.

Leadership is undoubtedly an important key to the success of a school, but it operates in context. The body of literature that has been written so far has established that there is a strong relationship between the success of a school and its leadership when it sets clear directions, manages people humanely and appropriately, and establishes meaningful collaboration (Guzmán 1997; Jacobson et al. 2005; Leithwood et al. 2004). Leadership does not exist in a void. It is bounded by contextual conditions that shape leadership styles and characteristics. As the contingency theory says (Fiedler 1967, 1993), no single form of leadership is effective for all contexts, particularly when the contexts are differently characterized.

This paper explores leadership practices in three different Islamic schools in Southern Thailand, an area where an ethno-political conflict between Malay Muslim insurgents and Thai Buddhist government has been ongoing for years. Some studies have been conducted about school leadership in government schools in this conflict area (Brooks 2015; Brooks and Sungtong 2016), but the focus of this study in the context of private Islamic schools is scarce. Private Islamic schools differ from government schools in the following ways. Historically, as will be explained below, private Islamic schools are later transformations of former *pondoks* – Malay Muslim indigenous institutions in Southern Thailand. On the one hand, private Islamic schools were established by Muslim people for Muslim people and they served as places of the formation and preservation of both religious and ethnic identity (Liow 2009; Madmarn 1999). On the other hand, Malay Muslims often saw the government's assimilationist policy which has had an effect on private Islamic schools particularly in terms of curriculum and funding, as a threat to Muslim Malay identity. The distinctive features of these schools in the context of the predominantly Thai Buddhist kingdom require leadership styles that enable school leaders to respond to, and survive, this challenging condition. This study is significant as it tries to understand Islamic school leaders' and teachers' perspectives on, and how they react to, the difficult conditions and environment where they live and operate, and how they make this manifest in school leadership practices. This study will contribute to the growing body of literature about this issue so that it can be used to formulate theories on school leadership in the context of ethno-political violent conflict situations. To date, this kind of literature is very scarce and even scarcer in the

context of Southern Thailand, particularly from the perspective of Islamic school communities.

The violent conflicts in southern Thailand is challenging to school leadership in several ways. First, the insurgent attacks, which are usually followed by sweepings and retaliations, pose an obvious danger for people who live in Southern Thailand (Chalk 2008; Feigenblatt 2010; Lee 2015). Stories circulated during our research that attacks on school teachers in schools were quite common. Second, as will be explained later, the Thai Buddhist government suspected some Islamic schools of supporting the insurgency (Sarkar 2014). One school leader had to suffer being interrogated just because he had attended an education conference overseas. Third, the Thai Buddhist government has issued several policies and reforms including the introduction of academic (non-religious) programs on schools and the provision of operational funds for these programs (Liow 2009; Madmarn 1999), initiatives Islamic school leaders are required to response to in the “appropriate” way. The security and political situation in the three provinces make up an extremely challenging mixture of very complex and intersected interests to school leadership as it is responsible to the Thai Buddhist government, Islamic society, Muslim parents and students for the success of the school process and output.

Islamic Schools in Southern Thailand¹

The educational politics in the Southern Thailand provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala more or less resemble the conflicts that exist between the government and Malay Muslims. In each of these contexts, education is always used as the battlefield for contesting ideologies and political interests between different groups of people – be they religious or political. This section will briefly describe the history of the Islamic educational system in Southern Thailand and, especially, the efforts by the government to influence this system.

Education in the Southern Thailand provinces has been strongly characterized by the presence of *pondoks*, parable to *pesantrens* (Islamic boarding schools) in Indonesia and *pondoks* in Malaysia that teach Islamic knowledge and place the *Tok Guru* (school grand teacher) as the central figures in the system (Liow 2009; Madmarn 1999). *Pondoks* implement a traditional approach to Islamic teaching using old-fashioned methods of instructions which are *kitab*-based and consist

of lecturing (Liow 2009). Usually, the curriculum is designed by using books that follow the established levels within the *Shāfi'i madzhab*. In learning circles (*halaqah*), teachers usually read several paragraphs and explain their contents whilst pupils jot down what they deem important. This circle incorporates few questions and answers.

Generally, Thai Buddhists regard the *pondoks* in the South as hotbeds of Muslim radicalism and political activism (Sarkar 2014, 14). This is not without reason. A document leaked from the Thai military that listed at least 50 educational establishments spread throughout the three provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat where Muslim militants came to recruit and train students for holy war (Davis 2004). Because of this, the Thai government has made efforts to control the system by taking several approaches and implementing various policies. Madmarn (1999) explains that the government had the explicit intention to exert Thai influence on the educational system and the learning process in Malay Islamic communities. The government has taken the approach to integrate the government curriculum into the *pondok* system. Some of the *pondoks* which adopt the curriculum have transformed into *madrasahs* or Islamic schools. As a result, these private Islamic schools teach both the secular academic and the Islamic curriculum. Another approach that the Thai government took to implement was to impose the use of the Thai language in the Islamic educational system with the intention to replace Arabic and Malay and ultimately to remove these languages from the schools and, in turn, from the Muslim community at large. For Malay Muslims in that area, Arabic and Malay are both significant components of their Malay-Muslim identity. This policy, however, had been far from successful mainly because in particular the Malay language was regarded as part of the ethnic identity of Muslims in the area. Madmarn (1999, 73) describes:

Through introducing Thai education into the private Islamic school, the government hopes that the Thai language will take over from the Arabic as well from the Malay languages and there after replace them in their daily lives. The Malay language, which is the mother tongue of the Malay Muslims in these areas, has not faded away as the government might have hoped.

In 2006, the Thai government has issued the Education Development Plan of the Provinces along the Southern Border promoting massive and remarkable reforms on education in the south (Liow 2009, 30–

33). One of the reforms is that in schools the use of two languages – Thai and Malay –has become mandatory. Other initiatives include improvements in teacher training, school facilities, career development for school graduates, and more and better access to higher education. With this enormous support from the government, the transformation of *pondoks* into private Islamic schools has been increasing with the purpose of enhancing efficiency and quality (Saleemad, Eamorapha, and Vinitwatanakhu 2012), even though some remain reluctant to accept the changes because they are concerned with the future maintaining of their Islamic traditions and Muslim identity through traditional Islamic education.

Despite the changes imposed on local communities in the Muslim majority provinces, the Thai government still maintains strict control over the schools' curriculum through the Office of Private Education under the National Education Act (2542/1999). The Office works closely with individual Islamic schools and school associations to coordinate the curriculum at elementary (*ibtidā'i*), middle (*mutawassit*), and secondary (*thānawi*) levels. The curriculum itself is divided evenly between religious and general subjects (50–50), even though certain schools have instituted a breakdown consisting of 18–22 hours per week for religious education and 22–28 hours a week for secular subjects (Liow 2009). The effect of this policy, however, has been the increasing move by Muslim parents in the area to remove their children from government schools as in their view these schools only take Muslim children off their Malay Islamic values (Brooks and Sungtong 2016). As a result, the majority of Muslim students, estimated around 90% (Brooks and Sungtong 2016; Liow 2009), in the south attend private Islamic schools.

All the information above – the history of the making of Islamic schools, the connection with violence, and the government's assimilationist interventions – suggest that private schools have unique differences with public schools in the area. This uniqueness is hypothesized to have an effect on the leadership in these schools, which will be explored in this study.

Leadership in Challenging Circumstances

No single form of leadership is effective in all contexts. Therefore, researchers have conducted numerous studies on school leadership in different, including challenging, contexts to explore leadership

characteristics and practices that facilitate successful school outcomes (B. Davies 2002; Day 2005; Leithwood 2005). Research on school leadership in areas of violent conflict or war is scarce, even though it has started to attract academics' attention. To provide a theoretical insight to this paper, I will review several relevant studies about educational and school leadership in conflict or post-conflict zones including those conducted in Southern Thailand. This review will also serve as a useful comparative account for what will be discussed later in this paper.

One study conducted in the conflict zones of the West Bank and Gaza found that superintendents were forced to act as daily responsive educational leaders since incidents that affected school processes happened unpredictably (Elayan 2007). They were described as lone rangers because the central authority in these conflict areas was not quite functioning. The author concluded that the roles of these superintendents – e.g. decision maker, emergency manager, community builder, and capacity builder – were very complex and political in nature. In a post-conflict zone in Liberia, school principals were also faced with very difficult situations where education was not completely normalized (Norman 2012). While the superintendents in Palestine had to deal with almost-daily armed incidents, school principals in Liberia, as the report presents, were faced with drug/alcohol abuse, student fighting, bribes and corruption to get good grades, low teacher qualifications and salaries, overcrowding and lack of facilities. In their view, school principals need professional improvement so that they can develop themselves and acquire positive attitudes and dispositions, commitment and dedication to the job, and the capacity of establishing partnerships with wider communities. This latter quality is important and recommended in Clarke & O'Donoghue (2013) in their volume on school leadership in post-conflict areas in several countries. In the same volume, Earnest (2013) argues for the importance of establishing leadership capacity of transformative and participative practices to establish trust between the school and the community.

McGlynn & London (2013, 159) made a study of school leadership in the troubled context of Northern Ireland where the Roman Catholic and Protestant communities remain divided. Despite government efforts to integrate children of both groups at school, only 6% of them attended integrated schools. The most featured characteristic of the principals in the schools studied is their vision for inclusion of children

from different group. They developed a strong vision to integrate all children irrespective of their diverse backgrounds and they were able to articulate their vision. More importantly, they communicated their vision and how they understand this inclusion to other stakeholders and they shared its proper meanings so that school staff members and students were confident and able to recognize and accept differences and different people in schools. Another quality of their leadership was the creation of the supportive conditions to enable the inclusion they aspired.

In the conflict zone of the Southern Philippines, Milligan (2010) found that pragmatic prophetic leadership was more effective for school development than previous traditional type of kinship-based leadership. In a simple way, this leadership is rooted in religious authority and in aspirations of technological competences. In this context, principals had the vision to develop schools into venues where students learned Islamic knowledge, sciences and technology. Therefore, Integrated Islamic Schools have become popular and the ideal choice for parents to send their children to for their religious and intellectual development. The principals were described as optimistic agents for improvement and proud of what they were doing. They viewed their job as a calling but remained open to criticism as a way to further improvement. The wider community of schools increasingly better accepted this type of leadership.

Using Davies's (2011) framework of social fragility, Brooks and Sungtong (2016) conducted their study to explore school leadership in government schools in Southern Thailand. They found that community support was the key to successful leadership for government school principals – be they Muslims or Buddhists. In this particular context, school-community relations provided more security for the schools, principals, teachers, and students as the military could not be seen as effective in providing peace and security. In another study, Brooks (2015) conclusively argued that trust was the primary foundation for successful school-community relations in the troubled region. Government school principals in Southern Thailand made various programs and adopted a number of different approaches to gain the trust of the community leaders and the community members at large.

It is clear from these reviews that conflicts create specific challenges to educational and school leaders in a situation where they need to

respond in such a way that leadership practices can be transforming and effective. This is in line with the existing theory that leadership is contingent with the context where it is exercised and that an effective leader is acutely aware of both the immediate and the broader contextual influences on the school or the organization he or she is working in. In most cases, the school leaders' understanding of, and agility in coping with, difficult situations was the basis of their leadership. The Philippines' case, for example, demonstrated the analytical capacity of the school leaders to establish schools that integrate Islamic knowledge, sciences and technology. Islamic ideology and their aspiration to teach advanced technology strongly influenced their leadership practices. In all cases, the school leaders also demonstrated that they had compelling visions that guided them in the processes of realizing their leadership objectives. They knew what they wanted their schools to become. Another quality of the school leaders was that they acted as problem solvers in their schools. Sometimes, they not only solved problems in their schools, but they were also engaged in solving problems in the community problem such as in Liberia, the Philippines and Thailand. They demonstrated their strong commitment to the creation of a better and peaceful community through education. Therefore, they always tried to involve the community in school activities or were themselves engaged in community programs. To do that, they saw the importance of establishing trust between themselves, the schools, and the community. Without trust, any school-community partnership is fragile.

Visiting Three Islamic Schools in the Conflict Areas

This study used the case study approach (Miles and Huberman 1994) and focused on exploring leadership practices in Islamic schools in the provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala. Since these three areas are conflict zones, only one criterion decided the selection of the schools that would be used as research cases, i.e. they had to be easily accessible in terms of proximity, transport and security. Fortunately, beside my own research team,² I had a couple of colleagues from a local institution whose names cannot be revealed here but who provided invaluable assistance to this research. They taught me about a range of issues including the appropriateness of, and access to, our cases, key contacts, and “dos” and “don'ts” during the field research

in this particular area of Thailand. Finally, we decided to select three Islamic schools in three different areas, namely: Pattani Islamic School, Narathiwat Islamic School and Yala Islamic School.³ Visiting these three Islamic schools every day proved quite a challenge to us because of the security checkpoints that were established at almost every kilometer, especially on Narathiwat's main roads.

The three Islamic schools share some similar characteristics, namely: (1) Each of them started as a *pondok* and turned into an Islamic school after following the recommendations of the Thai government and accommodating to the demands of Muslim parents who wanted their children to learn both Islamic and general secular knowledge; (2) They currently adopted the government general curriculum in addition to the Islamic curriculum; (3) They have become the popular choice for parents to send their children to be educated; and (4) They have a dormitory for students to live in. Pattani Islamic School is located just in the outskirts of Pattani city and was established in 1970. Currently it has about 3,000 students. Narathiwat Islamic School was established in 1961 and is located in a rather rural area of Narathiwat province. There were more than 6,000 students enrolled in 2015 coming mostly from the three Muslim areas in Thailand. Yala Islamic School is the oldest of the three and was established in 1951. It is located near the city of Yala. Around 6,000 students from different backgrounds were enrolled in this school. The three schools went through the third round of assessment by the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) in 2015 and all three were classified as "Good Quality Educational Standard". The assessment is carried out every five years. In addition, these schools are categorized as "large".

I used qualitative data collection methods (Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Merriam 1998) to gather data during my fieldwork. I conducted interviews with each of the principals and several teachers of each school. In Yala Islamic School, I involved the foundation's chairman to be interviewed and conducted focus group discussions (FGD) with five to six students in each school. The interviews and FGDs – each lasting an hour or so – were employed to understand the participants' perspectives on the practices of school leadership, the contexts of the Islamic schools, and other relevant issues important to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Examples of the questions we used include: What do you understand about the

conflict and its history? How does this understanding influence your leadership? What are your vision and priorities in your leadership? When an informant permitted us to do so, the interview was recorded to be used for transcription and analysis. Third, I collected several documents that supported and complemented the information we collected through our interviews and FGDs. Fourth, I observed the Islamic schools' rituals, ceremonies, day-to-day interactions, and events that can be inferred as typical of the Islamic school culture.

The data analysis went through several stages: data cleaning, transcribing, coding and categorizing, and interpreting (Merriam 1998; Miles and Huberman 1994; Patton 2002). Every evening after data collection, my team members and I discussed the information we had found, identified what was relevant and what not for the purposes of the study. After cleaning the data, local assistants made verbatim transcriptions and translated them into Indonesian. I coded the transcripts, categorized them into themes, and compared them across the cases. The most commonly emerging themes from the three cases included "understanding of context", "vision for school advancement", "integration of religious and secular curricula", and "creation of collaboration". Under each of these themes, some sub-themes were identified; some of them differed from one case to another. By taking these steps, I managed to generate theoretical prepositions from the data about leadership in Islamic private schools in Southern Thailand.

The Portrait of Leadership in the Three Schools

To understand the leadership characteristics and the practices in the three Islamic schools, we present our findings around several themes including the development of school vision, strategic policies and movement within the political constrains in the particular area, the establishment of togetherness, and the openness to broader collaboration.

Developing School Vision

One of the leadership qualities that we learned from the three principals was the ability to develop a compelling vision of the direction the schools were to go. There was consensus among the three school leaders that they wanted to see their schools as comfortable and supportive places to educate children not only in Islamic knowledge but

also in general sciences. The principal of the Narathiwat Islamic School explained that the first knowledge students need to learn is about Islam. It was for this purpose that the school was established. However, the societal demands on citizens to contribute more to a modern society cannot be ignored. Therefore, the three schools were willing to adopt the government curriculum of academic subjects. The principal of the Yala Islamic School pointed to the recent development of the ASEAN Economic Community as a driving force behind such a vision. He said:

We here in the three areas of Southern Thailand serve as a hub for the Kingdom of Thailand in its relation with Malay countries and communities such as Malaysia and Indonesia. We share borders with Malaysia, and are very close to Indonesia geographically, culturally and emotionally. We need to play a more significant role. Can you imagine if our children cannot speak Malay and do not possess modern knowledge or master necessary skills?

It is clear that the principals had a strong vision to create Thai Muslim citizens who can actively participate in and contribute to the development of society in a sense not limited to the religious sphere but in other spheres as well. They wanted to prove that contemporary Islamic schools transformed from religious *pondok* institutions, which were characterized as traditional and static as opposed to modern Islamic schools. We quote here the motto of Narathiwat Islamic School that was posted on the school gate in large Arabic script but using the Malay language (*Jawi*). It represents exactly the vision of the school leader and says: “*beragama* [to be religious], *berilmu* [to be knowledgeable], *berdisiplin* [to be disciplined]” and continues with the school philosophy “*belajar keduniaan seiring keagamaan, mengarah dunia menuju keamanan*” [learning general knowledge alongside religious ones to contribute to global [society] and security]. When he was asked to explain the motto, the principal said:

We have opened programs of Quranic memorization and Sciences. If our graduates become medical doctors, they would be doctors who have memorized the Quran, or the Kingdom’s public servants who have memorized the Quran. We know that there are graduates of this school who have become doctors and when they treat patients, they inform them about verses of the Quran or of the Prophet’s traditions.

It seemed that other stakeholders, especially teachers, shared his vision. As became clear during several interviews we had, teachers were confident when they explained that the schools were in the process of

making a difference in terms of the knowledge students learn, meaning that the schools provided general or academic subjects, too. Ali, a teacher of Pattani Islamic School, argued that he did not want to see his students only to teach the Quran or religious teachings to the community. He strongly aspired to encourage them to seek more modern knowledge even if they had to go overseas. The teachers we interviewed always told us with pride that the schools' graduates continue education at both domestic and international universities; many of them were accepted in general universities. Also, Dulla, a student from Yala Islamic School proudly said during the FGD: "Do you know that in this area this school has become the center of astronomical study? Also, some of our students went to America in a student exchange program".

This kind of shared understanding of a schools' vision cannot come into being without effort. It is the ability of the school leaders to articulate and align their vision so that most of the stakeholders were aware of and shared it. The principal of Pattani Islamic School explicated that there were regular workshops where teachers discuss the future of the school. In the other schools, regular meetings and speeches during events had become effective vehicles to share their leaders' vision and align it with that of the others. The teachers looked comfortable with the future directions of the schools and were confident that better school conditions and outcomes would soon be realized.

Compromising and Winning

In a politically difficult situation like that in the region where the three Islamic schools are located, carefully measured policies and actions are vital. It is not about a few people's interests such as those of school leaders only, but about those of a large number of students and even of the community as a whole. As described previously, the conflict in the three provinces was marked by regular ambushes and attacks from both sides. The government increased its pressure on the Muslim minority to accept the power and authority of the Thai Kingdom. Through various initiatives, the government wanted Muslim people to integrate and assimilate well with other citizens. In education, as described before, the most remarkable initiative was the introduction of the academic or general curriculum into Islamic schools. One of the objectives of this initiative is to educate all children in the Kingdom in knowledge, competences and skills that help them contribute to the development of

the country. However, some Islamic schools were reluctant to respond positively to this initiative. The principal of the Pattani Islamic School said:

In 1982, we started to introduce the academic/general curriculum. [Sponsored by the government], teachers were taken to Bangkok for training to open their minds. There were many *pondoks* that refused to participate because they did not fully understand what the government wanted. They were very defensive. [I think,] they misunderstood that. They thought that the academic curriculum was Buddhist-based and that speaking Thai was considered Buddhist.

Although some rejected the initiative, many other intelligent principals, as the quote above indicates, responded positively to the government's initiative to infuse an academic curriculum and general subjects in the schools as a way to open the minds of the teachers first and then of the students. The principal demonstrated his awareness that Muslims in his school not only need Islamic knowledge but also general and modern knowledge and sciences. He initiated several science programs including science competitions to encourage the development of his students' love for this "new thing". Regarding the government's suspicion of Islamic schools as places that support insurgency, the principal of the Yala Islamic School argued that it was because of lack of communication between the government and the schools.

Actually, we wanted to cooperate with the government in the field of education. We only wanted Malay Muslims to learn religion properly. The government and the military did not understand this. They did not come to us, and [therefore] encouraged suspicion and mistrust. But after they came and talked to us, they got to understand our mission [which is not to educate for insurgency].

One of the founding leaders of the Yala Islamic School thought that the willingness of Islamic schools to adopt the government-imposed curriculum was a strategy to be seen to compromise and then win the "battle". He further explained that Muslim children and youths need not only religious teachings but also academic knowledge in order to contribute to the development of the Islamic people. "One cannot just hide under the umbrella of this conflict without doing anything to move forward", he said. The principal of Narathiwat Islamic School was convinced that by accommodating the government's interest, the school would be able to improve the betterment of Muslim society in

the province, which was shown as being far behind compared to other parts of Thailand. He said that as long as the adoption does not go against Islamic principles, Islamic schools need to respond positively to the government's initiative. The benefits of accommodating the government's interest include the reception of school operational funds which is calculated on the basis of the number of individual students who participate in the academic curriculum. The funds could cover teachers' salaries, cross subsidize religious teachings, and cover other operational costs. The principal of the Pattani Islamic School said: "Before, we had only a small number of students. We had financial problems, because we ran a *pondok* system that taught religion only. Now the government supports us".

Building Cohesion

The adoption of an academic or general curriculum in the three Islamic schools did not go without having consequences. Students who opted to participate in the academic curriculum – and most students did – have to attend class twice a day, in the morning and in the afternoon. In the morning, they have to attend Islamic religion classes like Islamic theology, Islamic jurisprudence, Quranic exegesis, and so on, whilst in the afternoon they study academic or general subjects such as the sciences, economy, geography and so forth. This condition creates a heavy burden on the students, and may lead to boredom and exhaustion and subsequently to the creation of a lack of social cohesion among them. The adoption of the academic subjects also requires the schools to employ Thai Buddhist teachers to teach these subjects. This means that there are two groups of teachers both in terms of the subject matters they teach and in religio-ethnic terms. There is a group of academic subject teachers, some of whom are Buddhists, and a group of Islamic religious teachers, who are Malay. These differences among the teacher population pose a potential threat to the social cohesion among the community members of the three schools. This is acknowledged by several of the schools' teachers who think that this diversity is a complex phenomenon. For example, Sadik, a teacher in the Yala Islamic School, said that the presence of academic Thai Buddhist teachers has created uneasiness in their relationships.

The principals of the three Islamic schools were aware of this problem, and therefore initiated various activities to encourage social

cohesion among the schools' internal stakeholders. To mention some, there were events called "Sukan Jaya" and "Family Day" in the Yala Islamic School. Sukan Jaya is a sport competition week that involves the entire school community thus including teachers and students. Teacher Salim said:

In this Islamic school, there is Sukan Jaya "Sport" in which teachers and students are involved. Muslim teachers and non-Muslim teachers are the same. We play and compete in games. Often Muslim teachers have to teammate with Buddhist teachers. This event can strengthen the relations amongst us.

The Family Day, according to the principal, nurtures a sense of belonging among teachers and students. Regardless of ethnic background, a sense of belonging to one family overwhelmed everyone in the school community. Through this event, students have been given an inspiring example that there need not be a barrier for them to respect all teachers equally. Halimah, a student, stated that in school, she learned to respect all the teachers in ways appropriate and according to their religio-ethnic backgrounds. Students usually shake and kiss the hands of Muslim teachers, while they bow before Buddhist teachers. She further narrated: "If he (a non-Muslim teacher) asks for help, although he is a non-Muslim he is our teacher and thus if he needs our help we will help. We have the same respect for all the teachers". Similar activities were held regularly in the other two Islamic schools. All the respondents said that these activities created solidarity among teachers and students. Dawud, a student of the Pattani Islamic School, said that he was very happy to study at school because of the solidarity and family-like relationship that was created among the school community.

Reaching Out and Building Collaborations

The social cohesion was strengthened not only among internal school stakeholders, but also between schools and the wider community in the form of collaborations. All the principals, as most respondents acknowledged, demonstrated a strong disposition to establish collaborations with a wider circle of stakeholders to gain more support from, and give benefit to, the outside community. According to the principal of Narathiwat Islamic School, the school had to think of what it was able to offer the surrounding community to help it with its development. To realize this idea, in every fasting month (Ramadan) the

school sent out selected senior students to many mosques in Narathiwat to lead prayers, particularly the special Ramadan prayers. He said that the community's response was very positive, and as a result, the school was more trusted as indicated by the growing number of community requests for these kinds of programs and the increase of new enrolment every year. This type of mutual relationship between the school and the community had become an important characteristic also in the other schools. The reach-out programs were part of the schools' policies. In Pattani Islamic School, for example, there was a program called "*usrah*" [lit. family] which pointed out the way the outside community lived to teachers and qualified students. They stayed a few days in the community, helped people to clean the surrounding environment, and offered them religious consultancy. This program not only targeted the Muslim community, but also "Kampung Buddha" (Buddha village), without of course the religious consultancy program.

Another program that reflects the school leaders' ambition was to establish collaboration with external or even overseas organizations. When we visited Yala Islamic School, we were warmly welcomed by the school leaders, teachers and students. Knowing that some of the research teams came from an Indonesian university, at the end of our research activities, the principal asked us to sign a Memory of Understanding (MoU) between our university and the school. Although this MoU might not be substantially significant, the school's ambition to establish more extensive collaboration shows their willingness to be internationally known and to learn from overseas institutions. One of the principal's objectives with establishing relationships with overseas universities was to send the school's graduates for further study to these universities. He said that university tuition fees and living costs in Indonesia were significantly lower than those in other countries. Indeed, we discovered that at least twelve of the school's teachers had graduated from Indonesian universities.

Whilst Narathiwat Islamic School established relationships with domestic organizations and, as a result, received some sponsored teachers to teach English and various Islamic subjects, Pattani Islamic School enjoyed partnerships with international scholarship organizations such as the Fathullah Güllen Foundation, which enabled several graduates to continue their further education in Turkey. The school also sent graduates to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Indonesia, Malaysia and other

countries; most of them with scholarships. Hajir, one of the teachers, conveyed: “Our principal is open-minded. He travels a lot, and has a strong ambition to seek partnerships. He regularly sends teachers and students overseas and teachers used to join free training sessions in Bangkok. Also, twenty teachers visited Pare in Indonesia for ten days for intensive English training”. The principal argued that if Malay Muslims in Thailand want to advance, they need to open their minds to changes and be exposed to external ideas. One way to do so, he continued to say, is by creating partnerships with as many international organizations as possible.

Concluding Remarks

The school leaders in the three Islamic schools in the ethno-political conflict areas of Southern Thailand demonstrated that their leadership qualities and characteristics enabled them to turn their institutions into popular schools. Despite the difficulties they face due to the ongoing conflict and the unrest in their regions, they survived and emerged as effective school leaders. Certain qualities and attributes characterize their leadership. First of all, similar to effective principals in other contexts (Masewicz and Vogel 2014; McGlynn and London 2013), they have been able to develop a strong vision and align it with that of others to improve the quality of their graduates by adopting the government academic curriculum. The decision to accept to teach non-religious subjects was difficult in a situation in which the relationship between the Thai Kingdom and the Malay Muslim community was strained and *pondoks* and Islamic schools had become the targets of suspicion by the government and the military. Liow (2009, 36) argued:

Bearing in mind the difficult historical relationship that southern Thailand’s Islamic education institutions has had with the Thai State, the attention that schools have garnered is to be expected, given some measure of precedence for the purported nexus between these schools and separatist violence.

Therefore, we can understand that the principals strongly believe in the importance of academic subjects for the students of their schools. They have moved from the orthodox teaching of only religious classes to the careful adoption of change, yet in the schools teaching religion remains an important component. Besides their personal belief, their ability to understand both the conflict and the socio-economic

changes that take place contributed to their decision to accept these subjects. The principals' consistent statements about the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) suggest they are concerned about the recent developments in the region which require appropriate responses through education. The principal of Narathiwat Islamic School used to say that several big companies operating in the three areas of Southern Thailand have already opened recruitments for local youths. Those who graduated from schools which teach the government curriculum and who speak Malay will have a greater chance to be recruited.

The principals of the three Islamic schools demonstrated their capacity of making strategic decisions for the good of the schools, students and the whole Muslim community. Like in other contexts (Clarke and O'Donoghue 2013; Milligan 2010), they were visionary – a leadership style that is underpinned by faith in the schools and in the aspirations of what their graduates might want to become. Although the orthodox group might see them as having become leniently cooperative with the government or of having made themselves the targets of criticism because of this strategic development, their care about the advancement of Muslim society overrides such risks. They have planned this adoption, calculated the risks and benefits, and walked through the processes to achieve their objective of creating a better Muslim community. They were always keen in building trust (Brooks 2015) between their schools, the government and the community, and invited all the stakeholders to be involved in the school improvement process, encouraged unity and collaboration, and produced mutual benefit for both the school and the community. Strategically, they were very keen to establish external collaborations to help with the schools' programs.

In conclusion, this study supports the theory of school leadership which is based on strong personal beliefs and a thorough understanding of both the immediate and the wider contexts where schools exist (Leithwood 2005; Leithwood et al. 2004), although the way they articulated their beliefs and how they responded to their contexts were influenced by the particularities of the conditions where they live. In these difficult circumstances, the school leaders of the Islamic schools I studied strongly upheld Islamic principles and by these they guided and led their schools to the extent that they did not show any awkwardness because of their strong religious beliefs. Based on their understanding of the contexts, the school leaders were open to changes

for the betterment of Islamic schools and education in their regions. They were keen to collaborate with the government in a situation where they are in danger of being suspected of being insurgents. They just wanted to demonstrate to the government that Islamic schools in the South like any other schools in the country aspire to endow their children with religious competences, science and technology. In short, in doing so, the principals of the three Islamic schools are visionaries with a strategy, as well as collaborative. The difficulties they meet in their conflict-affected areas did not hinder them in making meaningful changes for the schools, the students and the community at large.

Endnotes

1. A significant portion in this section is adapted from Raihani et al. (2016, 123–45).
2. Special thanks to my research team members: Mr. Promadi Karim, Mr. Sopyan, and Mr. Nunu Mahnun for helping me to collect data. However, this paper is written solely by me.
3. I do not reveal the names of these schools to protect their anonymity and so I called them Pattani Islamic School, Narathiwat Islamic School and Yala Islamic School for easy reference. I also do not disclose the names of my informants for whom I use pseudonyms instead.

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The journal invites scholars and experts working in all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences pertaining to Islam or Muslim societies. Articles should be original, research-based, unpublished and not under review for possible publication in other journals. All submitted papers are subject to review of the editors, editorial board, and blind reviewers. Submissions that violate our guidelines on formatting or length will be rejected without review.

Articles should be written in American English between approximately 10,000-15,000 words including text, all tables and figures, notes, references, and appendices intended for publication. All submission must include 150 words abstract and 5 keywords. Quotations, passages, and words in local or foreign languages should

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2. Booth, Anne. 1988. "Living Standards and the Distribution of Income in Colonial Indonesia: A Review of the Evidence." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19(2): 310–34.
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5. Utriza, Ayang. 2008. "Mencari Model Kerukunan Antaragama." *Kompas*. March 19: 59.
6. Ms. *Undhang-Undhang Banten*, L.Or.5598, Leiden University.
7. Interview with K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, Kajen, Pati, June 11th, 2007.

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الحركات المناهضة للمشايخ
والعلماء الحمر في Priangan:
الاتحاد الأخضر ١٩٤٢-١٩٢٠ نموذجا

محمد إسكندر
