The Royal Activities of His Majesty King Bhumibol towards Muslims in Thailand

Chamnong Kanthik* and Sudaporn Khiewngamdee**

This article aims to study the work of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) concerning the Muslims in Thailand. According to the present Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, Section 7 says that the King is a Buddhist, but he must be an upholder of other religions, as well. And Section 67 says that the State should support and protect Buddhism and other religions as well. From clear evidence, it appears that Islam first came to Thailand in the reign of King Ekathotsarot (1593 - 1601) during the Ayothaya period, and has flourished since then. The early ancestors were Shi ah, and this has continued to the present. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who recently passed away, completely supported the activities of other religions, including Muslims. In 1979 he started a project to seriously support agriculture. After that, he kindly ordered the renovation of the central mosque in 1993. Moreover, he had many projects to help resolve the troubles in the southernmost part of Thailand, such as Phikunthong Project. The results reveal that regarding his activities concerning Muslim people, he acted in accordance with his speech that “understanding, approaching and developing”, which is why the Muslim people in Thailand have freedom of religious observance, and are happy, as are people of other religions in Thailand.

[Keywords : The Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, The Muslims, The Royal activities]

* Associate Professor, Ph.D. in Pali and Sanskrit Program, Department of Oriental Language, Faculty of Humanities, Mahamakut Buddhist University, Phra Nakhon, Bangkok (Thailand)
** Lecturer in Pali and Sanskrit Program, Department of Oriental Language, Faculty of Humanities, Mahamakut Buddhist University, Phra Nakhon, Bangkok (Thailand)
E-mail: <sudaporn_khiewngamdee@hotmail.com>
1. **Introduction**

In the history of Thailand, from the Sukhothai period (B.E. 1762/A.D. 1219) (Plueng Na Nakhon, 2005 : 551) to the Rattanakosin period, there have been 8 dynasties with 54 kings. All the kings have been Buddhists. Even though the kings are Buddhists, they are also the patrons of all religions. Every king gives equal patronage to every religion in his kingdom. In the royal court, the Chularajamontri (Most Senior Islamic Spiritual Leader) supervises Islam, and Phramaha Rajakhruvamadebmuni (Brahmin Great Master) performs Hindu rituals. Christianity and Sikh have no representatives in the royal court, but both receive equal patronage from the kings as do other religions.

In the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2560, there are sections concerning the monarch as follows:

**Section 7**: The King is a Buddhist and Upholder of religions.

Other sections specify the freedom of belief among Thai people and the duty of state to protect every religion as follows (Academic team, 2017 :10):

**Section 31**: A person shall enjoy full liberty to profess a religion, and shall enjoy the liberty to exercise or practice a form of worship in accordance with his or her religious principles, provided that it shall not be adverse to the duties of the Thai people, neither shall it endanger the safety of the State, nor shall it be contrary to public order or good morals (Academic team, 2017 : 22).

**Section 67**: The State should support and protect Buddhism and other religions.

In supporting and protecting Buddhism, which is the religion observed by the majority of Thai people for a long period of time, the State should promote and support education and dissemination of dharmic principles of Theravada Buddhism for the development of mind and wisdom development, and shall have measures and mechanisms to prevent Buddhism from being undermined in any form. The State should also encourage Buddhists to participate in implementing such measures or mechanisms (Academic team, 2017 : 41).

2. **A Brief History of Islam in Thailand**

For more than 700 years in the history of Thailand, from the Sukhothai kingdom B. E. 1762 (A.D.1219), the country has been ruled by the monarchical system. In about B.E. 235, Buddhism was spread to this area from India by Buddhist monks sent by King Asoka. The document to confirm this fact is an inscription in stone slabs. In the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng, Buddhism was the national religion. There were no referent documents indicating that there were other religions in the Sukhothai kingdom at that time or not. The document found in the reign of King Ekathosarot (A.D. 1593-1601) indicated that there were two Shia Islamic brothers; Sheikh Ahmad and Mahamad Sa-id from Persia who came
to rely on royal protection in the land of Siam. They both lived a life in trading and then became state officials. Sheikh Ahmad was appointed as Phraya Sheikh Ahmad Rajasetthi and acting-Chief of the Muslims in Thailand in the reign of King Songdham (A.D. 1620-1628) (Phraya Raksakunmontri, Chuen Komarakul Na Nakhon, 2003 : 15) Muhammad Sa-id was appointed as Chaoapraya Bovornrajanayok, the Royal Councilor, in the reign of King Prasartthong when he was 87 years of age. Some descendants of Muhammad Sa-id remained in the faith of Islam and some became Buddhists. The kings of Siam have given patronage to Islam from that time onwards. The lineage of Mohammad Said has continued until the Rattanakosin period and is related to the royal families and government of Thailand. In the Islamic lineage, a son of Phra Phetphichai was appointed as Phraya Chularajamontri, the Most Senior Islamic Spiritual Leader, until the reign of King Rama VII in the Rattanakosin kingdom. In the reign of King Rama IX, a member of this lineage became a judge in the Administrative Court.

Islam in Thailand can be divided by sect; Sunni and Shia, and by geographical location; Muslims in regional areas and Bangkok, and in the southern part of Thailand.

Although the kings of Thailand are Buddhists but all of them give patronage to other religions equally. This may reflect the teaching of non-violence in Buddhism as expounded by King Asoka the Great (B.E. 218-260) as the main model. The reference is in the King Asoka’s Rock Edict number 12 (Phraphrommakhunaphon, Poh Or Payutto, 2009 : 95-96):

‘The Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi, honours all sects and both ascetics and laymen, with gifts and various forms of recognition. But the Beloved of the Gods do not consider gifts or honour to be as important as the advancement of the essential doctrine of all sects. This progress of the essential doctrine takes many forms, but its basis is the control of one’s speech, so as not to extoll one’s own sect or disparage another’s on unsuitable occasions, or at least to do so only mildly on certain occasions. On each occasion one should honour another man’s sect, for by doing so one increases the influence of one’s own sect and benefits that of the other man; while by doing otherwise one diminishes the influence of one’s own sect and harms the other man’s. Again, whosoever honours his own sect or disparages that of another man, wholly out of devotion to his own, with a view to showing it in a favourable light, harms his own sect even more seriously. Therefore, concord is to be commanded, so that men may hear one another’s principles and obey them. This is the desire of the Beloved of the Gods, that all sects should be well-informed, and should teach that which is good, and that everywhere their adherents should be told, ‘The Beloved of the Gods does not consider gifts or honour to be as important as the progress of the essential doctrine of all sects.’ Many are concerned with this matter - the officers of Dhamma, the women’s officers, the managers of the state farms, and other classes of
officers. The result of this is the increased influence of one’s own sect and glory to Dhamma” (Lars Fogelin, 2015 : 78).

That the kings of Thailand have protected and given patronage to every religion in the kingdom is because they keep following the principles of the Tenfold Code of the King. The Tenfold Code of the King consists of:

1. **Dana**: Generosity
2. **Sila**: high moral character
3. **Pariccaga**: self-sacrifice
4. **Ajjava**: honesty: integrity
5. **Maddava**: kindness and gentleness
6. **Tapa**: austerity; self-control non-Indulgence
7. **Akkodha**: non-oppression
8. **Avihimsa**: non-violence; non-oppression
9. **Khanti**: patience: forbearance, tolerance
10. **Avirodhana**: non-deviation from righteousness, conformity to the law (Khu. Ja. 28/240/86) and (Phraphromma khunaphon, 2016 : 240-241).

His Majesty King Bhumibol of Thailand (A.D.1927-2016) followed the steps of other late kings in giving patronage to every religion in the kingdom. The following is the brief history of His Majesty King Bhumibol or King Rama IX:

### 2.1 Birth

His Majesty King Bhumibol was a son of Mahidol Adulyadej, Prince Songkhlanagarin and Lady Sangwal born on December 5, 1927 at Mount Auburn Hospital in Massachusetts State of the United States of America and passed away on October 13, 2016.

### 2.2 Education

When His Majesty the King was 5 years old, he started his kindergarten education at Mother Dei School in Bangkok. After that he was enrolled in Merriment School in Lausanne for elementary education. In 1935, continued his education at Ecole Nouvelle de la Suisse Romande and graduated with Bachelors Letters. In this college, he learned languages, such as English, French, German and Latin and he was good at all these languages. In higher education, His Majesty the King was enrolled in Science and Engineering at Lausanne University. Later in 1938, he returned to Thailand and ascended the throne as the ninth king of the Chakkri dynasty on June 9. Since he was so young and had to return to Switzerland for his education, the regency was established to run the state administration.

On August 19, 1946, His Majesty the King returned to Lausanne for his study. Even though he preferred Engineering to other courses of study, but for the
sake of country administration, he changed the field of study to Government consisting Law, Language, Political Science, Public Administration, and Geography. He was so interested in music that he could learn and practice professional skills in music by himself (Vutthichai Malasin and others, 2003 : 392-394).

2.3 Marriage

February 27, 1950, His Majesty the King returned to Thailand for the royal cremation of the late King Ananda from 28-30 March 1950. April 28, 1950, the royal wedding ceremony was arranged at Sa Pathum Palace. His Majesty the King was married to HRH Princess Sirikit. HRH Princess Srisavarin presided over the ceremony. His Majesty the King and his consort had a marriage registration certificate as other Thai people did. HRH Princess Sirikit was later entitled as Queen Sirikit.

2.4 Coronation

May 5, 1950, His Majesty King Bhumibol was crowned at Phaisanthaksin Pavilion in the Grand Palace with the title inscribed in the golden plate that “His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej Mahitalathibet Ramathibodi Chakkri Naruebdin Sayamintharathiraj Borommanathbophit”. In the Coronation at the Grand Palace, during which His Majesty the King swore: “We shall reign with righteousness, for the benefit and happiness of the Siamese people.”

At the same occasion, His Majesty the King elevated HRH Princess Sirikit to the rank of full queen. On October 22, 1956, the king was ordained at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha and resided at Panya villa in Wat Bovornnives Vihar for 15 days. During that period of time, Queen Sirikit was assigned to overlook the royal activities and duty for the king. The queen was entitled as Queen Sirikit Boromrajininath. (Rong Prapanpong, 2017 : 245-249)

2.5 Royal Activities

From A.D. 1959 onwards, Their Majesties the King and the Queen paid visits to countries in Europe, America, Australia and Asia to foster international relations. At the same time, they visited and met people in every part of the kingdom. Seeing people’s problems in living and earning, Their Majesties sacrificed themselves in solving and improving people’s life quality until the present. It can be said that there are footprints of Their Majesties in every part of the kingdom. With his long sight, vision, and wit, people’s problems were solved, and life quality and income were gradually improved. His Majesty the King tirelessly devoted himself for the sake of people and country.

His Majesty the King initiated more than 2,000 projects covering public health, agriculture, irrigation, land development, education, religious affairs, society, culture, transportation, and economics for the benefit and peacefulness of
people, especially people in the countryside. In the urban areas, the king initiated ways and methods in solving traffic problems, flooding, pollution etc.

His Majesty the King worked tirelessly for the benefit of the people, even when he was not well, he still kept thinking and planning for eradicating people’s poverty and suffering, and increasing people’s happiness and well-being. Sometime, he carried on the work under the sun and the rain in a joyful manner surrounded by the people.

When the country was confronted by economic crisis in 1997, His Majesty the King presented a new way of life called “Sufficiency Economy” for people to live the life sustainably. People have implemented this theory in their living and this has resulted in improvements to the quality of life and a new way of living.

3. **Royal Projects for Thai-Muslims**

   In his 70-year reign, His Majesty the King created lots of projects and initiated activities for Muslims. Thaksin Palace in Narathiwat province was the residence of the king when he visited Islamic people in the 3 southern provinces. Here are 2 examples of the royal projects for Muslims:

   1. Residing at Klaikangwon Palace in Hua Hin district of Prachuap Khiri Khan province, His Majesty the King visited people in the nearby area and found that people needed a road for transporting their agricultural produces. The king gave his pocket money 50,000 baht to Border Patrol Police Division to construct a new road for people. Later on, this kind of initiative became the royal projects and was extended to the southern part of Thailand for improving the life quality of Thai-Muslims. At present, there are 398 of the Royal initiated projects altogether with a budget of 3,700-3,800 million baht.

      In Narathiwat province, there are 296 projects with a budget of 2,700 million baht.

      In Pattani province, there are 62 projects with a budget of 549 million baht.

      In Yala province, there are 40 projects with a budget of 455 million baht.

   2. Mr. Dilok, the private interpreter of His Majesty the King, stated that, at first, Islamic people called the king “Rayoshiah” or “King of Siam”. When the king visited people in the area more and more often, they changed their address to “Rayokito” or “Our King”. With deep impression and faith in the king, people added “ba-eh” to “Rayokito ba-eh” or “Our good and kind King”, and some people say “Kidokase Rayokito” or “We love our King” (MGR Online, 2006, May 20, Online)

3.1 **Building and Renovating Mosques and Education Centers for Thai-Muslims**

   1. When His Majesty the King visited a Muslim village named Baan Huay Sai in Cha-Am district of Prachuap Khiri Khan province in 1979, the mosque leader
asked the king to accept their mosque under the royal patronage. The king accepted it with pleasure and donated his own money 500,000 baht for the restoration of the mosque. The restoration work was completed in 1999. Princess Maha Chakkri Sirindhorn presided over the opening ceremony in 2000.

2. October 21, 1993, His Majesty the King visited the central mosque in Pattani province and found that the area had limited space for a large number of people to participate in the religious functions. At the king’s suggestion, the government carried out the work and a mosque extension was completed 3 years later (Phalakorn Suwannarat, 2016, November 24, Online).

3. There are educational centers for Muslims, such as Huay Sai Educational Center in Prachuapkhirikhan province, Phikulthong Educational Center in Narathiwas province, Phuphan Educational Center in Sakolnakhon province etc. (Sappasin Sattrathirat, 2017, June 14, Online).

3.2 Promoting Islamic Affairs Administration

1. To appoint the Most Senior Islamic Spiritual Leader
2. To approve the board of Islam of Thailand by law, and
3. To enact the Act of Islam, such as Hajj Supporting Act A.D. 1981

3.3 Relations and Activities on Islam

When His Majesty the King went to Thung Sadet village in Sai Buri district of Pattani province, Mr. Wadeng Puteh, 70 years, had an audience with the king with his upper body naked and informed the king about acid soil in the village. Then the soil clinic and other projects were set up. It is known that Wadeng Puteh is the best friend of the king or a best friend of Sai Buri. Wadeng Puteh passed away at the age of 96 in 2012.

3.4 The Royal Activities Beneficial to the Faith in Islam

1. Before A.D. 1962, the consulate of Saudi Arabia had an audience of the king and offered him a set of the Koran in English. Considering that Thai-Muslims should have the Koran in Thai version for study, His Majesty the King addressed the Muslim Master, Tuan Suwannasart, to have the Koran translated into Thai. The translation work took 2 years to complete under the supervision of His Majesty the King. The Koran in Thai version was published in 2008.

2. In Annual Maulid Ceremony, the most significant ceremony of Muslims in Thailand, when His Majesty the King presided over the ceremony, he stood up for salutation when the history of the Prophet Muhammad was read. That impressed and satisfied Muslims in Thailand (Beduin, 2016, October 29, Online).
3. Once Mr. Wanmuhamadnor Mata, President of the National Assembly, had an audience of the king for the king’s signature on the Constitution B.E. 2540 (A.D. 1997). The king allowed President of the National Assembly to follow the code of Islam. The king understood that Muslims were not allowed to pay respect to anyone than the Prophet, and the Muslim status can be ended at once (Phalakorn Suwannrat, 2016, November 24, Online).

3.5 Scholarships for Muslims

1. With His Majesty the King’s initiation, the government set a budget to support the study of Islam and granted scholarships and quota in higher education for Muslims.

2. The Ministry of Education at the suggestion of the king initiated and improved the learning system in Pondok schools with general education and religious education (Beduin, 2016, October 29, Online).

4. Conclusion

The kings of Thailand from the ancient time to present are Buddhists, but all of them have given patronage to Islam and other religions equally. Muslims have been supported during all this time. There are many royal projects initiated for Muslims only. The religious problems of Muslims throughout the country have not occurred. The problems in southern part have not occurred from religious conflicts, but from political concepts that should be solved with understanding. His Majesty the King gave a suggestion as a guideline for solving this problem with “Understand, Approach, and Develop”.

References


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Article Received on December 27, 2017; Accepted on March 17, 2018