

His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej and the Thai Muslim community

Much has been written about the love that Thai people have towards His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who during His 70-year reign had dedicated Himself to improving His people's lives. His Majesty stood by the oath which He gave during the coronation ceremony, that "We shall reign with righteousness for the benefit and happiness of the Siamese people." Nevertheless, little did anyone know of the close relationship between His Majesty King Bhumibol and the Thai-Muslim community living near Thailand's southern borders that made up part of the country's overall population.

According to the late Thanpuying Samorn Bhuminarong, a prominent leader of Thailand's Muslim community, a strong bond had been maintained between His Majesty the King and the Thai-Muslim community during His reign. For many Muslims in Thailand, the King was and continues to be a source of inspiration, guidance and support. The King tirelessly worked to promote religious and cultural diversity in Thailand, constantly stressing the importance of peaceful coexistence among the country's different religious, cultural and ethnic groups.

His Majesty's and the Royal Family's uniquely special, deep-rooted bond with the Thai Muslim community was the product of not just support and guidance, but rather His Majesty's actions that reflected a genuine respect and interest in the religion and most importantly the will to promote acceptance and enhance tolerance throughout the country.

The late King Bhumibol, known to be fond of languages, was a key force behind the publication of a Thai edition of the Al-Quran. His Majesty's fascination of Islam's holy scripture of the faith was initially sparked in 1962 when He was presented by the Consul of Saudi Arabia with a copy of the English edition of the Quran. After studying the text, His Majesty expressed a desire to commission a Thai edition. The King proceeded to ask Thailand's Islamic spiritual leader, the Sheikhu'l Islam (Chularajmontri), to prepare a direct Thai translation of the original Arabic version so that copies can be distributed to all parts of the Kingdom.

In 1968, Their Majesties the King and Queen presided over the ceremony to commemorate the 1,400th anniversary of Quran, despite that Thailand is not a majority-Muslim country. On this occasion, the first Thai edition of the Quran was published and copies were royally conferred to masjids across the country. His Majesty also explained the importance and benefits of translating the holy Islamic scripture into Thai, as it will allow Thai Muslims with limited or no knowledge of Arabic to study and gain a deeper understanding about the principle teachings and practices of Islam.

His Majesty had openly developed a keen yet genuine interest in Islamic culture and history. Every year, the King or a member of the Royal Family, as His Majesty's representative, participates in the ceremony commemorating Mawlid al-Nabi, known as the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

His Majesty and the Thai Royal Family engaged in steps to acknowledge and prioritise the concerns and needs of minority Thai-Muslim communities that often perceived themselves as neglected. To increase Their presence, Their Majesties the King and the Queen travelled to the South to reside in the royal palace located in the province of Narathiwat. The palace was built with the intention of enabling Their Majesties to be closer in proximity to the Thai Muslim communities.

Having a residence in the south enabled Their Majesties to conveniently meet with local communities in order to best understand their concerns and needs. Such knowledge had then eventually formed the basis of various royal development projects aimed at improving the lives and welfare of Thai-Muslims in Thailand.

The late King Bhumibol's work approach was based on the principles of "Understand, Access, and Develop", which stressed that all parties concerned, including government officials and local communities, must be on the same page in understanding the issues. This would enable issues to be resolved more efficiently and pave way for development. In practice, it is an approach that focuses on citizens' participation.

For example, some areas in the Southern provinces faced challenges such as drought and soil conditions of high salinity and acidity content. His Majesty's solution was to provide specific species of plants and animals that were suitable for breeding in drought and poor soil conditions. This enabled agricultural workers to be able to feed themselves and have regular sources of income.

The worldly King's public embrace of minority cultures and values sets a strong example for all Thais to respect cultural and religious differences. This ultimately propelled the nation towards greater tolerance and pluralism.

His Majesty had recognised the importance of forging personal ties with local representatives in the South. The most famous example was his friendship with Uncle Wahdeng PuTeh or "PohDeng", known as the "Friend from Saiburi." Uncle Wahdeng was a local fruit farmer whom His Majesty first met during a trip to the Saiburi district in Pattani Province in 1992. His Majesty was impressed with Uncle Wahdeng's humility, honesty and local knowledge, and asked Uncle Wahdeng to show Him around the area, asking him about the needs of the local communities. During subsequent visits to the Southern Provinces over the years, His Majesty would always request to meet with "PohDeng", and "PohDeng" would often send the best produces from his fruit orchards as gifts to His Majesty. Their friendship continued until Uncle Wahdeng passed away peacefully in 2012 at the age of 96.

His Majesty visited local religious schools and masjids across the country and made personal contributions from His own funds to support their activities and causes. The King also provided medical supplies and sent royal doctors to visit and treat ill patients.

His Majesty encouraged the Thai Government to build a Central Masjid in each of the Southern Border Provinces and then personally attended the opening of each Central Masjid. In 1990, when His Majesty went to reside at His seaside palace in Hua Hin, He visited a local Muslim community in an area that had a small masjid, the Masjid Nurul Ehsan, which was built on a very small plot of land. Upon being made aware of the needs of the local community, His Majesty granted additional land to the community for the masjid. Subsequently in 1996, His Majesty made contributions from His own funds for the construction of a new Masjid Nurul Ehsan on the same site, which was completed in 1999.

Last but not least, His Majesty saw great importance in improving the education system for Thai Muslims. His Majesty appealed to educators and relevant agencies to consider ways and means for providing a strong religious education with a methodical curriculum so that Thai Muslims can thrive in society.

The late King Bhumibol also initiated development projects to assist Thai Muslims in their career development. Development Centers were set up in various parts of the country, including the Phetchaburi and Narathiwat provinces, enabling the once impoverished populations to have an opportunity to become self-sustainable and improve their welfare.

The late King's personal attention and care to the Thai Muslim community over the years, along with the support for the various Royal initiatives and projects for the community, were testament to His respect and support for Islam and devotion to all His subjects who practice the faith. Such was reflected by not only the reverence that Thai Muslims have towards His Majesty and the Thai Royal Family, but also the acknowledgement and respect from Islamic communities in other countries including Saudi Arabia and Iran. The beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej's passing on 13 October 2016 brought together in unity Thailand's Muslim population and the rest of Thailand to embrace their common love by mourning their revered King, whose generosity, self-sacrifice, wisdom and grace had touched the hearts of all Thais.
