



ajf TEMASEK FOUNDATION
Asia Journalism Forum

Reporting **Religion**

DILEMMAS OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

All Rights Reserved. To cite or use the contents of this presentation,
please write to ips.publicaffairs@nus.edu.sg for permission.
The contents cannot be used without permission.



Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information



Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

Reporting religion in conflict

The case of Thailand



Religion in Thailand

- A secular state with a constitutional guarantee to freedom of religion
- Population 67.7 million, over 94 % are Buddhists
- Have more than 30,000 Buddhist temples and 230,000 monks, oversight by the Sangha Supreme Council
- Deep south provinces' population 1.8 million, over 80 % are Muslims

Case 1: legal status of Buddhist sects (The Santi Asoke Sect – The Sangha)

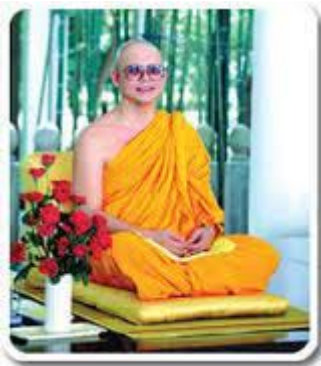
- Established in 1973
- Conflicted with the Sangha over the interpretation of Buddhism
- Banned from calling itself a Buddhist denomination in 1989
- Seen by some as a 'purist' sect whose teaching and practice differ from the 'mainstream'
- Believes in political involvement
- Has structured organization and broad-based followers
- Now a major political force within "the Yellow Shirt" movement



The Santi Asoke sect



The Dhammakaya sect



Case 2: Buddhism as national religion

- A campaign by nationalist Buddhist groups in 2007
- Demanded for Buddhism to be stated as national religion in the new constitution
- No sufficient public support
- Rejected by the constitutional drafting committee



Case 3: Monk killings in the deep-south

- Differ from past southern conflicts
- October 2005 – the first major case, the burning of temple and killings of a 74-year-old monk and two temple boys in Pattani province
- Has continued since (the latest case was in February this year)
- Government’s stand : an insurgent tactics to stir-up religious conflict



The existing religious-related conflicts in Thailand

- Contain certain elements of extremism (ideology/ practice)
- Violence is rare or non-exist (except in south Thailand)
- May receive people's support, but not from the majority
- Most anti-mainstream religious groups still have space in the society
- Religious groups' involvement in politics is considered a political issue, not religious
- Lack of sufficient knowledge on other religions

Media reporting on religious-related conflict

- Rather passive
- Free to criticize individual monks who violate the Buddhist rules
- Bias but avoid extreme opinions
- A 'secular' approach to reporting
- Suffer insufficient knowledge on other religions
- Active use of new media by religious groups



Reporting religion: something to think about

- One's own journalistic values
- One's readiness to face dilemma - to report or not to report
- How to report – stick to the difficult basics (fairness, fact – opinion etc)
- Religion in context (money, politics, gender etc)
- Sensibility and sensitivity (fact and faith etc)