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Mass Media and Problems and Guidelines for Resolving Minority Group Problems in Thailand

It may be stated that Thailand is one of the Southeast Asian countries where a large number of minority groups is living. In addition to Chinese, hill tribes, Vietnamese refugees, and Thai Muslims, there are other refugee groups, including Haw refugees, displaced persons of Burmese nationality, Indo-Chinese refugees and small minority groups which are scattered all over the country. Most of the small minority groups have been virtually assimilated into the Thai. This is especially true in the case of descendants of the Mon and Vietnamese of past generations that sought refuge in Thailand at the beginning of the Ratanakosin Era. In the Northeast, there are various minority groups all over the region such as Phu Thai groups, Soh and Khak tribes. Among these groups, Cambodians are possibly of significance because of their presence in large numbers along border areas in Ubon Ratchathani, Surin, and Srisaket. However, the minority groups in the northeastern region have posed no administrative problem, for they are regarded as Thais by the government. So, the greater the prosperity is extended, the greater possibility there will be of these groups becoming real Thai citizens.

The minority groups which remain a problem which the Government will have to seek ways to resolve are the 4 major groups and refugee groups as stated above.

In the writer's opinion, a minority group means a group of people whose race, language, religion, customs and beliefs differ from those of the majority of the people in the country. When the term

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"assimilation", of which meaning is indicated above, is used together with the words "minority groups", it means a process whereby differences in races, languages, religions and customs of various minority groups in the country are done away with until adequate cultural unity is achieved.

The Government's Policy Toward Chinese

None of the countries in Southeast Asia has escaped being faced with a problem concerning Chinese. This is so because the Chinese in large or small numbers have migrated to most of the countries in the region, depending on where the Chinese liked most. Thailand is a country where the Chinese came in for settlement since the ancient time because Thailand is a fertile country while the Thai themselves are generous and do not discriminate against foreigners. The Thais do not oppress nor limit foreigners' rights to religious practices. That is why the influx of Chinese into Thailand has been going on without interruption. Inasmuch as the majority of the Chinese are diligent, they have become an influential group in Thailand's economy.

Considering the Thai government's policy toward minority groups in Thailand, it is obvious that as far as the Chinese are concerned, the policy of the Thai government of every period has been in the same direction, i.e., ways are found to assimilate the Chinese into the Thai population as much as possible.

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The Government's Policy Toward Hill Tribes

With regard to the Thai government's policy toward hill tribes, General Praphas Charusathien, former Minister of Interior, in his capacity then as chairman of the Hill Tribe Committee, stated in part on "Hill Tribes in Thailand" in a document as follows :

..... The Government does not have a policy to force hill tribes to give up their old ways of life The tribesmen have the right to profess their original religions and can observe their own customs as they may desire. The hill tribes' only political duty is that they must be loyal to the King and observe the law of the country. In return, the Government will try in every way to promote economic and social development of the hill tribes. The Government's policy is toward coexistence rather than assimilation. However, there will not be any objection, if tribesmen want to be Thais in the full sense.....

The current work of various government agencies to develop hill tribes and to promote their welfare in keeping with the above policy is a proof that the government's policy toward hill tribes is for alliance or coexistence.

The Government's Policy Toward Vietnamese Refugees

There are 2 groups of Vietnamese refugees now living in Thailand. The first group came to Thailand at the beginning of the Ratanakosin Era but almost all of them already became Thai citizens. The second group is composed of Vietnamese who used to live in Laos and Cambodia and who fled a war to Thailand at the end of World War II.

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The Vietnamese of the first group known as the "old Vietnamese" became Thai citizens. For the second group, the Thai government's early policy was to treat these Vietnamese with leniency. The Thai government then followed the policy of treating the Vietnamese as refugees and had no intention to absorb them as the government held that the refugees would remain here temporarily. Later, the government began to adopt a policy requiring stricter control of the Vietnamese because it was aware of the threat resulting from infiltration and subversive activities of communist agents in the Vietnamese refugee communities. Under the said policy, restricted areas were adopted for the Vietnamese and various regulations were laid down to control the movement of Vietnamese refugees. Because the government continues to regard these Vietnamese as refugees, children of the Vietnamese born in Thailand are not granted Thai nationality but will remain Vietnamese.

Vietnamese Refugees in Thailand : Problem and Guidelines for Remedy

Among the minority groups which have caused problems and troubles to the Thai government is the Vietnamese refugee groups in the northeastern region which is posing a very significant problem. The Vietnamese refugees are not in a very large number compared with other ethnic groups, but they have been creating troubles, requiring constant action by the government to seek remedial measures. Day by day, problems created by the Vietnamese refugees have been on the increase.

One obvious solution to the Vietnamese refugee problem is to evacuate them back to Vietnam. This is the best way to resolve the problem, but the government is not yet in a position to do anything.

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To resolve the problem by means of assimilation is not possible because the Vietnamese, in their capacity of refugees, cannot acquire Thai nationality either by naturalization or by birth. So, while it is not yet possible to repatriate them to Vietnam, it is advisable, in addition to devising tighter measures for control of Vietnamese refugees, to take another step in the case. Thai is, effort must be made find ways and means of enabling the Vietnamese's children to adjust themselves to the Thai society. By such adjustment, the Vietnamese's children could live in peace without feeling hostile toward Thailand and without creating any problem detrimental to the country. If there is any method that can make these Vietnamese children feel loyal to Thailand, it should be employed. Though they are on the status of refugees but should they have a favourable attitude toward Thailand and be loyal to this country, there would be benefits and problems caused by Vietnamese refugees could be effectively cut down

The Government's Policy Toward Thai Muslims

Thai Muslims in southern border provinces, namely, Satul, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, differ from other minority groups. They did not seek refuge in Thailand like those minority groups but have been living in those border districts since the ancient past. The existence of various problems is attributable to various factors. These Thai Muslims profess a religion different from that of the majority of the Thais and because of their religious devoutness, they naturally follow customs different from those of the Thais in general. The majority of Thai Muslims, being descended from Malays, do not speak Thai or refuse to speak Thai. They continue to use Malay, which is a popular dialect in their localities.

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The difference in respect of the language and religion has brought to pass problems concerning these Thai Muslims regardless of the fact that Thai Muslims, in the eye of the law, are Thai citizens by nationality and race.

Since Thai Muslims are nothing but Thais, the government does not have any special policy toward them. However, there are few exceptions in the matter of administration of these southern border provinces. For instance, in the court of law, the government allows the application of principles and rules in their religion to civil cases. Because of their profession of a different religion and their use of a different dialect, Thai Muslims entertain the idea that they are not Thais but Malays. For that reason, the government is inclined to turning Thai Muslims into real Thai citizens instead of letting them remain nominal Thais as they are now. Attempts have been made to convert "Pho Noh" establishments (Muslim religious schools) into ordinary private schools which can also teach the religion, while a project on Muslim religious missions has been launched. These are all steps that reflect the government's tendency to turn Muslims into Thai citizens both legally and spiritually.

Problems Concerning Hill Tribes in Thailand and the Government's Measures to Deal with the Problems

The minority groups which have received considerable attention are those hill tribes that are living in scattered groups in forest areas of North Thailand. Previously, the government paid little attention to the hill tribes because problems connected with the tribes were not very serious. Later, when a survey was made of damage caused to the forests

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by hill tribes' felling of trees and clearing of forest areas for their own shifting cultivation of crops, it was found that a tremendous amount of valuable resources of the country was destroyed by the tribes. Further, when a ban on opium smoking and sale of opium was declared in 1959, opium was replaced by heroin, which later spread extensively. The government's attention then was focussed on effort to end the cultivation of opium poppies among hill tribes in order to solve the problem regarding the spread of narcotics in the country. Further, the Communists lately started their activities among hill tribes and were successful in inducing a number of tribesmen to favour their cause and to be engaged in activities harmful to Thailand. For that reason, the government, in an attempt to resolve those problems, has given serious attention to economic and social development for hill tribes.

Policy to Resolve Hill Tribes and Poppies Growing Problems

A policy, together with the commencement of work on hill tribe development and welfare, seemed to be the latest one proposed to the Cabinet by the Ministry of Interior. The policy has the following 3 objectives:

(1) In the administrative field, the objective is to make tribesmen feel aware of their being Thai citizens or of their forming part of the Thai society so that they will not cause security problems and unfavorable economic, social and political conditions in the country. Further, action will be taken to regulate occupations on the hills in keeping with official regulations. Proper understanding among hill tribes will be promoted and they are to observe the law in earning their living. Areas will be located which are suitable for habitation and permanent means of livelihood.

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(2) In the eradication of poppy growing and opium addiction, the objective is to reduce poppy growing and opium addiction among hill tribes until such growing and addiction are eventually abolished. The tribes will be freed from the influence that supports poppy growing and narcotics trade. In this respect, hill tribes will be encouraged to derive income from other occupations instead of poppy cultivation. Mobile hill tribe welfare teams are expected to reach the tribes in the near future.

Long-term measures to deal with hill tribe problems will have to be aimed at development of education among hill tribes. When members of the tribes are educated up to a certain level, they will be able to understand authorities' activities and explanation.

Problems and Obstacles to Assimilation of Thai Muslims in Southern Border Provinces

1. The southern border provinces, namely, Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satul have a total population of 1,353,428. About 74% of the people professes Islam. The provinces have been in Thailand's possession for a very long time and every Thai government holds that the people living in these provinces are Thais.

2. Thai Muslims have been living in Thailand for a very long time and in the eye of the law, they are Thais by race and nationality. Further, they have been treated with leniency by authorities. In spite of that, why has not Thailand been able to assimilate these Thai Muslims so that they may become Thai citizens to the fullest sense? Generally, we will find that the majority of Thai Muslims cannot speak Thai. Malay

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is still their popular dialect used in their daily life. Their customs and beliefs differ from those of the Thais in general. They are tightly knitted groups. Those factors have accounted for the occurrence of administrative, political and social problems.

3. Judging from the general conditions and political history of these southern border provinces, it is possible to see that these provinces are faced with problems which are of a different nature from those in other provinces. In the economic field, the problem is connected with occupations, the finding of new occupations and promotion of such occupations in line with technical principles and environment to enable the people to have stable means of living. There is also the problem concerning communication. In this respect, good roads are needed to make convenient communication among various localities possible. In the social field, the problem covers language, religion, customs and education. In the political field, the problem is connected with the influence of deposed town rulers of the past. There are also other problems such as those concerning communist infiltration and subversion, international relations, the Thai Muslims' refusal to regard themselves as being Thais and the relations between government officials and the people. These problems are interrelated and can hardly be separated. For example, the problem on relations between officials the people is also related to the racial problem and communist infiltration.

Every Thai government in the past had a policy to resolve those problems but as yet those problems have not disappeared. The Government will have to continue its effort to deal with the problems.

4. In the matter of public relations and mass media, radio and television programs cannot yet reach every area. Further, remote areas cannot have access to newspapers which can keep the people informed of news and other information. As a result of the absence of mass media, people in the border provinces have turned to read newspapers and receive radio and television programs from Malaysia, the neighbouring country. This amounts to depriving the local people of communication or information on matters connected with the Thais. Consequently, they are not interested in the affairs of their own country.

Under the circumstances, the people in the southern border provinces feel that the Government is lacking in interest in their welfare and that it is as if they were isolated and left to struggle alone in their living. For that reason, they do not feel they are Thais and they have turned to communicate more and more with Malaysia.

5. In the religious field, because most of the people in the southern border provinces are devout Muslims, religious leaders there are in a position to use the religion as a tool in seeking personal benefits. Moreover, since most of the government men in the southern regions are Buddhists, they lack proper understanding of Islam. This has led to difficulty in cultivating relations with the people and then to disunity. The situation has in turn posed an administrative problem.

6. With regard to education, the general education level of the people in the southern border provinces, especially the Muslims, is low. Literacy among the population is not more than 30% while the number of children in primary schools is equal to only 12.5-13.5% of

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the entire population in the provinces. It may be said that the low level of education among the provinces' population constitutes a very important problem both in the political and administrative areas. The low level education has made the Thai Muslims feel that they cannot have any part in the administration of the country and that they do not have the same opportunity as Thai Buddhists in getting government jobs. The lack of education causes the lack of the faculty for reasoning. They are religious devouts and they do not understand the rights and duties of a citizen. For instance, they do not understand that for a person to be a Thai national it is not at all necessary for that person to be a Buddhist. The lack of education among the people is one reason why the people in the southern border provinces can easily be induced or incited to become hostile to the government. The lack of education among them can, therefore, generate very serious effects on administration and national security.

7. Political problems there have stemmed from many causes. There is the problem connected with the influence of former town rulers in addition to the racial problem which has caused Thai Muslims to refuse to acknowledge their Thai citizenship. Communist infiltration and subversion and international relations have also become problems.

8. In connection with the racial problem, Thai Muslims in the southern border provinces fail to acknowledge the fact that they are really citizens of Thailand and that they do have the same rights and duties as other Thais in every respect. Their attitude is that they are not Thais and that they are of the Malay race. A number of these Thais

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still feel loyal to the Sultans or the King in Malaysia, entertaining the belief that the Sultans and the King there are their spiritual leaders. That the government has granted freedom of religious practices and some special legal privileges different from those received by other Thais to suit environmental conditions has made the people there to mistakenly think that they are not Thais. The lack of the sense of being Thais has become a serious problem connected with the education of the people. It can also be considered a major political problem for the government.

9. The government, being conscious of the importance of those problems, has continually laid down measures and methods to overcome them. It is apparent that the government has employed various methods in this direction. For example, it has adopted a policy for coexistence and policy guidelines connected with ideals and relations with the aim to correcting the people's wrong attitude and to promoting good relations between the people in the southern border provinces and government officials.

10. Furthermore, the government has also implemented a policy to change environmental conditions so that they will no longer be in the nature of creating disunity. The policy also calls for the creation of new social values and greater economic progress for the people in the southern border provinces.

11. A project has also been launched on the setting up of public television sets in the southern border provinces. The project is consistent with the government's objective to publicise the government's activities, to promote learning of the Thai language and to

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spread the knowledge required in various occupations as well as to promote public education. It is evident, however, that this project has not yielded reasonable results.

From the above, it is clear that Thailand is still faced with minority group problems, though no serious situation has cropped up. The use of the government's mass media and the private sector's media in spreading news and information concerning minority groups is very limited. This is due to several factors. One key factor is the lack of interest on the part of mass media to present such news. The other factors concern the problem of cooperation between the government and mass media and news sources as well as the acquisition of adequate data for news presentation. The presentation of news by mass media is usually confined to statements made by government officials and the agencies concerned whenever an important situation crops up.