

The Re-organization of Islam in Cambodia and Laos

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to examine the role of Islam in present-day Cambodia and Laos. Specifically, the paper tries to focus on how the re-organization of Islam in Cambodia has been negotiated and how that process has affected the role of the Muslims in the contemporary Cambodian polity. The paper begins with a discussion of the profile of the Muslims and then goes to examine the various contexts that the Muslims have had to cope with in recent Cambodian history such as the two decades of civil war, the intervention of the United Nations and the re-introduction of democracy in Cambodia. Subsequently, the nature of Islamic reconstruction in post-1993 Cambodia will be analyzed. In the case of Laos, only a brief examination of the profile of the Muslim community will be made. It will be obvious in the paper that the role of Islam in Cambodia and to a lesser extent Laos, has been very much determined by contextual factors which may have little to do with Islam but the internal religious motivation of the Muslims has also been significant to impel them to reorganize themselves using Islam as the basis. For Cambodia particularly, the reorganization of Islam is not only attributable to the structural changes that have taken place in the kingdom since 1993 but has also been driven by the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism.

1. Introduction.

The role of the Muslims in Cambodia and Laos has not been fully appreciated or understood even though they have been part of these countries for a very long time. Hitherto there is only a dearth of works on Islam and the Muslims in that part of Mainland Southeast Asia. Philip Taylor's most recent work, "*Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta: Place and Mobility in the Cosmopolitan Periphery*" is a notable exception but even then its focus is on the Mekong delta region of Vietnam rather than that which encompasses Cambodia and Laos as well. There are other minor works which try to document the history of the Chams like the volume entitled *The Cham Community Through the Ages* written by Mohammed Zain Musa and Nik Hassan Shuhaimi Nik Abdul Rahman, but they are still far and few in between. The paucity of academic literature on the Muslims in Indochina is obvious.

In my earlier papers on the Muslims in Cambodia I have tried to highlight this problem [Omar:1998]. In my first paper on the Muslims in Cambodia I identified four reasons for this unsatisfactory state of affairs which are namely, (1) research on Islam and the Muslims in Cambodia has not been systematically developed; (2) there is a dearth of published materials on the subject; (3) there is still some considerable confusion as to who the Muslims in Cambodia are and as the Chams constitute the overwhelming majority of the Muslims in Cambodia, there is a tendency to use the term Muslim and Cham synonymously as if they mean the same thing thereby excluding the range of other Muslim ethnic groups who also constitute an essential part of the larger Muslim community; and, finally (4) probably due to the research bias of academics the esoteric preoccupation with the Chams, for example, had led to a growing interest on Chamic research internationally at the expense of trying to

understand the overall role of Islam in Cambodia. Chamic research too is also not just confined to Muslim Chams but also involves non-Muslim Chams. Research on the Chams may indeed help provide useful information on their religious profile in Cambodia but that information alone will not be adequate to explain the comprehensive role of Islam in Cambodia which certainly goes beyond the Cham community. The situation is even worse in the case of Laos as there hardly has been any serious publication on the role of the Muslims and to this day even basic data on them is either hard to get hold of or hardly reliable.

There definitely is a need for more research and more work to be done on this theme. This paper constitutes a very preliminary and modest attempt to provide some basic information on the subject with a view to stimulating discussion on it. The main objective of this paper is to trace and evaluate the role of Islam in Cambodia and Laos in the last decade or so particularly following the end of the Cold War. For Cambodia especially the role of Islam will be assessed in the context of the post-UNTAC reconstruction era. Specifically, the paper will focus on how the re-organization of Islam in Cambodia has been negotiated and how that process has affected its Muslim population. The paper begins with a discussion of the profile of the Muslims in Cambodia. The paper then examines the various contexts that the Muslims have had to cope with such as the two decades of civil war, the intervention of the United Nations and the re-introduction of democracy in Cambodia. The nature of Islamic reconstruction in post-1993 Cambodia will also be analyzed. The paper will try to argue that the re-organization of Islam in Cambodia is not only a function of the structural changes that have taken place in Cambodia but is also a consequence of the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism in the kingdom itself. In the case of Laos, there are obvious structural limitations for the Muslims besides the fact that numerically they are also a very small group. Thus, the paper will merely confine itself to profiling the Muslim community in Laos and highlighting the manner in which Islam has been negotiated to reconcile the needs of the Muslim community with the demands of the communist state.

2. Profile of the Muslims in Cambodia.

According to the 1993 Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia Buddhism is the official religion of the country but freedom of religion is guaranteed. The Constitution also advocates parliamentary democracy as Cambodia's political system. The position of Islam in Cambodia today has to be seen in this context. It is both the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom as well as the electoral strength of the Muslims that have enabled the re-organization of Islam to take place to give it a more tangible, public and positive role within the new Cambodia. At the same time it also has to be acknowledged that for at least a few centuries Islam has been an integral feature of Cambodia although for a variety of reasons this has not been fairly reflected in the existing academic literature. In an important sense its impact has been so significant that it has emerged to become the irreducible and definitive element of Cham ethnic identity in Cambodia. All Chams in Cambodia are Muslims although not all Muslims are necessarily Cham. The centrality of Islam in the lives of the Muslims in Cambodia, Cham or otherwise, who constitute a significant numerical, historical, cultural and religious minority is easily identifiable.

The Muslims in Cambodia today are however characterized by diversity. Essentially they are represented by various categories of people including Chams, Chveas, Khmers, Indians and Arabs. The Chams are indeed the most important ethnic category because they are not only the most numerous but also are generally accepted as being synonymous with the Muslim community, constituting literally, its backbone. But even the Chams are basically represented by two major groups, namely the *Cham Shariat* [i.e. Chams who observe

the Sharia, or Islamic law in the Shafiee tradition of Islam] and the *Jahed* or “*Kaum Hakekat*”, also known as “*Kaum Jumaat*” or “*Cham Bani*” who have a rather superficial Islamic identity. It is the *Cham Shariat*, however, which is the dominant and dynamic group. The principal denominators of their identity are basically knowledge of the Cham language, continued practice of Cham culture, a common Cham ethnic ancestry and a strong sense of attachment to orthodox Islam. As indicated above, their Islamic identity has become an inseparable part of their ethnic identity. There is also a third group which is still in a very nascent state of formation and this is the group primarily consisting of members of the *Jahed* community who are beginning to move towards the *Ahmadiya* version of Islam.

The *Chvea* or *Jva* is another important ethnic group within the Muslim community. The term *Chvea* or *Jva*, is actually closer to *Jawi*, which has been more commonly used as the equivalent of Malay with a strong Islamic connotation. The term *Chvea* in the context of Cambodia is used to refer to Malays in a generic sense. According to Po Dharma, there are actually three categories of Malays, namely *Jva Krap*, *Jva Iyava* and *Jva Melayu*. *Jva (Chvea) Krap* refers to *Jva Kerbau* which indicates Malays who are from Sumatra including those from Aceh and Minangkabau. *Jva (Chvea) Iyava* specifically refers to Malays from the island of Java while *Jva (Chvea) Melayu* refers to those from the Malay Peninsula. [Po Dharma n.d: 9] Besides the Chams, the Chveas are the most numerous although in terms of percentage they are still a very small group. The Khmers are also a very significant group within the national Muslim community because they constitute the natural link between Islam and the indigenous Khmer culture and demonstrate the affinity that can develop between Islam and practically every ethnic or indigenous group.

Interestingly as the Muslims become more empowered educationally, economically and politically the latent religious schisms within the broader Muslim society have begun to re-emerge. The most obvious traditional division within the Muslim community has been between the *Jaheds* or the heterodox Muslims and the *Cham Shariat*, or the orthodox Muslims. But recently there have also been other groups such as the *Ahmadiya* sect, the *Wahabis* and even the *Jamaat Tabligh*, which have been consolidating their respective constituencies, thereby contributing to internal religion frictions within the Muslim community.

There are various estimates of the Muslim population in Cambodia today. The percentage of Muslims in relation to the total population of the kingdom is usually stated to be around 4 to 5 percent. As the population of Cambodia today is estimated to be at least 13.5 million, there could be as many as 650,000 Muslims in Cambodia. The Secretary of State in the Ministry of Cults and Religions, Mr. Zakariyya Adam, suggests a slightly lower figure of just above a half million people but admits that it is very difficult to verify the authenticity of whatever figure that is given at the moment. Probably a better way of gauging the numerical presence of the Muslims in Cambodia is to look at the distribution of mosques throughout the kingdom. In the early 1990s when the reconstruction of Islam in Cambodia had just begun it was generally believed that there were about one hundred mosques in existence throughout the kingdom but as of 2007, according to the latest Mosque List, the number of mosques throughout the kingdom has exceeded four hundred and this figure does not include the scores of *suraus* or *mussallas* that usually perform lesser functions compared to the mosques. In addition to this there are also more than 300 madrasas or Quranic schools spread over 315 villages throughout the kingdom of Cambodia. What is obviously significant is the fact that these religious institutions, from mosques to Islamic schools are to be found in practically all the provinces in Cambodia from Phnom Penh to Rattanakiri, and Preah Vihea to Preah Sihanouk. The largest concentration of mosques occurs in Kg. Cham which has over 148 mosques. This also means that the largest concentration of Muslims occurs in Kg. Cham. It is no wonder that the present Deputy Governor of

the province, Sem Sokprey, is a Muslim. The next largest concentration of Muslims is to be found in Kg. Chnang, which has over 42 mosques. The deputy governor of the Kg. Chnang province, Saleh Sen, is also a Muslim indicating. The numerical as well as the political strength of the Muslims is again reflected here. The capital city, Phnom Penh, has a total of 12 mosques.

Culturally, the Muslims can be fairly easily identified by their practice of Islam but linguistically, although among the Chams the Cham language continues to be the principal medium of practical communication, almost without exception all the Chams can also speak Khmer without difficulty. Language code-switching seems to be a common practice among the Chams and also the Muslims. Many Chams also learn Malay, which is perceived as a language of religious instruction although they may have only limited speaking ability. The Muslims in Cambodia therefore generally tend to be bi-lingual if not multi-lingual.

Occupationally the overwhelming majority of the Muslims in Cambodia are either fishermen or farmers. A significant component of the Muslim population though is engaged in either vending or cattle-rearing. A small number is employed in factories, the service sector or as government servants. There is also a very small group of Muslims engaged in trade and commerce. There is a noticeably large number of Muslim economic migrants working abroad especially in Malaysia and Thailand. Within Cambodia, unemployment among the Muslims is also very high. By and large, the majority of the Muslims in Cambodia appear to be socio-economically disadvantaged.

Educationally, many *madrasas* or Islamic schools have been built and the traditional Islamic educational system revived. Muslim children in Cambodia are generally enrolled both in Islamic religious schools as well as the secular national schools where they will divide their time almost equally. Students who opt for religious education study both at night and in the daytime. It is also common now for Muslim children to the Quran school or Ta'hafiz which specializes in training its students to memorize by heart the whole Quran. Thus, it is not uncommon to find young Cambodian Muslim children who can recite the Quran through memory. There is also a tendency for students in the religious school system to want to go abroad especially to Pattani in Thailand or Kelantan in Malaysia to pursue further their religious studies. Many madrasas in Cambodia follow the curriculum of the Malaysian religious school system. Some Cambodian Muslim children even aspire to go to the Middle East if they can acquire funding. Since the 1990s there has also been a proliferation of educational institutions to cater to the needs of the Muslim children of Cambodia. Nevertheless, despite the growing emphasis given to education by Muslim leaders and NGOs, in terms of infrastructure, facilities, textbooks, teachers, curricula and teaching methods, the situation is still far from satisfactory.

The case of *Ummul Qura*, an Islamic school with one of the best infrastructures in Cambodia whose medium of instruction was principally Arabic, illustrates the educational and political dilemma facing the Muslims. This school was set up in 1998 with generous Saudi funding and was officially opened by Prime Minister, Hun Sen himself, a symbolic act which not only the highest recognition of Islam by the state but also the harmonious state of relations between the Muslims and their non-Muslim counterparts and political masters. The opening ceremony was launched with great fanfare and drew a lot of publicity in the local as well as international media. Its teaching staff comprised mostly foreign Muslim teachers from a variety of countries in the Middle East as well as Southeast Asia. Since it had very good boarding facilities it was able to cater to students from all over the kingdom. Although the student population was overwhelmingly Muslim, a good number of non-Muslims students especially those from the remote provinces, were also enrolled. The

school also functioned as a feeder institution preparing its graduates for university education abroad especially in the Middle East.

The *Ummul Qura* school had emerged to become the talking point of the Muslims in Cambodia as they were perceived to be directly helping the new generation of Muslims in Cambodia for their educational empowerment. Following the war on terror which was launched by President Bush, in 2003 just before an international conference which was scheduled to be attended by the U.S. Secretary of State then, Colin Powell was held in Phnom Penh, the *Ummul Qura* school was closed by the Cambodian government, twenty-eight of its foreign teachers expelled from the country within 72 hours and three expatriate teachers were accused of being members of the international terrorist organization, *Jemaah Islamiyah* [JI].

The harsh action of the government was extremely unpopular with the vast majority of the Muslims and created a serious crisis of confidence in the Muslim leadership at that time. To neutralize the ire of the Muslims and prevent a political crisis, the government almost immediately handed over the Ummul Qura school to the Mufti of Cambodia to take over its administration. In view of the problem of logistics and funding, the local Muslim leadership under the Mufti could not revive the school immediately. When this happened very much later, the school was not able to restore its former status. The credibility of the government and the United States was seriously undermined by this development. Although dislocation of the Ummul Qura affected drastically the confidence and hope of the Cambodian Muslims at that time, eventually this was made up by various friendly gestures by the United States Embassy in Phnom Penh to try to repair the damage that was done. Among other things, Muslim leaders would be invited for ‘*iftar*’ or breaking of the fast ceremony during Ramadhan with the American Ambassador and members of the Muslim diplomatic corps in Phnom Penh. The U.S. Embassy also began supporting financially and materially many projects undertaken by the Muslim NGOs in Cambodia to uplift the conditions of the Muslims. This Ummul Qura episode is a stark reminder of the vulnerability of the Muslims to attack not only by outsiders but also by its own government.

3. The Different Contexts.

The role of the Muslims in Cambodia has been primarily a function of the different contexts with which they have had to exist in. The civil war years were the most discordant, disruptive and destructive for the Muslims. The absence of peace created a situation where the Muslims, like the rest of the Cambodian population were not able to lead normal lives. Beginning from the decade of the 1970s Muslims began to be uprooted and dislocated from their homes and villages all over Cambodia culminating in the period of Khmer Rouge rule under Pol Pot when they became one of the primary targets of the genocidal policies of the regime. There have been various estimates of the number of Muslims killed during this period but many Muslim sources insist that as many as half a million of them had been exterminated as a consequence of the genocide. Ben Kiernan, however, offers a much smaller estimate of about 70,000 Muslims killed. But what was less disputed was the phenomenon of tens of thousands of Cambodian Muslims having to flee their country to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. The turmoil that ensued following the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime by the Vietnamese military at the end of 1978 and the beginning of 1979 did not improve the situation very much although the post-Khmer Rouge period witnessed some measure of the rehabilitation of the Muslims under the patronage of the Vietnam-backed Cambodian Communist Party, the situation was far from normal and the Muslims continued to live in a state of anxiety and with lots of uncertainties. In the meanwhile

the civil war in Cambodia continued. The Vietnamese-installed regime of Cambodia was refused recognition by the ASEAN and the United Nations, which instead recognized the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea [CGDK] which was a loose coalition of all the parties opposed to Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. It was not until the intervention of the United Nations in Cambodia following the end of the Cold War and the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia that the situation began to change dramatically for Cambodia and its Muslim population.

It was the establishment of UNTAC [United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia] that marked an important watershed in the recent history of Cambodia. UNTAC had created the conducive conditions for the political reconstruction of Cambodia, which in turn, facilitated the rehabilitation of Islam in the kingdom. It was this development that had enabled the re-assertion of the political role of the Muslims both through traditional channels as well as the democratic platform to take place within the reconstructed polity. In addition to this, the creative use of external Muslim sympathy and support has also helped the local Muslims to reorganize Islam in Cambodia not only to make it more relevant to their practical needs but also to give it greater visibility to demonstrate its affinity with the state.

The 1991 Paris Agreements, and in particular, the creation of UNTAC led to the emergence of a conducive climate for the re-emergence of Islam on the national scene. This happened in four ways. First, the presence of UN soldiers and civilian personnel from Muslim countries such as Indonesia, Egypt and Malaysia, helped create new channels of contacts and cooperation between the dislocated local Cambodian Muslims and the sympathetic UN Muslim soldiers and officials. This was the crucial period in which the patronage and sympathy of the UN Muslim soldiers helped restore the confidence and morale of the Muslims. Second, in fulfillment of one of the essential provisions of the Paris Agreements, many Muslim refugees too began returning to their homes or villages Cambodia. The reconstruction of Muslim villages, under the protection of UNTAC, was undertaken. Third, many well-educated and well-connected Muslim refugees who had fled to Malaysia, United States and other Western countries were persuaded to return home to help in the process of the democratic and economic reconstruction of Cambodia. Their return and their subsequent role helped provide a new focus of Islamic leadership in Cambodia. And finally, the holding of democratic national elections in May 1993 under the auspices of the United Nations, conferred on the Muslims an electoral role which instantly made them a significant electoral group, whose support was sought by all the candidates, especially in areas where Muslim voters were dominant or present.

Following the elections, the promulgation of a new constitution and the formation of the first government in the post- UNTAC era, the role of the Muslims became further strengthened with the co-option of a number of leading personalities into the government. Beyond that, in attempting to seek foreign investment and assistance to stimulate the economic recovery of the country the government of Prince Ranaridh, was impelled by political considerations to move closer to countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore to avoid being over dependent on its big neighbours, Thailand and Vietnam. The role of Indonesia and Malaysia correspondingly became a significant factor in the economic reconstruction of Cambodia. Indonesia, for example, initiated a major Rural Development Programme to help Cambodia rebuild its rural infrastructure. Indonesia too, is one of the countries supporting the Angkor Restoration Project. Both Indonesia and Malaysia also invested heavily in Cambodia helping to bring in the much-needed foreign capital. Although these aid projects and business investments are not directly tied to any policy requirements, they have had the implicit effect of making the government more sensitive to the special needs of the Cambodian Muslims as a minority group. Conversely, Muslim businessmen and

government officials from Indonesia and Malaysia as well as other countries from the region as well as outside have also on their own accord been very positive and helpful towards their Muslim brethren in Cambodia.

The emergence of an expatriate Muslim community in Phnom Penh, with the setting up of many Malaysian companies and business houses and other forms of investments has also helped create new channels of contacts between the Cambodian Muslims and their foreign counterparts. Muslim Embassies and Muslim officials of international organizations in Phnom Penh too have been very forthcoming in handing out assistance to the Muslims of Cambodia. The open political system which Cambodia enjoys at the moment guaranteeing freedom of expression, movement and association has also helped to enable the local Muslims to organize themselves institutionally to promote Islam and the interests of the Muslims.

The 1993 Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia upholds fundamental human rights which include the freedom of religious belief and worship.¹ It was with this liberal spirit that the reconstruction of the Cambodian polity was undertaken in the post-conflict period. The role of Islam in Cambodia which had been severely displaced during the turbulent years of the nation's civil war began to be rehabilitated. The Muslims of Cambodia, who had suffered greatly as a consequence of the political upheaval in Cambodia, especially during Pol Pot's regime which targeted them for extermination, have, in the process begun to emerge as one of the main beneficiaries of the new Cambodia. The political recognition and space that they began to acquire in the first few years of the new democratic era were very promising. It was in this period that the reconstruction and re-organization of Islam was undertaken in an unprecedented way.

In the post-1993 constitutional era, the Muslims enjoyed political representation in Cambodia which even appeared disproportionate to their numbers. There were Muslims in all the major political parties in Cambodia. The Minister of Education, Youth and Sports in the Coalition Cabinet then, Toh Lah, was a Muslim. There were two Under Secretaries who were Muslims including one who was the Under Secretary of the Ministry of Cult and Religion. There were three Muslim Members of Parliament representing the different political groupings in the country. There was also a significant number of Muslims working as parliamentary support staff for several senior Members of Parliament. The secretary of the Speaker of Parliament, for example, was also a Muslim.

After the 1998 general elections, the Muslims continued to be well represented in public office representing the different political parties in Cambodia. This trend, no doubt showed that the Muslims were indeed already accepted as a national minority within Cambodia whose numbers and political role seemed to matter. Perhaps on account of this the Muslims in Cambodia today enjoy a much higher public visibility compared to any time in the past.

The commune council election in 2002 which sought to establish a decentralized system of governance through the creation of democratically- elected councils in each of Cambodia's 1621 communes helped to empower the Muslims throughout the kingdom as they are to be found in all the provinces of Cambodia and exist in concentrated numbers in several of them.

Subsequently, following the general election of 2003, under the premiership of Hun Sen, they have continued to be well represented in government as well as in parliament. There are now three Secretaries of State in the present Cabinet, two of whom are in the

¹ For detailed provisions of the Constitution see *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia 1993* published in Phnom Penh. It contains 14 Chapters and 139 Articles.

Ministry of Cults and Religions and the third in the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training. In addition to this there are also four Undersecretaries of State, one each in the Office of the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Women. The first ever Muslim ambassador to serve in the post-conflict government of Cambodia has been appointed to Brunei Darussalam. There are six Members of Parliament representing the Cambodian People's Party, FUNCINPEC and the Sam Rainsy Party. There are also two Muslim Senators representing the Cambodian People's Party and the FUNCINPEC respectively. Due to the democratic development in Cambodia the Muslims, by and large, have become politically active especially at the grass-roots level as well as in the political party level. There seems to be a special relationship developed through the political patronage system between the Muslims and the Prime Minister, Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party and coalition government although the Muslims are also represented in other political parties.

4. The Nature of Islamic Reconstruction.

The rehabilitation of Islam in Cambodia would not have been possible without the dividend of peace that the modern kingdom enjoyed in the post-UNTAC era. The restoration of peace in Cambodia made possible the return of Islam to the kingdom. This process, however, has also been partly helped by the phenomenon of Islamic Revivalism which has characterized the situation in much of Southeast Asia. Although Islam in Cambodia had, for much of its existence there, adapted itself to the local contexts its external links remained. Cambodian Muslims continued to look beyond their homeland for religious inspiration, education and contacts. The *haj* was one institution that helped Cambodian Muslims establish an important channel of communication with the Muslim world. Another important venue of contact was through education. It was common practice for Cambodian Muslims to send some of their bright young men to study in the Islamic educational centres in the region, such as those in Pattani and Kelantan or even those in the Middle East such as Mecca or Cairo. The existence of Cham villages or emigrants in areas outside Cambodia, such as in Thailand or Malaysia, has also helped keep alive important social and family contacts between Muslims within Cambodia and those living outside of the country.

In an important sense, the Muslims in Cambodia, although insulated in some other ways from the outside Muslim world continued to constitute a part of a loose and informal international Muslim network that was in existence for a long time. But before their dislocation within Cambodia, the nature of their contacts with the outside Muslim world, significant though it may be, was still essentially limited. In most cases these contacts were maintained at their initiative. Outside initiative to link up with them, for various reasons, was either very limited or did not exist at all. This partly explains the fact that very little was really known about the Muslim communities in Cambodia by their co-religionists elsewhere. And it was also this factor that led to the perpetuation of the deviant practices of Islam among some of the more insulated sections of the Muslim community in Cambodia such as the Cham Jahed.

The civil war in Cambodia and especially the carnage committed by the Khmer Rouge on the Muslims between 1975 and 1979, which led to an exodus of Muslim refugees across into neighbouring countries paradoxically had the unintended effect of highlighting their plight to the outside world. This development helped the Cambodian Muslims in at least two ways. First, many were resettled abroad in countries such as Malaysia, United States and France, and in their new homes they found new economic and educational opportunities for their self-improvement, something which escaped them even in their homeland.

Second, many who had fled to safety in the refugee camps in Thailand or Laos and Vietnam, continued to be involved in varying ways in the developments that were unfolding in Cambodia. This, for example, was what made it possible for a leader like Mat Ly, [a senior member of the Cambodian People's Party until his recent death], who had fled to Vietnam to return to Cambodia after the Vietnamese invasion of the country to work for the Vietnamese-installed regime in Phnom Penh to basically look after the interests of his co-religionists. Although religion was never given a high profile place in the post-Democratic Kampuchea period, the rehabilitation of Islam in Cambodia, albeit in a very nominal way, actually began in this period. It was during this period that many of the displaced Muslims began to return to their villages, a phenomenon which immediately led to the reconstruction of mosques, which constituted the focal point of Muslim communal life. Likewise, Cambodian Muslim refugees in Laos and various parts of Northeastern Thailand, actually played an important role in promoting Islam in these non-traditional areas of Islam.

The relative peace that Cambodia was now able to enjoy has made it possible for Muslims to regroup and reorganize themselves communally. One of the most obvious consequences of this was the remarkable growth in the population of the Muslims in Cambodia. It was in this context of a fast-growing Muslim population that the reconstruction of Islam has been undertaken. The process of reconstruction itself has manifested itself in a variety of ways. The Muslims have become very active in Cambodian civil society recently. Most of the Muslim NGOs were formed in the post-conflict era and practically all of them have been involved in soliciting foreign funds to support their activities in the kingdom. Many of these organizations have also tried to link up with INGOs to coordinate their activities. Some of the most active Muslim NGOs include the Highest Council For Islamic Religious Affairs in Cambodia, the Cambodian Islamic Centre, the Cambodian Muslim Development Foundation, Cambodian Islamic Women Development Association, the Cambodian Islamic Development Association, the Cambodian Islamic Association, the Cambodian Muslim students Association (CAMSA), Islamic Medical Association of Cambodia (IMAC) and the Cambodian Islamic Welfare Association. Muslim INGOs which are active in Cambodia include WAMY Charity Organization, World Islamic Call Society, International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) and Muslim Aid. Since March 12, 2004, Radio Sap Cham or the Voice of Cham, has been on the air with a view to “reaching out to and connecting (with) the Cham Muslim community and Cham diasporas as well as maintaining and preserving the Cham linguistic and cultural identity.”

It is through the above organizations that funds from foreign as well as local sources have been solicited for distribution to their respective national constituencies, usually to support repair work or the reconstruction or completely new construction of mosques or *madrassah* (religious-school) in the local villages. Donations have been forthcoming from international Muslim organizations, Muslim Embassies as well as individual foreign donors and Cambodian Muslims who now live abroad. The Malaysian and Indonesian Embassies, for example, have been very generous in supporting mosque reconstruction efforts in Cambodia.

The Islamic International Relief Organization, on the other hand, has been active in providing assistance to build toilets and ablution facilities in mosques all over Cambodia while the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been providing generators to these mosques to facilitate power supply. Individual Arab donors have also contributed generously towards projects involving the construction of new mosques. The Dubai Mosque in Phnom Penh, for example, which is now easily the biggest mosque in Cambodia, built on

the premises of a building that used to be a dancing restaurant, was undertaken with funding from two wealthy Dubai Arab businessmen.

The Muslims, especially the Chams, who had fled Cambodia as refugees, brought Cambodian Islam with them. This, for example, explains the emergence of Cham mosques in areas where there were none before in the country and in places abroad such as in Vientiane, Laos and Santa Anna in the United States. In Malaysia, a large number of Cambodian Muslims were resettled in the East Coast States of Kelantan and Trengganu, and have quickly assimilated into Malay society. By and large, they now appear almost indistinguishable from Malays. Nonetheless, especially for the Cham Muslims, a shared sense of collective historical memory seems to prevail among them. Perhaps it was partly this factor that has brought about the emergence of a loose Cham transnational network beyond the political boundaries of Cambodia.

The various Cambodian Muslim Associations mentioned above have also been organizing the pilgrimage of selected individuals to Mecca every year. In addition to this, scholarships from several Muslim governments, like Malaysia, tenable at universities abroad for a range of subjects have also been offered to many Cambodian Muslim students. A wealthy Turk businessman had also sponsored a number of Muslim students for their studies in Turkey. The *Samakhum Kuwait* has established a large and modern school for Muslim orphans in Phnom Penh. The Cambodian Muslim Development Association has started a computer school in Phnom Penh, which is open to both Muslims and non-Muslims. It has a large enrollment of not only Muslim students but also some non-Muslim students as well. The Jeddah-based Islamic Development Bank supplied large copies of the Quran and other related religious literature to Muslims throughout Cambodia. In fact, even Japanese aid agencies, made generous donations to the Muslims through the Ministry of Cult and Religious Affairs to support school projects as well as Islamic books distribution schemes. The generous support given to Islamic projects in Cambodia by many quarters coupled with an active national Muslim leadership had helped reinvigorate Islam in the kingdom. This can be seen not only in the growing number of mosques and religious schools in Cambodia but also the frequency and variety of Islamic religious programmes sponsored and supported by the community. Probably, the most important aspect of this renewal of Islam in Cambodia is the attempt to create a national organizational network of mosque officials throughout the country. The *Khana Chuol Kapuol Islam Kampuchea* rendered into Arabic as Mufti, the highest officially-recognized authority on Islam in the kingdom, is now democratically elected for a five-year term. In February 1994, the name *Sheikhul Islam Kampuchea* was used to designate this post which was called *Changwang Islam Kampuchea* in Khmer but from 1996 it has been changed to *Khana Chuol Kapuol Islam Kampuchea* or Mufti. This election for this post is undertaken at a special meeting of the country's Imams specifically called for this purpose. Although technically this practice has not yet been legislated into law the Under Secretary of State of the Ministry of Cult and Religions determines the procedures and regulations pertaining to the elections and supervises it thus giving it official sanction. But the office of the Mufti and the national socio-religious network that it has tried to create is very much a civil society movement. The energy that Muslim civil society acquires seems to be tapped from and through Islamic religious sources. Islam has been creatively used to create an ostensibly cohesive national Muslim community under the leadership of an officially-sanctioned Mufti.

While the above structural and formal organizational changes have been extremely important in the overall reconstruction of Islam in Cambodia, these have also been adequately complemented by the systematic and frequent spiritual inspiration that they have received from a number of quarters. The *jamaah tabligh* movement is easily one of the

most important sources of spiritual influence for the Cambodian Muslims. Tabligh groups from many countries including Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan have been frequently organizing trips to Muslim villages in Cambodia no matter how remote these places were in order to demonstrate the spirit of Islamic brotherhood to their Cambodian counterparts. They would normally stay in any one place no more than three nights holding various religious activities to draw the participation of the locals and to re-affirm their commitment and faith to Islam. Their continual presence, which was unprecedented in the pre-conflict days in Cambodia, has had the effect of drawing the Cambodian Muslims closer to Islam and the Muslim world. In fact, under the leadership of Imam Suleiman Ibrahim, who has been the head of the *jamaah tabligh* movement in Cambodia since the post-UNTAC era, regular tabligh activities have been regularly undertaken and his markaz tabligh in Kompong Cham is recognized as one of the most active in the Southeast Asian region holding annual gatherings which draw tens of thousands of people from all over Cambodia and beyond.

Another extremely important source of religious inspiration for the Cambodian Muslims is Malaysian Islam. The Malaysian Government has been very supportive of Islam in Cambodia and has been directly and indirectly involved in promoting Islam along its own lines. Many mosque-building projects in Cambodia are supported not only by the Malaysian Government but more importantly Malaysian NGOs and individual philanthropists. Religious training and instruction have also been offered by Malaysia to the Cambodian Muslim leaders. In April 1995, for example, with the support of Pusat Islam (Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia) and RISEAP, the first ever national seminar for Imams in Cambodia was held in Kampong Cham drawing about 300 participants nation-wide. The main aim of the seminar was to improve the way the Islam is organized in Cambodia. Following this event, more religious seminars and classes have been organized with the assistance of human and financial resources from Malaysia. Malay religious texts now find their way to most of the mosques in Cambodia and Malaysian-trained Islamic teachers have been active in promoting Islam. Malay is now taught in practically every madrasah or mosque-school in Cambodia, although this may not be a completely a new trend as it used to be for a long time the language of Islam in the region. What is important to note here is that, Islam in Cambodia has been reconstructed in the image of orthodox Islam that is practised in Malaysia.

Perhaps another significant development in the reconstruction of Islam in Cambodia is the growing relevance of Khmerization. As Muslims try to develop a national posture in Cambodia it is inevitable that there will be a greater effort to identify with the State. The Khmer language, which is the national language will certainly grow in importance among the Muslims. In fact, even now it has emerged as the principal medium of official communication for the Muslims, including the Chams. Most mosques in Cambodia too now deliver the Friday sermon in Khmer although routine announcements may be made in the Cham language. The attempt to translate the Quran into the Khmer language and the attempt now being undertaken to come up with a common Friday sermon for all the mosques in the nation in the Khmer language are compelling signs of the Khmerization process accompanying the reconstruction of Islam. The increasing number of conversions to Islam among the Khmer too is bound to stimulate further the re-orientation of Islam towards Khmer.

5. Islam in Laos.

Islam has had a long association with the area that now constitutes modern Laos but unlike its neighbours, China, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and even Vietnam, numeri-

cally, culturally, politically and economically, the Muslims are not a significant community. Although there was a period of time in the 1960s and early 1970s when there was a noticeable presence of the Muslims in various parts of Laos the emergence of a communist system and an authoritarian system of government had caused many of them especially the Haw Chinese to migrate overseas. The urban centres of Vientiane and Luang Prabang too had a visible Muslim presence before which has been disappearing in the last decade or so. The 1991 Constitution of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, amended in 2003, provides for the freedom of religion and it is this provision that gives Islam a legal presence. It is estimated that about 40 percent of the Laotian population adopts Theravada Buddhism, Nonetheless, the practice of all religions, including Buddhism, is severely controlled although there was an attempt to relax some of the more restrictive rules pertaining to the religious practices of the minorities. The political constraints that exist in Laos on all religious groups have contributed to constrict the role of Islam in the country.

In terms of numbers, it is almost impossible to even give an estimate of the Muslim population in Laos but various sources, including Encyclopedia Britannica speculate that the Muslims make up about 1 percent of the total population of Laos which should come to about 50,000 as Laos now has a population of 5 million people. This is likely to be an inflated figure but even if it is accurate, in terms of visibility, Islam hardly makes an impression in Laos. But what is known is that like Muslim communities elsewhere in the region, the Muslims in Laos come from a diverse cultural and ethnic background. The biggest group is the Chin Haw or Chinese Muslims whose population has been declining very fast. The second group is made up of the South Asian Muslims usually from either India, Pakistan or Afghanistan. The third group is made up of the Chams and basically constitute refugees who fled Cambodia during the civil war especially against the backdrop of their persecution by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouges. The fourth group is represented by any one of the indigenous ethnic groups in Laos who converted to Islam due to intermarriage with Muslims. Finally, there is also a very small population of other Muslims from a variety of countries.

In view of its geographical location Laos has been subjected to Islamic contacts or influence from a number of countries such as Thailand, China, India and Pakistan, Cambodia and Malaysia and the Middle East. But it is also geography that has insulated Muslim communities from each other. In view of the mountainous terrain of Laos and the difficulty of communication from one region to another, Muslim groups have tended to develop autonomously except in the urban areas where there is more interaction between the various groups. But even then, the two mosques in Vientiane, for example, the Azhar Mosque and the Jami' Mosque are polarized along ethnic lines, the former being basically a Cham mosque and the latter an Indian Mosque. The Azhar Mosque is also Sunni while the Jami' Mosque is Hanafi. The Indian/Pakistani Muslims in Vientiane, despite being a minute community, are also polarized further according to their nationalities as they are represented by the Indian and the Pakistani Association respectively. Because of its contiguity with Thailand, Laos has overlapping ties with it, be it commercial, trading, educational or family. It is within the context of this broader framework of Thai-Lao relations that Muslims from Thailand have tried to develop their own relations with the Laotians. The Thai-Lao connection has been the most developed historically and the Thai Muslims have used this channel to find their niche. Interestingly too, the South Asian and other Muslims, for reasons of convenience also use Thailand to enter Laos. This phenomenon has had the effect of constantly revitalizing the Islamic links not only between Laos and Thailand but also between South Asia and Laos through Thailand.

Notwithstanding the existence of the above channels of contacts between the Muslims in Laos and their counterparts in Thailand and beyond, in view of the political restrictions that have been in place in communist Laos for over three decades already, the development of Islam has simply been stifled. Even the Chinese Muslims who could be considered as closest to being indigenous in Laos, have seen their role being dislocated or undermined by political developments. They have not only declined in numbers but have become less visible. The Chams in Laos have mostly acquired Laotian nationality but are fully aware of their foreign origin and therefore tend to be very docile. There have been in the recent years a growing number of Laotian Muslim students who went to study abroad at the Islamic International University in Kuala Lumpur and it is possible that they may want to change the way Islam is organized in Laos but in as long as the contextual constraints remain in place, it is very unlikely that this is going to take place soon. It is more likely that for quite some time to come Islam in Laos will continue to be perceived and practiced as a minority tradition that needs to be constantly monitored by the state.

6. Conclusion.

It is obvious from the foregoing analysis that the vicissitudes of Islam in Cambodia and Laos have been primarily a function of the contexts it is in. It was the outbreak of civil war that had dislocated Islam from Cambodia. In fact the genocidal policies of the Khmer Rouges were intended to annihilate the Muslims completely from Cambodia in the name of pursuing national homogenization. It was the peaceful resolution of the Cambodian conflict that had not only restored the role of Islam in Cambodia but also given it new energy, dynamism and direction, which is unprecedented in its long history in Cambodia. Democratic rule which demands respect for fundamental human rights and the principles of participatory politics has also given the Muslims a tangible political role in the reconstructed Cambodian polity. The emphasis on market economy as well as the need to attract foreign assistance and investment has also impelled the leaders of Cambodia to be responsive to the wider implications of their policies on minorities. The Muslims, as the second largest religious community in Cambodia have benefited from this benevolent policy. The role of countries like Malaysia and Indonesia and the international Muslim community and organizations has also considerably helped the process of the social, economic and spiritual reconstruction of the Muslim communities in Cambodia. The commitment of the Cambodian Muslims to Islam became reinvigorated and there is visible evidence of a revival of Islam in Cambodia. The growing contacts between the Muslims in Cambodia and Malaysia in recent years have brought Malaysian influence to bear on Islam in Cambodia, making it increasingly indistinguishable from the orthodox Islam practised in Malaysia. The political, economic and educational empowerment of the Muslims in Cambodia have helped them greatly in their desire and efforts to reorganize Islam in a way that will make them respectable as a community. The emergence of Muslim civil society in Cambodia has facilitated the systematic development of Islam in the kingdom beyond mosques and schools. New Muslim NGOs and Islamic institutions like the office of the Mufti, the Islamic Centre of Cambodia, the Royal Advisory Committee for Islam have emerged to cater to the needs of the Cambodian Muslim community. As this whole process has its own political dynamics it is also inevitable that latent tensions and schisms will also surface as the Muslims acquire greater public visibility. In contrast, the role of Islam in Laos, is unlikely to change very much as long as the broader context within which it has to operate remains restrictive.

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