

Analysis of Inter-Faith Intolerance in Thai Society through Online Speech

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Executive Summary

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Two major occurrences of hatred are happening in the offline and online worlds of Thai society. One is the ongoing political conflict since 2006, and the other is the ongoing violence in the southern border provinces of Thailand since 2004. The latter event has had both positive and negative effects in certain areas: while Thai Muslims have received much more attention from the government and society in general, there are still many issues to be concerned about, especially the fact that Thai Buddhists in the region feel neglected, as if they were abandoned by the government.

Today, the tense and polarizing situation between Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims has spread throughout the country to the extent that one Buddhist monk published his controversial comment on social media saying that "One monk killed is one mosque (to be) burned." Other hateful acts toward Islam are also found in many regions of Thailand, including the south, the center, the north, and the northeast, which reflect the phenomenon of distrust and fear that Thais have against Muslims.

The conflict between the Buddhists and the Muslims in both offline and online worlds is evidence of the increase in extremist ideas and the decrease in religious tolerance in Thai society. It is, therefore, important for us to understand the origin, causes, and factors that maintain this problematic situation in order to create strategies to prevent the situation from escalating to the point of violence between the two religious groups at the national level.

The objective of this research is (1) to study the use of language, the communication, and the expressions that are considered "hate speech" on social media concerning the relationship between Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims in the southern border provinces and other parts of Thailand; and (2) to analyze important events to discover whether there is an increase or decrease in religious intolerance in Thai society due to online communication; and (3) to come up with proposals and policies (battle plans) to cope with and prevent intolerance from becoming violent and instead to transform it into reconciliation and respect for the diversity of cultural identity.

The study uses the integrated research method (mixed-method) consisting of;

1) Group focus discussions with experts who study and follow the situation between Buddhism and Islam in Thai society. Two group focus discussions were conducted. The objective of the first discussion was to gather information, to select important events to be analyzed in the research, and to create a set of keywords related to those events and that were likely to appear in online discussions. The keywords would be used alongside data collection and the analysis of social media (Social Media Analytics). The second discussion was for these experts to comment on the findings from social media analytics and to suggest measures or solutions.

2) Social media analytics, which is a method of analyzing a large volume of social data using a set of tools called "Social Listening" from Zanroo Company called "Zanroo Listening Tools." The study defines the scope of the events to be analyzed based on 6 events covering 3 levels which are local, national and international levels as follows:

Local Level: 2 Events

1) The hijab ban at the Pattani Kindergarten School, Noppawongsaram Temple, Pattani Province (May 2018)

2) The attacks and killings of Buddhist monks and Islamic leaders, including the killing of monks in Ratanaupap Temple, Narathiwat Province (January 2019), and the events involving Islamic imams and Islamic committees throughout the year

National Level: 2 Events

3) The opposition to the construction of mosques in the northeast and north of Thailand (January 2015-June 2017)

4) The anti-Halal industry movement

International Level: 2 Events

5) Sharia law enforcement in Islamic countries, such as Brunei, to punish LGBT groups by public stoning or caning in Brunei, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, etc.

6) Throat-slitting killings by ISIS and the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand in early 2019

The time frame for retrieving past social data was from 2015 to July 2019. In order to accumulate a large enough volume of social data, the social media platforms from which the text data would be retrieved included Facebook (public accounts), Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, websites, blogs, forums, and community pages that had discussion topics about the relationship between Buddhists and Muslims in the southern border provinces and other parts of Thailand during the specified time frame.

After that, the experts (Zanroo Company) would begin to retrieve and filter the data by optimizing the keywords, filtering the information with keyword hierarchy, creating a set of words (Category & Tags) to focus on only relevant data by using the system to distinguish “hate speech” or verbal abuse, which is defined as “verbal or meaningful expressions in any form which are intended to attack individuals or groups of individuals by focusing on the common inborn or acquired identity, such as race, religion, gender, or other characteristics that can be discriminated.” The data would then be divided into 4 levels according to the severity as follows:

Level 1: Expressing intense dislike (discriminating) – separating ‘them’ from ‘us,’ including publishing information of how ‘they’ threaten ‘us’

Level 2: Inciting hatred – strongly condemning, insulting, abusing, belittling, degrading by dehumanizing and demonizing the opposite side

Level 3: Refusing to coexist

Level 4: Inciting illegal acts – encouraging assaults or hurting, annihilating ‘them’ to protect ‘us’

In addition, there are two types of “counter speech,” which are direct responses to “hate speech” in two ways: 1. convincing haters to stop their actions now and in the future and letting the targets of the hate know that the hate speech level 4 is not acceptable, 2. “vaccinating” the targets of hate so that they are not influenced by hate speech.

Study Results

1. Instances of language, communication, and expressions that are considered “hate speech” on social media in Thai society concerning the relationship between the Buddhists and the Muslims in the southern border provinces and other parts of Thailand

1.1 The comparison of 6 events

Events	Number of relevant messages	Messages considered hate speech	Percentage of hate speech from all relevant messages
1. Anuban Pattani School	5,446	746	13.7%
2. Monk killings in Narathiwat	4,647	1,057	22.7%
3. Opposition to mosque building in the north and northeast	1,672	835	49.6%
4. Anti-Halal movement			
4.1. Halal food	3,007	428	14.2%
4.2. Halal industry	247	193	78.1%
4.3. Halal kitchen at Yala Hospital	267	171	64.0%
5. Same sex lovers caning (Brunei)	6,391	1,078	16.9%
6. Christchurch Mosque Shootings (New Zealand)			
6.1. To Muslim victims	594	139	23.4%
6.2. To the perpetrator		40	6.7%

From the table, in the events of which the volume of messages collected is over 3,000, the proportion of hate speech is between 13-23% (Anuban Pattani 13.7%, monk killings in Narathiwat 22.7%, Halal food opposition 14.2%, caning in Brunei 16.9%), which is a smaller proportion than in the events with fewer than 3,000

messages. In the latter group, the proportion of hate speech is between 30-78% (mosque building opposition 49.6%, Halal industry opposition 78.1% Halal kitchen opposition 64%, Christchurch mosque shootings 30.1%).

It can be translated into a hypothesis that in the cases with a broader base of interested online media users, there is less hate speech, but for events with less interested social media users or, in other words, receiving less interest generally from the public, the opinions and comments would be more radical and the media users more ready to spread hatred to the opposite side. This could be partly because less interest from the public means less diversity of the people who commented, and opinions tend to be shaped in the same direction.

This hypothesis, similar to what the experts commented, is that the comments under large news agencies' posts tend to be based more on principles, reason, have a variety of opinions, and are less inclined to any specific direction than posts in community pages that are created to serve specific issues and attract members from specific groups.

1.2 The 4 levels of language usage, communication, and expression considered hate speech, and counter speech from 6 events

Events	Messages considered hate speech	Level of Severity				% of Counter speech (responses to hate speech)
		Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	
1. Anuban Pattani	746	335 (45%)	352 (47%)	20 (3%)	39 (5%)	7 (1%)
2. Monk killings in Narathiwat	1,057	396 (37%)	540 (51%)	17 (2%)	104 (10%)	3 (0.28%)
3. Opposition to mosque building in the north and northeast	835	233 (28%)	360 (43%)	191 (23%)	51 (6%)	53 (6%)
4. Anti-Halal movement						
4.1 Halal food	428	102 (24%)	294 (69%)	28 (7%)	4 (1%)	52 (12%)
4.2 Halal industry	193	49 (25%)	53 (27%)	87 (45%)	4 (2%)	4 (2%)
4.3 Halal kitchen at Yala hospital	171	68 (40%)	90 (53%)	12 (7%)	1 (1%)	19 (11%)
5. Same sex lovers caning (Brunei)	1,078	289 (27%)	729 (68%)	5 (0.46%)	55 (5%)	2 (0.19%)
6. Christchurch Mosque Shootings (New Zealand)						
6.1 To Muslim victims	139	29 (21%)	94 (68%)	0 (0%)	16 (12%)	15 (8%)
6.2 To perpetrator	40	3 (8%)	29 (73%)	1 (3%)	7 (18%)	

From the table above, it can be seen that, except for just one case against the Halal industry, in the remaining 5 cases, **the largest proportion** of hate speech, approximately 43-69% in each case, was in level 2 (condemning, insulting, abusing, belittling, degrading), **followed by** hate speech level 1 (discriminating comments), approximately 27-45% in each case.

The level 3 hate speech (refuse to coexist), is quite rare except for the case of the mosque opposition in the north and northeast, which is 23% (835 messages from the total of 1,672 hate speech messages), and in the Halal industry opposition case which amounts to 45% (193 messages from the total of 247 hate speech messages). The reason for the level 3 hate speech found in these cases is the content of the debate which is about whether or not to allow mosques or industrial estates in those areas.

In addition, the level 4 hate speech which is the most severe to the point of inciting illegal acts with malicious intentions to inflict suffering on and destroy others. Overall, in the 4 events which are not related to physical violence, only a small amount of hate speech in this level is found, but in the cases of physical violence such as the killings of monks in Narathiwat, the level 4 hate speech increased to 10% (104 messages from the total of 1,057 hate speech messages). In the case of the Christchurch mosque shootings, the level 4 hate speech directed to Muslim victims rose to 12% (16 messages from 139 hate speech messages to all Muslim victims) and the level 4 hate speech aimed at the perpetrator climbed to 18% (7 messages from 40 hate speech messages to the perpetrator).

Therefore, from these 6 events, **three general observations** may be established as follows:

- In general, hate speech often begins at level 1 (discriminating) and level 2 (accusing, condemning and degrading).
- On issues related to constructions and buildings in particular areas, the majority of hate speech tends to go to level 3 (refuse to coexist).
- In the event that physical violence is involved, post-incident hate speech tends to rise to level 4, which is borderline dangerous speech.

As for counter speech, there is only a small proportion of it in each event. Especially in the local level events, the amount of counter speech is very small. To be specific, only 1.00% of counter speech is found in the Anuban Pattani case, and 0.28% in the case of monk killings in Narathiwat. For national events, even with a smaller amount and a higher level of hate speech compared to the local level, it is notable that the amount of counter speech is higher in a relative level, especially in the case of halal food opposition (12%) and in the halal kitchen opposition in Yala Hospital (11%).

On the other hand, for national events, the proportion of counter speech in the case of the halal food and halal kitchen opposition is higher than the case against the halal industry (2%) and the opposition of mosque building in the north and northeast (6%).

It can be assumed that because the halal food and the halal kitchen are linked to **people's awareness of food (the first of the four basic needs)** and have a much broader impact on dietary norms, the topics become more visible and debatable or interesting. In the Halal kitchen case at Yala Hospital, the topic links to the **awareness of health and illness (the second basic need)**. That is to say, it is not just related to food in general, but also to the patient's awareness of diet and nutrition. Most of the people who joined the online discussion on this issue were concerned about the feelings of recovering patients whose dietary options might be limited. This connection made the topic even more relatable to the public. While the Halal industry and the construction of mosques in the north and northeast of Thailand are concerned with the awareness of territory, be it the location of industrial estates or mosques; therefore, fewer people felt connected to it. The conflict is not serious enough to be considered an issue of territory invasion or the **awareness of living space** which is **the third basic need**.

2. Analysis of the increasing or decreasing trend of religious intolerance in Thai society through online communication based on important relevant events.

From the analysis of the online hate speech on Buddhist-Muslim relationship topics in Thai society by using Susan Beneach's Dangerous Speech criteria to assess the possibility of whether hate speech in all of the 6 events studied in this research would escalate into a large scale physical violence or not, the results can be summarized in the table below.

Dangerous Speech Indicators	Yes / No	Explanation
1. Senders (speakers)		
1.1 Are they people of authority, power, or influence?	Y	Although there are Buddhists among the commenters, the senders who are most listened to and considered more credible and influential are usually monks.

Dangerous Speech Indicators	Yes / No	Explanation
1.2 Are they charismatic or popular figures?	Y	Considering the number of page likes, there are 2-3 popular pages with hundreds of thousands of followers. Even if the page owners do not show hatred, these pages are spaces for hateful comments.
2. Receivers (audience)		
2.1 Which groups of people are most likely to respond to hate speech?		A group of disciples of the vocal monks or a group of people who, though not as close to the monks as their disciples but have faith in the monks and observe the teachings of the monks through online media.
2.2 Who is the target audience of the messages? (the opposite side, the same side, other parties, more than one parties)		Most of the messages are targeted towards Muslims. The messages to and from the Buddhists themselves are meant to express opinions, complaints, and feelings rather than to deliberately persuade, or incite violent acts.
2.3 Is the audience capable of committing violence?	N	Not at a physical level.
2.4 Is the audience financially insecure?	N	They are more likely to feel insecure about their identity and culture, than economic status.
2.5 Does the audience show a great respect and fear to authority	N	From the information found on the Facebook community pages, no one seems to be able to control anyone.
2.6 Is the audience intimidated by the messages?	Y	They fear that Buddhism is being threatened, and that Islam is expanding. They are also concerned about the safety for the lives and property of Buddhists.
3. Speech Act		
3.1 Does the audience interpret those messages as encouragement to use violence?	N	Most of the comments, such as "Just shoot them all," are lacking in the willingness or a serious intention to transform them into real actions, so the audience probably does not see them as encouragement to use violence as suggested in some messages.
3.2 Are the to-be victims compared or referred to as non-humans?	N	Such references are not found. Most of the comments only tell them to go live with goats and cows, or sometimes threaten to stuff pork into their mouths, or will have dogs chase them.
3.3 Are the audience members in danger themselves?	Y	Most comments refer to the events in which Buddhist monks and lay people were killed, abused, or sustained injuries.
3.4 Are there phrases, words or codes that can be understood only by a specific group?	Y	Most of the words are slangs, or parodies of Muslims, or just the name of Allah, rather than encoded words related to some unknown operations.
4. Social and Historical Contexts		
4.1 Have there been any conflicts between the groups before?	Y	Conflicts on Buddhist-Muslim issues already existed in the southern border provinces.
4.2 Has there ever been any violence arising from hate speech in conflicts from the past?	N	No violence ever arose from hate speech in the past.
4.3 Are these considered risk factors that will lead to mass violence?	N	Major institutions in Thai society have not discriminated against or unfairly treated Buddhists to the point that they feel hurt enough to cause mass violence.

Dangerous Speech Indicators	Yes / No	Explanation
5. Modes of Communication		
5.1 Does online media make the hate speech messages sound more convincing?	Y	Facebook pages and groups are relatively closed platforms that can filter out most differing opinions.
5.2 Does the audience have access to other different aspects, opinions, or sources of information?	Y	In closed groups or community pages, the audience tends to share the same ideas rather than in the pages of major news agencies where opinions are more diverse.
5.3 Is the speech reproduced in terms of form or content?	Y	Screen shots are captured and published for further discussion, sharing and liking. This has become a normal behavior in today's online world and among the various pages and groups that this research follows.
Total		11 Yes; 7 No

If one considers all 18 indicators to have the same weight in predicting the possibility of whether online hate speech about the 6 events between 2016 and 2019 would escalate to mass violence or not, it can be concluded that **“there is 61% possibility that from these events hatred can escalate to violence.”**

This probability of 61% comes with, as the researcher is well aware of, many limitations and is just a rough assessment. However, it might be interesting to use these indicators as a prediction guideline for social media monitors to prevent hate speech from becoming violence, to assess the seriousness of the situation, and to know when action or intervention is needed.

Suggestion

The following policies and measures are proposed in order to cope with and prevent hate from turning into violence, and instead to transform it into reconciliation and respect for the diversity of culture and identity. The policies that will be proposed to government security agencies or organizations involved in religious policies, including other departments and related sectors, are as follows:

1. Suggestions for government security agencies

Inter-religious intolerance in Thai society and hate speech on the online world based on religious prejudice, intolerance and segregation, especially between Buddhism and Islam, are still not very serious, and are not to the point of encouraging harmful, destructive or illegal acts to annihilate the target of hatred. However, there is a form of communication, identified by empirical evidence, that reflects the **“boiling”** and **“Infiltrating”** intolerance and hatred in Thai society since 2012. In today's society where communication through social media creates awareness of events among social media users in the national and international levels, people not only receive but also forward and share messages. These are actions that cause hatred to spread more widely.

Therefore, regulating online communication with appropriate measures is very important in order to not cause serious consequences in society. To make the regulatory measures sustainable is to balance the surveillance and preventive actions so as to avoid any situation that could be a danger to national security. At the same time, free speech must not be compromised.

The researcher recommends measures to regulate communication and comments that are considered hate speech on online platforms regarding the situation between religions in Thai society. The measures are divided into 2 parts according to the severity of hate speech, as follows:

1. Guidelines for publishing restrictions (restrictive approach)

The severity of hate speech	Guidelines for Publishing Restrictions
Level 1	Self-supervision by online media users should be implemented by Internet users. This must be done in tandem with education and social campaigns so that Internet users are aware of how to use freedom of expression in a responsible way, understand and realize the effects of hate speech, and to be active digital citizens and participate in reporting or filing complaints.
Level 2	Focus on supervision through intermediaries as a preventive measure. - Micro level intermediaries should be encouraged to play the role of overseers. Those intermediaries are, for example, community pages that focus on situations regarding the Buddhist-Islamic relationship in Thai society; or have influence on audiences, pages for media organizations or news agencies that report news about the relationship between Buddhism and Islam, especially in the international and national levels
Level 3	- Macro level intermediaries are website service providers and social network web service providers.
Level 4	Legal supervision by intermediaries in accordance with legal frameworks. - Implement the Notice and Take-Down (NTD) policy, have a clear regulatory procedure, and ensure there is a participatory procedure joined by relevant stakeholders.

2. Guidelines to respond or resolve conflicts with information (informative approach)

2.1 Fighting hate speech with counter speech

We have to encourage and develop online communicators to be able to perform counter speech and distribute it among wider society, including creating opinion leaders to help disseminate non-violent counter speech and communicate with haters to stop the action now and in the future, to communicate with other internet users that hate speech level 4 is not acceptable, or to “vaccinate” the audience to not be influenced by hate speech. This will require cooperation from various relevant agencies such as academic bodies, government educational agencies, security organizations, communication organizations, and civil society.

2.2 Raising social awareness and campaigning

Set norms in society and online communities to get rid of the culture of indifference and consent to online hatred and teach media literacy to online media users. This includes raising awareness of values that should be cherished, such as solidarity, tolerance to difference, acceptance of diversity, and digital empathy to other users who may not interact with each other in a physical sense.

2. Suggestions for religious institutions/organizations to strengthen the relationship between religions

2.1. Cross-religion operations from the offline world to counter hate speech in the online world

People, especially the neutral group or unarmed group, in the southern border provinces have been “living with violence” for at least 15 years, and they have learned and adapted to one another against the backdrop of this violence which has been eroding trust between people and communities. Therefore, people who live with violence must think, design, and build relationship in the offline world among themselves. There could be visits between practitioners of the two religions or between followers of the two religions to take care and embrace each other's feelings in the midst of violence. This is something that helps contain the level of hate that plagues the online world where most people are “behind the screen” to not come out “off the screen.” The offline operations help regain trust in the hearts of people the midst of fragile situation and tense emotions.

2.2. Religious institutions/organizations as leaders in establishing inter-religious relationship in the offline and online world

Preventing violent extremism should be an important goal for Thai society so as to prevent violence between Buddhist and Muslim groups. Specifically speaking, institutions and religious organizations that are directly related to the issue and have resources can take the initiative by supporting the organizations and

related networks from the local, national to international levels, pushing projects and activities that promote coexistence between Buddhists and Muslims through interaction and social participation, especially through inter-religious interactions and activities. This research recommends these kinds of developments in at least 3 areas:

- 1) Develop a monitoring system to prevent religious interpretation in an extreme way and as a reason for violence
- 2) Promoting the creation of online media literacy programs with emphasis on religion
- 3) Collaborating between the highest institutions of each religion (**inter-institutional religious collaboration**)