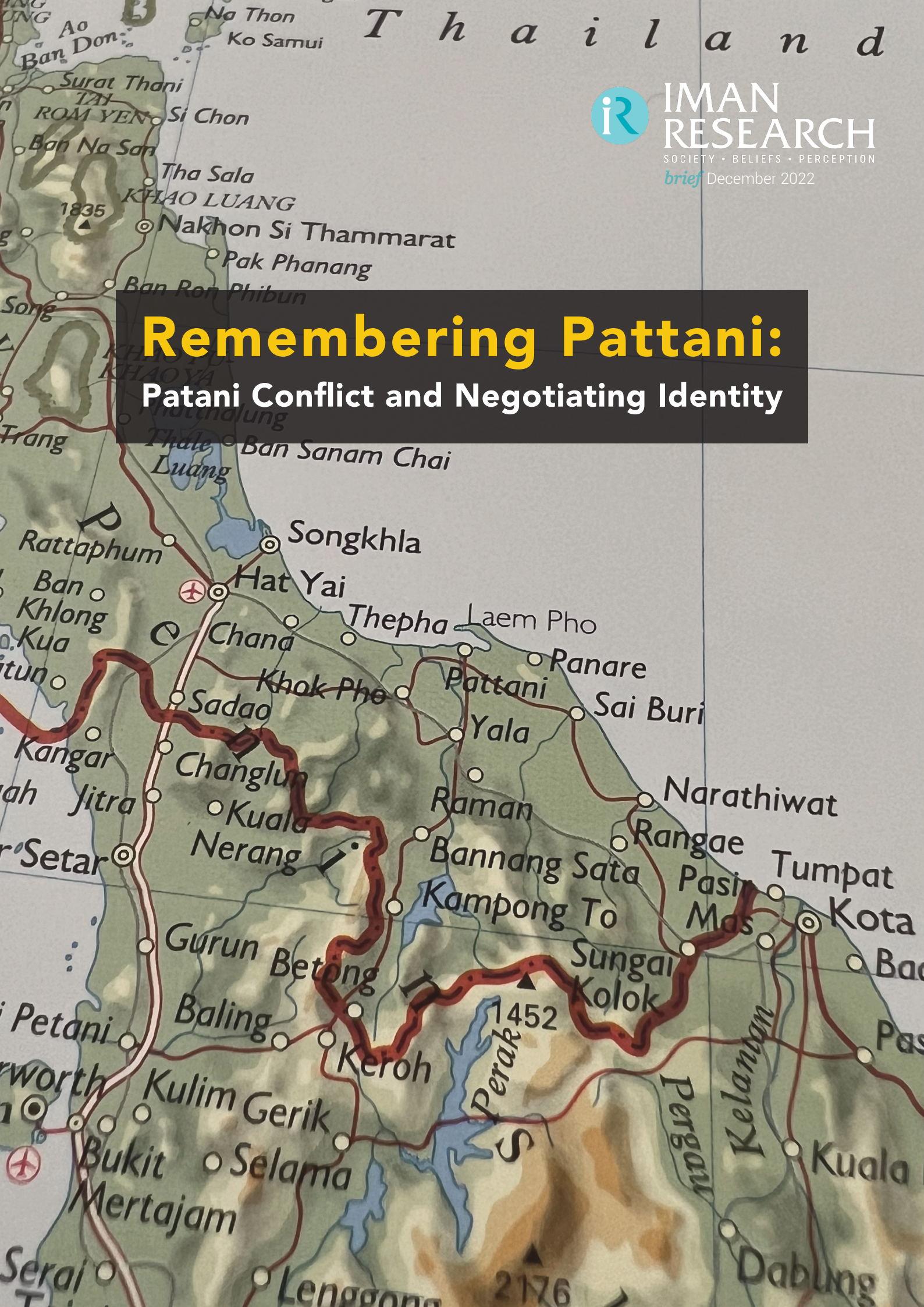




# Remembering Pattani: Patani Conflict and Negotiating Identity



## Remembering Pattani: Patani conflict and negotiation identity

by Nadia Lukman. IMAN *brief* | December 2022

I visited the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur a few months ago and saw the Patani Malay kingdom stamps being exhibited. I quickly turned on my phone camera, and sent the picture to a Patani social worker who attended a workshop IMAN organised on para-counsellor training in early October 2022, to train Patani social workers on counselling skills. A brief history of the Patani kingdom was included in the Malay kingdom section of the National Museum. If the Nadia who read the section was the Nadia from three years back, she might have just read it through without any interest. Nadia three years later is different. She has worked with IMAN and been involved in IMAN's project on Pattani for the past two years, focusing on community resilience and mental health of the Patani community.

For me, it is ironic that the Patani Malay kingdom stamp was kept by Malaysians. It was included in the abovementioned exhibition of the Malay kingdom, and yet Patani Malay kingdom has ceased to exist and they are now referred as Southern Thailand, comprising three main provinces; Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala and part of current Songkhla. If you ask Malaysians what they know or remember about Pattani and Patani<sup>1</sup>, some would probably say something about Patani Malays and there was a conflict there, that's it. Some might not even know there's a conflict in Pattani.

Therefore, I decided to write about the memories of Patani. The current ongoing conflict in Pattani has not been easy on everyone, at the very least even to us who monitor the situation from afar. My years working on this issue has taught me a lot of things, especially as a Malaysian Malay who knows that there is conflict in Pattani but never realises what is happening. This article is my personal interpretation of Pattani, Patani, the conflict, and the way the community refused to be torn down by violence. Though this article might not be able to bring justice to a century-long struggle the community experienced against violence, hopefully these writings of mine are able to show their tenacity and resilience en route to peace. This article will be divided into four sections: Patani homeland for the separatists; Patani that I live in: in the eyes of the community workers; Patani community: where are we going; and Patani struggles from the eyes of an outsider. Hopefully this article will shed some light to Malaysian society on the struggles of our neighbours to achieve peace.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pattani refers to the region while Patani refers to the people*

## Patani Homeland for The Separatists

It is a known fact that the separatist movement in Southern Thailand comprise various groups, such as the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), Patani Liberation United Organisation (PULO) and Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani (GMIP). When the Thai government mooted the peace process in 2015, MARA Patani, an umbrella organisation encompassing PULO and GMIP was established, 'engineered' by Datuk Zamzamin, a previous facilitator from Malaysia in the Southern Thailand peace process. For the separatists, their objective has always been clear: independence. However, the road forging towards independence is still blurry. There are a few questions that the separatists have yet to answer; such as the divisive nature among Patani separatist movements, the support and 'buy-in' these movements have among Patani community in Southern Thailand, and the strategy the groups have to establish for Pattani's independence.

For a long time, one of the most critical issues faced by the Pattani separatist movements has been the division between the separatist movement even when the peace negotiation is currently ongoing. When the Thai government triggered the peace process in 2015, under the Yingluck Shinawatra administration, MARA Patani was said to be composed of PULO, GMIP and BRN. The 'united' image shown via MARA Patani was not for long. BRN then declared that 'the BRN representative in (MARA) does not represent BRN' and was then sidelined. This conflict on the peace negotiation table signals a sense of disunity among the separatist movements in Pattani. The Patani peace negotiation with MARA Patani was then cast aside, and BRN became the sole entity representing the Patani separatist movement to negotiate for peace with the Thailand government.

For the separatists, there might be a slight disagreement between each other, but they claim to be united. Showing themselves as a different entity and blurring the key persons leading the organisation is a tactic that these organisations are using to conceal their movement against potential Thai military crackdown. Some fighters living within the Patani community may claim themselves to be members of multiple Patani separatist movements; some also claim to be both BRN and PULO members at the same time. Whatever it is, the fight to free their homeland from the coloniser's hand is what is important to them. In what form a free Patani state looks like is still ambiguous, both to people that observe and monitor the peace process, and possibly to some fighters sacrificing their lives on the ground as well. Perhaps, only this 'unknown' leader leading the separatist movement knows what shape the state should look like.

## Pattani that I live in: in the eyes of the community workers

The interview we had with female-led civil society organisations in Pattani was definitely interesting. The reason for this is due to the contradictory

nature of their positioning in the work that they do. At some point of the conversation, they said that women cannot be leaders, only men could. But throughout the conversation we had with them, they showed tremendous leadership qualities and charisma via the activism work that they have shared.

For them, the conflict in Pattani has been a daily occurrence since they were young. Both female leaders shared their experiences protesting against Thai military, and discrimination and harassment that they received. The protest happened during their undergraduate degree which influenced their participation in activism. They reminisce fondly and with fire in their eyes of the days they went out of the university, organising protests on the street. They were part of multiple street protests which then turned into a meeting organising a movement of young students against Thailand military cruelty in Southern Thailand. Now, both are involved with civil society organisations helping women and children in Pattani.

Indeed, for them the cruelty, discrimination and harassment that they experienced is something out of ordinary. They shared how tough it was to meet various individuals and families who needed their help, thinking of the possibility that those families might be harassed by the military as soon as they left. Or the possibility of them being stopped by the authorities at a military checkpoint. The inability to extend more help due to their limited capabilities as social workers was another; in terms of materials or skills. But they persevered. And they do this because they call Pattani their home.

However, this does not mean that civil society organisations also agree with the way the separatist movement has been fighting for the independence of Pattani from Thailand. They might understand or empathise with the cause, but for them, peace is important. Peace is the focus of the discussion. The blurry leadership tactic used by the Patani separatist movement also means that civil society organisations that work tremendously for the Patani community in Southern Thailand feels detached from the fight that the separatist is trying to reach. This brings us to the question: does the separatist get real support from the Patani community in Southern Thailand en route to independence?

## Patani Community; Where are we going?

The answer is probably yes and no. Our interactions with the Patani community so far seems to hint that the older generation of Patani community support the fight for independence. However, the same cannot be said for the younger generation. For us at IMAN who have been observing the conflict, the youths seem to be conflicted. The community are well versed in Patani Malay, since that is their mother tongue and yet they very much prefer communicating in Thai to help them

better understand any conversation. There are two possible explanations for this. One, Patani Malay and Malaysian Malay are quite different. Malaysian Malays use romanised script, thanks to the British influence while the Patani people still use Jawi script. Their spoken language is more similar to the Kelantanese dialect, which is hard even for some Malaysians to understand. On top of these, Thai education has been successful in assimilating Patani Malay into Thai society.

Religious values seem to be one of the biggest reasons young Patani prefer to migrate to Malaysia than Bangkok. Often, the Patani community stated that they felt much more comfortable in Malaysia because it is easier to find halal food and to practise religion compared to in Bangkok. This is probably due to being on the receiving end of prejudice and discrimination as soon as people notice that they came from Southern Thailand. Hence, this preference to work in Malaysia rather than Bangkok seems to be due to the ability for these community to integrate with Malaysian society, the Malay-muslim majority in Malaysia. Plus the fact that the network Patani community has in Malaysia is enormous. Most of the Patani community that we have met in Malaysia were introduced by a contact they know to work in Malaysia. Some may be family members or neighbours in Pattani, others maybe seniors in the university. These extensive networks help overcome the low trust issues the community have with outsiders and probably explain part of the reason for their migration as well.

As such, religious values itself cannot explain the Patani migratory pattern to neighbouring countries like Malaysia. It is a combination of religion, ethnic-integration and network factors. These all make so much sense when we consider the presence of other muslim communities in Thailand who have integrated. Malays are not the only Muslims in Thailand. Muslims in Thailand composes of Arabs, Persian, Indians, Chinese and Malays. Even in Bangkok, there are numerous options for halal food and mosque that caters to the muslim communities.

## Patani Struggles: From the Eyes of an Outsider


From the perspective of an outsider to the conflict; one of the frustrations as we engaged with the community is the trust deficit towards outsiders. Getting participants to be interviewed was hard, getting an answer from them was as hard, avoiding their suspicion was harder, no matter what level of engagement you are doing. And the issue of trust is one of the reasons the Pattani separatist movement continues to use this leadership tactic. It's a defence mechanism from everyone in the community.

However, as a researcher who is trying to create awareness, this mechanism is hard to overcome. Inquiring questions related to trauma and mental health also means that the source of these issues; i.e the conflict, has to be unpacked as well. Some may be open to answer these questions as soon as

we clarify our background and the purpose we're doing this project, but some may not. We took years in building relationships with various organisations before we were able to conduct this project two years back.

Those are the trickle down effects of the trust issues, from a standpoint of a researcher. As an observer to the conflict, I also think that this trust issue has created a barrier for the community to educate others on the struggles they faced. Let's face it. If even their most important neighbours, Malaysia, were not aware of the experience they have faced since the Tak Bai massacre in 2004, that says something. But then, it doesn't help the separatists nor the CSO to keep silent for the sake of their objectives. More interest on the issue means more resources can be used for the community, at least for the CSOs who continuously work closely with the community for issues such as economic, social or health that is currently happening.

### What kind of future awaits Pattani?

The final question that we need to think of is the future of Pattani. The peace process between BRN and Thailand is still ongoing, but the chances to have peace in the near future seems to be pretty bleak. For the Patani diaspora who empathise and support the separatist movement, they imagine an independent Patani that they can come back to. For the Patani who never left, all they want is peace, without military or violence acts, threatening to happen to their children, parents, neighbours, and friends. This disengagement between Patani CSOs and the separatists needs to be solved in order for sustainable peace to happen for Pattani in the future. The Patani people are resilient, and hopefully a solution to the conflict will come soon. 

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