

Travelling with the Tablighi Jamaat in South Thailand

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Thailand's southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat have seen a wave of violence since 4 January 2004, when simultaneous attacks took place on Thai army bases, police posts, and schools. Since then, violence in these majority Malay-Muslim provinces has escalated through the consequent siege and storming of the historical Krue Se mosque in Pattani province, the deaths of 78 demonstrators after their arrest in Tak Bai, and the killings of policemen, soldiers, and civilians claiming more than a thousand lives. Fingers have been pointed at Malay-Muslim separatists, renegade soldiers and policemen, crime syndicates, and individuals settling personal feuds.

In the midst of this violence, the principally apolitical Tablighi Jamaat continues to carry out its *da'wa* (call to Islamic practice). Groups of dedicated followers in south Thailand visit the *markaz* (Tablighi Jamaat Centre) in the city of Yala at least once a week. They go on *khuruj*, tours to propagate their version of Islam, to fulfil the Tablighi's religious obligation, further deepen their faith and, perhaps, also escape the harsh day-to-day reality of violence on the streets. In more than one way, the Tablighi Jamaat can be seen as a safe haven from worldly affairs.

The Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic missionary movement originating from the Indian subcontinent, first got a foothold in Thailand in the early 1980's when *ijtima'* (major gatherings) were held in Bangkok and Yala. From then, the movement's ideas spread rapidly among Thailand's Muslims. In the course of my research on Islamic reformism in southern Thailand, I was invited by the Tablighi movement to participate in one of its three-day *khuruj* trips. The *shuras* (councils of elders) in Bangkok and Yala deliberated whether an outsider could participate and decided positively. In the current escalation of violence and suspicion, the movement's leadership felt it had nothing to hide. This is an account of my three-day journey with the Tablighi Jamaat in the Deep South.¹

The markaz in Yala consists of two main buildings: the two-storey headquarters and a large mosque used by up to 10,000 to 12,000 people during Friday prayers. The markaz is the base from which the Tablighi set out to visit villages and communities fulfilling the important duty of going on *khuruj*—the most visible characteristic of the Tablighi. The deputy head of the markaz explained that the first goal of *khuruj* is to "develop ourselves" by following in the footsteps of the Prophet. "The reward is Paradise. If we don't do this then we will follow our own desire," he said.

The Tablighi in south Thailand are of varied occupational backgrounds: teachers, businessmen, shop owners, students, lawyers, and medical doctors. The leaders estimate that 20,000 people go on *khuruj* every year. There is, however, no registration of membership. Most men

Even as the situation in southern Thailand degenerates into one of daily violence, the Tablighi Jamaat continues to take its message to the remotest villages. Ernesto Braam accompanied a group of followers to a small mosque in the Thai province of Pattani. The aim of this missionary movement is both to renew the faith of its followers and to appeal to villagers to come to the local mosque more often. The Tablighi Jamaat has attracted thousands of followers in Thailand's predominantly Malay Muslim Deep South.

wear a white Saudi style *thawb* (loose long-sleeved ankle-length shirt) and a *taqiya* (skull cap) because that would best imitate the dress of the prophet. Some men, however, wear the traditional Malay *sarong* and *songkok* (cap).

Preparation

Going on *khuruj* requires both spiritual and logistical preparation. The Tablighi use the *Guide for Tableegh Journey and Six Points*, printed in Pakistan, as an instruction manual. The

leadership reiterated the six principles as presented by Tablighi Jamaat founder, Mawlana Ilyas, in India in 1934, namely 1) the belief in Allah and practice according to the prophet's way of life; 2) praying with attention to Allah; 3) knowledge of Islam and remembrance of Allah; 4) respect for others, Muslim and non-Muslim; 5) serving Allah without benefit; 6) allocating time to *da'wa*.

The leadership also explained the "sixteen rules" which should be obeyed while on *khuruj*: four sets of four practical rules—respectively four things to do more of, four things to do less of, four things not to do, and four things to ignore. The latter however are not mentioned in the *Guide*. They include the rules to ignore politics, conflict between different Islamic groups, one's own title and position, and donations. The leaders explained that the goal of *khuruj* is to increase one's personal belief in Allah and to practice Sunnah as shown by the prophet. The leaders did not elaborate on the *Guide*'s very specific etiquettes of eating, sleeping, and going to the toilet.

In line with the general tenets of the Tablighi movement, its adherents in south Thailand have to go on *khuruj* three days every month or 40 days in a year in groups consisting of six to seventeen members. The goal is to spend at least four months in a lifetime on *khuruj*. They have to use their own money and time.

A local shopkeeper was appointed amir (leader) of our small group. The destination was decided based on which villages had not been visited recently. Typically, at a meeting, the destinations of future trips are selected, and mosques at those communities contacted to inquire if they would be willing to receive a *jama'ah* (group). The participants in the *khuruj* had each brought a small bag of clothes, toiletries, a mat to sleep on and a mosquito net. Finally, they and the other Tablighi prayed together.

Going on khuruj

We set out by car from the markaz to the small town of Prigi in Pattani province. The destination, less than an hour away, was a small mosque on the main road. The countryside of the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—where up to 80% of the population are Malay-Muslims speaking a local dialect of Malay—is covered by rubber plantations, interspersed with kampongs (villages) and paddy fields. About 10 local Malay Muslims out on *khuruj* had already arrived, as well as a *jama'ah* of seven men from Saudi Arabia. Normally, the participants of a *khuruj* do household chores like cooking, washing, cleaning etc. for themselves. But because of the presence of a group from Saudi Arabia, the local Malay men at the mosque had taken it upon themselves to perform these duties. They prepared several meals a day and served them on large platters around which the Tablighi gathered, eating in a commu-

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nal fashion using their right hand. The locals waited until the visiting Tablighi had finished before they took their fill.

Communication between the Malays and the Saudis was hampered by the language barrier. However, some Malays spoke Arabic, which they had learned while studying in the Middle East. The Saudis were travelling through Thailand on a 40-day khuruj tour. This was quite significant because, as they explained, the Tablighi practices are forbidden in the official Wahhabi doctrine of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the Saudis had to travel abroad to be able to join the Tablighi Jamaat. Coming from the holy city of Medina, they were treated with great respect and often led the prayers. In Thailand, the Tablighi are not welcome in mosques affiliated with what local people call "Wahhabis" or "Kaum Muda" (Malay: "New Group"). In fact, some followers of the traditional Malay Islam, hold negative views of the Tablighi Jamaat, saying it is alien to south Thailand and that its followers abandon their families when on khuruj.

As expected, the Tablighi participated in the mandatory prayers five times daily. An extra prayer at 2am was optional. At most prayers, local Malay men from the kampongs in the vicinity joined in. They numbered between 50 and 80, and comprised mainly those who were regular visitors to this village mosque. Women apparently sat behind a curtain that cordoned off an area of the mosque. They were from the local community and played no noticeable role in the khuruj. The leadership had, however, said that women could participate in the khuruj with their husbands, but would have to stay separately at the house of relatives or (female) friends. The prayers were generally followed by a *bayan* (story, sermon) told by one of the Saudis and translated into Malay, and sometimes told by a local Tablighi. A different bayan teller was chosen earlier in the day at an informal meeting of the more senior Tablighi. A congregation of both Tablighi and local non-Tablighi listened to the bayans attentively. The bayans took between 30 and 60 minutes and were generally based on stories from the *Faza'il A'maal*, which is prescribed literature for Tablighi comprising stories of companions of the Prophet, virtues of the Holy Quran, virtues of *salaat* (prayer), virtues of *zikr* (remembrance), virtues of tabligh, virtues of Ramadan and "Muslim degeneration and its only remedy." They were told with a strong conviction and concentrated on virtues and morality, applied to current day situations. The aim was to strengthen the listeners' faith and motivation to carry out the duty of approaching other Muslims with the same message.

After the bayan, especially in the evening when the mosque was more crowded, another Tablighi would stand up next to the bayan teller and appeal to the local non-Tablighi Malay-Muslims to go on khuruj. This was the liveliest part of the day in the mosque. First this person would ask who wanted to go on khuruj for four months. Sometimes twenty people would raise their hands, sometimes ten and occasionally no one. Then other people were asked to go on the 40-day khuruj trip. All this was done with some encouragement to convince those who looked away with timidity to sign up. Finally, the speaker loudly asked who would go on the three-day trip. Attendees often looked at each other and some of the younger ones would poke their friends. There was clearly an atmosphere of duty more than of coercion. When everyone had had the opportunity to raise their hand—by far not all did that—the names of men wanting to go on khuruj were taken down. Later, they would visit the markaz to talk to Tablighi elders, who would decide if their family situations permitted the volunteers to go on khuruj. After this session, or directly after the bayan, the congregation broke into smaller groups to read and discuss some stories from the *Faza'il A'maal*. At this point most local Muslims returned to their work or families.

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The most outgoing part of the khuruj was when the Tablighi left the mosque to visit Muslims in the vicinity to invite them to join evening prayers at the mosque. No effort was made to convert Thai Buddhists. Groups of five to ten Tablighi went in different directions by car, scooter, or on foot. I walked with a group of ten in a queue with a young man from the local community as guide and a Saudi Tablighi as group leader at the head. The group walked through paddy fields and bushes to pre-selected houses in the kampong. A loud "*as salamu alaykum*" by the Saudi usually urged the shy resident to come outside. The group leader then expressed the greatness of God, stated that man and woman were created for worship and invited the resident to come to evening prayers at the mosque. This took about five minutes after which, in the same fashion, seven to ten other houses were visited. Sometimes people on the street or on a football field were addressed. Most of them agreed to come to the mosque, but generally did not show up that evening.

The whole group of Tablighi slept at the mosque on the floor, careful not to point their feet in the direction of the Holy Places. However, the etiquettes of sleeping under point 4 of the *Guide* (sleep on the right side of the body) were not strictly followed. The other days basically followed the same routine.

It was easy to forget the outside world, in spite of the Thai army truck that would show up every morning in front of the mosque, armed soldiers jumping off to guard the school across the street. For the duration of those three days, those present formed a tightly-knit group sharing a strong sense of fate and solidarity, praying, eating, and sleeping together, at the same time and in the same space. As an outsider I felt genuinely accepted by the group and included in all activities. The rather inconspicuous mosque had become a retreat from the turbulent world outside, and provided an oasis of spirituality, bridging language and cultural barriers, in fact, rendering them obsolete.

Thai reading notes on origami cranes, dropped by military planes, that promote peace, south Thailand, 2004

Note

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