

Saudi Charitable Impulse Abroad! The Contrasting Coercive Power of Belief and Money in Thailand and Sudan

Rajeswary BROWN

School of Management, Royal Holloway College

The paper traces the growth and activities of the International Islamic Relief Organization [IIROSA] in Thailand and Sudan .This faith based NGO was established in October 1978 in Mecca with administrative headquarters in Jeddah ,As an Islamic charity, its polices, programs are inherently religious. Was their grandiose program of building mosques and madrasas as part of Saudi Arabia's global vision of a Wahhabi inspired, conservative Islam competing globally with its rival Shiite Iran. The latter's revolutionary pedigree particularly after 1979 inspired Muslim youth globally. Velayet-e fiqh, Khomeini's doctrine of state, allocated authority of a legal juristic system abroad. This theocratic model which apportioned power to the clerics did however compromise and shared power with secular and non clerical Islamic forces who had collaborated with Islamic groups in overthrowing the pro-American Pahlavi dynasty.

In essence with large swathes of different Muslim identities in Thailand and Sudan, was Saudi Arabia stirring volatile, separatist Muslim identities particularly among the dispossessed elements of the hill tribes of Chiangrai in the north in Thailand and parts of Sudan.

Second did it play an important role in socio-economic development, constructed in the vision and scope of ethical Islamic economics, or was it purely a peripheral financier in disaster and crises relief in Thailand and Sudan. Third core issue is the relations between the IIROSA and the state as well as with provincial Islamic power. This is particularly important because of Thailand as a Buddhist Monarchy with a high level of participation by the Thai army and bureaucracy in politics and the economy. The issues and debates within this interaction between the foreign Islamic advocate, the IIROSA and the Thai authorities, caught in repression and co-optation of an highly divided indigenous Muslim minority, illustrates the legal and transparency dilemmas of an Islamic NGO.

The main ideology behind IIROSA is Wahhabism, within the Islamic Ummah, a mutual religious identity, a form of international bond through allegiance to a Wahhabism brotherhood. Saudi Arabia, infused with petro -wealth after the boom of 1973, targeted its "economy of religious affection" at turbulent areas of Thailand, the Philippines, Chechnya, Sudan, Kenya and parts of Latin America.

Its sources of funds were diverse. A significant proportion came from Saudi Arabia. There were substantial donations from mosques in the Middle East, Asia and Europe as well as from the hajj pilgrims that complemented the more personalized from of voluntary almsgiving. This was particularly large during Ramadan. The Charity also held substantial reserves of emergency funds for international disaster

relief. There was in addition support for long term projects in education, religious dissemination and charities dedicated to the welfare of women and children.

The focus is on the contrasting economic and legal agenda of IROSA in Thailand and Sudan. In Thailand the NGO concentrated on education and religious ideology while in Sudan there is a precise emphasis on reshaping the economy and casting a new capitalist order. Their gaze principally on the mosques and minarets in Thailand and not on economic empowerment held critical lessons for the stunted spread of sharia as well as for Islamic finance and the evolution of social entrepreneurship. Despite increases in expenditure in Thailand compared to Sudan, between 1996-2006, the impact was limited.