

Wan Nor: Hero from the Deep South but Not the Saviour of Thai Democracy

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22 May 2023 was a symbolic day for Thai politics because it marked the ninth anniversary of the 2014 coup d'état.¹ In the hope of restoring democracy, eight political parties jointly signed a 23-point memorandum of understanding (MOU).² That same day, at the MOU's signing, Wan Muhammad Noor Matha (hereafter Wan Nor), the veteran Muslim politician of Yala province and leader of the Prachachart Party, gave a powerful speech.³ He wished to see change in Thailand, begging the "powerful and mighty ones" to "use your power and your mighty strength to help those who want to work for their people...let them work for their people" (author's translation). His inspirational speech was powerful and went viral; Wan Nor's political star was burnished overnight.

On 4 July, Wan Nor gained more fame when he was appointed as the compromise choice for Thailand's House Speaker. People in the southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat celebrated this news with tremendous joy. The symbolism of a politician from Thailand's Muslim-majority "Deep South" being the Buddhist kingdom's peacemaker led to netizens flooding social media platforms with their selfies or pictures with Wan Nor. For some, Wan Nor can now claim to be the saviour and pride of Thailand's Malay-Muslims, but the key question now is, can he mend a divided parliament in Bangkok?

A former deputy prime minister (under then PM Thaksin Shinawatra), Wan Nor had previously served as House Speaker between 1996 and 2000, under then PM Chuan Leekpai. Wan Nor is the first Muslim to hold such high positions in Thai government. Hailed for his calm demeanour and deliberate conscientiousness, he is considered by his generation as one of the most respectable Thai politicians. However, Wan Nor can be considered a public figure who may inspire 'love' or 'hate' depending on one's religious or political affiliation. Many Malay-Muslims would view him as their most reputable representative. However, from the author's recent interviews with Buddhist elements in Yala, some Buddhist extremists have associated Wan Nor and Prachachart with the Muslim separatist movement. They have even pejoratively labelled Prachachart a "Party of Thugs."

While a deep dive into the longstanding conflict in Thailand's South is beyond the scope of this commentary, the conflict in part derives from the 2004 Narathiwat military camp rampage.⁴ When the state authorities alleged that Wan Nor's team members were the masterminds behind the violence, Wan Nor took no action. Later that year, a clash between Malay-Muslims and the Thai state authorities at Kruesae Mosque and Takbai claimed nearly 120 Malay-Muslim lives.⁵ Again, Wan Nor remained silent. In retaliation, the southernmost constituencies punished Wan Nor in the 2005 general election: he and all his team members failed to be re-elected.

After a time in the political wilderness, Wan Nor sprang back into politics in 2018 with the help of Police Colonel Tawee Sodsong, the former director of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre. Together they formed a new political party, Prachachart (which means "Ummah" or Muslim community in Thai). Speculation exists that Tawee and Wan Nor still have close ties with Thaksin Shinawatra, though both men have denied this. Whatever the case, the catastrophic incidents of Kruesae and Takbai during Thaksin's premiership caused Thaksin's party to lose its popularity in the deep south. Wan Nor's Prachachart is thus seen as a rebranded party. Now,



Figures 1-2 (above and below): Wan Nor, the first Muslim to hold the high position of House Speaker in the Thai government. (Photos from Prachachart Party's Facebook page)

people are curious whether Wan Nor will steer Prachachart closer towards Pheu Thai's lead or continue to protect the interests of Malay-Muslims.

The 2023 general election results showed that Prachachart still won most of their seats in the deep south. In 13 constituencies, they secured seven seats plus two from the party-list. Some argue that Prachachart's success was due to Wan Nor's close connection with Islamic religious leaders from both the reformist (*khana mai*) and the traditionalist (*khana kao*) camps. However, politicians from various camps who spoke to the author criticised Prachachart for stirring up identity politics to attack his opponents. Whatever was the case, the campaign successfully kept Prachachart's rival parties at arm's length.

Nonetheless, Wan Nor has not translated this stellar performance into success within the national legislative assembly. His position as House Speaker was put to the test on 19 July, when he was criticised for his inability to control the House during the second round of voting for Move Forward

candidate Pita Limjaroenrat's nomination for prime minister.⁶ The pro-military parties essentially argued, on a technicality, that Pita's renomination was a motion and that resubmitting a failed motion was against parliamentary regulation 41.⁷ (Pita's supporters counter-argued that renominating Pita was not a general motion and hence would not be subject to that parliamentary regulation.) Wan Nor eventually allowed the vote on the logic that resubmitting the same name for the nomination was a motion – that is, subject to the regulation. Thus, those opposed to Pita's nomination won by a majority and defeated Pita's bid.

On 7 June, at Prince of Songkhla University in Pattani, students held a seminar on the right to self-determination and Patani peace.⁸ They held a mock referendum on self-rule, leading Thai security authorities to accuse the organisers and panelists of promoting a separatist agenda. In response, Wan Nor said in an interview that Prachachart would never endorse such an activity.⁹ Students

interviewed by the author in mid-July expressed disappointment at Wan Nor's reaction. This incident illustrates how Wan Nor must now carefully navigate between his main constituency – Malay-Muslims in the south – and the heavy demands of his Speaker role. He needs to convince his southern support base that he is not trying to please Pheu Thai (and its partners) and Thai security officials at the expense of the former's long-term interests. Saving Thai democracy, however, might be a shot too long even for this veteran of Thai politics.

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Notes

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