



SHEDDEN PAPERS



The Conflict in Southern Thailand

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Abstract

This paper examines the insurgency in Southern Thailand. It offers an analysis of the historical, political, economic, religious and cultural influences in this conflict. It finds that Malay nationalist identity in the south is the strongest driver of the insurgency, and it suggests that the government needs to reassess its response in order to bring the violence to a satisfactory end.

This paper is 20 pages long.

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Introduction

The insurgency in southern Thailand is inherently complicated, and no single factor can explain why violence resumed in southern Thailand in 2004. While the struggle has taken on more of a religious orientation in recent years, it is not apparent that this has changed the underlying ethno-nationalist cause. This paper argues that the conflict in southern Thailand essentially remains a localised conflict over territory and identity.

This paper explores and explains the background to the insurgency in southern Thailand and assesses the government's responses to the insurgency.

A Brief History of the Region

The ancient Kingdom of Patani¹ was founded in 1390. It included the modern-day Thai provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala and parts of Songkhla along with neighbouring areas of Malaysia.² Patani was a regional trading power, one of the leading centres of Islam in Southeast Asia, and with close ties to sultanates in Kelantan and Terengganu in Malaysia.³

Muslims are the largest religious minority in Thailand, and accounted for 2,777,542 or 4.5 per cent of the total population in the 2010 census and over 80 per cent of Muslims live in the southernmost provinces near the Malaysian border.⁴ According to the Department of Provincial Administration, the population of the three southern border provinces (Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat) in 2010 amounted to 1,879,801.⁵ Of the total population, 22 per cent are Buddhist and 78 per cent are Muslim.⁶ The majority of Thai Muslims are ethnic Malays.⁷ The people in these southernmost provinces speak two languages: Thai and Jawi.⁸

¹ The Patani Kingdom in the past was spelled with a single 't', whereas Pattani province is spelled with double 't'.

² Neil J Melvin, *Conflict in Southern Thailand: Islamism, Violence and State in the Patani Insurgency*, Bromma, Sweden, CM Gruppen, 2007, p. 1.

³ John Funston, 'Malaysia and Thailand's Southern Conflict: Reconciling Security and Ethnicity', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2010, p. 235.

⁴ 'Population Census', *National Statistical Office Website*, available at <http://popcensus.nso.go.th/table_stat.php?t=t5&yr=2543>, (Translated by C Nurakkate), accessed 30 June 2011.

⁵ 'Population from Registration Record by Sex and Area', *National Statistical Office Website*, available at <<http://www.nso.go.th/index-1.html>>, (Translated by C Nurakkate), accessed 30 June 2011.

⁶ Srisompob Jitpiromsri and Panyasak Sobhonvasu, 'Unpacking Thailand's Southern Conflict: The Poverty Of Structural Explanations', *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2006, p. 102.

⁷ Thammanoon Maisonti, *A Proposal to Address the Emerging Muslim Separatist Problem in Thailand*, Naval Postgraduate School, 2004, p. 6.

⁸ Jawi is a Malay dialect similar to the language used in the bordering Malay state of Kelantan.

The economic activities of Thai Muslims are divided between fishing in the coastal regions and agricultural work on the rice and rubber plantations in the hinterland.⁹ A large percentage of the Muslim population works in small-scale agriculture or fisheries, either self-employed or as labourers.¹⁰

The Insurgency

The insurgency in southern Thailand has always been about territory and identity. The goals of the insurgents range from an independent Patani state to inclusion with Malaya. Those goals not only challenge Thailand's national identity predicated on the pillars of Nation, Religion and King, but also the Thai economy.

The movement to unite the southern provinces with Malaya was active after World War II, and in the late 1940s, the Association of Malays of Greater Patani (Gabungan Melaun Patani Raya, or GAMPAR) was established with the objective of merging the southern provinces of Thailand with the Federation of Malaya.¹¹ This was the only movement among the separatist groups that advocated irredentism - uniting with Malaya. Later, GAMPAR became inactive and was dissolved and took with it the desire of southern Thais to unite with Malaya.

The other separatist groups predominantly favour the goal of separatism – or independence.¹² Most agree that the group BRN-C (Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate) is the most important organization in the current conflict.¹³ The BRN-C follows a seven-step plan, or Berjihad di Patani.¹⁴ The Berjihad di Patani was seized during an attack in April 2004, and it outlines the insurgent's strategies and objectives.¹⁵ Its ultimate objective is to establish an independent Patani state.¹⁶ Thus, it can be concluded that the main objective of the contemporary insurgents is to separate from Thailand and establish an independent Patani state.

⁹ Maisonti, *A Proposal to Address the Emerging Muslim Separatist Problem in Thailand*, p. 6.

¹⁰ John Funston, *Southern Thailand: The Dynamics of Conflict*, East-West Center, Washington, 2008, p. 7.

¹¹ S P Harish, *Changing Conflict Identities: The Case of the Southern Thailand Discord*, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies Singapore, No. 107, February 2006, p. 8.

¹² Ian Storey, 'Ethnic Separatism in Southern Thailand: Kingdom Fraying at the Edge?', Center for Army Lessons Learned, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, *NEWSLETTER*, February 2010, No. 10-29, p. 33.

¹³ Melvin, *Conflict in Southern Thailand* p. 9.

¹⁴ Joseph Chinyong Liow and Don Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts: Thailand's Shapeless Southern Insurgency*, Longueville Media, Double Bay, 2010, p. 4.

¹⁵ Marc Askew, 'Thailand's Intractable Southern War: Policy, Insurgency and Discourse', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 30, No.2, 2010, p. 128.

¹⁶ Liow and Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts*, p. 4.

The insurgents' goal to establish some form of independent state undoubtedly undermines Thai sovereignty and challenges the monarchy. Since the Thai Constitution specifies that the country is one indivisible Kingdom,¹⁷ any movement to break away or even to seek a greater degree of autonomy from the government, could be considered as being against the Constitution.¹⁸ Thailand, when it was Siam, lost territory on 14 separate occasions, especially during the colonial period, to Britain and France,¹⁹ and is therefore acutely aware that it does not want to lose any territory it currently has. Furthermore, the current Thai King (King Bhumibol) is the grandson of King Rama the Fifth who introduced the country's central administration in 1902. The central administration incorporated most of present-day Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces.²⁰ Later in 1909, King Rama the Fifth ceded neighbouring Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu under the Anglo-Siamese Treaty.²¹ The Thai history of loss and humiliation in those times resonates with generations of Thais who resolve not to let it happen again. Thus, the message is clear that Pattani must not be lost to the separatists. Further, given that the Thai king is inseparably bound up with the legitimacy of the Thai state, such a movement to liberate southern Thailand could be considered a treasonous act of disrespect towards the monarchy as well.

The BRN-C has also played a crucial role in giving this movement a more Islamic character in a country that is predominantly Buddhist. Its two main approaches are to emphasise religion, and to indoctrinate the youth with the history of central government oppression.²² Since the resumption of violence in 2004, there has been more sectarian violence. Buddhist monks and civilians have become symbolic targets. The violence has caused Buddhists to flee their own villages and seek shelter elsewhere. Some temples have also been closed down.²³ This movement is clearly an attempt to get rid of Thai culture from the Patani area. Therefore the BRN-C movement is in direct opposition to the three core tenets of Thailand's national identity: nation, religion and king.

In terms of economy, Thailand is the world's foremost rubber producer, with approximately 32 per cent of the world market in 2010, and the world's number one rubber exporter with around 43 per cent of the overall market in 2010.²⁴ The net export value for Thailand's rubber industry in 2007 was almost six

¹⁷ 'Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand', *The Constitution Court of the Kingdom of Thailand Website*, (Translated by C Nurakkate).

¹⁸ Duncan McCargo, 'Mapping National Anxieties: Thailand's Southern Conflict', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 154, No.3, June 2009, p. 59.

¹⁹ McCargo, 'Mapping National Anxieties', p. 54.

²⁰ Maisonti, *A Proposal to Address the Emerging Muslim Separatist Problem in Thailand*, pp. 3-4.

²¹ Funston, 'Malaysia and Thailand's Southern Conflict', p. 235.

²² Surachart Bamrungsuk, 'Southern Thailand in Globalization', (Translated by C Nurakkate), *Security Studies Project*, Vol. 79, 2010, p. 29.

²³ Storey, 'Ethnic Separatism in Southern Thailand', p. 33.

²⁴ 'SWOT Analysis: Rubber', July 2010, *Export-Import Bank of Thailand Website*, available at <<http://www.exim.go.th/doc/newsCenter/10183.pdf>>, accessed 30 June 2011.

billion US dollars, which accounts for about 25 per cent of Thailand's net export value.²⁵ Therefore, the rubber industry is vitally important to the national economy. The plantation areas of the south are extensive, with roughly 70 per cent of the entire area being rubber plantations, and more than half are in the four southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and Songkhla.²⁶ Therefore, if Thailand were to lose those areas in these four southernmost provinces, the economic consequences would be far-reaching. There is no doubt it would profoundly and adversely affect the overall Thai economy.

It will also affect the southern region's economy. Songkhla province is the main economic centre in the region. It also has its own international airport. Hat Yai, one of the districts in Songkla, is the long established main tourism destination, particularly for Malaysian tourists. Songkhla has the highest GPP (Gross Provincial Product) in the southern region, and accounts for approximately 20 per cent of the overall region.²⁷ Thus, the Songkhla economy contributes significantly to the overall regional economy. A few violent incidents, such as bombs targeted at the international airport and business centres, have already occurred in Songkhla.²⁸ These incidents have severely affected the economy in Songkhla.

Understanding the Causes of the Conflict

There are three ways of understanding the underlying causes of the conflict in southern Thailand. The first is to see it as an ethno-nationalist conflict; the second to see it as a religious conflict; and the third is to see it as having its roots in the region's poverty and unemployment. This section argues that religion and poverty have roles to play, they are not the main causes of the conflict. It is instead the strong sense of Malay ethnic identity that is the strongest driver behind the conflict.

The Berjihad di Patani document mentioned above explicitly highlights jihad as a legitimizing motivation for fighting the Thai state.²⁹ The insurgents have certainly employed religious language to justify their struggle. However, the

²⁵ 'World Factbook', MILITARY PERISCOPE, 1 July 2008, accessed 28 March 2011.

²⁶ 'Rubber Plantation Area in Thailand', *Rubber Magazine*, Vol. 31, No. 3, July – September 2010, Rubber Research Institute of Thailand Website, available at <http://www.rakbankerd.com/argriculture/open.php?id=2159&s=tblplant>, Translated by C Nurakkate, accessed 30 June 2011

²⁷ 'Gross Provincial Product at current market prices', *Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board Website*, available at <http://www.nesdb.go.th/default.aspx?tabid=96>, (Translated by C Nurakkate), accessed 30 June 2011,

²⁸ Brian McCartan, 'Despite Concerns, Thailand Insurgency Stays Local', Center for Army Lessons Learned, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, *NEWSLETTER*, February 2010, No. 10-29, pp. 41-42.

²⁹ Christopher M Joll, 'Religion and Conflict in Southern Thailand: Beyond Rounding Up the Usual Suspects', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2010, p. 268.

emphasis of ideological indoctrination for violent jihad in some of the pondoks³⁰ seems still to be on historical discrimination, oppression and the necessity of reclaiming Patani Muslim land, rather than solidarity with international jihadist causes.³¹ Pondoks function as conduits for disseminating local histories that emphasize narratives of oppression and colonization.³² The 2009 edition of Country Reports on Terrorism, produced by the US Department of State, also affirmed that there is no evidence of a direct connection between militants in southern Thailand and international terrorist groups.³³

Further, if the struggle was about Islam, then the question arises why it remains limited within the geographical boundaries of an ethnic-Malay area. The insurgents do not target foreigners, tourist resorts or overt symbols of American 'cultural capitalism'. Indeed, there appears to have been a deliberate strategic decision on the part of insurgents not to tie the Malay cause to wider Islamic anti-Westernism. This conflict relates specifically to where ethnic Malays form the vast majority of the population, and hence it is confined to this area. Furthermore, an expansion of attacks in the tourist areas that Westerners frequent would not only draw negative international attention, and a loss of tourist revenue, but could well bring some form of intervention from Western powers.³⁴

While the struggle has taken on more of a religious orientation in recent years, it is not apparent that this has changed the underlying ethno-cultural aims and objectives. Moreover, the overriding sense of self-identity that characterises the southern border provinces strongly resists external intervention.³⁵

The argument that the economic problems in the region are a major cause of the insurgency is also questionable. Data drawn from between 1995 and 2009 - to represent the period both before and after the return of violence in 2004 - shows that the economic index in Yala and Narathiwat improved markedly even after 2004.³⁶ The GPP for Yala rose from 17,958 million baht in 1995 to 26,646 million baht in 2004 and to 39,224 million baht in 2009. In Narathiwat it increased from 20,754 million baht in 1995 to 31,612 million baht in 2004 and to 48,357 million baht in 2009. In Songkhla also the GPP increased from 89,289 million baht in

³⁰ Pondoks are religious education institutions which have performed a key role in providing religious instruction and also in deepening the community's understanding of Islam.

³¹ Melvin, *Conflict in Southern Thailand*, p. 23.

³² Joll, 'Religion and Conflict in Southern Thailand', p. 272.

³³ 'Country Reports: East Asia and Pacific Overview', *US Department of State Website*, available at <<http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2009/140884.htm>>, accessed 19 July 2011.

³⁴ Peter Chalk, Angel Rabasa William Rosenau and Leanne Piggott, *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2009, p. 29.

³⁵ Chalk et al, *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia*, p. 28.

³⁶ The following statistics come from 'Gross Provincial Product at current market prices', *Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board Website*, available at <<http://www.nesdb.go.th/default.aspx?tabid=96>>, (Translated by C Nurakkate), accessed 30 June 2011.

1995 to 127,657 million baht in 2004 and to 153,022 million baht in 2009. The smallest increase was in Pattani from 29,240 million baht in 1995 to 31,727 million baht in 2004 and to 39,658 million baht in 2009. During the same period, the average per capita income had the same trend. These figures show that the economic situation in the four southernmost provinces has continued to improve in the past fifteen years, including after the resumption of violence in 2004.

In terms of average household income in 2009, none of the four southernmost provinces is at the bottom of the Thai provincial table. Narathiwat and Pattani ranked three and fourteen from the bottom respectively, and still higher than some north-eastern provinces, while Yala and Songkhla sat in the middle or higher on the table.³⁷

Unemployment figures are also useful to note. Official figures in 2009 indicated that 2,510 people were unemployed in Yala, and 20,462 in Songkhla,³⁸ while violent incidents in Yala and Songkhla were 312 and 16 respectively.³⁹ Thus, it can be argued that neither poor economic conditions nor unemployment are driving forces behind this conflict. Economic grievances may have some role to play, but it seems reasonable to conclude that they are not a decisive factor behind the recent upsurge of violence.

Historical Factors

The roots of indigenous Malay dissatisfaction and perceived discrimination emerged centuries ago from the increase of Siamese influence over the south. In 1786, Siam (as Thailand was then called) expanded its influence to include Patani and thus ended the Patani kingdom's reign as a regional power. In the process, Siam appointed leaders loyal to Siam to replace the existing rulers of Patani and this led to the isolation of existing elites. This historical annexation of the south serves as a more convincing reason behind the ongoing contention between Malay Muslims and Siamese.⁴⁰

To appreciate this longstanding animosity, a brief discussion of the historical relations between Siam and Patani is needed. At the beginning of the 20th century, the perceived threat to Siam from the British in Malaya was clear. The Siamese King responded by exercising strong control over the whole country including the southernmost area. As mentioned above, in 1902, King

³⁷ 'Average Monthly Income for Household 1994-2009', *National Statistical Office Website*, available at <<http://service.nso.go.th/nso/nsopublish/BaseStat/basestat.html>>, (Translated by C Nurakkate), accessed 8 July 2011.

³⁸ 'Population 15 years and over by Labor Force Status and Sex 1994-2009', *National Statistical Office Website*, available at <<http://service.nso.go.th/nso/nsopublish/BaseStat/basestat.html>>, (Translated by C Nurakkate), accessed 8 July 2011.

³⁹ Bamrungasuk, 'Insurgency in Southern Thailand'.

⁴⁰ Liow and Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts*, p. 2.

Chulalongkorn introduced a central administration which incorporated most of present-day Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces, and this served to alienate the Malay rajas and nobility in the region.⁴¹ Many Malay Muslims felt that they were second-class citizens, discriminated against economically, socially, legally, and politically.⁴² Then, with the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, Siam surrendered neighbouring Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Terrengganu, but retained the areas incorporating Patani and the province of Satun.⁴³ The Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 resulted in the political isolation of the Malays in Thailand. However, the broad cultural, commercial and personal bonds between the Malay communities on either side of the border were maintained.⁴⁴

During the 1930s, the rise of Malay nationalism in Southeast Asia could have contributed to the situation in southern Siam. In response to this threat, the Thai government introduced assimilation policies aimed at unifying Thai culture by promoting Thai as the national language and Buddhism as the state religion.⁴⁵ These policies attempted to ban Malay dress and the Malay language, redefined Malay Muslims as 'Thai Muslims', and closed down Islamic courts which had been in place since the Patani Sultanate.⁴⁶ Muslims were strongly affected by these policies, especially the culturally enforced changes in their language, education and way of life. This generated a great deal of resentment among the Muslim population of Thailand and thousands fled to neighbouring Malaya.⁴⁷ The effects of these policies would last for decades.

After the Second World War, Patani Malays sought to merge the four southern provinces with Malaya. A petition emerged from the strong Malay identity of the four southern provinces.⁴⁸ However, the resultant petition to the United Nations failed, because in the end, Britain did not support the southern provinces' incorporation into Malaya.

As a result, what was seen as a continued stifling of Muslim culture and aspirations, the first civil non-belligerent political movement to emerge in the area was the PPM (Pattani's People Movement), organized by Haji Sulong bin Abdul Kadir. Its aim was to improve the welfare of the local people through constitutional means.⁴⁹ In April 1947, Haji Sulong bin Abdul Kadir tried to negotiate with the Thai government by submitting seven demands. On the list was the call for an end to the assimilation policy in the south. The Thai

⁴¹ Harish, *Changing Conflict Identities*, p. 5.

⁴² Harish, *Changing Conflict Identities*, p. 5.

⁴³ Funston, 'Malaysia and Thailand's Southern Conflict', p. 235.

⁴⁴ Harish, *Changing Conflict Identities*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁵ Melvin, *Conflict in Southern Thailand*, p. 20.

⁴⁶ Funston, 'Malaysia and Thailand's Southern Conflict', p. 237.

⁴⁷ Nathan Porath, 'Civic Activism Continued Through Other Means: Terror-Violence in the South of Thailand', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 2010, p. 589.

⁴⁸ Harish, *Changing Conflict Identities*, p. 7.

⁴⁹ Porath, 'Civic Activism Continued Through Other Means', p. 592.

government responded by arresting him and charging him with treason. This led to widespread protests in Pattani and surrounding districts. He was released in 1952, and then killed while in police custody in August 1954.⁵⁰ His presumed murder instantly transformed him into a central symbol of ethnic Malay Muslim resistance.⁵¹ This event also reflected the end of civil tolerance against a repressive regime.⁵² Following this incident, Muslim separatism began to spread through the Malay Muslim communities in the south.⁵³

Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat strengthened assimilation policies and resettled ethnic Thais in the region.⁵⁴ In 1961, with the introduction of the Pondok Educational Improvement Program, pondoks were brought under the control of the Minister of the Interior. This program implemented secular education for students studying at the pondoks. This gave the Thai government some degree of control over the pondok curriculum and it was hoped to develop people who could occupy administrative posts in the southern provinces.⁵⁵ This policy upset the *tok gurus*, the heads of the pondoks, and the traditional process of generating elites in the Malay-Muslim society. This policy also led to the end of Pattani as a regional centre for Islamic education, and some Muslim students chose to study in the Middle East instead.⁵⁶ In Thailand, the government closed down the pondoks that were explicitly critical of its program, and a number of loyalists to the pondok cause fled to the jungle, and later organized Muslim separatist groups.

Three major groups were formed during this period. The BNPP (Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani or National Front for the Liberation of Patani) was founded in 1959. The BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional or National Revolutionary Front) was established in 1960, and the PULO (Patani United Liberation Organization) was founded in 1968. Notably, the period from the 1960s to the 1990s was marked by guerrilla actions, political activism and the emergence of cell structures. The BNPP represented a coalition of the aristocracy and conservative Islamic class.⁵⁷ The BRN adopted Malay nationalism as its driving force, aiming to develop the Malay identity of the people of southern Thailand and calling for solidarity with Malays in other countries of the region.⁵⁸ During the 1980s, BRN suffered from an internal rift and split into three factions: BRN Ulama, BRN-Coordinate, and BRN Congress.⁵⁹ The PULO focused more on secular nationalism than Islam.⁶⁰ By

⁵⁰ Funston, *Southern Thailand*, p. 9.

⁵¹ Chalk et al, *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia*, p. 7.

⁵² Porath, 'Civic Activism Continued Through Other Means', p. 590.

⁵³ Maisonti, *A Proposal to Address the Emerging Muslim Separatist Problem in Thailand*, p. 18.

⁵⁴ Funston, *Southern Thailand*, p. 9.

⁵⁵ Harish, 'Changing Conflict Identities', p. 11.

⁵⁶ Harish, 'Changing Conflict Identities', p.12.

⁵⁷ Funston, *Southern Thailand*, p. 9.

⁵⁸ Harish, 'Changing Conflict Identities', p. 9.

⁵⁹ Porath, 'Civic Activism Continued Through Other Means', p. 592.

the 1970s, PULO was the most violently active of all the separatist organizations.⁶¹

The Thai government introduced an amnesty program during the 1980s which brought significant changes to the situation by the 1990s. Two important initiatives were the establishment of the Civilian-Police-Military Command 43 (CPM43) and the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) on 6 November 1980, and 5 April 1981, respectively, and both covered the five southernmost provinces.⁶² The SBPAC played a crucial role in fostering closer relations and mutual trust between the local community, security forces and government officials. It also served as a critical intelligence function. This intelligence function was built on mutual trust that developed over many years.⁶³ These organizations helped reduce misunderstandings between Malay Muslims and government officials, and undermined the insurgent's ability to use propaganda to gain supporters. Moreover, Thailand received cooperation from Malaysia, in not allowing the insurgents to seek an external sanctuary. It also resulted in the detention of several insurgency leaders and mid-level commanders, and some PULO leaders were handed over to Thai authorities.⁶⁴ These setbacks caused a major re-evaluation of strategy by the insurgents, many of whom subsequently fled abroad or took advantage of a government-sponsored amnesty program and surrendered directly to authorities.⁶⁵

While there were some small successes, it can be seen that for much of the last century the governments' responses to the situation in the southern region exacerbated the differences and contributed to the emergence of an ethnic Malay identity which in turn became violent. While there are legacies of decisions made by the British, and there were global changes such as the quest for post-colonial independence and the growth of Malay nationalism across Southeast Asia, the government's centralised control over the south, and the enforced assimilation policies, in fact fed into a stronger Malay identity.

From the 1990s onward, the insurgent groups utilised religion to recruit and unite their following, however it is clear that the constant political theme of this conflict is the Malay ethno-nationalist cause.

⁶⁰ Funston, 'Malaysia and Thailand's Southern Conflict', p. 238.

⁶¹ Porath, 'Civic Activism Continued Through Other Means', p. 592.

⁶² Funston, *Southern Thailand*, p. 16.

⁶³ Liow and Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts*, p. 61.

⁶⁴ Funston, 'Malaysia and Thailand's Southern Conflict', p. 240.

⁶⁵ Chalk et al, *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia*, p. 9.

The Situation from 2000 to the Present

The Thaksin Era

Thaksin Shinawatra was Prime Minister from 2001 to 2006. During his time in office, his strong leadership and what many sees as harsh policies, provided conditions conducive to the escalation of the unrest. Because of the successful policies implemented during the 1980s to the 1990s, violent incidents dropped dramatically by the end of 1990s. At coming into office, Thaksin believed that there were only an insignificant number of insurgents remaining, and only criminal gangs involved in illicit activities in the southernmost provinces. As such, he believed the best course of action was to dissolve the successful SBPAC and CPM-43 and to transfer all responsibilities to the police. Unfortunately, this created a communications vacuum between the government and Muslims in the area.⁶⁶

Thaksin's brutal war on drugs campaign in 2003 claimed more than 2,500 lives including an unspecified number of Malay-Muslims from the southern provinces. This campaign, mostly enacted through extrajudicial police killings, further aggravated Muslim hostility.⁶⁷ In 2004, Thaksin employed what many termed a 'heavy-handed' military approach to the south, and two incidents in particular are recognized as having had serious repercussions.

The first incident occurred at the Krue Se mosque. On 28 April 2004, around 200 insurgents attacked 11 police and military posts in Pattani, Yala and Songkhla. Five officials and 107 rebels were killed. During this incident, 32 Muslims retreated to the historic Krue Se mosque.⁶⁸ A tense nine-hour standoff, followed by a full-scale attack on the mosque, resulted in all 32 insurgents being killed as well as one civilian.⁶⁹ This incident fuelled public anger in the south, and feelings of injustice were further stirred up by subsequent separatist propaganda.⁷⁰ Such feelings were compounded when, according to the report of a government-appointed fact-finding commission, no attempts were had been made to initiate negotiations at all during the siege.⁷¹

The choice of venue and dates for the insurgent attack were deliberate and profoundly symbolic. Krue Se is a historic mosque in Pattani. The Muslim insurgents deliberately withdrew back to this Krue Se mosque and all of them died there. This incident fed into the Muslim insurgent's cause in at least three ways. First, it confirmed the Thai oppression of Malay Muslims by using excessive force in a Muslim holy place. Second, the date was chosen as the same day as Haji Sulong's original protest in 1948. As mentioned earlier, Haji

⁶⁶ Storey, 'Ethnic Separatism in Southern Thailand', p. 34.

⁶⁷ Liow and Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts*, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Funston, *Southern Thailand*, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Storey, 'Ethnic Separatism in Southern Thailand', p. 34.

⁷⁰ Liow and Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts*, p. 65.

⁷¹ Liow and Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts*, p. 64.

Sulong has been a symbol of Malay struggle in southern Thailand for over 50 years. Third the Thais, who are mostly Buddhists, can be seen to have begun a war against the Muslim minority, and thus the Muslims felt that it was their responsibility to fight back. Either way therefore, the intention was to draw support from moderate Muslims to fight for Patani land. As this paper argues the insurgency is not religious at its core, this staged event once again confirms that the insurgents used religion to reassert the Malay ethno-nationalist conflict.

In the second incident, on 25 October 2004 at Tak Bai, Thai police killed seven Malay demonstrators protesting against the detention of six Malay village defence volunteers. One thousand three hundred Malay protesters were subsequently arrested. Figures vary, but around 80 people died, mostly from suffocation, being transported in crowded trucks from the protest site to an army camp.⁷² The incident took place during Ramadan, further aggravating the tense atmosphere.⁷³ A fact-finding committee set up by the government concluded that the authorities had in fact used excessive force.⁷⁴ Later however, in June 2009, the Songkhla Provincial Court decided to acquit the security forces of any maltreatment.⁷⁵ This decision caused widespread dissatisfaction among the local Malay population, and also drew the attention of local and international human rights groups.⁷⁶

During Thaksin's six years in office, the consequences of his profound lack of understanding of the situation and implementation of crude policies and an unwavering iron fisted approach fuelled the fires of Muslim disaffection in the south. He also intensified the service rivalry between the military and the police. Furthermore, by dissolving the important SBPAC and CPM-43, most of the information networks tied to the military were also dissolved. Without such a communication channel between the military and the people, there was little means of countering the propaganda and recruitment techniques of the insurgents. Finally, his War on Drugs campaign – resulting in thousands of extra-judicial deaths - led to a number of complaints of blatant human rights violations. Many of these complaints are still under investigation. As a result, it is of little surprise to see an increase in aggrieved recruits among Malay youths to the insurgency who have witnessed brutality and humiliation, lost family members or who have been abused themselves.⁷⁷

⁷² Funston, *Southern Thailand*, p. 3.

⁷³ May Tan Mullins, 'Voice from Pattani: Fears, Suspicion, and Confusion', in Duncan McCargo (ed), *Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2007, p. 39.

⁷⁴ Storey, 'Ethnic Separatism in Southern Thailand', p. 35.

⁷⁵ Liow and Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts*, p. 66.

⁷⁶ Funston, *Southern Thailand*, p. 3.

⁷⁷ Liow and Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts*, p. 46.

The Post-Thaksin Era

Since 2007, the Thai government has authorized a doubling of the number of troops into the area. The army alone increased troop strength from 26,000 to 38,000.⁷⁸ From June to September 2007, the army launched cordon-and-sweep operations in suspected Malay insurgent-dominated villages. The operations resulted in the mass arrests of suspects. Those suspected of being sympathizers were sent to undergo vocational training in military camps, even during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. These operations had some impact on the reduction in the number of violent incidents in 2008, but casualties were still almost the same number as in 2004.⁷⁹ This indicates that each incident has an average casualty rate higher than it had before; less incidents but overall more deadly attacks. Thus, the situation was not really improving in 2008, because the severity of the violence was growing. It has also raised concerns over human rights violations with the impositions of martial law in 2004 and an Emergency Decree in 2005.⁸⁰ Over the longer term, these special laws could play directly into the insurgents' hands by fostering an increasingly divided and angry local population.⁸¹

Responding to the insurgency with brutality, the Thai government has been accused of abuse, torture and the extra-judicial killing of Malay Muslims suspected of involvement in the insurgency.⁸² A very detailed January 2009 report by Amnesty International found widespread evidence that torture of suspects had become a standard operating procedure, routinely practiced by army rangers, and other military and police units, often carried out in unofficial detention centres.⁸³ The consequences of these wrongdoings are profound and are simply likely to backfire. They could provide the conditions for separatists to gain sympathizers and to energize their propaganda.⁸⁴ Additionally, the local Malay community- some of whom had played a critical role as voluntary informants for the government in earlier counterinsurgency campaigns - withdrew support from the government.⁸⁵

Thus, from the 2000s to the present, government policies have aggravated the perceptions of oppression and injustice in the south. The deployment of enormous security sector resources have also failed to address the root causes of the conflict. The heavy-handed approach, the detentions without trial, and impunity of the army and police in the region are not resolving the conflict, and in fact can be seen as making the situation worse.⁸⁶ The violence continues not

⁷⁸ Askew, 'Thailand's Intractable Southern War', p. 200.

⁷⁹ McCargo, 'Mapping National Anxieties', p. 57.

⁸⁰ Harish, 'Changing Conflict Identities', p. 18.

⁸¹ Chalk et al, *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia*, p. 127.

⁸² Duncan McCargo, 'Thailand's Twin Fires', *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 4, July 2010, p. 6.

⁸³ McCargo, 'Mapping National Anxieties', p. 57.

⁸⁴ Askew, 'Thailand's Intractable Southern War', p. 209.

⁸⁵ Liow and Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts*, p. 54.

⁸⁶ Melvin, *Conflict in Southern Thailand*, p. 17.

least because the Southern Thai Muslims have not received just treatment, and any trust they once had in the authorities has been eroded.⁸⁷

Challenging Times Ahead

The insurgency in southern Thailand has been a serious threat since 2004, and there is little sign that it is subsiding. There are at least three main challenges ahead. First, due to the deep lack of trust in the government by people in the south, the Thai government will probably not be able to gain intelligence about the organization/s behind the insurgency, as has been the case since the violence resurged. This leaves the insurgents room to continue to employ their propaganda effectively and they are therefore likely to expand their influence. Second, the political instability in Bangkok in recent years, and the impending royal succession will create uncertainties for the country. Third, it is likely the government will continue to lose not only enormous budget resources but also personnel in continuing to employ force to cope with the situation.

The government has had difficulty combating a campaign against covert, cell-based, and arguably popular insurgent groups. The insurgents have used their clandestine militant organization/s effectively and have shown that they are highly resilient to the authorities' effort to neutralize them. Indeed, even the Prime Minister and senior officials have admitted this.⁸⁸ Thai authorities believe that well-trained insurgents have established cells in two-thirds of the 1,574 villages across the southern border provinces.⁸⁹ If this number is correct, the government needs to pay urgent attention to combat this because it confirms that the insurgents are close to achieving their ultimate objective which is to 'liberate' Patani from Thai control. Because the government has demonstrated a lack of empathy and understanding regarding the situation for the Malay Muslims, and continues with a brutal approach by exercising special laws and conducting wrongdoings, the insurgents are able to exploit such conditions to indoctrinate new generations of fighters. These are the conditions that make this conflict so intractable.

Further, the ongoing political conflict between the red shirts, the supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and the yellow shirts, the pro-monarchy and pro-military group, has strongly influenced political issues in the Kingdom since 2005.⁹⁰ The military coup in 2006, the continuous demonstrations in Bangkok by the yellow shirts in 2008, and the bloody security crackdowns on the red shirt protesters in Bangkok in 2009 and 2010 indicated that these political uncertainties will not easily go away. The

⁸⁷ Askew, 'Thailand's Intractable Southern War', p. 202.

⁸⁸ Liow and Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts*, p. 5.

⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch, 'No One Is Safe: Insurgent Attacks on Civilians in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces', Vol. 19, No. 13, p. 9.

⁹⁰ McCargo, 'Mapping National Anxieties', p. 55.

government has spent most of its time trying to resolve this political turmoil, and will most certainly have this as a main concern. As such, the southern conflict will not be a priority for any government looking to keep office.

It can also be seen that a potential royal succession crisis is looming. The incumbent Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the world's longest-reigning monarch, has been a unifying and stabilising figure for Thailand since 1946.⁹¹ He is now elderly and ill. During any transition from the King to his successor, there could well be a crisis among the country's most powerful groups, most notably, the pro-Thaksin and the pro-military. Uncertainty will definitely reach a high point and this will affect other issues in the Kingdom including the southern conflict. The insurgents could use the opportunity to gain the upper hand in the south while the government is busy with the political issues in Bangkok. The prolonged political uncertainty and the impending royal succession will unavoidably marginalize the southern problem.

Finally, from January 2004 through January 2010, there have been over 9,000 violent incidents in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and four districts of Songkhla province.⁹² There have been 4,100 deaths and 6,509 injuries, totaling 10,609 casualties of violent incidents, and, of those killed, 59 per cent or 2,417 have been Muslims, while 38 per cent or 1,559 have been Buddhists.⁹³ Civilians have been the primary target - around 6,000 casualties, and government officials - about 4,000 casualties.⁹⁴ And since June 2007, the government has deployed more than 60,000 troops into the region, and the government has spent more than 20,000 billion baht each year on security and development.⁹⁵

With regard to the budget, the government has invested a huge amount each year on the insurgency in the south. Most Malay Muslim and some Buddhist communities in the south feel that despite this government spending, they get little benefit locally in terms of enhanced security or economic assistance.⁹⁶ The violent incidents still high average more than 1,000 incidents per year. Thus, the government is most likely to keep troops there and continue to invest in security and development activities, until the situation gets better. This money

⁹¹ 'Biography of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej', *The Golden Jubilee Network Website*, available at <<http://kanchanapisek.or.th/biography/hmk.en.html>>, accessed 7 July 2011.

⁹² Srisompop Jitpiromsri, 'The Six Years Of The Southern Violence In Thailand', *Deep South Watch Website*, Center for the Study of Conflict and Cultural Diversity, available at <<http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/Node/728>>, accessed 12 December 2012.

⁹³ Srisompop Jitpiromsri, 'The Six Years Of The Southern Violence In Thailand'.

⁹⁴ Srisompop Jitpiromsri, 'The Six Years Of The Southern Violence In Thailand'.

⁹⁵ Salaya Prachachart, 'Budget for Southern Thailand', *Deep South Watch Website*, Center for the Study of Conflict and Cultural Diversity, available at <<http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/Node/362>>, accessed 7 July 2011.

⁹⁶ McCargo, 'Mapping National Anxieties', p. 58.

is equivalent to about 18 per cent of the defense budget.⁹⁷ Dealing with the insurgency in the south is therefore hugely taxing on the Thai budget.

It is also taxing on the lives of Thai security personnel. The government has lost many personnel; almost 700 casualties per year. If this trend continues, the government will need replacements every year for the next ten years collectively around 7,000 personnel. It is not simply a matter of loss of life, but also the cost of training replacement personnel in language and cultural awareness, before being sent to the area plus medical and other costs in meeting the needs of those hospitalized or disabled. Thus, not only is the cost associated with each person high, but also the time to provide the right skills to each staff member is lengthy. Providing these replacements will be challenging, and a better solution is needed.

Conclusion

The insurgency in southern Thailand has become entrenched. It poses major challenges to Thailand's identity and the Thai economy and it has already taken a huge toll on the lives of southern Thais and government personnel, and on the taxes paid by Thai citizens.

While conflict remains largely a matter of ethnic identity, economic and religious factors play a significant role. However the continued lack of knowledge about who exactly the insurgents are, and understanding of their group and network structure makes the situation much more challenging. Existing and upcoming political challenges in Thailand will make dealing with the issues in the south all the more difficult, and the south may well become sidelined which will not solve the problems there at all. The government would do well to consider that the time is ripe for alternative approaches to the insurgency in the south and entertain ideas such as limited autonomy for the region, even though up until now it has been reluctant to do so. What is clear is that more of the same is not a solution.



⁹⁷ The defence budget in 2010 was about 5 billion US dollars, while the budget for the insurgency problem in the south was about 900 million US dollars, or almost one fifth of the entire Thai defence budget.

