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Introduction:

Thailand's southernmost provinces of Pattani¹, Yala, Narathiwat and the four Malay-speaking districts in Songkhla province has a population of about 2 million, of whom more than 1.5 million are Malay Muslims. This distinctive group of people has a history and identity that predates the imposition of centralized rule of the Thais in the early 20th Century. The region is situated between Buddhist Thailand and mostly Muslim Malaysia. But in cultural and linguistic terms, this region is at home with neither country. The centralized structure of the Thai state makes little accommodation to their unique identity. Adding to their sense of alienation is the fact that the region is one of the least developed in the country. Over this past century, Thailand's policy towards the region has mostly centered on assimilating the people of this contested region. As academic Michael K. Connors argues, "The history of the South may well be written as a history of differentiated cyclical patterns of Malay resistance and rebellion and state accommodation and pacification."²

Resistance to assimilation has taken various shapes and forms. From clinging on to their cultural characteristics to armed separatist movements, the Malays of Patani have consistently rejected attempts by the Thai State to get them to embrace a national identity as defined by the state. They prescribed to a different historical/cultural narrative -- in this case, a century old occupation of a Malay historical homeland by invading Siamese forces. It is this very narrative that has kept the insurgency alive throughout the relative quiet of the 1990s, only to resurface in this highly contested region in the late 2001. The insurgency was not officially recognized as a serious threat

1 *Pattani* with two "t" is the name of a modern Thai province, while "Patani" with one "t" alludes the entire Malay-speaking region in Thailand's southernmost provinces.

2 Michael K. Connors, "War on Error and the Southern Fire: How Terrorism Analysts Get it Wrong", *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, 2006.

until January 4, 2004 when scores of militants raided an army camp and made off with nearly 400 pieces of weapons. It was at this point that the Thai State could no longer ignore the political underpinning of the attacks, thus, the admission that a new generation of separatists. Prior to the raid, from late 2001 to January 2004, these insurgents were dismissed as “sparrow bandits” working for influential figures looking to create disturbances for political and/or financial gains.

Since the 2004 arms heist, violence has been occurring at an almost-daily rate in Thailand’s Malay-speaking South.³ The absence of claims of responsibility for attacks has also lent itself to multiple interpretations of the violence, as seen in the wide range of explanations offered by Thai and foreign scholars, security analysts, and terrorism specialists. But in many respects, the dynamics of the current insurgency in southern Thailand are nothing new. Today, the Thai state no longer subscribe to the “sparrow bandit” explanation. Instead, they conveniently dismissed this new generation of insurgents as a network of angry young Malay Muslim men who have been taught a distorted history and embraced false teaching of Islam. Unfortunately, the issue of the legitimacy of the Thai state in the Patani Malay historic homeland continues to be ignored, as well as other contentious issues, such as cultural space and identity of the Patani Malays.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, subsequent Thai administrations have instituted measures that sought to assimilate the Malay-Muslim provinces into the wider Thai geo-political body. Local Malays in the deep South resist these attempts because they feel that their cultural and religious identity is at stake. Like the Thais, the Patani Malays are immensely proud of their institutions, way of life and their place in the Malay-speaking world. In the late 1960s these grievances translated into organised armed resistance movements -- most notably the BNPP (Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani or National Liberation Front of Patani), BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional or National Revolutionary Front) and PULO (Patani United Liberation

³ According to statistics compiled by Deep South Watch (DSW), a center attached to the Prince of Songkhla University in Pattani, the ongoing violence has claimed more than 3,400 people, mostly ethnic Malays, have been killed between January 2004-March 2009. The statistics also indicated that, since June 2007 following the military's blind sweep operation through highly contested areas has pushed the number of attacks down. While that may be the case, the statistic does not say anything about the nature of these attacks. Since then the insurgents became much more selective in terms of picking their targets. (see Appendix 1)

Organisation). Armed separatism peaked in the late-1970s and early 1980s, and supported by some governments in the Middle East who provided financial aid, training, and ultimately, refuge, for the mushrooming Patani diaspora. At the time, groups such as PULO and BNPP had set up offices in various Muslim countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. These armed movement went under in the late 1980s and early 1990's, partly due to Thailand's counter-insurgency strategy, known as Tai Rom Yen, and partly because the gap between combatants on the ground and the leaders abroad was getting wider. Field commanders and militants didn't see an endgame to their struggle, and one by one decided to put down their arms and returned to their villages and to the life they had left behind for the base camps along the hilltops on the Thai-Malaysian border. The following decade was greeted with immense development in this region. A civilian-led multi-sectoral agency -- the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) -- was set up to administered over the region. SBPAC took into consideration the unique characteristic and special needs of the Malay-speaking region in a way that previous Thai government agencies had failed to do, generating some degree of good will with the population. For nearly a decade the region was at peace, or so it seems.

The Lull Before the Storm

In 2002, for reasons still unclear, then prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, dissolved the SBPAC about one year into his first term in office. Development projects and administrative were returned to the provincial administration and respective government agencies, while the police were given control of security matters.

While there is a tendency to link Thaksin's handling of the deep South to the resurfacing of insurgency in the region, there are actually multiple explanations for the reemergence of the insurgents. Amid the years of quietness, new generation of militants was being groomed years before Thaksin came into power. Unlike the previous generation, this time around they were told that they don't just have an obligation, but a moral obligation, to liberate the occupied Patani from the invading Siamese. The Thai State, along with fellow ASEAN governments, mistakenly assumed

that the absence of violence meant the conflict was over. Bangkok had thought that massive development, coupled with its good intent, was enough to reconcile the historical mistrust between the region and the state. As a seal of approval over how the country deals with its Muslim community, Thailand was granted a permanent observer status in the Organisation Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1998. The calm in the 1990s led many to wrongly believe that the Thai State and the Patani Malays had discovered a comfort level and that a new chapter of ever lasting peace was in the making. But obviously, as the ongoing daily violence suggested, that was not the case.

Today's militants are organized into a network of organic cells that stretches through out the Malay-speaking in Thailand's deep South. There is no need for anybody to run up the hills with supplies or for them to come down to carry out attacks. The switching of battleground from the remote hills of the previous decade to urban areas and villages have resulted in more collateral damage as innocent bystanders becomes victims while non-security personnel are singled out by assassins.

For the past three years, a number of these long standing separatist groups have resurfaced, trying to link up with the new generation of insurgents on the ground with the aim of establishing some sort of peace process. Some of these initiatives appeared to be gaining more traction than others but overall they are being kept outside the public sphere for the time being. This is understandable, given the fact that Thai security planners have yet to come up with a common position and understanding as to how the separatists/militants should be dealt with. Hard-line officials believed that the government would be unnecessarily giving away too much political capital if it was to recognize any one of these long standing separatist movements or the militants on the ground. A more progressive thinking camp suggested that dialogue is the only way forward.

During the Surayud Chulanont Government, concerted efforts were made in reaching out to long standing Patani Malay separatist groups. Surayud, towards the end of his term, even held a secret meeting with a senior member from the Patani United Liberation Organisation in December 2007 in Bahrain. Early on in his administration, Surayud extended an olive branch to the Malay

community in the deep South, apologizing for the past atrocities committed against them by the state, including the Tak Bai massacre in which more than 80 young men died at the hands of the Thai security officials. While his apology was welcomed by the residents of the Malay-speaking South as the first step towards a new beginning between the Thai State and this restive region, the militants on the ground, did not reciprocate. Surayud's term in the office witnessed the most violent year since this wave of violence resurfaced in the region eight years ago. The Army, on the other hand, responded with troops surge, rounding up men deemed sympathetic to the insurgents and sent them to "job training" sites in military camps that functioned more like a "re-education camp". The initiative ended when a Thai court intervened declaring the project unconstitutional.

After the Surayud government, progress on the talks quickly bogged down. The post-coup, elected governments of Samak Sundaravej (September-December 2008) and Somchai Wongsawat (January-September 2008) were pre-occupied with street protests in Bangkok, and relegated Thailand's deep South to the back burner. The current Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, in spite of being tied up with the ongoing political crisis, has made concerted efforts to keep the conflict in the deep South high on the government priority list. It is not clear if Abhisit is trying to pick up from where Surayud left off or is working to come up with something entirely new.

One of the first thing Abhisit is trying to do is bring back civilian supremacy in the deep South where the Army has since 2004 been in the driver seat overseeing both security and development in this highly contested region. Currently, a legislation to give the multi-agency Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) a legal basis is being debated. In a recently proposed piece of legislation supporting the SBPAC, the centre would no longer have to go through the military to ask for budgets to carry out its projects in this highly contested area. It also means the Army will lose much of its clout and leverage in the region because a sizable chunk of development budget would be allocated directly to the SBPAC.

New Generation of Militants But Old Grievances

Unlike the previous generation of Malay Muslim separatist, this generation of militants has

been much more brutal and daring in their activities, expanding the scope of their targets to include non-security personnel. Moreover, unlike the past, Islam has become an essential component in their insurgency, in terms of recruitment, indoctrination and justification for the insurgency itself. To make matter worse, the Thai state often exaggerated this point – that the militants are embracing the “wrong Islam” -- adding to the perception that this conflict is a battle between Buddhists and Muslims. But in spite of the religious connotations, the conflict at Thailand’s Malay speaking South is essentially local in nature and continue to be driven Patani Malay nationalism.

There is a grave concern, however, that the political context could change or evolved from a fight for Malay nationalism to Jihadism in which the banner of the insurgency would become a fight for Islam rather than for Patani Malay nationalism. In this backdrop, it is necessary to examine the extent of changes, if any, in the political context and explore other possibilities that can contribute to the reduction of the current level of conflict in the region. It is recognized that the situation in southern Thailand is constantly evolving but for the time being, the political context remain very much the same as the previous generation.

Path Forward:

The current Bangkok government and security apparatus have toyed with the idea of engaging long standing separatist groups with the hope that they can curb the violence on the ground. A number of secret meetings between these groups and representatives of Thai government/political/military circles have taken place at various locations over this past four years. But none seems to have gained any real traction, mainly because the political crisis in the country has consumed an enormous amount of time and resource from the government of the day. However, this is not to say the channel of communication between various Thai government agencies and the long standing separatist groups only started four years ago. In fact, Thai officials have conducted secret meetings for decades but most of these dialogues were treated as news or intelligence gathering exercise. This explains why the outcome did not have any real impact on policy because these initiatives did not receive a proper mandate from the government. Much of these secret discussions were centered

on ending the ongoing violence and hardly ever focused on the root cause of the Patani Malay grievances. Today, some of these exiled groups and leaders are said to be moving closer together, formulating a common platform over how to deal with the Thai State when the opportunity arises. The Abhisit-led administration is formulating a comprehensive policy for the deep South, much of it centered on adjusting the division of labor between the military and the civilian agencies.

For the time being, only solutions coming from Bangkok would lead to an end to the conflict seems beyond the bounds of possibility when one takes into consideration the extent of the damages inflicted over this past five years. Moreover, a successful solution would require thinking creatively and formulating proposals outside the framework of the present structure of nation-states within Southeast Asia. Recent developments in ASEAN suggested that the ten-member grouping is not only trying coming to terms with the need for higher degree of institutionalization but also the evolution of being an intergovernmental body to one that could, perhaps, just possibly accept a degree of super-nationalism. The situation in southern Thailand could provide a first case study of how national and extra-national allegiances could be reconciled within a regional entity. Let's face it, in many respects, Kelantan and Patani have more in common than they have with Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. Could it be possible for southern Thailand and northern Malaysia to re-establish their links with the narratives of the past within an entity that straddles both sides of a border? It is indeed ironic that the border imposed during the colonial period be given the sanctity that they have been given by modern nation-state in Southeast Asia. In the case of Patani, perhaps a pre-Westphalia arrangement could be more appropriate than we have assumed.

It is clear that the end of Patani sultanate did not mean the end of a virtual nation, or a nation without a State. A *Patani* nation-state may not exist, but a virtual *Patani* Malay nation (one sharing the same language, religion and way of life) defined not by its physical borders but by a sense of cultural space does. Islam feeds into this problematic situation in so far as it is the strongest of all signifiers of difference. In the case of southern Thailand what Islam does provide is a further justification for the rejection of the rule by an "infidel occupier". Indeed, compromises in the form

of structural reform may be perceived politically disastrous for any Thai political leader in the face of today's public opinion and the Thai establishment.

One possible approach would be to allow greater recognition for a Patani Malay cultural space, one that not only co-exist along other ethnic groups but embraced and cherished by the state as well could provide the people of this highly contested region the much needed sense of dignity. Unless the Thai State can appreciate and respect the fact that Patani Malays has a cultural narrative of their own, that they have their own heroes and heroines, closing the chapter on this bloody conflict would be virtually impossible. Acknowledging these grievances or granting the Patani Malays more cultural space, some Thai nationalists may argued, paves the way for separatism. But it could also mean permitting the Patani Malays to be part of Thailand on their own terms. The fact that the region has the highest turnout of voters in past general election suggested that the local residents still have some faith in its membership with the Thai State and the hope that the Thai nation-state can come through for them in addressing their grievances and the good and services that all citizenships are entitled to. But Thai citizenship does not and should not mean an end to the membership of a virtual *Patani* Malay nation.

There is a general tendency to see the problem as an internal, domestic matter for Thailand. In many respects, this is true. But the Westphalian concept of the nation-state has its limitations. But who would dare to say that the political borders that cut through communities are a mistake. The best anybody can do, it seems, is trying to come to terms with it. The question is how. It is my sincere belief that most of the Patani Malays residing in the three southernmost provinces do not want to separate from Thailand. I believe they want to be part of Thailand but ON THEIR OWN TERMS. Their way of life and their Malay identity, as opposed to the nationally constructed "Thai identity", is not up for compromise.

In this globalised world, with Internet, free flow of information and the high level of religiosity among Muslim communities throughout the world, the Thai State must find a better way to engage the world and explain its official policy. It needs to go beyond just blaming misguided

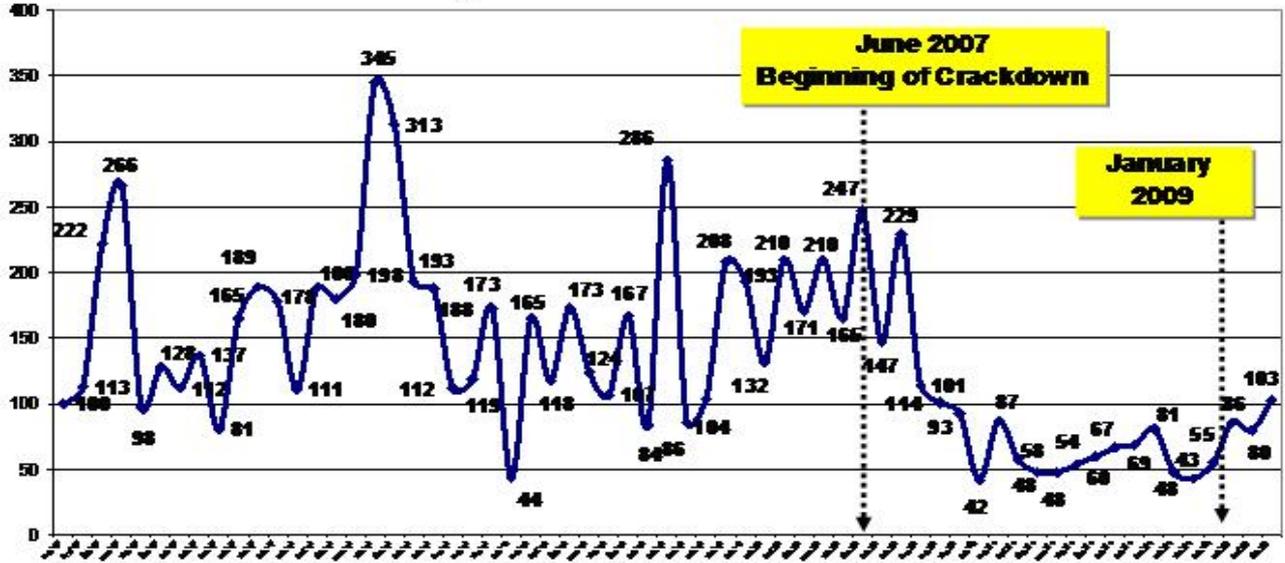
youths who have been taught a distorted version of history and a wrong brand of Islam.

Unfortunately, there exist a culture of impunity in the deep South. Thailand needs to do more in administrating justice to the people of Patani Malay. Without that, Bangkok can forget about its state aim of winning hearts and minds.

Conclusion

The Thai State will have to spell out in real terms the Patani Malays' place in the Thai society. They can start by accepting local culture and language, followed by projects and programs to assist the local Patani Malays move up the social ladder. Besides improving social mobility of the Patani Malays, Bangkok will have to understand that government handouts do not equate to empowerment or ownership, or confused its good intention with policy. Thailand will have to listen seriously to the grievances of the local community, and the government will have to come up with a common understanding, a policy, as to how it will handle issues. This includes entering into peace talks with the armed separatist groups. But if the Thai State chooses this route, it will have to prepare to debate its legitimacy in the Malay historical homeland, the State's official history, as opposed to the cultural narrative of the local community that largely sees the Thai State as an occupying force. While the idea of bringing back civilian supremacy to this highly contested region should be welcomed, the government needs to move quickly in developing a bolder and more sophisticated approach to the deep South, taking into consideration the historical mistrust and the contentious issue of identity. It is clear that past government initiatives have not succeeded in curbing the violence or winning hearts and minds of the local community.

**Monthly Statistics of Southern Violence
(January 2004-March 2009)
8,810 Incidents of Violence**



Appendix 1

Source: Deep South Watch