

By Bunn Nagara

A faintly familiar feeling



Spreading joy: Thai Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-O-Cha (centre) offers toys to children in Bangkok.

Another round of peace talks between Thailand and rebel groups hosted by Malaysia will be starting soon, but any new chances of success are still in question.

AS everyone will appreciate, conducting peace talks is a deadly serious matter.

Getting both warring parties to sit down at the same table is an achievement in itself. To get them to agree to anything at all through civil dialogue is another major achievement.

One of the series of peace talks Malaysia is facilitating is between the Thai government and rebel groups in Thailand's southernmost provinces.

This series began in February 2013 and has dragged on intermittently since. Little has resulted beyond both sides sitting down occasionally to talk.

Understandably, both sides have been busy for years, mostly in issuing statements through the media when they are not actually fighting, exchanging blame or presiding over a perforated ceasefire.

Owing to the sensitivities in reaching a conducive climate for talks, the hosting of the talks themselves is kept confidential. When Malaysia hosts these events they are usually at secret police safe houses in Kuala Lumpur.

The following, for example, has come to sound all too familiar: Malaysia will be hosting peace talks between representatives of the Thai government and southern rebel groups in Kuala Lumpur next Tuesday.

That was from a news report in August 2015. It is also from a news report just a few days ago.

The two-year period in between has produced nothing by way of a peace settlement, only a willingness to continue talking – sometimes. But such are the difficulties that even the willingness to engage is taken as a hopeful and positive sign.

Progress depends on both principals on the Thai side. Malaysia as Facilitator can do little or nothing if one or both of them refuse to proceed.

The obstacles experienced since 2013 have been many and varied. The main, if not the only, reason for optimism is that both sides still say they want to talk peace.

Among the problems in such negotiations is the change of leadership on one or both sides. That has happened, among other disruptions.

The civilian government of Yingluck Shinawatra was deposed in a coup, resulting in the military government of Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha. There have also been leadership changes on the rebel side.

Then when talks seemed promising early last year, the chief Thai negotiator Lt-Gen Nakrob Bunbuathong was replaced in April. Confidence had to be rebuilt again with his rebel counterparts.

Another problem is the lack of credibility, and thus of capacity, of the negotiators. That, too, has happened.

The conflict in Thailand's "deep south" goes back more than half a century. But failure to find a lasting solution has meant sporadic violence spanning Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces creeping north and spilling over into Songkhla and Satun.

Some southern-related violence has even erupted in Phuket and Bangkok. So long as the situation remains unresolved, none can say where in Thailand it will not spread to.

The violence still seemed manageable until 2004 when Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra decided on a jackbooted approach. His imposition of martial law in the three key provinces and rough methods resulted in more violence and casualties, notably in the Krue Se Mosque and Tak Bai incidents.

The following year, Thaksin stepped up his use of force by assuming emergency powers, only to see the violence escalate. In 2006, the army deposed him in a popular coup.

The post-coup administration tried a softer approach, but by then the spiral of violence had set in. Since then, rebel groups have multiplied in number while militant leaders and insurgents have become more extreme.

In the decade after Thaksin's iron-fisted rule, southern communities bore witness to nearly 7,000 deaths and some 12,000 injuries. Although the rate of violence has dipped since his ouster, it still lingers.

Trigger-happy military leaders have contributed to the carnage. Gen Pallop Pinmanee, commander of the "Southern Peace Enhancement Centre," disobeyed a direct order by Defence Minister Gen Chavalit Yongchaiyudh to resolve a standoff peacefully and produced a massacre instead.

In 2011 the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party won the election and Thaksin's sister Yingluck became Prime Minister. Thaksin tried to return home from exile without having to serve his two-year sentence for corruption and abuse of power.

This comprised a two-pronged approach: Yingluck's tabling of an amnesty Bill to absolve him of the court sentence, and a public relations effort to paper over such disasters as Krue Se and Tak Bai in the southernmost provinces.

The Amnesty Bill was approved by Parliament where Pheu Thai support was strong, but stalled at the Senate. The show of goodwill in the south proved even trickier.

In early 2013 Thaksin quietly flew into Kuala Lumpur to initiate what was billed as “peace talks.” Yingluck’s administration had its chief negotiator in National Security Council secretary-general Paradorn Pattanatabutr , while the supposed rebel representative Hassan Taib was seen as a Thaksin crony.

The whole exercise lacked credibility from the start. The amnesty Bill was stopped by the Senate, while the peace talks went nowhere when the BRN rebel group Hassan was supposed to represent refused to recognise him.

The following year, Yingluck herself was deposed in a coup. Still, both the military junta of Prayut and rebel groups active on the ground said they remained committed to a negotiated settlement.

However, persistent failure in reaching a settlement has meant continued violence. Worse, it has also seen a hardening of rebel postures and a growth in militant numbers.

The largest and most active rebel group, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), has split into at least three factions. So has the Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO).

At least two other separate organisations are also active and openly Islamist, with some reported links to al-Qaeda. The general drift in recent years is to aspire steadily to an Islamist Caliphate of sorts.

In their uniquely inconvenient ways to peace, the splintering of these groups and sheer multiplicity of groups and sub-groups have not meant a contradiction in their views or objectives. Instead they have seen a growth in the challenges they pose to Bangkok.

Thai authorities hoped these groups would come together as one if only for the government to negotiate with.

Last August, Prayut asked them to form an umbrella organisation to flesh out the Terms of Reference consistent with international law as a basis for talks.

For now, that mother organisation is the Pattani Consultative Council or Majlis Syura Patani (Mara Pattani). It is said to comprise six rebel groups for meaningful talks to begin.

But observers point out that like before, insurgents on the ground do not recognise Mara Pattani. Components of this organisation are said to be based in Malaysia and have no control or command over insurgents in Thailand.

“Safe zones” are said to have been agreed and Mara Pattani’s Awang Jabat has replaced BRN’s Hassan Taib, but how much can really change?

Critics find that like before, Prayut’s Thailand considers insurgents criminals not worthy of dealing with. And like before, the Thai policy of assimilation wants southern Thai Malays to absorb the Thai language.

Unless and until Thai authorities make genuine efforts to respect Malay Muslim culture in Thailand’s southernmost provinces, militants will resort to extreme methods to assert themselves.

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