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Bangkok's Southern Discomfort: Violence and Response in Southern Thailand

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Since 4 January, a sustained wave of violence has engulfed the Malay-Muslim provinces of Southern Thailand. This has included arson, murder, bombings, kidnappings, an arms heist, and theft of bomb-making material. This state of affairs is a far cry from the situation in the late 1990s, which witnessed dwindling separatist recruitment numbers, an increase in defectors seeking amnesty from the Thai government, and the arrest of key rebel leaders with the assistance of Kuala Lumpur. What accounts for this mayhem?

New Dimensions to Violence

Violence in Thailand's restive Malay-Muslim provinces is nothing new. Muslim unrest in Southern Thailand against the central government in Bangkok over the last century has taken forms ranging from reluctant integration to secession and irredentism. Its regularity has vacillated in tandem with government policy that itself wavered between pacification, forced assimilation, and accommodation.

The recent campaign of violence appears to have several new dimensions. First, separatist movements such as PULO (Patani United Liberation Organization) and BRN (National Revolutionary Front) have traditionally claimed responsibility for violence perpetrated by them. To date, no group has come forward to make such claims. This has raised doubts on the role of these established separatist organizations in the recent violence. Second, unlike previous cycles of violence (save perhaps a 1993 attack which witnessed the synchronized torching of 34 schools), the current campaign has manifested a level of sophistication, coordination, and implementation never before witnessed in Southern Thailand. This leads to a third point – the attacks were not likely to have been the work of any of the established resistance groups alone, but were possibly orchestrated by umbrella organisations such as Bersatu or Pusaka, perhaps operating with external assistance. Indeed, Thai officials have been quick off the mark in blaming the wave of attacks on Al-Qaeda and JI inspired Muslim militants. Finally, the violence appears to have targeted Buddhist monks and tourist destinations (in Sungei Golok) for the first time. The mutilation of the monks and the recent synchronized suicidal assault on security outposts in the 28 April attacks suggests that violence is beginning to manifest a degree of rage previously unseen in Southern Thailand.

Environmental Conditions and Root Causes

Thailand's southern region is already known for illicit activities such as document forgery, people smuggling, and drugs and arms trafficking. There is also a general sense of neglect, borne of its distance from the central government in Bangkok and more importantly, the

repeated failure of assimilation and reconciliation policies of various Thai administrations towards the Malay–Muslim community. This has aggravated the region’s lawlessness, allowing crime, violence, and militancy to fester.

The Thai government’s inability to control the situation in the South owes much to its inability to gather proper information on the situation. Depending on who one talks to in the Thai government, any act of violence can be attributed at the same time to banditry and drug-related activities, disgruntled and corrupt politicians, institutional rivalry between the police and military, and Muslim separatists and militants. This, in turn, has created a host of problems for the Thai government.

First, contradictory statements coming out of the government do little to allay domestic and international concerns. A case in point is statements made by government officials after the most recent wave of attacks on 28 April 2004. While Prime Minister Thaksin echoed the familiar refrain that it was the work of “drug addicts”, and that “victory was achieved” after the massive use of force by the government in retaliation, his views were contradicted by Defence Minister Chettha Thanajaro, who described the attackers as “well trained” and added that “worst is yet to come”.

Second, Prime Minister Thaksin’s implementation of Martial Law and augmentation of security forces has sparked widespread disaffection within the Muslim community, with many feeling that they are once again being targeted despite the fact that the vast majority no longer identified with ideologies of separatism and resistance.

Third, dissatisfaction has been further fuelled as authorities continue taking religious leaders and local residents into custody without clear evidence linking them to violence. Rumours that the government will exert greater control over the hundreds of private Muslim schools on grounds that they are teaching Islamic extremism has intensified disaffection. Currently, these schools are already suffering the ignominy of having Thai security forces enter their premises at will and arresting religious leaders and *Ulama*. The epitome of this failure to consider the sensitivities of the Muslim community was the raid on the Kue Se Mosque, which might well have permanently damaged relations between Bangkok and Muslim communities in Southern Thailand.

Finally, it is becoming increasingly evident that the stability of the Thaksin administration is coming under increasing strain because of the problem of Southern Thailand. Splits have reportedly begun surfacing within Bangkok’s decision-making circles, and threaten to deepen as the security situation worsens.

Re-orienting State Response: Some Policy Considerations

Unless informed attempts are undertaken to understand the grievances of the Malay-Muslim community and tailor policies accordingly, the threat of continued violence in Southern Thailand, not to mention the potential of international terrorists capitalizing on widespread Muslim discontent, would continue to present a clear and present danger for the Thai government. In particular, the following policies demand re-evaluation:

The reinstatement of the SBPAC (Southern Border Provincial Administration Center)

The SBPAC was established in 1981 for the purposes of educating the Thai public on Malay-Muslim culture in Southern Thailand. Despite playing a vital role as a channel of

communication with the southern provinces and an advisory body to the Bangkok establishment, the center was prematurely abolished by Thaksin on 1 May 2002.

Security Management

Thaksin authorized the introduction of up to 6000 military and police personnel after the 4 January arms heist and arson attacks and implemented Martial Law in the southern provinces. Given the persistence of violence that peaked with the attacks of 28 April, it appears that Martial Law and the ubiquitous presence of security forces ironically has done little more than further antagonize the population in the South.

Notwithstanding the presence of two additional battalions since 28 April, what is urgently required in Southern Thailand is reliable intelligence. The Thai government's purposes would be better served with a scaling down of a physical security presence (which does little more than alienate Muslims further) and gradual lifting of Martial Law. It should simultaneously enhance field intelligence capabilities by introducing new intelligence officers untainted by corruption into the South and mobilizing Muslim leaders and *Ulama*, who traditionally command a great deal of respect within the Muslim community, to create channels of communication and assist in negotiating the region's socio-cultural and political terrain.

Re-orientation of Economic Development Policies

Since the 1980s, the Thai government has attempted to improve economic conditions in Southern Thailand as a means of under-cutting the appeal of separatism. The development of the tourism industry in particular, was envisaged to be a major boost for the Southern Thai economy. In practice however, this initiative has suffered two major shortcomings. First, the fact that the tourism industry is often synonymous with forms of entertainment forbidden or frowned upon in Islam again illustrates a lack of regard for and sensitivity to issues considered important by the Muslim community. Second, this lucrative sector remains controlled by the central government, which has preferred non-Muslims for revenue opportunities and jobs.

The Thai government should consider shifting the focus of development to the modernization of the agriculture, fishing, and small enterprise sectors.

Education Policies

Finally, rather than clamping down on religious education, the Thai government should focus on increasing funding, support, and attention to *Pondok* education by bringing it under the auspices of the Islamic Council.

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