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Conflict in Southern Thailand: Removing Education from the Security Agenda

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The extremists in southern Thailand have a unique target – schools. The first major attack took place in 1993 when more than 30 schools were torched in a single night. The Thaksin government encountered its first school arson in 2002 and in January this year, nearly 20 schools were burnt down. Nearly all of these schools were government-run state schools.

These regular arson attacks have disrupted the education of students at these schools. Parents are now apprehensive about sending their children to government-run schools and teachers are fearful of working at state schools in southern Thailand, causing the level of education in the area to decline.

The targeting of state schools over the last decade reflects the resistance by Muslims in the south to what they believe to be symbols of national assimilation and cultural domination of the Buddhist Thais. In fact, Sarit Thannarat's attempt to control the religious schools or *pondok* in southern Thailand during the 1960s backfired and led to the formation by a *pondok* teacher of the National Revolutionary Front (Barisan Revolusi Nasional). In short, there was a lot of antagonism over the 'Siamisation' of the Malay-Muslims.

Thai Government Response

Soon after the January attacks, the Thaksin government declared martial law in the region and the police conducted searches in mosques with weapons and dogs. Religious leaders and *pondok* teachers were also arrested without definite evidence. These insensitive intrusions have only succeeded in fanning anger and fear among the Thai Muslims.

The following month saw terror threats forcing hundreds of schools in the region to close with students as well as teachers staying away from classrooms. Parents pulled their children out of the schools in droves. Suspicions also began to mount over the Middle Eastern influence on some *pondoks*. Some of them were being funded from Saudi Arabia and teachers who were educated in the Middle East came under scrutiny.

The storming of the historic Kue Se mosque by Thai commandos has had two important consequences. First, whatever little trust was present between Bangkok and the Muslim community in southern Thailand quickly evaporated and second, *pondoks* have come under intense media investigation concerning secessionist propaganda and arms training.

The Thaksin government believes that Islamic education in the *pondoks*, especially given

their Middle East link, is a security threat. Recent threats to close down *pondoks* have many parallels with the decision taken by Sarit Thannarat nearly four decades ago and risks running in the same direction of isolating the Muslim community in southern Thailand.

Some Policy Implications

To avert such a bleak outcome, the Thai government may want to consider ways to exclude the issue of education from the security agenda. It has to recognize that within these *pondoks* are potential leaders who can work with Bangkok to help integrate the southern provinces into the Thai nation-state.

Hence what is required is the reform of *pondok* education in Thailand. Instead of policies that control the *pondoks*, the Thai government could support *pondok* education. For instance, it can help to provide infrastructure like tap water and electricity to the schools. Provision of science laboratories, computers and libraries will go a long way in improving the quality of education at the *pondoks*.

One of the suggestions given by *pondok* owners at a workshop organized by the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand is the creation of a Pondok Institute Association that will establish an educational standard for all *pondoks*. This proposal, if taken up and implemented by central government, will help in building trust and serve as a point of communication between Bangkok and religious leaders in southern Thailand. The Thai government could also create higher education opportunities for graduates of *pondoks*, so that students from the *pondoks* will not have to go to the Middle East for further studies.

The reform of *pondok* education will also require persuading the Muslim religious leaders to understand the importance of secular education. The teaching of mathematics and sciences will help in opening job opportunities for *pondok* graduates. At the same time, The Thai government will also need to do more to improve the quality of secular education at the state-run schools.

As for *pondoks* that preach extremist ideas, the Thaksin government needs to monitor such institutions closely but should tread carefully when dealing with these institutions. For instance, authorities need not carry weapons when *pondoks* are searched. Furthermore, the police need to communicate with and clearly explain to Muslim community leaders the need to search the premises of religious learning. Where *pondoks* are engaged in militant activities, the Thai government should act against them but ensure that a policy of using minimum force is adopted to avoid alienating the Muslim majority in southern Thailand.

It is time that the school attacks cease and children in southern Thailand are able to pursue religious as well as secular education in peace. Removing education from the security agenda will go a long way in attenuating resistance from the Thai Muslim community.

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