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Insurgency in Southern Thailand: Ethnic or Religious Conflict?

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THE wave of violence in southern Thailand that began in January last year has continued unabated. A cursory reading of news reports during the 1980s illustrates the insurgency as one that is caused by resistance of the Malays of the southern provinces against central government policies. The separatist rebels are hence seen as opposing the perceived 'Siamisation' of the people of southern Thailand.

On 3 April 2005, explosions at the Hat Yai airport as well as in front of the French-owned Carrefour supermarket in Songkhla province resulted in deaths of at least two people and injuring 75 others, including four foreigners. CNN said the incident "raised concerns that Muslim insurgents are expanding their field of operations". Reuters further highlighted that security officials had "blamed [the bombing] on Islamic militants [and this] had raised concern across the Buddhist country".

A much smaller but insightful incident took place late last year. On December 14, a teacher in a district school was shot on his way to work and died en route to the hospital. The Bangkok Post gave an account of the episode with the headline, "School teacher gunned down on way to work". Reuters began its report by saying that "Suspected Muslim militants killed a Buddhist teacher in Thailand's largely Muslim south...". The Straits Times went on to say that, "[the teacher] was among scores of Buddhists killed in apparent acts of revenge by Islamic militants after at least 85 Muslims died at the hands of Thai security forces, who dispersed a violent protest on Oct 25 in Narathiwat's Tak Bai district".

Factually, none of the news reports were inaccurate. But they varied in the way the conflict was depicted. These differences beg the questions – is the insurgency in southern Thailand an ethnic or a religious conflict? And more importantly, does it matter?

The Changing Backdrop

In order to answer the above questions, the conflict in southern Thailand needs to be seen in identity terms. Social identity is multifaceted and involves attributes such as ethnicity, religion, gender, class and kinship in varying degrees. Which trait gains prominence varies from society to society. The identity of the southern Thailand population is, to some extent, imposed by the state after the Thai military overthrew the monarchy in 1932.

Military leaders like Phibul Songkhram (1938-44, 1948-57) and Sarit Thanarat (1958-63)

tried to assimilate the people of southern Thailand into the larger Thai nation-state. They sought to create a Thai national identity that was ethnically united. In short, the people of southern Thailand were portrayed as Thai Muslims. To their credit, both leaders did not compel people to embrace Buddhism. But they did not fully comprehend the role of Islam among the Malays and thought that they could be forced to accept a new ethnic identity. For instance, Songkhram disallowed Islamic law and made it mandatory for children to register in Thai language schools. Thanarat coerced *pondoks* in southern Thailand to teach the Thai language. Not surprisingly, these attempts to assimilate the Malays at the barrel of a gun failed.

In direct contrast, General Prem Tinsulanonda (1980-88) sought to accommodate the people of southern Thailand. He displayed a much clearer understanding of the separate social identity of the southern provinces. Instead of assimilating the Malays, his policies were aimed at integrating the local people irrespective of their religious or ethnic identity. This wider view of the conflict helped the Administrative Centre for Southern Border Provinces gain legitimacy among the population in southern Thailand. In spite of this, the violence persisted during the 1980s and most observers continued to view the insurgency in ethnic terms.

After the arrest of the Jemaah Islamiyah operations chief, Hambali, the Krue Se mosque massacre and the Tak Bai fiasco, there is a growing tendency to associate the violence in the southern provinces with the call for global *jihad* by Al Qaeda. Media reports also have a propensity to represent the insurgency as Islamic in nature and portray attacks as revenge against the Thai Buddhists. Increasingly, the perpetrators of violence in southern Thailand are being depicted as suspected Islamic or Muslim militants.

The point here is less about the accuracy in depicting the nature of the conflict but more about understanding how the context of the insurgency has changed. A conflict initially portrayed as predominantly ethnic in nature has acquired a more religious connotation in recent times. But why does all this matter? If there are both ethnic and religious roots for the insurgency, can we not just label the conflict as ‘ethno-religious’?

What the Changing Backdrop Implies

How the conflict is portrayed has deep implications for the way it will be managed. Firstly, there is a fear of a diffusion of the conflict. The geographical reach of an ethnic conflict in southern Thailand is far less compared to a religious one. Since Malays are a majority only in neighbouring Malaysia, an ethnic conflict could potentially only lead to support and sympathy from across the border. A religious conflict feeds the paranoia of the post-9/11 mindset. It conjures a picture of terrorists with religious motivations from the Middle East and Southeast Asia coming to the aid of their kin in southern Thailand.

Secondly, the nature of a protracted conflict plays a part in supporting the social identity of the local population. The identities of the people in southern Thailand are not primordial. The repeated depiction of the insurgency as ethnic in nature serves to deepen the Thai-Malay divide. In a similar manner, frequent portrayal of the conflict as religious nourishes the Buddhist-Muslim cleavage. Minority elites, who include separatist leaders, play a significant role in sustaining these subaltern identities. Notably, these elites can demand loyalty to a particular identity during a conflict.

Thirdly, the character of the insurgency also provides insights into the main actors. In addition to the Thai state and the separatist groups in southern Thailand, an ethnic conflict would include for example, the role of Malaysia. A religious conflict might bring into the picture the role of Islamic NGOs as well as religious terrorist groups from outside Thailand. The recent visit to southern Thailand by the chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation, reflects how the religious nature of the insurgency is gaining prominence. In addition, international Islamic organisations and separatist groups will not hesitate to overemphasise the religious makeup of the discord if it serves their interests. A case in point is the interest shown by the Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC) in the conflict and the possibility of Wan Abdul Kadir Che Man, leader of the separatist group, Bersatu, of attending the next meeting of the OIC.

Prime Minister Thaksin's policies have without doubt contributed to the rejection of his Thai Rak Thai party by the people of southern Thailand in the recent national elections. The saving grace for PM Thaksin is that the majority still support the democratic system and prefer to show their displeasure by means of their vote. During his second term, PM Thaksin will need to engage community leaders in the south and identify the social context in which the separatist groups have been allowed to emerge. The arduous task that now lies before his administration is to recommend policies that will integrate the people of southern Thailand while keeping in mind the manner in which they are being depicted in the conflict.

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