

American Foreign Policy Council

THAILAND

QUICK FACTS

Population: 68,200,824

Area: 513,120 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Thai 95.9%, Burmese 2%, other 1.3%, unspecified 0.9% (2010 est.)

Religions: Buddhist (official) 93.6%, Muslim 4.9%, Christian 1.2%, other 0.2%, none 0.1% (2010 est.)

Government Type: Constitutional Monarchy; note - interim military-affiliated government since May 2014

GDP (official exchange rate): \$390.6 billion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (LAST UPDATED January 2017)

OVERVIEW

Since January 2004, the three southernmost provinces of Thailand have been affected by an ethno-nationalist insurgency. This Malay-Muslim rebellion is not new to the predominantly Buddhist kingdom of Thailand; rather, it has erupted sporadically ever since the 1902 Sino-British border demarcation carved out a Malay majority in the southern provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, Satun and parts of Songkhla. Official Thai government policy has focused on the assimilation of the 1.3 million Muslims in the country's southernmost provinces (of the total 1.8 million people living there), which has only further alienated the local population. The Malays of this region see the Thai government as outsiders occupying their homeland, and meet any attempts at assimilation with resistance. Thai Muslims are more amenable to the assimilation movement.

An all-out insurgency raged from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s. However, the insurgents themselves were plagued by factional and ideological strife. The insurgency was comprised of a loose amalgamation

of secular-leaning ethno-nationalists and groups affiliated with the Malayan Communist Party. In the first wave of armed insurgencies, all groups were committed to complete independence. As time wore on, positions changed: some favored independence, while others simply wanted greater autonomy within Thailand. Today, all insurgent groups, except for the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), would settle for less than full independence. The insurgency eventually collapsed for various reasons, including a widening gap between combatants on the ground and their leaders living in exile. The Thai government, though fairly brutal in its counterinsurgency operations at first, was able to capitalize on the disorganization of these groups. The government began offering general amnesties and showering the region with development funds. In the mid-1990s, the last major insurgent group, the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), accepted the government's amnesty, and by 2002 the government declared victory. Yet local grievances remained deep-seated, and after a decade-long incubation, the insurgency re-ignited in 2004.

Though it began on a small scale, missteps by Thai government, political opportunism, and accusations of widespread human rights violations have led to an increase in the scope of the violence and level of support for the current insurgency. Now in its thirteenth year, and sixth government, no end is in sight, with more than 7,000 people dead and nearly 10,000 wounded. While violence declined dramatically in 2008, it increased anew from 2009-2013, and continued even after the start of peace talks in February 2013 between Thailand's National Security Council and the BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional), with Malaysia acting as facilitator.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The southern Thailand conflict is ostensibly an ethno-religious one, being waged by ethnic Malay Muslims in Thailand's south against the Thai security forces.¹ However, a more detailed analysis suggests that the conflict is driven more by local political concerns than a quest for global *jihad*.² In the view of Patani Malays, Thailand's policy of assimilation comes at the expense of their ethno-religious identity. The Thai state prefers to frame the conflict primarily as a religious one, rather than as a question of national policy or governance.

The vast majority of the current generation of Patani Malay combatants fall under the command of the *Barisan Revolusi Nasional* (BRN), one of the longstanding separatist movements that, like many others, surfaced in the mid-1960s in response to Thailand's policy of assimilation. That policy included the move to ban all *madrassas* in the region and demand that only Thai language, customs and traditions be taught. The insurgents are locally referred to as *juwae* in local Malay dialect or *perjuang* in standard Malay, both of which mean "fighter." The *juwae/perjuang* are organized in

small cells and scattered through out the Malay-speaking region. The insurgents are provided with only a vague idea of the rules of engagement and guidelines from BRN leaders. These directives center on the limitation of their violent activities in terms of geographical scope or the theater of violence. Combatants are not permitted to carry out violence outside the region unless they are specifically instructed to do so. As control over the movement is extremely fluid, cell members turn to criminal gangs and crime syndicates to make extra cash, though this occurs only very rarely.³

BRN cadres, along with those of other separatist organizations, disarmed in the late 1980s. But unlike other organizations, BRN managed to maintain its network and infrastructure, and thus was able to revive quickly and take up arms anew in 2004. BRN's main support is found in the hundreds of *madrassas* that dot the entire Malay-speaking region in the south of Thailand. By contrast, other long-standing separatist groups were unable to revive their respective networks of fighters when unrest flared in 2003, and thereafter decided to enter into a political dialogue with the Thai government. In August 2015, these groups merged into one umbrella organization, known as MARA Patani, pursuant to their talks with the government. However, it has since become clear that MARA Patani does not have any true control over insurgents on the ground.

At present, militant Malay youth in the South embrace *Shafi'i* Islam rather than the *Salafism* or *Wahhabism* of many other global *jihadi* outfits. Their agenda is driven as much by ethnic and political concerns as religious ones. While the local Malay Muslim villagers in the Thailand's far south support the movement, the insurgents do not have the support of the Thai Muslims. Militants acquire weapons either by stealing them or by keeping them after battles with government forces or local village defense volunteers. They buy or steal materials for bombs.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

There are about seven million Thai Muslims, 44 percent of whom are ethnically Malay and reside in the three deep southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat and the four Malay-speaking districts of Songkhla province. The remaining 56 percent of Thai Muslims are multi-ethnic and are scattered throughout the rest of the country.⁴ The majority of southern Muslims speak Patani-Malay as their primary language. They are not fluent in the official Thai language. Patani Malay is identical to Kelantanese Malay spoken across the border in Myanmar and remains an important identity marker for local communities.

The Malay Muslims of Thailand's south strongly emphasize the ethnic aspect of their adherence to the religion of Islam. Their ethnicity and religion are both key and deeply interconnected parts of their experiences and identity. Ethnicity and religion are intermingled, resulting in the formation of an ethnicized view of Islam. From the Malay perspective, mere religious conversion to Islam is not enough; rather, accord-

ing to them, one has to *masuk Melayu*—“become a Malay”—in order to be accepted as a Muslim. The strong convictions of the Malay *ulema*, their role as custodians of religion and ethnic tradition, and their sturdy network thus render them important players in the ongoing insurgency so far as they keep the Patani Malay narrative and identity alive and encourage the Muslim population to question the Thai state-constructive narrative.

In fact, the first person who tried to negotiate the terms for coexistence between the Thai state and Patani was an Islamic cleric, Haji Sulong Toemeena, who was a reformist and political activist educated in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Upon returning to Pattani in 1930, he engaged in the reform of the Malay Muslim community and represented Malay Muslim interests before the government. Principally, Sulong sought political autonomy for the south within a federal system as proposed by the then Thai Prime Minister Pridi Phanomyong. In 1947, Haji Sulong made several demands of the central government. These demands centered on the issue of political freedom for the Malays and the preservation of Malay language and cultural identity. The only religious demand concerned the recognition and enforcement of *sharia* (Islamic law). Since his mysterious death in 1954, Haji Sulong has become a symbol of resistance to the Thai state. He was believed to have been abducted and killed by a Thai death squad.

Today, the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand view national integration as equivalent to cultural disintegration for, according to them, Thai Buddhism and Malay Islam are “closed systems” belonging to two fundamentally different orientations. The conflict in the Patani region has also become an excuse for continuing Thai nationalism and Islamophobia.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In the face of the reemergence of the southern insurgency—marked by bombings and executions—the ruling government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra responded with excessive force and imposed martial law on the deep south. Two particular episodes, the first in April 2004 and the second that October, stand out, having left a lasting imprint on the insurgency.

The Krue Se Jihad

After the imposition of martial law in the south on April 28, 2004, insurgents attacked 11 security posts in Yala, Songkla and Pattani. The resulting battles led to the death of 105 Muslim militants and five security personnel, 17 of the militants have been arrested. Thirty-seven of the militants were killed in the blockade of the Krue Se mosque, where militants are reported to have engaged in mystical religious prayer services comprised of the recitation of sacred verses and the drinking of holy water after the evening prayer. The militants were led to believe that these rituals would make them invincible to the police and invulnerable to bullets. They were suspected of be-

longing to a radical religious group called *Hikmat Allah Abadan* or *Abadae* (Brotherhood of the Eternal Judgment of God), led by a religious teacher by the name of Ismail Yaralong, also known as Ustaz Soh. The cell was secretive, and members were indoctrinated with mystical-leaning beliefs that they could become invisible and invincible.⁵

A 34-page Jawi/Malay language booklet, *Berjihad di Patani*, was found on the body of one of the dead militants. Published in Kelantan, Malaysia, it called for a separate Patani state and for the extermination of people of different religious faiths should they stand in the way. It concludes by suggesting the formation of a constitutional state of Patani based on the Sunni-*Shafi'i* school of law. Local clerics who studied the booklet described it as more of an organizational manual aimed at motivating the combatants, rather than a theological work. It also reflects the local *Shafi'i* school of thought and how it incorporates animism, popular beliefs, and pre-Islam practices that continue even today in this historically contested region.

The Krue Se mosque incident led to a large public media debate about the methods being used to quell the insurgency. The Thaksin government was also criticized for dismantling the Southern Border Provincial Administration Center (SB-PAC) and the Combined 43rd Civilian-Police-Military Command (CPM 43). Established in 1981 during the period of democratization, these two bodies played an important role in educating the local Malay Muslims about integrating and assimilating in the Thai society. The SBPAC served as a sounding board for feedback on how to implement national accommodation policies—an important procedure, because government officials sent to work in the south come largely from majority-Buddhist areas of the country. They have frequently been accused of being culturally insensitive to Malay-Muslim values, thus perpetuating the conflict and resentment.

The Takbai Incident

Violence spiraled out of control in another episode in the Takbai district of Narathiwat in October of 2004, when police accused a group of village defense volunteers of handing their government-issued weapons to insurgents, and arrested them. In response, a large group of Muslims held a rally outside the Takbai district police station. Seven were killed when soldiers and police moved against the mob, and a further 78 died of suffocation after they were piled into trucks to be transported to a military camp. The government was sharply criticized for excessive use of force, neglect, and human rights violations, as well as Prime Minister Thaksin's refusal to apologize for the tragedy. The incident became part of the insurgent narrative to reinforce the notion that the state has never treated Patani Malays fairly.

The government set up an independent fact-finding commission into the incident, which yielded criticism of the method of transport and its supervision by inexperienced, low-ranking personnel. Ultimately, however, the commission did not find that the deaths had been caused intentionally, but did find some senior security officials to be at fault, and suggested that compensation be paid to the families of those who died, were injured or went missing.

In 2006, General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin launched a bloodless coup and removed Thaksin Shinawatra. Former army chief General Surayud Chulanont became prime minister. Surayud officially apologized for the Takbai massacre and other atrocities committed by the Thai state against the Patani people. He also invited the international community to help Thailand develop and reconcile the conflict in the far south.

Surayud sought to reconnect with older generations of separatists of PULO and BRN, hoping that they would take on a mediating role between the government and the new generation of younger insurgents, who are now even more devoted to their cause and radically more violent in their approach. However, *Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate* (BRN-C), the most active insurgent group, rejected negotiations. While other groups did not respond, General Surayud's government remained open to talks and to the possibility of granting autonomy (albeit not separation).

The interim government also revived the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC), the civilian-military-police task force that had played a crucial role in offering a forum for dialogue between the locals and the authorities until its dissolution by Thaksin. The body's main task is development of the south, through the creation of pilot projects that, if successful, are turned over to the respective local ministries for further management.

By all indications, Prime Minister Surayud was sincere in his attempted solution for the southern conflict, but his preoccupation with national politics took up much of his time and energy. His government's apology and dialogue-centered approach was not supplemented with other measures, such as delivery of justice, recognition of local language and culture, and allowing the locals to manage their own affairs. Nevertheless, Surayud's apology marked the beginning of a more peaceful governmental approach to the conflict, supplanting Prime Minister Thaksin's approach of meeting violence with violence. However, this shift did not curb the number of assassinations, abductions and bomb attacks.

The Samak government proposed initiating joint military and private business ventures in the south with the intention of boosting the local economy and offsetting the insurgency. By this time, the central government was bogged down in political bickering with an opposition group outside parliament called the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which was bent on driving the PPP government from office. Out of necessity, the government was forced to fully transfer to the army all responsibility for dealing with the southern insurgency. The army promptly initiated a full-scale operation to suppress the violence. Though this approach has reduced the number of violent attacks, violent episodes continue, including assassinations, disappearances, human rights abuses, and the shooting of Muslim religious teachers. To date, authorities have by and large ignored these problems, which has only resulted in the further alienation of the Malay Muslims from Thai society.

During July 2008, an obscure group claiming to be the “real” separatists came forward to announce a ceasefire. It was soon revealed, however, that they were former separatist leaders who retained little influence among the insurgency and the new, young, and faceless group of insurgents who controlled it.

In late 2008, the Bangkok government sent a retired general to Bogor, Indonesia, to meet with leaders from various separatist organizations. Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla organized the event. It was meant to be both secret and unofficial, despite the fact that it was Prime Minister Samak himself who had reached out to the Indonesian government for help. When the event became public, the Thai government immediately backed away from the meeting.⁶

The 2011 Thai elections led to the victory of the Pheu Thai Party, also supported by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinwatra. Yingluck Shinwatra, Thaksin’s sister and the leader of the Pheu Thai party, became the first female Prime Minister of Thailand. In March 2012, Thaksin met with separatist leaders in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in an attempt at reconciliation, but fell short of apologizing for his heavy-handed approach to the southern conflict when he was prime minister.⁷ Peace talks were attempted once again on February 28, 2013 between Thailand’s National Security Council and the BRN, with Malaysia acting as a mediator. But in the months since the talks were announced, violent attacks have increased, and several insurgent groups remain absent from the negotiating table.⁸

ENDNOTES

[1] Michael K. Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury : Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Imtiyaz Yusuf and Lars Peter Schmidt, eds., *Understanding Conflict and Approaching Peace in Southern Thailand*, Second Edition (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2006); Duncan McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand* (Cornell University Press, 2008); Wan KadirChe Man, *Muslim Separatism : the Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford University press, 1990); Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand* (Thai Khadi Research Institute: Thammasat University, 1985).

[2] “Southern Thailand: Insurgency, Not Jihad,” International Crisis Group Asia Report no. 98, May 18, 2005, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/thailand/southern-thailand-insurgency-not-jihad>.

[3] Author Don Pathan’s interviews with Thai military officials.

[4] Imtiyaz Yusuf, “Ethnoreligious and Political Dimensions of the Southern Thailand Conflict” in Amit Pandya and Ellen Laipson, eds., *Islam and Politics: Renewal and Resistance in the Muslim World* (Washington DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2009), 44.

[5] Author Don Pathan’s interviews with members of cells led by Ustaz Soh.

[6] Adianto P. Simamora, “Kalla insists Thai peace talks received ‘valid authorization,” The Jakarta Post, October 9, 2008, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/09/27/kalla-insists-thai-peace-talks-received-039valid-authorization039.html-0>.

[7] Don Pathan, “Deep South peace talks lead back to square one,” The Nation, May 13, 2013, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/Deep-South-peace-talks-lead-back-to-square-one-30205515.html>

[8] “BRN YouTube clip threatens talks,” Bangkok Post, April 29, 2013, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/347469/brn-demands-hard-to-believe>.