



THAILAND

Quick Facts

Population: 68,414,135

Area: 513,120 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Thai 97.5%, Burmese 1.3%, other 1.1%, unspecified <.1% (2015 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$437.8 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated May 2018)

INTRODUCTION

An ethno-nationalist insurgency spearheaded by rebels representing the minority Malay-Muslim communities has been active in southern Thailand since January 2004. With a history of separatist tendencies, the native Malay Muslims consider majority Thai Buddhist community and government an occupying force. According to a moderate estimate, nearly 7,000 people have died during this violent campaign and over 10,000 people have suffered injuries.¹ Violent incidents and fatalities declined gradually since 2013, coinciding with the peace dialogue and reconciliation efforts between Thailand's National Security Council and five insurgent groups that were represented under a conglomerate called MARA Patani (Majlis Syura Patani or Patani Consultative Council). The MARA Patani includes several members of the most powerful Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (Patani-Malay National Revolutionary Front, or BRN). Despite these unofficial dialogues, factional violence persisted, but at more limited scale.

While the nearly decade-and-a-half long conflict remains unresolved, with both the government and the rebels remain steadfast in their respective demands for sovereignty and independence. Avenues for negotiation and dialogue are still open to find common ground. Concerns abound about Thailand's new constitutional mandate in 2017 to protect and patronize Theravada school of Buddhism that might jeopardize religious freedom in the country and could exacerbate sectarianism within different sects of Buddhism. This constitutional mandate could fan the subdued Malay-Muslim insurgency as well.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The separatist conflict in southern Thailand is ostensibly an ethno-religious one, waged by ethnic Malay Muslims against Thai government forces.² However, a more detailed examination of the conflict suggests that the insurgency and violence are more a nationalistic exercise than a manifestation of global jihad.³ Even some 14 years since the start of the latest incarnation of its insurgency, Thailand's unique localized conflict has not metastasized into a broader jihadist struggle within the country or beyond.

Nevertheless, the localized violence has taken a heavy toll on southern Thailand since 2004. The violence spiked exponentially during the first five years of the conflict, with the highest number of casualties recorded in 2007 at 892 deaths and 1681 injuries.⁴ According to a moderate estimate, nearly 7,000 people have died in the last 14 years and over 10,000 people have suffered injuries.⁵ The annual

death toll in 2017 remained relatively low, at just over 235.⁶ However, after a short-lived quiescence, the specter of violence seems to have returned with an improvised explosive device blast in Yala.⁷ Even though militants primarily target government forces, Thai civilians often bear the brunt of the damage.

Two major militant formations dominate the Islamic militancy landscape in southern Thailand: the Mara Patani militant conglomerate (Patani Consultative Council), which came into existence in May 2015 after six militant groups merged and entered into an informal political dialogue with Thai government, and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), one of the oldest and by far the strongest militant network in southern Thailand.

Initially conceived by senior members of BRN as *Majlis Amanah Rakyat Patani*, the Mara Patani consists of six Islamic groups. They are all pro-dialogue organizations comprising of senior members of BRN, BIPP (Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani or Islamic Liberation Front of Patani), three factions of the PULO (Patani United Liberation Organization) and Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani (Patani Islamic Mujahidin Movement, GMIP). However, in June 2015, one of the PULO factions backed out of the Mara Patani's founding agreement, leaving five groups in this conglomerate.⁸ The Mara Patani has weakened over the years due to strong counter insurgency efforts by the Thai government, which have dismantled the group's networks, and also because many of its leaders are now living in exile in Malaysia. With less firepower and manpower, the Mara Patani conglomerate is considered less powerful than the BRN and lacks control over the larger insurgency.

In contrast, BRN remains powerful. The vast majority of the current generation of Patani Malay combatants falls under the command of the BRN, which emerged in response to Thailand's policy of assimilation in the mid-1960s. 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 "young fighter." The *juwae/perjuang* are organized in small cells and scattered throughout the Malay-speaking region.⁹ 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.

BRN has also faced internal feuds and splits over the years. The most powerful faction, BRN-Coordinate (BRN-C) or Barisan Revolusi Nasional Patani-Melayu-Koordinasi, remained a key group responsible for much of the violence that plagued Southern Thailand. Though it is still hesitant to engage in dialogue, the faction has denounced the ongoing peace process with MARA Patani and its own three senior BRN members. In a statement in April 2017, BRN announced that it was willing to negotiate directly with the Thai government, but nothing substantial has happened since that declaration.¹⁰ The peace process remains largely deadlocked over a few issues, including implementing a safety zone aimed at helping end the conflict.

Global jihadi outreach

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 by religious ones. While local Malay Muslim villagers in Thailand's far south support the movement, the militant movements hardly ever garnered support or sympathy from Thai Muslims at large.

Several media reports over the last couple of years have alleged that foreign fighters from the Islamic State had attempted to exploit the situations in southern Thailand, but most of these reports have turned out to be false and unsubstantiated. For example, reports about IS fighters visiting a religious school in Sungai Kolok district in Narathiwat province in late 2015,¹¹ or news about several IS militants entering into

Thailand to attack Russian interests,¹² remain uncorroborated. Similar reports surfaced in January 2018 about a Pakistani national identified as Muhammad Iqbal who was arrested in Bangkok's Phasi Charoen district. Iqbal was accused of producing fake passports for Islamic State operatives and transnational criminals to arrive in Thailand.¹³ While the investigation into this latest case of passport forgery and illegal immigration is still underway, the Immigration Bureau has confirmed that so far Iqbal's attempts to facilitate IS linked individuals from Middle East to Thailand were unsuccessful.¹⁴ Regardless of the veracity of past news reports about jihadi inroads, these type of media reports still crop up every now and then as fear of a transnational jihadi outreach looms large over the southern Thailand's militant movements.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

There are about 7.5 million Thai Muslims, 12% of the total 62.5 million Thai populations comprising of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Others. The Muslims who are ethnically Malay, reside in the three deep southern provinces of Patani, Yala and Narathiwat numbering 1.4 million, constituting about 18% of the total Thai Muslim population.¹⁵ There are a sizable Muslim populations who are largely multi-ethnic, are scattered throughout the country. 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, according 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 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 named Hajji Sulong bin Abdul Kadir, who was a reformist and political activist educated in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Upon returning to Patani in 1927, he engaged in the reform of the Malay Muslim community and represented Malay Muslim interests before the government. Sulong sought political autonomy for the south within a federal system as proposed by then-Prime Minister Pridi Phanomyong. In April 1947, Sulong, as President of the Provincial Islamic Council, led a group of Malay Muslims who submitted a list of seven demands to the Bangkok authorities. 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). In his own words, Sulong explained the aspiration and desire of the Malay-Muslims in the South as: “We Malays are conscious that we have been brought under Siamese rule by defeat. The term “Thai Islam” with which we are known by the Siamese government reminds us of this defeat and is therefore not appreciated by us. We therefore beg of the government to honor us with the title of Malay Muslims so that we may be recognized as distinct from the Thai by the outside world.”¹⁶In 1947, Haji Sulong made several demands to the central government. Since his mysterious death in 1954, Haji Sulong has become a symbol of resistance to the Thai state.

Even 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.¹⁷ 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 southern state. Two particular episodes, the first in April 2004 and the second in October of the same year, stand out, having left a lasting imprint on the insurgency:

The Krue Se Mosque raid (2004)

After the imposition of martial law in the south on April 28, 2004, insurgents attacked 11 security posts in Yala, Songkla and Patani. The resulting battles led to the death of 107 Muslim militants and five security personnel, while several militants were arrested.¹⁸ Thirty-seven of the militants were killed in the blockade of the Krue Se mosque. 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 of their objective. 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 more as 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 Tak Bai Incident (2004)

Violence spiraled out of control in another episode in the Tak Bai district of Narathiwat in October 2004, when police accused a group of village defense volunteers of handing over their government-issued weapons to the insurgents, and then arrested them. In response, a large group of Muslims held a rally outside the Tak Bai district police station. Seven were killed when soldiers and police moved against the mob, and some 78 died of suffocation after they were piled into trucks to be transported to a military camp.¹⁹ 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 blamed some senior security officials and suggested that compensation be paid to the families of those who died, were injured or went missing.

The Tak Bai event triggered several revenge attacks by the Islamic militants. One such incident occurred in early November of that year, when a senior Buddhist deputy police chief was found beheaded in Sukhirin district of Narathiwat province. A leaflet there described the killing as a retaliation for the deaths at Tak Bai.²⁰

In 2006, General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin launched a bloodless coup and removed Thaksin from power. Former army chief General Surayud Chulanont became prime minister. Surayud officially apologized for the Tak Bai massacre and other atrocities committed by the Thai state against the Patani people. He also invited the international community to help Thailand mitigate the conflict in the far south. Surayud sought to reconnect with older generations of separatists from 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 more violent in their approach. However, the 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) to the southern province.

By all indications, Prime Minister Surayud was sincere in his overtures 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 toward the conflict, supplanting Prime Minister Thaksin's approach of meeting violence with violence. However, this shift in approach did not curb the number of assassinations, abductions and bomb attacks.

Al-Furquan Mosque Massacre (2009)

Besides the Krue Se mosque and Tak Bai episodes, Malay Muslims faced another major violence in the hands of suspected government forces in June 2009 when unidentified gunmen opened fire at worshippers performing the evening prayer at Al-Furquan mosque in Joh Ai Rong district, Narathiwat. At least ten people, including the chief priest of the mosque, died in the shootout and several others were injured. The killings created a global outrage and both Thai and Malaya Muslims of Thailand heavily criticized the then prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's administration for serious rights violations in the southern border provinces.

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 during his earlier premiership.²¹ 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 that followed, violent attacks continued and several insurgent groups remained absent from the negotiating table.²²

In the wake of the May 2014 coup, the country's Constitution was revoked and the military backed National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) invoked martial law and restructured the administrative structures in Southern Thailand amid stepped up counter-insurgency measures. The NCPO's actions largely stifled the militant movements and significantly reduced the overall violence, although they did not eradicate it completely. Four years after it came to power, Thailand's military government is formally committed to dialogue and conflict resolution with insurgent formations, including the powerful BRN. However, the communal situation remains tense down south and deteriorated with Thailand's new constitutional mandate in 2017 to protect and patronize Theravada school of Buddhism. This state patronage of the dominant majority religion may jeopardize religious freedom in the country in the coming years, exacerbating sectarianism.

ENDNOTES

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