

# American Foreign Policy Council

# THAILAND

## QUICK FACTS

Population: 67,448,120

Area: 513,120 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Thai 75%, Chinese 14%, other 11%

Religions: Buddhist 94.6%, Muslim 4.6%, Christian 0.7%, other 0.1%

Government Type: Constitutional Monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$365.6 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated September 2013)



*Since January 2004, the three southernmost provinces of Thailand have been afflicted with an ethno-religious insurgency. This Malay-Muslim rebellion is not new to the predominantly Buddhist kingdom of Thailand; rather, it has continued to erupt 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.*

*Since then, official Thai government policy has been based on assimilation of the 1.3 million Muslims there (of the total 1.8 million people in the south), which has further alienated the local population. All-out insurgency raged from the 1960s to the 1990s. However, the insurgents themselves were riddled with factional and ideological differences. The insurgency represented a loose amalgamation of Islamists, secular-leaning ethno-nationalists, and groups affiliated with the Malayan Communist Party. Some favored independence, others union with Malaysia, and others simply greater autonomy within Thailand.*

*The Thai government, though fairly brutal in its counterinsurgency operations at first, was able to defeat these groups, and it began to implement general amnesties and shower 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, dismantling the key agencies that brought the insurgency to an end. Yet local grievances remained deep-seated, and a small cadre of Islamists and veterans of the Afghan jihad went underground, organizing amongst the youth in madrassas, private Islamic schools, and mosques. 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 violence and level of support for the current insurgency. Now in its tenth year, and fifth government, no end is in sight, with more than 4,500 people dead, and nearly 10,000 wounded. While violence declined dramatically in 2008, it increased anew from 2009-2013, and continued 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.*

*Meanwhile, the social fabric of southern Thailand has been irreparably damaged, with little hope of reconciliation among its various communities. Counterinsurgency operations have been hampered by weak intelligence, human rights abuses and a lack of political coordination of activities between various government agencies.*

## **ISLAMIST ACTIVITY**

The southern Thailand conflict is ostensibly an ethno-religious one, being waged by ethnic Malay Muslims in Thailand's south against the country's Thai Buddhist majority.<sup>1</sup> However, a more detailed analysis suggests the conflict is driven more by local political concerns than a quest for global *jihad*.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the Thai state views the conflict primarily through a religious lens, and thus it seeks a religious solution. It is engaging in dialogue with religious groups in southern Thailand such as the Wahhabi/Saudi supported institution of Ismail Lutfi, Yala Islamic University, which is ready to engage in a dialogue of peace with the Thai state.<sup>3</sup>

The roots of the southern Thailand conflict go back to 1906, when Siam annexed the southern Malay Muslim kingdom of Pattani.<sup>4</sup> This annexation was legitimized through the 1909 Anglo-Siamese treaty in which the British recognized Siamese sovereignty over Pattani in return for Siamese recogni-

tion of British control over the Malay states of Kelantan, Kedah, Perak, and Perlis.

Two primary groups are leading the current insurgency in southern Thailand. A new generation of Malay-Muslim insurgents known as *juwae* or *perjuang* - meaning “those waging the struggle” - are organized in cells and scattered through the entire Malay-speaking South. Few of them identify with the “old guard” insurgent groups. Their leaders have regular dialogue with the more established factions, but they run entirely separate operations. Some of the young *juwae* are working for criminal gangs and it has been reported that the “elders are extremely concerned with such activities, as it blurs the line between insurgency and criminality.”<sup>5</sup> None of the opposition groups engaged in peace talks have been able to rein in the *juwae*, who have continued to attack Thai officials and local civilians since the beginning of the peace talks in February 2013.

Obstacles to the success of the peace talks include divisions among the Pattani insurgent groups operating from outside Thailand, and the behind-the-scenes influence of former (now exiled) Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The peace talks have been turned into a political issue between the opposition Democrat Party (the favored party in the South) and the Phue Thai party led by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, former Prime Minister Thaksin’s sister.

Another group widely involved in the insurgency is the *Gerakan Mujiheddin Islamiya Pattani* (GMIP). The GMIP was originally a criminal gang closely linked to GAM, the Aceh-based resistance movement in Indonesia. The GMIP was implicated in contract killings and affiliated with criminal syndicates until two veterans of the Afghan *mujahideen* took over the organization. Though much smaller than the BRN-C, and lacking the latter’s broad-based social network of *madrassas* and mosques, the GMIP is violent, maintains significant operational capabilities, and (at least at one time) enjoyed close working ties with cells of Jemaah Islamiyah in Malaysia.

Unlike in the period from the 1960s to the 1990s, when disparate insurgent groups were riddled with factionalism, the BRN-C and GMIP today appear to work together closely. They do not compete or seek to discredit one another, and there is a significant degree of operational cooperation between the two organizations.

The present Malay militant youth in the South are inspired by a radicalized version of Malay Shafi Islam rather than the Salafism or Wahhabism of many other global *jihadi* outfits. Their agenda is driven as much by ethnic, local,

and political concerns as it is religious. Most weapons used by insurgents are acquired through theft or after battles with government forces or local village defense volunteers. Materials for bomb-making are generally acquired commercially or through theft. Mosques and *madrassas* controlled by or supportive of insurgents tend to be self-supporting.

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

There are about 7 million Thai Muslims, 44% of whom are ethnically Malay and reside in the three deep southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. The remaining 56% of Thai Muslims are multi-ethnic and are scattered throughout the rest of the country.<sup>6</sup> The majority of southern Muslims speak Pattani-Malay or Jawi as their main language of communication. They are not fluent in the official Thai language. Pattani Malay is identical to Kelantanese Malay spoken across the border and remains an important identity marker for local communities.

The Malay Muslims of Thailand's south place a strong emphasis on the ethnic aspect of their adherence to the religion of Islam. They give primacy to their ethnic identity and view their life experience from within the context of the local practice of Islam. Thus the ritual, mythic/narrative, experiential/emotional, ethical and legal, social, material, and political dimensions of life are all interpreted and perceived through the lenses of ethnic identity. Ethnicity and religion are intermixed, resulting in the formation of an ethnicized view of Islam. In the past, Pattani even served as an important center for traditional-conservative Islamic learning in the Muslim world.

This phenomena of ethno-religious nationalism in the case of the southern Thai Muslims is largely the result of the merging of local Malay Islam with the more traditional Shafi version and the puritan Wahhabi creed acquired by many who have studied abroad at foreign educational institutions in the Middle East and South Asia.

In fact, the first person to bring Malay Muslim nationalist ideas to southern Thailand was an Islamic cleric, Haji Sulong, 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 to the government. Principally, he 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 seven ethno-religious demands to the central government. These demands centered on the issue of political freedom for the Malays and the preservation of Malay language. The only religious demand concerned the recogni-

tion and enforcement of Islamic law or sharia. Since his mysterious death in 1954, Haji Sulong has become a symbol of resistance to the Thai state.

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. “They do not want to be integrated into the Thai state. They do not want to lose their religious and cultural autonomy. If the Thai state is the manifestation of the Buddhist cosmology, the Malay-Muslims do not want to be a part of it.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the conflict has succeeded in destroying social relations between the Thai Muslims and Thai Buddhists who have been living as neighbors for centuries. At present, Muslim-Buddhist relations are at a dismally low level, with distrust and alienation on both sides.

The Malay Muslims may well be the most ethinicized group within the worldwide Muslim community. They even recoil from other Muslims unless they are members of the same ethnic group or speak the Melayu language. Similarly, 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 thus render them important players in the ongoing insurgency.

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In face of the reemergence of the southern insurgency - marked by bombings, kidnappings, and executions by beheading and shooting - the ruling Thaksin government responded with excessive force and imposed martial law in the deep South. Two particular episodes - Krue Se (April 28, 2004) and Takbai (October 25, 2004) – 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 15 security posts and police stations in Yala, Songkla and Pattani. The resulting battles led to the death of 107 Muslim militants, five security personnel, with an additional 17 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 comprising recitation of sacred verses and drinking of holy water after the evening prayer. The militants were led into believing that these rituals would make them invincible to the police and invulnerable to bullets. They were suspected of belonging 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 Ustaz Soh. The cell was secretive, and members were indoctrinated with ideology of hate for Thai Buddhists.

A 34-page Jawi/Malay language book titled, “Berjihad di Pattani” was found on the body of one of the dead militants. Published in Kelantan, Malaysia, it called for a separate Pattani state and for the extermination of people of different religious faiths. Chapter 3 calls for the killing of all opponents, even one’s parents if they stand in opposition, and the sacrifice of one’s life in order to go to heaven to be with Allah. It concludes by suggesting the formation of a constitutional state of Pattani based on the Sunni-Shafi school of law.

Incidentally, the Krue Se mosque incident took place on the same date as that of “Dusun Nyur” rebellion of April 26-28 1948, which was the first major uprising against Bangkok after Pattani was annexed by Siam. That incident, too, involved mystical Islamic elements, including the rituals of bathing in holy oil to obtain immortality and the wearing of holy robes.

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 criticized for dismantling the Southern Border Provincial Administration Center (SBPAC) 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 Thai public about the culture and lifestyle of the Muslims of the south. The SBPAC served as a sounding board for feedback on how to implement national accommodation policies – an important procedure, since the government officials sent to work in the south come largely from majority-Buddhist areas of the country and have frequently been accused of being culturally insensitive to Malay-Muslim values, thus perpetuating the conflict and resentment.

#### *The Takbai Incident*

Instead of subsiding after the Krue Se mosque incident, violence spiraled out of control in another episode in the Takbai district of Narathiwat just a few months later. After the arrest of several local Muslims suspected of perpetrating violence, a large group of Muslims held a rally outside the Takbai district police station in October 2004. Six were killed when soldiers and police moved against the mob, and a further 78 died of suffocation after they were piled in trucks to be transported to a military camp. The government was charged with excessive use of force, neglect, and human rights violations; Prime Minister Thaksin refusal to apologize for the incident sparked a new round of public protests.

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

#### *Southern Thailand Insurgency During the Surayud Government Era (2006-2007)*

The 2006 military coup led by General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, a Thai Muslim, took a reconciliatory stance in attending to the resolution of the southern conflict. During the previous Thaksin regime, General Sonthi, as the army chief at the time, was the first to propose talking with the insurgents, but he was sidelined. After the coup, Sonthi and then-interim Prime Minister General Surayud Chulanont recognized the need for dialogue with the separatists. They also favored the role played by the former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in contacting the separatist leaders for peace talks with Thai officials.

In his first visit to the South after taking office, General Surayud offered an apology to the southerners for the previous Thaksin government's mishandling of the crisis through the use of excessive force and the resulting thousands of deaths. He also announced amnesty to any who would withdraw from the insurgency movement. With this, he 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. Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate (BRN-C), currently the most active insurgent group, rejected negotiations at that time. While other groups did not respond, General Surayud's main position remained one of readiness to talk and the possibility of granting autonomy (but not separation).

The interim government also revived the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC)—a 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. After five years of continued violence, the revived SBPAC under its new name of Southern Border Provinces Development Center (SBPDC) is now playing a crucial and a newly designed role in the resolution of the southern conflict. It is working toward changing the prevalent hostile attitudes between the Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims of the South to one of mutual acceptance, trust, and building

of cooperation in the joint management of their political and social affairs.

Prime Minister Surayud was sincere in his attempted solution for the southern conflict, but his preoccupation with national politics such as restoring democracy occupied much of his time and energy. His government's apology and dialogue-centered approach must still be supplemented with other measures, such as deliverance of justice, recognition of local language and culture, and allowing the locals to manage their own affairs. Yet Surayud's apology marked the beginning of a peaceful governmental approach to the conflict, replacing Prime Minister Thaksin's approach of meeting violence with violence. Nevertheless, assassinations, abductions and bomb attacks still continue.

*Southern Thailand Insurgency During the Samak Sundaravej (January 29, 2008 – September 9, 2008) and Somchai Wongsat (September 18, 2008 – December 2, 2008) Eras*

The December 2007 election was won by the Palang Prachachorn Party (PPP), who had the support of the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinwatra from his exile in Dubai. Mr. Samak Sundaravej, the leader of the party, subsequently formed the new government. The new government surprised the public when then-Interior Minister Mr. Chalerm Yubamrung announced that it was time to find a new solution to the violence in the South, and that this could perhaps be achieved by arranging for some form of autonomy. The announcement was received with much enthusiasm, but it was soon discarded by the Prime Minister himself, who warned his minister not to engage in such loose talk. The episode revealed that Samak and his government initially had no clear policy for the South. Soon thereafter, the Samak administration discussed studying the Aceh model of solution in Indonesia in the hopes of applying it to their own conflict. This proposal was also quickly shot down by a senior military officer and security experts who denied that the two situations could be comparable. After this debacle, 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 quell the southern violence with heavy hand. Though this approach has reduced the level of the number of violent attacks by the militants, violent episodes continue, including assassinations, disappearances, human rights abuses, and the shootings of Muslim religious teachers. The authorities to date have by and large been 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, news leaked to the media that the Indonesian government was brokering talks between the Thai government and a group of southern separatists. Once again, though, any hopes of ending the conflict were quashed when it became clear that the Thai government was not even involved and that the Thai general present at the signing event was not actually an official representative of the government.

Although in 2009 the Somchai government allotted 8 billion Thai Baht to the army to fight the insurgency, the subsequent Democrat Party-led government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva undertook a more development-centric approach to resolving the conflict. In July 2009, the Thai government allocated 63.1 billion Thai Baht (\$1.85 billion USD) for security and development programs in the South. The army continues to manage most of these projects.

The 2011 Thai elections led to the victory of the Pheu Thai Party, supported by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Yingluck Shinawatra, 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- [<sup>1</sup>] 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).
- [<sup>2</sup>] International Crisis Group, “Southern Thailand Insurgency, Not Jihad,” *Asia Report*, No. 98, May 18, 2005, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-east-asia/thailand/098-southern-thailand-insurgency-not-jihad.aspx>.
- [<sup>3</sup>] Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Islam, Education and Reform in Southern Thailand: Tradition and Transformation* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009).
- [<sup>4</sup>] Ibrahim Syukri, *History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, 1985); Patrick Jory, *Ghosts of the Past in Southern Thailand: Essays on the History and Historiography of Patani* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013).
- [<sup>5</sup>] Don Pathan, “Disunity puts southern peace process on its last legs,” *The Nation*, September 22, 2011, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/home/2011/09/22/opinion/Disunity-puts-southern-peace-process-on-its-last-l-30165815.html>
- [<sup>6</sup>] 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 D.C.: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2009), 44.
- [<sup>7</sup>] Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand*, 13.
- [<sup>8</sup>] 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>
- [<sup>9</sup>] “BRN YouTube clip threatens talks,” *Bangkok Post*, April 29, 2013, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/347469/brn-demands-hard-to-believe>.