
Language, Ethnicity, Culture and the Conflict in Southern Thailand

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Recent reports of resurgent violence in the southern provinces of Thailand have surprised observers of the region and led to widely differing attributions of cause. Though overshadowed by terrorist attacks in Indonesia, the situation in Thailand might be seen to be as threatening to peace in South East Asia as any other source of tumult. Superficial explanations of the cause of the resurgence, and the explanations of politicians and policy makers in Thailand, have played down the significance of the violence. The situation deserves a much fuller analysis. In this paper I will examine the broader background to the troubles in the area, to show that the conflict is much deeper and more complex than it has been portrayed to be in the media, or by official Thai government statements. Many of the issues are common to border regions worldwide, but others are particular to the region. The problem has also been viewed from many different perspectives, but the cultural or political interests of the parties proposing them have in turn, tainted most of the views. Here I examine the violence from the perspective of the principal sociological and historical constructs seemingly applicable to the situation. My interest in the area stems from many visits made in the course of research there. That research was meant to examine the educational needs of the Malay-Muslim communities.

In the past 19 months, more than 900 people have been killed in various violent incidents in Southern Thailand. The initial cause appears to have been a raid by Muslim youths on a police post, from which arms were taken. The largest number of deaths occurred when 78 young Muslims of Malay ethnicity suffocated while being transported following their arrest after a political demonstration.¹ Another 32 were killed in a siege at a mosque in Pattani and many more have lost their life in attacks by police and armed forces. Prior and subsequent to this, many Thai government officials, teachers, police, Buddhist monks and other citizens have been killed as a result of random shooting and bombing by Malay-Muslims. The incidents, which occur almost daily, involve attacks on police posts, schools and lone travelers such as monks. These events have caused many Thais to leave the area and disrupted the already shaky sense of community, and have severely affected the economy in the south. This recurrence of violence in Southern Thailand after 20 years of calm, forces a reconsideration of the problem at a fundamental level. The historical and contemporary background to this violence is discussed below.

1. In Thailand, people of Malay ethnicity and Muslim religion are officially referred to as Thai-Islam. The Malays prefer the term Malay-Muslims. It certainly describes more accurately their self-recognition and aspirations. The latter term will be used in this paper.



The Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand: History

The area of Thailand in which the trouble has occurred is in the extreme south of the country, more than 1,000 kilometers from Bangkok. The provinces mainly affected are Pattani, Yala and Narathivat.² These provinces form the border region with Malaysia, on the eastern side of the

2. More recently, the violence has spread to Songkhla, a larger and more economically important province with its capital the city of Hat Yai. In April 2005, a bomb exploded in airline luggage at Hat Yai airport.

peninsula facing the South China Sea.³ The population of the three provinces was 1.7 million according to the national census of 2000.⁴ Of these, between two-thirds to three-quarters identify themselves as Malay-Muslims, though in the Thai government's classification they are referred to as "Thai Islam."⁵ These people are the traditional inhabitants of the region, and are descendants of the Melayu who have lived in that part of the Malay Peninsula since the 7th Century at least (Teeuw & Wyatt, 1970). With the arrival of Islam at the end of the 14th Century, a strong sultanate developed around the natural harbor of Pattani, to the extent that it came to be the greatest centre of Islam in South East Asia.⁶ Yet from then until the 19th century, the various Thai kingdoms held nominal suzerainty over the area (Haemindra, 1975 & 1976). Its formal incorporation into Thailand only occurred in 1909, as part of an agreement between Britain (which, at that time, administered the Malayan sultanates) and Thailand. Yet the area has remained stubbornly Muslim and Malay, despite intense efforts, both oppressive and benevolent, but always misguided, to incorporate it into the Thai nation.

The strength of the Pattani sultanate lay in its position as the main seaport between China and Persia. Its only rival was Malacca, which after the Portuguese settled it as a trading base, lost any advantage it may previously have had. The significance of Pattani's early history today lies in the memory held by the local people of a greater past; one, in the minds of some, yet to be redeemed. Descendants of the rajahs who ruled just over one hundred years ago still live in the area and across the border in Malaysia. At its height, the sultanate of Pattani included the northern states of today's Malaysia, including Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu. In the minds of many Malay-Muslims in Thailand, the unredeemed Pattani is a larger Ummah Islama⁷. This concept of community, however, needs to be seen outside of the context of the nations of Thailand and Malaysia as they presently exist. Thailand as a nation in the modern sense is of recent construction and Malaysia has existed only since the British withdrawal in 1947 (and even then it included only peninsular Malaya).⁸ During Pattani's high period, its suzerain was variously the Kingdom of Sukhotai, of Ayudhaya, and later only, of Bangkok. These states themselves were in constant conflict with other neighbors, the Burmese and the Kmer especially, and consequently their hold over Pattani was

3. In using the term Malaysia I refer specifically to the present polity, which came into existence in 1963. To refer to the peninsular country prior to that, I shall use the term Malaya.
4. The 2000 Census gives a total of just over 2 million "Thai-Islam" inhabitants in the greater southern Thai region. But the region so defined covers 14 provinces.
5. It is not possible to get exact census figures as data on language and nationality are presented aggregated for the whole Southern region of the country. The birthrate within the Malay-Muslim population is higher than that of the Thais and other groups, so it can be reasonably inferred that the higher estimate is probably closer to the true percentage, since the recognized figure 20 years ago was about 75%.
6. Pattani is the name of both the province and its main city. There are variant spellings of this name. The current Anglophone version is Pattani, but older versions are Patani and Tani. Narathivat is sometimes transliterated as Narathiwat.
7. The term here refers to Mohammed's notion of uniting all believers in a community.
8. Modern Thailand can be said to begin with the reign of Mongkut (Rama IV). By "nation in the modern sense" I am referring to the state with a clearly defined center and borders, able to exercise control over and defense of its people, attain the recognition and the respect of other nations, and exert a notion of community, however imagined it might be, on its people. In this sense most countries we call nations are of recent origin, particularly those whose boundaries were drawn by colonial empires. The point is important because the predecessors of nations were more like collections of communities with an organic center based on cultural, religious or linguistic coherence. It is not inconceivable that the Malay-Muslims of South Thailand think of their community in this form rather than in a national sense. Benedict Anderson (1982) gives a fuller account of this idea in his *Imagined Communities*.

never tight. Nor was Pattani a willing vassal. On many occasions it rose in rebellion against the Thais. Greater Pattani ceased to exist in 1909 when Britain concluded a treaty with Thailand in order to halt the Thai kingdom's gradual extension southward. This resulted in the delineation of the border in its present form. Britain took the four northern Malay states as part of its colony, severing them from the old sultanate.

The last chance for Pattani's independence from Thailand came following the Second World War, when Britain considered incorporating the Malay speaking part of southern Thailand into Malaya, as retribution against Thailand for its having declared war on the allies in 1942, and having allowed the Japanese a corridor through which to invade Malaya and Singapore. But Britain was dependent upon Thai rice for its Malay colony following post-war shortages and so the petitions of the Pattani Muslims for freedom from Thailand failed.⁹ The Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand are strongly aware of their past, yet their resistance to being a part of Thailand has probably as much to do with recent cultural grievances. I will now consider their perceived discontinuities with the dominant culture of Thailand.

Language

Thailand is a multicultural and multilingual country. Its common language consists of dialects of the family known as "Tai." This term is applied to the dialects spoken in a broad region from north-east India, through the Shan states of Myanmar, Thailand, parts of South China, Laos and Cambodia. There are four main dialects of Tai spoken in Thailand itself and about twelve minor dialects in regional use. The official language of Thailand is Central Thai (also known as Siamese). As well as Tai, there are forty-nine other languages or dialects spoken (these mostly being dialects of six main families: Mon-Kmer, Malayo-Polynesian, Tibeto-Burman, Karen, Miao-Yao and Chinese). South-eastern dialects of Chinese are the most widely used non-Tai languages (Wangsotorn, 1982).

The Malay-Muslims mainly speak a variety of Malay, known as Pattani dialect, and officially referred to as Jawi.¹⁰ It is closely associated with the Kelantan dialect of Malay, which is a "schwa" variety, in this respect, like Arabic. Those who write the language do so using a modified form of the Arabic script also called Jawi. This betrays their historical remoteness from their Malaysian brothers who have officially adopted the Roman alphabet. It also betrays their principal interest in literacy, being the study of the Koran. A considerable portion (perhaps 30%) of those living in larger settlements also speaks a dialect of Thai known as Southern Thai (Pak-Thai), though their fluency and pronunciation is regarded as poor.¹¹ Most Malay-Muslims, however, live in small villages in huts (Pondoks) in rural areas and speak only the local Malay. The consequences of this will be discussed below in the section on education.

9. These petitions were addressed to Clement Atlee, then British Prime Minister, and the rights were claimed under the conclusions of the San Francisco Agreement.

10. The term *Jawi* refers to the imputed origins of the dialect and alludes to its association with a Javanese language represented in an Arabic script.

11. It is important to note that there is also a Malay-Muslim group (the so-called Sam Sam) living on the east coast of the peninsula on both sides of the border, but they mainly speak Thai and are more closely integrated into their community. The complex nature and arbitrariness of the delineation of such border regions is amplified by the fact of existence, in the northern states of Malaysia, of an ethnic Thai-Buddhist population, which lives in harmony with its Muslim neighbors (see Golomb, 1978). A glance at the sinuous Thailand-Malaysia border as drawn on an accurate map will indicate how randomly nationality can be determined by geography.

Economic Situation

The general southern region consists of forests, which begin in the coastal hinterland and become denser as they ascend the mountain range forming the backbone of the peninsula. Where the forest has been cleared it has been replaced by rubber and fruit trees, oil palms, and nearer the coast, coconut palms. As the region receives two monsoons a year there are many rivers, along and at the mouths of which are found the main towns. In the past, these provided flood land for small-scale rice farming. The Malay-Muslims' occupations mainly involve small-plot farming (of rice or fruit), rubber tapping, fishing, and manual work in rubber plantations and tin mining.¹² In the past, the coastal people fished in the near offshore waters, but this industry has been eclipsed by capital-intensive methods of fishing using large trawlers, or by farming of fish and shrimp. The Malay-Muslims who work in fishing, now labor for the absent owners of trawlers (Aeusrivongse, 2005).¹³ Though rubber tapping or work in open-cut tin mining used also to be an economically viable option, depressed world prices for these commodities have reduced the income from such work. Most Malay-Muslims can be said to be at the bottom level of the socio-economic strata as a consequence of their traditional choice of livelihood, and of the changes that have taken place in methods of production. Aeusrivongse refers to the environmental degradation that has had deleterious economic consequences for the Malay-Muslims, and the corruption that has deprived them of traditional access to land and water.

The economy of the area mainly depends upon fishing, rice and fruit production, tin mining and rubber harvesting, and some cross border trade, both legal and illegal. In general it can be said that Thai-Chinese control the rubber and tin business as well as mercantile ventures, and own the large trawlers that fish the outer waters of the gulf. The ethnic Thais' occupations are found in the civil services and clerical positions, and they mostly live in larger towns. There is also a heavy military presence in the area. Troops from other parts of Thailand are garrisoned in many places. The Malay-Muslims mainly live outside of the towns, though a small middle-class lives within them. This group is mostly bilingual, but few have the language skills sufficient to hold down jobs in the public service. The majority of Muslims live in cleared areas between the forests or rubber plantations, in small villages, which are somewhat remote from the towns. Their community centers around a mosque, usually a modest building, yet one of some character, individuality and beauty. It might be thought to be a peaceful if hard life.

The upland regions beyond the villages are remote and extremely difficult of access, and have been the hiding place of insurgents and bandit gangs from both sides of the border, who exploit the border to cross to the other state when pursued by the home state authorities. The jungle is known best only by the various outlaw groups who have made it their base. In the trouble of 25 years past, most of the roads and the countryside, even the settled areas were dangerous at night.

Health and Social Services

As a result of a prolonged insurgency in the 60's and 70's, the central government became particularly concerned with improving the economy of the south, believing that education and

12. The best anthropological work on the Malay Muslims is that provided by Fraser in his study of the fishermen of Pattani (Fraser, 1966).

13. The first call of the Muezzin to morning prayers in Pattani is now challenged by the unpleasant noise of the diesel motors on the large trawlers, which have supplanted the smaller colorful sail or outboard-motor driven boats of the traditional fishermen.

an increase in income would calm what were then separatist sentiments. In fact at the time, the average income in the south was just over half that of the average of the rest of the country.¹⁴ In a series of five-year plans, the government invested very heavily in infrastructure, health, security and education. Many roads and harbors were built and swamps drained. The roads were broad and straight, and for strategic purposes could serve as landing areas for aircraft. A new university for southern people was built with three campuses (in Hat Yai, Songkhla and Pattani). Although the Malay-Muslims were given access to full education if they desired it, the provision did not translate into the supposed economic advantages that education is thought to bring. The capital inflow to the region benefited mainly those with private capital and entrepreneurial skills. Health had till then been a major concern with up to 80% of rural dwellers suffering from schistosomiasis, caused by water-snail-borne parasitic worms which severely debilitate those infected.¹⁵ Changing the aquatic regime reduced the problem, but also reduced the availability of water for lowland and riverine rice production.¹⁶ The government also tried to introduce what it called a “proper understanding of family planning,” meaning birth control, for the Muslim population. This concept was construed in the worst possible way even though it may have been intended as a means of economic betterment.

Consequences of Development in the South

The south of Thailand has changed dramatically since 1980, due mainly to social, infrastructural and industrial development generated by the government. The impetus for the development was the notion that economic betterment of the region would diminish the grievances of the Muslims: the perception being that their discontents were the consequences of poverty and educational backwardness. Yet for the Muslims, the consequences have been rather the opposite of those intended. Economic development has attracted capital in-flow, which has increased the scale of all enterprises, but reduced the villagers to lower levels of production of their traditional crops or to casual wage dependency or unemployment, where once at least they were independent.

Education

The principal social intervention was in education. Traditional education was given in a so-called Pondok (or “Pawnor”: hut) school. In the 1980’s there were about 400 of these in the three provinces. The school was based around the mosque where children, mostly male, were taught religion and literacy using the Koran. The Thai government believed that employment problems and general disaffection might be remedied by offering a secular education based around the Thai language. At that time, government regulations demanded 6 years of compulsory school attendance.¹⁷ The Pondok schools were also offered a subsidy if they taught Thai. As well as Pondok schools, the government has had its own public school system nationwide, in which Thai was the language of instruction. Muslim students were encouraged to attend these, but such schools

14. The average income in the south is now equivalent to the average nationwide. The area of North-eastern Thailand was then and is still more economically depressed, due to climatic circumstances. That area is devoid of rain for much of the year.

15. Also known as Bilharzia. The schistome worms can penetrate the skin of persons bathing, wading or working in fresh water. For people who are repeatedly infected, the parasite can damage the liver, intestines, lungs, and bladder.

16. Rice had been traditionally grown in flood plains of the rivers, not in irrigated plots.

17. The minimum attendance required now is 9 years.

were located only in larger settlements. Where Muslim students did attend government schools, absenteeism and grade failure were very high, and most students dropped out after three or four years.

The key problem was, not surprisingly, a linguistic one. Muslim students had great difficulty in learning Thai. The tonal features of Thai (with nine tones) contrasted greatly with the neutral (schwa) sounds of Malay vowels. (Local Thais derive some mirth from imitating the attempts of the Malays to speak Thai.) The orthography is also quite difficult, and the fact that Thai was read from left to right yet the Malay Arabic script (Jawi) was read right to left, added to the difficulty. A “head-start” type of program was introduced, but research conducted by myself and colleagues showed that though beneficial immediately after, by two and three years later the affects had washed out.¹⁸ There were other problems when Muslim students brought home books in the Thai script, which was identified with Buddhism and seen as a subterfuge by parents and local, usually little-educated, imams. Secular education as such was perceived by many as a threat to religion, and the notion that learning Thai would make the Muslims more integrated within the nation was viewed with grave suspicion, because being Thai was associated with being Buddhist.¹⁹ The dialect of Thai prescribed for lessons was Central Thai (the official language). If the teachers came from Bangkok, as many did, they spoke the standard, but it was difficult of comprehension for those familiar only with the local dialect. Research in such bilingual situations worldwide shows that a second language can be taught successfully only if the home language is accorded equal respect. Otherwise it is perceived to be (and often thought to be) inferior. Such perceptions appear to affect the whole learning program adversely.

The emphasis on education did promote the development of other private Muslim schools, which received a subsidy if lessons were taught in Thai. Some of these schools also offered secondary education, but with an emphasis on religious studies. Some graduates of the private schools went on to further studies in Indonesia, Egypt, Malaysia, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Not all Muslim children failed in the government schools either. Some graduated each year and went to the university for southern people (the Prince of Songkla University), but at that time less than 3% of the students in the university were Muslim. Aeusrivongse (2005) reports that Muslims still feel there are not enough places for them, though it is not true. What is clear is that the initiatives in education conferred few benefits on the Muslim children in the villages.

The More-recent Uprisings

I referred above to some of the historical rebellions against Thai rule. These are well known by the community as part of a past glory (Aeusrivongse, 2005). But more important rebellions have occurred quite recently. The one with most impact upon the present troubles, took place in 1948. Having failed in their bid for post-war annexation to Malaya, the Muslims faced an even more serious setback. A coup d’etat in Bangkok in 1947 had brought Phibul Songkhram back into power. Field Marshal Songkhram had been prime minister from 1939 to 1944 following a coup he had initiated in 1932. He had instituted a harsh set of cultural laws in 1940, which threatened every

18. The “Headstart” program was based on a successful model used in North America. It provided intensive instruction in Thai language and Mathematics in the beginning grades of school.

19. A strong equation of being-Thai with being-Buddhist had been overfly the central notion of many preceding periods of extreme nationalism in Thailand.

aspect of the Malay-Muslim culture. These laws dictated dress (banning the sarong for men) and religious observance, and were intended to make all citizens culturally Thai.²⁰ The Malay-Muslims, not unreasonably, perceived these to be a threat to their way of life, and after petitioning the government fruitlessly in 1947, there was talk of insurrection. The government moved quickly and arrested the leader of the Islamic Religious Council, Haji Sulong, and three associates and charged them with treason. After a search, the police found evidence of their contact with Malayan supporters. The arrests caused fury amongst supporters in both countries and rebellions broke out in the three provinces. This quickly led to killings on both sides, and a particularly harsh response by the government. In Narathivat, vicious fighting in one demonstration, led to deaths estimated to be in the hundreds. Although the insurrection had begun with the elite, ordinary villagers quickly joined it. With no real armament, the village people were powerless against the forces of special police sent to the area under the guise of combating communist insurgents. The rebellion died, and the government gave in on some cultural matters (religious freedom and Malay to be taught in schools), but the feelings of the people were in no way calmed. There is no reliable estimate of the number of deaths and thousands fled Thailand to Malaya as refugees. There was some support and agitation from the newly independent Malaya, which had then petitioned the United Nations on the Malay-Muslim cause. The Thai government had realized that a concession of independence would lead to similar claims from other minorities in the north, and Malaya was at the time faced with a strong communist insurgency in the border region. Thus considerations of cooperation with the Thai government were seen to be beneficial to both sides. Using fighting communism as a pretext, a state of emergency was declared in September of 1948 (Haemindra, 1977). In the next few years the same pretext was used to suppress the Thai-Chinese throughout the kingdom.²¹

The situation appeared to have calmed down after 1948, and the government had made concessions to the Muslims, mostly in relation to education and encouragement of Muslim participation in local government. Six years later the then-freed Haji Sulong disappeared, and suspicions, probably well founded, held that he had been extra-judicially killed by paramilitary forces. Most people (Thai and Muslim) believe his body was dumped at sea. A few years later, some people supporting Sulong's son, who was running for parliament, were killed.²² At this time, and leading up into the sixties, there was continuous talk of separatist organizations being formed. The government publicly regarded such groups as either bandits or communists, and though bandit and communist groups were active in the area, the main insurgents were either separatists or irredentists with a fundamentally Islamic outlook. Another group was simply pressing for more local autonomy.

20. The laws forbade wearing of the sarong and made Western style dress mandatory for public appearances. It also forbade teaching of Islam and instituted Thai as the exclusive language. This was not the first occasion when such codes had been instituted. The great king, Rama V (Chulalongkorn), had introduced many cultural reforms at the end of the 19th Century, but these were principally aimed at modernization. The laws descended even to such matters as eating-utensils—introducing the fork and spoon that nowadays surprises first-time visitors to Thailand. Rama V's reforms had also been strongly resisted by the Malay-Muslims.

21. The Chinese in Thailand had been brought to the country in the 1880's and 90's by Chulalongkorn as part of his drive to modernize the country through infrastructural programs. They were imported mainly as laborers (Anderson, 1983: 94), as they were in the USA and Malaya, and still are in parts of Africa.

22. Extra-judicial killings have been common in the country, affecting not only the Muslims. There have been a number of occasions in the last 40 years in which large numbers of Thais (especially students) have been killed extra-judicially. In some cases these were students who had returned from overseas, perhaps regarded as having been tainted by radical ideas. In others they were simply people protesting against the government following election fraud and curtailment of freedoms. The press, which was controlled by the government has revealed little of this and it is a topic well-known, but still spoken of in hushed tones.

By the 1960's, the underground groups were gaining support. None now perceived that Malaysia would fight for their cause.²³ A group that wanted more local autonomy as part of a separate administrative unit was apparently supported by an older group of residents (Haemindra, 1977).²⁴ Another wanted a special state within Thailand, ruled by a sultan or raja. This group, the Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Republik Patani (National Liberation Front of the Pattani Republic), was headed by a Tengku (nobleman) in Malaysia. The third group, the Tentera Nasional Pembebasan Rak'yat Pattani, (National Liberation Army of the Pattani People) wanted a completely separate state. The latter was a well-organized army based on a cell structure with trained military leaders. It is the group widely held to be responsible for the numerous raids on police stations, roadblocks, nighttime banditry and the demands for protection money.²⁵

It should also be noted that there was a communist movement, the Communist Terrorist Organisation (CTO), active in the border region at this time. It is thought to have had some loose connections with the more radical of the separatists, each group using the other to advance its aims. The communist group was more active in Malaysia, and for that reason, by the late 70's both countries had begun cooperating to try to wipe it out. Its access to the border and the dense jungle provided it with a degree of protection, but the Thai army had some success in combating it.

The troubles in the South in this period were to some extent a mirror of troubles throughout the country. For most of the time since 1932, the government had been either directly run by the military or dominated by it following their coups. There was also dissention within the forces with the Navy rising up against the Army in 1949 and 1951. From 1958 the country was under martial law. Some of the 1948–49 reforms disappeared when the government announced a return to the 1932 constitution. The Phibul regime had treated Thai-Chinese very harshly, and after the revolution of 1949 in China, adopted an even sterner stance.²⁶ In 1953, under the pretext of combating communism, the police arrested many Chinese, attempting to curtail their economic influence. The country generally was very unsettled for the next 25 years. The Meo tribes in the North were suspected of complicity with the Pathet-Lao and many people in the Northeast, the poorest part of the country, were protesting against the Bangkok regime. Though the economy of Thailand boomed in the 60's and 70's, the lot of the common people did not. During this period there was widespread discontent in Bangkok and throughout the country. All opponents of the government were labeled as communists and treated harshly and extra-judicially. Several student revolts occurred resulting in hundreds of deaths at the hands of police and paramilitary forces.²⁷

The renewed separatist actions in the South were less directly confrontational than the 1948, or the 2004 outbreaks, but they were extremely effective in unsettling the countryside in the greater part of the south for a long time. Many small raids were carried out, no one would travel at night,

23. In 1971, Tun Abdul Razak, the Malaysian Prime Minister assured his Thai counterpart that Malaysia had no intention of interfering with Thailand's internal problems. In 1974, the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) stated that it was sympathetic to the separatists, but that it also did not want to interfere in Thai politics (Haemindra, 1977: 101).

24. The sentiments of the older group are articulated well by some of the informants in Suhrke's (1978) paper on the separatist issue.

25. The separatist groups coalesced under a variety of names. The most prominent one in the late 70's and early 80's was the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO).

26. Many young Thai-Chinese, some just teenagers, went to China after '49, either inspired by the utopian dream of Mao or as a means of escaping persecution in Thailand.

27. Three incidents in 1973, 1975 and 1976 saw police invade university campuses and kill hundreds of students protesting for democratic reforms.

and buses and trains carried armed soldiers. Little was really known about the group that emerged as the principal front, the PULO.²⁸ The government again sent a large force to the south, but the lack of direct contact with the adversaries, and their guerrilla tactics, meant there was less obvious success in defeating the insurgency. The government could also be said to have tried more wisely to address the social conditions that it believed to be the main problem anyway. It was at this time that the five-year plans for the South began to address poverty, health and education issues, and to invest in the massive infrastructure developments described above. This intervention and the increased security measures had the effect of calming the overt separatist activity, but the main concern for an unredeemed Pattani still simmered, out of sight. By the early-to-mid 80's a sense of surface calm prevailed in the area, and it might have appeared that way until January, 2004.

It is possible to believe that the Thai government never really understood the cultural sensitivity of the Muslims, or perceived the centrality of Islam to them. Most Thai officials probably believed that the Malays' main problem was their backwardness, and that education would remedy this. Comments reflecting this belief have often been made to me, not in any overtly racist way, but simply in the way that many dominant groups in any country think of a group so apparently lower in status and economic success, or even more pointedly, so little desirous of economic success (as defined by the aspirations of the dominant group).²⁹

As I noted above, the developments of the 80's brought economic success to the South and a large inflow of capital. It also brought new educational opportunities for the Muslim villagers, but it did little to better their economic opportunities. Auesrivongse (2005) interviewed a number of Muslims in his own research into the present problems and concluded that the developments have led to the diminution of employment opportunities for young people, especially those from the villages (Pondoks) or even the Islamic private schools. Dorairajoo (2003) notes from his research in a village near Pattani that:

... villagers hardly approached government officials to report the destruction of their environments (sic) and hence livelihoods. This was because they felt they did not speak good Thai and also had little hope of redress from these officials who (sic) they said received bribes from the commercial fishermen who destroyed their environment

He notes too that government development projects harmed the villagers' environment. He also reports that his informants told him of the grave breakdown in relations between the Muslims and Buddhists in villages in Pattani, where once there was a sense of shared community, even extending to ceremonial occasions.

The Present Trouble

The troubles that began in January last year, have taken more than 900 lives (of insurgents, the Thai police and military, and innocent Thais—often monks or teachers). By any measure it must be seen as a major uprising. The initial action in the latest insurrection was the sacking of a police post on January 4th, 2004, in which four policemen were killed and about 300 assault rifles

28. PULO was an acronym for the Pattani United Liberation Organization.

29. Cultural insensitivity is still evident in the recent attack (April, 2004) on the old and venerated Kruese mosque in Pattani. Cultural sensitivity is not usually commonly found in dominant groups. In a visit to Narathivat some years ago, I was taken to a site in a wide valley, dotted with small villages and plantations, where a local wealthy Thai had paid for the erection of a massive Buddha head (in concrete). This monument was visible for kilometers in most directions, and yet I understood that this to be mainly a Muslim area.

were captured. Martial law was immediately imposed on the South, and 30,000 extra military personnel were sent to reinforce the police and forces already there.³⁰ The shape of the rebellion has much in common with the 1948 one, in terms of tactics, yet there seems to have been no *causus belli* equivalent to that which aroused separatist fury in 1948. The next major clash occurred on April 28th, 2004. It began with a fierce gun battle between security forces and insurgents who had raided a police post in Tambon Tanyong Rulo, Pattani. The skirmish left three police officers and soldiers and one of the insurgents dead. The insurgents then retreated to Kruese Mosque, which remained under siege until the afternoon.³¹ The military bombarded the mosque using M79 grenade launchers, resulting in the deaths of 34 insurgents.³² This date (April 28th) was the 56th anniversary of the greatest clash of the 1948 rebellion.

The worst subsequent clash followed a demonstration in Narathivat, on October 25th, 2004. More than 1,500 people had taken part, mainly protesting the earlier disappearance of people believed to have been arrested. A military force of 2,000 confronted the demonstrators. Six people were shot during the demonstration, but 78 later died of suffocation or crushing, while being transported under arrest to a military camp in Pattani. The Prime Minister described the outcome as “typical”, noting “It’s about bodies made weak by fasting.”³³ That most reports describe the 1,000 arrested as being piled on top of one another 6-deep in the back of trucks, casts significant doubt on this imputed cause. The journey to Pattani took 5–6 hours. Other military people claimed the demonstrators were on drugs, a claim the PM also made.

Yet the loss of life in these major actions has been less than that resulting from the on-going small-scale guerilla-type actions that have occurred across four provinces. After the declaration of martial law in January 2004, 11 schools were burnt. There have been many attacks on Thai citizens, especially those seen as representatives of the government, and Buddhist monks have been killed. Other actions include bombings of schools and markets, ambushes of police, roadblocks, and some acts that often have more the random character of banditry. The military forces have responded harshly to the uprisings and it is estimated that 500 of the 700 deaths have been of Muslims. The greatest source of grievance is the arbitrary arrest of young people and the (assumed to be) extrajudicial killings. The insurrection overall though seems to differ from that of the 70’s and 80’s in that it is more closely involves communal violence.³⁴ To some extent it indicates the depth of the divide that has separated the two groups. The renewed violence has also meant that intensive and arbitrary searches and harassment of the villagers is occurring. This too is leading to grave resentment and is further antagonizing the Malay villagers. Auesrivongse reports that searches of whole villages usually turn up no arms or seditious material. If they exist, he thinks they must be stored elsewhere. The number of guns stolen is in excess of 500, these mostly being M16 assault rifles.

There seems at present (July, 2005) to be no end in sight. The action has spread as far north as Hat Yai (in Songkhla Province), the main city and economic center of the lower south of

30. There has been a strong military force in the area since the 70’s, so the newly introduced troops would only have increased the overall number of troops there.

31. This is the mosque mentioned above. Both the damage to the building and the violation of its supposed sanctity were further grave provocations to the Muslims.

32. These guns propel 40mm. grenades, which explode into hundreds of smaller steel particles. The intention behind their use seems fairly obvious.

33. This event took place during Ramadan.

34. The communal violence is one-sided, perpetrated by the Muslims on symbols of the government and its established religion.

the country, and to the border towns with Malaysia in the south, indicating that this is no small insurrection. The military commander interviewed by Auesrivongse after the mosque siege, seemed unclear as to the political identity or motives of the adversaries, but noted that they were fierce fighters with some obvious military training. The PULO seem not to have been centrally involved, on Auesrivongse's evidence, and the supportive communiqué they issued betrays (in his view) a certain lack of knowledge of the guerillas identity. Given that the political and cultural situation of the Muslims is better than it has been in more than 100 years, we must ask what has caused the latest uprising?

Causes of the Recent Insurgency

Apart from signs that communal relations had been deteriorating, there was nothing that would have presaged the recent events. No commentators had predicted the trouble. Free elections and universal suffrage now exist. The only notable change in the country has been the accession to government of a new political party, "Thai Rak Thai" (meaning Thai Love Thai). After the Asian economic "meltdown" of 1997 and a previous run of weak governments, the new party gained a large majority in Parliament, and increased it in the most recent elections. This government might be said to be more overtly nationalistic than recent ones, and the Prime Minister, Mr. Thaksin Shinawatra's response shows little comprehension of the current problem. The Prime Minister has adopted a confrontational style and appears to have little understanding of the Southern region. The style of government would have had little impact upon the Malay-Muslims however. The intellectual elite of the country is much more sympathetic to the difficulties faced by the Muslims, and shares with many other marginalized groups a distinct concern that the country is returning to its authoritarian past.

One thing only is clear when we search for reasons after the fact; that is that many possibilities emerge. The initial attack was seen as an isolated guerilla action to gain arms. What is apparent, however, is that it unleashed a movement in which thousands across at least three provinces have become prepared to engage in some form of protest at least, and many of them seem prepared to go further. I will now consider some possible causes.

A Border Problem?

We could speculate that this is just another border problem; that the plight of the Malay-Muslims in Southern Thailand is shared by many other people in border areas around the world. An interesting body of literature has emerged recently describing the social, political linguistic and economic characteristics of border areas and their citizens (Wilson and Hastings, 1998; Horstmann, 2002). Much of this literature focuses on deconstructing the notion of the nation-state. In Abrams words, quoted by Alonso, there is a "state system" as well as a "state-idea", the latter "a message of domination—an ideological artifact attributing unity, morality and independence to the disunited, amoral and dependent workings of the practice of government" (Abrams, 1988, quoted by Alonso, 1994: 380). Horstmann claims that "people on the fringe of the nation-state are questioning the monopoly of identification and helping to transform taken for granted concepts of nationalism." The dominant group in the nation-state probably mythologizes the state as embodying its expression of community. For minorities, and particularly those for whom another idea of community is tangible and rooted in a consciousness of the past (however imagined it might be), the nation-state is a constant threat. In the experience of the Malay-Muslims

in Southern Thailand over the past 100 years, the state apparatus and its laws have seemed nothing but an attack on their language, culture and religious beliefs. Their resentment is not likely to have directly caused the recent violence, but it probably contributed to it.

A Millenarian Uprising?

Auesrivongse, after a tour of the South to research the violence, surprisingly concludes that the insurgency is a “millenarian rebellion.” This is a strange conclusion in the light of the evidence he puts forward, and the actual circumstances of the individual clashes. He finds parallels with the peasants’ revolts of the past in Thailand. He believes the present one to be a utopian social movement, with no clear goals, striking only at symbols of state in reaction to undesirable changes affecting them. He notes that the traditional elites appear to have played no part in the recent uprisings. This no doubt leads him to perceive the absence of organized leadership behind the actions. That more than 1,500 people will demonstrate shows some sense of planning if not direct leadership. He also notes that there appears to be no clear political objective and that there has been no appeal to international support or recognition. That such appeals in the past achieved nothing should not have escaped his recognition. It is possible that Auesrivongse believes in his millenarian thesis because he (probably correctly) perceives that the revolts will fail in the long term. But he cannot claim that the remote likelihood of their success is perceived by the insurgents themselves. He has a clear view of the power of the Thai state to suppress revolt, but that may not be the view of the Muslims.

He also notes that the participants in the demonstration that led to the fighting at the Kreuse mosque had written Islamic prayers and messages on their clothing and that they drank a liquid which they believed would render them invincible.³⁵ This use of religious invocation further strengthens his view that the uprising is utopian. I believe it may signal something quite different.

Islamic Extremist Terrorism?

The widespread nature of the revolt, covering thousands of square kilometers, points to something perhaps better organized than Auesrivongse perceives it to be. The fact that the participants in the violent actions are all young men leads to speculation that there is a considerable degree of organization behind them. Both Auesrivongse and Dorairajoo refer to the growth of religious fervor (that which is fashionable in the West to call Muslim extremism) amongst the Muslims. The recent rebellion has had a more overtly religious character than previous ones. The increase in numbers of returnee teachers and religious scholars, especially from Saudi Arabia, has meant that the villagers are more familiar with current events and tendencies in Islam and the debates about its relationship to the secular and the Western world. It is also known that terrorist groups have been active in the South.

The government of Malaysia is currently fighting two terrorist groups, the KMM (Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia), and the better known, Jemiah Islamiah (JI). Though both are thought to be small organizations, JI members, on good evidence (Noor, 2003), have trained in Afghanistan under Al Qaeda and in camps in Malaysia (in Negri Sembilan).³⁶ KKM seems to be a more local organization, but JI is intent on working for a purist pan-Islamic nation of South East Asia (Noor,

35. Many rumors have surfaced regarding rituals preceding the attack, They must be regarded as speculative only.

36. Jemiah Islamiah is suspected of having planned and executed the bombing of the nightclub in Bali.

2003: 162). This is to include Southern Thailand. Thorough investigative work by Malaysian and Singaporean authorities has prevented a number of major actions planned by both groups. Intelligence reports have also shown that Malaysian JI members have had contacts with a similar organization in Thailand. Thailand is also known to have some JI cells. In January 2002, the JI operational commander Hambali met a Canadian operative of Al Qaeda, M. Mansour Jabarah in Southern Thailand. Hambali at that time proposed the Bali bombing to Jabarah (Gunaratna, 2003). It is now known that the decision to go ahead in Bali was made in Bangkok.³⁷

It is mentioned above that young Malay-Muslims from Southern Thailand have gone to the Middle East for education and religious training. They return mainly to teaching jobs in the Pondok and private religious schools. They may well contribute to the rise in fundamentalism that is widely reported in the South. It cannot be assumed that JI are directly involved, as the recent insurgency seems not to have the degree of organization and discipline, or the kind of targets that one might expect of JI. But it is not inconceivable that JI would encourage such civil strife as it would be consistent with and certainly support a longer-term aim of fomenting a mass uprising. If the Thai intelligence service has knowledge of any conspiracy involving JI, it is not revealing it. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has said that militants who fuelled the ongoing violence were local, but could be receiving informal assistance from extremists abroad. In a public statement he claimed: "It's merely personal contacts, not organised networks.... So there is no involvement by al-Qaeda or any other organization" (Auesrivongse, 2005).

The best evidence points to the insurgency being at least an expression of popular discontent with the economic and employment opportunities in the South. The younger generation has seen a general economic growth that has at the same time diminished their personal life chances through the alteration of the environment in which they earned their traditional livelihood. Their further realization that education brings no material improvement, and in most cases provides no linguistic means to enable them to compete in the world outside the village, breeds greater frustration. The Thai language does not empower them; it appears more like a linguistic conspiracy against them. Their increasing religious sentiment and its more overt expression has also sharpened the differences between them and their Thai neighbors. Their separateness has been heightened by a greater awareness of their religion linking them with Malaysian neighbors, and also with the ummah (community) of Islam. Such intra-communal feeling as formerly existed has been affected by this growing sense of difference. The situation of young men with few employment opportunities but sharpened ideologies has much in common with that in other Muslim countries (Egypt, Pakistan, Palestine), where disaffection points to a continuing threat of radical revolt. Whatever the government in Bangkok does, is interpreted as its intent to assimilate the Muslims, as it probably is. Unfortunately their main contact with the government's will is currently through the repressive military and special police acting under martial law.

The Future

The rebellion has gained significant attention in the world press. The 78 deaths by suffocation brought international censure to the Thai government and military. The Malaysian Government has not said much officially, though a popular state-controlled daily said the Thai government now "surpasses Israel's record of aggression" against Muslims. The opposition Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) has called the incident "a Holocaust of the modern era" (Gatsiounis, 2004). The widely

37. Jabarah was later arrested in Oman and handed over to the Americans who debriefed him.

respected former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, has compared the region's unrest to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and urged Thailand to grant autonomy to Thai Muslims.³⁸ But the maintenance of harmony in ASEAN will probably outweigh any concern of regional governments with the Thai regime's policies. The Malaysian government also has its own problems with Malay-Islamist-nationalistic opposition parties, as well as with the state governments in Kelantan and other northern peninsular states, which are overtly Islamic.³⁹ Supporting secessionist moves in Thailand might also promote striving for independence on the part of some East Malaysian states (in Kalimantan), and also spur the Moro Liberation movement in the Philippines and the Aceh separatists in Indonesia.

In the absence of another major incident (a spectacular bombing in Bangkok has been thought to be considered) the insurgency will probably die down, especially under the heavy repression of the Thai military and special police. It will not, however, disappear. The Malay-Muslims cannot expect the sympathetic understanding of the problems in the South that followed the last insurgency. The Thaksin government will probably consider that enough has been done for the development of the South already. The Malay-Muslims will become even more alienated, capital inflow to the South may decrease and their social situation and wellbeing will deteriorate even more. It is likely that a more fervent brand of Islam will continue to capture the affections of the villagers and even the townspeople. Education will continue to be a locally governed option for the Muslims and consequently one of the main conduits for wider participation by this community, i.e. knowledge and fluency in the Thai language, will be blocked.

The only feasible solution to the problem might be in the approach taken early by the Malaysian government, which was to form a multi-ethnic party (appealing to Malays, Chinese and Indians) with the aim of creating a secular multicultural society.⁴⁰ I doubt that this will ever be a solution taken in Thailand, which has had a history of nationalistic regimes and which has so closely identified Thai citizenship with Buddhism and respect for the monarchy. Nor would it appeal to the other side. Failing such a development, the social and economic situation of the Malay-Muslims will find further expression in a militancy increasingly ideologically influenced and interpreted, and consequently more uprisings can be expected.

38. This is something Mahathir would never have done when Prime Minister.

39. Kelantan abuts Narathivat and was originally part of the Sultanate of Pattani. The PAS is the government of the state, as it was also in the other border state of Trengganu until the recent elections. The PAS favors adoption of the shariah as the legal basis of the state.

40. This being the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the long-term ruling party of the nation.

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