DELHI POLICY GROUP

DPG BRIEF

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

Vol. II, Issue 11

November 9, 2017

Insurgency in Southern Thailand

by Mohit Musaddi, Research Assistant, Delhi Policy Group

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy that has switched between parliamentary democracy[1] and military juntas[2] for decades, the latest coup being in May 2014 by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). Although its origins can be traced back to 1948, a distinct Malay-Muslim-based insurgency has engulfed the three southern-most provinces in the country since December 2001 and more prominently January 2004. This new wave of insurgency has claimed close to 7,000 lives and injured almost 12,000 people, making it one of the deadliest insurgencies in the entirety of South-East Asia.[3] What is more startling is that almost 90 per cent of all deaths are those of civilians comprising ethnic Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims.[4]

The exact reasons why the Southern Thailand insurgency flared up again in 2001-02 remain obscure. "Some southern civil society activists have suggested that a new generation of young southerners has come of age, seen little progress in [the] southerners' position in Thai society, and possibly been influenced by increasingly hardline, pro-separatist religious schools in the southern provinces."[5] Even so, some other analysts suggest that "the new insurgency started because of internecine southern conflicts over smuggling weapons, drugs, or other illicit goods, and that some of these conflicts may have spiraled into violence against the state."[6]

Irrespective of the reasons for the resurgence of the insurgency in Southern Thailand, one stark difference between this wave of violence and the violence of previous decades is that the new insurgents used terrorist means rather than the guerilla warfare tactics.[7] Bomb blasts and drive-by shootings have replaced the earlier ambushes, sabotage, raids and hit-and-run tactics. Today the perpetrators are not "a bunch of nihilist teenagers, bent on creating havoc"[8] but calculating political actors who use unclaimed violence to magnify their power.

This "change in tactics indicates desperation by the insurgents as well as a willingness to be more daring and more destructive and radical" as compared to the insurgents of the previous decades.[9]

IN THIS ISSUE

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In keeping with the growing dynamism of India's foreign and security policy, the DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's broader regional and global role and the strategic partnerships that advance India's rise as a leading power. To support that goal, the DPG undertakes research and organizes policy interactions across a wide canvas, including strategic and geo-political issues, geo-economic issues and defence and security issues.

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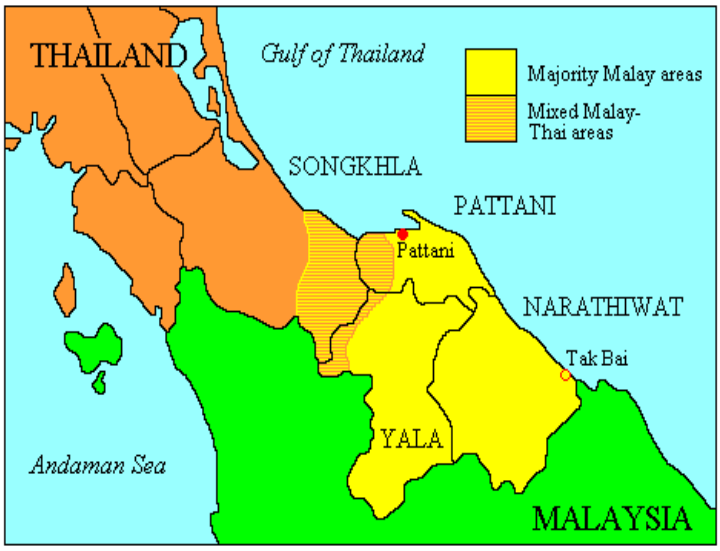
Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh
Director General

BACKGROUND

The southern Thailand conflict has its roots in earlier waves of Malay nationalist resistance to Thai rule, instituted after the Siamese had annexed the region in 1902.[10] At the time, the Patani region, which has been the centre of the insurgency, were ruled by Sultans. The Sultans preferred to pay tribute to the distant Siamese kings in Bangkok. This continued until the early half of the 20th century and the government of Bangkok interfered little locally and preferred to rely on local officials for the implementation of policies within the Patani region.

However, the turning point in the region was in 1934 when "Marshall Plaek Phibunsongkhram set in motion a process of 'Thaification', which had as its objective the cultural assimilation of the Patani people, among other ethnic groups in Thailand".[11]

This process of forced assimilation enraged the Malay Muslims, who were the majority residents of the Pattani region and soon, there began to grow a nationalist movement, leading to the South Thailand insurgency. A successful first stage in any insurgency is to be strategically defensive where the government or the "enemy" is on the offensive. At this time, the insurgents usually retreat into space but advance in time. Between the 1940s and the 1980s, the separatists did exactly that by staging a series of opposition uprisings which were mostly nonviolent and largely confined to the three provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat and five districts of Songkhla province – Chana, Thepa, Na Thawi, Saba Yoi and Sadao. Poor socio-economic conditions added to the regional discontentment with the Thai government.



The provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala (majority ethnic Malay areas) have been at the heart of the insurgency.
Source: Adam Carr, Wikimedia

IDEOLOGY

On the face of it, the southern Thai insurgency appears to be solely based on religion as the motivating factor. Overall, Buddhism is the major religion in Thailand with over 95 per cent of the population practising the Buddhist faith. However, the southern part of Thailand, where the insurgency is most prominent, has 1.3 million Muslims out of the 1.7 million residents as of 2008. The attempt at 'Thaification' led to the Muslims in the kingdom to be disgruntled and press for a secessionist movement which included demands for an autonomous region and self-governance.

However, in the 1970s, the insurgents in Southern Thailand described Thailand as a 'colonialist' state constituted by 'Siamese fascists officials' who had illegally colonised the Patani region. "The flavor of this discourse shows the importance of historical context in shaping the way resistance movements interpret their own struggles."[12] In this case, it reflected the effects of the wider international anti-colonial struggles and its embrace of nationalism and secularism. Soon though, it became clear that religion did motivate the movement as translating it into a political agenda was increasingly becoming complicated by the centrality of Islam in defining the grievances of the Patani Muslims. "Islam was the reason they were considered marginal by wider Buddhist society and hence it was Islam that became a core identity marker and the fulcrum upon which the resistance movement grew."[13] Ultimately, the merger of anti-colonialism with the aspect of religion did not work out too well for the Patani Muslims and as a result the insurgency failed to define clearly its ideology in the 20th century beyond the obvious maxim of 'liberating the homeland' to create a Republic.

By the turn of the century though, the situation changed and the ideological mesh began to be increasingly dominated by Islamic notions, thus distancing itself from the secular concepts that earlier guided the secessionist movements. The objective now was the creation of an 'Al Fatoni Darussalam' (Islamic Land of Patani) by "purging all Siamese infidels out of…[the] territory to purify the religion and culture".[14] This shift in terminology indicates an ideological shift as well. The 'liberation of the Republic' had now evolved into a struggle to 'liberate an Islamic Land'. From 'colonialists' and 'fascists' of the past, the kingdom of Thailand now assumed the status of an 'infidel' in the minds of the insurgents.

RESPONSE FROM THE GOVERNMENT

Few countries in the world are as divided as Thailand. Since assuming a constitutional style of government in 1932, Thailand has undergone 19 separate coups, one often more catastrophic than the other.[15] When the telecommunications billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra was elected Prime Minister in 2001, he promised the inclusion of the hitherto neglected rural poor. However, five years later, "Thaksin, beset with accusations of cronyism and graft, was ousted by the military and forced into exile".[16] Then in 2011, Thaksin's sister Yingluck assumed the leadership role and promised to carry on Thaksin's agenda. Not more than 3 years into the role, she too was removed in a coup in May 2014 following months of violent protests and in September 2017 was found guilty of "dereliction of duty" thus being sentenced to five years in prison.[17]

Thailand has had an unstable political system since adopting a constitutional form of government in 1932, resulting in 19 separate coups. Former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra (right) pictured with the army chief Gen Prayuth Chan-ocha. Source: Chiangraitimes

While the reasons for the resurgence of the insurgency in 2001-02 remain obscure, two pointers to the government stance can be listed. One, the Thai state clearly failed to recognise the Southern Muslims as a set of distinctive people with their own separate identity and two, they also "failed to grasp the capacity of external forces to reenergize and rejuvenate secessionist sentiment that is based on these distinctive patterns of culture and identity".[18] The main reason for the insurgency to persist as long as it has, is that the Thai state has shown very little interest in addressing the situation in the South.

"Under a series of administrations—that of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra between 2001 and 2006, the coup government that deposed him in September 2006, and the elected governments in the late 2000s and early 2010s—the Thai security forces took actions that ran counter to most tested counterinsurgency doctrines."[19] The forces employed in the areas were not accustomed to the southern terrains and customs – something that must be second nature in any counterinsurgency (COIN) operation. Also, the Thai officials sent to the region were not Malay Muslims themselves, thus making it difficult for the locals to identify with them. They had hardly communicated with the local police who otherwise could have had information related to the insurgency. Any attempt to establish contact with the local opinion leaders and the elected politicians of the south were also not made. In fact, in a comparison of the insurgents' tactics with the counterinsurgents, Kurlantzick points out that,

> "the Thai security forces also operate with indiscriminate brutality, mirroring the brutal tactics of the insurgents. The insurgents have few boundaries. They have set off bombs outside hospitals, shot and hacked to death teachers and other civil servants, and killed hundreds of children. Insurgent cells have destroyed schools, rubber plantations, and many other institutions central to southerners' daily lives and work. At times, the insurgents have tortured victims, beheaded them, and then mutilated their bodies."[20]

By resorting to similar tactics as those of the insurgents, the Thai government failed to grasp the essence of a COIN operation.

The dissolution of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) and Civilian-Police-Military Command 43 (CPM_{43}) in 2002 further exacerbated the problems. The SBPAC was established in 1981 to monitor the work of civilian government agencies and to coordinate with security forces in the Malay Muslim provinces of South Thailand while the CPM_{43} was established to reduce military pre-eminence and give civilians and the police greater security roles. The CPM_{43} and SBPAC had, over the years 'developed a reputation for improving governance and helping to curb armed separatism'.[21] Its dissolution sparked fears among the ethnic Malay Muslim population that the government had taken away a vital safeguard that for many years had ensured their protection from being abused and exploited by local Thai officials. Finally, in October 2006, the Thai government reinstated the SBPAC after the failure of PM Thaksin to quell the fresh southern violence that had erupted in 2004.

In February 2013, the government under the leadership of Yingluck Shinawatra initiated a formal peace process holding several rounds of talks. However, these talks ultimately came to a standstill by fall 2013, mainly because of internal inconsistencies and differences between the Shinawatra government and its military.

Thus, the overarching response by the government has not been a success. In fact, the biggest failure of its operation has been an inability to distinguish between insurgents and the general population leading to a 9 to 1 death ratio of innocent civilians to armed insurgents.

CURRENT SCENARIO

"In mid-2015, the Malaysian government pushed the various Pattani groups together, forging an umbrella organization, MARA [Majlis Syura] Pattani. The BRN [Barisan Revolusi Nasional] held half of the seats and leadership [which was] an acknowledgement of their dominance."[22] However, by October that year, they had quit the umbrella body as it became evidently clear that the junta was only hoping for a ceasefire with the insurgents without having to make any concessions to them.

Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra (left) and her Malaysian counterpart Najib Razak pose for photographers after their joint press conference at the latter's office in Putrajya, Malaysia, February 2013. Despite Malaysia's repeated attempts to broker peace talks between the Thai government and the insurgent groups, a consensus is yet to be reached. | Source: Associated Press

In an April 2017 public statement, "the BRN rejected the military's 'peace plan' demanding that any peace process include the participation of third parties from the international community 'as witnesses and observers' and that an 'impartial' mediator should conduct the talks".[23]

Thus, the south-Thailand insurgency appears to be currently in a state of political stalemate. The Thai military remains the dominant political actor and its position has only strengthened since the coup in 2014. Although there have been democratically-elected governments in Thailand from 1992-2006 and 2007-2014, it has largely been an example of failed democracy leading the insurgents to further believe that coups are not only possible in Thailand but that they shall also go unpunished. Having vowed to end the south-Thailand insurgency within a year from the coup in 2014, the problem with the military junta lies in identifying interlocutors with whom they can negotiate. Ever since MARA Pattani broke down, the fringe groups have resorted to violence independently which the BRN and the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO) have not been able to stop even if they wanted to.[24]

The Insurgency in Southern Thailand is one of the deadliest in South-East Asia, claiming close to 7,000 lives and injuring 12,000 people. | Source: Christian Science Monitor

CONCLUSION

The violence was at its peak in 2007 when 836 people were killed in Thailand. In 2016, the number dropped down to 307 which is well below the 14-year average of 455. However, the insurgency is nowhere near its end. This is because a lack of resources and inadequate logistics among the insurgents have contributed more to the fall in death rates than the COIN operations carried out by the Thai government.[25]

Recent studies indicate that the current rate of violence would only enable the insurgents to achieve their short-term goals. The violence in Thailand has been normalised and is at such a level that the government can attribute it to routine criminality, and hence they are not compelled to negotiate.[26]

A lack in unity among the various insurgent groups along with an increasingly disoriented public means that the insurgency is nowhere near success. Nor does it appear that the government is winning. It is only evident that the violence in Southern Thailand is destined to stay for the foreseeable future. All parties involved may be reevaluating their policies but none is anywhere close to a surrender.

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Endnotes:

[1] A parliamentary system is a type of democratic governance where the executive branch derives its democratic legitimacy from its ability to command the confidence of a legislative branch.

[2] A military junta, also known as military dictatorship is a type of governance in which the military group of a country rules after taking power by force.

[3] Bangkok Post. January 4, 2016, https://www.bangkokpost.com/archive/insurgency-claimed-6543-lives-in-last-12-years/815372

[4] Human Rights Watch. May 9, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/09/thailand-insurgents-bomb-southern-mall

[5] Kurlantzick (2016), p. 3

[6] *Ibid*.

[7] Abuza (2009), p. 3

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Dominguez, *Deutsche Welle*, July 20, 2015. URL - http://www.dw.com/en/a-look-at-southern-thailands-smoldering-insurgency/a-18591878

[10] International Crisis Group, December 11, 2012, p. 1

[11] Impunity watch (2010), p. 5.

[12] Andre (2013), p. 116.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Human Rights Watch, 2007, p. 45

[15] Schiavenza, *The Atlantic,* May 31, 2015. URL - https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/05/thailands-royal-conundrum/394529/

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] McKirdy and Paranasamriddhi, *CNN,* September 27, 2017. URL - http://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/27/asia/thailand-yingluck-shinawatra-verdict/index.html

[18] Andre (2013), p. 109.

[19] Kurlantzick (2016), p. 4.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] Wheeler (2010), p. 209.

[22] Abuza, *The Diplomat*, July 18, 2017. URL - https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/no-end-in-sight-for-thailands-deadly-southern-insurgency/

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] Dominguez, *Deutsche Welle*, July 20, 2015. URL - http://www.dw.com/en/a-look-at-southern-thailands-smoldering-insurgency/a-18591878

[25] Abuza, *The Diplomat*, July 18, 2017. URL - https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/no-end-in-sight-for-thailands-deadly-southern-insurgency/

[26] *Ibid*

Delhi Policy Group
Core 5A, First Floor, India Habitat Centre
Lodhi Road, New Delhi 110003
Phone: +91 11 48202100
Website: www.delhipolicygroup.org
Email: dg@dpg.org.in; dgoffice@dpg.org.in

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November 2017