

THE ONGOING CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN THAILAND AND ITS INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The military coup that was launched on September 19, 2006 in Thailand to bring down the government of Thaksin Shinawatra for its alleged failure to resolve the on-going crisis of confidence in the Thai capital as well as the escalating political violence in the deep south, demonstrated in no uncertain terms that Thai democracy itself was in crisis. The fact that the political quagmire in Thailand's southernmost periphery was affecting the power configuration at the centre in Bangkok is also unprecedented. Probably, this is one reason why there is no shortage of attempts to try to analyse what has gone wrong in Thailand and its southernmost region. As the southernmost part of Thailand, comprising the provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and to a lesser extent, Songkhla and Satun, are overwhelmingly Malay and Islamic, departing from the the rest of Thailand which is distinctively Thai in respect of culture and Buddhist in terms of religion, the politics of ethnicity is assumed to be the principal cause of the problem. However, no matter how the problem is analysed, what seems to emerge is that the on-going conflict in Southern Thailand is actually a function of a complex interplay of factors. This paper intends to focus on the nature and dimensions of the unresolved conflict in Southern Thailand and its actual and prospective international implications. It begins by re-capitulating the different ways in which the problem has been viewed before exploring the various external factors that have contributed to its persistence. The interconnected issues of irredentism, international terrorism, geopolitics, regional security, humanitarian interventionism and the role of the media will be particularly highlighted. Finally, the implications of the international dynamics of the on-going conflict, for Thailand and its neighbours, will be assessed.

Key Words: Southern Thailand, conflict, international terrorism.

INTRODUCTION

In the age of globalization, regionalism, the ICT revolution and the growing international concerns for fundamental human rights, good governance, democracy and the global war on terror, which appears to question the continued relevance of the traditional notion of the unconditional primacy of the nation-state, one wonders to what extent national governments can any longer

try to contain or insulate their internal problems from external scrutiny. Where do the borders of national prerogatives end and where do the boundaries of international accountability begin? In recent years we have seen this issue addressed, albeit sometimes inconsistently, incoherently and coercively, in Bosnia, Kosovo, Georgia, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, East Timor, Cambodia, Haiti, Afghanistan and Iraq to cite a few examples. These are the high-profile cases but there are plenty more which, for a variety of reasons, may not have caught as much attention as they should have. Thailand is apparently one of those countries which is becoming increasingly vulnerable to international scrutiny and accountability. This paper intends to examine this issue. It primarily seeks to highlight the nature and dimensions of the ongoing conflict in Southern Thailand and to analyse its actual and prospective international implications. The paper begins by recapitulating the current state of the debate on the crisis. It then goes to identify and examine the various external factors that are, in one way or another, connected or relevant to the problem. Specifically, the paper will examine the role of the following factors, namely, Malaysia, ASEAN, Organisation of Islamic Conference [OIC], the International Community and finally, the media, in relation to the problem. In the conclusion, the implications of the internationalization of the conflict for Thailand and its neighbours will be assessed.

Thailand today is probably facing its worst political and security crisis for a long time in the form of an ongoing insurgency in its southernmost border provinces or *changwat chaiden pak Tai* in Thai comprising the Muslim-dominated provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat and parts of Songkhla. This region which is also commonly referred to as the deep south has witnessed an unparalleled and unprecedented escalation of violence in the last five years or so not just in terms of its nature but also pattern, scale, frequency and impact. The ongoing conflict has been characterized as an ugly conflict and a rebellion. To me it resembles a low-key Malay-Muslim *intifada* which has far more popular involvement than the authorities are prepared to admit. So far about 2,500 people have already lost their lives in Thailand's southernmost region due to various acts of violence during this period and thousands more have been wounded. According to an Agence France-Presse report, over this period, 15 per cent of government schools have been torched and 71 teachers killed. Innocent civilians, both Muslims and Buddhists, have been maimed or murdered, monks and clerics injured, intimidated, or killed, soldiers ambushed and massacred, schools and government properties set alight, trains derailed, entertainment centres and markets bombed and places of worship including temples and mosques vandalized and attacked. Beheadings of innocent Buddhist civilians have also become common inspiring fear among many that the situation could degenerate to a point beyond repair. At the same time there have also been claims of unjustified, unaccountable and illegal arrests, detention, prosecution and execution of a large number of ordinary village folks by the authorities and many protests and demonstrations have been mounted against them. A small

contingent of 131 Muslim villagers from the deep south has also fled the country to seek refuge in Malaysia. A climate of fear and insecurity has prevailed all over South Thailand for the past five years affecting the lives of more than 5 million of its inhabitants. What makes this crisis potentially even more explosive is the fact that while the predominant population of the area in question is overwhelmingly Muslim in population and Malay in language and culture, the rest of Thailand is predominantly Buddhist in culture and religion with the Thai language as the sole dominant language. At a time when anything associated with Islam is invariably viewed with suspicion for its possible kinship with terrorism it is not difficult to imagine why the crisis in Thailand's deep south has all the ingredients for more trouble. At the same time, as observed by Chaiwat Satha-Anand, a more alarming trend that has occurred is that while in the past the conflict in the extreme south used to be vertical in character involving primarily the confrontation between the local people and the state, recently it has begun to take a horizontal form, pitting the Muslims against the Buddhists. Hardly a day passes now without incidents of violence being reported in the south and invariably these would involve tit-for-tat killings involving innocent civilians across the religious spectrum of society.

It is significant to note that the military coup in Thailand which took place in September of 2006 was partly a function of the increasing paralysis of the then civilian government of Thaksin Shinawatra to resolve the worsening political violence in Thailand's Muslim-dominated provinces. The role played by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army, and Chairman of the National Security Council, a Muslim himself, in spearheading the coup, is also revealing. But after being in office for almost one year already and despite more conciliatory gestures and measures offered to the Muslims in the form of new policies, strategies and initiatives, a peaceful solution to the crisis appears as elusive as ever. Martial law is still in place alongside an unpopular Emergency Decree which gives military and police officials immunity from prosecution. According to an evaluation by the International Crisis Group "The interim government has made no progress in granting justice to victims of past abuses and credible reports of torture and extrajudicial killings persist." (*International Crisis Group Asia Report* No. 129: 3) A general climate of fear, anxiety, inconvenience and insecurity in the whole southernmost region of Thailand has apparently emerged to highlight the existence of what appears to be unresolved fundamental issues confronting the Thai state and its Malay-Muslim population in the deep south.

1. Current State of Debate

Most analyses of the crisis in the south, no matter what position they take, tend to assume that essentially the problem is one directly caused by Malay-Muslim separatist insurgency which has apparently been fuelled by a range of possible factors including the economic marginalization, poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment of the Muslims and their perceptions of

widespread and longstanding discrimination and injustices against them by the state and its arms. The dominant view held by the Thai security establishment is that the conflict in the deep south is basically a function of Malay-Muslim separatist insurgency. The Thaksin government had wavered between blaming local criminal elements for the troubles in the south and accusing 'outsiders' for promoting violence. Some quarters have also tried to suggest that the violence in the south is a function of global terrorism. Outwardly, basically for political reasons, the military-installed government of Surayud appears more conciliatory in its approach to tackling the problem, willing to accept that it was the policy mistakes of the past government that had led to the mistreatment of the Muslims of the deep south and that therefore a policy shift should help overcome the situation but within the larger security establishment and among many Thai nationalists the principal suspicion is still that it is the Malay-Muslim separatist ambitions that are to blame. If Malay-Muslim separatism is the main cause of the problem, then Malaysia, as Thailand's southern neighbour and as a country whose majority Malay population shares a range of ethnic, social, cultural and religious affinities with the Malay-Muslims of Thailand's deep south in addition to family and kinship ties, for obvious reasons, has to be perceived as being part of the problem. Hence, the traditional suspicions that Thailand used to harbour against Malaysia's alleged irredentist designs have again re-surfaced. Never mind the facts but this has definitely been one way in which Malaysia's role has been consistently perceived in Thailand.

Two leading scholars on the problem in the south, Srisompob and Panyasak, have given a very balanced and informed evaluation of the crisis, underlining its complexity, suggesting that:

"Whereas many local people do not understand what is happening, ascribed causes range from the act of separatist movement, international terrorist attacks, a resurgence of historical consciousness on the part of local Malay Muslims, the outcomes of the government's mishandling of the southern problems, to long-standing grievances related to poverty, unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, drug abuse, vice, crime and social deprivation. Conspiratorial accounts also abound...A variation on these domestic conspiracy theories is the belief that government officials, the military, and the police have actually orchestrated much of the violence for their own purposes. Some people subscribe to international versions of these conspiracy theories, believing that the CIA and other foreign intelligence agencies have been playing the role of agent provocateurs in the deep South." (Srisompob and Panyasak: 100)

In more or less the same spirit as the above analysis, Saroja Dorairajoo, a specialist on Southern Thailand, argues that "While the Thai government has constantly and consistently assigned all blame for the violence in the south to the Muslim separatists and Muslim militants, evidence reveals that there is no one mastermind to the violent activities in the south. Instead many interest groups operate, often independently of each other, to create a climate of fear

and terror that has negatively affected both Muslims and Buddhists in the region.”(Dorairajoo: 84)

She is even more forthright in asserting that the discourse of violence in the Muslim provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat in Southern Thailand takes its anchor from what she calls the ‘ghost of separatism.’ “Any and every official discussion on the violence in the south is tagged on to this apparitional entity which is constantly resurrected to take blame for the violence in the south.”(Dorairajoo: 84)

Joseph Chinyong Liow, another well-informed observer of the problem in Thailand’s deep south is also very critical of attempts by security experts to approach the issue of long-standing tensions between Muslim communities and secular states with the ongoing war on terror as a point of entry. He argues that, “The problem with such an approach is self-evident when one considers how such works have privileged simplistic assumptions of Muslim resistance as expressions of a broader international *jihadi* struggle being conducted by well-connected Islamic terrorists, rather than complex and localized Muslim contestations against prevailing power configurations.”(Liow: 155)

Thanet Aphornsuvan attributes the problem in the south to policy failure and a lack of understanding of the factors that have contributed to violence. He singles out the interventionist educational policy of successive Thai governments as the principal culprit. Warayuth Sriwarakuel, on the other hand, cites the lack of trust among the population in the south especially in dealings with officialdom that is the root cause of the crisis.

From the above analyses, we can identify at least four major characteristics of the conflict. First, it is a complex conflict involving many perspectives and players. Second, although it has deep historical roots it has only escalated after the attack on a Thai military camp in January 2004 and due to subsequent violent actions by the authorities following this incident, notably at the Kruse Mosque and after that the town of Tak Bai. . Third, it is somehow connected to the global war on terror that the U. S. has launched following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, in New York whether in an imagined or real way. And fourth, despite all kinds of coercive and conciliatory measures undertaken by the Thai authorities it has continued to persist. An editorial in a leading Thai newspaper, The Nation, on 11 September 2007, succinctly summarizes Thailand’s dilemma stating that “The ongoing violence in the deep South of Thailand continues unabated to the point where it could escalate into a much bigger and nastier conflict. The Thai security agencies continue to debate whether the insurgency there is linked with international terrorism, which is beside the point. The point is that it matters little whether the Islamic militants/Malay separatists in the deep South have international connections. The point is how to effectively combat violence while at the same time dealing with the grievances of the local people that enable the insurgents to

attract new recruits. How to put an end to violence is the important question” (*The Nation*, September 11, 2007)

2. The Role of External Factors

For historical, geographical, ideological, political, cultural, social and economic reasons, the conflict in Thailand’s deep south has an innate international dimension that needs to be appreciated before any meaningful attempt can be made to resolve it. Liow correctly observes that “There should be little doubt that the conflict in southern Thailand is framed by the ongoing “global” war on terrorism, whose parameters are both being defined by the policy elite in Washington and embraced by their counterparts in Bangkok.” Another external dimension that he has identified is the so-called Malaysian connection. (Liow: 167) Across the border in Malaysia there have been open allegations by opposition politicians from the Islamic Party (PAS) of the role of the U. S. in creating the disturbance in southern Thailand. In a recent publication I have already examined the role of Malaysia in the context of resolving the ongoing conflict in Thailand’s southernmost provinces and will recapitulate some of the points I made in the following section. (Omar, 2006: 191-239) In practically, every other report on the problem, the role of the external factor in either prolonging, exacerbating or helping overcome the crisis, will almost surely be either explicitly or implicitly raised. The growing relevance of ASEAN as a regional economic bloc, has, for example, offered hope that whatever tensions and suspicions that might arise between Thailand and Malaysia over the conflict might be neutralized or overcome through the growing economic cooperation and ties that have been fostered by ASEAN. In an increasingly globalized world where information flows and ideas move across nations at a speed even faster than the movement of goods and people across borders, it would be difficult if not impossible for any country to try to prevent any external monitoring of negative or controversial internal developments. International civil society has now assumed a much visible presence everywhere including Thailand. But in the context of south Thailand, when we talk of the international factor that is immediately relevant to it, the visible role of Malaysia is very obvious. This is how Malaysia is considered to be inextricably linked to the conflict in southern Thailand.

2.1. Malaysia

It is a combination of geo-political, historical, demographic, ethno-cultural, educational, economic and religious factors that have created the natural and overlapping bonds between the Malay-Muslims of Thailand’s southernmost provinces with Malaysia. There seems to be a deep and symbiotic relationship between Malaysia and Thailand’s southernmost Malay-Muslim provinces. The International Crisis Group has suggested that the Thai government views Malaysia’s support of the separatist cause as a key stumbling block to resolving the conflict. [International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 98: 14] Nair, on the

other hand, correctly observes that “The Relationship between Malaysia and Thailand’s Muslim population centres around a shared identity defined by an inextricable link between religion and ethnicity”. (Nair: 173) Wan Abdul Rahman Wan Ab. Latif also seems to underline the importance of religion in Malaysia’s attitude towards the Muslims of Thailand arguing that “Malaysia’s relationship with the Muslims of Southeast Asia has a deep-rooted cultural origin that transcends political and geographical boundaries.”(Wan, 217) This is also only partly true. I have, in an earlier article, offered a slightly more detailed clarification of Malaysia’s role in southern Thailand emphasizing the historical roots to the crisis which have made Malaysia’s role critical to its resolution. I argued that historically the problem of Malay-Muslim separatism has involved Malaysia as much as it has involved Thailand. The Malay-Muslims appear to be convinced that “because of the factor of their common culture, religion ethnic background and past history with the Malays in Malaya, their ethnic brethren would readily come to their rescue”. Although the situation today has become more complex, the basic arguments that I made before are still valid. (Omar, 1984: 243-248) But essentially, the role of Malaysia in the context of the ongoing problem in Thailand’s southernmost provinces has been determined by the following factors,

2.1.1. Geo-Political

The factor of geographical contiguity between the Malay-Muslim dominated provinces of Thailand with Malaysia, where their ethnic brethren, the Malays, are the dominant group and the existence of extensive and overlapping kinship, cultural, religious and educational ties between them transcending their respective national boundaries, not only contribute significantly to the resilience of the Malay-Muslim identity in that part of Thailand but also give them the sense of belonging to a much bigger identity community than Thailand represents. The porous border between Malaysia and Thailand also makes it easy for the Malay-Muslims to move back and forth between Thailand and Malaysia. The existence of a very large number of Malay-Muslims holding dual Thai-Malaysian citizenship, estimated to be between 50, 000 to 100, 000 has also given political leverage to the Malay-Muslims across both sides of the border. The exile community of Malay-Muslims in Malaysia is also very large concentrated mainly in the northern Malaysian states of Kelantan, Perlis, Kedah and Perak. Because it is easy to move from one territory to another and the fact that there is a very large Malay-Muslim exile community in the states of Kelantan, Kedah, Perlis and Perak, Malay-Muslim separatist organizations have exploited fully the geopolitics of the border region to assert their presence and conduct their struggle against the Thai authorities.

2.1.2. Historical

The history of the Malay-Muslim provinces of Thailand is simply inseparable from the wider history of the Malay world. The forcible historical

incorporation of the Kingdom of Pattani into Thailand is widely known. The overlapping bonds of history between the Kingdom of Patani, which was once located in what is now the provinces of Songkhla, Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani and other Malay sultanates in the peninsula were strong and elaborate. Even as recent as the last years of the colonial era in British Malaya, the Malay-Muslims of southern Thailand were still hopeful that they would eventually be integrated into the new Malayan federation based on British war-time promises to them and in the spirit of the San Francisco declaration which guaranteed colonized people “the right to self-determination”. The complete history of the Malay-Muslim provinces can neither be written nor understood without incorporating the wider Malay regional element. Likewise the history of the Malay world would not be complete without the inclusion of the history of Pattani, which was once one of its principal centres. The collective historical consciousness of the Malay-Muslims has also been inspired by the lessons of the history of Pattani as a Malay sultanate. The notion of Malay-Muslim homeland is also based in Pattani. Historically too Malay-Muslim separatist organizations have always found a safe sanctuary in Malaysia as they can easily melt into the local population when necessary to maintain their low-profile visibility if not complete invisibility in Malaysia.

2.1.3. Demographic

With a population of over two million people, the Malay-Muslims in Thailand represent a sizeable and viable constituency which can choose either to insulate itself culturally from the rest of the nation or to integrate with it. In view of their numerical predominance in the southernmost parts of Thailand the majority-minority profile is reversed making them the de facto majority ethnic group and the Thais, the minority group. The Malay-Muslim population too has been growing very fast. And perhaps most importantly the existence of overlapping channels of contacts and networks with their own people within Thailand as well as other Malays across the border in Malaysia and even beyond, gives them a strong sense of membership in a wider Malay-Muslim community. Short of a genocide it is difficult to imagine that the Malay-Muslims of southern Thailand could be easily assimilated or annihilated.

2.1.4. Ethno-cultural

Ethnically, the Malay-Muslims of Thailand are Malays although there is evidence of some of them having been assimilated into Thai society. But that phenomenon happened only when they were uprooted from the southern region to be rehabilitated in other parts of Thailand which were overwhelmingly Thai ethnically. Essentially the Malay-Muslims speak Malay rather than Thai and practise Malay culture which make them culturally distinguishable from the Thais. Although legally there is a physical international boundary separating Malaysia from Thailand, this boundary is not co-terminus with the ethno-cultural boundary separating the Malay-Muslims from their Malay counterparts

in Malaysia. The sense of ethno-cultural togetherness with the Malays of Malaysia is therefore strong. Hence, the Malay ethno-cultural revival in Malaysia has invariably contributed to reinforce Thailand's Malay-Muslims' pride and confidence in their own culture. In the Malay-Muslim-dominated provinces of Thailand, the Thai-Buddhists represent a minority comprising essentially recent migrants from other parts of Thailand as well as government officials on temporary posting to the region. Thus, the Malay-Muslim provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and parts of Songkhla in South Thailand also in effect constitute a distinctive and viable Malay-Muslim ethno-cultural zone within the kingdom of Thailand with a strong relationship with their counterparts across the border in Malaysia.

2.1.5. Educational

Traditionally, the Pattani region used to be viewed in the Malay world, as the region's leading centre of Islamic religious education. Pattani was synonymous with Islamic education. Although the institution of the *pondok*, through which Islamic education in Pattani, used to be given, has come under increasing Thai government pressure to modernize or face closure, students from many parts of the Malay world still cherish the prospect of being educated in a Pattani *pondok*. This kind of link between the Malay-Muslim region and the Malays from Malaysia has also helped to enhance the visibility of Malaysia in that part of Thailand. But perhaps more significantly it is the reverse movement of students from Thailand's Malay-Muslim region to Malaysia in search of modern education. There is a large contingent of Malay-Muslim students from Thailand in all of Malaysia's institutions of higher learning. As Malaysia intensifies its efforts to market itself as the new educational hub in the region the number of Malay-Muslims seeking to enroll in Malaysian colleges and universities is bound to increase greatly.

2.1.6. Economic

The presence of a large number of Malay-Muslims from Thailand in Malaysia as migrant labourers, farmers, vendors as well as restaurant operators has also reinforced their economic dependence on Malaysia. The Malay-Muslims in Malaysia virtually dominate the Thai restaurant industry popularly known as *tomyam* restaurants. Malaysia has certainly emerged as an alternative and attractive job market for the Malay-Muslims. The economic activities of the Malay-Muslims in Malaysia have also generated a lot of revenue not just for the country but also for Malay-Muslims who usually remit their income home. The economic opportunities that Malaysia offers the Malay-Muslims in Thailand must have enhanced their positive image of the country. The Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle project which was intended to stimulate and generate the economic development of the three countries in transnational joint-projects is also supposed to speed the process of the economic integration

of the region encompassing northern Sumatra, northern Malay peninsula and south Thailand.

2.1.7. Religious

Malaysia tries to promote itself as a model Islamic state despite its secular constitution. Although Islam is regarded as the state religion in Malaysia other religions may be practiced freely. This feature of Malaysia in itself has a positive impact on the Malay-Muslims who have strong religious affinities with their Muslim counterparts in Malaysia. The active patronage and promotion of Islam by the government in a range of ways encompassing the areas of banking, legal system, education, commerce, food industry, insurance and promotion of values, have created a very good impression of the country among Muslims internationally including the Malay-Muslims of south Thailand.

2.2. ASEAN

Both Malaysia and Thailand are founder members of ASEAN which was established in 1967 with the express aim of, among other things, to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and “to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter.” Apparently part of the rationale for the establishment of ASEAN was to try to overcome the historical legacy of mutual suspicions that tended to characterize the relationships between the various countries including Thailand and Malaysia. Thus right from the beginning of its foundation ASEAN adopted the policy of “adhering to the especially important principle on non-interference in the internal affairs of its fellow member nations.” This policy evolved to become known as “the ASEAN way” which characterized ASEAN’s modus operandi when it involves relations with its own members. Malaysia too subscribes to the belief that “a strong and successful ASEAN is not only an economic necessity but also a strategic imperative. A prosperous, consolidated and stable ASEAN at peace with itself and with its immediate neighbours provide the best guarantee for the security of the entire Southeast Asia and East Asia region.” Thus, if in the first instance the comprehensive and overlapping bonds of commonalities that the Malay-Muslims of southern Thailand have with the counterparts in Malaysia, may appear threatening, both Malaysia’s and Thailand’s membership of ASEAN provides an instant counterbalance to this threat through the principle of the mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and political independence. Both Malaysia and Thailand recognize the need to pursue regional integration seriously and sincerely in order to inspire trust and confidence not just between themselves but also the other member states. ASEAN today remains committed to accelerating the process of integration as manifested in the ASEAN Vision 2020 which was adopted by the ASEAN leaders in 1997 and further reinforced by the Hanoi Plan of Action of

1998. Since ASEAN Vision 2020 envisages Southeast Asia as a community of caring societies where “all people enjoy equitable access to opportunities for total human development” implicitly, the ongoing conflict in south Thailand has to be addressed to enable the right conditions to emerge for total human development to take place. The problem, however, is that as ASEAN is basically a treaty organization without a proper legal system or representative structure, in practice it may be more difficult to enforce compliance. The recent attempt to come up with an ASEAN Charter to spell out more explicitly the fundamental rules of the game that member countries are expected to follow, is though imperfect, an indication of the recognition by ASEAN that it has to take itself on to another level of existence which would probably require a review of its strict non-interference policy.

But, in terms of individual members as well as bilateral relations all has not been well between Thailand and its neighbours. Both Indonesia and Cambodia have been openly accused by Thailand of helping the insurgents. The Thais alleged that a large number of missing Cambodian Muslims in Thailand is a clear indication of the Cambodian Muslim involvement in the Muslim insurgency in Thailand’s deep south. However, no less than the Cambodian Premier himself, Hun Sen, refuted the charges and said that Thailand was trying to find a scapegoat for its failure in resolving its own problem. The Thais have always suspected the large number of Cambodian Muslim religious students at Thailand’s numerous pondoks in the south of either being sympathetic to the Malay-Muslims or being themselves involved in the violence, charges they have always denied. Indonesia, on the other hand, has also been accused of providing sanctuary or training to the Malay-Muslim insurgents. These charges have also been denied by the Indonesians who have called for concrete proof of these accusations. Singapore has always had an interest in what is happening in the south of Thailand fearing that if the violence in that part of the peninsula spills over into the peninsula it could affect Singapore’s well-being as well. But the recent suspicions of Singapore trying to manipulate Bangkok through the ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra, have also created tensions between Singapore and Thailand but for different reasons from Cambodia, Indonesia or Malaysia. Nevertheless, despite these tensions their commitments to ASEAN have helped neutralize what could have been a far more inflammable situation.

2.3. Organization of Islamic Conference

As Islam is a factor in the ongoing conflict in south Thailand, it is inevitable that the role of the OIC has been invoked as part of the possible solution to the conflict. This is because of at least three factors. First, since the OIC is obliged to look after the interests of Muslims as well as member-states all over the world, whether or not its participation is solicited it is bound to be involved in one way or another. But obviously it would be better for all parties if its positive role could be harnessed. Second, when we talk about the OIC the highly visible role of Malaysia cannot be disregarded because it is at present the current

Chairman of the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference) since 2003 [to 2007] and with this leadership position the country has to be seen to be sensitive to the need to protect the interests of Muslims all over the world. In this sense, the Malaysian government will have to show interest in the question of the treatment of non-Muslim governments towards their Muslim minorities. Hitherto, because of its own constraints, Malaysia has been basically reacting on an ad hoc basis to any problem arising from any major incident involving the Malay-Muslims. Malaysia's response has always been measured taking into consideration its own obligations as Chairman of OIC, Thailand's sensitivities as well as the demands of domestic politics in Malaysia. Third, although Thailand is a predominantly Buddhist country, it was able through Malaysia's support and goodwill, to gain acceptance as a Permanent Observer of the OIC since 1996. Thus, because of its presence within the OIC, Thailand appears to be in a better position not only to defend itself from within of allegations of discrimination against the Muslims but can also use its influence to draw the support of the OIC to its side in its psychological war against the insurgents. Thus, many OIC delegations have been invited to visit the conflict region in the south to see the situation for themselves and to help persuade the Muslims in the south to renounce violence and seek the path of reconciliation. At the same, mindful of its privileged status as a Permanent Observer of the OIC, Thailand too has been making a range of concessions to the Muslims in the south to demonstrate that Islam is treated with respect in Thailand and that the ongoing problem is not due to religious discrimination against the Muslims.

2.4. The International Community

Due to its chronic and very violent nature the ongoing conflict in the south of Thailand has attracted the attention and interest of many foreign parties and governments. International civil society, like the Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and International Crisis Groups have been monitoring the conflict for years already and have indeed produced excellent reports on the situation on the ground with their own recommendations on what the conflicting parties and the outside world can and should do to ameliorate the suffering of the people directly affected by the conflict for so long already. Some of the recommendations to the Thai Government which Human Rights Watch made in its report issued in March 2007 are as follows:

- 1.** Promptly sign and ratify the Disappearances Convention and adopt all necessary legislation and other measures to comply with its terms. Act in accordance with the convention prior to ratification and prior to its coming into force.

- 2.** Make an enforced disappearance a criminal offense. The law should be amended so that it is not necessary to produce a body to proceed with a murder prosecution.

3. Ensure that all persons detained by the police and security forces are held at recognized places of detention, and are not subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Their whereabouts must be made known to family and legal counsel. They must be allowed contact with family and unhindered access to legal counsel of the detainee's choice. All procedural rights guaranteed under the constitution and the code of criminal procedure must be respected. In cases where a "disappearance" has been reported, the relevant security forces should immediately make known the whereabouts or circumstances of the detainee.

4. Ensure that the police, prosecutors, and the National Human Rights Commission conduct prompt, independent, and impartial investigations into allegations of "disappearances." Strengthen the independence and capacity of the Ministry of Justice, state prosecutors, and the National Human Rights Commission to ensure stronger investigations and public reporting of allegations of "disappearances" and other human rights abuses. It is vital that each is able to act independently and have the resources and security to perform their executive functions.

5. Prosecute officials regardless of rank responsible for "disappearances" and other abuses, including officials ordering "disappearances" or who knew or should have known about the pattern of abuses but took no action.

Foreign governments and international agencies were also asked by the Human Rights Watch to undertake the following:

1. Continue to press the Thai government to act on its stated human rights commitments under international human rights law, and publicly condemn specific violations and urge the Thai government to address them.

2. Actively monitor the end use of any weapons and material provided to Thailand to determine whether they have been used by security forces to commit violations of human rights. The United States has the closest relationship to the Thai military, while the United Kingdom has the closest relationship to the Thai police.

3. Urge the Thai government to ensure that security forces at all levels are receiving suitable training to improve compliance with international human rights law. This training should be woven into the training and operational instructions received by all security personnel.

4. Support the National Human Rights Commission and the human rights community in Thailand to be able to safely monitor, investigate, and report on allegations of abuses. Insist that the government, army and police do not interfere with, threaten, or intimidate human rights workers.

In its latest report issued in September 2007, Human Rights Watch warns the insurgents not to target innocent civilians as this constitutes a crime against humanity. Inspired by the leadership of the various INGOs in Thailand to

monitor the developments in the south and to promote a universal standard of decency many local NGOs, Muslim, Buddhist and interfaith, have also intensified their efforts to look for ways to arrest the conflict and begin the process of national reconciliation. The higher level of international accountability should help reassure the people in the south that the rule of law will prevail and that the innocent people will be protected from abuses.

2.5. The Media

The media has played a very important role in Thailand in bringing about the conflict in the south to the attention of the rest of the world. In a number of incidents which involved mass deaths, like the Kruse Mosque killings and the Tak Bai tragedy it was the media that highlighted the true course of events which the government was trying to cover up. It was also the media that followed up on the disappearance of the human rights lawyer, Somchai Neelaphajit, presumed murdered by the police, until it reached a level that it just would not go away. Although the real culprit or culprits have not been charged or convicted, this one individual case has greatly raised the human rights consciousness of a lot of Thais. The popular video versions of some of the major violent incidents like the Tak Bai tragedy which were circulated widely through CDs, DVDs and through the internet contributed to openly contradict the official version of events serving to offer 'the other side of the story' which was often either disregarded or never known at all. The constant international media coverage of the ongoing conflict in the south, has given it an international profile it could never expect to achieve otherwise. Continued media attention on the ongoing might not help resolve it but would certainly ensure that there will be less human rights abuses in the name of national security.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion it is obvious that due to a variety of reasons the ongoing conflict in Thailand's deep south has its own international dynamics. The role of Malaysia with its contiguous and porous borders with Thailand, especially in its southernmost and geostrategically vulnerable area and as a convenient constituency where Malay-Muslims from Thailand can easily either seek refuge, employment or sympathy creates the impression among many Thais that it may have irredentist designs on that part of Thailand. There seems to be an uneasy feeling that whatever the Thai government does, be easily undermined or circumscribed by Malaysia which is also widely perceived in Thailand to be naturally sympathetic to the cause of Malay-Muslim separatism. Thailand's obsession with its territorial integrity and the aggressive pursuit of its traditional understanding of national security which is invariably defined by territory and physical presence or force have also helped perpetuate this suspicion. The tendency to view Malaysia as being part of the problem may not be helpful as it will only undermine the spirit of cooperation and trust that

has been so carefully nurtured between the two countries for a long time and consolidated by their mutual membership of ASEAN. The only viable alternative is to view Malaysia as being part of the solution. In fact, this process has already started. Malaysia has already been coopted to help Thailand in various ways especially in providing educational assistance to the Malay-Muslims. At the same time, both Malaysia and Thailand, recognize that unless the southern region is developed the Malay-Muslims of Thailand are going to feel marginalized further and if this happens the conflict in the south is unlikely to end soon. The ASEAN factor may be an additional way for Thailand and Malaysia to continue to pool their resources together and with the other member states of the regional organisation to bring about a better quality of life for all the citizens of the region as envisaged in ASEAN Vision 2020. Strategies have indeed been identified but legal regimes will have to be introduced to ensure compliance but probably this is the most difficult area to achieve. But as the the modus operandi within ASEAN begins to change to accommodate the need for greater accountability latent tensions are bound to surface. ASEAN leaders will have to learn to negotiate the new challenges that they have to overcome with courage and wisdom.

The OIC is another venue which offers Thailand both challenges and hopes at the same time. Thailand will have to get used to the idea that, whether it likes it or not, the OIC factor has to be taken into account in its policies towards its Malay-Muslim constituency but at the same time it can count on its status as a Permanent Observer to solicit the goodwill and cooperation of the OIC to help it enhance its reputation in the eyes of its own Muslim citizens. Thailand can be expected to use the OIC in its attempt to undertake the political socialization of its Muslim population to orientate them towards Thailand. At the same time, Thailand can also use its status in OIC to consolidate its friendship with other member states of the organization.

The role of the international community in the ongoing conflict in south Thailand is now a given. There is no way in which Thailand can avoid scrutiny from the international community. INGOs like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are bound to assert their presence even further especially working in tandem with their local counterparts. Especially in Thailand it is very difficult to imagine that the government would want to undo what has been achieved over a period of a few decades in terms of the emergence of a viable civil society in the kingdom. In fact, even if the government wants to resist the international environment has already changed considerably in the region to make this option viable. As people become more exposed and better informed they can be expected to make more demands on the state especially in respect of their fundamental rights. The United Nations Human Rights instruments which are already there will be more seriously and systematically invoked by the ordinary people in Thailand as elsewhere in Southeast Asia as their inalienable rights which cannot be taken away from them. INGOs like Human Rights

Watch and Amnesty International have already served notice, as we have seen earlier, that if national governments are not prepared to do their job, they will be there, working with their local counterparts, to help. The media too will almost certainly not let abuses of power go away unnoticed and unchecked or terrorist acts of violence unreported. Although there will always be the danger of media manipulation, an even greater evil is to constrict the freedom that the media rightfully deserves. It is likely that the ongoing conflict in Thailand's deep south stands a better chance of being resolved when it is placed under international scrutiny not to question Thailand's sovereignty but rather to show that it is above suspicion and at peace with itself. This is probably going to be the benchmark in Southeast Asia for the future.

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