

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND OF THE UNREST IN SOUTH THAILAND

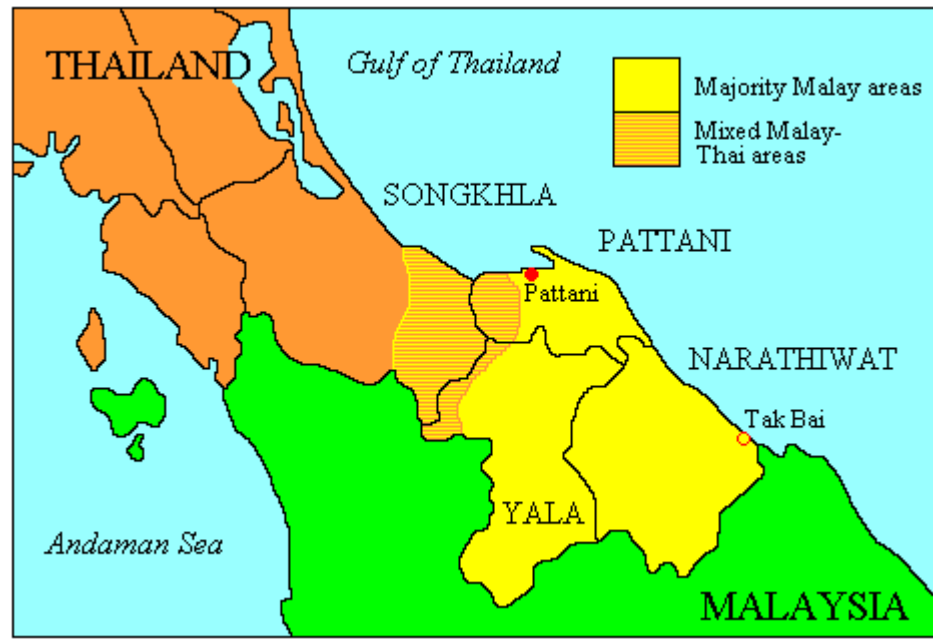


Figure 1: The Southern provinces of Thailand showing the Malay-Muslim majority areas (source:<http://www.answers.com/topic/souththailandmap-gif>)

In 1902, Pattani was formally annexed by Siam. Seven years later, under the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, the British colonial administration in Malaya forced the King of Siam to cede sovereignty over all of these except Pattani to Britain, while the British recognized Siamese sovereignty over Pattani, which became a monthon (region) of Siam. In 1933 the monthon was divided into the provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala.

In the late 1950s a number of Malaysian refugees slipped across the border into Thailand. These Malaysian refugees were Communist guerrillas. Thailand became the place where they blended into the local Malay community. At that time the Kingdom of Siam exercised a loose sovereignty over the northern part of the Malay Peninsula, including the Malay Sultanates of Kedah, Kelantan, Pattani, Perlis and Terengganu, from the 16th century. Malay

resistance expanded and by the late 1960s there were more than 60 armed groups operating in the south.

During the 20th century the area was assimilated into Thai society. Most people acquired Thai names, and there was considerable Thai Buddhist settlement in the area. Most southerners speak and understand Thai. Although there were considerable Buddhist missionary efforts, some 2.6 million people in the three provinces, as well as some districts in Songkhla province, still speak Malay as their first language, and have remained Muslims. Over 80% of the population in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat continue to remain under Islam. However, the Pattani Malays have little sense of connection with the Malays of modern Malaysia, and they speak a distinct local version of the language known as Yawi.

Important movements in Southern Thailand

There have been separatist movements in Pattani since at least the 1930s but they were unsuccessful. During World War II, when Thailand under the nationalist regime of Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram was an ally of Japan, Tengku Mahmud Mahyuddin, a prominent Pattani leader, who was the son of the last Raja of Pattani, allied himself with the British in the hopes that should the allies win, Pattani would be granted independence after the war. After the war, there was an attempt to establish a "Greater Malay Pattani State", but the British gave this movement no support and hopes of an independent Pattani were shattered.

In the late 1940s when the Phibun regime tried to impose Thai-language education on the area, the Pattani leader Haji Sulong Tokmina (who had supported the Japanese during the war as a rival to the pro-British Tengku Mahmud Mahyuddin), wanted cultural autonomy but not independence. Haji Suulong was imprisoned in 1948 and killed by the police shortly after his release in 1952.

In 1948, an incident which was “a central and highly controversial episode in the history of southern Thailand”¹⁰ took place. This incident was called the Dusun-nyor rebellion of April 1948. It was a conflict between Thai government forces and the Malay-Muslim villagers living in Dusun-nyor. This incident was caused by the misunderstanding of the Thai government under Field Marshal Phiboonsongkram who thought that Malay-Muslim villagers were preparing themselves for a fight against the Thai government. In reality these villagers were gathering and performing their own ritual. The ritual was conducted with the belief that if one bathed themselves in magic oil, they would be invulnerable, none of the weapons could hurt or kill them. Furthermore, it was said that Malay-Muslim villagers performed this ritual in order to protect themselves from Chinese Bandits or the so-called the Communist Party of Malaya.

In 1959, the National Pattani Liberation Front (BNPP) called for full independence of the Pattani provinces. The National Revolutionary Front (BRN) emerged in the early 1960s, also seeking an independent republic. The Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) was formed in 1968, with help from Patani leaders who had gone into exile in Malaya and Saudi Arabia in the late 1940s, and implanted a religious dye on the nationalist movement. Other rebels joined in with the communists in a movement described earlier. A series of incidents in the mid-1970s – mostly between a growing number of Islamist militias and Buddhist paramilitaries as well as state security forces – were worrying for future security of the state.

By the early 1980s, however, the Thai government under General Prem Tinasolanond overhauled its security apparatus and brought a degree of prosperity to the country. Good policing and economic growth were effective in stemming the violence. Prem, a southerner, established the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) under the command of the Fourth Army. This Centre

¹⁰ Chaiwat Satha-Anand, “The silence of the bullet monument: Violence and ‘truth’ management, Dusun-nyor 1948, and ‘Kru-Ze 2004’,” *Critical Asian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2006), pp. 11–37.

rooted out officials who were provocative in their dealings with local Muslims, and established on-going relationships with Malay Muslim leaders. Amnesty of militants both worked to reduce recruitment by the radical Muslims. There were still little open secessionist feelings until the liberalisation of Thai politics in the 1980s, but separatist groups such as the National Revolutionary Front (Barasan Revolusi Nasional, BRN) survived and maintained a base of support.

Disturbance in the 1990s, was led by Malay intellectuals influenced by revolutionary and Islamist ideas from the Middle East. The BRN split into three rival factions, of which the most militant were the BRN Coordinate and the BRN Congress. The BRN Congress is now regarded as the most active group, but there are several others, and competition between these militant groups has helped fuel the insurgency. It is believed that there is now a co-ordinating body called the Pattani United Liberation Organization (Dewan Pembabasan Pattani or PULO), although little is known about the composition or leadership of the various groups.

PULO's stand is highlighted by its Islamic nationalist goals, calling the Thai presence in Pattani "a colonisation" and an "illegal occupation." Its stated aims are to separate from Thailand through military and political means, and to create a state named Patani Darul Makrif (Pattani, Land of Good deeds). The PULO flag has four red and white stripes and a blue rectangle on the upper left with a crescent and a star similar to other Malaysian Malay states.

In 1997 PULO were allied to an umbrella group called Bersatu (Unity) that camped in northern Malaysia. They carried out thirty-three separate attacks (with nine associated deaths) in a campaign called "Falling Leaves" which targeted state officials. (General Prem threatened Malaysia with trade sanctions and Bersatu leaders were quickly arrested). The Islamic Mujahidin Movement of Pattani, which was formed in 1995, had a leader who trained in Libya and fought with the Afghan Mujahidin. These organizations could recite a litany of grievances to help recruit local rebels. Disrespect for Islam (for example, in the promotion of tourism, which brought wealth, but the dress and activities of the tourists were held to be sinful by local cultural standards), and the marginalizing of the Malay language provided grist for the

rebel mill. Despite proto-insurgent organizational survival and a compelling agenda of indignities, the amount of damage caused in the period 1980-2001 was quite minimal, hardly qualifying as a civil war. In fact, rebel activities mostly concentrated on isolated terrorist attacks rather than capture and rule of villages, suggesting that conditions for rebels were hardly ripe for insurgency. But the period of relative peace did not last.

Political violence in the southern provinces in the 2001-2004 period, while still decentralized, has pushed Thailand into a civil war. In 2001, small-scale attacks, such as the bombing of the Haad Yai train station, resulted in only a single death, although there was a great deal of property damage and injuries. A series of attacks on police checkpoints killed five police officers and a defense volunteer. In 2002, Muslim groups, numbering no more than thirty members for each group, coordinated a set of ambushes, murders, weapons thefts and criminal extortions. By 2003, the group Jemaah Islamiyah was on the verge of bombing embassies. In early 2004, several soldiers were killed when armed bandits stormed an army depot, and in a related set of attacks, twenty schools were torched. In that same period, some seventy Thais were killed, mostly in drive-by killings by motorcyclists. In April 2004, at least 112 people were killed in clashes between security forces and militants. All in all, the criteria for a civil war onset were met. Thai security forces killed enough rebels to qualify. In their military campaign, they killed the leader of the New Pattani United Liberation Organization in 2000. On April 27, 2004, troops stormed the Krue Se Mosque where insurgents were using it as a sanctuary, and killed thirty-one. On that same day, another seventy-four attackers were killed by security personnel. In October seven protestors (against the arrest of supposed supporters of the militants) were shot dead by the police. The police then rounded up suspects for questioning, and seventy-eight of them died en route to the army camp. But the real killing – turning the violence into civil war proportions – was in the related war on drugs in which 2,275 people were killed in 2003. Police went indiscriminately against Thai Muslims in killing rampages supposedly in the name of drug control, with little state oversight.

The Mujahideen Islam Pattani was accused of killing fifty police officers from 2001-2004. The Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) claims that Thai security forces have been “falling like leaves” in the face of their insurgency. It is surely the case that at least one hundred state personnel have been killed in the Patani violence since 2001.

Present Situation in Southern Thailand

Martial law was instituted in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat in January of 2004, and violence increased, with 200 Muslims killed by troops during the year. In April, troops killed over 100 Muslim men in Yala province who attacked well-defended police stations with only light weapons, in what police described as "suicidal" attacks. Those incidents to some extent could be the example of the belief that “ethnic and religious minorities have been subjected to the brutality of state terror and sometimes genocide.”¹¹

In December 2005, representatives from five Muslim insurgent groups met secretly with senior Thai military and intelligence officers in Langkawi, Malaysia to develop a peace plan for the South. However, the dialogue between the government and the rebels is seen at a dead end.

Many Thai Muslims fled across the border into Malaysia to escape ongoing violence in restive southern Thailand. In 2005 there was the flight of 131 Thai citizens of Muslim-Malay ethnic origin for asylum in neighboring Malaysia.

Meanwhile, Malaysian authorities announced that so-called refugees from southern Thailand will be arrested and deported if they crossed over to Kelantan to seek political asylum.

In September 2006 there was coup in Thailand.. Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont’s interim government has repaired some policies of the former government and signalled willingness to address longstanding grievances. Surayud made an historic apology to southern Muslims for past abuses, announced an end to

¹¹ Alexander Horstmann, “Incorporation and Resistance: Borderlands, Transnational Communities and Social Change in Southeast Asia” (working paper, Institute of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan, 2004), p. 19.

blacklisting of suspected insurgents leading to a significant decrease in arbitrary arrests and revived key conflict management institutions disbanded by Thaksin Shinawatra in May 2002.

Since the coup the new government has made significant progress in mending ties with neighboring countries, especially Malaysia. Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi has praised Surayud's "more diplomatic" approach to the restive south.¹²

From this chapter we can see that the conflict in the South of Thailand has a long history centering Thai cultural and political subjugation. This problem is not only complicated but it is also differently interpreted. In order to understand more about the case, the genesis of problem will be discussed in the next chapter whether the conflict in the South is an ethnic or religious movement.

¹² "Malay PM says Surayud on Right Track in South," *Bangkok Post*, December 12, 2006.