Chapter 5

Separatist Insurgency in Southern Thailand:
An Approach to Peacemaking

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I. Introduction

On January 4, 2004, Malay-Muslim insurgents in southern Thailand raided a military camp, killing four guards and stealing a cache of weapons. Simultaneously, eighteen public schools were set ablaze in coordinated arson attacks. The day’s violence marked a qualitative shift in a decades-old conflict between the Malay-Muslims concentrated in the country’s southernmost provinces and the government of Thailand. Since January 2004, roughly 3,000 deaths have occurred in connection with separatist violence in the region. The latest iteration of the conflict is both the continued manifestation of long-standing grievances between a majority government and a minority population, and, simultaneously, the signaling of new conceptualizations of, and justifications for, violence.

Historically, the minority Malay-Muslim population has viewed the Buddhist government of Thailand with suspicion, fear, and contempt. Since the region’s annexation, portions of the population have conceived of the government as an internal colonial power. Organized insurgency has existed since the late-1940s, and though violence has waned during certain periods, Thailand has yet to achieve a lasting peace. As Reisman notes, stopping kinetic violence (war) and making peace are distinct: “Stopping war is a short-term and provisional action [...] unless stopping is followed by a qualitative change in the objectives and expectations of the belligerents [...] the war will resume whenever one of the parties wishes.” Despite periods

1 Rohan Gunaratna et al., Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand 22 (2005).
2 Id.
of limited war-stopping, it is peacemaking that has eluded decades of military and civilian administrations in Thailand. Determining viable options for the endeavor of peacemaking in southern Thailand, if not the beginnings of a strategy, is the focus of this chapter.

The southernmost provinces of Thailand⁶ are not in a state of open, conventional war, but rather a constant, low-level separatist insurgency fueled by a variety of groups engaging in intercommunal and terrorist violence coupled with more traditional insurgent attacks. Thailand’s southern provinces are a demographic anomaly compared to the rest of the country. Muslims represent Thailand’s largest religious minority at roughly 5 percent of the total population. However, Muslims in Thailand are highly concentrated with over 80 percent residing in the three southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat,⁷ creating a nearly homogeneous Muslim region.⁸

This conflict is exceptionally complex, rooted in a deep and troubled history, framed by concepts of ethnic and religious identity, and fueled by cyclical patterns of separatist violence and government reaction that has led the local population to doubt the legitimacy and viability of government control over the region. In order to develop a set of policies and principles to help guide the transformation of the Pattani region into a peace system, this chapter will evaluate conflict in the region to develop an adequate lens through which to understand the forces driving tension and violence.

In Section II, this chapter will begin by cataloging the history of conflict between the Malay-Muslims and the Thai government. Section III will then explain the current phase of the conflict, which for the purposes of this chapter is defined as January 2004 to the present day. Section IV will establish a framework through which one can better understand the underlying drivers of the conflict with an eye toward relying on that framework to identify peacemaking initiatives. Section V will examine three different (past) approaches to war-stopping and peacemaking on the part of the Thai government. Finally, Section VI will consider what can be done to transform the latest iteration of the conflict from a system characterized by daily violence to one of sustainable peace.

II. Conflict History

The current phase of the Malay-Muslim insurgency is the latest in a century of tension between the minority population and the Thai-Buddhist authority. This sec-

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⁶ The conflict zone is limited primarily to Thailand’s three southernmost provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani. Together these provinces are referred to as the “Deep South.” Insurgent activity has also occurred in the provinces of Satun and Songkhla, which are located directly north of the three southernmost provinces, and are often considered part of the historical zone of separatist conflict.

⁷ The provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani are often referred to collectively as the “Pattani region” denoting their historical location within the Malay-Muslim Kingdom of Pattani.