KOÇJMUN 2025
Commitment to Innovation

RESEARCH REPORT

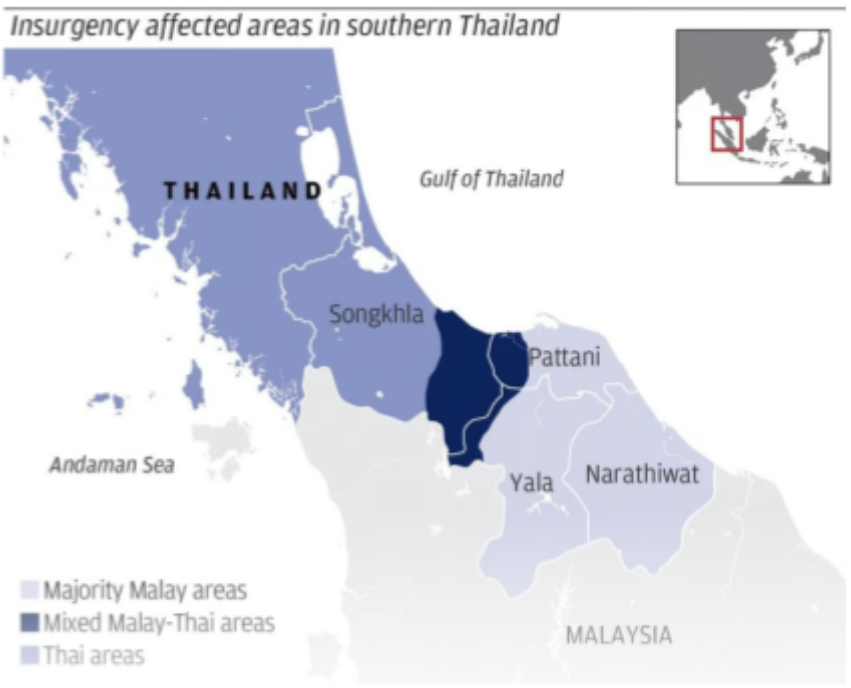
UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND PEACEBUILDING AFFAIRS (UNDPPA)

MEDIATING TERRITORIAL DISPUTES IN THE SOUTH THAILAND INSURGENCY

BURAK YILDIRIM

Basic Overview of the Issue

The South Thailand Insurgency is a separatist movement centered in the southern provinces of Thailand, particularly the provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Songkhla. These regions consist mostly of Malay Muslims and were historically governed by them under the Sultanate of Pattani. The region was transferred to Thai rule by the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909. The region remained peaceful thanks to the lack of intervention from the Thai government, which allowed the Patani people to live their traditions and make use of Islamic law instead of Thai Civil Law. However, in 1934, Plaek Phibunsongkhram, who would later become the prime minister of Thailand, started a process called Thaification, aiming to assimilate the Malay Muslims culturally. Thai civil law began to be enforced, schools were taught in Thai instead of the local Jawi, the native language of the people there, and Muslim courts were removed. In 1947, Haji Sulong started a campaign for autonomy and cultural freedom of the Patani people. He was later jailed, and he mysteriously disappeared a few years after his release.



A map displaying areas affected by insurgent groups in South Thailand and their ethnic division.

The Patanis began a nationalist movement after being denied recognition. This turned into the South Thailand Insurgency. The Patani National Liberation Front (BNPP) was established as the first rebel group of the Malays. The groups aimed to create an independent Patani state in the region. The groups conducted attacks on military and police posts, schools, and government offices. Despite these attacks, the situation was

relatively peaceful.

In 2001, the attacks took a more violent turn. The new attacks were conducted in secrecy, decreasing the ability of the Thai government to respond. The new attacks became more organised, and the sources of many remained unknown. With Thailand getting widespread international support, the future of the Muslim minority and whether it will be able to survive the pressure between the Thai assimilation and the terror attacks remains unknown.

Explanation of Important Terms

Patani Darussalam

The term Patani Darussalam is a term given to a historic province of the Malay peninsula, as well as the Malay Sultanate that was located in said region. It is a region in which there can be found a muslim minority that has come to be a point of discussion with connections to the South Thailand Insurgency. The term should not be mistaken with the Patani region, which controls a different area in the greater area.

Insurgency

An insurgency can be considered a form of rebellion against an organized group. This often includes rebellions made by militia groups against governments and their bodies. An insurgency, however, is not an organized rebellion. (Asprey)

Minority

A group of individuals who are culturally, politically, ethnically, racially, religiously, or by any other means, separated from a larger group of societal formations that surround them. In the case of this issue, the Muslim population is the minority group. (Brittanica)

Minority Rights

According to the separate terminology, all minorities must be allowed to practice their religion, speak their own language, and continue their cultural traditions without being touched. This gives the Malays in the Patani region the right to practice Islam without the government banning it, speak in their original language of Jawi, and keep Malay traditions as they choose. Despite the crimes committed by separatist groups in the South Thailand Insurgency, the primary cause of this issue shouldn’t be forgotten. The issue has been caused by the oppression and

assimilation of the Malay Muslims in Patani, and it is particularly important to address the primary cause before aiming to end the separatist violence.

Thaification

Thaification refers to the processes aimed at assimilating the different cultures in Thailand into Thai culture. Thaification aimed to effectively turn Thailand into a nation-state. The rise of Thaification coincided with the rise of nationalism in Europe before World War 2. Thaification was mainly focused on the Chinese and the Malay minorities. The Malays responded to Thaification by campaigns and resorted to separatism when met with no proper response from the government, leading to the South Thailand Insurgency.

Detailed Background of the Issue

The South Thailand Insurgency is an old conflict caused and continued by historical, ethnic, and religious tensions in Thailand's most southern provinces. The insurgency mainly centers around Malay-Muslim separatist groups fighting the Thai government, which is Buddhist. Over time, the violence has led to thousands of deaths and has resulted in the continuing instability in the region.

The origins of the conflict go as early as the early 20th century when the Sultanate of Patani was transferred to Thai rule by the Anglo-Siamese Treaty in 1909. The Muslim population of Patani was considered as a minority and was given the rights to practice their culture and implement Islamic Law. Later on, with the rise of nationalism in Thailand, these rights were taken from the Patani people in an instant, robbing them of their minority identity. Some groups among the Patanis choose to violence in response to the oppression. By the middle of the 20th century multiple separatist groups emerged in the region. The conflict has rekindled after 2001 following a period of relative peace.

The attacks following 2001 were more coordinated and were conducted in secret. The Thai government was left in confusion as they could not locate the sources of the attacks. Some groups mentioned below in the section titled "The Separatist Groups" have been identified as the source for some attacks however, it is still uncertain who holds the real power in the south and who conducts the majority of the attacks. This has made it more

difficult for the Thai government to negotiate with the Patani people, as even when the leader of one militant (armed rebellion group) group offers to cease fighting, their authority in the region is low and the conflict continues.

The Separatist Groups

The separatist groups in the South Thailand Insurgency consist mostly of Islamists and Jihadists. Recognizing the actions and nature of these groups is important in strengthening the counterinsurgency movement led by the Thai government.

Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Koordinasi (BRN-C)

The BRN-C is the strongest group in the Patani region. Led mostly by Salafi Muslims, the BRN-C recruits members from mosques and through education in Islamic schools. The BRN-C has no political plans or goals, and its broad aim is to damage peace in the Patani region. The group made assassinations, bombings, calculated destruction, and guerrilla (method of fighting using the region's structure like in Vietnam agaisnt an organized enemy) warfare, making them overall successful in their goal.

Runda Kumpulan Kecil (RKK)

Alleged to be an armed wing of the BRN-C, RKK has been the most violent group in the conflict. The members, who are mostly young Salafis, conduct violent attacks and routinely flee to Malaysia. Their acts consist of arson, murder, and kidnappings.

Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani (GMIP)

Formerly a nationalist group, the GMIP has become an Islamist group since the rekindling of the conflict in 2001. The members reportedly support Al Qaeda and the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate.

Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO)

Originally a nationalist and secular group, PULO aimed to free Pattani from Thai rule through armed struggle. However, since 2001, its influence has decreased as Salafi ideology has reshaped the insurgency. Many former PULO members have joined more religiously driven groups, and PULO now has little control over the broader conflict. In 2009, PULO attempted to regain influence by uniting with the GMIP to form the Patani Liberation Army (PLA). Abu Yasir Fikri, PULO's president, was given authority to speak for GMIP politically, while PLA's military leadership remained under PULO's command. That same year, PULO

also sought international support by presenting a conflict resolution proposal at an OIC conference in Jeddah, but these efforts failed to restore its former influence. It can be seen that the majority of the separatist groups are either extremists or are under heavy Salafi influence. This can consist of a threat to the identity of the Patani people. Hence, for a solution to properly address the concerns of the people rather than the militants, the Patanis should be given a chance to express their opinions through polling or a referendum.

The Government Response

It is clear that the root cause of the issue stemmed from the Thai government and its nationalism. However, the Thai government has taken multiple stances across different leaders. There have been efforts to negotiate with the insurgents, but the efforts have not been fruitful due to the anonymous nature of the attackers. In 2004, one of the leaders, Wan Kadir Che Man, offered to stop fighting and soften the demand for full independence. The government seemed responsive at first, but was criticised for treating the offer as a way to gain positive publicity. In the end, the offer proved fruitless as Wan Kadir Che Man did not have full control over the region and the insurgents. The Thai government established a no-negotiation policy in response to the issue.

Sonthi Boonyaratglin, an army general who would later overthrow the Thai government and rule the military junta, stated that a “new and effective” approach would be taken to the issue. He also stated that he would ensure that the military got adequate information on the attackers. After the bombing of 22 banks in Thailand, Sonthi announced that he would break the no-negotiation policy. However, the government was not fully in favour of this move. Even if the government was convinced, the army did not know who to negotiate with.

Later in 2006, the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) was created to negotiate with the insurgents. The leader of the NRC, Anand Panyarachun, criticised the Thai government and blamed it for arresting innocent people. The NRC basically offered a return to the times before Thaification, the introduction of Islamic Law and more cultural freedom in the south were recommended alongside the establishment of an unarmed peacekeeping force. The proposal was rejected by the government, which said that Thailand was a Thai nation, echoing the idea of Thaificaiton and Thai nationalism.

Major Parties Involved

Thailand

Thailand, being the country in which the situation takes place in, has responded strongly to the insurgencies. Martial law began to be implemented in South Thailand as part of the crackdown on the insurgents. The responses of the Thai government need to be strong to establish order in the region. However, the identity of the Patani people shouldn't be oppressed, which is a point that has faced criticism and has been the source of the conflict. This has made the Thai position more debatable as they, by legal means, have the right to and must centralize the population but this also results in the minorities losing their culture.

United States of America

The United States of America has assisted Thailand in intelligence operations and supplied them with K-9 dogs, military training, and personnel. Another reason when it comes to why the USA comes to support the Thai government while it speaks for minority rights constantly comes from its international conflict with China, where they see the Thai government as an ally not worth losing to the Chinese.

A map displaying the countries that are members of ASEAN and its additions.

Malaysia

Despite unofficially supporting the insurgents due to their religion and ties to Malaysia, the Malay government has recently taken a stance that asks for peace in the region and does not support the insurgents. This is important considering how Malaysia and Thailand are a part of many joined organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or others, making their conflict due to this a cause for potential instability in the greater region as a whole. However, Malaysia is also a Muslim country, and it is for that reason that a large percentage of the Malaysian population supports the insurgency as they see them to be their brothers and sisters under Islamic

tradition. Malaysia is also a neighbor to the region where the Insurgency is located, and so, is geographically close to the point of debate. Overall, the question of if Malaysia officially supports the insurgency is a clear “no” as they have not made any official statements confirming the allegations.

China

China, being one of the largest global powers in the world, has come to support Thailand in the matter for various reasons. China believes that supporting Thailand is the right choice, considering how they are also often blamed for targeting minorities in the regions of Xinjiang or East Turkestan under Chinese control. They see this as a chance to crack down on international support for Muslim minorities around the world. Also, China wants to increase its strength in Southeast Asia as the dominant political and economic factor, which can only be done if the countries in the region are willing to take up China as the main economic partner instead of the USA.

Chronology of Important Events

1948	The very first origins of the South Thailand Insurgency just after the Second World War start to gain shape.
1960-2001	Insurgency began in the southern provinces, fighting remained relatively peaceful. Some deaths occurred, and organisations such as the PULO and the BRN were formed.
Septerm 11, 2001 - 2004	Following the September 11 Attacks on the World Trade Center, militants distributed propaganda calling for support and war for Osama Bin Laden. Attacks on police posts began taking place.
2001	The US affirms support for the Thai government as a greater part of the war on terror.
April 28, 2004	Krue Se Mosque Incident occurs. Thai forces attacked a mosque and killed 32 insurgents.

October 25, 2004	The Tak Bai Incident occurred and 85 protesters died, mostly from suffocation during military transport.
2006	After intense fighting since 2001, a coup d'etat on September 19, 2006 briefly reduced conflict. The military junta was more willing to reconcile. The efforts have been futile, and fighting has resumed since.
March, 2011	The Thai government officially recognizes the increasing rate of insurgency in the region and plans to make counterinsurgency efforts stronger than ever before.
May 9, 2017	A bomb in a shopping mall exploded, 56 individuals were wounded.
2017 - Ongoing	Increased conflict causes instability, and suspicions on international support for the insurgency rises.

Relevant International Documents

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948, General Assembly Resolution S/RES/217A.
- Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, December 18, 1992, General Assembly resolution 47/135
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Adopted in 16 December 1966
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Adopted in 16 December 1966

Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

There have been multiple efforts to solve the issue, but until now, all have failed. The government of Thailand tried efforts of negotiate with insurgent groups, but their disunited

nature and lack of loyalty have also made this ineffective.

In 2013, Malaysia facilitated peace talks between the Thai government and the Barisan Nasional Revolusi (BRN). This ended up also failing due to how the Thai government, at the time, was still continuing military operations and the insurgent groups were not united in their agreement. Believing that the support for insurgency was due to a lack of development, the Thai government made economic development plans that have also shown to be a rather weak method, since although the support did decrease, the principal motivations were not changed at all.

Some International organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have argued that the way in which the government deals with the issue and the insurgency is too violent and threatens the safety of their Islamic brethren. This ,however has not affected the situation as much. The Thai government has rejected foreign intervention, arguing that the insurgency is a domestic (national level) issue. Despite occasional ceasefires and local agreements, violence continues in the region, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive approach.

Solution Alternatives

The solutions that should be presented need to address both sides of the conflict. To address the Thai government's concerns by themselves would crush the identity of the Patani people, and doing the opposite would result in Thailand losing its territorial integrity.

One possible solution is for the Patani people to get minority rights and proper recognition. However, the Thai government has previously rejected this proposal. The idea could be revived if the main force behind the attacks is identified. This could be done by giving Thailand international support and potential economic or political incentives that negotiate a possible decision to recognise the minority presence in the region and act accordingly. Furthermore, Thailand would be further motivated to take this decision if there is clear international support for it, meaning, if nations around the world affirm their recognition of the unfair treatment of the Muslim population, a potential solution would be more possible.

This brings us to the most important issue: the attackers. The Thai government could be assisted with military intelligence aid, and when the attackers are identified, they could

be administered adequate punishment. Furthermore, this would allow the Thai government to negotiate with the right people, those who hold power in the region. This can also be done through helping the Thai government by sending legal experts as well as intelligence that can work to find and accordingly build systems that can punish the attackers. This is important considering how the attackers like to use methods of violence to achieve their goals and damage Thai control.

To create a more welcoming Thailand for minorities, the United Nations could conduct educational programmes focusing on countering racism. This could be integrated to already existing UN organisations against racism. This can also be further made encouraging if the

Useful Links

- https://thaipolitics.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/87/2022/01/Rethinking-Thailands-Southern-Violence-2007.-preprint.pdf
  A book written in 2006 that talks directly about proposals to solve the insurgency issue.
- https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/establishing-peace-in-southern-thailand/
  A website giving recommendations on solving the issue and analysing the key issues that make the issue so complex.
- https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3023237/muslim-insurgent-group-thailand-says-it-has-opened
  A website giving infographic and photographic information that gives background on the issue.

Bibliography

1. “26. Thailand/Malay Muslims (1948-Present).” *Uca.edu*, 2025, uca.edu/politicalscience/home/research-projects/dadm-project/asiapacific-region/thailandmalay-muslims-1948-present/. Accessed 1 Apr. 2025.
2. Asprey, Robert Brown. “Insurgency | Definition, Examples, Types, & Facts.” *Britannica*, 11 February 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/insurgency. Accessed 3 April 2025.

3. “Being a Good Neighbor? Charting Malaysia’s Evolving Views on Thailand’s “Deep South” Conflict | New Perspectives on Asia | CSIS.” *Csis.org*, 2024, www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/being-good-neighbor-charting-malaysias-evolving-views-thailands-deep. Accessed 1 Apr. 2025.
4. Brittanica. “Minority | Definition & Facts.” *Britannica*, 7 February 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/minority. Accessed 3 April 2025.
5. Kathryn. “Minority Rights: A Guide to United Nations Procedures and Institutions.” *Report*, no. 2, 19 Apr. 2024, minorityrights.org/resources/minority-rights-a-guide-to-united-nations-procedures-and-institutions/. Accessed 1 Apr. 2025.
6. Nations, United. “Minorities | United Nations.” *United Nations*, 2020, www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/minorities. Accessed 1 Apr. 2025.
7. “No One Is Safe: Insurgent Attacks on Civilians in Thailand’s Southern Border Provinces: II. A Brief History of Insurgency in the Southern Border Provinces.” *Hrw.org*, 2025, www.hrw.org/reports/2007/thailand0807/3.htm. Accessed 1 Apr. 2025.
8. OHCHR. “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.” *ohchr*, 1966, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights. Accessed 2 April 2025.
9. OHCHR. “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.” *ohchr*, 1966, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights. Accessed 2 April 2025.
10. SCMP. “Muslim insurgent group in southern Thailand says it has opened a dialogue with the government.” *Insurgent Groups in Thailand*, 2023, https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3023237/muslim-insurgent-group-thailand-says-it-has-opened. Accessed 2 04 2025.
11. Teekah, Ethan, and William H. Frederick. “ASEAN | Definition, History, Economics, &

Facts.” *Britannica*, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/topic/ASEAN. Accessed 3 April 2025.

12. “Thailand: Insurgents Target Civilians in South.” *Human Rights Watch*, 21 Nov. 2024, www.hrw.org/news/2024/11/20/thailand-insurgents-target-civilians-south. Accessed 1 Apr. 2025.