

Analysing the Causes of Unrest in Southern Provinces and Its Impact on Democratization of Thailand

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Abstract

The southern region of Thailand consisted 5 changwat or provinces namely: Pattani, Songkhla, Narathiwat, Yala and Satun. The majority of the population i.e. 94% called Malay Muslims who speaks Yawi. Historically Pattani was a part of Malaysia, annexed and divided into 3 changwat: Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat by Siam (Thailand) in 1902. This region is the center of insurgency and violence which intensified in 2004 caused more than 6000 deaths and 10000 left injured and aggravated security issues throughout the country. Afterwards the mishandling of the issue by Thaksin administration with a hardline approach and the mistrust among the Malay Muslims towards Thai Buddhist state left the region in chaos. Though the country is prone to coup culture and political instability, the southern violence presents a unique opportunity to analyze the causes of the insurgency which re occurred at a time when Thailand was considered as democratic having people's constitution of 1997 in force. The last elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra astounded everybody by declaring the start of a peace exchange with key political figures of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional- a separatist group, yet the discourse came to halt after 3 meetings. In 2014 another blow accompanied with overthrow of Shinawatra government by military coup after which junta set up safety efforts on June 22, 2014 in an effort to tackle the situation in the region. From then onwards the political eventual fate of Deep South is by all accounts unverifiable. The article examines why the democratization has failed to curb the violence and what are the reasons behind the dissatisfaction among Malay Muslims which force them to claim a separate identity and an autonomous region based on religious or ethnic ground.

Keywords: Violence, Insurgency, Thainess, Resistance, Democratization, Human Rights

1. INTRODUCTION

Thailand has been struggling for political stability since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932. Since then the popular belief is that the nation has experienced a coup or an attempt at coup every four and half years (Crouch, in Diamond et al, 1997.p. 213). Till today there has been 19 coups, often justified by the coup maker as a necessity to remove corrupt politician and to clean political system. In the latest event on May 22, 2014 General Prayuth Chan-ocha seized power under its revered monarch king Bhumibol. This coup has been viewed as serious setback against a democratically elected Government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra of pheu Thai Party which came to power in 2012. Till the 2006 coup which led to the overthrow of Thaksin government, Thailand believed to be a democratic country. It was after the establishment of democratic rule in 1992 that gave the hope to a sustainable democracy and it seems true till the 2006 coup. Afterwards Thailand has witnessing a severally unstable, polarized political scenario. The Thaksinization of Thai politics left the country unstable, polarized and under the heavy control of military officials with no scope of civil liberties or dissent. It is interesting to note that Thaksin's two administration which is popularly considered as democratic regime having mass support, intensified the violence and insurgency in the Malay dominated Deep Southern Provinces. Though the ongoing insurgency is not new, it haunted Thai state from almost past century. However in the past decade it have been growing into excessive use of violence and civilian murders (Fleetwood 2010, Liow & Pathan, 2010).

2. BACKGROUND

Thai Muslims are categorized into two realms: the Malays living in southern Thailand and non-Malays or Thai Muslims living in urban regions and chiefly in Bangkok. Thai Muslims are an appalling influent group in Bangkok, firmly attached to political and different elites (McCargo, 2012). As indicated by the 2000 statistics, the total populaces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat are 1.8 million, of whom 75 to 80 percent are Malay Muslims (at times alluded to as "Muslims of Malay descent" or "Patani Malays"), making the main part of the population ethnically Malay Muslim and local Yawi (a tongue of Malay) speakers. The remnants are Thai Buddhists, including Sino Thais (Bangkok Post 2007). As it were, the mono-ethnic Malay Muslims of the Deep South constitute around 44 percent of the aggregate Thai Muslim populace (Yusuf, 2009). In this manner, Malay Muslims chiefly appeal for further autonomy and rights with respect to their spoken and composed vernacular. They feel themselves to be dominated and discriminated by the majority and keep on fighting for freedom (Minority Rights 2014). It is pertinent to mention that Thai Muslims living in Bangkok and in urban areas, do not pay heed to claims made by Malay Muslims. There is no similarity between the two. Malays are rural and

more depend on Islamic administration than that of Bangkok's while Thai Muslims are successfully assimilated into Thai society. The differences that Malay Muslims seeks to 'preserve are their lineage of Malay Kingdom of Patani, the Malay language, and the Islamic faith' (Smith, 2004 p.2). The forced assimilation and strict centralization left devastating effects on the locals.

The international crisis group report of 2012, depicted historical development such as annexation of the region by Thai state in 1902 as the factor behind unrest. The resulted dissatisfaction with policies of state triggered series of violence. This is since 2004 that the turmoil has continuously deteriorated and reached to an extent where state have struggled hard to put on an effective strategy to counter insurgency (International Crisis Group 2012). A very important scholar and expert of Thai politics, McCargo in his work 'Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand' 2008, cited the reason behind state's failure to make reconciliation and curb insurgency, is the 'highly centralized administrative structure, rigid concept of national identity along with traditional bureaucratic mechanism that severally failed to understand the political dimension of the conflict (p.16). According to Phasuk Sunayi (2008), the administration of Thaksin Shinawatra deteriorated the conflict by instituting harsh tactics to control it. He declared martial Law in the region and suspended individual rights by enforcing emergency decree. Additionally he deployed a great number of military and police official to establish peace (Thailand monitor, 2008). After Thaksin, the intractable national-level political struggle between former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his establishment opponents has gripped the country that has inhibited Bangkok's response (ICG, Asia Report No.192, 2010). In 2011 new hopes were ignited for the reconciliation with the advent of Yingluck administration. Further the latest coup under Prayuth Chan Ocha in May 2014 ceased the peace talk initiated by Yingluck administration. At present juncture Thailand is under martial law since 2014 because of the renewed stand - off between the red shirts and the yellow shirts fractions (Sundaraman S, IPCS Forecasts 2015).

3. IMPORTANCE OF THE INSURGENCY

The circumstance of vicious turmoil in the southernmost regions has been given the name 'khwam mai sa-ngop' in Thai language implies turbulence or disturbance. The expression 'insurgency' is more reasonable than terrorism or separatism while considering the definitions, objectives and scale of violence (Boonpunth, 2015, p. 88). By definition the terms insurgency means as 'violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and/or influence over the relevant populations' (Chris North cited in Boonpunth 2015, p. 89).

For a long time Thai government, denied any separatist activity that was growing in southern Thailand. But in 2004 after the dramatic increase in violence the then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra announced publically that the cause of violence was the local political infighting and crimes or in other words problem of law and order (Liow & Pathan 2010, p.2) Also, for insurgents, Thaksin used the term 'bandits' and says that they are both Muslims and Buddhists. Interestingly the officials were warned against using the term 'Islamic' for this unrest perhaps to protect relationship with ethnic minorities (L. Smith, 2010, p. 2). The term insurgency is not new in Thai case. But since 2004 it escalated into something much advance and more organized way of execution on the part of perpetrators. For instance, bomb attacks are more sophisticated, increasing civil casualties, high death toll, multiple targets of surgical violence on daily basis, informant's assassination, arson attacks on hotels and schools, killing of military and police personnel became the tactics of transformative insurgency. Interestingly, none of the perpetrators identified or take responsibility of these attacks leaving the authorities in deep speculation and termed state response as confronting ghost (Liow & Pathan, 2010, p.8).

As Askew (2010) noted that the escalation of violent attacks resulted in increasing the military budget by 300 percent left development projects in cold bag (p.130). Also CIA report of 2009 recorded that insurgency adversely affected tourism industry of Thailand along with 2.2 percent of economic withdrawal in the wake of global financial emergency (Ibid). Apart from this, the problem of law and order prompted unlawful trade of arms and ammunition through Malaysian borders further aggravated the situation. And finally and most importantly, Muslim characterization of the turmoil presented the possibilities of international terrorist groups to be involved in the region, for example, Al Qaeda and Jemah Islamia (Gunaratna and Chua, 2005, p.9). But this position was refuted by Sara A. Jones (2007) in her thesis, where she depicted that, it was due to islamization of international terrorism that southern Muslims equated with terrorism. She further stated that even after Kru Se mosque attack the government declared it as war against Thai citizens and denied all possibilities of foreign elements.

4. SOUTHERN INSURGENCY: RELIGIOUS OR ETHNIC OR A CASE OF GLOBAL TERROR

A vast literature and interpretations from different scholars gave support to the presence of international terror outfits in the region due to religious proximity of the region. The foreign educated youth brought with them a more radicalized version of Islam. And they also get influenced by the global happening against Islam such as war on terror after 9/11. The post 9/11 environment also united terrorists groups into a single fitting unit against western powers especially united states. Contrary to this Duncan McCargo (2008) argued that local Muslims in

the region believes that violence is nothing but a big power game to overpower the imperialist propaganda of United States from Southeast Asia (p.7). Several authors made strong claims for the presence of international jihadist group like Jemah Islamia (JI) in the southern region. Global jihadist agenda of Jemah Islamia give support to the connotation of insurgency in South. The arrest of Hanbali, a regional operational head of JI in 2003 raised such possibilities. Apart from this in June 2003, Thai authorities arrested three prominent people anticipating their role over planning of attacks on foreign embassies and tourist places from south namely Maisuri Haji Abdullah, Mayahi Haji Doloh both religious teachers and a physician Waemahdi Wae-dao (Smith, 2004,p. 3).

From this juncture the nature of conflict in southern province shifted from ethnic to religious in outlook (Harish, 2006, p.16). The attack on Kru Se mosque in 2004 gave first indication towards religious affiliation to the conflict. The insurgents killed by security forces, had written Islamic teachings on their bodies. Such happenings in post 9/11 scenario gave supports to the argument that jihad had begun in the region (Brannon, 2012, p. 32). Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra accepted the conflict as the local front in the global War on Terrorism but senator from Sophon claimed in 2005 that bombing at Hat Yai had been done by United States in order to gain momentum in the name of war on terror (Thnaprarnsing, 2009, p.4). A fact to keep in mind that terrorist groups always put demands but in this case none of the group took responsibility nor did they put any demand.

For McCargo (2008) the fact that no evidence found regarding US propaganda (p.7) and for Jitpiromsri & McCargo 2010, still there is inadequate data to prove the religion as a stimulating factor behind violence (p.169).

5. POSSIBLE CAUSES OF UNREST

5.1 HISTORICAL CAUSES: ANNEXATION AND FORCED ASSIMILATION

By 1909 Anglo-Siamese treaty the five provinces Patani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun and Songkla created from Pattani sultanate came under Siamese control. The subsequent repressive policies tried to bring Muslims under state control. For instance, in 1921 first such attack was came in the form of ‘Compulsory Primary Education Act’ through which traditional Pondok replaced by national schools and Thai became the language of instruction (Liow, 2004, p.533). The resistance occurred in the form of rebellion of 1922 and 1923 which made Siamese state to rethink its policies regarding administering of southern people. In 1932 absolute monarchy was replaced by constitutional monarchy. This revolution resulted in abolishment of territory system and marked the recognition of Patani region by including Pattani, Songkla, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun with the boundaries as it has today (Ockey, 2008, p.126). This revolution again tried to ensue Thai nationalism in the name of nation building but met with great resistance in the southern region. With the nation building popular sovereignty emerged as a concept and defined citizenship on the basis of national unity and not on political obedience. Further the emphasis on centralization policy needed immediate assimilation of ethnic group which in turn effected local administration (Maisonti, 2004, p.3). In the words of Che Man (2003) “It was believed that Muslims’ submission to an infidel regime without resistance was not permissible in Islam” (p.10). Later on subsequent policies and event further fuelled this anger and took the shape of insurgency. In brief, the legitimacy crisis and the old dream of establishing a sovereign state have prompted the insurgents to violence.

5.2 INCREASING TREND OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION

Bradford M. Brannon (2012) in his thesis argued that the recent cause of intensity in the violence is due to the increasing trend of Islamic education in the region which become uniting factor of new generation of insurgents. For education Malay Muslims prefers to send their children either in Pondok (Islamic School) or to Middle East for higher education. Local Pondoks are the source of religious education as well as building moral character at the same time they instill a sense of differences and fundamentalism among children and amplified the religious identities.

5.3 SOCIO-ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION

For scholar like Croissant (2005) one of the reason behind insurgency can be disparities in economic condition and poverty among rural and central Bangkok which lead to marginalization of the Malay Muslims. He further stated that though northeast region of the Thailand is the poorest, southern province has been least developed in comparison to other parts of country (p.27). Leading scholar Duncan McCargo (2008) cited this state instituted marginalization as major factor behind feeling of rebellion among Malay Muslims. Abah Billy (2004) in his article ‘Muslims under Attack in Thailand’ described that the under development and marginalization of the region in comparison other parts of country is the biggest factor behind the unrest. He further noted that the region accounted for 1.5% in terms of GDP of Thailand. Due to the lack of infrastructure hardly any industry flourishes there despite the fact that tourism has high chances to attract visitors for its extensive natural beauty.

5.4 JUDICIAL AND HUMAN RIGHT ISSUES

The most common acknowledged factor behind the conflict and violence is considered as Judicial and Human rights abuses done by both by Thai state against Malay Muslims in the south. The argument based on the fact that discrimination against people originates from Thai officials. First as mentioned earlier Malays considered as disloyal towards Thai state. The lack of respect towards diversity of people by Thai state and enforced concept of thainess is seen as breeding ground of conflict among Malay Muslims. As Ake Thangsupvattana (2009) opined that lack of understanding of conflict and providing any sufficient solution to it is a major demonstration of ignorance on behalf of the Thai state (p.145). For instance in 2002 people got beaten up brutally and charged by police when they were demonstrating peacefully at Hat Yai against the construction of gas pipeline to Malaysia (Smith, 2004, p.2). The torturous incidents of Kru Se Mosque and Tak Bai and later disappearance of a Muslim lawyer named Somchai Neelapaijit are seen as poor treatments towards Malay Muslims. From 2002 to 2011, there were 22 cases of disappearances of Malay Muslim men aged under 30s were recorded where 33 people were found guilty but no perpetrator got punishment. Ironically no perpetrators of torture and killing of Muslims were held responsible by the Thai state.

5.5 POLITICAL ISSUES AND ROLE OF THAKSIN SHINAWATRA

The national politics of Thailand has have major impact on the escalation of the violence in the southern province. The religion has been used as a political tool to create ideological differences. The concept of unification based on 'Nation-Religion-King' though accepts Thai Islam, leave no room for being Muslims without being Thai (Liow, 2009, p.36). Thus, in such scenario credibility to each other's actions has been seen in utter mistrust and resulted in the crisis of legitimacy. When Buddhist ideology were instilled to control the issue by the then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra with the consent of Monarchy, the violence exacerbated. For example, security forces used sniffer dogs for searching Malay houses resulted in offending Muslims (Boonpunth, 2015, p.93).

An important factor behind the re-occurrence of violence can be cited as Thaksin's southern policy, which he implanted in order to weaken the hitherto dominated Democrat Party and gain government control over the region. Thaksin assumed southern conflict, as McCargo depicted (2006) a 'personal challenge to his authority' (p.54). By 2002, In order to strengthen the control of his government, Thaksin dismantled the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) established in 1981 which came into existence to remove corrupt officials, implementing socio-economic and political policies in the region. As an attempt at decentralization SBPAC proved successful in enhancing mutual understanding between Thai state and Malay Muslims. This move created resentment and snatch the right of decision making from Muslims (Croissant, 2005, p.31).

During his two administration Thaksin put 3 laws in force to manage the violence in southern region namely- Martial Law, the Emergency Decree and the Internal Security Act (ISA) through which military got extraordinary powers. These laws were widely criticized on the ground of granting impunity to military actions which subsequently resulted in wide spread abuse of human rights and proved counter effective (Boonpunth, 2015,p.126). Thaksin's inability to understand the conflict aggravated the situation. When the Narathiwat Army Camp was attacked on January 4, 2004, he called suspects as common bandits (Pathmanand, 2007, p.70) and denied presence of insurgents. In the name of 'War on Drug' he declared martial law and deployed 3000 additional troops authorized to arrest suspects without court warrant. According to ICG, Asia report 2005, Thaksin praised the army on the battle of Kru Se mosque in April 2004 and called the dead as Drug Addicts and justified under the nomenclature of Rules of Warfare. The site of this mosque was considered as sacred by Muslims, generated hate for hitherto gentle Royal Thai Army. On the mishandling of protestors of Tak Bai mosque in October 2004, which resulted in the death of 80 innocent Muslims in army trucks, was claimed by Thaksin as their 'own fault due to fasting of Ramadan resulted in weakness of protestors' (ICG: 98, p.29). This operation attracted the worldwide attention and sympathy for Muslims and generated criticism of Thai government as anti-Muslim.

In his second administration, Thaksin initiated various new proposals to settle the issue. First he sent additional 12000 troops and divided the southern region in colored zone according to the Loyalty towards Thai state. Interesting to note that the southern provinces completely rejected Thaksin in 2005 general elections. The government development funds to southern region had to be decided on the basis of color which subsequently resulted in cut of fund. This move caused resentment among Muslims and deemed to support militants. Second, in July 2005, Thaksin promulgated an Emergency Decree to handle the insurgency and provided some safeguards from abuse of power. But soon nationwide protests were started because the law bestowed vast power in prime minister and his cabinet (Boonpunth, 2015, p.115). Thangsupvattana et al. (2009) cited the reason behind Thaksin's failure as "relying too much on political popularity around gaining vote" (ibid, p.94).

6. IMPACT OF VIOLENCE ON DEMOCRATIZATION

Thailand has been struggling for political stability and often called an unconsolidated or semi- Democracy due to

the regular occurrence of military coups and authoritarian regimes. The democratic rule of Thaksin Shinawatra is an exception in the case that he was the longest ruling and most controversial prime minister in Thai history. Through his personalization of politics he polarized Thai society to such extent that country will take time to get rid of his influence. Interestingly, during his rule the violence in southern province of Thailand exacerbated and created chaos both in the region and county. It is true that democracies bring peace and stability but doubt stems from the fact that internal peace is not a guarantee even in democratic regime. Often authoritarian regimes faces less resistance than democracy. But in ethnically divided country like Thailand, democracy may increase polarization and separation (Swain, 2008, p.213, Croissant, 2007.p.12). It is true that during Thaksin Shinawatra regime which is known as democratic regime, the democratization was not complete when it comes to southern provinces. In order to suppress influence of Democrat Party who was Thaksin's main opponent, Thaksin launched a new policy for south which contributed in marginalization and increasing violence in south. As a consequence violence hampered the democratization process left the country unconsolidated or semi democracy. For instance- in order to suppress violence, Thai authorities declared martial law and emergency decree in the region. In the cases of disappearances, unlawful detention, torture and indiscriminate killings, Thai courts mostly favored Thai authorities. In 2009, in the ruling of Tak Bai massacre case, the court gave acquittal to all security force officials who were charged for the death of 78 detainees in 2004 Tak Bai incident (Fleetwood, 2010, p.3). Even in the disappearance case of a Muslim lawyer Somchai Neelapaijit (who represented Muslims suspects of Army camp raid incident of 2004), the court in its hearing in 2011, dismissed the case against all defendants. Citing lack of evidence (Boonpunth, 2015, p.101). Such human rights abuses and act of impunity is a serious blot on personal freedom and civil liberties which is an indispensable element of democratization.

Also, the lack of representation and accountability leads to lowering democratic qualities. It is pertinent to note that in any Muslim dominated area, they have their own cultural, social and historical narratives that provides essential framework to legitimize any institution. The 'locally grown institutions successfully draw support from society than artificial or imitated (western-imported) institutions' (Achilov, 2010, p.44). Therefore the authenticity and legitimacy of an institution stems from the fact that, it can flourish in an indigenous set up (ibid, p.45). On the contrary 80% officials appointed in the southern region were non Malays often don't know even the local language. The dissolution of SBPAC in 2002 and CPM 43 in 2004 proved disastrous for Malay Muslims, it not only snatches their rights in policy making, also removed the prospects for decentralization. Apart from this, the internal security issues were transfer to police (Boonpunth, 2015, p.10) hitherto managed by Royal Thai Army. The local populace see police as corrupt, unjust and thug. Their role in extra judicial killing in the name of War on Drugs diminished its credibility and generated resentment (Fleetwood, 2010, p. 17-18). The lack of representation and accountability increased legitimacy crisis for Bangkok and rise in violence.

Another major impact of violence on Democratization came in the form of removal of democratically elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra by Military dictatorship. This coup democratic institutions weak to an extent that democracy still not been able to exist in current Thai political scenario. The freedom House report of 2014 stated the partially undemocratic politics in Thailand as Partly Free (Freedom house, 2014). The hardline approach of Thaksin in South further aggravated by his attempt to abolish and challenge Network Monarch by suppressing the influence of Democrat party. His approach not only created resentment among Muslims who called Thaksin responsible for bloodshed but also generated anger among Network Monarchy (McCargo, 2008, p.111). Then the king Bhumibol intervened and authorized the Military to overthrow the democratic government of Thaksin Shinawatra. Thus, when a popular government was interrupted by extra judicial mean, it hampered the process of democratization and consequently left the Thai polity as semi- democracy or pseudo democracy.

CONCLUSION

From above discussion it is clear that religion per se is not the real cause of violence rather religion used as an instrument to gain legitimacy both by insurgents and political parties. The long rooted historical causes such as forced assimilation and the concept of Thainess along with economic and cultural marginalization are the major factors behind the southern unrest. The hardline approach of the then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the failure of intelligence in recognizing the issue as separatism or insurgency further aggravated the violence. The lack of representation and accountability on the part of Bangkok generated resentment against Thai authorities and support for insurgents. In present scenario it very difficult to get independence from state. Rather the issue of violence can be resolved by including minorities into main stream. The forced assimilation always remain alive in memories of people. By giving some autonomy, for instance- encouraging local population to have say in local administration, can resolve issue to a larger extent. The role that democracy play in solving difference seems promising but with the condition that political regime plus ruling elites embrace it with true spirit. The process of democratization and violence both have qualities to encourage separatist demands as well as undermine political regimes. For instance – hardline approach of Thaksin aggravated the violence and became one of the reason behind military intervention which staged a coup against democratic government. The weak or low quality democracy can assure electoral participation but cannot resolve issues of difference. Same

happening with Thai politics. The process of democratization in post-colonial states takes time and often resulted in weak political institutions that has capacity to both undermine the civil liberties of people as well as prompting authorities to curb dissent with harsh tactics. The denial of autonomy leads to resentment and often disloyalty towards state. It also affected stability and regional security as a whole. We need to understand that Malay Muslims have their own way of life based on Islamic norms and value. By granting them regional autonomy, one can expect an appropriate solution to the violence. Thus in brief, democratizations accepts the differences at the same time provides the peaceful solution to a violent resistance. In reverse violence has the equal capacity to undermine democratic qualities and creating the crisis of legitimacy.

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