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## | RESEARCH ARTICLE

### **A Case Study of Separatist Movement in Thailand: South Thailand Insurgency**

**Tang Shuiling**

*Tong Ren Polytechnic College, Tong Ren City, Guizhou Province, China, 554300*

**Corresponding Author:** Tang Shuiling, **E-mail:** [Tsl921943080@163.com](mailto:Tsl921943080@163.com)

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## | ABSTRACT

Thailand is a nation deeply steeped in Buddhist traditions and has endured protracted separatist disturbances, predominantly in the southern region, orchestrated by certain Malay Muslim factions. The turmoil is concentrated within the southern provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala. Insurgent elements have perpetrated a significant number of violent incidents, particularly in the year 2004. During this period, the separatist unrest resulted in the loss of nearly 7,000 lives.

## | KEYWORDS

Southern Thailand; Insurgency; Separatist Movements

## | ARTICLE INFORMATION

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### **1. Introduction**

According to the data from the International Crisis Group, the security situation in Thailand began to worsen in December 2018, especially in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. In January 2019, insurgents perpetrated six acts of rebellion against Buddhist institutions, law enforcement entities, and even a hospital and several educational facilities. On January 8th, 2019, militants were responsible for the assassination of a retired Buddhist educator and perpetrated bombings targeting a police officer and a 12-year-old female student. In the subsequent two days, assailants claimed the lives of four volunteers providing assistance to the Royal Thai Police outside a school premises.

An assault transpired subsequent to the dialogue between the Thai military junta and Mara Patani, an umbrella entity representing insurgents in the southern region of Thailand.

This article delineates the separatist movement, terrorism, and governance dynamics within southern Thailand, conducting an analysis to ascertain which International Relations Theory aligns with the insurgency present in the region's southern territories. Additionally, the article explores the relationship between Thai Muslims and Malay Muslims, the concept of Sharia, and various insurgent factions operating within southern Thailand.

### **2. Background**

The insurgency in Southern Thailand represents an enduring religious conflict that commenced in 1948 within the historical Malay Pattani Region. Post-2001, the situation has evolved into a more intricate scenario, characterized by pervasive violence.

The former Sultanate of Pattani, encompassing the southern provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, along with adjacent regions of Songkhla Province (Saba Yoi, Thepha, Chana, and Na Thawi), and Kelantan (the northeastern region of Malaysia), was annexed by the Siamese in 1785. With the exception of Kelantan, these territories have been under Thai administration since that period. This area corresponds to the extent of the former Patani Sultanate's domain but has been under Bangkok's governance since the late 18th century, specifically following the Siamese military incursion in 1786.

Armed separatist factions have been notably active since the 1960s. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a significant escalation in violence. Additionally, several prominent insurgent groups emerged during this period:

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(1) The National Patani Liberation Front (BNPP), established in 1959, was the inaugural organized resistance group in the southern region. It concentrated on enlisting bandits and militants to serve as leaders of its guerrilla forces and commenced operations within the southern provinces. At its zenith in the 1980s, the organization's membership numbered between 200 and 300 individuals. Recruitment efforts were orchestrated by religious instructors who selected students, educators, and rural inhabitants for military or political instruction. Political education was directed by religious mentors, while military drills were conducted by the guerrilla leadership. Additionally, certain recruits were dispatched to Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya to undergo military training.

(2) The Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) was established by Ustaz Haji Abdul Karim Hassan in the early 1960s in the district of Tok Guru, Narathiwat. He believed that the reforms of 1961 were intended to undermine Malaysian culture, prompting him to establish the BRN. He articulated his ideology as Islamic socialism.

(3) The Patani United Liberation Organization, known as PULO, was founded in 1968 and emerged as the most significant and influential separatist movement over the subsequent two decades. It maintained neutrality between the BRN and BNPP without forming close alliances with either. Its official ideology is encapsulated by the principles of "Homeland, Race, Religion, and Humanitarianism". Although its ultimate goal was the establishment of an independent Islamic state, PULO is now more accurately described as ethno-nationalist rather than Islamist in orientation.

The Thai government quelled unrest by implementing reforms in policy and the economy, thereby eroding support for armed conflict. By the mid-1990s, it appeared that tranquility had been restored. However, new insurgent movements surfaced, and four major factions emerged. These groups remain active to this day.

(1) The BRN-C (Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordination, National Revolutionary Front-Coordination) represents the active faction of the BRN, initially established in the early 1960s, advocating for the independence of the Patani region. It is recognized as the largest and most organized armed insurgent group. Notably, they conducted recruitment activities within Islamic schools.

(2) Pemuda constituted a secessionist youth organization (with certain factions under the influence of BRN-C). They were predominantly accountable for the frequent incidents of gunfire, explosions, and acts of sabotage.

(3) The Gerakan Mujahid in Islam Patani, commonly known as Patani Islam Mujahid in Group (GMIP), was founded by veterans of the conflict in Afghanistan in 1995. Its purpose is to strive for the establishment of an autonomous Islamic state.

(4) The New PULO, constituting the smallest armed faction as a subsidiary of the PULO, was established in 1995. Their objective was to advocate for the establishment of an independent nation.

### 3. The historic conflicts

The inaugural act of defiance against the Siamese occupation was orchestrated by Tengku Abdul Kadir, the final Sultan of Patani. In 1903, he faced charges of treason. Despite the violent repercussions of his actions, Bangkok retained control.

The Compulsory Primary School Law of 1921 mandated that all primary students learn the Thai language. This directive was perceived as an affront by the Malay Muslim community, who viewed it as a direct assault on their cultural, linguistic, and religious identities.

In 1946, an explosion occurred in Narathiwat. The following year, in 1947, the chairman of the Patani Provincial Islamic Council, Haji Sulong, initiated the Patani People's Movement, advocating for autonomy, linguistic and cultural rights, and the enactment of Islamic law. In 1959, he established the Patani National Liberation Front (BNPP, Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani), the inaugural organized armed entity to champion Patani's independence.

On November 29, 1975, it was reported that Thai marines executed five Muslim youths in the Bacho district of Narathiwat. Subsequently, on December 11, 1975, a demonstration ensued, during which over 70,000 Malay Muslims congregated over the ensuing three days. On that day, Thai Buddhist militants detonated explosives amidst the crowd, resulting in the fatalities of twelve individuals and injuries to at least thirty others.

On December 24th, 2001, a series of five assaults on police stations in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat resulted in the fatalities of five officers and a civilian village volunteer.

In 2004, it was estimated that around 50 educational institutions in southern Thailand had religious instructors who were recruiting and training students to participate in the insurgency.

An additional attack was initiated on January 4th, 2004, when militants assaulted an armory, resulting in the burning down of a school and a police station. Furthermore, several explosions occurred the subsequent day.

On April 28, 2004, militants perpetrated assaults on eleven police stations located in the provinces of Patani, Yala, and Songkhla, which were subsequently followed by the Krue Se incident. The Thai military responded by firing upon thirty-two individuals. Subsequent to these events, a total of one hundred and five armed militants, one civilian, and five soldiers perished.

The Tak Bai incident, which unfolded in Narathiwat province in October 2004, began with the arrest of six local residents on charges of possessing weapons in connection with conflicts. A protest was subsequently organized to advocate for their release. In response, the military deployed water cannons and tear gas against the demonstrators, and gunfire ensued, resulting in the deaths of seven men. An estimated hundred local youths were apprehended. They were compelled to remove their shirts and lie prone on the ground, with their hands bound behind their backs. Subsequently, they were loaded onto trucks and transported to an army camp in the vicinity of Pattani. The prisoners were packed six to a layer in the trucks, and upon arrival at their

destination five hours later, seventy-eight men had succumbed to asphyxiation due to the heat. This tragic incident ignited widespread outrage throughout the southern region and across the entirety of Thailand.

An explosive device was detonated at the Erawan Hindu Shrine, located near the Ratchaprasong intersection, on August 17, 2015. The blast resulted in injuries to 125 individuals and claimed the lives of 20 people, predominantly foreign nationals. To date, no group has asserted responsibility for the attack.

On August 11, 2016, a series of explosions occurred in seven provinces of Thailand, orchestrated by insurgent elements among the Muslim population. These attacks targeted frequented locations, including Patong Beach in Phuket Province and the town of Hua Hin in Prachuap Khiri Khan Province, resulting in the loss of four lives and injuries to thirty individuals. Among the injured were nationals from Italy, Austria, and Germany. To date, no group has claimed responsibility for the incidents.

#### **4. The reasons of conflicts**

The Malay Muslims residing in the three provinces harbor profound sentiments. However, significant alterations in the 1980s and 1990s shifted their concerns. Conciliatory security policies prioritized political over military solutions and included generous amnesty offers. The expansion of democracy provided increased opportunities for Malay Muslims to engage in national cabinets and local administration. Additionally, the influential Thai royal family focused greater attention on the south after establishing a palace in Narathiwat in 1972. Despite these changes, their concerns were not entirely alleviated. Nevertheless, the disorder in the south diminished during that period, partly due to these alterations.

Following Thaksin's election in 2001, he disbanded the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre and Civilian Police Military Task Force 43, which were mechanisms for conflict resolution. This decision impacted southern security, and the ensuing rivalry between the police and military surfaced, resulting in 56 fatalities in 2004. In 2003, Thaksin initiated a campaign against drugs, which led to approximately 2,500 deaths nationwide.

As a minister, Thaksin's inability to quell violence was partly due to his "CEO style" leadership in the southern region. This approach resulted in erratic alterations to security infrastructures and military command in southern Thailand, hindering security officials from establishing a stable influence.

Additionally, Islamic educational institutions were significantly implicated in the violence. Certain instructors held adversarial stances towards Bangkok. The BRN was founded by this faction and garnered numerous recruits from pondok schools. Thaksin was convinced that these pondok schools were undeniably the incubators for Muslim militants.

An additional factor was the Islamic reform movement, encompassing the proliferation of extremism and fundamentalism. Notably, the Dakwah Movement and certain organizations, such as the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement, were rapidly embraced by insurgent groups in the southern region.

The southern Muslim population experienced radicalization influenced by international events. The United States invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq precipitated widespread Muslim protests across Thailand. Furthermore, entities such as Jemaah Islamiyah and al-Qaeda utilized Thailand as a locale for respite, transit, and leisure activities.

These factors persuaded certain terrorism experts of the southern violence's legitimacy.

#### **5. The current situation**

Thailand initiated counter-terrorism cooperation with Australia on September 11, 2011. The Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand, Prawit Wongsuwan, stated that the Thai government was collaborating with Australia to establish a new counter-terrorism treaty in response to the escalating concerns over ISIS's activities in the Asia-Pacific region, which became public in January 2016.

Thailand participated in an international counter-terrorism conference held in Bali in August 2016, which concentrated on addressing the regional issue of cross-border insurgent movements.

In its 2017 report, the United States Department of State characterized Thailand as a proactive counter-terrorism partner. The United States has provided the Royal Thai Armed Forces with counter-terrorism intelligence and military equipment.

Thailand is an active member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. The Thai government has implemented security measures in accordance with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation's Counter Terrorism Action Plans (CTAP), including measures to protect international aviation and maritime activities, enhance cybersecurity, and combat terrorist financing.

Thailand engages in counter-terrorism endeavors via the ASEAN Regional Forum.

On January 25, 2018, six Southeast Asian nations, comprising Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia, initiated the Our Eyes Initiative (OEI). This initiative is designed to facilitate the exchange of strategic information pertaining to radicalism, violent extremism, and terrorism.

#### **6. Conclusion**

Upon examination of the insurgency movements in Southern Thailand, it is evident that not only the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Patani Patani (BNPP), Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO), and the BRN-Coordinate (BRN-C), but also the Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani (GMIP) can be scrutinized through the lens of Recruitment Theory. This theory posits that these groups engage in a deliberate strategy of perpetrating attacks or violence to entice individuals to join their ranks. The BNPP has

been known to enlist the services of thugs and bandits; the PULO has targeted Patani Muslims pursuing education in Malaysia or the Middle East, with a particular emphasis on religious instructors in Southern Thailand; the BRN-C has shown a propensity for recruiting teachers from Islamic schools; and the GMIP has favored enlisting veterans of the conflict in Afghanistan. Collectively, their efforts appear to be geared towards destabilizing the entire Southern Thailand region. Irrespective of their ultimate objectives, these groups employ a strategy of recruitment and training of specific demographic segments to engender violence or attacks, thereby seeking to augment their strength.

## 7. Insurgent Groups

- [1] BNPP: Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani, also known as the Patani National Liberation Front, was established in 1959 with the objective of advocating for an independent Islamic State of Patani.
- [2] BRN: Barisan Revolusi Nasional, founded in the early 1960s, aimed to secure an independent state of Patani.
- [3] PULO: Patani United Liberation Organization, established in 1968, pursued the establishment of an independent Islamic state with a significant ethno-nationalist component that was not exclusively Islamist.
- [4] BRN-Coordinate: A faction of Barisan Revolusi Nasional that diminished in influence by 1980, concentrating its efforts on political mobilization within certain Islamic educational institutions.
- [5] Pemuda: A separatist youth movement partially controlled by BRN-C, responsible for a substantial number of bombing and arson incidents.
- [6] GMIP: Patani Islamic Mujahidin Movement, or Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani, was initially formed in 1986 but experienced a schism in 1993.
- [7] New PULO: A splinter faction of PULO that disintegrated in 1995.

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