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The Way Forward in the Southern Thailand Conflict: A Public Peace Process

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THE southern provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani in southern Thailand have witnessed a series of high-profile incidents of violence in the last month. The alleged killing of a Muslim religious teacher by security forces led the residents of Lahan in the Sungei Padi district to blockade access to the village. The subsequent exodus of more than a hundred people from southern Thailand to neighbouring Malaysia has led to tensions between the two countries.

Furthermore, the gruesome murder of two soldiers in Ban Tanyang Limo and the ensuing cordon of the village by women and children reflected the deep mistrust between the authorities and the populace of the region. Even as Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra visited the southern provinces, two bombs went off in Sungei Golok. Clearly, more than a year after the Tak Bai incident in which 85 protesters were killed by security forces, the violence in southern Thailand continues in a downward spiral.

Many analysts advocate a velvet glove approach to alleviate the insurgency. Particularly after the conclusion of a peace agreement between the Government of Indonesia and the separatist group *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* in Aceh, there have been calls for Thailand to initiate a similar peace process. There are two problems with applying this Aceh-style strategy to southern Thailand. Firstly, unlike Aceh, no one rebel group can offer a reasonable guarantee to cease all acts of violence in southern Thailand. Secondly, it does not take into account the role that ordinary citizens can play in resolving the insurgency.

Broadening the Actors

Tackling the conflict in southern Thailand requires what peace scholar Harold Saunders calls a 'public peace process'. The aim of the peace process is not just to conclude a peace agreement but to inoculate society against violence. It endeavours to empower actors other than the state in building peace. In doing so, it seeks to go beyond the winning-hearts-and-minds rhetoric and attempts to make citizens responsible for peace.

The current attempts in southern Thailand to engage non-state actors primarily involve recommendations made to Bangkok by the National Reconciliation Commission and the local elites. Unfortunately, these groups currently do not have the autonomy to implement any of their proposals. The central government in Bangkok still has the power to adopt or reject these suggestions. The recent extension of the emergency decree in the south and the labelling of villages into coloured zones depending on their perceived support for the

insurgents have only widened the divide between the authorities and the local population. In contrast, a public peace process advocates a more bottom-up approach where a sustained dialogue is maintained between Bangkok and the southern populace.

With a broader group of participants, a better understanding of the nature of the conflict in southern Thailand can be obtained. Is the conflict ethnic or religious? Could it be economic, or a potent mix of all three dimensions? If so, how should these different aspects be prioritised in the government's search for a solution? These seemingly abstract questions are important for determining whether the current response to the conflict is a right one. More significantly, a larger consensus can help determine more precisely the nature and characteristics of the insurgency.

At the risk of oversimplifying, a formal peace process between a government and a rebel group usually focuses on stemming the violence on the ground in exchange for addressing the grievances of the insurgents. Since a single rebel group in southern Thailand is unlikely to assure the termination of violence, the situation is ripe for a public peace process.

Some Plausible Approaches

Among the strategies that could be employed to deal with the current divide between Bangkok and the people of the southern provinces is through education. The *pondoks* are probably the most effective medium to engage the southern population. Although there may be a few radical ones, more efforts could be made to ensure that *pondoks* are not chastised. Sincere efforts by Bangkok to create an environment where they can flourish will go a long way in gaining the trust of the local populace. The *pondoks* can then be steered towards imparting both the Islamic education which the southerners want as well as a curriculum that will promote their Thainess.

In the past two months, there have been a number of newspaper reports about rebels surrendering to the authorities. While this is a good sign, there can be more information on the efforts made by the authorities to reintegrate these rebels into mainstream society and enlist them for peace building efforts in their respective villages. This will showcase Bangkok's sincerity in assuaging the conflict.

The public peace process also calls for the involvement of the rest of the Thai population into peace-building endeavours. The historical mistreatment of the southern population has largely been ignored by the rest of the country. The people of the southern provinces are usually referred to as *khaek*, which means visitor or guest. One possible way to get the Thai population involved in the public peace process is for the government to spearhead an initiative that discourages the use of such derogatory terms. Steps can also be taken to strengthen the culture of mutual tolerance. In other words, the focus of a public peace process is more on relationships and less on the tangible demands of a specific rebel group.

Issue of Legitimacy

In the final analysis, the legitimacy of a public peace process is critical to its success. This legitimacy can be built in two ways. First, people from all cross-sections of society can be engaged to have a stake in the process. The more inclusive the public peace process, the higher its authority. Second, consensus needs to be achieved through persuasion rather than coercion. With a greater number of voices debating possible policy options, compromise will

be harder but not necessarily impossible. Arm-twisting tactics to realise an agreement may work in the short-term but in the long-term, it is detrimental to the legitimacy of the public peace process.

Engaging non-state actors as part of a public peace process is not a one-off consultation exercise. The sustainability of such a peace initiative is crucial. Indeed, the process is not a linear road and some measures may need to be revisited regularly to ensure its relevance. If a formal peace process with a rebel group is commenced in future, the public peace process will only reinforce it. The primary focus of the Thai government now seems to be containing the internationalisation of the conflict. Instead, more attempts could be made to stitch the divide between the southern populace on the one hand and the government as well as the rest of the country, on the other.

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