

Thailand's southernmost provinces have experienced an upsurge in ethnic violence recently. If Bangkok's current attempts to address local problems don't bear fruit, argues Sonia Rothwell, the overall unity of Thailand may start to fray at the edges in the next several months.

By Sonia Rothwell for ISN Security Watch

The arrival of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan has done little to quell unrest in Thailand's largely Muslim southern states. The government recently announced an injection of an extra \$12.4m in emergency funding to boost military operations in the region in an attempt to stop what Thai media report to be an increase in the number of attacks since the start of Ramadan. This move may bring a superficial peace to the south, but Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's suggestion that state television channels deliver news and official information in the local Yawi dialect ultimately may be the start of a more interesting and positive shift.

The restive southern provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and Songkhla have seen a revival in violence this year. Since 2004, almost daily attacks across southern Thailand - often but not solely against state targets - have chipped away at the security of this largely ethnic-Malay region which Thailand annexed in 1902. A coordinated series of vehicle-borne bomb attacks on 31 March 2012, for example, hit the cities of Yala and Hat Yai. A car bomb, one mounted on a pick-up truck and two motorcycle bombs detonated, killing 14 and wounding hundreds of others. They were a reminder of the seriousness of this so-called "small war" conflict which, according to Thai media reports, has killed an estimated 5,200 people in 11,000 recorded incidents.

As part of government measures to contain the insurrection, the states are subject to martial law and strict controls over press freedom. That they are also physically distant from the country's capital Bangkok enhances the sense of political separateness here and, as evidenced by continued insurgent attacks, the Thai government's chosen methods of containing the violence do not appear to be working. The Economist has reported that political grievances harboured by Thais in these ethnically distinct states are being taken up by a more radical younger generation. Indeed, the emergence of a new generation of opponents to the Bangkok government may add another dimension to the potentially unsettling effects of a change in monarch, as will be set out later.

A possible rapprochement

Meanwhile, some analysts have called for a different approach to addressing the schism between the south and the rest of Thailand and there is optimism that other ways of appeasing southern Thais may be emerging despite continued reliance on military means of control. Since her election victory, Prime Minister Yingluck has appeared open to the possibility of a level of autonomy for the south. Indeed, further hints from her office that she supports the use of the local Malay dialect in state broadcasts suggest that moves towards inclusivity through the recognition of regional difference may be afoot. The US State Department has also noted that:

"A range of Thai government agencies, including the Ministries of Interior and of Social Development and Human Security, and the Thai military and police academies continued to organize outreach programs to ethnic Malay-Muslims to counter radicalization and violent extremism. A small group of international non-governmental organizations also reached out to communities in the southern provinces to provide services and to identify the underlying causes of the area's violence".

Accordingly, a 'soft' rather than hard-power approach may yet yield a rapprochement between the disenfranchised south and its northern rulers. However, such a development needs to be handled with the utmost care, as the febrile atmosphere means the situation could as easily descend into more serious conflict. It could be argued, for example, that the mobilization of a further 4,000 military reservists to deputise for a lack of police officers risks further intensifying regional tensions and alienating southern Thais from Bangkok. Demonstrations of hard power can either reassure or galvanize and it is debatable whether the deployment of yet more soldiers will deter the diverse militants from continuing their campaign of violence.

The Red Shirts' legacy

Building on the political awakening of the middle classes in the 1990s, there has been increasing political awareness both in the far south and among Thailand's poor. Encouraged by Prime Minister Yingluck's brother Thaksin, the politicization culminated in the so-called Red Shirt protests of 2010. Mr Thaksin's party supporters, largely drawn from the poorer sections of Thai society, descended on Bangkok in anger after he had been ousted by a group of army generals in what they saw as a rejection of the mandate which they had given him. Bloody clashes between the Red Shirts and the Thai authorities resulted in dozens of deaths and the imposition of a state of emergency in and around Bangkok which shook Thailand's elite. In a reminder of that period, several leaders of the protests currently await a High Court decision on whether they should go back to prison for allegedly violating the terms of their bail.

The declining health of Thailand's long-serving King Bhumibol also threatens to seriously fracture the fragile unity of the country. The 84-year old monarch - who has been widely regarded as a unifying figure for Thailand over the past 66 years - suffered a bleed on his brain in July following years of illness which included a stroke early in 2012. With the continuity of Thai nationhood at present largely resting on the continuity of the royal family, it is perhaps unsurprising that the country's notoriously stringent lese majeste laws (which prohibit criticism of the royal family) continue to be tightly enforced. The fact that Prime Minister Yingluck has not relaxed them not only demonstrates her loyalty to the royal family (contrasting her with her brother in the eyes of her political opponents) but perhaps shows a political appreciation of what any such relaxation could lead to. However, Yingluck has sought to revise Thailand's constitution, a move which prompted the country's constitutional court to make a ruling which stated that the changes did not amount to a threat to the political system. The same court also rejected complaints that Yingluck's Pheu Thai party had threatened the monarchy, thereby highlighting extant tensions between her party and the long-established conservative elites.

Linked to this general political uncertainty is the continued presence in exile of Ms Yingluck's brother Thaksin who still enjoys considerable support in Thailand. Facing jail should he return to

his native country, Mr Thaksin is thought to still wield influence within the Pheu Thai party, and his visibility around the world suggests he is not minded to retreat from the spotlight. His is a divisive presence, especially antagonistic to Thailand's ruling elite and his return would likely trigger civil unrest.

Challenges

In a speech to mark his 84th birthday in January, King Bhumibol again called for his country to unite. He said: "The most important thing is you should not be split or fighting each other. We need to inspire and give each other confidence so that the work we do will be fruitful for the well-being of the people and the stability and security of the country." His ailing health and the relative unpopularity of his son the crown prince strongly suggest that the country faces significant uncertainty in the short to medium term. The combination of a long-running violent separatist movement in the south which shows no signs of abating, deep social divisions and the off-stage presence of a popular but controversial former prime minister present serious challenges to Thailand. The modest moves being made by Prime Minister Yingluck to seek an alternative to the hard power management of the insurgency, if they continue, could give cause for some optimism that the killings will become less frequent. Her continued application of the lese majeste laws shows an acknowledgement that any policy changes must be set against the continued stability of the monarchy. Destabilizing the monarchy while simultaneously trying new approaches to quell chronic insurgent violence would be ill-advised to say the least.

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