

The Autonomy Questions: Conflict Transformation in the Three Southern Border Provinces¹

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Introduction to the Deep South Conflict

The historical grievances of the Southern border provinces (Deep South) during the configuration of the modern Thai state could be the root cause of the insurgency and recurring violence. Yet, for more than a hundred years, people of different ethnic identities in the region co-existed peacefully. The recurring violence has been determined to a large extent by the unhealthy relationship between the central state and the border communities. Past experience has demonstrated that the more peaceful periods in history were those during which the local provinces were able to maintain the political and administrative practices of Malay-Muslim culture. Those were the times when the border provinces were granted self-government, called *Monthon* (or *Mandala*), prior to the modern provincial administration (see Apornsuvan, 2008: 42-47), or during the period of the Special Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC). The most notably unhealthy relationships between the Deep South and the Thai state appear to have marred the early phase of appointed governors sent from Bangkok during the reign of King Rama V,

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the intense nationalism of Prime Minister P. Pibulsongkram, and the transmigration resettlement from the Northeast to Southern border provinces during Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat's regime.² More recently, these relations have soured with the implementation of special draconian laws like Emergency Decree, National Security Act, and Martial law.

The fact that social injustice and a gap between state and local communities also prevails in most parts of the country is quite relevant. Yet, the people in the Deep South, with their complex history and particular identity, face more difficulty in dealing with public sector state apparatus (see National Reconciliation Commission, 2006). The long and painful history of the Southern people's resistance to cultural suppression by the state goes far in explaining the entrenched local distrust of government authorities and the prevailing "we-them" syndrome. The recent escalation of conflicts, the new pattern of violence against innocent people, and the return of military omnipresence has exacerbated identity politics in the South. That a sensitive, distinctive identity plays an important part in the ongoing violence is, by now, clear enough. Identity politics interweaves with the issue of social justice and so has certain implications as to how the problem should be solved.

The cultural specific of the majority Malay-Muslim population in the Deep South and the unsettling memory of past grievances explain why cultural assimilation and integration does not always work well with the people there. The incompatibility of minority Malay-Muslim cultural expression in a public sector operating under the majority Buddhist-Thai cultural scheme is now all too clear. This incompatibility is not just about cultural freedom and discrimination, issues which are not considered pressing problems by Thai people generally. Surin Pitsuwan (2007) has proposed a "cosmology of conflict" in which he states that "there are fundamental differences in the two cosmological orders being perpetuated and followed by the Thai government officials and the Malay Muslims in southern Thailand today. They are two different cosmologies. The Thai government officials perceive themselves as eyes and ears of the Thai state whose rituals and value systems are based and informed by a totally different religious worldview. ...not prepared to understand the differences within the cosmological outlook of the south." (p. 284-285)

Provided that the on-going violent conflict in the South is more complex than what the public generally imagines, it is now imperative to ask if Thailand is at a turning point toward an option for sustainable peace or simply a quick fix resolution. This paper asks if some kind of arrangement for more autonomy for the communities of the southern border provinces will be

² Policy features of both Sarit's and Pibulsongkram's government are generally known to the Thai public. See for example "Separatism in the South (4): Cultural Assimilation Policy" (2004).

necessary in order to move forward. Another question is whether the current decentralization and local government scheme can accommodate the need for greater recognition of cultural identity, and the pivotal role of local communities in accomplishing it.

Conflict transformation: A Political Option

Recurring and escalating violence to a large extent indicates that the conflicts of the past 100 years have not really been transformed, despite constant intervention. The problem once was contained by an institutional mechanism that provided a negotiating platform outside the existing political and administrative structure. That mechanism included the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) and the Military-Police-Civilian Force. That arrangement was vulnerable, however, because of uncertainty due to changing government policies. The relationship between the Malay-Muslim South and the rest of Thai society, including the state, appeared to be in the hands of some referee, and this state of affairs could be managed and contained only temporarily. The arrangement could not survive rising global religious and neo-liberalist fundamentalism. It was also vulnerable to national political rivalries (see International Crisis Group, 2007). In the long run, the incompatibility will have to be faced and dealt with.

Conflict transformation generally implies changes or reforms arising from the dynamics of conflict and resolution. It can begin when conflicting parties change their perspective and when society at large becomes more collaborative, open minded, or self-regulated. When institutions and politics reform to accommodate such perceived incompatibility, a culture of peace, justice and toleration can emerge (see Austin et al., 2004). In this case, a new arrangement of the relationship between the central state and local communities is required, as well as clearer recognition of minority rights in a democratic system. As the society opens more to globalization, its contradictory impacts are higher in Thailand, particularly in the Southern border provinces. It has been stated that, for conflict transformation in the South to take place, the conflicting parties must overcome the tension between state nationalism and ethno-nationalism. Both sides must move on to a new shared value of multiculturalism. It is also most important that the peacemaking process does not imply a surrender of the aspirations of individuals or groups, but rather expresses them through a peaceful political process.

In Thailand's Deep South, a re-assessment of conditions for a multicultural society is needed; that is, there must be access to the public sphere, including public spaces, power sharing institutions, media, symbols and school curricula (Pieterse, 2010: 101). In doing so, the management of the public sector in consideration of ethnic representation is a primary concern. The notion of representative bureaucracy is noteworthy in the environment of Buddhist

ethnocracy³ in Thai public administration. Both the structure and behavior of public organizations may have to be considered in light of the question of ethnicity.

Conflict transformation can be initiated even in the midst of on-going violence by redressing grievances and by managing the social and political environment to make possible a healthy co-existence of peoples with different ethnic identities. The components of multiculturalism that could provide a framework for policy development include power sharing, economic/resource development, access to public institutions, and symbolic recognition. The primary question is whether the existing political and administrative structures in the Southern border provinces have facilitated local people's ability to express their ethnic identities and live their way of life. This question might bring us back again to the issue of choices in conflict transformation, between multiculturalism or ethno-nationalism. What remains to be tackled is the kind of political space or arrangement from which will emerge a common desirable society.

Since 2004 when violence broke out in the Deep South, there have been countless recommendations for measures/strategies and guidelines to help resolve the violence.⁴ In general, most proposals concentrate on conflict management, including measures against the insurgency, coordination, organization, and management of information and the media. Grievances are recognized, and certain social and economic measures are suggested. However, good intentions can often turn negative if cultural sensitivity is lacking. For example, allocating lottery profits for Muslim students raises a religious concern, and the temporary employment of new graduates favors the local government offices which use their labor rather than the young people themselves. Civil society and public intellectuals have called for a better understanding and awareness of ideas of cultural diversity, peace, and non-violence.

Appeals to clichés occur in the resolution discourse, among others, two important indicators of conflict transformation, “political primacy strategy,” and “non-violent approach” (See Wasi, 2009). The use of such terms has evoked wide criticism as little more than empty rhetoric. Jaturon Chaisang (2008), former Deputy Prime Minister under the Thaksin regime in 2004, has advocated the primacy of political strategy in order to emphasize that political action, rather than military tactics, better acknowledges the feelings of the people and better takes into consideration cultural differences and the need to

³ Ethnocracy was referred to as the cultural control of state apparatus. In this case, it is Buddhist ethnocracy (Pieterse, 2006).

⁴ The Peace Building Council, Special Border Province Administrative Center, reported on proposed resolutions gathered during 2004-2008, and came up with 135 measures/guidelines/strategies from 23 documents by individual thinkers, academic, government agencies and politicians.

redress grievances. The suppression of insurgents should be a secondary concern focused within the legal framework. Chaisang's proposal was overlooked and not implemented, so "political primacy" has indeed become little more than rhetoric. Non-violence, as well, was preached by most governments with no implications for the practical level because government officers perceived the philosophy as incompatible with the army's conventional approach to suppressing insurgents. The policy was mostly blamed by security officials as causing confusion in their day to day operations. In this regard, the political will and ability of leadership to adjust or adapt their conventional strategies are to be questioned seriously.

After the 19th September Coup in 2006, there was less countervailing public action to monitor policy in the South. Overall management and operation has been in the hands of the army, supported by expanded legal tools (the emergency decree and martial law for the sake of official impunity), and the renewed SBPAC under the command of the army chief. Srisompob Jitpiromsri (2009) reported that a huge budget was allocated for solving the Southern "troubles." Within five years, 109 billion Baht was spent, with a large proportion of the budget allotted to "security." Despite some improvements of operational procedures among both the military and the police, the atmosphere of conflict resolution under the control of the military is far from realizing anything resembling conflict transformation.

These numerous efforts to fix the problem of the Deep South are not leading to significant reforms, even though elements of transformation are assumed be happening within the existing system of the state. The following highlights are seen by some as relatively easy solutions which, at the same time, would be very difficult to "sell" to those in power:

- emancipating Islamic education,
- liberating cross-border migrant workers,
- installing a proportion of Malay speaking personnel in the public sector, and
- recognizing Malay as another working language.

Unfortunately, not many good policies have been carried out because they failed to win the confidence of higher ranking officials in Bangkok (see Chaisang, 2008). So far, the favorable response to conflict resolution has been an affirmative measure for Malay Muslims such as a quota system, not without criticism, for university enrollment and personnel recruitment for some public services. Unfortunately, the evident inconsistency and unsystematic implementation are interpreted as insincerity on the part of the government.

In the NRC's comprehensive recommendations, long term resolutions were also proposed with an organization like the previous SBPAC, established

with a mechanism to achieve community involvement. The NRC seems to have opted for an incremental approach to change, with some future improvement of local government being suggested in the form of locally elected governors at some point.

Several political options were brought into the discussion but were not activated because of the lack of political process. What has been missing is the voice of insurgents in the negotiating platform. So far, the expression of grievances has surfaced only through violent means, justified by the lack of political space and peaceful means. Chaiwat Satha-Anand (2012) argued that transformation should also take place within the insurgent side. He submitted his peace message to the insurgents at the International Seminar on *Peace Dialogue in the ASEAN Context* in 2012 in Pattani, proposing that, “there is a need for the insurgents to understand several things, ...[first] their political agenda needs to be initiated and carefully formulated for the public sphere, both in the local and national context. Second, they need to understand the effect of the use of violence for their cause more realistically. Third, they need to think more about the possibility of using non-violent methods instead of violence.”

Since the recurrence of violence in the Deep South from 2004 onward, Thailand has, on the one hand, implemented draconian state security measures such as Emergency Decrees, the Internal Security Act, and Martial Law. These provide protection for the officials who are attempting to control insurgent activities but also lessen their capacity to transform. In fact, any political option as a way toward conflict transformation will have to survive the moment of thinking the unthinkable, and violence has given rise to a number of formerly unthinkable thoughts. These would include, for example, giving up military impunity, restorative justice, and the possibility of regional autonomy (*khet pokkrong piset* in Thai). In such a state of affairs, peace initiatives and conflict resolutions in the Deep South have only proved counterproductive. In other words, the unthinkable reforms were impeded by the state’s need for strengthened security.

Autonomy Debates and the Peace Process

The most controversial idea for resolving a century old conflict in the Deep South, if not self-determination or separatism, is to treat the area as an “autonomous region” (*khet pokkrong piset* in Thai). This has become a very sensitive terminology; even the National Reconciliation Commission has tried to avoid it. The argument put forward by opponents has been that such status is unconstitutional, since it might jeopardize Thailand as a unitary state. From another angle, the idea of an autonomous region is also seen as challenging Buddhist nationalist ideology. The general public is skeptical about it, and to a certain extent sees this as a threat to national security rather than a reassuring resolution to the problems.

Different focus group discussions and forums⁵ on the directions of local government have gathered a variety of ideas. *The most extreme idea* coming with local autonomy would be the ability to apply Islamic law, Shari'ah. This means the autonomous area would be governed by different laws, so that Malay-Muslim culture could be expressed in terms of language, legal system, public administration, social and economic development, and local politics. Proponents of this position include intellectuals, religious leaders, Malay Muslims and political elites, and progressive youth groups.

A moderate view is that things can be solved in the long term by ensuring that people's aspirations can be expressed in local politics, regardless of their cultural identity. This would require that people in the provinces be able to choose their provincial governors. The election of governors might follow the model of the Bangkok Metropolitan Area and Pattaya City, or become possible by some other special legislation. This contributes to the recognition of the need for genuine political representation in important political and official positions. Those who support this view are, for instance, national and local politicians, progressive civil society, and academics.

Lastly, *a view of the status quo*, autonomy under the scope of the existing decentralization scheme is seen as adequate to address local needs. This view, which is generally claimed by the majority, holds that as adjustments in the local government are more fully implemented and strengthened, any necessary changes can be made within the existing system. For instance, public personnel are being reoriented; the security and judicial systems are being reformed, and mediating and coordinating institutions are being established, along with social and economic development programs. This view is popular among bureaucrats, academics and perhaps urban middle classes, as well as local politicians.

The idea of local autonomy for the Deep South so far is out of the question. On the other hand, a sensible comment on the issue of the Deep South's autonomy, which cannot be overlooked, is whether *more* autonomy is the answer we are searching for. High ranking officials asked if the Deep South actually has a structural or personnel problem. Would this lead to other similar groups in other parts of Thailand demanding more autonomy as well? Is such a course justified to satisfy one minority group?⁶ These seemingly simple questions, so difficult to answer, indicate a certain degree of mystifying perception about the changing features of national security and its relationship with territory, the majority-minority balance, and Thai identity or the Thai

⁵ A research project on Multi-ethnic Democracy and Local Government for the Southern Border Provinces of Thailand supported by the National Research Council, 2005-2006, and a similar project carried out by Mahidol University, 2005-2007. The forums included participants such as religious leaders, local government leaders and personnel, academics and civil society groups on separate occasions.

⁶ Group discussion, Peace Building Program 1, King Prajadhipok's Institute, 27 December 2008.

people's shared loyalties. These questions must be transcended and will require a social process if mutual understanding is to be achieved.

A recent public discussion began to probe into the values behind "Thainess," particularly when applied to the Deep South. Saichon Sattayanurak (2008) argues that the term "Thai" does not have a definite meaning. On the contrary, she said, it is a term which is typically used negatively to discriminate against others. The phrase "Thainess" therefore should be dropped. Surely one of the most self-congratulating definitions of "Thainess" is found in the commercial song of a popular folk singer, Ad Karabao. His lyric asks, "Who's a Thai?" and he answers, "If the person is considerate and generous, that is definitely a Thai!"

Perhaps one concern to be addressed here is whether insurgents look at the autonomy issue as a common goal, and if autonomy can substitute for calls for complete independence. Perhaps the most constructive message from an independent movement is from Haji Sulong Abdulkadir (Haji Sulong), who was President of the Pattani Islam Committee in 1947 (Whittingham-Jones, 1947 cited in Mongkonworawan, 2009: 17).

- (1) The appointment of a single individual with full powers to govern the four districts of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala and Satun, and in particular having authority to dismiss, suspend or replace all government servants, this individual to be local-born in one of the four districts and to be elected by the people.
- (2) Eighty percent of government servants in the four districts to profess the Muslim Religion.
- (3) Malay and Siamese to be the official languages.
- (4) Malay to be the medium of instruction in the primary schools.
- (5) Muslim law to be recognized and enforced in a separate Muslim Court other than the civil court where a onetime *Kathi* sits as an assessor.
- (6) All revenue and income derived from the four districts to be utilized within them.
- (7) The formation of a Muslim Board having full powers to direct all Muslim affairs under the supreme authority of the head of state mentioned in (1).

Haji Sulong's propositions once were viewed very sympathetically by the Thai government during Pridi Panomyong's leadership, but such a move was doomed to failure with the political uncertainty of that period. Similar

propositions by Wan Kadir Che Man (2003), the former leader of the Bersatu movement, were referred to again after the Kru Se incident in June 2005. In his writing, he trusted that if the Thai government was concerned and responsive to the proposals, the armed movement might be convinced to end their struggle. He referred to two broad points as follows:

- Recognize the importance of the people's history, Muslim identity and the specific needs of Muslims in politics, economy and culture.
- Rigorously and efficiently apply Articles 282 to 290 of the 1997 Constitution, for those provisions will allow local executives to be established and authorized to take charge of their own [local] destiny.

Taking these two propositions seriously, there is a degree of historical uniqueness which makes the Deep South different from other provinces in Thailand. A flexible and autonomous setting is reasonably required. Neither Haji Sulong nor Wan Kadir Cheman implied that a separation was wanted. Indeed, appreciation of the 1997 Constitution is reflected in his statement. Although it was instituted in the period of a military coup, the 2008 Constitution favors a higher degree of decentralization and a greater empowering of local governments.

The autonomy debates came to the attention of the public and the nation in an introductory academic discussion on special models of local government for the Deep South (see Jitpiromsri and Langputeh, 2008; Banpasirichote, 2008; Jitpiromsri and McCargo, 2008). National politicians with Malay Muslim identity picked up the issue positively. The idea was explored further during study tours made possible by a European foundation. High ranking officials traveled to different countries such as China (Xinjiang), Finland (Aland), Spain and Northern Ireland. The standing committee of the National Legislative Council under the coup government, the National Security Council during the Thaksin regime, and the King Prajadhipok Institute all took an interest in the Southern problem. The mixed responses were not unexpected. They reflected a contested discourse on national unity and the indivisibility of Thailand.

The floating idea of local autonomy subsequently evolved into a country-wide movement on comprehensive decentralization under the banner of "provincial self-management" (*changwat jatkarn ton-eng* in Thai). Civil society organizations have been working to propagate the idea of meaningful decentralization. Provincial self-management has certain features such as elected governors, people's councils in the structure of local government, and re-allocation of taxes. Chiang Mai,⁷ one of the leading provinces, and the three

⁷ Chiang Mai, in its campaign for provincial self-management, has developed a network to promote the idea and push for a policy agenda. See P-Power Changwat jatkarn ton-eng website at <http://p-power.org/>. As for the Pattani Metropolitan idea, Deepsouthwatch website promotes the discussion on the topic. See, for example, <http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/node/3444>

southern border provinces have developed their own versions of a provincial self-management bill with technical assistance from the office of the Legal Reform Commission and other civil society groups and networks such as the Community Organization Development Institute, the Political Development Council, and Reform Thailand.

The growing interest in greater autonomy for the three southern border provinces has brought together provincial self-management forces from other provinces, culminating in their own policy agenda for *Pattani Maha Nakorn* (Pattani Metropolitan). However, the idea of local autonomy is faced with serious debate about whether it will in fact encourage reconciliation. The push for autonomy might not necessarily represent the interests of the insurgents, whose aim is known to be only *Merdeka* or independence. Haji Sulong and Wan Kadir Che Man's proposals might no longer connect with the new generation of insurgents. This is clearly seen by the changing patterns of violence and organization, and a certain distancing of Wan Kadir Che Man from the new movement. The autonomy idea is probably too much for the Thai state and too little for the insurgency. Official reluctance among the authorities to lend support to the idea is quite clear. Local autonomy per se might not be sufficient to settle the century-old conflict, unless autonomy is an integral element in a peace process in which many stakeholders can take part.

The Autonomy Questions

Taking identity and historical grievances as positive guides to conflict transformation, a number of questions still need to be addressed. What, for example, is a "special autonomous region?" How can local ethnic and religious identities be represented in the government's structure and mechanism? What will become of non-Malay Muslims residing in the Deep South? How stable are the new political arrangements for local autonomy? Can the push for local autonomy eventually reduce violence in the border provinces of the South? Finally, is there enough political will to pursue this political transformation?

A desirable local autonomy can only be one which is mutually agreed upon and collectively constructed. The search for answers should also be carried out collectively. Lessons can be drawn from international experience and from analysis of local government practices in Thailand. There are certain principles to be observed in whatever model is initiated, for example, resource sharing, symbolic recognition, and political representation and participation.

The idea of regional or local self governance is not new. *The World's Working Regional Autonomies* by Thomas Benedikter (2007) offers a convenient and comprehensive source for a better practical understanding of autonomy. There are many possibilities for applying a certain degree of autonomy, not necessarily equivalent to the separate state which some power-sharing models

might suggest. There are ways of linking autonomous communities/regions to a national government. Benedikter (2007: 16) describes four main approaches to autonomy:

- Autonomy as a right to act upon one's own discretion in certain matters, whether the right is possessed by an individual or a public body.
- Autonomy as a synonym for more independence
- Autonomy as a synonym for decentralization
- Autonomy as a quality providing for exclusive powers of legislation, administration and adjudication in certain areas.

The forms of autonomy can also differ, ranging from territorial, as in an area-based region; cultural, based on a peoples' identity; or local or administrative autonomy (See Banpasirichote, 2009). It seems that territorial or local autonomy can provide an initial idea as to what is appropriate for the Deep South, provided that Malay Muslims are mostly concentrated in those three provinces and form a majority there. A glance of possible arrangements of autonomy is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Scope of Different Forms of Autonomy (Benedikter, 2007: 59)

Territorial Autonomy	Cultural Autonomy	Local Autonomy
All powers considered necessary for conducting the affairs of an ethnic group, specifically:	All powers considered necessary for the preservation and development of the cultural identity, specifically:	Regulation of institutional bilingualism within the local self-administration:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language rights and policy • the rights of the ethnic group national emblems, use of names and toponyms • the right to settle any question of possible second citizenship • education, including higher education • cultural institutions and programmes • radio, TV, electronic media • licensing of professions and trades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language rights • culture • education system • information, including media • use of the ethnic groups national emblems and toponyms • participation in the settlement of possible second citizenship • any other matters necessary for preserving and exercising the protective rights they are entitled to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of names and symbols specific to the ethnic group • Regulation of local customs and festivities • Protection of local monuments and memorials • Local security and traffic police • Local health and building inspectors • Institutions for local teaching, media, traditions, education, safeguarding economic activities

- use of natural resources
- health care, social services and insurance
- regional transport and communications
- energy production
- banks and other financial institutions
- regional and local police
- taxation for regional purposes
- environmental protection
- urban planning, development programmes
- regional economic policy, incentives for economic branches

A fundamental principle of any arrangement for an autonomous region is that an agreement be reached between conflicting parties and be endorsed by the local population. Benedikter (2007: 46-47) points out that the means by which autonomy is established is as vitally important as the imagined end.

In the Thai context the most critical issue, aside from technical considerations, is the question as to whether there is enough political will on both sides. Will there actually be a political opportunity to negotiate the terms of autonomy? At present, the idea of local autonomy or self-government in the Deep South is seen by the Thai authorities and by the general public as unconventional and thus unthinkable. Another question concerns the visibility and legitimacy of the insurgents, since key actors from the underground movement cannot be definitely identified and presented in public beforehand.

The conflict in the Deep South reached an important turning point when the Secretary General of the Office of the National Security Council, as the representative of the Thai Government, signed an agreement to begin talks with the BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional, BRN-Coordinate), one faction of the independence movement, on February 28, 2013. The “talk about talk” allowed the insurgent side some visibility, and their demands have now been put on the table. Although some analysts did not find that the talk greatly increased anyone’s confidence, the agreement was an important first step toward opening up new political options (see Abuza, 2013). There are problems in the process of peace talks that can be better prepared in many respects with: Malaysia in the role of mediator; the unity and representation of insurgent factions and state agencies, the supporting role of civil society organizations; and the preparation of a framework for the settlement. It remains to be seen whether the talks will eventually turn into a real negotiation or if the parties involved will find the idea of local autonomy relevant.

Along with the peace dialogue, BRN representatives publicly posted their conditions for peace talks on Youtube. Isra News Agency has reported on the five demands from the BRN by referring to a 38-page English language document. The demands concern recognition of the BRN as a legitimate party, safety measures, Malaysia as a mediator, and release of prisoners and suspects. The focus is on demand no.4, which puts forth the idea of autonomy to redress historical grievances. It is worth quoting at length.

“Number Four demand states that the Thai government recognizes the existence and supreme power of the administration of Patani Malay nation on the Patani territory. The BRN has reasoned that the root of the conflict stems from the occupation of Patani Malay and that it wants self-determination.

Details of this demand are as follows: that the government must recognize the Patani Malay nation with parliamentary approval; that the government must allow the Patani Malay people to set up a special administrative region in Thai territory similar to Bangkok Metropolitan Administration or Pattaya City.

Details about the right of self-determination which will be further discussed must include the following elements: the recognition of Patani Malay community; the modality of special administrative region; a special representative in the parliament; the governor the special administrative region; the administration of troops or police movement in the region; quota of official positions in the region; youth affairs; press freedom; revenue sharing and property in the region; and education.” (“More to know,” 2013)

The representatives of the BRN, the most radical faction of the movement, have sorted out important characteristics about the future of the Southern border provinces which seem more open for compromise than was initially expected. It is interesting that, at times, the BRN document refers to articles in the 1997 Constitution to provide legitimacy to their demands. Similarly, by referring to the special local government models of Bangkok Metropolitan and Pattaya City, the BRN stance can be placed closer to an on-going campaign for provincial self-management.

Local Government and Autonomy Questions

There are questions that have to be raised. Can the existing scheme of local government accommodate the different ways of life of the local people, protect human security, restore the judicial system, and enhance co-existence among members of the population? In other words, can the demands for autonomy articulated by the BRN be accommodated in the local government system as it now exists?

With the long tradition of highly centralized government administration, attempts at decentralization have stagnated. The work of decentralizing is handicapped by the lack of political will to fully enhance the capacity of local government and by the lack of trust and confidence in local leadership.

The development of local government in these provinces is complicated by the fact that the lives of Malay-Muslims are framed by Thai Buddhist cultural dominance in the public sector. Political representation at the local level is not a problem, since the local government mostly consists of local people. However, ethnic representation in public institutions at the provincial and district levels does not reflect the reality of the ethnic population. The practice

of decentralization under the supervision of the provincial and central governments has not been genuine and has not necessarily facilitated the expression of cultural diversity.

Local government models, particularly the sub-district or Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO) and the Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO), were improved by the 1997 Constitution. Election of members and heads of these administrations was introduced to implement local democracy. These agencies of local government were added on to the existing structure of the village, the sub-district (*tambon* in Thai) headman under the Ministry of Interior, and a religious leader under the Islamic Administration Act. They all operate under the authority of the regional government, namely the District Chiefs and the Provincial Governor, both appointed from the central government, the Ministry of Interior. It is quite true that the life of a Malay-Muslim is subject to different layers of state and religious authority which ironically do not make their life any better.

Local government is supported by a decentralization policy in which certain state functions/services and budget allocations are in the process of being transferred to the local governments at different levels. The whole thing is meant to increase local autonomy for self-government. According to the Plan and Steps of Decentralization Act 2001, local government agencies can exercise their power to control and manage community activities. They are entitled to voice their concerns over the possible impacts of development, even when that development takes place outside their jurisdiction. It is possible to develop regulations and local decrees which serve the community's own objectives. However, problems remain in the decentralization process where there are obstacles to implementation, namely, delays in personnel transfers and budget allocations.

With the available legal framework and the fact that local governments in the three border provinces are run by Malay-Muslims, political representation in local government is no longer an issue. New development of personnel recruitment is also in the hands of the local governments. The Department of Local Administration from the central government will no longer arrange for recruitment (Bunsueb Chamchoiy, personal communication, 28 January 2009).

In focus group discussions, members of local governments expressed their acceptance of the existing system, but could not claim to have any effective positive impact on the on-going violence. At the same time, religious and village leaders are worried and disturbed by the fierce electoral competition which is dividing their communities. The question is raised, therefore, as to why local people cannot or do not exercise power through their local government to express their aspirations. Information gathered from several focus groups organized by the author reveals a number of issues worth considering.

First, as much as they are able to exercise administrative power within their jurisdiction, local governments do not enjoy autonomy. There are a very few local governments in the country that can negotiate with the District Chief or Provincial Governor. Most simply cannot escape the logic of centralized government. Above all, people in general do not look up to their local government with confidence and trust. Local election practices are criticized as heavily based on patronage. There is a political tradition to respect the hierarchy in the central-local relationship.

Second, the fundamental problem of local administration, especially of the TAOs, is that there has been a misconception about the local government philosophy (Piya Kittavorn, focus group discussion, October 8, 2006). Most local government turns out to be project management. It is concerned mostly with how to propose plans for and spend the annual budget. Local government has not been oriented toward the protection of people's security and rights or the protection of the natural environment. This is partly due to local leadership itself and partly to the central government's administrative blueprint.

Third, although political representation of local ethnic identity is at a level which is generally acceptable to different ethnic and religious groups, the presence of cultural diversity is not a matter of particular interest to public sector organizations. This has to do with negligence in regard to symbolic recognition of historical grievances of the Malay Muslim identity, which forms the majority in the area. The centralized government administration uses a blueprint for most transactions such as religious holidays, forms of buildings and architecture, official and working language, personnel, school curricula and religious education, etc. In fact, there has been tradition of coexistence among different cultures, religions and ethnic groups. People understand and communicate with different languages and share local festivals. The agenda here is not about people-to-people relations, but about the central state and the local Malay Muslim community.

Political representation of ethnic identity extends to national politics as well, perhaps with more implications for the Deep South conflict. There are a number of Malay Muslim politicians who have made their way into the national parliament. Their political groupings have formed a collective voice; the best known group is Wada. The Wada political group was rather successful before the Thaksin regime (2001-2004). There were a few members of parliament that were quite sympathetic to local needs. The work of Wada has yielded some development on behalf of Islamic institutions such as *Pondok* subsidy funding. However, political partisanship and fragmentation have since damaged their political representation, and Malay Muslims from the border provinces have lost their collective voice in the house of parliament.

In practice, democracy does not always function well in terms of responsiveness and representation. Government needs to be more creative when interfacing with Islamic religious institutions. There are also differences in opinion as to whether politics, i.e., elections, should be pushed back on track by the moral guidance embedded in Islam. In any case, it seems to a large extent that healthy democracy in the Southern border provinces will depend on the strength of their religious institutions and on the will of active communities to ensure moral legitimacy and proper checks and balances in politics.

Apparently, local government faces a number of challenges since the current tradition of administration has not been geared toward reconciliation. Other countries have in other times devised useful approaches to boosting local self-government for peace building (Banpasirichote, 2009). To break away from outmoded traditions, provincial self-management has been initiated. The campaign introduces two key structures for the design of the new model of provincial autonomy. The first is **election of provincial governors** and the second, integration into the structure of the provincial administration of a **people's council** with mandates and political resources.⁸ The design of these structures aims at keeping local government locally accountable. The new idea of provincial self-government finds its legitimacy in the current constitution and gains comfort from the campaign alliance country wide. This comprehensive and advanced decentralization model not only functions as an alternative political platform for cultural diversity, but also depoliticizes the idea of local autonomy, and thus reduces any perceived threat to state security.

Nevertheless, it will take more than an advanced policy on decentralization to transform conflict in the Deep South. The proposition needs to be collectively constructed and mutually acceptable to the parties in conflict and the concerned stakeholders. Therefore, the achievement of peace talks is as critical as the articulation of provincial autonomy framework in the Deep South's transformation

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⁸ See draft bill on Provincial Self-management, Sub-committee on decentralization and public participation, Office of Legal Reform.

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