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**Introduction:
Conflict in the Deep South of Thailand:
Never-ending Stalemate?**

PAUL CHAMBERS*, SRISOMP OB JITPIROMSRI**

AND NAPISA WAITOOLKIAT***

The Introduction to this Special Issue lists the background, principal causes, possible future scenarios and potential solutions to the conflict in Thailand's Deep South. It also presents summaries of the articles in the Special Issue.

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* First Author, Lecturer and Special Adviser on International Affairs at the Center of International Affairs, Naresuan University, Thailand;
E-mail: pwchambers@gmail.com

** Assistant Professor, Center for Conflict Studies and Cultural Diversity, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, Pattani, Thailand;
E-mail: srisompob@yahoo.com

*** Assistant Professor and Dean, Department of Social Sciences, Naresuan University, Thailand; E-mail: napisaw@gmail.com

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ethno-religious strife has existed in the Deep South of Thailand for over 100 years. It involves a clash between a Buddhist Thai nation-state and a minority of Malay-Muslims.¹ In January 2004, however, Malay-Muslim insurgents escalated their fighting and it has been raging ever since. Yet the Thaksin Shinawatra government (2001-2006), the military regime (2006-2008), the elected governments afterwards (2008-2014) and the post-2014 military regime have all failed to fully pacify the insurgency. In 2019 the insurgency entered its 15th year. Indeed, though there has been a litany of proposals to defuse the imbroglio, it has continued and fluctuated unabated. Yet what have been the causes of the crisis? What are the principal issues involved in it? What might be the most viable proposals to diminish the violence? Finally, what might be the future trend for the conflict? This Special Issue examines the quagmire of conflict in Thailand's Deep South and specific issues relating to it.² It begins with a brief history of the conflict; discusses its different causes; how and why it has escalated; and what might be the future of state-local relations in the far south. It ends with a brief discussion of the articles in this Special Issue.

II. THE CONFLICT: A HISTORY UNTIL 2014

The current conflict in Thailand's far south originally is centered upon the modern Thai provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and parts of Songkla, which, together with areas of northern Malaysia, generally covered the area of the Muslim sultanate of *Patani*. The region was once the center of Langkhasuka, an Indianized trading kingdom dating back to the second century AD. *Langkhasuka* (later *Patani*) was as part of the Srivijaya empire during the seventh to thirteenth century AD) and practiced a mixture of Hinduism and Buddhism. In the mid-1400s, most inhabitants of *Patani* converted to Islam, with *Patani's* king declaring in 1457 that his kingdom was henceforth Islamic (Islam 1998, 443). This shift in religious identity, though part of a trend in the Islamization of Java, created immediate frictions with the mighty Ayutthaya Buddhist kingdom to the North. *Patani* became an uneasy vassal state for Ayutthaya. However, when *Patani* refused to pay tribute to an usurper to the Ayutthaya throne in 1629, Ayutthaya in 1632 sent troops to repress the insurrection—but the offensive failed. In 1632, Ayutthaya unsuccessfully attacked *Patani*. The memory of this incident, together with Ayutthaya's own military problems with then-kingdoms of present-day Myanmar, guaranteed an uneasy ceasefire between *Patani* and Ayutthaya for 150 years (Syukri 1985, 41-44).

In 1785, the successor state of Ayutthaya's- Siam--forcibly subjugated *Patani* and did so again in 1791 (Syukri 1985, 44-53). After another 1808

rebellion by *Patani*, Siam dissected the sultanate into seven administrative units called *Khaek Jet Huamuang* under the indirect supervision of the Viceroyalty of the South in Songkla. However Siamese forces continued to quell numerous insurrections and directly incorporated the newly-named provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat into Siam in 1902- the four others being ceded to Britain in 1909. Yet Siam's forceful treatment of the people comprising the region of the former *Patani* merely provoked continuing resistance and revolt. From 1902 until 1944, repressive laws and assimilation policies were applied against the southern Malay-Muslim community. The Malay language was banned in public offices, Malay state employees were required to assume Thai names, Muslim-Malay attire was forbidden in public, and Islamic law was no longer allowed to be practiced. At the same time, Buddhist statues were placed in schools and Muslim children were forced to bow before them (ICG 2005, 2-3).

From 1944 until 1947, the state made moves towards conciliation, but it also sought to incorporate Muslims under Thai state structures. Though this was an improvement over the earlier repression, most Muslims remained disaffected by these "cooptive" policies (ICG 2005, 4-5). In 1947, Muslim leader Haji Sulong submitted a petition to the state on behalf of the *Patani* People's Movement. The petition generally called for centralized control over most southern issues to give way to local power. This and other petitions, however, were voided in November 1947, when a right-wing coup in Thailand resurrected the policy of military oppression against the southern Muslims (Aphornsuvan 2007, 41). Thailand arrested and imprisoned Haji, which led to mass protests in the South. One 1948 protest in Narathiwat was stifled when police killed 400 demonstrators. Though Haji disappeared in 1955 (permanently "disappeared" by Thai authorities) amidst highly repressive state policies toward the far south, in 1959, Malay-Muslim insurrectionaries established the *Patani* National Liberation Front (*Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani*, BNPP), the first armed group to advocate *Patani's* independence. The BNPP engaged in attacks against the Thai state until the late 1960s, when it began to splinter. Meanwhile, around 60 other armed groups were operating in southern Thailand, some political, some criminal. However, there was no leader who could unite them. Two important organizations which emerged in the 1960s were BRN (*Barisan Revolusi Nasional*), that was founded in the early 1960s and PULO (*Patani United Liberation Organization*) that was founded in 1968 BRN. These two groups became the principal rebel organizations over the next 20 years (Thayer 2007, 7).

After March 1975, Thailand's elected government commenced policies designed to win the hearts and minds of Malay Muslims. Thus, the central government allocated funds to improve various infrastructural and educational projects in Muslim majority provinces. Regardless, insurgent attacks mounted in rural Yala, Narathiwat and *Patani* on government offices and police posts. In

November 1975, tensions boiled over following Thai soldiers' shooting of five Muslim youths and Buddhist extremists' killing of 12 Muslims. These incidents raised tensions to an even higher level. In the early 1980s, the government of Prem Tinsulanond improved security in the South by allocating more money to security institutions; enhancing cooperation with moderate Muslim leaders; and pursuing conciliation (Thayer 2007, 10). This policy stressed economic development, an amnesty for rebels, as well as the establishment of two inter-government agencies. The first agency (CPM 43) coordinated the security operations of civilians, police, and the military. The second agency (the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center [SBPAC]) sought to increase cooperation among government agencies on political issues in terms of the southern insurgency.

The 1980s also saw growing factionalism among the separatist groups and the emergence of new ones. This changed with the 1989 establishment of the *Patani Malay People's Consultative Council* (*Majelis Permesyuaratan Rakyat Melayu Patani*, MPRMP) (shortened to *Bersatu* or "Unity") and Bersatu's 1997 reinvigoration. Bersatu has been significant as it was an umbrella organization which united PULO, BRN, and two other insurgent groups (ICG 2005, 14). Bersatu led targeted assassinations of state officials in the late 1990s. But this united insurgency was temporarily stanchd thanks to three factors. First, the 1988 ascension to office of an elected government in Thailand allowed members of the Wadah Muslim parliamentary faction to gain influential positions in Thai cabinets. Thus, many Muslim moderates threw their support behind cooperating with Bangkok. Second, following the Asian financial crisis, Malaysia agreed to help Thailand arrest suspected rebels who fled across the joint border. Third, SBPAC conciliation efforts were beginning to pay off. Fourth, in the late 1990s, Thai military maneuvers against rebels who refused government amnesties were increasingly successful (Thayer 2007, 11-12).

In 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra was elected Prime Minister in a landslide. Considering the Malay-Muslim insurgents as little more than bandits and wanting to reduce the influence of his political rivals in the South, Thaksin in 2002 dismantled CPM 43 and SBPAC. These agencies had become military creatures of Thaksin's growing nemesis (former Prime Minister, now Privy Council chairperson) Prem Tinsulanond (McCargo 2007, 39). SBPAC had also been influenced by the anti-Thaksin (and pro-Prem) Democrat party (Askew 2009, 3). Given his deep influence in the police, Thaksin placed control over southern security matters solely in the hands of police commanders, exacerbating tensions between the army and police, while police became accused of greater human rights abuses in the south. Meanwhile, following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, insurgent incidents in Thailand's far south intensified (Thayer 2013, 13).

These strikes culminated in a well-organized insurgent attack on an Army camp in Narathiwat province on January 4, 2004. The militants seized close to 350 weapons and executed four soldiers. Not long after this, Thaksin declared martial law in Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani. At this point fighting between insurgent and security forces began to soar and each was implicated in human rights abuses. Soldiers and police now worked together in counter-insurgency operations. Security forces were soon accused of murdering prominent Thai human rights lawyer Somchai Neelaphajit, who disappeared on 12 March 2004 in Bangkok. He was a lawyer representing five Muslims who were accused of having stolen some of the 300 guns (BBC 2006). In 2004 alone there were two massacres. On April 28, following a seven-hour stand-off with Thai soldiers, 32 suspected guerrillas took shelter in Krue Se mosque. Thereupon soldiers stormed the mosque, killing all 31, as well as 80 other insurgents (Thayer 2007, 13-14). Then on October 25, after soldiers arrested several protestors at the border town of Tak Bai and transported them to an army base, it was discovered that 78 had died in route of suffocation. After the Krue Se and Tak Bai incidents, the Malay-Muslim community became infuriated and insurgent attacks skyrocketed. Moreover, the incidents gave Thaksin a poor public image in the Deep South and he replaced the Army Commander (his trusted cousin Gen. Chaityasit) with the then-little-known Gen. Prawit Wongsuwan. On July 14, 2005, Thaksin promulgated the Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situations which gave security forces the power to arrest and detain suspected rebels, as well as engage in human rights abuses with general impunity (ibid, 13-14). Also, in 2005, partly to deflect his critics, Thaksin adjourned a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) which was tasked to suggest ways to bring peace to the troubled South. The NRC published its recommendations in 2006: these included 1) making Patani-Malay (Yawi) the official language for the three provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala; 2) establishing a single administration for the provinces; and 3) re-introducing Islamic law Privy Council Chair Prem immediately rejected the first of these proposals (The Nation 2006). Nor did Prem respond enthusiastically to the other suggestions. Thaksin himself brushed them aside and increasingly relied on repression to address the chaos in the South —but the insurgency nevertheless continued. Criticism of Thaksin's policies grew among some in the armed forces as well as among Privy Council Chair Prem Tinsulanond and the king. Indeed, Thaksin's southern policy played a role in his September 19, 2006 overthrow (Askew 2008, 191).

Following Thaksin's ouster, the newly-appointed Surayudh Chulanond government sought to revive Prem's policy of conciliation, even issuing a public apology to Malay-Muslims and announcing a new economic stimulus program for five southern provinces (including also Satun and Songkhla) (Askew 2008, 192). It re-established the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Committee

and Civil-Military-Police Task Force to coordinate security and political policies on the ground in the South. Both of these were placed under the direction of the Army-controlled Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC). Indeed, the powers of ISOC were strengthened such that army commanders would increasingly be calling the shots with regard to internal security. However, the insurgency refused to go away (Joll 2010, 260).

In 2007, the military began to adopt a far more aggressive counter-insurgency policy. Under a new ISOC-directed “Southern Territory Protection Plan,” a total of 60,000 soldiers were deployed to maintain peace and order, while 30 brigades of *Tahan Phran* paramilitary forces were established. In addition, the number of village security volunteers was increased, and the police created the Southern Border Patrol Police Operations Centre (SBPPOC). The increased security operations, leading to more patrols and arrests, brought about a decline in the unrest in 2008 (Jitpiromsri and McCargo 2010, 159-160). But the tranquility proved to be stillborn. In 2009 there was an upsurge in violence (in terms of incidents of violence), a situation which in 2010 and 2011 was continuing unabated. According to Srisompob and McCargo (2010), this owed to the fact that security forces, through their increased counter-insurgency operations, were simultaneously violating more and more human rights which exacerbated Malay-Muslim grievances against the state, which then again gave insurgents more propaganda to rationalize continuing support for their cause (ibid, 163).

In the days of the insurgency until 2011, there had been some negotiations between the Thai state and the insurgents. But such talks had been few and superficial. It was not until the 2011-2014 elected government of Thaksin’s sister Yingluck Shinawatra that Thailand (in 2013) began to seriously negotiate with the insurgents in a peace process aimed at reducing and eventually bringing the violent conflict to an end. With the military reluctantly backing the talks, Yingluck’s government held talks with one major rebel group (the BRN or National Revolutionary Front) with Malaysia acting as arbiter. Yet these talks were hindered by anti-Yingluck protests in Bangkok, the lack of cooperation from the army, and the fact that only one insurgent group was negotiating with the Thai state (Boonpunnth 2015, 121).

III. SINCE 2014

Thailand’s May 22, 2014 military coup, establishment of martial law and institutionalization of tactics to embed long-term military influence suggested that the junta was not interested in moving toward sustainable peace in the Deep South, including the continuation of negotiations. Nevertheless, in 2015 renewed negotiations commenced between Thailand’s military regime and a new group of insurgents.

Indeed, the peace dialogue between Thai government under the military regime and the insurgent umbrella group negotiators MARA *Patani* (a collection of representatives of insurgent groups) has only slowly and gradually developed since 2015. Yet by 2018, the only success which the talks had produced was the announcement of a “pilot safety zone (Pathan 2018).” Given that the largest actor among the insurgent groups, the BRN, has not taken an active participatory role in the peace process, it remains unclear whether the peace dialogue can go as planned. Meanwhile, MARA *Patani* is unsure about the sincerity of Thailand’s junta in the negotiations.

IV. THE CONFLICT’S CAUSES

There have been various explanations suggesting why the insurgency exploded in 2004 and why it has continued. The first four below (A-D) are particularly plausible rationales in descending order of importance. Indeed, these four, can help to explain the narrative of injustice at the hands of the state, which is the principal perception of people in the Thailand’s Deep South. The other two explanations for the insurgency (E-F) are often attributed by Thai state actors as a means of delegitimizing the four aforementioned principal explanations.

1. Ethno-Religious Differences

At a more general historical level, discord between Buddhism and Islam has been at the heart of the impasse. The religious discourse of the kingdom of *Patani* always looked southward to other Muslim sultanates. However, it had to contend with the raw military prowess of Buddhist kingdoms to the north. During the 1930s, the Thai state’s cultural mandates required that all government offices in the three southern provinces (and elsewhere in Thailand) display Buddhist monuments. Thai officials were also highly suspicious of the *pondok* education system. Pondok are schools in which the curriculum is taught in Malay or Arabic and the emphasis is on religious learning with regard to the Malay-Muslim identity. Many Malay-Muslim grievances against Thais owe to consternation about the Thai state’s attempt to regulate these schools. To avoid being placed within the Thai educational system, many pondok preferred to dissolve themselves. Today, there are approximately 500 pondok schools operating in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat with around 300 registered with Thai authorities. In about 30 of the 500, teachers are suspected of preaching separatism from Thailand (Liow 2004). Soldiers regularly search pondoks, provoking local outrage (ibid.). Amidst state suspicion that pondoks offer accommodation to insurgents while secretly inculcating terrorist learning, soldiers have regularly searched pondoks and have even seized some of them. Such state tactics have

provoked mass outrage among Malay-Muslims in the Deep South (Nanuam and Ngamkham 2019). Intervention by the government in southern pondok schools has certainly not helped to improve its public image there.

Fundamentalist imam connected with pondok schools are considered to be influential with Malay-Muslim rebel organizations. Since 2004, some of these groups have attacked Buddhist temples and killed Buddhist monks, intensifying sectarian hatred between Muslims and Buddhists. In the aftermath of one such attack, the Sangha committee of Pattani declared its opposition to any National Reconciliation Commission for the South and criticized those who accused soldiers of human rights violations (Joll 2010, 260). Malay Muslims increasingly identified Buddhist temples with support for the military, especially where certain temples allowed soldiers to cache military hardware on their premises and “military monks” were assigned to guard fellow monks against attacks by Muslims (ibid, 261). Ultimately, growing religious hostility between Muslims and Buddhists has been a cause for the continuing life of the Muslim insurgency as well as violence between Muslims and Buddhists.

2. Socio-economic grievances

Socio-economic factors may be considered a cause for the imbroglio. Indeed, Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani possess the lowest average income of all southern provinces. The three provinces have also experienced greater poverty than nearby Malaysia. However, the provinces’ incidence of poverty is comparable to many other parts of Thailand. Moreover, between 1983 and 2003, the gross provincial product of each of the three provinces expanded greatly. The continuing insurgency, of course, is doing little to improve the economies of the three provinces and other Thai provinces have not been compelled to suffer through insurgency violence. Ultimately, though these provinces have seen increased growth, they have “generally experienced slower economic development than neighboring provinces in Thailand (Melvin 2007, 18).”

Education and employment are perhaps more important issues for southern Muslims. Levels of education among Malay-Muslim meanwhile remain low in comparison to Buddhists in the South. Furthermore, there are less employment opportunities for Muslims than Buddhists. Indeed, government officials comprised only 2.4% of all working Muslims are government officials in these provinces, compared with 19.2% who are Buddhist. Finally, illiteracy is much higher among Muslims than Buddhists (Jitpiromsri and Sophonvasu 2007, 96-104). For Muslim students who do not or cannot use Thai language, jobs are often more difficult to come by. In sum, socio-economic problems remain an important, though not leading cause of sense of frustration among Malay-Muslims, which southern insurgents have succeeded in tapping. Perhaps sensing

this, various governments, including the Abhisit and Yingluck administrations, promised socio-economic development projects (Jitpiromsri and McCargo 2010, 172; Nanuam 2012). In 2012, most of these programs had not yet been implemented. Meanwhile, the World Bank Group reported that the percentage of the poverty head count in the Deep South was about 32.8 in 2013, the worst record of national poverty gap compared with other regions in the country in that same year (World Bank Group 2016, 64). This implies that after a decade of intense budgetary mobilization to reconstruct order and develop the troubling sub-region, the poverty is still rife.

3. Bad State Policies

Since Thailand's incorporation of the three southern provinces, state policies toward Malay-Muslims there have been both biased and heavy-handed. Authoritarianism and various degrees of nationalism-assimilation were central features of Thailand's policies until the 1970s. State bureaucrats sent from Bangkok to administer the far South were often negligent or even provocative towards the local population. In 1981, however, then-Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond introduced a new approach, stressing economic development, political accommodation, cultural rights, as well as an amnesty, instead of simple force to combat the insurgency. Prem also worked with the government of Malaysia to enhance border cooperation and security (Bajoria and Zissus 2008). For a time, it seemed that this new approach was bearing fruit as it appeared to weaken the rebel organizations throughout the 1980s and 1990s. "Ironically, however, the weakening of the armed movements caused them to splinter and radicalize (ICG 2005, 6)." Prem's new political approach was handled through the aforementioned SBPAC. But the SBPAC budget was rumored to be for years a source of largesse for corrupt senior military officers (Askew 2010, 247). Such rumors did little to convince Malay-Muslims that state officials were serious in their approach toward the South.

Upon becoming Prime Minister in 2001, Thaksin abolished the SBPAC and joint civilian-police-military task force, instead enhancing the role of police. When the insurgency escalated in 2004, Thaksin imposed two repressive laws in the three provinces: first the Martial Law Act of 1914 and later the 2005 Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situations. He even classified villages in the three provinces into three zones. Villages classified as belonging to "red zones" would receive no develop funds from the state because such villages were suspected of siding with the insurgents. Villages classified into "yellow zones" had put up moderate resistance to the state so they would receive part of their development funds. Villages classified as "green zones" would receive full benefits because they were deemed to be peaceful (Bangkok Post

2005). The Prime Minister refused to take heed of conciliatory recommendations offered by the National Reconciliation Commission. In the end, Thaksin's use of repression and withholding of benefits to villages only served to alienate Malay-Muslims.

Following the 2006 coup, the newly appointed government of Surayudh Chulanond brought back the conflict-management structures which had been closed down by Thaksin. Surayudh reached out to the rebel groups, even holding a series of peace talks in Malaysia (Bajoria and Zissus, 2008). But the insurgent violence grew again with the result that in 2007 the state returned to a policy of increased repression. Such repression was legitimated through the use of a newly enacted (2008) Internal Security Act, though the state also continued to use the Martial Law Act and Emergency Decree. The Democrat-led government of Abhisit Vechachiwa continued to support the use of force though it emphasized that civilians rather than soldiers control the SBPAC. Suspicions have arisen that the Democrats would use the bulk of SBPAC funding to shore up their voting base in the South rather than seriously address the insurgency issue (Askew 2010, 250). Ultimately, however, the state has relied much too often on the "stick" rather than any lasting and effective "carrot." Moreover, the "stick" has been pointed only at Malay-Muslims, which has helped to foster perceptions of ethnic discrimination. As a result, wrong-headed state policies have been counter-productive because they have simply increased hatred and suspicion toward the state.

4. Political Factors

Political factors have been a major cause for the southern insurgency. Such factors at the least have involved obstacles to more local governance under the Thai state and at the most impediments to self-determination and independence from the Thai state. This is perhaps surprising given that Malay-Muslims have seen some of their own become leaders within Thailand's political establishment. As democratization in Thailand took hold in the 1980s, opportunities for Malay-Muslims' political representation began to grow. During the 1980s, a Muslim political faction emerged which was composed of Muslim members of parliament at the national level. This clique, known as *Wadah* (meaning "unity") was at first part of the Democrat Party, and then moved to various other parties until finally lodging itself in Thaksin's own Thai Rak Thai (Jitpiromsri and McCargo 2010, 171). Since the late 1990s, the political representation of Muslims has been on the rise. Wan Muhammad Nor Matha (a Malay-Muslim from Yala) was President of Parliament (1996-2001) and also served in a number of ministerial posts. Surin Pitsuwan, (a Muslim from the upper-South province of Nakhon Si Thammarat), was Foreign Minister under the second Chuan Leekpai

government (1997-2001). During Thaksin's first government (2001-2005), there were 14 Muslim MPs and several Muslim senators. The leader of the 2006 coup which ousted Thaksin—Sonthi Booyaratklin—was even a Muslim. At the local level, the three provinces have seen provincial legislative assemblies dominated by Muslims and there have been an assortment of Muslim mayors (Sugunnasil 2007, 115-16).

However, when the violence accelerated in 2004, Muslim politicians were immediately suspected of involvement by the Thai state agencies. One was even charged with supporting the insurgency. Muslim politicians were also generally silent as violence in the South grew during the 2000s—apparently not wanting to offend their party leaders. This cost them dearly in the 2005 elections, when all but one of the incumbent Malay-Muslim representatives running for re-election under the banner of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party lost their seats (Sugunnasil 2007, 116; see Utarasint, this Special Issue). After taking office in 2008, the Abhisit government did not reward any cabinet positions or give senior party positions to its Malay-Muslim MPs. The (perceived) inability of Malay-Muslims to be able to avail themselves of the democratic structures of Thailand's political system in the face of seemingly endless state authoritarianism has compelled many to question whether Bangkok even deserves political legitimacy. Yet the Thai state has never seriously worked for any sizeable length of time to obtain political support and participation from Malay-Muslims. More often, repression has been the state's favored tool. As a result, many locals feel alienated and deem Thai control over them as illegitimate. As such, locals become "ripe for recruitment or complicity with insurgent organizations (Jitpiromsri and McCargo 2010, 170-171)." In this respect the insurgency is a violent struggle which seeks a political objective. According to Srisompob and McCargo (2010), there need to be new political structures which can address local grievances because only with such local participation will the conflict dissipate in the long term (McCargo 2010, 167). In sum, a political legitimation crisis exists in the far South. Many Malay-Muslims, feeling unable to express themselves politically, have come to oppose Thai rule. Resolving this predicament will require some major re-thinking. The next section examines potential conflict resolution ideas.

5. Criminality

Criminality is an implausible cause of Thailand's southern violence though Thai state officials sometimes offer it as a rationale. The gist of this cause is that the insurgency derives from the attempt by militants to obtain economic benefits from the chaos. As such, insurgents are mere bandits, smugglers, or narcotics agents. Indeed, there is some truth to accusations that insurgents are criminals. After all, BRN, PULO and other groups have used extortion activities

to raise funds for their efforts. At the same time, enforcement statistics from Thailand's Office of Narcotics Control Board indicate that indictments for supplying and abusing drugs grew dramatically in the three southern provinces from 2000 to 2004. Such seizures are among the highest in the country (Jitpiromsri and Panyasak 2007, 101-102). Until 2004, Thai government agencies generally viewed the insurgents as simple criminals (ICG 2005, 14). Thaksin himself referred to them as "sparrow bandits (The Nation 2012)." His Interior Minister was quoted in 2002 as saying that the rebels "are looking after their own interests, they are motivated only by money (BBC 2002)." But when Thai political leaders and security agencies characterize the source of the insurrection as mere criminality, it allows them to dismiss the legitimacy of any southern grievances "from the outset (Jitpiromsri and McCargo 2010, 179)." Moreover, though it is easy to blame criminality—a universal problem in the world—the southern Thailand conflict has been protracted over several years now. Ultimately, blaming only crime or drug abuse as the root of the crisis distorts reality as the weight of evidence is stacked against such a misperception (ibid, 179). In fact, the data collected by Deep South Watch from 2004 to 2017 has shown that, out of 19,279 incidents of violent conflict in the Deep South officially recorded, only 4.7 incidents were identified as being criminal acts while drug-related acts were about 2.8 percent. Most of the incidents, 72.9 percent, were insurgency or separatist-related (Deep South Watch 2017). But these incidents can be viewed as criminal in the sense that they are human rights violations. Allegations of such violations have involved both state actors (the military and police) as well as insurgents themselves.

6. Growing Pan-Muslim Militancy

Another argument put forward by some state actors and their allies is the unproven contention that the globalization of militant Islam especially after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the invasion of Muslim countries (Afghanistan, Iraq) by mostly-Christian soldiers, lends credence to a snowballing effect of increased Muslim militancy in the world—including in Thailand in 2004. Actually, the notion of a global militant Islamic "jihad" which is "an existential threat to the West" has been constructed by Western media (Hammer and Rothstein 2012, 263). It is true that in the Deep South Riduan Isamuddin, alias Hambali, who concurrently held senior positions in Al Qaeda and its Southeast Asian affiliate *Jemaah Islamiyah*, was apprehended in Thailand in 2003. He was rumored to have had contact with some involved in Thailand's southern insurrection (Liow 2006, 91).

Also, since most victims of the violence since 2004 have been Muslims, most have perhaps died at the hands of militants who consider them to be

collaborators or hypocrites. But this does not prove that the Southern insurgency is part of a global jihad (Joll 2010, 269). Though some southern Malay-Muslim Thais do study Islam in Muslim countries and return home to Thailand to work in pondok schools, there is not enough evidence that proves that such learning abroad amounts to some kind of foreign intervention which has brought pan-Islam to the fore of Thailand's insurrection (Bajoria and Zissis 2008). Moreover, the nationalism and self-identity of southern Thai insurgents points to a greater emphasis on establishing a sort of Malay nation of *Patani* rather than becoming a mere part of a pan-Islamic state. Foreign Islamic operatives have actually been treated with mistrust among Malay-Muslims in southern Thailand. Suicide bombings are not practiced in Thailand and, unlike beheadings abroad; beheadings in southern Thailand have been conducted after death (Joll 2010, 271). All in all, it seems implausible that the international Islamic movement is guiding Thailand's southern insurgency.

V. PROPOSALS TO DIMINISH TENSIONS

1. *Continuation of the Status Quo*

Continuing the status quo offers only short-term solutions to dealing with the southern insurgency. From 2004 until 2019, 6,938 people were killed as a result of the escalation of violence in the Deep South (Deep South Watch 2019). Though at times the insurrection seemed to diminish, in 2019 the violence continues. Meanwhile, the state has expended a great deal on various military and political efforts. A continuation in the status quo simply means more deaths; increased financial costs for the security effort; continuing domestic and foreign criticisms of Thailand; and an inability to safely invest in or tap the resources of the region.

2. *Secession*

Thailand's principal insurgent groups have long advocated the secession of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat as well as a few parts of Songkla province "from Thailand and the establishment of an independent *Patani* Republic (or, in the case of some BNPP adherents, a *Patani* Sultanate), presumably in economic and political alliance with Malaysia or Indonesia (Forbes 1982, 1064)." If the three provinces were to secede together, they would be following the model of Timor Leste (East Timor) which was allowed to secede from Indonesia in 1999. Clearly, this would be the final option for the Thai government because it would mean a loss of territory. The advantages would be that Bangkok would appear magnanimous and achieve a positive image in world. Also, secession would save lives, time, and

finance in the long term. Finally, it would prevent any more human rights violations by Thai police, soldiers, and paramilitaries.

As for disadvantages, Muslim violence against Buddhists in the seceded state might continue. In addition, a new problem might arise about how to relocate Buddhists or other people from the seceded territory. At the same time, after secession, radical Muslims might carry out an increased number of revenge attacks against more moderate Muslims considered to be “collaborators” by the extremists. Moreover, an independent *Patani* would be faced with stark economic challenges as the new country would have to find ways to attract investment and employ its people. Furthermore, secession would bring forth new frontier demarcation problems. Finally, as Thailand’s territory would be reduced, secession would stoke Thai nationalism and be difficult to implement (Thnaprarnsing 2009, 23). As such, secession offers an unlikely outcome of the southern insurgency. Nevertheless, the major group of insurgents, the BRN and its supporters, still feel no qualms about expressing their beliefs about the rights for self-determination (RSD), a variation of secession. The evidence is seen from BRN’s demands in the peace dialogue in 2013 and, covertly, in MARA *Patani’s* statement concerning the peace dialogue in 2018.

3. *Autonomy*

Autonomy has slowly come to be a possible solution to the crisis in the South. Though the 2006 Report of the National Reconciliation Commission on the Deep South never mentioned the word “autonomy,” the commission’s vice chair —Dr. Prawase Wasi—was one of the first proponents of this idea (though he later backed off of it). Such autonomy could be akin to increased political or administrative decentralization. Political decentralization gives citizens or their elected representatives more power in public decision-making. Administrative decentralization refers to the devolution of control, responsibility and management of finances to different levels of governance. Thailand made a major move toward political decentralization in 1994 with the passage of the Act on Tambon Councils and Tambon Administrative Organizations (enshrined in the 1997 and 2007 constitutions). Though focusing on the sub-district level, this Act initiated the path toward elected officials at the sub-district, metropolitan and provincial levels. Decentralization for the three southernmost provinces might mean electing provincial governors as a means by which southern Malay-Muslims could gain more control over policies affecting them, at least at the local level. As such, decentralization has been opposed by many Buddhists in the Deep South region. But Thailand is a unitary state and decentralization was still tightly controlled by Bangkok.

In 2008, leaders in the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party (e.g. Chalerm Yubamrung; Chavalit Yongchaiyudh) voiced their support for a greater degree of autonomy. In that same year, Dr. Srisompob Jitpiromsri produced a proposal outlining administrative reorganization arrangements in the three southern provinces, including the creation of a new ministry to manage the region (McCargo 2010, 263). This ministry of southern border provinces would be overseen by an MP from the region and would have power over the region's budgetary and policy affairs in socio-economic, educational, though it would not control security. Under the aegis of the ministry, several local councils were to be created, including a regional people's assembly composed of various occupational groups' representatives which would act in a consultative capacity (McCargo 2010, 274). In 2009, Chavalit—as Chairman of Puea Thai Party—began pushing strongly for the establishment of Nakhon Pattani or “Pattani City”—as a political solution to the southern insurgency and also to increase Puea Thai popularity as a general election approaches in 2011. Nakhon Pattani would be the name of the autonomous region which had been proposed by Srisompob (Bangkok Post 2010). Meanwhile, the newly-created Matuphum Party, headed by former coup leader Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratklin and some members of the old Wadah faction began to sell itself as the party of the Deep South. Srisompob's proposal became the Matuphum Party's policy (McCargo 2010, 276). This idea of a ministry for the southern border provinces was useful because it does not tread on the military's monopoly on security policy. However, the danger is that the ministry will simply become peripheralized as the military continues to dominate policies of security and development for the Deep South.

Some have sought to diminish the role of the military in the South altogether. Kariya Kijjarak the confederation chairman of the 15 Central Islamic Committees representing the South has stated that the military cannot solve the social strife in the southern border provinces. Thus, he advocates complete withdrawal of the security forces from there—though this would not mean autonomy or secession. However, he says that locals would run their own affairs. At the same time, he called for the setting up of an industrial estate for *halal* food so as to spur the southern border economy. Also, these provinces would be designated as a tourist destination for religious/cultural attractions (The Nation 2010). Ultimately, however, any notions of autonomy or near-autonomy will continue to meet resistance by bureaucratic and aristocratic interests. At the same time, advocates of such proposals need to be careful not to offend royal prestige given that the southern frontier area is part of the kingdom of Thailand (McCargo 2010, 265). Following the military coup in 2014, the autonomy-decentralization project for the Deep South was sidelined by many of the NCPO's Orders. The new program on integrated mobilization for problem rectification in Southern Border Provinces leaves no room for local participation.

4. Improving the Justice System in the Deep South

Thailand's justice system in the southern border provinces has long been perceived by locals as biased against Malay-Muslims. Thus, in order to build confidence, the 2005-2006 National Reconciliation Commission recommended a complete overhaul of the court system in the far South. Overall, the NRC called for improved efficiency, transparency, and public participation "in upholding justice (NRC 2006, 78)." Criminal investigations should be handled, not only by the police, but also officials from other agencies, with an emphasis on public participation. Independent commissions should immediately investigate allegations of violence perpetrated by state officials against locals. Moreover, human rights personnel and lawyers from the Thai Malay-Muslim community must always be available to suspects and defendants. Meanwhile, the state should emphasize the importance of imams and mosques in providing assistance to locals about justice matters.

Perhaps most radically, the NRC recommended studying the feasibility of establishing an Islamic (Shari'ah) law division in courts in the southern frontier provinces. Regarding judicial arbitration, the NRC suggested appointing arbitrators versed in Islamic law such as imams (NRC 2006, 78-83). In support of a reformed justice system, the NRC proposed the establishment of unarmed peacekeepers to defuse conflict and promote dialogue (ibid, 70). In January 2010, the Abhisit government announced a series of modifications for the region which the government would study, including enhancing rule of law, administration of justice and protecting citizen's rights (Chongkittavorn 2010). Since the 2014 coup, judicial reform in the Deep South remains unrealized. In fact, following a 2016 report about state torture in the region, the army charged its authors with defamation, in what critics said was an effort to silence critics (AFP 2017).

5. Declare Patani Malay an additional working language in the southern border provinces

This proposal is secondary to more major ones. The NRC made several other recommendations, among them that *Patani* Malay should become an additional working language in the three southern border provinces. Thus, all official documents in the provinces should be in both Thai and *Patani* Malay; signs should be posted in the two languages; street and village names should be written in Thai and Malay; there should be more civil servants who understand *Patani* Malay; and finally bilingual interpreters should be available at all southern border state facilities (NRC 2006, 100). However, this particular suggestion was most strongly criticized by Privy Council Chair Prem Tinsulanond, who stated that "We have to be proud to be Thai and have the Thai language as the sole

national language (The Nation 2006).” Since Prem’s public disapproval of this proposal, little has been done to implement it.

6. Negotiations with Insurgents

Establishing and sustaining dialogue with insurgents has been a particular challenge for the Thai government. A major difficulty has been the inability to identify with whom to talk since there are several insurgent groups and they all make attacks anonymously. At the same time, over the years, there have been splits in older extremist groups while new ones have arisen. In 2013, the Yingluck government’s initiation of a dialogue with the BRN offered perhaps the greatest hope of moves toward peaceful change in the Deep South. But the negotiations ultimately ended thanks to the 2014 coup.

Since 2015, the Thai junta has involved itself in a new dialogue with MARA *Patani* but the slow pace of talks has created questions about the junta’s sincerity. The junta remains publicly in favor of dialogue, but only in conjunction with security measures so as to pressure the insurgents to come to the table. Meanwhile there are several potential spoilers of any negotiations. These include military hardliners, more radical insurgent groups; crime syndicates affiliated with local politicians; and Buddhist vigilantes. The latest attempt in April 2018 to set up a Safety Zone through peace negotiation in Kuala Lumpur seems to have been unreliable and volatile, if not totally abortive. Since 2018 negotiations have stalled (Yusa and Ahmad 2019). Nevertheless, though it appeared that year that insurgent violence had finally receded, the killings of two monks in January 2019 demonstrated that the Deep South region was continuing to experience fiery frictions.

VI. CONCLUSION AND ARTICLES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Ultimately, though radical insurgents are part of the problem, hardline policies of the Thai state have continued to contribute to prolonging Thailand’s Deep South crisis. Human rights violations, bias against Islamic education, the need to improve the region’s socio-economic conditions, lack of judicial reform, insufficient administrative modifications, and the need to preservation of Malay-Muslim cultural values—these are the principal issues involved in the current conflict. Only when the state realizes that this insurgency is not going to be brought to an end through inordinate reliance on repression, then a more serious dialogue between state and insurgents can commence. For most stakeholders, autonomy is the most likely sustainable solution to the current conflict. But any autonomy must be sincere in its ability to govern the people of the three provinces: Thailand’s military and police must not be allowed to ignore

the authority of any autonomous zone.

Any future peace in the southern border region depends upon the level of seriousness of both insurgents as well as military and civilian policy-makers in Bangkok. Each will have to find it in their interest to agree to an autonomous area as the final plan. The militants (Muslim and Buddhist alike) will have to be offered amnesties. Economic incentives such as more employment opportunities and increased development projects for the South will have to be implemented. At the same time, the Thai military must moderate its policies in the Deep South and allow elected politicians in the region to influence public policy there. Malay-Muslims need to be encouraged to be more involved politically at the national level of Thai politics in order to increase linkages between Muslims and Buddhists in Thai politics at the national level. Meanwhile, political parties which form ruling coalitions must develop quotas so that some Malay-Muslim candidates can be included in the upper rungs of political party lists during elections. Ultimately, the mindset of Thai policy-makers needs to change from looking for a military solution which vanquishes resistance to accepting blame for past injustices in the South. The judicial system in the southern borderlands must be revamped to consider the realities of Malay-Muslims living under a Thai Buddhist state. Education in the region must allow for the free expression of education in pondok schools. Implementation of these reforms must not be haphazard but rather applied over a long period of time so as to engender increased trust from the local population. Only with such reforms, especially increased autonomy, enhanced legal rights and educational freedom for Malay-Muslims in the far South, can the beginning of a secure peace be achieved in southern Thailand. The key to attaining this goal, however, is for both sides to become more willing to seriously compromise.

This Special Issue elaborates upon the continuing strife in *Patani* as well as related aspects of the crisis. Following this Introduction (Article 1), the six articles in this volume offer insights into different angles of the Deep South conflict.

Article 2 by Matthew Wheeler and Paul Chambers looks in detail at the state of the post-2014 peace dialogue between Thailand's military regime and the MARA *Patani* group. Drawing on interviews with officials and militants, they argue that the structure of the process, including the role of Malaysia as facilitator, must be adjusted for talks to progress. The article also examines political will as a determining factor; although capacity constraints and technical problems pose challenges to a fruitful peace dialogue, they are a less immediate obstacle than the conflict parties' lack of determination to negotiate a settlement.

Article 3 by Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat looks at the role of

the Thai military in the Deep South. They contend that Thai security forces' preference for a hard-line policy in the Deep South has resulted in a vicious cycle of tension and violence between security officials and local Malay-Muslims which has effectively destroyed peace efforts in the region. Nevertheless, because Thai security forces possess the highest security capabilities in the three provinces, any durable peace will need to satisfy military perceptions of security.

Article 4 by Srisompob Jitpiromsri examines trends in violence in the Deep South from 2004 until 2017. He argues that incidents of violence are decreasing, but still continuing. There is still a long way to go to find a sustainable peace solution. Intrinsic social forces have developed to counter the violence, but international factors have become significant intervening variables. While both the Thai government and some insurgents are finding a way out from conflict through negotiations, many international observers still think that the peace dialogue has no traction and has become stuck in stalemate. All parties may have to think the unthinkable, talking more seriously about a political formula including decentralization, peace, humanitarianism and human rights.

Article 5 by Daungyewa Utarasint scrutinizes the rise and fall of Malay-Muslim politicians from the Deep South working in the national parliament as a faction called "Wadah." The significance of the study is to illustrate that elites of a marginalized group in a democratic country can form a political group that serves their electorates effectively. She contends that when the Wadah faction politicians were perceived by their electorate as mishandling the situation, the latter retaliated against Wadah by voting them out of office in the next election.

Article 6 by Hara Shintaro analyzes different interpretations of the conflict in the southern border provinces of Thailand relative to Thai nationalists versus Malay-Muslims nationalists. With regard to Malay-Muslim combatants, he argues that "shahidization," as a specifically regional, nationalistic form of jihadism, characteristic of "*Patani*," is the most convincing factor for why they have taken part in the struggle.

Article 7 by Anders Engvall looks at electoral violence in the Deep South during elections there. He argues that insurgents tend to use violence during elections as a means of rejecting Thai political processes and thus weakening state legitimacy in the region. Moreover, insurgents used violence to sway voters against the draft constitution in the 2016 referendum to deal a blow against state legitimacy. The analysis predicts that the perceived success in swaying the outcome of the 2016 referendum may lead to higher levels of violence in future regular elections.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Muslims make up less than 5 per cent of the religious population of Thailand while Malays comprise approximately 3.5 percent of the ethnic population.
- ² The articles in this Special Issue partly derive from a 2017-2018 Toyota Foundation project facilitated by Dr. Katsuyuki Takahashi which was entitled "Locating Peace through Diversity: The Cases of Thailand's Deep South and Indonesia's Aceh Province." Each article was presented as a paper in July 2017 at the 13th International Conference on Thai Studies in a panel entitled "Continuing Conflict in Thailand's Deep South Borderlands since the Coup: Dimensions, Trends and Challenges." The Special Issue also arises from a joint endeavor between the Center of ASEAN Community Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Naresuan University, Thailand and Deep South Watch, Center for Conflict Studies and Cultural Diversity, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani campus, Thailand.