

# Thailand's Southern Fires: The Malaysian Factor\*

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The resumption of violence in Thailand's south has alarmed neighbouring Malaysia. Separated from other Malay states by the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, the predominantly Malay/Muslim provinces share ethnic, cultural and religious ties with states in northern Malaysia. They have a long history of conflict with Thai-Buddhist governments in Bangkok, at times with the support of governments in Malaysia. Conflict eased in the 1980s and 1990s as Thai governments adopted more accommodating policies. The 1989 surrender of the Communist Party of Malaya – which had retreated to the southern provinces – also removed a bilateral irritant and made Malaysia more willing to assist Thai security concerns. Nonetheless the Thaksin government remained suspicious of Malaysia after violence resumed in late 2001, accusing it of supporting or providing a refuge for insurgents. Influenced particularly by tragic killings at the historic Krue Se mosque in April 2004, and Tak Bai in October 2004, Malaysia was critical of Thai policies – pushing the limits of traditional ASEAN respect for non-intervention – but did not provide active support for insurgents. Vitriolic exchanges between the two countries have, however, limited bilateral cooperation, including Malaysian attempts to mediate in the conflict initiated by former Prime Minister Mahathir.

## Introduction

Security problems in southern Thailand are now the most serious in Southeast Asia. After some two decades of relative peace, violence resumed on Christmas Eve 2001, with coordinated attacks on police posts in three provinces that killed five police and one defence volunteer. In the next two years around 50 people were killed, most police officers. The conflict escalated further after a raid on a weapons armoury on 4 January 2004, where 50-100 insurgents killed four soldiers and seized a cache of 413 light infantry weapons and 2,000 rounds of ammunition. Two incidents later that year attracted international attention. On 28 April around 200 insurgents attacked 11 police and military posts in Pattani, Yala and Songkhla, resulting in the death of 107 rebels (including 32 killed execution-style in Pattani's historic Krue Se mosque) and five security officials. On 25 October police fired on a large crowd in Tak Bai, Narathiwat, protesting the detention of six village defence volunteers whose shot guns had been stolen by insurgents, killing seven; 1300 protestors were then detained, and 78 suffocated during transportation in crowded trucks from the protest site to a nearby Army camp. Since 2004 more than 2,300 lives have been lost in a tragic and often brutal conflict, known by Thais as the "Southern Fires".

Outside Thailand no country has a greater interest in this conflict than neighbouring Malaysia, whose Malay majority share a common ethnicity, culture, religion and language with their southern Thailand kin. Malaysia has volunteered to assist Thailand's efforts to contain this conflict, even to the extent of mediating with the insurgent opposition. But Thai leaders have not always seen Malaysian actions in a positive light. Indeed they have sometimes claimed that Malaysia has, wittingly or

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unwittingly, provided support to southern insurgents, and intervened in Thailand's internal affairs. The following paper examines whether or not these claims have substance. And it looks briefly at the prospects for Malaysia's attempt to mediate following policy changes in Thailand after the 19 September 2006 coup.

## Background

The known history of the region extends back to the kingdom of Langkasuka, around the first century AD. Three southern provinces – Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat – and four districts in Songkhla, became known as Patani or Patani Raya (Greater Patani) from around the fifteenth century. Patani was a regional trading power, one of the leading centres of Islam in Southeast Asia, and a major player in the politics of the Malayan peninsula. However its main relationship was with the powerful Siamese kingdoms of Ayuthia and, from the late eighteenth century, Bangkok. For much of the time Patani enjoyed a degree of independence under what was often a loose tributary arrangement. However after the founding of Bangkok Siamese forces crushed Patani in 1786, and despite several rebellions in subsequent years began to assert strong influence over local affairs. In the late nineteenth century King Chulalongkorn introduced a policy of administrative centralization, and in 1902 brought the area under direct Thai rule, an arrangement confirmed by the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 when Thailand ceded neighbouring Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu to British Malaya.

The three southern provinces, and four districts in Songkhla, are around 80% Malay-Muslim, in a country that is 90% Buddhist. Around 70% of Satun is also Malay, but the province was previously linked to Kedah not Patani, and its more integrated, Thai-speaking population has never been the centre of violent resistance to Bangkok. According to the 2000 census Narathiwat has around 546,450 Muslims (82% of the population), Pattani 482,760 (81%), Yala 286,005 (69%) and Satun 168,640 (68%); Songkhla also has 291,392 Muslims, and although this is less than 25% of the provincial population four Malay-majority districts adjacent to Malaysia have also been caught up in the recent conflict. In total Malay-Muslims in the five southern provinces number around 1,775,247, and 2,345,800 for the 14 southern provinces as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

## Linkages between two regions

Malays in southern Thailand and Malaysia have maintained close people-to-people links despite the political division. Families often have relatives across the border. The southern Malay language is almost identical to the dialect found in neighbouring Kelantan and Terengganu – though many Thais believe it to be a separate language, *jawi*, which correctly refers to the written Arabic-based script. While the Thai education system has ensured many are now bilingual, Malay is spoken at home in the three southernmost provinces.

Thais have crossed the border for education in Malaysia, while some Malaysians have moved in the opposite direction to study at renowned Islamic schools (*pondoks*) in Thailand. Islamic teachers have crossed the border in both directions. Islamic reform movements have had a similar impact in both regions. In the early twentieth century the *Kaum Muda* (Young Group) – also known as *Khana Mai* (New Group) in Thai – brought a more orthodox Islam influenced by the Muhamad Abdul movement in the Middle East. Further moves towards orthodoxy began in the 1970s with the *dakwah* movement. This was a world-wide phenomenon, but in southern Thailand the Malaysian influence was critical – including the growing strength of political Islam, the activities of the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM, established in 1971 by later Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim), and the revitalization of the Islamic Party (PAS) in neighbouring Kelantan in the 1990s. (Funston, 2006) When Anwar was sacked and jailed by Prime Minister Mahathir in 1998 southern Muslims held prayer meetings in a gesture of solidarity. Nik Aziz, Kelantan's state leader, and PAS Spiritual Adviser, was a regular and revered visitor to the

south, where he conversed in the local dialect and reportedly led prayers at a mosque next to the Thai royal family's palace in Narathiwat at the Queen's invitation.<sup>2</sup>

Large numbers of Thai Muslims have also sought employment in Malaysia. Once this was seasonal by groups who crossed the border for rice harvesting. In recent decades, as the Malaysian economy has expanded, larger numbers have moved to take up labouring opportunities in a wide range of agricultural and secondary industries, and open food stalls (particularly selling *tom yum kung* – Thailand's famous hot and spicy prawn soup). There are no precise figures on numbers, but a broad consensus is around 300,000.

The border between the two countries has never been a barrier to movement. A large number of people on both sides of the border have dual nationality – often seeking this out as a way of maximising their employment and social opportunities. (Horstmann, nd) In theory Malaysia does not allow dual citizenship, though its existence in this case is an open secret; Thailand has traditionally allowed it, but in recent years has moved towards withdrawing it from citizens in the south. There is no consensus on whether dual nationals number in the tens of thousands or beyond a hundred thousand.

Border residents without dual citizenship are able to cross over with a border pass valid for six months rather than using a passport. But many do not even bother with this. According to a recent report in 2006 1,468 crossed the west side of the border legally to obtain employment, while at least 50,000 crossed illegally.<sup>3</sup> Another report on the east side of the border notes that despite a legal crossing at Golok many commuters prefer to cross illegally just metres away, and authorities do nothing to stop them.<sup>4</sup> In August 2004 the two countries agreed to replace the border pass with new 'smart cards' being introduced in each country,<sup>5</sup> but the date for commencing this scheme has yet to be announced.

### **Southern resistance to Bangkok**

The three southern provinces have a history of resistance to authorities in Bangkok. In the early years after 1902 opposition was led by the ousted royal families and charismatic Islamic leaders. The frequency and intensity of conflicts varied with the extent to which governments in Bangkok sought to impose Thai cultural norms on the region. The introduction of a compulsory state education in 1921, and reports of closing traditional Islamic schools, led to fierce rebellions in the next two years. The ultra-nationalistic policies of the first Phibun Songkram government (1938-1944) saw attempts to ban Malay dress and the Malays language, redefine them as "Thai Muslims" and, in the final year, the closing of Islamic courts. After the Second World War many Patani Malays sought unsuccessfully to merge the four southern provinces with Malaya, establishing the Malay Association of Greater Patani (Gabungan Melayu Patani Raya, or GAMPAR) towards this end. (Thanet 2005, 23-27)

At about the same time a Patani People's Movement (PPM) was founded by charismatic religious leader, Hajji Sulong bin Abdul Kadir. Unlike GAMPAR it sought autonomy rather than secession. In April 1947 Hajji Sulong issued his famous seven demands, urging devolution of power to Muslims in the four southern provinces. He was arrested in January 1948, Phibun returned to power in April 1948 (after a military coup by associates the preceding November), and the Dusun Nyor uprising followed around 26-28 April. The reasons for the outbreak of conflict remain contested – by one account it began as a misunderstanding by security forces who saw a religious gathering as preparation for a rebellion, and by another as preparation for *jihad* against Chinese communists. (Chaiwat 2006, 18-22) However it has become remembered by Muslim Malays as a major uprising against the Thai state. As many as 400 Muslims and 30 police were killed in this conflict, and thousands fled to the Malay states.

Conflict intensified after the coup led by General Sarit Thanarat in 1957, and gave birth to new forms of resistance. Sarit strengthened assimilationist policies, resettling ethnic Thais in the region, and

trying to assert control over Islamic *pondok* schools. In response Malays formed several unstable, covert organizations, all broadly committed to independence for the south. Three major groups were the Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani (BNPP, 1959), Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN, 1960) and the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO – in Malay Pertubuhan Pembebasan Patani Bersatu – 1968). All split and were reorganized in the eighties. One section of the BNPP formed the Barisan Bersatu Mujahideen Patani (BBMP) in 1985, and perhaps became or merged with Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani (GMIP) ten years later. In 1989 PULO and BRN formed a loose coalition as Barisan Bersatu Kemerdekaan (or *Bersatu* – United), which a PULO breakaway (New PULO) and GMIP may have joined at some stage. (Che Man 1990, 98-112)

These separatist groups benefited from foreign assistance. Middle Eastern Islamic charities provided financial support, while countries such as Libya, Syria and in the 1980s Afghanistan provided military training. Their main operational centres until the late 1980s were in Malaysia. (Che Man 1990)

Nonetheless, security problems did ease considerably in the 1980s and 1990s, in parallel with the expansion of democracy throughout Thailand, and administrative and security policies that stressed peaceful resolution of disputes (including a generous amnesty) and showed greater sensitivity to Muslim cultural needs. New dispute resolution organisations, particularly the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) established in 1981, also played a part. Separatist groups split and went into decline. Violence never completely ended, but became confined to isolated incidents. (Funston 2006, 80-81)

### **Malaysia and southern Thai resistance**

Malaysian reaction to southern resistance has been a mixture of caution, sympathy for fellow Malay Muslims, and realpolitik. At the end of the second world war groups aligned with the Malay Nationalist Party (MNP) saw the four southern provinces as part of a *Melayu/Indonesia Raya* (a Malay state bringing together the Malay states and Indonesia, including also the Philippines and the four Malay-majority provinces of southern Thailand), and supported a merger between Malaya and southern Thailand. As the inheritor of this tradition, the Islamic Party (PAS) often spoke in support of southern Thais – particularly after it came to power in Kelantan state (adjacent to Thailand's south) in 1959. PAS has retained office in Kelantan since then, except between the years 1978 and 1990, and for much of this time has supported southern Thailand's autonomy, independence or amalgamation with Malaysia. (Funston 1980, 140-145)

The rival United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which came to dominate the independence struggle and then successive national governments in independent Malaya/Malaysia, also supported a *Melayu Raya* concept, but party president Dato' Onn bin Jaffar resisted efforts to support southern irredentist calls. His successor in 1951, Tunku Abul Rahman, had a Thai mother and received some education in Bangkok, making him more sympathetic to Thailand. In 1955 he visited Bangkok and agreed that in return for support to the independence struggle no assistance would be given to Malays in Thailand's south. Nonetheless Tunku did subsequently express sympathy for Thailand's Malays, noting for instance at an UMNO meeting in 1961 that those who had fled oppression had been allowed to settle in Malaya. Subsequent leaders continued to pursue similar policies. Locked in an intense rivalry with PAS, UMNO could not avoid expressing at least sympathy when conflict occurred between Thailand's Muslims and authorities in Bangkok. Publicly, however, it stated the issue was an internal matter for Thailand. (Funston 1980, 135-140)

But there was also a realpolitik aspect to Malaysian policies. Policies towards southern Thailand were in large part shaped by conflict with the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), sections of which fled to the region from the beginning of armed conflict with the colonial regime in 1948. British colonial

authorities signed an agreement with Thailand for cooperation against the CPM in 1949, providing for regular meetings of senior officials, military cooperation along the border, and a joint intelligence centre in Hat Yai. A similar agreement after Malayan independence in 1959 – updated in 1965 and 1970 – provided for annual ministerial meetings, a senior officials regional committee that met more frequently, and rights of hot pursuit across both sides of the border (though the latter was rescinded in a further revision in 1977). (Funston, 1989: 198-200) However neither side fully trusted the other and maintained links with the others' adversary to exercise some leverage. That is why, as noted, operational headquarters for separatist groups were located in Malaysia until the 1980s.

Bilateral relations changed, however, after the surrender of the CPM in 1989. Malaysia withdrew its support from insurgent groups. In 1998 it handed over the five remaining senior separatist leaders (from PULO) to Thailand. A new bilateral border agreement was signed in March 2000 with more emphasis on combating criminality and promoting cooperation in areas of socio-economic development.<sup>6</sup>

### **Thai concerns over renewed violence**

Nonetheless, when violence resumed in December 2001, it was not long before Malaysia fell under suspicion. In March 2002 Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra placed the blame for the violence on dual citizenship – because it allowed insurgents to cross the border and evade capture.<sup>7</sup> In subsequent months several Thai officials expressed concern about violence planned in Malaysia.

For the most part, however, the resumption of southern violence led initially to closer cooperation between the two countries. A first ever joint cabinet meeting was held in December 2002, with both sides agreeing to intensify the fight against terror and cross-border smuggling, and boost tourism and trade.<sup>8</sup> A military cooperation agreement was signed on 22 May 2003 that included provisions for carrying out joint patrols, standardising military operational procedures and opening up new entry points to enhance economic activities between the two countries.<sup>9</sup> And in July Thaksin responded positively to a proposal from Prime Minister Mahathir for “a degree of integration of the five southern provinces of Thailand and the northern Malaysian states of Kedah, Perlis and Kelantan”.<sup>10</sup> This later became known as the Joint Development Strategy, and envisaged cooperation across a wide range of economic and social issues in the border region.<sup>11</sup>

However relations deteriorated after the 4 January raid. Thaksin again identified dual nationality as a major problem, proposing an end to this and also the building of a 90 kilometre fence along the border to block insurgents.<sup>12</sup> Plans for a fence were soon abandoned after practical difficulties became apparent, but Thaksin and senior security officials continued to address issues of dual nationality, complain about limited Malaysian cooperation – particularly in relation to the names of ‘18’ alleged southern ‘masterminds’ handed to Malaysia<sup>13</sup> – and make specific claims of insurgent or separatist activity in Malaysia. Thaksin also sought Malaysian support in relation to teaching southern Muslims a moderate form of Islam, and turning them away from militant doctrines. Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Najib Tun Razak agreed to send Islamic lecturers to the south to convey the true meaning of Islam during a meeting with Thaksin in early April.<sup>14</sup>

In April 2004 Thaksin implied Malaysia might be turning a blind eye to separatist activities when he said: "Right now there are villages in northern Malaysia where the Muslim separatists responsible for all of this violence have been residing....We are not accusing the Malaysian government of sheltering these militants but they know where they are."<sup>15</sup> In July regional army head, Fourth Army chief Lt-General Pisarn Wattanawongkeeree, said that separatist leaders had recently met in Malaysia's Kelantan state to plot major attacks. The 4 January raid and 28 April attacks were planned in Kelantan, he said. And after the 28 April violence the group met in Kuala Lumpur on an unspecified date, and again during 2-3 May on the Langkawi islands where they discussed their operations for June.<sup>16</sup> Following the Tak Bai

incident in October Thaksin said terrorist and separatist networks could not be easily destroyed as core leaders could move freely between Thailand and Kelantan.<sup>17</sup> Shortly after he told a group of Thai academics that 3,000 insurgents had been trained in a neighbouring country.<sup>18</sup>

A number of specific incidents fuelled Thai suspicions of Malaysia. In May 2004 Wan Kadir Che Man appeared at a public seminar in Kuala Lumpur and acknowledged that he was Chairman of the resistance group *Bersatu*. The *Bangkok Post* described his action as “a slap in the face of Kuala Lumpur, which had consistently dismissed suggestions that those behind the wave of killings and attacks in southern Thailand had fled to their side of the border”.<sup>19</sup>

Thais also blamed a Malaysian author for the booklet *Berjihad di Patani* (Holy War in Patani), which was found on the body of one of those killed in the Krue Se mosque and widely seen as providing ideological guidance for Muslim insurgents. The author was subsequently arrested by Malaysian authorities, who refused to hand him over because he held Malaysian citizenship.<sup>20</sup> (Thai authorities also subsequently identified a Thai Muslim who had collaborated in the writing.)

In November Thai intelligence agencies reportedly claimed that Malaysia’s PAS was attempting to regain political momentum after electoral setbacks by fuelling violence in the south.<sup>21</sup> Further suspicions fell on PAS when a senior figure from the ruling UMNO claimed that PAS had channelled funds to the separatist PULO through the Muslim charity Perkim.<sup>22</sup>

Prime Minister Thaksin then created a minor diplomatic drama in December 2004 when he announced that the insurgent “ringleaders” had been identified, and had trained local Muslim youths in “militant training in jungle camps in Thailand and in Kelantan state, Malaysia”.<sup>23</sup> Deputy Interior Minister Sutham Saengprathum said he had photos to prove it – and that Thailand had “knowledge” of about 10 ringleaders in Kelantan state.<sup>24</sup>

Thaksin was careful to say that he believed training had been done “without the knowledge or support of the Malaysian government”,<sup>25</sup> but still the Malaysian government interpreted his words as a criticism of its support for insurgents. This was probably a reasonable interpretation given earlier repeated criticisms of Malaysia for not helping as much as it could against insurgents.

A further deterioration in relations occurred after 131 Thai Muslims fled across the border to Kelantan state on 30 August 2005, declaring they had lost faith in the government’s ability to protect them. Thai leaders claimed that the group had been instigated by insurgents and that a large number of the group were insurgents – allegedly acting to embarrass Thailand before an Organisation of the Islamic Conference meeting (which Malaysia, as OIC Chair, would be leading). Thailand was particularly upset when Malaysia subsequently allowed the UNHCR to interview the group, and then moved them further away from the border to Terengganu. Defence Minister Thammarak Isarankura responded to a comment by former Prime Minister Mahathir supporting refuge for the Thai villagers, by alleging that much of the planning for violent incidents in the south had been done on Langkawi Island by insurgents, Thai politicians and a former Malaysian politician who owned the island (implying Mahathir, though it is not correct to say he owns Langkawi).<sup>26</sup>

Diplomatic conflict escalated in October when Foreign Minister Syed Hamid said Malaysia would not return the group unless Thailand guaranteed their safety and rights. The Malaysian ambassador was called in to receive a rare official protest. Syed Hamid then upped the ante further, calling for Thaksin to be more ‘mature’ after the prime minister had claimed Malaysian NGOs protesting at the Thai embassy were collaborating with insurgents. Foreign Minister Kantathi Supamongkhon threatened to suspend all contact until Malaysia showed sincerity. A moderately worded statement by the OIC secretary-general – emphasising the importance of dialogue over harsh security measures – also played into the conflict. In a

remark deeply offensive to most Muslims Thaksin said that the OIC secretary-general should read the holy Koran carefully before making criticism of his government's handling of the southern conflict.<sup>27</sup>

Cooler heads eventually prevailed late in the month when Thai leaders visited Kuala Lumpur for the funeral of Prime Minister Abdullah's wife. Malaysia handed over one of the group who had an insurgent past in December,<sup>28</sup> but reports that all in the group would be returned to Thailand have so far proven incorrect.

Thailand continued to express doubts about Malaysian activities in following months. In November Thaksin declared that insurgency in the south was all about a coordinated attempt by his 'enemies' to oust him – revealed by an intelligence report on a recent meeting of 'radicals' in Kelantan.<sup>29</sup> In February 2006 Thaksin asserted that ring leaders of the insurgency had fled – “one to Indonesia, and two or three to Malaysia”.<sup>30</sup> In April a military intelligence source told the media that about 50 female insurgents had attended a one-month course on offensive strategies, intelligence gathering and bomb making in Malaysia.<sup>31</sup> Finally, when some 50 bombs were exploded in the south in June Thailand's Interior Minister Kongsak Wantana claimed these had been assembled in a 'foreign country' (understood to mean Malaysia), though Deputy Prime Minister Chidchai Vanasathidya quickly disputed this.

### **Malaysian involvement**

Did Thai claims against Malaysia have some substance? The alleged stalling over action against identified identified ringleaders was greatly exaggerated – details provided by the Thais were vague and unreliable.<sup>32</sup> However Malaysian actions were often not as forthcoming as Thailand wished, and at times pushed the doctrine of non-intervention to the limits. In part this can be explained by the strength of Thai complaints provoking a nationalist response. And in addition, Malaysia was in no position to be too forthcoming to Thai requests since that would benefit PAS in its rivalry with UMNO. Further muddying the waters were Malaysian media claims that sometimes went far beyond credulity – such as one report that an additional 1,000 had 'disappeared' at Tak Bai,<sup>33</sup> and another that 200,000 had fled the south and were residing illegally in Malaysia.<sup>34</sup> Yet Malaysian actions never approached the degree of complicity with insurgents suggested above, and must be seen in the context of deep concern over the escalation of southern violence, particularly during incidents such as those at Krue Se and Tak Bai.

Immediately after the Krue Se incident Prime Minister Abdullah offered refuge for those seeking temporary shelter from the unrest, prompting a “please don't intervene and leave us alone” retort from Thaksin.<sup>35</sup> After Tak Bai Abdullah rang Thaksin to express his concern, and sought to send Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak to Bangkok – a move that Thaksin rejected. Foreign Minister Syed Hamid told the local media that problems in Thailand were an internal matter, but warned that if they were not correctly addressed it could have adverse implications on Southeast Asia as whole, so the ASEAN non-intervention principle should be changed for the common good.<sup>36</sup> In a most unusual step the Malaysian parliament then debated the Tak Bai incident in November, unanimously condemning Thai security actions. Thai comments on this focused on the fact that the parliamentary motion had been proposed by PAS – though the four PAS speakers were supported by four from the ruling party.<sup>37</sup> Thaksin then threatened to leave the ASEAN summit in late November if other countries raised the Tak Bai incident, but eventually allowed the mention of violence in the south in general terms.

Malaysian responses to the Krue Se and Tak Bai incidents pushed the limits of non-intervention. But Malaysia ensured that this did not lead to open confrontation in the ASEAN arena. It also used its influence as OIC chair to ensure that no resolutions were passed that would humiliate Thailand in the Islamic world.

Malaysia's willingness to accord de facto refugee status to 131 Thais who fled from the south – and others before and after who were not accorded as much publicity – must also be understood in the context of broad concern about violence in the south. Though Malaysia did, as noted, repatriate one of these identified by the Thais as an insurgent, it could not risk public opposition by doing more than this.

Do the various claims of insurgents planning and training in Malaysia have substance? Malaysia ended support to insurgent groups after the surrender of the CPM in 1989, and is alarmed by prospects of instability in its neighbour spilling across the border. There is admittedly a small chance of limited planning or training taking place without Malaysia being aware of it. The regional terrorist organisation *Jemaah Islamiah* (JI) conducted planning and basic para-military training in Malaysia for some time without being discovered.<sup>38</sup> Yet Malaysian intelligence generally has a well-deserved reputation for closely monitoring Islamic groups, and its slip on JI would probably have made it more determined to avoid further mistakes.

The widespread availability of dual nationality does make it easier for insurgents to escape by crossing the border. Malaysia expressed willingness to cooperate on this issue, though whether Thailand helped its cause by highlighting the issue is debatable. Dual nationality helped Thais gain hard-to-find employment, and repatriate funds to Thailand. And even without this the border remains highly porous.

Dual nationality was a factor when Malaysia refused to hand over Chae Kumae Kuteh (also known as Abdul Rahman Ahmad and Doramae Kuteh), said by the Thaksin to be the 'mastermind' of violence in the south, though debate focused on extradition issues. Kuteh had been arrested on 5 January 2005, but instead of handling this through formal channels Thaksin went public later than month demanding his extradition. He was apparently a dual national – both sides claimed citizenship – but Malaysia then said he could not be returned as there was no bilateral extradition agreement. This was clearly a technicality – and apparently an incorrect one as the Thai foreign ministry pointed out that Malaya had confirmed a 1911 extradition agreement with British Malaya in 1959. But the real if unstated concern was that Thaksin had embarrassed Malaysia by publicly demanding extradition. Abdullah noted that Malaysia would be able to help in other ways if a formal request were lodged,<sup>39</sup> and Foreign Minister Syed Hamid said that "there is an existing mechanism for this sort of thing and Thailand can use it".<sup>40</sup>

Of all the Thai concerns those relating to Wan Kadir are the least likely to be associated with the expansion of violence in southern Thailand. Wan Kadir, a quietly-spoken academic, does not seem to have direct control over *Bersatu* members, and indeed his self-outing in Kuala Lumpur was specifically for the purpose of offering to help resolve issues in a non-violent way. He no longer, he said, wished to see a separate homeland for ethnic Malay Muslims, but reconciliation could only come about if the local community were given more "political space". He denied that *Bersatu* had been involved in the violence there, and expressed uncertainty about who was responsible. He offered to negotiate with authorities, a move that was scuttled by the initial opposition of Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyut.

Similarly, there does not seem to be any substance to UMNO claims of PAS support. On 8 December 2004, Kelantan UMNO chief Annuar Musa alleged that the state branch of Perkim (a government-linked Islamic missionary organisation) had given about RM120,000 from the sale of a timber concession to PULO. He claimed the money was part of RM1.2 million that had gone missing after Perkim Kelantan sold the timber concession for RM2.4 million. Indeed according to media reports he even had confessions of those directly involved in channelling the money to PULO.<sup>41</sup> The reality was less sensational. The state government acknowledged it had granted Perkim rights to a logging area which it later sold for a sum of RM2.4 million. Perkim had then instructed that RM1.2 million of this be paid into a trust fund, which subsequently mysteriously disappeared. When Perkim was made aware of this, it filed a police report on 30th June 2004. Annuar subsequently claimed that he had been reported inaccurately by the media, and expressed satisfaction with the account given by PAS leaders.<sup>42</sup>

PAS leaders have been outspoken on recent southern Thai developments, raising this not only in parliament but also in public demonstrations. However there is no evidence that sympathy has led to direct intervention. There have, moreover, been different views on approaches to resolving the conflict. Party President Ustaz Hadi has called for a referendum on independence, similar to that in East Timor.<sup>43</sup> However Kelantan leader, and party Spiritual Adviser, Nik Aziz, who has worked closely with members of the Thai royal family, has called for a solution to southern problems through involvement of the monarchy,<sup>44</sup> and advised southerners against demanding independence.<sup>45</sup>

Still, most of the time Malaysia continued to assist with intelligence and arrests of insurgents. Occasionally this was acknowledged in the media, such as in January 2004 when reports noted that Malaysia had handed over no less than ten 'militants',<sup>46</sup> and in relation to one of the 131 refugees. Leader of the September 2006 coup in Thailand, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, also acknowledged Malaysian cooperation, and implicitly explained for why this had not been greater when he noted that the Thaksin government killed many of the insurgents Malaysia had handed into Thai custody.<sup>47</sup>

### **Mahathir's Mediation**

In spite of these conflicts, in late 2005 Mahathir became involved behind the scenes in facilitating peace talks between insurgents and the Thai government. Other attempts to negotiate with insurgents were occasionally reported – with PULO and *Bersatu* – but seem to have made no headway. Mahathir's mediation had its origins in June 2005, when Thailand appointed an Honorary Consul on Langkawi island, Malaysian businessman Dato' Eskay Shazryl Abdullah. Hundreds of southern Thais who had fled to Malaysia to avoid arrest or persecution began appealing for his help, and he in turn asked Dr Mahathir to assist.<sup>48</sup>

Mahathir discussed the issue with Anand Panyarachun, former Prime Minister, and chair of the National Reconciliation Commission – an independent body advising the government on southern issues – when he visited Kuala Lumpur in early October. In late November Mahathir visited Bangkok and met with Anand, Prime Minister Thaksin, and the King, who reportedly endorsed Anand's suggestion that he play a mediating role.<sup>49</sup> Later that month Lieutenant-General Vaipot Srinual, head of the Supreme Command's Armed Forces Security Centre and General Winai Pathiyakul, head of the National Security Council, joined the dialogue, signalling high level government support for the process. Detailed negotiations were held from 26-27 December, following which a draft proposal was sent to Deputy Prime Minister, General Chidchai in February. In August a Joint Development and Peace Plan for Southern Thailand was handed to Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Najib, and General Chidchai.<sup>50</sup>

Mahathir reportedly dealt firmly with southern Muslims, telling them they had to be realistic. "We explained to them that violence is not going to get them anywhere," he said. "There is no way they can expect the Thai Government to give up territory".<sup>51</sup> According to Mahathir, they did not seek independence or even autonomy: "They merely want peace, better education policy, equitable development, and better economic prospects for the South."<sup>52</sup> Dato' Eskay put this slightly differently, saying the Langkawi participants were willing to settle for less than complete independence.<sup>53</sup> The Development and Peace Plan focused on promotion of Malay economic and cultural interests, offer of an amnesty, and establishing an independent tribunal to try security officers involved in human rights violations.<sup>54</sup>

Many Thai officials expressed scepticism about these efforts, describing them as a personal initiative by Mahathir, and implying that Malaysian authorities would be unlikely to support them. Yet as indicated Najib was aware of these at least by August, and both he and Foreign Minister Syed Hamid later expressed willingness to continue with mediation if Thailand wanted this.

Other Thai critics noted that the insurgent groups taking part in the negotiations were ‘outside’ organisations, and might not have any control over groups in the field. That concern is valid, though of the four organisations listed as participating in talks – Bersatu, PULO, GMIP, and BRN-Congress<sup>55</sup> – the GMIP is widely assumed to conduct on the ground activities, and others presumably have some links to those in the field.

### **Post Thaksin**

With the coup of 19 September 2006 the chances of reduced violence in the south, and improved relations with Malaysia, looked promising. Coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin was a Muslim (though not from the south), and on record as supporting both more emphasis on peaceful settlement of the conflict and negotiation with the insurgents. One of the participants in the Mahathir initiated discussions with the insurgents, General Winai, was a leading figure in the coup group; and his dialogue colleague, Lieutenant-General Vaipot, soon received a promotion to head the National Intelligence Agency. The new prime minister, retired General Surayud Chulanont, a privy councillor and former army head, had repeatedly called for a peaceful resolution of the dispute. He gained initial goodwill when he re-established the SBPAC,<sup>56</sup> publicly apologised for the violence under Thaksin and promised to drop ‘blacklists’, and dropped charges against Muslims arraigned under dubious pretexts,<sup>57</sup> and announced plans for southern economic and educational development. Indirectly, these actions addressed several aspects of the Mahathir ‘plan’.

But after this promising beginning progress has been slow. Violence has not declined, and may have increased. The execution-style killings of nine Buddhist commuters on 14 March took the brutality of this conflict to yet another level. The insurgents are partly to blame – they have signalled greater willingness to use terror to advance their cause. But the government is also at fault. Policy changes have not gone far enough, coordination between agencies has been inadequate, objectives have not been clearly articulated, and the situation on the ground is little changed. (ICG 2007)

The relationship with Malaysia is one area where the inadequacy of the post coup government’s southern policy has been much in evidence. As with its predecessor, the government has not formally responded to the Mahathir plan. On 21 November Prime Minister Surayud even appeared to be back in the business of blaming Malaysia when he announced that the insurgency was being financed by restaurants and stalls selling *tom yum kung* in Malaysia<sup>58</sup> – an explanation that was indignantly denied by Malaysia, quickly qualified by other Thai leaders, then dropped in subsequent Thai statements.

Bilateral relations were, however, soon back on a cooperative footing after Surayud made Malaysia his first port of call for overseas visits in mid October, and Prime Minister Abdullah visited Bangkok in February. Malaysia declared its confidence that the Surayud government would restore normality to the south. Still, outcomes from these visits were modest. A plan to extend a three kilometre border security barrier another 27 kilometres recalled Thaksin’s ill-considered and abortive plan to build a 90 kilometre fence. Surayud’s request for assistance in Islamic education also mirrored Thaksin’s plans to involve Malaysia in teaching ‘correct’ Islam to southern Muslims – and carried the implication that southerners were not capable of doing this themselves. Finally, the two sides agreed that Malaysia would take over Mahathir’s mediation initiative. Nonetheless misgivings were readily apparent on this critical issue – the foreign minister initially denied that Thailand would request this, only to be public contradicted by his prime minister two days later<sup>59</sup>, and other officials continued to express scepticism over Malaysia’s suitability for such a role. At a Joint Commission for Bilateral Cooperation in June Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar made it clear that Malaysia had not yet become involved in efforts to mediate.<sup>60</sup>

## Prospects

Malaysia and Thailand have a long history of difficult relations over the Muslim provinces of southern Thailand. Decades of conflict between the region and governments in Bangkok, ethnic, cultural and religious links across the border, widespread adoption of dual nationality, and tens of thousands of Thai citizens who regularly cross a porous border for employment, make management of bilateral relations a most complex issue. Nonetheless the relationship seemed to be on a cooperative footing in the 1980s and 1990s, when violence subsided and the surrender of the CPM eased Malaysian concerns. But as violence returned from 2001, bilateral relations again came under strain. Is a return to more cooperative relations in prospect?

In the initial period after 2001 Malaysia and Thailand increased interaction, concluding several agreements on enhanced developmental and security cooperation. These made little progress, however, because of Malaysian concerns over incidents such as those at Krue Se and Tak Bai, and Thaksin's vitriolic criticisms of Malaysia. The relationship has greatly improved since Thaksin's ouster, and practical cooperation in the areas earlier agreed on now seems likely. But opportunities for Malaysia playing a more direct role by mediating between the Thailand and the insurgents are problematic. Malaysia is arguably well-placed to assist, as the mediating role already played by Dr Mahathir, and Malaysia's part in Philippines' government negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Organisation and the Moro National Islamic Front, all indicate. But although Thailand has agreed to this in principle, deeply entrenched suspicions over Malaysian intentions make anything beyond a low key role improbable.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Census details have been taken directly or calculated from: [http://www.nso.go.th/pop2000/finalrep\\_e.htm](http://www.nso.go.th/pop2000/finalrep_e.htm) (Accessed December 2004)

<sup>2</sup> *The Nation*, 14 May 2004.

<sup>3</sup> *The Nation*, 25 February 2007.

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- <sup>4</sup> “Golok crossing brings hope to southern Thais”, AFP, 6 March 2007.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Phuket Gazette*, 16 August 2004. (Posted at: <http://phuketgazette.net/news/index.asp?id=3601>)
- <sup>6</sup> “Agreement between the Government of Thailand and the Government of Malaysia on Border Co-operation.” Signed by the Defence Ministers of Thailand (H.E. Mr Chuan Leekpai) and Malaysia (Hon. Dato’ Sri Mohd Najib Bin Tun Haji Abdul Razak) on 18 March 2000. I am grateful to Panpanga Chulanont for drawing this to my attention.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Nation*, 18 March 2002.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Nation*, 23 December 2002.
- <sup>9</sup> *AFP*, 23 May 2003.
- <sup>10</sup> *Utusan Express*, 28 July 2003.
- <sup>11</sup> Specifically, it envisaged nine areas of cooperation: (1) development of basic infrastructure and transportation linkages, (2) human resource development including education, (3) tourism, (4) culture and promotion of people-to-people relations, (5) trade and investment, (6) agriculture including fisheries, livestock and irrigation, (7) monetary and finance, particularly the development of Islamic banks in Thailand especially in the southern provinces, (8) energy and (9) disaster relief. Closing Remarks by H.E. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand at the First Meeting of the Thailand-Malaysia Committee on Joint Development Strategy for border areas (JDS) 5 August 2004.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Nation*, 17 February 2004 and *Bangkok Post*, 13 March 2004.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Nation*, 11 February and 2 April 2004, and 26 April 2008. While most reports speak of 18 names, others report as many as 35. See, for instance, *Bangkok Post*, 26 July 2004.
- <sup>14</sup> *Utusan Malaysia*, 5 May 2004.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Nation*, 2 April 2004.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Nation*, 8 July 2004.
- <sup>17</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 31 October 2004.
- <sup>18</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 15 November 2004.
- <sup>19</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 18 September 2004.
- <sup>20</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 18 September 2004.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Nation*, 9 November 2004.
- <sup>22</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 10 and 14 December, 2004.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Nation*, 19 December 2004.
- <sup>24</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 22 December 2004.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Nation*, 20 December 2004.
- <sup>26</sup> *The Nation*, 10 September 2005.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Nation*, 20 October 2005.
- <sup>28</sup> *The Nation*, 22 April 2006.
- <sup>29</sup> *The Nation*, 10 November 2005.
- <sup>30</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 12 February 2006.
- <sup>31</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 27 April 2006.
- <sup>32</sup> Defence Minister Chettha Thanajaro reportedly admitted that incomplete and out of date information supplied by Thai authorities on the militants was responsible for Malaysia's lack of action. (*Bangkok Post*, 26 July 2004) A reporter for *The Nation* also noted that Thai intelligence provided only very basic biodata – names of suspects and blurry pictures of them and their spouses, parents and relatives – and that none of these materials offered any convincing evidence linking the suspects to the southern violence. (Supalak Ganjanakhundee, “Analysis: Thaksin’s blame game backfires”, *The Nation*, 23 December 2004)
- <sup>33</sup> *Utusan Malaysia*, 10 April 2006.
- <sup>34</sup> *Utusan Malaysia*, 14 September 2006.
- <sup>35</sup> *The Nation*, 3 May 2004.
- <sup>36</sup> *Mingguan Malaysia*, 21 November 2004.
- <sup>37</sup> *Utusan Malaysia*, 24 November 2004.
- <sup>38</sup> The Singapore White Paper on JI notes, inter alia, that before being sent to for more distant training Singaporeans went for “pre-course ideological preparations as well as physical and survival training at several locations in peninsular Malaysia”. Ministry of Home Affairs, *White Paper: The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and The Threat of Terrorism*. Republic of Singapore, January 2003, p.17.
- <sup>39</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 28 January 2005.
- <sup>40</sup> *The Nation*, 3 February 2005.

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- <sup>41</sup> *Reuters*, 10 December 2004 and *Straits Times*, 11 December 2004.
- <sup>42</sup> *Harakah*, 10 December 2004.
- <sup>43</sup> *Harakah*, 2 November 2004.
- <sup>44</sup> *Bernama*, 14 November 2004, and *The Nation*, 15 November 2004
- <sup>45</sup> *Bernama*, 12 April 2007.
- <sup>46</sup> *The Nation*, 11 January 2004.
- <sup>47</sup> *The Nation*, 27 November 2006.
- <sup>48</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 October 2006.
- <sup>49</sup> *The Star*, 7 October 2006.
- <sup>50</sup> The most detailed accounts of the negotiations can be found in *The Star*, 7 October 2006; two articles by Connie Levett in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 and 9 October 2006; and *The Nation*, 27 November 2006
- <sup>51</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 October 2006.
- <sup>52</sup> *The Star*, 7 October 2006.
- <sup>53</sup> *The Nation*, 27 November 2006.
- <sup>54</sup> According to *Time* (21 December 2006) the plan is a 16-page document that outlines seven points of agreement, including: reestablishment of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC), establishing a program for the economic development of the region on par with the rest of the country, recognition of southern Muslims as a distinct ethnic group with Malay an official language in the south, an independent tribunal to try army officers for alleged human rights violations, and amnesty to all insurgents. *Time* says that the last two provisions proved stumbling blocks, though any attempt to recognise Malay as an official language would also be problematic – as the hostile reaction to the National Reconciliation Commission recommendation that Malay be accepted as ‘working’ language reflects.
- <sup>55</sup> See *The Star*, 7 October 2006 and *The Nation*, 27 November 2006. According to the latter, quoting Thailand’s Honorary Consul on Langkawi Dato’ Eskay, the negotiators included: Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani president Mohammed Bin Abdul Rahman, Pattani United Liberation Organisation (Pulo) vice president Razi Bin Hassan, Barisan Revolusi Nasional Congress (BRN) president Abdulah Bin Ismail, its vice president Abdullah Bin Idris and Bersatu president Wan Kadir Che Man. BRN Coordinate, often identified as the main group on the ground, did not join the talks.
- <sup>56</sup> *The Nation*, 25 October 2006 and *Bangkok Post* 28 October 2006.
- <sup>57</sup> *The Nation* and *Bangkok Post*, 3 November 2006.
- <sup>58</sup> *The Nation*, 22 November 2006.
- <sup>59</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 15 February 2007, and *The Nation*, 17 February 2007.
- <sup>60</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 30 June 2007.