

# Muslim Insurgency in Thailand and The Philippines: Implications for Malaysia's Cross-Border Diplomacy

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Armed conflict between Muslim minorities and the state in the Philippines and Thailand present Malaysia with ongoing diplomatic challenges. This paper examines Malaysian responses to the Moro rebellion in the Southern Philippines since 2001 and the repression of Muslim minorities in southern Thailand since 2004. Malaysia's response to these challenges has often been multifaceted due to cultural, linguistic and religious affinities with Muslim minorities on one hand, and its avowed policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries in ASEAN on the other. Tensions can particularly be discerned in Malaysian responses to demands for Muslim autonomy in southern Thailand. However, Malaysia has also sponsored a number of diplomatic, educational and economic initiatives aimed at quelling separatist conflict. Since the mid 1970s Malaysia has also played an active role in the mediation process that brought about a degree of Muslim political autonomy in Mindanao, despite ongoing conflict with Muslim splinter groups, and additional diplomatic challenges spurred by the global War on Terror.

## Introduction

Two intra-state conflicts involving Muslim minorities close to Malaysia's borders have been simmering for decades: the Moros rebellion in the Southern Philippines and the Muslim insurgency in Southern Thailand. In the relatively recent past, however, the pace of developments has accelerated. In the Philippines in 2001 an attempt was made to hasten the peace process between Filipino authorities and rebels in the south, at the same time as the insurgents were intensifying their activities. In Thailand events began to gather momentum early in 2004, threatening the *status quo* or at least bringing to a head the issues surrounding the border conflict. Until then Malaysia's relationship with Thailand appeared to be in a reasonably healthy state.

Actively (though intermittently) involved in the past, Malaysia was now faced with fresh challenges. This essay examines the nature of these challenges and assesses whether they and Malaysia's responses to them were in any way comparable. The implications of these responses also deserve attention. The periods to be considered will differ slightly in each case – for the Philippines the analysis begins in earnest in 2001, for Thailand in January 2004. This having been said, a degree of historical contextualisation is needed in both cases if we are to gain a better understanding of the complex evolution of each conflict.

## Malaysia: overriding interests and considerations

In determining how it should handle each conflict at different times, Malaysia has had to take account of multiple interests and diverse considerations. These include peace and security in the Southeast Asian region as a whole, but in particular peace and stability in its border regions. Malaysia has also been concerned not to disturb the *status quo vis-à-vis* its interests in the eastern state of Sabah, a territory also

claimed by the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, as a leading Muslim nation Malaysia has sought reassurances that Muslim minorities in neighbouring non-Muslim countries face neither neglect, nor discrimination, nor disadvantage. Achieving such goals would produce other positive spin-offs: the strengthening of regional trade, open lines of communication, and other opportunities for mutually beneficial exchanges between neighbours (e.g. technology or education), not to mention the benefits of an approving domestic Muslim population. To these ends Malaysia's response has been to collaborate in various development projects in Southern Thailand while in the Philippines its role has been more that of a peacekeeper/mediator. If the two conflicts presented opportunities for Malaysia to further its interests, they also involved a number of constraints. One dilemma has been how to support a Muslim minority in another country without offending the relevant government? This constraint is compounded by Malaysia's membership of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). On the other hand, as a predominantly Muslim society and member of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) Malaysia was expected to respond to the needs of other Muslims.

During the Cold War years many of the states within the Southeast Asian region were in conflict with each other. Support for different sides of a dispute emanated from other Southeast Asian nations, sometimes involving one or other of the superpowers.<sup>2</sup> A case in point was Vietnam (Severino 2001). Wishing to contain differences and exclude great power rivalry from the region the foreign ministers of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines met in 1967 and founded ASEAN with its strong emphasis on informal dialogue and co-operation.<sup>3</sup> Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia joined later and since 1967 the record of peace between member countries has been maintained.

While not without its critics, the "ASEAN Way" of dialogue and consultation, often quite protracted, has been credited with the relative success of the Association. Mutual respect and sensitivity provided a strong basis for the informal and delicate handling of actual or potential conflict. Quiet diplomacy has been the order of the day, with an "informal and incremental approach to co-operation" (Hiro Katsumata 2003). This is not to say that formal agreements have not been reached, notably the *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation* which provides for the settlement of disputes through regional processes.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, central to ASEAN's quiet diplomacy is the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other members, the non-use of force and the practice of consensual decision-making. As a founding member of ASEAN Malaysia was keen to abide by these principles and even help to set the standards.

The second set of considerations which influenced Malaysia's conduct relate to its membership of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) whose Charter commits members to "strengthen the struggle of all Muslim people to safeguard their dignity, independence and national rights".<sup>5</sup> Within the OIC, which was established in 1969, Malaysia increasingly found itself in a leadership role encouraging Muslim nations to move forward within the world community and often speaking on behalf of the poorer nations, many of which have sizable Muslim populations. Malaysia's membership of ASEAN and the OIC strikingly illustrate the complexity and ambiguity of its foreign policy. It has had to tread a fine line in its efforts to assist two minority Muslim communities each located in a predominantly non-Islamic country with both countries members of ASEAN. A word about domestic pressures, and the question of survival at home: in dealing with these two conflicts the Malaysian leadership has also had to keep in mind the demands of those within Malaysia who can exert considerable pressure through the ballot box. Although the global fight against terror was non-existent when the two conflicts began, it has increasingly become part of the Philippines scene, as pan-Islamists try to integrate the local struggle into the wider one

### **The Thai-Malay border region: historical background**

Malaysia shares a border with Thailand. The two countries "have a long history of boundary disputes but have consistently resolved them in original and innovative ways".<sup>6</sup> The focus of this paper is

an area of Southern Thailand which today comprises Patani, Yala, Narathiwat, and to a lesser extent, Songkhla and Satun.<sup>7</sup> In 1457 the declaration of an Islamic state in the kingdom of Patani marked the beginning of a) the decline of prevailing Hindu-Buddhist influences and b) the expansion of Patani into a centre of Islamic scholarship. Three centuries later the then Islamic dynasty was itself taken over and divided up by the king of Siam.<sup>8</sup> The Anglo-French convention of 1896 supported Siam's position. In 1909 another agreement, the Anglo-Siamese Treaty led the way to a marked dilution of Islamic/Malay identity so that by 1921 *sharia* law was replaced by Siamese law and all children were obliged to attend Siamese primary schools. After World War II Muslim names were prohibited and the area came under the direct control of Bangkok.

The Malay Muslims of Patani had earlier inhabited part of a wider region which included the northern Malay states of Kelantan, Terengganu and northern Kedah. With the Anglo-Siamese Treaty these three Malay states were incorporated into Britain's colonial territory, thus segregated from what had been the centre of Islamic scholarship, Patani, now on the Siamese side of the border.<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising that part of the legacy of this demarcation has been the spread of border-crossing networks with many people on both sides holding dual citizenship. Many Muslims living in southern Thailand hold Malaysian identification cards and are on an electoral roll in Kelantan, Malaysia – a situation which the Thai State has found difficult to control and which the Malaysian leadership must consider before deciding on a course of action.<sup>10</sup> The Thai-speaking Muslims of Satun (Thailand), the majority of whom are of Malay descent, and the Buddhist monks of Kelantan (Malaysia) have been described as trapped minorities between a hostile state and “an ambiguous position within their parent ethnies” (Horstmann A 2002). In spite of this the Satun Muslims, by and large, have not been noticeably vocal in the secessionist campaigns (Albritton 2004).

Thai government policies of accommodation, assimilation and integration during the early post-World War II years did not deliver the desired calm. In the late 1940s the president of the Islamic Religious Council, Haji Sulong, presented a list of seven requests to Thai authorities and was promptly arrested on charges of treason.<sup>11</sup> Clashes between members of the police force and Patani Muslims increased. In 1959, with the backing of the traditional aristocrats and religious elites, the BNPP *the Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani* (Patani National Liberation Front) was formed. A world slump in the price of rubber left the Malay rubber workers of Southern Thailand worse off economically. Youth returning from overseas studies were finding themselves among the ranks of the unemployed. Some Islamists among them formed the *Barisan Revolusi Nasional* (National Revolutionary Front) in 1960 while a number of secularists founded the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO) in 1968. Soon the two groups were engaging in separate instances of guerilla warfare. Again the Thai government implemented a number of accommodating strategies, while continuing its military operations.

During the 1970s certain “privileges” and concessions were introduced, from socio-economic development packages, to freedom of religion and the incorporation of more Malays into State administration. In addition the position of a State Councillor for Islamic Affairs would be created (Searle 2002). Massive economic projects were initiated: from agricultural enterprises to the construction of roads, colleges and universities in the Muslim majority provinces of the south. Despite these concessions the separatist movements began to acquire added impetus, this time from religious teachers returning from studies abroad, as well as other members of “radical Islamic movements associated with *Jemaah Islamiyah*” whose agenda, according to some, included the establishment of a Pan-Islamic state stretching from Indonesia to parts of the Philippines (Albritton 2005, 167). Unlike their predecessors, these radical Islamists targeted civilians, including teachers and community officials. In 1997 in spite of widespread factionalism a united opposition, the Council of the Muslim People of Patani (MPRMP) or *Bersatu* was formed (Syed Serajul Islam 1998). With the demise of the Thaksin Shinawatra government<sup>12</sup> (the result of a military coup in September 2006), insurgent groups, according to at least one report, approached Thai officials, requesting talks with a view to end the unrest. Thai General Viroach Buacharoon agreed that

talks could take place provided the insurgents could prove their resolve to end the violence (Pracha Hariraksapitak 6 October 2006).

Less than two weeks later Thailand's new prime minister General Surayud Chulanont visited his Malaysian counterpart Abdullah Badawi to discuss the "troubled waters of southern Thailand". He promised to employ peaceful means to resolve the conflict which had resulted in 1,700 deaths since 2004. Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad stated in a BBC interview that the rebels "have to accept that they are Thai citizens" (*BBC News* 19 October 2006). Newspaper headlines for November 8, 2006 announced, "Charges against Thai Muslim protesters dropped PM apologises for brutal crackdown" (Levett 8 November 2006c). In contrast with his hard-line predecessor Thaksin, the former chief of the army said to a crowd of about 1,000 people in Patani, "I come here today to reach out to everyone and say, 'It's my fault. I am sorry'" admitting that as a former army chief he had not done enough to oppose the policies of the south of the now deposed Mr Thaksin. Although Thai responses were always heavy-handed, he was referring to the Tak Bai incident in particular, where men and boys were stacked in military trucks, on top of each other up to five layers deep. Most suffocated as a result. Hundreds of other protesters were also arrested.

Fearing the growth of Malay nationalism during the early post World War II period, the Thai government attempted to blur the ethnic divide in Southern Thailand by labelling the ethnically Malay Muslims "Thai Muslims," a term which inadvertently helped to highlight the religious dimension. Consequently, what had begun in the 1950s as a movement fighting the suppression of language, culture, traditions and seeking improved *economic* conditions in an under resourced part of the country – in essence an anti-colonial struggle<sup>13</sup> – by the 1990s was being interpreted by some as having been hijacked by leaders with links to *Jemaah Islamijah* and its global religious and terrorist implications. It was claimed that training for Islamic movements was taking place in the *pondoks* or religious schools of which there were 250 in Patani. Funding often came from outside through Indonesian, Malaysian and Middle Eastern foundations.<sup>14</sup> In June 1993 Thai Security arrested four alleged members of *Jemaah Islamiyah* in Narathiwat province on charges of planning bombing attacks on three tourist resorts in Thailand (Neuman 10 January 2005). The charges were later dropped. This said, current available evidence does not support the theory that the continuing violence in Southern Thailand is driven by the ideology of *jihad*, although such undertones may be present. It seems the "political agenda of separatism" remains the goal of the Muslims/Malays, rather than a pan-Islamic nation (Liow 2006). This view is supported by Vatikiotis who argues that "insurgents in Southern Thailand espouse fairly narrow ethnic nationalist aims, and have been reluctant so far to bring their campaign of violence to Bangkok or other places outside the South" (Vatikiotis 2006, 34). Viewed in this light many, including outside Thailand, have inferred that local grievances needed to be addressed with less reliance on the military who have sometimes over-reacted to violent acts by the resistance.<sup>15</sup> And this is precisely the line of action which Malaysia wished to promote.

## Malaysian Involvement

Malaysia's declared policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of fellow ASEAN members has been maintained. Thailand has been no exception although, as previously alluded to, there is a sizable Muslim population throughout Thailand with a Malay/Muslim concentration close to the Thai-Malay border. On the Malaysian side of the border kinship ties, ethno-cultural links and commercial activities as well as a shared religious belief system have ensured a periodic groundswell of sympathy among the Malays in particular in Kelantan.<sup>16</sup> The state of Kelantan is currently (the sole state) ruled by *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) which, from time to time, has referred to disadvantages endured by their Muslim brothers in Southern Thailand. Suspicion and tensions have resulted from particular incidents. In 1974 a serving Malaysian Cabinet Minister and PAS member expressed the opinion that a wise move towards peace in the troubled region could be "the request for autonomy with specific conditions". Thai society, however, "is organized around an assimilation principle" whereby the "embrace of Thai language and

culture is demanded” (Vaikiotis 2006 43). A personal letter from the Malaysian prime minister to his Thai counterpart reiterating Malaysia’s stance of non-interference helped to allay suspicions of what might have been interpreted as official support for the separatists. Such occurrences have tended to leave a lingering “residual mistrust” – at times mutual – rendering any negotiations which either party may wish to initiate more difficult.<sup>17</sup>

In March 1965 an agreement between Malaysia and Thailand on border co-operation was signed. Communists were specified as the common enemy. This agreement enabled Malaysian troops to pursue alleged Communists over the border into Thailand during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>18</sup> Given that Malaysia and Thailand were staunchly anti-Communist, this agreement was relatively easy to implement. However, subsequent attempts by Thailand to link militant Muslim separatists to the communists were consistently opposed by Malaysia who did not consider the two necessarily connected.<sup>19</sup> Further pressure from Thailand resulted in a compromise of sorts, if not quite a win-win situation, in 1993 when Malaysia agreed to support Thailand in its hunt for separatists on the condition that these guerrillas were actual criminals (Tasker *et al.* 1993). In early 1998, in line with a commitment to develop the Malaysia-Indonesia-Thailand Growth Triangle, successful joint police raids against secessionists took place in Northern Malaysia during Mahathir’s prime ministership (Rabasa 2001). This collaboration led to the arrests of several leaders, and in the months that followed “over 900 militants . . . joined a government-sponsored ‘rehabilitation’ program, pledging to become active participants in peaceful national development” (*Bangkok Post* 12 March 1998). In December 2002 the two prime ministers agreed to the opening of two new immigration checkpoints to fight terrorism and smuggling in the border area and to facilitate trade and tourism (*Thai Visa Thailand Expat Forum* December 2002). In January 2004 the Thai government was searching for the leader of *Gerakan Mujahideen Islami Pattani* (GMIP) whose tactics (which included kidnapping, extortion and contract killings) could best be described as those of a criminal gang rather than a group of freedom fighters. According to unconfirmed reports he was detained by Malaysian authorities who found it appropriate to deport him to Syria (Abuza 2006). Thus far Malaysia was able to indirectly respond to the challenges posed by the needs of the Muslims in southern Thailand through joint development projects in tandem with Thai authorities.

The period beginning in 2004 which is the focus of this part of the study, was one of frenetic activity on the part of the rebels as well as those attempting to bring peace and stability to the region. For three decades the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Thailand had flourished. Co-operation was evident in economic and social development, electronics, and infrastructure. In January the foreign ministers of the two countries agreed to co-chair a special committee to look at development issues along the border (e.g. tourism and fisheries) (Mokhtar Hussein 2004). In spite of these indicators of progress, in April 2004 the two prime ministers met for urgent talks. Thai leader Thaksin Shinawatra claimed that terrorists had taken shelter in Malaysia, a claim which his counterpart Abdullah Badawi denied.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, tensions were high and the decision was quickly made for senior officials from both sides to meet in order to plan anti-poverty measures in the area (*Taipei Times*, 13 April 2004).

Apart from numerous relatively small scale acts, the torching of buildings or car bombings by separatists, the year 2004 was marked by two incidents which raised the security stakes considerably. First, the storming of the Krue Se mosque on the outskirts of Patani by Thai security forces in April resulted in the deaths of thirty two seeking refuge within. This act followed a series of pre-dawn raids on military storage facilities as early as January (Baker 2004; AP 2004). Malaysia’s spontaneous response to such treatment of fellow-Muslims by two senior government members may have pleased Muslims on both sides of the border but created further problems with the Thai leadership: Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar had announced he would prepare for an influx of refugees, while Abdullah Badawi referred to fleeing Muslims being able to shelter in Malaysia. Thai authorities eventually reinterpreted the latter comment as a ‘paternal’ gesture (*ABC Online*, 4 May 2004). PAS had requested an emergency meeting of ASEAN and Kuala Lumpur dispatched a high-level delegation to Bangkok. Agreements

followed “to bring prosperity to the poor provinces”. The relatively neglected region would receive an injection of cross-border transport links, trade and investment (Burton and Kazmin 3 May 2004). These practical, pragmatic steps, however, did not deliver the desired results. Malaysia was about to be confronted by a tide of criticism and pressure to be part of a permanent solution from several other sources.

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir suggested that political autonomy for Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani might help minimise the violence (Levett 2005). Messages came from Jakarta, and the Muslim Professionals Forum (Malaysia) who believed that the Malaysian government, in tandem with ASEAN and OIC was well-placed to resolve the crisis (*Malaysiakini*, 10 November 2004). In October the Tak Bai tragedy which resulted in the deaths of eighty five protesters in Thai custody was the second major setback to progress that year. The head of the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre Abdul Razak Baginda advised, “the government should act tough in stopping Malaysian territory from being used as a base camp to launch raids into Thailand”. He added that Malaysia’s pursuit of “positive engagement” to seek a solution to the crisis was being hampered by ASEAN’s non-interference policy (Teropong Negara, 8 November 2004). ASEAN members were virtually silent apart from some criticism of Bangkok’s handling of its troubled south (*Financial Times*, 25 November 2004). There was no shortage of challenges facing the Malaysian leadership: was it necessary to assure Thailand of co-operation following Mahathir’s remarks? Was Malaysian territory being used as a springboard for raids into Thailand? ASEAN’s policy of non-interference was not helping to curb the violence being perpetrated by Thai officials and Malaysia was being pressured to act on all fronts. Nevertheless, in November the Malaysian government chose to endorse a carefully-worded motion condemning “the aggressive use of power in Narathiwat province that had led to numerous deaths among Muslims (Roberts November 2004). In December the Thai prime minister’s comment that there were training camps inside Malaysia further increased tensions. Nor was the United States administration oblivious of the alleged activities of insurgents commenting that, “the United States is concerned about the situation in Thailand’s southern border area ... international terrorist groups might use [it] as a base” (Neuman 10 January 2005).

Malaysia’s response again involved collaboration with Thailand. A Joint Development Strategy (JDS) was signed in 2004. This aimed to boost the economy and eventually eradicate poverty. More recently came the news that Thailand was enlisting the help of a Muslim cleric and “honest broker” Burahanudin from Malaysia to assist in finding a solution (Cochrane and Holland 2005). Late in August 2005, when one hundred and thirty one Muslim villagers fled across the border into Kelantan, Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said they would be repatriated only if guarantees of their human rights and safety were forthcoming from Bangkok (Roberts October 2005), while former Malaysian leader Mahathir said they “may deserve asylum” (Levett 10 September 2005). Following these seemingly insensitive remarks, the Thai prime minister was in no mood to talk to Malaysia (*China View*, 10 October 2005). However, one of the Thai general’s willingness to speak with representatives of the one hundred and thirty one helped to break the impasse (*Malaysiakini*, 28 October 2005). Eventually, one of the group was returned to Thai authorities as a militant suspect (Macan-Markar 3 September 2006).

In October Mahathir was invited to the National Reconciliation Commission in Thailand (Yuwadee Tunyasiri 2005). When Thaksin and Mahathir met in November they “came to an understanding to refrain from megaphone diplomacy and agreed that autonomy was not a solution for Thailand’s southern provinces” (Harish 8 February 2006a). Again, fences were mended. The former Malaysian prime minister had modified his comments and withdrawn suggestions of autonomy. Nevertheless, he seemed to have gained the trust of the insurgents: The newspaper of October 7, 2006 carried the headline, “Thai rebels ready to strike a deal Former Malaysia PM guides secret talks with Muslim groups” (Levett 7 October 2006a). It was revealed that Mahathir had been meeting with Islamic insurgents and Thai leaders (in Malaysia) over a period of fourteen months, resulting in a peace proposal, the final draft of which was handed over to the Thai and Malaysian deputy prime ministers in August. The

list of demands reinforced the belief that this was a local conflict: there were no calls for autonomy or independence or to make Malay an official second language. Rather, requests included “an end to injustice, economic development, improved educational opportunities” together with greater Muslim participation and a blanket amnesty for insurgents who apply for it. It was once again largely an economic contest which Malaysia had well recognised from the beginning. In return the rebels would end all violence and surrender all arms. Mahathir had encouraged all parties to accept what would amount to a compromise position for the hardliners, “to grab the opportunity for reconciliation while it lasts”. *Bersatu* leader Wan Kadir called the proposal “significant.” He described the main concern as one of identity, “We can live together ... we don’t need to ... separate. But the Thais tried to assimilate us ... we are Thai citizens, but we are Malay.”<sup>21</sup> A former leader of Muslim Youth of Thailand saw the issue of use of the Malay language as a justice issue, saying, “If the Government accepts our language, we can accept the Thai nation” (Levett 16 October 2006b). Nevertheless, the compromise solution did not embrace these demands.

The insistence by the Malaysian Government that it would not interfere in the affairs of Thailand coupled with various comments by Malaysians who were critical of Thai authorities, placed Malaysia in an unenviable, incongruous position. While some rebel groups had bases in Kelantan Malaysia, the Malaysian government had been reluctant to proactively crack down on sympathisers and supporters. It was not in Malaysia’s interests to support the rebels, yet the heavy handedness doled out to them by the Thai authorities had led to a mood of disillusionment. At the same time Malaysia wished to enhance its profile among the members of the OIC of which it was the current Chair, so comments by leaders or former leaders need to be read within this context. Domestic pressure from PAS (as well as members of the electorate in Kelantan) was another factor.

The dilemma in which Malaysia found itself was compounded by suggestions from other interested parties. According to a statement from the Institute for Global Engagement, “Internationally Bangkok should rebuild strained relationships with Malaysia and Indonesia. If Thaksin announced a comprehensive policy package for South Thailand designed to create a ‘political and cultural space’ for the Malay Muslim community to flourish, then Kuala Lumpur might be willing to crack down on insurgents operating on Malaysian soil” (Harish 2006a). According to Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Malaysia had “worked with the Thai government to provide vocational skills training to youths from these affected regions. [It has] also offered to send Muslim scholars and preachers to Southern Thailand to share Malaysia’s experience and practice of progressive Islam” (Najib Tun Razak 6 June 2004). It was reported on *BBC News* of 27 February 2006 that security forces in Thailand would henceforth undergo “cultural awareness training”. Writing from Singapore, S.P. Harish had suggested a large part of the solution may lie in the *pondoks* (Islamic Schools) if encouraged from Bangkok to combine Islamic education with “a curriculum that will promote their Thainess”. He added that perhaps emphasis had to be placed on “progressive Islam”, affirming its adherents and encouraging others to follow suit.

In retirement Mahathir was able to continue with his negotiating role, as head of a non-governmental organisation, with the blessing of his successor Abdullah Badawi in spite of a difficult relationship between the two (Harish 2006b). There has been evidence of Abdullah continuing the work of his predecessor. In January 2004 when Thaksin called Abdullah requesting a meeting and suggesting a higher level of intelligence co-operation with Malaysia, the two Special Branch Police Chiefs met on the same day (Bangkok Post 8 January 2004). Thaksin’s successor has met with Abdullah on several occasions as these headlines show “Quest for peace in Southern Thailand tops Abdullah-Surayud talks” (Office of the PM of Malaysia 18 October 2006), and on the occasion of Abdullah’s visit to Thailand in February 2007, where again the two leaders renewed “their fresh commitment to solve the conflict in Southern Thailand” (Office of the PM of Malaysia 11 February 2007). Then again as “Thai PM seeks KL help on insurgency” (Malaysiakini, 21 August 2007). The online edition of the English language

Malaysian newspaper *New Straits Times* in September 2007 alone has published several editorials and articles on the situation and Malaysia's attempts to assist, with education and employment projects high on the agenda (*NSTOnline* September 2007). "Bangkok has rolled back earlier rhetoric of Thai militants finding succour and support in Malaysia" raised expectations of a solution sooner rather than later (*NSTOnline* 11 September 2007). Thus far Mahathir had been able to sensitively steer a course without needing to resort to damage control.

## **Islam and the Philippines**

Muslim merchants from present-day Malaysia and Indonesia brought Islam to the southernmost part of the Philippines, the Sulu Islands and Mindanao during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The first official sultan of Sulu, crowned himself around the year 1450. Within fifty years another influential sultanate had been established in Mindanao. Although Islam did spread northward throughout the Philippines, its stronghold remained in the south where commercial and diplomatic ties were established with the neighbouring sultanates of Brunei and present day Malaysia. In 1565 Catholic Spain, having relatively recently expelled Islam (the Moors) from its own shores, arrived in the Philippines to colonise and convert. Correspondingly there began three hundred and fifty years of attacks on the sultanates some of which (in the south) were never subdued. Integration policies were unsuccessful and transmigration from other areas led to the Moros (the *Moors* of the Southern Philippines) losing much of their ancestral land which invariably resulted in economic hardship.

After the Spanish-American War of 1898 the Philippines was sold to the United States of America. With Philippine Independence in 1946 the Moros did not wish to become part of a Christian Philippines but the position of the United States was immutable. After independence the Filipino government accelerated what the United States and Spain had promoted: transmigration by non-Muslims to the south, a policy which the Moros viewed as a plan to de-Islamise the area (Koerner 2006). This resettlement strategy resulted in the Moros becoming a minority in their land (*United States Institute of Peace* 2005). As with the Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand the Moros had hoped that the end of World War II would bring them improved opportunities for economic development coupled with some degree of autonomy. Resistance movements began in both areas because this had been denied them.<sup>22</sup> The resistance movements of Patani and the Southern Philippines are both Muslim minorities who feel they have been *economically* exploited and *religiously* persecuted. In each case members claim ancestry predating colonisation, and in each case the moderates have splintered into more violent groups who use Islamic symbolism in their campaigns (Baxter 2004). As we have seen, Malaysia's course of action in Thailand was very much aligned to co-operative development efforts with Thailand as well as Mahathir's meetings with insurgents and authorities across the border. However, the challenges posed by insurgency in the Philippines provided scope for new opportunities and restraints.

In the Philippines the more recent phase of the movement for Muslim separatism (for both religious and cultural reasons) originated in the late 1960s.<sup>23</sup> Economic disparities resulting from continual discrimination, poverty, inequality and displacement, compounded by the imposition of martial law under Marcos in 1972, gave impetus to the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) led by Nur Misuari. The MNLF, which enjoyed the approval of Libya and Malaysia, grew to become the largest movement of armed separatists in the Philippines at the time (Gersham 2001). When OIC countries sent a delegation to Manila expressing concern about the situation of Muslims in the Southern Philippines, the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) responded by requesting the OIC to initiate the First Formal Peace Talks between the GRP and the MNLF. The early involvement of the OIC in the Muslim struggle was a new factor in the equation. During the OIC's third Ministerial Conference in Jeddah, the December 1976 Tripoli Agreement was formulated. This was to serve as a basis for a comprehensive solution to the conflict in the Southern Philippines within the framework of the Constitution. Included in the agreement was a ceasefire and autonomy to thirteen majority Muslim provinces. The Marcos

government was not ready to implement the spirit and letter of the agreement and the fighting continued. Although President Marcos turned the armed forces into his power base, the loyalty of the military to the government is sometimes questioned, in particular since an unsuccessful coup by a renegade faction in July 2003. Members have been accused of gross human rights abuses.

In 1987 the MNLF signed an agreement with the new government of Corazon Aquino, accepting the offer of autonomy and relinquishing its goal of independence. A referendum held to decide whether the provinces wanted autonomy resulted in only four becoming part of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). In 1996, under the presidency of Fidel Ramos, a Peace Agreement was signed with the MNLF's Nur Misuari, becoming the first regional governor of the ARMM which consisted of Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Basilan. A second plebiscite held in 2001 resulted in the expansion of ARMM to five provinces. With the central government remaining in control of finance, defence and foreign policy of the autonomous region, many believed that peace had finally arrived. Others however, felt betrayed that the agreement did not deliver independence, or for that matter, true autonomy. Nor did developments within the ARMM fulfil expectations. The results of a study released in 2003 concluded that there were many concerns over the behaviour of ARMM units, among them claims of nepotism, corruption and the lack of accountability. Such instability would no doubt influence any responses Malaysia would be likely to make (Bacani 2003).

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a large splinter group from the MNLF, refused to accept the accord of 1987 and sporadic fighting continued. During President Estrada's term of office, an "all out war" was waged on the MILF. A few days after current President, Gloria Macagapal Arroyo assumed office, her Executive Order No 3 was already in place to provide "the framework for the implementation, coordination, monitoring and integration of all government initiatives and the participation of civil society in the pursuit of a just and lasting peace". In March 2001 the Malaysian prime minister "helped convince the MILF to resume talks" (Cagoco-Guiam 2004). Relinquishing their demand for independence, the MILF had signed a cease-fire with Manila the same year. The historic event took place in Libya in the presence of Indonesia and Malaysia who represented the OIC. Malaysia was also to succeed in negotiating peace talks with Thailand's southern citizens, albeit without the involvement of the OIC.

The *Abu Sayyaf*, which split from the MNLF in 1991, is the smallest and the most radical Islamic separatist group in the Southern Philippines. They have continued their quest for an Islamic state. Engaging in extortion and kidnappings, the group has been called a terrorist organisation by both the Philippines and the United States governments and has been condemned by both the MNLF and the MILF (*BBC News* 17 March 2003). Allegedly it has links with Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.

### **Malaysia's role in the peace process**

The conflict in the Southern Philippines has been both protracted and complex. Malaysia's involvement dates back to 1976. However, in order to maintain a focus on the more recent past we shall take up the narrative post the GRP-MILF Joint Communiqué of August 7, 2001 which expressed "appreciation and recognition of the noble efforts of [among others] ... H.E. Dato Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad ... for advancing the cause of lasting peace, development and stability of the region" (GRP-MILF Joint Communiqué 2001) Historically, the Philippines government had attempted military solutions for the "restive south" – as had Thailand. Malaysia sought to inject a different approach. With the MILF prepared to talk in 2002, the stage somehow seemed set for the final act. Mahathir made a commitment "to play the role of benevolent host and mediator" between the Filipino authorities and the MILF once negotiations resumed (*The Office of the President – News Page* 15 May 2002). At the same time, as in Thailand, co-operative enterprises involving the two countries were under consideration: Malaysia and the Philippines would develop the island of Mindanao with joint projects that would hopefully stem the tide of

undocumented Filipinos moving into Sabah in search of employment (*Office of the President – News Page 8 May 2002*).<sup>24</sup> The rehabilitation of what was once the largest steel mill in the Philippines would be jointly undertaken, providing an increase of employment in the south (*Office of the President – News Page 15 May 2002*).

As these plans were taking shape a marked resumption (by the MILF) of the cycle of violence was also taking place. As the violence continued the MILF was condemned for its attacks by both Malaysia and the Philippines. Towards the end of 2003 Malaysia was brokering the resumption of peace talks with peace and development at the top of the agenda (*Office of the President – News Page 23 September 2003*). Mahathir offered to lead an “international monitoring team (IMT) from Islamic countries that would oversee the ceasefire between Manila and the MILF”. He also expressed his support for the Philippines to be given observer status during the OIC’s summit the following month (*Malaysiakini 27 September 2003*). Bahrain, Libya and Brunei subsequently offered representatives to contribute to the monitoring team. Mahathir’s subsequent retirement as Malaysian prime minister in October 2003 meant the postponement of the eagerly awaited talks to January 2004. Incoming Malaysian president Abdullah Badawi confirmed his country’s ongoing commitment as the MILF waited for the arrival of the Malaysian team followed by another, consisting of representatives from OIC countries.

In sharp contrast with official Thai attitudes towards Malaysia, which could at times be described as suspicious, in July 2004 Filipino President Macagapal-Arroyo requested the role of the Malaysian government to be one of mediator, rather than facilitator – which meant that Malaysia would become more engaged with both sides in an effort to affect reconciliation – during her government’s talks with the MILF (*The Office of the President – News Page 7 October 2004*). This request flew in the face of the idea of “non-interference” among ASEAN members. The International Monitoring Team arrived in October 2004. The arrest of Nur Misuari on sedition and rebellion charges sparked renewed fighting in February 2005, this time between the Armed Forces and a breakaway group from the MNLF still loyal to Misuari (Spaeth 2005). Dr Aburahman Amin, the MILF’s representative to the OIC appealed to the body to urgently find ways of arresting the fighting (Usman 15 February 2005). In April 2005 talks between the MILF and the Arroyo government focused on the issue of “ancestral domains” claims which related to the areas (and revenue from strategic resources therein) which would be directly under MILF control – virtually the entire island of Mindanao. The two other substantive themes were security, and relief and rehabilitation (Rivera 2005).

As the talks hosted by Malaysia proceeded the President acknowledged the supporting roles played by other ASEAN neighbours. Indonesia too lent its weight to the Philippines in its efforts to obtain permanent observer status at the OIC and the chairmanship of the Committee of Eight (Ministers from Bangladesh, Brunei, Indonesia, Libya, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Senegal and Somalia) which had formed a sub-committee to look at the Southern Philippines. Brunei was part of the International Monitoring Team (*The Office of the President – News Page 18 February 2006*). Several co-operative efforts involving ASEAN members bear witness to regional goodwill and co-operation: a trilateral agreement (the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia) to fight terrorism was signed in May 2002 (*The Office of the President – News Page 7 May 2002*). Malaysia was host to 700,000 (eligible) Filipino workers. Eighteen months earlier a joint venture to explore and drill for oil had been signed (*The Office of the President – News Page 20 January 2004*). The BIMP-EAGA (Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East Asia Growth Area) played a supporting role in capacity-building in the Philippines. Training of Filipino youth also took place in some Malaysian institutions. In June 2005 it was announced that a large gas deposit in MILF territory would be jointly developed by Malaysia and the Philippines (*The Office of the President – News Page 9 June 2005*).

While some progress was made, talks stalled over the “ancestral domain” – or land issues (*Reuters Alert Net 4 May 2006*). The MILF had demanded large parts of Mindanao as part of the ancestral domain

without first holding a plebiscite in the areas. In the absence of a political agenda other than independence *Abu Sayyaf* militants continued to clash with government forces. A US backed offensive was said to have considerably weakened the *Abu Sayyaf* group (*BBC News* 1 August 2006). Filipino soldiers engaged in operations against the *Abu Sayyaf* were trained and provided with counterterrorism equipment by US advisers (Gershman 2001). The US also provided an incentive for the signing of a peace accord with the promise of more than \$30 million in development aid once the accord was finalised (Villanueva 26 January 2005).

At the behest of the Philippine government the OIC Expanded Mission together with government representatives conducted field visits to Mindanao in May 2006. All parties agreed that renewed efforts should be mounted with the support of other parties including the Islamic Development Bank with the aim of implementing the peace of the 1996 agreement. Furthermore, the Philippines would continue to seek observer status in the OIC as well as assistance from the organisation (Joint Press Communiqué between the GRP and the OIC 22 May 2006). Mahathir's successor, Abdullah Badawi has continued to work with Gloria Arroyo as the Malaysian-led IMT has been encouraging the Filipino Armed Forces to forge a ceasefire in the troubled region (*Government of the Philippines News* 9 September 2007).

### **Concluding Reflections**

The Malaysian government's interventions on behalf of two neighbouring, economically disadvantaged Muslim communities at war with their respective governments, have been cautious and measured. Not wishing to offend either government for a variety of reasons – from a desire for regional stability to increased trade to co-operative ventures with neighbouring countries – and certainly not wishing to provoke hostility from its constituents at home, Malaysia has had to assess how far it could safely apply pressure on the various players in its efforts to diffuse tensions between authorities and rebel groups. In the case of Thailand, suspicion and mistrust limited Malaysia's role to that of a facilitator of dialogue. At the same time Muslims on the northern side of the border pressed for a tougher response. The Malaysian government's response was to pursue a co-operative approach with the Thai authorities for the most part, while periodically making its dissatisfaction known whenever necessary. Abdullah Badawi has kept Malaysia on the same course, meeting with his Thai counterpart several times since taking office. In the case of the Philippines Mahathir, having been officially invited to participate, had greater scope to integrate his efforts with those of the OIC and the Philippines government. Here Malaysia played the role of both mediator and facilitator. After his retirement, as head of a non-government group, Mahathir was able to continue, to conduct secret talks with the rebels with the blessing of his successor.

Malaysia had to respond to competing external pressures symbolized by its membership of the OIC and ASEAN, although neither organisation exerted pressure directly at any time. It is difficult to conclude with any precision whether the motives behind the commercial enterprises jointly pursued with Thailand and the Philippines were primarily motivated by short-term interest, a desire to build durable relationships, or to gain prestige within ASEAN. In all probability it was a blend of all three objectives. The gas, oil, tourism and trade initiatives, to name a few, promised benefits to each party although not necessarily to the same degree. Through offers of economic support Malaysia gained a stake in the future development of the area, and helped to stabilise otherwise volatile relationships. Apart from the practical support he was able to contribute, Mahathir's role became one of defining, within the constraints of good neighbourliness and sensitivity to Islamic sentiment, the positive role that each side of the conflict had to play. In the case of the Philippines Mahathir's involvement was openly welcomed, as was that of the OIC, which had a long-standing interest in the resolution of that conflict.

Within the limitations set by domestic pressures (the need to represent Malay interests in Thailand), regional pressures (the need to respect a sovereign state's right to conduct its own internal affairs), and international (the need to combat terrorism), Malaysia pursued a careful strategy through

collaborative projects with the Thai authorities and bridge building through dialogue at the grass roots level. When it overstepped the boundaries of tolerance on the part of one side or another it took a step back for fear of exacerbating the offence. In the case of the Philippines Malaysia was invited to take a more proactive role which it accepted, at the same time collaborating with the Philippines on infrastructure and other projects and on useful ways of internationalising the conflict. Initially Mahathir handled the dilemma imposed by opposing interests through pragmatic pursuit of the possible – a strategy which his successor has continued in line with his low-key diplomatic style. Although neither conflict has ended Malaysia's efforts have helped to calm to some degree two extremely volatile situations. The *Abu Sayyaf* have brought a new dimension to the conflict in the Philippines, as has the War on Terror, shifting the focus from the local to the global, thereby compounding the unresolved problem of Islamic minority discontent in Southeast Asia.

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## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The status of the East Malaysian state of Sabah has been disputed since Malaysia was formed in 1963. The Sultanate of Sulu had transferred Sovereignty of Sabah to the Philippines in 1962. The following year it was included as part of Malaysia, with the proviso that it pay cession fees annually. Outside of Malaysia many see Malaysia to be merely a tenant in Sabah, and an irresponsible one at that. Some would argue that Malaysia's facilitation of the peace process in the Philippines is merely a way of protecting its interests in Sabah. (See the Official website of the *Royal Hashemite Sultanate of Sulu and Sabah* <http://www.royalsulu.com/issues.htm>).

<sup>2</sup> For Southeast Asia security concerns related to the USSR, USA and China.

<sup>3</sup> In 1997, following the Asian Financial Crisis Mahathir returned to this theme when he reminded ASEAN members that they must become "less susceptible to the kind of outside pressures our detractors like to apply". M. Day, 1997. Mahathir hits out at rich Western powers. *West Australian*, 25 July 1997 at *Georgist Education Association Inc.* 12 August 1997. <http://www.multiline.com.au/~georgist/exploit.htm>, accessed 29 October 2006.

<sup>4</sup> The *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation* was signed in 1976. ASEAN also operates within the UN and its Charter (See Severino 2001).

<sup>5</sup> The tenth Session of the Islamic Summit Conference took place in Putrajaya, Malaysia in 2003. See "OIC in Brief" [http://www.oic-oci.org/english/main/oic\\_in\\_brief.htm](http://www.oic-oci.org/english/main/oic_in_brief.htm), accessed 28 May 2006.

<sup>6</sup> A dispute over the "Delimitation of the Territorial Seas" was settled amicably in 1979. In another case (Sadao in Songkla Province) a win-win solution was reached whereby Thailand would have sovereignty and Malaysia would control the economy. See "Conflict resolution in the decision to build the Trans-Thai-Malaysian pipeline". A report prepared by the Croft Institute for International Studies, Oxford, Mississippi USA and King Prajhadipok's Institute, Bangkok Thailand, 22 August 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Patani is the Malay spelling, Pattani is the Thai spelling.

<sup>8</sup> Siam's name was changed to Thailand in 1939.

<sup>9</sup> Professor Suthiwong Phongphaibun's edited work *Encyclopaedia of Southern Thai Culture* is a study of identity of the inhabitants of Patani and the Northern Malays through "common ancient roots" which predate the Buddhist era. He refers to the work of Greek geographer Ptolemy whose "golden peninsula" was the Thai-Malay peninsula. B.W. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, Macmillan Press, London, 1982, pp. 196-97.

<sup>10</sup> The Thai government has announced that it would introduce new ID cards or 'smartcards' to deal with this problem. *Malaysiakini*, 7 October 2005 <http://www.malaysiakini.com/print.php?id=41480>, accessed 11 October 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Haji Sulong's list of demands included "education in the Malay medium up to the fourth grade in parish schools within the four provinces, and use of the Malay language within government offices alongside the Siamese language". Haji Sulong was assassinated in 1954. See S.P. Harish, "Changing Conflict Identities: The Case of the Southern Thailand Discord". Working paper 107, IDSS Singapore February 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Prime Minister of Thailand February 2001-September 2006.

<sup>13</sup> The grandson of Haji Sulong today writes that the southern region of Thailand dates back to the ancient Malay kingdom of Langasuka and the Thai and British colonisers divided the area between them. This, he claims, resulted in a "total cultural colonization". "Colonisation reason for southern Thai conflict", *Malaysiakini*, 24 February 2005.

<sup>14</sup> "Colonisation reason for southern Thai conflict" in *Malaysiakini*, 24 February 2005.

<sup>15</sup> More than seventeen hundred people died in the two years up to the overthrow of the Thaksin government in September 2006. J. Gecker, Humble king gave nod to oust arrogant Thaksin, experts say in *Age* 21 September 2006, p. 13

<sup>16</sup> Relations between the Kelantanese (Malaysia) and Patani (Thai) royal families date back to the pre-colonial era.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Chinlong Liow, 2006. International Jihad and Muslim Radicalism in Thailand? Toward an alternative interpretation. *Asia Policy*, No 2, July: 89-108.

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<sup>18</sup> In 1977 a pact was signed allowing Malaysian troops to cross into Thailand if in “hot” pursuit of Communist guerillas. See R.S. Milne and D.K. Mauzy, *Politics and Government in Malaysia* (rev edn). Time Books International, Singapore, 1980.

<sup>19</sup> This linking was an attempt to amend a 1965 border treaty.

<sup>20</sup> By December 2004 Thaksin Shinawatra had upset another neighbour, Indonesia by saying that some of the militants had been inspired by extremists during their studies in Indonesian Islamic schools. He added, however, that both Malaysian and Indonesian governments had fully co-operated with Thai authorities to end the conflict in the south. *ABC Radio Australia*, December 19, 2004

<http://www.abc.net.au/ra/news/stories/s1268577.htm>, accessed 28 September 28 2006

<sup>21</sup> Federico Magdalena’s “Islam and the Politics of Identity: Lessons from the Philippines and Southeast Asia” stresses the issue of identity, ‘the badge that distinguishes one from others.’” Lecture presented at University of Hawaii-Manoa under the joint auspices of the Center for Philippine Studies and the Matsunaga Institute for Peace, 17 November 2003

<sup>22</sup> In the case of Thailand which was trusted as a strong anti-Communist ally, Britain had compounded the problem by assisting in the quelling of unrest. See “Thailand conflict rooted in centuries of Muslim separatism”. *Manila Times*, 3 May 2004 at

<http://www.manilatimesnet/national2004/mayo3/yehey/world/20040503war2.html>, accessed 23 February 2005. See also Andaya, pp. 445-6.

<sup>23</sup> During the 1960s many Moros went to Sabah to live, thus relieving the labour shortage there. The Jabidah Massacre 1968 occurred when more than twenty youths from Sulu were killed by the Filipino Army because they refused to be part of an invasion of Sabah, to kill fellow Muslims. See Cagoco-Guiam, R “Mindanao: Conflicting Agendas, Stumbling Blocks, and Prospects Towards Sustainable Peace” in A. Heijmans, *et al.* (eds) *Searching for Peace in Asia Pacific*. Lynne Rienner, London, 2004, p. 485.

<sup>24</sup> Apart from refugees from the Southern Philippines, in 1978 there were 70,000 Filipinos in Sabah. See S. Nair. 1997. *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, Routledge, London 182. An estimated 200,000 undocumented Filipinos were seeking work or working principally in Sabah by 2006, *Malaysiakini*. 2006. Manila, KL meet on growing migration problems 17 June.

<http://www.malaysiakini.com/print.php?id=52654>, accessed 19 June 2006.