

# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Hypothesis**

The objective of my thesis is to assess feasibility of restructuring the local administration for the three southernmost provinces in Thailand, and to demonstrate this as a solution to ending the insurgency. My aim is to show that by endorsing and facilitating the creation of a certain level of substantive autonomy in the south, the Thai government will in fact strengthen the country in the long term. I believe this will clearly indicate the government's sincerity in that it will finally address political and historical grievances of the Malay Muslims and will recognize and allow for the undeniable differences in their ethnicity and culture. Furthermore, I hold that this restructuring will remove popular support for the insurgency, bring peace and stability to the provinces and the Thai-Malaysian border, and pave the way for good governance, human security, social development and economic growth.

### **1.2 Background**

The three southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat were at one time autonomous Islamic Sultanates which entered a vassalage relationship with Ayutthaya in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Since that early period, these states have moved through various stages of dependence and autonomy, based upon the political strength of the Siamese court. By 1902, they had been formally annexed by Siam, and with the administrative and bureaucratic restructuring of the Siamese government the vassal system came to an end and traditional local leaders were replaced with Thai civil servants. Subsequent

assimilationist policies by the Siamese, and later Thai government included closing the religious school systems, sole promotion of the Thai language at the expense of the Malay language/Yawi script, and special legislation covering Muslims in the provinces. The net result of Thai policies was a Buddhist and Muslim society coexisting with virtually no contact, economic stagnation, and ultimately the first emergences of separatism.

From the late 1940s until the turn of this century, the violence in the south would by and large be seen as a low level secessionist insurgency. Militant separatist groups such as The Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) which emerged from the 1960s into the 1980s resorted to violence typical of guerilla warfare, using classic hit and run tactics directed against military targets. The separatist struggle in this period was based on Malay National liberation, and in fact appeared to be in decline thanks to accommodative amnesties and development programs administered by the Thai government.

The violence took a turn for the worse beginning in January 2004, when Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Thai Rak Thai came to power. Heavy handed tactics and strategic errors directly contributed to resurgence in the violence, and the death toll to date is over 3000 people. It was hoped that with the ouster of Thaksin in the September 19 coup, the insurgency would fade away. Further hopes were raised before the December 2007 MP elections, in which each political party had campaigned upon proposed solutions, to include establishing special administrative zones. The fact is no significant political changes have taken place, and the cycle of ambushes, arsons, and murders occurs on a daily basis. Government schools are burned, pondoks are vandalized, and teachers carry weapons or refuse to teach altogether. Medical school graduates refuse postings in the south, and the RTA is compelled to provide special incentives to soldiers serving in the south. In addition to a military surge of 20,000 to 30,000 soldiers, paramilitary and village defense organizations have increased in number,

mostly with the goal of protecting the Buddhist communities, further alienating the Muslims and thereby building support for the insurgents.

Recent government statements to the press admit that the current policy of reconciliation and proposed amnesty are not bearing fruit, and many believe that the security forces need to become more aggressive to deter violence and defeat the insurgents. Until recently even the RTA admitted that they were not really certain who the insurgents are. If the insurgency continues, Thailand may become weakened to the point of suffering a potential civil war as well becoming as a breeding ground for transnational terrorism. Internal security issues will transform into a regional and international crisis.

The idea of granting regional autonomy to the southern provinces is something that needs further study, according to both former Prime Minister Surayud and current Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej. Yet currently it is not considered it as an option for bringing peace. I hope that this thesis will serve as further study on the problem and a possible solution.

### **1.3 Main Arguments**

In 2005, the Thaksin government formed a 48 member National Reconciliation Commission to investigate the sources of the resurgence of violence and make recommendations for solutions to the longstanding problems. Led by former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachan, the NRC had a mandate to recommend policy guidelines and measures to create unity and peace in the southernmost provinces. It had a mandate to look into the causes and extent of violence, educate the public, and encourage peaceful means to solve problems. While proposing the formation of a special agency to oversee the regions administration, the NRC completely ruled out autonomy on the grounds that it will lead toward independence.

A study conducted by Prince of Songkhla University in Pattani indicates that close to 45 percent of southern Muslims want a special administrative body set up for the three southernmost provinces. An almost equal number called for the restructuring of local administration. The study indicates that local Muslims see the central government as insensitive and unresponsive to their needs, conditions which historically embolden ethnic rebellion and insurgency. Local residents want to be empowered to manage their affairs, although they remain divided over the proper administrative structure. Along with local residents, many academics have called for the autonomy of southern bureaucracy, allowing the local community to assume a greater role in the decision making process.

The concern of the central government, and the majority of the population however, is that any concessions made to the ethnic Malays, such as self governance and local autonomy, will lead to the break up of Thailand.

Using the Indonesian Province of Aceh as a historical model, I will attempt to demonstrate that regional governance can serve as a mechanism to mitigate the ethnic violence and the low level militant insurgency now gripping the south.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

I will use primary and secondary sources, consisting of desk research and field research. Through mostly secondary sources and desk research, I plan to provide the historical setting of the region from the Islamicization up to the present time, explore the demographics and culture of the south, and discuss the current local government apparatus. Next I will explain Thai government's experience with fighting counterinsurgency, specifically against the CPT in the 1980s. I will trace their early methods and the policies emplaced after various failures and successes, and then focus on the contemporary strategy and operations. Perhaps the most important aspect of my thesis

will be to compare and contrast the situation in Thailand with the situation in Aceh, Indonesia. The Indonesian government granted autonomy to that province after fighting a protracted insurgency. My aim is to apply the Aceh model to the three southern Thai provinces and determine its suitability for ending the violence as well as strengthening Thailand as a whole. I will use primary sources to supplement my research with interviews of military officers, political scientists, and policy makers.

### **1.5 Significance and usefulness of research**

Although Thailand successfully defeated and reintegrated the former Communist insurgents back into society, that model no longer seems applicable to the current Muslim separatists. The roots of this ethno-separatist movement are deeper than a political ideology. Where the Communists were still by and large Thais with the same Theravada Buddhist culture, the Malay-Muslims are different from the Thai majority in numerous ways, and there are historic grievances which have never been successfully addressed. What's more, all data suggests that the Malay Muslims are much more disadvantaged than the Buddhists socially, politically, economically, and educationally. They are a disenfranchised segment of society. I believe this research will be useful in terms of exploring a method by which the violence can be brought to an end, the legitimacy of a government can be demonstrated, and the popular support for an insurgency can be eliminated. There is potential to empower communities, strengthen them politically and economically, and promote stability within the region. The crisis in southern Thailand is a contemporary problem that makes headlines each and every day. As a means to quell ethnic tensions by some measure of political self determination the subject of autonomy requires further study, and I hope to provide some of that study through this thesis.