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Situation and Problems of the Three Southernmost Provinces in Thailand*

Senee Madakakul

1. The Origins of the Problem

The Sukhothai administration was never able to claim direct power over the Malay States, which were alternatively vassals of either Sukhothai or Mojopahit (Srivijaya), depending on which was the stronger at any given time. Actually neither of these two power governed them but they merely exercised in turn their protectorate over them. In other words, the Malay peninsula** enjoyed administrative autonomy in the Sukhothai period, although its foreign relations had to submit to the stronger of its two neighbours.

When Ayuthya first fell to the Burmese (1655), the Malay States, Pattani included, declared their independence but maintained friendly relations with Ayuthya.

During the first reign of the present Chakri dynasty, two hundred years ago, the siamese military was able to occupy some Malay States in the South of today’s Thailand, which and to show their loyalty to the Siamese king by paying every three years a tribute called “the golden flower” (bungamas). In exchange, the Thai government guaranteed their independence and protected them from interference from Portugal,

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**The Malay peninsula refers to the territory extending South of the Krah Isthmus down to Singapore (Tamasek).
Holland and Britain.

At the time, a Siamese governor was sent there to oversee the security affairs of these Malay States and turn them into petty autonomous state, each headed by a *sultan*. Yet the Siamese government did not interfere in internal administration but only supervised external relations. During that period there were several insurgencies fomented by one or more of the three European powers which wanted to forward their own economic interests. They encouraged these States not to bow to the Siamese government and offered them their covert support. This forced the Siamese authorities to interfere more and more in their internal administration, to the growing dismay of the sultans. Their relations with Bangkok soured and eventually led to the arrest of the sultan of Pattani (1902). From then on, using the policy of "divide and rule", the Siamese government reduced the powers and prestige of local rulers by bypassing them to deal directly with the people, altering the administrative structure and infusing it with its own officials. Still, Bangkok recognised the Malay ethny and the Islamic religion, and gave the people Siamese nationality without interfering at first with their local customs, traditions, culture or even language.

When the Siamese government tried to force them to alter their customs and beliefs, the people and their leaders appealed time and again to the authorities to maintain the *status quo* and the government had to resort to compromise for the sake of these States’ stability. But after the fall of absolute monarchy in 1932, conflicts between the local people and the central authority increased, especially under Phibul Songkhram. His Pan-Thai, ultranationalist policy was much resented by the local people and fostered their everlasting distrust of any Thai government, despite efforts by successive officials to placate them.

The failure of Thai government policies to gain their trust was due to the following factors: 1) an inappropriate ruling system; 2) Thai nationalistic attitude of civil servants; 3) their bureaucratic and feudalistic tendencies; 4) their failure to understand local mentalities, customs and traditions; 5) their recourse to exploitation and intimidation; 6) their greed for wealth and power.

Under such circumstances, local Muslim leaders did not stay still.
They tried to convey the problems to Thai authorities and even to appeal to the central government. At first, they had no intention whatsoever to secede, they only asked for a return to the former autonomy they used to enjoy from the Thai government in the old days. The record clearly shows that most of these local leaders were honestly trying to uphold the security of the land, because they were convinced that the people preferred to remain loyal to the Thai Kingdom, and that the problems could be acted upon easily. They tried to act in peaceful ways, according to the Islamic precept that “one who is truly faithful will dare speak the truth out to the ruler”

*Tengku* Abdul Yala Naser, who was an MP tried to use parliamentary channels to suggest to the Bangkok government ways to solve the various problems of the South but he we accused by Thai officials posted there of being opposed to the government policy and unloyal to the Thai nation. On the strength of their adverse reports, he was accused of being the leader of the *Dusongyor* separatist rebel group and was forced to take refuge in Kelantan. It was only then that he became convinced that it was not possible to fight by peaceful means and that the Thai government was not sincere in its dealings with the Muslim people. He then began to set up a movement among those who had fled from Thailand, who disliked the Thai government or were incensed by the murder of relatives or friends.

*Haji* Sulong Tomina was asked by Pridi Phanomyong who had a plan to decentralise administration to suggest a programme to solve the problems of the Muslim South. *Haji* Sulong produced a seven-point proposal, but by then the Pridi government had been overthrown by Phibul Songkhram. His proposal was branded as being a separatist policy, he was arrested and later eliminated along with some other Muslim leaders. Their associates and relatives were also denounced as separatists, forcing them to flee Thailand and join the first group.

*Haji* Makarae, the leader of the *Dusongyor* rebel group, originally was a Muslim preacher who used both rational arguments and superstitions to convince the people to protect themselves and fight Chinese Malay communists. One day, a Thai policeman molested a villager belonging to the *Dusongyor* group. *Haji* Makarae rallied his followers to beat the
policeman up, and this row became a big case as more police were sent to deal with the people in the area. Haji Makarae was accused of being a separatist leaders. Many more people fled abroad and joined the group led by Tengku Yala Naser.

Vilai Benchalak, Che Abdullah Langputeh and Amin Tomina, all of them were MPs, presented complaints from the local people to the government and offered helpful suggestions; but at the time even the Thai Buddhist MPs who understood the people’s problems were being denounced as radicals cooperating with the separatists. Evidence was forged and Amin and Vilai were arrested on the charge of inciting rebellion on Hari Raya*. They were imprisoned for several years. The accusation was totally unfounded, there was not a shred of evidence. After being released, they did not even try to flee abroad, but other local leaders similarly accused did so and are understood to have joined the same group.

Haji Yusof Japakiya is another religious teacher (Tok kru). He opposed and refused to go along with the government’s policy to change the system of pondak schools, and thus was variously branded a separatist, a radical or even a communist sympathizer. He became scared and kept some weapon in his school for self-protection, which only worsened his case. Eventually he had to flee and apparently set up his own movement.

Haji Karim or Ustaz Karim, originally an associate of Haji Yusof’s, later split away to set up his own pondak school at Ruso district in Narathiwat province, but because of his critical preachings he was denounced as being a movement leader. As he was about to be arrested he fled abroad and set up his own separatist movement.

Tengku Biror, the leader of PULO**, was educated in India not Pakistan (as usually reported) thanks to the support of Luang Job Krabuanyut, Thanom’s father-in-law. After graduation, he came back to Thailand and decided to work in the South. A plan he proposed to Luang

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* HARI RAYA literary means celebrating day. There are two HARI RAYA annually: 1) the 10th day of the twelfth month of Muslim Calendar (falls between Jan. to May) celebrating the return from Haj, in honored of Muslims who have accomplished the pilgrimage to Mekka, 2) the 1st day of the 10th month of the Muslim Calendar, marking the end of Ramadan (month of fasting). The HARI RAYA incident referred above was the Hari Raya Haj.

**PULO : Pattani United Liberation Organization
Job was turned down for whatever reasons. He felt hurt and told me that he could no longer stay in Thailand but would like to find a way to fight for the interests of Southern Muslims. I tried to convince him to do so in a peaceful way in our own homeland, but failed to convince him. So he started to look for Muslim students abroad to organise them into his own movement. He is reported to be the leader of PULO, which is true.

The government's and local officials' treatment of dissidents was following the policy of "the gun before politics", an authoritarian and violent attitude instilling fear in the people and forcing the leaders to follow the official line. The results were mixed. The power and influence of Bangkok increased by stages, depending on budgetary allocations, but in political, socio-psychological and moral terms, it was constantly negative. Its adverse effects eventually turned against the officials, who became increasingly estranged from the people and were perceived by them as "tokna" (feudal lords who come to be the masters, exploit and oppress Muslim Thais, seeking their own interests by misusing their authority). Those Muslims who supported the Thai officials would be denounced as lackeys of the tokna.

The frequent changes of governments negatively affected national policies and programmes in the South as elsewhere. The replacement of local top officials was done according to the whims of their superiors in the central authority, not according to the needs or wishes of the people. The government's ignorance and neglect of Muslims and their leaders (no Thai Muslim has ever become a minister or a high ranking official) made the people feel they had no stake in the government and were not trusted by it. All this compounded the political and administrative problems of the region. Top officials kept a close watch on those who did not agree with the government line and suppressed those who opposed their personal performance. Those who went into politics (at municipal, provincial or parliamentary levels) and criticised the government in a democratic way were accused of lacking patriotism, of being rebels or separatists. So much so that muslims in all five provinces in the South are afraid and weary even to this day.

To solve the various problems, top officials only thought in terms
of suppressing rebels in conformity with the gun-before-politics policy. Every time there were harsh operations, increasing number of people felt compelled to take to the jungle or flee abroad. Meanwhile, the underground political movement kept records of the various instances of people’s oppression by officials and used these to mobilise the masses by inciting their hate of all civil servants and of the Thai government, in speeches, articles and pamphlets not only at home but all over the Muslim world.

Because of the failure to develop education and to achieve economic progress and of the growing gap between the people and officialdom, most civil servants even now do not dare to become close to the people like their predecessors originally did. They complain about the language barrier, claim that budgetary allocations being spent mostly on suppression leave too little for development, allege that the separatist movement prevents them from carrying their duties, stress that the villagers’ various claims have become important issues, which certainly deserve to be analysed to achieve better understanding between Muslims and other Thais. The central government considers them to be the major problems, although in actual fact the major problem is that the Thai Muslim point of view is never taken into consideration.

The Thai nation was never colonised and thus the Thai bureaucracy is not used to being flexible. Thai civil servants do not understand the needs and feelings of citizens of other religions, ethnics and cultures. They do not know how to bring about peaceful coexistence between different races. The Thai nation only knows about what is Thai and what the Thais want, yet there is much argument these days about what is specifically Thai in terms of issues and identity. We all accept that we cannot approach Thai-ness in a concrete way but only as a concept: how then can we require of others to behave in a Thai way? To do so is to exacerbate conflicts between the various races within our nation.

Both Thai Muslims and Thai Buddhists want to live peacefully as they did in the old days and work jointly for development and progress as friends and fellow compatriots. They want dignity and civil rights as provided for by the constitution. The problem here is: who will achieve
this? And who is preventing it? Is there a way to provide justice and fairness to the people? What are the real security needs of this region?

2. Present Situation and Problems.

There are various types of insurgents, with or without ideology - Malaysian Chinese communists, Thai communists, separatists, and ordinary bandits and criminals. These groups resort to various types of activities such as ransoms, protection rackets, highway 'tolls', hold-ups of buses and attacks of officials. All this has negative impact on society, weakening the people's morale, making it hard for them to earn a living, creating great damage to the economy and upsetting the security and the stability of the government. Even though it can help reduce some of these problems, the government cannot ensure total security. In some areas, people are pressured from various quarters at once and have to pay all kinds of protection money to the police, to bandits and to influential people, on top of the taxes they pay to the State.

This is due to the harsh and wrong methods of the administrative and suppressive arms of the State which create injustice and provoke discontent among the people. There is no well-organised plan, no constructive short-term or long-term perspectives, no coordination among the various government agencies, and no real understanding by the administration of the specific problems of each region and of the mentality of the local people. This in turn gives rise to patronage and leads to the emergence of opportunists at local level. People who are good in the eyes of the officials may be loathed by the villagers - and vice versa, so that the officials and the people go further apart.

This also creates divisions among the villagers themselves as they fight each other for influence and wealth, to the point of bad-mouthing, suing or even killing each other. This translates socially in suspicions and endless division, an increase in crime, and a weakening of the people's solidarity and integrity as well as a loss of their rights. Only influential people enjoy freedom and rights. They also benefit from privileges.

At the political level, it means that democracy cannot be
established. Most candidates for parliament like to set up their own power group of followers to campaign for them. This creates further divisions and clientelism, which only deteriorates further the local administrative process and prevents the rise of a genuine democratic system. Villagers feel that their MPs and other representatives are useless, and the local administration cannot improve.

At the administrative level, we have seen that each unit carves out its own niche, competing for its vested interests, status and power. Government policies cannot be fully implemented. The people have to answer to several heads, which makes life that more difficult for them and disgusts them with officialdom. As for the officials, they only look after their own interests, do not really understand the policies, and only cater to the whims of their direct superiors, whether right or wrong.

The most criticised aspect of the administration is that officials do not want the people nor their local leaders to participate or express their opinions and suggestions. Several cases have created tensions and frustrations among the people unbeknown to civil servants, who stay aloof and fray among themselves only. Very few of them do go out to the people or know their customs. Officials belong to the masters society, while villagers seem to live like slaves: this class division is obvious in living style, in dressing, even in food habits.

Worse still, there is competition for positions among civil servants. If a Thai Muslim becomes a local official, his superiors will be informed by his colleagues that he is not trustworthy, that he associates with bandits, so that his bad record will prevent him from moving up the hierarchy.

As for education and culture, the fact is that about 65% of Thai Muslims cannot understand thoroughly the Thai language, but government policy has tried to forbid the use of the local Malay dialect for security reasons. The various mass media, all official pronouncements, instructions for agricultural development, etc., are all in Thai. Villagers do not understand what the officials want - and reciprocally. This creates lots of misunderstandings, as well as a rift between the State and the people. The people do not want to contact, deal with, or support the officials and their activities. This has encouraged the appearance of middlemen who act as
interpreters in various government offices. Every time they have business with government agencies, people have to pay tea-money to these middlemen. When they want to listen to the news or acquire knowledge, they tune in to Malaysian radio and TV programmes.

All this is because in the old days villagers did not have any opportunity to learn Thai; there were schools only in towns. Primary schooling in the countryside only began some 25 years ago. At the beginning, methods of teaching Thai to Muslim Southerners were not good. The curriculum went against local customs. Social sciences textbooks at primary level concentrated on spreading the Buddhist culture (they were illustrated with pictures of the Buddha and of temples) and said nothing on Islamic culture. Muslim believers did not even want to touch these books nor allow their children to go to government schools.

Nowadays, nearly everybody wants to be educated, so much so that there are not enough schools. Yet officials still claim that the people do not want to learn Thai but only want to know about religion so that the youth cannot find employment once they have completed their religious schooling. But the fact is that thousands and thousands of Muslim children out of Thai secondary schools or Thai vocational colleges cannot find jobs either. The government has not tried to solve this problem and one wonders whether the present official education and ideology are useful or appropriate to Thai Muslims.

Neither the curriculum nor the system of education nor even students uniforms are suitable to people's customs. I daresay that almost all of it has been imported from the West. Muslims all over the world have long accepted this type of education so long as it is compatible with the fundamentals of Islam. When it is not, they reject it, whether in Egypt, Indonesia, Turkey, Iran, Malaysia or elsewhere. Muslims believe all present Western knowledge derives from various Muslim sources before colonisation and that later the Jews and the Christians developed it in their own ways so that contemporary knowledge is sometimes misleading for Muslims. Muslim scholars all over the world see this as a problem and have warned their correligionists about it. When Thai scholars set up Thailand's education system on Western lines, this bred distrust among the Muslims.
Most Thai people believe that Islam creates divisions. Only a few government leaders understand that, far from being divisive, all religions including Islam can help solve social problems if properly handled. Problems arise from those who distort religion to their own ends.

Assimilation and integration are policies deemed essential by the government to ensure security. Since man is pliable they could bear fruit if properly implemented, in keeping with their original conception. Yet this could only be done by real revolutionaries with high moral standards, totally pure and dedicated to justice, working for the benefit of mankind as a whole. Not even leaders such as Mao, Nasser, Lenin or Ataturk could have achieved this - only the Prophet could.

On the other hand, Thai leaders have adopted Western civilisation values which the Muslims distrust. They claim to be Buddhists yet true Buddhism is never implemented. They see themselves as standard bearers of Thai culture but in fact have adopted the decadent culture of the West in work or leisure, in the way they dress, eat, drink, play games, express their opinions, etc., partaking of a culture which has a lower morality level that the subculture of ethnic minority groups. When such a subculture has higher morality standards than the majority culture, the ruler or the administration have no right to ask the minority to abandon its own (sub) culture and adopt a decadent one.

The policies of assimilation and integration are being carried out by setting up new communities of Thai Buddhists or by giving land to establish Thai Buddhist villages, for the sake of balancing out Buddhist and Muslim populations. This can be done properly if the land used is uninhabited or if it is developed first for the benefit of its residents before helping out poor settlers migrating from elsewhere.

Under the present conditions, villagers are poor, they do not have enough land to plant nor enough work to do and still they have to share with poor newcomers who get support while they are left to their own fate. This means that the government actually pushes them into further misery, and they have nobody to turn to. When they see that others get the land they should be entitled to, the jobs they should be offered, what are they supposed to feel vis-a-vis Thai Muslims, vis-a-vis the government? Quite
understandably, they consider this as some sort of racial extermination undertaking like that of Red Indians by White settlers in the 18th and 19th centuries United States.

However good a policy may be, if its implementation is badly thought-out imposed by force, unjust and basically wrong, it puts the whole situation in jeopardy. These days, everything has become politics - from education to suppression of bandits, from culture to agriculture. Even to be a Buddhist or a Muslim is politics. It is most unfortunate that the government, in tackling the various issues, has always only taken a military approach.


Administration agencies and their staff are not trusted by the people and are wrecked by chronic factionalism. Their improper performance has generated various anti-government movements either legal or illegal. Southern Thailand was known to have less economic problems than other regions, but this bad administrative record has led to economic problem which should never have happened and which in turn have spread to the cultural and social fields until everything turned into a whole mess.

It should be recognised that decentralisation in administration is a must for the Muslim Malay minority. Britain and Holland were able to govern the Malay people for centuries precisely because of widespread decentralisation. Malaysia has achieved security and stability through the same means: each State has its own autonomous registration, administration and jurisdiction.

The border provinces in the South are ruled by Thais whose different language, beliefs and culture make it even more imperative to resort to decentralisation. It is widely said that the best governing system is to ‘‘govern the people less and let the people govern themselves more’’. This is the essence of democracy. Separatist or communism can only succeed through consensus, through the united struggle of the people. But the problem here is that we make life difficult for the local people and then try to solve their difficulties according to our own judgment, one-sidedly
defining them and acting on them while the people have no say and do not participate nor assess whether what is done is right or wrong.

I firmly believe that "If the Southern border is dirty, really dirty, the only way to get rid of the dirt is to use pure water, the purer the better, but if you use refuse water, not only will you not clean the dirt but you will add up to it everafter". And also that "The key to success is political stability and efficient government performance. If the Thai Muslims have neither confidence nor faith in the Thai government, they will have no other choice but to unite and fight for their rights and freedom (or for independence) or to ally with the communists. So, if the government only uses military force, it will be no guarantee of victory in the fight against bandits and ideologically-motivated insurgents."

In a meeting between members of parliament and top government officials, with the prime minister as chairman, I suggested a set of solutions which emphasize political and administrative aspects. More specifically, I proposed to set up a special organisation for the purpose of planning specific policies and programmes for the South. Whatever its name, this organisation should have three key qualifications, i.e. 1) enjoy the trust, faith and cooperation of the people; 2) have full authority to enable it to solve political and administrative problems promptly as well as to allocate budget expenditures; 3) have the capacity to fully mobilise all kinds of economic and human resources, including civilian, military and police officials and the private business sector.*

Democratic structures with parliamentary representation must also be set up, most importantly at tambon, district and provincial levels. Their people's representatives must be treated with dignity by government officials, and must have the right to express their views and participate in

*Editor's note: The author, and two other MPs, Wanno Matha from Yala and Prinya Jetaphiwat from Narathiwat, proposed this plan to the top government leaders in August 1980. Apparently, by the late 1981, Prem's government set up Center for Directing the Administration of Southernmost Provinces, a special body under the office of the Prime Minister, responsible for policy planning and directing the implementation of policy for five southern provinces: Songkhla, Pattani, Satun, Yala and Narathiwat. The center's Committee composes of high ranking government officials, appointed by the prime minister, with an advisory board composes of local leaders.
problem-solving. At present, these representatives are not taken seriously by government officials, thus forsaking their potential use. Government and local officials claim that they are eager to set up democracy yet the way they go about it is just the opposite.

Everybody these days is afraid of all kinds of insurgencies but no one fears the masses. We think that ordinary villagers do not count. Their troubles are taken lightly, their grievances ignored: why should we be afraid of them? This phenomenon puzzles me a lot.

I am further puzzled by the monopoly our civil servants seem to have on the assessment of the situation at all levels. They dismiss contrary evidence from the people or independent analysts which are variously branded as separatists, communists or sundry other "burdens to the land". Using their one-sided information, the more they try to correct problems, the more influential they become and the worse the situation.

The border provinces of the South are the theatre of much infighting over considerable resources. All problems occur because of conflicts of interest, over money, power, status, rank and influence, among influential groups which victimise both the people and the central government. May I call these groups here the Southern border mafia gangs.

Before becoming a member of parliament, I was for several years a civil servant. All along, I have tried my best to stay away from these mafia gangs, with the result that on several occasions I was a target for assassination and was reported to be the leader of nearly all insurgency groups! Being hunted by hired guns from these mafia gangs for years has forced me to try and figure out who these gangs are. They are composed of regional and provincial level government officials, wealthy and corrupt businessmen, and top local gangsters. I know many of their names but cannot reveal them because I fear them.

I am saying all this only to show that as long as the government cannot suppress these gangs, the problems of the South will remain unsolved. It is easy to find out what they are doing by watching the behaviour of corrupt civil servants, of exploitative businessmen, of the followers of influential officials, and of the local gang leaders who are
clients to these three groups. They cause great trouble to the people, who are squeezed left and right and face physical harassment from well-connected gangsters. As a member of parliament, I receive many petitions, many of which I dare not reveal lest my informers or myself are killed.

It is not surprising that many simple villagers believe opposition groups when they present them with concrete examples of the cruelty, injustice and malpractices of local officials - whereas the latter show only the good side of their case and do so in abstract terms, appealing for love of nation, king, religion and democracy.

This does not mean that all local officials are corrupt. Actually, I believe the majority of them are fair and well-intentioned, but they do not have power or influence and they rather prefer to stay out of trouble.

I also believe that if all these problems are not solved promptly and correctly, the Southern provinces will erupt. If the local officials’ shenanigans are left unchecked, further deterioration will take place. After officials and the people have become estranged, the next thing to happen might be that Buddhist Thais and Muslim Thais would segregate too - and that, in itself, would be a victory for the insurgency. If religion is affected (through suppression of mosques, pondok schools or religious leaders), the situation could turn into an international issue. There would be a civil war, and then the government would be forced to deal with the South in political and administrative terms, because there is no other way.

I suggest that the way to deal with the Southern problem politically and administratively is as follows:

1) setting up a special high-powered organisation chaired by the prime minister or his personal representative to be directly responsible for Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, Songkhla and Satun provinces. This organisation would consist of representatives from all concerned government agencies and the various people's groups. It would be responsible for designing policies and programmes and for registering people's complaints, and would be empowered to nominate and remove civil servants and to allocate the budget.

2) starting urgently to introduce or develop local democratic
structures, especially at the levels of tambon, municipality and province. These councils would have legislative powers at their own level, and should not become instruments of civil servants as is currently the case.

3) providing these tambon, municipal and provincial councils with adequate budget to carry out their respective tasks.

4) considering as paramount people’s grievances to these councils and acting upon them promptly.

5) maintaining the current bureaucratic structure but making it change its image and attitude in order to prove to the people that it is at their service.

All the above can and should be done because we cannot consider the Southern provinces, where Muslims Thais form a coherent ethnic group, as similar to the other provinces. Thailand, like most civilised countries do, must have a special policy for minorities. We have to respect and accept the latter’s differences, so long as they do not affect the security of the country and the stability of the government, so that various ethnic groups of the Thai nation can live together in solidarity and peace and enjoy freedom.

6) Regarding the economy, I submitted in 1980 a package of reforms to the government. The main thrust of my suggestions is that most of the products in the South are world market commodities. The necessary infrastructure and facilities for their processing and export should be set up in the South, bypassing Bangkok, and this development of local resources must be done in conjunction with development of the area’s human resources.

7) Regarding culture, the government should refrain from interference in local culture. Whenever it needs to advertise something for mutual understanding and national unity, it should do so in a way acceptable to the local people and not try to impose its views by force or by law. Official broadcasts and documents should be in both Thai and Malay languages. Every district should have a public relations section employing bilingual officials to receive petitions and help the people draft them. The government should set up a Southern Islamic Cultural Centre responsible for activities concerning religion and culture, providing an office for the
province Islamic committee, a mosque for *lamat* prayers, a meeting hall, a reception room for VIPs, a youth centre, etc. This Centre would work in close coordination with the government, contributing accurate studies and research on cultural issues. It would express the sincerity of the government in promoting the local culture and would thus greatly boost the credit of Thailand in the Muslim world.