

Thai government and Muslim separatists agree to talks

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Malaysia is due to host peace talks, beginning on March 28, between the Thai government and the Muslim-based separatist group Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) over the protracted armed conflict in southern Thailand. A formal agreement to hold the meetings was signed on February 28 in Kuala Lumpur.

Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra claimed that Thailand was “willing to engage in the process of inclusive dialogue with all relevant stakeholders to address the root causes of the problem.” However, the agreement was signed with just one separatist group, pointing to the government’s intention to cut a deal with the BRN and divide the insurgency.

The negotiations follow escalating violence in the southern, predominantly Muslim and Malay-speaking provinces, of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat and Songkhla. Thai military authorities claim that the security forces face around 9,000 armed militants, based largely in village level cells. They belong to at least 20 loosely organised groups, with no central leadership. Their demands range from regional autonomy within Thailand to a fully independent Islamic state.

The insurgency has been fuelled by anti-Muslim discrimination, military repression and the region’s economic backwardness. The conflict flared in 2004 after security forces carried out two massacres in April and October that killed at least 187 men at the Krue Sae mosque and the Tak Bai demonstration.

Since then, according to data from Deep South Watch, 5,000 people have been killed and 9,000 injured in 11,000 incidents. The rate of attacks has reached an average of 3.5 per day. Some groups carry out indiscriminate killings of ethnic Thai civilians or target symbols of Bangkok’s authority, including teachers.

On February 10, insurgents killed five soldiers during

two ambushes in Yala. On February 13, in one of the biggest attacks so far, insurgents carried out a failed assault on a marine base in Narathiwat. The clashes have continued since the talks were announced. On March 9-10, three people were killed, including the wife of a border guard, and one injured in four attacks in Pattani.

During the 2011 election campaign, Yingluck’s Puea Thai party proposed the creation of a special administrative zone that granted a degree of autonomy to the country’s south. It also called for an easing of the oppressive restrictions in the region, replacing the existing emergency decree with regulations under the country’s Internal Security Act.

Yingluck was forced to back away from these policies when she encountered opposition from the military. Yingluck only assumed office after bitter and protracted political infighting within the Thai ruling elite, stretching back to 2006 when the military ousted her brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, from power.

Thaksin had earned the hostility of the traditional Thai establishment—the military, monarchy and state apparatus—after he further opened up the economy to foreign investment, undermined existing systems of patronage, and made limited populist concessions to the rural poor. After five years of intense turmoil, culminating in the violent suppression of pro-Thaksin protests in 2010, a compromise was reached: Puea Thai could form a government if it won the 2011 election, as long as the interests of the monarchy and military were respected.

Having agreed not to interfere in military matters, Yingluck was reluctant to press for her autonomy plan. As the conflict continued to escalate, however, the government felt it was in a stronger position to act.

Malaysia has played a significant role in facilitating

talks, as it has in similar negotiations to end the longstanding separatist conflict in the Philippines. With an election due to be called shortly, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak also has his own agenda. He calculates that by playing the role of peacemaker he will be able to present himself as a defender of Muslims in southern Thailand.

In what is expected to be the closest election in decades, Najib's involvement in the Thai peace talks could boost his electoral prospects in northern rural areas of Malaysia that have close ties with the Muslim population in southern Thailand. His United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has lost ground in the past to the Islamist Parti-se Islam Malaysia, which is part of the opposition coalition led by Anwar Ibrahim.

The Malaysian ruling elite is also concerned that escalating violence in southern Thailand could spill over the border.

The Thai government has encouraged Malaysia's involvement in the so-called peace process as a means of pressuring Thai Muslim separatist groups to participate. According to an article in *Asia Times* last month, key Puea Thai figures, including Thaksin, have been in touch with Malaysian authorities since 2011. They have made requests for Malaysian Special Branch police to put pressure on separatist leaders to take part once the Thai government signalled that it was open to formal negotiations.

The wording of the February 28 agreement avoided any mention of autonomy or the emergency decree and referred only to working within "the framework of the Thai Constitution". But Thai National Security Council general secretary Paradorn hinted that both issues might be raised during the discussions.

Paradorn's remarks provoked a sharp reaction from army commander General Prayuth Chan-ocha. On March 15, he publicly opposed any concession on the emergency decree until the Muslim insurgents demonstrated that they would end their violence. He is on record as flatly rejecting any autonomy for the southern region.

Thai opposition leader Abhisit Vejjajiva has also called the peace talks into question, saying the only beneficiaries of the deal would be the two political parties involved—Puea Thai and UMNO.

The Yingluck government's position remains tenuous. The military has not intervened directly into

the political arena since the 2011 election, but the threat is always there. The army and the opposition Democrats are bitterly opposed to the government's legal and constitutional proposals, which would give amnesty to the exiled Thaksin and allow him to return to Thailand.

On March 12, army commander Prayuth and Abhisit both attacked Yingluck for following Thaksin's instructions. Prayuth specifically warned Yingluck to listen to people who lived in Thailand "and leave the person who stays overseas alone".

As a result, the prospects for any immediate breakthrough at the talks next week are slim. Even if a deal on limited autonomy were struck in the longer term, it would be a power-sharing arrangement between local Muslim elites in the south and the political establishment in Bangkok. That would do nothing to end the region's endemic poverty and economic backwardness.



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