Thailand's Restive South: Time to Acknowledge the Multiplicity of Thai-ness

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ALTHOUGH bloodshed on the scale of the Krue Se mosque massacre and the bungled Tak Bai arrests have not occurred in Thailand's restive south recently, the violence continues to rumble on. To quell the violence, the Thai government appears to have adopted a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, it is continuing to adapt its military response to the unrest; on the other, it is seeking to foster unity through dialogue.

With regard to the first prong, the Thai government has reviewed the command structure of its military in the southernmost provinces. This has led to a restructuring that has seen a change in the higher-echelon officers as well as a clarification of the command hierarchy. With regard to the second prong, the Thai government has sought to defuse tension by creating the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC). Charged with the responsibility for suggesting policies and mechanisms to create reconciliation and bring peace, the NRC has proposed policies such as a fund for victims of the violence and also the establishment of a centre in the south offering Muslim Thais the opportunity to put forward suggestions on how the tensions may be better addressed.

Though these measures may go some way to resolve the violence, one of the key issues surrounding the problems of the south has not been addressed. Currently, Muslim Malays in the south feel any expression of their Muslim Malay culture and language is perceived as an act of disloyalty by Thai authorities. In addition, the term 'Thai' appears to encapsulate only Thai ethnicity and the Buddhist religion. This view makes them feel out of place in Thailand and makes them susceptible to the allure of extremist views.

As the conflict is to a large degree about religion and ethnic identity, a re-evaluation of Thai-ness is essential to resolving the unrest in Thailand's deep south. The Thai government may have to revise its practice of multiculturalism as well as its understanding of Thai identity in order not to alienate the Muslim Malays and to remove Malay ethnic identity and Islam as rallying tools by extremists.

An open acknowledgment by the Thai government of the diversity of multicultural Thailand will offer Thai Muslims in the south greater scope in expressing themselves as both Thai and Muslim - where both identities are not seen to be mutually exclusive and where charges of disloyalty are foreclosed.

Multiculturalism in Thailand

From the perspective of the long-term, most societies, whether acknowledged or not, are multicultural. The term *multicultural* is used here as an adjective and it describes the social demographic of states where different cultural communities live together and attempt to build a common life. Although most states are multicultural, there are different ways in which they manage these differences within their borders – i.e. they have different policies on multiculturalism. For instance, under the apartheid regime in South Africa, the policy of multiculturalism practised by the state was one of segregation while the policy of multiculturalism in Singapore is one where the state ensures equality of opportunity while also recognising and supporting the differences between ethnic groups in Singapore.

Thailand has never officially stated its policy on multiculturalism though it may be inferred from government policy that the approach one of assimilation. Despite the great linguistic and cultural diversity of central, northern, northeastern and southern Thailand, the official rhetoric has been that they are all 'Thai'. Unfortunately, 'Thai' here is often not understood purely to be an identity founded in citizenship. Instead, 'Thai' here is a culturally and ethnically loaded term with Thai ethnicity and Buddhism being the *sine qua non* of Thai-ness.

The domination of this limited understanding of Thai-ness is unusual given that diversity has always been a feature of the social demographic and history of Thailand. Thailand has always been a diverse society composed of groups such as the Chinese, Sikhs, Malays, Mons, Khmers and Isans to name but a few. These groups are not recent immigrants as they have long histories entwined with Thailand. For example, the Chinese have been a feature of Thai society for about 200 years, the Sikhs can trace their first arrivals to 120 years ago and the Mons have had a community in Bangkok since 1609. As such, a more precise representation of Thailand is a community of citizens *and* a community of ethnic and religious groups.

Besides the history of cultural difference within Thailand, as all key political players seem to be in agreement, Thai politics appears ready to officially express their multicultural composition. During the King's first royal address to Prime Minister Thaksin's cabinet on 22 February 2001, the King commented on what constituted the Thai nation. The Thai nation, he said, "comprises people from various parts of the country. They differ in thoughts and ways of life. Their home topographies are different. So are their standings… One of the problems that the government will face concerns the people who have long been living in our country but are not yet considered Thai… They were born in Thailand. They have been living in Thailand. But they haven't received the benefits of being Thai citizens. This matter must be handled without discrimination".

Thai politicians have also recognised the diversity of Thailand with Prime Minister Thaksin in a national radio address on 11 January 2004 calling upon the Thai people to end religious violence as they are all Thai citizens. The Thai military has also acknowledged the need to stress Thai commonality by requesting the media to refer to locals in the south as either Thai citizens or southern residents and not Thai Buddhists or Muslims. Finally, Thailand's Constitution offers the possibility of declaring Thailand a multicultural society by guaranteeing that its people will not face discrimination based on origins, race, language or religion.

The Benefits of Stressing the Ties that Bind

The manner in which Thailand describes itself and the manner in which ethnic and religious differences are managed offer an opportunity to escape the quagmire of violence in the southern provinces. Admittedly, a clear articulation of the official standing on multiculturalism in Thailand will not be the panacea for the problems in the southern Thai provinces. But it would definitely be another important supplement to the government's current efforts.

Firstly, officially celebrating and protecting the ethnic and religious diversity of Thailand furnishes the government with a strong tool with which to remove ethnicity and religion as a rallying tool for foreign and local extremists. Regardless of whether the violence in the deep south is perceived to be a secessionist struggle or whether it is viewed as a fight by an alienated minority to attain cultural space, by officially stating that Thailand is a multicultural society allows the Thais the opportunity to live their differences while still being united as Thai citizens.

Secondly, this new form of multiculturalism permits the breaking of the vicious circle of *pondoks* and the lack of Muslim bureaucrats. Currently, many Thai Muslims send their children to *pondoks* (Islamic schools) instead of Thai state schools as parents feel that state schools are a means for the state to enforce assimilation and undermine their identity. A small pool of Muslim students in state schools then results in a small number of qualified Muslims qualified to join the state bureaucracy. A redrafting of the Thai educational curriculum to better reflect and celebrate diversity within Thailand will attract more Muslim Thais to attend state schools or at least convince *pondoks* to teach the Thai language and more standard subjects so that a new breed of bureaucrats can be developed to make up the current shortfall.

Finally, a change in the government's policy on multiculturalism will allow for Thais to further develop deeper bonds with each other so that the different ethnic and religious communities can view each other with less suspicion. Although national identity is not something that can be ascribed purely by the state, government policies have a part to play in informing and steering its development. Years of distrust and unfair stereotypes have to be removed in all sides of the dispute in order to continually build up peace and understanding.

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