Country Briefing Note:

Security Sector Reform and Peace Process in Southern Thailand

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This paper is written during the time of Thailand's totalitarian rule. It might be quite difficult to analyze the factors that could be conducive to the reform of the security sector, since the overwhelming power taken and exercised by the military regime is totally against the principle of democratic accountability and civilian oversight of the use of armed forces in a democratic society. However, this paper addresses some important issues that should be of concern if the reform becomes possible in the future.

Regarding the attempts to make peace in the Southern-most provinces of Thailand, the security sector is struggling to find common ground to harmonize the use of force and the political tools to encourage conflicted parties to engage in the peace process. Since the insurgency broke out in 2004, the number of casualties has increased significantly. For the security sector, this is the important reason to continue using martial law, emergency decrees, and internal security law in order to guarantee security in the conflicted areas. However, the perception of what constitutes security varies depending on the different standpoints of the stakeholders. The diverse perceptions of security play a significant role in shaping collective attitudes among conflicted parties, stakeholders, and the general public. This is the strongest barrier that obstructs the path towards a peace process, especially when the security sector is involved.

This paper aims to clarify the necessity of understanding how the collective attitude of several conflicted parties, stakeholders, and the general public is important for proceeding with any future security sector reform (SSR) which would be beneficial to the peace process and the implementation of the peace agreement in the Southern-most provinces of Thailand. Even though the formal peace process was initiated on 28 February 2013 on the basis of the General Consensus Document signed by the representatives of the Thai Government and of the National Revolutionary Front (*Barisan Revolusi Nasional* - BRN), one of the major insurgent groups to proceed with the peace dialogue between the two conflicted parties, this consensus does not assure the success of the peace agreement. There are a number of factors that bring about uncertainty in the peace negotiation that was preliminary aimed to be a stepping stone towards a peace agreement, such as: 1) the differences in opinion between the various stakeholders, 2) the complex socio–political situation, which several parties were involved in and influenced, 3) the mainstream Thai authoritarianism social structure, and 4) bureaucratic red-tape.

Challenges of Peace Process

The stability and sustainability of the peace process in the Southern-most provinces of Thailand has been questioned. Disregarding the uncertain political situation in Thailand during the past few years, the attempt to initiate an appropriate peace process has never been clear in both policy and implementation. The Thai government aimed to reduce the violent situation and to return to the normalcy of the unity of a single state, while the groups of insurgents aimed to demand independence. The viewpoints of the major conflicted parties are at different sides of a compromise. According to Lederach, violent

conflict could become a single - wave timeline. This timeline contains different factors that cause the complexity of the conflict situation. The violent conflict situation in the Southern-most provinces of Thailand shows that the conflicted parties have not realized that the current conflict situation emerged from the factors on the single – wave timeline. The reason why this timeline is in a wave shape is due to the fact that there are factors that contribute to both the escalation and de-escalation of the conflict. Both conflicted parties have concluded that their proposed agenda for the peace negotiation concern the real definite needs of their respective group.

The different opposing standpoints could be counted as the major barrier of the peace process, and it is important to examine the origin of these rigid standpoints. Lederach (2005) explains that "the past that lies before us" plays a significant role in the collective cognition process of the stakeholders in the conflict. For example, the Muslim Thai nationals who are from the Malay ethnicity might feel irritated with the central Thai authorities, and the Thai officials would have to learn about their significant past, which is a very important component of the Muslim Thai existing identity. These values are so important to Muslim Thai nationals that it is better to fight to death than to live without the recognition of these values. On the contrary, Thai authority officers do not share the same values as the Muslim Thai nationals. Their collective cognition process makes them believe in the value of nationalism with a single Thai identity as the way to maintain the peace and stability of the nation. Similar to their opponent, they prefer to fight to their death to maintain their values. As a result, it is possible that these values have become the source for the perceived needs that the two conflicting sides demand from each other.

Sen (2007) addresses the importance of understanding the consequences of the collective belief in the single identity and analyzes the essentiality of plural identities in relation to violence. He states that "the singular – affiliation view would be hard to justify by the crude presumption that any person belongs to one group and one group only". (Sen, 2007: 25) In the case of the Southern-most provinces of Thailand, the difference in identity values creates mistrust between the conflicted parties and the stakeholders since each actor affiliates with a different identity. The singular identity affiliation derives from their belief in the value of sharing the same identity; both conflicted parties and the stakeholders hold this belief throughout the single – wave timeline.

Shifting from the rigid standpoints in the form of positional bargaining to the standpoints of conflicted parties that acknowledge their aspiration and underlying interests would enable the peace process to progress. Lederach (2005) addresses the "mystery of risk"; it is necessary for the conflicting parties and stakeholders to reassure the others that it is very important to allow their own respective voices to be heard, which means not those of the others, but those of themselves. The voices enable them to hear their aspirations and underlying interests that brought them to these standpoints. The capability to hear such voices will encourage them to get out of their comfort zone and to listen to their opponents.

At the stage of the pre-negotiation process, it is a great challenge to set up a platform in which the major conflicted parties could trust and could get out of their comfort zone. The traditional negotiation of Track I might face a difficulty in building trust among the conflicting groups. In order to provide such a platform, people-to-people dialogue (Track III) would be an additional path towards a sustainable peace process. According to several studies conducted by the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, the general public has increased its role as an important actor to clarify the need for peaceful conditions of living. However, it requires space and time for the people with differences in identity to build trust and create a web of plural relationships.

The other factors, such as the socio – political situation, authoritarianism, and bureaucratic obstacles, also influence the people's attitude. The differences in culture, religions, and languages have become the issues that justify the use of violence between the conflicted parties. Thus, it becomes the circle of violence that breeds the violence. The attempt to forge Thailand into a single identity unity produces the consequences of cultural oppression. The Muslim Malay ethnicity in the Southern-most provinces feels this pain. Once the violence breaks out and the security authorities apply immediate force in response to the return of violence from insurgents, such actions justify their belief that the Thai state is a cruel opponent. Whether or not it is acceptable to Thais, Thailand is a strong authoritarian country. The attitude of Thais has been shaped by the cognitive process in which authoritarianism is nurtured and implanted beneath the way we perceive things:

> "Thai people accept any forms of authorities. It was not only the authoritarian mechanisms of lifelong education, but it is partly cultural lifelong education in the relation to authoritarianism acceptance. That could explain the reasons why there were various military regimes […], and even with the democratic-like elected civilian governments they trend to practice the authoritarian aggression". (Pindavanija, 2009: 287)

The high degree of authoritarian submission, aggression, and conventionalism in Thai society brings about the justification for the use of violence against their opponents. Thus, the rule of law functions well only if it suits the interest of the rulers.

The authoritarianism in Thailand could be one of the causes of bureaucratic red-tape that brings about the results of uncertain policies, reluctance of the implementation, corruption, and human rights abuses by the authorities. Several circumstances prove that bureaucratic red-tape is one of the factors that causes the obstacle to people's participation in the peace process.

Security Sector Reform in an Authoritarian Society and Totalitarian Rule

Even though this paper is written for the purpose of exploring SSR in relation to the peace process in the Southern-most provinces of Thailand, the security sector in the local areas is directly linked to the national level. It is almost impossible to reform the local bodies if there

is no awareness of a necessity to make changes at the level of the central government. From the perception of a human rights and peace academic, the coup d'état on May 22, 2014 marks a setback for the democratic movement in Thailand. However, from the perception of the majority of military and security personnel, the same circumstances prove to be a heroic movement to secure the country from violent conflict. These perceptions are very important, because, in the eyes of the hero, the fulfilled actions are the acts of righteousness; it is the sacrifice of the heroes to save the kingdom in the time of crisis. This attitude of righteousness justifies any of their actions, no matter if it is a human rights violation or the abuse of power. Consequently, "such belief leads to the emergence of leader saves the nation, in which the leader is by all means the nation protector, and his decision is the end of all decisions, people who are considered royalty to nation must thereafter follows without doubts". (Chaleamtiarana, 1979: 31)

Under the mentioned attitude, the question arises if it is still possible to implement the reform of the security sector that is already perfect from the point of view of military and security personnel, and, if it is already perfect, why it needs to be reformed. Based on the assumption of an authoritarian society such as Thailand, the military has taken the privilege to access political power by means of a coup d'etat: "[…] the monopoly of force in the hands of Thai military group has added up more power to the powerful authorities who have tendency to exercise this power". (Pindavanija, 2009: 288 – 289) The reform of the security sector regarding the military, the police, and other legally armed groups in Thailand is not possible as long as the military leaders hold the attitude that they are the power that will save this nation.

Policies on Increasing Security Personnel in the Southern-Most Provinces of Thailand

In the past few years, security authorities have reformed the security sector in the Southern-most Provinces of Thailand by increasing the number of paramilitary forces by recruiting more paramilitary officials from the local and regional provinces. Furthermore, at the same time, Thai government authorities have been trying to increase the number and to enhance the capability of village-defense volunteers by providing battle training and equipping them with arms. It symbolizes the attitude of Thai authorities that security is only achieved through the use of force by village volunteers and by professional armed forces personnel. The consequence of this policy is that the amount of fire arms in the hands of civilians has increased substantially, leading to a higher risk of armed violence in the conflict area in the Southern-most provinces of Thailand.

Conclusion

Acknowledging that it is a very difficult task to reform the security sector in an authoritarian country, security sector reform in Thailand could be beneficial to the peace process in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. However, the coup d'état on May 22, 2014 and its consequences minimize any possibility and hope for reform of the security sector.

It would require substantial efforts to address the strong attitudes, the value of identities, the mistrust, the fear, the anger, and the hostility of the conflicting parties, stakeholders, and public in order maintain a sustainable peace process. Other factors deriving from the violent situation including the abuse of power are beyond the capability of a resolution under the totalitarian regime.

The change of attitude of the conflicting parties is possible, both in theory and practice, once the environment of the conflict is suitable. No matter how difficult it is, the arrangement of a safe platform for the conflicting parties, stakeholders, and the public could always be organized. However, under the current circumstances of the minimal freedom of expression in Thailand, such a safe platform for dialogue between the parties in conflict is far from possible. If Thailand could one day return to a democratic government, the possibility and hope might come back too.

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