

# **SOUTHERN THAILAND PEACE TALKS: THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD – AN ANALYSIS**

## **1. Introduction**

When thinking about conflict in Thailand, people will tend to portray it through the street protest in Bangkok with people wearing specific colored T-shirts (Red and Yellow). Sad but true, less known about the long-simmering insurgency in the southern border provinces of Thailand, predominantly Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. The intense political crisis that haunted Bangkok spawned negligence among the media on the complexity of the security situation in the forgotten south. Veritably, it can depict as a ‘covert war’ with less attention from the outside world.

With almost 6,000 people killed since 2004 and more than 10,000 injured for a population of only 1.8 million (a rate of bloodshed nearly double that of Afghanistan) and ranked number eight in the 2013 Global Terrorism Index, grievously it is the world’s most intensive insurgency after Iraq and Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>. The perpetuating violence had made the southern part of Thailand as the deadliest war zone in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the conflict in the South has for years, been almost ignored and evanescent on the global stage.

Conceivably, the insurgency in the southern region has been a ‘substantial headache’ to the Bangkok’s government for decades and now the new waves of insurgency are far from ending at any time soon. Perhaps because of this, the Land of Smiles is not smiling anymore. When the year of 2014 brings southern Thailand in the tenth years of relentless insurgency, the persistent question puzzling in peoples’ thought, why is that peace in the Deep South still a long way off?

Strive to culminate the decades of conflict in the far South, the Thai’s government ‘break the ice’ by initiating a peace dialogue with the insurgents. The remarkable drive by the 28<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of Thailand, Yingluck Shinawatra, which brought the insurgent movement and the Bangkok’s government to the table for ‘deep conversations’ and in one way perceived as the best

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace (2013, April). *Global Terrorism Index 2013*. Retrieved from: <http://economicsandpeace.org/research/iep-indices-data/global-terrorism-index>

achievement for the younger sister of former Prime Minister in exile, Thaksin Shinawatra<sup>2</sup>, since she took office in August 2011.

On 28 February 2013, Thailand's government signed an agreement on peace dialogue with the Malay-Muslim separatist movement. The agreement, which is the General Consensus Document on a Peace Dialogue Process was signed between the National Security Council (NSC) as the representative of Thai's government and the well-known long-standing separatist group, the National Revolutionary Front or Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), with the support of the Malaysian Government as a facilitator, during the first meeting at Pusat Latihan Polis (PULAPOL), Kuala Lumpur<sup>3</sup>. The agreement is truly a step toward ending the long-running conflict in south Thailand. Yingluck decently 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<sup>4</sup>. For the first time in history, the Thai's government publicly acknowledged the need for a political settlement to end the insurgency, explicitly reflects a major stepping stone after years of insisting that the southern crisis is driven by drug gangs and criminals. In point of fact, it is a historic breakthrough for Thailand.

This working paper series discusses the current development of the Southern Peace Talks initiated by Yingluck Shinawatra's government in early 2013, along the line analyze the challenges that stonewalled the move to install peace in the far south.

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<sup>2</sup> Thaksin Shinawatra is the controversial prime minister of Thailand that lives mostly in London and Dubai in self-exile to avoid corruption charges against him. He was popular among the rural poor especially because of his populist policy. After more than five years in power, he was ousted in a military coup in September 2006, accused of corruption and abuse of power.

<sup>3</sup> The text of the agreement can be retrieved from "Text of the Agreement between Thailand and the BRN," *Bangkok Post*, February 28, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Agence France-Presse (2013, February 28). *Malaysia to host Thai peace talks in two weeks*. Retrieved from <http://news.malaysia.msn.com/malaysia-news/malaysia-to-host-thai-peace-talks-in-two-weeks-1>