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TROUBLE IN THAILAND'S MUSLIM SOUTH: What a stronger Thaksin can do

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THE Thai Rak Thai party has swept back to power in Thailand's latest general election and its leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, is set to return to office as prime minister with a much stronger mandate. One of the key challenges waiting for him to resolve is the conflict in Southern Thailand which is threatening to radicalise the Muslim community there. If prolonged, the conflict could increase sympathy and, possibly, support for separatist and militant groups.

While the Thai authorities may justify their tough handling of the situation in the South on security grounds, the Tak Bai incident of October 25 has again raised questions about the government's approach, which has caused the deaths under questionable circumstances of at least 78 Thai Muslims while in custody. The tensions in the Muslim south have to be defused and the underlying causes need to be addressed. Both the authorities and the Muslim community in the south can consider several options open to them.

Dialogue with the Muslims

To begin with, the authorities can take a softer line to regain the trust of the people of this region. To win the hearts and minds of the Muslims, they can consider conceding that the Tak Bai incident had been mishandled. The public should be assured that the necessary steps have been taken to prevent a recurrence of such a tragedy. Closed-door dialogues can then be held with leaders of the Muslim community to reduce the tensions. These dialogues should include the community leaders, *tok gurus* (Muslim clerics), professionals and even members of the *Pattani* royal families. To pave the way for reconciliation, an apology may even be offered to the community for the Tak Bai tragedy. These sessions should then be used to understand and appreciate the grievances of the Muslims in Southern Thailand while at the same time stressing the government's policy of acting in the best interest of Thailand as a whole.

One source of grievance is the problem of "rogue elements" within the system - in the military, police and other government agencies -- that have obstructed the growth and development of Southern Thailand. Indeed, the reasons usually cited by analysts to show why the southern provinces are amongst the country's poorest and under developed include:-

- Officials who pilfered funds earmarked for development;
- Maladministration of the government;

- High-handedness of the army personnel;
- Common banditry and lawlessness making it difficult for the authorities to differentiate these activities from that of the separatists or militants.

Adequate representation from the locals in the area is also a vital component of development strategies in the south. In this respect, it would be helpful if the local leadership, such as governors and other office-bearers, reflect better the demography in the south where the Malay population is dominant. Co-opting into the mainstream prominent individuals like Ismail Lutfi, the Chairman of the Saudi-funded Yala Islamic College - as the Thai government has done - will help keep in check separatist tendencies and prevent a drift towards extremism. This way, the possibility of the separatist groups linking up with transnational militants and adopting the ideology of “global jihad” can also be reduced.

Managing the pondoks

The government must however approach with utmost caution the issue of reforming the hundreds of Islamic schools in Thailand. It is important that the authorities avoid taking steps that would destroy the credibility of the religious leaders and institutions. The two are synonymous with Southern Thailand. Therefore any measures that undermine their credibility will adversely affect the Muslim community’s cooperation with the government. Instead the government could consider increasing financial, technical and professional support for the *pondoks* to enhance their relevance to national developmental goals.

In addition, NGOs can also be given a role in solving the problem in the South, at least on the social front. The improvement of social conditions will help address the grievances of the Pattani Malays and ease their strained relationship with other Thais and the government. NGOs which can help improve the social, economic and educational levels of the population in Southern Thailand should be offered government support, such as through funding for their reform programmes. The involvement of civic groups will help reflect a more balanced approach in relating to the south -- one that is not too security-oriented.

Studies can also be done on how Thailand’s ASEAN neighbours, such as Singapore, relate to the Muslim minority community. Such studies could start with a focus on certain laws and administration. They can then expand into concrete cooperation in assisting the Southern Thai Muslims to adjust themselves to the Thai context. Southern Thai Muslims can also be exposed to other countries where the Muslim minorities have successfully contributed to their nation’s progress and development.

Reviewing the separatist strategy

On their part, the Muslims in Southern Thailand, especially those who are involved in separatist activities, can review their goal of separatism. In particular, the community should reassess the whole spectrum of *jihad*, which, conceptually, has a wider meaning and may not be limited to armed struggle, but has nevertheless been mobilised by militants to legitimise their actions.

Finally, Thailand’s active role in the US-led war on terrorism must be carefully managed so as not be seen as a war on Muslims, which could only inflame local sentiments. This would help prevent separatist groups in the south from being exploited by external interests to destabilise Thailand. This possibility cannot be ruled out given that Hambali and a few other

Ji operatives were arrested in Thailand and appeared to have moved freely in the country. While the government maintains its firm grip in order to contain separatism and militancy, it needs to realise that its bigger battle is winning the hearts and minds of the southern Muslims.

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