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Insurgency in Southern Thailand: More Unrest Ahead?

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Synopsis

Growing discontent in Southern Thailand has led to a significant increase in the number of attacks in the region, a surge in radical online activity as well as the revival of militant groups that are thought to be defunct or dormant. These trends portend more unrest in the coming months and render the region vulnerable to exploitation by groups like ISIL/ISIS.

Commentary

ON THE evening of 26 June 2016, a powerful car bomb exploded along a busy street at Sungai Golok (near the Thai-Malaysia border) killing four people, three of whom were Malaysians. This explosion came in the wake of an upsurge of violence in South Thailand since March 2016. Several days earlier, insurgents detonated two floating bombs near a wharf in Pattani; this new form of attack is believed to be a trial run for such devices. Throughout the month, there were three major bomb attacks that killed 12 people, among them several soldiers.

Southern Thai insurgents have also been very active on social media domains as reported in an earlier Commentary. (See Vikram Rajakumar “Insurgency in Southern Thailand: What Does ISIL’s Black Flag of Pattani Portend?”) (08 April 2016). Social media platforms have become a new front for the insurgents to win recruits and rally support for their militant campaign for autonomy. Their online propaganda efforts have clearly resonated in the real world as seen in the attacks targeted at government and security personnel and institutions.

Revival of Southern Thai Insurgent Groups

Since the shutting down of an Islamic school (Jihad Wittaya or “Pondok Jihad”) by the Thai government in 2005 and confiscation of its land by the courts in December 2015, the trust between the government and the southern Thai Malay Muslim community has been severely impaired. It has proved to be the turning point for the insurgency as seen in the escalation of bombings and attempted bombings since early this year. Although there have been many bombing incidents since 2008, April 2016 alone saw a 42% increase in attacks, according to terrorism specialist Dr. Zachary Abuza on 1 May 2016.

The upsurge in violence and online activity has been accompanied by the revival of hitherto defunct and dormant breakaway factions of the Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), one of the most active insurgent groups in the south. The resurrection of these groups, which include the Nampra Army (PULO’s armed wing that was active from 1976-1990) and the Pattani Liberation Army, are possible game changers to the restive region. (Nampra stands for Negara Melayu Patani Raya or the Malay State of Patani Raya.)

The appearance of Nampra Army in February 2016 was confirmed when rocket explosives were found with the PULO MKP’s sticker flags (PULO MKP is a term used by radicals to distinguish PULO’s two factions). The PULO MKP split from PULO several years ago and is directed by Kasturi Mahkota who is based in Gothenburg, Sweden. Kasturi’s faction is part of MARA Pattani, a coalition made up of six insurgent groups formed in August 2015.

The coalition had expressed the desire to engage in a peace dialogue with the Thai government on the condition that the Thai state officially recognises it as an official entity with legal and diplomatic immunity. Though this has been reported in the media, the Thai government has not acknowledged it.

Alleged Human Rights Abuses

The Pattani Liberation Army (PLA) was an organisation formed in 2009 when PULO and the Group of Mujahidin Islam Patani (GMIP) formed an alliance. They agreed to jointly form a unified military wing, the PLA, under the command of the First Deputy Military Commander of PULO. The PLA was thought to be defunct, but in the last one week, there have been Facebook posts suggesting that the PLA has been revived and has re-joined forces with PULO’s main arm.

The upsurge of violence and simultaneous burst of online radical activity and revival of defunct or dormant insurgent groups are portentous developments. They reflect the strained relations between the Thai government and southern Thais, stemming from the ‘Pondok Jihad’ dispute as well as issues concerning tight military control and alleged human rights abuses and ill-treatment of detainees.

Traditional insurgent networks and alliances are being utilised in unpredictable ways. That social media accounts related to Thai insurgent groups have begun using flags and symbols of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) also known

as ISIS are ominous; whether these groups have adopted the same goals as ISIS however remains unclear.

PULO had issued a statement in February 2016, declaring that it does not have anything to do with ISIS. However, given the spike in violence since this statement, and the increase in online clamour for autonomy using Islam as a cantilever, more investigation is necessary to determine whether there are any links between local insurgents and ISIS.

Remembering Krue Se and Tak Bai

Recent developments suggest that ISIS is increasing its presence in Southeast Asia and targeting vulnerable groups in South Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and South Thailand. ISIS has published the first edition of a newspaper meant for speakers of the Malay Language which is also widely spoken in Southern Thailand. The publication, Al-Fatihin, was revealed on 20 June 2016 by Furat Media, an IS-affiliated media agency.

This was followed by the release of a 21-minute video by the Islamic State's Philippines Media Office entitled "The Solid Structure", featuring Southeast Asians from Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, pledging allegiance to the group. One of the individuals, Abu 'Aun Al-Malizi, a Malaysian, identifies Thai nationals as part of the Katibah Nusantara (a dedicated Southeast Asian military unit in ISIS), and that fighters will return to their homelands with new skillsets, ready to wage jihad.

ISIS videos with Malay subtitles are also being widely circulated on Thai social media. These significant developments to the jihadi landscape have the potential to aggravate radicalism and militancy in the already simmering south.

The possibility of more attacks like the Sungai Golok blast on 26 June cannot be ruled out. Social media platforms are teeming with radical activity, disseminating videos displaying the training of insurgents and the making of bombs as well as sermons, caricatures and pictures depicting atrocities that southern Thais had to endure.

Insurgents may view this year as an opportune moment to dramatise their cause as it marks the 12th anniversary of the Kru Se mosque and Tak Bai incidents, pivotal events in the history of the conflict; they coincide with the upcoming Thai Constitutional Referendum scheduled on 7 August 2016, when Thais will head to the polls to vote on the ruling junta's proposed military-guided democracy. Insurgents may seize this period to mount attacks not only to commemorate past tragedies, but also to send a strong message to the Thai government that "We are still here".

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