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Malaysia's Role in South Thailand: What's at Stake

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SYNOPSIS

*The issue of the South Thailand conflict featured prominently during Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's visit to Bangkok in February 2023. While it remains Thailand's prerogative to address the insurgency occurring in its deep south, **NAWALJEET SINGH RAYAR** and **DAVID HAN** analyse how Malaysia's role as mediator of the conflict can serve to meet its and Anwar's own needs.*

COMMENTARY

During his recent visit to Bangkok in February 2023, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's outlined his administration's perspective on Malaysia's role in mediating the South Thailand conflict. He said that Malaysia "will exercise [its] rights as friends and family to express [its] legitimate concerns whilst acknowledging that South Thailand is an internal issue within Thailand."

That Malaysia's role in mediating the South Thailand conflict featured prominently during Anwar's visit is not surprising. First, the conflict involves a marginalised, predominantly Muslim population, for which there is sympathy among the Malay-Muslim voter base in Malaysia that Anwar's ruling coalition has yet to capture. Second, Malaysia has a history of mediating in this conflict and other similar ones, for example in the Bangsamoro peace process in the Philippines. Third, the insurgency itself is a national security concern for both Malaysia and Thailand, hindering the possibility of greater trade and commerce across the border.



Soldiers resolving unrest along the southern border areas in Thailand, 2020. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim highlighted Malaysia's role in mediating the long-standing South Thailand conflict in his recent visit to Bangkok, a position which may well serve Malaysia's and Anwar's own needs. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

At a time where Anwar's primary motivation for foreign engagements is to secure investments and economic opportunities, Malaysia will be well served to be able to maintain good relations with its international partners. Even on that front, it was reported that Anwar and Thai premier, Prayuth Chan-ocha, mainly discussed economic development along the border of southern Thailand and Peninsular Malaysia's northern states.

Taken together, Anwar's visit attempted to amalgamate his domestic political agenda with Malaysia's capabilities, national security concerns, and economic goals while balancing the need to manage a potential flashpoint of Malaysia-Thailand relations.

Malaysia's Perspective

Malaysia has long had an interest in the security and stability of southern Thailand. It has seen developments in Thailand's far south as a national security concern and has sought to address this by enhanced cooperation with its northern neighbour. However, this has been complicated by Bangkok's treatment of its ethnic Malays, with whom segments of Malaysia's population share a common ethnicity, culture, religion, and language.

Malays in southern Thailand and northern Malaysia have maintained close people-to-people linkages despite being separated by sovereign borders. Many in southern Thailand have crossed borders to attend educational and religious institutes, seek employment in Malaysia's agricultural industry, and maintain familial ties. Malaysians too have crossed in the opposite direction to study at Islamic schools, conduct business and keep in touch with their families.

However, the southern provinces of Thailand covering Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat (which border the northern Malaysian states of Kedah and Kelantan) have been marred by decades of insurgency and socio-cultural challenges originating from tensions between the Malays in southern Thailand clamouring for greater political and religious autonomy and the Buddhist-majority Thai authorities.

While the porous borders have allowed for such cross-border linkages to be maintained, the unrest in southern Thailand has been a source of security and political concern for Malaysia. Specifically, Malaysia is concerned that the insurgency could become a channel for foreign terrorists and extremist groups to infiltrate southern Thailand. In turn, this could pose security challenges for both Malaysia and Thailand. Moreover, insurgents have been known to cross over into Malaysia to seek refuge in times of intense military and police actions by the Thai government.

Strains in Malaysia-Thailand Relations

Since the ethnic Malay-Muslim community in southern Thailand share such close ties with their counterparts in Malaysia, Malaysian government leaders have to be careful in deciding to express concern for the welfare and rights of Malays and Muslims in southern Thailand.

For example, the then Chief Minister of Kelantan, Nik Aziz Nik Mat, had voiced concern for 131 Thai Muslims who had fled to Kelantan claiming they had felt threatened by the Thai military's crackdown on Islamic insurgents in 2005. Demands by the Thai government to repatriate the group were met with responses from Malaysian leaders (namely then foreign Minister Syed Hamid and then Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak) seeking assurance that the human rights of the 131 would not be infringed before committing to returning them.

Thailand responded by summoning the Malaysian Ambassador in Bangkok to receive an official protest for "inappropriate remarks" that amounted to interference in Thailand's internal affairs. While Malaysia eventually repatriated the Thai Muslims, the incident strained Malaysia-Thailand relations considerably and together with other similar incidents, has left an indelible mark on Malaysia's approach to Thailand's restive south.

Anwar's Approach

Issues arising from the management of the unrest in southern Thailand saw diplomatic ructions between the two countries under the successive administrations of Mahathir Mohammad and Abdullah Badawi in the early to mid-2000s, thereby leading to strained relations. Nevertheless, relations improved once cooler heads prevailed and, for a period under the premierships of Najib Razak and Abhisit Vejjajiva, even enjoyed an upswing. Thailand was then Malaysia's fifth biggest trading partner in the world and second largest in ASEAN.

Currently, Thailand is Malaysia's seventh largest trading partner globally and the third largest among ASEAN countries. Anwar himself acknowledged during his keynote speech at the "Future of ASEAN" forum in Bangkok that the potential of trade and investment relations has yet to be fully harnessed.

During Anwar's visit, both sides once again reiterated the commitment to expand annual trade to US\$30 billion by 2025. (Najib and Prayut Chan-o-cha, too, had set an identical target in 2016, to be achieved by 2018.)

Anwar also pledged to "do whatever is required" to facilitate a peaceful solution to the long simmering insurgency in southern Thailand. This stance seeks to improve Malaysia's efforts at third-party mediatorship, which had declined in the post-Najib era.

The disruptive changes of governments after the fall of Najib's Barisan Nasional in 2018 were symptomatic of political instability that weakened Malaysia's ability to focus on foreign policy issues, let alone perform the role of a facilitator to peace efforts in southern Thailand. Moreover, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought a temporary halt to the peace dialogue.

As onsite peace talks between the concerned parties have resumed in Kuala Lumpur and were facilitated by Malaysia in late February 2023, it was reported that the parties reached an agreement "to develop a Joint Comprehensive Plan towards Peace as a road map in 2023 and 2024". The newly appointed Malaysian Chief Facilitator, Zulkifli Zainal Abidin, also stated that there was an "aura of reconciliation" from all parties.

Still, a swift conclusion to the Southern Thailand Peace Dialogue process, which is now in its 10th year, is not expected to happen anytime soon. Given Malaysia's lengthy experience with the issue, the Anwar government has been seeking to steer Malaysia towards greater involvement in contributing to peace efforts in southern Thailand while aiming to keep relations warm with Thailand to avoid a repeat of strains in bilateral ties.

Anwar's Goal

Malaysia's efforts to facilitate continued dialogue in southern Thailand could help it regain its position as an influential voice in regional affairs, bolstering its credentials amongst ASEAN member states, and building momentum and confidence for its tenure as chairman of ASEAN in 2025.

If Malaysia does contribute to a sustained period of non-violence in southern Thailand, this should benefit Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim who is looking to enhance his stature as a regional or even international, statesman. A conclusion to the conflict would be a "win" in the foreign policy domain, potentially helping him to gain more approval of his leadership at home.

Ultimately, however, making progress on peace in southern Thailand lies with the Thais. Anwar will have to weigh the credibility he is willing to stake against the dicey situation there.

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