

# Reflections from a donor-doer

## Fostering pathways to peace in Southern Thailand

**Maho Nakayama** is Director of the Asia Peace Initiatives Department in the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. Prior to this she spent a decade at the Japan Foundation including working in Indonesia to develop programmes to promote Japan's relationships with Asian countries, and supporting peace and reconciliation projects in Aceh. She holds an MA in social anthropology from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UK.

**Akiko Horiba** is Program Director of the Asia Peace Initiative Department in the Sasakawa Peace Foundation with a focus on Southern Thailand, women's political participation in Asia and strengthening civil society networks in Southeast Asia. Previously Akiko worked as a policy secretary in the Japanese House of Representatives. She received a PhD in Area Studies (Indonesia, conflict analysis) from Sophia University, Japan and a Master of theological studies at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Massachusetts, USA.

The southern provinces of Thailand bordering Malaysia have been affected by violent conflict since the 19th century. Conflict has centred on self-determination, and since 2004 around 7,000 people have been killed in urban guerrilla warfare, bomb attacks and counter-insurgency operations.

Peace has proved elusive. The Thai government has taken an uncompromising attitude to territorial integrity and has rejected international peacemaking support. The armed opposition is secretive and factionalised and lacks a clear political agenda. The largest armed group, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), has insisted on both formal talks and international involvement as prerequisites for dialogue. The Covid crisis has added another dimension to peace efforts, after the BRN announced that from 3 April it would 'cease all activities' in order to facilitate humanitarian access.

This article outlines the work of Japan's Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF), where the authors work, to support pathways to peace talks in southern Thailand, including mechanisms for more diverse representation and inclusion of conflict-affected communities in peace initiatives. It contextualises the SPF's efforts by outlining recent conflict dynamics and broader peace initiatives in the region.

### **Conflict background**

The contemporary conflict in southern Thailand has pivoted on disagreement over the legitimacy of Thai state control of the northern Malay peninsula, and an underlying disconnect between Thai state discourse that asserts long-term jurisdiction over the region, and local history that emphasises Patani-Malay authority over it.

This article refers to border provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and the four districts of Songkhla province as 'Patani' (with a single 't'), the preferred form for Patani-Malay communities. This region comprises 80 per cent Malay-Muslims in a country of primarily Thai-speaking Buddhists. The Thai state emphasises 'Thai-ness' as a unifying concept encompassing Thai language, Buddhism, and the supremacy of the monarchy. It does not officially recognise the regional Malay dialect, Melayu, which many among the Malay-Muslim community in Patani see as indicative of their secondary status. Many Melayu-speakers enrol their children in Melayu-speaking religious and private Islamic schools, exacerbating social separation from Thai institutions and Thai-speaking populations, with further negative implications for livelihoods and labour market access.

Map 2: The Patani region of southern Thailand



Thai state policies of centralisation and modernisation at the turn of the 20th century were opposed by Patani-Muslims, unlike most non-Thai identity groups, which precipitated the launch of a Patani-Muslim resistance movement in the 1960s with a mix of ideological and separatist ambitions. Over time, these groups have adopted varying levels of militancy and different tactics such as guerrilla warfare.

The Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) was formed in 1960 and became the dominant movement after 2000, although their fully fledged armed struggle only started in 2004. The BRN is secretive, but observers describe an elaborate structure including political and military wings with well-developed outreach capacities to their supporters. The military units are decentralised and most of the fighters are part-time.

State responses to the insurgency have included a mix of counterinsurgency, securitisation measures and development assistance aimed at winning 'hearts and minds', with different governments fluctuating between harder and softer policies, including reconciliation and amnesties for surrendering fighters.

#### **Peace initiatives: 2005–19**

##### *Informal peace efforts 2005–11*

The state has largely resisted engaging in formal peace talks or allowing any international involvement in peace efforts, consistently portraying the conflict as an 'internal affair'. The enigmatic character of the BRN has helped the government to sustain this policy.

Nevertheless, several informal peace initiatives have been attempted, including with international involvement. Two significant efforts were initiated by leading Southeast Asian political figures: the Langkawi talks of 2005–06, promoted by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad; and talks in Bogor, West Java, in 2008 led by the then Vice President of Indonesia, Yusuf Kalla.

Neither of these initiatives ultimately succeeded, not least as they were not able to engage serious representation by the BRN – although there was some traction with other armed groups such as the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO) and the Islamic Liberation Front of Patani (Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani – BIPP). Similar difficulties have undermined other international peace efforts, such as a 2009 initiative supported by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, as well as the 'Geneva Process' between 2005–11 by the Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

##### *Direct dialogue efforts 2013–14*

In February 2013, the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and the BRN signed a 'General Consensus on Peace Dialogue Process' – the first time that the parties had reached an official agreement – which committed to pursue dialogue supported by Malaysian government facilitation.

However, the 'General Consensus' was agreed and published before all parties had sufficiently explored the details of how to organise negotiations in practice or prepare their constituencies for the process. The BRN subsequently released five 'preliminary demands', which mostly concerned securing their status as the sole representative of the 'Patani-Malay nation'. These demands were unacceptable to the Thai military, and the Yingluck government could not reframe them to secure military support and sustain the dialogue. The main achievement was a 40-day ceasefire during Ramadan, which collapsed after some Thai military resumed combat operations in the south. In August 2013, the BRN effectively retreated and has remained elusive.

In May 2014 Thai Army Chief General Prayut Chan-o-cha led a coup against the Yingluck government and installed the military-led National Council for Peace and Order. Prayut saw the necessity of maintaining the official peace efforts as a display of the military's good intentions, although he opposed the existing agreement with the BRN.

At the same time Patani opposition groups formed a new umbrella outfit, the Majelis Amanah Rakiyat Patani (MARA Patani), comprising several organisations and formally headed by a member of the BRN. The MARA Patani's objectives were to consolidate the priorities of Patani movements and to pursue dialogue while assessing the sincerity of the Thai state's commitment to peace. The MARA Patani maintained communication with the military wing of the BRN but had no control over the group's military engagement.

##### *Violence reduction and backchannels 2015–20*

From mid-2015 the military government's strategy shifted to reducing violence through the incremental establishment of local 'Safety Zones', starting in areas in which the MARA Patani claimed to have control. The Patani movements agreed to this strategy in the belief that it was a first step towards local ownership of peace efforts by communities in the Safety Zones.

However, implementation of the Safety Zones was interrupted due to leadership changes and internal disputes within both parties. Ultimately, despite some 20 meetings from 2015–18 between the parties' technical working teams,

no compromise was reached and the talks ground to a halt. The MARA Patani lost momentum and is no longer active.

The first national elections in Thailand since the 2014 coup were held in 2019. These were conducted under a controversial constitution and though contentious marked the 'official end' of direct military rule. The BRN subsequently returned to peace talks through backchannel communications assisted by some European NGOs and embassies. Concurrently, the Thai government accepted the BRN's request for the involvement of international mediation experts to observe the talks as long as they acted in a personal capacity.

**“ The failure of various peace efforts to deliver concrete results has resulted from shortcomings among both parties. ”**

The failure of various peace efforts to deliver concrete results has resulted from shortcomings among both parties. The fragmented Patani movements have struggled to rally behind a unified peace strategy. The Thai military has exerted significant influence over national politics amid broader political turmoil within the Thai state. The military has not prioritised peace dialogue and there has been strong resistance to internationalising the process. Both sides have adopted a narrow top-down approach to peace talks, so far neglecting the diversity of Patani people's realities and needs.

However, on 3 April 2020 in the heat of the Covid-19 crisis, the BRN issued a unilateral declaration advising it was ceasing operations, on the proviso that there would no attacks by the Thai military. At the time of writing it is unclear what opportunities will result from this overture.

#### **Peace support by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation**

The SPF has been involved in supporting peace initiatives in southern Thailand since 2010. The fact that the SPF is a private foundation has allowed it significant flexibility in its programming and has made it less prone to shifting political currents. The programmes do not depend on fundraising, which has enabled it to pursue an approach of long-term engagement with key actors in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex and fluctuating situations in Patani. The SPF is therefore involved as a donor as well as an implementing agency, a 'donor-doer'.

The SPF approach prioritises 'accompaniment' at multiple levels with both conflict parties and with society more broadly: functioning as a 'critical friend' to explore and exchange ideas, discuss and analyse political developments, respond to emerging trends, and review cultural and religious sensitivities. Its long-term, ten-year engagement enables the Foundation to understand the local context through the knowledge that the Patani conflict primarily involves clashes between resistance movements comprising hybrid 'villager-fighters', and the Thai military at local level, rather than triggered in accordance with proclaimed higher-level political agenda – for example relating to self-determination. This provides clarity of purpose to SPF's 'bottom-up' focus in linking various segments of society and politics encouraging a more consolidated pro-peace constituency.

#### *SPF approach*

The Foundation has engaged with civil society in southern Thailand and with the conflict parties at multiple levels. Collaborations with Bangkok-based partners, including a Thai think-tank, have sought to promote dialogue and its benefits with the Thai government and military. This has enabled the Foundation to both fund and support backchannel communications for both parties' technical working teams – 'track 1.5' dialogues, particularly during the promising time of the Safety Zones process. Adopting the multi-track diplomacy concept, the support to communication spaces within and between both parties extended to track two and three engagements to help build and consolidate a wider base for peaceful change, involving journalists, lawyers, local politicians, local religious leaders, academics in Bangkok and Patani, civil society and community organisations.

**“ As with so many conflicts, a challenge has been to strengthen legitimate representation in peace talks. ”**

The BRN leadership and decision-making structures are complex and secretive. Thorough dedicated analysis of the characteristics of the BRN is essential to overcome blockages that have undermined previous peace efforts, including over-reliance on a conventional 'top-down' dialogue model. As with so many conflicts, a challenge has been to strengthen legitimate representation in peace talks, as BRN delegates often lack authentic ties to Patani communities or other opposition movements or even other BRN actors. Many BRN leaders in Patani have not been able to attend peace talks due to fear of being arrested

or detained. Attendees may not be directly involved in movements' decision-making or have control over local commanders. This exacerbates divisions among BRN members – especially between those in political asylum in Malaysia and those who remain in Patani.

Civil society and community organisations can play a much wider range of roles in the Patani resistance. BRN members live among the Patani communities and are ideally placed to tap into villagers' needs and perspectives. A diversity of Patani communities including young people, women and those traditionally excluded from such processes are increasingly interested in peace and to see how they could benefit from peace talks and are looking to shape nonviolent solutions. Young people can potentially shift BRN attitudes towards making a clear commitment to peace talks and dialogue.

The SPF has been working with Patani civil society together with local experts and NGOs based in the Southeast Asian region, providing training courses

to enhance communities' skills and capabilities, and facilitating discussions that help provide local communities with space to air their views. This has led to the development of a mechanism for collecting and presenting local people's aspirations to the BRN, serving as a channel to incorporate people's agendas into peace talks.

Looking ahead, finding the right balance of continuity of senior figures from the conflict parties and bringing forward newer faces and perspectives will be important. It is also important to nurture civic space to promote greater diversity of perspectives in discussions and decision-making. Of crucial relevance will also be how effective the international support can best be organised additional to Malaysia as a facilitator. Various entities can play a role providing valuable comparative insights for tracks one and 1.5 and encouraging context-specific confidence- and trust-building initiatives. It is incumbent upon international actors to play to our strengths and support this fragile process with strategic complementarity.