

THE 2013 KUALA LUMPUR TALKS:  
A STEP FORWARD FOR SOUTHERN THAILAND

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In 2013, talks were held in Kuala Lumpur between Thailand's National Security Council (NSC) and representatives of the Malay-Muslim separatist group Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). The unprecedented announcement of this formal "peace dialogue" between the Thai state and an insurgent group led to much scepticism from different parties concerning the motivations of the NSC and the level of influence of the BRN delegation's chief representative, Hassan Taib. This article examines the turbulent ten-month period from the 28 February 2013 declaration in Kuala Lumpur to the 29 December 2013 announcement by General Prayuth Chan-ocha that the military, and not the NSC, would represent Thailand at the next round of talks. It draws attention to the relevance of BRN's communication with both the general public and the NSC, assesses the barriers toward further progress for peace in the region, and evaluates the positive aspects of the talks.

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INTRODUCTION (JUNE 2011 TO FEBRUARY 2013)

On 28 February 2013, the "General Consensus on Peace Dialogue Process" was signed in Kuala Lumpur (KL) by Lt. Gen. Paradorn Pattanatabut of Thailand's National Security Council (NSC), Barisan Revolusi Nasional's (BRN) Ustadz Hassan Taib, and Datuk Mohammed Thajudeen bin Abdul Wahab, Secretary of the National Security Council of Malaysia. The document (written in English) stated, "The government of Thailand has appointed the Secretary-General of the National Security Council (to be

referred to as party A) to head the group supporting favourable environment creation for peace promotion in the Southern Border Provinces of Thailand. We are willing to engage in peace dialogue with people who have different opinions and ideologies from the state (to be referred to as party B) as one of the stakeholders in solving the Southern Border Provinces problem under the framework of the Thai Constitution while Malaysia would act as a facilitator. Safety measures shall be provided to all members of the Joint Working Group throughout the entire process.”<sup>1</sup> This unprecedented declaration, which would previously have been unimaginable, was initially warmly received, though much scepticism surrounded the role of Hassan, a former assistant to Amin Tohmeena and a member of BRN since 1992.<sup>2</sup> Hassan had worked for BRN as a liaison officer with the Malaysian government,<sup>3</sup> but according to many analysts, had never held an important or influential position within BRN.

The Pheu Thai party, elected in the summer of 2011, stressed that one of its aims was to improve the situation in the country’s south, which had already experienced over seven years of conflict. The government discussed changes for the south such as the establishment of a special economic zone, the abolition of the controversial emergency decree, the possibility of elected governors for the three southern provinces, and the possible implementation of a new system of governance for the south. Although many feared the possibility of Prime Minister (PM) Yingluck Shinawatra using her government to arrange for her fugitive brother (and former prime minister) Thaksin Shinawatra to return to Thailand without facing legal proceedings, many also welcomed the new government’s proactive attitude towards the south.

In October 2011, Thawee Sodsong was appointed as the new secretary-general for the Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (SBPAC). Thawee became popular in the south by providing victims of violence with compensation and openly engaging with civil society. He also voiced support for the repeal of the emergency decree. In February 2012, Minister of Justice Pracha Promnok advocated an increase of up to 7.5 million baht (US\$220,000) in compensation for victims of violence in the south.

In March 2012, Thaksin met with insurgent leaders in KL for talks.<sup>4</sup> Thaksin used the talks as an attempt to make amends for his poor handling of the southern crisis from 2004 until he was ousted in a coup in 2006. Thaksin blamed the military for providing him with poor intelligence, yet refused to apologise for lives lost during his time in office. Thaksin also

used the meeting to arrange future peace talks between the SBPAC and NSC (both controlled by Thaksin loyalists), and insurgent representatives based in Malaysia. Multiple bomb attacks in Hat Yai and Yala in late March were widely seen as a response by insurgents who were angered by Thaksin's continued interference in the south.<sup>5</sup> This meeting in KL in March 2012 was the starting point for a process that would culminate in the 28 February 2013 declaration and subsequent meetings between NSC and BRN representatives in 2013.

This paper sets out to analyse the different factors that prevented the KL talks from gaining traction, the numerous shortcomings of the process, and also the three positive developments associated with the talks. An in-depth timeline of events is provided to show how the process developed throughout 2013.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

More than 6,000 people have died in Thailand's "deep South" since January 2004. The region, comprising the provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and eastern Songkhla, was once a Malay-Muslim sultanate that later became a vassal of Siam before being fully incorporated into the state in the early twentieth century;<sup>6</sup> there has been intermittent resistance to Thai rule ever since.<sup>7</sup> In the 1960s, that resistance became more organised and a number of groups fought a guerrilla war against the Thai state until an amnesty was granted in the late 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Some local administrative reforms were also introduced in the 1980s.<sup>9</sup>

A more brutal insurgency surfaced in the early 2000s which became widespread after January 2004.<sup>10</sup> Some minor initiatives have been put forward by successive Thai governments since 2004, yet the southern problem has mainly been treated as a security issue by the Thai military and the royalist political establishment, who are reluctant to introduce any major political reforms concerning autonomy or devolved governance into the kingdom.<sup>11</sup>

Thailand's legal system has also failed the south since 2004. It was reported in May 2013 that of the 907 national security cases prosecuted since the violence in the south became widespread in 2004, only 31 have received a final ruling in the Supreme Court.<sup>12</sup> More than ten years after the deaths of over eighty protestors at a demonstration at Tak Bai (Narathiwat), members of the security forces responsible for the deaths have still not been

prosecuted. Thailand's military chief, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, has also instructed journalists and human rights activists not to remind the Thai public about the incident.<sup>13</sup>

Talks between insurgents (often from the former conflict that effectively ended in 1988) and Thai politicians, military figures, and bureaucrats took place numerous times between 2004 and 2011<sup>14</sup> under various different governments.<sup>15</sup> The most notable of these is the "Geneva process" (2005 to 2011) brokered by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, which involved intermittent talks between the NSC and insurgent representatives. The talks continued until the Pheu Thai government came to power in 2011. The talks mainly involved the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), which is widely seen as the second largest insurgent group operating in the south. PULO played a larger role in the previous conflict that ended in the late 1980s. Ultimately, the talks proved fruitless.<sup>16</sup> Another notable initiative was the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC). The NRC was established under the Thaksin government in 2005 and published a report in 2006 which attempted to explain the causes of violence in the south and also provide recommendations for peace building.<sup>17</sup>

The 2013 KL talks would be different from previous talks as they would be held in public and would have the official backing of the Prime Minister.

#### TIMELINE OF EVENTS: 2013

This section provides a comprehensive timeline of events from February to late December 2013 to show how numerous crises, gaffes, and embarrassing incidents for the Thai government surrounded the meetings and had the effect of undermining the process in general.

##### *February 2013*

The February 28 declaration, which took place on the same day as the annual meeting of both heads of state, immediately came under scrutiny from analysts familiar with the conflict such as Duncan McCargo,<sup>18</sup> Don Pathan,<sup>19</sup> and Murray Hunter.<sup>20</sup> The "General Consensus on Peace Dialogue Process" was a short and vaguely written document and the actual level of authority of Hassan was a matter of much speculation,<sup>21</sup> as was the level of support for the talks from the Thai military, bureaucracy, and the Thai political establishment. Pathan claims that Hassan first met Thaksin at the aforementioned meeting in KL in March 2012.<sup>22</sup>

The declaration was followed by two bombs in Narathiwat town on March 1 as well as forty-one coordinated attacks across Yala on March 4. On March 5, General Paradorn flew to KL to meet Hassan and co-sign an accord endorsing the Malaysia-brokered peace talks that would commence on March 28. The NSC was to work with the Malaysian special branch throughout the talks. A day later, the police chief of Kelantan announced that both governments would be enhancing border security as an increase in attacks was expected over the coming weeks.<sup>23</sup>

### *March 2013*

In early March, Hassan announced that he would try to lower the number of attacks after the beginning of talks on March 28.<sup>24</sup> The first of many embarrassing blunders for the NSC, illustrating the lack of communication between the NSC, the military, and Deputy Prime Minister Chalerm, was over the possibility of autonomy for the south. In mid-March, both General Prayuth and Chalerm publicly stated that they opposed the idea of a special administrative zone for the south, claiming that it would contravene the Thai constitution. These statements were made after General Paradorn announced that he planned to discuss the possibility of a special administrative zone at the March 28 meeting.

Autonomy, or a special administrative zone for the south, had been publicly discussed by SBPAC chief Thawee since late 2011. In an interview with the *Bangkok Post* on March 17, Thawee claimed SBPAC was “considering a proposal to have Islamic deputy governor positions in the three southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani,<sup>25</sup> and Narathiwat.”<sup>26</sup> This proposal also came under much criticism from those opposed to the talks.

Violence continued throughout March with the most widely publicised attack being a bomb in Pattani that killed a young child on the same day as a visit by defence minister Sukumpol.<sup>27</sup> On March 27, in anticipation of the coming meeting in KL, banners were raised in Pattani and Narathiwat demanding *merdeka* (independence) for the south. The erection of banners carrying pro-independence or anti-Thai messages would continue throughout 2013.

At the first round of talks on March 28, the Thai side were represented by General Paradorn, Thawee, military and police figures, religious leaders, leaders of civic groups, and the governors of the three southern provinces.<sup>28</sup> Paradorn stated that the meeting would “focus on building mutual trust and

good relations.”<sup>29</sup> Members of one PULO faction also attended the talks, although BRN officially headed the delegation. Terms of reference were agreed upon and an agreement was made that insurgents would lower the number of attacks on civilians before the next round of talks on April 29. BRN demanded an amnesty for insurgents, the lifting of arrest warrants, the release of prisoners, and the lifting of a blacklist of suspected rebels. The first meeting was widely seen as beneficial for Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak who was running for re-election at that time.

### *April 2013*

The deputy governor of Yala was killed on April 5 when his car was destroyed by a bomb in Yala province. The death led to further criticism from local opposition Democrat party politicians who argued that officials had been targeted more often since the talks had started.<sup>30</sup> More criticism came from former NSC secretary general Thawil Pliensri, who criticised the NSC for publicising the process and for “revealing all its movements prematurely.”<sup>31</sup>

The home of Nujmudeen Uma, a local Malay-Muslim politician and an advisor to Deputy PM Chalerm, came under grenade attack on April 8 and 9 after Nujmudeen had met with local insurgents. On April 12, insurgents attacked a military base near the home of Hassan in Narathiwat. These attacks were seen as attempts by insurgents to send a message to local Malay-Muslims involved in the talks.

After much criticism from the media and opposition politicians, Chalerm finally visited the south on April 11 after a large number of coordinated attacks were carried out by insurgents the day before. More widespread coordinated attacks followed on April 19. Responding to the constant criticism received throughout April from the media, the opposition, and some members of her own party, the Prime Minister argued that the government had “no other choice” but to talk with insurgents and that violence “would endure longer” if there were no talks. In late April, General Prayuth announced that 1,700 police would be deployed in the south to deal specifically with smuggling and drug-trafficking.

On April 26, BRN released a YouTube video featuring Hassan Taib and Abdul Karim Khalib. Khalib, one of the leaders of BRN’s youth wing and widely seen as a hard-liner, had been added to the delegation by BRN before the second meeting.<sup>32</sup> Five demands were outlined in the video: (1) Malaysia’s role should be upgraded from facilitator to mediator; (2) BRN

should be the sole representatives of the "Patani Malayu people" at the talks; (3) the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member-states, and NGOs should be given observer status; (4) all suspects detained for terror attacks should be released and all warrants revoked; (5) BRN should be recognised as a liberation movement. The video came as a shock to the NSC. Abdul Karim's pledge to "continue the fight to get rid of colonial rule and the oppression of the Patani Malays" seemed contradictory to the joint statement made on February 28. Many viewed it as Hassan's "exit strategy" from the talks or a way for him to redeem himself among his BRN comrades who disagreed with the process. The Malaysian special branch came under criticism for not vetting Hassan properly; some accused the branch of forcing him to the table. The video led to further criticism as it was widely viewed that BRN was setting the conditions for the talks and were maintaining an upper-hand over the NSC.<sup>33</sup>

At the second round of talks on April 29, the NSC responded to BRN's demands by giving Hassan one month to prove his level of control over active insurgents by reducing the number of attacks in the region. The NSC rejected the demand for the OIC to have observer status and the demand to upgrade Malaysia's role. Militants in Yala killed an unarmed rubber farmer less than an hour after the ten-hour meeting had finished. The third round of talks was scheduled for June 15.

### *1 May to 15 June 2013*

May began with the brutal slaying of six Buddhist civilians (including a two-year-old child) in Pattani town. All were shot in the head. Days later, leaflets were circulated in Yala claiming that attacks on civilians, including women and children, would continue until the Thai government accepted BRN's demands.<sup>34</sup> In early May, it was reported that Thaksin had visited KL, supposedly to meet religious leaders. The visit was followed by an arson blitz in Pattani and Yala.<sup>35</sup> Veteran analyst Pathan claimed that Thaksin had actually met with Hassan in KL to salvage the peace process, but Pheu Thai party members insisted that Thaksin had only met with religious leaders and not members of BRN.<sup>36</sup>

On May 25, another BRN video was released featuring Abdul Karim and Hassan, who reiterated the five previously stated demands and stated that the conflict in the south stemmed from "Siamese colonial rule." The

video also mentioned killings of Malay-Muslim civilians by Thai security forces.<sup>37</sup>

On May 30, a rumour began to circulate that General Paradorn had been replaced as head of the NSC by his predecessor Thawil.<sup>38</sup> To the embarrassment of the NSC, the confusion continued for a week with Chalerm claiming that he had been appointed by the Prime Minister to head the next meeting, scheduled for June 15. On June 5, it was announced that General Paradorn would again lead the Thai delegation at the third round of talks.

At a meeting with SBPAC director Thawee in early June, imams from Narathiwat Islamic Committee demanded that insurgents refrain from violent activities during the holy month of Ramadan.<sup>39</sup> Although it was reported in *The Nation* and other media outlets that there would be a ceasefire during Ramadan, both sides only agreed to “reduce violence” during the holy month.<sup>40</sup> After the meeting, Hassan announced that the terms and conditions for a violence-free Ramadan would soon be announced<sup>41</sup> and that talks with the Thai government would continue for possibly “two to three years.”<sup>42</sup>

### *15 June 2013 to 10 July 2013*

The third round of talks took place on June 15. They included SBPAC director Thawee and the governor of Pattani. In the days after the third round, Den Tohmena, a well-known Malay-Muslim politician and advisor to Chalerm, voiced scepticism concerning the talks. Tohmena argued that BRN were not really willing to talk and that Hassan was pressured into the talks by the Malaysian government at Thaksin’s request.

On June 19, Hassan gave an interview to a Malay-language radio station in Pattani where he again reiterated the five demands and stated that the Thai government must respect the religion, social life, and the traditions of the Patani Malay people. Hassan told the interviewer that the Patani Malay people must have “freedom” concerning religion, education, and related cultural matters in the South.<sup>43</sup> The results of a Deep South Watch poll published in June stated that 74 percent of respondents expressed support for the peace talks, while 65 percent said they did not accept all of BRN’s five demands.<sup>44</sup>

BRN used another video (released on June 24) to set its conditions for the planned reduction of violence during Ramadan. Seven demands were listed: (1-3) members of the security forces (including members of



paramilitary groups, police, and military) should be withdrawn during this period; (4) Muslim security personnel should be relieved of their duty during Ramadan; (5) no attacks or arrests should be carried out on suspected insurgents by security forces; (6) no social activities related to Ramadan should be organised by the Thai government; (7) the Prime Minister should give her signature to the terms and conditions by July 3. Four provisos followed: (1) parliament should endorse the seven demands; (2) peace talks should be incorporated into the National Agenda; (3) the official status of the delegation should be determined; (4) there should be no secret talks. Hassan threatened not to return to the negotiating table if the demands were not met.<sup>45</sup> The demands were heavily criticised by General Prayuth, Defence Minister Sukumpol, and General Akkanit Muensawas. Commenting on the video, General Akkanit stated, “It’s obvious that this is the way out for Mr. Taib, because he knows he could not order the active militants to stop their operations. That’s why he proposed demands that were impossible to achieve by the Thai government again and again.”<sup>46</sup>

The video was followed by more controversy on June 28 when Chalerm was removed as deputy PM. Chalerm lashed out at SBPAC chief Thawee and publicly blamed him for his dismissal. Chalerm continued to attack Thawee in the media for nearly a week after his dismissal, creating much embarrassment for the Thai government and the SBPAC. On June 29, the Thai military suffered their worst casualty of the year when eight soldiers were killed in a roadside bomb attack in Yala.<sup>47</sup>

On July 9, BRN representatives cancelled a press conference where they were expected to announce a reduction of violence during Ramadan. Reasons were not provided for the cancellation. The military had previously announced that they would “ease up” on operations during the holy month. Most quarters, most notably the OIC, welcomed the proposed “reduction of violence” or “ceasefire.” General Paradorn stated that the two sides would communicate with each other through the Malaysian facilitator within forty-eight hours if any violent incidents were to occur. The peace initiative was undermined from the start by BRN’s cancellation of the July 9 press conference, the overall ambiguity concerning what was actually meant by a “reduction of violence,” and by command and control issues on both sides.

#### *Ramadan: 10 July 2013 to 9 August 2013*

The first day of Ramadan was violence-free, but a bomb attack injured eight

soldiers in Yala on July 11.<sup>48</sup> The next day, the Malaysian facilitator for the talks announced that a “common understanding” had been reached and that the two sides would attempt to reduce violence for forty days. Matthew Wheeler argues that neither BRN nor the government had fully committed themselves to the Ramadan peace initiative and that the original proposal was made by Malaysia. Wheeler also argues that BRN cancelled the July 9 press conference because the Thai side was not showing much enthusiasm about the proposed peace initiative.<sup>49</sup> Anthony Davis, a veteran analyst of Thailand’s south, has described the July 12 “common understanding” as “overly ambitious, dangerously vague and woefully ill-prepared.”<sup>50</sup> The announcement immediately came under criticism from the Working Group on Justice for Peace who noted that the agreement did not carry the BRN emblem. No external monitor was included for the peace initiative.

There were no bomb attacks between July 12 and July 17, yet a number of assassination attempts leading to two deaths were carried out against suspected insurgents in Yala days after the declaration.<sup>51</sup> On July 16, Deputy PM Pracha Promnok announced that there would be a partial withdrawal of troops from the south during Ramadan. On July 17, insurgents carried out two IED attacks.

On July 21, it was reported that BRN had filed a complaint with the Malaysian authorities accusing the Thai military of breaking the ceasefire agreement. The complaint concerned the killing of a man suspected of carrying out a bomb attack a few days before. General Paradorn denied the allegations.<sup>52</sup> Leading members of the opposition demanded that the government respond to BRN’s accusations more fully. Clearly indicating their lack of support for the peace initiative, the military carried out a widely-publicised raid on an insurgent mountain base on July 23, dispelling any notions that the army was going to refrain from raids or searches during the holy month. James Bean has pointed out that neither side had “prepared a detailed implementation plan, nor laid the groundwork for any monitoring of a suspension in military operations.” Further, he argued, Malaysian diplomats were creating friction by putting too much pressure on the BRN delegation.<sup>53</sup>

Anders Engvall and Srisompob Jitpiromsri argue that BRN withdrew from the Ramadan peace initiative because of attacks against BRN members by Thai security forces. BRN alleged that security forces conducted eleven attacks during the beginning of Ramadan. Engvall and Jitpiromsri claim

that because of the NSC's failure to take responsibility for the attacks and the inability of the Malaysian facilitator to investigate BRN's claims, the group withdrew from the ceasefire and then engaged in a major wave of violence across the south.<sup>54</sup>

Although BRN openly stated that they were holding to the principles of the peace initiative, many observers assumed that they were in practice undermining it in order to embarrass the Thai government. From late July onwards, the south experienced a brutal wave of bombing and arson attacks. July 31 to August 7 saw a total of thirty-five IED attacks, compared to an average of only twenty-four IED attacks per month during the first half of 2013.<sup>55</sup> Although these attacks were mainly focused on military vehicles and patrols, such a large number of IED attacks in such a short space of time was unprecedented. Against Engvall and Jitpiromsri, Davis argues that these attacks must have been prepared well before Ramadan,<sup>56</sup> for they could not all have been prepared at such short notice. Arson attacks on Thai-Buddhist and Sino-Thai businesses in early August created estimated damages of over one hundred million Thai baht.<sup>57</sup> On August 5, Imam Jakob, a well-known Muslim cleric, was assassinated by insurgents in Pattani town. Despite the wave of violence and rumours that Hassan would be replaced,<sup>58</sup> General Paradorn announced on August 5 that the talks would continue.

Another video released on August 6 featured armed men who announced that BRN had cancelled the reduction in violent attacks during Ramadan because the Thai state had not accepted BRN's previously stated demands. On August 7, Hassan sent a letter to the Thai government accusing it of not providing adequate protection for Muslims during the holy month. Hassan also stated that the next round of talks would be delayed until the Thai government responded to BRN's five demands. To add to the tension, Hassan claimed that BRN were not behind the May 1 massacre in Pattani, the August 1 arson attacks, or the killing of Imam Jakob.<sup>59</sup> Anti-government demonstrations incited by the government's proposed amnesty bill and the numerous scandals surrounding the Pheu-Thai party began in Bangkok in early August. The demonstrations would ultimately turn violent and lead to the downfall of the Yingluck government.

### *9 August 2013 to 10 October 2013*

Discussion concerning BRN's demands continued after Ramadan with General Prayuth declaring in mid-August that autonomy for the south was

not up for discussion.<sup>60</sup> General Paradorn told the press two weeks later that autonomy was the long term plan for the south, although barriers were in the way.<sup>61</sup> On August 14, Malaysia confirmed that Hassan would represent BRN at the next round of talks scheduled for mid-September, although Hassan had previously stated that there would not be another round of talks until the NSC had responded to BRN's demands.<sup>62</sup> On August 27, General Paradorn announced that the NSC had asked BRN for written clarification of their demands and details of what BRN would offer if their demands were met.

In early September, it was announced that Thailand had received a document of more than thirty pages outlining BRN's demands. General Paradorn also announced that the next round of talks would take place during the third week of October and not mid-September as previously announced. The general also stated his desire to discuss the five BRN demands with the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), the Thai Foreign Ministry, the Council of State, and the SBPAC.<sup>63</sup>

On October 1, General Paradorn announced that other groups had contacted the NSC with the aim of joining the next round of talks. Paradorn had discussed the possibility of involving other groups since April without providing details of the groups in question. Some analysts viewed these announcements as empty threats made to put pressure on BRN.<sup>64</sup> Further controversy arose when General Akanit alleged that the "BRN document" received by the NSC in early September was actually written by the Malaysian facilitator. He also stated that the SBPAC had recently met with PULO in Sweden.<sup>65</sup>

Another wave of arson and bomb attacks spread across the four southern provinces on October 8 and 9, two weeks before the scheduled fourth round of talks. On October 10, the NSC and the military, citing the latest spike in violence, announced that the next round would be postponed.<sup>66</sup>

### *10 October 2013 to 29 December 2013*

On October 19, the NSC asked BRN to reveal the identities of the cells which were responsible for the violence since the talks began in March. Colonel Jaroon Ampham announced that BRN would have to explain why the Ramadan truce was broken before talks could continue. He added that the Thai authorities and security agencies would decide after October 25 whether or not the fourth round of talks could be held. On October 25,

General Paradorn issued a letter stating that the NSC would need more time to discuss the demands.

On November 7, it was announced that Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani (BIPP) would officially join the next round of talks. On November 14, General Paradorn told the press that the next round of talks would take place at the start of December and that PULO and BIPP would each be given two seats at the negotiating table. Paradorn also stated that the NSC had not accepted BRN's demand for "a special administration area" for the south.

On November 26, Don Pathan reported that BIPP members who were to attend the December talks were told by their leadership to leave the organisation if they wanted to participate in the talks. Respected former insurgent leader Wan Kadir Che Man told the Thai Journalists Association on November 28 that the Thai state was talking to people without any power and that the Malaysian special branch was pressuring BRN representatives into attending the talks.<sup>67</sup> Rumours began to circulate that the military were using Wan Kadir to discredit the talks.<sup>68</sup>

On December 1, Hassan published a short video on YouTube introducing himself as one "formerly of the BRN delegation." Hassan stated two demands: (1) The talks would continue only after the five preliminary demands were approved and carried out completely by the Siamese national parliament; and (2) the peace talks must be made part of the national agenda and announced directly by the Siamese prime minister. Many analysts assumed that Hassan was using the distraction caused by mounting anti-government protests in Bangkok at the time as an opportunity to leave the talks.

On December 29, General Prayuth announced that the military would lead the next round of peace talks and not the NSC. Hassan's resignation and this announcement spelled the end of the KL talks. By early 2014, discussion surrounding the talks faded as the Yingluck government and the NSC became preoccupied with larger anti-government protests in Bangkok and the threat of a military coup.<sup>69</sup> In early March 2014, General Paradorn was replaced as president of the NSC by his predecessor and Democrat party politician Thawil.

## BARRIERS AND SHORTCOMINGS OF THE KUALA LUMPUR TALKS

This section analyses the different barriers and shortcomings of the peace talks that prevented the process from gaining momentum.

### *Military and Democrat Opposition*

Both the military and the Democrat party were vocal in their opposition to the talks from early March onwards.<sup>70</sup> As previously discussed by this author, opposition from the military, the bureaucracy, or the royalist establishment has been a constant barrier toward developing some kind of substantial peace process for the south since 2004.<sup>71</sup> Both Pathan and McCargo have drawn attention to the rivalry between the military, elected politicians, and conservative bureaucrats and how this rivalry has undermined initiatives working towards peace for the south. McCargo argues that representation is a contested issue: “There is intense distrust between elected politicians and competing bureaucratic entities; any dialogue process ‘owned’ by one partner is likely to be quietly disowned by the others.”<sup>72</sup> Referring to the 2008 Bogor talks, Pathan claims that “the talks were kept a secret from the Thai foreign ministry and the Thai embassy in Indonesia. The talks were undermined by certain elements of the Thai government and military.”<sup>73</sup> He also argues that the talks between the Abhisit government and Kasturi Mahkota were undermined by certain government agencies.<sup>74</sup>

If a government is to maintain a stable and fruitful peace process with a separatist organisation, then potential spoilers must be kept in check, whether they are elements within the military or factions within the state bureaucracy.<sup>75</sup> Taking into account Thailand’s deeply divided political landscape, such problems are currently unavoidable.<sup>76</sup> Thailand has become increasingly more divided since the turn of the century with the Thai police and the majority of the working class population loyal to Thaksin and his clique, while the military, the judiciary, and those connected to the monarchy are allied to the Democrat party. Political factions that are not in power tend to undermine the projects of their political rivals.

### *Internal Conflicts within Pheu Thai*

Opposition to the talks also came from within the Pheu Thai party. Former deputy PM Chalerm constantly undermined the talks throughout 2013. From March until his dismissal in June, Chalerm openly undermined and

criticised General Paradorn, Thawee, and the Thai delegation. According to former NSC chief Thawil, the constant public controversy and the visible lack of unity within Pheu Thai undermined the confidence of the Thai delegation and undermined the talks in general.<sup>77</sup>

### *Division within BRN*

Division within BRN concerning the talks was obvious, as was the organisation's general lack of commitment toward the talks. It is clear that BRN's main council, the DPP (Dewan Penilian Party), was not involved in the formation of the talks and that Hassan had a very minor role in the organisation before 2013. Hassan was chosen by the Malaysian side as he had previously worked as a liaison with Malaysian special branch for BRN. He was seen as trustworthy and received the approval of *de facto* Pheu Thai leader Thaksin, the driving force behind the talks.<sup>78</sup> It was announced in late February that two high-ranking BRN members would appear at the signing of the February 28 declaration, yet Hassan was chosen as ultimately no high-ranking members agreed to participate.

Davis argues that it is irrelevant whether Hassan had influence or not, for his role was that of a "mouthpiece," and Abdul Karim was "drafted into the process to exert a measure of supervision and control" over Hassan. Davis also argues that the YouTube videos were used to "assure troops and supporters on the ground that a political sell-out in the air-conditioned comfort of a Kuala Lumpur hotel was not on the cards."<sup>79</sup> Further, BRN's delivery of maximalist demands in April and before Ramadan show that they were not interested in building confidence, but in testing the Thai government to see what was on offer. Pathan argues that the April 28 video was used to test how dedicated to the talks the Thai government were.<sup>80</sup> The release of the videos with their extravagant demands undermined confidence in the sincerity of the BRN delegation.

The continuing violence throughout 2013 also undermined the credibility of the talks. Pathan argues that many BRN members opposed the talks because (1) members of the delegation were not provided with diplomatic immunity, (2) they attended the talks due to fear of deportation, (3) BRN was not recognised as a legitimate organisation representing the Patani Malay people, and (4) there was an overall lack of trust in the Thai government due to Thaksin's past involvement in the region.<sup>81</sup> Student groups and the Ulema council of Fatoni also opposed the talks, as both groups were

suspicious of the Yingluck government's motives.<sup>82</sup>

An NSC official interviewed by this author claimed that the bombings carried out in March and April were carried out by youth groups under the command of Abdul Karim. If this is true, it means that the talks were being undermined from within.<sup>83</sup> He also claimed that BRN's youth wing opposed having talks in 2013 as they would interfere with their plan to push Thai-Buddhists and Sino-Thais out of the region.<sup>84</sup> In his view, neither the military nor BRN were enthusiastic about the talks, but both sides were willing to see what the other had on offer. Overall, it is clear that BRN fighters on the ground and the organisation's top council are not at this stage genuinely interested in substantial peace talks that would lead to some form of resolution to the conflict.

### *Lack of Experience and Strategy*

General Paradorn's lack of experience, his team's lack of any discernible strategy, and his obsession with public relations constantly created embarrassment and confusion during the talks. Paradorn's numerous blunders often made the process look like a fiasco. In March, he also made the mistake of trying to appease BRN by agreeing to cancel some arrest warrants and agreeing to the removal of the emergency decree in certain districts. The other side did not reciprocate his overtures. As McCargo argues, the NSC entered into the process without any plan, so BRN had room to set the agenda for the meetings.<sup>85</sup> Pathan labelled the Thai delegation "Team Thaksin" as the delegation was made up of Thaksin-loyalists or individuals chosen for their loyalty instead of their experience and ability, although such a selection is understandable considering how deeply polarised the Thai political establishment currently is.

### *Malaysian Pressure*

Although Malaysia's involvement in the south has become more constructive since the 1980s, the involvement of Malaysian special branch and the Malaysian facilitator came under criticism during the KL talks. Pathan argues that BRN's basic requirements for engaging in talks—immunity from Thai prosecution and assurance that they would not be deported—were not fulfilled. Further, BRN depends upon Malaysian hospitality and deportation has been used as a threat to coerce the BRN delegation into speaking with the Thai state.<sup>86</sup> Throughout his coverage of the KL process, Pathan



argued that the KL talks were simply part of an overall campaign to clear the air (concerning Thaksin's mismanagement of the south during his time as Prime Minister) before bringing the fugitive ex-Prime Minister home in 2014 or 2015. Also, insurgents maintain a general distrust toward Malaysia as Malaysian authorities handed over two leading members of PULO to the Thai authorities in the late 1990s. Both PULO members are still in prison.

Due to BRN's and PULO's distrust of Malaysia and Malaysia's historical role in the south, this author would argue that Malaysia is not the most suitable facilitator for peace talks between Thailand and Malay-Muslim separatists. The Malaysian government must play some role in whatever solution emerges to the southern conflict, but it does not qualify as a neutral third party for negotiations between the two sides.

### *Division within PULO*

Since the death of Tonku Bira in 2008, PULO has splintered into three different factions with three different leaders.<sup>87</sup> Members of one faction were involved in the KL talks from the beginning, yet the NSC waited until after Ramadan (when it was uncertain whether there would be another round of talks) to persuade the other two factions to join. In late 2013, all three PULO factions agreed to join future talks. Analysts and authorities widely see PULO as the second largest insurgent group in the south.<sup>88</sup> It would be essential that in future peace talks all major insurgent groups operating in the south be involved.

## POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE KUALA LUMPUR TALKS

Although the talks were deeply flawed and in many ways doomed to fail from the beginning, there were three positive and very significant differences to the KL talks when compared to previous initiatives. As previously discussed by this author,<sup>89</sup> the two major barriers toward progress in the region since 2004 have been the inflexibility of the Thai political elite and BRN's policy of silence. Additionally, the ambiguous and sometimes unsupportive role of Malaysia has, in the past, added further complications.<sup>90</sup> The KL talks mark a small but significant step forward concerning these issues.

### *Thai Government's Willingness to Talk*

The Yingluck government's willingness to officially and publically engage with BRN or "people who have different opinions or ideologies from the

state” was unprecedented and a marked departure from the approach taken by previous governments. The KL talks included academics, representatives from civic and women’s groups, religious leaders, and representatives from both ISOC and the Thai border police. The talks were useful as both sides were able to learn each other’s limits and learn how far apart their respective positions were. The hype surrounding the talks, created by the NSC’s mishandling of the Thai media, led to unrealistic expectations as to what the talks could or might achieve.

The Pheu Thai party has shown itself to be more dedicated to making progress on the south than the Democrat party, even though the south is traditionally a strong support base for the latter. Thaksin’s party is willing to offer concessions and discuss new possibilities for the south, while his political rivals maintain an inflexible attitude toward the conflict, have not put forward creative solutions, and have the naive belief that the conflict can be won by traditional military means. Although Thaksin’s government was widely blamed for exacerbating tensions in the south during the early years of the conflict (2004 to 2006), Pheu Thai has made new ground since late 2011 by dealing with the southern issue in a proactive and constructive manner.<sup>91</sup> Thaksin has proven himself to be a risk-taker and a rule-breaker throughout his political career. As it has in other parts of the country, Pheu Thai offers some possibility for change, while the Democrat party maintains a conservative and outmoded party line that offers little to the south.

Numerous smaller, less publicised initiatives were either announced or implemented during 2013. In 2013, the Anti-Money Laundering Office (AMLO) stepped up its efforts against insurgents. Insurgent groups and related organisations receive billions of baht in donations from supporters every year.<sup>92</sup> In early 2013, AMLO fined a financial institution that allowed insurgents to make financial transactions one million baht.<sup>93</sup> On May 27, General Prayuth announced that a security fence would be built along the border with Malaysia sometime in the near future.<sup>94</sup> Defence Minister Sukumpol Suwanatat supported the proposal.<sup>95</sup> In September, the Malaysian government made a similar suggestion, although when construction would begin was not clarified. A new centre specialising in forensics and explosives was set up in Yala city in late 2013 and it was announced that other districts would have their own centres for dealing with explosives in the near future.<sup>96</sup> In October, the SBPAC made it easier for Islamic charities based in the south to receive donations.<sup>97</sup> Throughout 2013, the SBPAC continued its policy of

providing victims of violence and their families with financial assistance; by year's end the SBPAC had provided more than 97 million baht in financial assistance.

In December 2013, it was announced that the investigation into the 2004 disappearance and death of Somchai Neelapaijit, a prominent human rights lawyer for Malay-Muslims, would be resumed.<sup>98</sup> The earlier investigation had long been hampered by both police and bureaucrats.<sup>99</sup>

### *BRN Communication*

After nearly ten years of silence, BRN have started to communicate with the Thai government and the population of the border provinces. The meetings in KL, the YouTube videos, Hassan's interview on a Pattani radio station in June, and the September document have all helped to create a greater understanding of the movement, its aims, and its ideology.

YouTube videos. Between April and December, BRN videos released on YouTube featured Hassan Taib, Abdul Karim Khalib, Adam Haji Mohammed Noor, and (in early August) a group of armed and masked men. The purpose of the videos was seemingly to state demands, express grievances, and to communicate with fighters on the ground, the Thai government, and the local population. They are significant as the most in-depth and sophisticated form of communication used by BRN since 2004. Previously, BRN's communications had been limited to banners, leaflets, and graffiti.

BRN used the videos to outline their demands before the April 28 talks and also before Ramadan. The videos are also significant because some of the statements made offer insight into how members of BRN view the conflict and how they view the region's history. In the first video,<sup>100</sup> released on April 26, Hassan claims that justice would be provided for the Thai, Malay, and ethnic Chinese communities after the formation of an independent state. In the same video, Abdul Karim argues that if one wants to understand the current violence in the south, then one must understand the history of Patani since the 1780s, referring to the defeat of the Patani sultanate by Siam, the decline of the once-powerful local economy, the abolition of the sultanate,<sup>101</sup> and the subsequent campaign of integration or "Thaification" by the Thai state.<sup>102</sup>

In the second video,<sup>103</sup> released on April 29, Adam Noor describes the insurgency as the awakening of the people after hundreds of years of

oppression. He draws attention to the decline in use of the Malay language and attempts by the Thai state to assimilate the people through education. Noor describes BRN as the defender of the rights and interests of the Patani Malay people. In another video, Abdul Karim accuses the Thai state of numerous killings that had been blamed on BRN, including the killings of *Ustadz* (Islamic school teachers). Like Noor and Taib, he argues that Siamese imperialism is the root cause of the conflict in the south. The video released<sup>104</sup> on August 6 after the breakdown of the Ramadan peace initiative, which featured masked and armed men, was used to blame the Thai government for the failure of the Ramadan peace initiative. The final video,<sup>105</sup> released on December 1, was Hassan's way of confirming his resignation as head of the BRN delegation. In this video, Hassan states that achieving *merdeka* is the only way of securing peace and prosperity for the Patani Malay people.

The September Document. In August 2013, General Paradorn requested that BRN deliver their demands in written form for the NSC to consider. In early September, the Malaysian facilitator gave a document to the NSC. Much scepticism surrounded the document and its authors. It is unclear whether it was written by BRN representatives, the Malaysian facilitator, or by both parties together. It is also unclear whether BRN's high command would support the offers the delegation put forward in the document in the event that the Thai government fulfilled BRN's five demands. On October 4, General Akkanit was quoted as saying that the document outlining BRN's demands was actually written by Malaysian authorities rather than BRN. General Paradorn responded by saying that the document had been translated into English from Malay by Malaysian authorities before being submitted to the Thai delegation.<sup>106</sup>

The document elaborates on all five of the demands and provides an in-depth plan or "schedule of cooperation" for BRN to lay down their arms gradually. The document claims that by agreeing to the five demands, the Thai government would set the stage for upgrading the peace dialogue to peace negotiations that would eventually lead to a ceasefire and then ultimately a peace agreement. The document outlines a step-by-step process where BRN would gradually downscale their campaign of violence in return for the Thai government agreeing to their five demands incrementally. The document also demands Thai recognition of the historical right of the Patani Malay people to rule their own land. Notably, all five demands are supported

with reference to the 2007 Thai constitution. In response to the document, General Paradorn stated, “I don’t think the demands are in breach of the constitution, but a thorough study of the legal implications is still needed.”<sup>107</sup> General Prayuth, meanwhile, argued that people in the south did not want a new administrative area and that there was “no indication that the army were on the wrong track.”<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, the document requested that during peace talks, BRN members be provided with immunity from legal proceedings, that their personal security be guaranteed, that they be given freedom of movement, and that arrest warrants for other BRN members be dropped. This represented a new and more detailed level of communication by BRN.

### *Malaysian Participation*

Malaysia has been criticised in the past for not doing enough to stop insurgents from smuggling weapons across the border into the south and also for allowing insurgents to train and fundraise in Kelantan state. Although some accused the Malaysian government of using the talks to create publicity before the May 2013 Malaysian general election, the Malaysian government had a strong desire to resolve the southern issue before the ASEAN economic community would convene in 2015.<sup>109</sup> The Malaysian special branch also cooperated with the NSC throughout the talks. McCargo notes how a member of the Malaysian delegation visited exiled rebel leaders in Indonesia and approached members of PULO to play a greater role in the talks after the failure of the Ramadan peace initiative.<sup>110</sup>

Both security forces and insurgents suffered high losses in 2013. Ninety-three soldiers were killed compared to thirty-nine in 2012. Fifty-three insurgents and one hundred and thirty-two civilians were also killed in 2013. If this tragic trend were to continue, such high losses for both the military and BRN could motivate both sides to be more supportive of talks in the future.<sup>111</sup> The growing cost of the southern insurgency to the Thai state may also have influenced the Pheu-Thai government’s choice to engage with insurgents in the south. Matthew Wheeler points out that the Thai government has spent more than US\$6 billion on security for the south since 2004.<sup>112</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although ultimately a disappointment, we should note that the talks were held without a neutral third-party negotiator and that the delegates on both sides were either inexperienced or not suitable for their positions. The talks were undermined by the same factors that had undermined previous talks: division on all sides, political and bureaucratic rivalry, and incessant attacks by insurgents. An SBPAC official interviewed by this author in July 2013 stated, "Talks are a good start. The SBPAC support the talks, but not all government departments are supportive. Mr. Thawee would like to continue talks for years to come. Talks are better than none at all, whether there is violence or not."<sup>113</sup> Pathan argues that Thaksin's original plan was that once the talks had begun in 2013, they would eventually gather momentum and attract more prominent insurgent figures to the table.<sup>114</sup> Although such a development did not emerge, Abdul Karim Khalib joined the talks. An NSC official interviewed by this author in April 2013 claimed that Khalib is significantly higher ranking within BRN than Hassan or Adam Noor and maintains control over numerous active cells in the south.<sup>115</sup>

Entering into the talks at the beginning of 2013, both sides were inexperienced and unprepared. It is best to view the KL talks as a learning curve; both sides now have a better understanding of each other's positions and limitations. It is also apparent that the Yingluck government was open to enhancing its understanding of the south by learning from other conflicts. SBPAC officials went on a fact-finding mission to Northern Ireland in September 2013<sup>116</sup> and top NSC officials attended meetings with the Pakistani military in August 2013.<sup>117</sup>

Both General Paradorn and SBPAC chief Thawee have openly stated that granting some form of autonomy to the region is the long term solution to the southern issue. Unfortunately, there is much opposition to this, especially from the kingdom's royalist establishment. Thailand will have to evolve as a democratic state with a more open and inclusive ideology before any major changes take place in the south. The May 2014 military coup has been another setback for Thailand's democratic development. Undoubtedly, Thailand's dysfunctional political system and the endless cycle of coups and elections fail to inspire confidence in Malay-Muslims.

At a conference organised by the military in late 2013, former insurgent leader Wan Kadir accused Thai politicians of being insincere and only interested in using peace talks to advance their own careers.<sup>118</sup> In an interview

with this author, Wan Kadir argued that “the militants have the upper hand and whatever the Thai state can offer right now is not good enough for the militants or for the majority of the people in the south.”<sup>119</sup> Politically, there is very little on offer for BRN or for the Malay-Muslim population in general.

Overall, the February 28 agreement shows that a democratically-elected Thai government is open to ending the conflict through some form of an agreement, although the moment is not yet ripe for negotiations due to BRN’s tactical advantage and the absence of what William Zartmann calls a “mutually hurting stalemate.”<sup>120</sup> BRN is able to attack and kill Thai security forces and civilians at will while the security forces rarely arrest or kill the insurgents in action.<sup>121</sup>

The conflict in southern Thailand has entered a new phase, one where a Thai government is willing or able to engage with “people who have different opinions and ideologies from the state” and where members of BRN are willing to communicate with the public and the Thai government. The claim that the talks were part of a campaign to clear Thaksin’s name may be true or partially true, but more relevant is the fact that BRN is no longer maintaining a policy of silence and a Thai government has demonstrated some determination to make progress with the southern issue. Although it may take more than another decade to find a lasting solution to the status of the three southern provinces that is acceptable to all parties, the KL talks have been a small but important step in this direction.

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