

# Thailand and the politics of wording in the Deep South

Sunday 8 January 2017, by [PANJOR Romadon](#) (Date first published: 3 November 2016).

**Romadon Panjor, editor of the *Deep South Watch* website, presented his Master's Degree thesis at the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, on how the Thai state has created a large number of terms over the past 12 years' of violence in the Deep South that obfuscate the political intentions of the Patani liberation movement and deters international intervention. On the other hand, the insurgency has also created terms that Thais have never heard before and that challenge the mainstream Thai discourse.**

Romadon Panjor, editor of the *Deep South Watch* website, presented his Master's Degree thesis at the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University on 12 July 2016, with Chaiwat Satha-Anand as his advisor, Kasian Tejapira as the examination chairman, and Chantana Wungaeo as the external director. Romadon's thesis, titled "Politics of Words in Pa(t)tani: Constructing 'Peace' in Ethnopolitical Conflict" will be published by the Thammasat University Press in an effort to reach the general public.

## **Thaweeporn Kummetha - Why are there so many terms about the conflict in the Deep South, or Patani?**

Romadon Panjor - The basic nature of political ethnic conflict includes some terms which people view differently, especially terms relating to local political identity and people.

When we consider the conflict over the right to determine one's own fate, we have to consider three things: 1) terms that give meaning to people and who they are; 2) the land and its location and boundaries, what is covers and what the land is called; and 3) the demonstration effect, which follows from seeing examples, for instance if this land gains independence, questions will be asked elsewhere and it will be seen as an example, as an inspiration for movements elsewhere.

The reasons related to rights of self-determination that the insurgency tends to cite are in conflict with the state's ideology of territorial integration, or the ideology that the country is unitary and indivisible, as the state claims. Both principles which the two sides give as reasons are accounts of the past with different discourses. Professor Thongchai Winichakul calls this "dangerous history," and finds that conflict like this in Southeast Asia tends toward this pattern. That is, there is one official state history which is usually centred on the capital, talks of being a great nation with a common enemy. This history differs from, and hides the history of the discourse of minority groups and tries to suppress it. These attempts at suppression turn out to make the history or narrative of minorities even more powerful to those people, giving them a sense of legacy and identity that differs from the mainstream version. It can even give force to political movements, or go further and have a role in generating struggle using great strength.

Thongchai proposed that when there are conflicting histories or narratives like this, the solution is to "open up" both sides of the story, not suppressing one or the other. Minorities' nationalist history

must be brought to light, demystifying it. Of course, this solution may disturb the mainstream discourse, but ultimately reduces danger in that it gives people the choice to choose which one to believe.

The area that I have studied is popularly called the “Three Southern Border Provinces.” This is really an official term which has only recently been used. The name for this land has constantly changed. During Rama V’s reign, it was called “Monthon (Region) Pattani,” when “Pattani” was thought to have become serious for the first time. The next name was “Pattani Province,” during the time when the provinces were first being established. Then at times the group of provinces in that area were called the “four Southern Provinces” (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun). After that people used the term “Southern Border Provinces” covering five provinces (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Songkhla, and Satun). The fact is that, Pattani does not adjoin the border at any point. Sometimes, this term refers to only four provinces (all of the above except Satun). At present, the official term is “Southern Border Provinces,” which is referred to in law (the Southern Border Provinces Administration Act) covering 5 provinces. But in terms of security operations, this is limited just to three provinces and four districts of Songkhla. As you can see, the meaning of the area is continually changing.

From the insurgency movement’s perspective, however, they use the Malay term “Patani” to refer to this area, and also use the Arabic term “Fatoni”, which has different political and cultural connotations that describe a politically independent entity with a narrative of its origins and individuality not dependent on a centre in Bangkok.

This problem of terminology can be clearly seen in the conflicting views of the negotiating teams of the Thai state and MARA Patani over the Terms of Reference at Kuala Lumpur. Apart from other important issues, the use of “Patani” was a big problem, because while the official Thai side has to refer to the area by the official term of “Southern Border Provinces,” MARA Patani insists on “Patani.” This matter is related to calling them “Party B” or the movement at the negotiating table, because Thai state prefers to use a term in their policy documents like “people with different views from the state” (PDVS). But MARA Patani requires to be called by their official organization name, “Patani Consultative Council” (PCC).

In fact, the issue of names to call things is serious not just for the negotiation table, but also in fieldwork. Some officials find it really hard to accept the term “Patani,” even if it’s factually correct. Some military officials have told me that when they have to write situation reports on progress in the peace negotiations, they purposely write the wrong name of the organization “Mara Pattani” because for them, accepting the use of “Patani” is tantamount to dividing the territory by implication, even though these reports go only to the reader.

There are many kinds of expression referring to people but in many you see tensions relating to political identity attached to ethnicity. Lately, we find there are angles which are related to this territory, for example, calling Thai Muslims as different from Malay Muslims. The Thai state seems to accept a religious difference rather than allow ethnic characteristics to be the outstanding difference from being Thai. So being a Thai citizen that adheres to the Muslim religion is seen to create less of a problem than accepting the way of life of the Malay. Yet it is exactly this reason that creates the ever powerful consciousness of being Malay. Attempts to establish oneself as “Patanian” have appeared just recently. This is certain to severely disrupt the Thai state’s attempts to give a meaning to this people and territory.

Another term that has undergone very great changes refer to the armed movement or all fighting forces. In the early years of the new wave of violence which we can say began in earnest in 2004 during the Thaksin administration, Thai officials addressed the problem of violence that burst out in

a very confusing way. Assessments of the situation were based on an ideological framework of international terrorism, and interpreted the events in the region as related to terrorist organizations. Terms relating to terrorism clearly appear in policy documents from that period.

Later, when clearer information surfaced, Thai officials began to understand better that what they were facing was an armed group in the midst of adjusting and developing towards the goal of destroying state power and splitting off the contested land to create a free state. It has more local characteristics than those of an international movement. The basic ideological framework that was influential at the time was to deal with the insurgency using counterinsurgency (COIN) methods. The term used to call the opposition party was consistently changed to “insurgents”.

After the coup in 2006, the assessment of official Thai agencies had a consensus among various security units that the armed insurgents causing unrest in the area actually had the goal of seceding. But not long after that, the international political and legal analysis, pushed by experts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, advised caution when using terms to label the situation and the opposition, because the situation risked be raised into an international issue, The consequences may lead to something undesirable for the Thai state, i.e. intervention from the international community.

Around 2009, strategy circles of Thai government agencies determined that the terms used to refer to this situation may create complexities. Even using the term “terrorism” may attract world superpowers and opponents like international terrorist organizations to get involved. While admitting that the situation was one of “unrest”, they would call the other side “groups causing unrest,” which may define the situation as one of “armed conflict.” Then, according to international legal frameworks, the opposite party will be elevated to a political status of “Party to Conflict.”

The influential proposal of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which later became the control point for the Thai side for many years was just to avoid directly admitting that the opposition party was an established organization of any sort, with a clear structure or chain-of-command, and without any code of conduct about the use of force or capability to engage troops against government forces. For this reason, the Thai state is reluctant to affirm or accept the existence of the BRN. Ever since then, terms used to refer to the armed opposition to the state clearly changed at the end of 2009 from “insurgents” to “perpetrators of violence.” With these changes in terminology, the political meaning of military action by the BRN forces has been obscured and diminished.

The creation of these terms comes from serious reflection. The point is not just to get the spelling right but to spell out meanings to block opportunities so that the situation that the Thai state was facing did not open way for foreign intervention, but at the same time give more justification for the use of special laws in the area. One minor contradiction is that both the Thai state and the BRN see a procedural advantage in hiding behind these terms. I have already stated the reason why the Thai side wants to do this. But the BRN see secrecy is an important strategy in their continuing fight.

The next turning point for change came after the “peace talks” which the public learned about. The dynamics of the terms related to finding a solution to the conflict were interesting. This change in specifying terms is related to attempts on the Thai state’s part to specify the Thai government’s understanding of the armed groups. During the Yingluck era and before, official Thai policy documents stated that the solution that was being negotiated was “peace.” But under Prayut, this was changed to orders to rename the negotiation as for “happiness,” which is a word whose meaning was defined according to the needs of the state, because from the perspective of the security forces, the word “peace” is an international issue and the meaning is too universal. The use of this word was assumed to risk attracting the attention of the international community and created concern that the direction of the peace talks could not be controlled. It was believed that changing to “happiness”

makes it unrelated to a situation of war or armed conflict and frames the issue so that it is seen as a domestic one as far as possible.

In short, this thesis wants to affirm that terms that seem to be harmless in fact are not. Terms are created to regulate people's opinions toward the conflict, and have an effect on the direction in resolving the conflict. Terms are used to hide some things and are chosen to communicate others. The appearance and disappearance of some terms demonstrate the confrontation between both parties' attempts to create legitimacy and justifications for themselves.

### **What impact has the peace process had on the invention of these terms?**

Firstly, the peace process prompts the movement to begin releasing official statements for us to study, and created a clash between the terms of each side and negotiations over the different meanings. We can look at the conflict by examining it in a way we have not been able to do for almost ten years.

The BRN's first official press releases defined who they are, and who they are not. The BRN repeatedly affirmed that they are a liberation group, not terrorists and not even separatists, because the land that they say is theirs was their originally. It is not necessary to secede from anyone. The terms that are a problem when crossing the language barrier from Malay to appear in Thai have never before been a matter of debate as now. Look at "Penjajah Siam" or Siamese Colonialists (according to the translation by Hara Shintaro), which shocks Thais, because it challenges the old belief that Siam has never colonised anyone so how can they be colonialists. The word colony in the political vocabulary of Thai society is part of the narrative of Siam as the target of Western powers. The meaning that the BRN is proposing is completely unthought of, since it goes against current mainstream history. This word is also related to another important word "Hak Pertuanan," which is translated as "owner's rights." Previously, this term did not exist in Thai.

Now at the negotiation table, there has to be a draft agreement on terms of reference and they have to use different terms to refer to the land, people, armed groups, and the conflict, where each side wants to use its own words. So you want to find words that both parties can easily be satisfied with. While this kind of conflict over terms is more apparent in public spaces, reaching more substantial agreements on the next steps in the peace process will require some degree of resolution in regards to meanings, whether talking about de-escalation of violence or future distribution of powers.

### **Does the general public have any opportunity to be involved in the creation of these terms?**

Before 2013, the issue of terminology was not this much of a problem. Once the peace talks started, these terms became a social issue. What will we call this place? How will we build our future? People feel that the words that relate to our future are an issue of debate in the villages, not just at the negotiation table. What is clear to see is that some youth groups are trying to campaign to create new political identities for people in the area. They champion the idea of "Satu Patani," or "United Patani", which is quite remarkable, because they need to establish that "Patani-ness" has a place in public. The political actions of many groups are interesting. For example, Thai Buddhists are trying to go beyond the dilemma of the meanings "peace" and "happiness" by using the term "healthy peace." The LEMPAR group, for example, has even coined a new term, "dharmic peace."

### **Where did the term "southern bandits," which the newspapers like to use, come from and how does it affect the problems in the south?**

In 1963, official Thai sources used the expression "insurgency movement" and in 1972 changed it to "terrorist bandit movement," which older people will be used to by its abbreviation "*cho ko ko*" (in

Thai). Then in 1994 it was shortened to “terrorist bandits” or “*cho ko ro*”, cutting off the word “movement” and adding the word “bandit”. This clearly diminishes the negotiating power as a political group, while at the same time adding illegality, in anticipation of instead of economic benefits rather than political goals, “bandit” focuses on ones. Importantly, the meaning that we see is that of the use of violence.

At that time, it was understandable that the Thai side would see a group using violence as “bandits” without any of the characteristics of a “movement”, because at that time, the movement was losing ground, their military forces were beginning to fade and many of their men had also turned themselves into the state. The state estimated that the situation had improved and was being normalized. What needed to be managed next and the next step was to develop the economy and the local quality of life. In the eyes of the state, the movement that previously had a political motivation was already disintegrating. So calling them “bandits” seemed plausible became the term that has been widely used since.

In fact, this assessment was more or less a consensus whether it was the opinion of government agencies in the area, high-level government officials or all branches of Thai society. Prime Minister Thaksin even went as far as ordering the dissolution of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) and the Combined 43<sup>rd</sup> Civilian-Military-Police Command, a special agency established during the Prem administration to oversee political and military action, because the situation in the south was thought to have been normalized. The view did not see the development of the BRN incubating in that period which made dealing with the first years after 2004 confused and chaotic.

The problem is that “bandit” makes people look at the conflict in a skewed way. They do not see the political meaning of the conflict and lack the ability to look for a political solution that does not use violence, because when you look at a group as bandits, the options are limited to law enforcement and the use of violence for suppression. Other reasonable solutions will be blocked.

Similarly, if we see only the “Southern Border Provinces” and do not see that there is a territory that can be called rather than “Patani” and all the people fighting for “Patani”, we will not look at the problem from all points of view. We will not see the political wishes hidden by the conflict.

Therefore, we have to open out these terms and see what meaning they have for each side and how this affects their understanding of the conflict situation. This thesis is not to give answers or proposals about which terms should be used for different things. It just asks you to see the workings of these terms and the meanings that impel and change the conflict. If we can see this, then it will not be difficult to deal with the conflict that faces us. As for the question of which terms are best to use, it’s not only up to the people at the negotiation table to agree. The different people involved in this conflict should together choose the words and what they mean.

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\* Prachatai. Thu, 03/11/2016 - 15:12:  
<http://prachatai.org/english/node/6692>