

SOUTHERN THAILAND *Hagai Segal*

From confrontation to negotiation

Immediately after the recent bloodless coup in Thailand, a vigorous debate began over what stance the military-led leadership would take on the Muslim insurgency in the south that has claimed more than 1,700 lives since the start of 2004.

Since the coup, the situation in Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani provinces has shown few signs of abating. In the first week, two people were killed, police officers were shot at, two police stations and a military base were stormed, and a school was set ablaze. That left many fearing the new regime might grant the military a free rein to expand the kind of operations that were a feature of the Thaksin years.

The fact the coup was led by a Muslim, General Sondhi Boonyaratkalin – combined with immediate declarations by the government of a determination to seek a solution in the south –

raised hopes of a concerted drive for reconciliation and negotiation.

Symbolically important as General Sondhi's religion is, on its own, it will do little to improve the crisis. Although a practising Muslim, he is not a member of the Malay-Muslim community. Also, the religious nature of the conflict may have been overemphasised by many, not least the Thais, who have characterised the situation as an Islamist insurgency linked to global holy warriors, including al-Qaeda.

While the insurgency is a symptom of a conflict between elements of the Malay-Muslim minority and the centralised Thai-Buddhist state, it is as much motivated by state restrictions on culture, including the use of the local Yawi dialect, as it is by religious differences or Islamist theology. These issues will have to be addressed.

The government's conciliatory

statements have resulted in separatist organisations expressing willingness to talk, without preconditions. Wan Kadir Che Man, the exiled leader of Bersatu – a coalition of key insurgent organisations – said: "For the first time, we have seen positive signs from Bangkok and we don't want to jeopardise that by putting conditions [on talks]."

The key to success in any such talks may rest as much with Thailand's neighbours, and other Asia-Pacific states, as with the Thai government itself. For now, these states are keeping their distance, officially anyway, waiting to see how the situation develops.

Malaysian Defence Minister Najib Razak said his country would not be involved in current peace efforts, but that future involvement had not been ruled out.

Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad has, however,

confirmed that he has initiated a peace plan following his visit to Bangkok late last year when he met King Bhumibol Adulyadej and the then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Bersatu, and others in the south, are seeking significant autonomy, if not independence, from Bangkok, and there should be no doubt that this will be too much for even the most progressive in the new regime. Peace in the south is one thing, a breakaway quite another.

The region will watch carefully, not least Malaysia and Indonesia, struggling as they are with their own extreme Islamist elements. It is early days yet, but there is now at least some hope that the situation could improve soon.

Hagai Segal, a terrorism and Middle-East specialist, lectures at New York University in London