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Too feeble to be a scapegoat

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EXPLODING firecrackers to mark the recent end of the Songkran festival in the South Thailand border town of Sungai Golok strangely enough seemed to have rattled and unnerved many shop assistants and other locals going about their business.

The reason soon became quite clear. The public was still nervy after the spate of bomb explosions in south Thailand on April 7. The initial reaction of the Thai authorities in blaming the Pattani United Liberation Organisation or Pulo for the bomb explosion at Haadyai Railway Station has somewhat embarrassed the Government.

For one Pulo, for the last few years, has not been the force it once was. There is division in its ranks and it has been rendered almost impotent. Two, it has never been Pulo's style to target the civilian population. Civilian casualties would have resulted in the loss of public support for the movement.

Even the influential English daily The Nation lambasted the Government for making allegations without concrete evidence and prejudging local conditions without any actual understanding.

It cited the recent case of the Thai Airways International jet which exploded and caught fire at Bangkok Airport killing one person.

The paper noted that both Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his security leaders gave different interpretations of events without any real hard evidence to support them.

"The most embarrassing comment came from Thaksin, who said the bomb had been meant for him," it said. It was later learnt that the explosion was not caused by any bomb.

Pulo posted a message on its website denying that it had carried out the two bomb attacks in Songkhla and Yala. Army sources, however, blamed a splinter group of Pulo called Bersatu for the attacks which they said were launched in revenge for the killing of some 40 leading separatists over the past two years. But if this were so, why would the group target civilians?

Three days after the weekend bombings, Thaksin came up with a new theory and blamed extortionists for planting the bombs. He said they simply wanted protection money from the owners of places or firms they had targeted.

Development in Thailand and in neighbouring countries has had a greater impact on the Thai Muslim community and this issue is expected to be discussed by Thaksin and his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he visits Kuala Lumpur on April 24.

About 80 per cent of the six million people in Narathiwat, Yala, Pattani and Satun are Muslims of Malay descent. After more than 500 years of Thai domination, there remains a marked dichotomy between the Thai-Buddhist towns and the Muslim countryside.

Malay is widely spoken in southern Thailand and most families prefer to send their children to private Islamic schools instead of to free public schools.

In the past, attempts to establish stronger ties between southern Thailand and Malaya have not been easy under the scrutiny of Thai security agencies which regard cross-border links as a possible threat to national security.

Since the 19th century, it has always been the practice of Thai

governments to point the finger at Muslim groups such as the National Liberation Front of the Patani Republic whenever there is trouble in the south.

Whether it was an ambush on government troops or a killing, arson or abduction, such groups became convenient scapegoats.

Among early Muslim leaders who resisted the Government were Haji Mohamad Sulong, who rose to prominence in 1947. When he was arrested and charged for treason in 1948, there were violent clashes between Thai police and Muslim dissidents.

He was released from prison in 1952 but soon disappeared. The Thais, it was believed, drowned him near Songkhla on August 13, 1954, with his eldest son, Wan Mohammad and two other followers.

There was a lot of resentment among Muslims then due to various forms of oppression by the Thai Government. The Muslims protested attempts to erase their national identity, and there were heavy casualties on both sides.

Former Pulo members said the authorities were quite prepared to explode bombs and to kill, maim, pillage and burn - and blame these on Pulo.

Pattani-born Wan Yusof, 39, who runs a business in Takbai, said there were many occasions when Pulo was blamed for acts actually perpetrated by government troops.

"But Pulo today is only a pale shadow of what it was in the 1980s. Leaders who once made it formidable have been eliminated or have grown old. Pulo exists only in name. Kampung folks no longer support it."

Trader Abu Bakar, 35, of Kampung Nat Tanjung, 25 km from Pattani - a kampung which used to supply fighters for Pulo in the 1980s - said the culprits who bombed the Hatyai Railway Station were actually disgruntled railway department officers demoted after Thaksin's election victory.

"In Thailand, certain department heads are replaced when another party comes to power after an election. When he goes, all his men are often demoted or sidelined and this often results in acts of revenge or sabotage," he said.

Bakar said the Government's tendency to blame Pulo and Muslims generally for anything happening in the south had emboldened the real perpetrators.

"You can be sure that if the Thai Airways plane had exploded in Hatyai instead of in Bangkok, the Government would have immediately blamed the Muslims," he said.

Kalau sebut orang Pulo (if Pulo members are blamed), the kampung folk will no longer believe," said Bakar. Pulo's once capable leaders, he said semua cari makan belaka (were all earning a livelihood now).

"The only ones hiding in the Yala hills today are drug addicts and criminal elements who prey on local villagers. They are lurking here as the police are after them."

Businessman Ben Adam, 35, also from Kampung Nat Tanjung, said the lack of employment opportunities in the South due to lack of development had led to many younger Malays migrating to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia in search of jobs.

"Many of these youngsters are either working in factories, estates, restaurants or as construction workers abroad. The remaining jobless young often turn to crime or fall prey to drugs," he said.

Wan Yusof said there had been some progress in relations between Bangkok and the south as compared to the past and Muslims were happy that girl students can now wear the tudung in all schools.

The south today, he said, had capable leaders such as former Speaker Wan Mohammad Noor Matha, who is now a cabinet minister, Narathiwat MP Ariffin Uttaraid, and Pattani MP Mook Sulaiman.

He pointed to the Narathiwat-Pattani highway which was completed two years ago and facilitated travel between the two provinces.

Wan Yusof said under the new government, the poor could now afford to go to hospital as the fee had been reduced to 30 baht as compared to 500 baht before.

Thailand has come a long way in addressing issues related to discrimination against the Muslim minority. The situation has improved significantly over the past decade and the cultural conflict, which used to be the norm, has been reduced.

Along the way, bureaucrats became more sensitive and made adjustments to further assimilate the Muslim communities. Clearly there must be more opportunities for Muslims to improve their economic standing if Pulo and other such organisations are not to make a resurgence in the volatile south.

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