

The Politics of Autonomy: Exploring the Thai Government's Denial of Special Status for Southern Thailand

Elisabet Elfadani, Himawan Bayu Patriadi, Honest Dody Molasy

Departement of Social and Political Science, FISIP UNEJ

E-mail: 210910101013@mail.unej.ac.id,

hbpatriadi@unej.ac.id, honestdody.fisip@unej.ac.id

Abstract

This article examines the complex political landscape surrounding the Thai government's failure to implement special autonomy in Southern Thailand, a region characterized by ethnic diversity and historical grievances. The southern provinces, predominantly inhabited by Malay Muslims, have long sought greater autonomy due to perceptions of marginalization and socio-economic disparities. The study delves into the historical context of the autonomy movement, highlighting key events that have shaped the political dynamics in the region. The Thai government's rejection of these autonomy demands is analyzed from various perspectives, including national security issues, political stability, and the preservation of national identity. The article argues that the government's stance is influenced by a desire to maintain centralized control and prevent the fragmentation of the nation-state. Furthermore, the report explores the implications of this rejection on local governance, community relations, and ongoing conflicts in the region. The findings suggest that the refusal of special status not only exacerbates tensions but also hinders potential pathways to peace and reconciliation. Ultimately, the article contributes to the broader discourse on autonomy movements in Southeast Asia, offering a distinct understanding of the interplay between local aspirations and national politics in the context of Southern Thailand. This comprehensive analysis provides a nuanced understanding of the political complexities and historical underpinnings of the autonomy movement in Southern Thailand. By examining the government's decision-making process and its impact on local communities, the study highlights the challenges faced in balancing national unity with regional autonomy. The implications of the government's stance are far-reaching, affecting not only the immediate region but also broader discussions on governance and identity in Southeast Asia. This research underscores the need for inclusive policies that address historical grievances and promote social cohesion, essential for long-term peace and stability in the region.

Keywords:

Separatism; Special Autonomy; Southern Thailand

Introduction

Thailand is a nation distinguished by its extensive history and rich cultural heritage. The country boasts an array of natural resources that are abundant and diverse, presenting significant potential for economic wealth and development (Engvall & Andersson, 2014). These resources, which include fertile agricultural land, minerals, and a thriving tourism

sector, contribute to Thailand's status as a key player in the Southeast Asian economy. Thailand holds a unique position in the annals of colonial history, as it is the only Southeast Asian nation that successfully avoided colonization by Western powers. This historical context has allowed Thailand to maintain its sovereignty and cultural identity, setting it apart from many of its regional neighbors who experienced varying degrees of colonial rule. Despite these advantages, Thailand is not immune to internal challenges that pose threats to its stability and security. The country grapples with a range of socio-political issues, including political unrest, economic disparities, and ethnic tensions, particularly in the southern regions. These internal problems can undermine the nation's progress and threaten the social fabric that has historically united its diverse population.

The conflict in Southern Thailand can be traced back to the period when the leadership of the Siamese kingdom asserted control over the sultanate, leading to the imposition of policies that mandated the adoption of a "Thai" identity among all inhabitants of the region. This policy was particularly contentious as it disregarded the distinct cultural and religious identities of the Muslim-Malay population, which fundamentally contrasts with the Thai identity. The divergence between these identities is exemplified by the differing religious practices, notably the direction of Qibla, which reflects deeper theological and cultural divides. Such policies not only marginalized the Muslim-Malay community but also exacerbated tensions between the central government and local populations, highlighting the complexities of identity politics in the context of national integration efforts.

The separatist conflict in Southern Thailand remains unresolved, with no clear path to peace in sight. Despite the Thai government's numerous attempts to address the issue, an effective solution has yet to be identified. Among the proposed strategies for resolving this enduring conflict is the suggestion to grant special autonomy to the Southern Thailand region. This proposal is anticipated to foster a more conducive environment for dialogue and reconciliation, potentially addressing the unique cultural and political grievances of the local population while promoting stability within the broader national framework.

The Thai government's rejection of the special autonomy proposal for Southern Thailand can be interpreted as a strategic effort to uphold national integrity and prevent the emergence of similar separatist movements in other regions of the country. This decision reflects a broader

concern within the government regarding the potential ramifications of granting special autonomy, which could inadvertently empower separatist factions and exacerbate existing tensions. The apprehension stems from the belief that such concessions might not only embolden separatist sentiments but also set a precedent that could encourage other marginalized groups within Thailand to pursue similar demands for autonomy. Consequently, the government's stance is rooted in a desire to maintain a unified national identity and to mitigate the risks associated with fragmentation, thereby prioritizing stability and security over the potential benefits of localized governance.

Literature Review

The conflict in Southern Thailand, primarily within the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, has deep historical roots intertwined with geopolitical changes, ethnic identity, and religious affiliations. The historical backdrop is pivotal to understanding the contemporary tensions between the Thai central government and the local Malay Muslim population, which merits exploration through key events and underlying factors contributing to the ongoing strife.

One of the critical events marking the turbulent history of Southern Thailand was the annexation of the Pattani Kingdom by Siam in 1902. The consolidation of this sultanate into the Kingdom of Thailand disregarded existing local governance and cultural practices, leading to resentment among the local population who identified more closely with their Malay Muslim roots than with the Buddhist-majority central government (Pherali, 2021). This historical legacy set the stage for a persistent estrangement, exacerbated by the subsequent administrative and cultural policies imposed by Bangkok that aimed to assimilate the local population into a national Thai identity, undermining their distinct cultural practices and Islamic beliefs (Mohamad, 2018).

The integration of Southern Thailand has been marked by attempts from the Thai government to centralize power, wherein policies have often prioritized national security over local autonomy. This centralization approach, especially in times of strife, has fostered widespread mistrust among locals towards the government, further intensified by reactions to perceived threats to their religious and ethnic identity (Abdel-Monem et al., 2020). For instance, brutal government crackdowns in volatile periods have created a cycle of violence culminating in frameworks of injustice felt by the local population, thus feeding the insurgency since 2004,

characterized by increased terrorist activity and military responses by the Thai state (Pherali, 2021).

In parallel to these historical happenings, contemporary incidents reveal a clear indication of underlying social and psychological fractures. The violent encounters in Krue Se Mosque in 2004 and Tak Bai in 2004, for example, have been pivotal, marking a resurgence of overt violence associated with the long-standing insurgency (Pherali, 2021; Mohamad, 2018). These events not only reflect the political discontent brewing amongst the Malay Muslims but also underscore a broader narrative of collective victimhood, fostering a sense of community identity rooted in resistance against oppressive governance (Mohamad, 2018).

Several socio-political factors contribute further to the tensions observed in Southern Thailand. Key among them is the profound cultural dislocation experienced by the Malay Muslim population, who view themselves as marginalized within the political landscape dominated by the Buddhist Thai government. This disenfranchisement is reflective of their ethnic and religious identity, which the state has historically attempted to suppress through a range of assimilation strategies (Mohamad, 2018). The dynamic should also be interpreted against the backdrop of the region's historical role as a borderland, involving complexities around loyalty and national sentiment, resulting in fluctuating allegiances based on historical grievances (Mohamad, 2018).

Moreover, the educational disparities exacerbated by government policies significantly contribute to the state of unrest. Educational institutions in conflict areas are vulnerable to tensions, often becoming sites where young minds are molded in environments steeped in violence and insecurity. Interreligious educational efforts, although well intentioned, often struggle against entrenched feelings of distrust towards a centralized educational curriculum that is perceived to prioritize Thai Buddhist identity (Ummah et al., 2024; Wilartratsami, 2023). Nevertheless, local initiatives, particularly from Islamic schools, have been critical in promoting a more harmonious interfaith dialogue (Ummah et al., 2024; Azizah & Raya, 2021). The role of socio-economic factors cannot be neglected either, as a lack of investment in local infrastructure and underdevelopment have served to heighten grievances. Development policies have often been ineffectively designed or poorly implemented, leaving the local population feeling neglected and marginalized within their own regions, which amplifies resentments towards the Bangkok-centric authorities (Lowe et al., 2020). The psychological

toll of violence and insecurity has far-reaching implications for community wellbeing and cohesion, with some studies illustrating how ongoing conflict has impacted youth morale and educational stability (Payo & Askandar, 2024).

A further dimension to this ongoing struggle is the significant involvement of insurgent groups, which while catalyzing resistance also feed upon local dissatisfaction. Despite numerous political attempts at reconciliation through negotiations, these efforts have largely fallen flat, reinforcing perceptions of betrayal amongst the local communities. Insights from expert analyses indicate that key ground-level negotiations could have benefitted from increased local autonomy, but reluctance from the Thai state to relinquish control has sparked cyclical violence (Abdel-Monem et al., 2020).

As elucidated in recent studies, fostering genuine dialogue and understanding between the local communities and the Thai state is essential for conflict resolution. Structural reforms that recognize and respect the distinct cultural and religious identities of the Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand are critical to addressing the root causes of conflict (Mohamad, 2018). Healing the cultural divide through local representation in governance and integrated community-based initiatives may present a way forward towards achieving long-term peace in a region fraught with historical animosity and current grievances.

The proposal for special autonomy in Southern Thailand has elicited considerable debate, reflecting the complex interplay of historical, cultural, and political dimensions shaping the region. Given the enduring conflict and the unique identity of the Malay Muslim population in this region, examining the arguments for and against autonomy, alongside the implications of Thai government policies, is essential for understanding this multifaceted issue.

Proponents of granting special autonomy to Southern Thailand argue primarily that such measures would address the historical grievances of the Malay Muslim populace, who feel marginalized within the predominantly Buddhist Thai state. For these advocates, autonomy represents a pathway towards recognizing the distinct cultural and religious identity of the local population, which has been systematically undermined since the annexation of Pattani in the early 20th century (Abdel-Monem et al., 2020; Kewsuwun et al., 2020). The autonomy proposal is seen as a means to empower local governance structures that can better represent and respond to the unique needs and aspirations of the local communities, offering a degree of self-determination that has long been denied to them by central authorities.

Furthermore, supporters contend that implementing genuine autonomy could help de-escalate the ongoing violence and foster a climate conducive to peace and reconciliation (Kewsuwun et al., 2020). As evidenced in various analyses, the historical context of disenfranchisement and violence necessitates a real political solution encompassing local governance that aligns with residents' aspirations. Local officials, better acquainted with the socio-political dynamics of the region, might effectively mediate conflicts, enabling a more harmonious relationship between the populace and the state Kaewrakmuk et al. (2023).

Conversely, opponents of special autonomy raise concerns about the potential for increased separatism and a further entrenchment of the insurgent groups that have plagued Southern Thailand for decades. Critics argue that autonomy might provide a platform for extremist elements to gain legitimacy and autonomy, thereby enhancing their operational capabilities and potentially leading to a fragmentation of Thailand's territorial integrity (Kewsuwun et al., 2020; Changmai et al., 2022). The fear of exacerbating existing tensions is predicated on the notion that increased local control might not hinder insurgency but could worsen the security scenario, complicating the balance of governance within the nation-state (Abdel-Monem et al., 2020).

Additionally, opponents highlight that granting autonomy could set a precedent for other regions within Thailand, perhaps inspiring similar demands from other ethnic and cultural groups, thereby challenging the notion of a unified Thai identity (Kewsuwun et al., 2020; Srithawong et al., 2020). This national concern regarding the integrity of the state presents a significant barrier to the acceptance of any proposal for special autonomy, as it threatens the historical narrative of a unified nation.

The impact of the Thai government's policies regarding autonomy on the relationship between the central government and local populations in Southern Thailand has been profound and multifaceted. Various studies suggest that the government's hesitant approach to decentralization reflects a deep-seated fear of losing control over the region (Changmai et al., 2022; Srithawong et al., 2020). The selective implementation of policies designed to foster local governance has often been viewed with skepticism by the local population, who may interpret such efforts as superficial attempts to placate their demands rather than genuine commitments to meaningful autonomy (Day & Narongraksakhet, 2023).

Moreover, the prevailing security-oriented policies have predominantly prioritized military solutions to the conflict, which have proven counterproductive, often leading to more resentment and hostility among the local populace (Abdel-Monem et al., 2020; Kewsuwun et al., 2020). The heavy-handed tactics employed by authorities have not only failed to quell insurgent violence but also fueled anti-state sentiments, diminishing the effectiveness of any autonomy-driven proposals in building trust between residents and the government (Day & Narongraksakhet, 2023; Punsawad et al., 2018).

The complexities surrounding educational policies further complicate the landscape. Centralized educational frameworks, often ill-suited to the cultural context of Southern Thailand, reflect an insufficient engagement with local histories and narratives (Day & Narongraksakhet, 2023; Punsawad et al., 2018). This disconnect contributes to widespread disenchantment and fosters the perception that the state is failing to honor local cultural practices. Consequently, implementing a framework for education that embraces local languages and Islamic teachings could form a crucial aspect of any meaningful autonomy that resonates with the Malay Muslim community (Kewsuwun et al., 2020).

Methods

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach utilizing secondary data. This approach has been selected because it aids the researcher in gaining a deeper understanding of social phenomena and provides a broader context for the issues being investigated. The primary focus of this study is to examine and analyze the Thai government's rejection of the proposal for special autonomy in Southern Thailand, as well as the implications of such a rejection on the local communities and the ongoing conflict in the region. By utilizing qualitative methods, the research aims to capture the complexities of the situation, including the historical, cultural, and political factors that influence the government's stance and the reactions of the affected populations. This comprehensive analysis seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding autonomy movements and the challenges faced in achieving peace and stability in Southern Thailand.

Result and Discussion

The separatist conflict in Southern Thailand has yet to find a clear path towards peace. The

Thai government has made efforts to engage in dialogue with the Pattani community to negotiate a resolution to the conflict, but so far, these dialogues have always led to dead ends, with no definitive agreement in sight to resolve the conflict in Southern Thailand. One of the factors for the failure of this dialogue is the distrust or skepticism from the Thai government and the Malay Muslim community in Southern Thailand. This occurs due to several factors, such as the government's reluctance to grant the desires of the Malay-Muslim community, who demand significant autonomy in Southern Thailand, due to distrust in the special autonomy system, while the Malay-Muslim community feels skeptical that the policies taken by the Thai government still discriminate against their ethnicity. The Thai government responds to the proposal for special autonomy as an unfeasible solution because the risks involved in implementing it could threaten the sovereignty of the nation.

The rejection of the special autonomy proposal in Southern Thailand is certainly not an easy issue to resolve; the Thai government has considered many factors in responding to the proposal. Several reasons are significant factors in the failure to implement special autonomy in Southern Thailand.

Concerns about National Disintegration

The proposal for special autonomy in Southern Thailand has become an important consideration for the Thai government. The response of the Thai government is often related to concerns about the integrity of the Thai state. In responding to this proposal, the government addressed it by rejecting special autonomy as a means of peace. The Thai government's rejection of the proposal for special autonomy in Southern Thailand is a multifaceted issue. One of the main reasons behind this rejection is the concern over national disintegration. The Thai government believes that granting special autonomy could pose a threat to national integration, potentially creating similar events in other regions attempting to separate from the homeland (McCargo, 2010). Therefore, the Thai government not only considers internal assumptions but also refers to various events in other countries that show that the implementation of special autonomy often leads to divisions related to national unity.

The Thai government is also concerned that the implementation of special autonomy will strengthen the separatist movements that have developed in the conflict areas. History shows that separatist groups often use autonomy as a reason or tool to fight for independence from

the state. This is considered by the Thai government as granting legitimacy to separatist groups to strengthen their position in negotiating conflict resolution. This condition can trigger National Disintegration (McCargo, 2010). Thus, the Thai government's concern about National Disintegration is not unfounded.

Reflecting on conflicts in several countries around the world that also experience prolonged conflicts due to the implementation of special autonomy. For example, Indonesia has implemented special autonomy in the regions of Aceh and Papua, but this implementation is considered to be lacking in proper management, leading to challenges in resource management and the relationship between the central and regional governments. The Thai government is concerned that special autonomy in Southern Thailand will create dissatisfaction in other regions, which could threaten the stability of Thailand's national integration (McCargo, 2010). The failures experienced by other countries certainly serve as an important event for Thailand to be more cautious in taking action regarding the proposal for autonomy, where autonomy can threaten the stability of the country.

National disintegration will affect Thailand's national identity, so the Thai government strives to create unity in diversity and recognition of special autonomy, which is considered an acknowledgment of greater differences. According to the Thai government, this could threaten the state's efforts to build an inclusive and harmonious national identity (McCargo, 2011). Therefore, the government's response in rejecting this proposal is not merely a reaction to demands but also a strategic step to maintain national integrity and unity.

In this discussion, it is important to consider how the Thai government can respond to demands for special autonomy without sacrificing national integrity. One approach that can be taken is to enhance dialogue and negotiation between the government and local communities. Through constructive dialogue, the government can understand the needs and aspirations of the Malay community, as well as seek solutions that can accommodate the interests of both parties. This approach will not only help ease tensions between the government and the Malay Muslim groups but also create a sense of mutual trust between the government and the local community (McCargo, 2010). In addition, the Thai government also needs to consider the implementation of inclusive and fair policies in the southern region of Thailand. This is an effort to recognize the cultural and linguistic rights of the Malay

community, as well as to improve access to quality education and public services. Thus, the government has made efforts to demonstrate its commitment to respecting cultural diversity in Thailand while maintaining national integrity.

Political Group Resistance

The Thai government's rejection of the demand for special autonomy in Southern Thailand is not only due to concerns about national disintegration but also worries about potential political resistance that could arise from national groups or internal opposition (Heis, 2018). This group considers that special autonomy poses a threat to national stability and the territorial integrity of Thailand. They argue that special autonomy contradicts the principle of national equality, where all regions of the country must adhere to uniform policies and laws. Therefore, the strong nationalist spirit among the Thai people serves as one of the defenses for the Thai government in maintaining the country's identity and sovereignty.

Political resistance arises from the understanding that special autonomy can trigger injustice and inequality between regions in Thailand (Pulungan, 2023). According to nationalist groups and internal opposition, if one region is granted special autonomy, it will trigger similar demands from other regions, considering that each region has different ethnic and religious characteristics. The granting of autonomy will only create a threat to the unity and stability of the country (Paradipta, 2023). Therefore, this group argues that all regions in Thailand must adhere to the same laws and policies without any exceptions for any reason.

Just like the Thai government, these two groups have concerns about the proposal for special autonomy because it could strengthen the separatist movement in Southern Thailand. The granting of special autonomy will strengthen the position of separatist groups in negotiation forums. In this case, they support the Thai government to remain firm and not give space to separatist groups that are considered a threat to national integrity. This rejection is part of Thailand's political strategy to maintain control and power of the central government over the conflict-affected regions (Aziz & Musa, 2023). Moreover, political resistance also reflects the power dynamics within the Thai government. National groups and internal opposition often have significant influence in the political decision-making process (Pasalli, 2023). They can mobilize public support and create narratives that emphasize the importance of national unity and political stability.

In facing this political resistance, the Thai government needs to consider a more inclusive and dialogical approach (Kawer et al., 2018). A constructive dialogue between the government and local communities can help ease tensions and create a better understanding of the needs and aspirations of the Malay community in Southern Thailand. By involving various stakeholders, including national groups and internal opposition, the government can seek solutions that accommodate the interests of all parties without compromising national integrity (Widyastuti, 2021). It is also important for the Thai government to develop more just and inclusive policies in the southern region of Thailand (Nurhuda, 2023). This includes the recognition of the cultural and linguistic rights of the Malay community, as well as improving access to quality education and public services. Thus, the government can demonstrate its commitment to respecting cultural diversity in Thailand while maintaining national integrity.

Thus, the Thai government's rejection of the proposal for special autonomy in Southern Thailand is also influenced by political resistance from nationalist groups and internal opposition. They consider that granting special autonomy poses a threat to national stability and the territorial integrity of Thailand. Therefore, it is important for the government to seek solutions that can accommodate the aspirations of the Malay community without sacrificing national integrity. Through constructive dialogue and more inclusive policies, the Thai government can create better conditions to achieve peace and stability in Southern Thailand.

The Emergence of Inter-Ethnic Social Tensions

Ethnic social tensions in Southern Thailand are one of the main reasons behind the Thai government's rejection of the special autonomy proposal. This tension arises from the ethnic and religious differences between the predominantly Malay Muslim community in the region and the Thai population, which is mostly Buddhist and ethnically Thai (Kiselev et al. 2020). In this context, special autonomy, which aims to grant more authority to local communities, can exacerbate the existing religious and ethnic segregation. One of the main risks of special autonomy is the potential for excessive enhancement of group identity, which can lead to social exclusion and deeper conflicts (Megone et al., 2016).

The granting of special autonomy to the Malay Muslim community in Southern Thailand can create space for the strengthening of a more dominant ethnic and religious identity. By granting full autonomy to manage local affairs such as education, law, and culture, the

dominant ethnic and religious identity can become more prominent. This has the potential to create tensions between different ethnic and religious groups, which could ultimately exacerbate social segregation and intergroup conflicts (Ni'mah et al., 2014; Dvorchik et al., 2002). In this context, the Thai government is concerned that special autonomy will strengthen feelings of exclusivity among the Malay Muslim community, which could lead to the rejection of the existence of other groups, especially the Thai Buddhist group that is the majority in the country.

This ethnic social tension can also be exacerbated by narratives that are developing among separatist groups who claim that they are fighting for their rights as a marginalized community. In this case, special autonomy can be seen as legitimacy for separatist groups to advocate for their interests, which in turn can exacerbate tensions with other groups in the region ((Debkumar, 2022)). When group identity becomes stronger, the potential for conflicts between ethnic and religious groups also increases, which can threaten stability and security in Southern Thailand. In addition, special autonomy can also create dissatisfaction among other ethnic and religious groups who feel marginalized. For example, the Thai Buddhist group living in Southern Thailand may feel that they are neglected and do not receive adequate protection from the government (Bratianu, 2023). This dissatisfaction can trigger greater conflicts between ethnic and religious groups, which can ultimately lead to violence and instability (Birks, 2014). In this context, the Thai government argues that the rejection of special autonomy is a necessary step to prevent greater conflicts and maintain national unity.

In facing this ethnic social tension, it is important for the Thai government to seek a more inclusive and dialogical approach. A constructive dialogue between the government and local communities can help ease tensions and create a better understanding of the needs and aspirations of the Malay community in Southern Thailand (Marom et al., 2019). By involving various stakeholders, including other ethnic and religious groups, the government can seek solutions that accommodate the interests of all parties without compromising national integrity (Sautman, 2011). The Thai government also needs to consider implementing more just and inclusive policies in the southern region of Thailand. This includes recognition of the cultural and linguistic rights of the Malay community, as well as improving access to quality education and public services (Voyce, 2023). Thus, the government can demonstrate its

commitment to respecting cultural diversity in Thailand while maintaining national integrity.

Ethnic social tensions in Southern Thailand are one of the main reasons behind the Thai government's rejection of the special autonomy proposal. The government is concerned that granting special autonomy could exacerbate religious and ethnic segregation, as well as excessively enhance group identity. Therefore, it is important for the government to seek solutions that can accommodate the aspirations of the Malay community without compromising national integrity. Through constructive dialogue and more inclusive policies, the Thai government can create better conditions to achieve peace and stability in Southern Thailand.

Security Issues

The Thai government's rejection of the proposal for special autonomy in Southern Thailand is also closely related to security issues. The Thai government is concerned that granting special autonomy could trigger national fragmentation, political strife, and ethnic conflicts that could potentially increase the risk of rebellion or violence (Kingkaew, 2013). In this context, the government sees a number of security risks associated with the proposal, which is a major consideration in their decision to reject Hicken's special autonomy.

One of the government's main concerns is that special autonomy could create space for separatist groups to strengthen their position and increase their activities. History shows that separatist groups often exploit autonomy as a tool to pursue independence or independence from the central government (Dunlap, 2018). In this case, the Thai government is concerned that granting special autonomy to the Malay Muslim community in Southern Thailand will legitimize separatist groups and strengthen their movement (Unjana et al., 2018). This has the potential to lead to increased violence and instability in the region, which in turn could threaten national security.

Furthermore, the Thai government is also concerned that special autonomy could exacerbate existing ethnic social tensions. Tensions between the Malay Muslim community and the majority Buddhist population could escalate if autonomy is granted, as this could excessively strengthen group identities and create deeper segregation (Arcia & Macdonald, 2015). In this

context, the government argues that the rejection of special autonomy is a necessary step to prevent greater conflict and maintain national security.

Concerns about security also include the potential for larger political battles within the country. The granting of special autonomy can create dissatisfaction among other ethnic and religious groups who feel marginalized (Pongsudhirak, 2016). For example, the Thai Buddhist group living in Southern Thailand may feel that they are neglected and do not receive adequate protection from the government. This dissatisfaction can trigger greater conflicts between ethnic and religious groups, which can ultimately lead to violence and instability (Glassman, 2010). In facing these security risks, the Thai government feels the need to maintain control and power over regions considered sensitive. The rejection of special autonomy has become part of the political strategy to maintain stability and security in Southern Thailand (Flassy, 2022). Therefore, the government strives to avoid a situation where special autonomy could set a precedent for similar demands from other regions with different ethnic and religious characteristics.

The Thai government is also considering the impact of special autonomy on international relations and regional security (Drerup, 2019). In a broader geopolitical context, the government is concerned that granting special autonomy could attract the attention of other countries and international organizations, which could worsen the situation in Southern Thailand. In this case, the government argues that the rejection of special autonomy is a necessary step to maintain national sovereignty and integrity.

In facing this challenge, it is important for the Thai government to seek a more inclusive and dialogic approach. Constructive dialogue between the government and local communities can help ease tensions and create a better understanding of the needs and aspirations of the Malay community in Southern Thailand (Dunlap, 2019). By involving various stakeholders, including other ethnic and religious groups, the government can seek solutions that accommodate the interests of all parties without compromising national integrity (Resosudarmo et al., 2016). The Thai government also needs to consider implementing more just and inclusive policies in the southern region of Thailand. This includes the recognition of the cultural and linguistic rights of the Malay community, as well as improving access to quality education and public services (Sen & Tyce, 2019). Thus, the government can

demonstrate its commitment to respecting cultural diversity in Thailand while maintaining national integrity.

Thus, security issues have become one of the main reasons behind the Thai government's rejection of the proposal for special autonomy in Southern Thailand. The government is concerned that granting special autonomy could trigger national fragmentation, political strife, and ethnic conflicts that could potentially increase the risk of rebellion or violence. Therefore, it is important for the government to seek solutions that can accommodate the aspirations of the Malay community without sacrificing national integrity. Through constructive dialogue and more inclusive policies, the Thai government can create better conditions to achieve peace and stability in Southern Thailand.

Conclusion

The Thai government's rejection of the proposal for special autonomy in Southern Thailand is a result of a complex interplay of various considerations. This analysis has identified four primary reasons underlying this rejection: concerns regarding national disintegration, political resistance from national groups and internal opposition, ethnic social tensions, and security issues. Each of these reasons is interrelated and reflects the broader dynamics at play within the country.

Firstly, the concern for national disintegration is a significant factor influencing the government's stance. The Thai state has historically prioritized the maintenance of national unity and integrity, viewing any form of autonomy as a potential threat to the cohesion of the nation. This perspective is rooted in a historical context where the central government has faced challenges in managing diverse ethnic identities and regional aspirations. The fear is that granting special autonomy could set a precedent for other regions to demand similar privileges, thereby fragmenting the nation and undermining the central authority. This apprehension is particularly pronounced in a country like Thailand, which has a history of political instability and regional disparities.

Secondly, political resistance from national groups and internal opposition plays a crucial role in the rejection of the autonomy proposal. The Thai government is often influenced by nationalist sentiments that prioritize a singular Thai identity over the recognition of regional

differences. This resistance is not only evident among political elites but also among segments of the population who may perceive the autonomy proposal as a challenge to their national identity. The political landscape in Thailand is characterized by a complex web of interests, where various factions vie for power and influence. As such, the government's decision-making process is often swayed by the need to appease nationalist sentiments and maintain political stability, which can lead to the dismissal of autonomy proposals that are seen as divisive.

Thirdly, ethnic social tensions significantly contribute to the government's rejection of special autonomy. The Muslim-Malay population in Southern Thailand has long felt marginalized and excluded from the national narrative, leading to a sense of disenfranchisement. However, the Thai government's response to these tensions has often been to reinforce a singular national identity rather than to acknowledge and address the unique cultural and historical grievances of the southern provinces. This approach has perpetuated a cycle of mistrust and resentment, making it difficult for the government to engage meaningfully with the demands for autonomy. The lack of dialogue and understanding between the central government and the southern communities exacerbates these tensions, further complicating the prospects for peace and reconciliation.

Lastly, security issues are a critical concern that influences the Thai government's rejection of the autonomy proposal. The ongoing violence and insurgency in Southern Thailand have created a climate of fear and insecurity, leading the government to adopt a hardline stance against any proposals that could be perceived as weakening its control over the region. The government's focus on security often overshadows the need for political solutions that address the root causes of the conflict. Instead of fostering an environment conducive to dialogue and negotiation, the emphasis on security can lead to further alienation of the local population and a deepening of the conflict.

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