

Interviewee: Kasturi Mahkota, Foreign Affairs representative for PULO

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Concerning human rights; we know that in the area of the insurgency, persons perpetrating violence are violating human rights; does PULO have a part in perpetrating this violence?



There are many different kinds of violence. One is terrorism that is executed with advance planning, either by an underground organization or by the state. Another is unplanned acts of terrorism, say as acts of revenge, which may arise from many different groups. Another type of violence is “Black Violence”, violence perpetrated by unknown sources, although I personally think that the state is the perpetrator. Then there is opportunistic violence. This may include officials who don’t want to be transferred out of the area because of personal benefit. It may be both internal or external, drug sellers, for example.

Organized resistance movements tend to be accused by the state of being involved in the drug traffic. However, the resistance movement for Pattani is

largely Malay, and according to principles of Islam, addictive drugs are forbidden. For that reason, it is impossible that the resistance movement would use this sort of tactic in the movement.

The resistance movement is constantly accused of acts of violence. The Thai state tries to group PULO and JI and Al Quadah. We don't deny that we have some involvement, and [when we do?] we announce our participation.

In the events that have occurred [in the recent insurgency], have PULO forces or members been participants?

PULO's activities are to appeal for liberty. So we don't deny that we planned for these events. We are prepared on all fronts, politics, economics, arms, and public relations; we have all of this in place.

But PULO's strategy is to distance ourselves from accusations of being [like?] J.I. or Al Quadah. So when something happens, we don't want to say whether we were involved or not. We want to keep ourselves off of international black lists of terrorists. If we are seen as a terrorist organization, our resistance cannot succeed. Because of this, we are positioned with the Thai government as one organization together with which it might be possible to end the violence.

The current Thai Prime Minister, Samak Sunthornwet, has said that there are two groups of representatives negotiating with the Thai government. I will tell you now that those are PULO and BRN.

Even if you do not claim responsibility for creating violent events, what goals do you have for violence?

If there is no conflict, there is no resolution of problems. Sometimes violence is necessary in order to get to solutions.

What sorts of incidents has PULO created? How do these help clarify a problem?

If or when PULO executes an event, it doesn't cause harm to ordinary citizens. It is targeted to officials and persons who work with officials.

Do these events involve only PULO forces, or are they done together with forces from other groups?

I don't want to talk about this subject. It concerns movement groups that are engaged in the current conflict.

To what extent has PULO been involved in the events of the insurgency?

No comment. PULO has tried to use peace in its efforts to solve problems. I appeal to members of PULO and of the several other organizations who are fighting for Pattani and to ordinary citizens to use peaceful means in seeking their objectives, to stop the violence and demonstrate to the world that the people of Pattani have no preference for violence and want to solve our problems through peaceful means.

If violence is seen as the way to draw the attention of the world to the problems of Pattani, how far will the violence go? Is what has happened up to now enough?

The Thai government should be the one to answer this question. When a nation [a people] is oppressed by the state to the limits of its patience, everything is permitted. I am not able to answer what it is that the people will do.

Let's go back to the violence. If PULO accepts that it has a role in the violence, then it is not only the Thai government that can speak about it. As a participant in it, PULO should be able to answer whether the violence that has transpired over these more than four years is now enough or not.

The media and the state like to see that this conflict began in 2547 (2004), but the conflict between the Thai state and Pattani has existed for 100 years. And there are vast numbers of lives that have been lost that are never included in the totals. These numbers generate no particular interest on the part of the Thai state. And because the numbers of lost lives are not small, I want to appeal for the opening of an opportunity for a peaceful resolution.

In terms of seeking peace, what are PULO's objectives? At what level do you want to direct your appeals?

Our basic policy to seek liberty for Pattani from the rule of Siam. Ever since our foundation in 2511 (1968) until today, that has been our aim. And we are prepared to talk with and negotiate with the Thai government about our demands.

What has PULO done to create awareness in the world of its aims?

We have appealed for a peaceful end to the problems through intermediaries and through the press whenever we act as an observer or discussant. And no matter what opinion to the contrary may assert, the problem of Pattani today is an international problem. It is just that the Thai government will not accept this bit of truth.

Do you have a concrete demonstration of the problem of Pattani as having achieved recognition as on the international stage? Because as far as our data show us today from internal sources in Thailand and from foreign media, we see that there is still very little interest, even with respect to OIC [Organization of Islamic Countries].

In order to maintain an orderly progress to negotiation, we are required to close our activities from view. We do not yet want to make public information about our progress and the process we are pursuing in our cause. We have not yet presented a broad picture of how and through what organizations we are proceeding towards appealing to the Thai government for liberty. It is necessary to keep our work out of view so that we don't harm the process of negotiation. If Prime Minister Samak had not announced the negotiation [in a newspaper story a few days after the CS Hotel bombing], I would not be talking with you now. However, since the Prime Minister initiated discussion of the topic in public, we take the opportunity to add to what he has said.

Because this process has so far not involved the media, it is a process that must be careful of its secrecy, so that it can be able to seek resolution to the problems in the South.

From your point of view, which third party might be best for the process?

Who they are is not important. What is important is that they be acceptable to both the Thai government and PULO.

We ask this question because we want to understand the whole process.

I understand completely. I've been asked all sorts of questions from all sorts of organizations.

What are the questions that you are most often asked?

The first question is about the violence and who are its perpetrators. The second is about methods for solving the conflict.

And how do you answer?

I tell them some of the same things that I have said to you already here.

This negotiation process, which may not yet have accomplished much, maybe that is because PULO or whoever is prosecuting [the insurgency] is not yet bold enough to show themselves and claim responsibility for the violence. Your own words just a bit ago seem to allude to this -- PULO is one of the organizations involved, but there are other organizations. So when there are several organizations involved, many groups fighting in the name of Pattani, choosing to talk with just one or the other group, that doesn't mean that if the one group stops the others will too. Which brings up the question, is the violence at this time in a final stage in negotiations [sic] or not? And second, with a negotiation process that requires a third party, who should that be? and finally, what points or topics should be negotiated?

This process has been underway for fully three years, and before this we can understand that it was involved with all processes [sic]. However, the Thai government holds that there are only two organizations that have the capability or the position to resolve the issues. PULO is one of those organizations. We are professionals, and we are responsible. So they have chosen just two organizations to serve as representatives in negotiation.

Even if the Thai government sees only two groups, among the [several] groups prosecuting the insurgency in the name of Pattani, is there a division of labor and how is responsibility divided? For example, are there divisions of roles for inside and outside of the country? Or even with respect to granting interviews, do other involved organizations concur [in your doing this]? Have they delegated you or PULO to act in this respect?

For the process that will end the conflict, we have organized some committees. We have a research committee and a dialog committee and quite a few others.

In setting up this committee structure, is this just an organizational act by PULO? Let us ask again, have PULO and the other movement organizations together created a division of labor and assigned roles?

Absolutely. If that day comes, PULO knows very well that all of the other movement organizations will have to come together to achieve resolution.

So you are saying that so far there have been no discussions? Each group is acting on its own, is that right?

Well, in fact, our coming together in common occurred in the past, but it has not been formalized.

So we should understand that this role in foreign relations that PULO has undertaken in the name of Pattani, the other movement organizations -- whether BRN, BRPP, BERSATU or any other -- each is aware of and concurs in it?

If you look [back] from today, you will see that no one has objected to anything that PULO has done. These other organizations support PULO acting as a representative in negotiations. If there are problems [among us] it is only in regards to tactics.

Can you give us some examples?

Each organization has its own strategy. PULO has its own strategy. But each organization has totally the same goal.

The things that PULO is currently doing, is it acting as "speaker" or spokesperson for the other groups or [on its own]?

I don't want to characterize it that way. I am only speaking as a representative of PULO.

Does that mean that in the other groups, there are persons who have the same responsibilities as you?

I believe that there are such persons in the other organizations, but the time is not yet ripe for them to present themselves in public. Moreover, because PULO has members in many locations throughout the world, we are able to do this work. The other organizations may not have people in other parts of the world to enable them to act in this role as well as we can.

I once had some information from the vice commander of the 4th Army [in the South] just after the incident in which 131 Thai nationals left their homes in Thailand to seek refuge in Malaysia. At that time there was an organization that was promoting this story, Patani Malayu Human Right Organization [that had been founded by PULO], also known as HUMRO. I asked him about the role of HUMRO and organizations like PULO, with its presence outside of the country, in what was happening. He "discredited" [dismissed] PULO. He said that back in 2547 (2004), at the time of the [January 2004] arms thefts when this new era of insurgency began, he didn't believe that PULO had any role at all or had participated in any of the events that transpired. These events happened in 2547 (2004) when PULO had broken up into several separate groups. It was not until mid year 2548 (2005) that PULO was able to hold discussions in Syria and come together as PULO BERSATU. He felt that this demonstrated PULO's lack of readiness, and he did not believe that PULO was involved in any of the events of the insurgency. Excuse me if I speak directly. He said that PULO was using its strength in having a foreign presence to create a role for itself even though its circumstances in the area [Pattani] were diminished. This is the core of my question about the role of PULO.

We know that the Thai government is fearful of PULO. Because of that, the government tries to discredit PULO. They do not want to let us in with respect to these issues. The reason is that PULO has a movement both in and outside of the country. It is difficult for them to accept that PULO has a role outside of the country. If we look at the duration of the fighting, we see that PULO was fighting the entire time. There was no time when we had fallen or failed in any way. We were [always] present internationally.

An example is our website. Why is it that our website had to be shut down if the Thai government is not afraid of PULO? The government had to use up budgetary resources in the millions to close our website. And we have just opened up a new site. All of this reflects [their perception] of our strength. Another example is that were it to happen that there was an engagement in which hundreds were killed, that would not be the equal of PULO having one essay published for the whole world [to see].

PULO's way of fighting is the modern way for this age. Whatever the Thai government can do, PULO can do too. This is the thing that the Thai government most fears. It is for that reason that the Thai government tries to discredit PULO, to have PULO appear to have fallen on hard times or to make it appear that PULO's membership has shrunk away.

Therefore, PULO has increased its preparations to solve the problem of the Thai attempts to discredit it. When the Thai government says that PULO has no role in the violence in the South, we want the world to know that so that we are not included in a Black List of international terrorists.

Why would PULO want to have the image of not being involved in events in the South given that when the time comes for resolution there, it will be the partners in the conflict who will be involved in discussions. If PULO doesn't want to be seen as a partner in the conflict, how will you influence the outcome?

But PULO is one of the organizations that has been chosen by the Thai government with whom to negotiate. Therefore the Thai government concedes that it knows who is behind what is happening today.

These negotiations that we are discussing, when did they start?

They started in May of 2005.

Before or after the meeting in Syria to unify old PULO and new PULO?

Before.

How are these negotiations? How did they get started?

Actually, PULO came into the negotiations after they were underway. Before that, the discussions had been between other organizations. The conversations in May of 2548 had no official status. They were just the beginning of something that led [might lead?] to negotiations.

In the bargaining at that time, what was the organizational affiliation of the person[s] representing Thailand?

He/they were security people.

What were the topics that were discussed at first?

The topic was who it was for certain that could bring the problem of violence to an end, both on the part of the movement and on the part of the Thai government. Because differences exist not only among the parties to the

movement [insurgency] but also on the Thai side. Currently in Thailand, there are many [locations of] power -- the government, the Army, the 4th Army, and power groups outside of the government. These powers are not unified. So the process subsequently is to unify power to resolve the problems.

The power that is to be united, is this the movement? or the government? or both?

At this time, the insurgency movement is pressuring the Thai government to appoint representatives who will join together officially. On the side of the movement, there are representatives from two organizations. But there are many other things that have to be fixed. Over these three years we are still at the stage of building trust among the participants, trying to see which organization or persons are going to be representatives who can bring resolution. Even though the Thai side has official representatives, there are still problems in progressing.

Of all of those power groups that you mention, have any sent direct representatives such as yourself?

The discussions began during the Taksin administration. They increased in frequency during the Surayud government. However, in this current government, we have not met at all. But this is still a new government, and we are working to get information about what has transpired in previous meetings in front of Mr. Samak.

Has/have the representative/s of the Thai government changed over time?

Rank/s [job/s] have changed, but the people are the same.

If it is still the original people, the topic of conversation should have evolved over time. What are the important topics that have been discussed?

At this time, the talks are still at the stage of building trust. At this stage, it is not possible to accomplish a lot.

[If] there have been all of these meeting and all of this conversation, why is that there is still a lack of trust?

The southern border conflict has been going on for a long time. Solving these problems must take a lot of time. Feelings of anger and resentment are still present. It is necessary to take the time to allow trust to develop.

Thai officials in the past have said of the negotiations that trust on the Thai side requires some demonstration. For instance, they have asked that there be a cessation of violence for one month. Is it this issue that creates mistrust between the sides?

That's not it. Now the question is whether the Thai government will demonstrate sincerity about resolving the problem. [There are] requests from movement representatives to the Thai government with respect to which the government has still not demonstrated the ability to act.

What have you requested?

Please allow me not to say.

Are you saying that because the demands [requests] of both sides have not been acted upon, that trust is not yet in place?

As for we on the movement side, we are very aware of the things that the two sides have asked of each other. Especially what the movement has requested of the Thai side. We want to see if the Thai government will really follow through. We are ready to respond if the Thai government moves first.

Do you believe that negotiation will end the violence?

All conflict must end through negotiation.

For how flexible can these negotiations be?

It would not be smart for me to answer that. This is a request that our side has presented to the Thai government. The people to answer are on the Thai side. What do they want? What does PULO want? What is there to be flexible about? If we don't achieve our liberty, what will happen?

It is like what Mr. Chalerm (Police General Chalerm Yubamrung, Minister of Interior) [in the current government] once talked about, an autonomous zone. What can the Thai government accept of that concept? What form would it take? If we can work these things out, then the movement can talk with other organizations about the possibility of doing the things that the Thai government wants.

The peace talks that occurred on Langkawi Island at the end of 2549, was PULO involved in those as a participant?

We were not there as an organization, but some of our members were there as individuals.

From the point of view of PULO's highest aspirations, how do you imagine Pattani society, its politics, economics and social life?

Insa Allah. If it is the will of Allah that in the future we are able to govern as the populace wishes and in accord with the international bodies that have a role in

this, we will not oppress minority people under our rule. We will build an good example for them to see that it is possible to live under the rule of leaders who are Muslims. At first,we will establish a temporary government for 4-5 years. After that there will be elections to determine who will best serve as leaders. We will rule under a democratic system in which the people have power. What people say will be entirely under a condition of full-leafed liberty, not full-leafed democracy (laughs) [The translator does not get the joke or quite get the เต็มใบ reference]. But [for issues requiring] special forms of leadership, we will hold referenda for the people to indicate their desires.

If we are ruling under a system of Autonomy it might take as long as 30 years to come to public consensus about what forms the public wants. The first thing is to establish a beginning approach; then after 50 years, there can be another referendum to determine what is next.

So even if you achieve a kind of autonomy [within Thailand], that would not be the end of your political efforts to achieve independence?

We will give the right to the people to decide whether they can accept that autonomy. Or we may want to have them decide one more time.

It is common among countries that are newly independent to have problems with internal conflicts. How are you prepared to deal with that eventuality?

We are aware of the conditions that occurred in Aceh and in Timor. We will try to avoid having those things occur. We are very aware and we are trying to find solutions.

Can you describe the form of government and rule that you are proposing for Pattani?

We haven't yet planned or discussed that, but we somewhat expect that it will be a Patani Islamic Republic. The borders have not yet been determined, but that is a topic that will have to be discussed with many parties, but it will not be a part of Malaysia.

Many world Islamic movements assert that they will use Sharia or Islamic law. Do you also plan to do that?

We will only use Sharia for people who are Islam. We won't force it on other people, and we will use a pure [form of] Islamic law; we will not trample on the rights of other people.

The highest law will be a constitution?

For sure.

And what sort of economic system do you imagine?

The economic system will be a mixture of current forms and Islamic based economics. Malaysia is a good model of using an Islamic economic system.

What means of support will there be to grow the economy? What resources are there to support such a small country as this?

Patani is rich in resources, but these have not been exploited, both oil and gas. The existence of these resources has not been made public. The Thai state knows full well that there are rich resources in the territory of Patani. So before it is too late to exploit them, we should begin now with them to create the maximum benefit for the people of Patani.

Why hasn't the Thai government rushed to exploit these resources, if they are really so abundant?

The Thai government doesn't have the courage to invest in this part of the country because it knows that one day it will belong to the people of Patani, so they don't invest here, because they know won't get to use the resources. I didn't just make this up. There are numerous studies that describe the wealth of Patani. Everybody knows how fertile an agricultural area it is. One failing of the Thai government is that it has not taken advantage of the opportunity to great the greatest benefit [for the people of Patani]. This conflict would not likely have occurred had there been more economic development in the area. But it is too late now [baby, it's too late]. The Thai government has used out-of-date policies, trying to destroy Patani Malay language and culture, which was not very intelligent [policy].

One of the reasons that Timor was able to achieve independence was that it because of the excellence of its resources. If Patani has the kind of resources that you say it does, do you see that there would a third party country to lend a hand in trying to achieve its independence?

Certainly. We are looking for countries to be involved with us, who can benefit along with us. The Thai government would be one element that could work with us.

You have said that international countries have known about Pattani's situation from the beginning. Do you think that the efforts of these countries to help resolve the situation are motivated by the natural resources wealth of Pattani?

I think that is unavoidable. Any country that gets involved has some awareness of future benefit. All organizations that are aware of us will surely benefit.

With respect to Kosovo, the most recent newly independent country, they would not have succeeded to this point if they did not have the support of major powers like the United States and NATO. What major countries are prepared to support Patani [independence] or lobby for it at the level of the Security Council in the United Nations? Have you lined up anyone for that role?

Certainly. We have [them] lined up, but not yet officially. When the time comes, we will seek them out. For now, they come to us. We have many friends in that arena. In the not too distant future, I will be taking the problem of Patani before the EU.

Why would you go to the EU rather than to the Arab world?

We also have friends in the OIC (Organization of Islamic Countries). But official Thailand is in constant contact with the OIC. And there are countries [in the OIC] who Thailand accuses of supporting us. For these reasons, our entry into the OIC is a very delicate matter that requires care. But we are confident that the OIC will take our side, when the time comes, and it has not yet. As a nation of Muslims, we cannot ignore the OIC.

Why do you think that the EU will be willing to listen to your problems?

Because Europe has this sort of role in the world. Our choice of [the EU] will have positive results for the Patani nation. The EU gives importance to the oppression of minority peoples.

With respect to both human rights and the topic of Patani's natural resource wealth, why aren't you talking about the United States? Since the end of the Cold War, the US has had a major role [in the world]. They see themselves as a super power who can impose order in various regions, like Iraq and Afghanistan, citing the logic of human rights when they do it. Why haven't you chosen America? From the point of view of developing your oil resources, no country has companies that are better at evaluating oil resources than the US.

We are not saying that we will ignore America, but for the time being, we prefer the EU. We are not ignoring them, but we are not to a stage where we are ready to talk to the US.

The analytical work on your natural resources, was this prepared by PULO's own economics team, or does it have other sources?

It is academic work that was done by international [scholars] that is in general circulation.

Over the past 50 years of conflict, we never experienced the level of violence that is now occurring. Is awareness of the value of these natural resources causing this greater violence?

It is just one factor. What is [more] important is that the Patani people of this time have a better understanding of their situation and they understand more what is being done to them.

Under these conditions of conflict, what position has Malaysia taken with respect to your fighting?

Malaysia has no role in the processes of our movement in Patani. But because the people of Patani are of Malay nationality and of the same religion and have family relations in Malaysia, Malaysia is seen as and accused of aiding the movement in Patani.

How is the cohesiveness with your movement? Especially with respect to the activities of Lukman Binlimaa [‘ลุดมมัน บินลิมา’] [name].

After the reunification of old PULO and new PULO Lukman was given some responsibilities, but he did not accept the position. He attempted to remove old PULO’s ideas. That was his right as a citizen of Patani and as one who sought the independence of Patani, but not as a leader of PULO. Thank you for asking this question. It helps us to reduce the suspicions about the declarations of Lukman Binlimaa and whether he is still a member of the movement. He has had absolutely no role in the peace negotiations. As for his last pronouncement, that the negotiations should include intermediaries, these are already in place and have been for many years. Everything is ready.

You have said that PULO adheres to principles of human rights in its fight [for Pattani]. However in Thailand there are both foreign and domestic development organizations that are trying to improve conditions for Pattani Malays. Do you have any relationships with these groups?

We express our extreme gratitude to these NGOs who sacrifice time in assisting the Patani Malays.

Do you have any direct communications?

Some, occasionally, nothing consistent at the level of one organization to another. Many organizations have come and expressed their sadness to us.

Does PULO have any hopes related to parliamentary politics, in the sense that it is a setting in which to pursue your goals?

That is a contest that is played by the rules of the Thai constitution, not the Patani constitution, and that will not help us to achieve success. And even if they [parliamentarians from the southern provinces] have a mind to fight [for Patani liberty] they don't have the courage to speak the truth. If they were willing to speak up, they would not be permitted to enter Parliament, and under these circumstances, how are they going to fix anything? They all give more importance to their own lives than they do to the safety of Patani.

When there is a press release for distribution from PULO, your name is often prefaced with 'Colonel' rather than 'Mr.'. It makes people wonder where did you get this rank?

It is an honorary rank from within the PULO organization.

With respect to your life in Sweden, can we ask you to give us a brief description, what do you do there, do you have an occupation?

I have a business in Sweden. It is my principal work, and I don't think it is necessary for me to tell you about it.

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