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Abstract:

The "Southern Fire" is an ethno-religious conflict in the southernmost region of Thailand that has claimed thousands of innocent lives since an upsurge in violence in 2004. Although it does not catch the world’s attention as much as other conflict cases in the same region, daily violent incidents are ongoing for more than a decade. The violence in the South has multiple causes including historical concerns, economic marginalisation, political and social issues, religious and cultural differences, educational opportunity inequities, and judicial discrimination.

According to a framework for conflict resolution, for the Thailand case, the state’s policy alone could not resolve the conflict as it focused mainly on implementing a “peacekeeping” strategy by increasing the number of security forces and pursuing a “peacemaking” strategy via peace talks. However, to create lasting peace in this region, civil society actors need to be involved in a “peacebuilding” strategy in order to keep the balance of socio-economic structures and prevent violence from happening again.

This study used the qualitative method employing in-depth interviews and documentary research. The data was collected through person-to-person interviews with representatives of twenty-nine civil society groups. This study examines the role of the civil society sector in building peace in southern region; the efficacy of civil society groups; the problems of civil society groups active in the South; and puts forward recommendations on how to improve the work of the civil society groups.

This research concludes that the civil society sector plays various roles in attempting to create peace in this region. Together with other actors, the civil society sector can be an important part of the solution to reduce the violence and can play a major role in building sustainable peace in southern Thailand when the violence eventually stops.

Keywords: Civil society; ethnic-religious conflict; Southern Thailand; peacebuilding

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Conflict

The "Southern Fire" is known to the Thais as the ethno-religious conflict in the southernmost region of the country that has claimed almost 4,000 lives since an
upsurge in violence in 2004. The near daily attacks including ambushes and bombings are ongoing and more than half of the deaths are those of innocent people. The minority Malay Muslims, geographically concentrated in the three southernmost provinces, are divided from other Thais not only by religion but also by broader cultural differences. Most Muslims in Southern Thailand share the same characteristics as Muslims in Malaysia.

In the past, the southernmost provinces were known as the Malay Kingdom of Patani and considered a colony of Siam. Because of Pattani’s prosperity from being a centre for trade and also as the centre of Islamic religion, it tried to separate itself from Siam. After the signing of the Anglo-Siamese Treaty in 1909, Pattani became only a province under Thai rule.

Tension between the Pattani region and the central government in Bangkok continued and was intensified after the state attempted to modernise the country. The extreme nationalist policies of General Phibulsongkhram caused a Patani People’s Movement to be formed to resist these policies that were perceived as the state trying to destroy their Muslim identity. After the disappearance of the Movement’s leader while under police custody in 1954, and because of the continuation of the assimilation policies, three major separatist groups were established: namely, the Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani (BNPP, 1959), Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN, 1963) and the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO, 1968). These groups were called separatist groups because their commitments initially were to establishing an independent Islamic state. However, it seems the objectives of the insurgent groups today have changed to those of autonomy and justice rather than independence.

From the early 1980s to the end of the 1990s, violence in the southern region declined dramatically. It was mostly because the new government’s approach, which emphasised public participation as well as social and economic development rather than a purely military strategy, was effective in reducing the violence.

The violence in the deep south escalated dramatically after Thaksin Shinawatra became Prime Minister. His hardline security approaches and

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administration policies were widely criticised.\textsuperscript{3} The degree of violence in 2004 rose and there was a sudden upsurge of violence in these provinces. The three major violent incidents which occurred in 2004 are as follows: the army camp raid in Narathiwat on 4 January, the Krue Se Mosque on 27 April and the Tak Bai Tragedy on 25 October.

Since the return of violence in 2004, the forms in which it has occurred have changed depending on the tactics of the government and the insurgent groups. At the beginning of the violent upsurge, from 2004 to mid-2007, a rapidly escalating wave of insurgent attacks were fuelled by the brutal incidents of the Krue Se Mosque and Tak Bai massacres. The government handled the conflict by using aggressive counterinsurgency measures. The national policies concerning the violence in the deep south depended on the government’s leaders and overall circumstances during that time. After the heavy-handed measures used by Thaksin’s government, the latter governments have seemed to handle the conflict in a more compromising manner. However, some governments did not put in any efforts to improve the violent situation in these provinces because they had other more urgent issues to deal with, for example, the downturn in the economy, political crises and natural disasters.

The conflict has now moved to a new phase after formal peace dialogues were set up between the representatives of the Thai government and the BRN group in February 2013: the first ever official peace talks. This new phase of the conflict is being impacted by two new factors which are major tactical changes on both sides. The first is the influence of the official peace talks. The second is the growing government counterinsurgency measures, especially in intelligence operations. The violence is now becoming increasingly close-fought with a sharp rise in combatant casualties on both the state’s and militant groups’ sides.

1.2 Possible Causes of the Conflict in Southern Thailand

In order to resolve the conflict, the root causes must be clarified first. The ethno-religious conflict in Southern Thailand has multiple causes including historical concerns, economic marginalisation, political issues, social and cultural differences, educational opportunity inequities and judicial discrimination.

First, the distorted political history between Siam and the Kingdom of Pattani created prejudice among Muslims in the South and was used to mobilise their sentiment against the state.\(^4\)

The second factor is economic inequality as these three provinces are among the least developed in the country.\(^5\) Disparities between the centre and the rural areas have resulted in economic underdevelopment in the deep south. The government has failed to respond to the local people’s needs because most public policies are decided by the central government without participation from the local people. In addition, there are several reasons for constant poverty in the region such as the high birth rate and the lack of education.

Thirdly, the failure of the government in handling the insurgent problem includes dissolving the key state authorities in the region. Moreover, having a short-term governments make it difficult to produce tangible outcomes.

Fourthly, social and cultural differences can cause tensions. As Muslim identity in the South is different from the rest of the country, local people in the region feel very much connected with those in Malaysia because they share more similarities. Furthermore, the South also has a reputation as having a high crime rate and other forms of illegitimate business.

The fifth cause is an educational one. ‘Ponoh’, which provides both religious and academic teachings, was seen a threat to national security as they could be a breeding grounds for potential radical Muslims. Moreover, because of a syllabus imbalance, only a few graduates from ponohs are able to further their professional degree in a higher institution.

Finally, the problem of injustice is one factor which stimulates the conflict in the south. Due to the state’s lack of understanding and acceptance of cultural differences, local people do not trust government officials, have no faith in the justice system and do not rely on the national justice process.

There are many conflicting views about the causes of the conflict, but it has never been confirmed what the real reason behind the violence is. All the above factors contribute to local discontentment and tension in ethnic relations. However, the researcher believes that the root cause of the conflict is the disparity between the


Muslims in the south and the majority of the country. Muslims have always thought that they are ignored by the central government. They consider themselves to be regarded as second-class citizens in the country by everybody else.

2. Theoretical Review and Methodology

2.1 Purposes and Process

As a civilian living in southern Thailand, the researcher has realised that it is the whole country’s responsibility to help find potential solutions to the conflict. As the civil society sector dealing with the southern conflict has grown quickly since the new round of violence, it will be useful if there is some research about how the civil society sector can get involved in the peacebuilding process. This research aims to find the most suitable solution for the violent conflict in the southernmost provinces of Thailand; to promote the civil society sector as a tool of a non-violent approach which could help building a sustained peace in these provinces; to study the role of the civil society sector in building peace in the southernmost provinces; and to strengthen civil society groups attempting to find a solution to the insurgent problem in this region.

This research used the qualitative method by employing in-depth interviews and documentary research. The study used both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through person-to-person interviews with the leaders or representatives of civil society groups in Thailand. Secondary data were from, for example, published books and academic journals. The interview was a non-random sampling procedure using purposive sampling. Twenty-nine civil society groups were selected as research samples, mostly based in the southern provinces. These groups were classified into eleven categories: natural resources issues, human rights, media, academic, religious and culture, economic, public health, women, youth, multi-purpose and government agencies.

The questions used in the interviews were classified into four main sections: 1) the characteristics of civil society groups involved in attempting to resolve ethnic conflict in Southern Thailand; 2) the roles of civil society groups; 3) the effectiveness of civil society groups in resolving the conflict; and 4) difficulties and recommendations.

This study adapted some techniques from grounded theory and mind mapping as approaches to analyse data from the interviews. The SWOT Analysis, a
tool from strategic management theory, was used to evaluate the effectiveness of civil society groups. The main concept of SWOT Analysis is to study both the internal and external factors that affect civil society groups. The 7S Model was used as a framework to analyse internal factors while external factors were assessed by the PEST Analysis.

2.2 Lessons from Ethno-religious Conflicts and the Role of Civil Society in South and Southeast Asia

Most countries in South and Southeast Asia have been facing an internal conflict since the colonial period. The problems caused by ethnicity and religion remain the important causes of ongoing conflicts, for example, the Assam conflict in India, the Mindanao conflict in the Philippines and the hill tribe conflicts in Myanmar as well as former conflicts such as the Eelam war in Sri Lanka and the Aceh conflict in Indonesia. While some countries share common characteristics and patterns of conflict; each case, however, has its own distinct history and unique causes. Although Thailand is the only one country in this region that has never been colonised, nevertheless, colonialism still affected the country. The Treaty signed by Siam and the British created discontentment among Muslims in the South who became a minority of the country instead of joining the Muslim-majority neighbouring country.

It also discussed the role of the civil society sector in these cases of conflict. Although it is difficult for civil society actors to get involved in an official peace process, they have played a significant role in creating a better atmosphere for peacebuilding. The main role of civil society groups in these countries is secretarial or supporting tasks which include, for example, providing popular support for peace, promoting negotiation and reconciliation between conflicting parties, creating links at the local level between different ethnic communities and monitoring a ceasefire.

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6 Samir Kumar Das, Conflict and Peace in India’s Northeast: The Role of Civil Society (Washington: East-West Center, 2007), 42.
process. Therefore, involvement of the civil society sector is very important to create and maintain peace in this problematic region.

2.3 Why the Civil Society Sector is Important in Building Peace

According to the scholars, the civil society sector plays a significant role in building peace and peace has various aspects and meanings. Relevant actors in the conflict can be various, but each one plays a different part in the conflict resolution. It was accepted widely that civil society’s involvement can create a lasting peace in the conflict area, for example, the Peace-building Model by Stephen Ryan\textsuperscript{11} and Third-party Strategies in conflict transformation by Cordula Reimann\textsuperscript{12}.

It was found that the past government policies focused mainly on security issues, especially increasing troop strength, implementing laws and reorganising the government agencies. These policies could reduce the violence for some time, but the tensions remain and the root causes of the conflict have still not been resolved. It was shown that the government’s policy alone could not resolve the problem. Thus, civil society actors are needed to be involved in building peace in the region.

The concept of peace was described as having two different scopes and meanings.\textsuperscript{13} The state plays the most important role to achieve a negative peace which is to stop direct physical violence and to sign a ceasefire agreement. Nevertheless, to create a positive peace, which means achieving sustainable peace in society, it is the civil society sector that plays a vital role in creating a culture of peace and increasing social justice in the conflict area. Where states had failed in handling the conflict, the civil society sector was seen as a necessary party for reducing the violence and creating peace in the long term. Moreover, the aim of international diplomacy is no longer only to settle disputes, but also to prevent future conflict through transforming and improving attitudes in societies. Therefore, some peace strategies have been developed to enhance the participation of civil society in solving conflicts.

Based on the researcher’s experience and an analysis of researches concerning civil society’s roles in building peace, eight roles of civil society were

determined including that of being security protector, representative, bridge-builder, relief worker, monitoring observer, academic, public communicator and peace-builder. These roles can be used to analyse the contributions of civil society in resolving the ethno-religious conflict in the three southernmost provinces.

2.4 Civil Society Involved in Resolving the Southern Conflict

According to the fieldwork, civil society groups involved in attempting to resolve the conflict have different characteristics. The main purposes of civil society groups in this area were changed after an upsurge in violence. In the past, civil society groups in the south had similar aims to other groups in the rest of the country which was to improve the general social well-being and the local economy. Until 2004, many existing civil society groups shifted their roles and new civil society groups were formed with aims concerning the conflict.

There are not many key persons from civil society networks who play significant roles in this region. Many of them are from academic networks and one person could be involved in one or more civil society groups. Not surprisingly, most civil society groups in the deep south were formed by Muslims as they are the majority in this region. There are both full-time staff and volunteers working in the civil society groups. Those who work for civil society groups in the deep south are mostly volunteers who already have full-time jobs. The size of civil society networks have expanded. One of the reasons is that most civil society groups are normally open to all who are interested in their goals and activities and do not have membership requirements. Moreover, many civil society groups have their offices located in the town area which makes it easy to connect to and communicate with the community.

Although the state has encouraged civil society groups to register with the government agencies, only 15 per cent have been registered as foundations or associations. Many civil society groups have tried to upgrade from casual networks into registered organisations. Unfortunately, many of them have some difficulties in reaching the government’s requirements for registration. Civil society groups are poor in evaluation and getting feedback from the local population. It seems they are concerned more with process than the outcome. The good thing is that most civil society groups have simple and flexible structures which make them suitable for application in uncertain circumstances. Difficulties in finding financial support are not a concern for civil society groups and they normally receive funds from more than
one source. Various funding sources are available for civil society groups, such as the state, international organisations, the community, donations, their own members, and private business groups. The major financial support for civil society groups in the South are from international organisations.

Cooperation between civil society groups and other sectors is important for their group’s success. Local people respond to activities hosted by civil society groups quite well because most projects were based on the locals’ needs. Some civil society groups were good at cooperating with each other while some saw other groups as competitors to their funding. The relations between civil society groups and state are various. While some civil society groups were supported by the government, some saw other groups as opposition. For the private sector, cooperation between the business sector and the civil society sector is very rare. The only activity that the business sector is involved in is giving donations or financial support. Relations with international organisations occur in many ways, for example, as funding sources, or for exchanging knowledge and sharing data.

3. Main Findings
3.1 Role of the Civil Society Sector

According to, the fieldwork and an analysis of it, the three significant roles that civil society groups are playing in attempting to resolve the conflict are those of bridge-builder, academic and relief worker.

Civil society groups often play more than one role and the basic role of the bridge-builder is the one which most groups in the south are playing. To fill the gap of the differences in religion, culture, identity and ways of life, civil society groups can act as a bridge which will bring government and local people in the deep south closer to one another. As people are afraid of becoming a target of the state or militant groups, the civil society groups which act as bridge-builders have created better understanding and strengthened trust among the conflicting parties. Today, one of the significant successful efforts of civil society groups is creating a safe common space for relevant parties to communicate and share their ideas independently. Civil society networks have become a channel for people to share their ideas and work together for their community.

Scholars in academic institutions in this region play a leading role in brainstorming for potential solutions from other scholars who are experts in Peace
Studies in Thailand and also from those overseas. Moreover, this role aims to help promote non-violent solutions giving greater knowledge about Peace Studies and doing further research concerning conflict resolution. A number of researches have offered some alternative political solutions for the deep south conflict. As a result of the strong academic networks in the civil society sector, the autonomy solution once banned by the government is now widely acceptable to be discussed in public. The ideas which are supported by knowledge and academic data are stronger than the solution based on feelings or opinions from some parties. Furthermore, this academic role covers work that targets the young generation by helping to promote the growth of the volunteering spirit in children and youth who are seen as the key actors to keep a lasting peace in this region.

According to the interviews, it was found that there are a number of civil society groups carrying out this role. To provide urgent assistance to the victims of violence, this task of civil society groups is necessary, especially when the state fails to fulfil their duty. Moreover, to get assistance from the government usually takes a longer time and has more procedure. The main tasks of relief workers are to visit people injured because of the violence and to distribute money to those victims and their families. The long term projects, such as training them for careers or providing accommodation, have also been launched as giving money is not a sustainable solution. Furthermore, the civil society groups are aware of the need to heal of the minds of the victims by providing moral support and psychological consultation. As relief work is not a complicated task and is able to get funded easily, this role seems very popular among the civil society groups that deal with the southern conflict. Relief work was seen as an easy opportunity for some fake civil society groups to take the benefits and to use these for themselves.

3.2 Efficacy of the Civil Society Sector

The status of the civil society sector dealing with the conflict in the deep south has a potential to grow as it has a number of strong internal factors and many opportunities that can increase capabilities and help the groups to perform better. Civil society groups in the south have created two strengths of ‘Shared values’ including a common space and diversity. They have a flexible ‘Structure’ and effective ‘System’ including a comprehensive database and healthy financial status. The significant strength of civil society today is also its unique ‘Style’ of leadership.
In terms of the external opportunities, which concern the ‘Political’ element, civil society groups have been encouraged well by the government. The ‘Economic’ factor provides a good opportunity for funding, especially financial support by international agencies. The locals, as part of the ‘Social’ element, are keen to participate in their projects and to share experiences. Finally, the ‘Technological’ element also offers various channels to enhance their groups’ communication.

Interestingly, the government factor became an important variable for the civil society sector because it can be considered as both advantageous and disadvantageous depending on the circumstances and perspectives of each civil society group. Some civil society groups view government as an opportunity for sustainable funding sources while other groups have never relied on the state or even see the state as a threat.

Although the civil society sector has many strong factors that are advantages, there are some weaknesses that cause concern.

3.3 Difficulties Faced by the Civil Society Sector

There are a number of weaknesses and threats that the civil society sector is facing. There are four problems, including human resources, time management, influence from funding sources, and political and safety issues, which the researcher has identified as being important and which can have a serious impact on the civil society sector. This is because these factors are the elements that keep the civil society groups going. Without staff, time, money and a safe environment, any kind of work cannot be done. External factors, political and economic elements, were considered important as they are difficult to control and have high influence on the work of civil society.

The issues concerning human resources are the qualifications of the staff, the need for more specialists and the skills of the people who work in this sector. Also, language is a barrier in communication between the locals and civil society groups. As a huge amount of money has been distributed into this region, money has gradually turned people who work in the civil society sector from working based on a volunteering spirit to being money-centred. When money is involved, people became more selfish and think of their own benefit first.

Another obstacle for civil society is lack of time. Time management is a problem for many groups because staff normally have their full-time work. It is a struggle for them to manage and dedicate time for volunteering work. Arranging time
for group meetings and attending conferences which may be useful for their groups are also difficult.

Financial support is important for the success of the civil society sector in resolving the ethno-religious conflict and this issue has resulted in various problems. Many of the civil society groups in this region are financially sponsored by international organisations. These kinds of funds are normally only for a short-term and are not sustainable. Although it is not difficult for civil society groups to find sponsorship, the flow of funds may be a problem. The civil society sector should be independent for what they aim to do but in reality most groups depend on funding sources. A huge amount of funding money has caused conflict among people in the civil society networks because they were competing for sponsorship.

The political factor has a strong impact on civil society’s activities. The unstable political situation in Thailand makes it difficult for civil society to run their projects continuously. This is because each incoming government has different focuses in its policy and a new leader has his/her own style to deal with the problem of insurgency. The issue of personal safety is another problem. This safety issue obstructs the locals from participating in civil society networks as they fear for their life and the safety of their property from being targeted by insurgent groups.

### 3.4 To Improve the Performance of the Civil Society Sector

According to the results of internal and external analyses of the civil society sector, there are some recommendations to improve civil society’s activities. The three key recommendations that can help to enhance the performance of civil society groups that the researcher considers to be the most important are trust, understanding the needs of the locals, and strategy.

Working in the area of conflict is very sensitive and require some degree of trust between the relevant parties, for example, government, state officials, civil society groups and local communities. Thus, time, patience and deep engagement are needed for civil society to work with local people in a conflict area. Civil society should play a role in making Muslims in the south change their negative perception about the state and learn to trust government agencies. At the same time, the government should try to offer opportunities for the civil society groups to share their opinions, and to allow them to make decisions and to manage some matters.

Civil society groups should work based on a bottom-up approach depending on the needs of the local people. They should try to find out what the actual needs of
people in the region are in order to fulfill the locals’ needs better than following a plan that comes from the central government. Ideally, civil society groups should be initiated and formed by the locals who are aware of their citizenship and being a part of society. Moreover, civil society networks should try to make people understand their roles and how to be involved in civil society’s activities.

Today, the conflict is dynamic and there are many factors affecting the performances of civil society groups. Therefore, civil society groups should clearly identify their visions, objectives and plans for achieving their goals. While some factors are controllable, many are not. To ensure the group is aiming in the right direction, having a strategic plan is a useful idea. It is a good opportunity for the groups to assess their internal and circumstantial factors which can be advantageous or disadvantageous. Then, a suitable working plan can be determined in order to help the groups to survive in dynamic circumstances and to achieve their goals.

3.5 Other Findings

According to the fieldwork, there are some points that are not related directly to the role of civil society in resolving the conflict, but the researcher found them interesting and they could be useful for further study.

As drugs have been a problem in Thai society for a long time, there is no doubt that the southern provinces are facing the same problem. Besides the problem of insurgency in this area, many respondents mentioned that drug abuse and addiction among Muslim youths have become a new area of concern in this region. Religious teachings have been supported to be used as a tool to reduce the volume of this problem. However, the government should not overlook this problem which may be linked to the insurgent operations.

Interestingly, the hotel business gained benefit from the conflict as a number of seminars looking for the solution of the ethnic conflict have been held widely in the south, mainly in Pattani and Songkhla. Hotels in these provinces which are not popular for tourists since the violence erupted are fully booked by seminar participants. The hotel business, therefore, has unexpectedly profited from the southern crisis.
4. Recommendations for Further Study

The ethno-religious conflict in the southernmost provinces is a prolonged conflict which seems difficult to resolve. Therefore, this conflict has been of concern to many Thais. The violence is ongoing even though each government has attempted to end the insurgent operation in this area. There is, however, not much research about the civil society sector and its relation to the conflict in southern Thailand.\textsuperscript{14} Researchers may be interested to choose to study one particular category of a civil society group concerning their activities and how they are involved in creating peace in this area.

Funding is a complicated variable for civil society groups in the South. Funding can be considered to be both an opportunity and a threat. One area for further study would be the influence of funding sources on the civil society sector in attempting to resolve the conflict in these provinces.

Most people want to see greater cooperation among civil society groups in resolving the conflict in these regions. This is because it was believed that the wider networks can create a better change. One respondent questioned if it is true that the whole is more than the sum of each part? It will need further research to answer this question.

Another area for further study recommended is about the layers of the civil society sector. Since the upsurge in violence, there are many groups that want to be involved on the conflict solution. Civil society groups have divided themselves in the community by social class, education or region. These factors have widened the gap between the civil society sector and the grassroots.

Further studies focusing on the possibility of bringing political solutions into practice, and which model is the most suitable for Thailand are recommended. Civil society networks have been active in mobilising wide-ranging debates on some forms of the special administrative arrangement, or regional autonomy, which have included proposals for various models of new governance in the south; for example, the concept of “The Monthon”\textsuperscript{15} by Prawase Wasi and the model of “Southern Border

\textsuperscript{14} S21/45

\textsuperscript{15} Duncan McCargo, “Autonomy for Southern Thailand: Thinking the Unthinkable?,” \textit{Pacific Affairs 83}, no. 2 (June 2010): 268.
5. Conclusion

First of all, it should be clear that religious and cultural insensitivity has contributed to the conflict, but the conflict is not between the Buddhist Thais and the Muslim-Malays in the deep south. In fact, the tension and resentment of people in the South was caused by the disparity of opportunities provided by central government. However, the local people only want to have a peaceful and better quality of life. The actual cause of violence is from some groups of radical Muslim-Malay elite leaders, who are politically, ethnically and culturally conscious.

As far as a framework for conflict resolution is concerned, the Thai state has put a great effort in to increasing the number of military and police forces in the conflict area to stop the violence urgently which is a ‘peacekeeping’ strategy. However, the deployment of security forces cannot stop the violence in these provinces and may only obtain a negative peace. Another strategy used was ‘peacemaking’ which includes political activities. An official peace dialogue between the Thai state and an insurgent group held early in 2013 was a good start for the peacemaking strategy. The civil society sector has helped contribute to peacemaking in observing and monitoring although its role was very limited. However, negative attitudes among local people remain in the community. These strategies could be used together with ‘peacebuilding’ which will help keep the balance of socio-economic structures. This strategy aims to prevent violence from happening again and to create a sustained positive peace. In Thailand’s case, the violence is ongoing, although the civil society sector, a main actor in peacebuilding, has played its role in helping ameliorate the conditions which sustain the conflict since the upsurge in violence in 2004.

This research has proved that the civil society sector plays various roles in attempting to create peace in the South. Together with other actors, the civil society sector can be an important part of the solution to reduce the violence and even play a more important role in building lasting positive peace in southernmost Thailand when the violence eventually stops.

\[^{16}\text{Ibid., 270.}\]