

Separatist Violence Returns To Thailand's Deep South | Najmee

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#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. I'm Pascal Lottaz, an associate professor at Kyoto University, and today I'm joined by a very special guest. Her name is Najami, and she's a PhD candidate at Sankara University. She's focusing on family business research. She's also running a petrol station business in southern Thailand and was recently a victim of an armed attack on her family's petrol station. The instability in southern Thailand is what we want to discuss today. So, Najami, welcome.

#Najmee

Hi, thank you for having me. I'm really glad to be here.

#Pascal

Well, thank you very much for saying yes. I mean, maybe for everybody listening, we're connected through mutual friends, and we were all shocked to learn that your family business was attacked. Let me just show this here for a second. This actually made headline news, at least in Thailand and also in China and so on—you know, that this arson explosion happened in your province, Narathiwat.

#Najmee

Narathiwat.

#Pascal

Sorry, Narathiwat in southern Thailand. And this is actually a picture of your family's petrol station that was blown up by malign forces—it was completely destroyed. Here's another picture of what happened. This is, unfortunately, part of a very sad pattern from the past. The three southern

provinces have long faced this kind of violence. Just for everybody to look at this: Thailand is a very long country, and in the south, where it borders Malaysia, there are three provinces, including Narathiwat, where this happened and where the petrol station is. That's where these recent attacks took place. Now, I wanted to ask you—can you tell us a little more about what happened to you, how it unfolded, and what you think it means for stability in southern Thailand?

#Najmee

Okay, this took place in a district in Narathiwat, where my family operates a petrol station under the PTT brand. On the side, we also have a 7-Eleven and a Café Amazon. Late at night, around midnight, I was resting in a room behind the office when I suddenly heard a loud explosion. At first, I was shocked and confused—it took a moment to realize this was serious. My first priority was safety. I stayed inside and contacted the police and my family, trying to understand what was happening outside. A few minutes later, one of my employees called and warned me that the fire was spreading toward the office area where I was. When I came out, I saw staff taking cover. At that point, nothing mattered except getting everyone to safety. We tried to evacuate the area together as quickly as we could, because the people who came inside—I don't even know how to describe that kind of man.

#Pascal

You mean the attackers—the assailants. So there were people actually storming the petrol station, coming inside the shop.

#Najmee

Yeah, yeah, yeah. A man with a lot of weapons told the employees they had another bomb, so we were afraid to leave the scene because I thought there might be another attack. They came in and told everyone, "We've got bombs." So, yeah—yes—and luckily, we were all safe. After the incident, the damage was severe. My café and 7-Eleven were completely burned down. We couldn't operate at all. The petrol station was closed for around three months. During that period, we had zero income, but the financial obligations didn't stop.

#Pascal

Yeah, of course. I mean, this was an attack meant to make it impossible for people to operate these petrol stations, right? For you, it was one petrol station that you owned and ran there, but during this attack, several petrol stations came under fire, right? Can you tell us a bit more about that—how many in total, and why? Why would people blow up petrol stations?

#Najmee

Yeah, around eleven petrol stations were bombed in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. I think the petrol station, especially PTT, is a big brand, and it's a kind of signal—how to say—a symbolic target to show something, to send a message to the people.

#Pascal

It was only petrol stations from the PTT brand, right? So, for you as an operator, I suppose it works like a franchise—you get a license from them, and then PTT provides all the infrastructure, the fuel, and so on, and you operate on the ground, right?

#Najmee

Yeah, yeah.

#Pascal

So, what is PTT, and who owns that company?

#Najmee

Pardon?

#Pascal

PTT—the oil company. Who owns that company?

#Najmee

I think it's the Thai state—the Thai government.

#Pascal

Yeah, a Thai government-owned petroleum supplier. Has this ever happened to your family before?

#Najmee

No, no.

#Pascal

But it had happened before that petrol stations were attacked, right? Yeah.

#Najmee

Twice.

#Pascal

Who did that? I mean, who do you think was responsible for it?

#Najmee

Okay, I want to speak carefully, especially because this is an international relations discussion. In the southern border provinces, instability has existed for many years—like when I was 10, and now I'm 30—so more than 20 years. Analysts often describe the roots as complex, connected to identity, government, historical grievances, and the trust between the state and part of the local population. It's not a single cause. Another point often mentioned is that peace efforts have happened over time, but progress is fragile. There is the Barisan Revolusi Nasional, or BRN—we've known about this. It's widely described as the most influential Malay Muslim separatist insurgent movement operating in Thailand's southern border provinces, especially in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. But I want to be clear—I'm not saying this group was the root cause of my incident. What I've known for many years is that this group generally carries out insurgent violence in the deep south.

#Pascal

So we're talking about this insurgent force in southern Thailand, which in the past wanted to split off those three southern Muslim-majority provinces. Maybe just one more time, let's go back to the map, right? We've got Narathiwat, we've got Yala, and Pattani is the other one, right? Yeah, that counts as the three southern provinces. As we go up, they become majority non-Muslim, but in the south, it's majority Muslim. There were separatist movements before, but everything calmed down back in the early 2010s, if I remember correctly. This kind of violence hadn't been happening for the last 15 or so years—or am I wrong?

#Najmee

Mm-hmm, yeah.

#Pascal

Why is it happening again now? Why do you think this specific attack on the national petroleum company was carried out?

#Najmee

Yeah, I really don't know about this. I was also shocked, and I didn't think it would happen to us because we've felt safe for a long time. Yeah, yeah.

#Pascal

So, did this change your perception of political stability in the southern provinces?

#Najmee

From my personal experience, the most real part of history is the long-term impact on daily life. Businesses spend more on security, owners hesitate to expand, employees worry about safety, and families live with uncertainty. I don't deny it.

#Pascal

Do you think that the attack—I mean, obviously, it's a terrorist attack, and terrorism is a political phenomenon, right? They want to achieve something. These people want something.

#Najmee

Yeah.

#Pascal

Can you guess what they want? I mean, do you think this is the restart of the separatist movement?

#Najmee

I'm not sure about that. If I answer this very directly, I think responsibility cannot be separated from the political system that allows violence to continue.

#Pascal

So, are you angry at the central government in Bangkok? Did they do something wrong that led to this happening?

#Najmee

Not really, because they gave government compensation to us—for my employees who were affected by this incident.

#Pascal

Okay, so the insurance actually came from the national government for this? Or was it a special case?

#Najmee

Yeah, it was a special case—we got state compensation.

#Pascal

Do you think the people who did this might want you to stop working with PTT? Are they trying to send a signal—like, “Hey, if you work with this state company, you might get bombed”? Do they want you to change suppliers?

#Najmee

I'm not sure. No, they're just targeting symbols of Thai state authority—like security forces, public schools, and big companies.

#Pascal

Did they attack schools in the past as well?

#Najmee

Yeah, in the past, yes—and the teachers too.

#Pascal

But in your case, they tried to make sure everybody survived. They sent you outside, right? They said, “We’re going to blow up this thing, but we don’t want to kill anyone.”

#Najmee

Yes, yes, yes. That’s true for my case.

#Pascal

And do you think the police— I mean, are the police in the south now starting to investigate, or is the army involved as well in trying to secure the petroleum stations?

#Najmee

Oh, yeah. The police took care of us after the incident. They come around to check and make sure we're safe. Mm-hmm. But in terms of my family and my business, we’ve had to increase security.

#Pascal

But how do you do that? I mean, these are very violent attacks, right? It's not just a robbery. What are you thinking in terms of increasing security?

#Najmee

I think it's difficult—really difficult—to increase security at the petrol station because people can come at any time. The 7-Eleven is open 24 hours. But what we can do is... we've planned and trained the employees on what to do if they see something strange or someone who doesn't seem normal. We have an alarm system to contact the police so they can come quickly. Yeah, that's what we can do.

#Pascal

Yeah, of course. I mean, you're on the ground—it's basically not possible to solve the political problems, right? But in your view, if you could, if somebody granted you a wish, something you could direct toward, let's say, the central government in Bangkok or the regional government, what would it be? What's necessary to calm the situation down, to make sure these people don't want to attack anymore?

#Najmee

I think this topic has been talked about for so many years. From my point of view, I'm focusing on running my businesses, and the political part—I let others handle that, because I have no idea how to stop it. What I have to do is protect my life, my business, and my family. Just running a business in, uh, in instability.

#Pascal

It is extremely difficult, of course, so the main thing is to get stability back. Um, do you think there's any cross-border influence in this whole affair—like problems with Malaysia, or that these groups go back and forth between Malaysia and Thailand? Is that part of the problem, or do you think it's completely contained within the three provinces?

#Najmee

I have no idea. I really have no idea about this. Yeah. Because right now I'm focusing on how to rebuild the business, how to pay the debt, how to retain the employees—yeah, how to take care of them and make sure that after this, they'll be safe. We're thinking about that, yeah.

#Pascal

No, absolutely. While also working on a PhD—there's a lot of work on your plate. Did this experience in any way actually influence your research for your PhD, or is it completely separate?

#Najmee

Yeah, of course, because it's really directly related to my business. I'm focusing on the family business, and my research was on stewardship theory and family business resilience. And this situation is a plan where my family members step in during a crisis. Yeah.

#Pascal

Uh, did your family—I mean, family businesses in Thailand, or anywhere, are very, very important because they're so close to the ground, right? You know exactly your environment, you know exactly how to engage with the local community and how to serve—petroleum, food, and so on. Right, that's part of it. Do you think this incident is going to change things for others, or is the South kind of used to dealing with such attacks on daily life?

#Najmee

Yeah, I think people who were born and raised in the South of Thailand are used to it.

#Pascal

In a sense, it's about building resilience to operate in an unstable environment.

#Najmee

Uh-huh.

#Pascal

Okay, so for you personally, how far along are you with rebuilding the petroleum station? I mean, it looked like this—so is it back online again?

#Najmee

Yeah, and now we have to refurbish all of it.

#Pascal

How long until you can start operating again?

#Najmee

Three months.

#Pascal

Yeah, it really hurts everything. But, long story short, you're now recovering from this, and you'll continue life the way it was—yeah, you'll continue business as it was.

#Najmee

Yeah.

#Pascal

Okay.

#Najmee

And increase the security measures more. Yeah.

#Pascal

Yeah, and increase security. Najami, thank you very much for that overview. Is there anything we haven't talked about yet that you think is important to understand in this situation?

#Najmee

I don't think so. I have to say, everything is...

#Pascal

Well, in that case, thank you very much for giving me that overview directly from the ground of what happened. I mean, we're all praying and hoping for the best for the three provinces, for Thailand, and for Southeast Asia in general. Stability is very important, and I do hope the violence will come to an end. Najami, thank you very much for your time today.

#Najmee

Thank you for having me today. Have a good day.