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UNDERLYING VULNERABILITIES AND DRIVERS OF CONFLICT IN THAILAND

In recent years, Thailand has been troubled by both latent and violent conflict. Political crises have included violent street protests and the destruction of public property, which culminated in a military coup in 2014. Anti-Muslim sentiment is rising in some parts of the country, and grievances over land and water use and disparities in economic development have increased tensions that periodically erupt in violence. At the same time, the long-running insurgency in the deep south continues to claim casualties without a clear end in sight.

To date, research on conflict in Thailand has focused mainly on the Deep South, with much discussion of the issues, drivers, and push-and-pull factors that fuel the violence there. With few investigations of conflict in other areas of the country, many questions remain regarding the underlying pathways leading to the violence that has been witnessed in, for example, the north and northeast regions. A deeper understanding of the drivers of conflict is needed to address effectively the latent and violent conflicts affecting Thailand. For the purposes of this study, we understand “drivers” to refer to those push and pull factors that influence people to turn to violence and make it easier for violent people or organizations to attract followers to their cause.

To investigate the drivers of conflict and underlying vulnerabilities in more detail, USAID’s *Together* activity supported the design and implementation of a mixed-methods research project from November 2018 to June 2019. In partnership with five Thai universities,¹ the project explored issues of latent and violent conflict in the north, northeast, and deep south regions of Thailand to provide a better understanding of the drivers of conflict and the pathways through which individuals become influenced to participate in destructive or violent actions, such as arson or physically harming other people.

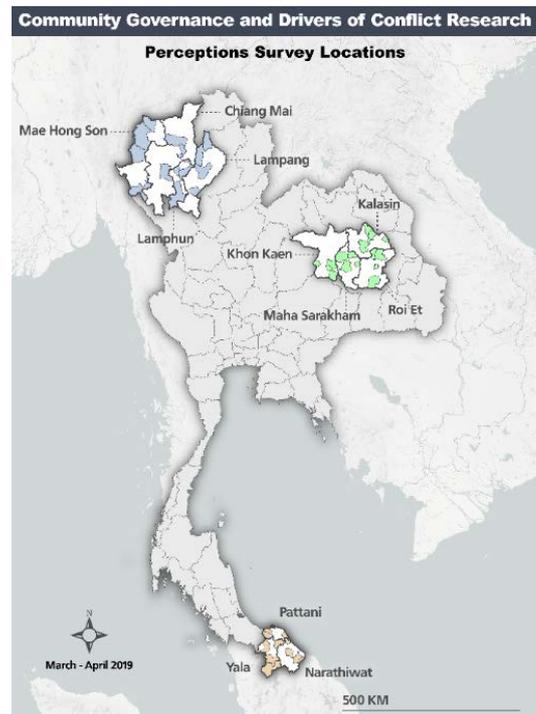
¹ The five universities are Maejo University, Khon Kaen University, Yala Rajabhat University, Prince of Songkla University–Pattani Campus, and Princess of Naradhiwas University. Khon Kaen University Ethics Committee for Human Research reviewed and approved the research methodology and tools for use.

The findings provide a foundation for the *Together* implementation strategy and a basis to measure the impact of its interventions.

METHODOLOGY

The research project began with a review of relevant literature and consultations with academics that led to a list of 10 assumed drivers of conflict in Thailand. With this prevailing consensus opinion in hand, USAID's *Together* activity designed a quantitative questionnaire to collect data to test for correlations between the assumed drivers of conflict and support for destructive or violent actions or support for extreme ideas. Research staff then collected a stratified random sample of more than 1,900 people aged 18 to 60 in 11 provinces in the three regions.

To understand how the assumed drivers form pathways to extremism, detailed case studies were collected from 40 people who had been personally involved in destructive or violent actions. This was done through semi-structured interviews with the individuals themselves, with family members, their close friends, and others to provide a full picture of their lives and actions.



WHAT DO THE DATA TELL US?

To uncover relationships between assumed drivers of and support for destructive or violent actions and extreme ideas, researchers applied the process of regression analysis on the survey data. This statistical analysis confirmed several assumptions about the drivers of conflict in Thailand and rejected others.

Factors that showed a significant relationship with support for extreme actions and ideas, and which confirm assumptions about drivers of conflict, include lack of self-efficacy, community marginalization and discrimination, revenge, and corruption.

Contrary to prevailing opinion, respondents' perceptions that laws are weakly or unequally applied, and that formal and informal security structures cannot be trusted to perform their roles *do not* emerge as significant forces driving conflict in Thailand. In fact, data analysis shows those perceptions having a significant, but inverse relationship with the dependent variables.

Factors that did not show a significant relationship with support for extreme actions and ideas include individual marginalization and discrimination, social conflict,² low levels of trust and satisfaction with government, and lack of sense of belonging.³ This challenges the consensus opinion of these factors as drivers of conflict.

The picture that emerges from analysis of qualitative data from the case studies supports these findings. Common among case studies across all three regions is the importance of family and community bonds in structuring support for and acceptance of extreme ideas and actions. Notably, family, relatives, friends, and the broader community are more influential than any specific

² Social conflict implies the struggle between people or groups in society for power over scarce resources. When the conflict involves the use of arms and military organization, it is usually called armed conflict (or war).

³ A significance level of p-value ≤ 0.001 is used in this analysis and throughout this discussion of results.

grievance or social/economic factor. Individuals profiled explained that in childhood they learned the values and beliefs of family and community and, through this, gained a deep sense of being a community member. This, in turn, provided them with a sense of value and self-confidence. As they grew older, they continued to receive support from their communities and were expected in turn to support others in their communities, as well.

In interviews with those who were personally involved in groups that committed destructive or violent actions, profiled individuals stated that they wanted to protect or seek justice on behalf of their communities. They felt persuaded by their peers and revered leaders to do the “right” thing and to act in the face of unfair treatment affecting their communities. Reflecting on their actions, interviewees spoke of the great pride they felt in helping their communities, and of the strong sense of confidence and personal value gained—and of the power they felt in taking control of their situation and future.

Analysis of demographic factors revealed that sex (male/female) had no relationship to support for either extreme actions or ideas, implying that women are as vulnerable to being influenced by the drivers of conflict as men. This does not imply that both men and women are equally likely to perform dangerous or violent acts—those are still done mainly by men. This finding mirrors results of research in other countries in the region and may indicate a shift in roles men and women are playing in conflicts.⁴ More research is needed to deepen our understanding of the roles that women may play in supporting destructive and violent actions in Thailand.

Data analysis at the regional level also showed that attitudes related to drivers of conflict were almost identical across the north, northeast, and deep south. That said, the data suggest that people in the north are more likely to support extreme ideas than people in the northeast and deep south. This finding raises the question of whether people in the north, compared with those in the northeast and deep south, are more intolerant of the ideas and beliefs of others and more supportive of unlawful actions to protect their communities. What might cause this regional difference?

Finally, it is noteworthy that support for extreme actions and support for extreme ideas share similar significant independent variables in the regression model, and indeed these two dependent variables show a significant positive correlation with one another. This suggests that while support

Prevailing consensus includes many drivers of support for extreme actions or ideas, yet only six show significant correlations:

1. Lack of self-efficacy
2. Community marginalization and discrimination
3. Revenge
4. Corruption

Significant but inverse relationship

5. Weak rule of law
6. Insecurity

No significant relationship:

- Individual marginalization and discrimination
- Social conflict
- Trust and satisfaction with government
- Sense of belonging

⁴ See, for example, Sara Mahmood, “Negating Stereotypes: Women, Gender, and Terrorism in Indonesia and Pakistan,” in *Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender, & Violent Extremism*, edited by Audrey Alexander, The George Washington University, Program on Extremism (February 2019). Management Systems International, “The Role of Women in Violent Extremism in Asia,” USAID (26 June 2018). IPAC, “Mothers to Bombers: The Evolution of Indonesian Women Extremists,” Report No. 35 (31 January 2017). Rafia Bhulai and Christina Nemr, “Gender Dynamics and Violent Extremism and Countering Violent Extremism in Southeast Asia,” Global Center on Cooperative Security (September 2018).

alone for extreme ideas may not make one necessarily more likely to perform destructive or violent acts, they do correlate with greater support for such actions.

This investigation of consensus opinion and assumptions regarding drivers of conflict in Thailand helps *Together* prioritize certain drivers—such as community marginalization and discrimination, lack of self-efficacy, revenge, and corruption—that influence people to engage in destructive and violent conflict. It also highlights how the pathway to extreme action is a social process that is structured by strong connections with family and a deep sense of belonging to community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

The research findings help us to reevaluate our understanding of drivers of conflict in Thailand and, subsequently, our strategies and actions to reduce vulnerabilities to these drivers in areas where USAID's *Together* activity works. Some of the more important implications include:

- **Programs seeking to address latent and violent conflict must understand the local social and political context, but also clearly identify and understand the most significant drivers and how they form pathways to extremism.** As this research indicates, it is important to test consensus opinion before designing interventions in order to ensure that assumptions regarding drivers of conflict are correct and to enable the design of indicators and evaluation methods that allow for effective measurement of program impacts related to these drivers.
- **The research shows the significant impact that a community can have on an individual's propensity to support extreme ideas or actions. It is critical that interventions are inclusive of the community as a whole rather than focusing exclusively on a few individuals that are perceived to be at-risk.** As indicated in the case studies, the pathway to extreme ideas and actions is a social process supported and reinforced by feelings toward and connections with one's family, community and local leaders. Family and community can also provide a positive formative influence, which can be leveraged to reduce both community and individual vulnerabilities to the drivers of conflict. At the same time, activities should include close interaction and partnership with leaders that communities trust and who provide productive guidance and encourage positive interaction, particularly with communities having different backgrounds or perspectives.
- **Interventions must involve the whole community and provide members with incentives and rewards like, but in place of, those offered by extreme individuals and groups.** For example, through increased and higher quality participation in community affairs and development, community members can strengthen their sense of self-efficacy and belief that they are supporting their community and making their leaders proud. This is further reinforced by seeing the actual impacts of their engagement on their community.
- **The acceptance of revenge and unexpectedly broad support of violence to protect communities and their way of life highlight the need to address latent conflicts and strengthen social cohesion and local capacity to mitigate conflict.** Interventions will be more effective if initiated and led by established and trusted individuals from within communities who can use their influence to mediate disputes and offer peaceful and effective alternatives to revenge seeking.