Malaysia’s relations with Thailand can be described as paradoxical. On the one hand, bilateral ties had been the least ‘problematic.’ On the other, the situation in the Southern Provinces had constrained relations and this could be seen during the administrations of Mahathir and Abdullah which became preoccupied with finding solutions. In ‘aggregating’ these two polar states together (‘superposition’), one could construe or amplify bilateral relations within a broader range of so-called overall ‘benign neglect’ that to a certain extent – characterised the approach of successive administrations of both countries. The objective of this paper as conditioned by archival sources as well as interviews seeks, therefore, to highlight the under-appreciated and overlooked role of the leadership factor in bilateral relations. This is in turn co-related to developments in political contestations and reconfigurations centred in Bangkok (“national politics”) which whilst promising little hope on the resolution for peace and stability in the Southern Provinces – contributes to the (unchanging) broader narrative. In short, directions in bilateral relations have been – to a critical extent – determined, influenced and constrained by the inability to achieve a breakthrough to the situation in the Southern Provinces.

Keywords: Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah Badawi, Southern Provinces, Bilateral Cooperation, Autonomy

Introduction

At the risk of over-simplification and over-generalisation, it could be stated that Malaysia’s relation with its northern neighbour, Thailand, is considered the least problematic compared with bilateral ties with the two other immediate neighbors, namely Singapore and Indonesia. Likewise, Thailand also seems to have the least issue with Malaysia as compared with its other immediate neighbours Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Except for a brief period in 2004 when the incidences of violence in the Southern Provinces (Deep South) of Thailand escalated, Malaysia-Thai relations were relatively free from tensions. Thus, despite the problematic nature of the Southern Provinces, the state of