



Unrest in South Thailand: Contours, Causes, and Consequences Since 2001

Strategic Insights, Volume IV, Issue 2 (February 2005)

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Strategic Insights is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Introduction

Historically speaking, Thailand is no stranger to armed conflict. Between the 1960s and early 1980s, the government fought an armed communist insurgency. Muslim separatists were active in the southern region of the country from the 1940s until the late 1980s. At the end of the 1990s, however, it seemed the Kingdom had solved its insurgency problem. The communist movement was dissolved and terrorism and political violence in the southern provinces was waning. In the past three years, however, southern Thailand has seen a recrudescence of long-dormant Malay-Muslim anger against the central government. The internal security situation in the country's southernmost provinces has rapidly worsened and worries are arising that the country will become another hotspot of Islamist terrorism in Southeast Asia.

This raises some critical questions: What is the conflict about? Why is violence rising? Who is behind the violence? How can Thailand counter this new wave of insurgency? What are the consequences for domestic politics?

This paper will discuss these questions. Section I describes the historical roots and the patterns of the conflict in Thailand's south until the late 1990s. Section II provides an outline of the current wave of insurgency. Section III examines causes for the latest outburst of violence. And Section IV discusses options for viable conflict solutions and the possible consequences for democracy in Thailand.

I. Historical Roots

Muslims comprise 5.5% of Thailand's population.^[1] Notwithstanding its relatively small size, the relationship between the Buddhist majority of the population and the government in Bangkok and particularly the Malay-Muslim minority in the southern region is of crucial importance for political stability and security in Thailand and Southeast Asia. While Muslim communities exist all over the country, by far the greatest number of Muslims living in Thailand, however, is of Malay ethnic origin. As the only Muslim population in the country, they share a common ethnic identity and form a locally concentrated minority in the Patani Raya region,^[2] which had been an independent

Kingdom until 1786 when Patani was conquered by the King of Siam and the Muslim dynasty was abolished.[3] The efforts of the Siamese government to subjugate the Muslim areas began immediately after its incorporation but became more hostile only after the Anglo-Siamese treaties of 1904 and 1909 which recognized the Siamese control over Pattani.[4]

With King Chulalongkorn's administrative reforms in the 1890s, the Kingdom developed a centralized bureaucracy and established central control over most of its territory. Doing so, the central government in Bangkok was strong enough that it did not have to cut autonomy deals with the local Muslim rulers. Rather, the government eliminated local elites as a politically relevant player, as governors and bureaucrats were sent from Bangkok down to the southern provinces.[5] The government divided Pattani into seven provinces which were governed by appointed bureaucrats under a centralized administrative structure.

Thailand's southern region



Source: [http://flagspot.net/flags/th\(s.html](http://flagspot.net/flags/th(s.html)

From the late nineteenth century on, the royal government developed a policy of nation-building from above, which forced the transformation of the multi-ethnic society of Siam into a unified Thai nation. In the south, however, Bangkok managed dissidence mostly by leaving the Muslims alone. This laissez faire policy changed shortly before and during World War Two when the country saw an acceleration of political efforts to assimilate the southern population.[6] When the ultranationalist regime of Phibun came to power in 1938, it followed a policy of enforced assimilation of the various minorities cultures into the mainstream Buddhist "Thai-ness"[7] in order to develop, in David Brown's version, "the mono-ethnic character of the state." [8] In the 1940s, this provoked the emergence of a separatist movement fighting for an independent Pattani. In 1948, the *Gabungan Melayu Patani Raya* (Union of Malay for a Great Patani) was founded in 1948. Following the setting up of the Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani (BNPP) in 1963, violent clashes between insurgents and the security forces were the rule in the southernmost provinces.[9] In the mid-1970s more than 20 separatist organizations agitated on both sides of the Thai-Malaysian border.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, the situation changed. The new government under General Prem (1980-88) stopped the assimilation policy; instead, it supported Muslim cultural rights and religious freedoms, offered the guerilla a general amnesty, and implemented an economic development plan for the south.[10] In the 1990s, the democratic government formulated a new "National Security Policy for the Southern Border Provinces" based on a "development as security" approach, which was supposed to be implemented during 1999-2003.[11] Deepened cooperation between the Thai and Malaysian authorities improved security along the borderland, which contributed to the decline of the insurgency movement as well.[12] Most observers described it, thus, as "waning" and "relatively quiet" at the late 1990s.[13]

II. The Recent Drift Towards Militancy

Even though Thailand's south contains fourteen provinces, the great majority of Thailand's Muslims live in the four southernmost provinces of Satun, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. A recent household survey conducted by the Thai government found that over 76 per cent of the population in these four provinces adhered to the Islamic faith.[14] These provinces are also hotspots of recent violence and insurgency, accounting for most clashes and violent incidences in the current wave of unrest.

Hotspots Of Insurgency In Thailand's South



Source: *The Nation*, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/specials/southterror/index.html>

Escalating Violence

The latest outburst of violence started in 2001. While in the years 1993-2000, there were only a few incidents of separatist violence, accounting only for a handful of casualties, Ministry of the Interior statistics show an increase of violence from 2001 on. In 2001 alone, 19 killed policemen and 50 insurgency-related incidents across the three most affected provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. In 2002, several police stations were attacked when the guerillas seized huge amounts of arms and ammunitions and killed some 50 police and soldiers in 75 incidents throughout the year. In 2003 official sources counted 119 incidents. The latest outburst of violence began on January 2004 when about 30 armed men stormed the army depot in Narathiwat, stealing 300 weapons and killing four Thai soldiers. During the ten months between January and end of October 2004, over 500 people reportedly have been killed in more than 900 insurgency-related incidents, including civilians, police, soldiers, and other government officials.[15] On October 25, 2004, the death of 84 Muslims at the provincial town of Tak Bai,

once again elevated the conflict.[16] Recent killings in Songkhla[17] raise fears that violence could spill over into neighboring areas

The recent assassination of a private Islamic school teacher and the wounding of four others in gun attacks in Pattani and Yala raise concerns that members of the security forces or local village defensemen could adopt the insurgents' tactics to pay personal bills and to spread counter-violence.[18] Separately, some 20,000 members of the notorious right-wing *Village Scouts* organization rallied in November 2004 to prove their determination to drive out the "separatist enemies" in the south out of the country. This added to the fears by human-rights groups and civil society activists that ultranationalist elements may open a Pandora's Box of nationalist backlash against what members of these groups view as a threat to monarchy, Buddhism, and the nation.[19]

Responding to the emergent crisis, the government enforced martial law in Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani, and deployed than 12,000 Royal Thai Army troops in the region. Although several mobile units are dispatched to protect teachers and civil servants, public order and infrastructure are eroding.[20] The educational system, for instance, came under serious stress after more than 1,200 teachers and education officials sought transfers out of the region; almost 1,000 schools in the three southernmost provinces had to be temporarily closed because parents were afraid to send their children to school. Several provincial court judges have also submitted requests for transfers out of the region following the killing of judges by Muslim separatists in 2004.[21]

Actors

Both the scope and co-ordination of operations point to new dynamics within the traditionally factionalized and ineffectual separatist movement. Despite large intelligence and internal security apparatus in the south, different government agencies do not seem to have a clear understanding of the groups involved in the violence.[22] It is clear, however, that several factions remain core actors in the insurgency.[23] Even though any account on these groups has to be taken with a grain of salt, it seems that the original PULO, although it is still active and maintains a website in English, Thai and Malay language (<http://www.pulo.org/>), does not have much military power on the ground. BNP/BIPP is largely defunct and Bersatu—an umbrella organization attempting loose political coordination among separatist groups — is believed to have no direct military operations in Thailand. Of the three remaining factions, New PULO is believed to be the smallest. GMIP may have a wider area of operations but the largest of the three main factions most certainly is BRM.[24]

Table 1—Main Insurgent Factions

Organization	Formed	Characteristics
BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional)	1960	Base of support lied mainly in the <i>ponohs</i> , today three separate wings: BRN Congress, the main military wing; BRN Coordinative Group, focusing on political agitation and urban sabotage; BRN Ulama, which coordinates a following among the Islamic clergy; largest and best organized faction
GMIP (Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani)	1995	Formed by Afghan veterans as an off-shoot of the older Gerakan Mujahideen Pattani; urban group; close relations to KMM (Kumumpulan Mujahideen Malay), its Malaysian counterpart
PULO (Pattani United Liberation Organisation) New PULO	1968 1995	Active in guerilla operations until the early 1990s; secularist organization with presumably no military capability on the ground Split as a dissent faction from PULO in 1995, but formed a tactical alliance with PULO two years later.
BNPP/BIPP (Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Pattani – Pattani National Liberation Front / Barissan Islam Pembebasan Pattani – Pattani Islam Liberation Front)	1963	Drew support from both traditional aristocrats as well as from religious elites; its objective was neither mere autonomy nor integration of Patani with Malaysia but complete independence and the establishment of an Islamic State, dar-al-Islam
Bersatu (Barisan Kemerdekaan Pattani – United Front for the Independence of Pattani)	1991	Loose political coordination, umbrella organization

What role ordinary criminals and religious authorities in the recent development play is controversial. Insurgent groups operate in a grey zone of crime and delinquent sub-culture on the one hand, and ethnic or religious consciousness on the other. As insurgents rely to some extent on the same infrastructure as criminals, it is likely that criminal gangs, bandits, and drug traffickers joined the Muslim insurgents in recent years. For many decades, Thailand has been at the key route for Golden Triangle drug trafficking to international markets. Furthermore, Thailand is a hotspot of small arms trade, with the military itself involved in the black markets for arms.^[25] Given the ubiquity of organized and petty crime, small-arms trade, smuggling, and drug trafficking in the south, it would be naïve to assume that criminals and terrorists can be clearly distinguished. Rather, a more plausible assumption is that there is a broad grey zone of greed and grievance in which there is no clear threshold between ‘entrepreneurs of violence’ and ‘warriors of convenience. Furthermore, there are no *jao pho*—major provincial bosses of a distinctly Mafioso variety who have penetrated politics and economics in Thailand in the past three decades^[26]—in the deep south. Pasuk and Sungsidh suggest that the existence of well-established local elites in many southern towns impeded the rise of new *jao pho* in the last three decades, while strong communist guerilla activities in the 1960s and 1970s “may have acted as a counterweight to the growth of new local potentates.”^[27] If this view is correct, crime in the south lacks the kind of informal controls and restraints that are exercised by individual godfathers in other provinces— which facilitates recruitment from criminal gangs for insurgent groups and, simultaneously, deepens the intelligence services’ problem of tracking down the specific links between crime and insurgency.

Furthermore, as reported in October 2003, intelligence sources have been in no doubt that some religious schools (*ponohs*) had lent themselves to paramilitary groups. Reportedly, young Islamic

teachers from Islamic boarding schools serve as recruiting officers and field commanders for insurgency groups, particularly the BRN.[28]

Another key unknown is the involvement of external groups. Some observers point to outside sources for providing training facilities, funds, motivation and instigation to the Muslim insurgents in southern Thailand, for example, Malaysian militants of the KMM and pro-*Al-Qaeda* groups in Bangladesh and Pakistan, and groups involved in arms-trade to Aceh, Mindanao, and Sri Lanka.[29] Thus far, however, there is no clear evidence of any direct involvement of either *Jemaah Islamiya* or *Al-Qaeda* in the insurgency. Furthermore, against such a connection speaks that violence so far is limited to the southernmost provinces. There is also a clear difference in operational methods. No attacks have been started on Western-style soft targets (tourism centers, western consulates, backpackers etc.) in the south, which are typically preferred by *Ji* and other *Al-Qaeda* affiliated groups. Instead, the recent insurgents have established a broad range of low-intensity, low-risk tactics that are difficult to counter by the security forces. These tactics—mainly arsons, bombings, attacks against state workers, law-enforcement personnel, local government officials, schoolteachers, and on Buddhist monks in particular, and raids aimed at seizing arms—serve the double purpose of destabilizing the region and shocking the Thai public, thereby weakening the central government’s position.

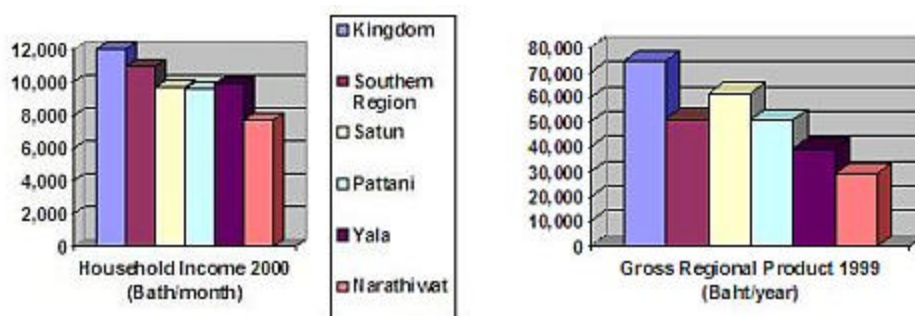
III. Causes for the Recent Outburst of Violence

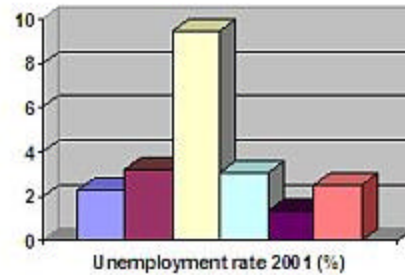
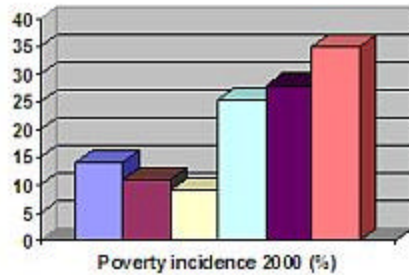
Ethno-religious violence in Thailand—as in most multi-ethnic societies—has multiple causes.[30] “Structural” factors including historical concerns, religious differences and social and economic marginalization resulted in local grievances and a latent crisis in inter-ethnic relations. The drift toward militancy, however, is caused by recent changes in the “enabling environment”[31] of insurgency in southern Thailand.

Absolute and Relative Economic Deprivation

To some extent, the political articulation of ethnic consciousness in Pattani can be explained as a response to the economic, cultural and political subordination of the Muslim communities as a consequence of “internal colonialism.”[32] According to this view, Thailand is the paradigmatic case of internal colonialism[33] in which the deepening economic disparities between the prime center (Bangkok) and the rural hinterland have resulted in economic underdevelopment of the south. Even though Thailand had an impressive record of economic growth between 1960-1997, the existing regional imbalances deepened during this period.[34] The available data show a high level of absolute and relative deprivation among the local population in the south, especially the deep south. While the northeast is the poorest region,[35] measured against core indicators of economic development, Satun, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat are among the least developed provinces of the Kingdom.

Figure 1—Regional Economic Indicators





Source: UNDP, Thailand Human Development Report 2003 (Bangkok: UNDP, 2003).

Furthermore, the shift of government policies towards the promotion of development in the peripheral region failed to reduce regional economic disparities between the south and the center. In the early 1960s, the mean household income in the south was one fifth higher than the average national household income and the regional GDP per head was one quarter above the national average. Four decades later, the south has significantly fallen behind.

Table 2—Trends in relative deprivation

	Household income by region		Gross Regional Product	
	1962	2000	1960	1999
Whole Kingdom	100	100	100	100
Southern Region	120.7	91.8	126.2	68.7

Source: Calculations by the author based on statistics taken from UNDP, Thailand (2003) and Malcom Falkus, "Income Inequality and Uncertain Democracy in Thailand," in Ryoshin Miniemi et al, eds., *Growth, Distribution and Political Change: Asia and the Wider World* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1999), ultimately on official data.

Although income levels increased in absolute numbers, the gap in mean household income and per capita income (Gross Regional Product) has widened between the regions. The relative deprivation of the region thus is now even greater than it had been under the earlier phase of economic development.

Political Subordination and Social Discrimination

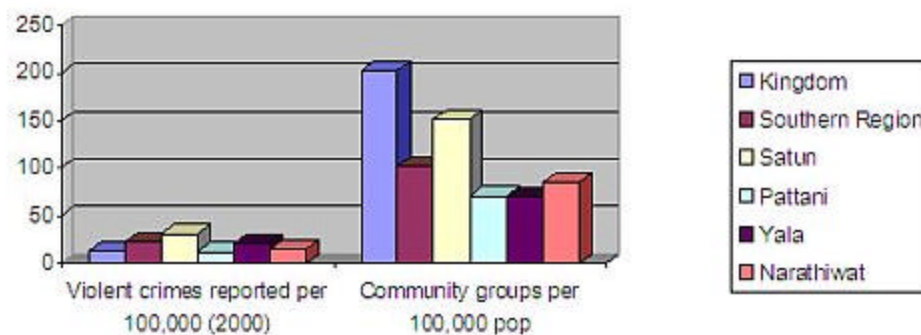
Economic deprivation is amplified by perceived political and cultural subordination. On the one hand, the constitution accords Muslims equal rights and opportunities. Muslims enjoy freedom of belief, symbolized by a network of religious institutions and organizations including more than five thousand mosques and several thousand religious schools. There is an active Malay-Muslim civil society movement, which promotes the collective interests of the Muslims in Thailand. Some of its members have risen to become successful politicians, academics, government officials, and businessmen.^[36]

On the other hand, several indicators point to a failed integration of the Muslims in the south. Although the government was in theory keen to increase the number of Muslims in the bureaucracy, in practice numerous obstacles ranging from educational attainment to demands for social conformity have limited such recruitment, especially to the higher grades of the civil service.^[37] Individual success stories as those of former President of the National Assembly,

Wan Muhammad Noor Matha, and former Foreign Minister of Thailand, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, are exceptions rather than the rule.

While the vast majority of the people are Thai-speaking Buddhists, the southern Muslims are ethnically Malay, who speak their own dialect (*yawi*), which few non-Muslims can speak or understand. Social capital and civil society are significantly weaker in southern Thailand than in the rest of the country. Furthermore, the south has a reputation as a ‘trouble shooter region’ characterized by a high crime rate, lawlessness, endemic corruption within the bureaucracy, smuggle, small-arms trade and other forms of illegitimate business.[38] In fact, crime rates in the south in general and in the Muslim-dominated provinces in particular are significantly above the national average, whereas civil society participation is below.

Figure 2—Regional Violent Crimes And Civil Society Participation Indicators



Source: UNDP, Thailand.

The most political salient manifestation of the economic, cultural and political subordination of the south has been the intensification of the ethnic consciousness of the Malay-Muslims and its emergence in confrontations with the state in the 1940s, the 1960s and 1970s and, again, since 2001. Economic backwardness, cultural hegemony of Thai Buddhism, and the widespread feelings of deliberate neglect of the south by Bangkok thus created a latent potential for political instability and ethnic violence.

But the question remains why insurgents in the past couple of years have been able to mobilize this latent dissatisfaction and to turn them into active resistance. Ethnic differences and relative socioeconomic deprivation *per se* are not sufficient to explain political violence. There is no automatism between relative deprivation shared by an ethnic minority and the emergence of violent antagonism between minority and majority. Accordingly, it is not (relative) deprivation *per se* that leads to political violence, but transformations in the political and socioeconomic “enabling environment” that alter the costs and benefits of rebellion. In fact, in the past couple of years three different developments have resulted in such a change: Islamization, shifts in government policies, and quality deficits in conflict management.

The Growth of Islamism

The conventional wisdom holds that “Islam in Southeast Asia has always been defined by tolerance, moderation, and pluralism.”[39] Right or wrong, as almost everywhere in the Muslim world, the past two decades have seen a stronger emphasis of Islamic identity among Thai Muslims. Thailand’s ethnic-Malay Muslims traditionally practice a moderate and syncretic variant of Islam, Sufism—Sunni Islam with a mystical moderate edge. Over the past few decades,

however, purist Salafi (and more specifically Wahhabi) teaching has been gaining ground—propelled by donations from charities and benefactors in the Middle East and fostering a greater orthodoxy in many of the increasing number of religious schools.[40]

According to the Ministry of Education, there were more than 500 private Islamic schools in south Thailand in 2004, covering more than 2,000 teachers and 25,000 students.[41] While most are registered with the Ministry of Education, some are beyond official supervision. Funded by private donations and in many cases founded by teachers (*ustaz*) who themselves have done religious studies in Pakistan and the Middle East, some *ponoh* became breeding grounds for potential radical Muslims. Separately, according to Thai government sources, in the past 15 years, 2,500 Thai-Muslim students graduated from religious schools in Saudi Arabia, 2,500 more from various Islamic universities in the Middle East and South Asia.[42]

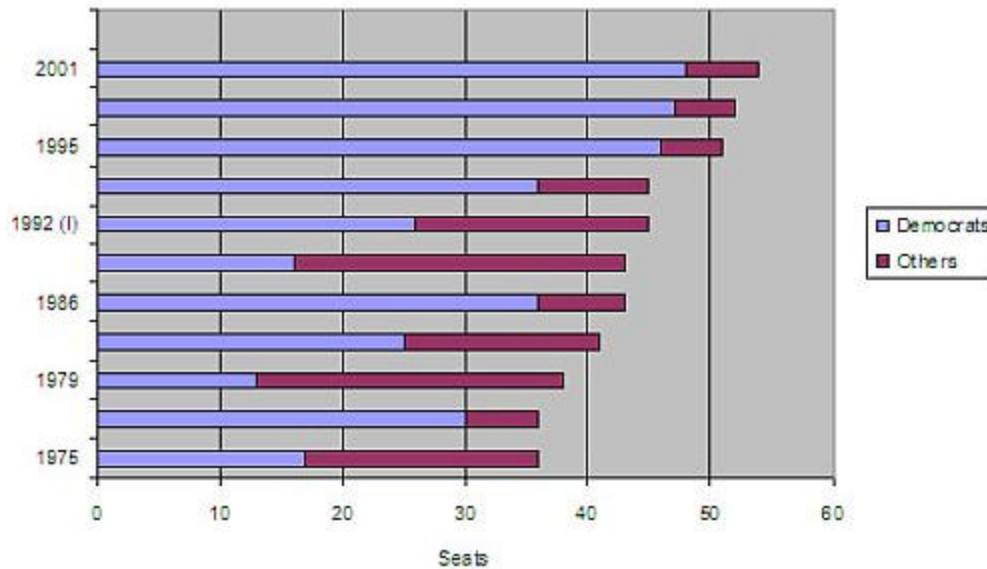
Upon returning home, few of these young graduates were able to find a job and were at the mercy of aid donors from Islamic countries in the Middle East. They ended up as religious teachers in local communities, thereby contributing to the growth of more orthodox and radical versions of Islam, such as Wahhabi and fundamentalist Islam. Politically radical young *ustaz* and their students became protagonists of the movement of *Umna-ism* in southern Thailand. This resulted in an expanded pool of disconnected youth that became prime targets for recruitment by the extremists. Inspired by the noticeable expansion of both radical Islamism and the transnational activities of the mushrooming number of radical Islamist organizations as well as by the Thai Government's assistance to the US war on terror after 2001, they became a spearhead of Islamist revival in the south.[43]

Shift of Government Policies

Increasing Islamic awareness and the split among Thailand's ethnic-Malay in Islamic fundamentalists, or reformists, and more moderate traditionalists contributes to a more favorable social climate for Muslim insurgency in the south and improves the opportunities for insurgent groups to recruit followers. However, the current crisis is also a result of some government policies that aggravated the situation in the region.

The insurgency problem in the south reemerged after the in January 2001 elected Thai Rat Thai party-led government decided to impose greater central control over a region traditionally dominated by the TRT's main opponent, the Democratic Party. Upon taking office, Prime Minister Thaksin announced his intention to make major changes in the government's policy in the south. This step made sense to break up the control the Democratic Party exercised over the bureaucracy in the south due to the party's near-hegemonic dominance in the region. From the mid-1990s the only seats not held by the Democrats were those of a group of Muslim MPs from the National Aspiration Party (which merged with TRT) in 2001, all from the border provinces.[44]

Figure 3—Elections In The South, 1975–2001



Source: Statistics taken from Michael Nelson, "Thailand," in Dieter Nohlen et. al, eds., *Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 304-9, based on official sources.

While these measures weakened the Democrats' party machines in the south,^[45] the policy did not take into account the south's unique culture and religion. The program contributed to the erosion of patron-client relations among local elites and voters in the south and the Bangkok-based DP that served as a prime mechanism for the representation of southern interests in national politics.^[46] Thus, it widened the intermediary gap between local voters and the government in Bangkok.

In addition, the government's decision in mid-2002 to dissolve the Yala-based *South Border Provinces Administration Centre* (SBPAC) has been widely criticized as a mistake that deepened the problems of information gathering and information analysis. An inspectorate set up in 1981 attached to the Ministry of Interior, the SBPAC had served as an interface between Bangkok and local provincial administrations. The same year also saw the abolition of an Army-run joint civilian-police-military border security office known as CMP-43 and handing of security in the south over to the police forces.^[47]

The old structures in place had improved the dialogue between the Thai government and the Thai Muslims. In its place, Thaksin put into place a corrupt Thai Provincial Police Structure ignoring the key elements of the previously successful structure. To make matters worse, Prime Minister Thaksin responded to the emerging security crisis by dividing responsibilities between the offices of three different ministries and reducing the Ministry of Defense to a revolving-door.^[48]

After the government became aware that previous measures had failed to improve the situation, the line of command for states agencies working in the region was restructured several times. Subsequently, responsibilities were recentralized and Deputy Prime Minister Gen (rtd.) Chavalit Yongchaiyudh—the architect of victory over communist insurgents in the early 1980s—was giving full authority to take charge of the situation. In early October 2004, however, Thaksin sidelined Chavalit again by picking up Deputy Supreme commander General Sirichai Thayasiri as the new chairman of the *Southern Border Provinces Peace-Building Command*, an organization set up in April 2004 to act as a super-agency directing and coordinating the operations in the south.^[49]

Low Quality of Crisis Management

Furthermore, the government's failure to ignore early warning signals from the south exacerbated the crisis. Initially, the government's response to the problem was limited to labeling the unrest a law-enforcement issue. Instead of recognizing that the country had an insurgency problem, the government blamed the violence on gangs of organized criminals. As late as April 2004, Prime Minister Thaksin denied such allegations, describing them as apart of an evil plot to undermine the country's tourism industry and tarnish its reputation as a safe destination for foreigners.^[50] The government thus lost valuable time for formulating a more coherent response to the emerging crisis.

What has further angered local Muslims was Thaksin's seeming insensitivity not only to the steady deteriorating situation in the south, but particularly to the humanitarian tragedies of both April 28 and October 25, 2004. Right or wrong, there is a perception not only among the Muslims, but also among non-Muslim human rights activists that the government lacks a willingness to hold the security forces accountable for their actions. Consequently, a growing perception among Muslims that the administration in general and the security forces in particular are anti-Muslim is adding to the complexities of an already difficult situation.

Cultural insensitivity and an increasing number of human rights violations committed by the police and the military have provoked fear and anger and strengthened the cause of the insurgents. According to reports by Thai newspapers and the National Human Rights Commission, as many as two hundred local Malay Muslims had been carried away by local police and military or disappeared after the security forces had looked for them.^[51] Several other measures taken by the security forces, such as intrusions into the unregistered religion schools, the arrests of teachers and the army's frequent search and arrest hunts have eroded the local people's will to cooperate with the security forces as well.

In addition, the government's decision in summer 2003 to dispatch Thai troops to Iraq and to consider the American proposal for allowing the use of Thai facilities such as Utapao Air Base to fight Islamic terrorism in Southeast Asia allegedly linked to Al-Qaida further created problems in the fragile relationship between the government and Muslims. The government's acceptance of US demands was perceived by many Thai Muslims not as compliance with the Thai government's obligations from the Thai-US Mutual Defense Agreement but rather as a consequence of the Prime Minister's personal to become a major US -ally in Southeast Asia. The outrage expressed by the radical Muslims against the United States, however, is shared by the moderate Muslim majority in southern Thailand, who began to fear that they could become the real target of the anti-terror war.

This fear was also motivated by two emergency decrees on anti-terrorism and money laundering which the government passed in autumn 2003. In view of the continuing climate of impunity for the security forces in the context of the violence in the south and the 2003 "war on drugs"^[52] these new security regulations raised strong concerns in the Muslim-dominated south, which the government's security policy will lead to a further deterioration of human rights and civil liberties in the south. Thai-Muslim community leaders mobilized more than 100,000 Muslims in a rally in Pattani, criticizing the regulations as being aimed at them.^[53]

Perspectives

What are the prospects for peaceful conflict solution in southern Thailand, how can the government counter the new wave of insurgency and what are the consequences for Thai politics? In the short-term, the overall assessment is pessimistic. In view of the present downward spiral of violence and counter-violence, more unrest must be expected in the near future. The long-term solution to the problem of Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand, however, is to develop a new

counterinsurgency strategy that combines short-term measures focusing on stabilizing the security situation with a long-term approach that redresses the political, cultural, and economic root causes of the problem is needed. Such a strategy must start with a broad recognition in government of the need to address Muslim disaffection from which both radical Islam tendencies and separatism have been drawing strength. A smart counterinsurgency strategy should account for, inter alia, the following considerations:[\[54\]](#)

- First, the RTP should be used as the weapon of the first resort against terrorism and the army only as the weapon of last resort. In view of the deeply flawed police system and RTP's involvement in human rights abuses, before the police can fulfill this function, improvement in the training of the police for counter-terrorism and drafting and implementing a code of conduct are necessary.
- Second, improving cooperation between police and military and revamp the local intelligence apparatus must be given high priority.
- Third, martial law should be lifted. Martial law gives the military too much power and caused several problems since it was implemented earlier this year. In view of the danger of further alienation between Buddhist and Muslim communities in the south, the existing *Self Defensive Volunteer Units* in the south which recruit particularly among Buddhist villagers should be dissolved. Whether these militias contribute in any meaningful sense to security in the south is arguable. Rather they may deepen the problem of small-arms trade in the region and increase the risk of 'privatized' counter-violence.
- Fourth, cooperation between Thailand and neighboring governments, especially with Malaysia, on issues of border security, border provinces development and religion must be improved. Although the past couple of months have brought some progress,[\[55\]](#) the weakness of intra-Southeast Asian security cooperation is, historically speaking, a characteristic feature of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. While Thailand's current challenge of dealing with ethno-religious militancy means that this is an area for cooperation with other countries in the region facing similar problems, the prospects for any significant improvements are rather uncertain.
- Fifth, overhauling the education system in the south and reforming religion schools to stop attempts at a radicalization of the local Muslim culture and religious practices through religion schools funded by Islamist foundations is necessary for cutting down the ideological and personal support for radical Islamist insurgency and, thus, is another top priority.
- Sixth, bringing economic development to the south is another crucial element of the package of measures for conflict solution. In view of the structural problems of economic development in the south, any short-term actions may have some symbolic effect on the Thai population but will not improve the economic conditions in the south. In the long-term, improving social and economic conditions in the south is crucial to dry up the local potential for violent insurgency.
- Seventh, "a commitment to human rights needs to be at the forefront of any country's counter-terrorist strategy."[\[56\]](#) Any further worsening of the human rights situation in the south which would only serve to deepening support for the insurgents' cause must be prevented. The current Prime Minister, however, prefers even tougher new security laws to thwart Islamic separatists.[\[57\]](#) Establishing a Truth commission with representatives from among the local Muslim communities, the government, as well as non-Muslim civil society groups and headed by respected judges, dealing with human rights violations in the south would be a first step to strengthen mutual trust.

A crucial difficulty in combating Muslim insurgency in the south is to convince the moderates that the internal dynamics of counterinsurgency won't put civil rights, the democratic process and cultural rights at risk. If the Muslim population stops believing in the political process in recently democratized Thailand, the government will lose the fight on the political front, leaving only military options available. Thailand's own experience with the communist insurgency in the 1970s

and 1980s proves that successful counterinsurgency is to a large extent economic and political, whereas military solutions are secondary at best.

The Thai government, however, may feel encouraged by the insurgency in the south to extend already existing internal security arrangements and emphasize the military response to the separatist movement. The net outcome of southern unrest, thus might, benefit authoritarian tendencies in the new democratic regime as the government could feel tempered to use the counterinsurgency to shift the political agenda to state security and away from democracy and human rights, as already has happened in some Southeast Asian countries.[58] Concerning the political dynamics of the “Thaksinization” of Thai politics[59] since 2001, the presumption that unrest in the south may drive the already faltering consolidation of democracy into the direction of a “semi-” or “illiberal democracy” is not groundless.[60] Two possible scenarios of democratic regression can be outlined. According to the first scenario, the ruling TRT and Thaksin choose a strategy of vote-seeking for the upcoming parliamentary elections of February 2005, that attempts to stoke fears and nationalist reactions among the Buddhist peasants, farmers, city-dwellers and working class in other regions of the country—groups that provided the TRT the bulk of its support in the elections of January 2001. On the other hand, surveys conducted in the past couple of months suggest that TRT’s support is rapidly eroding because of rising concerns about the economic and political situation.[61] If the TRT-dominated government fails to restore security, peace and law in the south, the party will run the risk that her legitimacy in governing the country diminishes. A crisis of government and the further worsening of the security situation in the south may provoke an authoritarian backlash in the political system, either in form of the restoration of authoritarian tendencies within the government or by provoking elements outside of the government to attempt the extra-constitutional ousting of the sitting government.[62]

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are solely of the author and do not represent the views of the US government.

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57. The proposed Draconian decree would have given security officers greater leeway in tackling violence. Following harsh critics even from inside the government, however, the PM stepped back from the idea (*The New York Times*, December 3, 2004; *The Nation*, December 4, 2004).

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