

Southern Thailand Insurgency Fails to Achieve Popular Support

By Peter Chalk

THE SECURITY SITUATION in southern Thailand has elicited growing concern during the past four years as a wave of militant attacks have swept across the Malay Muslim provinces of Yala, Pattani¹ and Narathiwat.² Despite the growing violence, there is little indication that the region is on the verge of a mass uprising, not least because the current generation of insurgents has yet to gain a strong foothold of support among the local population. The militants' lack of popular traction provides Bangkok with an unprecedented opportunity to garner greater trust and legitimacy in the so-called "deep south" (and thereby marginalize extremist separatist sentiment), but only if indigenous Malay Muslims are allowed to integrate into the wider Thai polity on their own terms.

A Catalogue of Violence

In the 43 months from January 2004 to the end of August 2007, a total of 7,473 acts of violence were recorded in the Malay-dominated provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, leaving 2,566 dead (which equates to an average of roughly 60 fatalities a month) and 4,187 injured. Civilians have been hardest hit, accounting for nearly three-quarters of all casualties, with respective tallies for the Buddhist and Muslim communities amounting to 1,124 and 1,330 killed and

2,483 and 1,238 injured.³ For a population that numbers only 1.8 million,⁴ these figures represent a considerable toll.

Besides the higher intensity of attacks, the nature of the current bout of instability in the south has been marked by an explicit religious undertone of a sort not apparent in past years. Reflective of this have been frequent attacks against drinking dens, gambling halls, karaoke bars and other establishments associated with Western "decadence"

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and secularism; the distribution of leaflets (allegedly printed in the northern Malaysian state of Kelantan) declaring that the Thai state is engaged in a systematic campaign to eradicate the Islamic faith and warning local Malays of severe reprisals if they do not adhere to traditional Muslim ways; and the increased targeting of monks and other Buddhist civilians—often through brutal means such as live burnings and beheadings—in an apparent effort to destroy the societal fabric by fostering communal fear, conflict and hatred.⁵

3 Personal interview, Pattani, Thailand, September 2007. These statistics are based on figures maintained by Professor Srisompob at Pattani Songkhla University (PSU), which are generally recognized to be the most comprehensive and accurate data set currently available.

4 Of the 1.8 million people in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, 79 percent are Malay Muslim.

5 Personal interviews, Bangkok, Thailand, November 2005 and April 2006, and Bangkok and Pattani, Thailand, September 2007. At the time of writing, there were already signs that the insurgent sectarian-focused strategy was beginning to "work." According to one Western official, indications of a far more radical stance within the Buddhist population had become apparent—especially in Yala—and were on the verge of spilling over into reprisal tit-for-tat killings. More seriously, allegations of the existence of an anti-Muslim vigilante force have surfaced. According to one Pattani-based academic, it is this militia that is primarily responsible for the spate of emergent attacks that have been directed at Islamic schools and mosques during the last several months.

The heightened scale of unrest plaguing Bangkok's southern border provinces has prompted growing concern that the Malay Muslim struggle is rapidly approaching a "tipping point" that could morph into a full, mass-based conflict.⁶ While such a scenario cannot be ruled out—the bulk of the local population clearly rejects the explicit assimilationist orientation that underlies the Thai concept of nation-building⁷—the possibility of an open-ended separatist war breaking out is being mitigated by the insurgency's general failure to achieve any real degree of popular support.

Insurgent Traction Among the Local Malay Muslim Population

In contrast to past manifestations of the southern Thai conflict, there does not appear to be a concerted effort by the current militant generation to win over the hearts and minds of the indigenous populations across Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. Indeed, other than repeatedly highlighting the presumed threat posed to Malay Muslim culture by a foreign and repressive Buddhist state, there has been little, if any, attempt by extremist entities to solicit widespread civic support through positive political propaganda or messaging.⁸ By contrast, the emphasis has revolved around intimidating the population through threats and directed acts of violence. Certainly, there has been no attempt to isolate local Malays from the effects of bombings and shootings—reflected in the number of Muslims that have been killed or injured in insurgent attacks—with resultant casualties either casually dismissed as collateral damage or weakly justified as the inevitable repercussions for failing to adhere to a "true" Islamic path.⁹

6 Views of this sort have been expressed in numerous regional conferences on terrorism and security in Southeast Asia attended by the author and have also featured in country assessments distributed by various think-tanks based in the region.

7 Three pillars underscore the Thai concept of nation-building: Monarchy, Religion (Buddhism) and (centralized) State.

8 According to one Western official based in Thailand, anecdotal reports began to surface in 2007 that Malay militants were engaging in mass round-ups of entire villages to forcibly impress the sanctity and legitimacy of their actions. Personal interview, Bangkok, Thailand, September 2007.

9 Personal interviews, Pattani, Thailand, September

1 Malays spell Pattani with only one "t" in reference to the historical Kingdom of Patani Darussalam. "Pattani," which is used throughout this paper, is the official transliteration employed by the Thai state.

2 Overviews of the roots of Malay Muslim separatism in southern Thailand can be found in Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand* (Bangkok: The Khadi Research Institute, 1985); Thanet Aphornsuvan, *Origins of Malay-Muslim 'Separatism' in Southern Thailand*, Asia Research Institute Working Paper No. 32 (Singapore: Singapore National University, 2005); R.J. May, "The Religious Factor in Three Religious Minority Movements," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 13:4 (1992); and Omar Farouk, "The Historical and Transnational Dimensions of Malay-Muslim Separatism in Southern Thailand," in Lim Joo Jock and S. Vani eds., *Armed Separatism in Southern Thailand* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1984).

Critically, the army and police have largely failed to offset these coercive tactics by providing an adequate security environment on the ground. This has inevitably led to a situation whereby the local populace neither trusts the security forces nor believes it has any choice other than to comply with rebel orders and assist in their logistical and operational efforts.¹⁰ As one Pattani-based Muslim scholar explained to this author:

For the insurgents, there is no perceived need to win over the population, as the people tend to lack trust in the security forces; [the assumption is that] they will therefore gravitate to [the insurgents] by default. [Militant] propaganda strategy has, as a result, largely taken the form of capitalizing on the mistakes of the authorities.¹¹

Although clearly motivated by fear, the bulk of Malays living in the border provinces have yet to be cowed into demanding outright independence. While palpable resentment over Bangkok's mismanagement of the south definitely exists, separatist militants have not been able to effectively translate this to their advantage precisely because their strategy has relied on brutality and scaremongering. Perhaps the best indication of this is that overt symbols of the Thai polity (such as the national flag and posters of the royal family) not only remain in evidence, but are also largely accepted, while graffiti calling for a "Free Pattani" is noticeably absent.¹² This is not the type of environment that one would typically associate with a seething hotbed of regional secessionist sentiment.

2006, and Bangkok and Pattani, Thailand, September 2007.

10 Personal interviews, Bangkok, Thailand, September 2007. Such perceptions are particularly strong given that most insurgent cells are located in urban areas (unlike the situation in the past when guerrilla groups operated from jungle hideouts), meaning that villagers have to interact with militants on a 24/7 basis.

11 Personal interview, Pattani, Thailand, September 2007.

12 Author observations during field research in Pattani and Yala, Thailand, September 2007.

The Future

Despite its seriousness, there is no indication yet that the insurgency is on the verge of going "critical." Most Malay Muslims do not seem to want an independent state and reject the extreme and arbitrary nature of militant attacks. The one factor that could change this dynamic would be a major crackdown by the security forces that results in large-scale casualties, or an attempt to forcibly institute a non-Islamic credo in the region.

It remains to be seen how the new political environment that has been brought about in Thailand as a result of the September 2006 army coup will impact Bangkok's overall response to the insurgency. Encouragingly, General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, who orchestrated the military takeover and who has been instrumental in appointing new members of an interim administration, has signaled that he is ready to negotiate with rebels in the south. Just as significant, his designated prime minister, Surayud Chulanont, has issued a public apology for past hard line government policies. Furthermore, in November 2006 he specifically affirmed that Islamic law should be given a bigger role in the south.¹³

These various gestures represent an abrupt change in tact from the non-compromising policies of the previous Thaksin Shinawatra administration.¹⁴ If these gestures were followed up with a vigorous policy agenda that allows Malay Muslims to integrate into the wider Thai polity on their own terms—rather than one which merely presses a Bangkok-dictated process of forced assimilation—a viable foundation for genuine ethno-religious reconciliation could still emerge in the south.

Dr. Peter Chalk is a Senior Policy Analyst with the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California. In addition to this position he serves as an Adjunct Professor with the Postgraduate Naval School in Monterey, California and the Asia Pacific

13 Personal interviews, Bangkok, Thailand, September 2007; "Thai Advocates Islamic Law for Far South," *New York Times*, November 8, 2006.

14 Thaksin consistently refused to engage in talks aimed at granting the Malay Muslim provinces greater autonomy, opting instead to deal with the situation in the south via a purely military-oriented approach.

Center for Security Studies in Honolulu, Hawaii. Apart from his professional affiliations, he acts as Associate Editor of Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, one of the foremost journals in the international security field.