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Southern Thailand: The Origins of Violence

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The assaults launched by Muslim youths on 28 April 2004 against police posts and military installations in three Thai provinces marks the climax, for the time being, of the unrest that has been mounting in the south of the kingdom since early January. Thus far, there are few indications of links with international terrorism. Should the situation escalate further, however, the existence of such links cannot be ruled out.

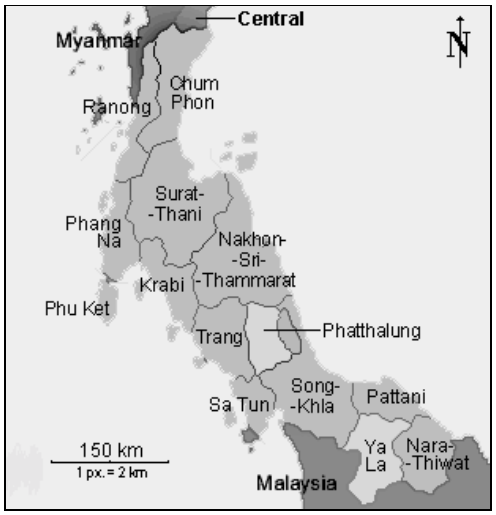
In the early morning of 28 April 2004, several groups of black-clad youths, armed with machetes and a few handweapons, assaulted fifteen police posts, military installations, and roadblocks in the southern Thai provinces of Yala, Patani, and Songkhla. The security forces had apparently been tipped off and immediately opened fire. According to them, 107 assailants, three policemen, and two soldiers were killed.

Shortly afterwards, the military used hand grenades and tear gas when storming a mosque in the town of Krueisei where one of the groups had taken refuge. Thirty youths died while a total of seventeen were arrested.

This event marks the climax, thus far, of the unrest that has been mounting in southern Thailand since 4 January 2004, when 364 machine guns were stolen during an assault on a military camp. Initially, as in the present case, the Thai government had blamed networks of drugs and arms smugglers traditionally active in the region. Given the sophisticated planning of the attacks, however (security forces were diverted by parallel assaults launched against twenty public schools, bombs were detonated along rail tracks, and roads were blocked by fallen trees), observers soon started speculating about political motives (among those subsequently arrested were senators and members of parliament) as well as links with international Islamic terrorism.

Since then, arson attacks on public buildings and assaults on police officers, teachers, and Buddhist monks have been reported from southern Thailand on an almost daily basis. Several bombs have exploded outside shopping centres. Thus far, 150 people have died. The government has proclaimed martial law in numerous districts.

Map of Southern Thailand



Source: Flagspot, <http://flagspot.net/flags/th(s.html>.

An Old Conflict

When large quantities of explosives were diverted from a quarry near the town of Sungai Golok close to the Malaysian border in late March, the Bangkok government officially started talking about a "separatist movement."

The region is home to the majority of Thailand's three million Muslims who represent about 80 percent of the populations of the provinces of Narathiwat, Patani, and Yala. Bangkok had occupied these territories that originally formed part of a Malay sultanate in 1902. A revolt in 1948 launched by Malay aristocrats with the aim of joining the Federation of Malaya was put down following an unsuccessful appeal to the United Nations in 1954.

In the 1950s, three separatist organisations emerged in the south of Buddhist Thailand as a response to the central government's ongoing policies of assimilation as well as economic and political discrimination: the Patani National Liberation Front (Barisan Nasional Pembebesan Patani, BNPP), founded by religious leaders supported by Thais studying in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan; the Revolutionary National Front (Barisan Revolusi Nasional, BRN), launched by progressive Islamic forces; and the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), created by students returning from overseas with a secular, nationalist orientation. The PULO soon became the most militant of the three organisations and at one point had more than one thousand fighters. Until the 1980s, all three groups received material support from Libya, Saudi Arabia, and other Middle Eastern countries. A small number of members were trained in Afghanistan.

Since the late 1960s there have been instances of splits, attempts at co-operation among the three groups, and co-operation with the Communist Party of Thailand which was to abandon its armed struggle twenty years later. The insurgents also received some support from neighbouring Malaysian states, albeit not from the government in Kuala Lumpur (in 1994, Malaysia built a fence to prevent border violations by both the guerillas and the Thai armed forces.)

In the late 1980s, the situation calmed down amidst the backdrop of economic growth, greater religious tolerance, and increased investments in education and infrastructure. However, in 1993 and 1994, the region was back in the headlines with reports of more than thirty cases of shoot-outs, bombings, and arson attacks. At the time, many observers blamed conservative politicians and military leaders who had lost power in the capital in 1992. In 1995, security forces estimated the combined strength of the PULO and the BRN to be about 120 guerillas.

In 1997, a new democratic constitution was promulgated in Bangkok that guaranteed religious freedom and conveyed certain autonomous rights to the provinces. More than 900 insurgents laid down their arms and registered for a government-sponsored reintegration programme. Others carried their message into the region's Islamic schools. Several leaders of the PULO and the splinter organisation, the New PULO, fled abroad. At the same time, Afghan-trained Thai veterans, who

were influenced by the Taleban, returned to the South.

Islamism?

To this day, nobody has assumed responsibility for the attacks and assaults. Neither is there any proof of links between the new guerillas on the one hand and Al-Qaida or the Southeast Asian terrorist network, Jemaah Islamiyah, on the other. According to Thai military sources, recent events would suggest a reemergence of separatist struggles organised by members of the PULO, the New PULO, and the BRN who have formed a new organisation named "Unity" (Bersatu). At the same time, however, mention has been made of an Islamic Mujahedeen Front in Patani (Gerakan Mujahideen Patani, GMIP) which has links to Al-Qaida, Jemaah Islamiyah, and the Malaysian Mujahedeen Group (Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia, KPM). Whereas the number of Bersatu-fighters has been estimated to be about twenty, the GMIP would be able to mobilise more than five hundred insurgents and up to seventy thousand sympathisers.

The military leadership believes that some of the younger guerillas were recently trained in Indonesia. The fact that stolen weapons have thus far not reappeared on the black market further suggests a rapidly growing organisation. Contrasting with the government's version that the GMIP has no political motives whatsoever, foreign observers believe that the group is trying to revive traditional separatism with the help of a "jihad ideology" derived from Wahhabite Islam. The GMIP thus has repeatedly called upon Thai Muslims to launch a "Holy War" against the "racist Bangkok government."

Another hint at possible links with international terrorism lies in the August 2003 arrest south of the capital of Indonesian citizen Riduan Isamuddin ("Hambali") who allegedly planned the 2002 Bali bombings in southern Thailand. At the time of his arrest, he was apparently preparing attacks against foreign missions in Bangkok during the October 2003 APEC Summit. Since 2001, numerous Indonesians have benefited from relatively loose immigration procedures regarding entrance to the south of the kingdom (from a US point of view, Indonesia, next to the Philippines, plays the most important role in the "second," i.e. Southeast Asian, "antiterrorist front.")

The Thai Government's Role

The Thaksin Shinawatra government is at least indirectly responsible for some aspects of the new round of violence. In 2002, Bangkok dissolved a southern taskforce run by both soldiers and civilians as well as shutting down a border liaison centre, thus closing important channels of communication for the local population. The following year, it let drug traders be persecuted by assassins in disregard of due legal process. Also in 2003, it closed ranks with the Bush administration and dispatched soldiers to Iraq. In June, the government, shortly before a meeting between Bush and Thaksin, arrested three prominent religious leaders in Narathiwat who had been suspected of links with (international) terrorists. Earlier, Washington had urged Bangkok to boost its co-operation against terrorism. Shortly afterwards, Thailand strengthened security in the southern provinces. In this context, armed police officers were stationed in Islamic schools, and mosques were occasionally searched with dogs trained to find explosives. Most recently, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur have launched joint border patrols, and Thaksin has been talking about the necessity of constructing a "protective wall" along the border. It remains to be seen whether a $560 million programme for the stabilisation of the region will not only benefit military security but civilian development as well.

It is especially among young people in the three southern provinces that the combination of traditional discrimination, growing unemployment, Thaksin's rallying

for the US, and heightened local security has inspired sympathy for Al-Qaida and Jemaah Islamiyah. Whereas criminal gangs are already benefiting from the growing unrest, southern Thailand, in the case of a protracted and escalating conflict, could become a safe haven and recruiting ground for regional and international terrorists.

Developments in the region have apparently contributed to the authoritarian leanings shown by Thaksin Shinawatra since assuming office in January 2001. Furthermore, and much like the October 2002 Bali bombings, the unstable situation in southern Thailand is likely to impact tourism and thus one of the country's main sources of income (Malaysian visitors have already been staying away). Lastly, new tensions in Bangkok's relations Malaysia and Indonesia can be expected as a result of a pro-American policy that lacks sensitivity in dealing with local issues.

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