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Conspiracy, Politics, and a Disorderly Border: The Struggle to Comprehend Insurgency in Thailand's Deep South

Marc Askew



East-West Center

Washington

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**Conspiracy, Politics, and
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Insurgency in Thailand's Deep South**

Policy Studies

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List of Acronyms

AFSC	Armed Forces Security Center
BERSATU	Barisan Bersatu Kemerdekaan Patani (United Front for Patani Independence)
BRN	Barisan Revolusi Nasional (National Revolutionary Front)
BRN-C	BRN-Coordinate
CPM 43	Civilian-Police-Military Command 43
DP	Democrat Party
DPSBPAC	Democrat Party Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center
ICG	International Crisis Group
ISOC	Internal Security Operations Command
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
NIA	National Intelligence Agency
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NRC	National Reconciliation Commission
NSC	National Security Council
PERMUDA	"Youth" (movement)
PIN	<i>Khruekhai Khao Pratcharatsadon</i> (People's Intelligence Network)
PULO	Patani United Liberation Organization
RKK	Runda Kumpulan Kecil (small armed guerilla force)

SBPAC	Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center
SBPPC	Southern Border Provinces Peace-Building Command
SBPPPC	Southern Border Provinces Peace Promotion Command
TRT	Thai Rak Thai Party

Executive Summary

Since early 2004, the escalation of violent events in Thailand's Muslim-dominated southern border provinces—dubbed variously by commentators, according to their assumptions and focus, as “insurgency,” “unrest,” “conflict,” or generalized “violence”—has opened a veritable Pandora's Box of discourses aiming to identify the culprits and causes, discourses that identify domestic, international, historical, and political/ideological dimensions. By early 2007, some nineteen hundred deaths had been sustained not only in the three Muslim-majority provinces, but in districts of adjacent Songkhla Province and the city of Hat Yai as well. The majority of the victims have been civilians, and over half of them Muslims. Despite the ousting of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) from power in the coup of September 2006, and reconciliation efforts of the new government under Surayudh Chulanont, the killings and attacks engulfing the borderland show little sign of abating.

This monograph reviews and interprets in depth some key themes in the discourses surrounding the causes and culprits of the violence in Thailand's southern border provinces, using Thai-language texts and several specific events as entry points and illustrations. The key themes are summarized in terms of (1) conspiracy, (2) the disorderly state and border, and (3) political contestation. Some of these themes have not been fully explored in contemporary discussion, especially among Western

commentators, and much of the Thai-language material used here (both public and classified) has not been adequately treated to date. The monograph begins with an outline of some key paradigms informing representations of the southern border problem in Thailand. It then focuses on three topics that surround the struggle to identify the character and causes of the “fire in the south.”

First, this study addresses the prominence of a number of conspiracy theories that purport to uncover groups and networks behind the violence, particularly one highly problematic intelligence report about the raid and arms theft at the Narathiwat military camp on January 4, 2004—the event generally viewed as marking the beginning of the current wave of violence. This follows with a consideration of other conspiracy frameworks which claim that the killings and bombings have been engineered, in whole or in part, by vested interest groups rather than by ideologically inspired separatists. Such rumors and theories range from suspicions of sophisticated planning by powerful clandestine cabals to belief in more prosaic, small-scale patterns of collusion among nonideological interest groups seeking to disguise the violence as separatist-related. These conspiratorial models are a dominant feature of explanations of conflict in Thailand (and particularly the borderland), where groups are known to manipulate events behind the scenes. It is not suggested here that the grand conspiracy theories have any credence or validity; however, what their circulation does bring into relief is the tangible reality of the labyrinthine and disorderly borderland. This disorderly borderland—a product of predatory officialdom, corruption, and crime—is a critically important problem, and I argue that addressing this long-established state of affairs is one key precondition for reducing periodic turbulence and vulnerabilities in the borderland.

Second, this study focuses on arguments that have identified Prime Minister Thaksin and his policies as a key cause of the southern disturbances through the dismembering of an institutional apparatus on the border that formerly guaranteed a level of equilibrium and dialogue between the state and Muslim communities of the border provinces. There are some problematic elements in standard arguments concerning the significance of the dissolution of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) in 2002, a multifunctional agency dealing with state-society mediation in the Muslim-majority provinces as well as with intelligence-gathering. Drawing on a number of Thai sources and interviews, this study

points to some of the flaws in the claims that, prior to its dissolution, the SBPAC had been effective in intelligence-gathering, arguing that the SBPAC had been already weakened under previous governments, and that there was a longer-term weakness in intelligence capacity prior to the advent of the Thaksin government—a weakness that prevented agencies from detecting the emerging new insurgent patterns of the 1990s that exploded in 2004.

Third, this monograph considers the party-political uses of the southern crisis by the opposition Democrat Party (DP). It shows how this party, threatened by the electoral onslaught of the TRT and lacking any convincing policy-based alternative at the national level, successfully defended and extended its critical southern electoral base in 2005 by demonizing Thaksin and his party. In doing so, the DP deflected attention from its own historical culpability (when in government in the 1990s) in allowing the borderland to remain an intractable “other country” within Thailand.

There are many interacting dimensions at play in the current crisis in Thailand’s south, and this study does not claim to treat comprehensively all of these. Rather, the themes and documents selected here aim to bring into relief some less well-treated but important issues that have shaped various discourses about the character of Thailand’s southern “problem.” This monograph aims to add to existing scholarly discussion by highlighting how interpretation has been framed by political contestation during the Thaksin era. It also points to the importance of considering the disorderly state and border as a generic condition that reflects much about critical weaknesses in Thailand’s state and society.

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Conspiracy, Politics, and a Disorderly Border: The Struggle to Comprehend Insurgency in Thailand's Deep South

The aim of this monograph is to interpret a number of themes (drawn from a variety of documents, debates, and commentaries) that have emerged in the context of the struggle to define the nature of the persistent and enigmatic "insurgency" prevailing in Thailand's Muslim-majority southern border provinces. Who are the perpetrators? Why is this happening? Why now? When will it end? Who is responsible for its persistence and escalation? What is to be done to end it? Struggles to answer these questions have emerged and taken shape in response to a new form of militant Islamic network-based insurgency that has imbricated itself into an already complex, unstable borderland that combines vulnerable ethnoreligious sensitivities and competing power groups, both state and nonstate. It is an insurgency that thrives on key weaknesses in the dysfunctional Thai state apparatus, and its character is easily disguised because rumor has long been the currency of knowledge in the labyrinthine southern borderland. The explosion of violence there has stimulated considerable debate on long-deferred and unresolved problems surrounding the cultural-linguistic rights of the borderland Malay Muslims. Arguments raised by Muslim intellectuals

and elites about these issues are vitally important, and they pose a challenge to incorporate genuine diversity into Thailand's state-society fabric. But it

*The explosion of violence
...has stimulated
considerable debate*

is unclear just how these identity issues help explain the foundations and dynamics of the current insurgency, especially in the light of new conciliatory policies since the change in government following the coup of September 2006.¹ The intensity of debate and the polarization of discourses that burst forth in Thailand from 2004 are a direct result of the twin impacts of (1) changes in

the world political environment ushered in by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S., and (2) Thailand's own polarized internal politics. The competing representations of Thailand's southern "turbulence" (*khwa mai sangop*) from 2001 to 2006 have been profoundly shaped by domestic political contests and Thaksin Shinawatra's project to restructure politics and the state under the rule of his Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT). Significantly, Thaksin's inability to convincingly define and control the violence in the Muslim-majority south proved to be his first major policy failure, which arguably presaged his subsequent political decline.²

A considerable literature of uneven quality and varied emphasis has been generated in Thailand and among foreign commentators that attempts to unearth the factors at play in the current insurgency, its persistence, and the groups perpetrating the violence (see, e.g., Connors 2006). In Thailand, discussion and argument incorporates, among other factors, (1) historical dimensions of the Muslim predicament in the south; (2) issues of cultural and linguistic rights; (3) flaws in state policy, past and present; (4) the role of clandestine state violence; (5) the relative significance of Malay nationalism versus Islamic militancy in motivating insurgents and assuring levels of support; and (6) the power dynamics underlying Thaksin Shinawatra's governance. Not surprisingly, the foci of such literature and debate have been shaped by specialists' disciplinary frameworks and assumptions, as well as by the deeply political stance of local protagonists in the struggle to define the actual "problem" prevailing in the south. Scholarship and investigations published in English include some important contributions by Thailand specialists that highlight the domestic political dynamics shaping the crisis during the Thaksin period (see McCargo 2006; Ukrist

2006), yet much material remains unconsidered by most foreign analysts and commentators. In Thailand most commentators, especially academics (who position themselves as public intellectuals), are firmly wedded to particular positions on the southern question (see Kaeow et al. 2006; Yusuf and Schmidt 2006), and as a result there have been few critical interrogations of causal discourses (but see Srisompob and Panyasak 2006, and among journalists, Barun 2005 and Sathian 2005).

This monograph adopts a critical stance toward some of the dominant representations of the “problem” of the south. It also isolates for closer analysis a selection of issues in the competing narratives that have emerged in Thailand about the causes and culprits of the current violence in the border provinces. These issues require greater attention in order to understand the full complexity of the southern crisis, as well as the irreducibly contested nature of representations of that crisis. To illustrate and investigate these issues, this study examines a variety of Thai-language documents and publications and draws on field observation and interviews undertaken by the author. It then summarizes these issues in terms of (1) conspiracy, (2) the disorderly state and border, and (3) political contestation. Why do conspiracy-related frameworks persist in explanations of the current violence? I argue that conspiracy theorizing reflects widely shared perceptions about how power is deployed in Thailand, particularly in the southern border provinces, which have long been the site of competing and overlapping vested interests that incorporate criminal networks, predatory and corrupt officials, and politicians, as well as separatist groups themselves. Rumor has long been the currency of knowledge in an environment where violent events have been staged and disguised.

The first substantive section (The Disorderly Border and the Plausibility of Conspiracy) examines a particularly improbable conspiracy hypothesis from a secret intelligence document produced in the early weeks of the unrest in 2004. This document shows how intelligence was deployed in a highly political way during the Thaksin period, although I also argue that the document contains some key general truths about the labyrinthine character of the southern borderland that dispose actors to presume conspiracy. I then highlight more prosaic speculations about the role of the underworld and influential figures in the current insurgency, highlighting how such speculations buttress various arguments of protagonists in the debate about culprits and causal factors. Two points are brought into relief

in this discussion: (1) that crime and militancy are intimately connected in the current insurgency, in common with insurgencies elsewhere;

and (2) that, despite their differing emphases, all groups (whether academics, officials, or Muslim and Buddhist villagers) stress that a weak and disorderly borderland is the foundation of southern Thailand's endemic instability: it is the product of the disorderly state itself, a problem that Thailand's governments have long

*a...disorderly borderland is
the foundation of southern
Thailand's...instability*

failed to effectively acknowledge and address.

The second substantive section (Red Herring or Precondition for Insurgency?) discusses the politicized nature of discourses surrounding the southern crisis, showing how key issues have been deflected in these politicized discourses. A major contention of this monograph is that there has been considerable oversimplification in the arguments (both local and international) that assign principal responsibility for the explosion of violence to the policies of the Thaksin administration. I address the claims that the dissolution of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC), and especially its intelligence arm, the Civilian-Police-Military Command 43 (CPM 43), allowed militant organization to proceed unchecked and undetected. I argue that in terms of intelligence-gathering, the SBPAC/CPM 43 was already ineffective as an intelligence-gathering instrument, partly because of reductions in resources that began with the Democrat government in the early 1990s.

The third analytical section (The Southern Crisis as Political Capital) focuses on the political uses of the southern crisis by the Democrat Party (DP), showing how, in the context of this party's serious electoral failures, the emerging crisis from 2003 became a central platform from which it could gain important political capital to protect its southern electoral base from encroachment by the electoral juggernaut of Thaksin's TRT. By demonizing Thaksin Shinawatra as the prime cause of the crisis, the Democrats offset their clear electoral disadvantages at a national policy level, and in the 2005 national elections succeeded in both protecting their regional electoral base and snatching the majority of seats formerly held by the Muslim Wadah (unity) faction in the three border provinces. To its credit, the DP also developed an array of policies addressing the religious,