

Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence

Duncan McCargo
Editor



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Edited by
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PREFACE

ANY ACADEMIC STUDY OF THE SOUTHERN THAI CONFLICT must engage with the politics of language. The debate begins over the use of place names: "Pattani" is the name of a modern Thai province, whereas "Patani" alludes to an older and larger area (roughly corresponding to the three provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala), and may carry some Malay nationalist connotations. As Chaiwat Satha-Anand has argued, while on one level the different spellings simply reflect a minor variation between Thai and Malay, to use the term "Patani" could also be a political choice, since the word "reflects the grandeur of this Malay kingdom in the past, refuses the present administrative arrangement which, in turn, means that to some extent the possibility of change can still be thought of."¹

By the same token, using the double "t"-ed spelling, "Pattani," could be seen as expressing support for the existing political order in the region. In this volume, contributors have exercised a free choice in such matters, using "Pattani" or "Patani" as they felt appropriate. The use of the spelling "Patani" here does not necessarily have the political implications suggested by Chaiwat; in some cases, the spelling has been employed descriptively, or simply because it seeks to invoke (rather than to commend) a wider imagined or historical region than that described by the modern administrative term "Pattani." While we need to

be alive to the nuances of linguistic choices, we should also recognize that not every linguistic choice carries a loaded political meaning.

Similar considerations apply to the terms used to describe the Muslim people of the southern border provinces. Chaiwat himself prefers the term “Malay Muslims,”² but many more conservative Thais insist on using “Thai Muslims.” After much debate, the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) finally settled on the rather convoluted formulation: “Thai Muslims of Malay descent.”³ Most of the contributors here have followed Chaiwat in using the term “Malay Muslim,” but there has been no editorial attempt to enforce consistency of terminology.

Thai transliteration is another vexed area for anyone writing about Thailand in English. Like most of my other publications, this volume employs a simplified version of the Library of Congress system, using only the twenty-six letters of the Roman alphabet, with no tone markers and no indications of vowel length. The aim is to transliterate Thai roughly as the language is pronounced, rather than as it is written.

This edited volume, which began life as a themed issue of the journal *Critical Asian Studies* (formerly the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*), has been made possible with the support of various organizations and individuals. The nucleus of the project was a program of academic exchange on the theme of conflict resolution in the Thai South. This Higher Education Link between the University of Leeds and Prince of Songkla University — originally negotiated by Michael Connors — was funded by the British government’s Department for International Development and managed by the British Council’s Bangkok office from 2002 to 2006. When Thailand’s southern border provinces became the focus of renewed political violence after January 2004, the rationale for a sustained critical analysis of the issues involved was clear.

At our initial workshop, held in Pattani on 26 February 2005, additional papers by Chidchanok Rahimmula and Ibrahim Narongraksakket helped shape our thinking, as did the participation of Sukree Langputeh, Worawit Baru, and other colleagues. Arlene Neher, organizer of the Ninth International Conference on Thai Studies held at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Ill., 3–6 April 2005, kindly gave our session “Crisis and Conflict in Thailand’s Deep South” the opening slot of the conference, immediately following Chaiwat Satha-Anand’s keynote address. The participation of Ukrist, Srisompob, and Wattana in the DeKalb conference was made possible through the helpful intervention of Thongchai Winichakul, with fund-

ing from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Chaiwat Satha-Anand's participation was supported by the Asia Foundation. Panyasask and Tan-Mullins received financial assistance from the conference organizers, and McCargo from the British Academy and the University of Leeds. In editing the papers for publication, Duncan McCargo wishes to acknowledge help received from Michael Connors, Patrick Jory, Francesca Lawe-Davies, Michael Montesano, M.L.R. Smith, and Michelle Tan.

McCargo's own fieldwork in Pattani from September 2005 onwards was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, grant number RES-000-22-1344. At Prince of Songkla University, Srisompob, Wattana, and many other colleagues provided him with an apparently inexhaustible supply of hospitality and intellectual companionship. Final editing of the book manuscript was completed while McCargo was a visiting senior research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore; thanks are due to Tony Reid and Bryan Turner for their support.

Finally, this project could not have been completed without Tom Fenton, the indefatigable managing editor of *Critical Asian Studies*, who prepared the texts of both the thematic issue and the subsequent book more or less single-handedly. He also compiled the index. Tom succeeded in retaining his good humor throughout a protracted and often fraught editorial process, and really deserves some sort of medal for his service to the cause.

Duncan McCargo
August 2006

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Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence



Thailand's Southern Border Provinces

INTRODUCTION

Behind the Slogans: Unpacking Patani Merdeka

Duncan McCargo

WHAT LIES BEHIND THE RECENT VIOLENCE IN THE THAI SOUTH? This apparently simple question is surprisingly difficult to answer. The subregion that includes the three provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat (see map, facing) was only incorporated into Siam (as the country was then known) in 1909, and roughly 80 percent of its population of around 1.8 million are Malay Muslims. Political and administrative power, however, remains firmly in the hands of a de facto Buddhist state. The area has a long history of resistance to the authority of Bangkok, and the past century has been characterized by periodic bouts of insurgency.¹ During the 1970s, this insurgency was linked to an explicit “separatist” movement. Many of the leaders of that movement surrendered under an amnesty policy announced in 1980. The Prem Tinsulanond government (1980–88) effectively brokered a kind of social contract in the area. The security forces were not too abusive, local Muslim leaders could report problems to a central agency and in exchange violence was kept to manageable levels. Nevertheless, Malay Muslims in the three provinces continued to harbor a range of griev-

ances against the Thai state, particularly about access to educational and employment opportunities.

In February 2001, Thailand underwent a change in political direction. Whereas the 1990s had seen the decline of military influence, the institutionalization of parliamentary politics, and the promulgation of the liberal, reformist 1997 constitution, the new millennium witnessed the remarkable political rise of Thaksin Shinawatra. A billionaire telecommunications tycoon, often casually compared with Italy's Silvio Berlusconi, Thaksin was also a former police officer who was determined to subordinate Thailand to his personal control.² He soon set about changing the security structures in the South. By 2003, his new policies saw a growing number of extrajudicial disappearances in the three provinces, provoking a strong and hostile reaction. At the same time, local militant groups had apparently been rethinking their strategies, partly inspired by the changing geopolitics of the time. Thaksin was a staunch ally of the United States, and strongly supported the post-September 11 "war on terrorism" declared by President George W. Bush. His decision to send a token contingent of Thai troops to Iraq infuriated Thailand's Muslim population, especially in the South.

On 4 January 2004, more than a hundred assailants made a bold attack on an army camp in Narathiwat, seizing over four hundred weapons and separating out and killing four Buddhist soldiers. Thaksin responded by declaring martial law, and a new phase of violence ensued.³ On 28 April 2004, more than a hundred lightly armed militants were killed after making simultaneous attacks on eleven security checkpoints. Thirty-two of them were shot at point-blank range inside the historic Kru-Ze mosque in Pattani.⁴ Matters escalated further after a demonstration outside the Tak Bai police station on 25 October 2004, when over a thousand Muslim protestors were arrested and piled into trucks. Seventy-eight of them died en route to nearby army bases. Since Tak Bai, shootings, arson attacks, and bombings have continued on a more or less daily basis in the three provinces, with no end in sight. The conflict has created problems for Thailand's relations with neighboring Malaysia, with Indonesia, and with the Organization of Islamic Countries.

The Thai government pursued two parallel yet contradictory courses of action during 2005. In March, under pressure from the Privy Council, Thaksin set up a high-profile National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) to develop proposals for a peaceful solution to the



Duncan McCargo

"War Room" at government offices in Narathiwat Province, southern Thailand. Political and administrative power in Thailand's Muslim-dominated southern provinces "remains firmly in the hands of a de facto Buddhist state."

violence in the South. Yet, in July, the cabinet hastily approved new emergency legislation that gave the prime minister unprecedented personal powers. Despite paying lip service to ideas of reconciliation, Thaksin has demonstrated a consistent preference for policies of securitization and repression.

The chapters in this book shed light on the southern Thai conflict from a variety of perspectives. Chaiwat Sathanand, himself a

leading member of the National Reconciliation Commission (he was responsible for drafting its report), addresses a set of themes that reflect many years of studying the political history of the region. His ostensible focus is not on the present day, but on an obscure monument that stands inside the provincial police compound in Narathiwat. The bullet-shaped monument, which has no accompanying plaque, commemorates the deaths of around thirty police officers in the "Dusun-nyor rebellion" of 1948, when the police fought pitched battles with Malay-Muslim villagers. Chaiwat suggests that the obscurity of the monument reflects a degree of collective amnesia about the events. The rather gruesome shape of the monument might be seen as glorifying the deaths of numerous Malay Muslims (estimates range from thirty to six hundred) in the violent incident. Yet in many respects the "Dusun-nyor rebellion" has important parallels with

much more recent events, notably the heavy-handed actions of the Thai security forces on 28 April 2004. Ironically, it seems highly possible that Dusun-nyor was not intended as a "rebellion" at all — the intentions of the villagers may have been misunderstood by local security officials, who launched an unnecessary attack on them. Chaiwat's chapter urges his readers to pay attention to the ambiguities and nuances of local histories and sensitivities in the deep South, rather than supporting simplistic solutions driven by a preference for violence.

The next two contributions examine the Southern conflict in relation to the government of Thaksin Shinawatra. Since the two authors have coauthored a book on Thaksin,⁵ it is not surprising that there are some similarities of perspective, though these chapters were written quite independently. Duncan McCargo relates the conflict in the South to a struggle for the control of Thailand more generally. In this struggle, Thaksin was initially pitted, not against separatists or the opposition Democrat Party, but against "network monarchy," a set of power structures linked to the palace. Making arguments generally avoided by Thai scholars, McCargo suggests that Thaksin has been engaged in a competition for power with the monarchical institution. He further argues that Thaksin's attempts to displace monarchical power contributed substantially to the post-January 2004 upsurge in violence. Subsequent developments, notably the creation of the National Reconciliation Commission, illustrate the attempts of "network monarchy" — led by a group of prominent members of the Privy Council — to resist Thaksin's seizure of power. Read in this way, the southern conflict is not simply about the South per se. The "liminal zone" of the border provinces has been thrust to the very center of Thailand's national politics; in this sense, "the periphery has come to town."

Ukrist Pathmanand emphasizes the way in which Thaksin has sought to exploit the South to whip up nationalist sentiment, thereby distracting public attention from his own policy shortcomings. He argues that Thaksin's hawkish approach to the South involves a deliberate "mobilization of hatred"⁶ among Thai Buddhists toward the country's Malay-Muslim minority. Ukrist suggests that Thaksin has successfully manipulated Buddhist chauvinism, in conjunction with hard-line policies aimed at suppressing resistance in the South, as a means of courting electoral popularity in the rest of Thailand. Thaksin has deliberately surrounded himself with security chiefs who share his views. In any case, he has rotated his adjutants with such frequency that they are all completely subordinated to his personal dominance.



Anonymous

A group of men allegedly involved in militant activities surrender to the authorities at Narathiwat Provincial Hall, 15 August 2005. Most of those participating in these “surrender ceremonies” turned out to have little or no involvement in the ongoing violence; they were coerced or cajoled into turning themselves in, after their names appeared on official blacklists.

Ukrist argues that Thaksin has been playing a very dangerous political game in the South, one that could have disastrous consequences for Thailand’s future. The arguments made by McCargo and Ukrist resonate with the views of many Malay Muslims in the deep South, who insist that if Thaksin were no longer prime minister, the conflict would immediately decline. This widely shared assumption remains unproven.

The next two chapters are the first extended English-language journal articles on the recent conflict by scholars who are based in the deep South, and should really be read together. In a chapter that will serve as an important reference point for everyone working on the southern conflict, Srisompob Jitpiromsri and Panyasak Sobhonvasu set out to review a considerable body of statistical material about the conflict. First, they clearly demonstrate that the escalation of violence in January 2004 was an extremely dramatic one. They go on to examine data concerning socioeconomic explanations for the southern conflict, and soon conclude that while legitimate Muslim grievances over issues such as employment and education are important, they do not

begin to account for the January 2004 upsurge. Nor are historical explanations about Malay-Muslim culture and identity adequate reasons for the latest violence — this is much more than a spontaneous “peasant uprising” of the kind Thailand has often experienced. Srisompob and Panyasak report the results of two surveys of urban residents of Pattani, both of which reflect general confusion on the ground about the identity of the perpetrators of violence. However, the surveys appear to show a growing belief that militant movements are the leading perpetrators: theories implicating local officials or organized criminals were less popular in February 2005 than a year earlier. The chapter’s most important findings come at the end, where the authors discuss a recent survey of more than a thousand key informants. The informants were asked to explain local understandings concerning the identities of perpetrators involved in recent violent incidents. The response — one that surprised the authors — was that more than 80 percent of the perpetrators were believed to be militants. Viewed alongside data illustrating a growing proportion of the victims of violence are Muslim — including the majority of those murdered in the first half of 2005 — the evidence suggests that Muslim-on-Muslim violence is now the fastest growing category of violent incidents in the deep South.

Srisompob’s colleague Wattana Sugunnasil takes up the argument at this point, insisting that the jihadist overtones of the recent violence need to be more seriously acknowledged and analyzed. These overtones were most clearly seen in the 28 April 2005 attacks, during which young men wielding knives charged at armed soldiers and police. Though not “suicide attacks” in the commonly understood sense, these were attacks apparently undertaken by men who must have known they would not survive. Wattana finds clues concerning their thinking and motivation in a document entitled *Berjihad di Patani*, which was found in the Kru-Ze mosque after the bloody siege. Important elements in this document include injunctions to the faithful to turn their backs on their own family members in the cause of Islam, and statements that “hypocrites” (fellow Muslims who were collaborating with the enemies of religion) deserved to die. Wattana argues that such ideas, which have a long provenance in militant Islam, are important in explaining the changed tactics of the southern insurgent movement since the beginning of 2004. Focusing on militant Islam is not a popular line of interpretation in Thaksin’s Thailand. The Thaksin