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**Conflict in Southern Thailand:
Causes, Agents and Trajectory**
John Funston



ARC Federation Fellowship “Islam and Modernity: Syari’ah, Terrorism and Governance in South-East Asia”

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Front Cover Image: ‘Suspected militants sit next to their seized weapons during a press conference after they were arrested, at a police station in Narathiwat province on June 9, 2008’: Madaree Tohlala/AFP/Getty Images.

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Conflict in Southern Thailand: Causes, Agents and Trajectory*

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Over 3,300 people have died in the conflict that has engulfed Muslim majority areas of southern Thailand since the resumption of violence there in January 2004. Although it has often remained 'off the radar' of the international press, it is now the most violent conflict in Southeast Asia. For the past two years nearly three people have died every day. There is, however, no agreement on why violence has returned to this region, and exactly who is responsible.

Background

The area of conflict is in three southern provinces, Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani, and four districts bordering Malaysia in Songkhla (Saba Yoi, Thepha, Chana and Na Thawi). The region is around 80% Malay, and corresponds to an area once ruled over by the Patani sultanate. Patani came increasingly under the influence of Bangkok from the late Eighteenth Century, particularly after Siamese forces sacked the area in 1786. Conflict intensified after the region was brought under direct rule in 1902.

Initial resistance was led by traditional rulers and Islamic teachers, particularly in response to assimilationist policies associated with the spread of state education in the 1920s, and Thai nationalist policies led by Prime Minister Phibul Songkram in the 1930s and 1940s. As the Second World War came to an end, some southerners promoted union with ethnically similar Malayan states to the south, but a rival group under the leadership of the respected Hajji Sulong bin Abdul Kadir sought greater regional autonomy. Further assimilationalist policies under Prime Minister Sarit in the late 1950s and early 1960s - particularly his attempts to close down traditional Islamic schools (*pondok*) and replace them with government controlled 'Islamic private schools' (IPS) - saw the emergence of

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Southern Thailand, border provinces



This map is an adaptation of Adam Carr's work, available from Wikimedia Commons: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Souththailandmap.GIF>

three major organisations pursuing regional independence: the *Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani* (BNPP, 1959), *Barisan Revolusi Nasional* (BRN, 1960) and the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO – in Malay *Pertubuhan Pembebasan Patani Bersatu* – 1968). In broad terms, the BNPP represented a coalition of aristocratic and conservative Islamic classes; the BRN had a more radical Islamic ‘republican’ orientation, with its base in the *pondoks*; while PULO focused more on secular nationalism than Islam (although from time to time it also emphasized Islam). In the 1980s and 1990s, these organizations split and reorganized several times, but elements of BRN and PULO have remained at the forefront of southern resistance.

Armed resistance in the 1960s and 1970s involved up to 1,500 insurgents, although casualties were much lower than in recent years. These were turbulent times in the south, with the Communist Party of Thailand, the Communist Party of Malaya and an array of criminal groups ensuring a period of continuous conflict. Change came, however, in the 1980s, with more conciliatory and culturally sensitive policies towards the various groups resulting in an end to communist insurrections (the CPT faded gradually, and the CPM formally surrendered in 1989) and a reduction in separatist violence as well.

The Current Conflict

The current violence began on 24 December 2001. Simultaneous attacks on police posts in the three provinces saw five police and one defence volunteer killed. In the next two years around 56 people were killed, 39 from the police. In most cases they appear to have been killed by members of the military (paramilitary Rangers).

A new phase in the conflict opened on 4 January 2004, when around 100 insurgents raided a military weapons depot in Narathiwat, killing four Buddhist soldiers and seizing around 413 light infantry weapons. As a diversion, they also torched 20 public schools and planted fake explosives in neighbouring Yala. Later that month three Buddhist monks were brutally killed, the first time ever this group had been targeted.

Two further critical events occurred in 2004. On 28 April around 200 insurgents attacked 11 police and military posts in Pattani, Yala and Songkhla. The attackers were for the most part unarmed or lightly armed, and in the ensuing conflict 107 Muslims and five security officers were killed. While security actions generally were viewed sympathetically by the Thai public, the deaths of 32 insurgents in the historic Krue Se mosque, and 19 others in Songkhla, were widely regarded as extra-judicial killings. A later government-commissioned report acknowledged that ‘disproportionate force’ had been used in the Krue Se incident.

The second incident began at the small village of Tak Bai in Narathiwat on 25 October. Police fired on a large crowd protesting the detention of six Village Defence Volunteers, whose government-issued shotguns had been stolen by insurgents. Seven were killed in this incident. 1,300 protesters were then detained, and 78 died of suffocation during transportation from Tak Bai to an army camp in Pattani. Again a government report acknowledged disproportionate use of force.¹

Since 2004, violence has taken different forms. Most fatalities have been the result of targeted assassinations, directed particularly at Muslims who held

¹ Official reports on the Krue Se and Tak Bai incidents were released by the government-established National Reconciliation Commission on 24 April 2005. Full reports in Thai were placed on the NRC Website (<http://www.nrc.or.th/th/>) and English language summaries were produced by *The Nation*. See <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/specials/takbai/p1.htm> and <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/specials/takbai/p2.htm>.

minor official office, acted as informants, or in other ways cooperated with state authorities. Other major targets have been Buddhists, including monks, singled out for particularly gruesome attention such as beheadings; the general public, in places such as markets, shops and entertainment centres; government institutions such as schools and health centres and security forces; economic infrastructure, including electricity, communication towers, buses and trains, and banks; and economic activities such as rubber tapping. Insurgents have been well-armed with light weapons, and have deployed a range of simple but efficient improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Apart from the Krue Se and Tak Bai incidents security forces have been less violent than insurgents, but there have been numerous instances of 'disappearances' and other atrocities committed, particularly by paramilitary forces.

During 2005-2006 the conflict grew in intensity. Insurgents mounted more audacious and well-planned operations, many aimed at dozens of targets across several provinces simultaneously. Casualty numbers increased, and sectarian aspects became more pronounced. Between June and July 2005, nine Buddhists were beheaded, and a monk and two temple boys were killed in an attack on a Pattani temple in October. In November 2006, in response to such incidents, 200 Buddhist villagers in Narathiwat and 40 from Yala fled to nearby temples and most remained there for a year. Nonetheless, Muslims remained the main victims of violence, but still felt discriminated against by the government. 131 fled to Malaysia in August 2005 following the killing of a local Muslim leader in Narathiwat, and most remain there to this day.

After the coup on 19 September 2006, the new government made an attempt to pursue a less confrontational approach, but this soon faltered and the conflict escalated further. Brutality reached new heights. Nine Buddhist commuters were ambushed and executed in a gang-land style killing in March 2007. More than a dozen beheadings occurred in the first half of the year, and many others killed were subsequently subjected to torchings or mutilations. Increasing numbers of teachers were killed, several in front of their students, and arson attacks on schools increased (from 37 in 2006 to 38 between the months of March and May in 2007).

Attacks on security forces also became more effective. On 9 May 2007 seven soldiers were victims of a roadside bomb, then shot execution style. This was the largest number of casualties in a single attack since the expansion of the

conflict in 2004, but was soon followed by 12 more deaths on 31 May, and seven on 15 June, along with several smaller incidents.

Statistics are not entirely reliable, but overall approximately 400 were killed in 2004, 500 in 2005, 900 in 2006 and 870 in 2007. Total fatalities reportedly passed 3,000 in March 2008.² Over 70 school teachers and school administrators have been killed, and 200 schools torched by arsonists. The conflict has had huge educational and economic costs, and has shattered communal relations. However no organisation has claimed responsibility, and there remains much debate over what the causes of the conflict are, which organisations are involved, what their objectives are, and where the conflict is headed.

Causes of Conflict – Three Explanations

There are three broad explanations of the causes of this conflict – traditional factors, religion and militant organisations. The first explanation focuses on factors that have sustained conflict in the past – Muslim perceptions that they are second class citizens, and a ‘disorderly border’, where criminality, local power struggles and a porous border with Malaysia have sustained violence over a long period. Some supporters of this explanation add that the effect of policies pursued under the Thaksin Shinawatra administration (2001-2006) was to reinforce these traditional factors.

Analysts emphasising religion address different facets. Some give prominence to the role of Islamic schools (particularly the *pondok*), or the process of Islamic revival since the 1970s (associated particularly with the reformist *dakwah* movement). Others focus on international factors – organisations such as al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiah (JI), or events such as the rise of Islamophobia after the 9/11 incident in 2001, or the subsequent war on terror. One prominent analyst has focused on the role of sufism and invincibility cults, particularly in relation to the 28 April 2004 incident.³

Finally, other analysts, particularly those from a background in terrorism studies, attribute the rise of violence to initiatives undertaken by militant Islamic

² *Bangkok Post*, 20 March 2008.

³ Nidhi Aeusrivongse, ‘Understanding the Situation in the South as a “Millenarian Revolt”’, *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 6, 2005: available at <http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue5/index.html>, accessed 15 May 2005. Appeared originally as ‘Mornng sathannakarn phaktai phan wæn ‘kabot chaona’’, special report in 25(8) *Matichon*, 1 June 2004, p 110–24.

groups.⁴ According to these accounts, militants – particularly those associated with the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate (BRN-C) – had been planning to resume violence since the 1990s, and did so when the conditions were conducive. Many of these accounts mention a 7-point or 1,000-day plan to seize power, allegedly discovered during a raid on a BRN-C leader's house in 2003.

These explanations are not mutually exclusive, and sometimes two or more run together. Former Prime Minister Thaksin used all three, at various times, in his comments on the conflict. How much weight should be attached to each?

Traditional Causes of Violence

There are undoubtedly deeply-engrained feelings among Malay Muslims in the three provinces of discrimination, even of internal colonialism. These concerns are articulated clearly by Wan Kadir Che Man, academician and leader of the coalition resistance group *Bersatu* (*Barisan Bersatu Kemerdekaan*), an umbrella front formed to unite the different insurgent groups in 1989.⁵ They are also a central theme in a report by the independent government-appointed National Reconciliation Commission, issued in June 2006, (NRC, 2006). The fact that there has been no violence in neighbouring Satun province, which is around 70% Malay-Muslim, shows there are shared perceptions amongst those in the area of the former Patani sultanate that play into this conflict. Some aspects of a 'disorderly border' are also relevant. Criminality, local power struggles and bureaucratic rivalries are rife in an area some 1,000 kilometres from Bangkok.⁶

Nonetheless, I would not give too much weight to these explanations alone. In the 1980s and 1990s some major changes were introduced that ameliorated Malay-Muslim concerns. More conciliatory security policies, noted earlier, included new military doctrines that emphasized the need to give primacy to political rather than military solutions, and included generous amnesty offers

4 See particularly Gunaratna, R, Acharya, A and Chua, S (eds), *Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand*, Marshall Cavendish, Singapore, 2005; various works by Zachary Abuza, including articles in *Terrorism Monitor*, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia. Crucible of Terror*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 2003, and *Conspiracy of Silence: The Insurgency in Southern Thailand and its Implications for Southeast Asian Security*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington (forthcoming 2008); and various writings by Anthony Davis in *Jane's Intelligence Review*.

5 'Dr. Farish A. Noor interviews the head of the Patani BERSATU movement', *Malaysia Today*, 15 June 2005. Available at: <http://www.malaysia-today.net/Blog-e/2005/06/dr-farish-noor-interviews-head-of.htm>.

6 Askew, M, 'Conspiracy, Politics, and a Disorderly Border. The Struggle to Comprehend Insurgency in Thailand's Deep South', *Policy Studies* 29 (Southeast Asia), 2007.

– Prime Ministerial Decrees 66/2523 (23 April 1980), 65/2525 (1982) and 47/2529 (1986). New security and administrative organisations also served as important conflict resolution mechanisms, notably the Civilian-Police-Military Task Force 43 (CPM-43), and Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC), established in 1980 and 1981. Democratic expansion provided more opportunities for Malay Muslims to take part in local administration and even national cabinets. New doctrines of cultural pluralism acknowledged the importance of Malay-Muslim traditions. Prime Ministers such as Prem Tinsulanond, Chuan Leekpai and Chavalit Yongchaiyut came from, or had an important base in, the south. And Thailand’s influential royal family also supported a focus on the south after establishing a palace in Narathiwat in 1972. These changes did not go far enough to overcome Muslim concerns completely, but they were a substantial improvement on policies that preceded them.

Disorder in the southernmost region also declined during this period, in part because of the changes noted above and the collapse of communism in Thailand and Malaysia. Indeed, the latter made Malaysia more willing to assist, even to the extent of repatriating five remaining separatist leaders in 1998.

Thaksin’s election in 2001, however, had an immediate impact on these developments. Distrustful of institutions established earlier, Thaksin abolished the SBPAC and CPM-43 in May 2002. This had an immediate impact on southern security, as the primary role of the military was replaced by that of the police. Rivalry between the police and military then came to the fore, causing a large number of the 56 killings in the next two years.

No less important, these actions marked a change to more heavy-handed (often extra-judicial) security policies that caused enormous resentment among Malay Muslims. Once the police were in charge of security they moved to entrench their position by moving against informers aligned with the military, and many ‘disappearances’ followed. In early 2003, Thaksin declared a war on drugs, which in three months led to around 2,500 extra-judicial killings nationwide, with a high number of these in the south. The 4 January 2004 incident was followed by an expansion of martial law and more disappearances – over 100 according to many estimates. In March, Thailand’s best known Muslim lawyer, Somchai Neelaphaijit, disappeared while in police custody.⁷ Government

⁷ Somchai was from Bangkok rather than the south, but had close ties with southerners and was at the time defending several southern suspects against terrorist and treason charges.

leaders subsequently admitted he had been murdered, but have brought only minor charges against police officers implicated. Later that year the Krue Se and Tak Bai incidents occurred, to the dismay of southern Muslims.

On occasions, it must be said, Thaksin did appear ready to consider a change of policy. In early 2004, he appointed Deputy Prime Minister Chaturon Chaisaeng to investigate southern problems and recommend a possible alternative approach. In February 2005, he announced the appointment of an independent National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), charged with recommending new policy directions and chaired by respected former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun. And in March he permitted a parliamentary debate on the south, during which he promised a change to a more conciliatory policy. However, the Chaturon and NRC reports were ignored, and hard line policies remained in force.

Besides alienating Muslims with these policies, Thaksin proved quite incapable of stopping the violence. Few arrests were made, and violence continued to escalate. A key reason for this was Thaksin's attempt to impose his self-declared 'CEO-style' leadership on the south. This led to frequent changes of southern military leadership and security structures, making it impossible for security officials to consolidate influence. Nonetheless changes gave the appearance that Thaksin was doing something, and heavy-handed policies were popular in other parts of the country, with public opinion polls showing a rise in Thaksin's standing after incidents such as Krue Se and Tak Bai.

Islamic Factors

Many analysts focus on the importance of Islamic schools to the current violence. There is likely to be some truth to this, as teachers in Islamic schools have traditionally played an important role in opposition to Bangkok. As noted, the BRN was founded by this group, and gained many of its recruits from the traditional *pondok* schools. Former Prime Minister Thaksin claimed that *pondok* schools were 'breeding grounds for Muslim militants',⁸ and insisted that all must register under the department of education. Over 300 have now done so.

But if schools are important, it would appear to be the government-supervised IPS rather than the *pondoks* that are of greater importance. There are only around 15,000 students in *pondok*, compared to more than 100,000 in IPS.

8 'Outlaw schools to be reined in', *The Nation*, 21 January 2004.

And in addition, nearly all linkages alleged by officials between Islamic schools and the insurgency have focused on IPS, including Thamma Witthaya School in Yala (where alleged top BRN-C leader, Sapaeing Basoe was principal), Samphan Witthaya in Narathiwat (where another alleged BRN-C leader, Masae Useng, was a teacher), and Islam Burapha in Narathiwat, which authorities closed down in July 2007.

Other analysts have highlighted the importance of Islamic reform, including the growth of fundamentalism and extremism in the form of salafi and wahhabi teachings⁹. At one stage, government leaders blamed the emerging violence on a 'new sect' called Wahhabi.¹⁰

Again there would appear to be some truth in these arguments, as the expansion of Islamic reform associated with the *dakwah* movement from the 1970s has made Thai Muslims much more conscious of their differences with non-Muslims. Moreover some of the regional *dakwah* organisations, such as the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (*Angkatan Belia Islam* Malaysia, or ABIM), organised themselves on the basis of cells. That seems subsequently to have been adopted by southern insurgent groups, and has proved a successful means of protecting the movements from government proscription or penetration.

Nonetheless the influence of reformism should not be exaggerated. The relationship between 'fundamentalist' groups such as salafists and violence is much debated, and one detailed account of salafism in Indonesia has argued against a close connection.¹¹ The one individual widely identified as a Wahhabi, Professor Ismail Lutfi Japakiya – head of the private Islamic University in Yala – has over time established himself as a leading opponent of violence. He was a member of the government-approved NRC, the author of a widely distributed booklet – translated into Thai and Malay from the Arabic original – entitled *Islam: a Peaceful Religion*,¹² and an ally of state-appointed Muslim officials in teaching 'correct' Islamic doctrines.

9 Wattana Sugunnasil, 'Islam, Radicalism, and Violence in Southern Thailand', 38 (1) *Critical Asian Studies*, 2006, p 119–144; Gunaratna et al, above n 4.

10 'Sect blamed for attacks in the South', *The Nation*, June 3 2003 and 'Thammarak 'wrong' about Wahabi sect', *Bangkok Post*, 4 June 2003.

11 International Crisis Group, 'Indonesia Background: Why Salafism and Terrorism Mostly Don't Mix', *Asia Report* No. 83, 13 September 2004.

12 Published in Malay as *Islam: Agama Penjana Kedamaian Sejagat* and in Thai as *Islam: Sasana Haeng Santiphap*.

Amongst the works rejected by Thai Muslim officials was the booklet *Berjihad di Patani* (Holy War in Patani), one of the few texts believed to reflect the thinking of insurgents.¹³ If *Berjihad di Patani* does reflect insurgent thinking then it would appear that fundamentalist influence is less pronounced than once believed. The work is traditionalist rather than reformist, advocating a sultanate and Islamic legal system based only on the Shafie school. Research on schools in the south, and accounts of insurgent interrogation, have also indicated that militants give much more emphasis to Patani nationalism than they do to Islam.

Have international Islamic influences been more important? It seems probable that a degree of imitation is present, such as in the beheadings and other violent actions. Southern Muslims have also been radicalised by international events. US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq prompted mass Muslim demonstrations throughout Thailand, at times 50,000 strong in the south. One DVD circulating in this region featured a fiery Malay-speaking preacher condemning the US and Israel in the strongest terms; another projected al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden in heroic terms.¹⁴ In addition, there is clear evidence that al-Qaeda and JI used Thailand for transit, rest and recreation, and perhaps even planning. JI's operational head Hambali was arrested in Thailand in August 2003, although in the old capital Ayuthia (near Bangkok) rather than in the south.

Such factors convinced many terrorism specialists in the early stages of southern violence that al-Qaeda and JI were directly involved. However, no evidence has yet surfaced of Thai Muslim membership in either organisation. Thailand (unlike Australia) does not appear in the formal JI structure – outlined, for example, in the Singapore White Paper on JI published in January 2003 – and accounts differ on whether southern Thailand is part of the Southeast Asian 'super state' that JI allegedly aspires to. Absent any evidence of al-Qaeda or JI exercising a direct controlling influence over southern affairs, the broad consensus now is that these international organisations are not directly involved – though all agree that the longer the conflict continues the more likely some involvement becomes.

Wan Kadir revived the issue during an interview with *Al Jazeera* in

¹³ A translated copy of this work can be found in Gunaratna et al, above n 4, at Appendix 1.

¹⁴ I am grateful to May Tan-Mullins for alerting me to these DVDs.

November 2006, when he claimed some activities of younger separatists were facilitated by JI, which now had a 'presence' in the south.¹⁵ Since then, regular media reports citing intelligence or security officials have asserted or implied that al-Qaeda or JI have a part in the conflict.¹⁶ In all cases, however, there was a lack of specific information to back up these claims.

Apart from al-Qaeda and JI, occasional references have been made to influence by the Bangladesh-based, al-Qaeda-linked group Harakat-ul-Jihad-al Islam,¹⁷ or Indonesian groups. There have been several media references to links with the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in the past, although more recent accounts are of training in Aceh for the BRN-C, without specifying which Indonesian group has provided the training.¹⁸ However again there has been a paucity of direct evidence for such links. GAM's recent incorporation into Indonesia's official administration makes it unlikely that Aceh would currently be the venue for such training.

One final argument related to religion has been advanced by the noted historian Nidhi Aeusrivongse, in a detailed examination of the 28 April incident. He argues that the violence represents a traditional form of agrarian revolt – found throughout Southeast Asia – in which millenarianism and sufism play a major role. Participants in such uprisings typically believe themselves invulnerable, which helps explain why those attacking security posts have done so with few or

15 'Bangkok not interested in peace', *Al Jazeera*, 21 November 2006, available at: <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/1BC4029E-DF85-41CE-8ECD-088DF76B9F47.htm>.

16 Members of Thai intelligence were reported to believe that a JI figure based in the south was behind the New Year's Eve bombings in Bangkok: 'Bangkok bombings the work of JI', *The Australian*, 20 January 2007. Prime Minister Surayud's chief security advisor, General Watanachai Chaimuanwong, stated that increasing brutality showed the insurgents were increasingly using techniques learnt from Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: 'Southern extremists learning from bin Laden' *Bangkok Post*, 22 March 2007. In November 2007, coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin said southern insurgents were part of an international terrorism network: 'Sonthi: Separatist movements part of int'l terror network', *Bangkok Post*, 21 November 2007. In January 2008, a government spokesman declared that the violence had intensified because insurgents 'received money from overseas, from the international terror organisation al-Qaeda', although Prime Minister Surayud subsequently rejected this: 'Al-Qaeda funding Thai separatists', *The Australian*, 18 January 2008. Later that month, a 'security source' was reported as saying that insurgents probably received funding from, and shared their ideology with, international terrorist groups: 'Source: Int'l terrorists financing rebel groups', *Bangkok Post*, 30 January 2008.

17 Rahman, B, 'Thai dilemma over Muslim anger', *Asia Times*, 3 November 2004. Originally published as 'Muslim anger: The Thai dilemma' at: <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/%5Cpapers12%5Cpaper1156.html>. Paper no.1156, 1 November 2004.

18 See, for instance, the article 'Parparn BRN sum 'fai tai' amnart son...soo rat Patani' (BRN plans to ignite the 'southern fire'; a new force to fight for a Patani state) in *Kom Chad Luek*, 21 April 2007, apparently based on an intelligence briefing, which claims that selected members of the BRN-C military wing are sent to Aceh for training.

no weapons.¹⁹ The text of *Berjihad di Patani*, which was found with one of the Krue Se mosque insurgents, also supports this argument: it was hand copied, not commercially printed, a sufist tradition in the south.

Nidhi makes a convincing case that millenarianism was an important element in the 28 April incident, but it is far from clear that this has been important in other manifestations of violence. There have been occasional reports of individuals taking part in sufist-type rituals when joining the insurgency or before launching attacks, but these have been infrequent, and there have been no subsequent attacks in which insurgents appeared to have believed themselves invulnerable.

Separatists, Terrorists and Militants

The explanations discussed above cannot by themselves account for the violence in the south. Particularly since 2005, violence has acquired an organised character, and has often been initiated by the insurgent groups. Researchers have also found that after initial scepticism southern villagers themselves accept that 'militants and insurgents' were the main instigators of violence²⁰, but there is little consensus over the circumstances that caused the insurgents to take up arms.

As noted, a common argument is that insurgents never abandoned separatist objectives and actively planned violence from the 1990s.²¹ Many accounts claim the existence of a 7-point or 1,000-day plan, discovered during a raid on an insurgent's house in 2003.²² Human Rights Watch has even published a copy of the hand-written 'plan', written in Malay in *jawi* (a form of Arabic) script.²³

While it is indeed likely that the rump of the insurgent movement would have been planning a comeback, there are reasons for being sceptical about an analysis that focuses exclusively on insurgent initiative. One reason for caution is that although Thai intelligence sources made these claims from 2003 – and there are occasional references to them in Thai language media and publications

19 Nidhi Aeusrivongse, above n 3.

20 Srisompob Jitpiromsri with Panyasak Sobhonvasu, 'Unpacking Thailand's Southern Conflict. The Poverty of Structural Explanations' 31(1) *Critical Asian Studies* 2006, p 95–117 at 114.

21 Askew, above, n 6 at 22 and 24–25

22 Gunaratna et al, above n 4 at 32–33, 46 and 170.

23 Human Rights Watch, *No One is Safe: Insurgent Attacks on Civilians in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces*, 19 (13(C)), August 2007. Available at: hrw.org/reports/2007/thailand0807/, at 19.

– they made little effort to convince the public of their validity. Another is that the 7 points are rather general in nature, with objectives such as ‘creating public awareness of the independence struggle’, ‘seeking public support’, ‘building a covert organisation’ and ‘launching attacks’.²⁴ They fall well short of a comprehensive road-map for action.

The progress of the insurgency showed a slow growth in 2002–2003, then accelerated rapidly from 2004, precisely the period when Thaksin’s heavy-handed policies were beginning to make themselves felt. It would appear far more logical to attribute the growth of insurgents to this. There have been few documented interviews with insurgents on this topic, but one with a leader said to command 250 fighters across Yala notes specifically that he rejoined the insurgency after Thaksin came to power.²⁵

The Nature of the Resistance

If it is accepted that insurgents have played a major part in the conflict, how are they organised to do this, what are their objectives, and how much support do they have?

Different accounts of the conflict, and also media reports, include a huge shopping list of insurgent organisations. Among the most frequently mentioned are BRN-C; the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO); New PULO; the Patani Islamic Mujahideen Movement (*Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani* or GMIP); *Bersatu*; *Pusaka* (*Pusat Persatuan Tadika* or the Central Organisation for Islamic Tadika Schools); *Pemuda* (Youth); and *Runda Kumpulan Kecil* (Small, Mobile Units or RKK). Gunaratna places most emphasis on BRN-C and *Pusaka*, but notes that leaders may in fact be ‘free floating cadres actually owing allegiance to none of these groups’.²⁶

24 The seven point plan is: 1. Creating public awareness of Islam (religion), Malay (nationality) and Patani homeland, invasion/occupation [by the Thai state] and the struggle for independence. 2. Creating mass support through religious teaching [at various levels, including *tadkika*, *pondok*, private Islamic colleges and provincial Islamic committees]. 3. Setting up a secretive organizational structure. 4. Recruiting and training [ethnic Malay Muslim] youth to become militants, aiming to have 3,000-strong well trained and well-disciplined troops. 5. Building nationalist and independence struggle ideology among government officials [of ethnic Malay Muslim origin] and ethnic Malay Muslims [of the southern border provinces] who went to work in Malaysi. 6. Launching a new wave of attacks. 7. Declaring a revolution: Human Rights Watch, above n 23 at 18–19.

25 Marshall, A, ‘War in the Land of Smiles’, *Good Weekend* (supplement with *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*), 6 October 2007.

26 Gunaratna et al, above n 4 at 45.

After a long period of acknowledged uncertainty, consensus began to emerge in late 2006 over the predominance of the BRN-C. This is reflected in official statements in the media, the work of international observers such as Human Rights Watch²⁷ and analysts such as Anthony Davis writing for *Jane's* publications on strategic and intelligence matters. One of *Jane's* articles argues that the BRN-C leadership role has derived in part from the weakening of PULO caused by the Malaysian handover of four leaders in 1998, and combat deaths of two others in 2000. PULO, which reabsorbed the breakaway New PULO in 2005, remains the second strongest organization.²⁸ Many of these accounts regard the Pemuda and RKK as the youth and armed units of the BRN-C respectively. Human Rights Watch also comments on the role at the village level of BRN-linked *Pejuang Kemerdekaan Patani* (Patani Independence Fighters).

Broad consensus also exists regarding the organisational structure of groups such as BRN-C and PULO. The key distinguishing feature is their organisation along cell lines. They do not have a strong party hierarchy, making coordination difficult within each group, and between them.

There is, however, no clear picture of relations between insurgent groups. The general consensus is that when major operations are undertaken, the BRN-C will coordinate with other organizations such as PULO and GMIP – through a *Dewan Pembebasan Pattani* (DPP, Council for Patani Independence) by some accounts.²⁹ There has also been some inconsistency in reports of relations between these insurgent groups and international organisations – such as al-Qaeda, JI and the Free Merdeka Movement – although, as mentioned, the general consensus is that no close ties have, in fact, been established.

Besides ambiguity over coordination amongst insurgent groups and with international bodies, there are many additional uncertainties about BRN-C and other groups. Despite occasional claims to the contrary, Thai security officials remain very much in the dark about insurgent activities and leadership. They generally acknowledge that they have no understanding of who actually leads the organization, or the relative importance of exiled leaders, as opposed to those on the ground. Only a handful of cases have gone to court and secured convictions, and government statements on insurgent groups are often inconsistent and

²⁷ Human Rights Watch, above n 23.

²⁸ *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, 'Patani United Liberation Organisation', 23 November 2007.

²⁹ 'Mystery group runs insurgency in Thai South', *Straits Times*, 25 July 2005.

unconvincing. In March 2007 Defense Minister Boonrawd Somtas said that 'We do not know them. We do not know who is working against us'. And a media 'source' said the army had so far only been able to learn about low-level supporters, such as those who hinder authorities by laying spikes and other obstructions. 'So far we have not been able to reach the leadership and their thinking.'³⁰

Indeed, even consensus on BRN-C's leading role seems not to be unanimous. Following detention of alleged insurgent spies in January 2008 a Fourth Army source was quoted as saying: 'All these years we were only thinking of the BRN-Coordinate group, believing that it was the one spearheading the insurgency. But now we know it isn't.' The source did not specify exactly who was providing leadership, but asserted: 'There are also other insurgent groups outside the country that are playing a big part in the regional violence and have the same objective – separatism.'³¹

Perhaps all that can be concluded is that the BRN-C appears to be the most important organization, but other groups such as PULO, GMIP and *Bersatu* also play a role.

Insurgent Objectives

In the absence of formal statements and demands there is no consensus on what the specific goals of insurgents are. Thai officials, perhaps influenced by the traditional demands of insurgents in the 1980s and the alleged 7-point plan, generally claim that the main insurgent demands are independence, in an Islamic state. That also appears to be the message in *Berjihad di Patani*, pamphlets left at the scene of various incidents, and from one website (patanikini.wordpress.com). Many analysts, and organisations such as Human Rights Watch, have accepted this.

Nonetheless it is not clear whether such demands are an absolute requirement or an ambit claim. Pamphlets are not necessarily reliable, as many are suspected of having been authored by Thai authorities in a bid to discredit the resistance. Insurgent groups such as PULO and *Bersatu* once demanded independence, but in more recent years their leaders have expressed a willingness to accept a form of autonomy. Indeed the only organisation that maintains a website, PULO

30 'Support for rebels now at 10,000', *Bangkok Post*, 23 February 2007.

31 'Chances of unmasking core rebel leaders rise', *Bangkok Post*, 13 January 2008.

(<http://www.puloinfo.net/>), has declared this publicly. Several organisations took part in a dialogue mediated by former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad in December 2005 and early 2006, although the BRN-C was notably absent. The previously-mentioned commander of 250 insurgents stated that the object was not independence, but merely a region where Muslims could have more influence, and thousands of military and police would be withdrawn. 'We can live within the Thai state', he reportedly said.³²

These sources make it clear that insurgent demands were more openly Islamic than those in earlier times. But how far the demands are Islamist remains an area of contention. Gunaratna notes some fundamentalist elements in *Berjihad di Patani*, but concludes it is mainly nationalist.³³ Abuza, by contrast, acknowledges nationalist elements in calls for the restoration of the sultanate rather than a pan-Islamic Caliphate, but sees the emphasis on martyrdom, and the alleged threat to Islam of Muslims who do not follow the correct teachings, as evidence of a strong 'fundamentalist' (Salafi) influence. Abuza extends this analysis more broadly, claiming militants are more concerned about imposing a 'fundamentalist' form of Islam than securing independence.³⁴

The broad consensus, however, supports the view that traditional nationalist concerns rather than extremist Islamic doctrines have priority. In a survey of over 30 Islamic schools and one hundred teachers, Liow found no instance where southern violence was 'explained in classrooms as *jihad qital* (defensive jihad). In fact, the vast majority refused to acknowledge any religious content to the violence whatsoever.'³⁵ Other reports on recruitment of insurgents through study groups organized by religious teachers also maintain that the main message conveyed in training focused on Patani history.

Extent of Support

Most estimates of insurgent size indicate only a small number of hard core activists. Abuza estimates the total at around 1,000.³⁶ Davis suggests that 'while

32 Marshall, above n 25.

33 Gunaratna et al, above n 4 at 91.

34 Abuza, Z, 'Alternate Futures for Thailand's Insurgency', 3 (3) *Terrorism Monitor*, 25 January 2006.

35 Liow, J C, 'Muslim Resistance in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines: Religion, Ideology, and Politics', *Asia Studies* 24 (Southeast Asia), East-West Center, Washington, 2006, at 59, footnote 68.

36 Abuza, Z, 'Southern Thailand Still Suffering from Insurgent Violence', 3 (21) *Terrorism Monitor*, 31 May 2006.

as many as 3,000 youths might have undergone rudimentary training in the years leading up to 2004, probably only 300 to 400 graduated as so-called “commandos” and might be intermittently active today ... [though] the pool of popular acquiescence in which these fish swim is clearly far bigger’.³⁷

Thai estimates are rather higher. Various military sources have claimed that of 1,580 villages in the deep south 257 are ‘red’, meaning that the village is essentially under the control of militants. By 2007, several government leaders, including then Prime Minister Surayud, were claiming some 20,000 militants.³⁸ Military coup leader General Sonthi claimed as many as 5,000 militants were actively instigating violence, under the command of the BRN-C.³⁹ Nonetheless, in a region of the country with over 2 million residents these numbers are not large. Malay Muslim leaders in the south – members of the provincial Islamic organizations, local government, academics and teachers – have all been critical of militants, though it must be added they have also been strong critics of government policies as well.

Grooming of recruits takes place from an early age, with the importance of opposing the rule of ‘Thai infidels’ emphasised from early education in the *pondok*, IPSs and *tadika* (primary level Islamic schools attached to local mosques). At around 15-17 years students are chosen for more intensive study, then are gradually inducted into insurgent activities, starting with spreading propaganda leaflets before advancing to more demanding tasks. Anyone unwilling to participate might find themselves or their families threatened.⁴⁰

Most Muslims seem to prefer a peaceful solution to these problems through existing institutions. The strongest evidence for this was provided by the 2005 election. Prior to this, many speculated that turnout in the three southernmost provinces would be low, in view of hostility towards the Thaksin government and worries about security at election booths but over 70% voted, as high as the overall figure for the country. Muslims passed their judgment on the Thaksin administration by voting out all government candidates, in a region where 10

37 Davis, A, ‘No End in Sight for Southern Thailand’s Escalating Insurgency’, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, 1 October 2005.

38 ‘PM: Crackdown on rebels has been a success’, *Bangkok Post*, 17 September 2007. For an earlier claim of 10-20,000 by the Prime Minister’s security adviser, General Wattanachai, see ‘Southern extremists learning from bin Laden’, *Bangkok Post*, 22 March 2007 and ‘Al-Qaeda influences seen in South’, *The Nation*, 22 March 2007.

39 ‘CNS chief says southern militants well organised’, *The Nation*, 17 May 2007.

40 Human Rights Watch, above n 23 at 22-25.

of the 11 sitting candidates had been from the ruling party. But there is no certainty Muslims will be given the opportunity to solve problems through existing institutions – hardline security policies have alienated many from the government, and even those inclined to support it will often hesitate because the government is unable to ensure their protection.

The Future

Where is the conflict likely to proceed from here? After four years of intense conflict violence has become entrenched. Following the 19 September 2006 coup the new government made initial efforts to change course, apologizing for the past violence, promising to seek a resolution of the conflict by peaceful means, and reestablishing the SBPAC. But the supremacy of the military in security issues was soon reasserted, and it reverted to hard-line security policies. With large-scale sweeps and arrests since June 2007, the peaceful approach has been abandoned. The sweeps seem to have curtailed large scale insurgent operations, but the level of killing and violence shows no signs of abating.

A new government headed by Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej came to power at the end of January 2008 on a platform of continuing Thaksin's policies, and has continued with a hard-line approach to the problems in the south. Samak started badly by reiterating Thaksin's initial claim that deaths at Tak Bai were accidental, caused by weakness due to fasting. He has showed little interest in southern affairs, taking three months to visit, making few comments on the topic, and handing matters over to army chief General Anupong Paojinda.⁴¹

Thailand's intense political conflict between factions loyal to, and opposed to, Thaksin has gathered further momentum since the September 2006 coup, and the southern conflict has become a secondary issue. This is not an environment in which policies of moderation and compromise, such as those advocated by the NRC,⁴² are likely to make headway. And without such a change the current level of violence seems destined to remain.

41 After this paper had been completed the Thai government fell in September 2008, when the courts found Samak guilty of a conflict of interest for presenting a TV program on cooking. The new government headed by Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother-in-law, is unlikely to change policy towards the south.

42 National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), *Overcoming Violence Through the Power of Reconciliation*, Bangkok, 2006.

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