

Conflict in Southern Thailand

Islamism, Violence and the State in the Patani Insurgency

SIPRI Policy Paper No. 20

Neil J. Melvin

sipri

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

September 2007

© SIPRI, 2007

ISSN 1652-0432 (print)
ISSN 1653-7548 (online)

Printed in Sweden by
CM Gruppen, Bromma

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>The Patani region of Thailand</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Table A.1. Data on the Patani region and Thailand</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Abbreviations and acronyms</i>	<i>vii</i>
1. Introduction	1
2. The contemporary conflict	5
The nature of the current insurgency	7
Tactics and targets	9
3. The historical roots of the conflict	12
Annexation and Thai state building	12
The 1950s to the 1980s: conflict and conciliation	15
Socio-economic grievances	17
4. Islamism and the Patani insurgency	19
The role of Islamism in the Patani insurgency	20
The Patani insurgency and international jihadism	23
Buddhism and the Patani conflict	26
5. Thai politics and the re-emergence of conflict	28
The rise and fall of Thaksin	29
6. Future directions in the conflict	33
Current peace initiatives	35
The way forward	36
Obstacles to peace	38
About the author	40

Preface

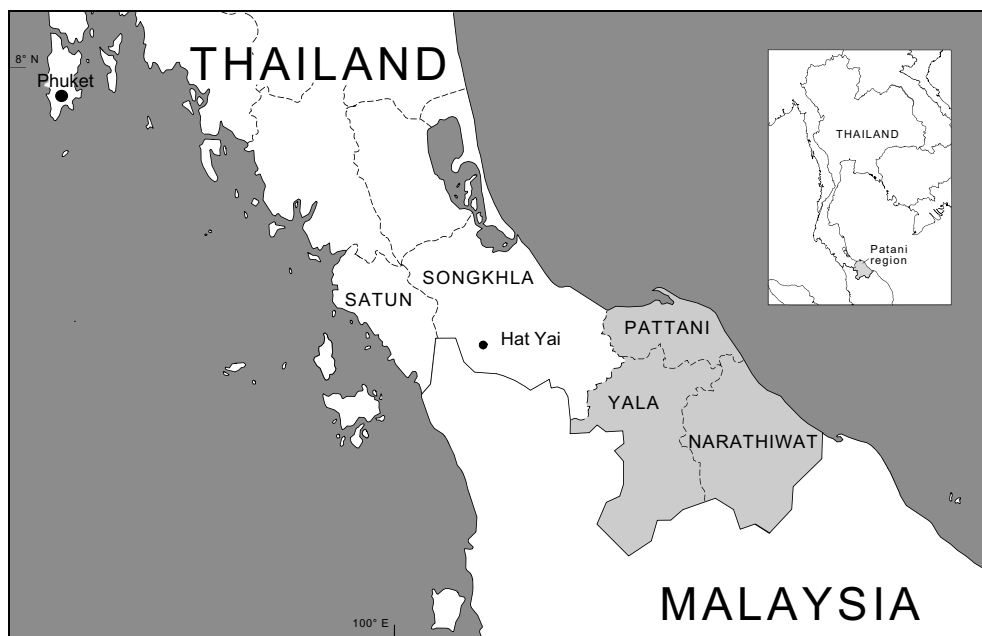
When the interface between terrorism, extreme Islamism and violent conflict is mentioned, most people would think immediately of the greater Middle East. Many security experts will also be aware of the existence of groups in Central Asia that seem to fit into the same pattern. Much less well known, however, is the case of southern Thailand, where in three provinces collectively known as Patani an escalating and brutal conflict has claimed over 2000 lives since 2004. The violence has already had important political consequences—the failure of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s government to get a grip on it was one reason for the decision by elements of the Thai military to launch a—successful—coup in September 2006. Despite the military junta’s more conciliatory approach to the insurgents in the South, however, the violence has continued to escalate.

As is so often the case, the origins and motives of the Patani insurgency defy any simple explanation. Political, social and economic tensions—some linked with the Thaksin government’s drive for economic liberalization—are certainly present, as witnessed by the fact that officials, monks and teachers as well as government security forces have been among the targets of attack. The violence in Patani also seems to reflect a resurgence of long-standing separatist sentiments and a rejection of the centralized Thai state, which motivated earlier conflict in the same region, particularly from the 1960s to the 1980s. However, on this occasion there is also clear evidence of the influence of Islamist groups and perhaps of the same type of jihadist ideologies as have motivated the choice of terrorist tactics and indiscriminate violence in other, better-known ongoing conflicts. Another parallel with the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, among others, is that the approaches chosen by the official authorities have not always been well judged to contain the violence. The Thaksin government’s espousal of many tenets of the US-led ‘global war on terrorism’ may have helped to destabilize conditions in the Patani region in the first place, and the increasing use of local militia against the rebels seen in recent months is hardly likely to soothe inflamed religious feelings.

This paper is one of the products of a larger SIPRI research project, *Conflict, Islam and the State-Nation: New Political and Security Challenges*, kindly supported by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In it, Dr Neil Melvin seeks to unravel these different strands of the Patani conflict and to shed light on its dynamics. He warns that the insurgents are now gaining the upper hand and it will be hard to stop the conflict escalating still further. The case is strengthening, therefore, for the international community to intervene, over and above the expressions of concern that have already come from Thailand’s neighbours. I am grateful to Dr Melvin for this original and illuminating study, and to Caspar Trimmer for the editing.

Alyson J. K. Bailes
Director, SIPRI
August 2007

The Patani region of Thailand



Map of the Patani region of Thailand, showing neighbouring provinces with majority Malay Muslim populations

Patani is a name often used to refer to a region in the far south of Thailand along the border with Malaysia. The name comes from the former sultanate of Patani, which was founded in 1390 and annexed by Siam (Thailand's historical name) in 1902. At the time of the annexation, Patani included the modern-day Thai provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala and parts of Songkhla along with neighbouring areas of Malaysia. The Malay spelling of Patani is used here to refer to the area currently affected by insurgency, whereas the Thai spelling, Pattani, is used to denote the province of that name.

The insurgency in southern Thailand is active primarily in Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala provinces. There has also been some violence in parts of Songkhla, notably in some predominately Muslim districts and in Hat Yai, a regional commercial hub and the biggest city in the South. Neighbouring Satun province also has a largely Malay Muslim population but has not been significantly affected.

The combined population of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala provinces is approximately 1.8 million, of whom about 80 per cent are Malay Muslims. Many speak the Patani Malay dialect, known in Thai as Yawi. The Patani region accounts for more than 65 per cent of Thailand's Muslim population. Although communities tend to be arranged along ethnic lines, the Malay Muslim and Thai Buddhist cultures have been largely accommodating to each other until recently.

Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala are among the 20 poorest of the 76 provinces of Thailand and have some of the highest rates of poverty in the country. Incidence of extreme poverty concentrated in a few districts. Some basic data on Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala provinces are presented in table A.1.

Table A.1. Data on the Patani region and Thailand

Entity	Total population, 2006 ^a	Muslim population, 2000 (% of total population)	Human Achievement Index grading ^b	Unemployment rate, 2005 (%)	Poverty incidence, 2004 (%)	Household income, 2004 (Thai baht)
Narathiwat province	707 171	83	Very low	1.9	18.15	9 214
Pattani province	635 730	81	Very low	2.1	22.96	11 694
Yala province	468 252	71	Medium	0.6	10.00	11 880
Southern region ^c	8 600 436	1.4	7.82	14 237
Thailand	62 828 706	5	..	1.3	11.25	14 778

.. = data not available.

^a These figures are based on the registration records of the Thai Ministry of Interior's Department of Local Administration. It may thus exclude Malay Muslims without official registration.

^b The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Achievement Index is composed of 8 indices, based on 40 indicators. The 8 indices are health, education, income, housing and living environment, family and community life, transport and communications, and participation.

^c The southern region comprises 14 provinces: Chumphon, Krabi, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Narathiwat, Pattani, Phang-nga, Phattalung, Phuket, Ranong, Satun, Songkhla, Surat Thani, Trang and Yala.

Sources for table and text: International Crisis Group (ICG), *Southern Thailand: Insurgency, not Jihad*, Asia Report no. 98 (ICG: Singapore and Brussels, 18 May 2005); Suwannarat, G., *Children and Young People in Thailand's Southernmost Provinces: UNICEF Situation Analysis* (United Nations Children's Fund: Bangkok, 2006); and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Thailand Human Development Report 2007: Sufficiency Economy and Human Development* (UNDP: Bangkok, 2007).

Abbreviations and acronyms

BNPP	Patani National Liberation Front (Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani)
BRN	National Revolution Front (Barisan Revolusi Nasional)
BRN-C	National Revolution Front–Coordinate (Barisan Revolusi Nasional–Coordinate)
CPM 43	Civil–Police–Military Taskforce 43
GAMPAR	United Greater Patani Malays Movement (Gabungan Melayu Patani Raya)
GMIP	Patani Islamic Mujahidin Movement (Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani)
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
OIC	Organization of the Islamic Conference
PPM	Patani People’s Movement
PULO	Patani United Liberation Organization
SBPAC	Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre

1. Introduction

In the early hours of 4 January 2004, a group of gunmen attacked an army camp in the southern Thai province of Narathiwat, seizing hundreds of weapons and killing four soldiers. At roughly the same time, arsonists set fires at 20 schools and two unmanned police posts in the province. Simultaneous incidents in Yala province—tyres being burnt on many roads and the planting of fake explosives in several locations—were believed by the police to have been intended to divert their attention from the army camp raid.¹ The following day, two police officers were killed in a series of bomb attacks in Pattani province. The Thai Government, headed by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, responded by declaring martial law in several districts of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala provinces.² Thus began the recent upsurge of violence in the southernmost provinces of Thailand that has attracted little international attention but has, according to recent estimates, led to more than 2400 deaths and 4000 people being injured since 2004 and threatens to escalate further.³

The southernmost provinces of Thailand—an area often referred to as Patani—are no strangers to conflict, having suffered several periods of violent instability in the 20th century. From the 1960s, a significant separatist movement, including more than 60 armed groups, was active among the Malay Muslims of the region.⁴ However, by the late 1980s the violence had largely subsided and many of the insurgent leaders had given up the armed struggle under an amnesty programme. As a result, for most of the 1990s the region was relatively stable, although it was not entirely free of conflict—233 deaths were attributed to political violence in the three provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat from 1979 until the end of 2003.⁵

The sudden return of violence in Patani took many observers by surprise. Although there had been a gradual increase in the number of violent incidents in the region from 2001, the 4 January raid was the major turning point. There were numerous attacks on government targets during the following weeks. Towards the end of January three Buddhist monks were murdered in Narathiwat and Yala, signalling a shift in tactics by the insurgents.⁶

¹ 'Barrack raided, 20 schools torched in South', *The Nation* (Bangkok), 5 Jan. 2004, <<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/>>.

² 'Southern violence: Pattani hit, martial law declared', *The Nation*, 6 Jan. 2006.

³ Estimates are of insurgency-related deaths and injuries between Jan. 2004 and July 2007. Human Rights Watch (HRW), *No One Is Safe: Insurgent Attacks on Civilians in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces*, vol. 19, no. 12(C) (HRW: New York, N.Y., Aug. 2007), <<http://www.hrw.org/>>, p. 5.

⁴ The term Malay Muslims is used here to refer to Muslims of Malay ethnic origin living in southern Thailand.

⁵ Sugunnasil, W., 'Islam, radicalism, and violence in Southern Thailand: Berjihah di Patani and the 28 April 2004 attacks', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Mar. 2006), p. 141.

⁶ Konglang, A., 'Separatist violence takes new turn in southern Thailand with monk killings', *The Nation*, 24 Jan. 2004.

2 CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

On 28 April 2004 more than 100 suspected insurgents, most of them lightly armed, were killed after coordinated attacks against 11 police facilities in Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala. Around 30 insurgents in Pattani then took refuge in the historic Krue-Se mosque. They were surrounded by security forces and killed with grenades after a stand-off lasting several hours. Questions were raised about the tactics used by the security forces.⁷

On 25 October 2004, during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, a demonstration outside the Tak Bai Police Station led to the arrest of more than 1000 protestors. Many were subsequently piled into trucks, several layers deep. Seventy-eight died, the majority from asphyxiation as a result of being smothered by the bodies of other detainees. Following the Tak Bai deaths, the violence in the southern provinces escalated sharply, both in the number of incidents and the brutality of the violence. The government responded by intensifying its efforts to suppress the insurgency.

By the second half of 2006 it was clear that the Thaksin government was losing control of the situation and that it had few alternative approaches left to try. There was a growing split between the army and Thaksin about how to prosecute the conflict. King Bhumibol Adulyadej's influential Privy Council endorsed a return to the traditional approaches to security in the South that Thaksin had abolished when he came to power.⁸ Bombings in Hat Yai, the main city of the South, on the night of 16 September 2006—and the resultant death of the first Western tourist in the southern violence—led to fears that the conflict might break out of Patani and potentially spread to popular tourist resorts such as Koh Samui and Phuket. Three days later, elements of the army launched a coup with the backing of Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda. This was seen by many as offering the prospect of a fresh start for efforts to resolve the Patani conflict.⁹ Coup leader Sonthi Boonyaratglin had become, in 2005, the first Muslim army commander-in-chief in Thai history and, although not a Malay Muslim, was considered to be sensitive to the situation in the South.¹⁰ In July 2006 he had been assigned responsibility for counter-insurgency in the region but his attempts to introduce a new conciliatory approach—and his claims of political interference—brought him into public confrontation with Thaksin.¹¹ It was hoped that, with Thaksin gone and Sonthi free to act, a genuine resolution to the conflict was possible. That initial optimism has proved unfounded. In fact, the violence in Patani has escalated: the numbers being

⁷ 'Southern carnage: kingdom shaken', *The Nation*, 29 Apr. 2004.

⁸ Sheridan, M., 'Thai coup sparked by failed war on Islamists', *The Times*, 24 Sep. 2006, <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/>>.

⁹ E.g. McGeown, K., 'Thai coup brings hope for south', BBC News, 18 Oct. 2006, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/6063498.stm>>; and Organization of the Islamic Conference, 'The OIC Secretary-General welcomes the new tendencies of the Thai authorities in dealing with the situation of Muslims in southern Thailand', Press release, Jeddah, 5 Nov. 2006, <<http://www.oic-oci.org/>>. See also International Crisis Group (ICG), *Southern Thailand: The Impact of the Coup*, Asia Report no. 129 (ICG: Jakarta and Brussels, 15 Mar. 2007), <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/>>.

¹⁰ 'Profile: Thai coup leader', BBC News, 19 Sep. 2006, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/5361932.stm>>.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch (note 3), p. 40.

killed have increased and the brutality of insurgent attacks has intensified since the fall of Thaksin.

With the insurgents in the ascendant and the Thai authorities struggling to find an effective new approach, understanding the nature of the conflict has grown more pressing. The time appears ripe for a re-examination of the Patani conflict with a view to better understanding its causes and dynamics and, thereby, helping to identify possible ways to promote peace in the region. However, there is still considerable disagreement among policymakers and analysts about the actual nature of the conflict, its causes and who is involved. Broadly, three distinct interpretations of the contemporary conflict have been put forward: those focusing on historical grievances; those focusing on the role of violent Islamism; and those focusing on the role of modern Thai politics and the ‘global war on terror’. Obviously these interpretations are not mutually exclusive, but analysts disagree over their relative importance.

The ‘historical grievances’ interpretation emphasizes the fact that the southern regions of Thailand have a history of violence and insurrection, dating from soon after the full-scale incorporation of these provinces into Siam (the former name of Thailand) in 1909. Bangkok-initiated programmes to pacify the South, including attempts at linguistic and cultural assimilation, largely failed, highlighting the shortcomings of Thai nation and state building in this region. Following World War II, violence emerged in the southern provinces, focused on the issue of separation from Thailand and on rejecting the assimilation policies of the Thai authorities. The use of—often unchecked—violence by the Thai security forces in the region over the years has created deep-seated resentment and fear of the Thai authorities among many Malay Muslims. Failure to address broad structural problems in the relationship between the southernmost provinces and rest of the country is also seen as one of the main reasons for the return to violence. In this view, today as for much of the past 50 years, it is the questions of education, employment in the public sector, language and economic development that lie at the root of conflict.¹²

Evidence of the growing influence of Islamist ideology on the conflict has led some to challenge the focus on ethno-national grievances as the main source of the contemporary violence. The emergence of conflict in the first years of this century is thus, in large part, seen as the result of factors internal to Islam and the Malay Muslim community in southern Thailand. Some commentators have suggested that the rise of violent jihadist ideology in Thailand, the creation of local insurgent organizations built on this ideology, and the interaction of these organizations with violent Islamist networks in South-East Asia and around the world has played a vital role in the reignition of the Patani insurgency.¹³ The violence is, in this view,

¹² E.g. International Crisis Group (ICG), *Southern Thailand: Insurgency, not Jihad*, Asia Report no. 98 (ICG: Singapore and Brussels, 18 May 2005).

¹³ E.g. Abuza, Z., *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (Lynne Rienner: Boulder, Colo., 2003), pp. 171–73; and Gunaratna, R., Acharya, A. and Chua, S. (eds), *Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand* (Marshall Cavendish Academic: Singapore, 2005), pp. 53–68.

4 CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

aimed at the creation of an Islamist order in the Patani region and a rejection of the secular policies of the Thai state.

Finally, a number of observers have focused on the issue of what triggered the dramatic escalation of violence following a decade of relative peace. They argue that political issues are the principal cause. In particular, some analysts point to the emergence of a struggle for power between Thaksin and the established power structure in Thailand, centred on the institution of the monarchy. Others also point to the harsh policies that have been followed by successive governments in respect to the conflict as playing a critical role.¹⁴

This paper outlines the main contours of the Patani conflict. It also examines in more depth the three main interpretations outlined above, with a view to increasing understanding of the conflict and identifying possible ways forward. Chapter 2 examines the current nature of the conflict, including the changing patterns of violence and the main actors in the insurgency (the role of security forces and of local paramilitaries are discussed in later chapters). Chapter 3 explores the historical roots of the conflict and how long-standing grievances have influenced recent developments. Chapter 4 examines the role of religion and the rise of radical Islamism in the Patani conflict. Chapter 5 looks at some key developments in Thailand's recent political history and their bearing on the conflict. In the final chapter, the likely future trajectory of the conflict and possible ways to promote peace in the region are considered.

¹⁴ E.g. Pathmanand, U., 'Thaksin's Achilles' heel: the failure of hawkish approaches in the Thai south', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Mar. 2006), pp. 73–93.

2. The contemporary conflict

At least 11 soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb attack on 31 May 2007 as they drove through the province of Yala in the far south of Thailand after negotiating with Malay Muslim protestors. On the same day another seven people were killed when unknown gunmen fired at local Muslims in a mosque in neighbouring Songkhla province.¹⁵ Barely two weeks later, on 15 June a further seven soldiers were killed in Yala on their way to a local school to provide security for teachers, who have frequently been targeted by Malay Muslim insurgents; three local government leaders were killed when the car they were traveling in came under fire in Pattani province; and five men were injured when gunmen fired into a village teashop in Yala province.¹⁶ Earlier, on 6 May, Thai military authorities had agreed to release 24 suspected Malay Muslim militants and withdraw a unit of rangers from Krong Pinang district in Yala following four days of demonstrations by 300 local people. Officials claimed militants had forced the locals in the area to stage the protests.¹⁷ These incidents highlight the complex and increasingly violent character of the contemporary Patani conflict.

On 2 November 2006 the interim prime minister appointed by the new military junta, General Surayud Chulanont, made his first visit to the southern border provinces of Thailand. During the visit he apologized for the past actions of the Thai security forces against ethnic Malay Muslims, notably the 2004 Tak Bai incident described in chapter 1.¹⁸ Among several initiatives aimed at defusing the tension in the South and addressing the legitimate grievances of Malay Muslims, Surayud proposed setting up a special development zone incorporating Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala along with neighbouring Songkhla and Satun provinces and even suggested that there might be space for the implementation of sharia law among southern Muslims.¹⁹ The government also held out the prospect of talks with the insurgents.

It quickly became clear, however, that the softer approach had largely failed, and the insurgents apparently rejected the idea of dialogue. Despite the presence of 30 000 heavily armed regular troops across the region, the insurgents stepped up their violent campaign in early 2007, forcing the closure of 1000 schools across the

¹⁵ 'Thai bomb blast kills 11 soldiers', BBC News, 1 June 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/6709673.stm>>.

¹⁶ 'Seven troops die in Thai bombing', BBC News, 15 June 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/6755319.stm>>.

¹⁷ 'Demonstrators end blockade', *The Nation*, 7 May 2007.

¹⁸ Pathan, D., 'Surayud apologises for govt's abuses in South', *The Nation*, 3 Nov. 2006.

¹⁹ Srivalo, P. and Shinworakomol, N., 'South zoned for development', *The Nation*, 24 Nov. 2006; and Fuller, T., 'Thai junta may allow Shariah in south', *International Herald Tribune*, 7 Nov. 2006, <<http://www.ihf.com/>>.

6 CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

South.²⁰ According to one analyst, some 600 people were killed in the nine months following the coup; one-third of the 30 beheadings in the conflict took place in the first half of 2007; and since the coup, larger and more deadly improvised explosive devices have been used, and the desecration of corpses has become routine.²¹

The military regime seems to be at a loss as to how to address the escalating conflict. With the government's conciliatory overtures rejected and the military seemingly unable to respond effectively to the violence, the authorities have not succeeded in forging a new approach or in making the existing arrangements work better. The junta has come under increasing criticism for this failure and there are fears that the state education system in the South is at risk of collapse.

Meanwhile, the Thai authorities have stepped up the recruitment and deployment of local militia to maintain security, reportedly allowing them to act with impunity.²² The Thai Buddhists who remain in the region are themselves often engaging in vigilante justice.²³ As a result, the South has seen a growing polarization between the ethnic Malay Muslim population and Thai Buddhist communities, prompting concern that intercommunal violence will escalate.

The problems in the South have also had a negative impact on Thailand's international image. During Thaksin Shinawatra's premiership, government policies towards the conflict caused tensions in bilateral relations with Malaysia and Indonesia several times. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) also expressed reservations about the government's handling of the violence in southern Thailand. In June 2005 the OIC sent a delegation to southern Thailand on a fact-finding mission. Although Thai Foreign Minister Kantathi Suphamongkon claimed that the OIC understood that the strife in the southern provinces was not religious and would not get involved,²⁴ in October 2005 OIC Secretary-General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu said that he was concerned about the 'continued acts of violence in southern Thailand against Muslims'.²⁵ The United Nations Human Rights Committee also raised questions over the actions of security forces in the South and the culture of impunity apparently surrounding them. In 2005 it demanded 'full and impartial investigations' of the incidents at Tak Bai, Krue-Se mosque and

²⁰ Macan-Markar, M., 'Southern Thailand: "They're getting fiercer"', *Asia Times*, 7 Dec. 2006, <<http://www.atimes.com/>>.

²¹ Abuza, Z., '9 months since coup, the military installed government has proven unable to quell insurgency in Thailand's Muslim South: violence has dramatically spiked', Counterterrorism Blog, 18 June 2007, <http://counterterrorismblog.org/2007/06/9_months_since_coup_the_milita.php>.

²² Human Rights Watch, 'Thailand: government-backed militias enflame violence', *Human Rights News*, London, 18 Apr. 2007; and Fuller, T., 'Southern Thai towns increasingly rely on militias', *International Herald Tribune*, 19 Mar. 2007.

²³ Ball, D. and Mathieson, D. S., *Militia Redux: Or Sor and the Revival of Paramilitarism in Thailand* (White Lotus: Bangkok, 2007).

²⁴ Thai News Service, 'OIC delegation visits southern Thailand', 7 June 2005, cited in Harish, S. P., 'Ethnic or religious cleavage? Investigating the nature of the conflict in southern Thailand', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Apr. 2006), p. 63.

²⁵ Organization of the Islamic Conference, 'On recurrent waves of violence in southern Thailand', Press release, Jeddah, 18 Oct. 2005.

elsewhere and of the targeting of ‘human rights defenders, community leaders, demonstrators and other members of civil society’.²⁶

Since the coup, the Thai authorities have sought to rebuild ties with the country’s southern neighbours and the OIC. The softer line employed towards the insurgency has been welcomed abroad. Although there is concern about the escalation of the conflict that has happened despite the new approach, a return to hard-line policies is likely to attract fresh criticism.

The nature of the current insurgency

A central question in the debate about the resurgence of violence in the South since 2004 has been why conflict re-emerged when stability seemed to have been well established during the 1990s. Providing an answer to this question has proved difficult. Perhaps one of the most intriguing elements of the current conflict is the lack of a clearly formulated set of political demands from the side of the rebels. Indeed, it is far from clear precisely who is involved in the insurgency. Nonetheless, a number of key points have emerged.

Despite the lack of a clear agenda from the side of the insurgents, many observers have suggested that there has been a shift from the exclusively ethno-national and separatist aims of the earlier phases of the insurgency towards radical Islamist ideology. In this understanding of the conflict, what started out as a post-World War II secessionist struggle led by various groups of secular, ethnic, socialist and nationalist ideologues—albeit one that became much more self-consciously Islamic during the 1980s—has today been transformed into an Islamist-style insurgency against the secular politics of Thailand’s Buddhist-dominated state.²⁷ In the words of one analyst, ‘In many respects, separatist militants seem to have successfully grafted the concept of radical jihad onto the old, relatively secular, Malay nationalist independence struggle.’²⁸ This has taken place against the background of a revival of Islam in southern Thailand and the break-up of the traditional structures of authority in the Islamic community, presenting opportunities for radicals to offer new interpretations of Islam and to put forward strong views about Islam’s political position. As a result of this interpretation, the conflict in the Patani region is increasingly presented as a religious struggle between Muslims and Buddhists, particularly in media descriptions, which now tend to refer to the insurgents as Muslims rather than Malays. (Chapter 4 examines the religious and Islamist aspects of the insurgency in more depth.)

The location and structure of the current violence also differs from those of the earlier incarnations of the insurgency. Violence has moved from the jungles into

²⁶ UN Human Rights Committee, Consideration of reports submitted by states parties under Article 40 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: concluding observations of the Human Rights Committee: Thailand, 8 July 2005, CCPR/CO/84/THA, <<http://www.ohchr.org/english/countries/th/>>.

²⁷ Sugunnasil (note 5), p. 141.

²⁸ Sugunnasil (note 5), p. 140.

villages, towns and cities. The urbanization of the conflict has been accompanied by the use of small cells of militants (from 5 to 10 persons) rather than guerilla armies like those maintained by groups such as the Patani National Liberation Front (Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani, BNPP) and the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) in the 1970s and 1980s. These cells are usually composed of religious young men, most of them in employment. The current lead organization of the insurgency, the Coordinate splinter group of the National Revolution Front (Barisan Revolusi Nasional–Coordinate, BRN-C, see below) reportedly uses as its main recruiter a student organization called Pemuda (youth).²⁹ More recently there have been reports that cells are spreading into villages, creating a broad network across the region and thus substantially strengthening the organization of the insurgency.³⁰ According to the Royal Thai Police there were in mid-2006 around 3000 militants in around 500 cells operating under the BRN-C.³¹ However, it is thought that other militant cells operate outside the BRN-C structure. A recent report by Human Rights Watch indicates that Thai authorities believe that well-trained insurgents have established cells in two-thirds of the 1574 villages across the southern border provinces, while there are now more than 7000 Pemuda members.³²

The militant cells have been responsible for a steady rise in the sophistication of the improvised explosive devices used by the insurgent—one of the favoured means of attack—and in the lethality of attacks. This structure has also given the contemporary insurgency considerable flexibility: the cells coalesce just before attacks and split up immediately afterwards.

The cell structure has changed the resource base of the conflict. Sustaining a guerilla army in the jungle requires considerable funds. During the 1970s and 1980s the separatist movement became increasingly involved with criminal activities, notably cross-border smuggling and narcotics trafficking in order to sustain the guerillas, leading to the coexistence of criminal groups and insurgents. The contemporary cells are, in contrast, financially autonomous, much cheaper to sustain than a standing guerilla army, and often largely funded by the insurgents themselves through regular and part-time employment—in many cases funding the insurgency is considered a religious obligation.³³

Observers have suggested that the identity of those participating in the insurgency set the contemporary conflict in the South apart from its earlier phases. As the International Crisis Group noted in a 2005 report, the perpetrators of the wave of attacks on police facilities on 28 April 2004 were ‘young, deeply pious, poorly armed and willing to die for their cause’.³⁴ This fact points to the emergence

²⁹ Abuza, Z., ‘A breakdown of southern Thailand’s insurgent groups’, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 17 (8 Sep. 2006), <<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/>>; and Human Rights Watch (note 3).

³⁰ International Crisis Group (note 9), pp. 7–8.

³¹ Shinworakomol, N., ‘South militants number 3,000’, *The Nation*, 23 June 2006.

³² Human Rights Watch (note 3), p. 8.

³³ Interview with Dr Srisompob Jitpiromsri, Pattani, 25 May 2006.

³⁴ International Crisis Group (note 12), p. 21.

of a new generation of militants trained for fighting typified by hit-and-run raids against members of the security forces, in contrast with the conventional guerrilla warfare of the 1970s and 1980s.

No groups have officially claimed responsibility for the current violence in the South. Several propaganda leaflets and notes distributed by the insurgents that attempt to justify the violence or threaten Thai Buddhists or Muslim ‘collaborators’ have been found—often at the scenes of attacks—but these are mostly signed ‘warriors of Patani’ or ‘freedom fighters of Patani’, neither of which is the name of a known insurgent organization.³⁵ However, some evidence has emerged about the broader structure of the insurgency.³⁶ It appears that several factions are working together in a loose coalition. The BRN-C appears to function as the lead organization.³⁷ The BRN-C was at the forefront of the revival of the separatist movement during the 1990s and it played a crucial role in reorienting this movement towards a more Islamist character. It is thought to have about 1000 members and to be led by schoolteachers and religious teachers.³⁸ A cell-based group called Runda Kempulan Kecil (RKK) is often cited as being responsible for the majority of the insurgents’ terrorist attacks. The RKK is believed to be the armed wing of the BRN-C and to train its members in Indonesia—its name reportedly comes from the title of one of the training courses, meaning ‘small patrol unit’.³⁹

Alongside the BRN-C, two lesser separatist groups, the PULO and the Patani Islamic Mujahidin Movement (Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani, GMIP), are reported to be active, as well as a number of smaller groups.⁴⁰ There appears to be only a limited degree of coordination between the insurgent groups, and their centres have little command, control or resources to offer their cells. With the organizations so compartmentalized and autonomous from the leadership, attacks in southern Thailand are usually disjointed and seem to reflect the initiatives of local actors more than a central command.⁴¹

Tactics and targets

Since 2004 the tactics used in the Patani conflict have become particularly savage. Whereas the insurgents had for the most part previously targeted security forces and symbols of Thai state authority such as government officials, schools and temples, according to a recent estimate, more than 90 per cent of those killed in

³⁵ Human Rights Watch (note 3), p. 24.

³⁶ For an overview of what is known about the broader structure of the insurgency see Abuza (note 29).

³⁷ Croissant, A., ‘Muslim insurgency, political violence, and democracy in Thailand’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Jan. 2007), pp. 4–6.

³⁸ Abuza (note 29), p. 2; and International Crisis Group (note 12), p. 12.

³⁹ Abuza (note 29), pp. 3–4; and Human Rights Watch (note 3), p. 26.

⁴⁰ Abuza, Z., ‘A conspiracy of silence: who is behind the escalating insurgency in southern Thailand?’, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 3, no. 9 (6 May 2005).

⁴¹ Abuza (note 40).

insurgent attacks have been civilians.⁴² Beheading, hangings and beatings are common; women, children, teachers and Buddhist monks have been murdered; and disappearances have become a frequent occurrence. However, while media reports have tended to focus on the increasingly brutal and morally abhorrent character of the violence and on the fanatical religious nature of the insurgents, this does not mean that the violence is random. Although it is difficult to be sure precisely who is involved in individual attacks, there is sufficient evidence to believe that there is a design to the use of violence by the insurgents.

Several distinct groups of targets can be identified: military and government officials and facilities; commercial locations; state schools and teachers; Buddhist monks and novices; Buddhist civilians, including those suspected of being informers; medical personnel and public health centres; and Malay Muslims. The extent to which each of these groups is targeted has also changed over time. While violence against military targets, government officials, commercial locations and suspected informers is common in such conflicts around the world, the other groups of targets are less so. Some explanations of why they are being targeted in the Patani conflict are offered below.

Violence has frequently been directed against a long-standing source of contention in the Patani region: the state school system. The targeting of teachers and schools has been a characteristic of the violence in the upsurge of conflict since 2004.⁴³ The state school system has played an important historical role as a medium for the linguistic and cultural assimilation of the Malay Muslim community into the Thai (or Thai Muslim) identity. The focus on teachers and the particularly brutal character of the violence used against them—which includes immolation, beheading and beatings—has prompted condemnation from human rights organizations.⁴⁴

The targeting of hospital workers and public health centres further reinforces this political dimension to the violence and has been seen as an attempt to eradicate all manifestations of the Thai state.⁴⁵

The local Buddhist community has also been subject to attack. Buddhist monks and novices, and the temples they reside in, have been particular targets, and many temples now lie empty.⁴⁶ This tactic has been interpreted as essentially a political gesture, as a campaign against the symbols of the Thai state, from which Buddhism is virtually inseparable.⁴⁷ The attacks on Buddhists seem also to have been, in large part, aimed at driving the local Thai Buddhist community from the region, which

⁴² Human Rights Watch (note 3), p. 7.

⁴³ Bangkok Pundit, 'Changing nature of insurgency: part 3', Bangkok Pundit blog, 20 May 2007, <<http://bangkokpundit.blogspot.com/2007/05/changing-nature-of-insurgency-part-3.html>>.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, 'Thailand: education in the south engulfed in fear', Human Rights News, 14 June 2007.

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch (note 3), pp. 70–72.

⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch (note 3), p. 69.

⁴⁷ Bangkok Pundit, 'Changing nature of insurgency: part 2', Bangkok Pundit blog, 18 Oct. 2006, <<http://bangkokpundit.blogspot.com/2006/10/changing-nature-of-insurgency-part-2.html>>.

perhaps partly explains the use of such extreme forms of violence. Indeed, many Buddhists in the Patani region are reported to have left their homes as a result of the insurgent attacks.⁴⁸ One observer estimates that some 15–20 per cent of the Buddhist population of the region has fled.⁴⁹ Insurgents in some locations are also reported to have resurrected the practice of taxing *dhimmi* (non-Muslims living under the protection of Islamic law) in return for a degree of protection.⁵⁰

There is considerable evidence, particularly from human rights groups, that the Thai military and police have been involved in violence against local Muslims.⁵¹ At the same time, the scale of the violence and the targets—who have included many Muslim clerics—suggests that much of the violence against Malay Muslims has been intra-communal. According to a survey conducted in communities affected by violence, during the first half of 2005, killings of Muslims by the insurgents began to exceed killings of Buddhists.⁵² The Muslims targeted by the insurgents are often those believed to be close to the Thai authorities or opposed to Islamist ideas.⁵³ This indicates that the insurgents have been seeking to consolidate their political and ideological control over the Malay Muslim community by targeting religious and other community leaders who could oppose them.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch (note 3), p. 56.

⁴⁹ Abuza (note 21).

⁵⁰ Abuza (note 21).

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch, *'It Was Like My Son Never Existed': Enforced Disappearances in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces*, vol. 19, no. 5(C) (Human Rights Watch: New York, N.Y., Mar. 2007).

⁵² Jitpiromsri, S. and Sobhonvasu, P., 'Unpacking Thailand's southern conflict: the poverty of structural explanations', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2006), pp. 102–106.

⁵³ Human Rights Watch (note 3), pp. 88–94.

3. The historical roots of the conflict

Perhaps the most developed and certainly the most enduring basis for explaining the instability and violence in the Patani region is one that locates the source of tensions within the formation of nation states in South-East Asia from the 19th century onwards, and the grievances and inequalities created in the process. As with most national histories, there is considerable debate about the true origins of the Thai nation and state in the Patani region. Traditional Thai historical scholarship has supported a version of history in which the territories of southern Thailand were historically part of the Kingdom of Siam and were brought under closer control in response to European colonial expansion in the early part of the 20th century. The official historical discourse on Thai independence has thus been structured around the loss and preservation of the country's territory in response to external and internal challenges.⁵⁴ Recent scholarship has proposed different interpretations of the emergence of separatist movements in Thailand and elsewhere in South-East Asia. Central to these interpretations has been the nature of state building in the region, notably efforts—usually by military-installed governments—to justify strong centralized rule over newly independent states.⁵⁵ Resistance by peripheral communities has thus prompted the consolidation of minority identities in opposition to the majority (in this case Thai) identity and thus the rise of separatist thinking.

Annexation and Thai state building⁵⁶

During the 19th century the territories of what is now southern Thailand were controlled by local principalities with vary degrees of affiliation to Siam. The present-day provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala, along with parts of western Songkhla and of northern peninsular Malaysia, comprised the independent sultanate of Patani, which is claimed to have originated in 1390 and which lasted until 1902. Siam then formally incorporated the sultanate, although it had already been a dependency of Siam for some time. In 1909 an Anglo-Siamese treaty led to the demarcation of a border between the Patani territories in Siam and the Malay states of Kelantan, Perak, Kedah and Perlis in British Malaya (now part of Malaysia). The Siamese authorities deposed the sultan and moved to impose Thai-

⁵⁴ Aphornsuvan, T., *Origins of Malay Muslim 'Separatism' in Southern Thailand*, Working Paper Series no. 32 (National University of Singapore, Asia Research Institute: Singapore, Oct. 2004), <<http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg>>, pp. 1–3.

⁵⁵ See e.g. Brown, D., 'From peripheral communities to ethnic nations: separatism in Southeast Asia', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 61, no. 1 (spring 1988), pp. 51–77.

⁵⁶ This section is largely based on International Crisis Group (note 12), pp. 2–5.

speaking local officials who reported directly to the central government in Bangkok, thereby displacing the political role of the local aristocracy.⁵⁷

The imposition of Siamese power was also accompanied by a range of measures aimed at strengthening Thai culture in the southern provinces. These were important causes of local discontent in the early and mid 20th century and a number of rebellions were launched. The use of education to promote Thai language and Buddhism and the key role of Buddhist monks in this system emerged as particular areas of contention. The effort to promote assimilation of the Malay Muslim communities in the South was particularly focused on displacing the *pondoks* (Muslim religious schools), which traditionally performed a central function in the reproduction of Malay Muslim culture and identity. One of the most controversial elements of the assimilation campaign was the 1921 Compulsory Primary Education Act, which required all children to attend state primary schools for four years and to learn the Thai language. The Siamese authorities later took steps to soften their approach in the South, leading to a period of stability. Following a constitutionalist coup in 1932, Malay Muslims gained the right to sit in the national parliament.⁵⁸

During the late 1930s, the rise to power of Field Marshall Plaek Phibulsongkhram (prime minister from 1938 to 1944 and from 1948 to 1957) and the promotion of his ultra-nationalist pan-Thai agenda led to another round of confrontation between Bangkok and the Malay Muslims.⁵⁹ Phibulsongkhram instituted a harsh set of policies designed to force the assimilation of minorities in the newly named Thailand—including a ban on the use of minority languages (including Patani Malay) in government offices, emphasis on Buddhism as the national religion across the country, and the requirement that everyone take a Thai name. These policies hit especially hard in the South, where the practice of Islam also faced new restrictions, including an initiative to rescind statutes that had allowed the local application of sharia law for family and inheritance matters.

⁵⁷ The relevance of this stage in Thailand's state formation to the situation in southern Thailand is highlighted by the fact that the conflict has largely been limited to the territory of the former Patani sultanate. Neighbouring Satun province, which also has a large Malay Muslim population, has had a different history—notably, it was incorporated earlier and more comprehensively into Siam—and has not experienced anything like the same level of political resistance or major incidents of violence. According to one commentator, 'The population of Satun, while having Malay ancestry, do not express a strong political allegiance to their ethnic Malay history and regard themselves as Thai. In addition, many of Satun's residents speak Thai and do not understand the Pattani-Malay dialect.' Harish (note 24), p. 63.

⁵⁸ *Pondoks* are residential religious schools in Malay Muslim communities. *Pondok* teachers are known as *ustah*, and the head teacher as *tok guru*. *Pondok* students may be adults or children, but are generally young people of secondary school age. *Pondoks* are mainly supported by donations. Suwannarat, G., *Children and Young People in Thailand's Southernmost Provinces: UNICEF Situation Analysis* (UNICEF: Bangkok, 2006), pp. 39–41, 44. *Pondoks* are known as *ponoh* in Thai.

⁵⁹ The fascist-inspired, irredentist pan-Thai agenda laid heavy emphasis on Thai ethnicity and the 'restoration' of the Thai 'nation' to its past glory. Jumbala, P., *Nation-Building and Democratization in Thailand: A Political History* (Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute: Bangkok, 1992). Siam was renamed Thailand (Muang Thai) in 1939.

Perhaps most significantly, Phibulsongkhram decreed that ‘anti-Thai’ activities (i.e. expressions of a non-Thai identity) should be treated as sedition.⁶⁰

World War II further exacerbated divisions in Thailand. While the authorities in Bangkok allied with the Japanese, the leaders of the Malay Muslim population opted to support the British based in Malaya, believing that their interests would be better served as a result. The initial defeat of the British and their retreat from Malaya left the southern regions of Thailand in a vulnerable position. During the Japanese occupation of Malaya, border territories that had been ceded by Siam in 1909 were restored to Thailand. Ironically, this helped to strengthen ethnic Malay separatist sentiment in Thailand when the territories were returned to Malaya after the war.

After the war, growing concern about nationalist sentiments prompted the Thai authorities to introduce a number of measures to appease the Malay Muslims—such as once again permitting the limited application of sharia—and to integrate Islam within state structures.⁶¹ Along with The Patronage of Islam Act of May 1945 created a set of state-aligned Thai Muslim institutions in order to co-opt the authority of Muslim clerics. In particular, the act revived the post of *chularajamontri*, the highest Islamic authority in the country. The *chularajamontri* was now to be responsible for the religious affairs of all Muslims in Thailand. Previous *chularajamontris* had been drawn from the Shiite elite that largely controlled Siam’s foreign trade and had not been religious scholars. The *chularajamontri* appointed in 1945 was a Sunni, like the majority of Muslims in Thailand.⁶² Nevertheless, the programme proved unpopular in the South and the new institutions were headed by Muslims from the capital rather than Malay Patani. Complaints about the activities of the Thai security forces in the region increased at this time.

The years 1946 to 1948 marked a crucial shift in the relationship between Bangkok and the Malay Muslims of Patani. Rioting in the South in 1946 was followed by the emergence of the Patani People’s Movement (PPM) in early 1947. The PPM called for self-rule in the South, language and cultural rights, and reintroduction of sharia.⁶³ In 1948 some 250 000 Malay Muslims petitioned the United Nations to oversee the accession of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala to the new Federation of Malaya. Growing confrontation between the Thai authorities and Malay Muslim groups such as the PPM led to widespread rioting during 1948. The period also saw the rise of the first significant post-war leader in the South, Haji

⁶⁰ Reynolds, C. J., ‘Introduction: national identity and its defenders’, ed. C. J. Reynolds, *National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand 1939–1989*, Monash Papers on Southeast Asia no. 25 (Monash University, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies: Clayton, Victoria, 1991), p. 6, quoted in International Crisis Group (note 12), p. 3.

⁶¹ Christie, C. J., *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism* (Taurus Academic Studies: London, 1996), p. 182.

⁶² Aphornsuvan, T., ‘History and politics of the Muslims in Thailand’, Thammasat University, Bangkok, revised 12 Feb. 2003, <<http://einaudi.cornell.edu/southeastasia/outreach/resources/MuslimThailand.pdf>>.

⁶³ Aphornsuvan (note 54), p. 33.

Sulong (Sulong bin Abdul Kadir bin Mohammad el Patani), the chairman of the Pattani Provincial Islamic Council. Sulong drew strongly on Islam as a source of legitimacy and support for the political struggle and was instrumental in presenting a programme of demands to the Thai authorities designed to improve the situation of the Malay Muslims. Sulong's arrest was one of the factors behind an upsurge of unrest during 1948, most notably the 26–28 April Dusun Nyur rebellion in Narathiwat on. Another religious leader, Haji Abdul Rahman, led hundreds of men against the police, resulting in the deaths of some 400 Malay Muslims; thousands more fled to Malaysia. The uprising in 1948 is widely regarded as the onset of the modern violent struggle in the South.

Traditional Thai scholarship casts the uprising as stemming from within the Malay Muslim community and being an example of rebellion and separatism. More recent work has highlighted the key role of the Thai authorities not only in the events themselves but also in constructing a narrative that has subsequently surrounded them. In the latter interpretation, rather than the Thai authorities merely responding to a popular uprising in the South, it is Bangkok that bears responsibility for escalating the confrontation. Following a military coup in November 1947, the junta elected to cast the Malay Muslims in Thailand as demanding separation—rather than self-rule and cultural and linguistic rights—and engaging in rebellion—rather than protest—to achieve their ends. In this way, the idea of a strong separatist sentiment and rebellion in the South at the time was politically fashioned by the junta as a means to help consolidate and justify their power in the face of an immediate threat to the country's territorial integrity.⁶⁴ According to this explanation, the legacy of this approach was a growing confrontation between the Thai authorities and the Malay Muslims and the emergence of genuine separatist sentiments in the South.

The 1950s to the 1980s: conflict and conciliation

During the 1950s various efforts were made to build a movement to promote the Malay Muslim political agenda through such groups as the United Greater Patani Malays Movement (Gabungan Melayu Patani Raya, GAMPAR) and the PPM. In 1959 the BNPP was created by the ex-leaders of GAMPAR and the PPM. The BNPP was the first organized armed group to call for Patani's independence.⁶⁵ The original leaders of the BNPP were mostly members of the traditional Patani Malay elite and religious functionaries like the ulemas and imams of mosques and madrasas in the region.

The conflict in the southern provinces grew significantly during the 1960s and by the end of the decade there was a range of armed groups operating in the region. Although lacking a single clear leadership, a set of core groups served to consolidate the insurgency. At this time, the BNPP opted for guerrilla warfare

⁶⁴ Aphornsuvan (note 54), p. 3.

⁶⁵ International Crisis Group (note 12), p. 6.

against the Thai security forces, working with rebels as well as criminal elements within Patani society. The National Revolution Front (Barisan Revolusi Nasional, BRN), formed in 1963, was much more focused on political organization, particularly in religious schools, than on guerrilla activities. It espoused an Islamic socialist ideology that set it apart from both the BNPP and the PULO.⁶⁶

A third armed group, the PULO, emerged in 1968 and became the largest and most effective of the separatist movements during the next two decades. It occupied the political middle ground between the BNPP and the BRN, not being strongly associated with either conservative Islam and former southern elites or socialism. Its official ideology was ‘religion, race, homeland, humanitarianism’. Although its stated goal was and is an independent Islamic state, it was more accurately characterized as ethno-nationalist than Islamic. During the 1970s and 1980s, many of its fighters were reported to have trained abroad. Indeed, during these decades, the militants began to establish links to other guerilla organizations around the globe, including in the Middle East.⁶⁷

Guerrilla activity in rural Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala increased during the late 1960s and 1970s, primarily in the form of attacks on police posts and government buildings, including government schools. When General Prem Tinsulanonda, a native of Songkhla province, took office as prime minister in 1980, after almost two decades of intensive campaigns against separatist and communist insurgencies in the South, the government realized that its strategy had to be political as well as military. In 1981 the new government overhauled security and governance structures to promote the new goal of political accommodation.

Among the innovations under Prem’s leadership was the introduction of a new administrative system in the South intended to promote a shift from confrontation to negotiation. A civil–police–military joint taskforce (CPM 43) was created to coordinate security operations, and it was reportedly instructed to ensure that extra-judicial killings and disappearances ceased. The government also launched the so-called Policy of Attraction, aimed at drawing sympathy away from separatist groups by increasing political participation and promoting development projects intended to strengthen the regional economy. Political matters were handled by the new Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC), which was established in 1981. Broad amnesty offers were eventually taken up by hundreds of communist and separatist fighters.⁶⁸

Although government programmes improved southern Muslims’ economic welfare and created opportunities for them to participate in public life, two major problems persisted. First, official, and especially police, corruption remained pervasive, and second, political integration policies still contained a significant assimilationist element. Many officials continued to equate cultural demands

⁶⁶ Abuza (note 29), p. 2; and International Crisis Group (note 12), p. 8.

⁶⁷ International Crisis Group (note 12), pp. 8–9, 13; and Pitsuwan, S., *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand* (Thammasat University, Thai Khadi Research Institute: Bangkok, 1985).

⁶⁸ International Crisis Group (note 12), pp. 11–12.

relating to expression of Malay identity with political demands for separatism, and their response was to suppress that identity. Promotion of the Thai language through education and the media was central to this effort. Teachers instructed their primary and secondary students to identify themselves as Thai Muslims rather than Malay Muslims.⁶⁹

Despite these difficulties, by the end of the 1980s there was strong evidence that the rebellion was coming to an end; although sporadic violence continued, it was at relatively low levels. Meanwhile, the remaining rebel groups were increasingly discredited as they became engaged in extortion and other criminal activities to raise funds. By the 1990s, the Thai authorities dismissed these organizations as simply bandit gangs.⁷⁰

Although the measures introduced in the 1980s appeared to bring the insurgency to an end, the sense of historical grievance manifest in ethno-national confrontation from the 1940s to the 1980s continued to animate political leaders in the region and to shape popular conceptions of discrimination toward the Malay Muslims. The complex political ties between the Thai authorities and the region that developed from the late 19th century also continued in the tense relationship between the Thai security forces and the local population. Human rights groups have catalogued the history of the targeting by the security forces of local human rights campaigners, the failure to investigate killings by any side properly, detentions without trial, disappearances, and an ethos of impunity among the army and the police in the region.⁷¹

Socio-economic grievances

Despite the important political progress from the 1980s on, which led to increasing participation by Malay Muslims in Thai public life during the 1990s, the southernmost provinces continued to lag behind much of the country in key areas (see table A.1 for some examples). Underdevelopment in the southernmost provinces has often been viewed, notably by the Thai authorities, as one of the key factors behind the violence in the region.

Identifying the links between underdevelopment and conflict in the South is, however, far from straightforward. The southern provinces have higher rates of poverty than the most developed parts of the country. Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala are among the four poorest of the southern provinces and the incidence of poverty is rising in some areas. Nevertheless, Thailand's northeastern and northern regions (which are also home to significant indigenous minorities) include provinces that are poorer but have not experienced in recent years the type of violent insurgency

⁶⁹ International Crisis Group (note 12), p. 12.

⁷⁰ International Crisis Group (note 12), pp. 12–14.

⁷¹ For examples of recent incidents of this sort see Amnesty International, 'Thailand: if you want peace, work for justice', Report no. ASA 39/001/2006, 4 Jan. 2006, <<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA390012006>>.

that has developed in the southernmost provinces.⁷² It is also true that the economy in the southern region as a whole has grown in the past few decades. Nevertheless, the southernmost provinces have generally experienced slower economic development than neighbouring provinces of Thailand or the northern provinces of Malaysia. There is also a strong sense among many in the Malay Muslim community that the natural resources of the South have been exploited by interests outside the region or by local Thai Buddhists.

A variety of social problems—particularly criminality and drug abuse—are sometimes seen as partially explaining the conflict in the region. An emergent problem with a subculture of youth delinquency in the South has also been seen as a factor, particularly where there is an overlap between crime and delinquency on the one hand, and ethnic or religious consciousness on the other. Researchers have, however, found no evidence that drug abuse is linked to the upsurge in militant activity.⁷³ Moreover, the contemporary insurgency seems, to a large degree, separate from significant criminal activity.

While absolute poverty, crime and socio-economic problems do not appear to be major causal factors in the Patani conflict, it is worth noting that the Malay Muslim population in Thailand does face a distinct set of socio-economic challenges—among them unemployment, low educational attainment and substandard infrastructure—which sets it apart from the Thai Buddhist population.⁷⁴ Moreover, Malay Muslims are poorly represented in the public sector or in high-status employment—in many cases because knowledge of the Thai language is required for these positions. Thus, while there is no simple link between the socio-economic situation in the South and the conflict, as two observers conclude, ‘structurally . . . Muslims in the three provinces clearly have legitimate grievances against the existing political system.’⁷⁵

⁷² United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Thailand Human Development Report 2007: Sufficiency Economy and Human Development* (UNDP: Bangkok, 2007), <<http://www.undp.or.th/>>, p. 15 and ‘Annex I: Human Achievement Index’; and Jitpiomsri and Sobhonvasu (note 52), pp. 102–106.

⁷³ Jitpiomsri and Sobhonvasu (note 52), p. 109.

⁷⁴ United Nations Development Programme (note 72), p. 12.

⁷⁵ Jitpiomsri and Sobhonvasu (note 52), p. 106.

4. Islamism and the Patani insurgency

Interpretations of the Patani conflict focusing on its religious aspects are attracting considerable support. This has led to the frequent characterization of the conflict as a religious one, with the motivation of the insurgents seen as shifting from mainly ethno-nationalist aims towards Islamist ones. Analysis has also increasingly focused on the links between the insurgency and international jihadist and terrorist organizations.⁷⁶ A close examination of contemporary violence in the south of Thailand clearly points to the important role of Islam—and religion—in the conflict. At the same time, the place of Islam in the insurgency is complex and notions that the South is caught up in a religious conflict and that the insurgency has undergone a process of Islamization may be misleading.⁷⁷

Islam has a long history in the Patani region of southern Thailand. It was brought to maritime South-East Asia in the 13th century by traders from India. Over the next four centuries, Islam consolidated its presence in the region. During this period Islam's position was strengthened through the work of Sufi missionaries and the conversion of key parts of the region's elite. The complex pattern of these conversions is believed to be one of the main reasons for the diversity of Islamic forms across the region. This diversity has been further reinforced by the patchwork of languages and ethnic identities found among South-East Asian Muslims.

The relatively peaceful expansion of Islam was associated with a degree of accommodation to existing local beliefs: Islam was overlaid on animist, Hindu and Buddhist traditions, giving the religion a more syncretic aspect than is commonly found in the Middle East.⁷⁸ The emergence of violent Islamism as the principal ideology of the insurgency in southern Thailand has, thus, been viewed as a break with a tradition of moderation. It is also, in the eyes of some, a sign that regional and international jihadist groups are playing an important role in the current conflict. However, the precise role of Islam, in all its 'moderate' and 'radical' forms, in the southern insurgency remains strongly contested and is at the heart of the contemporary debate about the nature of the conflict.

⁷⁶ Harish, S. P., *Changing Conflict Identities: The Case of the Southern Thailand Discord*, Working Paper no. 10 (Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore: Singapore, Feb. 2006), <<http://www.idss.edu.sg/publications/WorkingPapers/WP107.pdf>>.

⁷⁷ One author suggests that in fact the political goals of the Thai Malay ethno-nationalist movement have increasingly come to dominate the interpretation of Islam's political role in Thailand. Yusuf, I., *Faces of Islam in Southern Thailand*, Working Paper no. 7 (East-West Center Washington: Washington, DC, Mar. 2007), <<http://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/>>, p. 3.

⁷⁸ Rabasa, A. M., 'Southeast Asia: moderate tradition and radical challenge', A. Rabasa et al., *The Muslim World after 9/11* (Rand Corporation: Santa Monica, Calif., 2004), <<http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG246/>>, p. 369.

The role of Islamism in the Patani insurgency

There is broad agreement that since the late 1960s Islam has experienced a resurgence among Thailand's Malay Muslim community. Although the broad thrust of this revival in Thailand has not been political, it has nonetheless become interwoven with the instability in the South. This close interrelationship may have played a role in changing conflict identities from ethno-nationalism, which was at its peak from the late 1960s to the 1980s, to incorporate much more overt religious themes.⁷⁹ Since the late 1970s the violence in Patani has increasingly been characterized as between Buddhists and Muslims rather than between ethnic Thais and Malays. Nevertheless, just how far religion has replaced ethno-nationalism as the driving force of the insurgency is open to question.

To an important degree the current religious tensions in the South have their origins in the 1940s, when the Thai Government altered its assimilation campaigns in the South in response to rising Malay nationalism connected to the anti-colonial movements of the time.⁸⁰ One of the aims of the Thai authorities over the next two decades was to weaken the identity links between the Malays of Thailand and those in Malaya (and subsequently Malaysia). The policies introduced for this purpose may inadvertently have served to emphasize the religious identity of the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand.

To weaken these identity links, the Thai authorities—at that time still pursuing Phibulsongkhram's pan-Thai agenda—needed to delicately balance measures to cultivate allegiance to the Thai nation with recognition of differences between Malay Muslims and ethnic Thais. The formula they developed was to bracket the Malay Muslims together with the country's other Muslim communities as 'Thai Muslims'.⁸¹ A number of reforms were introduced in order to encourage the Malay Muslims to cleave to this new identity, including the 1945 Patronage of Islam Act (see chapter 3).

Language and education were—and remain—key issues in the struggle over reshaping the identity of the Malay Muslims and from the 1940s on were closely connected to resolving the problem of participation. Most of the officials in Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala were Thais who spoke little Malay and it was believed that this did little to strengthen loyalty to the Thai state in Patani. In 1961 the prime minister, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, launched the Pondok Educational Improvement Programme. This introduced registration of *pondoks* and gave the Thai Government a degree of control over their curriculums.⁸² The *pondoks* had until then operated independently of the state education system. The policy was intended to ensure that *pondok* students received some secular education and Thai

⁷⁹ Harish (note 24).

⁸⁰ Che Man, W. K., *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Oxford University Press: New York, N.Y., 1990), p. 64.

⁸¹ Christie (note 61), p. 182.

⁸² On *pondok* schools see note 58.

language training; it was hoped that it would help to produce Malay Muslims who could occupy administrative posts. Many *pondoks* upgraded themselves to become *rong rian ekachon sorn sassana* (private schools teaching religion), implementing the secular national curriculum and providing additional Islamic instruction.⁸³ However, the policy also met considerable resistance and was seen as upsetting the traditional process of generating elites in Malay Muslim society.⁸⁴ A number of *tok gurus* became more politically active and preferred to operate their schools underground rather than be incorporated into the state system.⁸⁵ Two corollaries of the policy were a decline in Patani's position as a centre for Islamic education and an exodus of young Malay Muslims to study in Islamic countries in the Middle East.⁸⁶

The stress laid on Muslim identity in Thai assimilation efforts and anger among Malay Muslims over the Thai authorities' perceived interference in their affairs helped to create conditions in which the rhetoric and ideologies of the Patani insurgents took on a more religious character. The collapse during the early 1960s of the GAMPAR and the failure of the BRN to achieve its political goals facilitated this process, creating a space for religious ideologues to rise to the top of the organizations involved in the insurgency. Groups such as the PULO and, later, the GMIP emphasized Islam in their struggle against the Thai authorities. Thus, during the 1970s Islam became a more important rallying point for the insurgents.⁸⁷ This shift was important in further dividing the Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim communities in the South.

From the 1960s the Muslim communities of southern Thailand were affected by an international revival of Islam that was stimulated to a significant degree by international events such as the Iranian revolution and the conflict in Afghanistan during the 1980s but also reflecting social, economic and political developments within the Muslim world. This resurgence was generally not political in Thailand but was rather characterized by growing piety, manifested in observance of Islamic practices, a return to traditional forms of dress (especially for women) and a more overt employment of religious symbols and language. Nevertheless, this Islamic revival did assist the insurgency. First, the strengthening of popular association with and interest in Islam allowed the insurgents to draw on religious symbols and images to claim legitimacy and gain support for their campaigns. Second, the revival helped to challenge traditional structures of authority in the Malay Muslim community, with the result that there was no effective and coordinated opposition

⁸³ Suwannarat (note 58), p. 40.

⁸⁴ Harish (note 24), p. 56; and Dulyakasem, U., 'Education and ethnic nationalism: the case of the Muslim-Malays in southern Thailand', ed. C. F. Keyes with J. Keyes and N. Donnelly, *Reshaping Local Worlds: Formal Education and Cultural Change in Rural Southeast Asia*, Yale Southeast Asia Studies Monograph no. 36 (Yale University: New Haven, Conn., 1991), p. 146.

⁸⁵ Liow, J., 'The truth about pondok schools in Thailand', *Asia Times*, 3 Sep. 2004.

⁸⁶ Madmam, H., *The Pondok and Madrasah in Patani* (Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia: Bangi, 2002), pp. 80–83.

⁸⁷ Harish (note 24), pp. 59–64.

from the clerical establishment to the insurgents' claims to take their authority from Islam.⁸⁸

By the late 1980s the Patani conflict was taking on a clearer Islamic character, as can be seen in the names of the insurgent groups formed at this time. Several leaders of the BNPP broke away in 1985 to form the United Mujahedin Front of Patani (Barisan Bersatu Mujahidin Patani, BBMP). In 1986 the BNPP renamed itself the Islamic Liberation Front of Patani (Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani, BIPP). The Patani Islamic Mujahidin Movement was formed in 1995 by some of the roughly 2000 Thai Muslims who are thought to have fought as mujahedin in the war in Afghanistan.⁸⁹ Further, the political liberalization that Thailand underwent in the 1980s and 1990s is reported to have led to the return of many Malay Muslims who fled to the Middle East during security crackdowns in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of these returnees brought with them Salafist ideas that were then becoming popular in the Middle East.⁹⁰

The insurgents had some success in trying to reframe the Patani conflict in terms of a religious war. As one scholar has noted, 'The jihad became a focus of attraction, the solution for the Muslim community's ills, and even one of the pillars of Islam.'⁹¹ In this way, the integration of the idea of violent jihad as an obligation into the broader revival of Islam became a means to mobilize militants and support which was further strengthened by efforts to promote other key religious concepts, notably that of martyrdom.⁹²

The Islamic education system appears to have become a particular focus for those seeking to promote radical and violent form of Islamism. Although the extent to which the system was infiltrated is not clear, evidence suggests that *pondoks* were targeted from the mid-1990s by an alliance of insurgent groups. A number of *pondoks* seem to have played an important role in spreading radical Islamist ideology.⁹³ The *pondoks* thus seem to have been a significant, but perhaps not essential, factor in strengthening the Islamic character of the insurgency.⁹⁴ While

⁸⁸ Sugunnasil (note 5), pp. 134–39.

⁸⁹ Liow, J. C., *Muslim Resistance in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines: Religion, Ideology, and Politics*, Policy Studies no. 24 (East–West Center Washington: Washington, DC, 2006), p. 56; and International Crisis Group (note 12), pp. 10, 13.

⁹⁰ Liow (note 89), p. 55. Salafi is a reformist current within modern Islam that advocates a return to the 'pure' form of the religion supposedly practised by the Salaf, the first 3 generations of Muslims, including the Prophet Mohammed. Many independent Salafi groups exist around the world, often following non-violent agendas. The words 'Salafism' and 'Salafist' are used here to denote Salafi-inspired political movements and their proponents.

⁹¹ Sugunnasil (note 5), p. 135.

⁹² Sugunnasil (note 5), p. 128.

⁹³ Sugunnasil (note 5), p. 135.

⁹⁴ According to one observer, more than 500 *pondoks* were operating in southern Thailand in 2004, but only about 300 of them were registered with state authorities. The Thai Government reportedly suspected that some of the 500 *pondoks* fostered religious extremism and harboured militants and about 30 were preaching 'violence in the name of Islam'. Liow (note 89). In Aug. 2007 Colonel Shinawat Maendej, an army commander in Narathiwat, was quoted as saying that the BRN-C had been recruiting and training Thai students in Indonesian universities with the help of the Free

there is little evidence that the schools have played a major role in recruitment of insurgents, they served to help to forge a stronger Muslim identity and Islamic consciousness, especially among young people.⁹⁵

It is worth noting, however, that the emphasis of the ideological indoctrination for violent jihad in some of the *pondoks* seems still to be on historical discrimination, oppression and dispossession and the necessity of reclaiming Patani Muslim land rather than solidarity with international jihadist causes.⁹⁶ Indeed, it has been convincingly argued that the notion of a transformation of the conflict in the South from a largely ethno-national one to a predominantly Islamist insurgency also seems to be misleading. In southern Thailand the mobilization of Islam has taken place within an insular and exclusive ethnic context where the identities of ‘Malay’ and ‘Muslim’ are fused and mutually reinforcing. As one leading scholar notes:

The region of Patani in southeasternmost Thailand provides a very clear-cut example of the almost inextricable link that can occur between an ethnic and a religious identity. At the height of their campaign of resistance to the Thai government in early 1948, the Patani Malay leaders appealed to the outside world in the following terms: ‘Give us back our race as Malays and our religion as Islam.’ As in the rest of the Malay world, for the Malays of Patani, ‘Malayness’ and Islam are virtually indistinguishable.⁹⁷

Thus, it can be argued that religion is simply a marker of the Malay ethnic identity.⁹⁸

The Patani insurgency and international jihadism

While the increasingly religious orientation of the Patani insurgency has been, to a great extent, the result of developments within Thailand, a number of analysts have suggested that regional and international influences, notably Islamist terrorist networks, have played an important role in reigniting the insurgency and altering the character of the conflict.⁹⁹ During the 1990s al-Qaeda saw South-East Asia as fertile ground for expansion and is reported to have built up terrorist networks in the region based largely on existing groups and grievances.¹⁰⁰ It is a widely held view that, in this way, long-standing insurgencies in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines became linked through cooperation between the regional group Jemaah

Aceh Movement (GAM) and JI. Many of these recruits then used jobs in Thai *pondoks* to recruit and radicalize the students there. Wangni, A. and Janssen, P., ‘Thailand takes battle to deep-South’s Islamic schools’, Deutsche Presse-Agentur, 24 Aug. 2007.

⁹⁵ International Crisis Group (note 12), p. 32.

⁹⁶ International Crisis Group (note 12), p. 32.

⁹⁷ Christie (note 61), p. 173.

⁹⁸ Liow (note 89), p. 61.

⁹⁹ Gunaratna, Acharya and Chua (note 13); and Sheridan, G., ‘Jihad archipelago’, *The National Interest*, 12 Jan. 2004, p. 49.

¹⁰⁰ Abuza (note 13).

Islamiyah (JI) and local organizations such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines, the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) in Malaysia and groups in Aceh, particularly in Aceh province.¹⁰¹

Despite a lack of clear evidence, some have suggested that there are good reasons for believing that the Patani insurgents are part of this regional cooperation and focus particularly on possible links with JI. The single strongest indicator of contacts between JI and groups in Thailand was the arrest of Hambali, JI's operational chief and believed to be connected to al-Qaeda, along with his two lieutenants, Zubair Mohamad and Bashir bin Lap (Lillie), in central Thailand in 2003. However, the main reason for their presence in the country seems to have been to plan attacks against Western targets rather than build links to the southern insurgency.¹⁰² There have also been reports of meetings involving JI and representatives from groups in Thailand.¹⁰³

While the existence of significant and sustained strategic-level cooperation between the Patani insurgents and other South-East Asian groups is hard to prove, there have certainly been contacts at a lower level. A number of militants from Thailand have been arrested in connection with the actions of violent Islamist cells in other parts of the region, while non-Thai Malay Muslims have been involved in violence in the South on occasion. Currently, foreign militants are reported to be training insurgents, notably in Indonesia.¹⁰⁴ It is also known that from the 1970s onwards there were frequent contacts between Patani insurgent groups and other armed groups around the world.¹⁰⁵ It is also probable that significant numbers of Malay Muslims from southern Thailand have come into contact with foreign Islamists during travel to study in the Middle East and Pakistan. There is also reported to be growing interest in the conflict from Islamist radicals around the world.¹⁰⁶

The emergence in southern Thailand of Wahhabi groups supported by organizations in Saudi Arabia has also led some to suggest that Wahhabism is major factor in the violence in southern Thailand.¹⁰⁷ It seems likely that its importance has been exaggerated. As one observer notes, 'a more sophisticated and contextualized appreciation of Wahhabism is required to understand fully its impact on Thai society, politics and insurgency. Wahhabism remains on the

¹⁰¹ See e.g. Tan, A., 'Southeast Asia as the 'second front' in the war against terrorism: evaluating the threat and responses', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 15, no. 2 (summer 2003), pp. 119–20, 124–27.

¹⁰² Ehrlich, P., 'Southern exposure', *Asia Sentinel*, 4 July 2006, <<http://www.asiasentinel.com/>>.

¹⁰³ International Crisis Group (note 12), p. 37.

¹⁰⁴ Abuza (note 40); Abuza (note 29), pp. 3–4; and Phasuk, S., 'The character of the conflict in southern Thailand', Presentation at the SIPRI workshop Violent Islamist Movements and Conflicts in Comparative Perspective, Stockholm, 11 May 2007.

¹⁰⁵ International Crisis Group (note 12), p. 8.

¹⁰⁶ Associated Press, 'Thailand insurgency may have links to the broader world of radical Islam', *International Herald Tribune*, 10 Mar. 2007.

¹⁰⁷ Wahhabi is an Islamic reformist current dominant in Saudi Arabia.

margins of Muslim society and is actively resisted in many mosques and educational institutions.¹⁰⁸

The fingerprints of modern Salafist thinking and the tactics, methods and rhetoric of violent jihadist groups are clearly present in the contemporary conflict in southern Thailand. This does not, however, prove the deep involvement of foreign jihadist groups. Salafist ideas seem to be important to certain sections of the insurgency and their supporters as a means to reinforce resistance to the Thai state and to provide a framework of meaning and intelligibility for Malay Muslims attempting to navigate the perceived challenges to their community.¹⁰⁹ With the global rise of Salafism, and the wide availability of Salafist propaganda in various electronic forms, it is not surprising that some Muslims in Thailand should view social, economic and political issues through the prism of this strand of Islam. It is also striking that the practices of some of the insurgents seem still to reflect many of the local traditions—including belief in magic (some insurgents appear to be convinced that they have been made invisible before attacks)—which would be abhorrent to Salafi thinking and suggest rather a form of Sufism.¹¹⁰

While the Patani insurgents are increasingly using the language of jihad to articulate their agenda, this agenda is different from those of international and regional jihadist groups. Perhaps most importantly, the aims of the insurgency are political and they seem to be focused on the specific local situation in Patani: ‘territorialisation of Islam in the local context’.¹¹¹ Documents produced by the Patani insurgents do not demonstrate a coherent global or regional jihadist agenda. In contrast, JI is a pan-Islamic movement, which aims at the creation of an Islamic state incorporating Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the southern Philippines, Singapore and the ‘Muslim lands’ of southern Thailand. JI’s strategy to achieve this relies on the creation of organizational forms based on an elite vanguard, whereas the Patani insurgents are trying to create a broad-based movement.

The growing sophistication of the methods used by the Patani insurgents, for example the construction of powerful improvised explosive devices, points to an awareness of military techniques recently developed by insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, much of the information needed is readily available through the Internet or other indirect sources, so it cannot be taken as clear evidence of personal contacts between Patani insurgents and terrorist groups involved in those conflicts. Also, while the conflict has become increasingly violent, suicide terrorism (often a marker of international jihadist influence) has yet to appear in Thailand.

Nevertheless, it does seem plausible that the global context of Islamic resurgence has been an important factor for the revival of insurgency in the South. The war in

¹⁰⁸ Liow (note 89), p. 48.

¹⁰⁹ Liow (note 89), p. 53.

¹¹⁰ Sugunnasil (note 5), p. 129; and International Crisis Group (note 12), p. 32.

¹¹¹ Liow (note 89), p. 55.

Afghanistan against the Soviet Union and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, which the Thai government supported, were important events affecting public opinion among Malay Muslims. The international revival in Islamic consciousness has strengthened Islamic identity in Thailand and afforded the insurgents stronger grounds for legitimizing the use of concepts of jihad and martyrdom in their campaigns of violence.

Although it has been difficult to establish any concrete evidence of direct connections between the insurgents and regional and international jihadist groups, and the Thai authorities are keen to stress the local nature of the violence, many are alarmed by the possibility that such ties already exist or could develop. The authorities in Malaysia have indicated that they are not only concerned about possible spillover effects of the conflict, but also that regional terrorist groups such as JI could still make themselves central to the conflict, a fear recently expressed by Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar.¹¹² It is worth noting, however, that the growth of speculation about the involvement of regional Islamist groups in the Patani conflict is taking place at a time when these groups are facing increasing pressure at the regional level on their activities, calling into question their ability to engage in new conflicts.¹¹³

Buddhism and the Patani conflict

An exclusive focus on Islam—and, indeed, on the Malay Muslim community—does not give a full understanding of the political and conflict dynamics that are operating across the South and in Thailand more broadly. Very little work has been done on the local Thai Buddhist community in the South. Just as Islam has been changing in southern Thailand, so, too, have Buddhism and the Thai community. This has been an important factor in the conflict in the Patani region. Thailand has been predominately Buddhist for 700 years. During much of that time, Buddhism has enjoyed the state's patronage. With the rise of efforts to promote a Thai nation state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Buddhism received an extra boost as a state religion.¹¹⁴ The symbiosis between Buddhism and the Thai state has been felt particularly acutely in the South, where monks have frequently been instrumental in efforts to assimilate the Malay Muslims, notably through education. These initiatives have included several under royal patronage.

¹¹² Associated Press, 'Malaysia warns Thailand's restive south could become terrorist breeding ground', *International Herald Tribune*, 8 Feb. 2007.

¹¹³ On 15 June 2007, Indonesian Police announced the capture of Zarkasih, who was believed to have lead JI since the capture of Hambali. Forbes, M. and Allard, T., 'Indonesia confirms arrest of JI leaders', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 June 2007; and International Crisis Group, 'Indonesia: Jemaah Islamiyah's current status', Asia Briefing no. 63, 3 May 2007.

¹¹⁴ Although no Thai constitution has overtly specified a state religion, they have stated that the monarch professes Buddhism. McCargo, D., 'Buddhism, democracy and identity in Thailand', *Democratization*, vol. 11, no. 4 (Aug. 2004), p. 156.

In recent years Buddhism in Thailand has faced new pressures and this is reported to have promoted ‘growing religious intolerance in Thai society—especially towards religious minorities, notably Muslims and Christians.’ This change is thought to have been driven in part by the Buddhist monastic establishment (the sangha), which has faced several problems in recent years: it has been viewed by rising numbers as ‘unconcerned with people’s problems and even irrelevant; monks [have] been involved in sex scandals which [has] undermined the sangha’s public standing; [and challenges from] aggressive Christian proselytising and the emergence of Buddhist feminist voices’.¹¹⁵ There was strong opposition from the sangha to the proposed establishment of a national committee of religion in 2005. The sangha and conservative Buddhists feared that such a committee would put other religions on an equal footing with Buddhism and thus weaken its dominant position in Thailand. While this Buddhist intolerance initially focused on Christians it soon came to include the Muslim community as well.¹¹⁶ The strongest criticism of the June 2006 report on violence in the southern border provinces drawn up by the National Reconciliation Commission,¹¹⁷ notably the recommendations for greater religious pluralism, also came from the sangha.¹¹⁸ Strong pressure in 2007 by the Buddhist establishment to have Buddhism recognized as the state religion appears to have further accentuated the religious dimensions of the Patani conflict.¹¹⁹

The growing hostility between sections of the Buddhist establishment and Islamist elements in recent decades has also been matched by a polarization between the Thais and the Malay Muslims in the Patani region.¹²⁰ As a result, many common elements of southern culture—interfaith marriages, conversions between Buddhism and Islam, similar beliefs in spirits and ancestors (which were often more important than canonical rules), and mixed rituals—have been replaced by separate cultural practices.¹²¹ These changes suggest that causes of the conflict can be found in both communities in the Patani region, rather than just in an increasingly violent Islamism.

¹¹⁵ Lowy Institute for International Policy, ‘Contemporary Islam in Thailand: religion, state and society’, Thematic summary of workshop held at the Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney, 9 Nov. 2006, <<http://online.anu.edu.au/thaionline/NTSC/Conferences/Summary - Contemporary Islam in Thailand.pdf>>, p. 2.

¹¹⁶ Lowy Institute for International Policy (note 115), p. 2.

¹¹⁷ National Reconciliation Commission, *Overcoming Violence through the Power of Reconciliation*, Unofficial translation, June 2006, <http://thailand.ahrchk.net/docs/nrc_report_en.pdf>.

¹¹⁸ Lowy Institute for International Policy (note 115), p. 2.

¹¹⁹ Mydans, S., ‘Thailand set to make Buddhism the state religion’, *International Herald Tribune*, 24 May 2007.

¹²⁰ Horstmann, A., ‘The Tablighi Jama’at, transnational Islam, and the transformation of the self between southern Thailand and South Asia’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2007), pp. 26–40.

¹²¹ Horstmann, A., ‘Ethnohistorical perspectives on Buddhist–Muslim relations and coexistence in southern Thailand: from shared cosmos to the emergence of hatred?’, *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Apr. 2004), pp. 76–99.

5. Thai politics and the re-emergence of conflict

Analyses of the Patani conflict that focus on historical grievances or on the role of religion provide plausible accounts of the factors that are fuelling the conflict and of some of its dynamics, but they offer little to explain the timing of the sudden upsurge in violence in 2004. Analysts have thus looked at recent Thai politics to understand better the emergence of a new insurgency. Although such accounts focus on contemporary politics, they generally situate it within a historical context that has featured multiple oscillations between liberal political regimes and military juntas since World War II. The struggle to promote or hinder a more liberal politics in Thailand has forged political institutions and a political culture that have regularly brought pressure to bear on the South as part of the broader power struggle in the country. The premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra, from 2001 to 2006, coming towards the end of a prolonged period of political liberalization, occupies a central place in politics-based explanations of the re-emergence of conflict.

The process of democratic reform and liberalization set in motion by General Prem Tinsulanonda in the 1980s accelerated during the 1990s.¹²² New political opportunities led to the increased engagement of Malay Muslims in national politics, notably through the Democrat Party, which led coalition governments from 1992 to 1995 and again from 1997 to 2001. The party's political base was traditionally concentrated in Bangkok. However, during the 1990s, under the leadership of Chuan Leekpai, a native of Trang province in southern Thailand, the Democrats became the dominant party in the South, and there was an influx of provincial politicians from the region into the party.

Also during the 1990s, governments took a more sophisticated approach to the sources of discontent in the southern provinces. An effort to improve relations with Malaysia and governments in the Middle East during the 1990s helped the Thai authorities to weaken international support for the insurgents.

A high point in the democratic development of Thailand at this time was the 1997 constitution, promulgated on 11 October 1997. This 'people's constitution' was drafted by a specially formed assembly, most of whose members were directly elected for the purpose—the first time a Thai constitution had been drafted with such a degree of public participation. The 1997 constitution contained a number of provisions important for the South including the explicit recognition of a wide range of human rights, the decentralization of government and school administration, and a strengthening of the judiciary.

¹²² Prem left office in 1988. The next prime minister to be elected, Chatichai Choonhavan, was overthrown by a military coup in 1991. The junta installed by the coup stood down in 1992. From 1992 to 2006 Thailand had a succession of democratically elected governments.

By the late 1990s, Muslims were holding an unprecedented number of senior posts in Thai politics. Probably the foremost example was Wan Muhammad Nor Matha, a Malay Muslim from Yala, who served as president of the National Assembly from 1996 to 2001 and as interior minister and deputy prime minister during Thaksin's first term. During Thaksin's first term there were several Muslims in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. Muslims dominated provincial legislative assemblies in the southern border provinces, and several southern municipalities had Muslim mayors. Muslims were able to voice their political grievances more openly and enjoy a much greater degree of religious freedom.

Under these new conditions, militant organizations faced increased internal pressures; both the BRN and the PULO split into rival factions, further weakening the insurgency. By the end of the 1990s, Thai officials were able to claim with some confidence that the separatist movement in the South had ceased to exist at any significant level and that its main elements had either surrendered, gone into exile or become involved in criminality. The GMIP was suspected of conducting a series of raids between 2001 and 2003 but was generally considered to be a marginal force.¹²³

The rise and fall of Thaksin

Thaksin Shinawatra was elected prime minister in 2001, four years after promulgation of the new constitution. The 1997 Asian financial crisis aside, Thailand had been enjoying a prolonged period of economic growth that had brought to the fore new economic actors. Thaksin, a telecoms billionaire, rose to power as head of the recently established Thai Rak Thai (Thais love Thais) Party. He introduced a set of populist policies focused especially on rural Thai communities that had lagged behind in the development of the country, including a universal health insurance scheme, a three-year debt moratorium for farmers and microcredit funds of 1 million baht (around \$23 000 at 2001 prices) for all Thai villages.

One of Thaksin's first priorities was to assert his authority in the South—and to challenge the near political monopoly of the Democrat Party in the region. He immediately set about changing the political and security arrangements in the region. Thaksin, who had been a policeman early in his career, was convinced that violence in the South was no longer political in character but essentially criminal.¹²⁴ Moreover, it was widely believed that the army had become deeply involved in lucrative smuggling over the southern border and was implicated in engineering violent incidents in the South in order to justify maintaining its

¹²³ International Crisis Group (note 12), p. 16.

¹²⁴ Connors, M. K., 'War on error and the southern fire: how terrorism analysts get it wrong', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Mar. 2006), pp. 157–58.

presence in—and thereby its control of—the border area.¹²⁵ In 2001–2002 Thaksin began to replace key officials in the South with his associates and loyalists. He also moved to reverse the institutional changes made by General Prem in the region in the 1980s, abolishing CPM 43 and the SBPAC on 1 May 2002. The police took primary responsibility for addressing the violence in the South and the army was progressively sidelined.

In February 2003 Thaksin launched a harsh nationwide crackdown on the trade in narcotics. Although it was largely successful in its stated aims, Thaksin's 'war on drugs' is widely viewed as having produced a climate of fear in the country and undermined many of the human rights advances of the 1990s; the police were suspected of involvement in many extrajudicial killings and disappearances.¹²⁶ In the South the campaign helped to further destabilize the situation at a time of change and when the police were growing increasingly aggressive in their policies toward the Malay Muslim community.¹²⁷

As Thaksin's reforms were implemented there was a rise in the incidence of violence in the South. According to Thai Ministry of Interior statistics, the number of insurgency-related incidents rose from 50 in 2001 to 75 in 2002 and 119 in 2003.¹²⁸ In response to the increasing violence, particularly from 2004, Thaksin introduced a dual-track approach. On the one hand, he sought to tighten control over the southern provinces through a series of security crackdowns during 2004 and 2005, culminating in the introduction of new legislation on 16 July 2005 that empowered the prime minister to declare a state of emergency and introduce curfews across the country.¹²⁹ At the same time, the government pursued a more moderate line to resolving the conflict, perhaps largely in response to criticism from the powerful Privy Council. Most significantly, in 2005 Thaksin announced the creation of the National Reconciliation Commission, headed by former prime minister Anand Panyarachun, a widely respected figure in Thailand who had led the drafting of the 1997 constitution. However, it was evident that while he initiated the establishment of the commission, Thaksin shared little of the philosophy that informed the commissioners' approach, particularly their desire to find ways to accommodate ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity in the country (see chapter 6).

Towards the end of Thaksin's period in office, the focus on challenging criminality in the South had been supplemented, and perhaps even surpassed, by a concern with countering terrorism. In 2002 Thaksin stated: 'There's no separatism, no ideological terrorists, just common bandits.' By 2004 he had reversed his

¹²⁵ McCargo, D., 'Thaksin and the resurgence of violence in the Thai south: network monarchy strikes back?', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Mar. 2006), pp. 45–46.

¹²⁶ Fullbrook, D., 'Thai war on drugs: Hollow victory', *Asia Times*, 17 Dec. 2003.

¹²⁷ International Crisis Group (note 12), pp. 35–36.

¹²⁸ Davis, A., 'Ethnic divide widens in Thailand', *Jane's Terrorism & Security Monitor*, 17 Nov. 2004.

¹²⁹ Cumming-Bruce, N., 'Thai shift of power by decree draws fire', *International Herald Tribune*, 19 July 2005.

position and increasingly regarded the insurgency as the local front in the global fight against terrorism. Thaksin was vocal in his support of the United States in its ‘global war on terrorism’ and sent a small contingent of Thai troops to Iraq with the US-led coalition forces, gaining Thailand the status of ‘major non-NATO ally’.¹³⁰ This position was unpopular in much of the South and appears to have contributed to the sense of confrontation between the Malay Muslims and the Thai authorities.¹³¹

Opposition politics also seems to have contributed to the growing instability in the South. By 2004 Thaksin’s populist policies had severely challenged the Democrat Party’s political dominance in the South. In 2004 and 2005 the Democrats waged an aggressive campaign to discredit Thaksin’s approach to the conflict and to alarm the local population about the policies being pursued by the government. This helped to exacerbate a sense of insecurity among the local population in the South, further destabilizing the situation.¹³²

The rise of Thaksin, particularly the harsh security policies he instituted in the South, was without doubt a key factor in the re-emergence and escalation of violence in the South.¹³³ Nevertheless, Thaksin’s rise was facilitated by the political context, notably the struggle to promote political and economic change in the country from the 1980s. Thaksin’s stress on concentrating decision-making power in the hands of the prime minister followed on from his belief in the need for a ‘CEO’ (from ‘chief executive officer’) style of government to push through the rapid and decisive reform he had promised. It was also a political response to the overt and covert established institutions of power that undermined the ability of the prime minister to pursue his agenda.

Thus, it has been argued that Thaksin’s drive to unravel the existing political and security arrangements in the South cannot be seen only in terms of the problems of the South.¹³⁴ His new approach to security in the South was as much about a struggle between different factions in Bangkok over control of the political economy of the South as it was about a confrontation between Malay Muslim insurgents and the Thai state and local Thai Buddhists.¹³⁵ Indeed, one scholar has suggested that Thaksin was trying to challenge the hidden power of ‘network monarchy’: a set of informal arrangements mediated by a variety of key senior officials—notably General Prem as chairman of the Privy Council—that

¹³⁰ Bures, F., ‘Muslim unrest flares in Thailand’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 7 Jan. 2004, <<http://www.csmonitor.com/>>.

¹³¹ Gunaratna, Acharya and Chua (note 13), pp. 15–16.

¹³² Askew, M., *Conspiracy, Politics, and a Disorderly Border: The Struggle to Comprehend Insurgency in Thailand*, Policy Studies no. 29 (East–West Center Washington: Washington, DC, 2007).

¹³³ Pathmanand (note 14), pp. 73–93.

¹³⁴ McCargo (note 125), p. 48.

¹³⁵ Connors (note 124), pp. 157–58.

supposedly institutionalize a range of extra-constitutional political powers available to the monarchy.¹³⁶

According to politics-based interpretations, the situation in the South reflects the competing and overlapping roles of the monarchy (usually manifest in the actions of the Privy Council), the military, opposition groups, private enterprise, and different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. At heart, these interpretations identify the conflict as being about the relationship of the Thai state to the different communities on its territory, the role of democratic politics and rule of law, and the character of the nation in modern Thailand. In Thailand as in other parts of South-East Asia, civic, ethnocultural, and multiculturalist notions of the nation continue to be fiercely contested while liberal and military-authoritarian notions of politics compete for control of the state.¹³⁷ Ultimately, the prolonged instability and the recent upsurge in violence in the South cannot be separated from these deep-seated political struggles.

Finally, it is also important to consider the opaque role of different interest groups in the conflict, including the complex interrelationship between politics and criminality in the region. It has been argued that the southern violence has re-emerged and intensified in part because of the ‘inability and unwillingness of successive governments to address a disorderly state that has rendered the borderland vulnerable through pervasive corruption, predation, and competition’.¹³⁸ In this environment of instability, a variety of groups—including the military, the militants and various political groups—have often benefited from the corruption and criminality that have flourished in the region and which cross ethnic, religious and political boundaries.

¹³⁶ McCargo (note 125), pp. 41–42.

¹³⁷ Brown, D., *Contending Nationalisms in Southeast Asia*, Working Paper no. 117 (Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University: Murdoch, Jan. 2005), <<http://www.warc.murdoch.edu.au/>>, pp. 17–18.

¹³⁸ Askew (note 132), p. 12.

6. Future directions in the conflict

Despite the Thaksin government's role in the re-emergence of conflict in southern Thailand, the violence has continued to escalate since his removal by a military coup in September 2006. The military junta's policy of achieving peace through negotiation and accommodation appears to have failed.¹³⁹ There is now a growing demand within Thailand for a return to the hard-line policies of the Thaksin era, not least because of a growing sense that the Patani conflict is being driven by radical Islamists who are not amenable to compromise.¹⁴⁰

In fact, as this paper argues, it is a mistake to view the Patani conflict as primarily about radical Islamism or indeed as an essentially religious conflict. Clearly, violence is being legitimated by many of the insurgents in overtly Islamist terms. Moreover, the methods used by the insurgents, such as beheadings, and the attempts of some insurgent groups to justify their actions by reference to conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine point to a linkage to the wider set of international conflicts involving violent Salafist organizations.¹⁴¹ However, the ties between Thailand's insurgents and international jihadist groups seem not to be strong, at least for the present.

The growing characterization in the media of the violence in the South as being motivated by Islamism risks masking the more complex nature of the conflict, which, as is argued here, is rooted in a variety of factors, including the political issues of nation and state building in the region, the failures of the Thai polity to cope with democratization and with the web of corruption and criminality that has grown up to a significant degree in the southern provinces.¹⁴² In this broader context, religion is coming to occupy a more prominent place in the conflict, on both sides, not least as a marker of group identity and solidarity; but religion is only part of the Patani conflict matrix.

While there has been no definitive articulation of demands from the side of the insurgents, the pattern of attacks suggests that a set of long-standing political grievances are the main issues of contention in the conflict. These include a rejection by many in the South of the centrally imposed state education system; a strong sense of discrimination against Thailand's Malay Muslim population in employment; and the inability to use the local form of the Malay language in many—especially official—settings. The actions of the Thai security services are also a source of anger and fear among Malay Muslims. Indeed, it has been argued that domestic

¹³⁹ Raekrun, N. and Ayub Pathan, M., 'Reconciliation not working, general says', *Bangkok Post*, 7 July 2007.

¹⁴⁰ Phasuk (note 104).

¹⁴¹ Ahuja, A., 'Asia's Muslim radicals take up beheading', Associated Press, 3 June 2007.

¹⁴² Harish (note 24), pp. 59–64.

incidents such as the Tak Bai massacre seem to have greatest resonance in terms of recruiting and motivating insurgents.¹⁴³

Behind these issues is the larger question about the place of Thailand's Malay Muslims—and other minorities—in contemporary Thai society. From the earliest days of the creation of modern Thailand, the place of the Malay Muslims has been uncertain and religion and ethnicity have been central to the question of their national identity. In this sense, religion and ethnicity have together underpinned the politics of resistance to assimilation in the South.

Nevertheless, it is clear that contemporary Thai politics was an important factor in the re-emergence of violence, particularly its timing. The security arrangements introduced under General Prem and the process of political liberalization initiated in the 1980s certainly contributed to the major reduction of violence in the South during the 1990s, but evidently the conflict was dormant rather than actually resolved. Many of the most enduring grievances—for example over education and language—went unaddressed. The co-optation of parts of the southern elite into the political system and a limited programme of social and economic development together served to maintain only an unsteady peace. In this environment, criminality and corruption, in which the military is alleged to have colluded, further compounded the consequences of the failure to find a genuine solution.

Whatever the historical origins of the Patani conflict, the violence that has erupted since 2004 is acquiring its own dynamics. The decentralized nature of the insurgency, the rise of Islamist ideology, the Thai Buddhist mobilization in the South and the lack of a clear and effective approach to the conflict from the side of the authorities suggest that the conditions are in place for a further rapid escalation of violence. The new violence seems increasingly to be motivated by revenge, the polarization of local Muslim and Buddhist communities, and fear, which may provide the conditions for a transformation of the nature of the conflict.

A particularly worrying possibility is that Patani will become a major battleground for the international jihadist movement. The movement currently focuses on Afghanistan and Iraq: jihadist websites and articles rarely mention Patani. However, a further escalation of violence in southern Thailand could alter this situation. Should the conflict come to resemble more closely a purely ethno-religious struggle, with intense sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing, it would be an attractive target for the international jihadist movement and might draw fighters moving from Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, as well as other locations, in years to come.

The transformation of today's essentially local conflict into an international one would have serious consequences not only for Thailand but also for Indonesia and Malaysia, affecting both the delicate religious and ethnic balances in these two countries and their relationships with Thailand. This risk suggests that there is a strong case for the international community to take a more active interest in efforts to launch a peace process that can produce a durable long-term solution to the Patani conflict.

¹⁴³ Ahuja (note 141).

Current peace initiatives

There have been several initiatives aimed at negotiating peace with the Patani insurgents since 2004. Following the 2006 coup Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont made clear his willingness to talk to representatives of the insurgency and sought to shift to a softer line in respect of the security situation in the South. During the summer of 2007 Defence Minister Boonrawd Somtas conducted an intensive round of meetings in Malaysia designed to promote bilateral cooperation and to help curtail the southern violence and prevent it spilling over into that country. Boonrawd indicated that the Thai authorities were even willing to consider enhancing the autonomy of the southern region: ‘Even China allows special administrative zones. If that can solve the southern problem, it is worth discussing.’ At the same time, he cautioned that the idea of secession was ‘totally unacceptable’.¹⁴⁴

Malaysia has taken a particularly active interest in the conflict, reflecting the fact that Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala are all on the Thai–Malay border. Although the Malaysian Government does not support the southern insurgency and has a vested interest in the Patani area being stabilized, between 2004 and 2006 there was a sharp, public deterioration in bilateral relations over the conflict. Malaysia responded angrily to a series of Thai allegations that the insurgents were using bases and raising funds on Malaysian territory. It also complained about the heavy-handed security regime in the South and refused to extradite suspected insurgents, citing concern that their human rights would not be respected in Thailand. However, in 2006 it emerged that former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad had mediated three rounds of peace talks between senior Thai military officers and exiled leaders of the older insurgency groups, including the PULO, during 2005. Although the talks were brokered by Mahathir’s own peace foundation, both the Thai and Malaysian governments appear to have given their approval. The talks reportedly produced a joint peace and development plan for the South that rejected the idea of independence (or even autonomy) but called for an amnesty for exiled leaders, the restoration of the SBPAC and the introduction of the Malay language in schools. However, this initiative had minimal impact because—as has since become clear—the exiled leaders have little influence over the new generation of insurgents.¹⁴⁵

There is significant international support for finding a negotiated settlement. The recent failed initiative by the Thai military to develop a dialogue with the insurgents was reportedly backed by United Nations bodies, ‘private groups’ and neighbouring governments, including Malaysia.¹⁴⁶ A number of initiatives to promote third-party mediation in the conflict have also taken place. In January

¹⁴⁴ ‘Rebels ignore govt efforts for talks’, *Bangkok Post*, 24 June 2007.

¹⁴⁵ Storey, I., ‘Malaysia’s role in Thailand’s southern insurgency’, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 5, no. 5 (15 Mar. 2007); and Abuza (note 29).

¹⁴⁶ ‘“Progress” made towards talks with the insurgents’, *Bangkok Post*, 1 July 2007.

2006 Lars Danielsson, then deputy minister to the Swedish Prime Minister's Office, indicated that Sweden would be willing to help broker a peace deal similar to that agreed in the Aceh region of Indonesia between the Indonesian Government and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM), if Thailand so requested. However, Thai Defense Minister General Thammarak Isarangura Na Ayutthaya rejected the suggestion.¹⁴⁷

The military junta has also come under pressure from the Organization of the Islamic Conference regarding the situation in southern Thailand. In a joint press statement in May 2007, the Thai Foreign Ministry acknowledged the OIC's desire for 'prompt and effective investigation of any allegation of human rights abuses'. The statement also included the proposal that 'the long-term solution [to the problems in the South] should entail granting the people of the region greater responsibility in governing effectively their local affairs'.¹⁴⁸ Despite this conciliatory move towards a major Islamic institution, Thailand continues to be criticized for its insistence on 'playing the Islamic card' and ignoring 'the complexity of the long-standing problem of assimilation and the question of identity the ethnic Malays face'.¹⁴⁹

The way forward

With the insurgency intensifying, the insurgents rapidly enhancing their control over key parts of the South and little indication that the policy initiatives of the current government are having a positive impact, it is apparently time for a new approach to the Patani conflict. The Thai security services' intelligence in respect of the insurgency appears to be improving, helped in part by strengthened cooperation with Malaysia over security issues. However, the military and police in the South continue to take an essentially reactive approach to the violence—remaining tied to fixed positions and doing little to make it harder for the insurgents to operate and to expand their activities. Moreover, the military seems unable to respond effectively to the shifting tactics of the insurgents.¹⁵⁰ The willingness of the Thai military to open negotiations with the insurgents is to be welcomed, but it seems likely that these groups will see little reason to come to the negotiating table unless the security services can also increase pressure on them.

As part of a comprehensive approach to resolving the conflict, the Thai authorities also need to develop a sharper political strategy aimed at winning support amongst the Malay Muslim community and thereby weakening support for the insurgents. A number of political initiatives were proposed by the National

¹⁴⁷ Lintner, B., 'Peace stays far away in southern Thailand', *Asia Times*, 15 Mar. 2006.

¹⁴⁸ Ihsanoglu, E., Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and Pibulsonggram, N., Thai Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joint statement at the conclusion of the OIC delegation's official visit to Thailand, 1 May 2007, <<http://www.mfa.go.th/web/35.php?id=18065>>.

¹⁴⁹ Pathan, D., 'Crisis in south rooted in ethnic Malay identity', *The Nation*, 22 June 2007.

¹⁵⁰ Pathan, D., 'Unclear aims, questionable tactics in South', *The Nation*, 2 Sep. 2007.

Reconciliation Commission in its report *Overcoming Violence through the Power of Reconciliation*, which was released in mid 2006. The report highlights the profound changes in Thailand that will be required before a durable peace can be attained. It asserts that Thai society as a whole must recognize that although the Patani region's structural problems—'poverty, brutal competition with external economic forces over natural resources, low-quality education, injustice at the hands of state officials and shortcomings in the judicial process'—may be similar to those faced by people in other parts of rural Thailand, it is nevertheless a special case because 'factors which include differences in religions, ethnicity, languages and understandings of history, all of which could easily be used to justify violence.' The highest priority should be given to political measures aimed at 'reordering relationships between the state and the people, and between majority and minority populations, both within the (Patani) area and throughout the country, to solve the problems at the structural level and address the justifications for violence at the cultural level.'¹⁵¹

Among the important proposals in the report are addressing socio-economic grievances, considering introduction of elements of sharia in the region, establishing an unarmed peacekeeping force and an agency called the Peaceful Strategic Administrative Centre for the Southern Border Provinces, giving local people more control over natural resources, creating community-level councils of elders (shuras), and strengthening the justice system and dealing properly with abuses by local authorities and security forces. The report also proposes making Pattani Malay an 'additional working language' in the region and outlines ideas to bring the Islamic and state school systems closer together, including through the introduction of bilingual and mother-tongue education.¹⁵²

The commission's recommendations were welcomed by several prominent members of the Malay Muslim community and openly supported by the United States.¹⁵³ Nevertheless, the Thaksin government—at that time an embattled caretaker government after a controversial election earlier in the year—was slow to respond. It then backed criticism of the recommendations, particularly of the proposals for language reform, from Prem Tinsulanonda, who stated: 'We cannot accept that [proposal] as we are Thai. The country is Thai and the language is Thai. . . . We have to be proud to be Thai and have the Thai language as the sole national language.'¹⁵⁴

It would not be possible to introduce immediately all of the reforms proposed in the National Reconciliation Commission's report, not least because some would be conditional on a ceasefire and moves towards peace by the insurgents. Nevertheless, some elements could be implemented as a way of promoting support

¹⁵¹ National Reconciliation Commission (note 117), pp. 104–109.

¹⁵² National Reconciliation Commission (note 117), pp. 93–94, 100.

¹⁵³ 'US urges action on NRC plan', *The Nation*, 23 June 2006; and 'Muslim leaders call for action', *The Nation*, 11 June 2006.

¹⁵⁴ 'Prem not happy with NRC's idea', *The Nation*, 26 June 2006; and 'Govt backs Prem against use of Malay in South', *The Nation*, 27 June 2006.

for the central authorities in the South. In particular, measures to address two long-standing sources of grievance—language and education—could help to improve the situation. Among other benefits, they would challenge the ability of the insurgents to justify their attacks on schools and teachers and help Pattani Malay speakers to strengthen their knowledge of the Thai language without having to sacrifice their mother tongue.

Moreover, it has been argued that, while the traditional *pondok* schools remains central to Malay Muslim identity and lifestyle in southern Thailand, they are struggling to make themselves relevant in the context of the social, political and economic changes taking place in the region.¹⁵⁵ Much could be achieved by transforming these schools from symbols of resistance to institutions that help Malay Muslims to advance within Thai society, and this would best be done through a constructive dialogue with the Malay Muslim community. This dialogue should be complemented by reforms in the state education sector in the region, including the training and recruitment of more local teachers.

Obstacles to peace

There remain important obstacles to opening a productive dialogue with the Patani insurgents and thus to negotiating a durable peace. One of these is the structure of the insurgency. While the Thai authorities have, to date, rejected the idea of third-party mediation in the conflict, it may be that only an independent outside agent can draw the diverse range of insurgent groups together so that they can enter a political process. Another issue of particular significance is the role of the Thai military. For many in the South, the Thai security services and their actions in the region remain one of the main sources of grievance. It may therefore be difficult, at least initially, to persuade the insurgents to negotiate directly with the army. Moreover, in order to address such grievances, any durable peace will probably require considerable reform of the Thai security services and independent investigations of their role in human rights violations and into allegations of corruption and complicity with criminality in the border region. While Prime Minister Surayud's recent apology for the past actions of the government and the security services is a step forward, many will expect to see real changes in the military and prosecutions of those involved in human rights violations.

A lasting solution to the problems of southern Thailand will almost certainly require substantial devolution of political authority and the opening up of state institutions in the region to the broad participation of Malay Muslims. This, in turn, will depend on the institutions themselves being democratic—and even eventually including political representatives of the current insurgent groups. In this sense, the military junta is an obstacle to a comprehensive peace since it stands in the way of democracy in Thai society.

¹⁵⁵ Liow (note 85).

It is also questionable whether the military—an institution that has historically viewed itself as a guardian of Thai national values and which has close ties to conservative elements within the Privy Council—can deliver the political reforms required to achieve the genuine integration of the Malay Muslim population into mainstream Thai society. As the National Reconciliation Commission report makes clear, peace will only be achievable in the long term through the creation of a Thai nation that accepts ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity and takes action to overcome discrimination. Such a change will be a major challenge for the key institutions of the Thai state—the military, the Buddhist establishment and even the monarchy—and to the notion of the Thai nation that has been fashioned, largely on the basis of assimilation, to support the creation of a modern Thai state.¹⁵⁶

The governance of Thailand's Muslim community also needs to be reconsidered. With the interpretation of Islam being contested in the country, Thailand lacks a credible and institutionalized religious authority that can command wide support in the South.¹⁵⁷ The institution of the *chularajamontri* (see chapter 3) lacks broad-based legitimacy among the Malay Muslims, putting it in a weak position to resist the radicalization being promoted by Salafist groups. Attempts by the Thai authorities to counter radicalization by promoting the idea of a model 'moderate' Muslim citizen are failing because, in the words of one observer, 'no one wants to be seen as a "Muslim Uncle Tom"'.¹⁵⁸ The government may simply have to accept that finding representatives of the Islamic community who have genuine local support and legitimacy will involve working with Islamists whose views do not reflect traditional notions in Bangkok about what makes a moderate and loyal Muslim.

Given the inherent difficulties in launching a peace process in southern Thailand and the even greater challenge of reaching agreement on the changes and compromises that are likely to be required from all sides if a permanent solution is to be found, third-party negotiation still seems to have a far greater chance of success than the current military-led initiatives. The experience of the Aceh peace agreement, at least in terms of the involvement of outside negotiators—the Crisis Management Initiative led by former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari with the subsequent engagement of the European Union and members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to carry out the tasks of the Aceh Monitoring Mission—points to one possible approach. It is to be hoped that the Thai Government will come to accept that it needs to open the door to international mediation.

¹⁵⁶ For a discussion of the dilemmas and contradictions of the Thai nation- and state-building model see the essays in Reynolds (note 60).

¹⁵⁷ Sugunnasil (note 5), p. 139.

¹⁵⁸ Pathan (note 149).

About the author

Dr Neil J. Melvin (United Kingdom) is Reader in Conflict Studies at the University of Kent's Department of Politics and International Relations, located at the Brussels School of International Studies. He was Leader of the SIPRI Armed Conflict and Conflict Management Project from 2005 to 2006. Prior to joining SIPRI, he served as Senior Adviser to the High Commissioner on National Minorities of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. He is the author of a number of books and articles on security and conflict in Eurasia. His publications for SIPRI include 'Islam, conflict and terrorism' in *SIPRI Yearbook 2006: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press) and *Building Stability in the North Caucasus: Ways Forward for Russia and the European Union*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 16 (May 2007).