

## EXTINGUISHING THE SOUTHERN FIRE: DEVELOPING A SOLUTION TO THAILAND'S INSURGENCY

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The insurgency in Thailand's Muslim-based southern provinces is not new, yet the past five years have seen a dramatic rise in the violence and severity of the problem. The Thai government's recent counterinsurgency strategy has been ineffective. The nature of this insurgency, coupled with the on-going political instability within the government itself, make a solution to the issue extremely difficult. A new strategy is now required. Just what elements must the Thai government include in a new counterinsurgency strategy for it to succeed?

## EXTINGUISHING THE SOUTHERN FIRE: DEVELOPING A SOLUTION TO THAILAND'S INSURGENCY

The insurgency in Thailand's Malay-Muslim dominated southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, has been an on-going issue for decades, and while religion plays a part in it, fundamentally this is a conflict that is based on long-standing political differences. The last six years have seen a dramatic increase in both the number and severity of violent attacks. Since 2004, more than 3,900 Thai security forces, insurgents and civilians have been killed in a region that has a population of only 1.8 million.<sup>1, 2</sup> The current situation continues to defy the Thai government's efforts to quell the violence. The growing unrest, coupled with the inability of the Thai government to provide basic security for the region, has led to growing fears that the insurgency will spread to other regions of the country. Developing a successful counter-insurgency strategy by finding a solution to the core issues involved requires a thorough understanding of the background of the region and the origins of the insurgency.

### Background

Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, the three provinces that are the predominate focus of the violence, originally were part of the separate Malay sultanate of Patani. The origins of the current separatist movement trace their roots back to the late 1700's when Siam (as Thailand was known before 1939) effectively ruled the area with Patani paying tribute to the Siamese government. This continued through the 1800's with the establishment of Thai governmental organizations in the area and the effective incorporation of the Patani chieftains into the Thai civil service. In 1902, the region was annexed as part of Siam and this was formally recognized by the British-Siamese Treaty of 1909.<sup>3</sup>

The root causes of the insurgency have not changed during this century and they center on the differences of culture, language and religion. Approximately 80% of the region consists of Malay-Muslims, whose language, Islamic-based religion and cultural identity is tied to that of northern Malaysia. This sets them apart from the Thai speaking, Buddhist-dominated population of Thailand.

Like the northern provinces of Thailand, the three southern provinces have long been among the poorest in the country. However, while substantial strides in combating poverty have been made country-wide with overall poverty falling from 38% in 1990 to 11.3% in 2004, poverty remains at 18% in Narathiwat and 23% in Pattani, more than double the national average.<sup>4</sup> In addition to poverty, maternal mortality is over twice as high in the southern provinces as it is in the rest of the country with 29.8 deaths per 100,000 births in Yala, 30.8 in Narathiwat and 41.8 in Pattani.<sup>5</sup> With the increased level of violence in the region, the provinces have seen their Human Achievement Index (HAI)<sup>6</sup> rating, in relation to the other 76 provinces, significantly drop between the official UNDP reports of 2003 and 2007. Yala's HAI rating dropped from 15 to 35, Pattani's from 53 to 61 and Narathiwat's moved down from 51 to 71. Additionally, the region suffered overall from lower marks in education, employment, family and community living indicators. With all this said, and despite the conventional wisdom, social-economic development does not seem to be a major cause of the recent increase in violence. In spite of the dismal HAI, confidential interviews with informants in the conflict region specifically point to political and identity issues rather than economic factors as the driving cause for unrest.<sup>7</sup>

Religion, while not the instigator of the violence, does serve as a rallying point for the insurgents. It is another vehicle in which the insurgency can show their major differences with the Buddhist-dominated Thai majority. Additionally, it is through a number of the many *pondoks* (small Islamic boarding schools), that initial indoctrination begins. Usually teaching pure religious curriculum, they can serve as a fertile ground in which to inculcate the impressionable youth with separatist ideology and recruitment into the insurgency. Some of these schools receive their funding through Saudi Arabian and other Middle Eastern organizations and the increasingly vicious attacks, including the beheading and burning of Buddhist monks and other civilians, are thought by many to be the result of the traditional Malay Islamic beliefs being replaced by more fundamentalist Wahhabi teaching. While the attacks are reminiscent of the brutal tactics undertaken by the global jihadist organizations, the fear that the resurgence in violence is due to a change in religious beliefs appear to be unfounded. These new tactics are an obvious effort to cultivate a religious fear and hatred among the population. It is also possible that they are an attempt to cause a reprisal attack by Thai security forces which could then be used for further propaganda purposes.<sup>8,9</sup>

Allegations of abductions, torture and extra-judicial killings at the hands of Thai security forces have assisted insurgency recruiting efforts and further alienated the population. Actions by the Thai courts to prosecute these incidents have repeatedly sided with the security forces and further reduced the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the local population. A recent example of this is the May 29, 2009 ruling by the Songkhla Provincial Court that absolved all Thai officials and security forces for their role in the deaths of the 78 detainees in the Tak Bai incident of October 25, 2004.<sup>10</sup> The

deaths occurred when hundreds of protestors at the Tak Bai Police Station were arrested, beaten, tied up and stacked four to five deep in military cargo trucks and transported over five hours to the Inkhayut Army Base in Pattani.<sup>11</sup> The conduct of Thai security forces during the original response to the protest incident, coupled with the inept information operations immediately following the incident served as a lightning rod to gain support for the insurgency, alienate, and delegitimize the government in the eyes of the population. The court ruling simply compounds the legitimacy issue, providing further reason to distrust the Thai government. The corresponding lack of local support to the government security forces from the increasingly terrified population further hampers counterinsurgency operations. This is particularly important to critical intelligence gathering and mirrors the experiences of the United States during initial operations in Iraq.

Despite aggressive efforts by the Thai government dating back to the 1930's, the area has never assimilated with the rest of Thailand. A major issue is the legitimacy of the Thai government. Because of past policy actions, the government is not seen as legitimate in the eyes of many Malay-Muslims in the region.<sup>12</sup> The core differences discussed in the following form the basic foundation for the many separatist groups that have formed in the southern provinces over the years.

### Separatist Groups

Historically, the insurgency in southern Thailand has been comprised of a variety of different organizations that share the same basic goal of forming a separate "Greater Patani" nation. Central to each of the separatist groups' argument is that they have a separate and distinct culture, religion and linguistic heritage that the Thai state has systematically attempted to erase in an effort to assimilate the population. The recent

upsurge in violence in the region however, does not seem to be the work of a single insurgent group, but rather a blending of dissatisfied individuals loosely bound by one or more of the traditional separatist organizations.<sup>13</sup> For that reason a brief discussion of three of the more significant separatist organizations is warranted.

*Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN).* The BRN was founded in 1960 as a result of the Thai government's decision to integrate the Islamic *pondok* schools into the Thai school system. This government policy was seen by some of the local population as an attempt to destroy the local Malay-Muslim culture and identity. The organization operates throughout the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. The BRN was rocked by factional infighting in the late 1970's which split the organization into two rival organizations: the BRN-Congress and the BRN-Coordinate. During the last twenty years the BRN-Congress has lost a number of key leaders and currently is more focused on criminal activity rather than insurgent actions focused on the Thai government. Currently the BRN faction, BRN-Coordinate, is the most prominent of all of the separatist organizations, becoming the core of the insurgencies operating in southern Thailand with many lesser organizations coordinating with them.<sup>14</sup>

*Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO).* Founded in Mecca, Saudi Arabia in 1968 by an exiled Malay-Muslim, the group's aims are the establishment of a separate Malay-Muslim state comprising the provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun. Originally the largest of the separatist organizations, in the 1980's the organization was split by factional differences similar to those that had split the BRN a decade earlier. The split within the PULO was driven primarily by issues relating to funding, with the organization drifting toward extortion and other criminal activities that

had become the focus of the BRN-Congress, undermining its credibility. The PULO broke into two factions: the Old PULO and the New PULO. In September 1997 both of the factions of the PULO allied with some insurgent groups like the BRN factions, and formed an alliance called Bersatu (solidarity) and conducted a series of coordinated assassinations and bombings in the three southern provinces. The operation, code-named Falling Leaves, lasted for the next five months and was finally brought to an end through the cooperation of Malaysia, who apprehended and extradited four of the top leaders within both of the PULO factions. This setback was followed closely with the PULO suffering significant losses when a number of individuals surrendered to the government. This loss of key leaders was a critical factor in the decline of the PULO factions and the subsequent strengthening of the BRN-Coordinate.<sup>15</sup> In 2005, a meeting was held in Damascus, Syria which reunified the 'Old' and 'New' PULO factions. Currently the organization is most active in the southern districts of Yala and Narathiwat provinces and operates from jungle-based guerrilla bands. They appear to receive the majority of their funding from extortion of Thai businesses in the area which varies from a few hundred baht a month for small businesses to thousands of baht for large factories.<sup>16</sup> The PULO is now considered significantly smaller than the BRN, but continues to play a key political role internationally in unofficial talks with representatives from the Thai government. This dialogue has been ongoing since 2005 in various locations in Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia.<sup>17</sup>

*Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani (GMIP).* The GMIP was established in 1995 by a small group from the original Gerakan Mujahideen Patani (GMP). While this organization remains quite small, it is significant because of the ties it has had to the

Indonesian-based global jihadist organization, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Because of confessions obtained by arrested JI, GMIP had representatives at meetings held by JI. This has spurred fears that JI or Al-Qaeda would use the GMIP to gain inroads into southern Thailand, creating another front in the global jihad. Despite the reported meetings, there is no evidence that links any of these global organizations to the current insurgent activities in the south.<sup>18</sup>

The tactics of the various insurgent groups basically focus on four areas: Assassinations of security forces, government employees, Buddhist civilians and Muslim community leaders; the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) which are increasingly aimed at transport and communications infrastructure; Arson against both government and private buildings with particular focus on public schools; and small-scale, direct-fire attacks on security forces, often in the form of ambushes.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, each of the active separatist groups has avoided claiming responsibility for the recent attacks in the southern provinces. This has served a significant purpose in giving the perception of a much wider insurgent front with no single group taking the lead in attacks. It could have the additional advantage of insulating the leadership from attracting the attention of international authorities, in particular the Malaysian government. This is likely a lesson learned following the demise of the PULO during the late 90's.

During the late 1970's and 80's many of the insurgents, particularly those aligned with the PULO, received specialized training in Syria and Libya, from elements of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Libyan government.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, Thai security officials believe that elements of the BRN received their early training in

Indonesia. But since the recent increase in violence beginning in 2004, it appears that the training for all the various insurgent groups is only locally supported and has been confined to the remote areas of the southern provinces.<sup>21</sup>

### Thai Security Forces

Critical to executing the Thai government's strategy in combating the insurgency are the roles of the different, often competing, elements of the Thai security forces. The 4th Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) oversees the Thai government's policies in the southern provinces. Currently the ISOC is aided in this task by two subordinate organizations that have been reinstated since the 2007 Coup. The Southern Border Provincial Administration Center (SBPAC) manages economic and development programs while the Civilian-Police-Military Unit 43 (CPM 43) coordinates the security and civil affairs related issues.<sup>22</sup>

*Royal Thai Army.* The Royal Thai Army is divided into four regional commands throughout the nation. The 4th Army Region is given the responsibility for the southern provinces and is comprised of two Light Infantry Divisions (the 5th and the newly created 15<sup>th</sup> Division). The 4th Army Region Commander also serves as the Commander of the 4th ISOC. Currently each of the other three Army Regions provides a reinforced Regimental Task Force to the 4th ISOC with one of these Task Forces assigned to each of the three provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat.<sup>23</sup>

The Royal Thai Army elements in the region suffer from a number of issues that limit their effectiveness. The Regimental Task Forces that are attached to the 4th ISOC from the other three regional commands are rotated annually. The constant turn-over of personnel causes significant issues with developing and sustaining civil relations as well as knowledge of the local area. This impacts interoperability with the other security

forces as well as long-term intelligence gathering. Additionally, the vast majority of soldiers assigned to the southern provinces lack the ability to communicate with the local population in their native Malay dialect. Finally, unlike the various other security forces assigned to the region, the Royal Thai Army uses conscription to fill the most junior ranks. These conscripts often lack the commitment, discipline and motivation necessary to sustain combat operations.<sup>24</sup>

*Royal Thai Police.* The Royal Thai Police in the southern provinces are comprised of a variety of police units ranging from the Provincial Police to the Border Patrol Police, which have a tactical responsibility similar to that of the Royal Thai Army and are among the best trained of the various police units.<sup>25</sup> As a whole, the Royal Thai Police suffer from a number of issues of which rampant corruption is the most prominent, a fact that is not restricted to the southern provinces. In a nation-wide poll taken in 2000, the police were listed as the most dishonest element of the Thai public sector.<sup>26</sup> The Royal Thai Police within the southern provinces are widely mistrusted by the local population both for their corruption as well as their general abuse of power and this has a significant impact on their effectiveness. Additionally, the Police and the Army have had a history of poor cooperation, due to major inter-agency rivalries and stovepiped intelligence processing.<sup>27</sup> This condition climaxed when Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a former Police Lt Col, transferred the functions of CPM 43 to the Police. Their subsequent mishandling of former Army-managed intelligence assets led to the murder of a significant number of informants.<sup>28</sup>

The use of paramilitary organizations has a long history in Thailand going back hundreds of years and they played an important role in the defeat of the Communist

guerrillas in the 1970's and 80's. The use of paramilitaries in combating the southern insurgency is not new either; however their role was greatly expanded this decade. There are a number of different paramilitary organizations currently operating in the southern provinces and they vary much in size, training and composition. A brief description of each of these security organizations, including their training and employment, is important in determining areas of improvement.

*Thahan Phran.* The Hunter Soldiers are more commonly referred to as Rangers and are a paramilitary force that was originally established in 1978 in an effort to counter the communist guerrillas in the mountainous northeast border area. They are located throughout Thailand's different regions and are under the command of the particular Regional Army. Recruited largely from the local area, in the southern provinces they are comprised of roughly 60% local Buddhists, 10-25% Muslims from provinces north of the conflict area (and as such do not understand Malay) and the remaining 15-30% Muslims from Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. They receive 45 days of basic military training, second only to the Royal Thai Army and Police training.

The Thahan Phran has a number of advantages over other security forces including their human intelligence gathering capability and knowledge of the area, due to the local recruits. Their companies, consisting of 80-100 individuals, are commanded by a Royal Thai Army Captain who is assisted by between two and three Army NCOs. They are extremely autonomous and have a much more flexible command structure than the Royal Thai Army, allowing the company commander to respond to and authorize combat operations without prior approval from higher headquarters. This allows them to rapidly respond to incidents in their area of responsibility. The Thahan

Phran has a very successful recruitment program that targets relatives of those killed by insurgents. Because of the level of commitment that these recruits bring to the organization, the Thahan Phran has been particularly effective at combating the insurgents and has a reputation for fearlessness.<sup>29</sup> But this is a double edged sword as the brutality attributed to the Thahan Phran is likely a result of revenge attacks and the abuses they have committed have been a propaganda goldmine for the insurgency.<sup>30</sup>

*Kong Asa Raksa Dindaen (Or Sor)*. The Volunteer Defense Corps works for the interior ministry. It was established in 1954 and is made up of local villagers. Like the *Thahan Phran*, the *Or Sor* receive 45 days of training, but are not expected to conduct combat operations. They primarily are used as security for interior ministry officials and government infrastructure in the southern provinces. According to Human Rights Watch the *Or Sor*, tends to be the least abusive and most professional of the various paramilitary organizations.<sup>31</sup>

*Chor Ror Bor*. The Village Development and Self-Defense Volunteers was established in 1985 by the interior ministry. The *Chor Ror Bor* are recruited and work within their villages. They receive only three days of training and are armed with a shotgun. The largest of the village defense organizations, they number over 47,000 and are expected to grow by an additional 7,000 in the near future. Poorly trained and not very effective, they still constitute the main security in most villages yet they often can't protect themselves, let alone their communities. The *Chor Ror Bor* have had hundreds of weapons lost to the insurgents.<sup>32</sup>

*Or Ror Bor*. The Village Protection Volunteers was established at the direction of Queen Sirikit in 2004 and is controlled by the Royal Aide-de-Camp Department. They

receive 10-15 days of training, are armed with rifles or shotguns and currently number over 10,000. Unlike the Chor Ror Bor, the Or Ror Bor is almost exclusively Buddhist and are used to protect the temples and Buddhist communities. Because of this, they are viewed with unease by the surrounding Muslim villages.<sup>33</sup>

The security role that the various village militias were established and equipped to perform has largely been a failure. They have been unable to defend the temples, schools, government facilities or the people whom they were formed to protect. And increasingly their weapons are stolen and end up in the hands of the insurgents.

### Thai Government Strategies

Key to the Thai government's overall strategy since the early 1900's has been the attempted assimilation of the Malay-Muslims but, with little recognition for their unique culture, religion and language, this has met with failure due to the strong resolve to maintain their unique culture and customs. Throughout the early to mid 1900's, the Thai government attempted to progressively integrate the southern provinces. They gradually replaced the old system of governance in the region which provided for some limited autonomous Malay representation, with one where the officials were appointed from the capital. This policy was in-line with the procedures for the rest of the country. It was during this time that the government attempted to enforce "Thai" customs, language and legal standards, phasing out Shari'a law and the use of the various dialects in the region. Forced integration and assimilation has remained a key element in the Thai strategy and this overall approach has not appreciatively changed. Because of this, all efforts undertaken by the Thai authorities are viewed with skepticism by the local population.<sup>34</sup>

Beginning in the 1960s, the Thai government attempted to register and convert many of the *pondoks* into private Islamic schools. The stated goal was to ensure that the converted schools provided a mix of the standard Thai curriculum in addition to the religious education previously provided. In reality, by controlling the funding for these private Islamic schools, the Thai government was able to gain considerable political control over the imams as well as the Islamic councils. Unfortunately this served to undermine the credibility and morale authority of these individuals with the Malay Muslim population as well as weaken the religious institutions.<sup>35</sup>

During the 1980's, following a major rise in violence in the southern provinces, the Thai government of Prem Tinsulanond<sup>36</sup> made a significant adjustment in strategy. The government offered amnesty to those that had taken part in the separatist movement and established the SBPAC to enhance consultations with the local population, solve the problem with corruption and reduce the prejudice among the non-local officials. The Royal Thai Army was given the lead for ensuring security in the region. Additionally, the government co-opted the Malay-Muslim religious and political elites by providing developmental funds and privileges for their cooperation. This policy was effective at stemming the violence for the next twenty years.<sup>37</sup>

In 2001, the new Thai Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, a former police officer and multi-millionaire telecommunications tycoon, began a series of changes that brought a new, very hard-line policy shift toward the southern provinces in response to both his political control of the region and to quell the beginnings of a resurgence in violence. At the time this increase in violence, which had not nearly reached the levels it would three years later, was attributed by Thaksin and his advisors as criminal in

nature. Thaksin dissolved the SBPAC and the CPM 43 commands. The dissolution of the SBPAC was seen by Thaksin as a critical element in securing the region for his Thai Rak Thai party,<sup>38</sup> since the SBPAC was seen as heavily favoring the Democratic Party (DP) because it was originally developed and managed by the then current head of the Privy Council. Thaksin also transferred responsibility for law and order from the Royal Thai Army, which was seen as allied with the DP and the monarchy, to the Thai Police. The SBPAC and CPM 43 had a good reputation for timely and accurate intelligence analysis. Additionally, the SPBAC and CPM 43 were the only conflict resolution mechanisms that had been in place and their dissolution left a major void. This decision, coupled with the increasingly brutal approach to security and the use of officially sanctioned extrajudicial killings<sup>39</sup> and other human rights abuses, were key elements that incited the Malay-Muslim population and further reduced the legitimacy of the Thai government in their eyes. By 2004, the situation in the southern provinces had become a serious insurgency.<sup>40</sup>

On January 4, 2004 a well organized, high profile raid was conducted by insurgents on the Royal Thai Army's 4th Development Battalion base in Cho Ai-rong District, Narathiwat. The attack killed four soldiers, but more importantly secured 380 M-16A2 assault rifles, 2 M-60 Machineguns, 7 RPG-7s along with an assortment of pistols and ammunition. This marked the beginning of the current level of violence in the region.<sup>41</sup> In April, responding to insurgent attacks on police stations and armories in several of the provinces, elements of the Army surrounded a group of insurgents that had taken refuge in the Kru-Ze Mosque, the most sacred site in Thailand for Malay-Muslims. During the standoff, the militants repeatedly exchanged fire with the Army.

The 31 insurgents were all killed when the Army assaulted the mosque.<sup>42</sup> This event, while justified under the rules of warfare, was neither militarily necessary nor was it politically wise. The Royal Thai Army acted exactly as the insurgents wanted and gave them a significant political victory that continues to be a rallying cry for recruitment into the insurgent organizations.

Following the steady increase in violence, and receiving criticism from both the King and the Privy Council, Thaksin established the National Reconciliatory Commission (NRC) which was charged with making recommendations on improving the security and governance of the area. The proposals that were presented in June 2006 were rejected by Thaksin as too progressive. Three months later, Prime Minister Thaksin was overthrown in a military coup undertaken while he was in New York City attending a United Nations General Assembly.<sup>43</sup>

While the military government, formed following the coup, immediately apologized for the policies of the past five years under Thaksin, insurgent attacks continued. Since the ouster of Thaksin, the previously disbanded SBPAC and CPM 43 have been restored, however they have not been given the full range of powers they previously held. Currently the SBPAC is subordinate to the ISOC and all projects must be approved by them.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, the current domestic political turmoil in the last three years has significantly impacted the government's strategy in dealing with the insurgency. Immediately following the coup there was widespread hope that the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army, General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, the leader of the coup and a Muslim himself, would be able to quell the violence. This did not happen. It's

important to note that he had been the head of the Army since October 2005 and had been given broad powers to solve the crisis by Thaksin but had not made progress in defeating the insurgency.

With the removal of two Prime Ministers by the constitutional court since 2007, combined with the violent, large-scale ongoing clashes between the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (Pro-Thaksin) and the People's Alliance for Democracy (Anti-Thaksin), the government has been severely weakened the past three years. The seizure of Don Muang and Suvarnabhumi International Airports in Bangkok by the PAD on November 26, 2008, which closed the airports, stranded thousands of tourists and halted international cargo for a week, combined with the overrunning of the ASEAN summit in Pattaya on April 10, 2009 by the UDD, have served to focus the energies of the government solely toward political survival.<sup>45</sup> Because of the serious domestic unrest and the correlating government instability following the coup, the insurgency in the south took a back seat to the domestic issues surrounding the government that were legitimately seen as far more critical to the survival of the government than the ongoing violence in the south. But the problems in the south cannot remain in the background and a new strategy must be adopted.

### Developing a New Strategy

The elements that drive the insurgency are not unique to Thailand and the components of a revised strategy contain many time-tested counterinsurgency principles. The problem in the south is complex, involving many long-standing issues and will not be easily resolved given the history of violence and repression. A solution, however, can be found if the Thai government has the determination to expend the resources necessary to achieve success. Establishing the legitimacy of the Thai

government in the eyes of the local Malay Muslim population must be the overarching goal of any successful strategy. Building legitimacy will require a concerted, long-term focus along seven lines of operation in order to be successful. The critical components are: Representative Governance, Reform of Security Forces, Accountability, Education Reform, Religious Tolerance, Economic Development and Change in Language Laws.

*Representative Governance.* Thailand's new counterinsurgency plan must contain measures that provide for a true representative government in the region. Approximately 80% of the civil servants in the southern provinces are non-Malay.<sup>46</sup> Having Malays in lower-level, non-decision making elements of the government and few, if any, at the key, higher-level is not a true representative government. The Thai government must adopt a policy of appointing governors from the region, and they must be Malay-Muslims that are not seen as co-opted by the government. In order to begin the lengthy process of binding the population to the State, the government must allow active participation, giving the local Malays a much greater say in their own affairs.

*Reform of Security Forces.* A reform of the Thai security forces in the region is equally critical. Before the current increase in violence began in 2004, the local population looked upon the Royal Thai Army with more respect than the Royal Thai Police because of their widespread corruption. However, due to a series of critical operational mistakes involving the loss of military equipment, cultural insensitivities, the brutal treatment of the local population, as well as their reliance on paramilitary forces to execute combat operations, the Royal Thai Army has lost their moral and professional standing with the population. Likewise, the police are seen as thugs, and this is not just in the southern provinces. Their direct involvement in the dramatic rise in

extrajudicial killings during Prime Minister Thaksin's war on drugs only further acerbated this. Both the Army, but especially the Police, must undergo a significant transformation in order to enhance their professionalism and effectiveness. Once these organizations regain the trust and confidence of the population, effective intelligence gathering which has been a consistent shortcoming, will begin to improve.

The value of the Thahan Phran is a mixed bag. While they are the most effective of the security forces, their brutality has caused them to be widely feared and a focus of insurgent propaganda. With an increase in RTA and RTP professionalism and competence, a gradual phasing out of the Thahan Phran in the southern provinces would be in order. However, until the RTA and RTP are able to effectively combat the insurgency, disbanding the organization would be counter-productive and so an immediate focus on professionalism, accountability and human rights training must be initiated. Additionally, more RTA personnel should be assigned at the company level in order to ensure effective supervision of operations. Assigning RTA Lieutenants as Platoon Leaders would greatly assist in this and would not be too difficult to accommodate.

The various village security forces, the Or Sor, Or Ror Bor and Chor Ror Bor, are not effective at either serving as a deterrent or securing their respective villages. The different government organizations to which they report creates a difficult and confusing coordination issue. Additionally, they are a source of small arms weaponry and present a lucrative element that can be exploited for criminal purposes. Finally, a number of these village security forces have committed retaliatory acts against innocents, furthering the hatred and violence in the region.<sup>47</sup> These organizations should be

abolished and their weapons removed in order to bring the region more in line with the rest of Thailand. It is important to note that the private armies that currently exacerbate the problems in The Philippines began as self-defense forces fighting against the Muslim insurgents.<sup>48</sup>

*Accountability.* Security under the rule of law is an essential element of counterinsurgency doctrine.<sup>49</sup> Abuses by Thai security forces must be halted and officials must be held accountable for their actions. The recent court ruling in the Tak Bai incident demonstrated once again the insincerity of the government and served to further delegitimize the Thai state. This must be rectified before any progress can be made on legitimizing the Thai government's image. Not only has it alienated the population, but the lack of accountability further emboldens the security forces, in a sense saying that any actions they commit in defense of the State are condoned.

*Education Reform.* While the government's efforts to transform *pondoks* into Islamic private schools was replete with ulterior motives aligned with co-opting the religious leaders, the basic idea of ensuring that the Malay students received a secular, as well as a religious education, has long-term benefits and should be continued. It ensures that the youth of the region have more opportunities for employment, both regionally as well as throughout the country. All *pondoks* should receive grants from the State provided they add the Thai curriculum to their religious based instruction and their facilities are not used to incite violence. It is critical that an emphasis on education is pursued, and government-run schools, with over 319 schools burned and 95 teachers murdered, at least currently, are not likely to see a rise in attendance due to the

perception that they are tools of the government's effort to undermine the Malay identity.<sup>50</sup>

*Religious Tolerance.* Islam is not the cause of the insurgency and therefore should not be a focus of the government's attempts to control it. Previous efforts by the government to co-opt religious leaders has backfired and actually served to alienate the more moderate leaders. As a nation that prides itself for tolerance, the government should not involve itself with attempting to determine what is the "correct" form of Islamic teachings for the population. Because of the history of manipulation of religious leaders by the Thai government, any involvement in officially sanctioning Islamic religious teachings now would likely fail and would jeopardize other efforts. As the southern provinces begin to experience the benefits of the other components of this new strategy, it is highly unlikely that radical Islamic views will gain ground because they are not traditional to the local population. In fact, it would be expected that those preaching the radicalized views would be stifled not by officials in Bangkok, but rather by the local religious and secular leaders.

*Economic Development.* While it has been shown that economic development is not a root cause of the insurgency, it is a fact that the southern provinces lag considerably behind the rest of Thailand in development. Significantly increasing economic development will serve to bond the region more closely with the Thai government and the rest of the nation. Additionally, economic prosperity will have the added advantage of reducing the number of disadvantaged, making recruitment more difficult for the insurgents.

A new strategy must have economic initiatives that are directly targeted toward the local population in order to increase the long-term sufficiency and prosperity of the local population. Rather than providing incentives for outside business investors to develop the region, which would primarily benefit Bangkok-based firms, capital should be provided directly to local villages for developmental projects. This will ensure that villages, providing the work force to build, operate and secure the projects, have a direct and vested interest. Examples include developmental aid to enhance rice farming, palm oil and rubber production, livestock and aqua-culture development as well as small-scale boutique resorts, which would provide significant tourism income once the insurgent violence is halted. Many of these examples follow King Bhumibol's Sufficiency Economy concept which is rurally centered and advocates sustainable development.<sup>51</sup> This approach toward economic development for the southern provinces was recently approved by the Thai government as part of a new multi-year developmental plan.

*Change in Language Laws.* The Thai government should undertake immediate actions that designate the Malay dialect as a second official language in the region. While seemingly not as significant as the other components, this is the fastest and easiest measure for the government to undertake. This has been a long standing grievance on the part of the local population and would do much to decrease the friction points between Bangkok and the southern provinces. While some have argued to make Malay the only official language in the region, that would be counter-productive. While it would likely be received with widespread popular approval by the Malays, this would further distance the region from the Thai government. As with the other

recommendations, the goal is to build systems and processes that serve to enhance the legitimacy of the government and to bind the provinces to the Thai Nation as a whole.

### Conclusion

Despite periods of reduced violence in the region, the Thai government's counterinsurgency strategies of the past have proven largely ineffective. Since the resurgence in violence, the Thai government has spent over \$3.2 billion in the region and doubled the number of security forces in the area to now almost 60,000.<sup>52</sup> As discussed, periods of relative calm were generally not because of Thai government policy successes or increases in security forces, but were the result of factional infighting within the various insurgent organizations or through the co-opting of key religious and political elites, rather than developing a solution to the underlying issues.

Fear that the southern insurgency is being influenced by radical foreign Islamic terrorist organizations like Jemaah Islamiyah and al-Qaeda seem to be, at least currently, unfounded. The tactics and particularly the targets are not indicative of the influence of these groups. There is an abundance of Western targets in Thailand, particularly in Phuket, Bangkok and Pattaya. If these foreign terrorist organizations had any influence with the insurgency, it is hard to imagine that these lucrative targets would not have already been exploited. The fact that they haven't seem to indicate two things: first is that foreign terrorist organizations do not have significant influence with the insurgency; and second, a decision has been made by insurgent leaders specifically not to target high-profile tourist areas. The later issue is important in that it would seem to indicate that the insurgency fears the level of reprisal and/or the increase in direct foreign counterinsurgency assistance should this barrier be lifted. Indeed, the statement made in 2006 by Kasturi Mahkota, spokesman for the PULO, that "there is no

interest in taking operations to Bangkok or Phuket. We do not need to be on anyone's terrorist list. Once we are on that list, it is all over"<sup>53</sup>, clearly indicates that this is a strategic decision on the part of the insurgents. This is likely one of the reasons for the Thai government's reluctance to accept any offers of direct foreign assistance. Any action or perception that a foreign government, and in particular the United States, is directly involved in counterinsurgency operations in the southern provinces could have the opposite intended affect and widen the conflict zone to heavily populated areas outside the southern provinces, causing significant damage to the critical Thai tourism industry. In other words, if it was perceived that the United States was directly assisting Thailand in their counterinsurgency efforts as part of the wider global war on terrorism, then the insurgency would not have any reason to limit their actions solely to the southern provinces. It is highly unlikely, given the current, constrained nature of the insurgency, that the Thai government would desire the level of assistance that the United States currently provides to The Philippines in their fight against the Muslim insurgency in Mindanao.

The current insurgency in the south is the most significant threat to the Thai government since the communist insurrection in the 1970's.<sup>54</sup> With the increase in violence and the inability of the Thai government to effectively provide security to the region, it is critical that a new strategy be developed. The basis for a new, revised strategy has been highlighted above and should be rapidly adopted. With each day that goes by, the increased level of violence, by both the insurgents and the Thai security forces, further alienates the population and reinforces the deep seated animosity between the Thai-Buddhist majority and the Malay-Muslim population. While a solution

to the insurgency will be costly, both in terms of time and resources, delaying action will only further the animosity, limit future options and increase the cost. Recent policy shifts, including a historic visit to the southern provinces by the new Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak at the invitation of the Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva,<sup>55</sup> offers a glimmer of hope that the government will adopt a new, more effective strategy in attempting to solve the dispute.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Fuller, "Southern Thailand's Turmoil Grows as Security Forces Try to Quell an Insurgency," *The New York Times*, September 5, 2009: A.4.

<sup>2</sup> Ian MacKinnon, "Blast injure 14 as leaders land in S. Thailand," *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2009: A15.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Chalk, *The Malay-Muslim Insurgency in Southern Thailand: Understanding the Conflict's Evolving Dynamic* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2008), 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Thailand Human Development Report 2007: Sufficiency Economy and Human Development* (Bangkok: United Nations Development Programme, 2007), 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> The Human Achievement Index is a tool that the UNDP developed in 2003 in order to assess human development in a particular area. It is a composite index of 40 indicators that evaluate the areas of health, education, income, housing and living environment, family and community life, transportation and communication, and political participation.

<sup>7</sup> Duncan McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand*, (London: Cornell University, 2008), 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>9</sup> Chalk, *The Malay-Muslim Insurgency*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Asian Human Rights Commission, "UPDATE (Thailand): Court Condones the Death by Suffocation of 78 Men in Military Trucks," June 5, 2009, <http://www.ahrchk.net/ua/mainfile.php/2009/3171/> (accessed November 15, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land*, 111.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> Chalk, *The Malay-Muslim Insurgency*, 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Jane's World Insurgency And Terrorism, "Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN)," June 8, 2009, <http://search.janes.com/Search/printFriendlyView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/binder/jwit/jwit0494.htm@current> (accessed October 26, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Chalk, *The Malay-Muslim Insurgency*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Jane's World Insurgency And Terrorism, "Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO)," July 15, 2009, <http://search.janes.com/Search/printFriendlyView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/binder/jwit/jwit0097.htm@current> (accessed October 26, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Jane's Intelligence Review, "Interview: Kasturi Mahkota, Foreign affairs spokesman, Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO)," August 8, 2006, <http://search.janes.com/Search/printFriendlyView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/mags/jir/history/jir2006/jir10020.htm@current> (accessed December 15, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Jane's World Insurgency And Terrorism, "Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani (GMIP)," January 28, 2009, <http://search.janes.com/Search/printFriendlyView.do?docId=/content1/janesdata/binder/jwit/jwit0495.htm@current> (accessed December 15, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Jane's World Insurgency And Terrorism, "Patani United Liberation Organisation ."

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Jane's World Insurgency And Terrorism, "Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN)."

<sup>22</sup> In June 2010, SBPAC will be redesigned the Southern Border Areas Administration Center (SBAAC) and will no longer be subordinate to the 4th ISOC, report directly to the Thai Prime Minister. The SBAAC will be responsible for coordinating support from the Thai ministries of Interior, Education, Public Health and Information, Communication and Technology. The 4th ISOC will continue to retain operational control of CPM 43. (COL Siriphong Patcharakanokkul of the Royal Thai Army, interviewed by author, Carlisle PA, December 19, 2009 and January 18, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> COL Siriphong Patcharakanokkul of the Royal Thai Army, interviewed by author, Carlisle PA, December 19, 2009 and January 18, 2010

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Chalk, *The Malay-Muslim Insurgency*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land*, 115.

<sup>27</sup> Chalk, *The Malay-Muslim Insurgency*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment-Southeast Asia, "Security and Foreign Forces, Thailand," April 09, 2009, <http://search.janes.com.ezproxy.usawcpubs.org/Search/document>

View.do?docId=/content1/ janesdata /sent/seasu/thais140.htm@current (accessed January 18, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> International Crisis Group, *Southern Thailand: The Problem with Paramilitaries* (Jakarta/Brussels: International Crisis Group, October 23, 2007), 6-13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>34</sup> Chalk, *The Malay-Muslim Insurgency*, 2-3.

<sup>35</sup> McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land*, 52-53.

<sup>36</sup> Former Army General and Prime Minister Prem Thinsulanond is the current Chairman of the Privy Council, the King's secular body that advises him on governance. The Privy Council, and in particular Prem Thinsulanond, have close ties to the Royal Thai Army and he is widely thought to have had a major role in planning the bloodless coup that overthrew Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra on September 19, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> The southern provinces had been under the control of the Democratic Party, the oldest political party in Thailand and closely aligned with the monarchy and the Royal Thai Army. The future role of the monarchy is a major, publicly unstated, issue that is behind the current motives and positions undertaken by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (Pro-Thaksin) and the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (Anti-Thaksin) parties. This serious domestic unrest has had a significant impact on the country, especially economically.

<sup>39</sup> In August 2007, the Thai government (from the military-led coup of 2006 that deposed PM Thaksin Shinawatra) conducted an investigation into the extrajudicial killings stemming from the 2003 War on Drugs. The investigation found that of the 2,819 people killed in the first three months, 1,449 were unrelated to drug dealing or had no known reason for their killings. (Human Rights Watch, "Thailand: Prosecute Anti-Drugs Police Identified in Abuses," February 7, 2008, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/02/07/thaila17993.htm> accessed December 18, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Jane's World Insurgency And Terrorism, "Patani United Liberation Organisation."

<sup>42</sup> Chalk, *The Malay-Muslim Insurgency*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land*, 10.

<sup>44</sup> International Crisis Group, *Southern Thailand: Moving Towards Political Solutions*, (Bangkok/Brussels, International Crisis Group, December 8, 2009), 8.

<sup>45</sup> Kitti Prasirtsuk, "Thailand in 2008; Crises Continued," *Asian Survey* 10, no.1 (January/February 2009): 181.

<sup>46</sup> Chalk, *The Malay-Muslim Insurgency*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Thailand: Prosecute Rights Violators in the South," December 1, 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/12/01/thailand-prosecute-rights-violators-south> (accessed December 20, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> "Thailand's Restive South and Malaysia: The Trouble in Between," *The Economist*, December 12, 2009, 48.

<sup>49</sup> U.S. Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, Field Manual 3-24 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, December 15, 2006), 1-23.

<sup>50</sup> International Crisis Group, *Southern Thailand: Moving Towards Political Solutions*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Thailand Human Development Report 2007*, 20-35.

<sup>52</sup> Fuller, "Southern Thailand's Turmoil Grows," A.4.

<sup>53</sup> Jane's Intelligence Review, "Interview: Kasturi Mahkota."

<sup>54</sup> Jane's World Insurgency And Terrorism, "Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN)."

<sup>55</sup> The recent visit to the southern provinces by the Malaysian Prime Minister was marked by tight security in the areas visited. During the visit, the insurgents focused their attacks on outlying areas, with 10 people killed in three days (Bangkok Post, "Malaysian, Thai PMs visit troubled region," December 10, 2009, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/asia/162210/malaysian-thai-pms-visit-troubled-region> (accessed December 15, 2009).

