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S. P. HARISH AND JOSEPH CHINYONG LIOW

The Coup and the Conflict in Southern Thailand

ABSTRACT

The September 19, 2006, coup, led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin and which overthrew the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, was expected to be a harbinger of some major shifts in Thai politics. In particular, given the Thaksin administration's mishandling of the crisis in the southern provinces, some believed that the change of administration would lead to a recalibration of policy in the South, which in turn would translate to concrete measures toward the ending of rampant violence in the region. This paper, however, cautions against such optimism. The strife in southern Thailand, it contends, was peripheral to the politics that led to the coup. While the coup no doubt created an opportunity for peace, marked most tellingly by Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont's public apology and admission of abuses on the part of the Thai government, stemming violence will require the formulation and implementation of substantive policies that address the root causes of the conflict. It remains to be seen if the post-coup government will have the resolve and political will to do this. To that end, the immediate signs have not been encouraging. In the months following the coup, attacks in southern Thailand have continued unabated, and the conflict has in fact emerged as one of the biggest security challenges for the post-coup government.

INTRODUCTION

September 19, 2006, marked a turning point in Thailand's political history. After nearly fifteen years of democratic rule, the Thai military led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin ousted the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in a bloodless coup d'état. Although this development was a setback for democratization in Thailand, it allowed the new military-appointed government to

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repeal some of Thaksin's unpopular policies. Thaksin was accused of corruption, exploitation of the electoral system, and stifling the media. He was also believed to have been at loggerheads with King Bhumibol Adulyadej and to have lost the support of the military. While all these contributed to Thaksin's overthrow, some observers have also included the deteriorating security situation in southern Thailand, where Thaksin's heavy-handed response to the insurgency had worsened the conflict, as a primary *raison d'être* for the coup (see, for example, Sheridan 2006).

This paper argues otherwise. It contends that the strife in southern Thailand was peripheral to the coup. The toppling of Thaksin's government was a result of elite politics in Bangkok and would most likely have taken place irrespective of the circumstances surrounding the insurgency. The coup, however, created an opportunity for peace. To its credit, the new military-appointed government moved quickly to overturn some of Thaksin's harsh policies upon assuming power and left the door open to negotiations with the rebels. Notwithstanding these positive initiatives, stemming the violence will require more substantive policies that address the root causes of the conflict and that can be successfully implemented. Indeed, in the months following the coup, attacks in southern Thailand have continued unabated and the conflict has emerged as one of the biggest security issues for the military-appointed government.

This article is divided into four sections. The first will provide a brief background of the southern Thailand insurgency. The second will discuss key events and policies under the regime of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The third will describe the lead-up to the coup and the final segment will analyze policies and their implications for the security situation in southern Thailand in the first seven months after the coup.

BACKGROUND OF THE CONFLICT

In 1832, the conflict between the Kingdom of Siam and the Malay Sultanate of Patani came to an end with Patani's political assimilation into Siam. Patani, however, engaged in persistent rebellions against Siam aimed at ridding itself of its tributary status (K. Che Man 1990). In order to stem the frequent revolts, King Rama I decided to absorb the sultanate of Patani along with the northern Malay states of Kedah, Kelantan, and Trengganu under the Siamese empire (Nantawan 1976:198). From then on, Siam practiced a divide-and-rule policy in southern Thailand, constantly redrawing the boundaries of its Malay provinces, partly due to the British threat from Malaya. In 1909, Siam and the British entered into a treaty in which Siam had to relinquish Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, and Trengganu but retained the provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, Pattani, Songkhla, and Satun. This division split the Patani Malay Muslims between Malaysia and Thailand. Today, Muslims constitute around 80 to 85 percent of the populace in the Thai provinces of Narathiwat and Pattani with 70 percent and 65 percent in Yala and Satun respectively. Together, the Muslims in these provinces amount to about 80 percent of all Thai Muslims.

This partition intensified the resistance of the Malay Muslims against Bangkok. Since the end of World War II, opposition to Bangkok hegemony has become more organized and sustained. In the 1940s, GAMPAR (Gabungan Melayu Pattani Raya or the Association of Malays of Greater Pattani) became the leading rebel group led by Tengku Mahmud Mahyiddeen. It campaigned for Malay unity and greater Malay rights. GAMPAR's association with communist elements however, led to its downfall. In the 1960s, a number of new rebel groups emerged. The Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) was formed in 1963 and led by Ustaz Karim Hajji Hassan. BRN was driven by a sense of Malay nationalism and wanted to create a pan-Malay state across Southeast Asia (Omar 1984:239–40). BRN has since split and the BRN-Coordinate has emerged as its most potent faction (ICG Asia Report 2007; 2005a). Among other groups operating in southern Thailand is Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) or Pertubohan

Persatuan Pembebasan, led by Tungku Bira Kotanila. PULO played a particularly instrumental role in internationalizing the southern Thailand conflict when it opened offices in Mecca and recruited among the Thai Malay-Muslim student community in the Middle East as well as pilgrims participating in the annual hajj pilgrimage (Surin 1982:234, 236). Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani (GMIP) is another rebel group that emerged in the 1990s led by a Soviet-Afghan war veteran, Nasori Saesaeng. GMIP has evidently also professed support for Osama bin Laden's global jihad (ICG Asia Report 2005a:13).

Over the last few decades, Bangkok has attempted to assimilate the Malay-Muslim population into the larger Thai-Muslim community. These have included appointing a Muslim leader to advise on Islamic issues as well as providing finances for the building of mosques and Islamic schools in the country. These measures, however, have not addressed many of the root causes of the conflict, such as the use of Pattani-Malay language, the independence of the Islamic education system, and justice for human rights abuses (Liow 2004; ICG Asia Report 2005a) and hence have had little bearing on the insurgency.

THAKSIN'S IMPACT ON THE CONFLICT

After a lull in the 1990s,¹ violence in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat erupted in early 2004,² forcing then-Prime Minister Thaksin to confront a rising insurgency in southern Thailand. On January 4, 2004, militants launched a daring raid on an army camp and torched 18 schools the same night. Since then, more than 2,100 people have been killed, with those injured totaling more than 2,500 (*The Economist* 2007:30; Associated Press 2006a). Roadside bombs, attacks on army camps, drive-by shootings, and gunfights have become an almost daily occurrence resulting in the slaying of soldiers, teachers, monks, and civilians.

¹ An exception was the torching of 34 schools in August 1993. See *Bangkok Post* 1993.

² In hindsight, a daring attack at a police checkpoint in late 2001 and the discovery of a bomb in a police yard in late 2003 were signs of the coming wave of violence.

To date, two incidents have marked important milestones in the current phase of the conflict, both of which were characterized by a disproportionate response by the security forces. On April 28, 2004, militants launched coordinated attacks on a number of security outposts and checkpoints in Pattani, Yala, and Songkhla. In Pattani, an attack on a security checkpoint was repelled by security forces. The militants involved subsequently retreated into the historic Krue Se mosque in the vicinity. After a tense standoff, security forces decided to storm the mosque. In the ensuing battle, all thirty-two militants holed up in the mosque were killed. Overall, more than a hundred rebels and five armed forces personnel were killed in exchanges on that day.

On October 25, 2004, four defense volunteers were arrested on the allegation that they had given their state-issued guns to militants. Outside the police station in Tak Bai (Narathiwat) where they were held, protestors swelled to close than 1,500 within a few hours, sparking suspicions that protests were in fact orchestrated. Army personnel arrested more than a thousand people and herded them into army trucks. In the ensuing six-hour journey to a Pattani army camp for further questioning, 78 people were asphyxiated. This led to an international outcry, especially since the deaths took place during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.³

Other than these two significant incidents, there have been numerous cases of human rights abuses in southern Thailand since the January 4, 2004, attacks (Amnesty International 2006). The imposition of martial law in the three southern provinces has given the security forces a free hand; torture, blacklists, and disappearances of civilians have become commonplace. The 2007 Human Rights Watch report has documented instances of disappearances which have yet to be addressed by Bangkok (Human Rights Watch 2007). It is not difficult to see how the continuation of these abuses could further swell the ranks of the militants, or at the very least impede local

³ Thaksin initially blamed the asphyxiation on the fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which had ostensibly weakened the victims. See Agence France Presse 2004.

cooperation with security officials, and make justice far more remote in southern Thailand.

Much of the exacerbation of the security situation in the southern provinces has been attributed to the misplaced and counterproductive policies of the Thaksin government (ICG Asia Report 2005a, 2005ab). In particular, his evident preference for a heavy-handed military response fomented suspicion and mistrust between security personnel and the local populace. Instead of viewing the security apparatus for protection, the people in the southern provinces have felt that the military and the police are part of the problem.⁴ Moreover, many of Thaksin's policies were implemented with little consultation or input from local community leaders. In addition, tensions between the military and police personnel have also impeded the launch of a coordinated counter-insurgency campaign.

After Thaksin came to power, he made numerous policy changes with regard to the southern Malay-Muslim provinces (Ukrist 2006).⁵ The most prominent of these was the dismantling of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC), an institution set up by former Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond and that had served as a communicative bridge between Bangkok and the Malay-Muslim populace. The Civil-Police-Military Task Force 43 was also dismantled and authority was transferred to the police. This move further marginalized the military, compromised the human intelligence network that the latter had painstakingly built up over the course of two decades, and intensified the rivalry between the military and the police. To replace SBPAC, Thaksin instituted a new security structure, the Southern Border Provinces Peace Building Command (SBPPC). Based in Bangkok and placed under the supervision of Chidchai Vanasatidya, this new apparatus adopted a more top-down approach compared to its predecessor. Moreover, the operational

⁴ There have been numerous riots and blockades in southern Thailand where people have expressed their dissatisfaction and suspicion of the security forces. See for instance Thai News Service 2005.

⁵ McCargo (2006) has done important work in explaining Thaksin's motivations to implement these policy changes in the southern provinces.

capacity of the SBPPC was severely hampered by the fact that its command changed hands five times under the Thaksin administration between April 2004 and October 2006 (ICG Asia Report 2007:1).

In April 2005, under increasing pressure from the king, Thaksin officially decided to form a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), to propose measures to peacefully end the southern insurgency. Headed by former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, the committee was to confer with all stakeholders and recommend policy options to the government. After elaborate consultations with local leaders, civil society groups, government and security personnel, the 50-member body concluded that the root causes of the conflict were poverty, underdevelopment, cultural divergences and the failure of the justice system. It recommended disciplining officials who exploit their authority, seeking negotiations with the rebels and better defense coordination between the military, police, and civilians (see National Reconciliation Commission 2006). However, after these useful proposals were suggested, they were ignored by the Thaksin government, which by that time was already being confronted with a fast-unraveling political fabric in Bangkok.⁶

In the weeks leading up to the coup on September 19, 2006, attacks in the southern provinces increased considerably. On August 31, there were near simultaneous attacks on fourteen branches of Bangkok Bank, Krung Thai Bank, KasikornBank, Siam Commercial Bank, Bank of Ayudhya, Siam City Bank, and UOB Radanasin, allegedly meant to coincide with the founding of the separatist umbrella group, Bersatu (*Daily Telegraph* 2006; Sutin 2006a, 2006b; Thai News Service 2006a). Insurgents had usually attacked government offices, schools, and security personnel, and the targeting of financial institutions, seen mainly as an attempt to weaken the economy, was a first. Soon after this incident, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin raised the possibility of negotiations with the rebels (*U.S. Fed News*

⁶ The Thaksin administration's nonchalance toward the NRC recommendations mirrored its earlier response when it ignored the proposals put forward by Deputy Prime Minister Chaturon Chaisang in April 2004 when he was tasked by the administration to investigate possible peace-building measures.

2006). While this was welcomed by the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), which also suggested it could facilitate talks with other groups,⁷ Thaksin's political allies rejected the idea of talks with the insurgents (Thai News Service 2006b). In fact, the Thaksin government, at least overtly, rebuffed all forms of assistance, including those coming from countries in the Middle East, to negotiate with the rebels and arrive at a peaceful solution to the insurgency (Hookway 2006; *Bangkok Post* 2006a).⁸

Days before the coup, General Sonthi said that intelligence reports had pointed to possible attacks around Hat Yai between September 16 and 20 to coincide with the anniversary of the GMIP (Thai News Service 2006c). Although security around Hat Yai was increased, blasts hit the Odeon and the Big C stores, the Lee Garden hotel, a bar and a massage parlor, killing four and wounding dozens more (Agence France Presse 2006a). The profile of these attacks increased dramatically after it was confirmed that a Canadian was among the victims. Moreover, Hat Yai is the economic, tourism, and communication center of southern Thailand, and these blasts were widely seen to reflect increasing capability on the part of the insurgents. It also increased pressure on Thaksin to act and clearly showed that Bangkok did not have a firm grasp on the security situation even as the strife worsened. At the time of the attacks, Thaksin was in New York for the United Nations General Assembly meeting and all he could do at the time was to convey his condolences and order more aid to the bombing victims (Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agencies 2006). These overtures were futile and three days later, the military forced him out of office in a bloodless coup.

THE COUP

Although Thaksin's heavy-handed tactics contributed to the mishandling of the southern insurgency, it was not the primary reason for the

⁷ Interview with PULO representatives, Gothenburg, 7 September 2006.

⁸ Reports of secret backchannel talks with militant groups emerged only after the September 19 coup.

coup. There was widespread discontentment with his administration in Bangkok. Thaksin's CEO style of governance and his attempted consolidation of power in Bangkok had alienated many parties, including the palace. Most importantly, Thaksin was also seen to have lost the support of the king, with whom he had a feud which was hardly veiled, as well as some of the influential Privy Council members (Thitinan 2006). The rhetoric of the coup leaders chiefly centered on the sale of Shin Corporation to Singapore's Temasek Holdings, which they claimed had violated foreign ownership laws. But it was Thaksin's attempt to install some of his classmates into key security positions in the armed forces that provided the impetus for the coup. His relations with the military worsened when the time came for the Commander-in-Chief Pravit Wongsuwan to retire. Thaksin wanted General Lertrat Rattananavich to lead the military, but it was General Pravit who pushed through General Sonthi Boonyaratglin as the new military head (ICG Asia Report 2007:2).

The military rightly calculated the time to launch the overthrow of the Thaksin government. Thaksin's authoritarian policies had alienated the urban middle class in Bangkok. He was accused of stifling sections of the Thai media, which has long been a bastion of free press in Southeast Asia. There was also growing dissatisfaction among the residents of Bangkok with Thaksin's money politics. Thaksin's support came primarily from Thailand's rural areas and the urban populations in Bangkok were helpless in expressing their discontent through their vote. The displeasure among Bangkok residents with the Thaksin government proved to be an important factor in ensuring the success of the bloodless coup.

On September 19, 2006, the military led by General Sonthi ousted Thaksin and his government without firing a shot. As news of the coup spread, Thaksin attempted to declare a state of emergency in Thailand via an audio statement from New York that was broadcast through a government-owned television station in Bangkok. But as it soon became clear that King Bhumibol supported the ouster, Thaksin decided that he would not return to Thailand. Days after the coup,

the military announced that a "Council of Administrative Reform" with King Bhumibol as the head of state would be established.

THE POST-COUP SITUATION

As far as the conflict in southern Thailand was concerned, the coup brought renewed hope. General Sonthi's comments just weeks before the coup, in which he said that he would prefer negotiations, raised hopes of stemming the injustices in the South and achieving a peaceful resolution to the strife. The coup was supported by many Thais, especially in Bangkok. In a poll of 2,000 Thais a day after the coup, nearly 84 percent approved the military takeover and nearly 75 percent said that it would make the political situation better (Kazmin 2006).

In the South, there was no panic in reaction to the coup. Hatyai was back to normal after the bombings (*Bernama Daily Malaysian News* 2006b). On the contrary, the coup was supported by the population and was seen as the harbinger of hope for a resolution of the conflict. An advisor to the Narathiwat Islamic Religious Council articulated this when he expressed hope that the military appointed government would help quell the violence in the South (*Bernama Daily Malaysian News* 2006a). Among the rebel groups, PULO leader Lukman Lima expressed support for the military coup and suggested that the conflict could be resolved under the military appointed government. PULO's positive response however, did not entail any compromise on its own agenda, for Lima also stressed that full independence remained the final goal of PULO (Dow Jones Commodities Service 2006a). But even as Gen Sonthi was consolidating his position in Bangkok and appointing an interim prime minister and cabinet, the coup did not automatically signal an end to the violence in the South. Fresh violence erupted within three days of the coup in a bomb blast that injured four police officers (Associated Press 2006b).

Policy changes

Days after Surayud Chulanont was nominated as the new prime minister of the interim military appointed government, he declared that resolving the insurgency in the southern provinces within a year was among his top priorities (Agence France Presse 2006b; Casey 2006). In direct contrast to Thaksin, he admitted that injustice was one of the causes of the conflict (Dow Jones Commodities Service 2006b; *The Nation* 2006a) and suggested that he would revive the SBPAC by enlisting the help of retired Gen. Harn Leenanond, former Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, and Palakorn Suwanrat, who had previously headed the SBPAC (*Dow Jones International News* 2006a).

Surayud initiated some significant policy changes soon after he assumed office. First, he apologized for the injustices and abuses committed by previous Thai governments. In particular, he apologized for the deaths of the 78 protestors who died at Tak Bai under army supervision. He also ordered the withdrawal of all charges against 56 protestors who were arrested at Tak Bai and were still held in detention (Rungrawee 2006). Second, Surayud revived the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) as well as the Civilian-Police-Military Task Force.⁹ It should be noted though, that although Phranai Suwannarat, the Nonthaburi governor, was appointed as director of the SBPAC (Thai News Service 2006d), it was placed under the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), giving the army supremacy over the police in the southern provinces (ICG Asia Report 2007:3). Third, Surayud also announced that the policy of blacklisting suspects would end (*The Nation* 2006b). This announcement was significant since the blacklists had been a hindrance for cooperation between the security officials and civilians in the region. Symbolically, Surayud made these comments at the

⁹ The primary objective of reviving the CPM Task Force was to standardize counterinsurgency operations against the militants. After its disbandment by Thaksin, rivalry between the military and the police had hindered the efficacy of such operations (ICG Asia Report 2007:16)

Thamma Witthaya school, whose teachers had been arrested more than two years ago and were released on bail only in January 2007.

While these measures by the interim military appointed government may be well-intentioned, they are only a first step. Substantive policies that deal with the root causes of the conflict have yet to be tabled. Although both Surayud and Sonthi have been more amenable to the NRC report released in June 2006, it remains to be seen whether the military appointed government will proceed and implement its recommendations. Despite the fact that charges against the 56 Tak Bai protestors have been dropped, Bangkok is still hesitant to charge the security personnel involved in the suffocation and deaths of the 78 civilians. The reinstatement of the SBPAC is a positive sign but it cannot be expected to rebuild trust with the local populace overnight and will have an uphill task in the coming months.

Back-channel talks

Soon after the coup, reports surfaced that peace talks between the Thai military and some rebel groups had been ongoing for nearly a year.¹⁰ These talks were held on the Malaysian island of Langkawi under the auspices of the Perdana Global Peace Organization, a non-governmental organization led by ex-Malaysian prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad.¹¹ In a meeting with the NRC head Anand Panyarachun in October 2005, Mahathir was advised to seek an audience with King Bhumibol. After approval from the king in November, he initiated peace talks between both sides (*Dow Jones International News* 2006b; Crompton 2006). Although the Thaksin government was not in favor of these back-channel talks (*The Nation* 2005; *Bangkok Post* 2006a), they were powerless to act against the directive of the king.

It is still unclear which rebel groups were invited to the talks and are currently participating in these informal backchannel talks. Wan

¹⁰ While these talks took place when Thaksin Shinawatra was in power, it is significant that these news reports emerged soon after the coup and that the Thai military was deeply involved in the negotiations.

¹¹ There were earlier reports of so-called 'plotting' in Langkawi. See *The Nation* 2005. It is probable that these were actually part of the back-channel talks.

Kadir Che Man, the head of Bersatu and Kasturi Mahkota, a PULO leader, supported the talks and welcomed the idea of Malaysia as an appropriate venue for the negotiations (Agence France Presse 2006c). In a statement from Perdana, it was revealed that Bersatu, an umbrella grouping, the Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Congress (BRN-Congress) and the Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani had participated in the talks (Cropley 2006). At the negotiations, the rebel groups ostensibly gave up on their demand for independence and even dropped their claim for Malay to be made an official language in the southern provinces. Instead, they wanted

an end to injustice, for economic development, improved educational opportunities, greater Muslim participation, up to 50 per cent, in the three provinces' administration, a blanket amnesty for insurgents who apply for it, optional use of the Malay language in schools and a regional body where Muslim groups can register complaints and concerns. In return, the rebels will end all violence and surrender all arms. (Levett 2006)

To what extent these concessions were unanimous among the rebel groups is still unknown. Moreover, International Crisis Group interviews have suggested that

[m]any participants only attended under pressure from Mahathir, via the former Malaysian police chief Tan Sri Norian Mai and the Special Branch, and only reluctantly signed the "Joint Peace and Development Plan for Southern Thailand" in which they renounced any aspiration for independence or even autonomy. (ICG Asia Report 2007:7)

In addition, there is a concern that the rebel groups at the negotiating table may not really control the violence on the ground. BRN-Coordinate is emerging as the major rebel group (ICG Asia

Report 2007:6) in the South but evidently it was not part of the back-channel talks. In the six months after the coup, there have been no signs of any insurgent group declaring a ceasefire in a sign of support for the peace talks. On the contrary, the scale of violence has increased.

In a sign that negotiations were not going as planned, Kasturi Mahkota changed tack weeks after supporting Malaysia as an intermediary in talks. He said that negotiations will need to be held in a neutral third-party location like Scandinavia, a clear sign that PULO felt that Malaysia was probably biased toward some rebel groups. He also said that any existing contacts between the Thai government and separatist groups were only based on “just informal meetings either by private initiatives or with low-level and unauthorized individuals” (Siti Rahil 2006), a sign of the disunity between the demands of the various rebel groups and the difficulty in reaching a peace settlement in the South. Moreover, peace overtures from Surayud have come under scathing attack from PULO. It was written off as a “new round of Siamisation aimed at turning ethnic Malays into Thais at the expense of their own cultural identity” (Ghosh 2006). The move to allow for teaching of Malay in schools and cater to syariah law in the southern provinces was rejected, with the revival of the SBPAC also dismissed as a “poisonous bait and a neocolonial-style office that served only the purpose of delivering the deceitful propaganda of the Thais” (ibid.). The hardening of PULO’s position could have resulted also from the recent conviction of PULO members when the provincial court of Pattani found PULO members Aduenan Seng, Abhisit Mahama, and Abdullah Dueramae, guilty of rebellion and criminal conspiracy (Associated Press 2006c).

The worsening violence

The surge of violence in Thailand’s southern provinces since the coup is ominous. Despite policy changes and back-channel talks, the situation on the ground has worsened. The military-appointed government has fared no better than the Thaksin government in

determining the perpetrators behind the violence. In the months after the coup, the Chinese business community has also become targets of the militants, raising fears of full-fledged ethnic strife. The insurgents have taken to mobilizing women and children as part of their tactical operations by employing them to instigate widespread protests and using them to form roadblocks to impede security operations. In addition, the capability and brutality of the militants has significantly improved over the past three years.

Surayud's apology for the excesses of the Thai government was met with a marked increase in the violence in the southern provinces. The average number of deaths in the months before the coup was about 56. In November alone, there were 208 incidents with 81 deaths; 3 November, the day after Surayud's apology, witnessed 46 separate incidents. There was a slight decrease in the months of January and February 2007 with 78 and 50 deaths respectively, but there was a surge in February with 243 incidents that included 81 bombings and 80 shootings resulting in 54 deaths (ICG Asia Report 2007:8).

Since the coup, attacks on Buddhist monks and teachers in southern Thailand have garnered greater national attention. In November and December 2006, the brutal killing of school teachers resulted in the closure of government schools in the area for more than a week (*The Nation* 2006c). In response, the Education Ministry has pledged to provide for temporary teachers and improve security for them (Thai News Service 2006e). However, these measures are largely reactionary and have not addressed the real issue of militants targeting teachers.¹² Despite protection from the army, attacks on Buddhist monks have also continued. In October 2006, the five Buddhist monks were injured as they were collecting their daily alms and this incident prompted a national uproar (ICG Asia Report 2007:9).

On the eve of New Year 2007, nine coordinated bombs were set off simultaneously in Bangkok. It killed three people and wounded thirty eight. This was the first time that Bangkok was targeted with

¹² For a more detailed discussion on educational issues in southern Thailand, see Liow 2005.

such a synchronized attack (Casey 2007). While the Surayud government initially blamed supporters of the Thaksin administration for the bombings, an investigation to apprehend the culprits behind the attacks has not led to any conclusive evidence. Some recent reports, however, link the insurgency in southern Thailand with the Bangkok bombings. General Wattanachai Chaimuenwong, a security advisor to Surayud, alleged that militants from southern Thailand were paid most probably by Thaksin's supporters to carry out the bombings in Bangkok (Straits Times Interactive 2007). If this allegation is proven true, it would confirm that the southern Thai insurgents would not hesitate to strike Bangkok and would seriously undermine the credibility of the peace overtures of the new military appointed government.

In February 2007, militants attempted to expand the southern insurgency into a broader ethnic strife.¹³ On February 18 and 19, over Chinese New Year, a series of blasts in southern Thailand specifically targeted ethnic Chinese in the area (*Straits Times* 2007b). While bombs at power stations led to a blackout, the main targets of the militants seem to have been business establishments owned by ethnic Chinese, a Chevrolet showroom, and a rubber-processing factory resulting in approximately US\$14 million worth of damage (*The Nation* 2007). Moreover, the three dead in the bombings were all Thais of Chinese descent (Associated Press 2007).

Explaining the continuation of violence

In the search for explanations as to why, given the excessive emphasis on the failures of the Thaksin administration and how they exacerbated the violence, the coup has not brought about the reprieve that many hoped for, one has to realize that the Surayud administration has in effect inherited many of the problems that plagued the Thaksin administration. Because Thaksin's policy mistakes set the Thai government back several decades in terms of critical intelligence gathering,

¹³ While these were not the first attacks against the ethnic Chinese in the southern provinces, the carefully executed strike is a clear sign of augmenting the ethnic dimension of the conflict.

it is no surprise that the current leadership is as clueless as to who the insurgents are as their predecessors. While Thaksin himself was often categorical in his pronouncements regarding the perpetrators of violence (even though his guesses varied from criminals and drug addicts to Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists), the military leaders are clearly less sanguine. Indeed, even as Sonthi announced his willingness to negotiate with insurgents, Surayud was quoted as saying that “we have agreed that there should be talks if Malaysia can help Thailand figure out which groups we should hold talks with” (*Straits Times* 2007a).

While the reinstitution of the SBPAC and the Civilian-Police-Military Task Force was greeted with measured optimism, there are structural problems that limit its effectiveness. First, as noted earlier, the SBPAC and CPM have been made subordinate to the ISOC, which effectively means that it comes under military command. The SBPAC has to seek ISOC approval for all its policies and programs, budgetary decisions, and disciplinary procedures against civilian and military personnel found guilty of abuses. Within this structure, tension between the military and police intensified further. On one hand, the police have felt marginalized, having been replaced by the military in the South. On the other hand, the military has upon assuming responsibility been highly critical of the police for their apparent failure to tackle the insurgency (ICG Asia Report 2007:16). Second, although the SBPAC began operations on November 1, 2006, as of early 2007 fewer than half of its posts were filled. This was largely a result of a lack of incentives for officials from Bangkok to volunteer service at the center (ICG Asia Report 2007:13). Third, the SBPAC was not made a permanent institution, but instead had to seek approval from the interior ministry in order to initiate policies. Fourth, Pranai Suwannarath, appointed to head the SBPAC by the Surayud administration, is a career interior ministry official with little experience in the affairs of the South (ICG Asia Report 2007:13).

Another problem confronting the efforts of the current leadership in the South is the apparent inconsistency between Surayud’s insistence on pursuing a conciliatory and peaceful approach on

one hand and the exigencies of security on the other. Confronted with intense pressure from Thailand's Buddhist majority to harden his approach to the southern Thailand conflict, Surayud has stood his ground and vowed not to reverse his soft approach to resolving the insurgency, regularly reiterating his mantra of "refraining from using violence to counter violence" and to "follow the rule of law." However, in response to the recent spate of attacks which included execution-style attacks, Surayud appeared to contradict his earlier position when he was reported to articulate the view that "we will have to use force to protect our people as it appears those insurgents don't want to settle the violence with dialogue" (*Straits Times* 2007a). Additionally, General Saprang Kalayanamitr, a likely candidate to replace Sonthi as Chief of Army, also opined to the *Straits Times* that "the main policy in the south is to increase troop strength so we can control the area" (*Straits Times* 2007c). Finally, on March 15, 2007, the government announced that it would dispatch 2,000 more troops to the South to buttress the more than 20,000 troops already deployed there, and that it was further considering adding another 3,300 police on the streets (*Straits Times* 2007d).

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the insurgency in southern Thailand was not a primary reason for the military coup in Bangkok on September 19, 2006. Instead, the key drivers of the coup can be found in the feud between the Thaksin Shinawatra government and certain factions within the military. It was Thai national politics that led to the overthrow of the Thaksin administration. Thaksin's attempts to strengthen and consolidate his power over security forces by promoting favored candidates alienated a significant faction of the army that in turn gave their allegiance to the palace.

While the southern Thai conflict was not a major factor in the coup against the Thaksin administration, it has however worsened in the months after the coup and is now a major security issue confronting the military-appointed government, and one on which its

legitimacy may well be assessed. Soon after the coup, the interim government under Surayud Chulanont announced measures to end the southern insurgency. But these measures skirt the root causes of the strife. Clearly, the insurgents are now trying to test the patience of the military-appointed government and lure a return to the heavy-handed approach of the Thaksin administration.

Half a year after the coup, Thais are disappointed with the interim military appointed government and Surayud's popularity is plummeting (Ghosh 2007). The Surayud government badly needs a success to legitimize the coup. To date, they have failed to prove corruption allegations against Thaksin. It seems that the military-appointed government is hinging its legitimacy on progress in the southern insurgency. On the one hand, it is important for the Surayud government, which does not have an electoral mandate, not to rush into a peace agreement with any rebel group that is unable to contain the violence on the ground. Yet it is also imperative that the government not jeopardize the painstaking work already done to win back some trust from the local communities by taking the bait and falling back to the militarized counter-insurgency approach of the previous administration. In this respect, while policies such as the reinstatement of the SBPAC are a step in the right direction, it is necessary to address the main grievances of the southern Thailand populace.

Ultimately, the reality may well prove to be that the insurgency in Thailand's "deep south" is in the final analysis peripheral to the broader political concerns of Bangkok. This is all the more so given that the current leadership is facing tremendous pressure to deliver results in order to justify the September coup. Among its preoccupations are ongoing charges of corruption and disrespect toward the monarchy against Thaksin and his associates, balancing remnants of the Thai Rak Thai and the ambitions of the Democratic Party, the perennial prospects of Thaksin's return to Thailand, drafting of a new constitution, the formulation of stable and sustainable economic policies, and the mitigation of tensions between the anti-Thaksin Bangkok middle class (which has begun to turn against the Surayud

administration as well) and the pro-Thaksin rural masses. Having to handle these competing priorities in a tentative and limited one-year time frame before relinquishing power, the Surayud administration may well have little choice but to trade off the priority given to solving the southern insurgency so as to balance other, arguably more pressing, concerns that impact its legitimacy and legacy. ■

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