



# Confronting ghosts

THAILAND'S SHAPELESS  
SOUTHERN INSURGENCY

Joseph Chinyong Liow  
Don Pathan

Lowy Institute Paper 30

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# Executive summary



The violence that has plagued the predominantly Malay provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala in southern Thailand (not to mention four Malay-speaking districts in the upper southern province of Songkhla) over the past few years has become one of the most closely watched security situations in Southeast Asia. Like Thailand, many other states in the region are still struggling with key nation-building challenges that are potentially prone to involvement by regional and global terrorist groups, posing threats to these countries' hubs of international engagement and undercutting attempts at regional confidence and community building. The significant and sustained upsurge in violence in southern Thailand in the last few years, across numerous administrations in Bangkok, and the nebulous nature of the insurgency itself, make it a particularly important conflict to understand for those with interests in Thailand and Southeast Asian security and stability and in the evolution of internal conflicts. A decade ago, many hoped that the insurgency in the south of Thailand had melted away. Instead it has come back in a more powerful and threatening manner.

This monograph analyses the changing nature of the insurgency in Thailand's southern border provinces and the inability of the Thai Government to understand and deal with it. It analyses new dimensions of the conflict, and considers the extent to which the insurgency is a coherent movement. In addition, the monograph also critically examines the response of the Thai state to the insurgency. Taken together, these two analytical threads allow us to address the questions of why and how the insurgency morphed in the direction it did, and what this portends for both counterinsurgency efforts and the state of affairs in Thailand more generally. In brief, four arguments are made:

- First, despite the discernible religious hues in insurgent discourse and language today, today's insurgency remains fundamentally based on earlier localist narratives, goals and motivations. This is

because history possesses deep meanings for local communities and makes their current situation more intelligible.

- Second, the nature of the insurgency itself has changed from the hierarchical and structured struggles of the past that were mostly led by an ethnic Malay political and religious elite to the fluid and shapeless organisational structure of a ‘new’ insurgency that as yet lacks clear, negotiable political goals. In matters of tactics, structure and mobilisation, the insurgency today departs from the traditional script of resistance in southern Thailand.
- Third, although there may be agreement among groups involved in the insurgency as to what might be the broad objectives of the movement (in fact, there might even be disagreement on this count), each may have different opinions as to how to proceed to achieve them. Rather than a monolithic insurgent movement, we may be looking at the existence of divisions and separate factions, each directly serving their own interests with methods and means they deem most appropriate even as they see themselves as part of, and sharing the common interests of, a larger movement.
- Finally, tackling the insurgency on both military and political counts will pose an even greater challenge for the Thai Government because of its inability to make significant headway in its counterinsurgency effort with properly calibrated responses. This stems from its reluctance to comprehend and accept the nature of this challenge to its legitimacy in the southern provinces. Upper echelons of Thai politics and the security services do not appreciate that they are facing an insurgency that is for the most part driven by a resilient resistance narrative that is finding new tactical forms of expression and mobilisation. Rather, given to instant gratification in terms of policy choices, they continue to be driven by a Manichean view of the Malay–Muslim population in the southern provinces that misses the proverbial forest for the trees.

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# Introduction

Following nearly fifteen years of civilian rule, the Thai military led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin ousted the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in a bloodless coup d'état on 16 September 2006. This development was met with mixed feelings across Thai society and the political spectrum. On the one hand, it raised fears that democracy had been dealt a body blow, a particularly salient concern given Thailand's long history of military coups, dictatorships and, in contrast, its relatively patchy experience of democracy. On the other hand, the coup raised hopes that unpopular (and undemocratic) policies associated with the Thaksin administration could be repealed, thereby paving the way for improved governance.

In particular, many anticipated that the coup would bring about an improvement of the deteriorating security situation in Thailand's southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, where a decades-old insurgency involving the region's predominantly ethnic Malay population was believed to have been reignited during Thaksin's tenure, and aggravated by repressive policies. This expectation that the coup would create an opportunity for peace was further heightened following conciliatory statements on the part of Sonthi and the military-appointed interim prime minister, Surayud Chulanont, the overturning of some of the Thaksin administration's harsh policies, and encouraging signals from the political and military leadership that they were open to dialogue with the militants.

Three years on, the security climate in the southern provinces remains dire, violence has in fact escalated, and, at the time of writing, the death toll is about to surpass four thousand. In the latest in a string of shocking incidents since the September 2006 coup, gunmen attacked worshippers at a mosque in Cho Airong district, Narathiwat, in June 2009 and killed eleven people, including the imam. Meanwhile, the Thai Government has extended emergency decree regulations across the provinces — much to the ire of human rights groups — despite the fact that several years of sustained policy attention, extensive investment of military resources, and implementation of martial law and emergency decree have yet to translate to any major arrest or dismantling of parts of the network of cells operating in the southern provinces. Likewise, the early promise of improvements in governance has given way to all-too-familiar heavily repressive counterinsurgency policies that further entrench the permissive environment for rebellion.

At the same time, while there remains no concrete evidence that the insurgency in southern Thailand is tied to larger regional and global movements of jihadi violence (either of the Jemaah Islamiyah or Al-Qaeda mould), concerns persist in policy circles that such connections could well surface if the problem is allowed to deteriorate further. The puzzle remains, however, why, despite several years of close analytical and policy attention, the insurgency in southern Thailand remains as murky as it is. The key to answering this question lies in developing a deeper understanding of the contours of the ‘new’ insurgency.

### **Framing the problem: continuity and change**

At the heart of the problem lies the Thai Government’s inability to grasp the full spectrum of the challenge posed by the nebulous network of cells and groups fomenting insurgency and violence in the southern provinces. To be sure, ethno-nationalist separatism and insurgency is not a problem that the Thai state is unfamiliar with. Indeed, organised armed insurgency has been waged by separatists in the south since the 1960s, though piecemeal resistance had been taking place much earlier. Yet while there is much that is similar between the current cycle of violence and what had informed earlier periods of resistance, the nature

of the insurgency itself appears to have changed.

Few would deny that today’s conflict is much more brazen and violent than before. Moreover, the structure of the insurgency seems markedly different. While insurgents had previously organised around formal separatist organisations with political and militant wings, their successors appear to be organised as a nebulous network of cells and armed groups with no clear lines of authority or formal nomenclature. The nature of attacks testifies to a largely decentralised insurgency where cells appear to be operating autonomously. That being said, there have also been several devastating large-scale attacks which clearly involved networks of cells and armed groups, thereby speaking to the ability of these autonomous groups to otherwise communicate, plan and execute coordinated attacks if it suited them to do so and if resources permit. Finally, while motivations remain very much anchored on narratives of ethno-nationalist grievances and ambitions towards self-determination (in a variety of forms), justifications of violence have also taken on religious hues and undertones that were largely absent from previous periods.

To understand the nature, scope and implications of this current insurgency and how it has changed from what came before, one must look within the insurgency itself. While a veritable cottage industry has emerged to study the violence and conflict in southern Thailand, none has managed to provide a detailed picture of what the insurgency looks like from ‘within’ — from the perspective of the insurgent movement itself in terms of how it organises, mobilises and recruits. The main objective of this monograph is to place the southern Thai insurgency under sharper analytical focus by analysing the new dimensions to the conflict, and considering the extent to which it is a coherent movement. In addition, the monograph critically examines the response of the Thai state. Taken together, these two analytical threads allow us to address the questions of why and how the insurgency morphed in the direction it did, and what this portends for both counterinsurgency efforts as well as the state of affairs more generally.

The monograph makes four specific arguments. First, despite the discernible religious hues in insurgent discourse and language today,

today's insurgency remains fundamentally driven by pre-existing narratives, goals and motivations. Indeed, the monograph argues that some government officials and analysts have underestimated the currency and resonance of historical narratives — regardless of their accuracy — among the local communities that eventually spawn insurgents. While there should be no doubt that such narratives can and have been constructed and manipulated by various interests, be they from the state, the local political elite, or the separatists, to further their own agenda, it is precisely because history possesses deep meanings for local communities and makes their current situation more intelligible that it can be used by those with more instrumentalist concerns.

Second, the nature of the insurgency itself has changed from the hierarchical and structured struggles of the past that were mostly led by an ethnic Malay political and religious elite to the fluid and shapeless organisational structure of a 'new' insurgency that as yet lacks clear, negotiable political goals. In matters of tactics, structure and mobilisation, the insurgency departs from the traditional script of resistance in southern Thailand.

Third, it is instructive to keep in mind not only obvious variations in tactics and structure, but also the frustrations and criticisms old-guard separatists have expressed towards the mutated forms of resistance evident today. Although there may be agreement among groups as to what might be the broad objectives of the movement (in fact, there might even be disagreement on this count), each group may have different opinions as to how to proceed to achieve them. Rather than a monolithic insurgent movement, we may be looking at the existence of divisions and separate factions, each directly serving their own interests with methods and means they deem most appropriate even as they see themselves as part of, and sharing the common interests of, a larger movement. Finally, it suggests that tackling the insurgency on both military and political counts will pose an even greater challenge for the Thai Government, and one with which they urgently need to come to terms.

# Chapter 1

## A legacy of insurgency

The violence that has plagued the predominantly Malay provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala in southern Thailand (not to mention four Malay-speaking districts in the upper southern province of Songkhla) over the past few years has become one of the most closely watched security situations in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Since the major arms raid that took place in January 2004 in the southernmost province of Narathiwat, violence has been occurring at an almost daily rate, spawning a veritable cottage industry of scholarship and analysis on the southern Thai conflict. At the same time, the absence of claims of responsibility for attacks has lent itself to multiple interpretations of the violence that are reflected in the range of explanations proffered by Thai policymakers, scholars, security analysts and terrorism specialists.

It should be noted at the very outset that in many respects the current insurgency in southern Thailand is hardly new. Indeed, the narratives of self-determination in the face of repression and marginalisation by a central state (in its modern version or otherwise) that continue to drive much of the present-day resistance are remarkably familiar, resonating with prevailing understandings during previous periods of rebellion. Depending on sources, some would even trace the roots of the contemporary conflict back several centuries to November 1786, when the historical kingdom of Patani, roughly coterminous to the current

territory of the three southern provinces under consideration here, fell into the Siamese sphere of influence by way of diplomatic and military compulsion.

Regardless of its accuracy, which is a matter of debate among historians, this depiction of Patani history had great historical and political currency insofar as narratives of insurgency are concerned, and has entered into the collective memory of the Malay–Muslims of the southern border provinces. It serves as the foundation for the contention that the southern provinces were annexed by foreign Siamese forces who posed an existential threat, and hence have to be taken back by the Malay–Muslims.

Most would agree that a major watershed period was the turn of the twentieth century, which marked the beginning of sustained efforts on the part of the royal Siamese court and, later, several nationalist and military administrations that succeeded it, to institute measures that sought to assimilate the southern provinces and their long tradition of stressing particularistic aspects of local (primarily cultural and religious) identity into the wider Thai geopolitical body.<sup>2</sup> These included: proscription of the use of the Malay language in both its written and oral form (in the form of the local Malay dialect which resembles the Kelantanese dialect used in the neighbouring northern Malaysian state of Kelantan, and its written form, Jawi); restriction of various cultural and religious practices such as the implementation of *shari'a* among the predominantly Muslim Malay community; and, perhaps the most controversial of all, various attempts by Bangkok-based authorities to regulate and police the tradition of independent Islamic schools that also served as the politico-cultural epicentre for Malays residing in southern Thailand.<sup>3</sup>

As a consequence of these actions, some of which were decidedly punitive in nature especially under the military administrations of Phibun Songkram and Sarit Thannarat, grievances built up among Thailand's southern-based Malay community, at times resulting in sporadic protests and confrontations with the state. It was only in the 1960s, though, that these grievances found expression in the form of organised armed resistance with the emergence of several separatist

organisations, most notably the BNPP (*Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani* or National Liberation Front of Patani), BRN (*Barisan Revolusi Nasional* or National Revolutionary Front) and PULO (Pattani United Liberation Organization).

Armed separatism in southern Thailand peaked in the late 1970s and early 1980s, endorsed and supported both by leaders and governments in the Middle East, who provided financial aid, training and, ultimately refuge, as well as a mushrooming 'Patani diaspora' from which sympathy and support were drawn. It was only after the successful implementation of a new, more holistic counterinsurgency strategy, known as *Tai Rom Yen* or 'South under a Cool Shade' in Thai policy parlance, introduction of developmental policies by a central government more sensitive to the culture and lifestyles of the ethnic Malay minority, and provision of opportunities for political representation in the south that levels of violence reduced.

Despite the emergence in the 1990s of other groups such as the GMIP (*Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani* or Patani Islamic Mujahideen Movement), the separatist cause was further undermined when the Thai Government under Chuan Leekpai succeeded, with the help of Muslim countries in ASEAN, in obtaining permanent observer status in the Organization of Islamic Conferences (OIC) in 1998. This proved a major coup for the Thai Government and it effectively denied the exiled Malay separatist groups, who were also appealing to the OIC for recognition, a much-needed international source of sympathy and forum to articulate their case.

By the early 1990s, the military wings of these separatist groups began to crumble in the face of *Tai Rom Yen* and differences within the separatist movement over objectives and strategies deepened. Foot soldiers and field commanders either opted for amnesty and returned to their villages or chose to take up citizenship or residency in neighbouring Malaysia.<sup>4</sup> Others — mainly the leaders — relocated to the Middle East and Europe, where, despite their efforts to sustain the insurgency, they found themselves gradually receding into the background by the late 1990s. In addition, the apparent success of *Tai Rom Yen* and the Thai Government's diplomatic efforts also sowed rifts among the exiled

separatists, leading to friction, factionalism and, ultimately, splits in the movement.

This counterinsurgency ‘success’, however, also had a downside in that it paradoxically laid the ground for the subsequent re-ignition of insurgency. While the 1990s saw a curbing of insurgent activity, it also lulled Thai security forces into a false state of security. Politico-cultural separatist organisations were gradually reproduced in exile. In the southern provinces, separatism mutated and, with Islamic schools as the vehicle of mobilisation, took on new forms even as it assumed the same function of reproducing the narrative of oppression and resistance. All that was required were the right conditions and political opportunities for conflict to be reignited. These conditions were provided during the administration of one of the most controversial political leaders in recent Thai history.

The turn of the century ushered into power Thaksin Shinawatra, a millionaire businessman and former mid-ranking police officer whose populist style would eventually polarise Thai society in fundamental ways. As far as the southern provinces were concerned, Thaksin’s antagonistic personality, governing style, populist platform and blatant nationalist inclinations further fanned the flames of discontent and disaffection. Upon taking office in early 2001, Thaksin moved swiftly to claim that Malay separatism had been snuffed out, and what remained were merely criminal gangs involved in illicit activities. To deal with this, the Thaksin administration essentially ‘desecuritized’ the southern insurgency, labelling it instead an inconvenient ‘law and order problem’.

Following this reframing of the problem, controversial policies such as Thaksin’s ‘war on drugs’ that claimed more than 2,500 lives mostly through extra-judicial killings, including an unspecified number of Malay–Muslims from the southern provinces, came to the fore. Thaksin’s confident claims were, however, not born out in reality, and his grandstanding cut little ice with many who were observing with concern a gradual escalation of violence as targeted assassinations and arson attacks began increasing in frequency from mid-2001 onwards.

When full-scale violence erupted in January 2004 with the audacious

raid by insurgents on the Thai Army’s Narathiwat arms depot, Thaksin initially blamed criminal gangs for the unrest. He was not alone in his nonchalant dismissal of the assailants. Then Supreme Commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, General Chaisit Shinawatra (Thaksin’s cousin), claimed in January 2005 that the violence was not driven by ideology, but rather by criminality. Away from the public eye, however, security officials in certain quarters were already harbouring concerns that the insurgency that many thought had died out was in fact resurfacing. Other senior Thai military commanders such as former deputy of the Internal Security Command, Panlop Pinmanee, and former army chief Kitti Rattanachaya have made unsubstantiated claims of involvement by Libyan and Indonesian-trained militants. At the end of the day, the Thai Government’s frustrations were captured in the frank admission of coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, who conceded in October 2005 that, despite decades of active intelligence gathering in the south, the security agencies had no idea who the perpetrators of the current wave of violence were, to say nothing of the identity of their leaders.

Historically, resistance against the Thai state’s policy of assimilation in the Malay-speaking south has taken on a number of shapes and forms, ranging from ‘everyday forms’ such as the reinforcing of local cultural identity and practice despite repeated attempts by the state to enforce adherence to Thailand’s ‘national’ identity, to armed rebellion and political violence. Whatever form of expression it finds, Malays in Thailand’s southernmost provinces have time and again rejected efforts by the Thai state to coax, persuade or impose its politico-cultural mores and nationalism upon them. The long tradition of resistance on their part has been aptly described in the following manner by Michael Connors: ‘The history of the South may well be written as a history of differentiated cyclical patterns of Malay resistance and rebellion and state accommodation and pacification.’<sup>5</sup>

# Chapter 2

## The 'new' insurgency

While a gradual upsurge in violence in southern Thailand was already discernible as early as mid-2001, the consensus is that a new phase of insurgency effectively began with an audacious raid on a military base in Narathiwat on 4 January 2004 by an estimated 100 assailants. During the raid, over 400 assault rifles and other light weapons were taken, and four Royal Thai Army soldiers killed. According to reports, the four soldiers were Buddhists, and, given that they were separated from their Muslim counterparts who were unharmed, it was surmised that they were killed because of their religious identity. What was further striking about this operation was the fact that the armoury raid was preceded that same night by arson attacks on nineteen schools throughout the province. The arson attacks were clearly diversionary in nature, indicating meticulous planning and execution on the part of the perpetrators. At the time, the scope and sophistication of the 4 January 2004 operations were on a scale far beyond the capabilities of any single known separatist group.

Since January 2004, the conflict in southern Thailand has escalated to previously unseen levels — the death toll continues to escalate, bomb attacks have taken on new levels of sophistication, and civilian casualties are increasing at a disconcerting rate. Transformations in the insurgency's tactics have been equally profound: coordinated attacks

on multiple targets punctuate almost-daily occurrences of isolated yet surgical violence, ranging from assassination of informants to arson and bomb attacks on schools and hotels, and ambushing of military and police convoys. Yet no group or individual has to date claimed responsibility for any of the attacks that have taken place since January 2004, leaving the identity of the insurgents and their leaders a significant and continuing source of speculation.

In this chapter, we will show how the conflict being witnessed today was not a spontaneous outbreak of violence, but an outcome of planning and mobilisation that was taking place beneath the Thai security and intelligence radar over the last two decades. It will also map out the contours of the insurgency, through which it identifies three concurrent generations of insurgents involved in the southern Thai conflict. These three groups are: (1) an old guard consisting of insurgents who were most active in the 1970s and 1980s, but who had then receded into the background only to resurface in recent years as self-proclaimed 'leaders' of the insurgency, (2) a new, younger generation who were mostly indoctrinated and recruited during the conflict's 'lull' period of the 1990s and are today the frontline combatants in the insurgency, and (3) a coterie of '*pemimpin*' — present-day operational commanders who were themselves rank and file combatants in the earlier periods of insurgencies (i.e., the 1970s and 1980s). The tactical and strategic dynamics of the insurgency are very much a function of the evolving relationship between these three cohorts.

### **Who are the insurgents and how are they organised?**

Efforts to identify the leadership of the insurgency have come to focus in particular on BRN-Coordinate, a faction within the BRN separatist organisation. Reeling from a decade of intense insurgency and unable to replenish its emaciated ranks, the original BRN broke into three factions in the early 1980s as a result of strategic and tactical differences — BRN-Congress, BRN-Ulama and BRN-Coordinate. Unlike BRN-Congress, which sought to stay the course of armed struggle, BRN-Coordinate consisted of leaders and members who agreed that there was a need to consolidate its ranks, particularly given the gradual erosion of support

for the struggle. In hindsight, the strategy of BRN-Coordinate to rebuild through mobilisation of *pemuda* (youths) proved the prudent one, for when the Thaksin administration provided the right conditions with its heavy-handed overreaction to the initial upsurge of violence in 2004, it was they who were well placed to capitalise on the situation.<sup>6</sup>

While there have been a great many references made to BRN-Coordinate among officials and analysts alike, the organisation's current permutation and the extent to which it is involved in the latest waves of violence remain unclear and a source of contention within the intelligence community in Thailand. Along with members and former members of earlier separatist groups, some Thai security officials have indicated that BRN-Coordinate's leadership has evolved over time into a loose network of cadres, mostly religious teachers, with no overall leader. Others have named Sapae-ing Basoe and Masae Useng as key leaders. The former was once a teacher at the popular Thamma Witthaya Islamic School, which is suspected of having links to BRN, while the latter was secretary of an Islamic educational foundation. Both are on the run from Thai authorities.

Yet while many agree that BRN-Coordinate is a major actor in the insurgency, the extent to which it forms the axis around which the insurgency turns remains unclear. A former separatist leader interviewed insisted, however, that 'there is no such thing as a BRN-Coordinate overall leader.'<sup>7</sup> Malaysian Government officials interviewed by the authors opine that BRN-Coordinate is more of a 'franchise' and a 'loose coalition of men' without a clear hierarchy and leader.<sup>8</sup> To the extent that there is a central leadership, the leaders of BRN-Coordinate are said to be ardent Patani Malay nationalists who have adopted an uncompromising position on insurgency as compared to other long-standing groups, which are more inclined towards negotiation and compromise.<sup>9</sup>

It is likely that the BRN-Coordinate's structure itself has evolved over the past decade and a half when it morphed from an organised segment of BRN into a decentralised network of insurgents operating within a framework where command and control is loose. Given the climate of the time, when security forces were enhancing their counterinsurgency

capabilities, such a strategy was clearly a calculated move to ensure that consolidation, recruitment and re-organisation were not easily detected.

According to sources familiar with the current insurgency, the current permutation of BRN-Coordinate consists chiefly of an ulama (religious scholars) wing, not to be mistaken for BRN-Ulama, which is an older branch of BRN) and an armed wing.<sup>10</sup> Notably absent, though, is a political wing. Because of the stature and the respect accorded to religious leaders in traditional Patani Malay society, the ulama wing essentially provides religious justification for the struggle and is involved in the recruitment through Islamic schools (a phenomenon which the paper will discuss in greater detail at a later stage). It also oversees the participation of non-combatant members of the insurgent groups. The armed wing, on the other hand, consists of combatants who are responsible for acts of violence as part of the insurgency. Both wings are believed to come under a loose internal umbrella structure centred on a *Dewan* or *Majlis* (council), which also includes a spiritual leader whom some insurgents have named as Sapae-ing Basoe.<sup>11</sup> Others have suggested that Sapae-ing is not so much the overall spiritual leader as just one of the popular senior ulama who has managed to command support from a significant number of cells. In any case, it is precisely this popularity and mystique within certain segments of the insurgency community that accounts for his degree of influence over the broader movement.

Aside from BRN-Coordinate, the other major known separatist group, PULO, also continues to operate in the south, albeit on a much smaller scale than it did in the early 1980s, when it was at the peak of its strength.<sup>12</sup> As was the case with BRN, ideological and tactical differences resulted in a split in PULO in 1995, with a new, more militant faction splintering off into New PULO. The deepening sense of crisis was further aggravated by mass defections from the organisation, brought about by the government's blanket amnesty policy, and, later, the arrest of prominent leaders of both PULO and New PULO in Malaysia in January 1998. In the interest of rebuilding its reputation and reasserting its prominence on the landscape in southern Thailand,

a major congress was held in Damascus in May 2006, in which PULO and New PULO leaders decided to reunite into a single organisation. Towards these ends, a new leadership was elected in July 2009 with the mandate to further PULO's role in the current struggle for self-determination.

If what is being witnessed today is an outgrowth of many years of consolidation and recruitment, then it follows that this state of affairs could only have come about as a result of conscious attempts by at least some segments of preceding generations of insurgents to sow the seeds of rebellion that are currently being harvested. To that end, BRN-Coordinate is, as suggested earlier, likely to have played a significant role in terms of mobilisation and recruitment. This has been done through their deployment of the BRN 'brand' which has come to be known and respected among locals as representative of a long-standing struggle for their cause against oppression from the central government, not to mention the network of Islamic schools that have come under its stewardship over the last two decades. In fact, the idea of a 'comeback' on the part of some of the old guard was already germinating in these circles in reaction to the dismantling of the armed wings of PULO and BRN by the early 1990s, even though there was at that point no clear indication when or how this comeback would materialise.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, while no one can deny the role of the old guard and their connection to the current generation of insurgents, the extent to which these elders possess significant weight to exercise influence over their successors and dictate the trajectory of the struggle, or play an instrumental role in indoctrination and radicalisation processes, remains unclear, even if one would expect them to have some measure or other of influence (in their capacity as 'elders') over the broad ideology of self-determination. Tellingly, insurgents operating on the ground today make clear that, while they respect the old guard, there was no pressing need to look to them for leadership, inspiration and justification to take up arms against the Thai state. Moreover, old-guard insurgents themselves admitted as much — that the tenor of the conflict was very much beyond their control.<sup>14</sup>

### **The process of consolidation**

Our interviews with insurgents suggest that, to the extent that the old guard does enjoy some influence over the insurgency today, it is likely to be mostly confined to matters of ideology, the articulation of broad common goals, possibly some aspects of overall strategy, and participation in dialogue processes. For instance, leaders of the long-standing separatist groups interviewed mostly opined that, after the offer of amnesty by the Thai Government in the 1990s, they were in agreement that any hope of reigniting the struggle depended on the ability of the remnants of the insurgency to embed themselves in local communities so as to sustain the historical narrative of resistance whilst replenishing ranks in a manner that would elude the attention of Thai surveillance.<sup>15</sup> As contended earlier, it was this that eventually led to an apparent agreement on the part of some factions in this leadership in the 1990s to enter into a process of consolidation.<sup>16</sup> This consolidation process was marked by several tactical and strategic shifts.

First, an approximate timeline was evidently set in place, where it was anticipated that the insurgency could only be reignited in a decade or longer if the consolidation plan was carried out successfully.<sup>17</sup> Second, it was agreed that a new wave of attacks would have to shift away from the guerrilla warfare tactics of PULO and BRN, which saw insurgents operating out of rural theatres along the Thai–Malaysian border. The new generation of fighters would embed themselves in villages and towns, and move within the community. In this manner, they could disseminate and perpetuate the separatist narrative and propaganda so as to capture the hearts and minds of the local Malay populace in the southern border provinces, while eluding the informant networks of Thai intelligence services honed through decades of counterinsurgency against separatists and communists.

Third, one of the main avenues for indoctrination and mobilisation would be Islamic schools — mostly but not exclusively linked to BRN — which provided not only the motivated, able-bodied young men to form the backbone of a resurgent armed insurgency, but also offered up the necessary avenues for recruitment and indoctrination. The new insurgency was envisaged to build on the grassroots network

that distinguished BRN from its more elite-oriented counterparts PULO, which was founded by a descendent of the historic Patani Malay sultanate, and BIPP (*Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani* or Patani Islamic Liberation Front, which was previously the BNPP), which was mostly also run by the local Malay elite.<sup>18</sup> It is in this manner that the groundwork was laid for a new generation of insurgents.

### **The new generation**

Notwithstanding the return to prominence, albeit in varying degrees, of established groups like BRN and PULO, the prevailing perception remains that the most potent force behind the current insurgency is youths known as *juwae* by locals (in reference to the Malay term for struggle, '*juangan*' or '*pejuangan*', which means those waging the struggle), who are entrenched in the front line. It is important to note, though, that while the term *juwae* is often associated with youths in discussions about the conflict in southern Thailand, in practice it defines a broader demographic cohort. According to the *juwae* themselves, the term simply refers to those who are prepared to wage struggle, regardless of their age. Concomitantly, the *juwae* are divided into two broad categories: armed fighters and those who themselves are not inclined or prepared to take up arms, but play supporting roles such as intelligence-gathering or logistics (e.g., planning escape routes and sabotaging military convoys).<sup>19</sup> What is striking about the *juwae* is the fact that though many were indoctrinated and recruited via local Islamic schools that were mostly affiliated with members of BRN-Coordinate — the organisation which had by then positioned itself as a vehicle for the perpetuation of the resistance narrative (thereby accounting for the prognosis in certain quarters that BRN-Coordinate was the central organisation behind the violence) — in reality they operated independently of any strict hierarchical central command.

An indication that a new insurgent movement was emerging, and that it was very much independent from the old guard leadership of PULO and BRN, was already evident in the sentiments of some rank and file guerrillas in the 1990s who expressed a sense of abandonment when leaders of the established separatist groups went into exile. This

point was made by a former BRN guerrilla, who had led a small unit that operated along the Thai–Malaysian border, when he expressed that he felt ‘let down’ by the decision of the old-guard leaders to shelve the struggle and go into exile.<sup>20</sup> He opined further that the leaders who had set up offices in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Libya and Iran to mobilise the diaspora were too busy with their diplomatic offensives and did not pay much attention to the foot soldiers located in the hills and remote pockets along the border with Malaysia. This state of affairs meant that, within the armed groups, many among the rank and file remained disenfranchised and hence still committed to the cause. What was lacking was leadership.

A decade later, in the absence of the established old-guard leadership, it would be this cohort of disenfranchised rank and file who would themselves assume roles as leaders of a reinvigorated insurgency. The case of the particular former BRN member cited above is instructive in this regard.<sup>21</sup> As a former rank and file guerrilla in BRN, he had returned to his farm after receiving word that his commanders had fled to Malaysia and further abroad, during which time he continued to feel marginalised from the state but was unable or disinclined to act. According to him, matters took a turn when he was approached sometime in 2004 by a group of young men who sought him out and asked him to return to the fray to take command of a network of cells covering a few districts in the southern provinces.<sup>22</sup> Evidently, several of his comrades had been approached in similar fashion. In other words, with a foot in both periods of the long-drawn-out insurgency these individuals in effect served as an important bridge between the old and new generations. Within the structure of the insurgency, these leaders are known to their counterparts in the old-guard separatist groups as well as local residents merely as *pemimpin* (‘leader’ in Malay) and they are a vital element in the organisational structure as well as command and control processes for the current insurgency.

### Cell structure

While it is likely that some *pemimpin* do take part in actual attacks, most are believed to direct from the rear, either on their own or through

their deputies.<sup>23</sup> Indeed it is the role played by these *pemimpin* that gives credence to the belief that the insurgency is primarily built around a dispersed cell structure. *Pemimpin* are in charge of a number of villages and have up to five deputies, who according to the *pemimpin* are known in local parlance as ‘*ajak*’ or ‘*ajok*’, and each of them is tasked with the formation and supervision of up to five cells each, with each cell consisting of about ten *juwae*. In all, any one *pemimpin* could have anywhere from 250 to 400 *juwae* under his command, which would cover a geographical area of about two provincial districts.<sup>24</sup> Though it is difficult to ascertain conclusively, locals nevertheless widely believe that virtually every single village in the three provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat is covered under this cell-based district structure. Even so-called ‘peace-loving’ villages — those where the community has endeavoured to distance themselves from the violence — will have at least a couple of insurgents within their ranks.<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding the presence of *pemimpin* as custodians of the wider insurgency, the tactical selection of targets for attack is the prerogative of these local leaders of respective cells. While the vast majority of insurgent attacks appear to be isolated in nature, larger-scale coordinated attacks have occasionally taken place. These attacks involve multiple cells and dozens of targets, and are a striking demonstration of insurgent capability in terms of tactical coherence, coordination, and efficiency of communications when these can be harnessed toward a common end. It is clear that while the insurgency is largely decentralised in nature, it has the capacity to occasionally mobilise on a larger scale, even though it is still premature to draw the conclusion from this that this ability to mount coordinated attacks is evidence of an authoritative central command.

As noted above, this clandestine cell structure was deliberately designed to avoid easy detection, allowing insurgents to steal a march on intelligence and security forces. In line with the tactical imperative to be discreet, a *pemimpin* may or may not be personally acquainted with each individual *juwae* under his overall command. The same can be said about the relationship between individual members within the cells. Moreover, according to *pemimpin* interviewed, in order to maintain

the fluid structure that would allow cells to disband easily in the face of sweeps in villages by Thai security forces and to relocate elsewhere in the border provinces without necessarily the same membership configuration, cells are regularly dismantled and reformulated into new entities in a different location and with a different membership.<sup>26</sup>

This fluid nature of movement between cells and geographical areas makes the already difficult task of intelligence gathering all the more taxing for the Thai security forces, who have resorted to blind sweeps of villages and random arrest of 'suspects' in areas identified as 'red zones', where insurgent activity is believed to be more intense. In addition to that, this structure also ensures that, upon capture, *pemimpin* and *juwae* cannot be able to divulge information that could compromise the operations of any particular cell, or any network of cells of which it is a part. To the extent that arbitrary and haphazard security sweeps have threatened operations, cells are sometimes broken up and either relocated or reconstituted in other parts of the southern region.<sup>27</sup>

While cells are for the most part operationally independent of each other, *pemimpin* do meet regularly — approximately every two months — in order to assess tactics and share readings of popular sentiment. Because of the lack of direct communication links, according to *pemimpin* sources, meetings are arranged by individuals who, in turn, receive instructions from shadowy 'leaders' of the movement.<sup>28</sup> Meetings are also conducted with leaders of the old-guard separatist groups located in Europe, the Middle East, or neighbouring Southeast Asian countries with increased frequency. These meetings are mostly held in neighbouring countries, though on occasion representatives have also met in remote locations in the southern provinces.

Initially, the primary purpose of these meetings was to assess tactics, share impressions of popular sentiment, and explore the feasibility of coordinated attacks. Now, trips made by old-guard elders to meet with leaders of the new generation are increasingly serving a broader purpose by providing a platform for attempts to devise a coherent political agenda, including the exploration of the feasibility of dialogue with the Thai Government towards the end of achieving political goals that both old and new generation insurgents share.<sup>29</sup> It is in this manner that

the *pemimpin*, many of whom are, as noted earlier, themselves veterans of earlier periods of separatist insurgency, serve not only as leaders, but also interlocutors and intermediaries between the established separatist groups and the *juwae*. Yet, despite the regularity of meetings between the key actors of the insurgency, it remains unclear the extent to which all parties share the same interests, objectives, or command for that matter, beyond the broad common goal of resisting the central government.<sup>30</sup>

### **Hierarchy and internal dynamics**

Most watchers of this conflict agree that there are essentially two generations of insurgents involved — the current generation of *juwae* and an older generation of separatists, some of whom have now taken up the mantle of operational leaders or *pemimpin*. The question though of how each relates to the other remains unclear.

The highly decentralised nature of violence indicates that the current insurgency is not hierarchically structured. To be certain, there have been an increasing number of meetings taking place that bring together different combinations of conflict actors — between the old guard, the *pemimpin*, and key cell commanders from the ground, as well as among the coterie of *pemimpin* themselves. These speak to efforts at fostering some form of understanding and cohesion among the various cells and groups involved. Both old-guard leaders and *pemimpin* interviewed have also alluded to attempts to bring all elements of the insurgency under one central 'forum' anchored on PULO and BRN-Coordinate but also including the *juwae* (with BRN-Coordinate serving as the conduit given their instrumental role in facilitating the emergence of the *juwae* through their schools and networks), though it is unclear just how embryonic or effective such a move is.

There are several reasons for doubt. First, PULO leaders themselves have opined that the formation of an umbrella organisation may not be the best course of action given that a previous attempt — the formation of Bersatu in the 1990s — proved to be an abject failure.<sup>31</sup> Second, while BRN-Coordinate purportedly 'represents' the *juwae* in this structure by virtue of being the only available bridge to them, in actual fact it is

doubtful that the former is able to exercise any measure of definitive influence over the latter. Third, some insurgents are of the opinion that the creation of a formal umbrella organisation is risky given that, in such a structure, the entire movement could be compromised if security forces successfully disrupt one branch of it. Finally, the *juwae* themselves are highly skeptical of any move to introduce structure into the hitherto shapeless, decentralised insurgency which continues to serve well the objective of the creation of instability and undermining the counterinsurgency competence of the Thai state.

On the matter of hierarchy and structure, a major source of contention among insurgent groups in recent times has revolved around the role of Sapa-ing Basoe. Seen by the Thai intelligence community as a key player, if not overall leader, of a BRN-Coordinate orchestrated insurgency, and described by the *pemimpin* as a 'spiritual leader' of the insurgency (they made it clear that he was not the overall leader), Sapa-ing Basoe, the former teacher of Thamma Witthaya Islamic School, who is still a popular and highly-respected religious personality within the community, had eluded a security dragnet at Thamma Witthaya and is likely to be residing outside of Thailand but in Southeast Asia. Among insurgents, opinions on Sapa-ing are polarised. On the one hand, Sapa-ing is described by some participants of the above 'forum' as a hard-liner who is reticent about the current attempts at dialogue with the Thai Government by the old guard and hence a liability to an insurgent movement seeking acceptability and a political identity. Yet, on the other hand, some among the *juwae* still revere him as a symbol of their struggle.<sup>32</sup> Still others among the *pemimpin* have confided that, while Sapa-ing is not averse to possible dialogue with the Thai Government towards a political solution, he does not trust the old guard, particularly PULO, to lead it.<sup>33</sup>

The debate over Sapa-ing speaks to a larger issue within BRN-Coordinate. It is believed that BRN-Coordinate's *majlis* or *dewan* may be split on the issue of dialogue, between those who are prepared to cooperate with other separatist groups and mount a united front before entering a dialogue process, and respected hard-liners who are of the opinion that there is no need for dialogue since they enjoy the tactical

and strategic upper hand against Thai security forces.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it is in the matter of dialogue and the prioritisation of political solutions among insurgent actors themselves that the internal dynamics of the insurgency are most visible. This will be taken up in greater detail in a later chapter.

### **Operational capabilities**

As suggested earlier, affiliation across generations is made easier by the fact that many of the *pemimpin* operating today were themselves once BRN or PULO foot soldiers, but who are now seen as 'elders' by the young men who form the backbone of the current insurgency. As one such *pemimpin* described: 'I used to be with BRN and PULO but quit both about twelve years ago. I took up arms again two and a half years ago. They made me a leader because of my experience. The *juwae* are about thirty years old and younger.'<sup>35</sup> In fact, many *pemimpin* started resurfacing about five years ago to take up positions as field commanders to provide guidance to the current generation of insurgents, most of whom are in their twenties.<sup>36</sup> Knowledge about weapon handling, bomb-making and tactical manoeuvres were passed down from *pemimpin* to the new generation. That being said, one *pemimpin* also expressed how 'impressed' he was when he observed the new and innovative techniques that the *juwae* under him explored in their preparation of IEDs (improvised explosive devices), thereby implying the existence of 'independent learning' on the part of the *juwae* as well.<sup>37</sup>

Not only has the bomb-making knowledge of today's insurgents improved, attacks are becoming more daring and audacious. On some occasions, insurgents have confronted Thai security forces head-on in conventional military exchanges. For instance, in April 2007, some 50 insurgents attacked a military convoy in Narathiwat's Sungai Padi district after luring them out with an arson attack at a local public school.<sup>38</sup> The gunfight that followed lasted over half an hour before the militants retreated. Such a display of force was indicative not only of an enhancement in insurgent capabilities far beyond the ubiquitous roadside bombing of passing military vehicles, or drive-by shootings at point blank range against a marked victim, but also of a generation of

bolder, confident and well-trained militants who are equally capable of more conventional-style confrontations with security forces.

Given the number of weapons that the insurgents have managed to seize, let alone the possibility that large caches could have been procured from elsewhere as well, it is clear that they have a fairly significant amount of firepower in their possession. All this was brought to bear over the first six months of 2004, which witnessed a sharp spike in attacks across the region. Since then, the regularity of attacks and level of intensity have increased. Furthermore, insurgents have taken their campaign of violence to a level of sophistication not seen in the past, and this has been demonstrated most profoundly in their attacks using explosives. Although most roadside bombs have had an explosive yield of around twenty kilograms, it is not uncommon for the weight of some IEDs to reach fifty kilograms. This is a big increase when compared to the bombs used at the start of the insurgency in early 2004, which were typically five to ten kilograms of explosives packed in PVC tubing. Moreover, the make-up of bombs has switched from analogue clocks that were employed by militants two decades ago to mobile phones that permit remote detonations of specific targets at a particular time while maintaining a clear line of sight from a distance. This improvement in technology has led some to suggest the possibility of foreign involvement by way of training.<sup>39</sup> Such claims are at best speculative in nature and, as the penultimate chapter will show, little evidence has been marshalled to support them.

### **Operational coordination and larger attacks**

Most of the attacks carried out by insurgents take the form of drive-by shootings or roadside bombings of security forces on patrol, sometimes followed by brief exchange of gunfire. However, three high-profile incidents offer some insights into the devastating collective potential of their capabilities.

The pre-dawn raid on an army battalion on 4 January 2004 in Narathiwat province, seen by many as the start of the current insurgency, was undoubtedly a carefully planned, well-coordinated operation involving about 100 assailants who made off with more than

400 weapons after killing four Buddhist soldiers. While the raid on the camp itself took less than one hour, events surrounding the raid revealed a sophisticated and synchronised operation that involved planting of several bombs in carefully selected places in Pattani, as well as a fierce gunfight at a police outpost in nearby Yala province. The same evening also saw arson attacks on nineteen schools across the region while two other police outposts came under attack. These were clearly diversionary attacks aimed at distracting security forces from the main raid that was to come. Moreover, the pursuit of militants after the raid was obstructed by the destruction of mobile phone towers and landline transmitters, while spikes, tree stumps, burning tyres, and fake explosive charges attached to bridges and overpasses were deployed to slow down advancing security forces.<sup>40</sup>

The second incident took place on 28 April 2004 when, at dawn, well over 100 young men armed with little more than machetes and a few pistols attacked ten police outposts and one police station throughout Pattani, Yala and Songkhla.<sup>41</sup> The question of what motivated these young men to certain death continues to baffle many. One 32-man unit attacked a police outpost in Pattani and retreated across the road to the nearby historic Krue Se mosque, where they remained. As security forces surrounded the mosque and hundreds of local residents assembled to watch the standoff from the main road, the militants went on loudspeakers and called on the local residents to take up arms against 'foreign occupiers'. A sporadic gunfight continued for about seven hours, after which the highest military ranking officer on the ground ordered an all-out assault on the mosque, killing all 32 militants and one innocent victim who happened to be in the mosque at the time when the raid began and could not get out. By the end of the day, 106 insurgents were killed. Police officers interviewed by the authors described their rules of engagement as 'shoot to kill', saying the martial law imposed in the region after the 4 January attack permitted them to do so. Most, if not all, of the perpetrators who died in the attacks were buried as martyrs by their families and communities.<sup>42</sup> Though most of the militants that day were gunned down as they charged outposts in the various locations, in Saba Yoi district (Songkhla), however,

19 young men, all members of a local football team, were shot to death in what was believed to be an execution.<sup>43</sup>

The third incident took place on 31 August 2006, when militants set off small bombs in 23 banks, including two Islamic banks, in Yala. Explosive materials were packed inside cut-out books; no shrapnel was used. The bombs were detonated in coordinated fashion at about midday, the busiest time of the day for the banks. Surprisingly, only one person was injured. The operation bore much similarity to another set of attacks perpetrated earlier in June that year, when a series of coordinated bomb attacks hit at least 40 targets across the three southern provinces. Ten bombs were hidden inside government installations, including district and provincial offices, and all exploded within half an hour of each other. At the same time, ten police installations were fired upon while one police outpost came under M79 grenade attack.

### **Local focus**

If the collective potential of the insurgency is notable, so too are the limits of the conflict theatre. While attacks follow no specific pattern and can take place at just about any place and any time, a closer look at the overall trend suggests that there is discernible self-restraint on the part of the militants. With the exception of a bomb attack at the Hat Yai International Airport and a few other isolated acts of violence in selected areas of Songkhla, violence attributed to the insurgents has been confined to the provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. The 3 April 2005 Hat Yai International Airport bomb, which resulted in two deaths, was estimated to be less than five kilos. The explosive device was placed away from the crowded area inside the terminal, suggesting that the aim of the perpetrators was to send a message to the government — that they had the capacity to go outside the three southern provinces and hit a high-profile target like an international airport if they so wished, rather than to inflict a maximum amount of casualties and physical damage.<sup>44</sup>

The question of whether and when insurgents will export their violence beyond the boundaries of the three southern provinces to Bangkok and other high-profile targets continues to occupy analysts and

policymakers. While the possibility of an expansion of the geographical footprint of the violence should certainly not be entirely dismissed, there are persuasive reasons why such a move may be difficult, if not unlikely.

In the first instance, insurgent leaders interviewed have conceded that such a move would undermine their cause and focus on the southern provinces. To them, the fight relates to, and hence should be confined in, the Malay territories. Second, they are also aware that an expansion of attacks to the tourist spots heavily populated by Westerners would almost certainly draw negative international attention to their cause, given the resonance such actions would have against the backdrop of international concern for anti-Western global jihadism. According to a member of the older generation of separatists, insurgents in southern Thailand are conscious of the strategic dangers of ‘making southern Thailand another Iraq’, and of having their struggle equated to the anti-Westernism of Southeast Asian terrorist groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, such a scenario would also compel Malaysian authorities to tighten border security and clamp down on insurgent elements who may travel across the border, not to mention suspected militants who may be residing in northern Malaysia. This would undoubtedly cripple the insurgency.<sup>46</sup> Finally, any move that can be equated with international terrorism would not only undermine the legitimacy of the struggle, but also likely bring about some measure or other of intervention on the part of Western powers. Notwithstanding the pragmatism, self-restraint and strategic logic demonstrated by these leaders, because of the decentralised nature and lack of stringent hierarchical structure, the possibility of dissident cells going rogue and conducting operations beyond the three southern provinces with external sources of support cannot be entirely discounted.

# Chapter 3

## Tactics and targets

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the insurgency in southern Thailand conducted by groups such as PULO and BRN was essentially rural-based, where armed wings located in the jungles of the region carried out hit-and-run guerilla attacks against the government's security forces. Their funding mostly came from abroad, namely from the southern Thai Malay-Muslim diaspora in the Middle East, and was channelled through their representatives and offices in northern Malaysia. By stationing themselves in the dense hillside jungles of southern Thailand, insurgents placed themselves out of reach of Thai security forces. In classic guerilla fashion, they nevertheless ensured that they were not isolated from the community from which they received logistical support.<sup>47</sup> Anecdotally, villagers recalled how PULO and BRN guerillas would come down from the hills to interact with locals and spread propaganda, and would retreat back before the government security forces passed by on their routine patrols. Others talked about how essential supplies, including explosives (dynamite), were provided by government contractors to guerillas during such occasions. In return, guerillas would ensure that their road construction projects and essential public works in the region were not harassed.

Today's insurgents operate in a vastly different fashion. Unlike their predecessors isolated in remote rural base camps along the

porous Thai–Malaysian border, today’s insurgents operating on the ground in southern Thailand are very much an urban phenomenon — decentralised, scattered, and embedded within local populations throughout the Malay-speaking region. In other words, today’s insurgents and militants are Thai citizens: they reside within their respective communities, from which they recruit, plan and launch attacks, and often retreat to after their attacks.

This shift in the front line of insurgency from the remote hills to urban areas has had several implications. For one, it has resulted in more collateral damage as fighting takes place in densely populated urban and suburban areas. Innocent bystanders account for many of the casualties from bomb attacks and drive-by shootings. Unlike the past, when gunfights were largely confined to remote areas, today village chiefs, *kamnan* (district officials) and Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO) personnel have also been targeted regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliations.<sup>48</sup> Insurgents justify the targeting of such local leaders because of their employment with the government. They view them not as civilians but accessories to the oppression of the Thai state. One insurgent offered the following justification:

Buddhist monks are men of religion; they are good people. But fellow Muslims who turned against the movements (separatists) are deemed legitimate targets. Our organisation doesn’t target civilians. In fact, Buddhists and monks would be better treated under our rule. The Buddhists have just as much right to be here as we do. Islam required that minority rights be protected so all could live in peaceful coexistence. But I also resent the fact that Buddhist victims receive more sympathy than Muslim victims. Look at Hong The (the young victim of the Hat Yai airport bombing). What about the boys at Tak Bai? ... Many Muslims who work for the state, especially those who come under the THB4500 scheme [employment scheme] are too eager to please their bosses. They often make groundless accusations against their neighbors

and against ustaz (Islamic teachers). They belong to the government’s employment scheme.<sup>49</sup>

Aside from the nature of insurgent targets, there have been other notable tactical differences that distinguish the current cycle of violence from what took place in the 1970s and 1980s. During the earlier phases of the insurgency it was common to hear of insurgents issuing prior warnings to potential victims, or even attempting explanations to the family of victims that their son, father or brother was killed because he was believed to be working for government security forces. Targets were also carefully considered, rather than indiscriminately hit. As one former PULO field commander explained:

I made it clear as to what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. We take accusations seriously and we discuss among ourselves as to what to do next, whether the accused would be a legitimate target. There were times when we gave the accused ample warnings, asking them to stop their activities (as informants) before we decide whether to hand down an execution order. My men didn’t attack monks or teachers. Punishment for our men could be death if they are found to violate the rules on what constituted legitimate targets.<sup>50</sup>

Given the nature of current attacks, it is clear that such norms no longer constrain the present generation of insurgents who in many instances have been indiscriminate and unrestrained in their attacks.

### **Informant targeting**

Casualty rates among district defence volunteers — who function as security details for their respective district chiefs — and village defence volunteers have been especially high.<sup>51</sup> This speaks to a tactic of eliminating conspirators and informants, including fellow Malay–Muslims. District chiefs and their guards are seen as complicit with the state’s policy of oppression and hence are legitimate targets of attacks.

Another view purports that:

It is fair to execute those truly found guilty of being government informants. There are many people among us [Malays] who work for the Thai state and want to please their bosses, including those who have come under the recently initiated temporary employment [for government agencies], by making groundless accusations against *ustaz* and their neighbors.<sup>52</sup>

Local residents employed by the government at lower rungs of the administrative structure, such as clerks, are usually spared from attacks unless they are believed to be spying for security agencies. Indeed, Thai authorities are known to quietly encourage these employees under the government's employment scheme to do just that — provide information on suspicious characters in their village as part of their 'civic duty'. The plight of these locals, trapped between the fears of being labelled a spy by their local community on the one hand and reprisal from the state for withholding information on the other, are further aggravated by the fact that Thai police are often very open about their reliance on local informants. For instance, when local informants are killed, Thai police are known to openly admit that the victim had been an informant for the state. From a tactical perspective, such admissions have predictably prevented otherwise-willing informants from performing their 'civic duty', for fear that even after their death their families and kin would be placed in danger.

### **Civilian targeting and sectarian violence**

A major and glaring point of departure between the current conflict and its earlier iterations is the seeming unbridled brutality that characterises certain aspects of the contemporary insurgency. The manner in which violence often appears indiscriminate and targeted at innocent victims, at times involving horrific acts of beheadings, brutal physical assaults, or even immolation, is a disturbing example of the distinctive tactics involved in the current insurgency that were largely absent from

previous periods of separatist conflict.

Statistics compiled by Deep South Watch, a centre based at the Prince of Songkhla University in Pattani, pointed out that from January 2004 to May 2009 a total of 8,908 insurgency-related violent incidents took place in the region, resulting in 3,471 deaths and 5,740 injuries.<sup>53</sup> More than 60 per cent of the people killed were Thai Malay–Muslims, mostly at gunpoint. It was not clear, though, what percentage of these casualties were victims of insurgent attacks, personal vendettas or at the hands of security forces. According to analyses provided by the centre, however, the circumstances of attack, the victims' background, and details surrounding the attack indicated that the vast majority of the victims were likely to have been killed at the hands of insurgents.<sup>54</sup>

In some instances, it appears that the insurgents are grappling with the issue of civilian targets. The authors were told, for instance, that during a particular meeting held in early 2009 which involved *pemimpin* and ulama, the matter of whether non-uniformed Muslim civil servants were to be considered *munafiq* (Muslims who are outwardly religious, but are in fact unbelievers in their hearts) and hence legitimate targets by virtue of their servitude to the Thai state (even though they did not bear arms) was debated. Evidently, after heated debate it was agreed by these leaders that this was not to be the case, and that the killing of such civilians was to be avoided. The prevailing opinion at the meeting was that, had the ulama legitimised the condemnation of Muslim officials in this manner, it would have undermined their struggle. In the words of the *pemimpin* informant who was present at the meeting: 'it would be the beginning of the end of our movement'.<sup>55</sup> Clearly, though, the decision taken by this network should not be taken as a reflection of any overall position on the matter, for there have been non-uniformed Muslim civil servants who have been killed.

It is important to recognise that insurgents are not the only perpetrators of violence. Human rights organisations, as well as various accounts from local residents, have managed to document instances where Thai security forces carried out targeted killings against suspected militants, or when interrogations culminated in the death of civilians, leading to the harsh criticism of the Thai Government by many of

these organisations. While the government has never publicly admitted to having death squads carry out targeted killings against people on their notorious ‘black lists’, these suspicions and allegations have often ignited street protests by local villagers, including women and children, who display their show of force by blocking roads and highways.<sup>56</sup>

While many Thai Malay–Muslims are targeted for tactical reasons (i.e., for being ‘collaborators’ and ‘informants’), Buddhist victims, on the other hand, are generally targeted as part of a strategy to discredit the state, undermine its legitimacy and foster a climate of fear in the region by sowing sectarian discord. On several occasions, assailants have mutilated corpses by either beheading the victims or setting the body on fire. It is possible that these gruesome acts are part of a strategy to amplify their impact so as to drive Buddhist residents out of the provinces. Whatever the motivations, the effect has been to reinforce the notion that the authorities are unable to provide urgently required protection to the local community. Indeed, a BRN operative interviewed opined that while he saw no end game with the ongoing violence, the aim at this point in time was ‘to make the region as ungovernable as much as possible’.<sup>57</sup>

While immediate comparisons can and have been made with similar brutal acts of violence in Iraq, analysis of the acts themselves has to extend deeper than the simplistic extrapolations that some terrorism analysts have made about the connection between the violence in southern Thailand and the nebulous global jihad.<sup>58</sup> In this regard, it is notable that while some of the gruesome images have indeed found their way into local and regional newspapers, these grisly tactics themselves do not appear to serve the function that they do in Iraq, where jihadi groups are quick to broadcast beheadings through any communication means available as part of their information warfare strategy to influence public opinion. In southern Thailand, these acts are not about transmitting images to the international community as part of an information warfare strategy to influence international opinion (i.e., ‘global’ jihad), although they are almost certainly using such acts to influence local opinion. Noticeably, images have not made their way to the Internet despite the fact that insurgents have ample time,

resources and capabilities to do so, if indeed that was their intention.<sup>59</sup> Rather, their intentions behind these brutal acts, and the targeting of civilians more broadly, are likely to be more insidious — to undermine the credibility of the state as a purveyor of security and to sow the seeds of sectarian conflict.<sup>60</sup>

The point to stress here is that, unlike past practice, the breeding of sectarian tension at the level of grass roots appears to be a discernible tactical objective on the part of the current generation of insurgents. Indeed, arguably the most sobering feature of the insurgency today, and one that distinguishes it from what took place previously, is the brutal nature of some of the ongoing violence. From the perspective of separatist leaders of the older generation, the level of brutality that the current generation is engaged in has been described as a ‘source of embarrassment’. In response, they have been unequivocal in their condemnation of these tactics. One such leader opined:

The problem with them [the *juwae*] is that their tactic is wrong and, besides, they don’t seem to be going anywhere with what they are doing. They are accusing the Siamese of being *kafir* [infidels] because they are Buddhists. We are not in the position to judge them or sentence anybody to death. Only god can do that. Most are good people and they have lived with us, even in the same villages, for many generations. Our children grew up together with them. They have never done anything to obstruct our way of life or our religious practices. But today, our kids (the *juwae*) are killing them and burn their houses down. They are doing this to fellow Malays as well. They even killed Buddhist monks.<sup>61</sup>

A further perspective was articulated in the following manner: ‘We don’t agree with their tactics. I could foresee some major disputes, especially after the liberation of Patani, between them and us. The *juwae* are young and quite bold, doing the kind of things the older groups wouldn’t think of. They are very much a village-based movement. I think

much of the decisions are made at the village levels as to what kind of activities they should be engaging in'.<sup>62</sup> Reflecting pragmatic concerns, a PULO leader suggested that what the juwae were doing would in fact be 'detrimental to the cause of the liberation of Patani as it would delegitimise all that we have been fighting for'.<sup>63</sup> On another occasion, a former PULO field commander admitted that the killing of innocent victims, including teachers and Buddhist monks, was a major affront to their long and proud historic struggle.<sup>64</sup> He insisted that, regardless of the obstacles confronting the separatist movements in the past, there was a tacit understanding among those involved that the social fabric of Patani society, in which non-Malays played an important role, had to be respected and preserved. The centrality of the social fabric during earlier phases of the separatist insurgency is further captured by the following depiction of the terms of the relationship between Malay separatists and non-Malay locals in the 1970s and 1980s:

I have no reason to believe that the attempt on my life was a personal matter. I don't have any problem with anybody here or anywhere. I think the people in the movement just want to create disturbance. The insurgents are not asking for anything. They just want to kill. It's strange, many of the suspected insurgents I heard of appeared to be very pious and good kids, living clean and quite strict religiously. I don't think they [today's insurgents] are [anything like] the BRN. The two generations are just too different. Back then, I could bargain with the BRN people. One time someone from the BRN sent me a letter demanding protection money or no one would be able to tap the rubber in my plantation. I refused to pay. They backed down. I know what they are like. The BRN guys know that at least five Muslim families depended on my plantation to make their living and they would have some explaining to do if they took away their livelihood. I have about 50 rais of rubber and fruit plantation. This generation of militants single out whom they want to kill

and they don't seem to have any particular reason for doing so. I think they tried to kill me because I am too close to Muslims. They want to split the Buddhists from the Muslims in this community.<sup>65</sup>

Though violence has become more indiscriminate and vicious, its perpetrators do not appear to appreciate, or indeed bother about, the potentially detrimental effect that their actions may have on their legitimacy or the cause. When queried about the current level of brutality, some *pemimpin* skirt the question either by dissociating themselves from it and laying the blame on 'other cells', or scapegoat the government by accusing their security forces of carrying out the atrocities.<sup>66</sup> The more candid among them would attribute it to 'collateral damage', even though some attacks, such as beheadings, are clearly premeditated. What is clear from this discussion of perspectives on the seemingly indiscriminate and vicious nature of violence within the insurgent community itself is the fact that these perspectives are divided. While older-generation leaders have voiced concern, even outrage, at the sectarian turn, there are others, discussed earlier, who view the killing of civilians as acceptable collateral damage, and who do not appear to appreciate or care that such tactics may have a detrimental effect on the legitimacy of their cause.

This state of anarchy can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that, because of the largely decentralised structure of the insurgency, today's armed insurgents are not restrained by institutional discipline that among other things spells out proper rules of engagement and defines what constitutes a legitimate target. For instance, civilians suspected of collaborating with state security agencies seem to be considered legitimate targets, while a number of Buddhist monks, as well as religious shrines and other soft targets like public markets, food stalls, eateries and banks, have also been. This indicates that cells and groups are likely to enjoy an extensive degree of autonomy insofar as target selection is concerned.

### Societal fractures

The impact of violence on the minority Buddhist community varies from place to place, making it difficult to draw generalisations. In some communities, such as Ban Takae in Pattani and Yalor in Yala, Muslim and Buddhist residents continue to live together, and there is hardly any indication of an exodus on the part of the latter. Many among the separatist old guard have also been quick to distance their cause from the seemingly sectarian targeting of Buddhists currently taking place. Consider the following comments:

It is not our duty to call them *kafir* simply because they are Buddhist Thais. Only God knows who is truly a rejecter [of Islam]. We are not in a position to judge them and sentence them to death. Most of them are good people who live with us in the same village for many decades with courtesy and friendship. They have never done anything to infringe on Islamic practice. Our children grew up playing with their children. But now our children are killing them and burning their houses. Those *pejuang* [fighters] attacked and killed Buddhist monks. That never happened when I was still fighting in the jungle. Buddhist monks are men of religion and cannot be harmed. But if that is not bad enough, those young *pejuang* are also persecuting our people [ethnic Malay–Muslims], accusing them of being *munafiq* [hypocrites] who collaborate with Buddhist Thais. The judgments are often made hastily, carelessly and unfairly. Many people have been shot or hacked to death in this way.<sup>67</sup>

Notwithstanding the views cited above, in other instances the erstwhile stable relations between these communities have fragmented under the weight of fear, anger and suspicion.<sup>68</sup> This mood of fear and uncertainty is captured profoundly in the comments of a villager from Sungai Padi district in Narathiwat (one of the hotbeds of the insurgency), who intimated to the authors that ‘it is like fearing a ghost. You don’t know

who or what is out there.’ The institution most affected by the violence has been public schools. Since the outbreak of violence, attacks on public schools, particularly arson, have increased exponentially. The vast majority of the 926 public schools in the region are primary schools. While 2006 saw a total of 37 arson attacks against public schools, the number rose to more than 100 in 2007. Public schools continue to come under arson attack in considerable numbers. Besides school structures, another disturbing development has been the routine targeting of public school teachers. Since January 2004, more than 70 teachers have been killed and about the same number injured.<sup>69</sup> Historically, public schools have been the centre of contention between separatists and the Thai state. Just as the government harbours suspicions towards Islamic schools, attacks against public schools are highly symbolic in how they are seen as attacks against the very institution that reinforces the state ideology that many Malays are suspicious of by virtue of their perception that this ideology threatens to fundamentally undermine their politico-cultural identity.

In response to the targeting of schools, the government has attempted to provide security details for teachers. It is not clear, however, whether this step has been helpful or harmful given that these security details have themselves come under attack. Indeed, some teachers have expressed concern that being shadowed by men in uniform has increased their chances of being attacked.<sup>70</sup> Other teachers have indicated that the presence of combat-ready soldiers walking in the school compound makes it difficult for them to concentrate on their work, and, worse, places them and their students at greater risk.

The increasingly sectarian nature of much of the violence threatens to further polarise local communities along ethnic and religious lines. There are already disturbing indications that this is happening in certain instances, where violence has moved beyond the ‘conventional’ conflict between state security services and insurgents to pit members of local communities against each other. In November 2006, 200 Buddhist villagers took refuge amidst violence in a temple in Yala, in a highly visible demonstration of the corrosive impact on the local population of violence and sectarianism in the southern Thailand conflict.<sup>71</sup> In

another incident in April 2007, four young Malay men who were attending a funeral in Banglang Dam (Narathiwat) were killed by a village defence volunteer following a heated exchange of words. While enraged local communities called for punitive action to be taken against the volunteer, the army defended his actions and instead blamed insurgents for the death of the four men.<sup>72</sup> Two days later, in what appeared to be a retaliatory attack, a Buddhist female college graduate was shot dead in a neighbouring village, and her body torched beyond recognition.

The decentralised nature of the insurgency, the continued lack of clarity as to its key leaders and the major differences in tactics employed by this new generation of insurgents all pose a major counterinsurgency challenge to the Thai state. While the temptation will be to view the current script of the southern Thai insurgency as entirely bespoke, it is also the case that, insofar as the underlying motivations and ideology are concerned, there is much that resonates with earlier periods of resistance, particularly the continued salience of historical grievances that have not been addressed by the central government over the years, and that have created a legitimacy deficit in the eyes of many among the local Malay community, some of whom have chosen to take up arms to redress these issues. In this regard, there are compelling reasons why the two generations of armed insurgency are at least to some extent linked in terms of motivations and ideology. It is to these patterns of continuity that the monograph now turns.

## Chapter 4

### Mobilisation and motivations

The previous chapters have illustrated how tactical features of the ongoing insurgency in Thailand's southern border provinces have departed noticeably from earlier periods of conflict. The current chapter looks at the issue of mobilisation from the perspectives of recruitment and indoctrination, as well as the underlying dynamics that motivate resistance. Here it focuses particularly on the role of religion as well as enduring narratives of history, identity and marginalisation among the Malay-Muslims of the southern provinces.

Based on information obtained through interviews, insurgent recruitment practices appear to vary according to geographical location. In instances where the level of confidence is high among militants, and where they have effective control over the environment, recruitment evidently takes place not only in a clandestine fashion in schools but even in public, usually at social gatherings (known in local Malay parlance as '*kenduri*'). Former militants who had recently left *juwae* cells, for instance, stated that in certain districts of Narathiwat recruitment was being done openly, for instance, at local teashops.<sup>73</sup> More common, however, is recruitment via the vehicle of private Islamic schools or *pondok* (traditional Islamic schools). In these contexts, secret fraternities are formed and student recruits *sumpah* (take an oath) not to divulge information about their activities or membership in the insurgent

cell. The following comments by a BRN-C operative from Narathiwat provide some insight into the recruitment process:

Thai officials thought we had given up during the period of quietness. They were wrong. We came back in less than a decade and began to carry out attacks in late 2001. We are different from the previous generation, who camped out in the mountains as an army of guerilla fighters with clear structure and chain of command. That made them easy to be identified, tracked down, and suppressed by Thai security forces. Our new strategy is more community-based, operating from a cell in each village. About two-thirds of all the villages [in the southern border provinces] now have our cells set up, and we are expanding. Islam has become much more important for our fight [compared to the previous generation] as the guiding principle. My generation is much more educated in Islam. The guidance of Islam is uniting us together, and keeping all of us true to our cause — that is to fight to liberate our land from the infidel occupation. The recruitment process takes time and we want to be sure that they are really committed. We watch them for many years — often since they were studying in *tadika* (kindergarten) or *ponoh* (or *pondok*). We only recruit those who are truly committed to Islam and their Islamic duty to fight for the liberation [of Patani Darussalam] to join us. They must be pious. We also welcome those from other [separatist] groups to join us as long as they agree to live and fight for our two guiding principles — [ethnic] Malay nationalism and Islam. There are many young men who would like to join but they are not committed to these principles. They wanted to do it out of resentment and anger. That is a personal matter. Our members must truly believe in their higher cause towards the liberation of our land and our people. This cannot, and will not, be compromised through any negotiations or any deals with the Thai state.<sup>74</sup>

What emerges from the above remarks is a view that while there are not likely to be problems getting youths to take up arms, the insurgents are intent on only recruiting disciplined young men assessed to be committed to the cause, and not simply angry young men with a vendetta against the Thai Government. Again, this speaks to the highly ideological nature of the insurgency, notwithstanding what appears on the surface to be indiscriminate violence.

Compared to the previous generation of insurgents, most of the militants operating today are significantly younger, ranging from their late teens to twenties, and tend to be educated in the region's ubiquitous religious schools. Senior Thai military and administrative officers, such as the director of the multi-agency Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC), Pranai Suwanarat, and commander of the army-led Civilian–Police–Military Task Force, Major General Samret Srirai, have rightly noted that it would be misleading to simply dismiss the new generation of militants as a bunch of enraged young men bent on carrying out havoc against all things 'Thai'. It has become recognised that, far from the drug addicts that Thaksin Shinawatra painted them out to be, the insurgents of today are often religious, informed and principled young men who feel a moral obligation, however misplaced, to fight and die for a cause.<sup>75</sup>

The most detailed evidence of recruitment practices to date pertains to one particular group, *Hikmatallah Abadan* (Brotherhood of the Eternal Judgment of God). This group was purportedly led by a charismatic religious leader, Ismail Rayalong, also known as Ustaz Soh, who over a period of five years managed to build a network of followers across the provinces of Pattani, Yala and Songkhla. Soh's recruitment modus operandi was based on persuasion and trust, which was carefully cultivated over social activities such as football games and casual gatherings.

According to Abdullah Akoh, himself a religious teacher and a one-time ally of Soh, once the latter had identified a potential recruit, determined that he shared the same views about the predicament of the Malay community in southern Thailand, and that he could be

persuaded to swear an oath to secrecy, he proceeded to divulge details of his secret life as a Malay nationalist and ‘freedom fighter’ and his goal of forming a network of militants ‘to liberate Patani from the invading Siamese.’<sup>76</sup> Soh based his ideology on a version of folk Islam, which among other things emphasised belief in divine interposition expressed in the conduct of rituals believed to impute to adherents supernatural powers, which in turn would make them invisible to the enemy and invincible to his bullets.<sup>77</sup> Soh also instructed his followers in special forms of prayer recitation that would send them into a trance.

A rigorous military training regimen conducted in the jungles of Pattani complemented ideological indoctrination and spiritual purification. Soh would organise secret training sessions in remote pockets in the region involving several cells at any one time from districts that were physically removed. This was apparently to ensure that *Hikmatullah* cells functioned independently of proximate counterparts. Military training involved a physical fitness regimen as well as rudimentary weapons training. Like other cells, Soh’s recruits were required to take vows of silence on the Qur’an not to divulge anything about the group’s membership, activities or plans. It was through this method of indoctrination that the hundred or so men who took part in the 28 April 2004 attacks were recruited, trained and mobilised.

A number of observations can be distilled from Abdullah’s disturbing account that bears heavily on our understanding of the nature of at least some aspects of the insurgency and the counterinsurgency effort. First, given the painstaking but careful recruitment process described, it should be clear once again that the insurgency had been incubating for a number of years, and which Thai intelligence was largely unaware of at the time. Second, and more disconcerting, such was the secrecy and effectiveness of the covert establishment of an insurgent network that even today it remains unclear how many similar cells or networks exist.

Accompanying the resurgence of violence is a convoluted nomenclature of groups alleged to have emerged as part of the kaleidoscope of conflict in the southern provinces. According to media reports, analysts and statements from Thai Government officials, these

include, in addition to the established separatist groups highlighted earlier, the *Runda Kumpulan Kecil* (RKK), *Pemuda* and *Talekat Hikmatullah Abadan*. Thus far, it has been difficult to ascertain if these groups are clearly defined entities in themselves. It is instructive to note that insofar as the *pemimpin* sources are concerned, they place little currency or emphasis on structured group allegiances. From the interviews conducted and cited in this report, it is clear that insurgents have paid little heed to the need to establish a formal organisation with a clearly articulated name. Rather, they have leveraged the BRN-Coordinate brand without necessarily joining the organisation as a formal member. In any case, one should also note that, in southern Thailand, memberships of insurgent groups have traditionally always been porous. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s it was not uncommon to hear of PULO members being affiliated with BRN as well. This being so, it may well be that not only is there a lack of clarity in terms of the status of specific new groups, but also that insurgents are likely to have multiple ‘memberships’ in both the established groups as well as newer configurations, thereby speaking further to the ambiguity of the conflict in terms of its hierarchy.<sup>78</sup>

### **The role of religion**

Concern for the religious dimension to the southern Thai conflict flows in no small part from the fact that the chief vehicle of mobilisation and recruitment for the current insurgency is widely believed to be Islamic religious schools.<sup>79</sup> Reinforcing this is the further fact that in not a few instances insurgents have appropriated religious language to justify their struggle; the most common is the depiction of themselves as ‘*mujahidin*’ carrying out a ‘*jihad*’. Finally, religious motifs related to notions of religious governance and lifestyle have also been regularly mobilised in the course of conflict, where the *jihad* in southern Thailand is portrayed as a war to drive out Siamese ‘*kafir*’ (infidels) and reinstate Islamic governance. Given the salience of this religious narrative, particularly against the backdrop of the current international climate where, on the one hand, concerns for the spread of global jihadism appear (appropriately or otherwise) paramount, while, on the

other, a global discourse of Muslim persecution has also evolved (in which southern Thailand is inevitably enmeshed), it is important to have a contextualised appreciation of the role of religion as a motivating factor.

The notion that the conflict and insurgency in southern Thailand has a religious underpinning has gained much currency in certain quarters, not just in the Thai Government, but in the analytical community as well. Much has to do with the use of the controversial and oft-misinterpreted (and misused) concept of jihad by militants to justify their actions. While classical Muslim scholars stress that jihad can be expressed in many forms, the concept itself has taken on a threatening note by virtue of the fact that Muslim militants are mobilising one aspect of jihad — that which calls for armed jihad against oppressive and hostile enemies of Islam — to sanction and legitimise their actions. Just as it has elsewhere across the Muslim world, how the concept of jihad has or has not been employed to explain and/or endorse the conflict in southern Thailand has become a matter of interest for analysts and scholars alike.

Not surprisingly, views among religious scholars on whether the ongoing southern Thai conflict can justifiably be considered an armed jihad (*Jihad Qital*) differ. For instance, Ismail Lutfi, the popular Pattani-based Salafi cleric, has argued that to describe the ongoing conflict in southern Thailand as a religious struggle betrays ‘a very general and simplistic understanding of jihad.’<sup>80</sup> In the literature that he has produced, Lutfi aligns himself with classic Islamic jurisprudence and contends that only recognised religious authority (*pemimpin agung bagi ummat Islam*) can declare jihad, and even then it can only be declared after other avenues of *dakwah* (proselytism) have been exhausted.<sup>81</sup> He further instructs that ‘Islam forbids the spilling of Muslim blood’, a view that carries greater credence in the context of ongoing violence in southern Thailand, which has increasingly witnessed the killing of fellow Muslims (including students of Islamic schools) by militants.<sup>82</sup>

By contrast, an ustaz with known links to PULO ranted in the course of an interview that *Jihad Qital* had long been necessary in southern Thailand because of the victimisation of the Malay people by the

oppressive Thai state.<sup>83</sup> This ustaz felt that offensive jihad was necessary to ensure the freedom, not just of religion but of Malay identity as well, in the southern provinces. Echoing a similar perspective, another ustaz with links to GMIP averred that the time for *Jihad Qital* had descended upon the *tiga wilayah* (three provinces) — referring to the local nomenclature for the southern provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala.<sup>84</sup>

In explaining his sentiments he was especially critical of Ismail Lutfi’s interpretation of the conditions, or lack thereof, for jihad in southern Thailand, suggesting that it stemmed from his ‘Saudi-oriented’ perspective which focused on developments in Islamic thought during the religion’s expansive phase of the Prophet in Mecca (*‘zaman nabidi Makkah’*) and where the message focused on the spread of Islam peacefully (*‘menyebarkan shari’a Islam dengan cara damai’*) amidst opposition from various sources such as the aristocratic Quraysh tribes who were sceptical of the new religion. On the contrary, the ustaz argued that what southern Thai Muslims are encountering today are in fact conditions similar to those which confronted the Prophet of the Medinan era (*‘zaman nabi di Madina’*), which was defined, in his words, by the ‘assault and violation of Muslim lands by non-Muslims (*orang yang mencerobuhi bumi kita*)’ from polytheistic Mecca. Under these conditions, *Jihad Qital* was not only warranted; it was necessary.<sup>85</sup>

Somewhat similar perspectives were echoed by another religious teacher who, when presented with the hypothetical situation in which he discovered that his students were active in militancy against the Thai state, opined that he would not stop them because they were perpetuating a ‘legitimate struggle’ that is several centuries old. When queried further what he thought of the fact that the Siamese did at various instances render aid and assistance to Patani, he reportedly responded: ‘Do you know how humiliating it is for the Malays to seek assistance from Siam?’<sup>86</sup>

In the instances cited above, however, it bears noting that the use of religion and theology to sanction acts of violence did not stem from established theological or jurisprudential literature or sophisticated Qur’anic exegesis, but rather from the oral instruction that these

religious teachers provide to their students, with the reference point once again being the ‘liberation’ of Patani. Unlike the situation in the southern Philippines or Indonesia, where the teachings of a Hashim Salamat or an Abu Bakar Ba’asyir have legitimised violence and resistance, the conflict in southern Thailand does not draw from the teachings and writings of any prominent local or foreign clerics.

As the remarks above suggest, insurgents justify the use of the religious lexicon on the grounds that Islam’s Qur’anic injunction to fight against the oppression of Muslims resonates with the plight of the Malays in southern Thailand and the insurgents’ objectives of liberating their historic homeland of Patani Darussalam from unwelcome Siamese colonialism. Islam, they explain, legitimises an ‘uprising against unjust rule’.<sup>87</sup> Given the nature of this justification, it is tempting for analysts to conclude that these insurgents are fighting for what amounts to a religious conflict, thereby making them easily susceptible to the lures of the global jihad. To that effect, some have even attempted a highly questionable connection between the conflict and rising Islamic consciousness and the purported growth of Islamism on the part of the Malay populace in southern Thailand, implying that both phenomena somehow predispose Muslims to violence, yet without showing how and why a pious Malay–Muslim makes the leap, as it were, to militancy and violence (apart from the fact that he/she is a pious Malay–Muslim!).

More important than religion is the fact that this ‘holy struggle’ is in fact taking place in a specific cultural, historical and political milieu. Not unlike their predecessors, for the current generation of insurgents it remains the idea of Malay self-determination, or perhaps more accurately a Patani Malay–Muslim nationalism, that lies at the heart of their cause and which serves as their banner under which the struggle is carried out, even if this struggle can be conveniently couched in a religious language that provides further credibility and legitimacy. The most striking illustration of this is the fact that the geographical footprint of the armed insurgency has not changed since it first began several decades ago. Insurgents remain disinterested in expanding the territorial parameters of insurgency beyond the provinces where Malay cultural identity enjoys pre-eminence, and where ethnic Malays

form the vast majority of the population. As this monograph alluded to earlier, despite the confident prognoses of terrorism experts that attacks linked to the southern Thai insurgency would surface elsewhere and in particular in Bangkok, violence remains confined to the border provinces.<sup>88</sup> Concomitantly, it is clear that precepts and analogies carrying religious overtones are understood through local lenses, read alongside local narratives, and used to further animate long-standing resistance to the central state.

Moreover, the role of religious schools in the perpetuation of this nationalism is instructive in this regard, for as the earlier discussion on recruitment practices noted, it is not ‘Islamic studies’ that is used to indoctrinate and recruit, but narratives of local histories — in particular, narratives of oppression and colonisation. This was affirmed in the International Crisis Group’s study on southern Thailand, which described the following *modus operandi*:

Recruitment agents, often religious teachers, reportedly select youths who display three key characteristics: piety, impressionability and agility. Agents recruit these youths into small groups, initially by befriending and inviting them to join discussion or prayer groups. Candidates are sounded out in conversations about Patani history. Those who seem receptive to liberationist ideology are invited to join the movement.<sup>89</sup>

In one particular instance, young men in their late teens from a weekend Islamic school recalled vividly, when interviewed by the media, how an ustaz who visited their school spoke passionately about how ‘*anak Patani* (children of Patani) had a moral obligation to take back the country from the kafir Siamese’. This ustaz further demanded from them unquestioning loyalty to the cause of the liberation of Patani from the occupying forces.<sup>90</sup> What is instructive here is the fact that, while the role of religious functionaries should not be dismissed, the narrative remains one that is centred on Patani’s history and its ‘occupation’ by Siam.

In the final analysis, if the struggle was about 'Islam', then the question quickly arises why the conflict remains consciously limited by geopolitical boundaries or a distinctly ethno-nationalist discourse of Malay self-determination which leads, for instance, insurgents to still refer to their Thai nemeses as 'Siamese', why southern Thailand occupies so marginal a space in the discourse of global jihadism, and why there remains a curious absence of any *fatwa* (legal opinion) that aims to legitimise the struggle from the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence (as compared, for instance, to Iraq or Afghanistan). Instead, what religious ideas and precepts have done is to further animate Malay ethno-nationalism, injecting into the drive for self-determination further meaning and intelligibility along with the precepts, however vague, for separate statehood. Put differently, religious dogma cannot be detached from politico-cultural references, and it is in this manner that the ideological aspects of the insurgency follow broadly a traditional trajectory where resistance is historically and culturally defined.

### **Grievances, identity, narratives**

A major, if understated, motivation for violence has been the principle of reciprocity, where attacks have taken place in response to perceived injustices and crackdowns by security forces. Given that the Thai Government continues to take a heavy-handed approach in their operations in the south, it should be no surprise to find ready pools of aggrieved recruits among youths who have either lost family members or were themselves subject to abusive interrogation procedures. Not a few locals have their own vendetta against the state, and have been drawn into the insurgency, not by grandiose visions of the liberation of Patani, but by profound enmity and a quest for personal revenge. For instance, two young Malay men interviewed by one of the authors in 2005 shared candidly that they had lost a relative to Thai soldiers, and as such were ready to join the insurgency, if only they knew 'where to get a gun'.<sup>91</sup> In several instances, insurgent propaganda fliers have also highlighted that attacks have taken place specifically in retaliation for arrests, torture and even suspected murder of Malays held in custody by security forces.

More broadly, however, these personal grievances are tied to a general perception of the position of Muslims in the Thai state. Among the insurgent community in southern Thailand the brand of nationalism that is being articulated with reference to ethnic Malay and Islamic dialectics has been a reaction to not only the centrality of ethnic Thai referents and the Buddhist religion in Thai national identity, but the perception that these norms and values are being forced upon them. Commenting on this disjuncture, Charles Keyes has noted that 'one of the underlying factors behind the virtual exclusion of ... Muslims from national politics is the equation of Buddhism with the national religion'.<sup>92</sup> In many respects, it is this pattern of 'othering' emanating out of the political centre in Bangkok that has fostered suspicions among its Malay minority communities and fanned the flames of resistance over the years.

The perpetuation of the ethno-religious narrative of victimisation and self-determination is undertaken through local venues and vehicles. Poems read out at public gatherings in school and village compounds create powerful myths that allude to Patani's glorious past prior to the formal annexation of the region by Siam, as well as the exploits of Haji Sulong Tohmeena, a prominent cleric and *cause célèbre* who championed greater autonomy for the southern provinces until his mysterious disappearance in 1952.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, '*Bumi Patani*' (Land of Patani), ostensibly the unofficial national anthem of Patani Darussalam, continues to be sung as covert acts of resistance and expressions of patriotism in Islamic schools across the region, sometimes right under the noses of military and police surveillance. Recorded collections of these poems and songs are circulated within the local communities and disseminated across the region.

On other occasions, leaflets have served as the primary means of insurgent propaganda and recruitment; they have also served as the chief means of communication between clandestine cells and the local communities they purportedly fight to liberate. It is through these leaflets that historical grievances are articulated and repeated. Often, these leaflets are discreetly distributed in local communities. In certain instances, however, militants have proven more audacious and have

openly pinned leaflets on the walls of village teashops. Some of these leaflets are even read out at public places such as village mosques during Friday prayers.

Such brazenness demonstrates the confidence of local cells that are either highly respected or deeply feared by their respective communities. As to the leaflets themselves, while their messages are hardly novel — they mostly reiterate the standard grievances of victimisation and marginalisation — a number of important points can be made. First, there are no formal letterheads or names of organisations included in these leaflets. While most leaflets clearly intend the content to speak for itself, those that make reference to a source do so in a very general way. Second, the content is often tailored to specific purposes, such as countering a particular campaign by the government, statement by a senior political leader, or making accusations against the authorities over certain violent incidents, wrongful arrests, or alleged targeted killings carried out by the death squads purportedly linked to the security services. Third, in many instances leaflets are tailored to provoke nationalist reactions from the local population. For instance, one letter made specific instructions and demands, such as declaring lands occupied by Buddhists should be returned to their ‘rightful’ owners, the Malay–Muslims. Another letter, addressed specifically to the wife of a district defence volunteer but distributed publicly, provided an apologetic explanation as to why her husband had to be killed.<sup>94</sup>

At one level, the diverse messages captured in insurgent propaganda described above suggest differences between insurgents as to the goal of the insurgency, which range from justice to cultural and/or political autonomy to outright independence. Yet the ‘independence’ and ‘liberation’ of Patani Darussalam as a key objective of the separatist insurgency has been made clear through the years. This goal has been expressed in the document titled *Berjihad di Patani*, possibly the most detailed and sustained articulation of the ideology behind contemporary armed insurgency in southern Thailand, that was reportedly recovered from some bodies in the aftermath of insurgent attacks on 28 April 2004. In it, the author makes plain the objective of the liberation of the southern border provinces and creation of a separate state. Indeed, on

close reading, it appears that the fixation of *Berjihad* was, in its own words, the ‘liberation of our beloved country’ from ‘the disbelievers’ occupation’. Moreover, the liberation project was intimately referenced to the historical myth, clearly evoked to inspire commitment to the cause, of the ‘valiant struggle’ of the Malay ‘freedom fighters’ and ‘Jihad warriors’ of a previous generation who fought and died for the same political cause, and that the ruler of a liberated Patani should be a descendent of the historic Patani Sultanate.<sup>95</sup>

# Chapter 5

## Responding to the insurgency

As noted at the beginning of this monograph, a pattern of targeted killings and attacks on remote police outposts was already discernible soon after the turn of this century, and signs became increasingly evident that relations between the populations of the southern provinces and the central government were slowly but surely fraying at the edges. This was evident in a number of violent incidents, some of which were starting to capture national attention. These included the killing of two plainclothes police officers on 26 April 2003 by a mob of Malay–Muslim villagers amid a heated exchange. Two days later, a Marine Corp civil affairs unit in the same province of Narathiwat was raided, with the culprits making off with more than thirty M16 rifles after killing five marines on duty.

Some of these early incidents also reflected poor judgment and shortcomings on the part of the authorities, presaging the often ham-fisted counterinsurgency efforts of the Thai state in the years that have followed. For instance, in August 2003 Pattani police chief Colonel Manit Rattanawin marched confidently into Ban Banna village with a group of journalists to arrest Mahama Mae-roh, a former army rifleman who became one of the most wanted fugitives linked to several incidences of violence. The seemingly straightforward operation soon went awry after the police detachment's arrival: Mahama grabbed an

assault rifle and ran into a nearby house from which he opened fire at the police, killing Manit, another senior police officer, and a sergeant.<sup>96</sup> Mahama himself was killed in the gunfight, but operations were halted and stalled for another half hour before an assault was launched on the house to flush out Mahama's associates if there were any. The reason for the delay was because security forces miscalculated the scope of the operation and had to wait for reinforcements to be mobilised. According to reports, the information on Mahama's whereabouts had come from an alleged associate, Manase Jeh-da, also known as Nasae Saning, who was reportedly apprehended in the northern Malaysian state of Terengganu and extradited to Thailand just days before the shooting in Ban Banna.

On the same day that Mahama was killed, Manase himself allegedly escaped police custody and was shot dead by police in Nong Chik district (Pattani), some 28 kilometres from Ban Banna. Though this has not been proven, because he had bruises on his wrists and other parts of his body, Manase's death was widely suspected to be that of an extrajudicial killing.<sup>97</sup> Manase's death proved costly for the public image of Thai security forces. Moreover, Thai intelligence officials further admitted that this incident had a negative effect on Thai-Malaysian security cooperation as well.<sup>98</sup>

Another example of the poor conduct of the counterinsurgency campaign by Thai security agencies — this time the Thai police — involved the arrest of Anuphong Phanthachayangkul, a *kamnan* from Tambon Toh Deng (Narathiwat). Evidence was obtained from Anuphong, likely under duress, alleging that a former member of parliament from Narathiwat, Najmuddin Umar, and Arif Sohko, also from Narathiwat, were the masterminds behind the 4 January 2004 arms depot raid. In December 2006, a Thai court acquitted the two men as Anuphong, the key witness in the case, retracted his statement in the court. The case against Najmuddin and Arif was further undermined when five other state witnesses ended up providing what were essentially conflicting accounts of Najmuddin's role. The manner in which the police carried out their investigation, which included numerous allegations of torture, brought into question their handling

of high-profile legal cases and further fanned the flames of public scepticism of intelligence gathering methods on the part of the security establishment.<sup>99</sup>

### **Counterinsurgency and the Thaksin administration**

Though the writing was already very much on the wall, when isolated instances of violence began resurfacing in 2002 they were conveniently dismissed by the political leadership in Bangkok as the work of illegal elements looking to make financial and political gains, and hence were a simple matter of law and order that did not require the attention of the military. This imperturbability on the part of political decision-makers quickly began to dissipate when scores of militants descended on an army camp in Narathiwat on 4 January 2004 and made off with several hundred weapons. Embarrassed by such an audacious raid, the Thai Government could no longer deny the possible political implications stemming from a slow but steady intensification of violence in the southern provinces. More specifically, the denial that a renewed insurgency driven by a new generation of insurgents might be emerging on the landscape was becoming increasingly untenable. Even so, the early counterinsurgency response from the Bangkok government hardly inspired confidence that they would, or could, nip the problem in the bud.

The wake of the 4 January raid forced the Thaksin government to dispatch overwhelming military force to deal with what they were publicly dismissing as the acts of 'criminals'. This massive military deployment involved both regular and paramilitary forces. At its peak, the mobilisation effort saw up to 30,000 heavily armed soldiers, police and militia cadres spread across the region.<sup>100</sup> The border with Malaysia was immediately sealed, while a number of districts were placed under emergency decrees, many of which remain in place at the time of writing.

Many have noted that the Thaksin administration's heavy-handed approach to counterinsurgency was in fact foreshadowed by its earlier 'war on drugs' campaign — which saw 'suspects' often hastily identified, mostly based on highly questionable intelligence and forced admissions,

and dealt with in a violent fashion that resulted in a host of mysterious ‘disappearances’. Moreover, under the Thaksin administration, security forces also had no compunction in view informants as suspects by virtue of their ‘knowledge’, and on several occasions these informants indeed found themselves on the suspects blacklist, and placed under interrogation. Meanwhile, warnings from proponents of more thoughtful and balanced counterinsurgency strategies — such as former student leader and Thaksin administration cabinet minister Chaturon Chaiseng — were drowned out altogether by hard-line voices calling for a swift and decisive ‘victory’ over the militants.<sup>101</sup> The consequence of this iron-fisted response (certain aspects of which continue to this day, such as the reliance on rangers and paramilitary units) was, predictably, tepid support from the local Malay community, some of whom had to that point played a critical role as voluntary informants for the government in earlier counterinsurgency campaigns.

Just days after the 4 January incident, in a live broadcast to the population, Thaksin delivered a politically charged missive where he castigated his ministers for failing to prevent such an occurrence. The event was heavily disparaged in several quarters as a feeble attempt staged by the prime minister to demonstrate that he was in control of what was proving to be a highly volatile situation. Thaksin’s vituperative attack on his ministers was quickly followed by a series of statements by senior security officials hinting that the government already had in fact been in possession of intelligence information pertaining to the arms raid of 4 January prior to the event. For instance, Defence Minister Thamarak Issrangura claimed to have information about a plan to ‘plant their flag pole at Taksin Rajanivej Palace’ — the royal family’s southern retreat in the province of Narathiwat, and that the militants have given themselves 1,000 days from the date of the raid to achieve this task.<sup>102</sup>

Without any attempt to first understand or appreciate the contexts behind the re-emergence of violence, such knee-jerk responses to spikes in violence came to typify the government’s handling of the security situation. Despite early indications that insurgency in the southern provinces was resurfacing and manifesting new patterns of tactical

norms, the Thaksin administration persisted with its caricature of the movement and gross underestimation of insurgent strength and resolve. It also demonstrated very little capacity for change, learning and strategic re-adjustment. In a radio address in January 2005 Thaksin went so far as to declare that authorities had made tremendous headway in eliminating the top echelon of this movement through a series of arrests even though they were not able to prove that those captured or ‘eliminated’ were in fact leaders of the insurgency.

He further portrayed the arrest in December 2004 of a group of Islamic teachers from the Thamma Withaya Islamic private school in Yala, accused of being involved in the insurgency, as ‘a major breakthrough’ and ‘a turning point’ in the government’s counterinsurgency campaign. So confident was he that the pieces had all fallen into place, Thaksin quickly identified Sapae-ing Basoe, a former teacher at the school, as the man who was earmarked to serve as the prime minister of a liberated Patani if the insurgency was successful, and Cikgu Mae Puteh or Jaekumae Puteh, another religious teacher linked to the school, as the military commander of the insurgent army.<sup>103</sup> Five years on, Sapae-ing remains at large, and while Thamma Withaya continues to be under heavy surveillance by security forces, its teachers have themselves become victims of violence, with several already injured or killed. Moreover, while Thai military intelligence has compiled a list of suspects and personal information, not to mention some of the accompanying photos, the information is usually suspect and usually considerably dated.

The security forces’ inability or reluctance to register that the structure of the current insurgency is highly organic, and hence requires a revised, if not entirely new, doctrine (of counterinsurgency), has proven a major obstacle that has hampered counterinsurgency operations. Confidential and summary reports from security agencies operating in the region handed over to political leaders in Bangkok often betray conflicting views of the situation on the ground. After initial denials that what they were confronting was more than just criminal activity, many segments in the Thai security establishment proceeded to accept that insurgency had resurfaced, but in a conventional form orchestrated

by a structured hierarchical leadership and shadowy government-in-exile (or in-waiting).<sup>104</sup> Some have more presciently observed that this generation of insurgents is ‘organised into independent cells with very loose and relaxed directives from their superiors as to how to carry out their attacks. Taking out one cell does little to suppress the insurgency.’<sup>105</sup> Yet this has not been translated into a more effective counterinsurgency response. Others continue to stress the role of the local political and administrative elite in provoking and fomenting violence, and reject the resurgence of a Malay–Muslim ethno-religious nationalism that is resilient enough to unite the village-based militants throughout the region under one common course of action. This already heavily contested terrain of counterinsurgency information is exacerbated by conspiracy theories and endemic inter-service rivalries and competition.<sup>106</sup>

Thai security officials have confused themselves with the number of groups they have purportedly identified but are unable to keep track of.<sup>107</sup> This confusion is at least in part a consequence of the pressure on the security establishment to demonstrate that they have the situation under control. To convey this impression, they have resorted to making regular statements that follow a predictable script: every few weeks or so a ‘top leader’ is either allegedly killed or arrested in a raid, while a ‘major breakthrough’ apparently occurs every other month. While such bold statements are manufactured to convey the message that the government holds an advantage over the insurgents, the overall picture on the ground tells an entirely different story. Despite claims that ‘the situation is improving accordingly as planned’, violence continues to escalate. The chronic inability of the government to either identify insurgent leaders or to try and convict militants is further evidence not only of the kind of exaggerations put out for public consumption, but also the confusion which has beset the security apparatus.

At the heart of the Thai Government’s inability to deal conclusively with the problem of the south, it should be reiterated, is its inability to appreciate the nature and causes of the problem, and its preference for precipitate hard-line security responses that fail to make the crucial distinction between insurgents and Malay–Muslim non-combatants.

This problem was particularly acute during Thaksin’s tenure, when the government chose to treat the simmering conflict in the southern provinces as essentially a problem of law and order. Because the leadership chose to frame the problem in such a fashion, the measures that followed focused primarily on coercion and, where necessary, the application of force. In a climate where the main motivating factors had less to do with crime than historical grievances and perceptions of legitimacy, such measures served to catalyse resentment and opposition.

The dismissive manner in which the Thaksin administration dealt with the conflict was further compounded by misplaced populist policies that did little more than further amplify the ignorance on the part of the Thai state of the challenges confronting it. This was demonstrated most profoundly in Thaksin’s bizarre move to drop millions of paper cranes from military transport planes as a ‘gesture’ of peace, while simultaneously ignoring pleas from local Malay–Muslim leaders to abandon this for more serious and sober approaches to tackle issues at the heart of problems in the south. Paradoxically, while this act boosted Thaksin’s popularity nationwide, it did virtually nothing to improve the relations between the Malay–Muslim south and the rest of the country, or the Thai state for that matter.<sup>108</sup> A leading Thai-Muslim academic, Chaiwat Satha-anand, had already warned that Muslims would perceive Thaksin’s gesture of peace differently, cryptically drawing attention to the fact that the Qur’an warns in Sura 105 (*‘al Feil’* or ‘The Elephant’) that flocks of birds would be unleashed from the sky to strike at the enemy of Islam and flatten them like blades of grass.<sup>109</sup> The irony would not be lost on Malay–Muslim minds. In any case, Thaksin’s populist approach to politics was itself frustrated by his equally characteristic impatience, in this case at the slow pace at which the local community flocked to his side.

### **Post-Thaksin**

After Thaksin was ousted in a coup in September 2006 following allegations of corruption, the military-appointed government of interim Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont moved quickly to recalibrate state

policy on the south with a series of carefully crafted messages to diffuse resentment against his predecessor's hard-line and dismissive approach towards the southern provinces. During an early visit to the southern provinces, Surayud took the unprecedented step of publicly apologising for the conduct of Thai security forces during the Tak Bai incident, when more than 80 Malay men were killed as a result of ill treatment by security officials.<sup>110</sup> Surayud's public demonstration of contrition and call for restraint from both sides was well received by locals in the southern provinces. This seemingly auspicious start to his tenure brought hopes that the conflict had turned a corner. In hindsight, nothing was further from the truth. Soon after Surayud's attempts at mollifying the local community, insurgents responded by intensifying violence.

Rhetoric aside, the military-installed government that succeeded the Thaksin administration did not fare much better in the area of 'winning hearts and minds'. In June 2007, Thai security forces embarked on a marked escalation of their counterinsurgency campaign by carrying out blind sweeps in suspected insurgent-dominated villages. The operations were combined police and military initiatives, which consisted of house-to-house searches for weapons and suspected insurgents. The sweeps resulted in the detention of scores of suspects. While most were eventually assessed to be innocent, those suspected of being sympathisers or having links with insurgents, and hence in Thai security parlance deemed 'vulnerable', were sent to internment camps to undergo 'job training' and rehabilitation.<sup>111</sup> In all, about a thousand suspects were interrogated, with 400 or so sent to undergo the 'job training' program.<sup>112</sup> Approximately 100 raids were conducted across the region but most were concentrated in highly volatile districts in Narathiwat and Yala. To be sure, the operations disrupted insurgent activity and brought a temporary halt to roadside bombings in the districts where sweeps were concentrated. Nevertheless, targeted killings and drive-by shootings continued unabated elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the 'job training camps', which were in effect 're-education' initiatives that served the purpose of indoctrination and 'religious rehabilitation', were subjected to legal scrutiny by the courts.<sup>113</sup> The courts decided in October 2007 that these camps were detaining

people 'against their will'. The military responded by pushing through the imposition of a new Internal Security Act that allowed the detention of suspects without charge for up to six months, and banned several hundred youths interned in rehabilitation camps in the upper southern provinces from returning to their homes in the border region.

While it remains too early to assess if these sweeps and re-education/religious rehabilitation camps have eroded insurgent resolve and reduced recruitment numbers, what is clear is that such initiatives have been met with legal obstacles and civic protests. As noted above, courts have raised doubts about the legality of these camps, while human rights groups have been criticising the new Internal Security Act and petitioning for the release of detainees. The situation has not been helped by regular allegations of detainee abuse, including the high-profile death under torture of a religious teacher, Imam Yapa Koseng, who was taken into custody on 19 March 2008, tortured, and eventually died from his injuries. No links between Imam Yapa and the insurgent movements were uncovered during those investigations.<sup>114</sup> This event speaks to the inability of the security forces to furnish conclusive evidence linking their suspects to the insurgency, which in turn has proven a major obstacle to the military's counterinsurgency campaign.<sup>115</sup>

A gradual shift in counterinsurgency strategy was attempted by way of reliance on paramilitary forces, as well as an increase in Malays recruited into the thirty paramilitary units operating in the southern provinces.<sup>116</sup> This shift, nevertheless, was not without problems. In the first instance, the proposed deployment of paramilitary forces was met with concern in several quarters. Human rights groups, conscious of the reputation of Thailand's paramilitary forces as poorly trained and trigger-happy, protested the move. In its October 2007 report, the International Crisis Group warned against increasing reliance on paramilitary forces and civilian militia, opining that this would in fact hinder counterinsurgency efforts because these forces are likely to be inadequately trained and equipped.<sup>117</sup> The notion that paramilitary forces consisting of large numbers of locals would have a natural advantage was also fundamentally misplaced. Few ethnic Malays have volunteered for the job, out of fear that the insurgents would target

their family members in retaliation, while those who enlist would undoubtedly be tainted as collaborators with the Thai state, and hence become prime targets of violence.<sup>118</sup>

Following two further brief administrations — under Samak Sundaravej (January-September 2008) and Somchai Wongsawat (September-December 2008) — that saw little movement in terms of the recalibration of counterinsurgency policies, the Democrat administration of Abhisit Vejjajiva came to power on 17 December 2008. In terms of policy pronouncements, the most significant initiative on the part of the Abhisit administration to date was its attempt to introduce legislative backing for a reconstituted SBPAC (Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre). The logic behind this was a realisation that a shift to some form of civilian leadership of counterinsurgency operations in the southern provinces was increasingly urgent. This move, however, was met with resistance from the military as well as the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), to which the reconstituted SBPAC hitherto reported, as well as members of his own ruling coalition and within his party.<sup>119</sup> The resistance of the security agencies flowed from their reluctance to essentially share resources with a civilian-led entity.

Beyond this, Abhisit's inability to push through a much needed paradigm shift merely draws attention to the crippling impact that the political stalemate in Bangkok has had on counterinsurgency approaches in the southern provinces. Since the September 2006 coup, Thailand has been plunged into political chaos as pro-Thaksin forces mobilised and took on various permutations to resist efforts to eliminate the former prime minister's influence. Until this political stalemate is resolved and key political forces in Bangkok are reconciled, the political will required to transform counterinsurgency policy will remain elusive.

### **Inter-agency rivalry**

Another significant impediment to the efficacy of counterinsurgency operations that has also inadvertently facilitated the upsurge in violence is the institutional weakness of the Thai security apparatus, compounded by the premature elimination of key organisations that would have

played an instrumental role in the government's campaign against the insurgency. Indeed, considering the important role that various security institutions had played in turning the tide against earlier separatist and communist rebellions, it follows that the premature dismantling of these structures would have an undoubted negative impact on the continued efficacy of wider counterinsurgency operations over the years. In hindsight, this was exactly what transpired.

In May 2002, Thaksin Shinawatra dismantled two critical government security institutions that had been operating in southern Thailand for two decades — the SBPAC and the CPM-43. Since its formation in the early 1980s, the SBPAC not only played an instrumental role in fostering closer relations and mutual trust between the local community, security forces and government officials, it served a critical intelligence function as well. Over the years, the SBPAC, an institution of local governance unique to the south, had laboured to put in place a region-wide intelligence network premised on informants who fed crucial information on the activity of remnants of the communist and separatist insurgents to the CPM-43, a joint civilian-police-military institution tasked with overseeing the security aspects of counterinsurgency in the south. More important was the fact that this intelligence function was built on trust between the government and the local community that had been carefully cultivated and nurtured. By dismantling both institutions, the Thaksin administration disrupted a delicate balance of agencies and took apart key institutions with a proven track record in counterinsurgency.

The intelligence 'gulf' created by the dismantling of the SBPAC and CPM-43 has been compounded by endemic inter-agency rivalry between the military and police, and at times within the military itself. This has impaired collaboration and fostered confusion, all contributing to the inability of the Thai Government to craft a consistent and coherent policy on the conflict in the south today.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, an attempt by Thaksin immediately after he came to power to transfer command of operations in the south from the local army command to the police effectively imported endemic inter-agency tension between these two organisations into the arena of counterinsurgency operations and

conflict management. As was the case with the dismantling of the SBPAC, the transition period from the military to the police witnessed the piecemeal dismemberment of the intelligence network that the former had painstakingly developed over the years; as the military reluctantly retreated from active command, informants were eliminated piecemeal by militants through targeted shootings reminiscent of earlier periods of the insurgency. The situation was not helped by the constant rotation of commanders in the south that took place particularly during the Thaksin administration, with none staying long enough to effect major tactical or strategic changes.

Rivalries and lack of cohesion within and among agencies in the cluttered terrain of intelligence gathering that was endemic during the Thaksin administration continued after the coup, stalling counterinsurgency efforts as differences between hard-liners and progressive thinkers over approach and tactics persisted. One particular incident demonstrated profoundly the lack of cohesion and its consequences. On 28 January 2008, Major General Wanthip Wongwai, commander of the Yala Task Force, met with representatives of the media, human rights groups and Islamic religious leaders and made assurances that security forces were committed to the rule of law, and that he would not tolerate abusive tactics and treatment on the part of government and security officials. In a striking demonstration of political will and resolve, Wanthip demanded the arrest of a Buddhist village defence volunteer who had earlier shot and killed a young Malay-Muslim man, and further made a personal appeal to the family of the victim to not lose faith in the country's justice system.<sup>121</sup>

What followed was as astounding as it was unfortunate. In a blatant act of defiance several days following Wanthip's statement, local hard-line military commanders thumbed their noses at the general by ordering a raid on local university hostels in Pattani that resulted in the arrest and detention without charge of seven members of the Muslim Student Network of Thailand. The arrests were made based on highly questionable information provided by an informant, who was himself detained in an army camp.<sup>122</sup> The detainees were reportedly tortured while being interrogated at a military camp in Pattani, although the

government denied any wrongdoing.<sup>123</sup> There has been no conclusive evidence thus far that any of those detained had links with the insurgency.

### **Tactical missteps, cascading effects**

The inability of the Thai Government to properly appreciate the challenge posed by the renewed insurgency, and the weaknesses and shortcomings of its policies and strategies, have undoubtedly been amplified by several operational failures on the ground. A careful investigation into the events surrounding some of the more prominent incidents, in particular the standoff at Krue Se Mosque, would highlight the monumental challenges confronting the counterinsurgency campaign in southern Thailand.

On 28 April 2004, insurgents mounted a string of coordinated attacks against police and military outposts in Pattani, Yala and Songkhla. In the province of Pattani, rather than scattering into the nearby villages and jungles for refuge after perpetrating their attack, a unit of 32 militants retreated to the historic Krue Se Mosque. A tense nine-hour standoff between them and Thai security forces followed and culminated in a full-scale attack on the mosque that resulted in the killing of all 32 militants and one civilian.

An analysis of counterinsurgency operations at Krue Se quickly reveals glaring problems with the tactical chain of command and the state of professionalism in the Thai security establishment.<sup>124</sup> The final assault was ordered by Panlop Pinmanee, then deputy director of ISOC and at the time the highest-ranking officer at the scene, despite clear instructions by Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh that force was not to be used under any circumstances and that negotiations were to be exhaustive. In actual fact, negotiations were not even attempted. Religious leaders at the scene who had offered to speak with the insurgents were apparently brushed aside by security forces.<sup>125</sup> Meanwhile, Panlop's direct contravention of the instructions from his superior was compounded by the fact that, as an official of the ISOC, tactical command at Krue Se was beyond his remit, and he had subsequently operated outside of his jurisdiction.<sup>126</sup> The clash

between Panlop and Chavalit prompted the former's immediate transfer out of ISOC after the incident. As it eventuated, the transfer was the only 'punishment' meted out, even though independent inquiries subsequently found Panlop responsible for the military's excessive use of force.

At a broader level, there was clearly no tactical blueprint for the operations at Krue Se beyond the use of force as a preferred option to flush out the militants. Because of this, it was not surprising when the measure of force brought to bear on the militants was blatantly excessive. The hurling of a total of eight grenades into the mosque even before serious attempts at negotiations were made was telling of the security establishment's tactical priority. As a matter of fact, according to the report of a government-appointed fact-finding commission, no attempts were made to initiate negotiations at all during the siege. The only communication between the security forces and the militants holed up in the mosque were demands by the former for unconditional surrender, failing which a full-scale assault on the mosque would ensue.

Admittedly, there were mitigating factors involved. The fact that the militants were armed and had in fact fired upon security forces, killing three soldiers in the process, was clearly one of them. Moreover, their arsenal, while paltry in size compared to what the security forces that had encircled them possessed, did include several automatic weapons and a grenade launcher. On balance, however, given the tactical advantage that security forces possessed, the lack of any significant supplies and resources in the hands of the militants, and the absence of any hostages, a convincing case can be made that the initiative lay in the hands of those outside the mosque.

Finally, there did not appear to have been serious thought given to larger strategic contexts or possible repercussions. A number of issues were at stake in this regard. No doubt, a crowd had gradually built up, and because of this there were concerns that, at the very least, a protest might have taken place that could well have impeded operations. To that effect, Panlop had defended his decision to order the assault by countering that 'I had no choice. If I had delayed my decision by two or

three hours there would have been more catastrophe'.<sup>127</sup> Similarly, field commanders on the ground had opined that 'we did all we could'.<sup>128</sup>

These protestations notwithstanding, it appears that little thought was given to the larger issue of the sanctity of the mosque as a religious and cultural site, or the message that an assault on the mosque would convey, especially to the eye-witnesses. The sentiments of those who were there and witnessed the attack on the insurgents at the mosque were captured in the opinions of one bystander:

It would have been much better if they (the insurgents) were captured alive. But the officials chose to purge them once and for all. I don't think the state has the right to kill people even if they have stirred up troubles. The officials did not really understand why more and more people joined the crowd since the late morning. When the officials' shooting started, many people booed and some even threw stones at the army officers.<sup>129</sup>

A statement posted on the Internet immediately after the massacre and attributed to PULO warned that the slayings by security forces would be paid 'with blood and tears'. Local Muslims, whose family members were among those killed on 28 April (whether in Krue Se or other theatres on the day), were reported to have expressed a desire for revenge. For instance, a *Time* magazine article on the attack quoted a local averring: 'I am so angry now that I will kill to defend my family and my faith ... I want revenge'.<sup>130</sup>

Tactical missteps were further compounded when the fallout from the Krue Se operation was mishandled by the security establishment. Rather than distance themselves from Panlop's unilateral decision to raid the mosque, across the entire Thai security establishment desultory attempts were made to justify the use of force, which did little more than fan public anger in the south over the actions. Feelings of injustice were further stoked by separatist propaganda, which on the anniversary of Krue Se decried the lack of accountability and absence of an acceptable explanation on the part of the Thai Government for how the operation

was handled.<sup>131</sup> Yet perhaps the greatest affront to the local community was what took place two and a half years after Krue Se, when General Panlop Pinmanee returned temporarily to ISOC in the capacity of ‘public relations advisor’ after the September 2006 coup.

Similar incompetence was displayed in Tak Bai, Narathiwat, on 25 October 2004 when a tempest of protest and harsh reprisals eventuated following the incarceration of several local defence volunteers, who had initially gone to a police station to report the loss of their handguns. In response to the build-up of a crowd of several thousand, troops fired live rounds into the unarmed crowd, killing six protesters. The fact that the incident took place during the Muslim holy month of Ramadhan further fuelled the tense atmosphere. After the crowd was dispersed, more than a hundred suspected provocateurs were arrested, beaten, and piled — in prone positions — one on top of another into military trucks for a four-hour drive to an army camp in Pattani for questioning.<sup>132</sup> By the time the trucks arrived at their destination, 78 of the protestors had suffocated to death.

A fact-finding committee set up by the government concluded that the authorities had used excessive force, but no one was taken to task for the operation. In an interview with Al-Jazeera in February 2008, then Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej dismissed suggestions that the government ought to take responsibility for the deaths. In yet another telling demonstration of insensitivity and lack of appreciation of context and circumstance, Samak responded that while the incident was a tragedy, the protestors died because they were too weak to stand in the back of the trucks as they had been fasting all day and hence ‘they just fall on each other’.<sup>133</sup>

The Tak Bai incident also illustrated the potent combination of weak intelligence and the power of rumour that confronts counterinsurgency efforts: outside the police station, locals had presumed that the six volunteers were detained as suspected collaborators, while, inside, authorities believed that militants had orchestrated the protest and armed the protestors. As with Krue Se, the full extent of the fallout of Tak Bai remains to be seen. When the Songkhla Provincial Court decided in June 2009 to absolve security forces for mistreatment of the

suspects rounded up at Tak Bai, the decision was immediately met with widespread dissatisfaction among the local Malay population and a discernible spike in violence, including an intensification of the targeted assassinations of teachers. Indeed, events such as Krue Se and Tak Bai are likely to pass into the narrative of local mythology and folklore that will resonate with local communities for decades to come.

Negligence, incompetence and the sluggish nature of state responses at the operational level continue to persist. Two cases are illustrative in this regard. The first involved two elementary school teachers who were beaten unconscious by a group of ten young men in Kuching Reupah, Narathiwat. The assault was purportedly in retaliation for an earlier arrest of two suspected militants from the village on 19 May 2006. It took the authorities more than two hours to arrive at the scene despite the fact that one of the regional task force headquarters was a mere ten minutes away.<sup>134</sup>

This incident echoed a similar one that took place in Tanyong Limo, Narathiwat, in September 2005. On this occasion, a standoff between local villagers and authorities ended with two marines being beaten to death. Evidently, the two marines had stopped at the village teashop moments after unknown gunmen had attacked the place and killed two and wounded four villagers. Convinced that an army death squad had carried out the earlier attack, the villagers held the two marines hostage overnight and demanded the government produce the culprits, whom eye-witnesses reported were hooded and dressed in black, combinations commonly associated with paramilitary troops. They also demanded that foreign press, particularly the Malaysian media, be permitted to enter their village so as to authenticate and report their versions of events. During the standoff, government forces hesitated to take action as women and children were used as human shields to prevent them from entering the village. Meanwhile, a group of young men managed to enter the compound where the two marines were being held and beat them to death.<sup>135</sup>

If anything, these cases illustrate the lack of appropriately calibrated policy aimed at addressing specific and immediate challenges, such as the need to deal with emotionally charged crowds that congregate in

protest, that has proven immensely costly in political terms. Moreover, weak coordination between regional headquarters and troops (whether on a routine patrol or embarking on specific missions), the lack of a rapid deployment unit and the absence of a comprehensive security grid have facilitated easy movement on the part of the insurgents and allowed them to carry out roadside bombings and assaults on troops with impunity. The Kuching Reupah and Tanyong Limo incidents were instructive of the shortcomings in the authorities' standard operating procedures — in both instances there were no designated negotiators present, nor was there a rescue team in place that was prepared to storm the compound if necessary.

In the final analysis, the counterinsurgency effort has suffered from strategic, political and tactical failures. From a strategic perspective, while insurgents have stolen a march on the state by restructuring the armed insurgency, the inability and reluctance to acknowledge and understand the nature of the current insurgency has further crippled Bangkok in its dealings in the southern provinces. Much of this was the result of failures by the Thaksin administration, yet successive governments have not fared much better. Indeed, the insistence on the part of most of the branches of the security establishment on 'fighting the last war' has meant that the requisite tactical innovation and re-think required to deal with the new dimensions of the insurgency in the southern provinces has continued to be lacking.

## Chapter 6

### **Transnational dimensions of local insurgency**

Conflicts such as that taking place in southern Thailand are foremost domestic in nature in terms of their underlying causes and their manifestations. Yet, there are facets to them that cut across state boundaries and serve as potential channels for outside interest and foreign involvement. Internal conflicts, for instance, can easily spill over across borders and involve neighbouring states. Conversely, neighbouring states may also be directly involved in such conflicts through the provision of sanctuary and support. With regard to southern Thailand, the co-affinity that its Malay-Muslim minority enjoys with Malaysia, and how this may translate to sympathy on the part of the Malaysian Government for a separatist movement, has been a matter of historical concern for the government in Bangkok.<sup>136</sup> Transnational dimensions of internal conflicts can find further expression in the form of the role of third-party mediation, either via activist international NGOs or neutral governments. Finally, internal conflict can elicit external attention by drawing the attention of transnational armed groups or even terrorist organisations.

This chapter will briefly consider concerns about the presence and activity of transnational terrorist groups in southern Thailand, the role of neighbouring Malaysia which shares a porous border with Thailand's

southern provinces, and discussions of the southern Thai conflict on the Internet.

### **Southern Thailand and global terrorism**

For a number of years now a host of security and terrorism experts have warned that southern Thailand could attract intervention from foreign radical jihadi groups, particularly if the Thai Government continues on its current hawkish course of action. Of particular concern has been whether Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the regional terrorist group which has been linked to Al-Qaeda and which operates in Indonesia and southern Philippines, has already established, or is likely to establish, a presence in Thailand's southern provinces.

Concern regarding the interest that foreign Islamic jihadi groups may have in southern Thailand accelerated after it was revealed that militants responsible for the October 2002 bombings in the Indonesian resort island of Bali had apparently planned their attacks in Bangkok. A senior JI member currently in US custody, Afghan-trained Ridwan Issamuddin (or Hambali as he is more widely known), was also alleged to have considered a number of high-profile attacks against 'soft targets' in Bangkok. These included the international airport and an American-owned hotel along the crowded Sukhumvit and Khao San roads that are popular with foreign backpackers.

Since then there has been no shortage of attempts to link violence in the south to global jihadi terrorism driven by Al-Qaeda and expressed in Southeast Asia in the JI and its ambitions of creating an abstract pan-Islamic state.<sup>137</sup> The quality of evidence in support of such claims is highly variable. Some commentators have, for example, pointed to the fact that several militants killed on 28 April 2004 were wearing T-shirts emblazoned with JI logos, as evidence of the insurgency's links to global jihadists. Others have even suggested that Thailand's Malay-Muslims have for years been collaborating with South Asian Muslim militant movements, and that Thais were being trained in militant tactics by such groups, specifically the Harkatul ul-Jihad Islami (HUJI) of Bangladesh.<sup>138</sup> Astonishingly, as the insurgency gained momentum in the first half of 2004, some even suggested at the time that 'independent

estimates already put JI membership in southern Thailand as high as 10,000', an inflated number by any count.<sup>139</sup> The claims of JI connections have even reached the level of Thailand's courts. The most prominent terrorism case in the country was the arrest in August 2003 of four Thai Malay-Muslims who were accused of being JI members.<sup>140</sup> Their defence lawyer, Somchai Neelaphaijit, was later believed to have been abducted by police officers and is now presumed dead (his body has yet to be recovered). The four suspects were not granted bail during the two years of their trial. In June 2005, the case was dismissed when a Thai court ruled that there was insufficient evidence to convict the four suspects — medical doctor Waemahadi Wae-dao, school owner Maisuru Haji Abdulloh, Maisuru's son Muyaheed, and labourer Samarn Wae-kaji — of conspiring to attack embassies in Bangkok and tourist destinations in Pattaya and Phuket.

Concerns about foreign jihadist involvement or the potential for such links to develop in the future should not be dismissed out of hand. It is precisely because of the serious policy ramifications that would logically flow from such claims, if proven, that they warrant closer scrutiny. It does indeed appear that there have been visits, overtures, and expressions of interest and support made by foreign extremist organisations intent on exploiting local grievances in southern Thailand for their own interests.<sup>141</sup> The International Crisis Group has noted that Philippines-based JI members Dulmatin and Umar Patek had at some point expressed interest in extending support and assistance to insurgents in southern Thailand.<sup>142</sup>

According to our own interviews with *pemimpin* sources, approaches appear to have been made, although they were treated by southern locals somewhat sceptically and cautiously:

There were guys who claimed to be JI members from Aceh. But they were too much like businessmen trying hard to make a deal. They wanted to sell us arms. They weren't much interested in our cause. These guys could be people disguising themselves as JI. But we don't want to deal with them because if we become like JI, the situation

in Patani will become even more complicated ... like Iraq where Muslims kill Muslims. As of now there are already too many splits among our people as to how to carry out this struggle. We don't want to see more Muslims killing Muslims. Also, we don't want to become international terrorists, as this is not our aim. That's why we keep the fight within our border [the southern Thai provinces].<sup>143</sup>

During interviews conducted by the authors with Ismail Lutfi, the Saudi-trained cleric who has been accused by some of being JI's southern Thailand representative, he revealed that while he did meet with three '*orang keras*' (militants) in Bra-o district (Pattani). They attended one of his *khutbah* (sermons) and asked to discuss religious matters with him, fundamental differences surfaced in the course of their discussion over the matter of the legitimacy of religious violence. According to Lutfi, he was 'uncomfortable' and 'disagreed' with their interpretation of the religious sanction of violence, and subsequently ended the discussion and dismissed the men.<sup>144</sup>

Aside from the inability of Thai security and intelligence to confirm JI activity in the south, it is also notable how the climate of violence differs from other JI operational theatres, or, for that matter, theatres in which transnational jihadi groups are known to thrive. Consider, for instance, the fact that there is (unlike global jihadi terrorists) a discernible lack of interest in Western targets simply because they are 'Western', among the insurgents operating in the southern provinces. Further to that, there has yet to be any suicide attacks, another trademark of JI and other jihadi terrorist organisations, in southern Thailand. There is also a notable contrast in the rhetoric justifying violence. While Al-Qaeda affiliates in Iraq and elsewhere proudly claim responsibility for acts of violence and make public calls for jihad, the perpetrators of violence in southern Thailand are, as this study has already ascertained, often conspicuous in their silence. Insofar as they are concerned, currently there appears to be no urgent need to register 'ownership' of violence, make political claims and demands, or even to associate these acts to the clarion call of jihad being issued by Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, thereby

belying attempts to neatly map out 'tentacles of terror' that extend into southern Thailand. In fact, given the tendency of Al-Qaeda to trumpet their presence across the globe, it would not be too far-fetched to assume that if indeed Al-Qaeda or any of its affiliates have gained a foothold in southern Thailand, they would have broadcast this achievement by now.<sup>145</sup>

Likewise, the suggestions of HUJI involvement in the southern Thai violence alluded to above draw a highly questionable causal relationship based primarily on the observation that the tactics used by some of the militants in southern Thailand resonated with those employed by militants in Bangladesh. Yet any student of insurgency and internal conflict would surely be cognisant of the fact that hit-and-run tactics are a popular insurgent tactic, as are small-scale and strategically orchestrated bomb attacks, and on their own would be insufficient to substantiate the existence of substantive operational cooperation among like-minded groups.

Thus far, there has been no evidence of any Bangladeshi involvement in the southern Thai conflict, either from interviews with security officials or insurgents, nor have such links surfaced in the admissions and interrogation depositions of captured militants or alleged JI members. Likewise, the various fact-finding missions commissioned by both the Thai Government and NGOs have not stumbled across any such Bangladeshi links in the course of their respective investigations.<sup>146</sup>

### **The southern Thai conflict in cyberspace**

The appearance of southern Thailand as a topic of discussion in several jihadist chatrooms on the Internet, though significantly fewer in number compared to other conflicts across the world, has raised the possibility that interest in the conflict amongst jihadist groups could be widening.<sup>147</sup>

In this regard, alarm bells rang in regional counter-terrorism circles when a web posting appeared in late August 2008 on al-Ekhlaas, a known jihadi forum site.<sup>148</sup> The post was purportedly made by Khattab, the media wing of the Mujahideen Shura Council in Southeast Asia, a hitherto unknown group claiming to be based on southern

Thailand, and declared its intention to ‘begin operation under the name of “Taubah operation” in the month of Muharram 1430H, and this front will go through all matters in secrecy so that it remains, by the will of Allah’. What raised concerns in particular was the group’s pledge of allegiance to Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Not surprisingly, the posting prompted a great degree of speculation as to whether a new jihadi operation had surfaced in Southeast Asia, and whether the violence in southern Thailand was about to spread beyond the erstwhile geographical confines of the three southern border provinces. Not surprisingly, opinions were mixed among specialists — some expressed scepticism and saw the postings as nothing more than a ‘publicity stunt’, while others took the declaration to mean that insurgents were about to take their struggle to Bangkok.

Those following jihadi web traffic in Southeast Asia would be aware that the August 2008 postings bore a striking resemblance to a declaration that surfaced earlier on a now-defunct website, Muharridh, in November 2005. Making claims that now resonate in hindsight, the Muharridh posting was a declaration of war on Southeast Asia in which Thailand was mentioned specifically. Written in Indonesian, the posting was made under the name ‘Majlis Syura Mujahidin Islam — Al-Qaeda Devisyen Asia Tenggara’ (Mujahidin Islam Shura Council — Al-Qaeda Southeast Asia Division), a name that bore an uncanny similarity to Mujahideen Shura Council in Southeast Asia. Nomenclature of the two groups was not the only parallel. The August 2008 posting carried a list of signatories, including one Sheikh Abu Okasha al-‘Arabi, Emir of the Shura Council, at the top. The November 2005 declaration was signed off by Abu Ukkasyah al-Arabi who described himself as the Supreme Commander of the Council.

The declaration posted on Muharridh was more general and longer than the one posted on al-Ekhlaas. While the latter specifically targeted Thailand, the former threatened Southeast Asia in general, but with mention of specific countries. The 2005 declaration was divided into four parts: the first consisted of threats directed at the governments of Thailand, the United States, and their allies; the second part of the proclamation was an ultimatum to Malaysia and other ‘evil’ Muslim

governments; the third was a request to Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri for instructions and weapons; and the last section appealed to Muslims in the region to stand up to the injustices committed against them. Specifically, the references to Thailand accused the Thai Government of orchestrating acts of terror that were then blamed on Muslims, and concluded that: ‘The ummah in Fatani (sic) yearns for a sovereign Islamic government. Hence, their jihad against the Thai army is obligatory and praiseworthy’. Citing the oft-cited (and often cited out of context, it should be added) surah of the Quran, At Taubah 9, it averred that a war has to be declared on those who do not worship Allah, those who are too concerned with worldly matters, those who do not forbid that which had been forbidden by Allah and His prophets, and those who do not practise the religion in its entirety. While the 2005 declaration made explicit mention of the various Southeast Asian countries, the 2008 declaration only mentioned that: ‘This front will be a new dismay to the tyrant countries in Southeast Asia, Allah willing.’

After both the 2005 and 2008 postings, attacks and killings continued unabated in southern Thailand, yet violence had not spread to other areas of the country, and there is still no conclusive evidence of international jihadi presence or influence in the south. It is important to note, too, that the established insurgent groups like PULO and BRN-C have roundly rejected these postings and denied the existence of their author(s). This is not surprising given the fact that these groups are cognisant that any move on their part to cooperate or even communicate with international jihadi and terrorist organisations would fundamentally undermine their cause and objectives, and jeopardise the goodwill that they have carefully cultivated in the international community (by playing up the human rights abuses perpetrated by Thai security forces), particularly if they end up being guilty by association and listed as terrorist organisations themselves.

In the same vein, the JI and al-Qaeda brands of religiously-sanctioned violence cut little ice with the highly-localised and nationalist objectives of the southern Thai insurgency. These focus on greater political participation, recognition of Malay-Muslim identity and religion, the use of Jawi as the official language in the three southern border

provinces, and greater control over economic resources in the region, thereby accounting for the lack of congruence between the objectives of transnational jihadi and local Malay–Muslim ethno-nationalist groups in Thailand.

### **The Malaysia factor**

The southern Thailand conflict has proven a particularly thorny aspect of Thailand’s bilateral relations with Malaysia, which shares a common border with the southern provinces and which has a politically powerful Malay–Muslim majority. Indeed, Malaysia’s role in the situation in southern Thailand is as complex as it is important.

The prevailing optic through which the Malaysia factor in the southern Thai insurgency is viewed is a religio-ethnic and historical one — the northern states of Malaysia are seen to share historical, cultural and linguistic links with the provinces of Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, so intimate was the relationship that in the embryonic stages of separatism in the immediate post-World War Two years the Malay feudal elite of Patani sought to pressure Britain to incorporate the region into British Malaya, citing their opposition to Bangkok’s collaboration with the Japanese during the war.

There are currently believed to be up to 200,000 people who hold dual citizenship (Thai and Malaysian), and several tens of thousands cross the Thai–Malaysia border daily as part of regular economic activity in that borderland area.<sup>150</sup> In addition, many have relatives living across the border. Clearly, from this perspective, the Thai–Malaysian border is in many respects an artificial one, but one which nevertheless has significant implications for the southern Thai conflict. Its existence continues to provide a vantage that reinforces local perceptions of identity among southern Thais in a climate that sees the central Bangkok government trying to enforce the centrality of ‘Thainess’ in the southern provinces. In terms of bilateral relations between Thailand and Malaysia, it is clear that, despite declaratory assurances of close cooperation between security services and intelligence agencies, on balance the conflict in southern Thailand has been a source of considerable strain. There have been a number of diplomatic clashes between the two governments,

most noticeably during the Thaksin administration, during which it has been commonplace for Thai politicians to accuse Kuala Lumpur of harbouring insurgents.

A major complication stems from Bangkok’s continued insistence that the conflict in the southern provinces is a domestic problem, even though there are clearly cross-border dimensions which involve Malaysia. Indeed, given the connections discussed above, it is all but impossible to insulate this ‘domestic problem’ from its decidedly transborder context, not least because insurgents are known to regularly cross into Malaysian territory, thereby placing them out of reach of Thai security forces.<sup>151</sup> The complexity of the situation is further compounded by the fact that Malaysia has long hosted members of southern Thailand’s separatist old guard, some of whom reside in the country while others are permitted to travel to and meet there.<sup>152</sup> The Malaysian Government has been candid in their recognition of these activities, with former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir explaining that while the separatist old guard are permitted to reside in and travel to Malaysia, from where they may speak on behalf of the Malay–Muslim population in southern Thailand but without disparaging the respective governments, the Malaysian Government would not tolerate them taking up arms against the Thai state.<sup>153</sup>

The pressure from Kuala Lumpur on the old guard to conform to this long-standing ground rule, and the insistence that they enter into a dialogue with the Thai Government, have led some of them to relocate to Indonesia, where the democratic environment ‘makes it easier to meet and discuss’ among themselves.<sup>154</sup> Another opinion states: ‘Indonesia is a natural attraction. Many Patani Malays who had taken part in the struggle against the Thai state studied there. They feel comfortable there and will not do anything to make it problematic for the Indonesian Government.’<sup>155</sup>

Within Thai Government circles, opinions differ as to the role that Malaysia can and should be allowed to play in the resolution of the southern Thai conflict. Some officials support a constructive role for their Malaysian counterparts, while others harbour doubts about Malaysian intentions. At the heart of this conundrum is the fact that while there

is general agreement that counterinsurgency policy cannot succeed without Malaysian cooperation, there is no real consensus among the Thai officials as to how significant a role Thailand is prepared to afford Malaysia in what they continue to insist is a domestic affair, or whether Malaysia can be trusted to play a constructive role. This catch-22 is further compounded by a lack of clarity between the two sides as to their respective ideas of what constitutes ‘facilitation’, ‘mediation’, or outright ‘interference’.

As a result of this ambiguity, differences have occasionally caused frustration and spilled over into the public domain where Thai security officials and politicians would openly question the commitment and sincerity of their Malaysian counterparts to assist in counterinsurgency efforts. At its extreme, Thai political leaders have also openly accused Malaysia of harbouring militants, accusations that have been met by verbal reprisals from Kuala Lumpur and that have almost certainly affected Malaysian resolve in collaboration efforts. Matters were particularly tense in the build-up to the 2004 ASEAN Summit, when the Tak Bai incident drew heavy criticism from Malaysia and Indonesia, with Kuala Lumpur hinting that they might consider pressuring for the southern Thailand conflict to be placed on the summit agenda. In response, Thaksin threatened to walk out of the meeting if the Malaysians did so. A potential diplomatic crisis was averted when an agreement was reached to have a special meeting on the sidelines of the summit between Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, where Thaksin would brief his counterparts on the situation in the southern provinces.

Problems between Thailand and Malaysia resurfaced again in January 2005, when Kuala Lumpur was accused of stalling on investigations of eighteen suspected southern Thai militants whose names and personal information had been furnished by Bangkok several months earlier. In a response to news reports about the arrest of Cikgu Mae Puteh,<sup>156</sup> the man whom Thai authorities believed was a key leader in the insurgency, Thaksin declared that he would ask for his extradition from Malaysia. He also alleged at the press conference announcing Cikgu Mae Puteh’s arrest that Malaysia and Indonesia were the breeding grounds for Thai militants. Both Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur responded angrily, and

demanded clarification.<sup>157</sup> On their part, the Malaysian Government has taken the position that the kind of ‘microphone’ diplomacy that Thaksin and several other Thai ministers had engaged in was unconstructive to bilateral cooperation. Beneath this diplomatic sabre-rattling, there undoubtedly were political considerations at stake for Malaysia, and it was careful not to give reason to its own domestic constituents to view the government in Kuala Lumpur as being complicit in the hawkish policies of the Thai Government towards the Malay–Muslims in the southern border provinces.

On the whole, cooperation between Thailand and Malaysia has been hampered by fundamentally different priorities. For Thailand, the immediate objective is simply to capture and/or kill militants. Given how counterinsurgency policy has continued much along the same path for the past several years despite changes in political and military leadership, it is clear that the matter of substantial institutional and structural reform of the security processes towards more effective counterinsurgency remains distant for Thai politicians and policymakers. For Malaysia, priority appears to turn on three concerns, namely the containment of the conflict in southern Thailand and the avoidance of spillover to northern Malaysia, the prevention of extremist jihadi involvement in the conflict that would transform the insurgency from one driven by Patani Malay nationalism to transnational jihad, and, above all, the need not to be seen as complicit in the suppression of fellow Malay–Muslims.<sup>158</sup>

Until both Thai and Malaysian perspectives can be reconciled, particularly at the political and executive levels, it remains unlikely that cooperation can advance beyond the usual niceties of diplomatic language and an occasional exchange of intelligence information. Equally so, an alignment of Thai and Malaysian thinking would be crucial, for it provides the firm ground upon which dialogue processes in search of political solutions can be built.

# Chapter 7

## The need for dialogue

Notwithstanding the sectarian undertones to certain aspects of the southern Thai conflict as discussed earlier, there are also significant numbers in the ranks of the insurgent groups who are considerably more pragmatic (and realistic) in their goals. This is particularly so among the older generation of insurgents who, even as they seek to reassert their influence on the movement, have, as a likely result of ‘insurgency fatigue’, also demonstrates a readiness to consider alternatives other than outright independence. To that end, they take the view that outright independence is not a realistic goal, if only for the fact that the Thai state will never allow it, that a push for political and cultural autonomy would be the more prudent path to take, and that ‘while we ask for independence, we know that it is unrealistic — we are prepared to hear what the Thai Government has to offer.’<sup>159</sup> Others among the older generation are philosophical in their abandonment of independence and separatism: ‘This is the age of globalisation. The world has moved on and there is no more room for separatism.’<sup>160</sup>

While the notion of some measure or permutation of autonomy has gained currency among certain segments of the Thai political establishment, there are abiding concerns and obstacles that would obstruct any move in that direction. One of the most pressing of these is that any initiative to grant formal autonomy to the southern provinces

might well open the floodgates, leading to other ethnic minority regions elsewhere across the country to aspire for similar arrangements. Indeed, it is for this reason that some in the Thai Government, most notably then interim Prime Minister Surayud, chose to float the idea of the possible creation of a ‘special administrative zone’ instead.<sup>161</sup> Underlying this thinking is the readiness on the part of certain quarters, both in the insurgent movement as well as the Thai Government, to explore the possibility of a political resolution to a conflict that is fast descending towards intractability, and the use of dialogue as a means to such a resolution.

The notion that dialogue presents a viable policy has predictably been met with mixed responses from the Thai political and security establishment. Hard-liners in government have warned against recognising and legitimising the insurgent cause through dialogue. Others, on the other hand, have suggested that it is a crucial component of eventual conflict resolution. Differences on the issue of dialogue are not confined to government quarters. Even within the broad insurgent movement, there are contending opinions as to whether dialogue should be pursued, as the pragmatists (primarily among the old guard) aver, or whether such gestures might in fact compromise the operational advantage that the insurgents feel they now possess. In addition, some are further concerned that the participation of Thai security officials in dialogue is in fact little more than an information-gathering exercise.

Whatever the prospects and misgivings, the fact of the matter is that dialogue is already being pursued through a number of channels, and involves various actors. These have for the most part been facilitated by either third-party governments such as Malaysia and Indonesia or foreign non-governmental organisations, and involve members of the Thai political and security establishment in their unofficial capacity at one side of the table, and, on the other, mostly old guard from the established separatist groups. In the latter instance, given that the identities of key leaders of the current insurgency remain unknown, Thai security officials have reached out to known old-guard separatists in the hope that the latter can leverage their position to influence

militants operating on the ground in the provinces.<sup>162</sup> The issue of establishing communication channels with members of the old guard based abroad had also been broached by the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) — an interim commission established by the Thaksin administration in 2005 to propose possible solutions to the southern Thai conflict. To the extent that elements in the Thai security establishment were prepared to discreetly reach out, they went to PULO.

Having experienced a marked decline in their numbers and influence since the late 1980s as a result of efficient counterinsurgency and factionalism within its leadership, it is not surprising to find that the resurgence of violence since the turn of the present century has presented PULO with an opportunity to re-establish itself, and hence proved a source of motivation for the old guard to close ranks. It was to this end that a PULO reunification congress involving some 40 party figures was held in late May 2005 in Damascus.<sup>163</sup> During this congress, it was decided that: (1) New PULO would reunite with PULO, (2) the organisation would embark on a major publicity drive that would see it return to the fold as the representative of the contemporary southern Thai insurgency, and (3) its representatives would respond positively to any move toward dialogue and, further down the road, possibly negotiation as well.<sup>164</sup> Following this, PULO’s foreign affairs chief Kasturi Mahkota made several appearances in the international media as a ‘voice’ for the ongoing insurgency, and articulated PULO’s claim to be providing some measure of political direction to the struggle. Along with their perfunctory criticisms of the Thai Government’s handling of the crisis in the southern provinces, PULO also maintained the Thai Government must include them in any dialogue process.

Of course, as has already been noted, PULO’s ability to represent the disparate insurgent groups or influence the *juwae* is questionable. PULO has consistently declined to confirm or deny a role in the violence, though its leadership has maintained that they do have members on the ground who provide the current generation of insurgents with ‘local knowledge’ and logistical support, and that they would be able to deliver on ceasefire assurances in several districts if such were made.<sup>165</sup>

To be sure, PULO is not the only old-guard group that has attempted to get back into the fray. In 2004, the self-professed former leader of the now defunct Bersatu (allegedly an umbrella organisation that was formed in 1989 and that brought together the disparate remnants of the separatist movement), Wan Kadir Che Man, openly criticised the Thai Government's handling of the situation in the south. Following the Krue Se standoff on 28 April 2004, Wan Kadir delivered a series of public lectures in Malaysia — he had been a professor at several Malaysian universities, the last of which was the International Islamic University of Malaysia — about the conflict in Thailand's southern provinces. In these, he argued that the insurgency's root cause stemmed from the central Thai state's reluctance to provide avenues of expression for local Malay-Muslim identity as well as the host of injustices perpetrated against the community over the past hundred years. It was during one of these seminars that Wan Kadir publicly revealed that he was the leader of Bersatu and, at the same time, he had given up the hope of an independent homeland for Patani's Malay-Muslims. Instead, he asserted that separatism was no longer a viable option, and that what were more urgently required were avenues and vehicles of communication and dialogue between the two sides.<sup>166</sup>

Predictably, Wan Kadir's public statements on the southern Thailand conflict created a furore in both Thailand and Malaysia. Thai officials were divided as to how to respond to his outspokenness and offer to facilitate dialogue. Some among them supported his return (though within this group there were 'hawks' and 'doves', both of whom had different reasons for doing so), while others were wary of recognising a declared separatist for fear of legitimising their cause. Given that Wan Kadir was at the time working as an academic in Malaysia, the Malaysian Government was also placed in an awkward position by his public statement. Evidently, Wan Kadir's public admission violated a tacit understanding between him and the Malaysian Government that he would be allowed to reside in Malaysia so long as he remained silent on the conflict. Shortly after the public statement, Wan Kadir retreated from the public spotlight and went into exile in Sweden, where he spent nearly two years, before returning to Malaysia.

Regardless of the lack of consensus on the matter of how to deal with exiled separatist leaders, by 2005 certain segments of the Thai establishment — notably the Royal Thai Army — appeared prepared to engage the exiled leaders of the known separatist groups.<sup>167</sup> Yet because of their reluctance to countenance external involvement in this 'domestic' crisis, Thai officials preferred to deal directly with the separatists. Concomitantly, a number of informal meetings involving Thai Government representatives, military officials and members of the old guard such as PULO and BRN-Congress have already taken place in Europe, the Middle East and, closer to home, in Southeast Asia, although none of these encounters constituted formal dialogue, much less negotiation. Notwithstanding the aversion to foreign involvement, on several occasions these meetings have been facilitated either by foreign governments or by NGOs. Whatever the mode of dialogue, though, they were mostly kept away from public knowledge and scrutiny.

### **Langkawi (Malaysia) and Bogor (Indonesia)**

One of the more publicised efforts was known as the Langkawi Process, initiated by former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. The Langkawi Process brought together leaders of some of the old-guard separatist groups and senior Thai security officials at the Malaysian resort island of Langkawi for several meetings between November 2005 and February 2006. The intention of the talks was to draft a set of proposals that would later be floated to the Thai Government for consideration.<sup>168</sup> From these meetings a set of recommendations, innocuously titled 'Peace Proposal for Southern Thailand', was prepared and delivered to former Thai Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun in February 2006 in Kuala Lumpur, with the understanding that it would be floated to the Thai Government. The recommendations bore the signatures of the exiled old-guard leaders as well as the two Malaysian mediators. While couched as 'recommendations', the terms of the document were for the most part little more than an enumeration of intent such as respect for Thailand's territorial integrity and expressions on the part of the separatist leaders of a desire for reconciliation, economic development and education reform in the southern provinces.

There were, however, several fairly bold requests that would have proven highly controversial had they been pursued. For instance, the document called on the Thai Government to set aside at least 50 per cent of local administrative jobs as well as uniformed security positions for ethnic Malays as part of an affirmative action policy. The document also recommended the establishment of a Board of Review with the power to grant amnesty to Malays convicted or charged with criminal activity in connection to the current crisis. Because of a highly unstable domestic political climate in Bangkok at the time, which was marked by street protests and growing calls for his resignation, it is perhaps unsurprising that Thaksin paid little attention to the recommendations. By the time he was removed in the bloodless coup of September 2006, the recommendations were all but forgotten.

While the Langkawi Process was undoubtedly significant in terms of how it opened a new 'frontier' to the southern Thailand conflict — one that allowed for the possibility of some form of dialogue — ultimately its potential impact was negated on a number of counts. First, the meeting was boycotted by BRN-Coordinate, the group believed to be the most active and organised network of all the long-standing separatist groups and the only group with links to the old-guard generation that can claim to be active on the ground on a large scale today. Second, the Langkawi talks could not be conceived as more than a potential confidence-building exercise, simply because Thailand remained reluctant to accept Malaysia as an honest broker given the historical baggage of the latter's connection to the southern provinces. Third, according to participants at the talks, the separatist leaders had little say on the contents of the document, and it was the Malaysians who enumerated all of the recommendations which the separatist leaders were apparently compelled to endorse.<sup>169</sup>

A more recent attempt took the form of so-called peace talks in Bogor (West Java, Indonesia) in September 2008. Brokered by then Indonesian Vice-President Yusuf Kalla on the basis of Indonesia's own experience in resolving the separatist insurgency in its province of Aceh, the talks involved representatives from the Pattani Malay Consultative Congress (PMCC), which claimed to be an umbrella organisation

representing the groups involved in the insurgency. While the Thai Government dispatched a five-member delegation headed by General Kwanchart Klahan, Bangkok was quick to deny that the talks were officially sanctioned.<sup>170</sup> While the Indonesian media made much of the goodwill spun from the meeting, the talks themselves failed to make any substantial headway for a number of reasons. First, it was clear that certain interests in Indonesia were less concerned with the substance of the meeting than the publicity derived from it, particularly given an impending presidential election in the country. Second, while the PMCC claimed to be an 'umbrella organisation', it did not include the two groups that really mattered — BRN-Coordinate and PULO. While information remains sketchy regarding the organisational affiliations of the Malay representatives at the meeting, they were believed to be essentially members of the old guard. In other words, it was not clear that the representatives from the PMCC had the authority and legitimacy to speak on behalf of the insurgency. The fact that violence had actually intensified after the talks gave cause for scepticism on that count.

While talks such as that which took place in Langkawi and Bogor did not lead to any meaningful outcomes, less visible dialogue between the Thai army and insurgents has continued. Former Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont acknowledged during a press conference in May 2007 on the occasion of a visit to Yala that the Malaysian Government had helped facilitate a number of these talks. At the said press conference, Surayud stated further that he received 'positive feedback' from separatist groups over 'dialogue' and duly expressed appreciation to Malaysia for their help in opening up channels of communication. Kasturi Mahkota responded by saying PULO welcomed Surayud's statement, calling it a 'positive gesture' and added that: 'It appears all sides are moving in the right direction and the conditions for dialogue appear to be positive.'<sup>171</sup> Beyond the Malaysian Government, several foreign NGOs have also either already initiated dialogue processes of their own, or are intent on initiating them. Hopes for a political resolution via dialogue increased when Surayud personally met with old-guard leaders in Bahrain in late 2007, towards the end of his term. However, the momentum generated by Surayud petered out under the successor governments of Samak

Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat, both of whom expressed no interest in pursuing dialogue. Likewise, PULO's inability to bring on board other major groups at the time, most notably BRN-Coordinate, further impeded any hopes of deeper commitment on the part of the Thai Government to the dialogue process.

### Prospects and challenges

Prospects for dialogue received a further boost when the Abhisit administration replaced the leadership of the National Security Council with personalities sympathetic to the option, and appointed a representative to meet with the old-guard separatists from PULO as a means of paving the way for a more formalised dialogue process.<sup>172</sup> As noted above, a central role for this old guard in this regard was to convince BRN, and in particular its Coordinate wing, to come to the negotiation table. The participation of BRN-Coordinate was deemed pivotal as it was seen as an instrumental conduit to the *juwae* because of its ties with them. On its part, BRN-Coordinate maintained an ambivalent position towards dialogue. Some in its ranks questioned the utility of working with PULO, and had the view that they could work directly with the *juwae* to create a political wing to the movement. Others, however, egged on by Malaysia, have taken the position that a consolidated front, providing strength in numbers, was the best means through which to approach the Thai Government.

In terms of their political demands, BRN and its respective component wings have historically taken the uncompromising position — requiring nothing short of independence for the Malay homeland of Patani before they agree to terminate their struggle. Indeed, the staunch commitment of BRN-Coordinate to this tradition explains, at least in part, its proximity to the *juwae*. That being said, the BRN-Coordinate's hitherto resolute stance has wavered somewhat in recent years under the influence of the more pragmatic PULO. Elements within BRN-Coordinate circles are now talking about the use of dialogue with the Thai Government as a necessary supplement to violence in order to achieve its political ends, with these ends themselves diluted from independence to some form of autonomy and local governance.

As discussed earlier, the idea of talking to the Thai Government in a systematic fashion through possible foreign mediators and/or facilitators was gradually introduced to BRN-Coordinate in late 2008 by PULO leaders who were themselves making some headway in international circles in terms of lobbying for and articulating the cause of the insurgency through numerous meetings with NGOs, diplomats and the media. The process would not take the form of a formal negotiation, but rather a series of confidence-building meetings between the insurgents, led by PULO but in which BRN-Coordinate would also participate, and Thai officials from Prime Minister Abhisit's special steering committee tasked to pursue this course of action with the insurgents. Between PULO and BRN-Coordinate, an understanding was reached that fostered a joint commitment to the search for a political process on the part of the insurgency with the signing of a *Resolusi Persefahaman* (Memorandum of Understanding) on 5 January 2010 by representatives of the two groups. This was a significant shift given the fact that BRN-Coordinate had refused to take part in either the Langkawi or Bogor peace talks. For BRN-Coordinate it was critical that, in the context of this understanding with PULO, the latter would be the main face at the dialogue table, with only a marginal, if any, BRN-Coordinate presence. This was to allow them to reassure the *juwae* who were still reticent about dialogue. Meanwhile, PULO would also be able to dissociate itself from the violence on the ground and hence have a freer hand to position itself as the 'political wing' of the insurgency.

Nevertheless, while the BRN-Coordinate's evident shift towards dialogue may be indicative of a more cohesive insurgent movement, given the still-decentralised nature of operations it remains unclear how the *juwae* would react if BRN-Coordinate were to fully commit themselves to the PULO-led dialogue process. The *juwae* are concerned that the Thai Government's ongoing talks with the old guard are a potential trap — a way of reaching the militants on the ground so as to eliminate them. Further reservations stem from the concern that, should dialogue and negotiations fail, the networks would then be left exposed. Indeed, it is likely that this precise concern not to drift too far away from the *juwae* had informed BRN-Coordinate's cautious

approach to cooperation with PULO and participation in the dialogue processes. Presently, the *juwae* have indicated willingness to acquiesce to PULO and BRN-Coordinate's pursuit of dialogue with the Thai Government. Nevertheless, they have also averred that theirs is a 'wait and see' attitude.<sup>173</sup>

Notwithstanding the various attempts highlighted above, the Thai Government's attitude to dialogue with the separatist groups — whether members of the old guard or the new generation of militants at the front lines — has for the most part been ambivalent. While the possibility of dialogue is cautiously welcomed in some circles in the establishment, there are members of the Thai leadership who are not prepared to bear the political costs associated with some of the demands that the insurgents might make. For instance, insurgents involved in Langkawi, Bogor and other dialogues are of the opinion that the Thai Government will eventually have to engage in some form of discussion on the matter of recognition of Malays as an ethnic group distinct from the Thais, and correspondingly, the opening up of more cultural space for the Malays, including the use of Malay as a 'working language' in the southern provinces and the recruitment of more ethnic Malays for government jobs as part of a strategy to enhance their social mobility in their own region.<sup>174</sup> Be that as it may, there is at present still no indication that the Thai Government is discussing these demands internally.

Sceptics in the Thai Government also question whether the old guard, the main actors that the state has been able to engage with thus far, will be able to deliver significant concessions on their part as a result of any dialogue, such as the implementation of a cease-fire or an end to arson attacks on public schools in specified areas.<sup>175</sup> Some in policy circles believe that the general public would not support the idea of talking to 'outlaws', while others see the possibility that the endorsement of dialogue could send the wrong message that the government was in a position of weakness. Nevertheless, other senior officials are of the opinion that any dialogue is better than no dialogue at all. These officials are convinced that the exiled leaders of PULO and BRN still command much respect as elders, and, even if they exercise little leverage by way of operational command, they will nevertheless be able to influence

the thinking of some of the current generation of insurgents and cajole them away from indiscriminate violence.<sup>176</sup>

Recent violence such as that which occurred at the Al Furqan Mosque in Ai Bayae, Narathiwat, has further imperilled prospects for dialogue. According to various accounts, on 8 June 2009 six gunmen with automatic rifles and shotguns fired indiscriminately into the Al Furqan Mosque during evening prayers, killing eleven people and injuring twelve others in one of the most vicious attacks in recent years. The initial response from certain quarters within the security establishment was to blame the attack on insurgents as part of their strategy of discrediting the state and driving a wedge between the government and the local populace. This explanation cut no ice with the local community, who defended the *juwae* by countering that the latter had never violated the sanctity of a mosque.<sup>177</sup> About two months later, police named Suttirak Kongsuwan as one of the assailants. This incident has become a major source of embarrassment for security forces, since Suttirak was a former ranger who had subsequently taken part in the government's ill-conceived village militia program. Suttirak surrendered himself to authorities in January 2010, but maintained his innocence. Despite assurances by the Abhisit administration, undoubtedly made with an air of desperation, that it was committed to the dialogue process and would arrest and charge the culprits, insurgents have been reluctant to continue with dialogue. As for the *juwae*, they have made clear that they see the satisfactory resolution of the Al Furqan Mosque incident as a litmus test for the utility of dialogue given that it would be indicative both of the sincerity of the Thai Government as well as the ability of PULO and BRN-Coordinate to influence decision-making in Bangkok.<sup>178</sup>

### **Bringing the peace process back on track**

In terms of its experience with insurgencies, the historical tendency among Thai security agencies has been to look for ways to come up with concrete and immediate results. Indeed, this has accounted in no small measure for the knee-jerk counterinsurgency responses that are frequently announced and implemented by the military. While the desire to produce something concrete is understandable, it is not likely

that dialogue and negotiations with insurgents will be adequate to bring conflict to a definitive conclusion and to institute a permanent peace. This would be so particularly if the historical mistrust and cultural narratives that shape the thinking of locals and insurgents for the past century are not addressed. If history is any indication, unless this paradigm shift is made and such mistrust and narratives are addressed, a new generation will eventually emerge on the scene, bearing the same sentiments, grievances and hatred against the Thai state. By this token, dialogue should not be viewed as an end in itself, but a means to dispel distrust and create conditions for further conflict resolution.

Yet events such as the Al Furqan Mosque massacre threaten to unravel prospects for deepening unity within the insurgent movement between the old guard, the pemimpin, and the juwae, particularly given the pressure that the old guard now face in convincing reticent counterparts that the Thai Government is sincere in its assurances that justice would indeed be served. Within some pemimpin quarters, it has been proposed that one way to bring the juwae closer to the peace process is to recruit the help of Sapae-ing Basoe. Indeed, while the Thai authorities are keen to charge him with treason, the Malay community in the southern provinces see him as a champion of their cause and a man who promotes the preservation of Patani Malay identity as well as historical narratives that have become a source of local pride (the same narratives that set the Malays apart from the rest of Thailand, it should be added). Although Sapae-ing never issued any specific demands like the seven points of Haji Sulong Tohmeena, local Malays see his struggle as analogous to the latter's immensely popular struggle for Malay-Muslim rights.

The government has never clearly defined the crimes that Sapae-ing had purportedly committed. Nevertheless, with or without evidence to back up their case, Sapae-ing's mystique continues to grow among the local population. According to PULO and BRN-Coordinate members, Sapae-ing continues to keep a distance from their dialogue with the Thai Government in spite of their requests for him to participate. It was believed that he had fled to Malaysia following the charges. His whereabouts remain unknown.

## Conclusion

For the past few years, Thailand has come under intense scrutiny because of chronic violence that has seized its southern border provinces. While there is broad consensus that this violence is mostly tied to a reinvigorated insurgency with deep and distressing historical roots, what makes it stand out (hence piquing intellectual and analytical curiosity) is the fact that, to this day, the identity of the insurgents remains murky and unknown to the Thai policy community. From the perspective of the insurgents, this speaks to the fluid and decentralised structure of today's armed resistance. At the same time, this silence is also indicative of the fact that there is considerable discipline among its constituent groups. From the perspective of the Thai Government, this inability to identify its enemy has been an unfortunate indictment of intelligence, strategic and political failure on its part.

Armed insurgency in Thailand's southern provinces is not a new phenomenon. That being said, the violence of the last six years or so has been defined by decidedly more diffused yet ominous patterns, and has followed a different operational script compared to earlier permutations of insurgency. Indeed, as this monograph has illustrated, the insurgency remains very much dispersed in terms of the operational autonomy across the cell structure, recruitment style, targeting, tactics, etc. Unlike their predecessors, this generation of insurgents appears intent on shattering the fabric of society and peaceful coexistence that has long existed between the region's Malay majority and their non-

Malay counterparts with their brutal and seemingly indiscriminate *rage militaire* — no doubt a consequence of the seeds of hate embedded in local historical narratives of long-standing repression. To be sure, there are pockets of villages that have consciously and vocally resisted the polarisation that the conflict has spawned. But these are far too few in number. The unfortunate reality is that in the vast majority of villages in the southern provinces suspicions run high, and neighbours have turned against one another in a climate of fear, both because of the impunity of security forces and the intimidation and indiscriminate violence of insurgents.

It is also the case that today's insurgency parallels previous periods of armed resistance in terms of root causes and ultimate motivations. From the extensive fieldwork interviews conducted, it is clear to the authors that while the discourse may be increasingly coloured by religious metaphors and may have drawn some measure of attention from transnational religious extremists, the collective memories of today's insurgents are built on much the same grievances and grudges against the Thai state that their predecessors had articulated and resisted — encroachment into religio-cultural space, lack of employment and advancement opportunities, forced acceptance of elements of Thai culture that undermined their religious practices, mistreatment in the hands of security officials, and the lack of avenues through which to articulate dissatisfaction with the prevailing status quo. Similarly, while no single group has surfaced to claim responsibility for the violence and articulate their goals and demands, interviews conducted with the old guard and *pemimpin* indicate that the objectives of the struggle, too, remain the same — the liberation of the kingdom of Patani — even if the exact form (independence, autonomy or rectification of injustices) a 'liberated' Patani would take remains ambiguous, and the means through which to achieve it may differ.

The insurgency in southern Thailand today basically involves two generations — the old guard who were involved in the armed separatist organisations from the 1960s to the 1990s, and the new generation or *juwae*, who are the front line in the current conflict. Both are drawn together by the *pemimpin*, who provide operational leadership to the

cell network and in addition serve as interlocutors between the old guard and *juwae*. While efforts to husband resources towards a coherent shared agenda have undoubtedly been made, this monograph has also shown that within the insurgency there are substantial differences that are not only generational but strategic (e.g., whether or not to engage in dialogue) and tactical. Until these differences are resolved among the different actors, the structure of the insurgency itself is likely to remain fluid. This poses additional problems for counterinsurgency given, for example, concerns as to whether all factions of the insurgency could ever be represented in a bona fide dialogue and negotiation process, should such a process materialise.

This paper has argued that the Thai state's inability to make significant headway in its counterinsurgency effort with properly calibrated responses to violence stems in large part from its reluctance to comprehend and accept the nature of this challenge to its legitimacy in the southern provinces. Rather than appreciating the fact that they are facing an insurgency driven by a resilient master narrative that is nevertheless employing new and quite effective methods and tactics for mobilising new adherents and striking at symbols of the Thai state, most in the upper echelons of the Thai polity and security apparatus continue to persist in their view that the insurgency confronting them has no basis whatsoever — be it cultural, moral, legal, or ethical. At the heart of the matter is the manner in which the political leadership and security establishment have framed the problem of the south. While they no longer dismiss militants as 'sparrow bandits', political leaders and security agencies continue to interpret the agenda of the insurgency as primarily either religious in nature (i.e., the insurgents have embraced the 'false teachings'), or a matter of criminality (thereby allowing them to dismiss all grievances as illegitimate from the outset).

On both counts they have been some way off the mark. Compounding the problem is the fact that (especially during the Thaksin administration) these perceptions of the conflict often find expression in incendiary public rhetoric that ultimately proves immensely unhelpful. Bereft of an historically and culturally grounded appreciation of the problem, the Thai Government continues to insist on its interpretation of the

conflict, which speaks of ‘misguided’ young men fed a ‘distorted’ version of history, one that wrongly and illegitimately questions the legitimacy of the Thai state over Malay–Muslim lands in the south.

Absent, for the most part, from the establishment’s appreciation of the situation is the recognition that the policies of the Thai state, however well-intentioned, have had the opposite effect of compounding the suspicions and misgivings that Thailand’s Malay–Muslim communities in the southern provinces harbour towards the central government. Admittedly, this would be crippling introspection. Until the Thai state comes to terms with these fundamental contradictions in how Bangkok and the southern provinces understand the historical and contemporary terms of their relationship, it must realise that tension between centre and periphery will never subside, and the century-old cycle of grievances against the central Thai state will remain unbroken.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In studies on southern Thailand, scholars normally distinguish between ‘Pattani’, the administrative province, and ‘Patani’, the historical geo-political entity whose final annexation by the Siamese Government was completed with the signing of the 1909 Bangkok Treaty between Siam and Britain. The southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, provinces to which separatists lay claim and where violence is most acute, were historically part of the kingdom of Patani.
- <sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the history and background behind Malay–Muslim separatism in southern Thailand, see Wan Kadir Che Man, *Muslim separatism: the Moros of southern Philippines and the Malays of southern Thailand*. Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1990.
- <sup>3</sup> For more on Islamic education and schools in southern Thailand, see Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Islam, reform, and education in southern Thailand: tradition and transformation*. Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> It is important to note here that the ‘surrender’ that took place in return for amnesty was never an official process. No records were kept or profiles made of those who surrendered, and there has never been a ‘list’ documenting the surrender process. Mostly, the surrender amounted to militants and field commanders surrendering arms to government officials and returning to their respective villages.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael K. Connors, War on error and the southern fire: how terrorism analysts get it wrong, *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, 2006.
- <sup>6</sup> BRN-Coordinate’s mobilisation of *pemuda* has caused some confusion for

Thai security forces. On several occasions, suspects under interrogation have mentioned that '*pemuda*', youths in the Malay language, were involved in the violence. This led to certain Thai officials identifying a new separatist group called '*pemuda*'. It is likely that what they were referring to was merely the youths who were operating broadly under the BRN-Coordinate banner.

- 7 Interview with a former separatist leader, Kelantan, 24 February 2008.
- 8 Interview with Malaysian officials, Kuala Lumpur, 30 January 2007.
- 9 Interview with Thai intelligence officials, Bangkok, 24 January 2005.
- 10 Interview with a *pemimpin*, Yala, 3 March 2009. As the main paper elaborates later, *pemimpin* is the generic name given to leaders who are in charge of clusters of cells involved in the current insurgency.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Interview with PULO leaders, Kuala Lumpur, 28 May 2008.
- 13 These attempts included the creation of an umbrella organisation, Bersatu, in 1997 and a temporary revival of coordinated attacks on security installations under the auspices of Bersatu's 'falling leaves' campaign.
- 14 Interview with a former separatist, Kelantan, 24 January 2008.
- 15 Interview with a PULO leader, Gothenburg, 6 September 2006; interview with a former separatist leader, Kelantan, 24 January 2008.
- 16 While several leaders of the long-standing groups interviewed all agreed that this was the case, they provided different dates and timelines for when this understanding was reached among its proponents. As such, we are unable to ascertain when exactly the agreement was made, and which parties were involved in it.
- 17 Telephone interview with a former separatist, 20 September 2005.
- 18 BRN itself was founded in the early 1960s by a *tok guru* (traditional Malay Islamic teacher) who took up arms in response to Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat's decision to dissolve the institution of *pondok*, a traditional Islamic school which provided instruction solely in religion and which was a ubiquitous religio-cultural institution across the Malay world in the early and mid-twentieth century. Sarit justified his actions on the grounds that *pondok* was 'un-Thai' by virtue of its preference for the traditional Malay language as its medium of education and the fact that its focus on religious education meant that its graduates had little to contribute to the modernisation and

development of contemporary Thai society. As established earlier, with its roots in traditional *pondok* it was not difficult for BRN-Coordinate to tap into a pool of religious teachers.

- 19 Interview with a *pemimpin*, who also referred to himself as *juwae*, Yala, 3 March 2009.
- 20 Interview with a former field commander, Narathiwat, 22 May 2007.
- 21 Most of the information on the organisation of the current insurgency, as well as on tactics, was obtained from an interview with this particular *pemimpin* over several meetings in Kelantan and Yala between January 2008 and March 2009.
- 22 Interview with a *pemimpin*, Kelantan, 24 January 2008. The reason for approaching him was because he was respected for his credentials as a former separatist. This did not mean, though, that he thence became a BRN-C member. In fact, he made it clear that he had informed the *juwae* that, while he would assist them, his loyalties remained with the old BRN.
- 23 Interview with a *pemimpin*, Kelantan, 24 January 2008.
- 24 There are a total of 36 districts in the three Malay-Muslim provinces.
- 25 Email interviews with local researchers, 21 July 2008.
- 26 Interview with a *pemimpin*, 24 January 2008.
- 27 Interview with a *pemimpin* in Kelantan, 24 January 2008.
- 28 Interview with a *pemimpin*, Yala, 3 March 2009. The *pemimpin* himself did not know who these leaders were, or even if the individual arranging the meetings was in fact a leader.
- 29 Interview with a PULO leader, Gothenburg, 11 December 2007.
- 30 Interview with a PULO leader, Gothenburg, 11 December 2007.
- 31 Interview with a PULO leader, Gothenburg, 14 January 2010.
- 32 Interview with a *pemimpin*, 2 March 2009.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Interview with a local researcher, Pattani, 5 March 2009. This is not to say, of course, that the faction within BRN-Coordinate that is amenable to dialogue, or the other separatist groups for that matter, do not see the importance of the violence. Rather, they are of the opinion that their ability to continue attacks on targets and elude capture is what would compel the Thai Government to enter into dialogue, but at a disadvantage.
- 35 Interview with a *pemimpin*, Kelantan, 28 January 2008.

- <sup>36</sup> See International Crisis Group, *Southern Thailand: insurgency, not jihad*.
- <sup>37</sup> Interview with a *pemimpin*, Kelantan, 24 January 2008.
- <sup>38</sup> One killed, 17 soldiers injured in Thai south, *Agence France-Presse*, 23 April 2007.
- <sup>39</sup> See Zachary Abuza, The role of foreign trainers in southern Thailand's insurgency, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 5 Issue 11, 7 June 2007.
- <sup>40</sup> Supalak Ganjanakhundee and Don Pathan, *Santhipart in Plaewplerng*, Bangkok, Nation Book, 2004, pp. 16-35.
- <sup>41</sup> The Krue Se Mosque incident is discussed in greater detail in a later chapter.
- <sup>42</sup> The fact that many of the victims were buried as shahid or martyrs, though, should not be taken to mean that they were thence all involved in a religious struggle as part of the insurgency. Rather, it is more likely that they buried according to the Islamic practice of burials for shahid because parents and family members, the vast majority of whom are not supportive of insurgent violence, simply did not want them to be perceived as the criminals the state made them out to be.
- <sup>43</sup> Don Pathan, The new face of militancy in the south, *The Nation*, 19 May 2004.
- <sup>44</sup> TERROR IN HAT YAI: Blasts hit airport, hotel and Carrefour, *The Nation*, 4 April 2005. In the report, Deputy Director of the National Intelligence Agency, Nanthiwat Samart, said that the bomb, which was poorly assembled, barely left a crack on the floor. He did not rule out a turf war in Hat Yai among illegal elements in the city. The culprits could have inflicted much more damage if they had wanted to.
- <sup>45</sup> Interview with a PULO leader, Gothenburg, 11 December 2007.
- <sup>46</sup> Interview with a *pemimpin*, Kelantan, 13 August 2007.
- <sup>47</sup> Supporters on the ground were also known to help transport essential supplies, including food and ammunition, to the rebel units up in the hills.
- <sup>48</sup> TAO is the acronym for the Tambon Administrative Organization, an institution of local government that operates at the sub-district level across Thailand.
- <sup>49</sup> Interviews conducted with a member of the original BRN, May 2006. Further interviews were conducted with this individual in April 2007. He spoke out strongly against the brutality of the new generation of militants.

- According to him, the cells under his supervision do not engage in the targeting of civilians. That said, this individual also expressed during the course of interviews that members of the public who served as informants for the state were legitimate targets.
- <sup>50</sup> Interview with a former company commander of PULO, Pattani, 23 May 2006. This individual took up the Thai Government's offer of amnesty in exchange for his weapon more than a decade ago.
- <sup>51</sup> Like the provincial governors, district chiefs report to the Minister of Interior and by virtue of that are associated with the Thai Government.
- <sup>52</sup> Interview with a former PULO company commander, Pattani, 23 May 2006.
- <sup>53</sup> Available <http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/node/369>. Accessed 4 August 2009.
- <sup>54</sup> Interview with Srisompob Jitpiromsri, Pattani, 30 January 2008.
- <sup>55</sup> Insurgent interview, Pattani, 14 March 2008. That being said, the insurgent was not able to explain if this meant that Muslim security officials were thence not legitimate targets for attack.
- <sup>56</sup> Army chief admits security agencies are using 'blacklists' in the south, *The Nation*, 26 April 2006.
- <sup>57</sup> Interviews conducted with a member of the original BRN, and who is currently a *pemimpin* in charge of several cells involved in the contemporary insurgency and on condition of anonymity, in May 2006 (he also instructed that we were not to divulge where the meeting took place).
- <sup>58</sup> See, for instance, Zachary Abuza, *Conspiracy of silence: the insurgency in southern Thailand*. Washington, DC, US Institute of Peace Press, 2009; Rohan Gunaratna and Arabinda Acharya, *The terrorist threat from Thailand*. Washington, DC, Potomac Press, 2010.
- <sup>59</sup> This is not to say that there are no other images of the southern Thai violence in the south. Indeed, some of these images have been carried by Indonesian extremist websites. Nevertheless, because they use the Indonesian language rather than the Malay language which is more popular in the southern provinces, it is likely this propaganda is the work of foreign parties bent on drawing attention to the southern Thai conflict as part of their agenda to undermine governments in the region who are allied to Western powers, rather than of southern Thai insurgents themselves. See Jennifer Yang Hui, *The internet in Indonesia: Development and impact of radical websites*,

- Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 33, No. 2, February 2010.
- <sup>60</sup> Exceptions are images of the Tak Bai and Krue Se massacres, which have been posted on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).
- <sup>61</sup> Interview with a former PULO company commander, Pattani, 23 May 2006.
- <sup>62</sup> Interviews conducted throughout May 2006, on the condition of anonymity with a member of the original BRN, who is currently in charge of several cells involved in the contemporary insurgency.
- <sup>63</sup> Interview with a PULO leader, Gothenburg, 6 September 2006.
- <sup>64</sup> Interview with a PULO leader, Gothenburg, 6 September 2006.
- <sup>65</sup> Interview with a Buddhist civilian who was injured in a targeted attack, Yala, 16 May 2006.
- <sup>66</sup> This perspective is derived from the authors' interviews with several individuals who claimed to be part of the current generation of militants over the period December 2007 to February 2008. Interviews were conducted in Narathiwat and in Malaysia.
- <sup>67</sup> Interview with a former PULO company commander, Pattani, 23 May 2006.
- <sup>68</sup> Don Pathan, Between the devil and the deep blue sea, *The Nation*, 3 September 2007.
- <sup>69</sup> Statistics provided by a Yala-based centre set up in 2006 to monitor and document attacks against schools and teachers in the south.
- <sup>70</sup> Indeed, in southern Thailand the everyday social norm among locals is to keep their distance from large groups of uniformed security personnel whenever possible.
- <sup>71</sup> Nakarin Shinworakomol and Charoon Thongnual, Exodus of Buddhists, *The Nation*, 10 November 2006.
- <sup>72</sup> The military backtracked on their statement the day after, but continued to insist that the actions of the volunteer were justified.
- <sup>73</sup> Don Pathan, Quiet warrior opposes new insurgency, *The Nation*, 13 September 2005.
- <sup>74</sup> Interview with a former company commander of PULO, Pattani, 23 May 2006.
- <sup>75</sup> See Saroja Dorairajoo, Current violence in Thailand is highly contextual and local, *Anthropology News*, Vol. 46, No. 3, March 2005, p. 29.

- <sup>76</sup> Interview with Abdullah Akoh, Pattani, transcribed on May 5, 2006. The following information was obtained from this interview. See also Don Pathan, Confession of an Islamic assassin, *The Nation*, 9 September 2004.
- <sup>77</sup> Abdullah related how these rituals included the drinking of holy water that would make their bodies impervious to bullets and knives, and the recitation of repetitive prayers until the militants entered a state of trance.
- <sup>78</sup> Insurgent interview, Kelantan, 24 January 2008.
- <sup>79</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the religious dimension to this conflict, see Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Muslim resistance in southern Thailand and southern Philippines: religion, ideology and politics*. Policy Studies 24. Washington, DC, East-West Center Washington, 2006.
- <sup>80</sup> Interview with Ismail Lutfi, Pattani, 14 January 2006.
- <sup>81</sup> Ismail Lutfi Japakiya, *Islam: agama penjana kedamaian sejagat*. Alor Star, Kedah, Pustaka Darussalam, 2005, p. 76.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- <sup>83</sup> Ustaz interview, Pattani, 8 May 2006.
- <sup>84</sup> Ustaz interview, Pattani, 10 May 2006.
- <sup>85</sup> This discussion is drawn from Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Islam, education, and reform in southern Thailand: tradition and transformation*. Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009.
- <sup>86</sup> This anecdote was shared by a Thai journalist during a seminar at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, 9 July 2007.
- <sup>87</sup> Interviews conducted with a member of the original BRN, who is currently in charge of several cells involved in the contemporary insurgency. Interviewed on condition of anonymity, in May 2006 (he also instructed that we were not to divulge where the meeting took place).
- <sup>88</sup> See: S'pore expert warns of terror in Bangkok, says attack in city probably before the end of the year, *Reuters*, 8 January 2006.
- <sup>89</sup> International Crisis Group, *Southern Thailand: insurgency, not jihad*, p. 26.
- <sup>90</sup> Alone in the shadow of militants, *The Nation*, 21 May 2006.
- <sup>91</sup> Interview in Pattani, 13 December 2004.
- <sup>92</sup> Charles Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist kingdom as modern nation-state*. Boulder, CO, and London, Westview Press, 1987, p. 207.
- <sup>93</sup> It should be stressed again that Haji Sulong never advocated the independence of Patani. His cause was for the inclusion of more Malays

in local government and administrative bureaucracy so as to ensure that locals have a say and stake in the future of Patani as part of the Kingdom of Thailand. Another cause that Haji Sulong championed was for the use of the Malay language alongside Thai as a working language in the southern provinces. This, though, was as much for pragmatic reasons as it was for reasons of cultural identity — most Malays in the south then could not speak Thai at all.

- <sup>94</sup> RSIS research team interviews in mid-2007 with villagers in highly contested districts in the provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala who revealed how cell members interacted with local residents at private and social gatherings and who collected and analysed militant leaflets.
- <sup>95</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the booklet, see Liow, *Muslim resistance in southern Thailand and southern Philippines*, pp. 39-42.
- <sup>96</sup> Battle is on for hearts and minds in the south, *The Nation*, 12 January 2004.
- <sup>97</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>98</sup> Interview with officials from the National Intelligence Agency and Fourth Army Intelligence, Yala, 14 August 2007.
- <sup>99</sup> Supalak Ganjanakhundee, Treason trial: Najmuddin acquitted as witness accounts clash, *The Nation*, 16 December 2005. The two men were members of the Pusaka Foundation, an Islamic education network that supports *tadeka*, village education centres, that provide Islamic studies instruction to children on weekends.
- <sup>100</sup> Southern Thai towns increasingly rely on militias, *International Herald Tribune*, 19 March 2007.
- <sup>101</sup> While this more balanced approach also approved of suppression against actual militants, they also proposed careful and considered identification of ‘targets’, abidance with the rule of law, dialogue with local community leaders, etc.
- <sup>102</sup> Southern violence: plan to capture province, *The Nation*, 14 January 2004.
- <sup>103</sup> Don Pathan, The turning point that wasn’t, *The Nation*, 27 January 2005.
- <sup>104</sup> As the study has thus far shown, while it is not unimaginable that the insurgency might have an administrative or leadership structure of sorts in place — after all there must be some manner of leadership involved in the orchestration of coordinated attacks — it would be a mistake to assume that

this translates to the existence of a centralised authority that can effectively orchestrate and coordinate every aspect of the ongoing insurgency. This is clearly not the case.

- <sup>105</sup> Don Pathan, Why the turning point never came, *The Nation*, 16 July 2005.
- <sup>106</sup> Marc Askew, Thailand’s recalcitrant borderland: insurgency, conspiracies and the disorderly state, *Asian Security*, Vol. 3, No. 2, May 2007.
- <sup>107</sup> For instance, the Deputy Commissioner of the Royal Thai Police, General Adul Saengsingkoew, quickly linked militants to BRN even while his predecessor, Lieutenant-General Thanee Thawidsri, candidly admitted to the authors that the knowledge that authorities had regarding the links between the older generation of separatists and the current generation of militants was still murky.
- <sup>108</sup> Can paper doves bring peace to the south?, *The Nation*, 17 November 2004.
- <sup>109</sup> Eliza Griswold, Dispatches from southern Thailand, *Slate*, 26 September 2005. Available <http://www.slate.com/id/2126807/entry/2126811/>. Accessed 11 August 2009.
- <sup>110</sup> For more on the impact of the coup on the conflict in the south, see Joseph Chinyong Liow and SP Harish, The coup and the conflict in southern Thailand, *Crossroads*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2007.
- <sup>111</sup> The basis or evidence substantiating these allegations is not known.
- <sup>112</sup> Figures taken from *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, November 2007.
- <sup>113</sup> Thailand uses ‘re-education’ to fight Muslim separatists, *Agence France-Presse*, 16 July 2008.
- <sup>114</sup> See: Thailand: Imam’s killing highlights army abuse in the south, Human Rights Watch, 25 March 2008. Available <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/03/25/thailand-imam-s-killing-highlights-army-abuse-south>. Accessed 12 August 2009.
- <sup>115</sup> Army allows detainees to go home, *The Nation*, 18 November 2007.
- <sup>116</sup> By the end of 2007, paramilitary troop strength amounted to 7,500.
- <sup>117</sup> International Crisis Group, *Southern Thailand: the problem with paramilitaries*. Asia Report No. 140, 23 October 2007.
- <sup>118</sup> Telephone interview with a Malay-Muslim Ranger, in January 2008. This ranger joined the force because he was unable to secure other employment. He attributed his inability to get employment to the fact that he lives in Narathiwat’s Sunai Padi district, considered a hotspot for insurgent

- activity. He expressed concern that by joining the paramilitary forces (out of desperation for employment more than anything else), he was placing himself and his family at risk.
- <sup>119</sup> Interview with a local Yala-based politician, Yala, 4 March 2009.
- <sup>120</sup> For example, the police operating in the south continue to report to national headquarters in Bangkok while the military comes under the command of the fourth army stationed in Pattani.
- <sup>121</sup> Yala Task Force holds meeting with members from human rights group aimed to create trust, confidence, *Issara News Center*, 24 January 2008.
- <sup>122</sup> Subhatra Bhumiprabhas, Military tortured us, claimed students, *The Nation*, 4 February 2008.
- <sup>123</sup> Ibid. Tensions have been brewing since, especially after the Muslim Student Federation of Thailand issued a statement on 18 December 2007 criticising the military for the arrest of four students, including the federation's secretary, Aatif Sokho.
- <sup>124</sup> This discussion is extracted from Joseph Chinyong Liow, Iron fists without velvet gloves: the Krue Se Mosque incident and lessons in counterinsurgency for the southern Thai conflict, in C. Christine Fair and Sumit Ganguly (eds), *Treading on hallowed ground: counterinsurgency operations in sacred spaces*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2009.
- <sup>125</sup> This was alleged during the author's interview with religious teachers, Pattani, 11 January 2005.
- <sup>126</sup> The operational theatre in which Krue Se was located came under the jurisdiction of the Fourth Army, not ISOC.
- <sup>127</sup> Quoted in: Thai mosque killings criticised, BBC News, 28 July 2004. Available <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3932323.stm>. Accessed 22 July 2008.
- <sup>128</sup> This was articulated by a senior police officer who was at the scene on 28 April 2004 during a discussion with members of the National Security Council of Thailand, Singapore, 22 December 2004.
- <sup>129</sup> Media for peace, *Bangkok Post*, 9 May 2004.
- <sup>130</sup> Simon Elegant and Andrew Perrin, The road to jihad?, *Time*, 3 May 2004.
- <sup>131</sup> See: Dua tahun tragedi Masjid Krisek (Two years after the Krisek Mosque tragedy), [www.puloinfo.net](http://www.puloinfo.net), undated. Available <http://puloinfo.net/?Show=ReadArticles&ID=28>. Accessed 11 April 2009.
- <sup>132</sup> Graphic images of the blatant violence and ill treatment meted out to the protestors can be found in multiple postings in [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).
- <sup>133</sup> Thai PM's controversial interview with Al Jazeera TV, *The Nation*, 20 February 2008.
- <sup>134</sup> Hostage taking: army image takes beating, *The Nation*, 23 May 2006.
- <sup>135</sup> Tanyong Limo drama: police deny 'death squad' charge, *The Nation*, 28 September 2005.
- <sup>136</sup> See Joseph Chinyong Liow, The security situation in southern Thailand: towards an understanding of domestic and international dimensions, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 27, No. 6, November-December 2004.
- <sup>137</sup> Some examples include: Thais: Bangkok embassy plot foiled, *CBS News*, 10 June 2003; The hard cell, *Time*, 16 June 2003; Jemaah Islamiyah's terror campaign, *CNN.com*, 26 February 2004; Thailand: Al-Qaeda's second front, *Washington Times*, 3 May 2004; Can Thailand keep a lid on the south, *Australian Broadcasting Service Transcript*, 8 May 2004.
- <sup>138</sup> See B. Raman, Bangladesh–Myanmar–Thailand: the jihadi corridor, *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper no. 1102, 28 August 2004.
- <sup>139</sup> John R. Bradley, Waking up to the terror threat in southern Thailand, *Straits Times*, 27 May 2004.
- <sup>140</sup> Information leading to their arrest came from a Singaporean JI member, Arifin bin Ali, aka John Wong, who was apprehended in Bangkok on May 2003 and quickly handed over to the Singaporean Government. Press statement from Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs, 10 June 2003.
- <sup>141</sup> See Noor Huda Ismail, Southern Thailand's conflict: a rare perspective, *Jakarta Post*, 30 March 2008.
- <sup>142</sup> This point was made by Sidney Jones during a seminar at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, on 29 October 2008.
- <sup>143</sup> Interview with a *pemimpin*, Yala, 13 August 2007. It bears noting that there is no evidence that JI has operated in Aceh either.
- <sup>144</sup> According to Lutfi, the '*orang keras*' began the conversation by asking about Islam. They then moved on to ask about the oppression of the Malay-Muslims in southern Thailand. It was then that Lutfi claimed he became suspicious of their intentions. Following this, the three men raised the issue of violence as a legitimate response to the oppression taking place in the southern provinces. It was at this juncture that Lutfi claimed he got involved

- in an argument with the men over the question of the use of violence to resolve the problems in the south, and he subsequently dismissed them. Interview with Ismail Lutfi, Pattani, 14 January 2006. There was, however, no mention of these three men being members of JI.
- <sup>145</sup> Consider, for instance, statements made by Ayman al-Zawahiri after the Madrid and London bombings.
- <sup>146</sup> See John Funston, Troubles in the deep south: importance of external linkages? Paper presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies, DeKalb, Illinois, April 3-6, 2005.
- <sup>147</sup> These range from forums to listserves (such as Nidaa Al-Lyman, Faloja, and Ana Al-Muslim, all of which liken the southern Thailand ‘struggle’ to Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq) and even youtube.
- <sup>148</sup> See <http://pintusyurgadipattani.blogspot.com>. Information regarding this posting can also be found at <http://wincoast.com/forum/showthread.php?t=79676>.
- <sup>149</sup> For a study into the historical links between Patani and Kelantan, see Azizah Yusoff, *Hubungan Patani-Kelantan dari segi sejarah* (Historical perspectives on Patani–Kelantan relations). BA (Hons) thesis, Universiti Malaya, 1976.
- <sup>150</sup> This figure was provided by a senior Thai military commander who had served in the south, during an interview in Hawaii, 1 February 2006.
- <sup>151</sup> Furthermore, there have been unconfirmed reports of Thai paramilitary being apprehended by Malaysian border authorities when they cross the border in pursuit of suspected insurgents.
- <sup>152</sup> Many of the old guard who did not opt to accept the Thai Government’s blanket amnesty offered two decades ago have crossed the border to Malaysia and are now residents, with some even taking up Malaysian citizenship.
- <sup>153</sup> Don Pathan, Mahathir: talk with exiled south leaders, *The Nation*, 1 February 2007.
- <sup>154</sup> Telephone interview with a PULO member, 28 May 2008.
- <sup>155</sup> This remark was shared by Thai intelligence officers to the authors in the course of an interview in Bangkok, 5 January 2008.
- <sup>156</sup> Cigku Mae Puteh is reportedly being held under Malaysia’s Internal Security Act, which permits detention without trial for a renewable two-year period.
- <sup>157</sup> Supalak Ganjanakhundee, Thaksin’s blame game backfires, *The Nation*, 23 December 2004.
- <sup>158</sup> Interview with a senior security officer in Malaysia on 30 January 2007 who spoke on condition of anonymity and has direct experience in dealing with the Patani exiled leaders. Needless to say, the last concern bears heavy political costs for the predominantly Malay–Muslim government of Malaysia.
- <sup>159</sup> Interview with PULO leaders, Kuala Lumpur, 28 May 2008.
- <sup>160</sup> Southern separatists: homeland not on the cards, exile says, *The Nation*, 24 May 2004.
- <sup>161</sup> Indeed, one report has reminded that the creation of such zones is catered for in the Thai Constitution, primarily Article 77 which says ‘the state shall decentralize powers to localities for the purpose of independence and self-determination of local affairs.’ See: No solution apparent as round of attacks signal insurgent pressure, *Asia Sentinel*, 17 January 2008.
- <sup>162</sup> Interview with Thai security officials, Singapore, 1 June 2008.
- <sup>163</sup> Interview with PULO leader, Gothenburg, 6 September 2006.
- <sup>164</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>165</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>166</sup> Wan Kadir had offered to help mediate between the insurgents and the Thai Government, but his offers were rebuffed by the Thaksin administration.
- <sup>167</sup> In truth, dialogue between Thai officials and the old-guard separatist groups is nothing new. Both sides have engaged in such talks in the previous decades, long before the advent of the Thaksin administration or the Langkawi Process. That said, these talks were often ad hoc in nature and never evolved into anything substantive; nor did they have any bearing on overall policy. The old-guard separatists have intimated that among their chief concerns was the lack of consistency in the Thai Government’s dealing with them, for which they have urged the formation of a committee to handle the dialogue process in order to ensure continuity. This proposal all but dissipated when Thaksin came into power and embarked on his ill-informed moves to decimate what he thought was an already-petering Malay–Muslim resistance movement.
- <sup>168</sup> At various stages, then Secretary-General of the National Security Council, General Winai Pathiyakul, former director of the Armed Forces Security

Center, General Vaipot Srinual, and former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun were involved in this process. The exiled old-guard separatists were represented by the president of Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani (GMIP), Ustaz Mohammed Bin Abdul Rahman, PULO Vice-President Razi Bin Hassan, another PULO representative, Ustaz Abu Najhan, BRN-Congress President Abdulah Bin Ismail and Vice-President Abdullah Bin Idris, and former Bersatu President Wan Kadir Che Man. Shazryl Eskay and former Malaysian Chief of Police Norian Mai were the designated mediators.

- <sup>169</sup> Interview with former separatist leader, Kelantan, 24 January 2008.
- <sup>170</sup> Thailand denies talks with southern militants, *International Herald Tribune*, 22 September 2008.
- <sup>171</sup> Positive signals in the south, says Surayud, *The Nation*, 14 May 2007.
- <sup>172</sup> In July 2009, Abhisit replaced Surapol Puenaiyaka with Thawil Pliensri as the Secretary-General of the National Security Council. Thawil is seen as sympathetic to dialogue as an option, while Surapol was known to be against talking to insurgents.
- <sup>173</sup> Interview with *juwae*, Thai–Malaysian border, 16 January 2010.
- <sup>174</sup> Interview with PULO leader, Gothenburg, 11 December 2007.
- <sup>175</sup> Interview with Fourth Army Intelligence officer, Pattani, 14 August 2007.
- <sup>176</sup> Interview with Thai security officials, Singapore, 1 June 2008.
- <sup>177</sup> The only exception cited took place in 2006 when a gunman, presumably an insurgent, shot a border patrol officer in the head while he was inside a mosque in Panare district, Pattani. The gunman had waited for the officer to complete his prayers before shooting. See: Seeing things from a different perspective, *The Nation*, 18 September 2009.
- <sup>178</sup> Interview with *juwae*, Thai–Malaysian border, 16 January 2010. By ‘satisfactory resolution’, the *juwae* essentially mean the trial and conviction of the paramilitary forces they believe to be the perpetrators.

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