
The Islamist Insurgency in Thailand

ZACHARY ABUZA

On January 4, 2004 Islamic militants in southern Thailand launched a daring and well-coordinated raid on an army post and got away with a large cache of weapons that included some 300 M-16s. Since then Thai militants have killed over 1,300 people and wounded thousands more. Their attacks have become more brazen and are meant to terrify; to wit, they are now responsible for over twenty-four beheadings. This insurgency has grown in both size and technical sophistication. Though the government repeatedly asserts that the situation is under control and that it has made more than 700 arrests, Thai security forces have detained very few of the leading militants and have acquired very little actionable intelligence.

The social fabric of the south is coming apart. Over sixty teachers have been killed, which has led to a mass exodus of educators. And because almost a thousand teaching positions are vacant, schools are closed for months at a time. At least ten percent of the Buddhist population has fled, creating a de facto ethnic cleansing, despite the presence of some 80,000 soldiers, police and government personnel. The situation is getting out of control and might soon attract greater interest from the broader international jihadist community.

A Volatile Region

Insurgency is not new to southern Thailand. A devoutly Theravada Buddhist country, Thailand has a Malay Muslim community of roughly five to six million people. Though only five percent of the country's total population, Thai Muslims comprise roughly eighty percent of the population in three provinces—Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani¹—along the border with Malaysia. In this region Muslims have rebelled since the nineteenth century against Thailand's rule and its attempts to inculcate Siamese language, customs and values.

The twentieth century was plagued by insurgent movements, though none posed a

major challenge to the Thai state for several reasons. The insurgent organizations were sharply divided along ideological lines. They included fairly secular ethno-nationalist groups, such as the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO); the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), which was closely aligned with the Malaysian Communist Party (MCP) and received support from Syria and Libya; a hardcore Salafist organization that targeted the beloved Thai monarchy; and the Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Pattani (BNPP), to name but a few. Personal rivalries and internal divisions weakened these groups as well. The BRN split into three distinct factions, for example, with each differing in its degree of Islamic identity. The organizations' ultimate goals and political platforms were also at odds. Some advocated union with Malaysia; others wanted to remain in Thailand, though with greater political and cultural autonomy; others wanted independence; others espoused the establishment of an independent Islamic state.

Unable to cooperate and find a common platform, the rebel groups were slowly picked apart by the Thai government.² By the mid-1990s the insurgency had petered out, and in 2001 newly elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra declared that the insurgency had ended. He then proceeded to dismantle many of the mechanisms that had been credited with defeating the insurgency.

This history raises four interrelated questions: Why has the insurgency resumed? Who is behind it? Why has the Thai government mishandled this new insurgency to the degree that it has? And what is the ideological basis of the movement? The answer to all these questions is Islam. Islamic schools—*madradas*—incubated the insurgency for almost a decade, and distinctly new Islamist organizations, unknown to Thai security forces, are behind the unrest. The Thai government's refusal to acknowledge the perpetrators' Islamist goals and agenda, in fact, accounts in large measure for its failure to counter the insurgency effectively. The implications of these developments are serious for both Thailand and the other states in the region. Thailand is becoming a magnet to *jihadis*, as well as an important propaganda front for the transnational jihadist community.

Insurgent Islamists

Dating the start of the insurgency to the January 2004 raid is a politically motivated and journalistically convenient mistake. The violence began years before that with attacks as early as 2001. But having just declared the insurgency at an end, the government refused to see it for what it was. It saw instead battles between smugglers and underworld criminal gangs. Though violence was being perpetrated by the Islamist groups active today, it was at such a low level that it blended into the overall criminality so endemic in the region.

This more accurate timeline raises the question of whether the insurgency broke out as a result of 9/11. Was it inspired by al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks, or did the insurgents

assume that it was their religious obligation to join the jihad against the United States and its allies? There is no evidence to support this hypothesis. The best information to date indicates that the surrender and capitulation of the insurgent groups in the 1990s frustrated many of their leaders, who spent the next decade acquiring and indoctrinating new recruits in a large number of *madrassas*, which are known in Thailand as *pondoks*. By 2001 they had sufficient manpower to move beyond indoctrination and begin operations.

One of the many reasons Thai officials have mishandled the insurgency is that they did not anticipate the emergence of the new and distinctly Islamist organizations. When the insurgency broke out, they simply went after the usual suspects, rounding up old PULO members. Making things more confusing is the fact that no group has taken responsibility for any of the 2004-2006 attacks, nor has any new organization publicly stated its goals or platform. The Thai government missed the emergence and slow transformation of a number of hardcore Islamist organizations that include the Gerakan Mujahidin Islamiya Pattani (GMIP); the BRN-Coordinate (BRN-C), an outgrowth of the old Barisan Revolusi Nasional organization; and two smaller fringe groups—Jemaah *Salafi* and the New PULO, which was split from PULO in the early 1990s. The GMIP was founded in 1986 but quickly degenerated into a criminal gang until 1995 when two Afghan veterans consolidated power. Since then the rural-based GMIP has led attacks on police and army outposts. The group had close relations with a Malaysian militant organization, the Jemaah Islamiyah-linked Kampulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM), which was also founded by veteran Afghan *mujahidin* in 1995.

The Thai National Security Council has acknowledged the existence of “a new Islamic grouping” that, “through increasing contacts with extremists and fundamentalists in Middle Eastern countries, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines,” has “metamorphosed into a political entity of significance.”³ Thai intelligence also now speaks of the insurgency as being a “*pondok*-based” movement.⁴ As the former commander of Thai forces in the south said, “There is no doubt that the basis for this new insurgency is the *ustadz* [Islamic teachers]. This is something that has been in the making for a long time.”⁵ Beginning in December 2004, the Ministry of Justice’s Special Investigations Department has launched a number of raids on five different *madrassas* and arrested or issued warrants for Islamic teachers from the Thammawittaya Foundation School and the Samphan Wittaya School.⁶ The evidence suggests that these schools, *ustadz* and radical students hail from the old BRN organization and networks established in the 1970s.

The Islamic identification has led to one significant development: an historically unprecedented degree of cooperation—and shared goals—among the insurgent groups. The GMIP, BRN-C, as well as the smaller Jemaah *Salafi* and New PULO, are not at ideological war with one another; indeed, they share an Islamist vision. No group has

credibly claimed responsibility for the attacks or outlined a political platform that could serve as a basis for negotiations: their demands are absolutist. To date, this insurgency has not been about physical space but mental space.

Muslim v. Muslim

This is a religious conflict, but one primarily within the Muslim community itself. Since March 2005, militants have killed more of their co-religionists than they have Buddhists. According to *The Nation*, “Ninth Police Region records show that more than half of the non-security personnel assassinated over the two years are Muslims. In Pattani, Muslim casualties number 330 against 141 Buddhists; in Yala, it is 222 to 99; and in Narathiwat, the figures are 1,406 to 237.”⁷ The ideologically and religiously motivated militants are waging war on their own community, which they find rife with government collaborators and other enemies. Thirteen percent of their victims have been village headmen and 61 percent mostly Muslim civilians. In May 2006 a Muslim police official was gunned down while he was praying in a mosque. Insurgents have targeted fellow Muslims who receive a government salary, Muslim clerics who support the government or who perform funeral rites for *murtad* (apostates), and teachers who work in schools that have mixed curriculums. Countenancing no opposition, they are trying to impose a very austere and intolerant form of Islam on their society.

The conflict in the deep south is more religious in nature than it ever has been. As one former BRN-C member told *Slate* correspondent Eliza Griswold, “The new generation of leaders uses religion as motivation. They turn to events around the world to show how America is treating Muslims, and they use this to motivate people.”⁸ The insurgents firmly ascribe, moreover, to the radical Islamist belief that Islam cannot triumph until it has been purged of corrupting impurities and incorrect interpretations, which include the acceptance of secular rule. At the heart of Salafism is a commitment to remove all innovations or “impurities” that have entered the religion since the death of the Prophet Mohammed. Its goal is to Islamicize society by inculcating it with *Salafi* values and norms that will strengthen the movement, regardless of whether or not these values and norms are popular.

The militants are intimidating their community with a variety of threats: They warn people not to work on Friday, and to observe it as a day of prayer, or to risk death or the amputation of ears; they warn imams not to conduct funeral rites for Muslim security forces, guards at state schools, government employees, or “anyone who receives a salary from the state”; they warn people not to send their children to state-run schools; and they warn everyone not to destroy the leaflets that carry the warnings. The insurgents seem to perceive themselves as operating from a position of strength and seem undeterred by their lack of popularity among the Muslim population. They have introduced

the Wahhabi culture of *takfiri*—condemning fellow Muslims for their lax interpretation of Islam. Rather than trying to create a mass-based movement, they are trying to impose a strict interpretation of Islam on society, which they believe will strengthen the Muslim community (*ummah*). There is some evidence that their efforts may be weakening, but it is also clear that the insurgency has never been so Islamicly-oriented.

Differing Views

Not everyone agrees with this assessment. Joseph Liow still sees the conflict as more criminal than religious in nature.⁹ Francesca Lawe-Davies, of the respected International Crisis Group (ICG), sees far more religious identification than ever before, but she sees it wrapped up in terms of national identification.¹⁰ S. P. Harish of IDSS thinks that the conflict is not religious in nature but that the militants use religion to “deepen the Thai-Malay divide.” Harish argues that the “frequent portrayal of the conflict as religious nourishes the Buddhist-Muslim cleavage. Minority elites, who include separatist leaders, play a significant role in sustaining these subaltern identities.”¹¹

Such veteran journalists as Don Pathan of *The Nation* do see the influence of Wahhabism on the new generation of militants, however. As the old insurgency was dying out, the current militants were being instructed for the better part of a decade in Thailand’s roughly 500 private *pondoks*. Their ranks were increased, moreover, by some 2,500 graduates of Middle Eastern institutions—a critical mass—who have returned to the south.¹² While Wahhabis are still a distinct minority in the region, their influence and numbers are growing steadily. At the same time the region’s traditional Sha’afi community is becoming more theologically and ideologically conservative and pious.

The south still remains, nonetheless, a very diverse region theologically. Moderate Sha’afis and Sufis have rejected Wahhabi approaches and, because of the conditions attached, Wahhabi financial support. As one Sha’afi told a reporter, “They came here to offer money to complete the school on the condition that we permit Wahhabi teachers.”¹³ But there is no doubt that Wahhabism is gaining strength. Thailand’s leading Wahhabi cleric, Ismail Lutfi, is on the board of directors of the Muslim World League, and millions of dollars have poured into his new Islamic College of Yala. Other Saudi and Gulf funds have poured into southern Thailand via the Pusaka Foundation and a branch of the Kuwaiti Om al Qura charity.

A Revealing Document

Attempts to evaluate the religious nature of the insurgency have been further complicated by a captured document, *Ber Jihad Di Pattani* (“Waging Jihad in Pattani”).¹⁴ This booklet has two distinct parts and, in the English translation, is twenty-two

pages long. The main section is structured in the form of a seven-day series of sermons. The remaining text includes an introduction, commentary, and an epilogue by a Malaysian cleric, Assuluk Ismuljaminah, of Kelantan. Though August 10, 2002 is affixed to the preface, the booklet is undated.

This document has generated considerable debate. Some see it as proof that the jihadists in southern Thailand are not salafis. They point to Sufi references, noting that salafis constantly try to purge their religion of Sufi heresy. They also emphasize two other facts: (1) The book seems to support the Sha'afi school of jurisprudence, the most common school in Southeast Asia, that the salafis tend to reject, and (2) it calls for the restoration of the Pattani sultanate rather than a pan-Islamic caliphate. But others point out that the booklet advocates martyrdom and implores the reader to become a *shaheed*—a martyr. It echoes the language of many other *salafi-jihadi* tracts—focusing on the idea that Islam is under attack, that there is a global conspiracy against Islam and that it must be defended at all costs.

From the first sermon, the author refers to the congregation as “*shaheed* warriors.” And each successive sermon is longer and more incensed, calling on the *shaheed* warriors to make greater sacrifices. The author chastises them for their complacency and goads them into action:

We should be ashamed of ourselves for sitting idly by and doing nothing while our brothers and sisters are trampled on by our conquerors. Our wealth that belongs to us and the wealth of our country are stolen. Our properties have been confiscated and our assets stolen from us. Our rights and freedoms have been curbed and our religion and culture have been sullied.

He reminds them that they are under the strictest religious obligation: “It is clarified that fighting to protect various rights is a responsibility that every one must fulfill.”

While the document does make many references to the Prophet Mohammed, who is usually downplayed in the writings and oratory of Salafism, it reflects the core of the *salafi* approach, which is to attack *munafiks* (Muslims who do not live in accordance with *sharia*) and *murtad* (apostasy). The booklet gives theological justification and instructions for killing both non-Muslims and Muslims who, even if they do not collaborate with the Thai government, are not cooperating with the jihadists. The author is unequivocal in his assertion that the greatest threat to “our honorable Islam” (i.e., Salafism) comes from fellow Muslims:

It is certain among the group of infidels [*munafiks* is the term used in the text] that they are the most dangerous enemies of God and ours for they are together within the Muslim circle. Sometimes you may see them fulfilling responsibility

before God, such as praying, fasting, giving alms, etc. In reality, all their actions or practices are a disguise, for their hearts are filled with hatred and anger against Islam. And they have fear against the laws and orders of Islam [i.e., they do not live in accordance with *sharia*].

These *munafiks* undermine their faith in two ways: by not living in accordance with *sharia* and, thereby collaborating with the Thai state.

One last point should be made about this document: its significance might well be overrated. It is a single document and, being one of the few found, received a great deal of media attention when it was leaked to the press by Thai security forces. We have little or no knowledge, however, about the teachings in the *dawa* sessions where most of the indoctrination takes place.

It is clear, though, that the insurgents are more religiously motivated than they have been in the past, and that previously secular groups are now dominated by religious leaders who are trying to impose an Islamic state. Whether the militants have a shared ideology with Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) or al-Qaeda is hard to tell at this point. To date the role of JI or foreigners in southern Thailand has been minimal, and the insurgents have not expanded their activities beyond the Muslim south, with the exception of two attacks in Songkhla's Hat Yai city. They have not bombed soft targets in Bangkok or Phuket, for example. While executing over 400 indiscriminate bombings that have killed some one hundred people and wounded hundreds more, they have thus far stayed focused on the "near," rather than the "far," enemy. Yet attacks have been decidedly sectarian and brutal.

Domestic Rebellion or International Front?

The Thai government has gone to great lengths to state that this is a domestic insurgency with no foreign roots. As a Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman said, "The causes of the situation (are) domestic. It's not part of any international terrorist network, but of course we are concerned about the introduction of extremist ideologies among the youths. We are concerned about the possibility of extremist groups in the region connecting together, and this could become a serious problem."

Though evidence pointing to JI links is limited, there are still several reasons to be suspicious. First and foremost, JI approached both the GMIP and Jemaah *Salafi* in 1999-2000 and invited them to a series of three meetings known as the *Rabitatul Mujahidin*—though it is unknown how deep or strong a relationship was forged. Thai intelligence officials have estimated that 120 to 150 Thais passed through Afghanistan over the two decades beginning in 1982, increasingly in 1988-89 when the *mujahidin* structure there became better organized.¹⁵

The arrests of prominent Islamists in Thailand also suggest that Thai insurgents may have ties to some international terrorist groups. Hambali, JI's operational chief and a senior member of al-Qaeda, was captured in Thailand, along with his two lieutenants, Zubair Mohamad and Bashir bin Lap (Lillie), who were charged with perpetrating a major terrorist attack in Bangkok. Lillie was arrested along with a local Thai *mujahid*, Awang Ibrahim. A Singaporean JI member, Arifin bin Ali, was captured in Thailand, where he was allegedly plotting to hijack an Aeroflot jetliner to crash it into Singapore. Several southern Thai militants were arrested in conjunction with a JI cell in Cambodia that was implicated in laundering money for al-Qaeda through the Om Al Qura Foundation.

The fact that one of JI's leaders and a key planner of the October 2002 Bali bombing, Ali Ghufron (Mukhlas), was given refuge by Thailand's leading Wahhabi cleric, Ismail Lutfi, also testifies to the existence of, at the very least, social links. Other JI members have sought refuge in southern Thailand as well. Thai security officials are aware of such links, but they have been unable to detect anything more than passive support for JI. In the April 2004 siege at the Krue Se mosque in Pattani, two Indonesians were killed and a third—an employee of the Medical Emergency Relief Charity (MERC), an organization related to JI, that supports JI-linked paramilitaries in the Maluku and Poso, Indonesia—was arrested and deported. Recent reports about the Indonesian leader Mudeh's influence in Thailand are sketchy, but it is clear that more Thai militants have been training in Indonesia than was previously thought. Thai authorities now regularly speak of an Indonesian network of the BRN-C known as the Runda Kumpulan Kecil.

JI nonetheless remains, as it always has been, focused first and foremost on Indonesia. It is currently regrouping and has little reason to increase activity in Thailand. Like al-Qaeda JI is less a monolithic organization than an organizational network based on a shared ideology, and it has limited means for strengthening the Thai insurgency other than offering a bit more training and support. From its point of view, moreover, everything in southern Thailand is going along swimmingly. The militants there share similar goals and values, and the technological proficiency of their bomb-makers make JI somewhat superfluous. In short, JI does not have to be involved.

Conclusion

It can be said with certainty that the insurgency in southern Thailand has never been as Islamist as it is today. *Salafi* principles and values, such as *takfiri*, are being injected into the conflict, making it more of a cultural war than a traditional insurgency. Though the groups involved have said almost nothing about their goals and ideology, their actions have been absolutist. Their current objective appears to be three-fold: to weed out moderates who support the government and oppose the Islamist agenda of the militants; to

make the region ungovernable so that they can establish parallel political institutions (known as *hijrah*); and to alienate the local population from the government by provoking Thai security forces to make heavy-handed crackdowns—as they did at Krue Se in April 2004 and Tak Bai October 2004—or to establish hit squads.¹⁶ Yet, as no group as stated its goals or platforms, there is very little in the way of an ideological paper trail.

There is palpable concern among many observers that, as bleed-out occurs in Iraq, the situation in southern Thailand will attract foreign *ihadis* who will want to escalate the conflict. Right now, the only silver lining of the war in Iraq may be that it is attracting most of the itinerant *ihadis* and most of the attention of the world's angry Muslims. Thus far, Thailand has remained low on their list of grievances toward the West and apostate regimes, well behind Iraq, Palestine, Pakistan, Afghanistan, North Africa, Kashmir, Chechnya, Mindanao and Indonesia. But there are already some signs that this is changing. The veteran Middle East journalist Amir Taheri wrote in a March article in the pan-Arab *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper that “international jihadist circles” on the internet and across the Muslim world were discussing the possibility of waging a broader *ihad* in southern Thailand. “The buzz in Islamist circles is that well-funded Jihadist organizations may be preparing a takeover bid for the southern Thailand insurgency.”¹⁷

NOTES

1. There is also a majority Muslim population in the neighboring province of Satun and in certain districts of Songkhla.
2. The government was assisted by other factors as well. First, in return for the right to pursue MCP rebels into Thailand, the Malaysian government gave substantial assistance to their Thai counterparts and never let the ethnic-Malay rebels develop an infrastructure in Malaysia that would allow them to wage a larger guerilla war. Second, starting in the late 1980s, the Thai economy took off and was the fastest growing economy in the world by the mid-1990s. While the ethnic-Malay-dominated provinces are poorer and lag behind the national average in most measures of development, they are still not the poorest region in the country. Finally, the Thai government had very good counterinsurgency tactics and operations. Officials understood that this was primarily a political, rather than a military, struggle. For that reason the military never operated alone. The Thai government put in place a joint command of civilian, police and military officials. This unified command coordinated operations and intelligence, and also served as an important community liaison and dispute-resolution mechanism. The government employed amnesties to great effect and directed development funds into the region.
3. Cited in Shawn Crispin, “Strife Down South,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 January 2004.
4. The Thai Ministry of Education has registered 214 Islamic schools but acknowledges that there are hundreds of small, unregistered, privately-owned *pondoks*. “Muslim Teachers Extend Cautious Welcome to Aree,” *The Nation*, September 2004.
5. Simon Elegant, “Southern Front,” *Time-Asia*, 11 October 2004.
6. The school, which is one of the largest Islamic schools in Thailand, was founded in 1951 by Haji Muhamad Tohe Sulong and has some 6,000 students, spread across four separate campuses. It has 196 *ustadz*, or Islamic teachers. The curriculum is mixed, however, and only 400 students solely study Islam.

7. Supalak Ganjanakhundee and Don Pathan, "From Guerrillas to Terrorists: New Face of Violence," *The Nation*, 9 January 2006.
8. Eliza Griswold, "Dispatches from Southern Thailand," *Slate*, 27 September 2005.
9. See, for example, Joseph Liow, "Over-reading the Islamist Factor in Thailand's Southern Troubles," *Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) Commentaries*, 10 March 2005, at www.idss.edu.sg/publications/Perspectives/IDSS112005.pdf.
10. Francesca Lawe-Davies, talk at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand, Bangkok, 11 January 2006.
11. S. P. Harish, "Insurgency in Southern Thailand: Ethnic or Religious Conflict?" *IDSS Commentaries*, 14 April 2005, at www.idss.edu.sg/publications/Perspectives/IDSS172005.pdf.
12. Don Pathan, "Planning for a Peaceful Future in the South," *The Nation*, 28 August 2005.
13. Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Thailand: International Terrorism and the Muslim South," in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2004* (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies [ISEAS], 2004).
14. Found in Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya, Sabrina Chua, eds., *Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand*, (Marshall Cavendish Academic). 2006.
15. Author interview, Kuala Lumpur, 19 April 2005
16. "Army Chief Admits Agencies Are Using 'Blacklists' in South," *The Nation*, 26 April 2006; "Govt Must Probe Blacklist Fiasco," *The Nation*, 28 April 2006
17. Quoted in Ismail Wolff, "Jihadist Threat to South Insurgency," *Thai Day*, 13 March 2006.