



Thailand: insurgency in the South

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The present situation in Southern Thailand cannot be understood without taking into consideration the history of the regions of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani all of which are mainly populated by Muslims. Therefore an overview as of the early 20th century (1902) when the Reign of Siam annexed the three regions in order to use them as a buffer zone against the British Malaya is necessary. Since then relations between these groups, perceived before as a Thai majority and Malay minority, and then as Thai-Buddhist and Malay-Muslim - in fact there are significant differences in terms of percentage between the two groups: the Thai ethnic group includes 75% of total population, but Buddhists are approximately 94,6%; as for the Muslim group, they count 4,6%, but realistically the Malay ethnic group includes less people - have changed radically, especially in respect of the central government's policies.

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In order to avoid misunderstandings I will proceed by analysing the different parties and organizations that constitute the galaxy of the Muslims' representatives. They have changed their features in conformity with the evolution of the central government's policies so as to guarantee the survival of their community.

Of particular interest is the Thaksin's policy towards the insurgency. The Governments "iron fist" policy is wrongly understood as a consequence of the shift to a more violent approach by the Muslim organizations on the south. For this reason it is certainly useful to analyse from the beginning the escalation of violence that exploded in January 4th, 2004 when an Army depot in Narathiwat was raided by more than 30 armed insurgents resulting in the death of 4 Thai soldiers.

New expectations for a possible solution to the conflict are placed on the coup d'état of September 19th, 2006 led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin. The coup overthrew the Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, whose mishandling of the southern insurgency is considered as being one of its "primary" causes. Nevertheless the complexity of the issue implies some clarity in order to understand the steps required to improving relations between government and insurgents.

Historical Roots of the Issue

In 1902, when Siam annexed the three provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, they were part of the Sultanate of Patani ("Pattani" with two "T" is the Thai spelling, but the original Malay spelling is "Patani"), established at the end of the 14th century and considered by some scholars as the birthplace of Islam in Southeast Asia. Already before 1902 there was nominal Siamese control over the area, but the Sultanate was free to maintain a substantial economical, political, and cultural independence and the hierarchical relations were represented by the dispatch of gold and silver to the King as a symbol of loyalty.

The annexation was strengthened in 1909 by an Anglo-Siamese treaty that drew a border between Patani and the Malay states of Kelantan, Perak, Kedah, and Perlis. The central policy made by Bangkok imposed Thai officials sent directly from the capital. That it is just an example of the attempt to force an assimilation policy demolishing the traditional local structures, causing resistance and tensions by the Malay minorities. A religious connotation grew when the local communities substituted the traditional elite with the teachers - the Tok Guru - of the religious boarding school - the Ponoh (from the Arabic word Fondok) - as "community leaders, defenders of the faith, and upholders of the Malay identity".

Those of these years were the first opposers to the Siamese rulers. They were led by different personalities and assumed various traits: the last Sultan of Patani - Tengku Abdul Kadir - who opposed a passive resistance (1903); his subsequent arrest increased tensions leading to an uprising in Bangkok (1906); the Sufi sheiks who led an uprising calling for a jihad against the infidel Siamese government (1910).

The Government's reaction was meant to reduce tensions, but it was in fact another attempt to assimilate the Malay-Muslim minorities. Indeed the principal reforms were directed at the educational system with the "Compulsory Primary Education Act", which obliged all children to attend state primary school for four years in order to learn the Thai language and Buddhist ethic too. As predictable, the Tok Guru perceived the reform as an attack to their language, religion and culture and as an attempt to supplant the Ponohs. Therefore they organized massive protests against the government's policies: first of all, education policy and taxes, explicitly in disadvantage for the Southern communities. In this case the government reaction was quite contradictory because it removed the unwelcome officials and reduced the taxes, but at the same time arrested and executed suspected leaders. Until the end of the 30s the situation did not present any significant variations. However, with Phibun Songkhram and his ultra-nationalist Pan-Thai policy, it started a nationalist assimilation approach with a consequent period of confrontation. The most important aspects of his policy are:

- A ban on Malays serving in government offices;
- Thai names were "warmly" recommended;
- Prohibition to dress in public the traditional Muslim-Malay clothes;
- Cultural mandates to assimilate ethnic minorities;
- Buddha statues were placed in every public school.

These policies were understood as a challenge to southern culture; thus it is from this period that organized movements started to fight against the assimilation. During the war period and until the 60s the situation shifted constantly from a conciliatory approach made by the government (the Prime Minister Pridi Phanomyong introduced the "Patronage of Islam Act" in 1944, which included Muslim leaders into the State structures in order to advise the king

on matters related to Islam), to riots in the South by insurgents (during the second part of the 40s the Patani People's Movement - PPM - established by Sulong bin Abdul Kabir bin Mohammad el Patani - alias Haji Sulong - organized numerous demonstrations in order to petition for political and cultural rights, as well as the implementation of Islamic law); from a new, severe, plan devised in Bangkok (after the coup by Phibun Songkhrum in 1947, the common approach was to imprison religious leaders and southern parliamentarians) to violent rebellions in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat (when at least 400 Muslims died in the Dusun Nyur rebellion, the religious leaders of Malaysia and three Southern Thai provinces called for a defensive jihad against Thai authorities).

In the 60s and 70s the situation became more and more strained, with the evolution of the Muslim-Malay movements towards a violent line of attack and the tough response made by the Thai authorities. In fact the insurgents' tactic was to hit the police posts and government buildings, and to extort money from rubber and coconut plantation owners, villagers, and local businessmen. The typical governmental responses were military operations.

The circumstances drastically changed when Prem Tinasulanond took office in 1980. He was chosen directly by King Bhumibhol - thanks to His Network Monarchy - in order to resolve or at least soften the southern problem. Prem had much better understanding of the identity policies and the local grievances than his predecessors, he was a liberal-pragmatic-military general with southern origins, and therefore he knew the insurgents' leaders too. As a result, his new strategy - the so-called "Thai Rom Yen", that can be translated as "peace on the south" - emphasized the participation of Muslim leaders in political life; particular attention was dedicated to the economic development of the Southern areas with the improvement of infrastructure, the connection of the electricity and water grids to the remote Southern areas, and a broad amnesty was granted. Furthermore he contributed to building a new monitoring system to coordinate the shift from confrontation to negotiation with the joint participation of representatives from the military, civil, and police sectors - the so-called CPM 43. Of utmost importance was the establishment of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) where the political matters were managed. The principal problems addressed to the SBPAC were: a better coordination among agencies and the fight against corruption and prejudices among officials. With Prem's policy the violence and the number of clashes dropped off significantly, and a period of substantial calm characterized the 80s until the financial crisis of the 1997.

The financial crisis made it possible for Thaksin Shinawatra to win the elections in 2001. He was a tycoon from the communications sector; his electoral campaign - that only his means could have funded - was based on his image of a businessman able to improve the chances of the national economy. For the first time a Prime Minister was elected by a strong popular base, without any connection to the Monarchy, consequently Thaksin was able to dismantle the southern local elite loyal to Prem Tinasulanond and to the "Network Monarchy". Additionally it is the case to remember that the major party in the South is the "Democrat Party", first opponent of the Thaksin's "Thai Rak Thai" - the party "Thais love Thai". Therefore this region was the first place where it was applied the strategy that Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand defined as the "Thaksinization of Thailand".

Thaksin's first decision was the dismantlement of the important SBPAC (2002), and of the CPM 43 too. Thaksin nominated as Deputy Commander of the 4th Division stationed on the south Songkitti Chakkabhatra, who had never served in the south. Songkitti's role was to

study and report on the situation. His statement was that separatism was no longer an issue; "that disputes between disgruntled interest groups, including within and between the security services, were driving violence and that the sooner the security situation was normalised, the quicker these problems would be resolved". In this way Thaksin was able to control the provincial police (In fact Thaksin - through Songkitti's advice - decided to withdraw the Army from Yala and Pattani considering the police sufficient for the monitoring of the area), commonly perceived as a dumping ground for corrupt and inefficient officers from other regions. Moreover it is necessary to recall that the hostility between the police and the Army is another destabilising factor in the Southern provinces.

An anonymous document made by someone who had access to confidential information assumes singular value giving credit to the so-called "Conspiracy Theory". This document catalogued the incidents in the south according to the responsibility of the criminal acts. Following its content it is clear that accountability has to be assigned to the regular soldiers, policemen, as well as to the politicians. Similarly the Police dossier on the incidents of January 4th 2004 mentions: "Weapons from the army development unit 4 had been stolen by army insiders who concocted the insurgent robbery story to cover their tracks". In this sense the "conspiracy theory" explicates that the Armed Forces would plot against the government sustaining the violence in order to discredit national security policies. Both the police and the army can become active parts of the conspiracy according to the corruption of policemen and the refusal, by the soldiers of the 4th Division, to recognize Songkitti as their Deputy Commander. Actually Songkitti was perceived as a tool of Thaksin's policy directed at weakening the Democrat Party.

Therefore some of the principal problem are:

- Thaksin's policy aimed at destabilizing the South, historically loyal to the Democrat Party and (from the 80s) to the "Network Monarchy" and the Prem's elite;
- Internal division of the Army weakened by several policies favourable to the Police and by a refused Commander;
- High level of corruption among the policemen;
- Possible connivance between insurgents and policemen.

It is quite easy to understand the escalation of violence in the southern provinces of Thailand, without turning to the abused concepts of "clash of civilizations", "jihad", and "war on terrorism".

Structure and Components of the Insurgents

In order to understand Southern Thailand's insurgency it is of absolute importance to analyse the structure of the rebels, from their organization up to the goals and aims that moved them to fight against the government.

- Active organizations until 70's-80's

Patani People's Movement (PPM)

It is probably the very first organized movement in southern Thailand. It was established by Sulong bin Abdul Kabir bin Mohammad el Patani (alias Haji Sulong) in the mid-40's. He was a modernist intellectual, educated in Mecca and deeply influenced by the reformist ideas of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. His approach was characterized by a deep religious faith accompanied by a populist nationalism. The fundamental aims of the PPM were:

- Obtaining political self-rule;
- Concession and respect by the central government of both the language and the cultural rights for the Malay minority;
- Implementation of Islamic law.

After the coup of 1947 Haji Sulong was imprisoned together with other leaders (religious as well as political) as a consequence of tough central policy. When its leader died, the organization disintegrated.

Gabungan Melayu Pattani Raya (GAMPAR)

The "Greater Pattani Malayu Association" was formed in Malaya with the essential purpose of incorporating Thailand's four majority Muslim provinces into a Malaysian Union. The movement collapsed when the leader died.

Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani (BNPP)

It is the first organised armed group calling for Patani's full independence. Its constitution dates back to 1959. It was composed by small groups of persons and the tactic was to destabilize the region and make it seem ungovernable (as we can see the tactic of destabilizing the region is not an "invention" of the Armed Forces) in order to provoke a reason for attracting new recruits and induce the other Muslim governments to pressure the Thai government. The recruitments moved on two fronts: on one hand the BNPP recruited thugs and bandits as guerrilla leaders to organise the operations; on the other hand the religious leaders selected students and teachers nominating them for political and military training, which took place not only in Thailand, but also in Libya, Syria and Afghanistan. In fact the BNPP network maintained relations with external subjects such as the Al-Azhar University in Cairo where they established a centre for advocacy and fund raising, as well as with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). At the moment the organization has ceased its activities in Thailand. It is believed to have been involved in some attacks during the most recent events of violence. The BNP is headquartered in northern Malaysia.

The BNPP became BIPP (Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani - Patani Islamic Liberation Front -) in 1986. The name emphasizes its own loyalty to Islamism and the ideological relocation in a radical creed is partly due to the success of the Iranian revolution. Another important split took place in 1985 when some radical militant leaders broke off to establish the BBMP (Barisan Bersatu Mujahidin Patani - United Patani Mujahidin Front -), a more extreme group that called for the jihad against the kafir Thai government.

Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN)

The BRN was founded on 13th March 1960 after the "Educational Improvement Program", a reform known as an effort to assimilate the Muslims and the Malays. Its founder was Karim Assan, young intellectuals and foreign-educated Muslims composed the leadership. The ideology of the BRN was described as progressive and usually is defined as "Islamic socialism". The principal aim was the creation of an independent republic of Patani including the regions of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun, and part of Songkhla. The Barisan Revolusi Nasional was more active on the political side than on the military one. It had particular influence on and contacts with the religious schools; nevertheless a small wing (150-200 men) led by Jehku Baku embraced the military solution.

Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO)

In 1968 the PULO became known as one of the largest and more efficient movements in the insurgency's panorama. It was set up by Kabir Abdul Rahman (alias Tengku Bira Kotanila) in India. Its ideology can be described with the official motto: "Religious, Race, Homeland, Humanitarianism", for that reason it is generally considered to be politically moderate with a noteworthy independence from both conservative Islam and former elites and socialism. The goal is the building of an Independent Islamic State, even if with a political agenda that is more focused on regional and ethnic independence, but with a large use of Koranic citations in order to justify the use of violence. Covering almost all the social aspects (politics, religion, ethnicity) it was one of the more influential organizations until the end of the 70s, by means of armed struggle, raising educational level and political consciousness.

Younger activists, many of whom had studied abroad, composed the PULO's leadership. Recruiters selected both Patani Muslims studying in Malaysia and abroad (especially the Middle East - indeed the most senior leaders were based in Mecca), and religious teachers in Southern Thailand. The military section of PULO was extremely well organised, with one of the best trained and equipped fighting forces - many fighters were trained in foreign countries (especially in Syria along the border with Lebanon) as well as by foreign instructors coming from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO); it was active in all four majority Muslim provinces thanks to the millions of dollars given by Arab leaders (particularly Libya and Syria). PULO was one of the main organisers of the 1975 mass protests. PULO is a popular organization formed to represent the Malay people of the southern predominantly Malay provinces. It considers the Thai constitution illegitimate in the area and its members are not under Thai jurisdiction. Therefore, if Thai justice system practices such inhumane activity, then PULO reserves itself the right to react.

Almost all the organizations that were active in this period were weakened by different campaigns carried on by the government during the 70's. As a result the organizations splintered and many leaders left with the intention of establishing new organisations, which - translated into practice - meant the constitution of more radical and Islamist groups, helped from private individuals and conservative Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Pakistan.

- Active Organizations until Nowadays

Since the 80's until today we can count more or less the same organizations as before, but

with important differences that made them more violent and unwilling to accept any compromise, especially with the Thaksin's entourage.

Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Koordinasi (BRN-C)

Currently the "National Revolutionary Front-Coordinate" is the strongest and best organised among the active separatist groups. It is one of the three factions formed after the BRN disintegrated during the 80's. The two less important sections are:

- The "BRN Congress" is an armed faction of BRN (1984), led by Che Kupeng alias Rosa Buraso, until he died in April 2005; it also has expatriate leadership in Europe, but at the present moment it has no military presence in Thailand.
- The "BRN Ulama" is a non-violent faction of BRN comprised of Islamic clergy. It is led by Wan Muhamad Wan Yusuf, in Perak, Northern Malaysia.

The BRN-C broke away in 1980, led by "Haji M", whose objective was long-term expansive support in Islamic schools, with a limited use of guerrilla warfare. Thus BRN-C is built on a large network of mosques and Ponohs. The role of the Ponohs in the recent insurgency is of extreme importance, and the BRN-C is often described as the spearhead of the riots. Actually BRN-C is striving to become a mass movement (in a BRN document that was found in Narathiwat's Joh I Rong district, there was a plan to increase popular support to between 200,000 and 300,000 people), not only for that which concerns "passive" support, but also for the paramilitary wing. According to official Thai statements no more than 1,000 members comprise the basis of the movement. The leadership is constituted by teachers from approximately 18 schools. The schools suspected to be the training places of potential terrorists are: the Thamawittiya Foundation School in Yala, the Samphan Wittaya School, Jihad Wittaya School and Pattana Islam. In many cases, the individuals involved were trained in Afghanistan. The BRN-C fights to achieve a pan-Malay independent Republic of Pattani. Similar to other separatist organizations fighting in southern Thailand, the BRN-C targets government and police forces and other perceived symbols of Thai repression.

Bersatu/Pemuda

Bersatu means "United" in Malay and the complete name of this organization is usually "United Front for the Independence of Pattani". There are several names that refer to this organization: Payong Organization, Ber Satu, Patani Malay's People Consultative Council (Majelis Permesyuaratan Rakyat Melayu Patani, MPRMP) and so on. Bersatu is an umbrella organization with the idea of unifying local resources so that foreign sources of support can be refused. It includes elements of several groups such as the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Pattani (BRN), as well as the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), the Mujahadeen Pattani and the Barisan Nasional Pember-Basan (BNPP). It was formed in Malaysia by exiles of the above-mentioned organizations and one of its members admitted that there is no operational control over the members. The group has employed the tactic of deploying small-armed bands to carry out guerrilla activities in the jungles. They set up no permanent bases on Thai soil. Instead, they are on the move all the time and avoid engaging in armed clashes with Thai Government authorities. It is currently led by Wan Kadir Che Man, who is based in Sweden. Its composition is very small and it is believed to be formed by no more than 60 components. Nevertheless a large part of the incidents are conducted under its guidance. The most important operation was the so-called "Falling

Leaves" operation launched between August 1997 and January 1998, in which state workers, law enforcement personnel, local government officials, schoolteachers and other perceived symbols of Thai repression were targeted in 33 different attacks. It is worth mentioning another peculiar fact related to this group: Bersatu issued a public warning to tourists to avoid the resort town of Phuket. It is one of the rare warnings made by Southern Thailand's insurgent organizations.

Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani (GMIP)

This group (Patani Islamic Mujahidin Patani) was established in 1995 by Afghani veterans. Its founder is Nasoree Saesang, who was trained in Libya and fought with the Afghani Mujahidin in the early 90s. The GMIP political agenda includes the constitution of an independent Patani and its network covers many international partners (for example, in late 2001 - after the 9/11 attacks -, leaflets were distributed in Yala calling for jihad and support for Osama bin Laden, in the service of the separatist cause). It is the derivative of the first GMIP founded in 1986. At the beginning it was more a criminal organization (engaged in kidnapping, extortion, contract killings) than a real group of insurgents. Jemaah Islamiya (JI) also approached the GMIP in 1999-2000, as a part of Rabitatul Mujahideen, but at the present moment it is unknown how deep the relations between the two groups are. It has interacted with the Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia (KMM), thus KMM procured them weapons and trainers. It is probably the strongest group refusing any Government offer of amnesty.

New Patani United Liberation Organization (new PULO)

The new PULO was founded in 1995 by two ex-members of the PULO: Arong Mooreng and Hayi Abdul Rohman Bazo. It is the smallest of the active armed groups and it too is fighting for an independent Patani State. Its strategy is similar to the one of the active groups of the past: it pursues a series of small attacks in order to minimise the loss of components and to destabilise the region as well, therefore the principal targets of the new PULO are the governmental buildings rather than Buddhist or police objectives. Many of the new PULO's leaders were trained in Libya and Syria and they possess significant bomb-making skills. It remains active in spite of the arrests of the main key leaders.

This description of insurgent organizations is not exhaustive. It is possible to count groups such as the Mujahideen Islamic Patani Group, the Sri Nakhro, and others but the above list is sufficient to describe the organizations and movements active in Southern Thailand.

Therefore from this list it is possible to trace a catalogue of their characteristics:

- They are national-based organisations without at the moment any connection with international terrorist movements (with the only exception of the Bersatu/Pemuda group);
- After the 80's and especially as a result of the "iron fist" policy of Thaksin, they radicalized and Islamized their political agenda becoming involved in more and more violent actions;
- No group has ever taken responsibility for any of the 2004-2006 attacks, nor has any new organization publicly stated its goals or platform.
- The principal tactics are extortion, kidnapping, as well as murders in order to collect funds. The situation probably changed after the January 2004's assault on the police depot.
- The goals are very similar, but they act without any organised cooperation. Nevertheless the share of a common Islamist agenda could open unprecedented possibilities of coordination and collaboration.

Southern Thailand as a part of the "Global Jihad"?

Analysing the Southern Thailand issue, it seems to be a matter that includes at the same time two antithetic and opposite interpretations:

- From the governmental point of view, the issue is totally related with the internal situation, the insurgents are all but terrorists involved in the global jihad. The rebels are not freedom fighters, but simply bandits, narcotic smugglers, kidnappers, as well as people searching for easy money exploiting the religious cause. Probably this attitude has changed since the elections of 2005, when Thaksin presented himself as the defender of Thai culture which is threatened by Muslim barbarism. The first step Thaksin made - as base for his election campaign - was to scare the central and northern Thai inhabitants declaring the presence of terrorists on Thai soil. His second step was to declare that the Malaysian forests are the training camps and Indonesian peasants potential recruits for the ideological formation of the future revolutionary separatists.
- According to a large number of analysts, the Southern Thailand conflict is another example of the so-called "clash of civilizations" that run down along cultural and religious fault lines. In this case the line is between the Thai-Buddhist culture of Thailand and the Malay-Muslim culture of the Thai southern provinces (Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and part of Songkhla). As Huntington argued, the particular identities might be dominated by the stronger religious one. For that reason these kinds of conflicts stimulate the internationalization of the conflict. In this way the concept of "Us versus Them" enlarges the spectrum of subjects involved in the conflict, justifying in the Thai context too, the participation of international terrorists and affiliated organizations.

Both interpretations can be considered as correct, but at the same time they lack a complete vision of the issue. Thus this approach is Hegelian: from the thesis (point 1) and the antithesis (point 2) I will try to extract the synthesis.

As mentioned before tactics are still antiquated and principally based on extortion and kidnapping local businessmen. Nevertheless from the assault of October 25th, 2004 the techniques and tactics of attacks have developed, maintaining a continuous series of attacks at regular intervals. What started as sporadic acts of terrorism has been transformed into sustained acts of insurgency.

At the beginning, and currently, the targets were mainly policemen, governmental buildings and the other symbols of the Thai central government. Today the targets are Buddhist civilians, monks, teachers and other symbols of Thai culture. For example it is often reported that during an assault on a bus the Malay-Muslims were separated from the Thai-Buddhist and only the latter were killed by the assaulters. Until 2004 the targeted killing implied the use of the hand-held weapons - such as revolvers, pistols, and weapons rudely made locally. One of the most frequent Modus Operandi for assassinations was for two terrorists to use a motorbike, the one on the back using a weapon to kill the target. This helps in rapid escapes after the killing and reduces the risk of being captured by bystanders or the police. Again we should highlight the shift in weapons and Modus Operandi: more and more the use of Improvised Explosives Devices (IEDs) has been observed. When this began the explosives would be procured locally and the quality was lacking in complexity; currently the techniques used in assembling the IEDs indicate some sophistication involving special training, either locally or in foreign countries. For example, the first car bomb explosion on February 17th, 2005 (17 killed, 40 injured) saw the use of a cell-phone detonator - as happened in the Palestinian attack on the Hebrew University in Israel in July 2002.

An important fact that contributes to thinking in terms of internationalisation of the Southern Thailand insurgency, is the large number of Muslims from Thailand studying in the Madrasas of Pakistan; some of them have been trained in the Jihadi training centres of the Taliban and Gulbuddin Heckmatyar's Hizbe Islami (HEI) and have participated in the current Taliban-HEI-Al Qaeda offensive in Afghanistan from sanctuaries in the NWFP and Balochistan. Some of them were run by the five Pakistani components of the International Islamic Front (IIF):

- LET - Lashkar-e-Toiba -, coordinator of the IIF activities;
- HUM - Harkal-ul-Mujahideen -;
- HUJI - Harkal-ul-Jihad-al-Islami -;
- JEM - Jaish-e-Mohammad -;
- LEJ - Lashkar-e-Jhangvi -.

According to Pakistani data, updated to 2002, the number of Thai studying in the same year in the different Madrasas was:

- In Sindh, 82 Thai students (totally 190);
- In Punjab, 49 Thai (151);
- In North West Frontier Province, 18 Thai (59).

There are other elements that force the above data to be taken seriously. First of all we cannot talk of Jihadism in Thailand because it is an internal movement, probably externally inspired and supported, but unrelated to the US-led occupation of Iraq and to Thailand's support to the US. Many of the insurgent leaders received operational training by mentors in Bangladesh and Pakistan, but as yet have not been afflicted by their hatred of the West, the US in particular. The practical consequences of this approach are that no Western target has been struck (here we see an important difference with the Indonesian case, where the anger is more against the Westerners than against the local authorities themselves) and neither economical nor tourist interests have been attacked, in order not to lose popular support. Regarding the four priorities of International Islamic Front (IIF) in South East Asia, these are:

- To Attack Americans and other Western Targets;
- To assist the Muslim minorities in non-Muslim States (Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar) in their jihad for an independent state as a preliminary step for the creation of Islamic rule. In ant case in the MMA's (Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal) election manifesto there was no reference to assisting the Muslims of Southern Thailand.
- To assist Muslims in the Muslim majority States (Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei) in realizing an Islamic State ruled by the Sharia;
- To build an Islamic caliphate including all these States.

These steps allow us to conclude effortlessly that the Thai insurgents might become part at least of the second point, but with exception of the second part of the point 2. The Thai insurgents' acts can be compared to the post-May 2003 Iraqi resistance fighters who acted against an occupation force. It is the same perception of the southern fighters who see in the government's policy an attempt to destroy not only their culture, but also their already weak economy. Currently Thailand is used as hiding place by terrorists belonging to Jemaah Islamiya (JI), thus after the Bali bombings of October 2002, both Malaysia and Indonesia exerted pressure on the JI activists on their soil, and as a result it was believed that its

operational leadership fled to Thailand. Bearing this in mind we should view the arrest of three members of JI in June 2003, plotting to bomb western targets in Bangkok, not as proof of the internationalization of the conflict. Likewise it is since 2001 that al-Qa'ida and JI members, imprisoned in the USA, Singapore, and Malaysia, have declared that they merely used Thailand as a secure transit area before and after attacks. The Tamil Tigers also used the Phuket area as a base for the heroin smuggling that supports their separatist activities in Sri Lanka.

There does not seem to be enough data for sustaining that the condition in Southern Thailand as it is today, it is not as serious - concerning the involvement of international terrorist organizations - as in other countries, Indonesia first of all. The separatist groups have limited organizational capability, poor leadership and virtually no public support. As Nik Abdul Ragib - a Thai-Malaysian relations' expert - declared: "people do not support separatists, they only fear for their safety which means less cooperation with the authorities. By putting martial law into force the government will only widen the gap between the people and the authorities". However if the government continues to apply the "kabi garam, kabi naram" - "sometimes hard, sometimes soft" - approach, the acts of violence will not stop, rather it might strengthen the advantage of a regional terrorist network and push the frustrated youth separatists to draw the attention of their co-religionists not only in Southern Thailand, but also in the rest of the Ummah to their anger and desperation.

Conclusions

The history of the southern regions seems to be a practical representation of the Buddhist theory of cyclical history: Cultural-religious oppression and violence succeed one another with new open-minded policy and periods of substantial peace.

Therefore to solve this issue it is necessary to look back to Prem Tinasulanond's policy reverting to some of his measures, ergo it seems appropriate to:

- Demilitarize the counter-terrorism methods (as in Afghanistan and Iraq the counter-terrorism practised by the security forces became a root cause of aggravation of the conflict) and that means:
 - Improve of police-Muslim community relations;
- Better observance of the Human Rights;

- Improving internal security management under civilian control, for example reviving the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Committee (SBPAC) that Thaksin dismantled in May 2002;
- Limit, or abrogate, the 2005 Emergency Decree that gives the security forces blanket immunity from prosecution and give citizens absolutely no recourse to seek redress for abuses of power;
- Encourage closed-doors dialogue with leaders of the Muslim community in order to reduce tensions. The dialogue should include the community leaders, tok gurus, professionals and even members of the Pattani royal family.
- Develop a social and economical package to improve the situation in the south.

These are the commitments that the General Sonthi Boonyaratglin and the new premier Surayud Chulanont are called to take. Since the beginning they have announced that they

are willing to negotiate with the insurgents to solve the issue. However to date a representative group in charge of negotiation has as yet to be identified, and the insurgents have little to gain from negotiations, moreover there have been no significant arrests, so their network is intact and their experience is improving day by day.

To sum up, it is certain that the figure of Thaksin is no longer on the scene. General Sonthi Boonyaratglin is a Muslim and he has a better understanding of, and experience in, the South. Consequently the new political strategy can give the southern communities the hope of a final resolution and the negotiations should be encouraged in any case.