Outrage over murder of Thai Muslim demonstrators

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The deaths of dozens of protestors on October 25 at the hands of the Thai security forces, and the horrifying manner in which they died, has unleashed fury in the predominantly Muslim provinces of southern Thailand and condemnation across the country and internationally.

Millions of people around the world watched in shock and disbelief at the news footage of hundreds of young men arrested by the military being beaten and kicked, and, with their hands tied behind their backs, forced to crawl along the ground to waiting trucks. They were then thrown face down on the floor of the trucks, with those following thrown on top of them by soldiers.

Over 200 men, bleeding, suffering the side effects of tear gas and in many cases barely conscious, were stacked four or five-deep in each truck. Soldiers stood or sat on them and the vehicles were enclosed with tarpaulin.

The trauma and terror that must have been endured by the victims defies description. A 22-year-old among them told the *Washington Post*: “Imagine a plastic bag being put over your head. Some people begged the soldiers, but the more you begged, the more they stepped on you.” Another prisoner cited in the *Financial Times* reported that a soldier told him: “Now you know what hell is like”.

The 1,300 men were trapped in the back of the trucks for as long as six hours, while the military transported them to detention points some 120 kilometres away. By the time they were finally unloaded, 78 were dead from suffocation, dehydration, broken necks or heat stroke.

The sadism and indifference to human life displayed by the Thai military was matched by Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Confronted by journalists over the atrocity, Thaksin denied the military had any responsibility for the deaths: “There are some who died because they were fasting [for Ramadan], and they were crammed in tight. It’s a matter of their bodies becoming weak. Nobody did anything to them.” Defending the security forces, he declared: “If we’re soft, they’ll think we’re caving in. I won’t have it. They [the police and troops] did a great job. They have my praise.”

The response highlights the character of Thaksin’s government. It is a regime driven to use ever-greater state repression to suppress the political and social grievances of the working class and rural poor.

One of the country’s wealthiest businessmen, Thaksin won the presidency in 2001 under conditions of rising social discontent over the fall in living standards after the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis and the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for further cutbacks. With the backing of the media and much of the political establishment, he successfully diverted the anger behind a series of populist promises to assist rural communities and save failing Thai businesses from bankruptcy.

Upon gaining office, however, Thaksin has primarily used it to rehabilitate the position of the Thai security forces and undermine the limited democratic reforms that were made following the end of the last military dictatorship in 1992. Last year, in the name of combating crime, the police and military were ordered to carry out a wave of terror in Bangkok and other cities, resulting in the summary execution of more than 2,500 alleged drug dealers.

The five southern Muslim provinces of Thailand have been the other main targets of Thaksin-ordered state terror. In January this year, an Islamic militant raid on an army base, in which four Thai soldiers were killed and a number of weapons taken, was seized upon to declare martial law in three of the provinces. In April, 112 alleged Islamic militants were killed in a government massacre at the Krue Sae mosque and other locations.

Commenting on this record, Kevin Hewison from City University in Hong Kong told the *Financial Times*: “Thaksin has come along, trained by the police and with lots of military connections, and let them off the leash to go back to their old tactics... The drug war told the military and the police they could do what they like and get away with it. They got away with the massacre at the mosque and they will probably get away with this as well.”

The southern provinces, once the Muslim state of Patani and with a predominantly ethnic Malay population, were annexed by Thailand in 1902. Throughout the twentieth century, political unrest in the provinces over religious and language discrimination was brutally suppressed. They are now among the poorest provinces of Thailand, with little industrial development or employment prospects.

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Since 1968, a separatist movement, the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), has conducted a small-scale and ineffectual guerilla campaign to demand an independent state. In the 1980s and 1990s, Islamic extremist groups emerged as well, carrying out sporadic attacks on military and government targets.

Since 2001, Thaksin has increased military activity in the region, in the name of imposing "law and order". While serving to rehabilitate the military, it has also been used to divert from the growing anger over his government's failure to deliver on his pledges to improve living standards. It has also enabled Thaksin to quash the vocal opposition in the south to his government's support for the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq.

Tensions have soared as a result of the military actions in the south. There are widespread allegations of army and police brutality, while Islamic militants have carried out a wave of assassinations, targeting police and government employees. As many as 415 people have been killed since martial law was imposed in January.

The deteriorating situation directly produced last week's incident. As part of the campaign against Islamic militants, villages were issued weapons and compelled to organise defense committees. Six villagers who had been issued rifles were then confronted by militants and the weapons taken from them. When they reported this to the authorities, they were arrested for giving the arms away and taken to the police station in Tak Bai.

Fearing the six would be murdered or tortured, 2,000 locals converged on the police station from about 8 a.m. on October 25 to demand their release. As many as 1,000 armed Thai troops were rushed in and surrounded the area, trapping the demonstrators on both flanks with a river behind them. At 2 p.m., troops began using tear gas and water cannons, and within minutes, firing live rounds into and over the heads of the crowd, forcing them to the ground or to try to escape into the river. At least six demonstrators were shot dead, with hundreds injured.

The beating, mass arrests and herding onto the trucks then began. A witness told AFP: "Demonstrators ran away, some jumped into the canal. Soldiers and policemen beat and kicked them. They were tied up by belts or rope. They were loaded into six trucks, piled on four or five deep. The reason they died was because they were beaten and injured and kept in a crowded area".

In southern Thailand, the deaths have dramatically inflamed tensions between the government and the population. Islamic and separatist organisations carried out a wave of revenge killings and bombings at the end of last week, with a statement from PULO declaring: "They will pay for what they have done. Their cities will burn. Their blood will pour into land and river." Academic Vitaya Visetrat warned that Thaksin "has made the situation in southern Thailand reach the point of no return".

Human rights organisations and the Malaysian and Indonesian governments—both predominantly Muslim and Malay countries—issued official protests, with Malaysia's Prime Minister Adbullah Ahmad Badawi comparing the scenes in Tak Bai to the "rounding of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland". His predecessor, Mahathir Mohammed, called for the Muslim provinces of Thailand to be granted autonomy.

Amnesty International's statement declared: "There is a disturbing pattern of Thai security forces using excessive force against Muslims in the region, resulting in large numbers of deaths."

Thailand's stock market began falling—4.6 percent by the end of last week. An analyst for JP Morgan Securities, Marco Sucharitkul, told the *Bangkok Post*: "We need to accept that the events in the south are causing some to rethink their view of Thailand as a stable country... Foreign investors are looking for an answer from the government as well as an indication of responsibility." The main concern of investors is that the Islamic extremists will target Thailand's lucrative tourist industry—which has been impacted upon by bird flu fears. Already, luxury tourist resorts in the southern provinces are reporting record vacancies.

By the end of the week, Thaksin had been forced to announce an independent inquiry, apologise to the victim's families and promise to punish "wrongdoers" in the military. Some 1,200 of the men who had been arrested were released on Saturday, though at least 113 are still being detained to face charges.

It is possible that the crisis developing around the Tak Bai killings will cause the fall of Thaksin's government. In a rare political statement Thailand's king said that he had informed Thaksin of "his deep concern" and asked for the government to be "more gentle" in the south. The parliamentary opposition is calling for his removal. The head of parliament's upper house foreign affairs committee, Kraisak Chunhavan, declared that Thaksin "should be fully responsible for this and resign for causing so many deaths".

What will not change, regardless of whether Thaksin stays or goes, are the immense class and social divisions that underlie the conduct of the military.

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