

Violence in southern Thailand escalates

John Roberts
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Three apparently coordinated bomb blasts on April 3 in the city of Hat Yai, the commercial centre of southern Thailand, have raised fears in ruling circles that anti-government opposition is spreading beyond traditional Muslim areas. Following the attacks, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has beefed up security in Bangkok at embassies, department stores and transport hubs and set up 256 checkpoints around the capital.

The bombs at Hat Yai's airport, a supermarket and a hotel were detonated by mobile phones. Two people were killed and over 70 injured, including a number of foreigners. Hat Yai had not previously been directly affected by fighting further south in the predominantly Muslim provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat.

There has been steadily escalating violence in southern Thailand over the past year, fuelled by the military's heavy-handed repression of Muslims. Between 600 and 800 people have been killed since fighting flared in January 2004. Further attacks have taken place since the Hat Yai bombings, including an attack on a police station and a government office in Narathiwat province by two armed groups.

Military spokesmen have tried to play down the bombings. Army commander Prawit Wongsuwan claimed they were a desperate act by insurgents cornered by the security forces in the southern provinces. Few commentators, either in Thailand or internationally, agree.

An unnamed US official cited in the *Nation* newspaper expressed Washington's concerns over the failure to contain the situation in the south. "We worry a great deal about the possibilities that external elements are coming to southern Thailand which could further ferment communal resentments there," he said.

Singapore National University's Michael Monesano told the *Australian* newspaper that the new methods and targets involved in the latest attacks were cause for concern. The newspaper speculated that the insurgency

was evolving and adopting a new strategy "under pressure from a heavy-fisted government".

Significantly, the Heritage Foundation website, a rightwing thinktank that has been a key proponent of the Bush administration's "war on terrorism", blamed the Thaksin government. While declaring it was not clear who was responsible for the attacks, the article declared: "One thing appears certain, however, the current Thai counter-insurgency strategy is a complete failure." It called on the White House to urge restraint, commenting: "The United States cannot stand by while heavy-handed Thai security forces create an international terrorist problem where there was not one before."

The Bush administration is of course responsible for encouraging rightwing allies like Thaksin to engage in their own "war on terrorism". The ruthless methods used by the Thai military in arbitrarily rounding up and detaining suspected "insurgents" have their direct parallels with the activities of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In April, security forces cornered Muslim youth who had attacked a police station with stones and machetes in the historic Krue Sae mosque and killed over 100, most at point blank range.

In October, at least 87 unarmed Muslim men died after the military fired on a demonstration at Tak Bai and then bundled hundreds into trucks piled four or five high for six hours. Most were suffocated to death. Despite widespread public outrage, Thaksin continued to urge the military on. Only recently has the government agreed to pay relatives of the dead and missing compensation of \$US7,500.

An ad hoc group of 10 human rights organisations recently submitted a list of demands to Thaksin's National Reconciliation Commission, including an end to martial law in the three southern provinces, an investigation into the Krue Sae and Tak Bai massacres

and an inquiry into the disappearance of Somachai Nilapaijit. Somochai, a prominent Muslim lawyer and human rights activist, has been missing, feared killed, for over a year.

During national elections in February, Thaksin was returned with an increased majority, but lost all the seats in the southern provinces. In response to the result and to mounting concerns in ruling circles, the government has attempted to put a more moderate face on its operations in southern Thailand. Islamic religious leaders, academics, opposition politicians and even the royal family have criticised Thaksin, warning that the situation is getting out of control.

On February 28, Thaksin appointed a 48-member panel headed by former prime minister Anand Panyarachun to study ways of solving the problem. He has since dropped plans to classify the three impoverished southern provinces as special security zones and to cut off all development aid.

On March 30, at a joint sitting of both parliamentary houses, the prime minister called for a more “lenient way” than military force to end the cycle of violence. “Using harsh measures in suppressing this unrest has caused more violence in the region,” he admitted. The following day, he indicated that the number of security personnel in the south might be reduced.

The prime minister also declared that all suspects under arrest would be tried in civilian criminal courts, instead of by courts martial. Among the government’s “suspects” are eight Islamic teachers charged with treason and separatism. Thaksin has also invited leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama—Indonesia’s largest Muslim organisation—to Thailand to offer advice.

The latest bombings indicate that Thaksin and the military have unleashed a wave of hostility and anger, which it is unable to control. Having suffered at the hands of the armed forces, local Muslim youth are not about to take Thaksin’s promises and concessions at face value. Decades of discrimination in the predominantly Buddhist country combined with entrenched poverty have created widespread resentment that is being exploited by Muslim separatists for their own political purposes.

Thaksin, a billionaire businessman and rightwing populist, has close connections to the police and military. His repressive methods in the south are of a piece with his “law-and-order” approach on other

issues. In 2003 he unleashed a “war on drugs” resulting in more than 2,500 extra-judicial killings at the hands of police. While he appears to have moderated security operations in the southern provinces, temporarily at least, Thaksin is maintaining a huge military presence in the region in preparation for future crackdowns.



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