Thai prime minister invokes emergency powers in country's south

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3 August 2005

Under the guise of combating separatist guerillas, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has invoked emergency laws in the predominantly Muslim provinces of southern Thailand that border Malaysia. The decree was endorsed by the King and came into immediate effect from July 16. Thaksin's cabinet rubber-stamped the measures on July 19.

The emergency measures prevail in the provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, where martial law was already in place as part of military operations against the longstanding separatist movement, as well as four districts in nearby Songkhla—Thepha, Saba Yoi, Chana and Na Thawi. The decree gives Thaksin and his security forces absolute power to suppress all dissent. It expands the government's authority to impose curfews, ban public gatherings, censor news, close publications, limit travel, detain suspects without charge, confiscate property and tap telephones.

The immediate pretext for the new powers was a series of attacks by insurgents on July 14 that left two police dead and 22 people injured in the town of Yala. The BBC reported that the attack "involved up to 60 suspected militants—who attacked Yala hotels, restaurants, a cinema and shops with bombs, guns and Molotov cocktails". Nine suspects are now in custody and under the new laws can be detained for up to 30 days without charge.

Further separatist attacks on security forces and ethnic Thais were carried out over the following days. On July 18, a bomb was exploded on a bridge as a military truck crossed it. Five soldiers and two police were wounded. On July 28, a former policeman, a government official and a village headman were killed by suspected guerillas.

A feature in the August 1 edition of *Time* magazine commented: "Today, the south looks and feels like a war zone. Schools and government offices are ringed with razor wire. At night, military helicopters fly low and fast over the rubber plantations, their lights off to foil militant attacks. Meanwhile, edgy, heavily armed militiamen patrol the more remote villages. Country roads are deserted."

As thousands of Thai troops step up their operations, the emergency legislation has come under intense criticism as an ominous threat to civil liberties and human rights. The most controversial clause in the decree grants immunity from criminal prosecution for any policeman or soldier accused of committing abuses.

Former Thai prime minister and the head of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), Anand Panyarachun, told national television: "The local community sees this decree as a license to kill."

National Press Council of Thailand spokesman Chavarong Limpattanapanee told a meeting of some 50 editors and journalists from print and broadcast networks: "We want the law abolished. The law does not only apply to the three provinces. It gives absolute powers to the prime minister to use in another situation."

In an apparent concession to critics of the measures, the clauses suppressing media coverage, banning public gatherings and imposing evening curfews were omitted from the decree when it went to cabinet. Kulachada Chaipipat, a spokesman for the Southeast Asian Press Alliance, noted however: "The article is still there. They can use it any time they think it's needed, so we have to be careful."

Press coverage of the activities of the military is being censored even without the media clause being invoked. In the first action under the new emergency laws, troops raided the Islam Suksa Wittaya boarding school in Pattani. The army officer in charge ordered journalists out of the area, declaring they were not allowed to take pictures or cover military operations.

Thaksin has consistently stoked and exploited the unrest in the south to develop a social base of support by appealing to patriotism and anti-Muslim chauvinism among layers of the country's majority ethnic Thai Buddhist population.

Thailand annexed the southern provinces, which were once the Muslim state of Patani, in 1902. The predominantly ethnic Malay population has been continuously subjected to language and religious discrimination and the provinces deprived of economic development, education and employment prospects.

Tensions have steadily grown over recent years, with

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separatist groups demanding an independent state and Islamic extremist groups carrying out sporadic attacks on military and government targets. Thaksin declared martial law in the three provinces in January 2004, after alleged insurgents seized weapons from a government armoury.

Over the past 18 months, more than 800 people have died due to violence, most in brutal massacres by the military, which Thaksin has let loose against the civilian population. On April 28, 2004, militants launched pre-dawn attacks on police bases, checkpoints and schools in several districts of the three provinces. Troops trapped a group of alleged insurgents in the Krue Se mosque in Pattani province and stormed it, using tear gas and rocket-propelled grenades. At least 32 young men aged between 15 and 20, and armed only with knives and a single gun, were slaughtered. In all, 106 Muslim youth were killed that day, as well as five security officers.

In October 2004, at least 87 unarmed Muslim protestors were murdered by the military. Six were killed when 1,000 troops opened fire on a protest at the Tak Bai police station. Three more drowned trying to escape from the Thai troops. In horrific scenes partially captured on film, over 1,200 detained protestors were stacked four-to-five deep on top of one another in trucks, to be transported by the military from the police station to a detention centre some six hours away. By the time the men were unloaded from the vehicles at least 78 had died of suffocation, heat stroke or broken necks.

Thaksin initially labelled the atrocity as nothing more than an "unfortunate incident" but was eventually forced to issue an apology and announce inquiries due to a domestic and international outcry.

During the national elections in January this year, Thaksin deployed as many as 10,000 additional troops in the south to reinforce his rhetoric that he would not give up "a square inch" of Thai territory to Muslim separatists. Along with economic populist promises to sections of the rural population, and mass disaffection with the main opposition Democrat Party, the nationalist appeals were a factor in Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party winning a clear majority in parliament.

Following his re-election, Thaksin moved to lessen the conflict he had fuelled in the southern provinces by establishing the National Reconciliation Commission on March 28 to investigate a peaceful resolution. Among the responsibilities of the NRC was to conduct inquiries into conduct of the military during the Krue Se and Tak Bai massacres.

Thaksin, however, is now confronting a mounting economic crisis and falling popularity. The hike in world oil prices has pushed up retail fuel costs in Thailand by some 26 percent, forcing the government to cut fuel subsidies. Economic growth forecasts have been slashed from 4 percent to 3.4 percent. Inflation and interest rates are rising, while the current account deficit blew out to $4.6 billion in the first five months of the year. To offset discontent over falling living standards, the government was compelled to introduce a small increase in the minimum wage and increase public spending in rural areas.

In order to deflect attention away from the economic problems, as well as ongoing corruption allegations against his government, Thaksin shifted once more to whipping up communal tensions in the south.

The NRC findings on the massacres in the south were released on April 24 and were critical of the military. State-controlled or pro-Thaksin media outlets immediately condemned them. While the NRC accused the army of "excessive force" at Krue Se Mosque and "serious dereliction of duty" at Tak Bai, only four military officers were transferred out of the area and no criminal charges were brought. The flagrant injustice of the government's actions was most likely the trigger for the insurgent attacks last month, which Thaksin has seized upon to introduce the emergency decree and a renewed crackdown.

Ukrist Pathmanand, a senior researcher at a Bangkok university, commented in the July/August *Far Eastern Economic Review*: "As a result, Muslim Malays' distrust of the state will continue to rise. In the medium term, the divisions among the majority Buddhists and minority Muslims will become more explicit. Consequently, racism, hatred and killings among the groups will continue to escalate. The violence will continue and the risk of secession by the three Muslim provinces is considerable."

Under conditions of rising social discontent across Thailand, the legislation could have far broader implications. Dictatorial rule and police-state measures have been the norm throughout most of Thailand's modern history. Suriyasai Katasila, the secretary-general of the Campaign for Popular Democracy, told the media on July 16: "Looking at the decree's content, we're afraid that many rights and freedoms guaranteed by the constitution would be violated, including civil rights as well as freedom of expression and communication."

Suriyasai warned: "Imagine if Thailand's economy collapsed and corruption became obvious in the next 3-6 months. The people cannot demonstrate like in the Philippines because it could be deemed illegal."

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