

Repression in southern Thailand provokes recriminations against Thaksin government

John Roberts
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The government of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has intensified its repression against the separatist insurgency in the country's three southern Muslim-Malay majority provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala. The conflict has claimed over 1,100 lives since it flared in 2004, largely as a result of government provocations. Thaksin's response to the deteriorating situation in the south is raising political tensions inside Thailand and fuelling a diplomatic rift with neighbouring Malaysia.

On October 19, the emergency powers under which the three provinces have been ruled since July were renewed for three more months. The laws give the security forces immunity from prosecution and suspend the jurisdiction of administrative courts to prosecute human rights violations. Thaksin's own National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), which was established following the murder of dozens of young Muslims by the military last October, condemned these provisions as a "license to kill".

The response in southern Thailand was a marked increase in the number of militant attacks. In late October, there were 43 apparently coordinated attacks on security posts across the three provinces. On November 2, insurgents set off a number of blasts that cut all power to the town of Narathiwat, located close to the border with Malaysia. The next day, Thaksin declared martial law in two districts in Songkhla, extending the repression into a fourth province.

The Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), the oldest of the Thai Muslim separatist groups, issued a statement on November 1 from its exile headquarters in Sweden calling for self-government in the south and warning of an all-out war if this demand were not met. Thaksin's response was to rule out autonomy and claim that the PULO communiqué "does not in any way reflect the interests and aspirations of people in the three southern provinces".

Resentment against the Thai government, however, is pervasive in the south. The provinces were annexed to Thailand in 1902. Ever since, the majority Muslim and ethnic Malay population, who comprise just 5 percent of Thailand's 65 million people, has been subjected to discrimination and economic neglect. A separatist movement has flared periodically in the region but gained broader sympathy in the

wake of two major atrocities against Muslim youth by Bangkok's security forces in 2004.

On April 28 last year, Thai troops stormed the historic Krue Se mosque in Pattani and massacred at least 32 men who the military alleged were a well-armed and zealous group of insurgents. After the assault, it was revealed the victims were youth who had only knives and one rifle.

In October 2004, nine men were shot dead or drowned when troops opened fire on a large demonstration outside the Tak Bai police station demanding the release of a group accused of being insurgents. The military detained close to 1,000 youth and proceeded to pile them four to five deep in the back of trucks. As they were being transported to a detention centre, at least 78 died from suffocation or broken necks while the survivors suffered injuries or severe trauma.

The military's crimes led to an increase in insurgent activity and reactionary revenge killings of Thai civilians by Islamic extremists. Thaksin's reaction was to give the security forces even greater repressive powers and escalate his promotion of anti-Muslim chauvinism among the country's ethnic Thai and Buddhist majority.

There is growing concern internationally that Thaksin's actions are strengthening the separatist movement and destabilising the broader region. The Brussels-based International Crisis Group issued a statement on November 18, warning that if the draconian emergency powers were not lifted, and reports of human rights abuses and disappearances in the south not investigated, then "the growing alienation may turn into sympathy, support and even recruits for the insurgency".

The Malaysian government has expressed dismay at the situation. The oppression of Muslims across the border in Thailand is provoking outrage in the majority Muslim country, especially in its northern states where the fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) is the dominant political force.

Thaksin has already created a diplomatic incident by insisting that Malaysia return 131 Muslim refugees who fled the activities of his security forces. The Thai government has also insinuated that insurgents are operating from safe havens inside Malaysia—an accusation that Malaysia has denied categorically.

Another controversy between the two states has developed

over the past month. On November 8, Thaksin made the bizarre claim that Islamic extremists from across South East Asia had met in the Malaysian state of Kelantan to plot his assassination.

The Malaysian government rejected the accusation. National University of Singapore academic Bilveer Singh told the *Taipei Times*: “The Malaysian government has been counselling restraint for a very long time but the Thai government is very dismissive, saying they can take care of the matter. Then when things get out of control, Thaksin blames Malaysia and Indonesia for being responsible for the insurgency in the south.”

Thaksin and former Malaysian Prime Minister Mohammed Mahathir met on November 19 and issued statements declaring the two countries would work together for stability in southern Thailand. There are, nevertheless, ongoing recriminations against the Thai government in South East Asia over its handling of the insurgency.

Tan Sri Razali Ismail, the UN special envoy to Myanmar (Burma) wrote in the Malaysian *New Straits Times* on November 30: “The arrogance of some office-bearers in Bangkok in insisting that the problem can be ‘solved’ in three years further fuels the determination of the insurgents to prolong it beyond a certain window. Any attempt to use a purely militarist solution to what essentially is a political problem will drive the insurgents deeper underground, dividing into smaller, deadlier cells and acquiring an ‘extremist religious’ trajectory...”

Ismail concluded: “The time is therefore right for Thailand to examine its own shortcomings, rather than to cast its blame elsewhere.”

There is little doubt that Thaksin’s provocations over the situation in the south will continue, however. They are primarily aimed at developing support for his government on the basis of Thai nationalism and diverting attention from the political difficulties and various corruption scandals that surround his cabinet.

Thaksin’s attempts to push through budget cuts and privatisation have suffered setbacks. The planned sale of the state-owned national electricity grid was blocked by legal challenges in the country’s Supreme Court. Teachers are threatening national strike action if the government proceeds with a plan to slash spending by handing responsibility for schools over to the provincial authorities.

Opposition to Thaksin’s government is growing. In by-elections for four seats of parliament on October 30, his Thai Rak Thai party won only one seat. In the other three, the candidates of the ruling party were defeated by large margins. Thaksin responded by declaring that only areas that supported his regime would get priority for state funding.

There are signs that sections of the Thai political elite are contemplating replacing Thaksin’s government. Media tycoon Sondhi Limthongkul, one of Thailand’s wealthiest individuals and previously one of Thaksin’s key backers, has used his

radio program to denounce the government for corruption. Last month, Thaksin filed a libel case and won a court order preventing Sondhi making any further statements. The businessman responded by calling an anti-government rally in Bangkok’s Lumpini Park on November 18 that brought some 50,000 people into the streets.

The *Nation* editorialised on November 22: “Sondhi’s apparently growing support seems to have a lot more to do with simmering public discontent and frustration at the prime minister’s arrogant wielding of his power and total reckless disregard for democratic principles, civil liberties and sound governance, which tend to grow worse with each passing day.”

Thaksin has reacted by turning to his most important base of support—the military. On November 16, members of the Royal Guard stormed into Sondhi’s office in an attempt to intimidate him. Immediately following the mass rally in Bangkok, the military supreme commander Ruengroj Mahasaranond said the armed forces were “losing patience” with Sondhi’s statements that Thaksin was defying the authority of the monarchy.

The army commander and other senior military officers are Thaksin appointees. The *Nation* noted on November 22: “Thaksin gradually had former classmates, close relatives and those of proven loyalty take over command of much of the armed forces ... The generals who are openly siding with Thaksin are putting the future of our hard-won democracy in jeopardy.”

The military’s intervention into politics provoked talk of a coup being prepared to suppress the opposition to Thaksin. After a week of falls on the Thai stock exchange, Mahasaranond was forced to deny the rumour in order to reassure financial markets. He told a press conference on November 28: “The Thai military in this modern age has no idea of conducting a coup. A coup d’etat causes huge damage to the nation. As long as I am still in office, there will not be a coup d’etat.”

Coming from the head of armed forces that only relinquished its grip on power a little over a decade ago, the statement is worthless. Thaksin’s record demonstrates he is prepared to use any means to shore up his position. This can only contribute to both greater violence in the south and political turbulence in the rest of the country.



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