Thai junta's "reconciliation" fails to stem separatist insurgency

John Roberts
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The continuing insurgency in southern Thailand is compounding the deepening problems confronting the military junta that took power last September. One of General Sonthi Boonyaratklin's stated reasons for ousting Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was his government's heavy-handed repression in the country's predominantly Muslim southern provinces, which inflamed separatist sentiment. The junta has failed to end the violence, however.

Coordinated bomb attacks in the four southern provinces on February 18 killed eight and injured more than 50 people. The 29 blasts, along with 20 other attacks, took place within a 45-minute period. It was the first coordinated offensive across the provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and Songkhla. Karaoke lounges, hotels, schools, petrol stations and electricity transmissions stations were hit.

The next day, four more bombings killed an army officer and wounded two soldiers and 13 civilians. Armed insurgents also ambushed soldiers protecting school teachers. Schools and teachers have been a particular target: 60 teachers and 10 students have died and 110 schools have been torched over the past three years.

Since 2004, insurgents have killed about 2,000 people. Separatist groups have not only attacked ethnic Thais, who are mainly Buddhist, but members of the country's Muslim Malay minority who cooperate with the government or serve as state officials. At least 24 people have been beheaded, and recently Buddhist monks and symbols of Buddhism have been targetted.

Military officials claimed that the February 18-19 attacks were timed to coincide with the Chinese New Year and were aimed at Sino-Thai businesses, some of which are prominent in the rubber industry, the region's largest employer. On February 21, the largest rubber warehouse in the south, at Yala City, was set alight, destroying 5,000 tonnes of rubber worth $US11 million.

General Sonthi and the junta's prime minister, Surayud Chulanont, claim to have been pursuing talks with insurgent groups, including the Pattani United Liberation Organisation, Barisan Revolusi Nascional-Koordinasi and the Gerak Mudjahideen Islamic Pattani. But many separatist groups are not under the control of these organisations and may not be even known to the government.

The Thai generals have attempted to enlist the support of the Malaysian government and former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. But according to an *Asia Times* article, the Bangkok government allowed talks brokered by Mahathir to lapse because "the exiled and elderly insurgent representatives no longer hold sway over the younger generation of Muslim fighters".

Prime Minister Surayud declared recently that the conciliatory approach was not working. "We can't see the results in three or four months because the painful feelings of southern people in the past four years run deep," he declared. Interior Minister Aree Wong-Araya, who like coup leader Sonthi is a Muslim, told a seminar on February 17 that the insurgents were winning greater support from local people.

Songkhla University political scientist Srisompob Jitpiromsri told the *International Herald Tribune* on February 25: "The momentum of violence in now beyond the control of government policy ... [the insurgents] have the upper hand." He said that in the "red zones, it is already a war situation. It is different now from last year, from the last two years."

According to an assessment by Francesca Lawe-Davies from the Brussels-based International Crisis

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Group, Muslim separatists now control some southern areas in a strict military sense. In some of these areas, Islamic insurgents appear to be pursuing a reactionary policy of ethnic cleansing, driving out non-Malays and non-Muslims. *Asia Times* reported that seems to be the case in a remote area of Narathiwat.

Clearly, the junta's token efforts have made little impact in the south where the Internal Security Operations Command still operates under repressive decrees issued by the former Thaksin government. These decrees effectively placed the entire region under martial law. Their provisions give the security forces complete immunity from prosecution for any actions. While the military operates under a cloak of secrecy, it is notorious for its ruthless methods in suppressing armed separatists and their supporters.

There is every sign that the generals are preparing to abandon their rather empty appeals for reconciliation. General Sonthi has announced that more troops will be sent to the south. The junta has ignored appeals from Muslim organisations for the release of some 700 people held in military custody.

Asia Times noted that there is no real consensus within the military hierarchy about how to deal with the southern insurgency. Few of the generals are prepared to make anything but limited concessions, fearing that any significant compromise on the demand for local autonomy will undermine the country's territorial integrity. "Hardliners in the military are expected to stiffen their position if, as expected, the tough-talking General Serang Kalayanamitr takes over as army commander this year," the article pointed out.

Bangkok formally annexed the southern provinces in 1902. Neglect and anti-Muslim discrimination over the past century has led to widespread poverty and fuelled separatist sentiment. But the separatist insurgency dramatically escalated after the right-wing populist Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) party came to power in 2001. After the September 11 attacks, he wholeheartedly embraced the Bush administration's bogus "war on terror" and collaborated with the US in hunting down alleged terrorists in Thailand.

In 2002, the Thaksin government unleashed the military to suppress growing unrest and opposition in the south. In April 2004, the army slaughtered 112 unarmed Muslim youth in the centuries-old Krue Sae mosque, where they had taken refuge. In October 2004, at least 87 Muslim men died after being seized by soldiers during a protest at the Tak Bai police station. Most suffocated after being piled into the back of trucks on top of one another.

The army was just as responsible for these crimes as the Thaksin government. Anti-government violence in the south exploded after 2004, leading to deep concerns among the generals that the situation was getting beyond their control. As the past five months have demonstrated, however, the military has no solution to the deepening conflict. The failure of its "softer" conciliatory approach can only mean that a new wave of brutal repression is being prepared.

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