

Thai mosque shootings point to government/military rift

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An attack on a mosque in Thailand's unstable southern region on June 8 served to highlight ongoing differences between the country's shaky coalition government and the military. The immediate issue in the government-military tensions is the handling of counter-insurgency operations against Muslim separatists in the south but any rift would have wider political implications.

The Alkulkon mosque in Narathiwat province 750 kilometres south east of Bangkok was attacked while worshippers were at evening prayers. Five or six masked gunmen entered the building via two entrances and opened fire with automatic rifles, killing 10 people immediately. Two died shortly after and 10 others were badly wounded.

The incident followed two weeks of intensifying violence in the southern region primarily against government teachers and soldiers. On the morning of the mosque shooting, a roadside bomb wounded nine Thai soldiers.

No one claimed responsibility for the massacre at the mosque. The army quickly denied any involvement and blamed Muslim separatists. Colonel Prinya Chaidilok told the media: "The attack was absolutely not done by us."

Local villagers, however, pointed to the military as the most likely suspect. In contrast to the army's denials, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva noted that the attack was out of character with previous separatist violence. "An attack on a mosque is unusual and not the style of the separatists," he said. Abhisit ordered army commander General Anupong Paochinda to carry out an investigation.

The mosque shooting occurred while Abhisit was in

Malaysia for talks with Prime Minister Najib Razak over joint plans to improve educational and economic opportunities in Thailand's five southern provinces. Army operations against separatist insurgents in southern Thailand, where the majority of the population are Muslim Malays, have led to worsening relations with neighbouring Malaysia.

The ongoing conflict has also led to tensions between the government and the military. Abhisit took office last December with the backing of the country's conservative establishment, including the military, after bitter conflicts between supporters and opponents of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The army ousted Thaksin in 2006, then helped to destabilise the pro-Thaksin governments that followed national elections in 2007.

The right-wing populist Thaksin was also at odds with the military over the situation in the south. To bolster his government, Thaksin whipped up anti-Muslim sentiment and stepped up repression in the south against what had been a largely moribund separatist movement. As the conflict escalated, the military became increasingly disgruntled with what it regarded as heavy-handed civilian interference with its operations.

About 3,500 people have been killed since 2004 and the counter-insurgency operations have cost the state treasury an estimated \$US3.1 billion. In October 2004, security forces used live ammunition to break up a demonstration at Tak Bai, killing seven people. More than 1,200 were arrested and piled into trucks in layers five or six deep for an hour-long journey to a detention centre. Another 78 detainees died in route, provoking widespread outrage.

After ousting Thaksin in September 2006, the military junta attempted to ease tensions in the south by

apologising to the families of the Tak Bai massacre and paying out \$US1.23 million in compensation. At the same time, however, it made no move to discipline any officers or to end military rule in the south.

Unlike Thaksin, Abhisit has been pressing for a softer approach to the Muslim insurgency. His Democrat Party draws much of its political support from the south and has been under pressure to end military rule in the region. Responding to an Amnesty International report detailing the use of torture by the security forces, Abhisit warned that his government might not renew the four-year-old emergency decree covering the provinces when it expired in April.

At the time, Abhisit was attending a meeting of the Association of South East Asian (ASEAN) in Jakarta. He told ASEAN leaders that the problems in southern Thailand could not be solved by military means and promised a “complete policy package” that addressed the issues of economic development, education and cultural issues. He pledged that abuses would be investigated, adding: “We are taking steps to make sure that there are no loopholes that could be exploited by officers and officials.”

By April, however, the Thai government was embroiled in a deep political crisis after pro-Thaksin demonstrations forced the cancellation of an ASEAN summit in Pattaya. Abhisit imposed a state of emergency and the army mobilised heavily-armed troops in the capital. On April 13, running battles erupted between anti-government protests and troops. Acutely aware of its dependence on the army, the government extended martial law in the south.

In the south, separatist guerrillas staged a series of attacks in May, including coordinated strikes on May 27 in the town of Yala on cell phone and electricity towers and security outposts. On May 29, the Songkla Provincial Court finally released its findings into the Tak Bai incident. While ruling that 78 men had died of asphyxiation, the court did not name the officers responsible and implied that the army had acted within the law, angering human rights groups and the victims’ families. The verdict was followed by further insurgent attacks.

In that context, it cannot be ruled out that the Alkulkon

mosque attack was carried out by the military or associated militias drawn from the Buddhist minority in the south. In that case, the shootings would also serve as a warning shot by the military to the government not to weaken the military presence in the south or lift martial law.

An *Asia Times* article on June 10 noted speculation that the “mysterious mosque massacre may have been a retaliatory state response.... One possible motive could be Abhisit’s continued pressure on the army to bring security operations under civilian control, repeal martial law and pushed for reconciliation and justice in the region.” The article pointed out that army commander General Anupong Paochinda had warned against making any hasty decisions to lift martial law.

Asia Times correspondent Brian McCartan also reported on rising discontent in military circles over government plans to cut defence spending. “[S]ome military officials might prefer that the conflict escalates to justify sustained budgets and big-ticket equipment purchases. Procurement plans for new hardware were put on hold this month after the military’s budget was cut by about 10 billion baht (\$US291.8 million) due to shortfalls in government tax revenues,” he wrote.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the Alkulkon mosque massacre, there are continuing tensions between the government and the military. While the Democrats and the military, together with the monarchy and the state bureaucracy, were united in their hostility to Thaksin and his populist policies, there are sharp differences not only over military operations in the south, but also economic policy. Abhisit and the Democrats have been advocates of pro-market reform, whereas the military and the royalists have favoured protectionist measures. As the social and economic impact of the global recession on the export-dependent Thailand deepens, further political instability is inevitable.



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