

American Foreign Policy Council

THAILAND

QUICK FACTS

Population: 66,404,688

Area: 513,120 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Thai 75%, Chinese 14%, other 11%

Religions: Buddhist 94.6%, Muslim 4.6%, Christian 0.7%, other 0.1%

Government Type: Constitutional Monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$269.6 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)



Since January 2004, the three southernmost provinces of Thailand have been in the throes of an ethno-religious insurgency. Malay-Muslim rebellion is not new in the overwhelmingly Buddhist kingdom, and has erupted sporadically since the 1902 Sino-British demarcation of the border that left a Malay majority in the provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, Saitun and parts of Songkhla. Since then, official Thai government policy has been based on assimilation of the 1.3 million Muslims there (of the total 1.8 million population in the south), which has further alienated the local population. All-out insurgency raged from the 1960s to the 1990s. However, the insurgents themselves were riddled with factional and ideological differences. They included Islamists, more-secular ethno-nationalists, and groups affiliated with the Malayan Communist Party. Some favored independence, others union with Malaysia,

and others simply greater autonomy. The Thai government, though fairly brutal in its counterinsurgency operations at first, was able to defeat these groups one by one, and began to implement general amnesties and pour development funds into the region. By the mid-1990s, the last major insurgent group, the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), accepted the government's amnesty, and by 2002 the government declared victory, dismantling the key agencies that brought the insurgency to an end. Yet local grievances remained deep-seated, and a small cadre of Islamists and veterans of the Afghan jihad went underground, organizing amongst the youth in madrassas, private Islamic schools and mosques. After a decade-long incubation, the insurgency re-ignited in 2004.

Though it began on a small scale, Thai government missteps and egregious human rights violations, compounded by political posturing, have led to an increase in the scope of violence and degree of support for the current insurgency. Now in its eighth year, and fifth government, no end is in sight, with more than 4,500 people dead, and nearly 10,000 wounded. While violence declined dramatically in 2008 (with the death toll falling by 40 percent from 2007), the level of violence increased anew in 2009-2010.¹ In the process, the social fabric of southern Thailand has been irreparably harmed, with little hope of reconciliation among its various communities. Counterinsurgency operations, meanwhile, have been hampered by weak intelligence, human rights abuses and a lack of political concern at the national level.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The current insurgency is being led primarily by two groups: most directly, the *Barisan Revolusini Nasional Koordinasi* (BRN-C) and, to a lesser extent, the *Gerakan Mujibeddin Islamiya Pattani* (GMIP). In addition, former members of New PULO and other now-defunct insurgent groups are also active. These groups tend to be loose-knit in nature, and organized horizontally.

The BRN-C has evolved significantly since the 1970s, when its precursor, the BRN, was more closely allied with the Malayan Communist Party. The BRN subsequently splintered and the BRN-C— one of three offshoots—became increasingly Islamized. The BRN-C

operated and recruited through a large network of mosques and private Islamic schools that were beyond the reach of the Thai state. Its top leaders, such as Sapaeng Basoe, Masae Useng, and Doromae Kuteh, were masters at several key Islamic schools in the region. In 1992, they established a quasi-overt youth organization known as *Pemuda*.² The BRN-C operates through a network of some 300 schools.³

The BRN-C's averred goal is to establish an independent Islamic state for the Malay Muslims who inhabit southern Thailand. The organization has a clear social agenda: the Islamization of society in the southern provinces. While the local community—which is adjacent to, and closely intertwined with, the Malaysian Islamist political opposition's heartland in Northeastern Malaysia—is pious and culturally very conservative, the BRN-C is imposing what amounts to the total Islamization of institutions and values. The group has targeted secular institutions—schools in particular, but also hospitals and courts—in order to force the community into parallel Islamist institutions. It has forced the separation (*purdah*) of men and women, and increased pressure for the full veiling (beyond the traditional *hijab*) of women. While much of the group's campaign of violence has been oriented at driving Thai Buddhists from the region, the BRN-C also has espoused a policy of isolation and non-contact with Buddhists, forbidding people to work or do business with Thais of that religion. Muslim women have increasingly forgone treatment at public hospitals, which are largely staffed by Buddhists from the north. Home births, coupled with the lack of registration of newborns so conceived, are putting a generation of Thai Muslims outside the purview of state institutions. As such, infant mortality in the south is now three times the national average.⁴ Diseases such as polio likewise are spreading, due to a decline in vaccinations.⁵

The handful of BRN-C documents captured by authorities to date suggests a strategy of protracted (30-40 year) struggle, with the ultimate goal of establishing an independent Islamic state. The short-term goals of the group are more achievable: driving out “Siamese *kaffirs*” (unbelievers), the inculcation of Islamic values, the estab-

ishment of Islamic institutions to supplant all secular institutions, and the elimination of political rivals, in particular moderate Muslims who either collaborate with or support reconciliation with the Thai state. Indeed, well over half of the victims of the insurgents to date have been their co-religionists.

The BRN-C appears to be horizontally-organized, but that is in part a reflection of how little is known about the group. While Thai security officials have identified a top cadre of leaders, they know very little about the organization's middle-managers. Moreover, the group is highly atomized; the arrest of thousands of low-level operatives has garnered very little by way of understanding of the organization as a whole. There is a regional structure (*ayoh*) that is comprised of cells at the district and village levels. Most are localized in nature, bound to their villages, but some cells have a regional mandate.

The size of the BRN-C likewise is uncertain. Thai security forces have asserted that it is in the tens of thousands, but the number of actual cadres involved in the group's management and operations is much smaller—probably in the low thousands. The number of activists and supporters, however, is closer to the Thai government's estimate. *Pemuda* itself is believed to have several thousand members.

The second group widely involved in the insurgency is the *Gerakan Mujibeddin Islamiya Pattani* (GMIP). The GMIP was originally a criminal gang closely linked to GAM, the Acehese resistance movement in Indonesia for whom it ran guns. The GMIP was implicated in contract killings and affiliated with criminal syndicates until two veterans of the Afghan *mujahideen* took over the organization. Though much smaller than the BRN-C and lacking the latter's broad-based social network of *madrassas* and mosques, the GMIP is a very violent organization with significant operational capabilities. It had close working ties with cells of *Jemaah Islamiyah* in Malaysia.⁶ The leadership of the GMIP includes: Nasa'e Saning, Mahma Maeroh, and Wae Ali Copter Waeji.

Unlike in the period from the 1960s-1990s, when disparate insurgent groups were riddled with factionalism, the BRN-C and GMIP today appear to work together closely. They have shared goals and ideology, and do not operate at cross-purposes or try to discredit one another. Indeed there is a significant degree of operational cooperation between the two organizations.

Funding for the insurgency is broad-based and thus not vulnerable to Thai government attempts at interdiction. At the local level, insurgents rely on extortion of local businesses and often leave letters with exact demands at businesses and homes. They have applied the concept of *dhimmitude* (second class citizenship for non-Muslims) to Buddhists.⁷ They also rely on voluntary contributions by the local Muslim community, as well as funds from likeminded sources throughout the region and Middle East. As of 2005/2006, an estimated Bt6 million (\$183,000) in Ramadan donations was believed to have been received by Thai insurgents from Muslims in Egypt, Libya, Sweden, Indonesia, and Malaysia.⁸ The Thai government has consistently alleged that insurgents fund themselves through their involvement in the drug trade. However, there has been only mixed evidence to support this. Though there is a sizeable amount of drug smuggling into Malaysia, it is widely controlled by criminal syndicates. Moreover, the Malaysian government's zero tolerance policy towards drugs makes the narcotic trade an unattractive one for Thai insurgents, exposing them to greater risk of government action.

Significant money from the Middle East, in particular from Saudi Arabia, came into the region during the 1990s and early 2000s to support *madrassas* and Islamic education. Such funding has come from the Muslim World League (MWL), the Al Haramain Foundation, the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), and from the *Al-Auqaf* (Welfare Department) and Islamic Call Society in Kuwait.⁹ In 2004, the Thai Minister of Defense accused the IIRO of donating more than Bt100 million (\$2 million) to Thai organizations.¹⁰ Ismail Lutfi Japagiya, the rector of the Yala Islamic College, a school with deep ties to the insurgency, has admitted publicly to accepting \$13 million from the IIRO, and some U.S. \$7.8 million from Kuwait.¹¹ Not coincidentally, Lutfi serves as one

of the few non-Arab directors of the MWL.¹² The Saudi Om al-Qura Foundation also had close ties to a cell of the al-Qaeda-linked terrorist organization Jemaah Islamiyah active in southern Thailand. Much of the Gulf money came through a Thai-registered charity, the Pusaka Foundation, which has since been shut down. Thai security officials, however, are convinced that the Pusaka Foundation continues to operate and distribute funds through Islamic banks in neighboring Malaysia.¹³ The imposition of Salafi values such as veils and the closing of shops on Fridays, rather than violence, appears to have been the key to winning financial support from the Gulf.

It should be noted that Thailand's is a low-level insurgency and does not require significant funding. Most weapons are acquired through theft or after battles with government forces or local village defense volunteers. Most materials for bomb-making are readily available via purchases and/or theft. Mosques and *madrassas* controlled or supportive of insurgents are self-supporting. While some operatives who have been captured have confessed to being paid for operations, the amounts thus received are trifling.

Violence is down from its peak in 2007. In July of that year, the Thai army authorized its own "surge" of forces, and there are currently more than 60,000 troops deployed in the south. In 2008, in part as a result of this expansion of military power, violence dropped precipitously. By January 2008, the average daily rate of killing was down to three, while the average number of weekly acts of violence had fallen by half, from 40 to 20. In 2008, the death toll fell by 40 percent from its 2007 peak. But since the current government of Abhisit Vejjajiva assumed power in mid-December 2008, violence has escalated steadily and the death toll has risen by 11 percent. Over 830 people have been killed, and nearly 1,500 people have been wounded, since the Democrats took over in mid-December 2008. In that time, there have been over 300 bombings, including five car bombings, nine beheadings, and 29 incidents of the burning or desecration of corpses. There have been over 50 arson attacks, including 12 schools. The government has spent 145 billion baht (close to \$5 million) during the past seven years to support military operations in the South but is unable to quell the violence.

Undoubtedly, Thailand is the single most lethal such conflict in the region.¹⁴

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Popular support for Islamist groups in Thailand is hard to gauge. Whereas public opinion polling has demonstrated high levels of distrust towards the state on the part of Malay Muslims, the degree of popular support for the BRN-C and GMIP is unknown. Like at the onset of any insurgency, these organizations are widely viewed as a fringe group of extremists. But government crackdowns, abuses and extra-judicial killings have increased their appeal dramatically, allowing insurgents to convince the local population that the Thai state is repressive and patently anti-Muslim. As a result, Thai officials estimate that 30 percent of the country's Muslim community supports the insurgents.¹⁵

The Thai state has lost much of its legitimacy, and its constant reliance on death squads has alienated the population.¹⁶ The 2005 Emergency Decree that governs southern Thailand has also infuriated the local population. The decree allows for detention without trial for up to 28 days. Due to police incompetence and a lack of public assistance, the charges against most suspects are dropped, and nearly 90 percent of those captured on charges of participating in the insurgency are released. This again further legitimizes the latter while discrediting the state.

For example, by November 2007 some 1,930 insurgent suspects had been detained. Nonetheless, only 300 had been linked to acts of violence, and according to a March 2007 Human Rights Watch report, only 15 of some 350 people arrested had been charged.¹⁷ The Army ignited a firestorm of protest when, in mid-2007, it initiated a program that forced suspected detainees into an army-run vocational training program upon their release after the 28-day detention expired. In all, more than 300 individuals were forcibly detained, until the courts shut down the program and allowed all suspects to be released.¹⁸ Of the 7,860 people detained since January 2004, the government has only charged 1,500 of them (19 percent), and the acquittal rate of those charged has been 43 percent.¹⁹

But how much real support there is for the insurgency is unknown. As mentioned above, the militants have killed more of their co-religionists than they have Buddhist civilians or security officials. Yet sadly, even Muslim victims tend to attribute the violence to government forces. In much of the countryside, which has only a limited and static security force, the insurgents have free reign to impose their will and social mores on society. The Thai government has over 80,000 security forces deployed in the south, but most are confined to large bases and if they are deployed, remain in fixed positions. Villagers have little sense of security, and those perceived as being collaborators are killed or threatened.

There is not currently an official Thai Islamist political party, and no political party publicly endorses the insurgency or its goals. Indeed, southern Thailand is the bastion of the Democrat Party, which currently leads the government. Though political support has waned considerably in the past few six years, it remains the largest single political party in the region. Before the start of Thailand's political turmoil in 2006, there was a bloc of Muslim politicians, including several avowedly Islamist ones, who were co-opted and brought into the party of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, *Thai Rak Thai* (TRT). Buoyed by Thaksin and TRT's enormous popularity, the *Wadah* faction, as it was known, became the first political challenge to the Democrat Party in the region. But the party fell out of favor, and took issue with Thaksin's heavy-handed approach to the insurgency. There have been allegations that senior members of the *Wadah* faction have some personal ties to the insurgency²⁰, though the party as a whole has distanced itself from the unrest. The legal and political dismantling of the TRT party since the September 2006 coup, meanwhile, has moved *Wadah* into its own orbit, and it merits further scrutiny in the future. There are some *Wadah* members in the *Pueh Thai* Party, the latest re-incarnation of the TRT, but they do not possess the cohesion and clout they did under Thaksin. The leading voice of the *Wadah* faction is Waemahadi Waedaoh, who has gained prominence for his calls for autonomy for the Muslim south.²¹

The insurgents finance their operations through a wide variety of means, both legal and illegal, and donations undoubtedly play a role. However, the extent to which members of the insurgency divert funds from local mosques and charities into the insurgency's coffers with the knowledge or support of the local community is unclear.

Gauging the popularity of the insurgency is all but impossible. It clearly has more grassroots support than it did when it began in January 2004. Much of that comes as public dissatisfaction and moral outrage toward the government's handling of the insurgency has soared.²² Government security forces get little in the way of public support. Tellingly, nearly no senior leaders of the insurgency have been killed or captured. Even at the local level, people are unwilling to provide intelligence or evidence to assist official investigations. How much of this is due to intimidation on the part of the insurgents is impossible to guess. The public often attributes killings to the government, even when the evidence often points to insurgents.

For their part, the insurgents seem to have calibrated the degree of violence necessary to achieve their short-term goals. There is no reason why the daily death tolls could not be significantly higher. Insurgents regularly use improvised explosive devices (IEDs), but most of the casualties come from drive-by shootings carried out by pillion motorcycle riders. There are few frontal assaults on police or army posts, despite the absence of physical or resource constraints on escalating the violence. The overwhelming consideration appears to be a potential loss of popular support if insurgents choose to drastically escalate the violence.

Public opinion and commitment towards Islamism generally has improved and deepened. The influence of Malaysia's neighboring Kelantan state, which the fundamentalist Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (or PAS) has dominated since 1999, is strong. The Muslim public in southern Thailand tends to see PAS' rule as being far better than anything the Thai government has provided. As importantly, they credit PAS for ridding the province of the corrupting influences of the non-Muslim community.

There has been a flurry of both mosque and *madrassa* construction since the mid-1990s, and the tempo has not subsided in the past few years. While much of the funding through 2004-05 was foreign, little has come through legal Thai channels. Thai officials are concerned that the funding is coming in via Malaysia, though the latter has not been forthcoming in providing assistance to stem the flow.

Perhaps the fastest growing Islamist organization in Southern Thailand is the Tablighi Jamaat. While nominally apolitical, there is considerable concern that this organization's stringent and intolerant form of Islam is fueling the conflict. In 2008, the group finished construction of the largest mosque in Thailand, in a remote area of the border town of Sungai Golok, and since has stepped up their construction of a network of *madrassas*.²³

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Since annexation in 1902, Thai policies towards the Malay Muslim community have been based on assimilation. Malayu has been banned as an official language or language of instruction. Malayan style dress was at times proscribed. Despite these attempts to Siamize the Malayan population, there was never any wholesale effort to repress the Muslim community or to inhibit the spread of the religion through limits on mosque and *madrassa* construction, *da'wa* (proselytization) activities or participation in the *haj*. There was considerable freedom of religion, though many other ethnolinguistic and cultural aspects were repressed. The overly centralized nature of the Thai state ensured that until the 1997 Constitution provincial leaders were chosen by the government in Bangkok, and not through local-level elections.

With the insurgency's onset, the Thai state has tried to work with moderate Muslim leaders in the various provincial Islamic committees, though without much success. Insurgents have targeted these Islamic committee leaders and others deemed to be collaborators. In general, Thai leaders have been blasé about the religious nature of the conflict and have gone out of their way to deny that religion

played any role in the insurgency. During his tenure, for example, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra saw the conflict as something that could be resolved largely through development funds. The National Reconciliation Commission established in 2005 similarly was in total denial about the Islamist nature of the conflict. Its final report, issued in 2006, denied both that the conflict was religious in nature and that the insurgents were secessionists. Instead, it simply argued that the root cause of the conflict was corruption and the lack of social justice.²⁴

The Thai government has spent considerable diplomatic resources lobbying the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which it feared would take a forceful stance against the Thai government's handling of the insurgency. In 2006, Malaysia, which then held the rotating presidency of the OIC, issued a number of reports and statements that whitewashed the Thai government's actions, to the point that an OIC delegation was targeted by insurgents.

Following the September 2006 coup that ousted Thaksin, the interim government headed by a former Royal Thai Army commander with long experience in the South, Surayud Chultanont, dedicated significant efforts to resolving the insurgency. In addition to very public apologies for the previous government's human rights violations and missteps, Surayud's government made numerous promises to the Muslim community, including a willingness to implement *sharia* law.²⁵ To this end, the government offered to increase education funds to Thai Muslim communities, and announced the hiring of 900 more Islamic teachers.²⁶ Interestingly, there was for the first time explicit acknowledgement by the government of the insurgents' Islamist agenda and demands.²⁷ The government also said that it would allow Malayu as the language of instruction in classrooms in the south and pledged a large budget increase for the region, which Thaksin had starved of funds.²⁸ By early 2011, few of these initiatives had been implemented, however, and many of the pledges to hold security forces more accountable have been scrapped—a state of affairs that has infuriated Thailand's Muslim community

ENDNOTES

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[14] My figures are conservative for two main reasons: First, they are based on open source reporting and not official government statistics and there is inconsistent media coverage. Second, many of those reported as wounded later die, which goes unreported.

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