

# The Pathology of Muslim Militancy in South Thailand

Omar Farouk Bajunid

## Introduction

Muslim militancy is a real and serious problem in South Thailand not just for what it has caused but also for what it is capable of. The recent upsurge in violence in the Muslim-dominated provinces of Southern Thailand which is generally assumed to be a function of Muslim militancy is a potent reminder that all is not well with the Thai State's relations with its Muslim minority and that, probably, the worse is yet to come. Given that the Muslims constitute the majority population in Thailand's deep south and that the name of Islam has often been invoked by the various Muslim groups in their political struggle for recognition, acceptance and autonomy in the modern Thai polity or for outright independence from Thailand, it is not difficult to imagine why Muslim militancy has always been attributed a role in that part of Thailand. Yet it would be simplistic if not misleading to assume that the origins, nature, causes and consequences of Muslim militancy can be satisfactorily explained without taking into account the different contexts within which it has evolved or that everything can simply be explained by putting the blame on Muslim militancy. It is only logical that every problem or conflict needs to be understood within its proper context—historical, geographical, cultural, social, political and geo-strategic and the same is certainly true in the case of Muslim militancy in South Thailand. There is also a need to clarify what we actually mean by Muslim militancy. There seems to be so much ambiguity and even carelessness in the use of the term. The term Muslim militancy is often applied to describe acts of violence committed by Muslims who are believed to have been inspired by their religion in their political actions. But the problem is that it may not be that easy to distinguish violence which is ideological in nature from that which is not, even though it is committed by people of the same religion. Thus, in the context of the Malay-Muslim provinces of South Thailand, while the Muslims have been accused of harbouring militancy they have also become victims of such militancy as well as other forms of violence including those sponsored by the state. The actual situation on the ground is actually far more complex than it is often made out to be. This paper hopes to explain the different dimensions of Muslim militancy and to identify and analyze the contexts within which it has evolved in South Thailand.

The paper begins with a brief analytical profile of present-day Thailand and the place of its Muslim minority within it. It then proceeds to trace and assess the recent upsurge of violence in the Muslim-dominated provinces of South Thailand especially since January

4, 2004. Subsequently, the historical precedents to the recent violence will be examined and the various attempts to analyze and explain these will be recapitulated. The issue of Muslim militancy in South Thailand will then be discussed highlighting the differing perceptions of the problem by the different parties involved. The implications of the ongoing violence which is related to Muslim militancy will then be highlighted. The conclusion will briefly refer to the outcome of the February 6, 2005, general election and its impact on the problem of Muslim militancy in South Thailand.

### **Profile of Thailand**

Thailand is, by any standard, a very big country. Its population of about sixty four million people makes it larger than any country in the European Union except Germany. In terms of size, with an area of about 513,115 square kilometer, it is much bigger than Japan although slightly smaller than France. It is the only country in Southeast Asia to have escaped Western colonization. It is a constitutional monarchy and ranks among the first Southeast Asian nation to experiment with democracy. The normal image of Thailand is that the Thais are culturally homogeneous with Buddhism as their definitive religion pervading every sphere of life in the kingdom. In actual fact, the situation is more complex than it has been usually portrayed.

The ethnic mosaic in Thailand is amazing although the overwhelming majority of the Thais have no problem at all identifying themselves as Thais. Thai identity actually subsumes many other kinds of identity including ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural and regional. The ethnic Thais are indeed the dominant ethnic group in Thailand but the role of the other ethnic groups, who are often marginalized, should not be underestimated. The Malays, Chinese, Vietnamese, Sea-Gypsies and the Hill-Tribes, for example, easily come under this category.

Although constitutional rule was first introduced in Thailand in 1932, Thailand has already had sixteen constitutions over the last seventy three years. The present constitution, promulgated in 1997, is therefore only about eight years old. It is supposed to be the most democratic of all the constitutions that Thailand has had so far and yet its inadequacies have already been a subject of considerable debate and calls have already been heard of the need to come up with a new constitution! Likewise, although democracy is not new to Thailand it is only in the last thirteen years or so, that it has had an uninterrupted history. Prior to this, for most of its modern history, Thailand was always either under military rule or ruled by military leaders. Before 1992, civilian prime ministers of Thailand were only able to serve for very short terms compared to their military counterparts and more often than not were booted out of office following a coup. For much of its modern history too, Thai politics has not been free from political violence of one sort or another and often too, it is the State which is among its main perpetrators. One could easily look at the political executions of the 1930s, the policies of forcible assimilation of the early 1940s, the various military coups, the suppression of the communists in the 1960s, the attempts to quell the 1973 students uprising and the 1976 massacre of the students at Thammasat University as obvious examples of State-condoned, if not State-sponsored violence. The State too is obsessed with the idea of its territorial indivisibility and any real or perceived threat to its sovereignty has always been dealt with harshly and decisively.

The role of Islam in Thailand has also not been fully appreciated. It is often not appreciated that Islam in Thailand enjoys both official as well as royal patronage and that it has long fostered positive and amicable relations with the Thai State historically. The Muslims, as a socio-religious community constitute the largest minority in the Thai kingdom. There are over 3,113 mosques distributed all over the Thai kingdom and the number appears to be growing.<sup>1)</sup> Hence, the population of the Muslims is also significant although its exact numbers still appear speculative. The Muslims claim that they constitute about ten percent of the kingdom's population while official figures suggest that they are no more than four percent.<sup>2)</sup> But even if the modest figure is used, in absolute terms, it still represents about 2.4 million people, which is bigger than many of the sovereign member states of the United Nations, like Timor Leste, Brunei, Maldives, Cyprus, and even Estonia. If the higher figure is accepted, its significance will no doubt be even greater.

Nevertheless, the Muslims in Thailand are far from being monolithic. Broadly, they may be divided into the Malay-Muslims who constitute the dominant population in the provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat and parts of Songkhla and the Thai-Muslims, who are to be found in all of the seventy six provinces of Thailand, including the Malay-Muslim-dominated provinces. The Malay-Muslims essentially speak Malay rather than Thai and practise Malay culture which make them culturally distinguishable from the Thais. In view of their numerical predominance in the southernmost parts of Thailand the majority-minority profile is reversed making them the de facto majority ethnic group and the Thais, the minority group. The geographical contiguity between the Malay-Muslim dominated provinces of Thailand with Malaysia, where their ethnic brethren, the Malays, are the dominant group and the existence of extensive and overlapping kinship, cultural, religious and educational ties between them transcending their respective national boundaries, contribute significantly to the resilience of the Malay-Muslim identity in that part of Thailand.

The presence of a large number of Malay-Muslims from Thailand in Malaysia as migrant labourers, vendors as well as restaurant operators has also reinforced their economic dependence on Malaysia while consolidating their cultural and ethnic affinities with the Malays. In the Malay-Muslim-dominated provinces of Thailand, the Thai-Buddhists are a minority comprising essentially recent migrants from other parts of Thailand as well as government officials on temporary posting to the region. Thus, the Malay-Muslim provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and parts of Songkhla in South Thailand also, in effect, represent a distinctive and viable Malay-Muslim cultural zone within the kingdom of Thailand with a strong relationship with their counterparts across the border in Malaysia.

On the other hand, the Thai Muslims are a diverse group united only by their Islamic faith and adoption of Thai culture and identity. Contrary to conventional views, the presence of Islam outside the Malay-Muslim provinces, is also significant in any number of ways although Muslims outside the Malay-Muslim cultural belt appear to have blended well with the ethnic Thais. For example, it is estimated that the Muslims make up about fourteen percent of the population of Chiangmai, in North Thailand, although the majority are Chinese-Muslims, rather than Malay-Muslims. The on-going conversion to Islam from not only ethnic Thais from all over the kingdom but also among the Hill

Tribes, such as Akha and Hmong, has also not been fully appreciated.<sup>3)</sup> It is also significant to note that in the recent general election, a candidate in Constituency One in Ayutthaya, which is well outside the Malay-Muslim belt, promised to turn Ayutthaya into a leading centre of *halal*-food industry in Thailand as a way of appealing to the Muslim voters, who according to him, make up between twenty to thirty percent of the electorate in his constituency, a development which clearly illustrates the growing importance of Islam outside of the Malay-Muslim provinces.<sup>4)</sup> The province of Satun which borders Perlis in Malaysia has an overwhelmingly Muslim population, but yet is culturally much closer to the ethnic Thais.

Although the overwhelming majority of the Muslims in Thailand are Sunni, the Shias have also for centuries been part of the wider Muslim community in Thailand. The *Chularatmontri*, or *Sheikhul-Islam* or Head of the Islamic religion in Thailand, serves as the royal adviser on Islamic affairs and has a tenure for life. He sits as an ex-officio of the Central Council for Islamic Affairs, which is the highest organ of the officially-sanctioned Muslim socio-religious organization in Thailand. But because freedom of religion is enshrined in the Thai constitution and is respected in practice, Muslims, like their Buddhist counterparts, have considerable leeway in determining their particular religious loyalties or practices. This, has in an important sense, enabled the different religious schools and traditions to flourish in Thailand especially in areas outside the Malay-Muslim dominated provinces but also within these areas. Schisms and tensions within Islam in Thailand do exist underlining the fact that the Muslims are far from monolithic.

Essentially, Islam in Thailand is characterized by diversity. But what is even more remarkable is the high degree of inter-religious tolerance and accommodation between Islam and Buddhism and between the Muslims and the Thai State for much of the kingdom's history. But how do we explain the recent outbreak of violence in the South which now appears to involve religion in a more direct way. It would be too early and too tenuous to suggest that religion or specifically Islam has suddenly become the primary source of conflict in the South. The role of Islam in Thailand itself is too complex to reduce it to a single dimension in trying to understand a phenomenon which is more plausibly caused by a combination of factors most of which are very local in nature. An examination of the recent upsurge in violence in South Thailand should shed more light on this.

### **The Upsurge of Violence in the Malay-Muslim Provinces**

The recent upsurge of violence in South Thailand cannot possibly be understood without appreciating its chronological context. What has recently been labelled as Muslim militancy actually has a long history although it was rarely described as such before. It constitutes an on-going problem for the State especially following the forcible incorporation of the former Malay Kingdom of Patani, which basically overlaps with the present-day provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and parts of Songkhla, into the Thai polity in the historical period. But history alone cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of the chronic unrest in that part of Thailand. It is also misleading to suggest that what is now referred to as Muslim militancy has been the single-most important aspect of the problem. It will become clear in our discussion later that there are also other reasons for the sudden upsurge of violence in those provinces. But perhaps at this juncture it would

be more helpful to just look at the facts pertaining to the recent upsurge of violence.

It is generally believed that the most serious recent violent incident took place on January 4, 2004, when an organized group of more than fifty men, according to some sources, raided an army depot in Narathiwat, killing four soldiers and stealing hundreds of rifles and a large quantity of ammunitions. Eighteen schools were also simultaneously set alight in what appeared to be well-coordinated attacks. Immediately after this incident more violence broke out with acts of arson, attacks against government officials and even beheadings of Buddhist monks. What was most troubling was that if in the past political violence in the south was invariably vertical in nature, and basically constituted attacks against the state, its apparatuses and symbols, the new development in the south marked a radical departure from past precedents in that the target of attacks began to shift to the horizontal plane involving innocent ordinary people. Thus, the deterioration of violence this time round could not have been more alarming. The crisis in Thailand's southern region deteriorated with the imposition of martial law there which failed to stop the violence. The situation in the south was described as 'Thailand's War Zone' by a leading Asian magazine.<sup>5)</sup>

The kidnap and presumed execution of a prominent Muslim lawyer, Somchai Neelaphaijit, allegedly by the police, who at the time of his disappearance was responsible for the defence of five suspected *Jemaah Islamiyah* [JI] terrorists under detention and the allegation that a few Muslim Members of Parliament were behind the unrest further exacerbated tensions in the Muslim south. These were high-profiled cases but besides these there were prevalent complaints by locals of the sudden disappearance of their close relatives and friends presumed detained and possibly executed by the security forces. The arbitrary arrests and detention of suspected militants also created widespread fear among the local people that they would be indiscriminately brutalized by the authorities. The intrusive inspections of mosques, *madrasas* and *pondoks* by the Thai security officials claiming to look for militants have also aroused the ire of the local people over what was generally perceived as unjust acts of suppression and recrimination against the Muslims.

The situation escalated further with the outbreak of another major incident on April 28, when Thai security forces killed 107 suspected militants, many of whom were members of a local soccer team, who were accused of planning acts of terrorism. Thirty-two were were gunned down inside the historic Kru-ze mosque in Pattani. A government appointed commission set up to look into this incident concluded that the level of force and type of weapons used in the attack on the mosque "was disproportionate to the threat posed by the militants."<sup>6)</sup> This incident generated even more violence including arsons, bombings, killings of government officials and security forces and beheadings and murders of innocent civilians. The murder of Nusee Yakoh by unidentified assailants on June 24, 2004, in Tak Bai in Narathiwat Province and the subsequent failure of the Police to make any arrests undermined the local community's faith in the impartiality of the Police force.<sup>7)</sup>

The latest major episode in this vicious cycle of violence took place on October 25, 2004, in Tak Bai, Narathiwat. In trying to break up a demonstration at the Tak Bai Police Station by about a few thousand protesters who were demanding the release of six men accused of giving weapons to Islamic militants Thai security forces shot dead six protesters and detained over one-thousand three hundred people. The detainees were

then stacked like logs into a number of military trucks and transferred to a military camp on a journey which lasted as long as five hours for some of the detainees.<sup>8)</sup> Many later alleged that they were maltreated and even tortured and abused by the Thai security forces while under detention. As a result of this, almost eighty people died of suffocation while there were also claims that many more had been left unaccounted. Although initially the government tried to play down this incident, when news of the incident broke out, the government came under relentless criticisms from the media, civil society and the international community. Muslim governments, from Iran to Indonesia, protested what they considered as unacceptable treatment of their co-religionists. The Malaysian Parliament unanimously passed a resolution on November 23, 2004, condemning the excessive use of violence by the Thai security forces against Thailand's own Muslim citizens.<sup>9)</sup> Referring partly to this event, the Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2005* suggests that "The steady erosion of respect for human rights in Thailand that has characterized Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's rule accelerated sharply in 2004."<sup>10)</sup> Following the Tak Bai incident, more violence erupted with rampant revenge killings of the innocent taking place almost daily.

Even with extra security being provided during the period leading up to the recent general election there were continuing cases of violence. In fact, even after the general election on February 6, 2005, there were still killings and bombings taking place. For example, on February 8, 2005, two locals were seriously injured in a bomb attack on a hotel in Rangae district of Narathiwat.<sup>11)</sup> On February 11, 2005, a Yala police officer was killed and more than 20 onlookers and police were injured after a remote-controlled bomb exploded near a CD shop. The owner of the shop had been shot four times just before the explosion.<sup>12)</sup> On Sunday, February 13, 2005, it was reported that suspected militants shot and seriously wounded Manasae Sama-ae in Narathiwat. In Raman, Yala, a police officer was killed when a gunman shot him twice in the back as he was riding his motorcycle and less than an hour later three workers painting the road in the same district were shot although they survived after being taken to the hospital. There had been bombing incidents on five consecutive days in the past week with one targeting the Governor of Narathiwat while he was inspecting a military parade at a sports stadium.<sup>13)</sup> Following this incident, two more bombs went off in Narathiwat province injuring eight people ahead of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's planned visit to the province.<sup>14)</sup> Acts of violence continued to occur right through April of 2005. In all, almost seven hundred people have been killed since January 2004 and a general climate of fear and insecurity still prevails in the south.

### **Historical Precedents**

How do we read the above phenomena? Perhaps to begin with we have to acknowledge that inasmuch as the recent spate of violence appears to be escalating, this is definitely not the first time that the region has witnessed an escalation of violence. The history of the Malay-Muslim provinces whether in the traditional or the modern period has always been characterized by some form of political struggle or other, violent or otherwise. In the post-Second World War period, when de-colonization was the trend, the Malays tried to organize various kinds of resistance against the modern Thai state although without success. Various irredentist and separatist movements like GAMPAR,

“New Malaya,” Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Pattani (BNPP), Barisan Revolusi Pattani (BRN) and Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), have emerged at different points of time to pursue the goals of autonomy or independence for the Muslims.<sup>15)</sup> W.K.Che Man, in his book, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand*, has also traced the evolution of Malay-Muslim separatism in Thailand in some detail.<sup>16)</sup> There were also other minor or ad hoc separatist organisations like Sabil-illah, Black December 1902, United Pattani Freedom Movement and Bersatu, which in their different ways all tried to pursue the goals of separatism from the Thai state.

Although all the above organizations were different from one another and existed at different times and under separate leadership they were invariably united by the common goal of seeking either greater autonomy or independence from Thailand. It would be useful to look at the main demands made by Haji Sulong bin Abdul Kadir, a highly respected religious leader, and President of the Provincial Council for Islamic Affairs of Pattani, to the Thai government in April 1947, the gist of which continues to be relevant until today. These were that there should be:

A single Malay Governor for the existing Malay provinces  
Eighty percent of officials should be Muslim  
Malay should be given equal status with Thai and should be introduced into primary schools  
Islamic law be administered in separate courts, not from within the Thai legal system  
Revenues raised in the region kept for the welfare and development of the region.<sup>17)</sup>

For leading the resistance movement, Haji Sulong bin Abdul Kadir was detained for a few years and later released only to disappear presumed kidnapped and murdered by the authorities. The same demands for greater recognition of their cultural and religious distinctiveness continued to be made to successive Thai administrations by leaders of the different Malay-Muslim separatist organizations with very little success.

The basic problem facing Thailand in its relations with its Malay-Muslim minority for the past six decades does not seem to have changed very much: how to integrate the Malay-Muslims into the Thai polity without alienating them? The insightful observation made by M. Ladd Thomas way back in 1975 still seems equally valid today as it was then when he concluded that:

“Geographical propinquity, historical heritage, local unfamiliarity with the administrative system, and resentment of bureaucratic attitudes and behaviour, absence of meaningful social intercourse between the Muslim and Buddhist communities, concentration of wealth in the hands of non-Muslims, deteriorating economic conditions, and failure of authorities to provide protection for the local people have all contributed to a sense of alienation on the part of Muslims in the region, as well to a belief that they are treated as second class citizens.”<sup>18)</sup>

But how did the Thai State respond to the problem. There is no doubt that it was an historical accident that the Malay-Muslim provinces were incorporated into the modern Thai polity but it is now a contemporary reality that those provinces now constitute an

integral part of modern Thailand which is uncompromisingly obsessed with the notion of its territorial indivisibility. Thus, Thailand's perception of the potential threat arising from the Malay-Muslim provinces to its territorial integrity has always been governed by feelings of nervousness and insecurity. The attitudes and policies adopted by successive Thai governments have always been a function of the above sense of anxiety and insecurity. The Thai attitudes towards the demands of the Malay-Muslims of the southern border provinces have always fluctuated between accommodation and confrontation. Thailand had been willing to accept certain conciliatory principles and actions at certain points of time, but had, at other times been unbending on what it perceived as its non-negotiable terrain.

In view of the relatively respectable degree of religious tolerance in Thailand, successive Thai governments have had little problem accommodating Islam as a religious system provided it is divorced from or devoid of political demands and Malay identity which is generally viewed as a competing identity for Thailand. Thai governments too have demonstrated their preparedness to use Islam as an instrument or means to assimilate or integrate the Malay-Muslims into mainstream Thai society. Successive Thai regimes have attempted to do this in a range of ways including co-opting the already assimilated Thai-Muslims from the other regions in Thailand to undertake the political socialization of the Malay-Muslims to bring about their speedier re-orientation towards Thailand. At various periods of its recent history too, Thai governments have even undertaken affirmative action in favour of the Malay-Muslims to facilitate their political integration and co-option into Thailand. Some concessions have been given to the Malay-Muslims in terms of private education, university enrollment and even job placements provided they are willing to assimilate or at least integrate.

But, on the other hand, the Thai state especially its security apparatuses, has been consistently intolerant of any signs of secessionism or perceived threat to its territorial sovereignty and would resort to the use of disproportionate force to eliminate this threat. To what extent a particular Thai regime is prepared to be more accommodating or confrontational towards the Malay-Muslims depends, among other things, on the particular political system in operation at any particular period of time and the personality of its leaders. Since 1932 however, Thailand has been for the greater part of its history, ruled by authoritarian military dictatorships than democratic governments. It was only since 1992 that Thai democracy has enjoyed uninterrupted existence. Hence it is not difficult to imagine that for most of Thailand's recent history, it was the confrontational way that was dominant with its intended and unintended consequences. Democratic regimes, however, tended to be more sensitive to the local sensibilities and therefore apparently more accommodating to the Malay-Muslims.

Successive Thai governments, whether democratic or authoritarian, recognize that the threat to Thailand in the deep south is basically due to the politics of identity. The continued maintenance and potential manipulation of the Malay-Muslim identity by the Malay-Muslims could undermine the Thai claim to legitimacy in that part of Thailand. Thus, the strategy adopted to counter this threat has always been to weaken the foundation of this competing identity, basically through its educational, linguistic and social policies.

The Malay-Muslim responses to the new demands of Thai citizenship as determined by



Bangkok have also not been clear-cut, vacillating between resistance and cooperation. The resistance took at least two forms, namely, 1] outright physical armed separatist struggle against the Thai state, and/or 2] organized non-violent demands for the state to respect their cultural privacy. Cooperation, on the other hand, involved working with the state to reform the Malay-Muslim cultural space, particularly its educational institutions and orientations to conform to the conciliatory gestures of the state. This includes modernizing and nationalizing the pondok school system to allow for the incorporation of the secular national curricula alongside the religious curricula.

As evident in the foregoing discussion, although the different Malay-Muslim separatist movements had different leaderships and orientations they were invariably united and consistent in their demands for their cultural distinctiveness as a people to be respected. Essentially Malay-Muslim separatism has been a reaction to the perceived denial of their basic rights as an indigenous people. The different times when the separatist movements were established or when separatist violence flared up in the Malay-Muslim provinces invariably coincided with the period when the Malay-Muslims felt that they were being subjected to injustices and that their fundamental rights were being threatened.

It is also interesting to observe that the Malay-Muslim cooperation with the Thai state had always occurred during the democratic era or at least when there was some semblance of democracy. It was, for example, during the premiership of General Prem Tinasulanonda that Prime Ministerial Decree 66//23 decree was issued on April 23, 1980, to spell out the new National Security Policy which among other things underlined the shift in approach from military confrontation to peaceful initiatives and to support the democratization process. Although the policy was basically intended to tackle the communist insurgency it also had a positive effect in overcoming the Malay-Muslim separatist insurgency at that time. Following this development, when General Harn Linanonda was appointed as Commander of the fourth Army Division which was based in the South, he issued Decree number 751/2524 outlining a new Southern Pacification Policy which was well received in the South especially among the Muslims. It was the above conciliatory gestures that significantly contributed towards resolving the problem of Malay-Muslim insurgency at that time.

Further democratic developments helped consolidate the political framework which made it possible for the Malay-Muslims to assert an important public role in Thailand. In the post-1992 period, Malay-Muslim Members of Parliament formed a parliamentary *Wahdah* faction to protect and promote their collective interests through political bargaining and negotiation within their own political party and in the parliament. Muslim representation in government during this period was at an unprecedented level. There were thirteen Muslim members of Parliament in 1992 [both in the March and September elections] and fourteen in 1995. After the 2001 general election which was held according to the provisions of the 1997 Constitution, the number of Muslim members of the House of Representatives rose to twenty one.<sup>19)</sup>

Notwithstanding the above positive development, a low-level threat of armed separatism remained. Outbreaks of violence continued to take place although this was not necessarily connected to separatism. But it was not until the developments of the post-September 11 incident especially after President Bush's declaration of the global 'war on terror' and Thaksin Shinawatra's immediate support of that policy that a new wave of

violence, conveniently attributed to Muslim militancy, erupted in the South. It is perhaps no coincidence that according to a recent study undertaken by Professor Srisompop Jitpiromsri of Prince of Songkhla University, out of a total of 1975 violent incidents that were recorded between 1993 and the end of November, 2004, only twenty one percent occurred before 2001 in the three southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat while the rest took place when Thaksin Shinawatra came to power. He further highlights that, in the first 11 months of 2004, 1253 violent incidents were recorded, which was sixty three per cent of the total over the period of eleven years. The figure for 2004 was nineteen times higher than the average of sixty six such incidents taking place each year between 1993 and 2003.<sup>20)</sup>

The facts speak for themselves. While it is difficult to deny that there were plenty of historical precedents to the recent Muslim militancy in South Thailand, it was definitely the regime change in Thailand in 2001 when Thaksin Shinawatra became Prime Minister and openly aligned himself with the U.S. in its global war on terror that the scenario was set in the Malay-Muslim provinces for a new round of conflict. The dispatch of Thai soldiers to Iraq in 2003 against the backdrop of strong Muslim opposition to the move, although withdrawn a year later, had also inflamed local Muslim feelings against the government.

### **Muslim Militancy: Differing Perceptions**

Most analyses of the crisis in the south, no matter what position they take, tend to assume that essentially the problem is one directly caused by Malay-Muslim separatist insurgency or Muslim militancy which has apparently been fuelled by the economic marginalization, poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment of the Muslims in that part of Thailand. The prevailing perception by the Thai security establishment is that the conflict in the deep South is basically a function of Muslim militancy. The government has wavered between blaming local criminal elements for the troubles in the South and accusing 'outsiders' for promoting violence. Some quarters have also tried to suggest that the violence in the South has been inspired by international terrorism although Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has not publicly endorsed this view. He has, though, been consistent in accusing local thugs and 'crazy' Islamic teachers for fuelling the violence.

One foreign analyst has even argued that there is an international *jihadi* perspective to the problem suggesting that the *Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami* [HUJI] in Bangladesh, which is linked to Bin Laden's International Islamic Front [IIF] may have been involved in supporting the Muslim insurgency in Thailand.<sup>21)</sup> The arrest of Riduan Isamuddin in August 2003, better known as Hambali, an alleged leader of Jemaah Islamiyah [JI] which was attributed the blame for a series of bombings in Indonesia, in Thailand was often suggested as evidence of the presence of international terrorists in the kingdom although there is no proof that he was in contact with the local insurgents in the South. Earlier, a senior Thai intelligence official had expressed concerns that the JI was trying to recruit followers in southern Thailand and that the region was becoming a breeding ground for international terrorists.<sup>22)</sup> The arrests, detention and current trial of a number of Malay-Muslims suspected of having links with a Singaporean Muslim convert of Chinese origin accused of being a JI member, now held in Singapore, also tend to create the impression

that there is some connection between international terrorist groups and Muslim militancy in the South.

This dominant government view of the cause of the conflict and its prospective remedy, however, is not shared by the majority of the Muslims who think that they are being unfairly targeted and victimized by the Thai security forces and the local government machinery, on the pretext of fighting Muslim militancy and international terrorism. A Muslim Senator from Narathiwat, Fadruddin Boto bluntly suggested that the local Muslims believe that the C.I.A. was trying to turn the southern problem into an international problem.<sup>23)</sup>

The views articulated by the former Foreign Minister of Thailand, Surin Pitsuwan, himself a Muslim from Nakhorn Sri Thammarat, in an article published in the Bangkok Post perhaps best sum up the Malay-Muslim perception of the crisis in the South. He argues that “The struggle in the deep South has a deeper cultural dimension that is being overlooked by the national leadership at the present. They are feeling that their cultural space is being violated. They first questioned about the interest (usury) they, as Muslims, would have to pay to the village funds providing personal loans to them. They were severely affected by the shooting spree unleashed during the anti drug campaigns when many of their innocent relatives were cut down without any due process of law. They were concerned with the ‘underground lottery’ being turned into ‘above the ground’ and therefore ‘legalized.’ They are now anxious about ‘scholarship funds’ being distributed from that ‘legalized gambling.’ They are deeply anxious about plans to register brothels and prostitutes. They are extremely worried about the idea of ‘legalized casinos’ being contemplated by the Government.”<sup>24)</sup>

### **Implications of the On-going Violence**

There are at least eight observations that can be drawn from the foregoing discussion.

First, the security situation in southern Thailand is no doubt serious and dangerous. The nature and frequency of the violence is cause for concern. It must be worrying for the government that although Thailand is still supposed to be practising democracy, due to the recent troubles, martial law and curfew had to be imposed in many areas in the Malay-Muslim provinces, to contain the disturbances and retrieve any semblance of the governability of the region.

Second, it was probably the fear of potential terrorist attacks on Western targets in Thailand that had prompted the Thai security forces, working in liaison with their Western counterparts to adopt aggressive pre-emptive measures to strike at Muslim targets like mosques, madrasas and pondoks to flush out suspected militants although this apparently had the adverse effect of alienating more people. The declaration of the global war on terror by President Bush and the adoption of the doctrine of pre-emptive strikes directly contributed to revive the issue of national security in governance in Thailand and with that the renewed dominance of the role of the state security apparatuses, especially the military and the police, who saw themselves as the natural custodians of Thai national security. This development inevitably led to the reassessment of the security threat in the Malay-Muslim provinces and the adoption of new strategies to handle it with ramifications on the ordinary citizens in the south in general and the Malay-Muslims in particular. Emboldened by Thailand’s alliance with the United States

on the issue of global terrorism, the Thai security forces exploited the fear of terrorism to pursue aggressive policies against the Malay-Muslims. This policy led to the growing perception among a large cross-section of the Malay-Muslims that the global war on terror was actually a war against Islam. Their latent fear that there appears to be a hidden conspiracy to rob them of their freedom, identity and religion has been revived. There was also growing sympathy for the co-religionists in Palestine and Iraq who were perceived as victims of this global conspiracy against Islam. The dispatch of the Thai troops to be part of the U.S. led coalition in Iraq had only served to reinforce their suspicions about the suspicious intentions of the state or at least the outright disrespect to their feelings and sensitivities.

Third, the extra-judicial killings that were sanctioned by the government beginning on February 1, 2003, as part of its 'brutal measures' to combat illicit drug trafficking and trade, which caused the loss of over 2,500 lives also contributed to the deteriorating violence in the region. In the Muslim south, this became a highly controversial issue and many Malay-Muslims claimed they were being targeted for the wrong reasons.

Fourth, Muslim militancy, broadly defined to mean any form of violence involving the Muslims in one way or other has definitely been part of the violent landscape of the South but it is far from monolithic. Muslim militancy in South Thailand has various shades of motives as well as expressions. It was the failure of the Thai government to understand these differences that had contributed to exacerbate the problem.

Fifth, as demonstrated by the April 28 armed showdown with the alleged militants and the Tak Bai Incident, violence was not the monopoly of the militants as the Thai government itself was equally accountable for it through its use of disproportionate force to quell opposition to it. The allegations that the Muslims have been making, that the violence in the south, especially the arbitrary kidnap of Muslims suspected of being separatists, leading to their disappearance and execution, has also been the result of the actions of corrupt and high-handed security officials appear more credible now.

Sixth, the role of criminal elements and 'hired assassins' has also been a factor in the recent violence.

Seventh, there appears to be an element of continuity in the unrest. There is a history of armed Malay-Muslim separatist insurgency in that part of Thailand. Although as a political ideology, the cause of Malay-Muslim separatism had been severely emasculated in the recent decade or so partly due to the Thailand's own democratic development and partly, the changing regional scene brought about by the consolidation of ASEAN as a regional body committed to respecting the territorial sovereignty of its members, Malay-Muslim cultural separatism or cultural space has been more difficult to eliminate and its continued existence constitutes a serious challenge to Thailand's claim to being a culturally homogeneous state.

Eighth, what is intriguing is the fact that government seems to be unsure, or at best, ambivalent about the causes of Muslim militancy in the South. There were, at times, even public differences of opinion among government leaders, bureaucrats and politicians as who to blame for the unrest. Thai military leaders tend to apportion the blame to Muslim militants with nuanced allegations that international terrorist groups, including *Al-Qaeda* and *Jemaah Islamiyah* [JI], have had a role in this. Other officials have tried to insinuate that foreign hands might be involved with Malaysia emerging as the prime

suspect. Thailand's prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, for a long time, probably acting on the advice of his Muslim cabinet colleague, Muhammad Nor Mattha, kept insisting that the crisis in the south was essentially the work of local 'thugs' and 'insurgents'.<sup>25)</sup> This could also have been due to the fact that, as a democratically-elected leader and as a politician, he had to be more circumspect than the Thai security people, so as not to alienate or antagonize the majority of the Malay-Muslims with unsubstantiated or controversial claims. Pointing the accusing finger at the bad elements within the broader Malay-Muslim society was probably a politically correct thing to do.

## **Conclusion**

It is fairly obvious from the above analysis that the on-going violence in South Thailand is in itself an indication of democracy in crisis. Muslim Members of Parliament and Senators who tried to speak up on behalf of the people had been accused of instigating militancy and had therefore been made ineffective. Martial law is still in place in the provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat and a curfew has also been imposed at selected times. There is also a general air of fear, anxiety and insecurity in the whole region. The Muslims complain of continual harassment and intimidation by the security forces and the Buddhists complain that they now feel very vulnerable. It is difficult for the people to lead a normal life under the circumstances. But it would be a mistake to attribute all the blame to Muslim militancy for the present crisis in southern Thailand. This view has been echoed by Anand Panyarachun, the Chairman of the National Reconciliation Commission, who observes that "perhaps half of the violence in the three southernmost provinces resulted from illegal smuggling, business disputes and the illicit drug trade."<sup>26)</sup> Muslim militancy is a problem and perhaps can become a bigger problem if not properly handled but as it is, it is not an insurmountable problem. Militancy is unlikely to provide the solution to the problems facing the Muslims. On the contrary, it can be counter-productive. Religion is not the central issue in the on-going violence although there have been attempts to manipulate religion by several interested parties. It is misleading to imagine that Islam is solely represented by the militants as there is a silent Muslim majority which has nothing to do with any kind of militancy. In addition to this, there is also a significant Muslim presence in the government at all levels including the outgoing cabinet, the local bureaucracy and the security forces although the number may be small. Some Muslims may have perpetrated violence but many more have also become its victims. The problem in the South is far too complex to come up with simple solutions.

There is a growing view that the rise to power of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai party must also be apportioned the blame for creating the conditions which have revived old anxieties and tensions in the Malay-Muslim provinces. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's C.E.O.-style of leadership which demands quick and effective solutions to problems has apparently not been very helpful in the Malay-Muslim region in view of the fact that some of these problems are chronic in nature and have been there for decades. The idea that there are instant solutions to all the woes of the region is unrealistic. The mutual distrust between the bureaucracy, especially the military and the police, on the one hand, and the local population, on the other, needs to be fully understood and delicately approached. The voices of the common people have to be

heard and their just grievances addressed.

The general election on February 6, 2005, in Thailand became a crucial referendum on the extent of support that Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai Party enjoyed in the southern provinces after being in power for four years. As it turned out, although the Thai Rak Thai Party won overwhelmingly in all the provinces of Thailand securing more than a two-thirds majority, it suffered a major setback in the southern provinces where it lost all but one constituency. The only constituency that Thai Rak Thai Party won, was in Phangga and that too by a very slim majority. In the Malay-Muslim provinces not a single Thai Rak Thai Party candidate won in the Constituencies: the only Thai Rak Thai candidate to have secured a respectable defeat, losing only by a marginal count, Najmuddin Uma, an outgoing Member of Parliament, was the very person accused by the security forces of instigating Muslim militancy! The results of the election in the South clearly indicate that the people there reject Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's hard-line approach in handling the crisis in the Malay-Muslim provinces. There was a chorus of calls from religious and community leaders in the South for the government to abandon its 'violent approach' and lift the martial law that was in force.<sup>27)</sup> This was actually the same message that the *Chularatmontri*, the Muslim spiritual leader in Thailand, gave just before the election when he said that "the use of force cannot solve the problem. It needs a gentle approach, understanding, and [the exercise] of reason. The more force [is] used, the more violent the problem will become."<sup>28)</sup> He further pleaded to the Thai public, "The Muslims in the South also love the country. Don't stereotype them as separatists. Regard them in a just way." It is instructive to note that he believed that the causes of violence in the South remain unclear because the problems are 'complex and cumulative.'<sup>29)</sup>

#### Notes:

- 1) This figure is the latest compiled by the Thai Parliamentary Senate Committee.
- 2) See Omar Farouk Bajunid "The Muslims in Thailand: A Review," *Tōnan Ajia Kenkyū (Southeast Asian Studies)*, Vol. 37, No. 2, September 1999, 222.
- 3) *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 November 2004.
- 4) See Election Pamphlet of the candidate of the Democrat Party in Constituency One, Ayutthaya, Mr. Suthat Atirojanasakul in the February 6, 2005 general election.
- 5) *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 March 2004
- 6) HRW 2005. *World Report 2005: Events of 2004*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 327.
- 7) *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 November 2004.
- 8) The Report of the Government-Commissioned investigation into the Tak Bai Incident has been partially released to the public by Mr. Anand Panyarachun, Chairman of the National Reconciliation Commission. Details of the treatment of the detainees during their detention which led to so many deaths are given in this Report.
- 9) *Utusan Malaysia*, 24 November 2004.
- 10) HRW 2005. *World Report 2005, op.cit.*, 326.
- 11) *Bangkok Post*, 9 February 2005.
- 12) *The Nation*, 12 February 2005.
- 13) *The Nation*, 13 February 2005.
- 14) *The Nation*, 14 February 2005.
- 15) See Omar Farouk "The historical and transnational dimensions of Malay-Muslim separatism in Southern

- Thailand,” Lim Joo-Jock and Vani S. eds., *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984), especially 237–243.
- 16) Wan Kadir bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990), 98–112.
  - 17) Clive J. Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), 174.
  - 18) M. Ladd Thomas, *Political Violence in the Muslim Provinces of Southern Thailand*, Occasional Paper No. 28 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975), 26–27.
  - 19) Omar Farouk Bajunid “Islam, Nationalism and the Thai State” in Wattana Sugunnasil ed. *Dynamic Diversity in Southern Thailand* (Chiangmai: Prince of Songkhla University and Silkworm, 2005), 13.
  - 20) Srisompop Jitpiromsri 2004. “One Decade and A Year of Violence in the Southern Border: Mysteries of the Problem and Solution.” Research Report. Pattani: Prince of Songkhla University [in Thai].
  - 21) See B. Raman “Thailand and International Islamic Front,” Paper No. 890, South Asia Analysis Group, 09-01-2004.
  - 22) *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 March 2004.
  - 23) *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 March 2004.
  - 24) *Bangkok Post*, 1 August 2004.
  - 25) Although Muhammad Nor Mattha was re-elected in the recent Thai general election on the Thai Rak Thai party list, he has been dropped from the new Thaksin cabinet. There is no Muslim representation at the cabinet level at present.
  - 26) *The Nation*, 8 May 2005.
  - 27) *The Nation*, 9 February 2005.
  - 28) *Bangkok Post*, 5 February 2005.
  - 29) *Bangkok Post*, 5 February 2005.