

The Effects of Thailand's Coup on the Southern Insurgency

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One of the justifications for the recent coup in Thailand was Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's mishandling of the southern insurgency, which has claimed some 1,700 lives in the past two-and-a-half years. The generals chafed at the political interference of Thaksin and his deputy Chidchai, their rotation of generals, failed policies and the blatant dismissal of the National Reconciliation Commission's (NRC) findings. People looked to General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, himself a Muslim, to solve the insurgency. With Sonthi in control, there will likely be three steps taken that will improve the current dismal situation, but by no means will it be a panacea.

First, there will be more consistency in personnel and policies. Countering an insurgency takes time and will not be resolved when leaders are constantly shuffled. There have been four separate Fourth Army commanders since 2003. Sonthi has also expressed an interest in reviving the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Committee (SBPAC) that Thaksin dismantled in May 2002. The SBPAC was a joint military-police-civilian command and administrative center, but also an arbitrator and dispute resolution mechanism, and a place where locals could raise concerns and flag abuses.

Second, Sonthi will implement many of the findings of the NRC. Most important will be the issue of impunity. While Sonthi is unlikely to change the existing policies—enacted in the 2005 Emergency Decree—that give the security forces blanket immunity from prosecution and give citizens absolutely no recourse to seek redress for abuses of power, he will not tolerate abuses of power and will address some of the other related findings. While the NRC recommendations alone will not quell the insurgency, they will go a long way in improving relations with the restive Muslim majority in Thailand's deep south. The Muslims severely mistrust the government, and without improved cooperation human intelligence will remain abysmally poor.

Third, Sonthi has announced that he is willing to negotiate with the insurgents. The problem with this offering, however, is that a group to negotiate with has not been identified. Additionally, warring sides only negotiate when there is nothing else to be gained by fighting. That is clearly not the case with the insurgents. There have been no meaningful arrests, their network is intact, their technical proficiency and experience is improving by the day, they can attack at will and the government's policies continue to alienate the population. They have nothing to gain from negotiations. Only the old, exiled leaders of the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), living abroad in Europe, have expressed any interest in negotiating, although they do not control the insurgents; offers to negotiate are simply leverage for their exceptionally weak hand (Terrorism Monitor, September 8).

More information has recently been shed on what transpired in secret negotiations last year. Thai Malays apparently approached the Thai consulate in Langkawi in 2005; the consul is a Malaysian national who then approached former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to begin negotiations (The Nation, October 6). While Mahathir apparently did this with the blessing of his successor Abdullah Badawi, Mahathir's efforts must be seen in the context of the increasingly acrimonious relationship between the two. There has been fanfare and significant optimism regarding the talks. In the October 7 Sydney Morning Herald, it was disclosed that several insurgent groups had signed on to the talks in principle, including PULO, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Kongres, Bersatu, the Gerakan Mujahideen Islami Pattani (GMIP), the Pattani Islamic Liberation Front and the Muslim Mujahideen Movement of Pattani (Terrorism Monitor, September 8). According to these reports, the two sides signed a draft "Joint Peace and Development Plan for South Thailand."

Yet there were two immediate problems. First, it is unlikely that the GMIP, now led by two Afghan veterans, had signed on in principle. Although their leader was arrested in Malaysia, there have been few subsequent arrests of GMIP members. Second, the group primarily responsible for the attacks, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Koordinasi (BRN-C), refused to sign on. This small detail was missed by most press reports.

The government immediately demanded that the rebels impose a one month cease-fire in a show of commitment to the peace process (Bangkok Post, October 8). As feared, the rebels with whom the government is negotiating have no operational control over the insurgency. The empirical evidence bears this out. While there were no attacks in the first two days after the coup, currently they are launching attacks just below their pre-coup rate (which were some of the highest in the course of the insurgency). A review of some of the larger attacks since September 23 include:

- Four police were wounded in a bombing in Pattani.
- A bomb placed in a Buddhist temple in Yala killed a soldier on guard.
- A 10 kg roadside IED in Narathiwat killed three, including one soldier, and severely wounded five others.
- In separate attacks, gunmen killed three in Yala and one in Pattani.
- In one shooting, a 10 kg bomb was left and set to go off when police came to investigate, although it was defused.
- One more person was beheaded, bringing the total number of beheadings to 25 since January 2004.
- On October 17, nine people were gunned down across four provinces.

Wan Kadir Che Man, the "representative" of the rebels and the head of Bersatu, has been unable to enforce any command and control [1]. Over the weekend of October 14-15, the Thai Fourth Army reduced the time required for a cease-fire as a show of goodwill to 14 days (The Nation, October 15). Nevertheless, the violence has continued unabated.

Caretaker Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont announced that he will travel to Kuala Lumpur this week to attend talks brokered by Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Najib Razak (The Nation, 15 October). It is still unclear whether Wan Kadir Che Man can deliver the goods. Moreover, talks on the Thai side will be conducted by working-level officers. As Sonthi said, "The Fourth Army commander and I will not do the talking. The dialogue will be processed via officers at the operational level only" (Bangkok Post, October 5).

PULO and Bersatu are important channels to the insurgent leaders who have continued to remain in the shadows, revealing neither themselves nor their agenda. Yet this is a new generation, and the old exiled leaders, whether they be in Damascus, Kuala Lumpur or Stockholm, have no control over the insurgents. Thai press reports indicate that authorities are still trying to open a direct channel of communication to the BRN-C's leaders Masae Useng and Sapae-ing Basoe, but there is no evidence to date that they have expressed any willingness to negotiate with the government (Bangkok Post, October 12). A military team was sent to Saudi Arabia to meet Tuanku Bilor Kortor Nilor, the former secretary-general of PUI O, whom they hope to enlist in

contacting the separatist leaders.

On top of the continued violence is the fact that the insurgents have issued three other preconditions to talks: a blanket amnesty for all insurgents detained (the Thai government claims to have arrested 700); greater funds for economic development; and the use of Bahasa Malayy/Yawi as the language of instruction in the schools. Security sources quoted in the Thai press contend that the insurgents are willing to drop their (hitherto unstated) demand for an independent state in return for the fulfillment of these demands (Bangkok Post, October 12). Yet the government is unlikely to fulfill any of these demands unconditionally; indeed, even the powers behind the coup have flatly rejected the adoption of Malayu as an official working language.

Conclusion

In post-coup Bangkok, everyone expects changes in government policy toward the insurgency. In that vein, it is assumed that changed policies will lead to alterations in the insurgents' tactics and operations. What has not been countenanced is whether if in the insurgent's analysis, nothing has changed; for instance, has one set of elites been simply replaced by another set of elites? Nevertheless, the negotiations are important and should be encouraged. Nearly 1,700 people have been killed and the situation could easily spiral out of control.

Notes

1. Bersatu was an attempt by insurgents to form a coalition of the Thai groups. It was established in 1989 by Wan Kadir Che Man, but it proved unable to forge a working relationship among the various Thai militant groups.

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