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Thailand's Twin Fires

Duncan McCargo

One country, two conflicts: a simmering insurgency on the southern border, and several rounds of violent clashes in the capital city, a thousand kilometres away. But Thailand's two conflicts may have more in common than meets the eye. Both reflect the unravelling of Siam's nineteenth-century form of rule – the domination of royal Bangkok over the untamed hinterlands, and the substitution of internal colonialism for European empire.

The small Malay state of Patani, today wracked by insurgency, was formally incorporated into Siam only in 1909, and relations with Bangkok have been troubled ever since. During the 1960s and 1970s, separatist resistance to the Thai state was led by armed groups, especially the Patani United Liberation Organisation and Barasi Revolusi Nasional. In the early 1980s the government of Prem Tinsulanond successfully co-opted the Malay Muslim elite, including much of the separatist leadership, into a social compact that dramatically reduced levels of violence. But in the early years of the twenty-first century that compact began to unravel. A resurgence of violence was symbolised by a bold attack on an army base on 4 January 2004, and worse was to follow.¹ To date, more than 4,200 people have died in what David Kilcullen argues is the world's third most intensive insurgency after Iraq and Afghanistan, yet the world knows virtually nothing about it.² The Thai government has done a wonderful job of talking down the conflict, but an expensive security response – including the deployment of around

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40,000 troops from all over the country to the region – has failed to quell the violence.

After a dip in the number of incidents in 2007–08, serious attacks are on the rise, including the systematic targeting of vulnerable groups such as school teachers.³ Much of the violence is carried out by young militants aged around 17–25, known as *juwae*, who operate in small cells. After recruitment and training, these units function largely without direct orders in a shadowy, anonymous and extremely decentralised movement. Not all of the violence is committed by Muslims against Buddhists: as in Algeria and other civil conflicts, the militants expend considerable energies on disciplining their own side, targeting *munafik*, or those who collaborate with the ‘infidel’ Thai state. At the same time, government forces have engaged in the abuse, torture and even extra-judicial killing of Malay Muslims suspected of involvement in the insurgency.

Trained in conventional warfare and with little history of combat, the Royal Thai Army has struggled to respond effectively to the violence. Successive governments have tried to address the conflict through parallel

Serious attacks are on the rise

talk of ‘reconciliation’ (*samanachan*), a term first popularised by the 2005–06 National Reconciliation Commission (chaired by former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, with the distinguished physician and social activist Dr Prawase Wasi as vice-chair). Reconciliation is an essentially royalist construct, which starts from the premise that all Thais are

bound together by a shared sense of identity predicated on the pillars of ‘nation, religion, King’. According to this thinking, the natural condition of Thais is to live in harmony, basking in the warm glow of royal virtue. Where there is conflict, as in the deep South, this suggests there is a virtue deficiency that needs to be remedied. This deficiency is an individual matter: there are two kinds of people in Thailand, good people who love the monarchy and appreciate being Thai, and bad people who reject these values. In one of several curiously moralistic passages, the report of the National Reconciliation Commission declares: ‘To be sure, there are bad people in this land, and they should be arrested and brought to justice according to the law. But the evidence from all sides indicates that they are few in

number.⁴ The mission of the state is to convert bad people into good: to turn bad Muslims into good Muslims, and to turn those who think of themselves as Malay into people who recognise their Thai-ness. Malay Muslims (the self-identification of many in the deep South) need to become Thai Muslims (the self-identification of most Muslims elsewhere in the country). The king himself gave a speech in which he declared that the correct approach to resolving the southern conflict was 'Understand, Access, Develop', reflecting a view of the Malay Muslim minority as underdeveloped and lacking in modernity. This motto may now be seen on the walls and uniforms of virtually every security unit in the South.

The central problem with the reconciliation discourse is its blindness to politics. In the South, talk of reconciliation involves ignoring the political aspirations of the Malay Muslim population. Thailand has 76 provinces: one of them, Bangkok, has an elected governor, while the rest have appointed governors who are rotated and assigned by the Ministry of the Interior. The southern border provinces elect fewer than a dozen members of the national parliament, and will never be able to speak with a loud enough voice to effect any substantive changes. Hailing from a peripheral region of Thailand, Malay Muslims are expected to kowtow to Bangkok, just as their ancestors paid regular tribute to the Ayutthaya and later the Chakri kings.

In place of political representation, participation and control, Bangkok pays lip-service to the rhetoric of justice. Harsh government officials who treat local people unfairly should be transferred to other parts of Thailand, so the argument goes, and replaced by more virtuous officials who will practice more benevolent forms of bureaucratic oversight. Unfortunately, this ad hoc, personalised notion of justice fails to satisfy the local population. Where flagrant abuses have been committed, as in the case of 78 unarmed Tak Bai protestors who perished mainly from suffocation while in military custody on the night of 25 October 2004, justice has yet to be done. Although the army commander responsible was transferred out of the South, he was promoted to full general the following year. In May 2009 a Songkla court reached the disturbing conclusion that there had been no intention to kill the detainees and that security officials involved had simply been carrying out their duties.⁵

Overall, the response of successive Thai governments to the conflict in the South has involved a combination of lofty disdain for the region and its people, especially the Muslim population; a willingness by the military to resort to excessive force; the deployment of royalist rhetoric as a substitute for serious study and analysis; the use of empty promises about justice and reconciliation; the deployment of vast 'development funds' to little obvious effect; and a complete denial of the political nature of the problem.

Battles in Bangkok

Years of conflict in the South bring the recent Bangkok protests into sharp focus. In many ways, the story is very different. The national-level crisis is essentially a conflict between different elements of the Thai elite, who have mobilised rival patronage-based networks of supporters. On the one side are the ruling Democrat Party, the military and the monarchical network, tacitly supported by the Peoples' Alliance for Democracy (PAD) – the yellow-shirted protestors who occupied Government House and eventually closed down Bangkok's airports in late 2008. On the other side are former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a flawed and controversial figure who was ousted from power in the anachronistic military coup of 2006 and has since spent most of his time in exile, along with the opposition Puea Thai Party and the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) red-shirt movement. The UDD disrupted the April 2009 ASEAN summit in Pattaya, and occupied central parts of Bangkok between March and May 2010. Clashes between the security forces, tens of thousands of red-shirts and their allies involved nearly 90 deaths, thousands of injuries, and a spate of grenade and arson attacks on buildings in central parts of the city. For all the protestors' antagonistic rhetoric, the yellow–red stand-off lacks any deep ideological basis, and the issues of religion, ethnicity and identity that loom so large in the South are far less salient at the national level. And while both sides have engaged in acts of violence, the national conflict is a much more conventional political stand-off where electoral contestation and relatively peaceful protests have generally predominated.

Most of the familiar mantras repeated in the international media coverage of the UDD protests are woefully simplistic. The red-shirts are not

all poor farmers, any more than the yellow-shirts are all members of the Western-educated elite. Their demonstrations are not spontaneous outpourings of resentment against the Thai aristocracy, despite the fact that some protestors wore T-shirts proclaiming themselves to be slaves (*prai*). The UDD is a set of loose, relatively autonomous networks, mainly but not entirely rurally based, organised around community radio stations and the PTV satellite station.⁶ This network exploits the rhetoric of social justice to mobilise voters in support of 'pro-Thaksin' political parties, building on the populist programmes of the Thai Rak Thai era (2001–06). Many of the local leaders of the UDD are vote-canvassers (*hua khanaen*), the grassroots political organisers who form the lynchpin of Thailand's electoral politics. Other key support bases for the UDD include elected members of sub-district administrative organisations, self-employed and semi-skilled workers, low-ranking members of the security services, and farmers holding sub-contracts to produce crops for agribusiness. In other words, these are mostly lower-middle-class people, not those living at the margins of Thai society. The UDD has been shaped and fostered through an extensive system of political-education schools, at least 400 of which have been held in 35 provinces during the past year, aimed at boosting a mass support base. However, most UDD networks lack formal members and often rely on outside financial support from politicians.

Some of those aligned with the UDD are essentially non-political interest groups; others support ideas of social justice or electoral democracy (often conflated with majoritarianism); while others openly call for the return of Shinawatra to Thailand. But within the UDD, there are tensions between ideas of localism supported by some groups, and the basically state-centric and top-down perspective of the movement's leadership. There is often a disconnect between the leadership and ordinary UDD activists, which was clearly seen when red-shirt leaders were booed by the crowd during the final days of the May protests, when they urged demonstrators to return home. Another highly problematic aspect of the UDD was the presence of violent elements, including so-called 'men in black', within or alongside the movement. These elements were associated with a number of serious incidents, including the firing of M-79 rocket launchers at both government security

forces and unarmed civilians, and were responsible for a number of deaths and injuries. While UDD leaders denied responsibility for these attacks, they never called upon controversial figures such as rogue general Khattiya Sawasdipol, known as Sae Daeng, to withdraw from protest sites.⁷

A hollow response

The response of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's government to the red-shirt protests has several crucial parallels with the approach of successive governments to the Southern conflict. Firstly, trying to discredit the political salience of the issue will not work. For all its ideological incoherence, the militant movement in the deep South is exploiting a real legitimacy deficit in the region, and exposes the hollowness of Bangkok's attempts to impose the will of the centre upon a very diverse and complex modern nation. Simply invoking demands for blind loyalty to the monarchy is no solution to Thailand's political problems; there are real divides that need to be addressed. The red-shirt movement raises similar challenges. Despite the movement's lack of ideological consistency, and the fact that many of the protestors were simply mobilised by pro-Thaksin politicians, the UDD protests reflected a seismic shift in Thailand's political order, the rise of new power networks at the local and national levels, and the emergence of bold and vigorous interest groups that will not just go away. King Bhumibol Adulyadej is now 82 years old, and the vexing question of the royal succession looms over all other issues, creating growing levels of national anxiety. Thailand has entered an era of end-of-reign politics characterised by deep social unease, as manifested by five years of continuous political crisis since the first yellow-shirt protests of September 2005. Thailand faces the need for a thorough reorganisation of political power, which can only come about through substantive debate and compromise at the highest levels.

Secondly, the two conflicts illustrate the limits of military force. In the South, the deployment of enormous resources on the part of the security sector has failed to address the root causes of the conflict. In similar fashion, although the military has cleared the streets of Bangkok – at the cost of scores of lives, and using tactics that clearly violated international law⁸ – the long-term consequences of such actions are a further erosion in the standing

of the armed forces (already low since the bungled 2006 military coup and its aftermath) and an associated decline in state legitimacy.

Thirdly, both conflicts illustrate the shortcomings of a discourse about justice and reconciliation. Like many Malay Muslims in the deep South, UDD sympathisers believe that the justice system is loaded against them. The Thai state has a poor track record of investigating abuses of power. There has never been any proper accounting for incidents of national-level political violence, such as the bloody crackdown on protests against the government of General Suchinda Kraprayoon in May 1992 – let alone for the 2004 Kru-Ze and Tak Bai incidents in the South. Few have much faith that an independent commission will get to the bottom of the scores of deaths during the March–May 2010 red-shirt protests, or that any senior figure from the government or the security services will ever be put on trial, let alone actually punished, for their orders or actions. The term ‘reconciliation’ in Thai has assumed the connotation of a government slogan, one that is unacceptable to the opposition. While those recently named to head committees for reconciliation and reform are trustworthy and well-qualified individuals (including, once again, Anand and Prawase), their committees do not bring together both sides of Thailand’s political divide, and so stand a very limited chance of success.

Thailand’s two recent violent conflicts both testify to a seismic shift in the country’s political landscape. Long suppressed by the Bangkok elite, forces of resistance, based primarily in the provinces, are challenging Thailand’s hierarchies and traditional power structures. Major changes in those structures, such as genuine decentralisation to the regions, are long overdue. Instead of empty talk of reconciliation, perhaps the time has come for a real national conversation about the country’s emerging political realities – and for an elite pact between the warring factions.

Notes

- 1 For a brief overview of the conflict see Duncan McCargo, ‘Mapping National Anxieties: Thailand’s Southern Conflict’, *RUSI Journal*, vol. 154, no. 3, June 2009, pp. 54–61.
- 2 David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 121.

- ³ See Srisompob Jitpiromsri, 'Sixth Year of the Southern Fire: Dynamics of Insurgency and Formation of the New Imagined Violence', Deep South Watch website, 10 March 2010, <http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/node/730>.
- ⁴ National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), *Overcoming Violence Through the Power of Reconciliation* (Bangkok: NRC, 2006), p. 3. For a critical discussion of the commission's work see Duncan McCargo, 'Thailand's National Reconciliation Commission: A Flawed Response to the Southern Conflict', *Global Change, Peace and Security*, vol. 22, no. 1, February 2010, pp. 75–91.
- ⁵ For details of the judgement see International Crisis Group, 'Southern Thailand: Moving Towards Political Solutions?', Asia Report, no. 181, 8 December 2009, pp. 13–14.
- ⁶ Naruemon Thabchumpon, 'Contested Political Networks: The Study of the Yellow and the Red in Thailand's Politics', presentation to International Workshop on Political Networks in Asia, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, Tokyo, Japan, 14 May 2010.
- ⁷ Maverick cavalry officer Sae Daeng played a key role in providing 'security' for the UDD protests until he was shot by a sniper's bullet on 13 May 2010. He died shortly afterwards.
- ⁸ See Amnesty International, 'Military Must Halt Reckless Use of Lethal Force', 17 May 2010, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/thailand-military-must-halt-reckless-use-lethal-force-2010-05-17>.