Review Article

Insurgency redux: Writings on Thailand's ongoing southern war

Marc Askew

Tearing apart the land: Islam and legitimacy in southern Thailand

By DUNCAN McCARGO

Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008. Pp. 189. Map, Plates, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

Confronting ghosts: Thailand's shapeless southern insurgency

By JOSEPH CHINYONG LIOW and DON PATHAN

Lowy Institute Paper 30, Double Bay, NSW: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2010. Pp. 114. Notes, Bibliography.

Comprehending the origins, dynamics and solutions to the ongoing violence in southern Thailand's Muslim majority border provinces has proved to be a challenge, not only to successive Thai governments and security forces but also to scholars and other investigators. Insurgent-instigated attacks, now paralleled by and intertwined with more opportunistic forms of violence, have afflicted the border region for nearly seven years (as of late 2010), with no sign of ultimate abatement, despite a considerable investment of resources by the Thai state. Arguably under-reported by the world media, this conflict has nonetheless attracted its fair share of parachute journalism and superficial reportage by instant-experts, single-issue rights advocates, wide-eyed postgraduate researchers and assorted cranks. Many of them have been ensnared by local 'fixers' with their own agendas. Despite some notable exceptions, much academic research effort in the region itself has been hit-and-run. As Duncan McCargo emphasises: 'this is a messy, awkward, in-your-face conflict' (p. 188) — as such it demands a comparable 'in-your-face' and sustained field-based research effort, which, as he rightly notes, has been sadly lacking.

McCargo's book, published in 2008, concentrates on the critical period of the southern violence and its impacts from 2004 to 2006 (though with some attention to 2007), encompassing the controversial policies and responses of the Thaksin Shinawatra administration. Aside from the Thaksin factor, this period generated the key issues that have shaped debate and positions on the south ever since, including: the role and character of Islamic radicalism, local ethno-religious identity and the function of the fraught past of the border region, the character of the centralised Thai state, nationalism and state

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violence. The book is a bold, ambitious and challenging work. It is bold because during the 2004 to 2006 period of unprecedented violence, McCargo was one of the few researchers committed enough to venture into villages and towns to engage with people directly, from religious leaders and politicians to captured insurgents and security officials. Thanks to his Thai-language skills, local Malay interpreters, observational acumen and sleuthing abilities, he amassed a wealth of material. McCargo's undertaking is also bold by virtue of its ambitious scope, which is not restricted to the narrower security issues encompassing insurgents and insurgency alone, but is focused upon the task of delineating the political power dynamics which, he hypothesises, undergird the current unrest. Some readers familiar with the terrain may cavil at some of McCargo's more dogmatic generalisations which stretch the available evidence. On the other hand, his book includes some superbly nuanced analysis of material.

McCargo frames his treatment of the southern conflict around a hypothesis of political legitimacy, since he defines the core of the conflict as a 'political problem', hardly surprising given his disciplinary background in political studies. His key argument draws on Mohammed Hafez's thesis (in *Why Muslim's Rebel*) that exclusionary conditions facilitate Muslim rebellions, which themselves exploit legitimacy 'resources' such as identity claims. The author contends that militancy in the south is part of a political process 'abetted by the Thai state's initially successful but ultimately corrosive attempts to enlist the Malay Muslim elite through a process of co-optation and coercion', and that, despite apparent advances in political participation in Thailand, these measures have actually constrained the region's Muslims from managing their own affairs (pp. 11–12). This is an effort to find a systemic explanation for the current violence enacted by a new-generation insurgency. Additionally, he employs Muthiah Alagappa's multi-dimensional conceptualisation of 'political legitimacy', drawing particularly on Alagappa's depiction of two forms of allegiance: of the elites and the masses. McCargo employs these and other notions throughout the book as a kind of legitimacy calculus, through which he examines the relations between the Bangkok state and the elites of the region, and Muslim Malay elites and their own society. 'Legitimacy deficit' apparently explains two levels of legitimacy strain/crisis in play: first, the persisting problem of Malay Muslim participation in an arguably Thai-controlled political space and structure; and, second, what appears to be a revolt of young Muslim militants against their own ostensibly Thai-co-opted elites. In the past the Thai state suffered from a legitimacy deficit in the region, but as a result of the state's responses to the violence during 2004, he asserts, this degenerated into a full blown 'legitimacy crisis'. It is up to readers to decide whether this crisis amounted to a condition of 'delegitimation' of the Thai state, as he claims. An important concept introduced in the introduction is 'virtuous legitimacy', a corollary of 'virtuous rule', which is a mode of benevolent stewardship characteristic of monarchical/authoritarian governance, particularly fitting to the Thai case, and claims to the legitimacy of the state's rule over the people of the border provinces. McCargo identifies this 'virtuous' mode as the authoritarian end of a continuum of legitimacy types extending through 'representative' to 'participatory' legitimacy. The reader is left in no doubt at this early stage that McCargo advocates the latter mode for the border provinces, a position that prefigures his more strident concluding statements on expanding legitimacy through alternative governance.

In the organisation of the book, McCargo eschews a conventional chronological treatment in favour of a very effective four-part topical division of chapters, respectively entitled 'Islam', 'Politics', 'Security' and 'Militants'. The rich detail and sub-arguments in each of the book's chapters are such that the reviewer can here do no more than highlight salient strengths, possible weaknesses and contentious arguments. The chapter on 'Islam' is possibly this book's crowning achievement. Though not a specialist in Islamic studies, McCargo provides an impressive discussion of key religious institutions, schools of thought, changes in practice and belief and tensions in the religious world of the region. This builds on work by scholars such as Imtiaz Yusuf and Omar Farouk on the weakness of religious authority in the changing Malay Muslim borderland and the political dimensions of Islam in Thailand. He identifies the proliferation of mosques emerging from competition between modernist and traditionalist groups, which has had the effect of weakening the authority of village imams. This process of authority erosion and splintering has also been set in train both by imams' politicisation due to the emergence of elected local government and elective Islamic Provincial Councils, together with the eclipse of their role by more highly schooled religious specialists (e.g. educated Ustads from private religious schools). McCargo discusses the emergence, peak and subsequent domestication of Salafist influence in the late 1990s, led by the Saudi-educated Ismael Lutfi, highlighting his change towards an accommodationist stance with Buddhist society, the Thai state and local Sunni traditionalists. He slaps down alarmist arguments that Salafism/Wahabism in the region has been connected with the emerging militancy, proposing instead that militancy has been nurtured essentially by local traditionalist Islam. He argues that the advent of elected Provincial Islamic Councils (from 1997) eroded religious authority in the region by opening the way for vote buying and politicisation linked to national- and regional-level agendas of Muslim politicians and, by 2005, interference by state interests. More central to the author's overarching theme of the co-optation of Muslim elites and their subsequent loss of authority/legitimacy is his treatment of the rise of state-subsidised private religious schools, a result both of the state's effort to domesticate traditional *pondok* schools and a popular emphasis on more rigorous Koranic learning. From the 1980s, McCargo argues, this led to the emergence of a class of 'babor barons' (McCargo's label for rich school owners), many of whom, he contends, entered into an arrangement with the Thai state to contain separatist impulses in exchange for subsidies. He argues that these owners often lacked religious standing among their own *ustads*. This contention, which lacks adequate empirical demonstration, operates in the writer's scheme to link emerging militancy with a form of class alienation in Malay Muslim society. The argument does not sit well with the documented fact that it was from well-funded private schools that many insurgent leaders and propagandists found a haven (Sapa-ing Basoe was principal of Yala's prestigious Thamawitthaya School, Masae Useng was a prominent teacher at Samphan Witthaya School in Narathiwat and secretary of the high-profile Pusaka foundation) with the tacit knowledge of the school owners. McCargo does not highlight the fact that private religious schools run by these 'babor barons' gained considerable funding from middle-eastern countries (probably more than from the Thai state) which allowed for extensive building programmes as well as generous scholarships for talented students to study overseas, some of whom became key

ideologues for the current insurgency. Accumulating and expending money is hardly inimical to legitimacy building among religious and other elites.

The second chapter 'Politics' deals with various topics under the rubric of the failure of representational politics, beginning with the paradox that southern violence began to increase just when Thai politics was opening up in the wake of the 1997 'people's constitution'. McCargo seeks to assess (through his legitimacy calculus) whether 'legitimate mechanisms for popular representation' were achieved during this period by Muslim representatives, and how the Thai state and governments communicated their fitness to administer the region. Ultimately, both processes, he argues, were compromised. A 'corrosive' (he likes this word) process ensued whereby Muslim parliamentary representatives (notably the members of the Wadah group) sacrificed their true representational duties for the sake of their own status and entourages, something which is apparently not a true Malay Muslim characteristic. 'Selling out' to the Thai state or its dirty pragmatic political system and shunning a putatively authentic and foundational Malay Muslim interest becomes a recurring motif in McCargo's portrayal of Muslim politicians and bureaucrats in this chapter. Certainly this interpretation is drawn from some of his interviews, but some could argue that the assumption of a singular real 'Malay Muslim' interest, against which all else is ethno-religious 'bad faith', sets up a dangerous binary in the argument. That being said, McCargo nicely describes the dilemmas faced by Wadah politicians in the face of controversial events such as Tak Bai, when, as members of the governing Thai Rak Thai Party they were unable to voice substantial criticism and suffered comprehensive electoral defeat in 2005. His case study of the fraught career of Den Tohmeena, son of the murdered Patani luminary Haji Surong, is very well done, though he may have underestimated the extent to which Den's failed project to build the promised Haji Sulong hospital fatally eroded his electoral standing among ordinary Muslims. In this chapter McCargo also provides a brief treatment of the Thai state bureaucracy, where he introduces, through the example of a province governor's approach, a characteristically royalist-derived notion of 'virtuous bureaucracy', based on the assumption that rule by 'good people' is the answer to problems of governing the border provinces. This contrasts with Haji Surong's famous proposals in the late 1940s for an ethnically 'representative bureaucracy' in the region. He dismisses Thai-style virtuous bureaucracy as an ineffective colonial-style palliative which ignores 'the underlying structural problem of the area' (p. 59), namely, the constraints to the political space of a minority people.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus directly on the insurgency and its challenges. In Chapter 3 (Security), the writer explores the question of the extent to which state authorities and security forces provoked or shaped the evolving violence from 2004. The first sections of the chapter are refreshingly even-handed, in contrast to the fashionable state-bashing of much writing. McCargo pulls no punches in depicting the militant movement as 'opportunistic, unpredictable and manipulative' in its exploitation of state responses for its own propaganda purposes in de-legitimising the state. Thai security officials would openly agree with him that they were caught on the back foot in the first years of the violence, unable to determine their enemy in the face of a clandestine network of insurgents embedded in communities, and whose targets were broader and tactics more brutal than former separatist fighters. McCargo does not believe

that 'justice' (or lack thereof) is the issue at stake in causing or solving the southern unrest, but he devotes some attention to the performance of the judicial system. In one key sense the judicial system failed because it could only secure a tiny fraction of culprits' convictions out of thousands of violent events. Paradoxically, court judges were scrupulous in their assessments of cases against insurgent suspects, and many cases presented by state prosecutors (using shaky police evidence) have been thrown out by judges. McCargo discusses the controversial events surrounding the army's bombardment and storming of the Krue Ze Moque (28 April 2004) and the disastrous bungling that led to the suffocation of arrested demonstrators in trucks after the Tak Bai demonstrations (25 October 2004). He enriches these accounts with examples of insurgent leaflets to show the propaganda value of state blunders. He fittingly criticises the farcical surrender ceremonies of suspected insurgents that were choreographed by Thaksin's Minister of the Interior in 2005. The thinnest part of the chapter is the treatment in the section on 'militias', which arguably falls victim to fashionable blanket stereotyping in favour of closer analysis. In the pejorative category of 'militias' are lumped district volunteers, village defence units and the much-maligned rangers. The judgement that high casualty rates among village defence volunteers are evidence of the military's failure to protect villagers misunderstands their role as a home guard and the fact that the military never envisaged flooding the region with army personnel on India's Kashmir model. The sad reality of these villagers being targeted (usually off duty) simply attests to the effectiveness of clandestine irregular warfare. As for the equally pejorative judgement that the military had 'subcontracted' its tasks (as opposed to 'delegated') to volunteer ranger units, it should be noted that rangers had always been central to the security landscape of the south (prior to the removal of the army from security duties under Thaksin in 2002) and are trained in forms of irregular jungle combat. Though rangers continued to attract a bad press during this whole period, insurgent propaganda against them conceivably attests to their effectiveness, rather than the reverse. McCargo's judgement that the militants 'consistently gained the upper hand' in their war (both in engagements and propaganda) is generally true during the core period covered by his book (to 2006), though events and monthly casualties were showing a clear drop by mid-2008 and have been at a lower threshold ever since.

The final chapter addresses the core conundrums surrounding the mysterious insurgent movement: issues of its structure, command, recruitment and driving ideology. In exploring these questions, McCargo draws on some fascinating intelligence materials, notably in a brilliant reconstruction of the bizarre cult of Ustad Soh and the mobilisation behind the 28 April attacks. Drawing on interviews and interrogation depositions, he judges the cell-based militant movement as one that is fundamentally new and organic, though some members have been connected with BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Pattani or National Revolution Front)-related groups. Importantly, as others have found, he stresses that militants are rarely drug users, and usually quite devout and well-behaved young men, carefully chosen by recruiters. He dismisses security officials' thesis that BRN-Coordinate is the lead umbrella organisation, postulating that the movement is structured as a 'liminal lattice', which is 'post-separatist' (whatever that means). At the same time he does not discern any clearly articulated ultimate goal for the movement; rather, statements from insurgents

highlight their acts of resistance as an identifier. Though insurgent rhetoric is replete with references to defending Islam and attacking the infidel aggressor state of Siam, McCargo views this religious symbolism as a mobilisation resource that does not signify religious goals or a theological base for struggle, but rather Patani Malay ethno-nationalism buttressed by simplistic myths of an imagined glorious Patani past snuffed out by a colonising Siam. That being the case, one wonders why the term 'Patani Malays' was not used in place of 'Islam' in the title of the book. The picture of insurgents that emerges is a bunch of well-meaning but angry young men who (with some assistance from elders) spontaneously generated a movement sometime in the late 1990s, though records available to other scholars show that the new cell-based networks were germinating earlier than this (at least from 1992). We are told that religion is a resource mobilised for 'political ends' (p. 180), but beyond their violent warfare and contestation of state authority, insurgents' 'political' ends remain unclear.

McCargo ends his book by replacing his scholar's hat with that of the advocate. He argues that 'the war in the South' will not be won by military means (this is something the Thai military would agree with), or by comforting words invoking justice and reconciliation. Only participatory rule and participatory bureaucracy will advance matters, due to the reality that the militants flourish because the Thai state lacks legitimacy. This is strong stuff, and attractive, though throughout the book we have only heard selected Muslim elites and insurgents speak. As for those Muslims who have 'sold out' to the Thai state or the mass of villagers who do not feature in the book, we cannot say. But then, despite his characteristically pugnacious writing style, it is doubtful that McCargo believes he has had the last word on all topics covered. This ambitious work, based on strenuous fieldwork in a difficult setting, has set a tough benchmark for other scholars to follow.

The heart of Joseph Liow and Don Pathan's exploration of the southern conflict is conveyed in the subtitle of their monograph: 'Thailand's shapeless southern insurgency'. Their focus is narrower than McCargo's, being equivalent to his last two chapter topics on security and militants. They address the same central challenge — to portray a new style of insurgency, what it represents, and where it is heading. Their coverage extends beyond McCargo's time span of research, including discussion of events and policy to mid-2009, with a few evident last-minute additions for early 2010 prior to publication. Both writers have been monitoring the conflict in the south since its early stages, and have previous book publications under their belts (Liow in English and Pathan a co-authored book in Thai). Unfortunately, the writers' division of labour in research and writing is not indicated, though Pathan's record of journalistic sleuthing in the shadowy world of exiled former Malay separatists suggests that he is likely to have been responsible for gathering the tastier morsels of interview testimony used in this study.

Shorter than McCargo's work, this study was produced as a research monograph for a policy think tank, and is predictably replete with the vocabulary of normative policy speak, some broad-brush forecasting and, annoyingly, some guesswork presented as empirical certainty. Readers unfamiliar with developments since 2006 should be wary of some of the more glaring exaggerations that intersperse the text, fuelled by ambiguous verbs — notably the claim that 'violence has in fact *escalated*'

(p. xii, reviewer's emphasis), whereas in fact there has been a discernible drop in average monthly insurgent attacks from early 2008. The work is divided into seven chapters, which follow the obligatory 'executive summary' (for a policy apparatchik/think-tanker readership) and the introduction. Chapter 1 looks at the legacy of separatist insurgency in Thailand's Deep South, followed by Chapters 2–4 which form the core of the book in analysing the current insurgency's 'nebulous' structure and the driving motivations/ideology of its participants and shadowy leadership coalition. Chapter 5 cursorily (and critically) deals with the Thai state's responses, while Chapter 6 discusses transnational dimensions of the current insurgency, followed by the final chapter which affirms the 'need for dialogue'. In the introduction, the authors claim that no previous study has made an attempt to explore the insurgency 'from the inside', a somewhat misleading flourish which ignores McCargo's efforts (in fact McCargo's book is not referred to at all, despite his work being published nearly two years earlier) and some other studies, including the work of Sascha Helbardt based on interviews of captured insurgents and interrogation documents. Four main arguments are put forward: first, that the current insurgency 'remains fundamentally driven by pre-existing narratives, goals and motivations' of Malay ethno-nationalism, despite the strident religious 'colouring' of insurgent rhetoric. This take, consistent with McCargo's, reflects the substance of Pathan's periodic opinion columns printed in *The Nation* newspaper (liberally footnoted throughout this volume). The second argument is that the nature of 'the insurgency' has changed from a hierarchical organisation with elite leadership (in previous decades) to a fluid and non-hierarchical affair. Note that the designation of a single 'insurgency' highlights the authors' presumption that the current militants are acting out the latest phase of a single struggle that stretches back decades. Notably, this affirmation grates with their third argument, that the 'old guard' of former (or militarily inactive) separatist groups such as PULO (Pattani United Liberation Organization) and BRN have expressed frustration and disagreement with the violent tactics of the current crop of militants. The authors assert that this illustrates that there is no 'monolithic' insurgent movement, but one that is factionalised, yet broadly unified with 'common interests'. This paradoxical conceptualisation of a simultaneously common but much divided insurgent cause is the only argument the authors can employ to salvage analytical value from the testimony of the so-called 'old-guard' separatist informants on which they rely. The possibility that this 'old guard' may be largely irrelevant to the current conflict (i.e. vocal but impotent has-beens) is not entertained. Fourth, the decentred and fluid nature of the insurgency compounds the challenges faced by the Thai Government, a phenomenon which it urgently needs to come to terms with. This cautionary mantra is frequently repeated in the book, and though it sounds impressive and knowing, it is never really given concrete substance, smacking distinctly of smug armchair policy speak.

The authors add an extra twist to the widely shared judgement that today's ethnic Malay Muslim militants of the south represent in their tactical violence and inchoate structure a 'new insurgency'. Importantly, they stress that the violence that was brewing over 2001 to 2003, and which dramatically erupted in 2004, was a product of long-term organising, planning and recruitment during 'the lull' period following the disintegration of the BRN and PULO insurgent groups in the late 1980s and early

1990s. The long gestation of a new networked formation is certainly clear from official intelligence reports and interrogation documents studied by others, but the additional twist is provided by the authors' model of a three-generational nexus underpinning the current insurgency, comprising: (1) the 'old guard' of former separatist leaders, who in recent years have been promoting their political role; (2) the young fighters of the new insurgency indoctrinated from the 1990s; and critically, (3) the alienated foot-soldiers of the older movements (the *pemimpin*, or 'leaders') who allegedly act as insurgent cell coordinators in the current struggle. Though most material drawn on in the study is already well known, the identification of this 'link-group' of *pemimpin* (comprising, the authors argue, former BRN and PULO fighters) is a new contribution to the discussion, based on interviews. Though this proposition is tantalising, the very few interviews employed to identify this group is not a convincing enough basis for the model. In addition, self-proclaimed groups of 'PULO' and 'BRN' leaders (members of the 'old guard') have since early 2010 announced an ostensible alliance, which the authors deem a nascent political wing for the *jue* (Patani fighters), offering some mechanism for the Thai state to engage in 'dialogue'. Despite identifying this recent development (which was publicised in the Malaysian press anyway), the authors are forced to admit that direct linkages between the 'old guard' and the fighters on the ground are undemonstrable. The recently reported claim of this group to have engineered local cease-fires in three districts (of 36 districts in the region) in June 2010 is testament enough to its impotence in controlling fighters on the ground.

At the end of this book, the reader is left with a feeling that though the authors have marshalled some interesting evidence from clandestine talking in the south, Malaysia and Europe, they are no closer than any other investigator to accessing the shadowy *jue* (they seem to have met only one, if the report's notes are read carefully). The writers tend to caricature Thai officialdom in the claim that it has 'misrecognised' the insurgency and failed to accept the necessity for gradual dialogue. This is the basic recommendation of the final chapter and conclusion. But, in fact, informed military officers and police on the ground are acutely aware of the decentralised character of the insurgency, and some senior-level commanders are certainly prepared to engage in forms of graduated dialogue. However, they do not have the green light from the army's topmost leadership to push forward with a concerted programme of localised open-ended talk or accommodation. The writers' stress on the importance for the Thai state to initiate incremental and exploratory initiatives in the face of an apparently de-centred insurgent movement is, nevertheless, a valuable contribution. They have brought to light important material and illuminated the varied views of the older generation of separatists towards the current insurgency. Unfortunately, however, Liow and Pathan demonstrate in this monograph that they are no closer than any other investigators in determining just what the insurgent fighters ultimately want, or if in fact the Patani warriors do have any end game in mind.

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