

**The Thai Insurgency Six Months After the Coup**  
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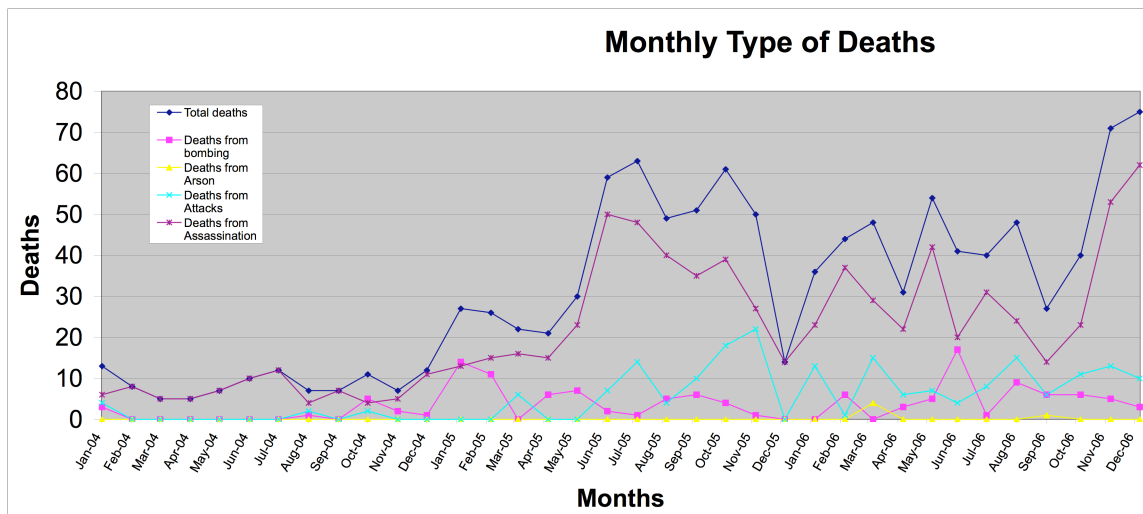
Earlier this month, a group of militants in southern Thailand threw a small bomb in front of a small passenger van, disabling it, opened the side door, and shot all nine passengers, including three women and a young girl, execution style. Though several suspects have been arrested, the attack was reminiscent of the savagery of Algeria or Kashmir, and portends a bloody year in the restive south. The attack was also the latest in a string of more audacious and provocative attacks from Muslim insurgents.

Few realize the extent of the conflict in the south. So many have bought into the Thai government's complacency and general sense of denial. The conflict in southern Thailand dwarfs any other conflict in Southeast Asia. Within the region, the United States remains pre-occupied with the southern Philippines, desperate for any success to justify the hundreds of millions of dollars invested there. There is alarming sectarian bloodletting in Indonesia's outer islands. Though on a much smaller scale than southern Thailand, we should pay attention to it, simply because JI is involved. The situation in southern Thailand deserves greater attention.

More than 2,100 people have been killed in 38 months, and the government has proven completely incapable of responding to the situation and stemming the violence. That has given the insurgents considerable momentum, and caused a greater number of moderate Muslim civilians to be more supportive of the insurgents.

The brutal killing of the nine civilians in the van came days before the sixth anniversary of the 19 September 2006 coup. While the justification and rationale for the coup is still debated, people across the political spectrum placed considerable hope that the Council on National Security (CNS) and the government that they installed would do a better job than the Thaksin administration in stemming the violence.

Yet, the exact opposite has been true: the daily average rate of killing has almost tripled in the past six months, from 1.6 people a day in 2006 to over four per day. Over 400 people, roughly 19 percent of the 2,100 people killed since January 2004 have died since the coup. Attacks have become more sophisticated and coordinated. Sadly the junta leaders remain oblivious to the reality on the ground and show precious little resolve in dealing with the insurgency, they remain mired in petty political squabbles in Bangkok and blind to the reports from their field commanders.



Besides the dramatic escalation in the number of people killed, there have been six discernable trends since the coup.

First, while most people are killed by gunshot, usually pillion motorcycles, the death toll from explosions is climbing markedly. When the insurgency began, in 2004, most bombs were small black-powder pipe bombs, usually under 2 kilograms. By 2006, the average was a 4-5 kilogram ammonium nitrate bomb. In 2006 the average size of IEDs increased further. Today 15 kg bombs are used regularly. Soldiers, long wounded by road-side IEDs are dying in higher numbers. On occasion, insurgents are also getting hold of high-explosives - usually mining-grade plastic. Detonators continue to include command-detonated, cell phones, but are increasingly relying on digital watches and other timing devices. There has been some experimentation with infrared detonators. IED technology has proliferated. Three years ago there were only a handful of bomb-makers, now, as a senior Thai military intelligence official put it to me, "the list is so long that we cannot even begin to identify individual bomb makers."

Second, the attacks have been far more provocative, such as the attack on the minivan. The rate of beheadings has increased: 10 percent of all the beheadings have occurred in 2007, alone. In this year alone, there have already been three attacks on members of royal entourages. While insurgents have stepped up their attacks on police and soldiers, civilians, monks, women (including pregnant women), and children have also been killed with appalling frequency. A week ago, insurgents opened fire on a class of 5<sup>th</sup> graders, leaving one 11-year old in a coma. The following day two female students were gunned down on their way to class. Monks have been targeted as well. These provocative attacks are meant to illicit heavy-handed government responses to further alienate the security forces from the broader Muslim community. While insurgents have not attacked soft targets out of area, it is on the table. Teams were caught in Bangkok in November 2005 and in Phuket in September 2006. "Although possible, attacking soft targets will not be employed as a new tactic since they are winning with their old tactics."

Third, teachers and schools, those vulnerable agents of secularization and assimilation, continue to be prime targets of the insurgents. Already 70 teachers to date have been killed and teachers that I spoke with a few weeks ago said that they only go to work because the military makes them. This has both eroded the social fabric of the region, while at the same time, forced the Muslim population to send their children to the private Islamic schools favored by the insurgents. Insurgents have killed Muslim teachers at government-supported Islamic schools with a mixed curriculum. On 17 March, insurgents struck an Islamic school in Songkhla, killing three boys between 12-14. While they were sending a message to the Muslim community to not send their children to government-supported schools, they were also hoping that many in the community would blame the government or Buddhist vigilantes for the attacks. Which leads to the fourth trend, more sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing. Already, 15 percent of the Buddhist community has fled the region. There have been stepped up threats and more leaflets left by insurgents to intimidate the local Buddhist population to leave.

Fifth, there have been more concerted attacks on economic targets, a trend that really began in mid-2006. We have already seen this in attacks in 2007 on the ethnic Chinese community, which dominates the local economy, on the Lunar New Year. There were 50 bombs and arson attacks mainly targeting the local Chinese community across four provinces. There have also been attacks on banks and on automotive dealerships. One of the largest rubber factories in southern Thailand was attacked on 21 February, destroying over \$11 million of inventory. A Chevrolet dealership was hit a week earlier, destroying 20 vehicles. Both attacks on rubber factories but also murders of rubber tappers have led to a 15 percent decline in rubber production, the driving force of the economy. The attack on the minivan threatens to hamper all travel and commerce, of an already economically fragile region.

Sixth, there has been a large increase in the number of civil disobedience cases, generally involving women and children. In the past they would march on police stations demanding the release of suspects. Authorities tended to acquiesce for fear of a violent confrontation, but this has only emboldened the protestors. They are not only demanding that police release certain suspects, but have escalated their demands and called for entire units to be withdrawn. Insurgents will use these encounters to provoke a violent response that will further discredit the security forces. The decision to create a unit of female paratroopers to deal with crowd control was a very smart decision, and hopefully the new unit will be better able to deal with these contingencies.

These trend lines are disturbing, but even more so has been the government's response. The coup leaders and interim government continue to ask the wrong questions and refuse to see the conflict for what it is: an Islamist insurgency. Coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, himself a Muslim, refuses to see an Islamist component to it. Many refuse to even think that it is a secessionist movement. A large number of Thai, even educated ones, think that this is about poverty and social justice alone. While part of it, why isn't Issarn, which lags even the southern provinces in every measure of human development, on fire? Some argue that the insurgency is simply about control of smuggling rackets with Malaysia. There is obviously some degree of criminality, but

cross border smuggling with Burma and Cambodia remain far more important and on a much grander scale. Why are all the other border regions so peaceful?

While no group has taken credit for any attack, nor publicly stated their demands, this is not a bunch of nihilistic youths. This is a highly organized, though cellular, movement, with clear command and control. The Barisan Revolusi Nasional Koordinasi (BRN-C) and the Gerakan Mujahidin Islamiyah Pattani (GMIP) are able to execute coordinated attacks, nearly simultaneously, across four provinces on a regular basis. Thai Muslim insurgents have never been more disciplined and united.

Their ideology has also never been so Islamist. The insurgents today are fundamentally different than previous generations. In addition to the broadened targeting of women, children, monks and the *de facto* ethnic cleansing that has transpired, the Islamist agenda is manifest in other ways. They are not out to win hearts and minds: they are thuggish, brutal, and imposing their values on the community. Over 50 percent of their victims have been fellow Muslims. They have a broadened definition of collaborator, to Muslim who reject their values and seek accommodation with the Thai state. They have killed moderate clerics, and threatened others to not perform funerals for the Muslims that they kill as they are not deemed to be real Muslims, the Wahhabi practice of *takfiri*. They have shuttered businesses on Fridays, killed Islamic teachers who teach at schools that receive government funding and teach mixed curriculums. Last Saturday, insurgents lobbed hand grenades in a madrassah that receives state funds and teaches a mixed curriculum. Three boys, aged 12-14 were killed. Members of the madrassah had been seen at a funeral for a Muslim policeman killed by insurgents.

Insurgents have set up parallel systems in the villages to force people to opt out of the state system: They have established private Islamic schools – often the only alternative when their arson attacks and murder of almost 70 teachers shutter state schools. *Ad hoc* sharia courts now are the primary means of dispute adjudication. Insurgents have begun forcing women to not give birth in hospitals, a tragedy for the health of women and infants, but by not registering the births, the children are ineligible to attend government schools or receive healthcare coverage. These policies are meant to impose a rigid set of ideological and religious values, and not win hearts and minds. Yet, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, like so many, still refuses to acknowledge that this insurgency has a clear Islamist agenda.

The government, too, misunderstands the insurgent's short-term goals to make the region ungovernable, provoke heavy-handed government responses, cause greater rift/mistrust between local population and the state, to begin to impose their Islamist agenda, and silence/co-opt potential political competitors in the Muslim community.

But it is not just questions of the ideology and goals. The government is flummoxed by who is actually behind the insurgency. Over three years into the insurgency, there remains an appalling lack of understanding of the insurgency. And for the first two years, the government really did not identify the groups responsible, instead blaming the previous generation of insurgents. Government forces have arrested more than 1,700

people, but that has led to little actionable intelligence, demonstrating that the arrested are innocents, or if indeed insurgents, that they are highly compartmentalized. No leaders have been arrested, and militants are able to strike at will.

While the Thai military enjoyed a rare success in early March when they came across a training camp in a remote part of Narathiwat. Five militants were killed and several small arms were recovered. Yet this was a rarity. Militants remain the capacity to attack at will and the attacks have become more frequent, more violent and more provocative.

There were high expectations that the coup leaders would do a better job in tackling the south than the Thaksin administration. General Sonthi Boonyaratglin and Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont announced a two-pronged strategy for dealing with the insurgency: A plan to win back the support of the moderates and to improve the capacity and inter-agency relations of the security service. The former included a public apology by Surayud for the Thaksin administration's policies, the dropping of charges against 58 Tak Bai protestors, a renewed pledge to solve the disappearance of human rights lawyer Somchai Neelapaijit, now labeled "murder," the abolition of blacklists, ending the culture of impunity, and promises to adopt Malayu as a working language. The latter included reinstating the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Committee (SBPAC), having more consistency in personnel and policies, and improving coordination with Malaysia.

Yet, in six months, little of those promised initiatives have actually been implemented. Malayu is still not a working language. While the government pledged to punish future abuses of power by security forces, there is still blanket immunity for security forces and none have been punished for the excesses of Krue Se and Tak Bai. One Palace official told me that "at least six heads have to roll, and I could easily think of 12." The SBPAC remains under-staffed, under-resourced, and in disarray. The 14 ministries and agencies that committed members have not fulfilled their obligations. At any rate this is not going to be a silver bullet: the SBPAC has been defunct since 2002 and the government enjoys a fraction of the popular support that it once had and is unlikely to win it back anytime soon. Managers from every security service have related to me that inter-agency competition and the hoarding of intelligence remains as bad as ever. Public trust towards the government is non-existent. One should note the Human Right's Watch report released in late March on government involvement in extrajudicial killings.

Talks and interviews with managers from different security services, all make clear that the national leadership are not committed to dedicating the resources needed to resolving the crisis. General Waipot, the chief of the National Intelligence Agency was recently sacked not just for his inability to improve intelligence on the ground, but for publicly questioning the leadership's resolve in dealing with the crisis in the south.

For one thing there are not enough troops on the ground. There are under 25,000 troops in area, not enough to be on constant patrols or setting up effective check points, let alone go on the offensive. Most soldiers are in static positions, hardly the way to fight an insurgency. They are now assembling 30 companies of locally recruited paramilitary troops, only a few are standing. No one knows how effective they will be, and

paramilitaries in Thailand have mixed reputations. The government had recently planned to send the first and eleventh infantry battalions to the south, but then General Sonthi decided against it, arguing that they were needed for the “security of Bangkok”, demonstrating how divorced from reality he is. Sonthi comes from the Special Forces, and doesn’t understand that a small number of lightly armed troops passing through a village once a week will not address the situation. Villagers flee the troops when they make their weekly visit, for if they are seen communicating to the troops, the insurgents will threaten or kill them as soon as the army leaves. The people need to be given a sense of security and assurances of their and their family’s safety if they are to provide critically needed intelligence.

Sonthi was also the person in the best position to know that the inter-agency rivalry and hoarding of intelligence was hampering counter-insurgent efforts. There is an appalling lack of coordination and sharing of intelligence. No agency trusts one another, nor is there a central repository of information. There are nearly a dozen agencies in the south. It is not just competition between the army, police, Ministry of Interior, department of Special Investigations, and National Intelligence Agency, any given agency such as the police and military have competing actors. IE the police are divided between Police Region 9, the provincial offices, the headquarters in Bangkok and Special branch. The military has suggested that the revival of the 1970s-era organization, the Internal Security Operations Command is for intelligence coordination. There is no evidence that it has become the coordinating body, and human rights and democracy activists are very concerned that it will become their bete noir. Continued stove-piping will continue to hamper efforts. The Australian Government is funding a bomb-database, housed within the police; will the army contribute to it in terms of data collection or manpower? They must be given joint ownership, or else the information will not be shared.

Much of the rivalry and withholding of intelligence and information between the army and the police has to do with the fact that the police have proved to be so ineffectual and incompetent in prosecuting insurgent suspects. To date, there have only been two successful convictions of insurgents. Very simply, the courts are throwing cases out, and freeing suspected militants because of shoddy investigations and a lack of forensic evidence. This has enraged the military, which has stopped turning over many suspects. The military is not putting suspected militants on trial, holding them indefinitely, further aggravating the sense of injustice felt by the broader Muslim community.

Barring these the situation in the south, already grim, is going to get much worse this year. The situation in the south is at a critical juncture. If the government does not quickly dedicate the necessary resources there will be an increase in Buddhist vigilante justice, creating an irreversible cycle of violence. The night of the van massacre, hand grenades were lobbed at a mosque. Soldiers or Buddhist vigilantes? If the latter, where did they get the grenades? At the same time, a larger percentage of people will be gin to support the insurgents, for no other reason than the government is unable to remedy the pervasive sense of insecurity. And yet, the government is not likely to do so, remaining complacent that the violence remains contained in the four southern provinces, far away from the petty political squabbles in Bangkok.