# Heading South

By Zachary Abuza

> Thailand's junta mishandles the insurgency.

BANGKOK—Thailand's military government justified its coup last year in part by promising to quell the country's violent Muslim insurgency. For the past three and a half years, the southern provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani have seen daily battles, as Islamist militants have begun their secessionist campaign. With the coup being led by a Muslim army chief, a "two-pronged" strategy of wooing moderate Muslims while improving the capacity of security forces, the government of Prime Minister Surayud Chultanont looked like it had a chance to succeed.

If only it had turned out that way. Since the September coup, the violence has spiked. More than 600 people have died, with more than a thousand wounded—not insignificant numbers, given that 2,300 Thais, in total, have perished in the fighting since 2004. Beheadings, machete attacks and the desecration of corpses are now routine. The insurgents use more sophisticated and larger, remote-controlled bombs, and they routinely execute up to 40 to 50 mass attacks daily across the three provinces. The victims now include women, children and Buddhist monks. Attacks on teachers and schools have paralyzed the region's education system. And the violence has led to de facto ethnic cleansing: Some 15-20% of the minority Buddhist population—more than 45,000 people—has fled. Buddhists who remain are often engaging in vigilante justice, portending a broader sectarian conflict.

What went wrong? For a start, the military junta learned little from the mistakes of the previous government. In a bid to reduce the influence of opposition parties with strong southern voting bases, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra dismantled institutions like the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Command that were credited with quelling the previous insurgency from the 1970s to mid-1990s. When the insurgency reignited in 2004, the security forces had no intelligence and rounded up the last generation of insurgents, who had little to nothing to do with the conflict. It took the Thai government almost two years to identify the Barisan Revolusi Nasional—Coordinasi, a group that was on the fringes of the earlier struggle, as the organization behind the more recent insurgency.

Prime Minister Surayud did revive the SBPAC, but it remains short of personnel and resources. Nor did his government source better intelligence on the insurgent networks. Instead, he promised a host of policies to win back the support of the Muslim community—such as the use of the Malay language, the abolishment of hit squads, amnesties and improved delivery of social services—but never followed through. Little wonder that the insurgency is making inroads into local politics, establishing local sharia courts, shadow governments and private Islamic schools. Some 55% of the insurgents' victims have been fellow Muslims, a clear sign that they are eliminating not only collaborators, but those who oppose their political and social agenda.

Then there's the question of military tactics. Mr. Thaksin, at least, knew that he was up against a violent struggle, and he met force with force. Indeed, Mr. Thaksin's government embraced militarist policies such as extrajudicial killings that only alienated the local population. That strategy weakened the already-corrupt police force, who were unable to build up cases against insurgents. From 2004 to 2007, some 20 people were convicted in courts of law for insurgent activities. Many went free, infuriating the military, which ceased cooperation with the police.

In October 2006, the government announced that it entered into negotiations with the "insurgents," though it was clear that they were talking with the previous generation, and not those responsible for the violence. Prime Minister Surayud promised to end the use of re-education camps and extrajudicial killings, though reprisal killings by the security forces have sharply increased. The culture of impunity, enshrined in the 2005 emergency decree that gives blanket immunity to security forces, has gone unaddressed. While preaching reconciliation, the government now debates whether to enshrine Buddhism as the official state religion in the new constitution, an act that will further alienate the Muslim population.

AFP

The beginning of a trend?

The government has likewise failed on the security front. Coordination between the security forces remains abysmal and the limited amount of intelligence remains hoarded between the various government agencies. The Army commander, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, has refused to dedicate the necessary troops needed to provide security in the south, preferring to keep them deployed in the north to stave off a counter coup. There are only some 20,000 troops deployed in the south, and they are in static positions, confined to barracks, with little overt presence to deter the insurgents. Instead, most of the policing is done by trigger-happy, poorly trained and unaccountable paramilitaries, who only drive more of the population into the arms of the insurgents. The police remain corrupt and inept. While the government claims that arrests are up, their catches have mostly been low-level insurgents, with little intelligence value.

Fighting Thailand's southern insurgency was never going to be easy. No group has claimed responsibility for any attack, yet the attacks are well coordinated and there is a historically unprecedented degree of command and control. But Prime Minister Surayud's government will get nowhere if it doesn't dedicate resources to the security forces and establish clear lines of authority. At the same time, the security forces' culture of impunity must end.

As important, the government must recognize the movement's secessionist and Islamist nature. Sadly, the attacks are gaining momentum, and a growing number of people are joining the militants—or at least giving them passive support—as the state has failed to provide security and is unable or unwilling to offer social services. As with Mr. Thaksin's regime, the current government remains preoccupied with elite machinations, unconcerned about the single most important security threat in the region. It's a risky bet.

*Mr. Abuza is professor of political science at Simmons College, Boston, and the author of "Political Islam and Violence in Indonesia" (Routledge, 2006).*

**Bookshelf** / *By Matthew Kaminski*

# A Foreign Correspondent's Ancient Companion

> **Travels With Herodotus**
> *By Ryszard Kapuscinski*
> (Knopf, 275 pages, $25)

"Herodotus works hard on the road—he is a reporter, an anthropologist, an ethnographer, a historian. And he is at the same time a typical wanderer, or, as others like him will later be called in medieval Europe, a pilgrim." Ryszard Kapuscinski, the Polish foreign correspondent who died in January at the age of 74, felt a special affinity for the writer whose "Histories" are among the glories of the classical age. Kapuscinski's life was also a wandering one, filled with anthropological detail. He calls Herodotus's "Histories"—written in the fifth century B.C.—"world literature's first great work of reportage." Kapuscinski's many books are part of the same tradition.

His last, "Travels With Herodotus," is an episodic memoir of a career spent on the road, including his first dizzying reporting trip to India in 1953 and the research-travel he did for books such as "Shah of Shahs" (1982), on the 1979 Iranian revolution, and the near-allegorical "The Emperor" (1978), about the downfall of Ethiopia's Haile Selassie. Over five decades as a reporter—he was nothing more or less, he insisted, even when he came to be regarded as a "serious writer"—Kapuscinski went to Honduras, Angola, Ghana, Kyrgyzstan and other far-flung places. He witnessed 27 coups, many wars and great historical shifts—a lot of the time, he tells us, with Herodotus by his side.

Kapuscinski knows the book well. Both men are fascinated by the blinding vanity of politicians, the role of chance in history, human folly and bravery. Across its sprawling nine books, the "Histories" chronicle Herodotus's Mediterranean travels and, most famously, the first great clash between East and West, in which messy, democratic Athens repelled the powerful, authoritarian Persians under the leadership of Xerxes. The opposition of these forces was one that had a special interest to Kapuscinski. In part as a result of his first-hand experience of Nazism and Stalinism in Poland, he knew well the danger of despotism. Of Herodotus, he writes:

"There is no anger in him, no animus. He tries to understand everything, find out why someone behaves in one way and not another. He does not blame the human being, but blames the system; it is not the individual who is by nature evil, depraved, villainous—it is the social arrangement in which he happens to live that is evil. That is why Herodotus is a passionate advocate of freedom and democracy and a foe of despotism, authoritarianism and tyranny—he believes that only under the former circumstances does man have a chance to act with dignity, to be himself, to be human. Look, Herodotus seems to be saying, a small handful of Greeks felt free and for that freedom were willing to sacrifice everything."

Thus in one tightly constructed paragraph Kapuscinski counters the fashionable idea—part of the "clash of civilizations" thesis—that some people are culturally ill-disposed to enjoy freedom or to break with tyranny. He also affirms the universal appeal of the open society and its astonishing, to some, resilience. But Kapuscinski is not often didactic and never triumphalist. His luminous narratives are filled with odd juxtapositions and the ambiguities of real experience. Here he is in Khartoum, Sudan, in 1960, at a Louis Armstrong concert:

"The evening was hot and airless, and when Armstrong walked out, attired moreover in a jacket and bow tie, he was already soaked with perspiration. . . . He sang 'Hello Dolly, this is Louis, Dolly,' he sang 'What a Wonderful World' and 'Moon River,' he sang 'I touch your lips and all at once the sparks go flying, those devil lips.' But the spectators continued to sit silently. There was no applause. Did they not understand the words? Was there too much openly expressed eroticism in all this for Muslim tastes? After each number, and even during the playing and singing, Armstrong wiped his face with a large white handkerchief. These handkerchiefs were constantly changed for him by a man whose sole purpose in accompanying Armstrong around Africa seemed to have been this. I saw later that he had an entire bag of them, dozens and dozens probably."

Kapuscinski's success brought him detractors. Pedantic scolds questioned his sourcing and style, claiming that his reporting included invention and heightened effect—a kind of "magical journalism." A different charge was leveled last month in Poland. Leaked secret police files purport to show that Kapuscinski "collaborated" with the communist regime in 1967-72 by filing short reports from abroad in exchange for the right to travel as an employee of the state news agency. A passport wasn't easily secured, and, like many East Europeans, Kapuscinski dreamed of "crossing the border." Not many who know the Poland of those days will be surprised. And this posthumous allegation doesn't diminish his work.

"Travels With Herodotus" is an atypical Kapuscinski book—less reliant on his own reporting and yet, though couched as a tribute to Herodotus, more personally revealing. His mission, he offers, was to convey the experience of seeing different places, meeting new people and living through interesting times. This approach is inherently subjective but all the more forceful for it. Like Herodotus, Ryszard Kapuscinski was a reporter, a historian, an adventurer and, truly, an artist.

*Mr. Kaminski is editorial page editor of The Wall Street Journal Europe.*

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