

Reproduced from *Deciphering Southern Thailand's Violence: Organization and Insurgent Practices of BRN-Coordinate*, by Sascha Helbardt (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2015). This version was obtained electronically direct from the publisher on condition that copyright is not infringed. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the prior permission of ISEAS Publishing. Individual chapters are available at <<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>>

# Deciphering Southern Thailand's Violence

The **ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute** (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian studies) was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

**ISEAS Publishing**, an established academic press, has issued more than 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

# Deciphering Southern Thailand's Violence

*Organization and Insurgent Practices of  
BRN-Coordinate*

**SASCHA HELBARDT**

First published in Singapore in 2015 by ISEAS Publishing  
ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute  
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119614

*E-mail:* [publish@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:publish@iseas.edu.sg)

*Website:* <<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

© 2015 ISEAS Publishing, Singapore

*The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the authors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the publishers or their supporters.*

---

### **ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

---

Helbardt, Sascha.

Deciphering Southern Thailand's Violence : Organization and Insurgent Practices of BRN-Coordinate.

1. Insurgency—Thailand, Southern.
2. Political violence—Thailand, Southern.
3. Barisan Revolusi Nasional Koordinasi (Thailand)
4. Muslims—Thailand, Southern—Politics and government.
5. Thailand—Politics and government—1988–

I. Title.

II. Title: Organization and Insurgent Practices of BRN-Coordinate

DS588 S7H47

2015

ISBN 978-981-4519-62-5 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-4620-60-4 (e-book, PDF)

---

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

*For all those who lost their lives  
in Southern Thailand's insurgency.*



# CONTENTS

|  |      |
|--|------|
| <i>List of Figures</i>   | viii |
| <i>List of Abbreviations</i>   | ix   |
| <i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>   | xi   |
| 1. Introduction  | 1    |
| 2. Organizational Aspects of BRN-Coordinate                                | 27   |
| 3. Making Insurgents: Recruitment, Training and Control                    | 90   |
| 4. Bringing the Actors Back In: Who Are the Insurgents?                    | 140  |
| 5. Making Sense of Violence: Power and the Insurgency's Communicative Side | 180  |
| 6. Conclusion  | 232  |
| <i>References</i>  | 239  |
| <i>Index</i>   | 253  |
| <i>About the Author</i>  | 257  |

# FIGURES

|            |   |     |
|------------|---|-----|
| Figure 2.1 | Formal Structure of BRN-Coordinate                                | 39  |
| Figure 2.2 | BRN-Coordinate's Funding Sources                                  | 41  |
| Figure 3.1 | Drawings by Tadika Pupils<br>(Banangsata District, Yala Province) | 101 |
| Figure 5.1 | Insurgent Propaganda Leaflets                                     | 209 |



# ABBREVIATIONS

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| Ajak  | Ahli Jawatan Kampung (Village Working Committee)         |
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations                   |
| BRN   | Barisan Revolusi Nasional (National Revolutionary Front) |
| BRN-C | Barisan Revolusi Nasional Coordinate                     |
| COIN  | Counter-insurgency                                       |
| DPP   | Dewan Pimpinan Parti (Party Leadership Council)          |
| DSI   | Department of Special Investigation                      |
| EGAT  | Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand             |
| ETA   | Basque Fatherland and Liberty                            |
| FLN   | Algerian National Liberation Front                       |
| GAM   | Free Aceh Movement                                       |
| GMIP  | Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani                          |
| IRA   | Irish Republican Army                                    |
| JI    | Jemaah Islamiyah   |
| LRA   | Lord's Resistance Army                                   |
| LTTE  | Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam                         |
| MILF  | Moro Islamic Liberation Front                            |
| MNLF  | Moro National Liberation Front                           |
| OIC   | Organisation of the Islamic Conference                   |
| PIRA  | Provisional Irish Republican Army                        |
| PULO  | Patani United Liberation Organisation                    |
| RKK   | Runda Kumpulan Kecil (Small Group Patrol/Commando)       |
| SBPAC | Southern Border Provinces Coordination Centre            |
| TKB   | Terrorism Knowledge Base                                 |



# PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has its origins in the research project, “Religious Dimensions of Local Conflicts”, at the University of Passau, funded by the German Research Council (DFG) from 2006 to 2008. Studying one of the bloodiest conflicts in Southeast Asia, which has to date lasted nearly a decade, my initial task as a PhD student was to analyse religious discourses that served to legitimize violence in Southern Thailand in both Muslim and Buddhist discourses. At that point of the project, the latter was of particular interest to me because most research on the legitimacy of collective violence had neglected the Buddhist perspective. Upon further exploration, the fact that was most startling to me about the violence in Southern Thailand was, however, the near total absence of identifiable collective actors on the Malay Muslim insurgent side, which linked political demands with acts of violence in a similar fashion to the practices of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka or the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) in Myanmar. Since the outbreak of violence in Thailand’s Malay-Muslim-dominated provinces (Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani) in 2004, much has been written about the region and the causes of this bloody conflict. Nonetheless, little is known about the perpetrators of these violent acts, as the description as well as interpretation of data is impeded by a cloud of “nameless” violence that renders the identification of the actors and interests involved difficult. While acts of state violence against the Malay minority can be identified more or less easily, the motives and organization of those on the “other side” are all the more heavily cloaked in secrecy, deception, and speculation. Few rebel groups in Southeast Asia have been as successful in hiding themselves from the outside world for so long.

This contradiction was also reflected during my fieldwork, as despite the fact that there was an abundance of popular explanations of why

Thailand's Malay minority demanded independence from the country as well as information about the political and economic conditions of the insurgency, the insurgents themselves were shrouded in darkness — although no credible source of information doubted their existence. It is always tempting to rely on popular explanations and treat them as self-explaining factors for collective violence, especially if they involve culture, ethnicity, or religion. The risk then for scholars is that they reproduce or glorify the legitimacy of violence and thus play into the hands of those who want to prolong it, especially if one does not take the time to fully consider who is on the other side of the insurgency. I was convinced that a foundational truth about any protracted warfare is that it needs an organizational dimension as much as legitimacy for its fight. Similarly, long-standing armed conflicts can never be explained simply by structural conditions, ethnic division, inequality, or political suppression. The eruption of popular violence is not usually suitable to the long-term; people need to be mobilized and coordinated in order to engage in an enduring campaign of violence.

Given such considerations, my interest began to shift increasingly over the course of my fieldwork towards the form as well as the degree of insurgent organization. Research on the nature of the rebellion was a risky venture with an uncertain outcome for numerous reasons, not the least because the rebels in Southern Thailand try to keep most of their activities secret, which affected data collection significantly. It seemed that almost every aspect of the insurgency was designed to hide the architects from external observers, regardless of whether these individuals were security officials, journalists, or scholars. There was no political arm like the IRA's Sinn Fein to take credit for violence; in fact, there was no credit-taking for violence at all and nearly zero public statements.

Eventually, the almost two years of fieldwork paid off. Interviewing security officials, informants at the village level, and former as well as active insurgents, it became very clear that the rebellion in Southern Thailand is meticulously planned. In stark contrast to images of "emotionally motivated" or "traditionally motivated" violence, the insurgents in Southern Thailand use violence rationally. Nevertheless, not every single act is rationally calculated and as violence is — as it is understood here — a social process, the outcome of violence seldom corresponds to the insurgent's initial intentions. Insurgents in the South orchestrate and instrumentalize the emotional energy of feelings like humiliation,

revenge, pride, or the charismatic power of visions of a “better life” (in an independent Islamic state of Patani) in order to mobilize and maintain their fighters. Therefore, they develop channels of communications, assign roles, and attempt to control conflicts within their organization, and, more importantly, have developed ways to communicate with outside actors despite their secrecy, not the least through violence itself. It is these concerns that make up the topic of this book.

I am deeply indebted to my supervisors, Rüdiger Korff and Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, for their intellectual advice and patience. Daniel Göler, Bernhard Dahm, and Marc Askew provided critical remarks on the text and corrected parts of the manuscript. The preliminary results of this book were presented at the SEA Studies Symposium 2012 in Oxford and the Council of Thai Studies Conference (COTS) 2012 in Ohio; I would like to thank all the participants who commented on my arguments. I am grateful to Perapong Manakit, who opened many crucial doors in Thailand for me. During my initial field research, Ekkarin Tuansiri and Abdulloh Tenloh answered countless questions and facilitated meetings with community leaders and academics in Pattani. For my time in Narathiwat, I must thank Prachya Pimarnman and his family who offered me endless insights as well as a home during my research. Ahmad Somboon Bualuang, Worawit Baru, Tilman Schiel, and Samrej Srirai have all been sources of revealing discussions. I want to thank Aishya Duereh, my research assistant, for her invaluable work, especially for the time she invested for conducting interviews and surveys. Special thanks go to Savitri Judiono and Janine Murphy for their proofreading.

Writing a book on BRN-Coordinate would not have been possible without “violence specialists” on both sides of the conflict. I therefore extend my gratitude to the dedicated officers of the Fourth Army Area. I am equally grateful to all former and active members of BRN-Coordinate who shared information about how they got involved with the organization and explained their motivations to join (or leave). Although I did not agree with the means that both soldiers and BRN-Coordinate members chose for attaining their goals, and they might disagree with my interpretation, we always found a common ground of respect that allowed for many hours and even days of discussion. It took months — in some cases nearly a year — to be able to establish trust with my informants. At times, they risked their lives taking me to insurgent villages or other interview sites that were clear security risks. This trust relationship requires that I avoid

direct reference to the intelligence documents, as it would risk disciplinary sanctions against the officials who provided the information. Moreover, most of the BRN-Coordinate members I interviewed cannot be mentioned by name in the book, as by giving away information about the group they risked severe punishment. I therefore accept full responsibility for the written content.