

BOOK REVIEWS

***Mapping National Anxieties: Thailand's Southern Conflict.* By Duncan McCargo. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012. Softcover: 213pp.**

Duncan McCargo's previous book on the conflict in Thailand's southern provinces, *Tearing Apart the Land* (2008), won richly deserved accolades throughout the scholarly community. He has now followed up that celebrated work with a second volume.

In many ways, *Mapping National Anxieties* picks up where *Tearing Apart the Land* left off. While *Tearing Apart the Land* flags a number of issues surrounding the central theme of the difficult relations between Bangkok and the Malay-majority southern provinces, *Mapping National Anxieties* elaborates on them from the vantage of the Thai state. Specifically, it shows how the state has (mis)managed the situation in the south, and discusses the historical, cultural and political reasons that explain this policy mismanagement. Comprising in part of previously published papers and presentations, the topics drawn together in this book range from an assessment of how the military remained oblivious to the sensitivities of locals in the provinces despite its vast budget, to the inefficiencies of the National Reconciliation Council and how, as McCargo suggests, the “fractured nation” cannot simply be repaired through “reconciliation” (p. ix). He is also critical — and rightly so, in my opinion — of the Thai media for their simplistic coverage of some very complicated and complex dynamics in the provinces, which tend to demonize one side without a full appreciation of the situation.

Characteristically, McCargo does not shy away from offering views on possible solutions. He recommends, for instance, that government structures be reorganized so as to allow for greater local participation, as well as the formation of a ministry dedicated to the affairs of the southern provinces (p. 149).

Notwithstanding the masterly treatment of the fundamental policy missteps that plague Bangkok's attempts to resolve its problems in the south, it is, arguably, the book's capable and effective discussion of historical, political and cultural undercurrents that impresses most. In this regard, one of the more interesting chapters in the book is the second chapter, which exposes the varying opinions among various segments of the Buddhist majority in Thailand towards the issue of the south. Here, McCargo draws attention to concerns within the Buddhist community about the motivations behind the insurgent "movement" operating in the south. Through interviews and participant observation, he teases out the deep-seated concerns that Buddhists harbour: "The strategy of the separatists was to rule the whole country using their religious laws. Muslims were now moving to many parts of the north and Isan and setting up mosques and surau (prayer rooms) everywhere, which would soon be as ubiquitous as Buddhist temples" (p. 24). McCargo further makes the case that the line between the Thai security forces and the *Sangha* is increasingly blurred, and by "militarizing" Buddhism, cases of brutality perpetrated by the army have come to possess a religious dimension (p. 35).

Turning to Islam, McCargo posits that Thailand is attempting to "nationalize" Islam by bringing state influence to bear on the Islamic councils and leveraging tensions between *kaum tua* (traditionalists or "old school") and *kaum muda* (modernists or "new school"). To be sure, one need only look at how deeply integrated "new school" ulama such as Ismail Lutfi are into the prevailing Bangkok-sanctioned social and political order in the south to understand the salience of what McCargo has identified. This tension sits with another source of friction between Malay Muslims and their non-Malay co-religionists, where the former view the latter as "less devout" and "over assimilated" (p. 113).

In Chapter Six, McCargo gets to the heart of the issue — often glossed over in other studies — of citizenship. Using the work of

T.H. Marshall and Bryan Turner as points of entry to capture the relationship between the individual and the state, McCargo draws the important distinction between formal and informal citizenship, and suggests that the latter is just as important as the former in the case of Thailand precisely because “today, Malay Muslims in Thailand’s southern provinces are Thai nationals, but do not meet the informally understood criteria for full Thai citizenship” (p. 112). He describes with thoughtful sophistication how the construction of Thai identity is a “quietly repressive” process, and aptly questions why Thais of Chinese origin were viewed positively as well-assimilated citizens when compared to the Malays. In McCargo’s view, this is because “Chinese-ness” can be subordinated to “Thai-ness” in a way that “Malay-ness” cannot by virtue of the fact that the Malays view themselves as being indigenous to the land. As a consequence of this self-identification on the part of the Malays with the land of their origin, they are unwilling to play “second fiddle” to another identity marker (pp. 125–26). This tension is further amplified, McCargo poignantly asserts, by the fact that Malay Muslims in Thailand have historically been constructed by the Thai state as subjects rather than citizens.

If the book suffers from one shortcoming, it is the absence of a conclusion that effectively draws together the several themes in each of the preceding chapters into one overarching framework. While the absence of such a conclusion can be explained by the fact that most of the chapters were previously published as stand-alone articles, nevertheless, some final reflections from the author might have further strengthened the cohesion of the book.

The study of political violence and conflict in Thailand’s restive southern border provinces is becoming an increasingly crowded field. Scholars and analysts from a variety of disciplines have lent their voices to attempts at better appreciating the factors driving the crisis in the Malay-majority “deep south”. Even so, the insightful analysis and empirical detail contained in *Mapping National Anxieties* means that it still stands apart from other works. Indeed, few have managed to bring to the discussion of the increasingly intractable conflict in Thailand’s southern provinces the depth of empirical knowledge and analytical rigor that Duncan McCargo has. Together with *Tearing Apart the Land*, *Mapping National Anxieties* is absolutely essential reading for those who wish

to have a deeper knowledge of the woes of Thailand's Malay minority in the southern provinces, the internal politics and fault lines within this community, and the problems that a resilient Malay identity pose for the Thai state and its national narrative.

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