

BOOK REVIEWS

***Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand.* By Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya, and Sabrina Chua. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International, 2005. Softcover: 209pp.**

The resurgence of violence that flared up in Thailand's predominantly Muslim southernmost border provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat on 4 January 2004 has spawned a cottage industry of academic assessments. Their emphases have mostly centred on historiography, domestic politics, and global "jihadist" networks inspired by the post-11 September 2001 world and the consequent US-led "war on terror". The authors of *Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand* have explained the insurgent violence in the country's Deep South through the lenses of the latter, as a coalescing jihadist struggle with local roots but global aspirations that demand appropriate counter-insurgency responses. This explanation is unsurprising in view of lead author Rohan Gunaratna's expertise in terrorism. The book's portrayal of Thailand's southern violence as a piece in the jigsaw puzzle of global terrorism is acutely consistent with Gunaratna's wide-ranging publications.

Divided into a brief introduction and four substantive chapters, almost half of the book comprises appendices. Some of these are superfluous. However, Appendix Seven provides a useful account of the background, makeup, objectives, and methods of the key insurgent groups, but these overlap with the thrust of Chapter Two. The "threat matrix" in the Introduction is also undeveloped throughout the course of the book. Chapter One is the most instructive and insightful of the lot. It attempts to put Thailand's southern violence in historical context, teasing out domestic political dynamics that gave rise to the "ethno-nationalist" insurgency over the past century. It outlines the repeated failures rooted in ignorance and insensitivity of the central government in Bangkok in its efforts to assimilate the minority Muslim

population. It discusses the role of poverty and economic disparity and Thai foreign policy as major sources of Malay-Muslim grievances and disenchantment. The crux of the first chapter is thus: "In Thailand, the Muslim separatist movement has so far not been driven by abstract or ideological rejection of modernity or 'the West', but rather developed as an opposition to Bangkok's attempts at assimilation" (p. 9). Thailand's southern violence, as noted on the same page, predates the post-September 11 conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. "The most recent example that the southern Thai insurgency does not fall into the global jihad phenomenon can be found in the booklet found on the bodies of some of the insurgents killed on 28 April 2004" (p. 9). These statements suggest that the emphasis on understanding the southern insurgency should be placed in the terrains of historiography and domestic politics.

The rest of the book does not bear out the argument delineated in the first chapter. While providing a helpful timeline of the violence that ensued since January 2004, Chapter Two focuses on the background, organization, objectives, and methods of the various insurgent groups. The sections on Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani (GMIP), and Pusat Persatuan Tadika Narathiwat (PUSAKA) are especially informative, the dynamics and interplay among these groups instructive. Chapter Two then brings in the role of radical Islam and the radicalized teachings in the *pondok*, Thailand's Islamic schools, as the potential hotbeds of local insurgent radicalism with extensive links to like-minded education and terrorist networks in South and other parts of Southeast Asia, including Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). The preponderance of data and the analysis implicitly situate Thailand's southern insurgency in a regional and transnational network of terrorism and political violence.

A solid contribution that is underdeveloped, Chapter Three discusses strategies, targets, and tactics of the insurgents along with government responses and the policies towards the south of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's administration. Few previous studies have approached the insurgency's strategies and tactics as incisively and as in-depth as Gunaratna, Acharya, and Chua have done. The authors also cover the successful counter-insurgency strategy against the communist movement undertaken by the government of General Prem Tinsulanond in the early 1980s. Thaksin's ineffective and counter-productive heavy-handed tactics are included in some detail (pp. 85–90). This section should have been elaborated and expanded into a chapter of its own. A number of contrasting analyses of the southern insurgency have attributed Thaksin's harsh governance, mishandling,

and mismanagement in the fluctuating context of domestic politics as a primary source of the violence, providing the enabling environment for the insurgency to resurge since January 2004.

The concluding chapter is practical and policy-oriented. It calls for enlightened counter-insurgency and counter-terrorist responses to contain and manage the “threat” from the insurgents. Closer cooperation with Malaysia is rightly deemed as vital. A hearts-and-minds campaign in the Deep South to win over the Muslim majority who are not supportive of the insurgency is equally indispensable. The last section on “international and regional implications of a domestic insurgency” leaves no doubt as to how the authors view their subject of study: “The insurgency in Thailand is rapidly becoming a catalytic conflict. Like Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, Mindanao in the Philippines, Algeria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the conflict in Thailand is likely to be placed on the global jihad map” (p. 113).

To be sure, the ongoing violence in Thailand’s southernmost provinces is difficult to pinpoint, having confounded analysts near and far, including the country’s very own intelligence services. By most accounts, the violence appears to emanate from long-standing ethno-nationalist grievances and identity issues with the goals of separatism ranging from greater administrative autonomy to outright independence. Domestic politics in view of Thaksin’s authoritarian tendencies and repressive policies since he came to power in January 2001 also figure prominently in assessing the causes and dynamics of the violence. Yet the wider regional and international “jihadist” networks cannot be excluded altogether from Thailand’s southern morass. The task of the researcher is to untangle the knotty imbroglio between domestic politics, historical southern Muslim separatism, and external terrorist linkages by apportioning weight to each of these causes persuasively.

Gunaratna, Acharya, and Chua initially appreciate the historical and domestic political components of the southern violence but end up almost openly as “war on terror” security analysts with southern Thailand as their case study. Some are likely to see this book especially as just another output in Gunaratna’s terror-mongering academic exercises. Yet the book deserves a wide readership for a rounded and comprehensive understanding of Thailand’s potent and lethal southern insurgency. Given that the insurgents are now able to inflict violence almost at will in the southern border provinces, there is growing likelihood that their scope of operations may expand to other areas around the country. This book should deter the Thai people and government from complacency as much as it should

promote their greater vigilance. Too many terror mongers are better than too few.

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