

***Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence*. Edited by Duncan McCargo.
Singapore: NUS Press, 2007. Softcover: 225pp.**

The book is essential reading for anyone interested in contemporary Thai politics. Though all of the seven contributors focus their analysis on the consequences of the upsurge in often indiscriminate violence in Thailand's three southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, the issues they canvas go further in shedding light on the country's social, religious and political conditions in the first decade of the 21st century. Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the incidence of violent attacks not only between the authorities and local residents but also of intra-Malay Muslim community violence. From 84 such attacks in 2003, the number of incidents rose to 1843 in 2004.

During the first six months of 2005, more than 650 persons died in attacks and more than a thousand others were wounded, the majority in both cases Muslims of Malay descent. Thailand's southern Malay minority, long ignored in national politics, has become a major issue. While several of the contributors to this volume imply that the problem was largely the result of the allegedly inept policies of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the inability of his military successors to have been any more successful in stemming the trend suggests that there are many factors to be considered in understanding and ending the escalating violence. The growth of violence since the book was published suggests that some of the authors might wish to rethink their arguments about the link between Thaksin's style of government and escalating conflict in the region. Great men theories, like great villain theories, rarely stand up to close scrutiny.

The seven chapters which form the core of *Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence* follow a useful discussion by editor McCargo of the political implications of the terms used to describe the southern most provinces of the Kingdom. One is left wondering, however, how the terms are used and assessed in Thai as well as Malay rather than in English. The editor ends the volume with a gloomy postscript about the continuing post-coup conflict. Each contributor approaches the question posed by the title in a different way. Chaiwat Satha-Anand provides a belles lettres discussion of the Bullet Monument that stands in front of a police post in Narathiwat Province commemorating those who died in an upsurge in violence in the region which occurred in 1948. His nicely written and clear deconstruction of the monument and its alternative meanings from different historical, social and political perspectives, while providing a good introduction to the issues in the region, leads to no clear conclusions. The more conventional social

science approaches of the other authors point more definitely towards potential causes and consequences of the region's violence, but, in the end, with little more certainty.

Duncan McCargo's own contribution is a retelling of a well known essay by him published in the *Pacific Review* in late 2005 on "Network Monarchy" in Thailand. This influential essay, though controversial in some parts of the Thai political establishment that McCargo deftly identifies, forecasts more clearly than any other the dangerous position that Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had put himself in prior to the September 2006 coup. That essay was the closest to predicting that a coup was imminent. The role of the south was just one of a number of factors which came together to give the coup group the encouragement to act, but as McCargo in this essay makes clear, it was not unimportant. The inability of the post-coup government to address the problems of the south at least in the first six months of their reign reveals the hollowness of some of their self-justifications.

"Thaksin's Achilles" Heel: The Failure of Hawkish Approaches in the Thai South' by Ukrist Pathmanand is the most vociferously critical of the former Prime Minister and therefore the least balanced. The author's animosity at his subject and his policies means that he is able to find little or nothing positive to say about his government's approach. Such criticism was perhaps easy, and certainly common before the coup, but when, like the coup makers, one can not propose a successful alternative, sometimes critics would be well advised to develop their critiques with a rather more balanced approach. The following essay by Srisompoh Jitpiromsri with Panyasak Sobhonvasu, on the difficulty of understanding the conflict in the south through structural explanations, raises the kind of issues that a balanced analysis of the correct policy line towards the South would have to examine. This very convincing, but ultimately dispiriting essay, demonstrates what social science is capable of doing, but also how weak an aid to policy making it actually is. The plea to do more research is usually heard at the end of such endeavours, but whether that would produce any more light is perhaps doubtful.

The interpretation of religion and religious symbols through debates within the Islamic communities of southern Thailand, and their links with the larger world of Islam, provides much of the focus of Wattana Sugunnasil's fascinating contribution. His scholarship provides a way into the debates about the role of Islam in the south which none of the other contributors consider. The essay deserves repeated reading for it raises a number of subtle and important issues

which are usually missed in discussions of violence and Islam in the contemporary period not only in southern Thailand but the larger world. May Tan-Mullins final essay, less analytical than those that come before it, is none the less useful for providing an opportunity to hear the voices of the people in the south, albeit at several times removed.

This volume grew out of a special issue of *Critical Asian Studies* and then went through several iterations in a workshop and presentations at the International Thai Studies Conference in 2005. The result is a volume which no serious student or scholar on modern Thai politics and society can ignore. It is well produced and underscores a point too often missed by funders and researchers in an age where mature scholarship tends to be downgraded for the sake of speed of production, often regardless of the quality. Each of the contributors to *Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence* has thought long and hard about the issues posed by their topic and they have produced a book which others should now seriously contemplate. Perhaps only a first class university press can still produce relevant scholarship of this quality.

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