

Southern conflict revives tensions in Thailand's ruling elite

By John Roberts
2 April 2012

Differences over how to deal with the separatist Muslim insurgency in Thailand's southern provinces are generating tensions between the country's military and the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. The ruling Puea Thai is associated with Yingluck's brother, exiled former Premier Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup in September 2006.

The insurgency involves various armed groups among the Malay-speaking Muslims who constitute 80 percent of the population in the southern provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, bordering Malaysia.

During the past three months, the violence has escalated, with one or two incidents occurring virtually every day. Last Saturday, four explosions killed 14 people and injured 300, in one of the worst such attacks during the protracted insurgency.

The killing of four civilians in Pattani by army Rangers in late January received widespread publicity. An inquiry exonerated the soldiers on the pretext that fatigue and darkness had caused a "mistake". On March 21, insurgents took revenge by luring soldiers from the same unit to a hidden explosive device that killed one and wounded two others.

On March 13, the government extended the state of emergency in the area for another three months. Deputy Prime Minister Yuthasak Sasiprapa said these laws, which give draconian powers to the military and police, would remain in force while a new security policy was prepared.

The government has revived plans to grant some form of autonomy to the southern provinces. Yingluck had campaigned on the proposal during last July's national elections, then backed away in the face of opposition from the military. The army has long insisted on dominating policy toward the south.

Puea Thai convincingly won the election, but the government's installation depended on a behind-the-scenes deal involving the military and the monarchy, which had backed Thaksin's ousting. As part of the political truce, Puea Thai leaders agreed to end criticisms of the armed forces and not interfere in military appointments.

Last September Yingluck watered down civilian control over the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC). The previous Democrat-led government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva had enacted legislation for SBPAC's secretary general to report directly to the prime minister.

Last month, however, Puea Thai's committee on law reform re-opened discussion on a special administrative zone for the southern provinces.

Yingluck also appointed Police Colonel Thawee Sodong, the SBPAC secretary general, to take charge of new initiatives in the south. Thawee is a close personal associate of Thaksin and was involved as a police commander in implementing Thaksin's policies in the region.

Thawee has been put in charge of new talks with separatist leaders. He has already offered the possibility of local elections for the head of SBPAC. The government's moves have effectively sidelined army commander General Prayuth Chan-ocha.

The military has reacted with alarm. Prayuth called together his southern commanders to discuss the plans. He is reported in the *Bangkok Post* on March 19 as saying: "From a security standpoint, I'd say I don't agree with (the special administrative zone). Thailand is indivisible."

An article in the *Bangkok Post* on March 22, entitled "South could see army at Yingluck's throat," cited an

army source as saying: “What are the government and the Puea Thai doing? On the one hand, they have held talks with separatist leaders. On the other they are pushing for a special administrative zone.”

Another source close to the army chief told the *Post*: “How could Police Colonel Thawee meet with the insurgents? Does he not know the army’s position?”

Army leaders maintain that the talks are useless as the separatist peak groups such as the prominent Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) only loosely control some of the active armed groups known as *juwae*.

The military also came into conflict with the previous Democrat-led government. Despite the army’s involvement in installing Abhisit following the 2006 coup, the Democrats have advocated an easing of military rule in the southern provinces, which they politically dominate.

In June 2009, masked gunmen entered the Alkulkon mosque in Narathiwat province during evening prayers and opened fire with automatic rifles. Ten people were killed immediately, two more died later and 10 were badly wounded.

While the military denied any involvement, the army or army-controlled militias were widely suspected. The massacre took place as Abhisit was engaged in talks with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak over joint plans for economic development in the border region. The Thai military is hostile to any international involvement in ending the Muslim separatist insurgency.

According to the *Bangkok Post*, Thaksin has sent his representatives for talks with Najib and former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed over possible development projects in southern Thailand. Yingluck has apparently had similar discussions with Najib, raising further concerns in the military.

The insurgency has cost more than 5,300 lives, including those of at least over 4,200 civilians, since 2004 when the Thaksin government imposed the state of emergency and ordered the army into the southern provinces. The shift by Thaksin and Puea Thai from military repression to seeking a negotiated solution to the insurgency, with Malaysia’s involvement, is driven primarily by economic considerations.

The continuing unrest in southern Thailand is an obstacle to plans for closer transport links and economic ties between members of the Association of

South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and with China. Further discussions took place in February between Chinese and Thai ministers about a high-speed rail project linking Kunming in southern China to Bangkok and Singapore through Thailand and Malaysia. In 2015 the ASEAN free trade agreement comes into effect, allowing freer travel between Malaysia and the southern Thai provinces.

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