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A Review Of "Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya, and Sabrina Chua Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand

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Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya, and Sabrina Chua, *Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Publisher, 2005), 240 pp.

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To outsiders, it may appear that Thailand has a new Islamic *jihad* on its hands. Since January 2004, over 2,000 people have died in Thailand's predominantly Malay-Muslim southern provinces as a result of terrorist acts aimed at police, military personnel, teachers, politicians, and other government officials. In 2004 alone, there were over 1,300 acts of terrorism reported in Thailand's southern region, up from the moderately low annual rate of 200 in the years immediately preceding. Additionally, an unreported number of Malay-Muslim insurgents and peaceful protestors have died at the hands of the government, prompting a fact-finding mission by the Organisation of Islamic Conference in May 2005. Up to 300 southern Malay-Muslims have been reported missing and unaccounted for, prompting inquiries by the United Nations. Every day, killings related to the "Southern Problem" are splashed across Thailand's newspapers. Billions of baht worth of physical damage has been done through acts of arson and bombing, not to mention lost economic revenue and opportunity. The credibility and legitimacy of the government are at stake, as are cordial relations with neighboring Malaysia.

An intelligent new book helps shed light on this conflict and its potential to spread from Thailand to neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Written by Singaporean scholars Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya, and Sabrina Chua, *Conflict and Terrorism in Southern Thailand* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Publisher, 2005) is well researched, thoroughly documented, and appropriately focused. It is a must-read for anyone interested in regional security or political issues, especially those related to the growing salience of militant Islamist groups. The book is as useful to scholars and students as it is accessible to government officials, politicians, and NGO personnel.

The researchers' primary purpose is to "assess the potential of what is currently a predominantly localized conflict confined to three provinces of southern Thailand, to escalate into an international Islamic *jihad* with reverberations . . . throughout the region" (6). Their secondary purpose, but just as important, is to recommend policies for managing the threat, something the Thai government has thus far done quite poorly. Indeed, the Thai government is faulted throughout for its insensitive, corrupt, heavy-handed approach for managing relations with Malay-Muslims, the largest ethno-religious minority group in Thailand. This, of course, does not justify the insurgents' use of force and terror tactics. But it does help explain the problem, the intentions of the separatist groups, the support insurgents receive from an aggrieved public, and their choice of targets.

After introducing the growing crisis, Gunaratna et al. briefly present the Adversary Threat Matrix, a model especially useful for analyzing non-state actors involved in asymmetric conflicts. The matrix considers insurgents' intentions, capabilities, and opportunities to carry out attacks. As such, the book focuses primarily on insurgent groups based in southern Thailand more than it does the root causes of the conflict itself or Thai government contributions and capabilities. That said, the book necessarily provides a short but useful history of the conflict, which dates at least to the early 1900s, as well as an analysis of factors contributing to the most recent escalation of violence, which began in

2001 and soared sharply in 2004. Many books of this type spend inordinate amounts of time on history while neglecting important details about the current context, a trap the authors deftly avoid. In light of the insurgents' capabilities and opportunities, the authors critique government policies and provide astute suggestions for resolving the conflict.

The core of the book is broken into two sections. Chapter 2 presents the threat. Considerable detail is provided on major incidences of terrorism from January to October 2004. While tedious at times, readers unfamiliar with the situation on the ground will benefit from such detail. Readers must remember the number and extent of terror incidences listed are only a small fraction of those taking place in southern Thailand. This chapter also provides concise but detailed background and analysis of six well-established insurgent groups operating in Thailand. The authors conclude that most such groups are small, generally numbering less than 100 members each; seek autonomy or secession; have links with Islamist militants abroad but no strong connection to them, such as joint training or significant funding; are heavily involved in organized crime, extortion, and terrorism; and, are not coordinating their efforts. The group of most concern is the Pusat Persatuan Tadika Narathiwat (PUSAKA), established in 1994 by a former Thai Rak Thai Party Member of Parliament.

The remainder of chapter 2 analyzes the link between these insurgents and Islam, an issue of considerable concern because of the strength religious symbols have in propelling a local conflict into a regional or global battle. The authors give a balanced presentation of the role played by *pondoks* and Islamic Private Schools, which generally are not radical. These institutions provide a means by which Malay Muslims can preserve and perpetuate their culture, especially in the face of assimilative governmental policies. At the same time, some have been co-opted by insurgents and have become training grounds for violent resistance, especially those funded by Wahabi-based institutions in the Middle East. The radicalization of teachers in Thailand's Malay-Muslim community is particularly troubling because of the traditional honorific and leadership role given to educators, as well as their ready access to children who typically come from impoverished families and have little hope of materially improving their own lives. As in many countries, there is a struggle within southern Thailand's Islamic community over religious belief, focus, and action. Chapter 2 concludes with an insightful and balanced discussion of problematic linkages between southern Thai insurgent groups and radical educational institutions abroad while, at the same time, a lack of direct linkages with regional or global terrorist organizations.

Chapter 3 outlines the strategies, targets, tactics, and weapons of the insurgents, followed by a presentation of government response and escalation potential. It is clear that the insurgents are becoming more brazen and lethal, albeit remaining local. A dozen beheadings have mimicked tactics used by insurgents in Iraq. It is also evident that public protests and rioting have, for the most part, been instigated and orchestrated, not spontaneous. Distrust between Malay-Muslims and the government tasked to protect and serve them is extremely high, with accusations of provocation on both sides. While insurgents have traditionally targeted symbols and representatives of the government, they broadened their strategies in mid-2005 to include nongovernment targets, such as Buddhist and Muslim plantation workers and ordinary citizens.

Readers need to be aware of a few oversights. First, "Islamist threat" needs to be more carefully defined and applied. While Islam has been used to mobilize collective action against the state, the primary identity of southern Thais is Malay, not Muslim. Second, the authors are a bit too hasty to label acts of violence as insurgency. Since responsibility is rarely claimed by anyone and justice rarely served, it is not always clear

whether attacks are perpetuated by insurgents, people with personal vendettas, organized crime groups, or government-sponsored militia. Third, a similar assumption seems to be made that those killed or captured by the government are indeed insurgents. This is unlikely given the government's history of extra-judicial killings, false arrests, poor intelligence, and torture-induced confessions. Finally, there is inconsistency in evaluation of government performance. On the one hand, the authors state that "the policies and measures adopted by the government to combat insurgency . . . appear to be sound" (200). This is contradicted by statements such as "Thai government policy privileges the use of force and intimidation," (201) government "tactics were largely unsuccessful," (201) and the "current military-dominated strategy adopted by Bangkok . . . is flawed" (230).

These issues, however, do not detract from the overall quality of the book. Readers come away with a better appreciation for the complexity of the issues, the role of government mismanagement, the imperative for quick and proper action by the government and moderate Muslims, and the potential threat to Southeast Asia.

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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