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Thailand's Southern Insurgency: Cracks in Bangkok's Message

By Brian McCartan

Synopsis

More sophisticated insurgent attacks in southern Thailand have raised serious questions about the Thai government's oft-repeated optimistic message on the conflict. The insurgents have become better organised, more confident and able to carry out complex and deadlier attacks.

Commentary

THAILAND'S GOVERNMENT and military repeatedly asserted in recent years that separatist support is declining as understanding is built with the Malay-Muslim population through programmes to spur economic development, improve governance, and bring justice to the region. In contrast, the separatist movement is often depicted as uncoordinated small groups suffering from declining support and reduced by desperation to committing small revenge attacks.

A deeper look at the situation in the region in the two years leading up to the recent attacks in the south, especially the bombings in Hat Yai and Yala on 31 March 2012, however, suggests a much more disturbing situation.

Militant reorganisation

Mounting evidence points to a movement that has shown an ability to not only endure, but also adapt, mature, and develop new skill sets. From early 2010 this process went into higher gear through efforts to recruit new members, reorganise command structures and provide advanced training to chosen adherents. This training included more advanced tactics and weapons instruction as well specialised skills including explosives.

The militants' new capabilities were first displayed in an attack on an army camp in Rangae district, Narathiwat province in January 2011. Marked improvements in tactical skill, operational planning, coordination, and confidence continued to be displayed in a series of subsequent ambushes of security units and well-coordinated attacks on military camps over the past year. A notable feature of these operations is a boldness and willingness to take risks that was hitherto rare in militant activities.

In a departure from the usual small village-based cells of the RKK (Runda Kumpulan Kecil in Malay, or 'small patrol group'), the insurgents have been able to assemble platoon-sized units of 15 to 40 men for operations. These units of better-trained militants, stiffened by more experienced RKK members, are supported by local

networks of fighters and sympathisers. A pronounced focus on seizing weapons is presumably aimed at expanding insurgent numbers and capabilities for future attacks as well as to mitigate a perennial lack of ammunition and weaponry. The larger units may also reflect an attempt by the Patani-Malay National Revolutionary Front - Coordinate (Barisan Revolusi Nasional Patani-Melayu-Koordinasi, or BRN-C), the main armed insurgent group, to proceed with a plan to develop such units. The plan apparently has yet to be organised due largely to inadequate experience and expertise as well as military pressure.

Command and Control

The complexity of these operations reveals a level of coordination and intelligence collection suggestive of an improved command and control structure capable of coordinating operations across districts and provinces. It seems highly unlikely that the pattern of attacks over the past year culminating in the recent Hat Yai and Yala bombings could be the result of a fragmented command structure. Instead, larger operations appear to be controlled through a separate chain of command to the normal village cells with each operation requiring weeks of planning and organising as an efficient network of supporters.

To be sure, daily, low-intensity violence continues, and has served to keep the military off-balance and tied down in manning checkpoints, on duties such as escorting teachers to school and investigating small incidents. The very routineness of the violence has worked to instill a sense of complacency in many security force units. The situation in effect provides a screen behind which the separatists can organise and plan operations.

While it is impossible to accurately gauge support for the separatist movement, anecdotal evidence from recent insurgent operations indicates a much higher degree of support than acknowledged by the government. In addition to the shooters and bomb makers, a network of people is involved in organising supplies, hiding weapons and ammunition, and providing safe houses before and after operations. Without a network of sympathetic informers it is unlikely the militants would be able to gather the intelligence on their targets that has become an important aspect of attacks over the past year.

While militants have become savvier about the need for operational security, this would still be very difficult to achieve in the community-based urban environment in which they operate without at least the acquiescence of a significant proportion of the local population. The military and police have become more knowledgeable about the region, its populace, and the insurgency since 2004, but as recent events have shown they are still some way from being able to consistently pierce the wall of silence that protects the movement.

Government options

The more aggressive and sophisticated attacks over the past year, and especially the 31 March bombings, puts the government in a difficult position. Despite the government's optimistic mantra, it is becoming increasingly obvious that efforts to contain the militant violence through a Bangkok-driven focus on paternalistic notions of economic development, good governance and justice are insufficient. Without addressing Bangkok's legitimacy deficit there is little likelihood of effectively addressing the problem, no matter how well intentioned, organised, or beneficial the programmes.

A return to large-scale cordon-and-search operations is also problematic. The ensuing home searches and mass arrests would surely be seized upon by the separatists propaganda machine to further alienate a population already upset with the military's impunity over charges of human rights abuses. Maintaining a security cordon in the South while simultaneously carrying out more aggressive tactics also threatens to derail plans to hand over security in the region to the newly-raised 15th Division backed up by a much expanded paramilitary 'Ranger' presence. A more aggressive posture after several years of optimistic statements could undermine any success the current counterinsurgency efforts have achieved as well as raise uncomfortable questions nationally and among the international community.

Proposals for implementation of some form of autonomy for the South also need to be improved. This option has never been popular with the Army and its political repercussions go far beyond the three southern provinces. Although autonomy has the promise of addressing many of the legitimacy issues, improperly implemented and without the proper political will on all sides, this too could fail and lead to more violence.

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