

Three Years after the January 2004 Raids, the Insurgency in Southern Thailand is Building Momentum

Zachary Abuza

zachary.abuza@gmail.com

3 January 2007

On 4 January 2004, a group of armed men raided a Thai army camp. The group had planned the attack well and knew exactly where the camp's armory was. They were equipped with acetylene torches and bolt cutters; in all they made off with more than 300 M-16s, small arms, ammunition and other weaponry. It is the date most commonly used to start the current manifestation of the insurgency in Thailand's restive south, dominated by Muslim Malays. In actuality the insurgency began several years earlier, in 2001, but at a low enough level to be considered routine criminality.

The government of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra blamed the insurgency on drug addicts and criminals. Only a year earlier, he had declared that the Malay insurgency had been defeated and transferred authority for the deep south from the Army to his former colleagues in the Royal Thai Police (RTP). He dissolved the two key institutions that were responsible for maintaining law and order, providing governance and dispute adjudication. The police, notoriously corrupt in Thailand, were ill-equipped to deal with the south, more concerned with consolidating their authority over smuggling and local crime rackets. The army withheld their human intelligence network hoping that the police would fail in their mission; eager to muscle back in when martial law was instated in early-2004.

Insurgency is not new to southern Thailand, but the post-WWII generation of insurgents had been defeated by the mid-1990s through a variety of means: effective uses of amnesties, development projects, security cooperation with Malaysia, good counter-insurgency tactics, and the country's vast economic growth. But the unrecognized reason was that the insurgents were so woefully divided over ideology, goals, and tactics that they could never cooperate. The Thai's could defeat one splinter group at a time. What Thai security officials concede now is that Islamists were disgusted with the insurgency's demise, and retreated to the mosques and madrassas, where the insurgency incubated for a decade. In early-2004, the Thai security forces were caught with their pants down. They rounded up the usual suspects of the previous generation, unaware that the insurgency was primarily being run by two groups they never considered threats: the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinasi (BRN-C) and their youth wing Pemuda, and the Gerakan Mujahidin Islamiya Pattani (GMIP). The government's missteps in early-2004 further alienated them from the community. The attack on the 14th century Krue Se Mosque in which 33 militants had retreated and the Tak Bai massacre in October 2004, in which 78 unarmed protestors died of asphyxiation in the back of army lorries, led to a rapid decline in cooperation from amongst the Muslim community and open hostility towards government forces. Thaksin's bullhorn diplomacy and allegations led to bilateral relations with Malaysia spiraling out of control.

What is new about the current conflict is the level and degree of violence, the Islamist agenda of the insurgents, and their unprecedented degree of cooperation and coordination. To date no group has taken any credit for attacks, nor have they publicly stated their goals or platform. The situation is not improving, and now entering its fourth year, there is a question of whether the Thai government can salvage anything. Right now, they are losing the south and 2007 will be a critical year.

Growing Violence

Since 4 January 2004, over 1,900 people have been killed in more than 3,000 separate incidents. Nearly half of the casualties have been amongst the Buddhist population, which numbers roughly 300,000. This has led to *de facto* ethnic cleansing. Entire Buddhist communities have fled to the relative safety of Hat Yai and Songkhla. Communities that had coexisted for years are unlike to ever come together and overcome mutual suspicion and animosity. The social fabric of the south has been irreparably damaged.

The professional group most targeted has been teachers: to date over 60 teachers have been killed. Schools are often the only manifestation of the Thai state in remote villages, poorly defended, and seen as agents of assimilation. Schools across the south have been shut for months at a time by teachers who refuse to go to school until their security is assured. The Thai government has reacted with various measures including attempts to arm teachers, promote soldiers who have qualifications to teach and to institute stop-gap measures to prevent teachers from transferring out of the region.

Yet more than half of the casualties (roughly 55 percent) of the insurgents have been fellow Muslims. The current insurgents have gone far beyond killing Muslim collaborators and village chiefs. They have killed Muslims who simply take a state salary or work for the government. They have killed and threatened imams who have performed funerals for Muslim collaborators and killed almost 10 imams who teach at government-funded Islamic schools. They have threatened parents to not send their children to any school but the private Islamic schools. They have forced businesses closed on Fridays. Suffis and moderate Sha'afis have been routinely targeted.

There is a palpable climate of fear in the South. The local Muslims do not trust the Thai security forces who have been abusive and indiscriminant, and yet they fear the insurgents as well. The insurgents are not fighting a Maoist struggle and trying to win hearts and minds; They seem to have little concern about garnering popular support. They have a clear Islamist social agenda that they are slowly implementing. Recently, women have been told to stop going to state hospitals to give birth, and are told ludicrous things about the infidel Buddhist doctors and nurses and what they will do to newborn Muslim babies. Births are not being registered, which means children cannot attend state schools nor are they eligible for the Bt30 national healthcare plan. People now turn to local *sharia* courts, eschewing state institutions. Insurgents are forcing people to send their children to private Islamic schools, instead of free state primary schools. In effect, people are

opting out (often out of fear) of the state and turning to a parallel set of rudimentary social institutions that the insurgents are gradually establishing.

What Are Their Goals?

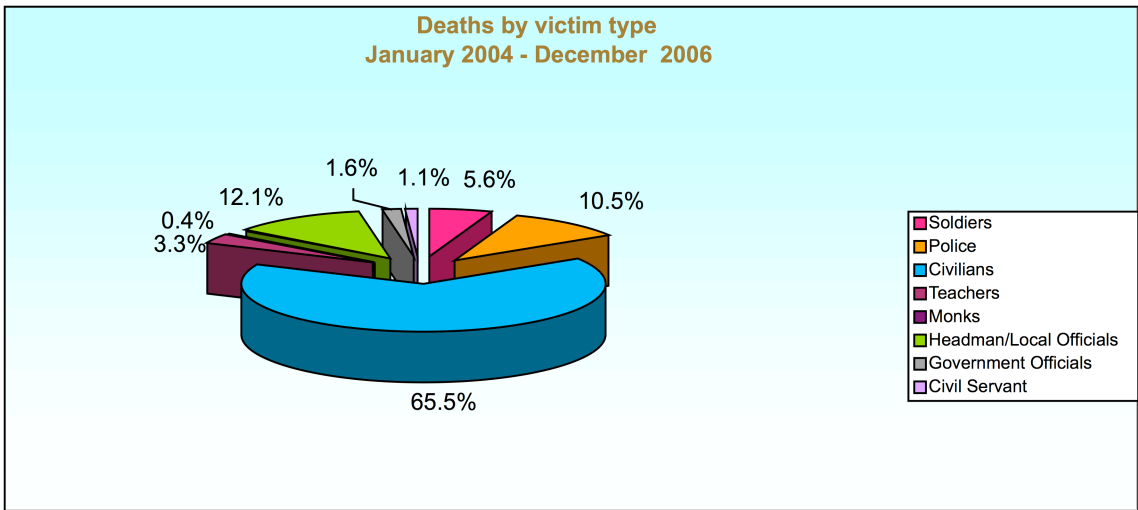
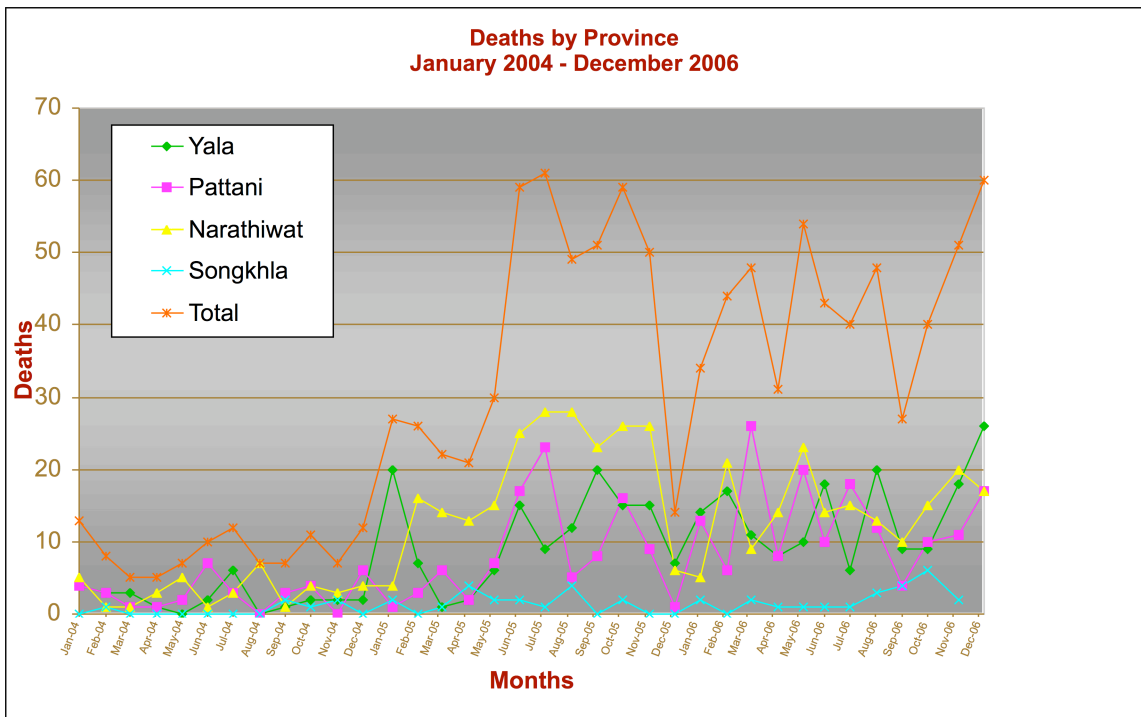
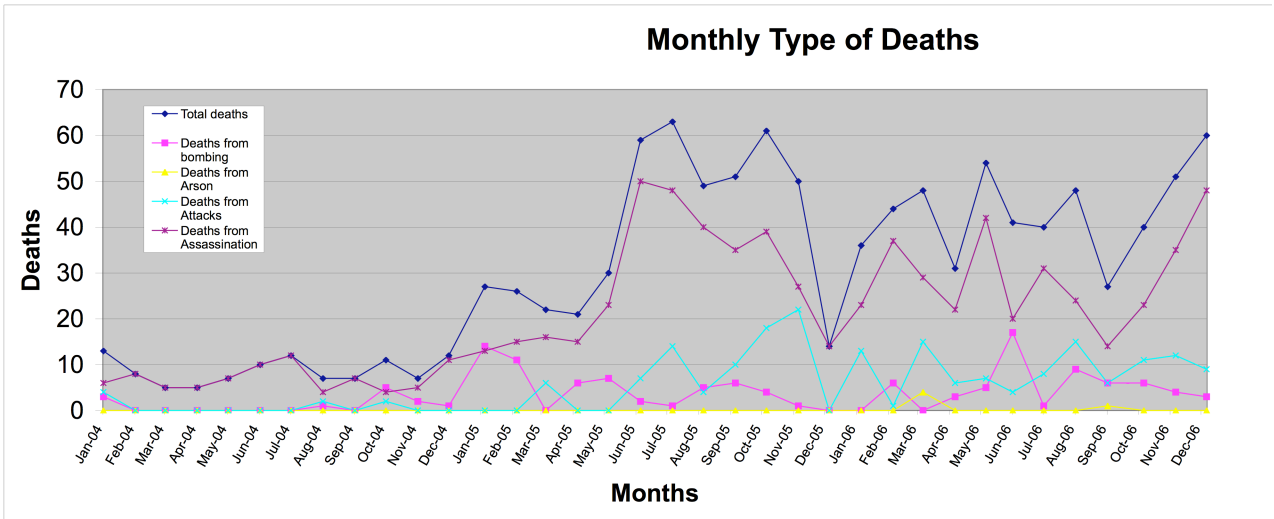
The insurgents have not publicly stated their goals or a platform. Nor has any group claimed any degree of responsibility for the insurgency. Keeping quiet has worked to their advantage, baffling the Thai security forces, and giving them a mysterious aura. It is what I term, a conspiracy of silence. The insurgents believed that the overt top-down structure of their predecessor organizations made them vulnerable. They have maintained a very flat structure of autonomous cells.

The National Reconciliation Council asserted in their final report that the insurgents are not secessionists, but every indication is that is exactly what they are. The long-term goal is clearly to establish an independent state, governed to a degree with *sharia* law and other Islamic institutions. It is also clearly a goal to rid the region of what they consider to be corrupting Thai culture.

The short- and medium- term goals of the insurgents are threefold: To make the region ungovernable, to provoke heavy-handed government responses that will further alienate the Muslim community, and to impose their values and authority on the local community. Regarding the first, they not only seek to make the region ungovernable, they want people to lose all faith in civic institutions and the ability of the Thai state to offer them a degree of protection. The clearly would like to provoke more crackdowns that would convince the local population of their rhetoric that the Thai state is abusive and patently anti-Muslim. Finally they are establishing a parallel set of institutions in which they can exert their authority, while eliminating other contenders for power.

Insurgent Tactics and Capabilities

The insurgents' capabilities have clearly improved. What began with small 1-2kg pipe bombs has escalated. Now 10-15kg road side IEDs are routinely detonated. On several occasions there have been bombs in the 20-40kg range, so clearly they have the technical capacity to do larger-scale bombings should they want to. There have been more than 500 bombings. There have also been many simultaneous bombings: On 3 April 2005, there were three bombs detonated in Hat Yai, including one in the international airport; six more bombs were found or failed to go off. On 16 June 2006, 50 bombs were detonated (12 in Yala, 18 in Pattani and 20 in Narathiwat). Two days later, another 12 bombs were detonated and at least 10 more were defused. In August 2006, all 22 commercial banks in Yala City were simultaneously hit by small bombs. A month later eight car and motorcycle dealerships were hit in a similar fashion. On 16 September, six bombs that were detonated six minutes apart were set in stores and shops down the main street of Hat Yai, killing at least five people and wounded at least 50, including a Canadian teacher. The attacks in Hat Yai, while infrequent, resonate loudly in Bangkok, as Hat Yai is the major wholesale and financial center for the deep south, where much of the world's latex rubber passes. Rubber tappers have also been systematically targeted, causing a 15 percent decline in latex output in 2006.



Most bombs are detonated by cellular phones. In November 2005, the Thai government blocked all unregistered prepaid mobile phones in an attempt to curb the spate of bombings. Bombings immediately fell off but escalated throughout 2006 as work arounds were developed. Insurgents stepped up the theft of mobile phones and in some areas have used Malaysian SIM cards. They have been experimenting with other detonator technology, such as infrared devices and remote controls. Command detonated bombs are used along train tracks and occasionally on remote roads. Insurgents have begun using Casio-watch as detonators in the past four to six months, a tactic used by the Iraqi insurgents. They have used time delayed second bombs to target first responders and police investigators.

Still, as shown above in Figure 1, most victims of the insurgents are killed from gunshot wounds, usually from a motorcycle. Many thousands have been wounded from bombings, but the overall death toll is not that high from bombings, in part because there is a time delay in the mobile phone network. Soldiers, in particular, are wounded by roadside IEDs that go off just as their trucks pass the device.

Insurgents hit security forces whenever they have high probability of success, but they are inherently conservative, more often opting for vulnerable targets: civilians, local headmen, teachers, government officials, and monks. Only 16 percent of the victims have been police or soldiers. [See Figure 3 above]. Insurgents have stepped up their ability in ambushes and raids on fixed targets. Their confidence has grown, and they will now engage in prolonged firefights.

The level of violence in Thailand's south has never been higher. Nor has it been more brutal. There have been over 24 beheadings, and by some estimates there have been almost 60 attempted beheadings. Teachers have been gunned down in front of their students. Buddhist monks, men of the cloth who had never been targets before, are now systematically attacked. In one famous incident, a monk was hacked to death and his monastery set on fire. Monks have been wounded on a regular basis in roadside IED attacks while they collect their morning alms. Targeting has never been so broad and indiscriminant. The insurgents attempt to maximize casualties in almost all attacks. Women and children have also been killed with increasing regularity.

The insurgents remain very loosely organized and cells are quite autonomous. There tend to be meetings of regional leaders on a regular, if infrequent, basis. There is a historically unprecedented degree of cooperation and coordination amongst the insurgents. They share a commitment to the goal of establishing an independent Islamic state. They certainly are not trying to discredit one another or take responsibility for the attacks.

There tend to be two types of operational cells: fixed cells with a geographical responsibility and mobile cells that move from district to district for specific attacks and operations. Because the insurgents do not have a secure sanctuary in which to train, the quality of the attacks as well as bomb design and construction differs.

Low-level insurgents who have been caught have made similar revelations: they are not paid, and are often treated as though they are expendable. They are given orders by

religious authorities whom they do not believe that they can question or contradict. They are usually not provided with safe houses or information to help them if operations go awry.

Thai Counter-Insurgent Efforts

There is considerable hand-wringing amongst diplomats and security analysts that the Thai, who were once so adept at counter-insurgency having fought in Laos and against the Thai and Malayan Communist Parties and their own Malay insurgents. Part of the problem is that the Thai military has become a conventional force more concerned with big-ticket purchases to keep up with their ASEAN rivals, rather than weapons systems and doctrines to fight the threats to their national security. The military has been too static and unwilling to take the fight to the insurgents. In part, this is because the insurgency is no longer confined to the jungles: there is an urban component to it, which the Thais have never had to contend with. But the primary reason for the mishandling has been bureaucratic competition, the lack of interagency coordination, the hoarding of intelligence and information, unclear chains of command, and poor policies.

There are some 11-12 different agencies or units with over 80,000 personnel in the South, but there is little cooperation among them. Within the Royal Thai Army (RTA), there is the 4th Army, military intelligence, the Special Operations Forces, and now Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC)(discussed more below). The Royal Thai Police, too, is divided between Police Region IX, the headquarters in Bangkok, and the Special Branch. They are intense competition with the Ministry of Justice's Department of Special Investigations, the National Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council, and the Ministry of Interior. There is almost no intelligence sharing amongst them. Competition over resources, bureaucratic rivalries and professional contempt define inter-agency relations.

The RTA has their own detention facilities and is not turning over suspects to the police or other agencies on a regular basis. The RTA has been exasperated by the fact that in three years only two people have been tried and convicted for their role in the insurgency. By some accounts, by mid-2005, only 11 percent of violent incidents led to an arrest; and almost none of those arrests led to convictions. The police have been so unprofessional that they have not been able to compile enough evidence that will stand up in courts. Thai authorities boast that more than 1,700 militants have been detained, though few have been leaders or top operatives; almost all are released due to a lack of evidence. The only important arrests to date have taken place in Malaysia; though the Malaysian government appears to have sent a key leader that they detained, Jekhumae Kuteh, to a third country. Thai police, who have a shockingly high rate of confessions in the rest of the country, have been unable to garner any confessions in the south. Much of that reason is that they have so few Malayu speakers or ethnic Malays in their force. They are culturally ignorant whose operational policies are often offensive to Muslims. The dismal showing of the police has further eroded public trust in them.

Some policies have just been abhorrent, such as death squads. Other policies, such as the re-education camps, have completely backfired. The military forced young men from the villages into compulsory education programs to teach about Thai nationhood. If the men were not members of the insurgency before they went to the camps they often were afterwards: insurgents considered anyone who returned from the camps to be collaborators with the Thai government and threatened to kill them unless they joined the insurgency.

Human intelligence is all but non-existent because the security forces have so alienated the local population through their abusive policies. The vengeance that insurgents have also employed against suspected informers has been a further deterrent to cooperating with the state. But beyond intelligence gathering, there are critical gaps in intelligence analysis. Few agencies have dedicated and professionally trained analysts, and those that do, tend to be the worst when it comes to information sharing. Three years out, the Thais are only now putting together a database of IEDs.

The Post-Coup Period

The 19 September 2006 coup that ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his deputy Chidchai Vanasatidya, provided an opportunity for new policies to be implemented in the south. The Council on National Security (CNS) and interim government put in place a two fold strategy: policies designed to win back the support of the alienated Muslim population, and policies designed to improve the government's capabilities in going after the insurgents.

The former included a public apology to the Muslim community for the previous government's policies, the dropping of charges against some 58 Tak Bai protestors, a renewed pledge to solve the 12 March 2004 disappearance of human rights activist Somchai Neelapaijit, which the government now labels "murder," (the previous government all but announced he was dead), the abolition of blacklists, and a willingness to implement some *sharia* law.

The government announced that they would punish wrong-doers and those officials who have abused their power, but in typical Thai fashion, they seem unwilling to apply this policy retroactively and punish anyone responsible for Krue Se or Tak Bai. Until people are not only expelled from government service, but serve jail time, the local population will continue to believe that there can be no justice. Moreover, the Emergency Decree, still in force, continues to give government security forces blanket immunity. The government will continue to be perceived as patently anti-Muslim until they remedy this.

The latter policies included the scrapping to the ineffective Southern Border Province Peace Command and the re-establishment of the pre-Thaksin era institutions, the army led- Southern Border Provinces Administrative Command (SBPAC) and Civil-Police and Military-43 (CPM-43). To date, the SBPAC has been crippled by an unwillingness of the various agencies to send competent officials and by a shortage of resources.

The interim government understands that they have to find ways to overcome the hoarding of intelligence and the total lack of cooperation amongst the various security agencies. The CNS appointed Army Lt. Gen. Vaipot Srinual as head of the NIA. It has also begun to push for a thorough reform of the police. The CNS also seems intent on transforming the long-moribund Internal Security Operations Center (ISOC), a part of the RTA), into a national coordinating center for security. While there are valid human rights and civil liberties concerns regarding the power and purview of ISOC, it is clear that their must be vastly improved inter-agency coordination and intelligence sharing if the insurgents are to be defeated.

The RTA announced that they were establishing 30 paramilitary companies of local volunteers, stakeholders with the local language skills. To date 10 companies are being trained.

General Sonthi Boonyaratglin and interim Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont have both made important fence mending trips to Kuala Lumpur. Sonthi publicly apologized for killing suspects turned over by the Malaysians, a long-time irritant. The leadership in Malaysia hailed Surayud's public apologies and new initiatives, making cooperation between the two states easier. Malaysian cooperation is essential: they have been reluctant to arrest many individuals wanted by Thai authorities, many of whom are dual nationals. The Pattani cause is politically sensitive in Malaysia, and is an issue that both the ruling party UMNO and the Islamist opposition party PAS, share a common concern. Outrage over Thai actions and policies against the Muslims, as well as the extra-judicial killings of suspects apprehended by the Malaysians have hampered cooperation. Only with improved Thai policies, will the Malaysians no longer feel compelled to release suspects like the GMIP's Jekhumae Kutae and to not actively track down and arrest insurgent suspects.

Unlike the Thaksin regime, the new government is not in denial about the scope of the problem. They do not attribute the insurgency to drug gangs, and acknowledge the secessionist and Islamist aims. They still have yet to understand the significance of the Muslim on Muslim violence, but for the first time they are asking the right questions.

The final thing that the government has done was hold a series of Malaysian-brokered peace talks with the "insurgents" in an attempt to negotiate a political settlement. The two sides allegedly came up with "Joint Peace and Development Plan for South Thailand," after the "insurgents" dropped their demand for an independent Islamic state.

Though there was great fanfare about the talks when they were announced in September 2006, the talks fell apart. For one thing, the "insurgents" that the government was talking to consisted of the GMP, PULO, BRN-Kongress and Bersatu, i.e., the last generation of insurgents and not the people responsible for the current violence.

The government demanded that they implement a one-month cease-fire as a show of good will and sign of command and control, later reduced to two weeks. The "insurgents" could not deliver a day of peace. If anything, the violence dramatically escalated

following the talks. [See Figures 1 and 2 above]. Both sides also made a set of preconditions to further talks that neither side was willing to even countenance. IE the government demanded a surrender of weapons and materiel, while the insurgents were calling for a blanket amnesty, the adoption of Malayu as an official working language, more development funds, and the scrapping of the Emergency Decree. Neither side was willing to even consider implementing these preconditions. Indeed, the Thai government went to great lengths to describe the talks as a “dialogue,” not as formal negotiations. It has steadfastly refused to countenance any plan for regional autonomy.

What is interesting is that the insurgents have shown absolutely no interest in negotiations or in the possibilities accorded by the change in government. Not only have the number of violent incidents not gone down after the coup, they have spiked to record highs. [See Figures 1 and 2 above]. In the 90 days after the coup, 174 people were killed, including 144 civilians, 19 soldiers and 11 police and more than 245 people were wounded. The average rate of killing was almost 2 people per day, the highest it had been in three years, and well above the 2006 pre-coup average of 1.65 per day. In the three month period after the coup, there were over 60 bombings and 45 arson attacks (of which more than 20 were schools), an average of 1.17 per day.

Clearly the spike in violence is meant to discredit the “insurgents” who had been trying to negotiate with the government. But it also reflects that right now they have no reason to negotiate: parties come to the table only when they feel that they have nothing more to gain from fighting. That is clearly not the case in the south. The insurgents are able to execute attacks at will, there have been few arrests, the government still has little understanding of the nature of the insurgent organization, and the bi-lateral relationship between Malaysia and Thailand is still poor enough that there is little in the way of close security cooperation.

The New Years Eve Bombings

Six bombs were exploded nearly simultaneously across downtown Bangkok on New Years Eve as revelers began to turnout for dinner and the evening's festivities. Two more bombs went off at mid-night. In total, only three people were killed and 38 people wounded, including six foreigners. Two other bombs, one in a crowded bar on Khao San Road, the crowded backpacker quarter, and at the Suan Luam night market in Lumpini, were found and defused.

Southern militants were ruled out fairly quickly for several reasons: the bombs were much smaller, much less sophisticated than what the insurgents typically use. The insurgents have always tried to maximize the number of casualties. The bombs in Bangkok were small, designed to create panic, not cause mass casualties. Second, it would require an infrastructure in Bangkok that few would consider them to have. Third, the low profile targets of at least the first wave of bombings seemed intended to provoke a domestic response, but not elicit much in the way of international attention.

While I they have never taken the option of targeting Bangkok off the table, nor are they ideologically against it, at the time they really do not need to change their strategy. At this point, the insurgents are winning (they certainly are not losing). They clearly have the technical capacity to execute large-scale bombings in Bangkok: on a daily basis they detonate far more powerful bombs than what went off in Bangkok. But they have no reason to change their strategy now, and for the foreseeable future will continue to focus their efforts in the deep south where they have the infrastructure to attack at will at little cost or risk.

While the southern insurgency cannot be ruled out, especially as more attacks on tourist venues were hit later in the evening, the prevailing wind in Bangkok is that the bombings were linked to elite political strife over the 19 September coup. Currently there are several hypotheses: It could be the police or other forces disgruntled with the military's takeover. The police are wildly unhappy about the reforms that the military is going to soon force on the police. It could have been the work of supporters of Thaksin simply out to discredit and destabilize the Council on National Security (CNS) and the government of Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont. Officials from former Prime Minister Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party have denied any involvement in the blasts. It is possible that it is also the military. Some hardliners are angry that Sonthi has not gone far enough in consolidating military power, others might be frustrated that all legal efforts to go after Thaksin and his allegedly ill-gotten gains have failed. It is telling that unnamed sources from the told *The Nation* newspaper hours after the bombings that the CNS was considering seizing Thaksin's assets so that he could no longer destabilize the country. The bombs make it likely that the restoration of democracy in Thailand will be further delayed. The bombings also demonstrate the vulnerability of Bangkok to attacks, should the insurgents feel the need to change their strategy and tactics.

A Critical Year

Historians often focus on the idea of a "tipping point." There is a sense that they are coming to one in southern Thailand in 2007. The insurgency is entering its fourth year, nearly 2,000 people have been killed, and the government seems no closer to coming up with a solution, stopping the bloodshed, or being able to protect the local community. The Thai government took great satisfaction that in the 2004 elections, 90 percent of the Muslims in the south voted; that was proof that the Muslims were not supportive of secessionism. Indeed the government asserts that only 2 percent of the Muslims actively support the insurgency.

But at what point will the population become so disaffected with the government, their inability to provide security, and the dwindling provision of social services? At what point will people fear the insurgents that they will simply quit the Thai state and use the parallel Islamic system of schools, courts and medical services? At what point will a growing number of people throw their lot in with the insurgents and support secessionism? The longer that the insurgency is raging, the more in place a parallel infrastructure will be, and the more that opponents, Buddhists, and moderate Muslims will be cowed into submission or vote with their feet.

There is a prevailing concern in Bangkok that the army will give the “carrots” used to win over the local population some six more months before they simply go in and launch a new wave of heavy-handed operations. Patience is wearing thin in the military, especially as the violence has spiked after the coup, at a time when many concessions and changes in Thai government policy were being offered. The rate of violence on the part of the insurgents is unlikely to go up considerably more because of logistical and resource constraints. This will change if there is a large-scale escalation of violence on the Thai side. It will also change if wide spread communal violence erupts in 2007. But even the current rates of violence are a threat to the Thai state. At present, they are losing the south.