

# THAKSIN AND THE RESURGENCE OF VIOLENCE IN THE THAI SOUTH

## Network Monarchy Strikes Back?

Duncan McCargo

**ABSTRACT:** Rather than viewing the recent violence in the Thai South largely as a product of long-standing historical and socioeconomic grievances, this article argues that the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has played a crucial role in provoking conflict in the region. Early in his premiership, Thaksin decided that the South was controlled by forces of “network monarchy” loyal to the palace and to former prime minister Prem Tinsulanond. Thaksin sought to reorganize political and security arrangements in the deep South in order to gain personal control of the area, but in the process he upset a carefully negotiated social contract that had ensured relative peace for two decades. As the violence increased, royal displeasure — articulated mainly by members of the Privy Council — forced Thaksin to make certain concessions, notably the creation of a National Reconciliation Commission to propose solutions for the growing crisis. Network monarchy had struck back, albeit from a position of weakness. This analysis seeks to demonstrate that the southern violence is actually inextricable from wider developments in Thailand’s national politics.

### Introduction

Over a thousand people met deaths attributed to political violence in Thailand’s southern border provinces during 2004 and 2005.<sup>1</sup> Underlying the resurgence in violence was a complex combination of factors, which have not yet been

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1. This article focuses on the areas known historically as “Patani.” This subregion roughly corresponds to the present-day provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, where more than 80 percent of the population are Malay Muslims. There has also been some violence in neighboring Songkla Province.



In response to an upsurge in violence in the Muslim-dominated provinces of southern Thailand in 2004, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (pictured here in conversation with U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld on 6 June 2005), “adopted a hard-line response, including use of martial law.” Thaksin and Rumsfeld sit beneath a portrait of Thailand’s King Bhumipol Adulyadej.

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, Secretary Rumsfeld was in Thailand “to strengthen U.S.-Thai relationships following a three-day International Institute for Strategic Studies Asia Security Conference in Singapore.” (DoD photo by Tech. Sgt. Cherie A. Thurlby, U.S. Air Force.)

clearly understood. This article seeks to address the crucial question “Why now?” by relating the explosion of southern violence to much deeper issues concerning the Thai political order. It does not purport to offer a complete explanation of the violence or its origins. Rather, it argues that the renewed violence reflects a direct challenge by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to well-established networks of power relations centered on the palace, and mediated by former premier Prem Tinsulanond.

It is tempting to relate the 2004 upsurge in violence simply to a long-standing, low-intensity conflict between the Thai security forces and militant “separatist” groups. Yet such a narrow explanation fails to account for the upsurge in political violence in recent years: the “separatists” had been largely moribund for the previous two decades. This article will explore alternative explanations for the dramatic increase in political violence close to the Thai-Malaysian border. Its core argument is that national-level political conflicts, rather than local or international factors, offer a core explanation for the upsurge in violence.

The renewed wave of violence began in the Thai South on 4 January 2004, with an attack on a Narathiwat army base (marked by four fatalities), coupled with twenty school burnings. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra adopted a hard-line response, including use of martial law. The police in particular appeared to be complicit in the unexplained disappearances of numerous Malay-Muslim suspects. Another 113 men died on 28 April. These deaths resulted

from eleven separate attacks on security posts in three provinces by groups of young Muslim men wearing black. A few carried guns, but most wielded nothing more than knives. In one of these incidents, security forces stormed the historic Kru-Ze mosque in Pattani, killing thirty-two lightly armed men who had barricaded themselves inside. An official investigation later found that the commander had used excessive force, a charge he denied.<sup>2</sup> Though less attention has been paid to the other ten attacks, there is evidence of extrajudicial killings by security forces in several places, notably at Saba Yoi market, where fifteen of the nineteen attackers killed had gunshot wounds to the back of the head.<sup>3</sup>

In October, several demonstrators were shot dead during a peaceful protest outside a police station in Tak Bai, Narathiwat. The army rounded up over a thousand men from the streets and piled them into trucks; seventy-eight apparently suffocated on the way to military camps. The Tak Bai incident had the effect of internationalizing the conflict, producing strong criticism from Malaysia and Indonesia. Murders, explosions, and other violent incidents continued throughout 2004, on an almost daily basis. Victims included a judge, a deputy governor, and numerous police and military personnel, as well as teachers and civilians.

Thaksin's response was to persist with a hard-line approach, whilst flirting with more conciliatory policies. In early April, Deputy Prime Minister Chaturon Chaisaeng proposed demilitarizing the area and working toward a political solution, but his ideas failed to win support from his boss. Thaksin's main response was repeatedly to reshuffle senior officers whom he held accountable for the worsening situation. By the end of the year, trust between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in the deep South had largely broken down. The Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thai) Party won a sweeping national victory in the February 2005 elections, but was trounced in the South. The party lost every one of its seats in the southern border provinces. Faced with growing criticism from the palace, Thaksin finally agreed to appoint respected former prime minister Anand Panyarachun to head a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), aimed at restoring the region to normalcy.

### **The Key to the South: Network Monarchy**

It will be argued here that the current upsurge of violence in the South of Thailand strongly reflects domestic political developments, including the mishandling of the security order by Thaksin personally. The South is the principal site for Thaksin's attempts to wrest control of Thailand from the old power networks that dominated the country prior to 2001. The South is unusually combustible, highly sensitive, and had developed a distinctive and precarious set of accommodations. Closely related to these political issues were competition for power and resources among the various government agencies responsible for security in the South.<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that a desire to control the lucrative

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2. Pallop 2004, 39–41.

3. International Crisis Group 2005a, 24.

smuggling trade motivated Thaksin to intervene in the South; rather, this trade supported a set of political arrangements that Thaksin found intolerable — and with good reason.

Thaksin Shinawatra has sought to lead (or perhaps, to manage) Thailand very differently from his predecessors.<sup>5</sup> One essential difference relates to the extra-constitutional role of the monarchy. The dominant mode of governance used in Thailand since 1980 may best be termed monarchical network governance, or network monarchy.<sup>6</sup> Since his success in helping to oust the Thanom-Praphas regime, Thailand's King Bhumipol has been far more than a conventional constitutional monarch. Rather, he has sought to institutionalize a range of extra-constitutional political powers. Occasionally, he makes open, personal interventions in the political process. The most well-known example was following the violent demonstrations of May 1992, when he called in Prime Minister Suchinda Kraprayoon and protest leader Chamlong Srimuang for a public, televised dressing-down. Much more commonly, the monarchy operates through proxies, led by former prime minister and Privy Council president Prem Tinsulalond, dubbed by Chai-Anan Samudavanija Thailand's "surrogate strongman."<sup>7</sup> Prem exerted considerable control over military and bureaucratic appointments, and intervened in the formation of government coalitions in 1994 and 1997. During the 1990s, Prem worked through a series of weak coalition governments to help preserve royal prerogatives and influence. It seems highly possible that Prem helped Thaksin escape conviction by the Constitutional Court in August 2001, when he faced charges of assets declaration violations.<sup>8</sup> As prime minister, Thaksin's aim has been to displace network monarchy, and to replace it with a much more centralized form of political control. The crisis in the South that began in 2004 was simply the most blatant manifestation of this political project.

### The Rise of Thaksin

The economic crisis and the new constitution of 1997 paved the way for the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra. In the January 2001 general elections, the Democrats were roundly defeated by the recently formed Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party led by the super-wealthy telecommunications magnate Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin campaigned as a new look "CEO" leader, capable of addressing national problems swiftly and effectively. TRT deployed a range of populist policies — such as a subsidized health-care scheme — to attract rural voters. Their campaign was also backed up by old-style big spending, buying in electable candidates and dispersing sizeable funds for vote buying. Thaksin epitomized new political forces unhappy with the residual influence of network monarchy. Knowing full well

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4. Connors 2005.

5. McCargo and Ukrist 2005.

6. The concept of network monarchy is elaborated in more detail in McCargo 2005.

7. Chai-Anan 1997, 56.

8. McCargo and Ukrist 2005, 513–14.

that other prime ministers who lacked palace support — such as Banharn Silpa-archa and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh — had been quickly ousted, Thaksin set about systematically challenging Prem’s political networks, ruthlessly installing his own relatives and associates in key positions. Thaksin was seeking to dismantle network monarchy, and to replace it with a much more familiar political economy network of the kind based on inside connections and business arrangements.<sup>9</sup> As Ockey observes, “Since the revival of the monarchy under Sarit, political leadership has been overshadowed by symbolic leadership. Not until Thaksin has any leader managed to consistently gain such a share of the limelight.”<sup>10</sup> Thaksin was the first popularly chosen Thai prime minister to challenge the palace for the leadership of the country. He sought to combine political and symbolic leadership, supported by overwhelming electoral legitimacy. His entry to Government House marked the beginning of a new form of Thai politics: instead of operating through loose alliances, Thaksin was intent on securing control of the entire country through tightly managed personal networks.

### **Prem, Network Governance, and the South**

The South was Prem’s backyard: although he never served in the Fourth Army Region, he came from Songkla, and was very familiar with the border provinces. His strategy there was to replicate the work he had done to combat the anticommunist insurgency in Isan. His principal adjutant for both projects was Harn Leenanond, whom he appointed Fourth Army commander. Harn was one of the architects of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC), established on 20 January 1981 by Prime Minister’s Office Order 8/1981. Using a policy known as “*Tai rom yen*” (South in the cool shade), Harn used a mixture of development projects and public relations initiatives to calm local tensions.

As a Southerner, Prem understood the mindset of the Democrat Party. As the architect of an uneasy truce in the southern border provinces, he understood the importance of this subregion: it was an enclave of military power and privilege, supported by local government officials who were overwhelmingly loyal to the Democrats. The governance network in the border provinces was centered on Prem: it was a working microcosm of the national-level political networks that he masterminded for over twenty years, which involved a complex mixture of monarchism, moralism, and structural corruption. Right up until 2001, Prem was often able personally to determine who was selected to serve as provincial governors, senior military commanders, and other key administrative posts in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. This was all part of the deal.

Other elements in the deal included: promoting local Muslims to positions in the bureaucracy, notably as district officers; giving local military commanders *carte blanche* to “secure” and oversee the Malaysian border (in effect, a license to coax or to extort rents and commissions from those engaged in illegal border trade); providing “development” funds and projects to the subregion, managed

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9. See Cartier Bresson 1997; McCargo and Ukrist 2005, chap. 6.

10. Ockey 2004, 183.

by the military, and so permitting the creation of local patronage networks; and cultivating a grassroots network of informers who would tip off the military about actual or potential “separatist” activity. At the same time, local Muslims were encouraged to enter politics, contesting parliamentary seats and gaining ministerial posts under the auspices of the Democrat Party and later the New Aspiration Party.<sup>11</sup> Administratively, this deal was managed via bodies such as the SBPAC, under the oversight of the Interior Ministry.

The SBPAC was seen as a liberal enclave within Thailand’s security apparatus, and had worked hard to build trust with Muslim leaders and their communities. The SBPAC received large numbers of complaints about abuses committed by government officials in the area — 1,354 complaints about 1,322 individuals between January 1998 and December 2000, resulting in fifty-one officials being transferred.<sup>12</sup> The Centre coordinated preparations for the annual hajj pilgrimage in the deep South, and had tried (albeit ineptly) to broker a compromise over the issue of headscarf-wearing in government educational institutions.<sup>13</sup> The Centre also intervened in the appointment of provincial governors in the area. Prominent Pattani Muslim Worawit Baru argued that “You can’t just look at the surface of the SBPAC” — it was more than just a formal institution.<sup>14</sup> Rather, the Centre was a beacon for ideas of administrative justice, symbolizing the Thai state’s sincerity and goodwill.

### **Institutional Culture and Tacit Understandings**

For many years, there had been widespread skepticism in Bangkok about the extent to which “separatist violence” in the deep South was really orchestrated by any political movement. Some estimates placed the strength of the movement at “no more than 120 leaders, 200 armed men, and 30 to 40 armed bandits who sometimes worked with the militants.”<sup>15</sup> As Croissant argues, “it would be naïve to assume that criminals and terrorists can be clearly distinguished... there is a grey zone of greed and grievance in which there is no clear threshold between ‘entrepreneurs of violence’ and ‘warriors of convenience.’”<sup>16</sup>

Separatist groups were accused by one source of hiring teenagers to cause trouble, paying them between five thousand and ten thousand baht each.<sup>17</sup> SBPAC intelligence sources reported that of twenty-seven incidents between October 2000 and July 2001, sixteen were based on benefits-related conflicts, two from personal conflicts, and three could not be accounted for. The four remaining were believed to be the work of bandits linked to the separatist move-

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11. Liow 2004, 535.

12. *Bangkok Post*, 12 August 2001.

13. Chaiwat 1994, 287.

14. Interview with Dr. Worawit Baru, deputy rector of Prince of Songkla University, Pattani campus, and member of the National Reconciliation Commission, 24 October 2005.

15. Chidchanok 2005, 24.

16. Croissant 2005, 5.

17. *Bangkok Post*, 19 January 1998.



A “Free Patani” (Patani Merdeka) slogan painted on a wall inside a small *sala* in a village in Narathiwat Province. The upsurge in violence in southern Thailand since January 2004 is often narrowly understood simply as part of “a long-standing low-intensity conflict between the Thai security forces and militant ‘separatist’ groups.” (Duncan McCargo)

ment — in other words, one in seven of the total.<sup>18</sup> In 1998 SBPAC chief Palakorn Suwannarat told the *Bangkok Post* that 70 percent of all sabotage attacks in the South were the work of bandits; the rest were “ordinary” criminal acts, some of them committed by officials themselves. By 2001, Palakorn was quoted as saying that only 20 to 30 percent of violent incidents in the deep South were the work of terrorists — the others arose from personal and business conflicts.<sup>19</sup>

Increasingly, the Thai government began to believe that violent incidents in the South were no longer fundamentally political, but reflected a complex pattern of criminal activity. Chidchanok has suggested that prior to 2002, roughly 80 percent of “separatist” incidents in the deep South were essentially fake.<sup>20</sup> Practically every local resident in the border provinces had stories to tell about the fabrication of terrorist incidents, generally referred to as *sang sathanakan*. When the discourse of incident fabrication became ubiquitous — and people began to believe that everything they saw and heard about was fake — it was dangerously easy to assume that the underlying political problems of the border region had simply gone away. “Thus people resort to assumptions, which mainly center on the conspiracy theory: a conspiracy of lies and official thievery.”<sup>21</sup>

Arson attacks were particularly suspicious — burning down schools in the middle of the night made alarming national headlines, but left no one hurt, and

18. Chidchanok 2005b, 19.

19. *Ibid.*, 51.

20. Chidchanok 2005a.

21. Supara 2001.

meant an additional budget allocation for their reconstruction. Coordinated arson attacks on thirty-four schools on 1 August 1993 were highly suspicious.<sup>22</sup> The major beneficiaries of the long-standing conflict in the South were the officers of the Fourth Army Region: the supposed insurgency provided the justification for their budget allocations, special allowances that boosted their pay, their extensive “development” projects, and their jurisdiction over the border (for which read, control of smuggling). Although the army practiced a degree of rotation in the assignment of officers, most officers had a core assignment with one of the four major army regions for their entire careers. The Fourth Army had a particularly clannish culture, excluding outsiders from senior positions, based on the belief that only those who spent their whole careers in the South were qualified to manage the complex problems of the border region. In other words, the Fourth Army saw itself as an untouchable enclave within an already highly privileged military institution. A 2002 Philippine government study found that “the military also initiate dialogues with armed units of separatist groups, not for surrender, but to find out their needs.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the Fourth Army had a very good idea of who the militants were, and how to contact them.

### **Thaksin and the South: Ripe for CEO Intervention**

Thaksin’s first term as prime minister clearly demonstrated his standard approach to problems. First, he viewed existing bureaucratic and administrative arrangements with distrust, believing that officials and the security services were too slow, unreliable, and inefficient to handle difficult issues. Second, he believed that structures had been created to serve the purposes of the old system of network governance: in other words, he suspected officials (especially in the South) of holding a primary loyalty to the Democrats, Prem, and the palace, rather than to him and his government. Third, he believed that simply by “thinking new and acting new” he could find creative ways of resolving issues that had plagued the Thai state and society for decades or even generations. Fourth, he believed that he could make the right decision very quickly indeed, so long as he was well advised by one or more of his most trusted associates. Fifth, he believed that transferring officials was the key to solving problems: put the right man in the right job (it was nearly always a man), and a difficult problem could be solved in a matter of weeks, or even days. Sixth, as a former police officer, he regarded complex social and political problems — ranging from drug abuse to low-intensity conflict — as manifestations of criminality, which could be solved by firm law enforcement.

Thaksin’s approach to the South follows logically from these principles. His strategy was to send in some of his own people to report on the issues, identify the key representatives of the old power group, transfer them out of the region,

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22. Liow 2004, 542.

23. Philippine National Security Office 2002, 10. This point was based on an interview with Colonel Akanit Maunsawat, representative of the Fourth Region Army commander.



then quickly move to dismantle the existing power structures, put in new officials loyal to himself, and give the police an enhanced role in a new power structure. The objective was twofold: to break the power of Prem's governance network in the deep South and (incidentally) to bring the low-intensity conflict to a complete halt. Unfortunately, the first task was less easy than he appreciated, and the second task was completely beyond him. Thaksin was not really interested in the South, except insofar as it constituted an unacceptable zone of liminality, an area of Thailand he could not yet control on his own terms. Emboldened by his success in seeing off the 2001 assets declaration case, Thaksin decided to challenge Prem's authority in his own backyard, by unraveling the political and security arrangements that Prem had created in the southern border provinces. In so doing, Thaksin aimed to undermine the mode of network governance that Prem had forged there. The key elements in this governance network were Prem's own central position in determining appointments and setting policy, the dominant role of the military, a prominent role for the palace, and the importance of bureaucrats loyal to the Democrat Party.

Thaksin began putting pressure on the existing security structures very soon after becoming prime minister, making it clear that he expected quick results. After nine separate bomb incidents on 18 and 19 June 2001, Thaksin berated the shortcomings of authorities in the South, and warned of a shake-up to come. He declared, "Transfers will be ordered for those who are inefficient and I am looking for a place to keep them. They won't be around here."<sup>24</sup> He announced an investigation into reports that some recent attacks had been orchestrated by police officers seeking money to purchase positions in the forthcoming reshuffle, saying, "It definitely has something to do with the positions." Thaksin rejected the idea that these attacks had any political foundation. The clear implication was that the SBPAC was failing properly to oversee security problems in the region.

### **Preemptive Strike: Palakorn's Elevation**

In July 2001, SBPAC chief Palakorn Suwannarat abruptly resigned in very unusual circumstances: he became a member of the Privy Council on the day of his departure. For one of the Interior Ministry's most senior officials, a deputy permanent secretary with seven years remaining until retirement, it was an extraordinary exit. Only three months earlier, Palakorn had been widely tipped to assume the powerful post of director-general of the Local Administration Department.<sup>25</sup> Anonymous leaflets distributed the following day at the Interior Ministry criticized Interior Minister Purachai Piemsomboon's treatment of Palakorn. They alleged that Purachai had briefed the press against Palakorn, telling the media that he was being transferred from his post for failing to contain terrorist violence in the South.<sup>26</sup> Palakorn declined to elaborate on the reasons

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24. *Bangkok Post*, 24 June 2001.

25. *The Nation*, 5 April 2001.

26. *Bangkok Post*, 20 July 2001.

for his resignation, saying only that he was very gratified by his appointment to the Privy Council, and would serve the country and the monarchy honestly. Purachai refused to comment on Palakorn's performance at the SBPAC, but admitted that he had reprimanded him on occasion. Religious and business leaders expressed disappointment at his resignation. Some pointed out that the SBPAC was not charged with fighting terrorism, and had no authority to issue orders to the army or police.

The implications of Palakorn's forced departure were interesting. Palakorn was a key figure in the old power network that had long controlled the southern border provinces, and was closely linked to Prem and to the palace. He had made a name for himself as a very liberal governor of Pattani in the early 1990s, once declaring that "tens of thousands of Southern Muslims will rise in protest if police throw the wrong people in jail."<sup>27</sup> Second, by resigning just before Purachai could oust him, and by leaving on his own terms for a seat on the Privy Council, Palakorn demonstrated that he had the full backing of the monarchy. Third, this pyrrhic victory exposed the government's heavy-handedness, and clearly indicated the real politics underlying the battle for the South. Incensed by media coverage of the affair, Thaksin declared that "it was inappropriate to criticise the issue since such an act could affect the power of his Majesty the King."<sup>28</sup> In effect, Thaksin was seeking to shelter behind the *lèse-majesté* laws to discourage discussion of his own political meddling. Finally, the elevation of Palakorn can be seen as network monarchy's first challenge to Thaksin's strategy for the South.

### Thaksin Restructures Power in the South

With Palakorn out of the way, discussions about the future of the Centre could proceed unchallenged. Thaksin decided to send in his own people to work on the southern problem. He assigned Major General Songkitti Chakkabhatra to study the situation and report back. Songkitti had an unusual international profile, having served as deputy commander of Interfet, the East Timor international peacekeeping force. But more importantly, Songkitti was one of Thaksin's classmates from the military pre-cadet school, Class 10: the two men had known each other for thirty years.<sup>29</sup> Thaksin appointed Songkitti deputy commander of the Fourth Army in October 2001, despite the fact that he had never previously served in the South. His appointment was criticized as politically motivated.<sup>30</sup> Songkitti reportedly studied the southern situation for several months before making a detailed report to Thaksin early in 2002.<sup>31</sup> He argued there was no real insurgency in the South, and that Thaksin should normalize the security situation there. As Wasanna Nanuam writes:

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27. Barnes 1993.

28. *Bangkok Post*, 22 July 2001.

29. McCargo and Ukrist 2005, 136, 144.

30. *Bangkok Post*, 11 August 2001.

31. Chidchanok 2005a.

Lt-Gen Songkitti's theory convinced Mr Thaksin, who mocked the southern attackers as nothing more than "common bandits." He subsequently ordered the paramilitary ranger divisions 41 and 43 and the marine corps out of the trouble spots in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces, and back to their barracks and based in Nakhon Si Thammarat, well away from the violence. There was growing disgruntlement from the military....The military could do nothing to stop the pullout, of course. Officers rationalised that Mr Thaksin, a former police lieutenant colonel, would naturally rather listen to fellow police than the military.<sup>32</sup>

Purachai elaborated the government's thinking following a series of fatal attacks on the police in March 2002. "These groups tried to make it look like the work of [Muslim] separatists, but it's not. These people were dissatisfied after they were demoted, or did not get promotions, or saw their interests affected."<sup>33</sup> Ironically, the strongest supporters of conspiracy theories about the southern violence fell into two mutually supportive groups: Muslims in the border provinces, and the prime minister's own closest advisors. Such theories were fueled by intelligence reports that related almost every violent incident in the southern border provinces to elaborate domestic plots. A ninety-seven-page Thai-language document evidently compiled by someone with access to intelligence sources gives a flavor of these views.<sup>34</sup> Apparently produced around March 2004 on Thaksin's orders, the undated document catalogued those allegedly behind dozens of incidents in the deep South, listing different political, military, and police factions, as well as separatist and Islamist organizations. The thrust of the report was that the overwhelming majority of violent incidents were orchestrated by politicians — notably a Democrat politician nicknamed "Thepthuek" (apparently a pseudonym for veteran Surat Thani politician Suthep Thueksuban), and Pattani senator Den Tohmeena — or by police and army commanders in the region. Thaksin's comments on developments in the South throughout the 2001 to 2004 period suggest that he was fed a constant diet of similar reading.<sup>35</sup> The report has strong echoes of conspiracy theories widely supported by local Muslims.

Thaksin's main assault on the Prem-centered governance network came when he abolished the SPBAC on 1 May 2002, some sixteen months after becoming prime minister. He thereby removed the only venue where "soldiers, police, Muslim leaders and religious teachers, and local officials met to exchange views and compare notes."<sup>36</sup> Officially, the Centre was closed because

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32. Wassana 2004, 2.

33. *The Nation*, 19 March 2002.

34. *Patipatkan Job Ai-rong*. 2004.

35. I am not seeking to give credence to these interpretations: verifying or discrediting them would require substantial fieldwork-based research. But their existence is extremely significant. The document quotes an extensive network of sources in the southern border provinces, the upper South, and Bangkok.

36. Kavi 2004, 274.



Anti-Thaksin graffiti on a billboard in Narathiwat Province, southern Thailand. "For Thaksin, the southern conflict was a personal challenge to his authority. This personalization reached its height during the Tak Bai incident in October 2004." (Duncan McCargo)

the National Security Council (NSC) argued that security problems in the area were caused by "conflicts among interest groups"<sup>37</sup> rather than genuine political grievances. At the same time, Centre 43 — the 43rd joint civilian, police, and military task force, an operational agency — was also dissolved. Thaksin saw these agencies as having been captured by Democrats and possessing close ties to Prem; this view undoubtedly underpinned his decision to abolish the Centre, reflecting his determination to stamp the force of his administration upon the entire country. The demise of SBPAC was widely criticized: the Centre had offered an important channel of communication between the government, and the leadership of the Muslim community. The abolition was carried out hastily, based on a prime ministerial order issued on 30 April 2002, which came into effect the following day. The ISOC (Internal Security Operation Command) Command Area 4, second detachment, remained in place in the southern border provinces, however, providing some continuity in military intelligence and psychological warfare.<sup>38</sup> Pattani governor Somporn Chibangyan told visiting Philippine officials that provincial governors in the South would continue to carry out the NSC policy for the southern border provinces on their own, despite the abolition of the SBPAC.<sup>39</sup> But this proved a short-lived aspiration, and Somporn him-

37. *The Nation*, 3 May 2002.

38. Chidchanok n.d.: 22.

self—a Prem protégé—was transferred the following year to the governorship of neighboring Songkla.

Yet the government began backpedaling very soon after abolishing the SBPAC; in July 2002, the NSC announced that it was creating a Southern Coordination Administration comprising military, police, and civilians to help unify security operations.<sup>40</sup> Following the dramatic escalation of violence in 2004, that April the government created a new agency, the Southern Border Provinces Peace-Building Command (SBPPC), which assumed some of the functions of the SBPAC. However, the new agency had a much lower profile and status. Crucially, it lacked direct contacts with Muslim leaders, the primary strength of the SBPAC. Muslim residents told a government peace envoy that they wanted to see the command abolished.<sup>41</sup>

It is striking that very few commentators have supported the decision to dissolve the SBPAC. Chulalongkorn University military specialist Surachart Bamrungsuk, a security advisor to the Thaksin government, has written that the police way of viewing the southern conflict from a “denial perspective” was very problematic.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Dr. Rung Kaewdaeng, another Thaksin advisor, argued in his book on the South that the police proposal to close the SBPAC and Centre 43 coincided with the wishes of the insurgents themselves, and the thinking of some local politicians. Thaksin failed to investigate deeply, and so did not catch the hidden agendas that underpinned the proposal.<sup>43</sup> He sent people to look into the matter, but they did not give him all the information—or they fell victim to surreptitious ploys.<sup>44</sup> Rung views this as a serious mistake on the part of the government, providing an ideal opportunity for the separatists to re-emerge rapidly.

When the closure of these agencies was followed by a new wave of violent incidents, senior figures offered a range of contradictory and incoherent explanations. Thaksin again claimed that the incidents were the work of bandits; Chavalit suggested that large-scale terrorist groups were in operation in the South; and police chief Sant Sarutanond declared that everything was down to internal conflicts among security officials. It seemed abundantly clear that no one in power really understood what was happening around the southern border. Srisompob Jitpiromsri of Prince of Songkla University later argued that the dissolution of the two agencies in May 2002 marked a turning point, precipitat-

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39. Philippine National Security Office 2002, 8. Citing a 20 August 2002 interview with Somporn.

40. *AP*, 16 July 2002.

41. *The Nation*, 15 March 2005.

42. Surachart 2004, 171.

43. Rung 2005, 133. At the time he published the book, Rung was serving as assistant minister for educational affairs, based at Government House. He was appointed deputy minister of education in March 2005. Would Rung have written this if he had not been told as much by Thaksin himself, or by people around him? It is impossible to be sure, but the Rung book could be seen as a retrospective defense of Thaksin over the closure issue.

44. *Thuk sotsai*, bold in original.

ing a great upsurge in political violence.<sup>45</sup> Thaksin responded to the deteriorating situation by dispatching a team of fifty-three generals to the region to gather intelligence and report back.<sup>46</sup> When this initiative yielded no answers, Thaksin became increasingly determined to put his own man in direct charge.

In April 2003, Songkitti was promoted to lieutenant general and Fourth Army commander. As *The Nation* noted, “Songkitti’s taking control of the southern forces is viewed by critics as showing the Thai Rak Thai Party’s determination to strengthen its position in the Democrat Party’s stronghold ahead of the next general election.”<sup>47</sup> Yet despite — or because of — Thaksin’s personal backing, Songkitti faced entrenched resistance from fellow officers, and was moved to another post in October 2003. Pongsak Akbanasing, one of Songkitti’s earlier rivals for the post, was brought back to head the Fourth Army Division — but his reign was to prove short-lived after he was held responsible for the deteriorating security situation the following March. The same applied to Pongsak’s successor, Phisarn Watawongkiri, who took the blame for the Tak Bai incident in October 2004.

The security situation in the South deteriorated gradually during Songkitti’s two-year tenure as Thaksin’s man in the region. His unwelcome assignments had provoked intense conflict within the Fourth Army, generating considerable infighting and exacerbating a difficult situation.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, Thaksin continued to view the Fourth Army with suspicion and even hostility, and senior officers from the Division found their promotion prospects sharply curtailed. As Liow argues, Thaksin’s excessive enthusiasm for reshuffling military commanders “no doubt affected the operational readiness of security forces in the South and contributed to their unprepared state in the face of sweeping offensives since January 2004.”<sup>49</sup> Thaksin also changed defense ministers with increasing frequency. Thaksin’s principal point man on the South at police headquarters was his close associate Police Lieutenant General Wongkot Maneerin, commissioner at the Central Investigation Bureau, and husband of Deputy Education Minister Sirikul Maneerin. Thaksin relied on Wongkot for advice on security matters in the South.

### Dismantling Network Governance

Thaksin took office determined to replace what he saw as a lumbering set of Prem-based power networks with a much more effective and decisive political order of his own devising. Seeing control of the southern border provinces as an example of the kind of governance network he despised, he set out to disrupt it through a series of moves. First, in May 2002 he abolished the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre. Second, by dissolving the joint security force that same month, he handed over responsibility for security in the area to

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45. *The Nation*, 21 December 2004.

46. *Thai Press Reports*, 31 July 2002.

47. *The Nation*, 19 March 2003.

48. Chidchanok 2005a.

49. Liow 2004, 543.

the police, thereby breaking the control of the military commanders and also reducing Prem's influence.

Third, in May 2002 he appointed Wan Muhammad Nor Matha, a Muslim, leader of the Wadah faction, and senior NAP (New Aspiration Party) politician from Yala, to the post of interior minister. Wan Nor has been courted by New Aspiration leader Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, and had played an important role in legitimating Chavalit's brief rise to the premiership in 1996–97. Chavalit had brought in Wan Nor and his Wadah faction as a means of consolidating his power base in the deep South. Thaksin assumed that Wan Nor would be able to wrest control of the administration of the subregion from Democrat officials whom he believed to be in Prem's pocket. As the only faction of non-Democrat MPs in the Thai South, Wan Nor's Wadah clique was the obvious starting point for Thaksin to begin his attempts to penetrate the region politically.<sup>50</sup> Bringing on board Wan Nor and his supporters was one of the aims behind Thaksin's incorporation of the NAP into TRT. But after being appointed interior minister, Wan Nor proved a broken reed who had lost the trust of many of his fellow Muslims and lacked the ability to manage the complex problems of the subregion. His oversight of the police brutality associated with the breakup of a demonstration against the Malaysian gas pipeline in Hat Yai on 20 December 2002 did much to undermine his position. As one irate protestor, Areeya Maedee of the Ban Nai Rai village, put it: "How could [Interior Minister] Wan Nor order the police to beat us? He is also a Muslim. Does he realize what he has done to his people?"<sup>51</sup>

Good intelligence about the situation on the ground dried up, and all manner of political and other tensions that had been artfully suppressed by the old Prem-brokered benefit-sharing arrangements quickly emerged into the open. Violence swiftly followed. After failing to control the security situation in the South, Wan Nor was unceremoniously ousted from the Interior Ministry in March 2004. Within days, members of the Wadah faction were actually implicated as possible suspects behind the 4 January 2004 raid on an army base.

Fourth, the war on drugs that Thaksin declared in February 2003 gave the police carte blanche to target selected locals for extrajudicial execution. Among those killed were long-standing informers with close ties to the military. The result was, literally, insurrection: the police and the army fought bitter turf wars over the control of smuggling and other illegal activities.

Fifth, by putting in Songkitti to head the Fourth Army, Thaksin tried to undermine the prevailing institutional culture of the military in the South, setting out to subvert local commanders' privileged sense of entitlement.

At its core, Thaksin's main approach to dealing with the South was tactical, rather than strategic: the deliberate rotation of senior officials. Army commanders-in-chief, Fourth Army commanders, defense ministers, provincial governors, national police commanders, deputy prime ministers, senior police officers, interior ministers — men in all these categories were subject to an

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50. Croissant 2005, 9.

51. Supara 2004, 158.

increasingly arbitrary pattern of transfers, and punished for their supposed failures and shortcomings. Yet with one or two exceptions they were all hard-liners, with near-identical approaches to the border region's problems. In this elaborate game of musical chairs — which allowed Thaksin endless opportunities for public grandstanding and displays of dramatic action — the only beneficiary was Thaksin himself, who increasingly bypassed existing structures for managing the security situation. As *The Nation* argued, even Thaksin's cousin Chaisit was unable to exercise any effective control while army commander. “[He] took firm action for about a week before fading from the scene,” believing that the army was being bypassed and that Thaksin favored the police. Relying on security adviser Surachart Bumrungsuk<sup>52</sup> and chief adviser Pansak Vinyaratn, Thaksin adopted a hands-on approach to the conflict, delegating the NSC to a subordinate role: “Armed with a weekly intelligence briefing from Jumpol [Intelligence Chief Jumpol Manmai], Thaksin directly supervises police operations in the South, pushing the Army — constitutionally empowered to enforce martial law — into the background.”<sup>53</sup>

A source familiar with Thaksin's intelligence-gathering capabilities argued that the prime minister lacked accurate information and analysis of developments in the South. By early 2004, the government had virtually no reliable human intelligence from the ground, and Thaksin was surrounded by security analysts and military officers who still believed that they were fighting a cold war-style insurgency with a communist enemy. To make matters worse, intelligence gathering was in the hands of too many overlapping agencies, most of them dysfunctional. Matters were not helped by the fact that Thaksin rarely read anything longer than a two-page briefing document, and was thus over-reliant on the ability of his officials and advisors to distill information accurately and concisely.<sup>54</sup>

For Thaksin, the southern conflict was a personal challenge to his authority. This personalization reached its height during the Tak Bai incident in October 2004, when Thaksin declared that he had taken direct control of handling the demonstration. “Thaksin said he had personally supervised Monday's anti-riot operation from 11 a.m. ‘I commend the anti-riot forces for adhering to my instructions,’ he said.”<sup>55</sup>

This declaration is very hard to reconcile with the findings of the Tak Bai inquiry, chaired by Pichet Soonthornpipit:

The inquiry chairman said security officials ran the entire crowd dispersal operation. Thaksin, he said, had no direct involvement in the operation, citing statements by General Samphan Boonyanon, defence minister, and General Sirichai Thanyasiri.<sup>56</sup>

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52. At one point, Thaksin was said to favor appointing Surachart as assistant minister at the Defence Ministry. *The Nation*, 26 March 2003. Surachart played a leading role in drafting TRT's defense policies.

53. *The Nation*, 30 January 2004.

54. Interview with security official, 16 October 2005.

55. *The Nation*, 27 October 2004.



As a basic operating principle, Thaksin prevented his subordinates from carrying out their formal duties. He did not rely on traditional methods of network governance: he was unwilling to put structures and officials in place and give them months or years to become effective. Indeed, he demonstrated contempt for the weaknesses of individual government officials, declaring that soldiers who failed to defend themselves “deserve to die,”<sup>57</sup> and commending insurgents for their boldness.

*Santbiphap nai plaew pbleung* [Peace in flames], a book on the southern violence written by two *Nation* reporters, Supalak Ganjanakhundee and Don Pathan, offers a succinct analysis of the problem. They argue that the SBPAC achieved considerable successes, and that the fourth National Security Policy for the Southern Border Provinces (1999–2003)<sup>58</sup> — based on extensive community consultation — received widespread support.<sup>59</sup> In the three years prior to the Centre’s dissolution, 114 former insurgents surrendered to the authorities. All this changed under Thaksin.

However, the Thaksin government had received proposals from the police, then under the leadership of former police chief General Sant Saturanont. Sant argued that the conditions in the South had returned to normal. Although there had been violent incidents on a monthly basis since the mass school burnings of 1993, these were a normal state of affairs in the South. Under these circumstances, it was appropriate for the region to be subject to normal modes of governance, according to which the police would be made responsible for general security, and the Interior Ministry would oversee development activities. The Army should withdraw from these spheres, and concentrate on their basic duties of guarding the border. Right after the election, a police officer close to Thaksin despatched a considerable number of associates to work in the border area. They hoped to change the SBPAC’s hitherto biased political relations, because they believed that the old structure was closely related to the Democrat Party.<sup>60</sup>

But the intervention of Bangkok-based police officers in the micro-politics of the southern border proved an unmitigated disaster. They pursued a policy of illegal arrest (known as “*um*”), extrajudicially killing individuals whom they suspected to be part of the movement. Many of those they killed were actually former separatists, who had long since served as informers for military intelligence.<sup>61</sup> Some had previously taken up amnesty offers in the belief that they would be safe. Many had not been active in the movement for decades. By killing them, the police were being provocative, stirring up resentment in Muslim communities. At the same time, they were also curtailing the flow of grassroots

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56. *The Nation*, 18 December 2004.

57. *The Nation*, 5 January 2004.

58. National Security Council 1999.

59. Supalak and Don 2004, 302–3.

60. *Ibid.* 303–4.

61. *Ibid.* 304–5.

intelligence information on which the security forces had long relied. Three disappearances in Narathiwat in October 2003 were especially provocative. The relatives of these men were convinced the police were responsible, since on 19 October the men had been taken to a police station for questioning and were never seen again. All three men were former separatists, who had given themselves up in 1981 when the amnesty policy was first announced. Since then, they were said to have been sources for military intelligence.

Similar disappearances took place no fewer than twenty times during 2002 and 2003.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Muslim residents of the southern border provinces complained to a government envoy in March 2005 that around fifty people had disappeared to date.<sup>63</sup> Military intelligence strongly believed that these disappearances were a very important factor in fueling the discontent that erupted from 4 January 2004 onwards. Though hard to prove, it seems highly possible that the targeting of military informers was a deliberate policy by the police, intended to eradicate the long-standing networks of the Fourth Army and to strengthen their own power in the area.

Wassana Nanuam argues that friction between the police and army commanders reached extraordinary levels after January 2004, especially over a leaked police inquiry report on the 4 January incident. The report concluded that “weapons from the army development unit 4 had been stolen by army insiders who concocted the insurgent robbery story to cover their tracks.”<sup>64</sup> Army commander Chaisit Shinawatra made a series of extraordinary public responses to the report, challenging the credibility of the police inquiry, calling on soldiers not to be provoked by the report, and urging the police to desist from spreading groundless rumors that could undermine the reputation of the army. As the intra-security forces blame game grew increasingly acrimonious, the violence continued to escalate.

### Chaturon and the Liberal Turn

In March 2004, Deputy Prime Minister Chaturon Chaisaeng was assigned to develop proposals to ease the conflict. A former student leader with leftist, activist credentials, Chaturon was arguably the most sympathetic member of the government toward Muslims. He met more than a thousand local people, canvassing their views and listening carefully to them. The outcome was a set of seven proposals for addressing the situation. The most important proposals were an end to state killings; the immediate transfer of Bangkok-based police officers back to the capital; and an amnesty for everyone involved in the conflict who had not committed criminal offenses.<sup>65</sup> One of Chaturon’s media statements is worth quoting at length:

This proposal is based on listening to the voices of local people, and comes from the police, military, governors, district officers and all sides. The

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62. Ibid. 305.

63. *The Nation*, 15 March 2004.

64. Wassana 2004, 3.

65. Chaiwat 2004, 6.

point on which there is the greatest agreement, the point which will really demonstrate the sincerity and determination of the government, is that the extra-judicial killings and torture must stop. Some other measures follow on from this: the withdrawal from the area of forces sent from police headquarters has been requested by the Fourth Army, governors, and district officers, along with local police commanders, who are all of the same view. It is not just my opinion, because the people are most afraid of them.<sup>66</sup>

Yet despite his attempts to argue that his proposals represented a mainstream position, widely supported even among the security forces, Chaturon was branded a soft liberal whose pacifist views were both unworkable and dangerous. His critics were led by General Chetta Thanajaro, who took over as defense minister in March 2004. Chaturon's proposals went nowhere; Thaksin kicked his ideas into touch by asking him to do further work on them. Chaiwat argues that the rejection of the Chaturon proposals was highly predictable, since the "insecurity industry" reaped considerable benefits from the conflict. Furthermore, the consultative approach used by Chaturon meant that his proposals were too radical to gain support.<sup>67</sup> Meanwhile, Chavalit was given notional responsibility for the security situation in the South.

The violent events of 28 April saw a resurgence of hard-line stances. Army Commander Chaisit Shinawatra denounced the Muslim youths who had attacked army and police posts as "inhumanly courageous" and "bloody crazy."<sup>68</sup> Faced with what they chose to construct as a fanatical and irrational other, the security chiefs of the Thai state convinced themselves that only forceful repression could bring the situation under control. Confronted with this enemy, forces on the ground ignored Chavalit's instructions not to storm the historic Kru-Ze mosque, which instead became the scene of an appalling episode of extrajudicial killing. The idea that Chavalit was in charge of the situation was exposed as a fallacy: a politician in Bangkok, even a former army commander, had no effective jurisdiction over troops in the field. The very approach that Chaturon had most explicitly disavowed became the basic instrument of state policy only a few days later. The police did not have a monopoly on extrajudicial killing: it was also standard practice for the army. Nor was it a response that met with general condemnation from the wider society: as Chaiwat observes, there was general public approval for the Thaksin government's handling of events at both Kru-Ze and later Tak Bai, approval that echoed popular support for the 2003 war on drugs.<sup>69</sup>

Supalak and Don see the Chaturon proposals as clear evidence of the government's incoherent and fragmented approach to the southern conflict, and Thaksin's inability to adopt a consistent and unified policy. The government

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66. Supalak and Don 2004, 306.

67. Ibid. 6–7.

68. Chaiwat 2004, 4, quoting *Maticchon*, 29 April 2004.

69. Ibid. 7–8.

was not even clear about what was going on in the South, let alone how to address the problem.<sup>70</sup>

### Network Monarchy Responds: Ticking Off Thaksin

Thaksin's relations with the palace have long been complex. The King's December 2001 birthday speech appeared to criticize Thaksin, while in the same month Prem made a major speech urging people to face up to reality, and refrain from admiring rich people who were not worthy of respect.<sup>71</sup> Early in 2002, a short item in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* hinting at tensions between Thaksin and the palace provoked uproar, and two *Review* correspondents were almost expelled from the country.<sup>72</sup>

The royal family has been closely involved in the mode of network governance promoted in the southern border provinces. Since 1973, they have visited the South regularly, often spending several weeks at a time at their Taksin Rachaniwes Palace in Narathiwat. The Queen has taken a particular interest in the region, providing moral support to the military units stationed there, and sponsoring local handicrafts production. This concerted activity by the royal family reflects part of a long-term project to secure the legitimacy of the Thai state in this border region. By implication, acts of "separatist" violence could be construed and constructed not just as challenges to political authority but as slights directed toward the palace itself. The involvement of the royal family in the area serves to raise the stakes of any conflict: violent actions directed at the state may be seen as acts of disloyalty toward the crown, and potentially even as acts of treason. This was most graphically seen in 1977, when a bomb attack on Yala station involved attempted regicide. In 1982, Muslim separatists tried to disrupt the Bangkok bicentennial celebrations (also the bicentennial of the Chakri dynasty) by placing a series of bombs around the capital.<sup>73</sup> Retired general and Thaksin advisor General Kittti Rattanachaya has repeatedly argued that separatist groups have a "seven-step plan" to seize the border provinces in a thousand days.<sup>74</sup> In an extreme version of this argument, Defence Minister Thammarak Isarangura raised the specter of a direct threat to the monarchy: he announced live on television that militants in the South planned to capture Taksin Rachaniwes Palace within a thousand days, raising their flag over it as a prelude to declaring an independent state.<sup>75</sup>

On 24 February 2004, Thaksin was summoned to the palace. The King urged him to deal with the southern crisis by using the principles of accessibility, understanding, and development.<sup>76</sup> This royal intervention may have partly inspired Thaksin's decision to ask Chaturon Chaisaeng to develop proposals for

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70. Supalak and Don 2004, 306–7.

71. *Bangkok Post*, 20 December 2001.

72. See McCargo 2003, 146–49.

73. *New York Times*, 9 May 1982.

74. Kittti 2004.

75. AFP, 14 January 2004.

76. AFP, 24 February 2004; *The Nation*, 25 February 2004.

addressing the crisis, but Chaturon's was a short-lived initiative. In a very similar move, the King called in Thaksin again on 1 November, advising him to handle the troubled region "with care." The King also urged Thaksin to allow the participation of local people in resolving problems. In addition, he asked Fourth Army commander Lieutenant General Phisarn Watawongkiri to give him a report on the Tak Bai incident.<sup>77</sup> Both the February and November audiences were private meetings, and the King made no public statement.

The Queen was more outspoken. On 13 October, two officials who were in the South to help block roads for the Queen were shot dead while purchasing *longkong* fruit in Narathiwat.<sup>78</sup> The men, a retired police captain and a mechanic, were working for the Highway Police Department. The incident received little detailed coverage in the Thai press, but a news agency reported that the men had been driving a palace Land Rover, and were actually buying the fruits for the Queen.<sup>79</sup>

Addressing an audience of more than a thousand people at Chitrlada Palace, the Queen said what she had experienced during her long two-month visit to the South forced her to speak out.<sup>80</sup> The scale and format of the event were unprecedented, with an audience including representatives of community organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the media, and members of the Cabinet, including the prime minister.<sup>81</sup> In her speech, broadcast nationwide, she described Muslims "she had never known" as the brutal murderers of many ordinary citizens and government officials. Every member of the audience received a card containing a poem entitled "The Ultimate Dream," written by the Queen herself, and declaring the willingness of the Thai people to die for their compatriots. She urged the three hundred thousand Thai Buddhists in the region to remain the area and not be intimidated. "Even at the age of seventy-two, I will learn how to shoot guns without using my glasses," she declared, urging Thais in the three provinces to take shooting lessons. Her statements represented a significant raising of the political temperature in the South, supporting a policy of firm securitization. Thaksin was swift to respond: "We will not have our Queen use a gun to defend the country, but she has shown she is ready to defend the country. All Thais can't sit idly by." The Queen's comments were followed by a rally of some twenty thousand members of the infamous Village Scouts at Bangkok's Sanam Luang on 21 November, at which they called for "separatist enemies" to be driven out of Thailand.<sup>82</sup> It was the largest Village Scout rally since 1976. Meanwhile, the education minister announced plans to step up the use of nationalism in the school curriculum.<sup>83</sup> This was not the sort of royal intervention liberals had hoped for.

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77. *Bangkok Post*, 2 November 2004.

78. *The Nation*, 14 October 2004.

79. Xinhua News Agency, 15 October 2004; 17 November 2004.

80. *Bangkok Post*, 17 November 2004.

81. *The Nation*, 17 November 2004.

82. *Croissant* 2005, 4; *The Nation*, 22 November 2004.

The following day, in a speech also broadcast on radio, the King addressed 510 newly promoted police and army officers. He declared that greater unity and cooperation between the police and the army could have avoided some of the “unrest and disorder” Queen Sirikit had witnessed during her stay in the South.<sup>84</sup> The King’s statement contained a more subtle message, making it clear that he viewed the security forces themselves as a major part of the problem in the troubled border region. This public speech was less explicit than his private admonitions to Thaksin on 24 February and 1 November, but the direction of his comments was much the same.

Faced with Thaksin’s apparently intractable hard-line stance on the South, some public intellectuals — both Buddhist and Muslim — began to hope that the King might make an extra-constitutional intervention to address the growing crisis, perhaps even by creating a caretaker government of national unity like the one formed after May 1992, when Anand Panyarachun was asked to return as interim prime minister following mass demonstrations that culminated in bloodshed and the resignation of the Suchinda Kraprayoon government. In the aftermath of Tak Bai, the *Bangkok Post* carried a front-page story headlined “Muslims to Ask King to Change Govt.”<sup>85</sup> Dato Nideh Waba, chairman of the private religious school association in the southern border provinces, as well as deputy chairman of the Islamic Council, had proposed an appeal to the King to establish a royally appointed government. This was a remarkable volte-face, since Dato Nideh “had been regarded for decades by local security officials as ‘our man.’”<sup>86</sup> He had stated: “We have no alternative apart from asking our beloved King, who is our father, to give us a royal government to tackle problems down here.” Dato Nideh recognized that the move had no constitutional basis, but it was designed to put increased pressure on the Thaksin government. He claimed that in informal discussions, fellow Muslim leaders had supported petitioning the King as a last resort. “In a critical time like this, who could we turn to if not our fatherly King who is our sole hope since all Muslims down here regard him with the utmost respect.”<sup>87</sup> Political scientist Somkiat Pongpaiboon was quoted in the same story as calling for Prem and Chavalit, former architects of the successful struggle against communism, to develop strategies for the South that respected cultural and religious differences. His statement could be read as a coded plea for intervention by Prem.

The following day, however, other Muslim leaders denied supporting Dato Nideh’s plans for a petition. Paisan Promyong, deputy secretary general of the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand, suggested that the idea came from Dato Nideh alone.<sup>88</sup> Unbowed, Dato Nideh repeated his intention to appeal to the King, though acknowledging it would be a “symbolic gesture”; he was also plan-

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83. *The Nation*, 20 November 2004.

84. *AFP*, 18 November 2004; *AP*, 18 November 2004.

85. *Bangkok Post*, 29 October 2004.

86. “Inside Politics,” *Bangkok Post*, 28 October 2004.

87. *Bangkok Post*, 29 October 2004.

88. *The Nation*, 30 October 2004.

ning a rally of sixty thousand Muslims to protest about Tak Bai.<sup>89</sup> Despite public denials by Nideh's fellow leaders, both Muslims and Buddhists continued to talk privately about the desirability of a royal intervention. On 12 March 2005, the Hong Kong-based human rights group Asian Human Rights Commission petitioned the King to "express concern" about the unsolved disappearance of prominent Muslim lawyer Somchai Neelapaichit.<sup>90</sup>

A persistent rumor in Bangkok was that former army commander (and privy councilor) Surayud Chulanont was planning to stage a military coup, with tacit approval from the palace, aimed at ousting Thaksin. Surayud spent the 2004 rainy season ordained as a monk in Nong Khai Province. While there was no evidence to support the coup rumor, it indicated the desire felt by some Thais for a reassertion of network monarchy. Surayud began speaking out on the South right after leaving the monkhood. On 2 November he gave an interview to the *Thai Post* newspaper in the wake of Tak Bai, emphasizing the importance of building trust with Muslim community leaders. Surayud declared, "To regard others as the opposite side or as enemies won't bring about a good result. We are all Thais and we can talk to each other with no need to pick up guns and fight."<sup>91</sup> Speaking at a seminar on 16 November, Surayud shared a platform with Anand Panyarachun. Both men used the occasion to state that crowd control and the dispersal of protestors were not proper tasks for the army. Lamenting the way in which "history repeated itself," Surayud called for the creation of a special unit to deal with such situations.<sup>92</sup> In a January 2004 newspaper interview, he urged the authorities to reach out to local Muslims in the South, in order to build sufficient understanding with them.<sup>93</sup> Early in 2005, prominent Muslims in the South still privately argued that action was needed from a source "higher up" than the Thaksin government.<sup>94</sup>

### Thaksin Re-emboldened: Paper Cranes and Ballot Papers

As *The Independent* put it, "The prospect of a gun-toting Queen has galvanised the nation into a frenzy of origami-folding."<sup>95</sup> Thaksin sought to create a positive news bonanza by asking Thais to produce millions of origami cranes to be scattered over the South, in a gesture indicating the popular desire for peace.<sup>96</sup>

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89. *Bangkok Post*, 2 November 2004.

90. *Bangkok Post*, 13 March 2005. Somchai, who had been defending suspects from the South arrested on terrorist charges, had openly accused the police of torturing his clients. He was abducted on 12 March 2004; he remains missing, and is presumed dead. For details of the case, see Somchai 2004 and Rengsak 2004.

91. Quoted in *The Nation*, 2 November 2004.

92. *Bangkok Post*, 17 November 2004.

93. *The Nation*, 4 January 2005.

94. Comments made to the author during two visits to the South in February 2005.

95. *The Independent*, 19 November 2004.

96. Not all the cranes bore messages of peace — some contained anti-Muslim slogans. Personal communication, December 2004.

Thaksin's initial response to the royal admonitions of November 2004 was a piece of pure political theater. While derided by his critics, the plan did strike a popular chord with many Thais, especially in other parts of the country. It allowed Thaksin to make a grand gesture of peace, while continuing to militarize the situation on the ground. The terrible Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December eclipsed news of the southern unrest for a couple of weeks, allowing Thaksin to launch his election campaign with renewed energy in early January 2005.

Following his landslide election victory in February 2005, Thaksin Shinawatra seemed re-emboldened to tackle the woes of the deep South — where TRT was decisively rejected by the voters, and the Wadah faction was humiliated. Thaksin immediately announced that he was sending twelve thousand more troops to the southern border provinces.<sup>97</sup> Three other initiatives followed in quick succession. The first was a proposal to divide the three provinces into colored zones based on their degree of loyalty to the Thai state, depriving the 358 villages designated “red zones” of government development funds. The second proposal, partly in response to the outcry of dissent over the zoning plan, was a plan to send twenty-five TRT ministers and MPs down to the South to assess the situation and report back. The third proposal, closely linked to the second and announced at the same time, was a decision to allow a rarely convened joint session of the Senate and Lower House to debate the crisis in the South on 30 and 31 March. But these three moves were not enough to satisfy Thaksin's growing critics.

### **The Privy Council Speaks Out**

After the first anniversary of the King's 24 February 2004 admonition to Thaksin, three members of the Privy Council made strong public statements. On 24 February, Surayud told a group of reporters that urgent action was needed to treat the wound in the South, which could otherwise become a malignant tumor.<sup>98</sup> He compared the southern unrest with the communist insurgency, an insurgency that emerged because villagers were treated unjustly. Surayud reported during the Crown Prince's recent visit to the region, Muslims in the South had given accounts of the injustice they had experienced. Religious teachers had been arrested on suspicion of masterminding attacks, while none of those responsible for the deaths of protestors at Tak Bai had been arrested. They had also raised the case of Somchai Neelaphaichit. Surayud argued that the justice system needed to treat people from both sides with equal fairness. He was also uneasy about the zoning plan, suggesting that it could inflame feelings of hostility. These were very detailed and highly critical comments on government policies, practically unprecedented for a member of the Privy Council. It is difficult to believe that Surayud would have made such remarks if they were not on some level sanctioned by the palace, or at least by Prem.

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97. *The Nation*, 16 February 2005.

98. *Thai Press Reports*, 24 February 2005.





In November 2004, Prime Minister Thaksin “sought to create a positive news bonanza by asking Thais to produce millions of origami cranes to be scattered over the South, in a gesture indicating the popular desire for peace.” (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit)

On 28 February, Prem made a remarkable public speech at the Chulabhorn Research Institute in Bangkok, in which he suggested that Thaksin accept advice from the King and Queen, and should adopt a peaceful and cautious approach to the problems of the South, rather than using military force hastily and without a deep understanding of the issues. Prem was speaking at a seminar entitled “Joining forces in solving problems in Southern provinces based on royal speeches,” and referred back to the 24 February 2004 royal speech advocating accessibility (*khao thueng*), understanding (*khao jai*), and development (*pat-tana*). Thaksin had been present at the original speech, but the clear implication was that he had failed to take on board the King’s words. Prem explained that everyone, ranging from community leaders to state officials, academics, and NGOs, should study the royal advice and adopt the same language. Prem stressed that Muslims with Thai citizenship must not be treated as second-class citizens.<sup>99</sup> Privy Councilor Kasem Wattanachai spoke at the same seminar, praising the wisdom of the King and Queen, and quoting the King’s speeches for most of his presentation.<sup>100</sup> Kasem stressed the unity and equality of all Thais, and commended the King’s “principles of thought” as the basis for addressing the country’s problems.<sup>101</sup> Ten of his eleven slides feature quotations from the King, and only one from the Queen.

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99. *Thai Press Reports*, 3 March 2005.

100. *The Nation*, 1 March 2003.

101. *Bangkok Post*, 1 March 2005.

## Creating the National Reconciliation Commission

Thaksin clearly got the message, going to see Prem the next day for private discussions. He immediately announced his fourth initiative on the South since the election, a plan to establish a National Reconciliation Commission headed by former prime minister Anand Panyarachun.<sup>102</sup> The idea of creating such a body had been mooted earlier by academics such as Chulalongkorn University sociologist Surichai Wungo, and had been in Thaksin's mind before the Prem speech. The choice of Anand, the King's personal choice as prime minister after May 1992 and the leading figure in drafting the 1997 constitution, spoke volumes. Anand had been a vocal critic of the government during Thaksin's first term. An anonymous Government House source declared that Thaksin had told Anand during a two-hour meeting "the government can no longer handle the southern violence alone."<sup>103</sup> The controversial zoning plan was abruptly dropped,<sup>104</sup> though the idea of "red" and "yellow" zones persisted in the thinking and vocabulary of local officials and residents.

The setting up of the NRC demonstrated that Thailand was torn between two major political directions. One view saw Thaksin and his TRT as the primary engine of dynamism in the country, and argued that by concentrating power in his hands, Thailand would be able to overcome problems such as weak coordination and decision-making to move forward according to a clear strategic vision. The second view held that Thaksin was not capable of managing complex social issues, as exemplified by the delicate situation in the South. According to this reading, Thailand needed to draw upon the wisdom of liberal elder statesmen such as Anand, who in the 1990s crafted a project of political reform that culminated in the passage of the 1997 constitution. In this sense, the NRC's creation implied a shift back to the more pluralistic and consensual politics of the 1990s.

Yet by bringing in new emergency legislation on 16 July 2005, Thaksin essentially blew the NRC out of the water, assuming personal powers completely unprecedented for a civilian Thai prime minister.<sup>105</sup> These included powers to declare a state of emergency and impose curfews anywhere in the country, and to ban public gatherings, censor news and ban media circulation, close premises, order evacuations, detain suspects without charge, confiscate property, intercept telecommunications, and order wiretaps. While some of these powers were not made immediately effective, they could be implemented at any time. What made this assumption of additional powers so extraordinary was that Thaksin has acted without consulting or even informing Anand and other members of the Commission — thereby preempting their special role to find a solution for the crisis, even before they had produced a report. Some NRC members

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102. *The Nation*, 2 March 2005.

103. *AP*, 28 February 2005.

104. *AP*, 1 March 2005.

105. For details and a critique of the emergency legislation, see International Commission of Jurists 2005. See also, International Crisis Group 2005b.

openly complained that the legislation had made their task irrelevant, and many threatened to resign. Anand had to work hard to talk them out of it.

Assuming that Thaksin wanted to signal his displeasure with the NRC, which he clearly viewed with growing irritation and suspicion, he chose a particularly crude form of action in relation to such a sensitive issue. TRT had an absolute majority in Parliament, and the prime minister could have railroaded the emergency legislation through effortlessly — something he finally did on 29 August. The irony was that despite his own successful career in electoral politics — and his wealth derived from the modern sphere of telecommunications — Thaksin appeared to prefer the old politics of exploiting state power, ruling by executive decree, and ignoring the voices of fellow MPs (even from his own party), critical journalists and academics, and wise elders.

A televised conversation between Thaksin and Anand, broadcast from Government House on 28 July 2005, clearly illustrated the gap between the government and the NRC.<sup>106</sup> Billed as a demonstration that the two sides were working together, the program actually revealed the intellectual and moral gulf between them. Anand stressed the need to recognize Thailand's ethnic diversity and establish basic principles of justice; Thaksin talked about combating terrorists, finding masterminds, and the problem of bad teaching in Islamic schools. Supported by a patently pro-government "moderator," Thaksin — who sat, presidentially, in the center of the room — repeatedly interrupted Anand. Anand appeared, in effect, an alternative prime minister, offering a different set of approaches and policies to the Thai public. In the broadcast he took on the role of the underdog — sidelined and harried — yet his greater moral authority shone through. In a very real sense, the NRC was becoming an alternative to the Thaksin government. When Thais talked about other people who could replace Thaksin as premier, the names most readily on their lips were those of Anand, and Privy councilors such as Surayud or Palakorn. The NRC had become the de facto opposition, representing a set of values and ideas comprehensively opposed by the Thaksin government. While the formal membership of the NRC included a number of bureaucrats and Thaksin associates, by October 2005 most of the core participants were people aligned with the NGO sector.<sup>107</sup>

### Conclusion: The Periphery Comes to Town

Thaksin Shinawatra has established a new mode of Thai leadership for the twenty-first century, associated with the creation of a quasi-professional political party and new alliances between political actors and the forces of big business.<sup>108</sup> Most importantly, Thaksin did not take his cues from lines scripted by the palace: this prime minister was answerable only to himself. Nowhere was

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106. *Kansanthana phiset ruang kansang santhisuk nai 3 jangwat chaidaeen phaktai* [Special conversation about peace-building in the three southern border provinces], broadcast on 28 July 2005, 20.35 on TV Channel 11.

107. Worawit interview, 24 October 2005. It is ironic that Thaksin was now opposed by much of the NGO-sector leadership, since these same people — including several NRC members — had backed TRT in 2001.

this new mode of premiership demonstrated more clearly than in Prem's backyard, the southern border provinces, which Thaksin sought to make a test case for the superiority of executive management, rather than loose network governance. The terrible upsurge in violence during 2004, TRT's disastrous performance in the February 2005 parliamentary elections in the three border provinces, and Thaksin's constant flip-flopping and inept handling of the growing crisis, all suggested that he was failing to prove his point. Yet the southern crisis also succeeded in smoking out Prem, and exposing the workings of network monarchy as never before. Thaksin's refusal to listen to private royal admonitions or coded signs of displeasure meant that Prem had to make an extraordinary public intervention on 28 February 2005, using a major public speech to rebuke the government and reject its policies.

Also evident was the way in which Privy Council appointments had been politicized during the Thaksin government. Three senior officials who had problems with Thaksin were fast-tracked to Privy councilor status: Kasem Wattana-chai, Thaksin's first education minister, Palakorn Suwannarat, director of the SBPAC, and Surayud Chulanont, former army commander and supreme commander. Two of them were actively deployed to question Thaksin's policies toward the South, backing up Prem with language scripted directly by the palace. Thaksin's powerful political position demanded a fresh strategy by network monarchy. Following the February 2005 elections, Thaksin's control of Thailand was formidable. Thaksin may have been believed that his super mandate from voters trumped the residual super mandate cherished by network monarchy. Yet the election also revealed Thaksin's weakness: his popular support did not extend to the South, and his MPs had been decisively rejected in the deep South. It was here that the old power networks chose to stage their struggle to regain the political initiative. This national power struggle was one core meaning of the renewed political violence in Pattani, Yala, and Narithiwat since January 2004.

Thaksin had set out to transform Thailand's deep South from a zone of liminality that resisted and undermined his authority, to a zone of conformity that he could dominate and control. Yet his misguided handling of this sensitive region seriously backfired. Far from being subordinated to the will of the center, the deep South began to undermine Thaksin's personal authority. Things fell apart, and the center could not hold. A small area containing less than 2 million people, one thousand kilometers from Bangkok, became a principal focus of news and public attention. In a highly centralized country such as Thailand, this was previously unthinkable: the provinces had no right to challenge the capital city in such a fashion.

Having told Anand in February 2005 that his government could not handle the South alone, Thaksin now seemed to believe that he could manage the growing crisis personally. As the violence continued unabated, there seemed

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108. These processes are discussed in McCargo and Ukrist 2005, chaps. 3 and 6 respectively.

scant evidence for this view: instead, Thaksin increasingly resorted to the mobilization of hatred, denouncing the killers of two marines in a Narathiwat village as “beasts.” Following the violent murder of two monks in Pattani, the provincial Sangha Committee called for the abolition of the NRC; a Pattani abbot gave an interview in which he accused the NRC of sympathizing with terrorists, and declared that the Muslim and Buddhist communities had been divided for a long time.<sup>109</sup> Anand, having earlier declined to criticize Thaksin publicly, became less and less coded in his dissatisfaction with the government. He told a conference in Hat Yai in September 2005 that the government showed little willingness to apologize for past mistakes, or to accept the viewpoints of others.<sup>110</sup> On the first day of 2006, deputy premier Chidchai Vanasatidya asserted that the southern violence was now on the decline: over 190 suspected insurgents had been captured, and local people were cooperating much more with the authorities.<sup>111</sup> He anticipated that by April, the situation would be largely under control. Chidchai’s remarks appeared to trigger a new wave of violent incidents. His attempts to claim that the government’s security policies were succeeding provoked a swift reaction from Prem Tinsulanond, who visited the southern border provinces for the first time since the January 2004 escalation. Speaking to over two thousand representatives of ninety-three civic groups and organizations in Pattani on 7 January, Prem repeated the royal mantras about the importance of understanding, access, and development as keys to resolving the conflict. He urged the government to listen to his advice, and expressed the concerns of the King and Queen over the continuing violence.<sup>112</sup> This exchange by leading proxies of Thaksin and the palace illustrated the continuing gulf between the two sides.

Faced with an invigorated parliamentary opposition under new Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, and undermined by persistent allegations of corruption and cronyism surrounding projects such as Bangkok’s new airport, as well as rising oil prices and other economic problems, Thaksin was now on a downward spiral.<sup>113</sup> Related issues included Thaksin’s attempts to bypass royal approval for the annual military promotions list, the launch of a book on “royal

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109. Interview with Phra Maha Thawil Khemkaro, the abbot of Wat Lak Muang in Pattani, conducted by the Issara News Centre, Pattani, posted 23 October 2005 at <http://www.tjanews.org/cms/>.

110. Author’s notes, Anand Panyarachund speaking at conference entitled “Kansang samanchan lae ruam funfu thongthin paktai” [Building reconciliation and joining together to revive the Southern locality], organized by the National Research Council, Prince of Songkla University, and UNDR, JB Hotel Hat Yai, 29 September 2005.

111. Piyanart 2006.

112. Wassana and Abdulloh 2006.

113. His troubles included the news that Grammy, an entertainment company with close ties to Thaksin, was trying to buy a controlling interest in the Matichon newspaper group. This generated such a furious public backlash that Grammy had to back off. Network monarchy was striking back in various ways, leading to public claims that Thaksin was trying to subvert the

powers” by conservative TRT MP Pramuan Ruchanaseri,<sup>114</sup> and the removal of outspoken Thaksin critic Sondhi Limthongkul from his popular Channel 9 television program. Indirectly, the NRC served as a rallying point for much of this political dissent, by opening up greater political space for reformists and friends of the palace.<sup>115</sup> Thaksin was able to manipulate and to capitalize upon public skepticism about the NRC’s “soft” approach to the southern violence. Yet the NRC had provided Thaksin’s enemies with an opportunity to regroup. Network monarchy might not possess the solutions to Thailand’s political problems, but it could mobilize formidable moral resources to harass and discredit the Thaksin government.

Why did violence flare up in Thailand’s deep South early in 2004? Though not a complete explanation, one important answer is that Thaksin Shinawatra had chosen the region as the battleground for his fight to wrest control of Thailand from the palace, the Privy Council, and from network monarchy. Thaksin and the forces he commanded were not directly responsible for all — or even most — of the violent incidents that erupted in the South from January 2004 onwards. Nor was this violence directly initiated or inspired by Prem, or by forces loyal to network monarchy. Rather, national-level tensions between the competing networks of Thaksin and the palace provided a context and background for the renewed southern violence, creating a space in which other forces could emerge and operate. Yet, Thaksin provoked a remarkable backlash from a wide range of groups and individuals who had come to oppose his rule. He retained such formidable wealth and power that he would not be readily ousted from Bangkok’s Government House. Instead, he seemed destined gradually to become a gesture politician, reduced to endless grandstanding as complex problems such as the intractable southern conflict moved beyond his ability to control. The South had come to symbolize all the problems faced by Thaksin and his government, and all the deficiencies of his authoritarian mode of leadership. “The South” was no longer about the South: it was about the legitimacy of the Thaksin government, and of the Thai state itself. The periphery had come to town. Network monarchy had struck back.

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prerogatives of the palace. The main focus of this controversy was the government’s attempts to dismiss anticorruption campaigner and auditor-general Khunying Jaruvan Maintaka, who insisted that the King had appointed her, and that only the King could fire her. For a discussion of these issues, see Pasuk and Chris 2005.

114. Pramuan 2005. Pramuan’s book is very conservative, arguing that the Thaksin government has sought to undermine the powers of the throne. The book received a positive endorsement from the palace.
115. This is not to suggest that the various groups criticizing Thaksin by late 2005 had much in common; to a large extent, this was a tactical alliance created by the need to confront a common enemy.

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