

Duncan McCargo

Can Thaksin Lead Southeast Asia?

Only if he first wins over the region's Muslims

THAKSIN SHINAWATRA'S FINEST HOUR ON THE GLOBAL stage came when he hosted the 2003 APEC summit in Bangkok. At the time, the world's media hailed him as the natural successor to Malaysia's longtime leader Mahathir Mohamad, then on the verge of retirement, as the voice of Southeast Asia. Yet just over a year later, a sulking Thaksin threatened to walk out of the ASEAN summit being held in Laos if Malaysia or Indonesia pressed him to explain the recent deaths of scores of Muslims who were protesting in the southern Thai town of Tak Bai. Soon afterward, he angered his regional allies by asserting that the southern insurgents were learning their extremism in Indonesia and receiving their training in Malaysia. Thaksin quickly discovered that regional leadership involves more than gala dinners and royal barge ceremonies: the trust and confidence of the international community have to be earned, rather than bought.

Historically, Southeast Asia's center of political gravity has lain well south of Bangkok. As a result, most previous Thai Prime Ministers had little regional influence or impact. During the 1980s and '90s, Mahathir and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew held the ring with their masterly grandstanding, punching far above their weight. How did the leaders of countries with such small populations manage to look so big—the equivalent of Belgium and the Netherlands speaking on behalf of Europe, while France and Germany stood by and listened? Both men were highly articulate and well informed. They controlled their emotions (though they were not averse to calculated bursts of indignation), and they convinced the wider world that they represented an imagined regional public opinion.

Since 9/11, international attention has turned from mainland Southeast Asia to Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation. If Thaksin aspires to regional leadership, the way forward lies not through talking shops such as APEC or ASEAN. Rather, Thaksin needs to connect with Southeast Asia's Muslims, especially those in Indonesia. Since being granted non-NATO ally status by U.S. President George W. Bush, Thailand has become a regional lieutenant of the U.S., helping to prosecute the war on terrorism—most

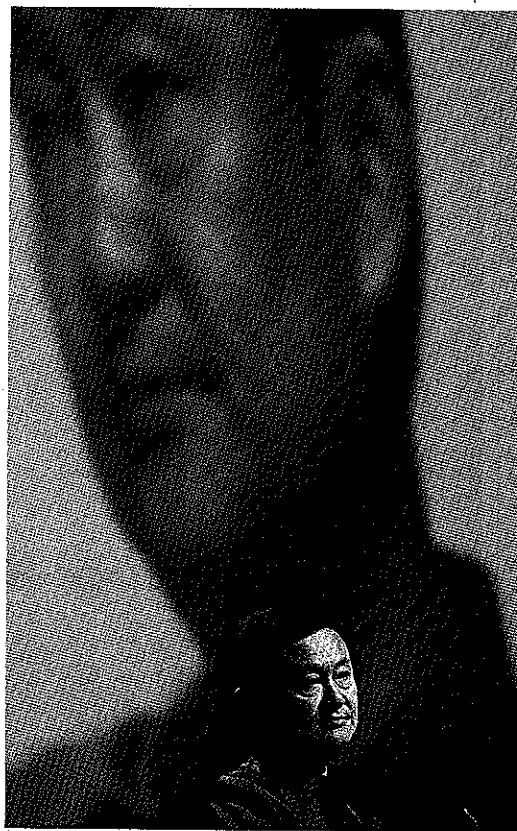
notably with the 2003 capture of Riduan Isamuddin, a.k.a. Hambali, the alleged operations chief of the regional militant network Jemaah Islamiah. For all his appearance of nationalism, Thaksin has forged closer security ties with Washington than any other post-Vietnam War Thai Prime Minister. But this alliance is a mixed blessing for Thaksin's leadership aspirations in Southeast Asia. South of Bangkok, Thaksin is regarded with wariness.

Thaksin's handling of the political violence in Thailand's predominantly Muslim provinces is his Achilles' heel. For Southeast Asia's Muslims, his treatment of the Muslims within his own borders is the best test of his credibility as a regional leader—yet he has failed it horribly, adopting a consistently hard-line stance that has deeply alienated local Muslims.

If Thaksin really aspires to be a regional leader, he must first act boldly to demilitarize Thailand's south and broker a hitherto unthinkable political solution—possibly some form of autonomy for the three southern provinces. At the same time, he should invest substantial resources in promoting educational and cultural exchange with the rest of Southeast Asia, especially with Indonesia. Thailand needs to show greater humility and learn more from its neighbors; far more Thai students should be studying other regional languages. The brightest Thai diplomats should be deployed to embassies close to home. Thailand's important bilateral relationship with the U.S. needs to be balanced by a deeper engagement with the rest of Southeast Asia.

It is time for Thaksin to emulate Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad by raising his game, graduating from national politician to Southeast Asian statesman. That means Thaksin should use his second term to reinvent himself, so as to build a more inclusive domestic and regional order. Mahathir famously asked Malaysians to “look east” to Japan as an economic and social model. Thaksin might ask Thais to “look south.” ■

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Thaksin hasn't yet earned the trust of other nations

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