

Duncan McCargo

State of Denial

The conflict in Thailand's south reflects a failure of political leadership

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Since January 2004, more than 1,700 people have been killed in an increasingly deadly conflict in Thailand's south, which comprises three provinces where the populations are predominantly Malay and Muslim, not Thai and Buddhist. Most victims of the attacks—bombings, drive-by shootings, beheadings—are somehow tied to officialdom: soldiers, policemen, local politicians and teachers in government schools. But Muslims with links to the military have also been targeted. Enhanced security measures have failed to halt the violence, and the 20,000 troops now in the area are struggling just to protect themselves. It isn't clear who is responsible, yet underpinning many attacks is a deep sense of resentment against the Thai establishment, and a belief that the government is ill-treating or discriminating against Muslims. In June, the government-appointed National Reconciliation Commission, chaired by the highly respected former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, made some modest proposals to address local grievances on issues such as justice and consultation. But caretaker Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his cabinet have yet to act on Anand's report.

The conflict in Thailand's south is primarily a political problem requiring a political solution. But Thaksin is preoccupied with his own survival—he risks facing crowds of hostile protesters if he visits any Bangkok shopping mall, let alone the alienated south. He has so little credibility in the capital that after an apparent car-bomb plot against him was revealed on Aug. 24, 49% of those interviewed for a Bangkok University survey believed the plot was a hoax.

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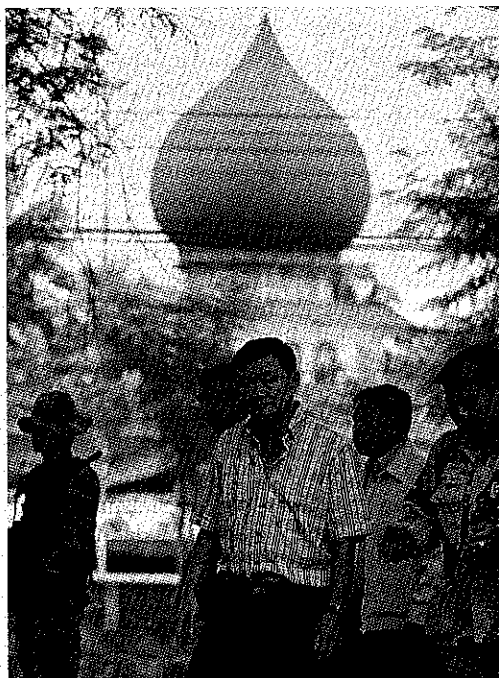
Singapore's Temasek Holdings. Since then, Thai politics have descended into high farce, culminating in an April snap election boycotted by the opposition and later invalidated by the courts. The election commissioners who oversaw this debacle refused to resign until they were briefly thrown in jail. A fresh ballot has been scheduled for Oct. 15, but it may well have to be delayed while new commissioners are installed.

Thaksin seems unwilling to grasp that he is the central problem in Thai politics. He remains popular with rural people, especially in the north and northeast of the country, and may well win another majority in parliament. Yet few of his own ministers have spoken out in his support in recent weeks. Questions abound about his ethics, his authoritarian style, and the blurred line between his business interests and the national interest. Thaksin no longer commands much respect from the country's business, intellectual or social élites, nor from those close to the palace. Privy Council president Prem Tinsulanond has repeatedly made thinly veiled criticisms of Thaksin; Anand recently declared that Thailand could become "a failed state"; and social reformer Prawase Wasi produced a damning 10-point checklist of Thaksin's failings. Thaksin responded by complaining that his senior critics were "senile." Meanwhile, the dragged-out political crisis is hurting the economy: GDP growth in the second quarter of this year was 4.9%, down from 6.1% in the first quarter.

Thai officials tend to assume that their status is inherently legitimate, not understanding that such legitimacy must derive from active popular consent on the part of citizens.

In Bangkok, Thaksin is in office but not in power. In the deep south, the Thai state holds official control, yet in practice is unable to function normally. In both cases, the cause is the same: where office-holders lack legitimacy, they cannot exercise power effectively. Winning elections or occupying territory does not automatically mean you have respect and authority. Unless Thailand's next leader understands that distinction, the nation will remain in limbo and in crisis. ■

Duncan McCargo is a visiting senior research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, and editor of the book Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence, to be published by Singapore University Press



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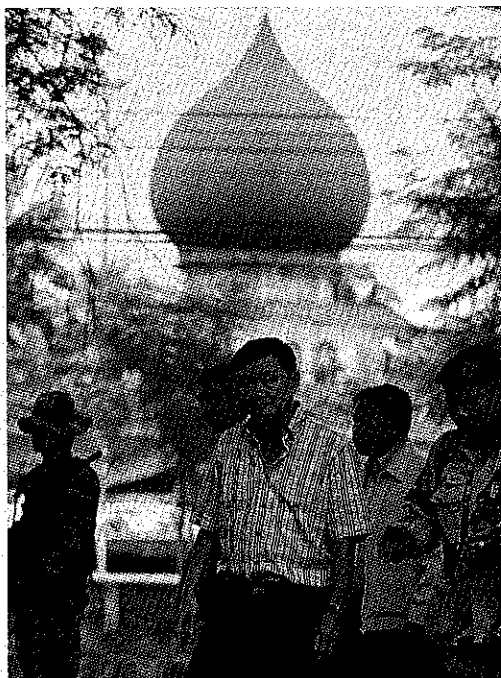
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SIRAPAN BOONTHANOK—REUTERS

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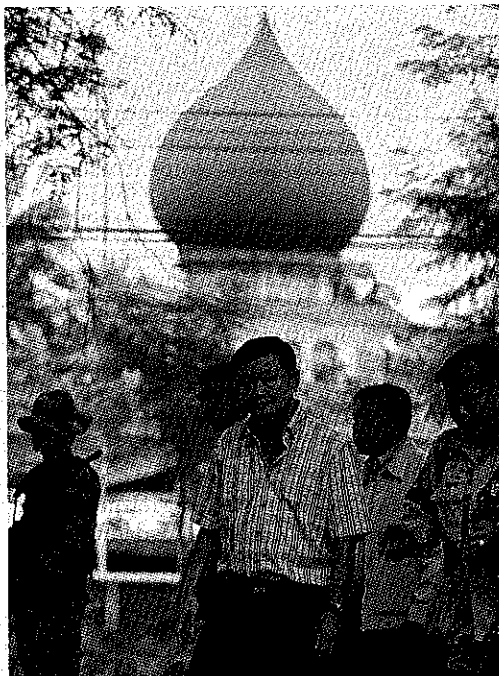
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