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A Ministry for the South: New Governance Proposals for Thailand's Southern Region

SRISOMPOB JITPIROMRSI AND
DUNCAN MCCARGO

The ongoing conflict in Thailand's Muslim-majority southern border provinces has claimed more than three thousand lives since 2004. To date, successive governments have sought to control the violence mainly through the use of enhanced security measures, and by arresting and prosecuting insurgent suspects. Yet despite some limited successes in reducing the number of violent incidents, the underlying causes of the conflict have not been addressed. The Thai state suffers from a legitimacy deficit in the region, and many Malay-Muslims would like greater control over their own affairs. The insurgency is ultimately fuelled by political frustrations. Yet all suggestions that the region might be granted some form of special administrative status have been consistently rejected by the authorities. This article examines proposals in a recent report by a team of Thai academics based in the region, who have advocated the creation of a new ministry to oversee the administration of the Deep South. These controversial proposals offer a compromise political solution, one which recognizes the distinctive nature of the region while preserving the core principle of a unitary Thai state.

Keywords: Thailand, South, conflict, insurgency, governance.

SRISOMPOB JITPIROMRSI is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Prince of Songkhla University, Pattani, Thailand

DUNCAN MCCARGO is Professor of Southeast Asian Politics at the University of Leeds, England.

Following the turn of the millennium, Thailand's Southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat have experienced serious political violence; more than three thousand people have died in the conflict since the beginning of 2004. As Marc Askew has recently argued, the violence has become increasingly intractable, and attempts by the authorities to develop security-based responses have substantially failed thus far.¹ This article argues that the Southern Thai conflict is at root a political problem, reflecting deep differences of identity. As such, options for developing a political solution to the conflict ought to be urgently explored. One such option is outlined in detail here: the creation of a distinct new ministry for the Deep South, along with new consultative bodies designed to address the special needs of the area.

The southern border region is markedly different in terms of ethnicity and religion from the rest of Thailand: roughly 80 per cent of the population in the border area are Muslims,² most of whom identify themselves as Malay,³ and speak a local Malay dialect (known as Pattani Malay) as their first language. The current conflict is rooted in history.⁴ The old Malay sultanate of Patani, a major centre of Islamic education and scholarship, was only formally incorporated into the Thai state in 1909.⁵ Since then, resistance to Thai rule has emerged regularly, most notably from the 1960s to the early 1980s, when a "separatist" insurgency flourished, led by a range of militant groups such as the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) and Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). During the Prem Tinsulanond government of the early 1980s, following an amnesty policy underpinning a deal with militant groups, a social compact was agreed with the local elites.⁶ Former insurgents surrendered to the authorities; large numbers of *pondok* (traditional Islamic schools) began offering the Thai curriculum in parallel with Islamic education; and a new class of Malay-Muslim politicians emerged. The Thai language was now much more widely spoken in the region, and it seemed that a substantive form of political accommodation had been successfully achieved. It gradually became clear, however, that this accommodation was less deep-rooted than it appeared. The elites who were now working closely with the Thai authorities, both civilian and military, through new agencies such as the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC), were losing grassroots support. The old militant groups appeared moribund, but those who opposed Thai rule were quietly regrouping and developing new strategies.

By late 2001, a new wave of violent attacks had begun, initially directed primarily at the security forces.⁷ The re-emergence of a major conflict in the South was confirmed on 4 January 2004, when a large number of militants — at least 50, perhaps more than 100 — staged a bold raid on an army camp in Narathiwat, killing four soldiers and seizing a large number of weapons. Two other major incidents occurred in 2004.⁸ On 28 April, small groups of young militants attacked eleven security positions across Yala, Pattani and also in neighbouring Songkhla province. Following these attacks, a group of militants took refuge in the historic Krue-Ze mosque. The army responded by storming the mosque and killing everyone inside — altogether, 106 militants and a few security personnel lost their lives. On 25 October, the army forcibly arrested more than a thousand Malay-Muslim men who were holding a demonstration in Tak Bai, Narathiwat; 78 men died in army trucks on the way to a camp, mainly from suffocation. Subsequent to Tak Bai, there had been no comparable loss of life on a single day. The conflict has since been characterised by daily killings: constant small incidents in which one, two or three people have lost their lives. By no means all of the victims have been combatants: by 2007 the majority of those killed were Muslims,⁹ many of them singled out by the militant movement as *munafik*, or traitors to their religion, because of their alleged collaboration with the Thai authorities.¹⁰ Initially, there was some confusion about the causes of the violence. Thai security sources suggested that “bandits” and local political conflicts were to blame; gradually, however, it became clear that a resurgent militant movement was responsible for the majority of the incidents. Conditions on the ground were exacerbated by a series of blunders and missteps on the part of the government.¹¹

To date, a range of approaches have been posited to address the violence. The governments of Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–06) were preoccupied with the search for a security solution, believing that effective use of military force, combined with the arrest and prosecution of militant suspects, could bring the conflagration under control.¹² By contrast, a report published in June 2006 by the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), a body set up to propose policy alternatives in the South, recommended a range of measures designed to address justice, identity and socio-economic grievances.¹³ At the same time, the NRC fought shy of addressing governance and decentralization issues directly. According to the commission's critics, this aversion to proposals for decentralization reflected the NRC's conservative and royalist orientation;¹⁴ defenders

of the NRC's record, however, point out that the local Malay-Muslim members of the commission were reluctant to initiate or support proposals for decentralization, a reluctance that made it impossible for sympathetic outsiders to craft serious solutions.¹⁵ The Surayud Chulanont Government (2006–08), installed following the military coup of 19 September 2006, paid lip service to the NRC's approach, but failed to implement the recommendations systematically. Meanwhile, despite regular claims by the security forces that the militant movement is growing weaker, and that the level and frequency of violent incidents has declined since June 2007, casualty rates from the violence have been constant, failing to decline significantly overall. They are subject to regular peaks and troughs. Between January 2004 and October 2008, 3,214 people were killed in the violence, and 5,249 people were injured.¹⁶

Siam (later Thailand) was forged in the nineteenth century as a buffer zone between British and French colonial territories, and King Chulalongkorn put great emphasis on the idea that his country should be a centrally administered unitary state. During the twentieth century, the degree of central control gradually increased. While modern Thailand has adopted various forms of elected government at the local level — including provincial administrative organizations, municipalities and sub-district administrative organisations — much of the day-to-day administrative control of the country remains firmly in the hands of unelected bureaucrats, notably provincial governors and their subordinates. Provincial governors, who are career officials of the Interior Ministry, are regularly rotated, and run their provinces according to a standard ministry template. Little account is taken of regional, cultural and religious differences, an approach which leads to considerable tensions in the Muslim majority Southern border region. Over-centralization was a consistent theme of complaint expressed by Malay-Muslim leaders.¹⁷ The only place in Thailand where a provincial governor is elected is Bangkok: residents of the capital tend to believe that they alone have the political sophistication to choose their own provincial government. In short, decentralization processes in Thailand to date have been problematic and incomplete.¹⁸

In many “separatist” conflicts around the world, ranging from Aceh to Northern Ireland, governance reforms have formed a central plank of negotiations that led to a cessation of violence.¹⁹ Might some form of decentralization, such as a version of autonomy, a devolved assembly, or elected local governors, offer the best way to address Thailand's Southern violence? For a range of historical,

cultural and political reasons, there has been little serious discussion concerning options for decentralizing power in Thailand's Deep South. The NRC scrupulously avoided discussing — let alone supporting — decentralization in its report. "Autonomy" has long been a taboo term in the Thai political lexicon; the principle of a unitary state has been axiomatic since the late nineteenth century. During research for this article, we found that Muslim politicians from the region remain consistently nervous about expressing support for notions such as autonomy, fearing that they might be branded as separatists and terrorists by conservatives in the Thai bureaucracy and military. Such fears are well-founded: in 2004, Najmuddin Umar, then a government Member of Parliament from Narathiwat, was actually tried for treason, accused of being a mastermind behind the violence. His trial later collapsed, but had served the purpose of intimidating local politicians and elites.²⁰

On the face of it, the reform of governance in the Southern border provinces potentially offers a way of undercutting the militant movement, addressing the Thai state's legitimacy deficit in the region, and renegotiating relations between Bangkok and the South. While serious discussion of a "political solution" for the southern violence was largely off-limits for the first three years of the conflict, such ideas have been raised more widely since 2007. In January of that year, Poldej Pinprateep (who shortly afterwards became deputy minister for social welfare) called for the creation of a special ministry for the South.²¹ In February 2007, leading social critic Prawase Wasi called for the implementation of a "monthon" system in Thailand.²² The term "monthon" recalled the administrative system used in the late nineteenth century under the reign of King Chulalongkorn, when Thailand was divided into a number of regions. In February 2008, newly appointed Interior Ministry Chalerm Yubamrung announced his support for some form of autonomy for the region.²³ While Chalerm was swiftly reprimanded by Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej (and dismissed a few months later) these various statements by senior figures in Thailand indicated that a rethink may be in the offing: governance reform could now be on the agenda for the South. Many problems remain, however: not simply what kind of governance reform should be proposed, but almost more importantly, how could an alliance be constructed to promote any such proposals? How could the inevitable backlash from conservative forces in Thai society be managed? Specifically, how could bureaucrats and the military be brought on board to support a set of proposals that were deeply challenging to their strongly-held convictions?

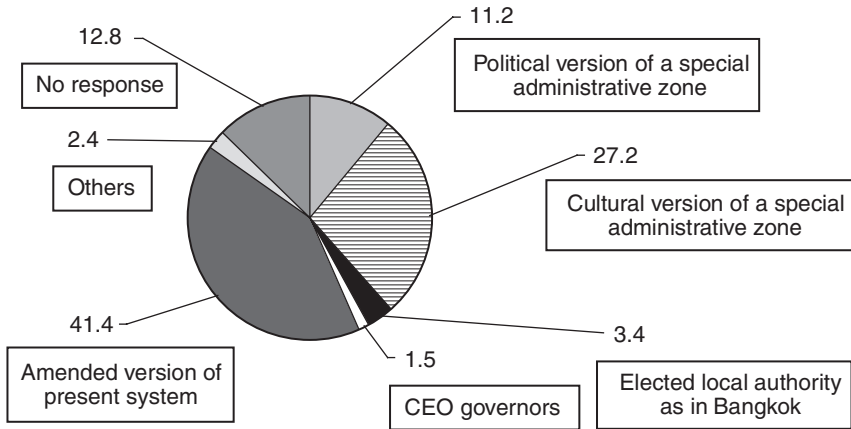
The Research

In 2005, a team of academic researchers was established to explore possible forms of decentralization in the Southern border region. The lead researcher was Srisompob Jitpiromrsi of Prince of Songkhla University, Pattani, supported locally by Sukree Langputeh of Yala Islamic College; primary funding came from Mahidol University's Centre for Peace and Development Studies, at the initiative of Centre Director and NRC member Gothom Ariya. The project later received some additional backing from Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Political Science. Though not formally an NRC initiative, the project reflected the interests of certain commission members who were disappointed that decentralization had not been addressed in the NRC report, and wished to gather evidence to support proposals for governance reform in the region. The team was very committed to a research process that would allow voices from below to be heard. The primary methodology was qualitative: twenty-five day-long workshops, focus groups and discussion meetings were held with a wide range of actors, including local politicians, religious leaders, teachers, members of the Buddhist community, government and security officials, NGO activists and villagers.²⁴ Ten one-on-one interviews were conducted with key informants, and questionnaires were used to survey opinions on a range of salient issues. Rarely has such a thorough exercise in research and policy consultation been conducted in Thailand.

Given the constraints on conducting research in a conflict zone such as the Southern border provinces, accurate survey data concerning public opinion relating to options for the reform of governance is difficult to obtain. Malay-Muslims are notoriously wary of responding to such questions because of fears that they might be identified and suspected of harbouring separatist tendencies. One of the few surveys to have been conducted on the issue was by Srisompob and his team, carried out in September and October 2005 (see Chart 1).²⁵

Villages to be surveyed were randomly selected across the three provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. In order to conduct this survey, specific assistants had to be recruited and trained from every one of the villages sampled; given the security situation and associated mistrust of outsiders, it was not possible to send research assistants from village to village. In other words, this kind of survey research requires both an extensive network of local contacts and informants, and a substantial budget for recruiting assistants.²⁶ Only in this way

Chart 1
Opinions Concerning Reform of Local Government



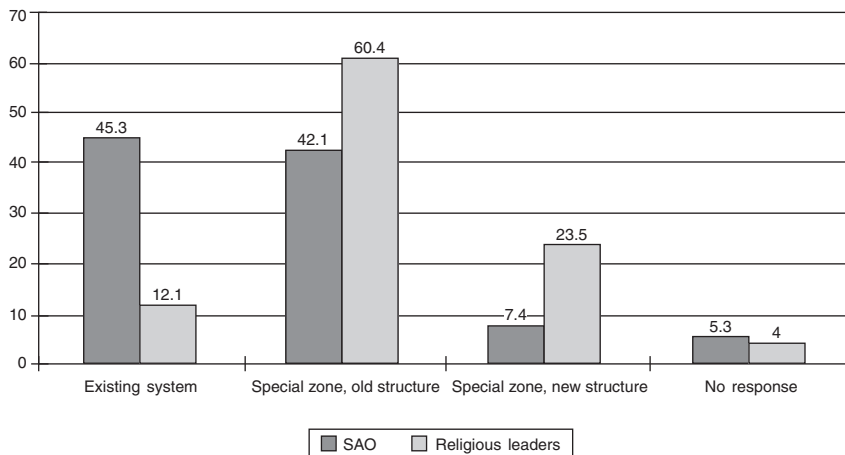
can structural constraints be addressed, and reliable data solicited. 874 ordinary respondents were asked to choose from a range of options concerning their preferred form of local government.²⁷ While just over 40 per cent expressed support for the existing system, a similar proportion supported some form of special administrative zone, or Bangkok-style elected authority. Given that some respondents were probably reluctant to express their real views and preferred simply to take the easy option of backing the status quo, the survey results tentatively suggest considerable potential backing for a new mode of governance in the area. But the results also imply that no one solution is preferred by a majority of local people: almost any proposal for governance reform in the border region is likely to be divisive, and to meet with elements of resistance.

Closer examination of these results shows that religious identification was an important variable underlying the responses (see Table 1). Around two-thirds of Buddhist respondents supported the existing system, compared with just over a third of Muslim respondents. Virtually all of those who supported a “special cultural zone” were Muslim — as were most of those who did not answer the question. The survey suggests a significant gap in perceptions and aspirations between Buddhists and Muslims in the region: Buddhists are much more likely to support the political status quo. Any proposals to reform the existing structures are therefore

likely to meet with significant objections from the roughly 20 per cent non-Muslim population of the Southern border provinces, who have suffered disproportionately from the violence and tend to feel alienated, marginalized and anxious about their security and general situation in the region.²⁸ In other words, any changes intended to satisfy Muslim political aspirations and demands are likely to be viewed with suspicion by the region's Buddhist minority: those advocating change to be sensitive to these concerns and should find ways to address them.

Another survey conducted in April 2007 asked around 200 sub-district administrative organization (SAO) heads and religious leaders for their views on decentralization (see Graph 1). This survey was conducted by asking invited workshop participants to complete questionnaires at the end of a day-long seminar; it did not require the survey team to conduct research in local communities themselves. The differences between the views of religious leaders and SAO heads was striking: while over 45 per cent of SAO heads supported the existing system of limited decentralization, only 12 per cent of religious leaders agreed. More than 60 per cent of the religious leaders supported a special administrative zone using the existing structure, and more than 23 per cent favoured a special zone using a new structure. In other words, almost 84 per cent

Graph 1
Views of SAO Chiefs and Religious Leaders on Governance in the South



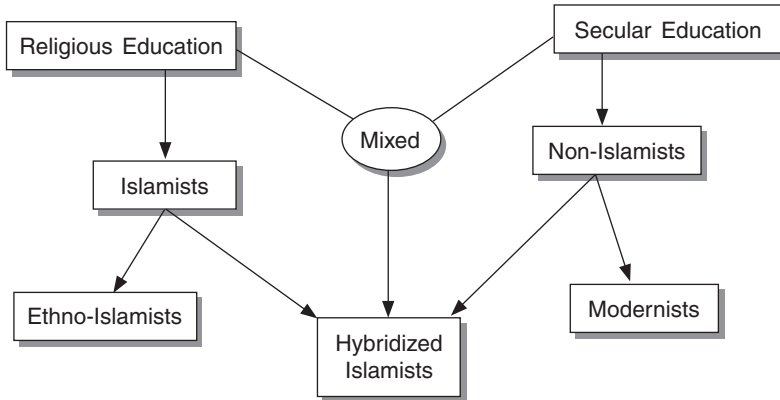
of religious leaders supported some form of special administrative zone, as well as just under half of the SAO heads. The survey demonstrated that there was substantial interest among the Malay-Muslim local level elites to reform the administrative system, an interest shared even by those with substantial vested interest in the status quo. Also, it is evident that the secular elites tended to be more supportive of the existing system of decentralization than the religious elites, who were more concerned about their local identity, Malay culture and an Islamic political perspective that emphasized questions of morality.²⁹

From the outset, the researchers were interested in developing viable proposals that had some chance of winning acceptance from the public and state sector. The research team did not begin with a prior agenda to propose some form of autonomy or far-reaching reform; indeed, initially Srisompob and most of his colleagues assumed that relatively minor changes in the existing system of local governance might be sufficient to assuage the concerns of the Malay-Muslim population and help boost the legitimacy of the state. The extensive changes proposed in the team's final research report — eventually completed in June 2008 — reflected the growing weight of evidence they found in support of a substantial overhaul of governance in the region, and their belief that a compromise could be developed that had the potential to win support from all sides of the political spectrum.³⁰

Central to the approach developed in the report was a particular understanding of the changing character of local Malay-Muslim elites in the Southern border provinces.³¹ Elites in the region may be divided into three broad categories: those whose main education was in the traditional Islamic system; those whose main education was through Thai-medium secular education; and those who are a product of both systems (see Chart 2).

Most of those who have experienced both systems are the graduates of private Islamic high schools, which offer both the Thai high school curriculum and a parallel Islamic curriculum. As a general principle, those who have attended Thai government high schools may be classed as “modernists” who are broadly comfortable with wider Thai society.³² By contrast, graduates of pondok, or traditional Islamic schools, usually have poor Thai language skills and so might appear sympathetic to anti-state movements — the report refers to them as “ethno-Islamists”. In practice, however, many young militants are the products of private Islamic schools that combine both an Islamic and regular Thai

Chart 2
Religious Orientation of Local Malay Muslim Elites



curriculum. The most important, fastest growing and largest group of local elites comprise hybridized individuals who have experienced both the Islamic and secular education systems,³³ referred to here as “hybridized Islamicists”. This crucial group has the capacity to reach out in both directions, embracing either the Thai state, or those whose sympathies may lie with the militant movement. Most Islamic teachers who have been trained in the Middle East, South Asia or Indonesia would also fall into the “hybridized” category — over time, many such teachers have made the transition from being simple “ethno-Islamists” to a more nuanced and ambiguous stance.³⁴

The report starts from the assumption that the Thai state can no longer rely on the “modernist” Malay-Muslim elite to deliver governance and secure order in the southern border region. The modernists have become increasingly out of touch with ordinary Malay-Muslims, partly as a result of their de facto co-optation, and partly as a result of rapid social change and the spread of Islamic education.³⁵ Rather, the Thai authorities need to forge a core alliance with those hybridized Islamicists who have the necessary grassroots connections to create a workable political and social order in the area. While some elements of this group harbour strong militant sympathies, other elements are ready and willing to work with the Thai state. The report sets out to craft proposals that have the support of emerging networks of hybridized-Islamicists.

Members of this network include elected local politicians, some religious leaders and others in positions of formal and informal influence over Malay-Muslim communities. Many of them have attended Thai higher educational institutions; while critical of the Thai state and certain government policies, particularly on security matters, these leaders broadly prefer engaging with Bangkok rather than supporting more militant causes. What they seek, however, is a reformed system of governance that will give them greater scope to exercise their authority and to take initiatives — without giving more power to the militant movement.

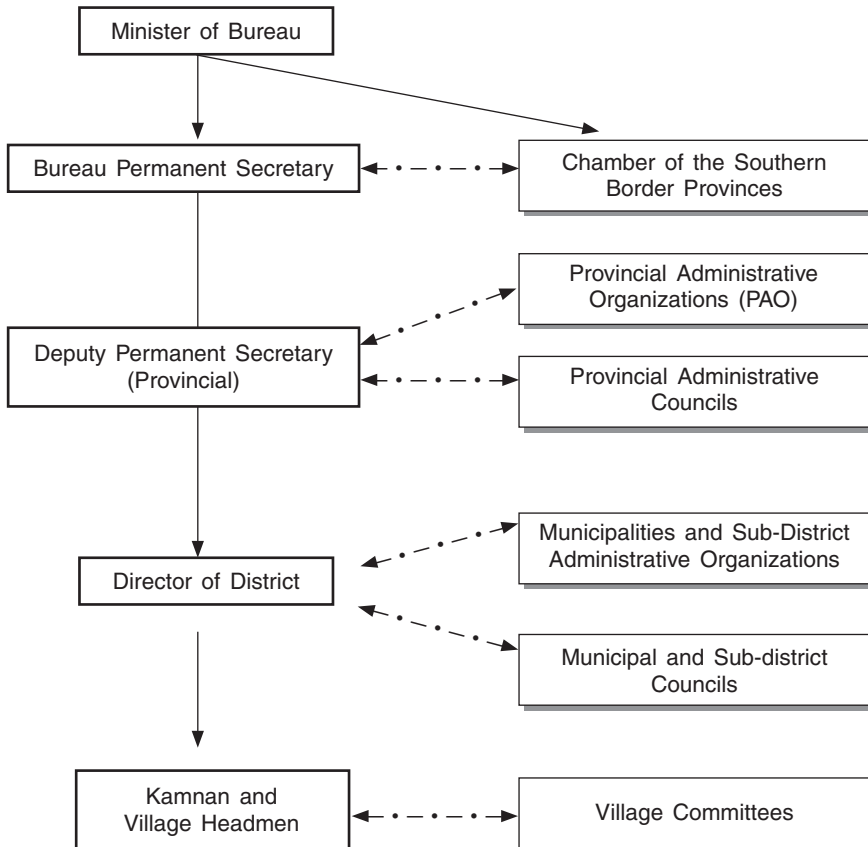
The Proposals

The proposals advanced in the report conform to certain basic principles. Any solutions advanced to problems of governance and administration in the region need to reflect a spirit of compromise, bringing together different sides in a natural and accommodating fashion. Governance mechanisms need to be informed by a cultural and religious sensitivity that creates space for diversity and difference, addressing questions of feelings. Such arrangements need to focus on building legitimacy and demonstrate an awareness of the troubled history of the region, as viewed from all sides. In all this, the deployment of state power will be of great importance: the agencies of the state operating in the region need to play a leading role in supporting a more open and tolerant style of governance which is appropriate to the special cultural context of the region. The report uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "habitus" as a way of framing the way Malay-Muslims locate themselves within a specific social and political context.³⁶

The essence of the proposals involve integrating modified elements of the existing Thai bureaucratic structure with some specially crafted governance measures that are quite specific to the locale of the lower South. They contain some provisions for decentralization of state power, as well as some new representative and consultative mechanisms intended to fit local society and conditions. One building block of the proposal is the existing Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC), an agency currently headed by a director seconded from the Interior Ministry. Originally created by the Prem Government in the early 1980s, the SBPAC was credited with building strong relations between state officials and Malay-Muslim secular and religious leaders through its use of consultative committees.³⁷ During this first incarnation, the SBPAC helped to

reduce conflict in the region and brought local elites on board to cooperate with the Thai state. Dissolved by the Thaksin Government in 2002, the SBPAC was re-established in late 2006 by the Surayud administration. The main strength of the post-2006 SBPAC has again been its advisory board, comprising a range of representatives from the Malay-Muslim community. However, SPBAC is currently subordinated to the military via the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), and lacks a proper legal basis of operations.³⁸ The report proposes that a revamped SBPAC should form the basis for a new model of devolution in the region (see Chart 3).

Chart 3
Southern Border Provinces Development
Administration Bureau (SBPDAB)



The first core element of the proposed new governance mode is the creation of a regional agency to oversee the administration of the Southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. This agency would amount to an upgraded version of the SBPAC, elevated to the status of a bureau. The Thai term “*thabuang*” or “bureau”, is normally translated into English as “ministry”, since a *thabuang* is headed by a minister of Cabinet status. Prior to its merger with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of University Affairs was classed as a *thabuang*: in effect, a small or minor ministry. The suggested title for the new ministry is “Southern Border Provinces Development Administration Bureau” (SBPDAB), in a deliberate echo of the SBPAC. The new agency would come under the Office of the Prime Minister (an important provision, to prevent it being captured by bureaucratic interests within a larger ministry).³⁹ Political oversight of the agency would be the responsibility of the minister, who would be an elected MP from the region; administrative oversight would be handled by a permanent secretary (*palat thabuang*). Under the proposed arrangements, the governors of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces would be designated deputy permanent secretaries of the bureau (*rong palat thabuang*). The title “district officer” (*nai amphoe*), which has colonial residues, would be replaced by “director of district” (*phu amnuaykankhet*), a term already used by the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority. The main benefit of creating the new ministry would be to ensure that the problems of the South were directly addressed by a powerful agency with a direct line to the prime minister and the cabinet, rather than being overseen by a range of different agencies or primarily managed by the military.

In parallel with the revised formal administrative structures — in effect, shifting bureaucratic oversight of the region from the Interior Ministry to a small, specialized ministry — the Southern border provinces would have a range of special consultative bodies designed to ensure popular participation in the governance of the region. The proposal does not include any provision for electing provincial governors or their regional superiors; rather, a parallel consultative structure is proposed which would operate in tandem with the new administrative framework. The most important consultative body would be the Chamber of the Southern Border Provinces (*samatcha changwat chaidaeen phaktai*), a people’s consultative, liaison and advisory assembly for the three provinces, comprising religious leaders, culture and education experts as well as administrators and security officials from the region.⁴⁰

Chamber members would have the authority to monitor and review personnel and budgetary matters at all levels, from that of region down to that of sub-district. They would have the authority to scrutinise issues of political strategy and the judicial process in the region. They would comprise representatives from areas across the three provinces, from local government agencies, business sectors, chambers of commerce, industrial bodies, civil society organizations, Islamic schools, and professional organizations such as those for teachers, health professionals, lawyers and both Muslim and Buddhist small businesspeople, farmers and traders. The Chamber members would be elected from representatives of a wide range of organizations in the three provinces, using a model of functional representation rather than direct election. The primary tasks of the Chamber would include producing a Political and Economic Development Strategy Plan for the three provinces, distributing financial subsidies to a range of organizations in the region, and allocating specially earmarked central government funding to selected projects designed to promote regional development goals.

Existing municipal and sub-district organizations would remain largely unchanged elected bodies, but would be granted greater powers to oversee cultural matters, including the power to curtail activities that contradicted Islamic sensibilities — for example, the authority to ban karaoke lounges, or to impose late night curfews on youth — in consultation with new advisory councils of religious authorities and people's representatives. These advisory bodies would be created by a nomination and appointment system from representatives of religious organizations, people's organizations and religious schools in the locality. Steps would be taken to ensure a balance of representation so that no single local organization could dominate a given advisory council. In predominantly Muslim areas, these advisory councils would have some characteristics of "*shura*", or Islamic consultative decision-making bodies, but these would be mixed with the features of other, secular forms of organization.

Following new legislation passed in 2007, village headmen are entitled to remain in office until the age of sixty: there is a need for an effective system of village committees adapted to local circumstances in the South.⁴¹ These committees will incorporate the *shura* model at the village level to support grassroots development. Under the proposed new system, religious leaders, administrative leaders and natural leaders and the district permanent secretary

(*palat amphoe*) will form an advisory committee in addition to the main village committee (comprising the village headman, assistant headmen, local elected representatives and heads of village-based organizations). This committee will function as a community *shura* council, with responsibility for advising on administrative matters and nominating representatives to the regional community council. In addition, community justice centres should be established at the village level, working under the coordination of the Ministry of Justice, to create a forum for alternative justice. There should also be some coordination of village defence volunteer and community police activities to ensure security at the village level, with technical input from the military, subject to the approval of the village advisory council. However, overall responsibility for security matters would remain unchanged under the new system.

As well as the main formal structures, the new system would involve a number of additional innovations and changes to reflect community concerns emerging from the study. Islamic law would play a greater role under the new governance arrangements, based on the needs of individual communities.⁴² Implicit in the shift to a separate agency overseeing the administration of the South is the principle of “representative bureaucracy”: Malay-Muslims should be represented in the local bureaucracy at much greater levels than currently, especially at more senior levels.⁴³ Specific measures should be implemented to support Muslim entrepreneurs and Muslim-owned businesses in the region. A bilingual policy should be pursued: children should learn both Thai and Malay, and both languages should be used as working languages in government offices. Islamic banking and collection of *zakat* should be actively supported where appropriate. The detailed operation of these secondary policies is not elaborated in the report, but would form important agenda items for new consultative bodies once the reformed administrative system was implemented.⁴⁴

Overall, the proposals aim to integrate the best elements of the existing administrative and political system with some innovations that reflect the particular social and cultural conditions in the Southern border region. In addition, the proposals require that sufficient resources and budget are allocated to the region to allow the new system to function effectively. The measures allow for a degree of decentralization in terms of resources and decision-making, without in any way undermining the principle of Thailand as a unitary state.

Reactions and Responses

The report produced a range of different responses, some positive, others negative. While the proposals were broadly welcomed among Malay-Muslims in the Southern border provinces, where they were viewed as a step in the right direction, elsewhere in the country they were viewed with considerable scepticism. The primary criticism followed familiar lines: this initiative was the thin end of the wedge, and would lead eventually to full autonomy and a separate Patani state. A second criticism focused on the means by which the proposal had been generated: the offer of a special ministry for the South was the result of a campaign of violence; terrorism should not be rewarded, as a matter of principle. A third criticism focused on the idea of precedent: the creation of a new ministry was a dangerous step, since it could lead to similar demands from other parts of the country which could claim a distinctive culture and identity.⁴⁵ How long before there were calls for a Ministry for the North (the Lanna region) and the Northeast (*Isan*)? Where would this all end? Interior Ministry bureaucrats were bound to oppose any move that called for administrative authority for one part of the country to be transferred to a new agency. The three posts of provincial governor in these provinces would effectively be “lost” to the Bureau, and would probably be given mainly to locals from the region: they would constitute, in effect, a Malay-Muslim “quota”.

Security questions were also central to criticisms made of the proposals. While the report's authors insisted that security arrangements would be essentially unchanged, the Interior Ministry was currently deeply involved in security issues in the South, and the Bureau would assume these responsibilities in the Ministry's stead. The new minister and the consultative Chamber might eventually oppose some of the security strategies adopted by the military and the police, leading to a further decline in inter-agency relations that were often strained even under existing arrangements. Any media coverage of a split between the Chamber and the security forces would undermine military morale, and make fighting the militants even more of a challenge. The new agency was likely to be dominated by Malay-Muslim politicians and to support the promotion of more senior officials from the region. Military and police officers therefore feared that the agency would be full of people sympathetic to the militants, and might not be a reliable partner in the struggle against the insurgency. Would a region in which Malay-Muslims played important security roles be a safe and

comfortable place for the Queen and other members of the Royal Family to visit? There was, after all, a royal palace in Narathiwat. At the same time, those who argued that the new arrangements would weaken the security forces often also claimed that the violence was already under control, and that a security solution to the conflict was already in sight — thereby obviating any need for any political solution to be pursued.⁴⁶

By contrast, for some analysts of the conflict, the proposals simply did not go far enough.⁴⁷ By concentrating on modifications in the central administrative structure, the report failed fully to assuage demands for greater local control over the region's affairs. The consultative components of the proposals had a tokenistic quality to them; the functioning of local governance from the provincial level downwards remained essentially unchanged. This was very much a "Thai" solution to the problem. But the solution proposed reflected real concerns, shared by many Malay-Muslim informants as well as Thai government officials, that more participatory measures (such as popular elections for provincial governors or a regional assembly) could be subject to capture or manipulation by a dynamic and aggressive militant movement.⁴⁸ The proposals sought to reduce this risk by offering an intermediate solution, which aimed at bringing the hybridized Islamicists on board and strengthening their hand *vis-à-vis* more radical social and political forces.

When the report received its first public presentation at a seminar held at Chulalongkorn University on 30 June 2008, the reaction from the audience was generally quite critical.⁴⁹ Comments made in the hall reflected wider political anxieties at the time: Thailand was in the third year of an extended political crisis, one that had begun with the sale of telecoms giant Shin Corporation to Singapore's Temasek Holdings by the family of the then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in January 2006.⁵⁰ Since then, there had been two general elections, a military coup, a new constitution, and a series of dramatic court decisions, including one dissolving Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party. The Samak Sundaravej Government formed in early 2008 was widely viewed as a surrogate Thaksin administration, and Samak's deeply undistinguished Cabinet faced daily denunciation from the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), a protest movement that had taken to the streets. Thailand was convulsed with political confusion centred on the capital city, and the PAD's use of nationalist rhetoric over a border dispute with Cambodia made this a singularly inopportune moment for an initiative to decentralize power in the Deep South.

One critique of the report came from General Ekachai Siwilat, the director of the King Prajadhipok's Institute's Office for Peace and Governance, who questioned the methodology of the study and argued that many people in the region would not agree with such a proposal. In any case, he personally believed that power was already in the hands of people in the region through elected local government bodies, and shifting responsibility for the region from one central agency to another might make little difference. General Ekachai went on to discuss the growing Muslim population in the world, which he claimed was increasing by fifty million people per year. In a hundred years' time, two-thirds of the world's population would be Muslim: this raised the question of how Thai society could live with Muslims? He claimed that social order in the region could not be imposed by bureaucratic means, but had to come from the initiative of elected local politicians. General Ekachai suggested that the three provinces were already subject to special governance arrangements, of which the military-overseen SBPAC was one example. His arguments mixed alarmism about rising global numbers of Muslims with a progressive-sounding emphasis on local elections, and a highly conservative claim that the region already had its own distinctive governance arrangements. Ambiguous critiques of this kind were standard fare when the report was presented in public; opponents of change tended to advance a mixture of arguments that obscured and undermined the proposals.

The report received a much more favourable reception when presented by Srisompob to the House of Representatives Politics and Government Sub-Committee of the Committee for the Study of the Unrest in the Southern Border Provinces, on 10 July 2008.⁵¹ The members of the committee, including several past and present MPs from the region and some progressive-minded bureaucrats, were extremely sympathetic to the proposals. The main problem, several speakers argued, was simply how to build a coalition of support for ideas that were so contrary to mainstream thinking on the South. Former Pattani MP Muk Sulaiman argued that there was an urgent need for a media strategy to popularise the report and help people to understand that the creation of a new agency was not a threat to national security. Given that security-based approaches to the violence had singularly failed, it was really time to try something new, bold and innovative. Politicians were delighted to support a proposal that had been initiated by a group of mainly Buddhist academics, since the identity of the proposers gave greater credibility to the ideas contained in the report. When Srisompob spoke to an

audience of security officials a few days later, his presentation was the subject of a sympathetic and prominent front page story in the leading Thai language daily *Thai Rath*.⁵²

Nevertheless, the question posed by General Ekachai about how far the proposal really reflected the diverse views of people in the region remained a salient one. Those in the Deep South who were dedicated to resisting the power and authority of the Thai state had so far singularly failed to agree on a common solution to their grievances, and there was no certainty about what sort of political changes would assuage their frustrations and resentments. A question not debated in the Sub-Committee was whether this sort of proposal would really be acceptable to militant groups. Sub-Committee Chair Najmuddin privately wondered whether young militants in the villages would really be impressed by the proposals.⁵³

Part of the social problem in the border provinces was the alienation of villagers, and especially young people, from the viewpoints of the Malay-Muslim religious and political elite.⁵⁴ The Thai state had always sought to deal with the region through the mediation of these local elite: elite co-optation had been at the core of the SBPAC's strategy since its inception in the early 1980s. The report's proposals essentially called for a scaled-up and more extensive version of this strategy, but it remained unclear whether provisions such as the creation of village advisory councils would really produce the desired results. If the Thai government embraced the emerging local hybridized-Islamicist leadership in much the same way as the SBPAC had embraced the modernists in the 1980s and 1990s, might not a fresh wave of co-optation mean that this lower level of leadership also became discredited in the eyes of ordinary Malay-Muslims? The proposals in the report involved a calculated risk, making the optimistic assumption that leaders with better grassroots connections could successfully negotiate with both the Thai state and their Malay Muslim support base. The only way of testing such an assumption was to implement the proposals, and then see what happened.

Conclusion

After more than four years of serious fighting and daily killings, Thailand's southern border conflict appears no nearer to a resolution. It is becoming apparent that the highly decentralized militant movement is well able to resist the best efforts of the country's security forces. Nor does it seem likely that approaches based on ideas of

“reconciliation” and confidence building will restore the region to relative stability any time soon. Now may be the time to try a third approach: undercutting the militants with a bold proposal for the reform of local governance. This article has reviewed one possible such proposal: the creation of a new ministry for the South, and a set of consultative mechanisms to enhance the legitimacy of the Thai state in the border provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. These suggestions have been advanced by a research team on the basis of extensive local consultation and careful reflection. From an international perspective, the proposals are modest: they steer well clear of notions of autonomy and do not include a devolved, elected assembly or even elected provincial governors. They are fully compatible with maintaining Thailand as a unitary state. However, for some stakeholders — especially conservative bureaucrats, and Thai-Buddhists from other parts of the country — the proposals make far too many concessions to Malay-Muslim demands. Yet for other stakeholders, they may not go far enough to address the core problem: even if the proposals were implemented, people in the region would still lack the capacity to participate fully in their own governance. The report represents an attempt to stimulate further discussion and debate concerning the viability of a compromise political solution to the Southern Thai conflict.

A major strength of the proposals involves an attempt to demarginalize the Southern Thai conflict. A rumbling crisis in Bangkok which has been ongoing since January 2006 has largely overshadowed other burning questions of the day: the media, state agencies and civil society groups have been overwhelmingly preoccupied with a series of national-level street protests, elections, judicial and military interventions, as pro and anti-Thaksin forces have sought to gain the upper hand. The victims of violence in the South have been casualties of a serious lack of public and political attention. Giving the Deep South its own minister, agency and budgets would certainly help redress this persistent attention deficit. Only when addressing Thailand's Southern conflict becomes a national priority will any resolution be within sight.

NOTES

Srisompob Jitpiromsri wishes to thank the Mahidol University Research Center for Peacebuilding for supporting his research on these issues, as well as Sukree Langputeh, his other co-researchers, and his research assistants Ann, Nitnoi and Fit. Duncan McCargo gratefully acknowledges the support of the Economic and Social Research

Council for their support of his work on the Southern Thai conflict, 2005–08, through grant number RES-000-222-1344.

- 1 See Marc Askew, “Thailand’s Intractable Southern War: Policy, Insurgency and Discourse”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 30, no. 2 (August 2008): 186–214.
- 2 Information from “Population and Households Census 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000: Southern Provinces”, *National Statistical Office* (Bangkok: Prime Minister’s Office, 2003). Based on this data, Muslims comprised 83.4 per cent of the population in Narathiwat, 82 per cent in Pattani and 71 per cent in Yala.
- 3 See Alexander Horstmann, “Ethnohistorical Perspectives on Buddhist-Muslim Relations and Coexistence in Southern Thailand: From Shared Cosmos to the Existence of Hatred?”, *Sojourn*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2004): 91. Patani Malays generally refer to themselves as “nayu” (“Melayu”).
- 4 For a detailed discussion of the historical dimensions of the conflict, see Srisompob Jitpiromsri and Sukri Langputeh, *Kanpokkhrong thongthin baep phiset nai jangwat chaidae phaktai, raingan khrongkan wijai kanpokkhrong thongthin nai jangwat thi mi khwam laklai chatiphan* [Special Arrangements for Local Government in the Southern Border Provinces: Research Report on Local Government in Ethnically Diverse Provinces], Mahidol University Research Center for Peacebuilding, 30 June 2008, pp. 15–23.
- 5 For an overview of the conflict using an historical perspective, see Thanet Aphornsuvan, “Origins of Malay Muslim ‘Separatism’ in Southern Thailand”, in *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on a Plural Peninsula*, edited by Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).
- 6 This argument is detailed in Duncan McCargo, “Thaksin and the Resurgence of Violence in the Thai South”, in *Rethinking Thailand’s Southern Violence*, edited by Duncan McCargo (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), pp. 35–68 (an earlier version was published in *Critical Asian Studies* vol. 38, no. 1, February 2006).
- 7 On the pre-2004 renewed wave of violence, see Anthony Davis, “The Complexities of Unrest in Southern Thailand”, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, September 2002, pp. 16–19, and “Thailand Faces Up To Southern Extremist Threat”, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, October 2003, pp. 12–15.
- 8 For the best background sources on the 2004 upsurge in violence, see International Crisis Group, *Southern Thailand: Insurgency, Not Jihad, Asia Report 98*, May 2005 <<http://www.crisisgroup.org>>, and Supalak Ganjanakhundee and Don Pathan, *Santhiphap nai plaew phleung [Peace In Flames]* (Bangkok: Nation Books, 2004).
- 9 See Srisompob Jitpiromsri, “4 phi krung fai tai: khwam lomlaeo nayobai khum phuen thi si daeng” [Four and a half years of the Southern Conflict: The Failure of the Policy to control the Red Zones], at <www.deepsouthwatch.org> (accessed 28 July 2008).
- 10 People normally assumed that a particular killing had been carried out by militants if it followed soon after warning notes were received, or after the appearance of eggs, rice or pieces of white cloth (funeral symbols) near the homes of the victims. Nevertheless, by no means all Muslim deaths were caused by the militants; other killings were committed by the authorities, or resulted from “ordinary” personal or political conflicts. See Srisompob Jitpiromsri (with

- Panyasak Sobhonvasu), "Unpacking Thailand's Southern Conflict: The Poverty Of Structural Explanations", in *Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence*, edited by Duncan McCargo (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), pp. 108–09.
- 11 For a discussion of causes of the violence, see Srisompob, "Unpacking", op. cit.
 - 12 The Thaksin Government's use of extra-judicial killing and privileging of police power in the South was prefigured in various respects by the controversial 2003 "war on drugs"; for a discussion, see Supalak and Pathan, *Peace In Flames*, op. cit.
 - 13 National Reconciliation Commission, *Overcoming Violence Through The Power Of Reconciliation* (Bangkok: NRC, 2006), pp. 63–109.
 - 14 This point draws on several interviews with NRC commissioners conducted by McCargo in 2006. It is widely recognised that Thai politics since 2001 has involved tensions between "pro-Thaksin" and "pro-royalist" networks and forces.
 - 15 Gotham Ariya interview, 16 July 2008.
 - 16 Regular statistical updates in Thai on levels of violence, based on the database maintained by Srisompob Jitpiomsri, may be found at <<http://www.deepsouthwatch.org>>.
 - 17 This was a consistent finding during nearly three years of workshop and interview-based research with these groups.
 - 18 On the problems surrounding decentralization in Thailand, see Michael H. Nelson, ed., "Thailand: Problems with Decentralization?", in *Thailand's New Politics: KPI Yearbook 2001* (Nonthaburi and Bangkok: King Prajadhipok's Institute and White Lotus Press, 2002), pp. 219–81.
 - 19 See IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance), *Towards Liberating Democracy: Devolution of Power Matters*, IDEA and Peace Building Centre, Report of the Regional Workshop, Bangkok (Stockholm: Mahidol University, 16–17 January 2007).
 - 20 For a discussion, see Michael Connors, "On Trial: Competing Interpretations of Violence in the South of Thailand", *Asean Focus*, November 2005 <<http://www.aseanfocus.com/asiananalysis/article.cfm?articleID=896>>.
 - 21 *Matichon*, 15 January 2007.
 - 22 Prawase Wasi, "Nayok ratamontri kap kan sang khwam pen ekkapap nai yutthasat dap fai tai", [The Prime Minister and Building Unity in the Strategy to Quell the Southern Violence], 24 February 2007, 3 pp., available at <www.prawase.com>.
 - 23 Simon Montlake, "Thai Leaders Spar Over Autonomy for South", *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 February 2008.
 - 24 Srisompob Jitpiomsri led most of these workshops; Duncan McCargo attended ten of them as a participant observer.
 - 25 This survey research was conducted by research teams from Chulalongkorn University and Prince of Songkhla University, Pattani campus in 2005 on behalf of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), on the tolerance of people concerning the Southern Problem. A sampling design was prepared to carry out questionnaire surveys in five Southern border provinces (including Satun and Songkhla) and in Bangkok. In the Southern provinces, the research team

from PSU Pattani was responsible for carrying out the survey. To come up with a representative sample, the sampling procedure was strictly scientific and mainly employed probability sampling. The research tools comprised structured questionnaires designed to obtain certain information and measure attitudes of respondents concerning tolerance and political orientations. The Southern team added an additional question, asking people about their attitude concerning the appropriate form of decentralization relevant to the context of the conflict in the subregion. The target population were people aged over eighteen years in five Southern border provinces: Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Songkhla and Satun. 400 respondents were selected from each province, totalling 2,000 altogether. The researchers used stratified random sampling by subdividing the population into different strata, in mutually exclusive segments. The units obtained at this phase were randomly selected as follows. The provinces were divided by subdistricts (tambon). Songkhla and Satun have 163 tambon, while Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat have 137 tambon. One half of the total tambon in each group were selected, that is 76 tambons from the three provinces and 42 from Songkhla and Satun. This was a stratified-systematic random sampling using the list of all tambons as a sampling frame to find a random start in order to conduct interval skip in the process. Villages and voting units (in municipalities where there are no villages) were then randomly selected from each tambon. We identified 434 villages and 131 voting units in municipal areas in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces. This was the sampling frame for a further sampling procedure. The survey team then selected 300 samples of ordinary respondents plus 100 bureaucrats from each province. Overall, we obtained 1,200 samples from the three southernmost provinces. In the end, 874 responses were received from ordinary respondents in these provinces. Responses from bureaucrats have not been included here.

- 26 To conduct this kind of survey, a budget equivalent to around 300 baht per respondent was required — though respondents were not themselves remunerated.
- 27 More details concerning this survey may be found in Srisompob and Sukree, *Special Arrangements*, op. cit., pp. 55–57.
- 28 Concerning the predicament of Buddhists in the Deep South of Thailand, see the forthcoming symposium on this topic in the February 2009 issue of *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*.
- 29 For a relevant discussion, see the quotation from a participant at a workshop of Muslim educationalists held on 9 March 2006, cited in Srisompob and Sukree, *Special Arrangements*, op. cit., p. 61.
- 30 For the full text of the report, see Srisompob and Sukri, *Special Arrangements*, op. cit., 2008.
- 31 This changing character is discussed in Srisompob and Sukree, *Special Arrangements*, op. cit., pp. 23–40.
- 32 The categories used here — “modernist”, “Islamist” and “hybridized Islamicist” — are inherently problematic, and would doubtless be queried by some scholars of Islam. The Thai report employs the term “secular Islamicists” rather than “hybridized Islamicists”, which we have adopted for this article. The report uses all of these terms as heuristic devices to capture and depict categories of

- actors and informants encountered during fieldwork, but both the authors of the report and the authors of this article are aware of the shortcomings and drawbacks associated with this terminology.
- 33 For data showing the exponential growth of private Islamic schools in recent years, see *Khwamkhatyaeng rawang pattana kap saphap sangkhom nai 3 jangwat chaidaen phaktai*, edited by Ammar Siamwalla [The Conflict Between Development and Social Conditions in the Three Southern Border Provinces] (Bangkok: Khana anukamkansuksa withithang kanpattana phua khwammankhong khong manut, Khana kammathikan samanachan haeng chat [Sub-Committee for Educational Development for Human Security, National Reconciliation Commission], 2008), p. 61.
 - 34 A chart showing the detailed evolution of religious elites over the past fifty years is presented in Srisompob and Sukree, *Special Arrangements*, op. cit., p. 48.
 - 35 For a detailed elaboration of this problem, see Srisompob and Sukree, *Special Arrangements*, op. cit., p. 39.
 - 36 Bourdieu, Pierre, "Social Space and Symbolic Power", *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 3, 1989. An alternative perspective has recently been advanced by leading academic Chaiwat Satha-Anand, who presents the southern border region of Thailand as an "imagined land", analogous to Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities". See *Paendin jintonakan: rat lae kankhaekhai panha khwamrunraeng nai phak tai*, edited by Chaiwat Satha-Anand [Imagined Land: The State and Solutions for the Southern Violence] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2008).
 - 37 For a critical view of the SBPAC, see Marc Askew, *Conspiracy, Politics and a Disorderly Border: The Struggle To Comprehend Insurgency In Thailand's Deep South* (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center Washington, 2007). Askew argues that the role and significance of the original Centre has been consistently overstated. He has also suggested that, so far, the reconstituted Centre has been of limited effectiveness: Askew, "Thailand's Intractable Southern War", op. cit., pp. 198–200.
 - 38 See International Crisis Group, "Thailand: Political Turmoil and the Southern Insurgency", *Policy Briefing*, 28 August 2008, available at <www.crisisgroup.org>, p. 9.
 - 39 For a relevant discussion, see Srisompob and Sukree, *Special Arrangements*, op. cit., pp. 100–02.
 - 40 *Ibid*, p. 101.
 - 41 *Ibid*, p. 105.
 - 42 There is no detailed discussion of Islamic law questions in the report, but the authors envisage the further implementation of civil, family and inheritance law. They are not advocating the introduction of Islamic criminal law or associated penalties.
 - 43 The idea of representative bureaucracy for the South is discussed in Ora-orn Poocharoen, "Representative Bureaucracy: An Alternative for Bridging the Gap between the State and Citizen", draft research paper, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, 24 December 2006.
 - 44 These secondary policies are listed in a table in Srisompob and Sukree, *Special Arrangements*, op. cit., p. 106.

- 45 Views of this kind are routinely expressed by government officials and security personnel when ideas of substantive decentralization are raised.
- 46 As Askew explains, by November 2007 the military were claiming that they had gained the upper hand against the militants: “We have ended their networks”, insisted Army spokesman Colonel Akkara Thiprote (*Bangkok Post*, 10 November 2007, cited in Askew, “Thailand’s Intractable Southern War”, op. cit., p. 197). Statements by the security forces during the first half of 2008 repeatedly included similar questionable assertions.
- 47 For example former NRC member Gothom Ariya expressed a preference for proposals involving an elected consultative assembly, such as in Northern Ireland. Interview, 16 July 2008.
- 48 This point reflects concerns expressed in interviews and discussions during the research process.
- 49 This and the following paragraph draw on details of the Chulalongkorn University seminar given in the summary at <<http://www.prachatai.com/05web/th/home/12712>>.
- 50 For a discussion of the wider political context in Thailand, see Duncan McCargo, “Thailand: State of Anxiety”, in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2008*, edited by Daljit Singh and Tin Maung Maung Than (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), pp. 333–56.
- 51 This paragraph draws upon fieldnotes and voice recordings made at this meeting on 10 July 2008.
- 52 “Khetpokkhong phiset klipom chaidaentai”, *Thai Rath*, 15 July 2008.
- 53 Conversation with Najmuddin Umar, 10 July 2008.
- 54 This is the core argument of Duncan McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).