A Breakdown of Southern Thailand's Insurgent Groups

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Thailand has faced an Islamist secessionist movement since 2001-2002 that has led to the deaths of more than 1,500 people. There have been nearly 400 successful bombings, many more attempted bombings and more than 400 arson attacks. Militants have assassinated more than 600 people. Ten of the 33 districts in the deep south are "plagued by violence" according to the Thai Ministry of the Interior, and the number is increasing. Yet, little is actually known about the insurgents' structure and capacity. To date, there has not been a single credible claim of responsibility, nor have the insurgents publicly stated their goals or political platform. Their unwillingness to disclose any details has worked to their advantage and left Thai intelligence in a quandary. There are a number of insurgent groups working together, and unlike the insurgency in the 1960s to the early-1990s, when groups were sharply divided over their goals and ideology and proved absolutely incapable of working together, today's organizations share a common Islamist agenda and are demonstrating unprecedented coordination and cooperation. No organization is trying to discredit another to build up its own power base.

The Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO)

PULO was founded in India in 1968 by Kabir Abdul Rahman, a Pattani aristocrat and Islamic scholar educated in the Middle East. The founding ideology was "religion, race, homeland, humanitarianism." His goal was to establish an independent Muslim state through armed struggle. PULO splintered, and by the mid-1990s it was all but defunct, with much of its aging leadership living in exile in Europe. PULO held a watershed "reunification congress that brought together some 40 leading PULO figures from Thailand, Europe and the Middle East between April 29 and May 1, 2005 in Damascus" in an attempt to bring itself back from irrelevancy [1].

PULO has taken a degree of responsibility through web site postings warning foreigners to stay away from southern Thailand, but they have no control over the insurgents [2]. PULO has held secret talks with the government, but this seems to be an attempt by them to leverage their limited degree of influence. A PULO spokesman recently caused controversy in an August 9 report aired by the BBC when he suggested that PULO could carry-out terrorist attacks in Bangkok: "Maybe we will target other areas, like Bangkok or Phuket—I can't guarantee it won't happen" (BBC, August 9). Yet, this goes against most of what the PULO leadership has stated and against the reality that PULO has no operational control over the insurgents.

PULO has always been a very secular organization, emphasizing Pattani secessionism, not religion. Yet this fact ignores the extreme religious undertones and forced implementation of Salafi values on the society. Former PULO members are very clearly involved in the insurgency, but it is not clear whether they are fighting in PULO's name or whether they have joined forces with newer and more radical organizations. Clearly, their experience in cross-border operations and their control or ownership of land that can be used for training has been important for the younger insurgents. Yet, even PULO leaders admit that the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Koordinasi (BRN-C) is spearheading the insurgency.

Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Koordinasi

The BRN-C was one of three splinters of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (National Revolution Front, BRN), which was opposed to the nationalist agenda of PULO. The BRN was founded in March 1963 by Ustadz Haji Abdul Karim Hassan and developed close ties to the Communist Party of Malaya and was influenced by the ideology of pan-Arab socialism. By 1984, the BRN had three discernable factions: BRN-Congress, BRN-Coordinate and BRN-Uran. The BRN-Congress, under the leadership of Jehku Peng (Rosa Bursao), pursued a military struggle. The BRN-Coordinate, or BRN-C, under Haji M, pursued a more political struggle in the mosques and emerged as the largest and best organized of the three groups.

BRN-C is distinctly Islamist and developed through a large network of mosques and Islamic schools. Thai intelligence now speaks of the insurgency as being a "pondok-based" movement. General Pisarn Wattanawongkeeree, the former commander of Thai armed forces in the south, said, "There is no doubt that the basis for this new insurgency are the ustadz (religious teachers). This is something that has been in the making for a long time" (Time Magazine Asian Edition, October 11, 2004). A police official stated, "We suspect some [Islamic] schools might have played a significant role in these shootouts. We think that they might have been used as training grounds for militants, or teachers might have indoctrinated their pupils with fundamentalist ideologies" (Reuters, May 7, 2004). There is now a critical mass: some 2,500 graduates of Middle Eastern institutions who have returned to the south.

The BRN-C is attempting to become a mass organization. In a BRN document that was found in Narathiwat's Joh I Rong district, the authors outlined a plan to increase popular support to between 200,000 and 300,000 people, 10 percent of whom were to be recruited into the paramilitary wing (author interview, Bangkok, April 20, 2005). Its main recruitment vehicle is a student organization, Pemuda (Youth), established in 1992. The Thai government has "blacklisted some 4,000 youths for suspected involvement in Pemuda" (Thai News Agency, January 13, 2005).

The number of members in the BRN-C is not known, but Thai officials estimate that there are approximately 1,000 members. Its current leaders are, for the most part, schoolteachers and ustadz from roughly 18 schools, including the Thamawittiya Foundation School in Yala, the Samphan Wittaya School, Jihad Wittaya School and Pattana Islam. Teachers at these schools have been arrested with weapons, bomb-making materials and bomb-making instructional videos. The current known BRN-C leadership includes Afghan-trained Masae Useng, Sapaeng Basoe, Abdullah Munir, Dulloh Waeman (Ustadz Loh), Abroseh Parehruepoh, Abdulkanin Kalupang, Isma-ae Toyalong, Arduenan Mama, Bororting Binbuerheng and Yusuf Rayalong (Ustadz Ismae-ae). The BRN-C is structured along strict cellular lines. It is estimated that 70 percent of the villages have a cell of between five and ten people. Many villages have two or more cells.

Gerakan Mujahideen Islami Pattani (GMIP)

The GMIP was founded in 1986 by Wae-Hama Wae-Yuso, but broke up by 1993 as a result of internal squabbling. In 1995, Nasori Saesaeng (Awae Kaelae), Jehku Mae Kuteh (Doromae Kuteh), Nasae Saning and a handful of other Afghan veterans consolidated power. For most of the 1990s, the GMIP was more of a criminal gang than a group of freedom fighters. It was thought to have run guns for other Muslim insurgent groups, in particular the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). The GMIP was engaged in kidnapping, extortion, contract killings and "enforcement." As one senior Thai Intelligence official said, "The Gerakan mujahideen had a poor record in the past. It was really a criminal gang. But they purged their leadership" (author interview, Bangkok, March 16, 2005). Thai authorities seemed to take the GMIP more seriously beginning in August 2003, when security forces gunned down two senior members in Pattani—its Afghan-trained operations chief Nasae Saning and Mahma Maeroh.

In January 2004, the government announced that it was searching for Doromae Kuteh, the head of the GMIP and "the mastermind of many evil attacks on the south." On January 26, 2004, Thai authorities announced that the Malaysian government had detained him under the Internal Security Act (ISA). Unconfirmed reports suggest that Malaysia deported Kuteh to Syria. Other Afghanistan-trained members of the GMIP include Nasori Saesaeng (Awae Keleh) and Wae Ali Copter Waeji. Karim Karubang (Doromae Lohmae) is another top leader.

Jemaah Islamiya (JI) approached the GMIP in 1999–2000 as part of the Rabitatul Mujahideen, but it is unknown how deep or strong a relationship was forged. Following the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the GMIP distributed leaflets in Yala calling for a jihad and support for Osama bin Laden. It has a stated goal of turning Pattani Raya into an Islamic state by 2008. The GMIP probably maintained a close relationship with the Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia (Malaysian Mujahideen Group, KMM), also founded by a veteran of the Afghan mujahideen, Zainon Ismail. Nik Adli Nik Aziz, another former leader of the KMM, trained with Nasori Saeseng in Afghanistan, and the two became close friends. The KMM was founded at approximately the same time as the "new" GMIP on October 12, 1995. Members of the KMM procured weapons and engaged in training in southern Thailand. In return, many of the Thai secessionists were able to seek sanctuary in parts of Malaysia where the KMM had influence or where government officials were sympathetic.

The GMIP tried to raise its profile in early 2002 by staging a number of raids on police and army outposts to steal weapons in the three southernmost provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani. Between 2002 and 2004, the group was responsible for the deaths of 40 police officers. Raids on armories have been the group's modus operandi for the past five years. Karim Karubang is believed to have been the leader of the January 4, 2004 raid that restarted the insurgency.

The GMIP is a rural-based organization and its operations reflect this. Thai officials have linked the GMIP to attacks on military convoys using roadside IEDs and on rural police and military outposts. Thai intelligence documents estimate that the GMIP has 40 well-trained cell leaders in the south.

The Runda Kumpulan Kecil (RKK)

In late 2005, the Thai government began to acknowledge that a number of BRN-C militants had been trained in Indonesia, although it was not known by whom. Both Thai officials and the media began to discuss the group known as the Runda Kumpulan Kecil (Bangkok Post, November 24, 2005). The RKK, however, is not a completely independent group per se, but simply a name for BRN-C militants who received some training in Indonesia; mostly, it seems, while studying there. Police believe that the head of this cell is Rorhing Ahsong, also known as Ustaz Rorhing, and that it has some 500 members (Bangkok Post, June 17, 28).

The 17 suspects arrested in connection with the October 16, 2005, killing of a monk all claimed to be part of this group. Police asserted that they were trained in Bandung, Indonesia (Bangkok Post, November 28, 2005). The commander of Police Region 9 said that the group that decapitated an army commando in early January 2006 had also been trained by Islamic scholars in Indonesia. Likewise, three men suspected of participating in an ambush on a commando unit in Yala's Banang Sata district on January 2 said they had received training in guerrilla tactics from the RKK in Indonesia. In late July, police detained Udeeman Samoh, 21, and Sapee-aree Jehkor, 21, both of the RKK. Investigators said Udeeman is a very skilful bomb-maker while Sapee-aree was considered one of the cell's top members (Bangkok Post, July 29).

In December 2005, Thai army chief General Sonthi Boonyaratglin traveled to Indonesia where the two sides agreed to further cooperate in counter-terrorism. The Indonesians agreed to monitor links between the southern Thais and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

New PULO

Two members of PULO—Ar-rong Moo-reng and Hayi Abdul Rohman Bazo—founded New PULO in 1995. Bazo and his deputy, Hadji Mae Yala, were two of the four Thai Muslim leaders arrested by Malaysian authorities in 1998 and turned over to Thai authorities. After that, Saarli Taloh-Meyaw headed New PULO until his death in February 2000. The current leadership of New PULO is unclear; the organization may be under the control of Kamae Yusof. A handful of arrests in the past two years suggest that members have some involvement in the unrest. Many of New PULO's leaders and original members were trained in Libya and Syria and have considerable technical bomb-making skills. Two members of New PULO—Marudee Piya, who is the head of the group's Narathiwat operations, and Paosee Yi-ngor, a top demolitions expert—are on the Thai government's most wanted list.

Jemaah Salafi

Muhammad Haji Jaeming (Abdul Fatah) founded Jemaah Salafi in the late 1990s. He trained in the Sadda Camp in Afghanistan in 1989 and returned to southern Thailand, where he established the madrassa Hutae Tua in Narathiwat. Abdul Fatah represented Jemaah Salafi at JI's three Rabitatul Mujahideen meetings in Malaysia in 1999–2000. He served as a liaison and moneyman for Hambali and seems to be one of the few Thais who favors the pan-Southeast Asian agenda of JI. Yet, Jemaah Salafi has played a very limited role in the violence as Abdul Fatah is under intense scrutiny by Thai security forces and is in no position to get involved in the current unrest.

Conclusion

The preceding groups are responsible for the continuing insurgency in southern Thailand. The past few months have seen repeated coordinated bombing campaigns by these insurgents, such as an operation in June that involved more than 70 bombs, an operation on August 1 and the most recent operation on August 31 that targeted at least 20 commercial banks in Yala province. Coordination between the groups will continue to evolve as they pursue their shared Islamist agenda.

Notes

1. The congress elected Tengku Bira Kotanila as titular president and the head of a 17-member executive council. Anthony Davis, "Interview: Kasturi Mahkota, Foreign affairs spokesman, Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO)," Jane's Intelligence Review, August 6, 2006.

2. PULO and Bersatu's joint "Statement of Protest," issued on October 31, 2004, can be found at www.pulo.org/statement.htm. Also see, Ed Cropley, "Exclusive: Malay Separatists Say Behind Southern Thailand Unrest," Reuters, August 28, 2005; Tony Cheng, "Behind the Bombs," BBC, August 30, 2005.

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