

## **CHAPTER III**

### **THAILAND'S POLICY TO ISLAMIC ARTICULATION IN SOUTHERN THAILAND**

The southern Thai province of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat have become hot-spot for insurgency against the Thai security forces. This has become very obvious since January 2004 in the period of Thaksin the Prime Minister of Thailand. The tools or the way that is very crucial is the policy; policy is the means or the way you conduct with appropriate situations. In this chapter the writer would like to explain the policy during Thaksin authority.

#### **A. The South under Thaksin Shinawat's government (2001-2006)**

##### **1. The policy documents**

##### **1.1 The National Security Policy (2003-2006)**

Interestingly, the Office of National Security Council (ONSC) did not produce a specific policy document concerning the Southern Border provinces for the next period from 2003-2006 (the period during which the NSC policy would be implemented by government agencies was reduced from five years previously to four years). Why Thaksin decide not to publish a policy document on the South? The reason could be that, reflecting the general mood in the country at the end of 2002, the government decided that the situation in the Deep South was not serious enough to warrant a specific policy document. The coming to power of Thaksin Shinawatra after the January 2001 elections had heralded a new era in Thai politics. At the end of 2002, the vast majority of the country was under the

charm of Thaksin, one of the first Prime Ministers to implement his campaign promises: social security; such as universal health care, the village fund, the suspension of farmer's debts. For many politicians, even the most seasoned ones like Nakhorn Sri Thammarath MP for the Democrat party and former Foreign minister Surin Pitsuwan, considered that the 'Southern issue' was on the way to being solved. In an interview in mid-1990s, Khun Surin told us "The Malay Muslims are being integrated to the Thai society through their parliamentary representatives; they are becoming partners in the social contract."<sup>24</sup> Such an apparent misreading of the situation by such an intelligent academic and politician is rather puzzling. But maybe, Khun Surin was, by then, more used to Bangkok political circles than to those in the Malay villages of the Deep South. This illusion that everything was on the right path in the South would explode towards the end of 2003, when the violent incidents became more and more frequent and more political in nature. Between the end of the separatists insurgencies at the beginning of the nineties and the new wave of militantism from 2002-2003, there were only sporadic incidents, mostly extortion by former separatists fights of local businessman. The most serious incident happened in 1993 when thirty government schools were torched during the night, for reasons still unclear. Some Thai Media implied strongly that General Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh, at the time a minister in Chuan government, had a hand in the wave of schools burning.<sup>25</sup> At the end of 2003, it became difficult to deny the rise of violent militantism in the southernmost provinces. From then on, Thaksin's government took the Southern

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<sup>24</sup> Dubus, 1994, p. 56

<sup>25</sup> *Manager Magazine*, October 1993

policy directly into its own hands and the NSC was not responsible anymore for dealing with the issue. Policies were directly designed by the government.<sup>26</sup>

This policy document is cohesive and straight to the point. This might have been down to the influence of General Winai Patiyakul, a brilliant military officer, who was secretary-general of the NSC at the time.

Interestingly, there is not, even once, a specific mention of the tensions in the Southern border provinces, as if there were no problems there. But as the document was written in the wake of the terrorist attack against the World Trade Towers (WTC) in New York on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, the whole text is imbued with the thinking that the Kingdom is not immune from the terrorist threats and that government agencies have to prepare themselves for a possible strike. At the time the document was written it was known that the terrorist organization Jemaah Islamiya, composed of Malaysian, Indonesian and Singaporean, was also showing an interest in Thailand, particularly at the Southern provinces. We will see in the next section what approach the NSC has taken towards the “terrorist threat” in this policy document.

The document also explains clearly that its content is simply a “strategic framework of operation for safeguarding national interests” to serve as guidelines to governments agencies in their specific field of work.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Duncan McCargo, “Thaksin and the resurgence of violence in the Thai South. Network Monarchy Strikes Back?” *Critical Asian Studies*, No. 38, Editions Routledge, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Office of the National Security Council, *The National Security Policy 2003-2006*, December 2002.

On the other hand, there is a Confidential Policy Document (June 2006), A confidential document, *Developments in the Southern Provinces of Thailand*, written in June 2006 by the Thai army provides both an assessment of the situation in the South and a review of the government's programs being implemented there. This document is not an official document, but was given by the Thai army to some diplomats in order to brief them on the situation. This four page document contends that the root issues in the region are "socio-economic problems", which are exploited by the rebels notably through "distorting religion", in order to benefit their own political interest. Thus, the document asserts, a number of measures aiming to improve the educational system and to stimulate economic growth in the region should help appease tensions and solve the situation. It is interesting to note the repetition in most official documents of the notion that the Southern border provinces are under-developed and in need of strong economic stimulation, although the reasons why this potentially very rich region has not benefitted from its natural resources are never explored.

As former policy documents stated, the text also recognizes the lack of good understanding between government officials and local residents as a key factor of the instability in the region. To cope with this issue, only officials "sensitized to the unique characteristics of the region" are being sent to the three provinces and "cultural awareness programs" have been initiated. Following the international criticisms against the government handling of two major incidents – the Krue Se mosque massacre in April 2004 and the Tak Bai massacre in October 2004, the Thai army commits to prevent a recurrence of such incidents and to

follow international standards in crowd control techniques. The document specifically mentions the setting up of a special "Riot control company" based in the South, but this unit seems to have been extremely discreet so far.

The economic stimulation package is being centered on the establishment of a "*Halal* food industry", a policy which makes sense but which does not seem to have been forcefully implemented, and on the provision of low interest loans. It is, again, striking that the political dimension of the Southern issue is not even mentioned, and the cultural aspect is glossed over with the same jargon previously used in policy papers over past decades. Among the educational initiatives listed in the document, one item deals with the government will promote Islamic studies at state primary schools. It further says that the government encourages local schools to teach Malay and the region's history. From our field observations, the second of these latter initiatives has never been implemented. It would also be interesting to know which version of the "region's history" the government would want to encourage.

Highly distrustful of the bureaucracy and imbued with a know-it-all attitude, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was not the kind of leader to let policy documents limit his field of action. Thus, it is not surprising that there has been a gulf separating the content of the policy documents and the real policy implemented on the ground by the government and its local representatives. Very reactive, impetuous and opportunistic, Thaksin continually shifted his policy on the South, sometimes promoting harsh measures and sometimes playing on a policy of appeasement. Three main thrusts can be discerned during this period: the

will of Thaksin to dismantle the “old power networks” associated with the monarchy in the South, the adjustment of Thaksin’s policy after he was confronted by this network monarchy and the impact of the emergency decree.

## 1.2 The emergency Decree and its consequence

The Executive decree on public administration in emergency situations (or Emergency Decree), imposed by the government on July 19<sup>th</sup> 2005, adopted an approach totally opposite to the one suggested by the NRC. From then, it became clear that Thaksin never really had the intention of heeding the advice of the “wise men” appointed to the Commission, but merely wanted to diffuse the tensions accumulating between him and the palace. The NRC members were especially shocked by the imposition of the decree because they were neither consulted nor, even, informed of the coming development. At that point, many members wanted to quit the NRC, it was by then clear that there could be no more trust between them and the Thaksin’s administration.

Written in order to replace martial law, the Emergency Decree, which could be imposed by the Prime minister on any regions for any period of time, was actually very similar to the martial law in terms of content. The main difference was that it did not carry the same stigma as the martial law in the eyes of the international community.