

Why So Much Conflict in Thailand?

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Abstract

Thailand has since 2004 formed an exception to the general peace trend in East Asia. An insurgency in its deep south has cost several thousand lives. Thailand has also engaged in a deadly border conflict with Cambodia and there have been violent incidents in Bangkok, as part of a polarized struggle for power between bitterly opposed political factions. Why does Thailand go against the regional grain? We seek an explanation to the Thai exception by investigating to what extent the southern conflict, the border dispute and the struggle over government are causally interlinked. The latter, we suggest, has been the determining factor, and the main explanation for the upsurge of conflict in Thailand is the lack of civilian control with the military, which has weakened state capacity and made it possible to topple elected governments in coups, court decisions and street-based campaigns.

Introduction

Since 1979 the East Asian region has been remarkably peaceful, with very few armed conflicts. Northeast Asia has had none at all, and Southeast Asia has seen a decline both in the number and intensity of its armed conflicts. Until the early 2000s, Thailand was part of the peace trend. Then a new generation of Malay Muslim militants in its southern provinces launched an armed campaign against the state. It escalated dramatically in 2004 and has since taken several hundred lives annually. In Bangkok, Thai politics went through a seismic shift with the electoral victory of the new Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) in 2001 and the coming to power of its leader, the telecom magnate Thaksin Shinawatra. Backed by his electoral success and his fortune, Thaksin was able to build up a new form of political network, partly based on

“insider dealing and structural corruption” (McCargo 2005: 512). A polarized struggle took off in 2005 when a complex elite “network monarchy” seeking to protect the powers of the King, army, judiciary and bureaucracy against Thaksin’s “usurpation” (McCargo 2005) resorted to a combination of judicial indictments, street based demonstrations and, in 2006, a military coup to overthrow him. In the following years, Yellow Shirts and Red Shirts confronted the governments of the day; a border dispute with Cambodia escalated, and an insurgency in the Malay Muslim south continued unabated. We look at how these three conflicts are interlinked, either by feeding on each other or by originating in a common factor. The key factor behind the violence in Bangkok, as well as behind the clashes at the border and the inability of the central government to cope with the southern situation, was the constant national power struggle, with six national elections (2001, 2005, 2007, 2008 (to the Senate), 2011, 2014), one constitutional referendum (2008), two military coups (2006, 2014), one judicial coup (2008), and five major street-based campaigns aiming to overthrow the government (Yellow Shirt 2005–6 and 2008; Red Shirt 2009 and 2010; People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) 2013–14).

With a basis in secondary literature complemented with some interviews, we analyse how this rapid sequence of political crises affected the level of violence not only in the streets of Bangkok but also in the more distant border dispute with Cambodia as well as in the southern periphery. We then ask how such an upsurge of violence could happen in a middle income country, a founding member of ASEAN, situated in the world’s main growth region. The answer, we propose, is to be found in weak state capacity, particularly with regard to the lack of civilian control with the military, whose main loyalty has been with the network monarchy rather than with any elected government. The room of manoeuvre of this independent military is helped by its relatively high popular legitimacy in the midst of the turmoil created by politicians. A survey undertaken shortly before the May 2014 military coup showed that 67 percent of the large majority of Thais who considered themselves politically neutral agreed with the statement that the military can take over to govern the country if the government is not capable (corresponding percentage for Yellow Shirt supporters was 60 and for Red Shirt supporters a mere 16) (Bjarnegård and Melander 2014). In other words, the independence of the military is boosted by its popularity. We argue that Thailand’s weak state capacity with regard to military control plays out in all the three conflicts. We demonstrate that although the three disputes (incompatibilities) are different, the fact that they have turned violent, and that violence in the south was allowed to escalate in 2004 and then continue on a high level for more than a decade, are interlinked.

The Peace Trend

Since the 1980s, Southeast Asia has seen a trend towards more peaceful relations both internationally and domestically (Tønnesson 2013). This has facilitated economic growth through trade, investments and transnational divisions of labour. In the whole of East Asia (Northeast and Southeast), the only inter-state armed conflict with more than 25 battle deaths in one year that has occurred since 1988 is the Thai-Cambodian border conflict, which reached that threshold in 2011. This is the only armed conflict that has ever been fought between two members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Several conflicts in the region have ended since the 1980s either in defeat for the insurgents or a peace agreement. Others have been frozen by ceasefire agreements (notably in Myanmar) or become less active. The former French Indochina countries (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) ended their long period of civil and international wars with the Paris agreement on Cambodia in 1991, and the demise of the Khmer Rouge in 1998. All three have joined ASEAN. So has Myanmar, who drastically reduced its level of internal conflict through a series of ceasefire agreements from 1989 onward. The long ceasefire in Kachin State broke down in 2011, but it is telling that the current government in Naypyidaw, who chaired ASEAN in 2014, has worked intensely with a peace plan aiming to arrive at a national ceasefire agreement with all of its non-state armed groups, in order to pave the way for a national political dialogue. Indonesia saw an upsurge of armed conflict and political violence after the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 but after 2005, when a peace agreement was signed by the government and the Free Aceh movement, the political violence died down not just in Aceh but in most parts of this nation of 220 million inhabitants.

For a long time, Thailand seemed to go with the peace grain. In the early 1980s, it overcame its long communist insurgency through a combination of repression and amnesty, and also instituted a surveillance and reward system on its southern periphery so its Malay Muslim opponents were pacified (McCargo 2008). Most international analysts were caught by surprise when Thailand made its subsequent violent turn. The Philippines is the only other Southeast Asian country that has not been able to reduce its level of internal armed conflict. However, in March 2014, its government signed a comprehensive peace agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) after many years of negotiations.

Thailand's diverging path is all the more surprising as it has long been a middle income country, which in the 1990s adopted a liberal political system based on competitive elections and a vibrant civil society. Democracy and prosperity are often seen as factors reducing the risk of armed conflict. Paul Collier (Collier and Rohner 2008; Collier 2009: 20–21) find that while democracies have experienced more political violence than autocracies in countries with a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of less than \$2,700 (such as Myanmar), democracies have been

significantly more peaceful than autocracies on higher income levels. With a GNI per capita of \$5,340 in 2013, only slightly less than China's \$6,807 (World Bank 2014), Thailand should not be at risk. The Thai economy, however, has lost momentum during its years of internal crises. As of 2004, the Thai GNI per capita was much higher than the average for developing East Asia and Pacific countries (\$2,400 versus \$1,416). By 2013, however, its national income had dropped below the average (\$5,340 versus \$5,536). The main reason was China's phenomenal growth but Thailand's growth did not just fall behind China's. It fell behind other developing countries' growth as well. What we see is a tragedy in two stages. First, Thailand's relative prosperity failed to save it from internal turmoil and then turmoil weakened its economy further.

The regional peace in Southeast Asia has been ascribed variously to interdependence through trade and investments, new alliance patterns, border agreements, more capable judiciaries, more professional and better equipped police and armed forces, more accountable governments, and consensus oriented discourses inspired by "the ASEAN Way" (Tønnesson 2009; HSR 2010; Kivimäki 2010; 2014). Mueller (2007 [2004]: 174–77) finds that the main reason why armed conflict in developing countries has been declining in much of the world is more "coherent political systems and disciplined military and policing forces." When he wrote this in 2003, he used Thailand as an example of "positive leadership" along with South Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines and most of Latin America. Thailand had prospered until 1997, and experienced a remarkable recovery from the Asian Crisis under Thaksin's premiership 2001–03. Mueller's book went into press just as Thailand's spiral of conflict began.

How could this happen? We think the key explanation is a failure to adapt the country's system of governance to conform to the needs of a modern society bureaucracy. Economic growth increases a government's legitimacy if its leaders are seen to have achieved it through their policies. Legitimacy is also enhanced if a government can increase its revenue through taxation, and use it to provide infrastructure, education, health and affordable finance for the population and its enterprises. Increased revenues also strengthen the capacity of the state to maintain law and order if used to build well-managed and loyal police and military forces. Importantly, however, increased revenues also raise the stakes of national politics. To the extent that the state expands its presence and role in a society beyond that of protecting its territory and maintaining a monopoly on violence it becomes increasingly important for various interest groups to influence state policies. While pre-modern peasants did their best to keep state agents at arm's length, modern populations demand access to government services and subsidies. The electorate wants more in return for its votes than a stack of money. They demand real influence and support leaders who make credible promises to provide services. Governments must thus be able to manage rising expectations in order to prevent social movements from resorting to illegal means in their struggle. Governments must also make sure that they get credit for economic

achievements. When governments are seen mainly as obstacles to business, either because of unwanted interference or incompetent macro-economic management, or because too little is given back to the population in terms of services, then informal networks outside of the state gain strength (Bjarnegård 2013: 89 ff). This can weaken state capacity and increase the risk of conflict. “State capacity” refers to the effectiveness of a state; its power to implement the political objectives of decision-makers (Mann 1988; Slater 2010; Htun and Weldon 2010: 211). State capacity does not just affect the government itself but also the opportunities open to its opponents. Before they decide to rebel they must take into account the government’s capacity for repressing or accommodating their interests. If the repressive capacity is high, rebellion may be too costly. If the accommodative capacity is high, rebellion may not be felt as necessary. While it has become foolhardy for rebels to challenge a national army in guerrilla style warfare in most of the world today – since technology and infrastructure have increased repressive capacities – the incentives for broad-based groups to seek power or advance their interests through electoral and street based political campaigns have increased. Social pressure mounts in all countries when a certain level of development is reached. What sets Thailand apart is its disorderly political outcome. Thailand’s system of governance seems to have prevented it from managing the rising expectations of its population in the transition from a low middle income to a high middle income country. The transition may display the same social and political tendencies as in other countries but Thailand has been less capable than other states to manage the rising social and political expectations following from economic growth.

Background

Thailand’s development since 2004 differs both from its own Cold War history and contemporary developments in other East Asian countries. Although Thailand went through dramatic social changes in the Cold War period and took active part in US-led warfare in Vietnam, it suffered comparatively little from conflict on its own territory. The Thai Kingdom was more secure than the neighbouring post-colonial states in Malaya, Cambodia, Laos and Burma (Myanmar). Its government and army were able to repress insurgent movements before they could establish “liberated territories”. This allowed Thailand to grow its modern economy. Rapid economic growth turned peasants into citizens with a pronounced interest in influencing the state (Walker 2012b: 326–30) but only some of them, and only until the 1980s, provided active support to communist rebels. The guerrillas who were active in the years 1965–83 found most of their recruits in the densely populated northeast (the Korat plateau), with its Lao speaking Isan rice growers. Partly for that reason the Thai government targeted the northeast for modernisation. Many Isan moved into new villages, while others left for Bangkok or its suburbs, and the rice farms became more export oriented. The local population were assimilated into Thai culture, assuming

a twin Thai-Isan identity. Yet they never fully embraced the national ideology, with its trinity of Army, Buddhism and King (Keyes 2014: 175–194).

Attempts were made to also modernize the economically backward Malay Muslim provinces in the south but they had less potential for growing export crops. The Malay Muslims were not as effectively assimilated as the Isan. The reason why the Malay Muslims and the Isan followed different political trajectories was a combination of economic, linguistic and religious factors. Numbers also matter: The Malay Muslims could dominate their own provinces but could not play any prominent national political role. By contrast, the numerical strength of the Isan made it possible for them to become a major national force in their own right if they could form a movement and find a leader. This is what they did at the turn of the millennium.

In the period 1976–83, the unrest among the Muslim Malay population in the south was not a big threat to the Thai state, although fighting intensified for a while in the 1970s. During the premiership of General Prem Tinsulanonda (1980–88), a broad and rather effective counter-insurgency strategy was applied both in the northeast and the south, with deployment of substantial armed forces, support schemes for economic development, extensive use of amnesties, and popular participation in local decision-making. In the south this was co-ordinated by a Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) (Nilsen 2012: 60; Srisompob 2013: 549). General Prem's premiership was a period of internal stability and economic growth. And growth continued in the 1990s, until the Asian Crisis.

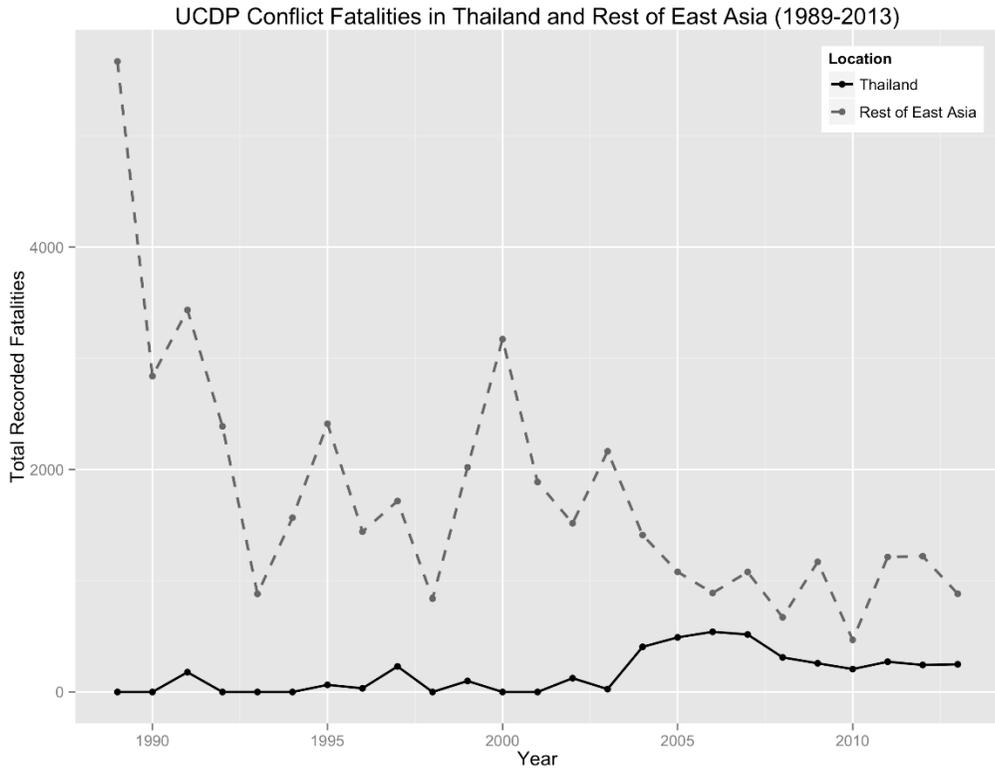
On 2 July 1997, after weeks of aggressive speculation against the baht, the government gave up defending the Thai currency's peg to the USD. The baht lost more than half its dollar value before rebounding to a level more than 30 per cent lower than before (Pasuk and Baker 2009b: 259). A deep recession followed, lasting through 1998. This had dramatic social and political effects. Living standards suffered badly but the crisis did not lead to increased inequality. Although many lost their jobs, inequalities were actually reduced (Walker 2012b: 324). Poor rice growing peasants benefitted from the new terms of trade, while many rich people lost their assets to foreigners. Industries serving the home market suffered as the weight of the economy shifted towards exports and services. Whole families lost their fortunes when their companies went bankrupt. Others, such as the Shinawatras, came through the crisis more or less unharmed. Thaksin was suspected of having based his financial dispositions on inside information about the decision to let the baht float (Pasuk and Baker 2009a: 58–59).

The Asian Crisis led to a change of government and the adoption of a new constitution but did not, as in Indonesia, lead to any violent conflict. Consultations had been going on for several years on a new "people's constitution" when the crisis struck. Many had been sceptical but now all

resistance evaporated so the constitution could be quickly approved. It was designed to overcome corruption and vote-buying, and provide for strong government by shifting to single-member constituencies, so it would be easier to gain a parliamentary majority. The constitution also sought to increase the quality of MPs by demanding that they have at least a BA degree. New independent courts were created to prevent corruption and vote buying. Ministers were obliged to declare their assets (Thitinan 2009: 30–31; Bjarnegård 2013: 123ff). These changes opened up for great political change, although not in the intended direction. “Money politics” did not disappear but became “big money politics” instead (Pasuk and Baker 2009a: 97, 173). When the Thai Rak Thai Party won its extraordinary victory in January 2001, the majority of judges on the new Constitutional Court did not dare to convict Thaksin of having concealed his assets although he clearly had. It took three years from Thaksin’s ascent to power before the courts established under the 1997 constitution joined the struggle to remove him (McCargo 2014). The years 1999–2004 were politically stable and saw an astounding economic recovery. Yet it should have been possible to predict that the emergence of a new, charismatic and ambitious leader would provoke a reaction from the powers that be. Thaksin took big risks by curtailing media freedoms, violating basic human rights in a “war on drugs,” enriching his family through asset sales, providing generous state loans to his peasant voters, and trying to gain personal control of the military. It is not easy to say which was seen as most unacceptable by the conservatives: his corruption, interference with army promotions, or flirtation with “socialist” redistributive policies.

A crisis soon emerged, and a contributing factor was Thaksin’s poor handling of the Malay Muslim insurgency in the south. As can be seen from Figure 1, 2004 was the year when the number of armed conflict casualties took off in Thailand while falling in the rest of East Asia.

Figure 1:



Total number of battle related deaths, one-sided violence deaths, and non-state conflict deaths, 1989–2013 (UCDP 2015b). The peaks in Rest of East Asia in 2000, 2003, and 2009 are due mainly to the conflict in Mindanao, in 2003 also the fighting in Aceh. Rest of East Asia’s steep increase in 2011-12 is the combined result of the new fighting in some of Myanmar’s ethnic minority states, and escalation in Mindanao. Note that since 1992 the estimated number of fatalities in all of East Asia has never exceeded 3,000 in one year, a low number by historical standards.

The numbers in the figure combine fatalities in Bangkok’s conflict over government, inter-state conflict with Cambodia and territorial conflict with Malay Muslim insurgents in the south. We shall now dig into each of Thailand’s three conflicts, while looking for interlinkages.

The internal conflict over government

The post-1997 economy had its winners and losers. Tensions were exacerbated between business groups, social classes, and regions. Thaksin was a winner. He successfully transformed himself from businessman to politician when founding the Thai Rak Thai in 1998, exploited resentments among common people (*phrai*) against the Thai elite (*ammatt*), tripled his family fortune while serving as prime minister, and won no less than six elections (two of which were annulled though by the courts). Because of his authoritarian tendencies, disregard for human rights, and increasingly pro-poor policies, he lost support from the established elites who dominated the courts, the palace, the army and the state bureaucracy. For them it was important to prevent him from controlling the army or influencing the coming royal succession. Among the tools used against him were judicial proceedings, military jockeying, and allegations that he was out of favour with the King. Threats of legal action under *lèse majesté* legislation were used against some of his supporters.

After a couple of years in power, Thaksin launched a “war on poverty” and took big measures to provide peasants with loans (Pasuk and Baker 2009a: 57–61, 115–117). This contributed to the conservative resentment. Thaksin’s critics tried to mobilize public opinion against him but could arouse only parts of the middle classes. When Thai Rak Thai won its second electoral victory in 2005 and a third in the annulled elections of 2006 (boycotted by other parties) it did not take long before the army staged its September 2006 coup. By then, the Yellow Shirt movement had begun their street-based campaign against him. They were, in the words of Pasuk and Baker (2009a: 270), a “largely middle-class movement with royalist overtones and covert protection from the military.” The campaign ended temporarily when the army seized power. However, after a referendum was held in August 2007 to approve a new constitution, which constrained the power of the executive, reduced the role of parliament and inflated the powers of the courts, elections were held once again in December. By then the Constitutional Court had dissolved the Thai Rak Thai Party but its former members formed the People Power Party, which won the elections. Thaksin could not, however, lead the new government. He had been indicted for corruption and was in self-imposed exile. A new government was thus formed under a veteran of Thai politics, who now supported Thaksin. In May 2008, the Yellow Shirts returned to the streets and occupied the Government House. In September the Constitutional Court found the prime minister guilty of a minor offense so he could be forced from power. He was temporarily replaced by Thaksin’s brother-in-law, but now the Yellow Shirts occupied and closed down Bangkok’s domestic and international airports. Although the People Power Party was in power, it was unable to prevent this from happening, despite the negative impact this had on the national economy. It became clear that the government could not control the army.

Many army officers sympathized with the protesters, so the government had to rely on police forces in a futile attempt to declare an emergency and restore law and order. According to Askew (2010b: 39) “the hapless police were devoid of military support.” There were also fears of confrontations between army and police. On 2 December 2008 the Constitutional Court banned the People Power Party and stripped a number of its parliamentarians of their political rights for five years. This also ended the airport occupation. To outsiders, it clearly looked as if the Yellow Shirts had won but the court case had been opened long before the airport occupation began, and there are clear indications that the People Power Party had anticipated the ban and had long been preparing to form a new party⁽²⁾.

Thaksinites now set up a third party, the Pheu Thai. However, because one prominent pro-Thaksin politician defected and brought with him his whole faction, a new parliamentary majority could be formed. This allowed the leader of the Democrat Party, the Oxford-educated economist Abhisit Vejjajiva, to form a new coalition government. Although it was established in a quasi-constitutional way it was not perceived to be legitimate as it had not been formed on the basis of an electoral victory. Nor did Abhisit satisfy the Yellow Shirts, whose movement began to fall apart. Some drew the conclusion that the country could not be stable if the parliament was dominated by elected representatives: Instead the King or the courts should appoint its members. The army should serve directly under the Crown, with a constitutional right to intervene in politics when necessary (Pasuk and Baker 2009a: 332–335).

Abhisit’s government would soon face a similar campaign in the streets, only this time from the opposite side. The Red Shirts and the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) had established themselves after the 2006 coup with the aim to reintroduce democracy under the “people’s constitution” of 1997. The activists wanted Thaksin back, and also took up radical demands for pro-poor policies. Some of the main organizers had been student activists and guerrilla fighters in the 1970s–80s. The goals of the Red Shirts were political, rather than economical, but economic differences were underlying the political struggles. Many of the Red Shirt activists resided in Bangkok and were not among the poorest of the poor but rather belonged to a lower middle-class, or to a middle-class peasantry (Walker 2012a). However, they certainly saw themselves as politically representing the interests of the poor in the countryside of Thailand. Survey results also demonstrate that Red Shirt activists in general did have a significantly lower income than Yellow Shirt activists (Bjarnegård and Melander 2014).

Now Yellow Shirts stood against Red Shirts, capital against countryside, patriots against social reformers, business groups against business groups, royalists against globalizers. King Rama IX had for a long time advocated a “sufficiency economy” based on a vision of local self-reliance. Although this is purely utopian in a modernised and globalised Thailand

and would not have been taken seriously if coming from someone else, respect was paid to the King's ideas (Ivarsson and Isager 2010: 223–265). The Thai business class was divided in its loyalties. Many supported the conservative reaction but Thaksin was also backed by some rich businessmen and women. McCargo (2010: 8) finds that the conflict was essentially “between different elements of the Thai elite, who have mobilized rival patronage-based networks of supporters.” However, what made the conflict so intensely protracted was the conflation of contradictions at different levels: class struggle, regional enmity and inter-elite rivalry, which provided wider content and radicalised agendas to the networks of supporters.

In March–May 2010 the Red Shirts organized massive demonstrations in Bangkok, bringing in activists from the north and northeast. They demanded new elections. Violent incidents occurred between demonstrators and army units, and there were attacks against the army from armed “Black Shirts,” who formed a shady protective force for the activists. The first serious incident occurred on 10 April, when an army commander was shot and killed by a rocket-propelled grenade. In apparent retaliation his troops shot a number of Red Shirts and bystanders. The incident was followed by heavy army deployment and frantic attempts to prevent further clashes. Contact was established between the two sides and it looked as though they might settle for a compromise. An agreement was ready to be signed, with the Red Shirts ending their demonstrations and the government pledging to dissolve parliament and hold elections. However, a majority of the Red Shirt leaders changed their mind and rejected the compromise, leading some to think they had got a long-distance call from Thaksin. International Crisis Group (2010: 8–9) blames the failure of negotiations on “internal disagreements” among the Red Shirts as well as on Abhisit's impatience. The army moved in decisively on 19 May, put an end to the demonstrations and had the main Red Shirt leaders arrested. In the aftermath of the repression, the Central World commercial complex was put on fire. It remains unclear if the perpetrators were Red Shirts, provocateurs, or just well-equipped looters (Askew 2010b; 2010c; Stent 2012: 25).

The top Red Shirt leaders were kept in prison until 22 February 2011. Soon afterwards the Red Shirts shifted to electoral campaign mood. National elections were held on 3 July 2011, and Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra campaigned for the new Pheu Thai party. She was nominated as a candidate in May, won the elections in August, and then became prime minister. In her first year in office, she did not find it expedient to bring her brother home. He had to play his leading role through twitter, skype, e-mail and meetings abroad. In 2013, however, Yingluck's government proposed a general amnesty that would allow Thaksin to return while also giving Abhisit immunity for his May 2010 order to crush the Red Shirts. The amnesty proposal, a constitutional amendment proposal, and the government's lacklustre economic performance now triggered a new round of campaigning in the streets, this time led by former deputy prime minister Suthep Thaugsuban, who formed the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC).

The campaign aimed at replacing Yingluck's government with a People's Council, which would carry out far-reaching reforms of Thailand's political system. Yingluck's government survived for several months, although several government buildings were occupied by the demonstrators. The government could not carry out its normal tasks, and could not restore law and order since it did not control the army. The police cautiously stood back, probably on the government's order and for fear of provoking the army. Although there were some pro-Thaksinite military officers and a few anti-Thaksin policemen, the general tendency was for the police to support Thaksin while the army commanders stood against him. On 7 May 2014, the Constitutional Court ordered Yingluck to step down, after she was found guilty of dereliction of power when transferring a national security chief to the indirect benefit of a relative. The minister of commerce formed a caretaker government that never was allowed to govern. Attempts were made to persuade the Senate to appoint an entirely new government. When this failed commander-in-chief of the army Prayuth Chan-o-cha summoned all the main political leaders to a two-day meeting, at the end of which he seized power in a well-planned coup. The 22 May 2014 coup provoked little open resistance. Thaksin and his supporters seemed to opt for a waiting game. Prayuth's new military government made clear that it would not hold elections any time soon. By late 2015 it was widely expected that the army would remain in power at least until after the royal succession. Meanwhile civil society and the national economy suffer.

We have seen how a nation that was used to economic growth and frequent shifts between democracy and military rule became deeply polarised between a "network monarchy" and a "political economy network" carefully built and maintained by Thaksin. Their rivalry prevented the government from carrying out its normal tasks. To some observers' surprise, though, neither the two military coups nor the three militant campaigns in Bangkok led to civil war. Six soldiers and 85–86 activists or bystanders are estimated to have been killed during April–May 2010.⁽³⁾ The Yellow Shirt demonstrations during 2005–08 and the PDRC campaign in 2013–14 had few casualties, although the PDRC was organized in a military fashion and probably backed up with arms.⁽⁴⁾ The most likely reason why the anti-Thaksin campaigns did not escalate to a higher level of violence is that pro-Thaksin governments could not rely on the army. The police was supportive but cautious because it feared the army. It stood aside while the Yellow Shirts and PDRC took control of whole sections of the capital. The same inclination to avoid civil war held sway for a long time when the Red Shirts held camp in Bangkok during March–May 2010. Even Abhisit's government could not count fully on the army's loyalty but had to put pressure on a reluctant army commander to move in decisively against the Red Shirts.⁽⁵⁾

What we see is a drawn-out power struggle, where organised groups could use illegal means without being arrested, and without much risk of civil war, although they undermined state authority and harmed the national economy. This worked best for the Yellow Shirts and PDRC,

who drew support from the highest places. The Red Shirts ran greater risks and failed to seize their chance for a compromise. The main asset of the Red Shirts was popular support while the strength of their opponents was support from the army.

The next question is how the power struggle in Bangkok affected Thailand's conflict with Cambodia.

The interstate conflict over territory

A prominent theme in Yellow Shirt campaigns against the pro-Thaksin governments was their alleged failure to defend national sovereignty against Cambodia. Preah Vihear (Prasat Phra Wihan in Thai), an 11th century temple, lies on a cliff near the border. The memory of Angkor, the empire that built it, is at the core of Cambodian identity. For Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen the quest for unhindered access to Preah Vihear was a national rallying point. The International Court of Justice had determined on 15 June 1962 that Preah Vihear belongs to Cambodia. However, the best access to it runs through a 4.6 km² area that Thailand has continued to dispute. In 2008, after Cambodian lobbying, UNESCO gave Preah Vihear status as a world heritage site. This could pave the way for bilateral tourist co-operation. A Thai-Cambodian communiqué of 22 May 2008 expressed the intention to jointly develop a management plan (Pavin 2010: 89, 98–99; ICG 2011: 4). However, UNESCO's decision was picked upon by Yellow Shirt leaders as something to be used against the recently formed pro-Thaksin government. Its foreign minister was accused of unconstitutional behaviour and forced to resign. If the government had been stronger, it would have resisted the pressure. A win-win solution was on the table. After the prime minister was removed from power by the Constitutional Court, the Yellow Shirts continued to use Preah Vihear in assailing his successor, who kept his post for just a little more than three months.

We cannot know for sure what the Yellow Shirt leaders hoped to achieve with their campaign. They may have expected to arouse a wave of patriotism among ordinary Thais. If so, their hopes were frustrated. However, they may also have wanted to play into the army's hands and encourage it to seize power. If this was their aim they were successful. Cambodia had followed up UNESCO's decision by starting to build a road to Preah Vihear. Thailand protested. Troops from both sides rushed to the border, and artillery exchanges followed. Yet the situation remained manageable. There were indeed incidents resulting in fatalities but the conflict was never allowed to escalate to an even more dangerous level. The repeated clashes leave an impression of a "managed conflict." Thailand's new foreign minister, although serving only from July to September 2008, arrived at a ceasefire agreement with Cambodia, which held until the next year, when a group of Thai nationalists moved into Cambodian territory, where they were

arrested.⁽⁶⁾ This led to a new conflagration at the border. It did not improve the relations between the countries when Hun Sen appointed the exiled Thaksin as advisor to his government in November 2009. Seeing the reactions this provoked in Thailand, Hun Sen realized his misstep and ended Thaksin's role. There were several incidents in 2009 and 2010, and the worst year was 2011, when a number of clashes occurred from February to May, with at least 28 fatalities (UCDP 2015b).⁽⁷⁾ Thailand, meaning its army, did not accept any intervention from ASEAN, whose inability to prevent armed conflict between its members was widely noted. Even after the International Court of Justice had intervened and ordered the two sides to withdraw from the temple area, and accept Indonesian monitors, the Thai army rejected any outside interference. The border conflict seems to have been used to demonstrate the army's independent power as the final arbiter of national security. The border conflict was thus part and parcel of the struggle over government in Bangkok.

ASEAN's proud record of avoiding armed conflict between its members became a victim of Thailand's domestic conflict. When Yingluck came to power in August 2011 the relationship between Bangkok and Phnom Penh improved but the Thai army continued to resist the pressures from the International Court of Justice, the UN Security Council and ASEAN to accept Indonesian monitoring, so the heavily armed Cambodian and Thai soldiers continued to stare each other in the eye from their fortified positions at the border.

Among the Thai population, the struggle for Preah Vihear does not seem to have aroused strong patriotic feelings. Thaksin was not discredited even when accepting to advise "the enemy". There was an episode when local Thais chased Yellow Shirt demonstrators away from the border area. The interstate conflict was fuelled by domestic considerations in both countries, but if the governments in Bangkok had been as secure domestically as Hun Sen's in Cambodia, they would no doubt have found a way out. The fragility of the Thai governments and the recklessness of campaigners who willingly sacrificed their country's relations with a neighbour for a chance to make points against their domestic rivals, prevented conflict management (International Crisis Group 2011: 9, 15). This caused deep frustration among experienced Thai diplomats. It did not just harm Thailand but ASEAN as a whole. The main factor to hold off further clashes was the clear outcome of the August 2011 elections. Neither army nor palace nor Yellow Shirts could in the short term unravel a government with a recent success at the polls and a clear majority in parliament. Yingluck was safe through 2012. Only in the following year did the campaign begin that forced her from power in 2014.

Meanwhile, on 11 November 2013, the International Court of Justice delivered its verdict on the case brought before it by Cambodia, as an interpretation of its 1962 judgment. This new verdict, although phrased in an impartial manner, recognized Cambodia's control of the access

area to the temple. Interestingly, and although this happened at the same time as the struggle had begun in Bangkok over Yingluck's amnesty proposal, the verdict did not provoke much reaction. The Thai and Cambodian governments both admonished their populations to stay calm. This was appreciated locally on both sides of the border where people wished to welcome wealthy tourists rather than poor soldiers. In December 2014, however, a new clash occurred when the Thai army interfered against Cambodian road construction in the access area to the temple.⁽⁸⁾ The Thai army could now make its own priorities.

Finally, we turn to an investigation of how the struggle over government affected the conflict over territory in southern Thailand.

The internal conflict over territory

When power changes hands on the central level, this does not just affect foreign policy but also the management of relations between centre and periphery within a country. If these relations are not handled with care, old secession struggles may return with a vengeance. This happened in Thailand's Malay-Muslim South during 2001–04. The triggering mechanism was of a different nature than the one leading to the border clashes with Cambodia. While weak government capacity formed a necessary condition for the outbreak of the border clashes in 2008–11, the resurgence of the Malay Muslim rebellion in the years 2001–04 happened at a time when the capacity of the government was quite strong. In fact, the conflict contributed to weakening Thaksin's authority. Thaksin was safe in the saddle in the first 3–4 years in office but was hurt by the way he handled the southern emergency.

This is not to say that the conflict was created by Thaksin. As Askew (2010a: 236) claims, the southern turbulence and the national crisis were not "causally connected" in the sense that the former followed from the latter – but they "interacted dynamically." Dynamic interaction, though, involves causal mechanisms working in both directions. There has been strong Malay Muslim resentment against Thai Buddhist domination for a long time. Thailand's three southernmost provinces Narathivat, Yala and Pattani were officially included in Siam only in 1909, through a treaty with Great Britain. Although the deep south can be reached from Bangkok in a few hours, it is not well known in the capital and is a world apart from the nearby tourist areas. Most of Thailand's Malay Muslims are in frequent contact with their brethren in Malaysia. Many have dual citizenship (McCargo 2008: xiii, 4). Whereas the neighbouring Malaysian states of Kelantan, Perak and Kedah enjoy a high degree of autonomy, Thailand's Malay Muslims have no autonomy. As elsewhere in Thailand (except Bangkok), provincial leaders are appointed, not elected. It is not surprising that this has caused local resentment. School children are being taught in a foreign language. Local cultural and religious customs are seen as threatened

by multiple external influences – not just from Thai culture, but from globalisation in general, and also from Middle Eastern trends towards a more pious Islam (Nilsen 2012: 160–70; McCargo 2012: 16–66). A comprehensive survey undertaken shortly before the escalation of violence in 2004, with multiple questions being asked of representative samples of people, revealed that out of the three factors economic backwardness, Islamic religion and Malay language, the latter showed the strongest correlation with distrust in the Thai government (Engvall 2010: 36–42). There is little doubt that the conflict is local and ethno-cultural, not one linking the insurgents to either Muslims abroad or the underclass in other parts of Thailand. Violence is confined to the southernmost provinces. There have been no incidents in Bangkok, although in March 2012 there was a bomb attack in Hat Yai, slightly north of the Malay Muslim area. The contrast between the deep south and upper south is stark. The upper south is richer, predominantly Thai Buddhist, and a stronghold of the Democrat Party.

While the Malay Muslim provinces carry little numerical weight in national elections they have played a part in national party politics. A few Malay Muslim members of parliament have bargained for local interests. This used to be the business of the local organization Wadah, who entered into shifting electoral alliances with Thailand's political parties. It bargained in favour of local interests, but did not promote cultural integration. The Malay Muslims always saw themselves as a people apart. While the Wadah group navigated Thai politics, other groups operated clandestinely and in exile to keep the vision of an independent Patani alive. Ethno-religious grievances must be crucial to any explanation of the long term conflict between the Malay Muslims and the Thai state.

However, while constituting an underlying cause for the conflict, old grievances cannot explain the escalation of violence in the beginning of the 2000s. An escalation must be due to something happening shortly before. It could either be a change in the Malay Muslim society or in the behaviour of the Thai state – or both. Some Malay Muslims, notably in exile, have kept alive the memory of the 16th–18th century Patani Sultanate (Chik and Chik 2012). Militants want to resurrect it as an independent state. In 2001 such militants opened a violent campaign to prevent the integration of Malay Muslims in Thai society. On their anonymous leaflets they presented themselves as “Patani Mujahidin warriors” fighting the “Kafir Siamese state” (McCargo 2008: 102, 123). A new more militant generation took over from older leaders. This generational change may have its origin in events happening around the time of the Asian Crisis. The Wadah had played a key role in channelling money from Bangkok to Islamic schools and other purposes. These flows contributed to forging the electoral alliances allowing the Malay Muslims to be represented in the National Assembly. In 1995, while times were still good, Wadah's leading personality failed to be re-elected and stepped down in favour of a lesser personality, who used his position to enrich himself and boost his personal career instead of taking care of his constituents. This weakened

the system of co-optation established in the 1980s, and made it difficult for Wadah to weather the storm when its sources of money dried up in the economic crisis. In 2001, leading Wadah members followed their Thai alliance partner in a merger with the Thai Rak Thai. McCargo (2008: 79) finds it “striking” that the upsurge of political violence in the south coincided with the elevation of the new Wadah leader to interior minister in Thaksin’s government. The causal mechanism could have been the following: As long as Wadah satisfied its local constituents, moderates were able to prevent young militants from resorting to violence. When funds dried up and the new Malay Muslim leader allowed himself to be captured by Bangkok politics, no one could hold back the youthful militants.

Developments in the Malay Muslim exile community worked in the same direction. In 1998, the Malaysian government sought to improve its relations with Thailand by arresting four leaders of the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) in Malaysia (McCargo 2008: xi). PULO had stayed alive since its formation in 1968 along with its rival, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). The four PULO leaders were handed over to Thailand, where they were given life sentences, and remained in prison until 2013 (Davis 2011; International Crisis Group 2012).⁽⁹⁾ Young militants were left to take initiatives on their own. On 24 December 2001, shortly after Thaksin came to power, they launched their first big operation by attacking five police posts. Over the next two years, snipers repeatedly shot policemen. Yet it took until 4 January 2004 before the insurgency hit the Bangkok headlines. After having set fire to twenty local schools, a crowd stormed an army base, and stole firearms. The guards were caught by surprise. This paved the way for the next operation on 28 April, when militants made simultaneous attacks on twelve targets, using simple weapons like daggers. Most of them were shot by guards as soon as they got off their motorbikes. One group of fighters withdrew to the Kru Se mosque. The army surrounded it and shot and killed all 32 inside. This was an event of momentous symbolic importance. The spilling of Muslim blood, and the fact that the bodies were not buried in accordance with Muslim custom transformed the fighters into martyrs and turned the Kru Se mosque, whose construction had never been completed, into a holy place.⁽¹⁰⁾ Six months later, at Tak Bai, the insurgents changed tactics and mobilized a huge unarmed crowd in front of a police station. Army forces came to rescue the beleaguered police. Some demonstrators were shot while others were packed into military vehicles in order to be taken into detention. 78 apparently suffocated inside the packed vehicles (McCargo 2008: 134–46).

No similarly spectacular incidents have happened since 2004. It has, however, almost become routine that bombs are placed by the wayside where army units shall pass, and that shots are fired against soldiers on leave. Moderate Malay Muslims have been branded as collaborators (*munafik*) and sometimes killed. School teachers have been assassinated. Such killings are meant to frighten Thai teachers away, and get Malay Muslim teachers to refrain from conveying the values

of the Thai state. Much of the struggle has been internal to the main ethnic group: Malay Muslims kill Malay Muslims (McCargo 2008: 116). Many Malays have positions in the local government. Only a minority seem to sympathize with the violence (interviews in Pattani 2010–14) but the militant leaders enjoy sufficient support, maybe also from people in high places, to conceal their identity and avoid being killed or captured. No central leaders have emerged.

Hardly a week has passed since 2004 without someone being killed. According to Deep South Watch (DSW) the total number of conflict fatalities 2004–14 amount to 6,297, while the more conservative UCDP estimate is 3,573.⁽¹¹⁾ Trends look approximately the same in the two datasets. There was a rapid escalation 2004–6, then a decline followed by stabilisation on a somewhat lower level. A new escalation occurred in 2011, which continued in 2012, with larger (but fewer) attacks. On 31 March 2012 there was a co-ordinated bomb attack in Yala and Pattani in which eleven people were killed and around one hundred injured. On 31 August 2012 explosive devices were placed and Malaysian flags displayed in more than a hundred locations in a highly co-ordinated fashion. The same pattern continued in 2013, although there was a lull in the fighting during Ramadan, resulting from a short lived, partial ceasefire agreed between the Thai government and the exile leaders of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN).

Table 1: Conflict fatalities in Thailand’s Deep South, 2003–14, according to UCDP best estimates, and Deep South Watch (DSW)

	Battle related deaths in armed conflict (UCDP)	Killed in one-sided violence (UCDP)	Total number of killed (UCDP)	Total number of deaths (Deep South Watch)
2003	27	0	27	0
2004	164	146	310	881
2005	205	287	492	601
2006	214	326	540	715
2007	197	320	517	836
2008	129	179	308	470
2009	134	120	254	570
2010	68	135	203	452

	Battle related deaths in armed conflict (UCDP)	Killed in one-sided violence (UCDP)	Total number of killed (UCDP)	Total number of deaths (Deep South Watch)
2011	142	116	258	491
2012	132	111	243	484
2013	193	160	353	456
2014	68	?	68	341
Total	1,673	1,900	3,573	6,297

The UCDP reports 'low', 'best' and 'high' estimates, which differ only marginally (UCDP 2015b). The DSW figures are from communications to the authors from Srisompob Jitpiromsri (Deep South Watch) on 3 May 2012 and 2 September 2014.

Emergency legislation has allowed the security forces in the south to use violence with impunity, including torture and extrajudicial killings. Lack of good intelligence has sometimes made repression blind. This was notably the case in the first years when pro-Thaksin police killed off army informers in its "war on drugs" and had to set up new intelligence networks (McCargo 2008: 116). In 2002, Thaksin dissolved the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC), which had co-ordinated the government's co-optation policy in the 1980s–90s, and replaced experienced army commanders with less experienced police officers, and instructed both army and police to not wear silk gloves.⁽¹²⁾ He refused to accept that there was a rebellion. The perpetrators of violence were pure criminals, he claimed. This formed the background for the Kru Se and Tak Bai massacres. Thaksin's failure in the south weakened his standing in Bangkok and made the military look bad. It helped produce the polarization that led to Thaksin's downfall in 2006. The weakness and ineptitude of the governments that followed made it difficult for them to mobilize the knowledge and resources to deal with the southern situation.

Thaksin began to realise his mistakes while he was still in power. He agreed to somewhat change his approach and listen to more cautious voices, such as that of deputy prime minister Chaturon Chaisang. He would claim later that Thaksin's government "did not understand the problem" (Chaturon 2010).⁽¹³⁾ After the tragic events in 2004, Thaksin sent Chaturon to study the situation in the South. He recommended the set-up of a National Reconciliation Commission. Thaksin did so only after General Prem, president of the King's Privy Council since 1998, urged him publicly to do it. The commission was led by former prime minister Anand Panyarachun, who had a high standing in palace circles. Its 2005 report recommended a number of different

measures, ranging from improved dialogue to legal and institutional changes (NRC 2006). According to Chaturon, Thaksin listened to the Commission's recommendations after they were made public in June 2006, but did not get around to formulating a new southern policy before he was overthrown in September. By contrast, McCargo claims that Thaksin "largely ignored" the Commission's report (McCargo 2008: xxiv; 2012: 75, 78). When the army drove Thaksin from power in 2006 it further moderated the central government's approach to the South, while increasing the attributions of the army. Much was said about peace, justice and development, and many conferences were held. Attempts were also made to enter into talks with Malay Muslim leaders. Since the rebels have no known leaders inside Thailand, the options were to talk with exile leaders or religious leaders in the south under the assumption that they were in contact with the rebels. An attempt was made in 2006 by former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir to establish a dialogue with some of the exile leaders, but no one seemed to speak fully on behalf of the militants. In 2007 and 2009 there were talks in various places, facilitated by an international NGO. An unsuccessful attempt was made in June–July 2010 to establish a local ceasefire (Davis 2011). These attempts reflected a realisation within parts of the Thai government that the iron glove had not worked. New counter-insurgency strategies were tried out, with emphasis on hearts and minds. The central government was, however, consumed by its own troubles. It took many years before it could even mention the possibility of local autonomy, since all Thai constitutions have specified that the Kingdom is indivisible: "Thailand is a unified and indivisible Kingdom" (1991); "Thailand is one and indivisible Kingdom" (1997); "Thailand is a Kingdom, one and indivisible" (2006), "Thailand is one and indivisible Kingdom" (2007). To advocate autonomy was for a long time considered treasonous (McCargo 2009: 59).

Once Thaksin had been ousted from power, his supporters and the Malay Muslim rebels became *de facto* allies in the struggle against Abhisit's government. Hence there was speculation in 2010–11 that a new pro-Thaksin government might stand a better chance to stabilize the situation in the South. However, no big changes followed when Yingluck formed her government in 2011. In the three southernmost provinces, the results of the July 2011 elections were unhelpful. The Malay Muslims spread their votes on several losing parties. Hence all the seats were won by the Democrat Party, whose main constituency is in the upper south.⁽¹⁴⁾ Yet Yingluck's government continued to search for a more effective approach. The word "autonomy" was no longer anathema. The SBPAC was reinstated with a mission to seek out someone among the insurgents that could be talked to. The 4th Army reached out to the insurgents through their families and managed to persuade 93 insurgents to give themselves up in September 2012.⁽¹⁵⁾ Talks were also held with exile leaders in Malaysia, and Thaksin used his connections in Malaysia to help arrange talks. In February 2013, Yingluck's government initiated the first formal peace dialogue with alleged representatives of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (BRN). There were reports that some insurgent leaders wanted to form a legal, political wing,

and also impose more clear rules of engagement that could reduce civilian casualties (Srisompob and Engvall 2013; Pathan 2013a; 2013b). The two sides met three times in Kuala Lumpur with facilitation from the Malaysian government. These contacts were interrupted by the May 2014 military coup but representatives of the new military government re-opened the talks in December 2014.⁽¹⁶⁾

There are at least two reasons why the talks are now unlikely to yield much result beyond providing a platform for Malay Muslim exiles to present their demands. One reason is the difficulty of knowing how representative the dialogue partners are, and whether or not they have sufficient authority to order a genuine ceasefire. The other one, related to the argument of the low state capacity of Thailand, is that the Malay Muslims are unlikely to enter into any kind of agreement as long as they cannot be sure that they are talking to someone who represents both the army and a stable, legitimate government. To talk just to a pro-Thaksin government without loyal army participation, as was the case in 2013, is not reassuring since the army might repudiate any agreement made at any time. To talk just to the army, as was the case in 2014–15, means that any future elected government could withdraw any promises made. It is no surprise that the Malay Muslim representatives in the 2013 talks insisted that any agreement must be formally endorsed by the Thai parliament. There is little reason to expect any genuine process of peace until Thailand has a legitimate, civilian government, with control of its military. Although Thailand's current military government has managed to discourage resistance in other parts of the country, it has not been able to do so in the south. The struggle continues.

Conclusions

Causal mechanisms have been identified in this article leading from socio-economic and political change in the wake of the 1997 Asian Crisis to three inter-related violent conflicts. The Asian Crisis unravelled a system of political co-optation for Malay Muslim leaders in Thailand's deep south, thus creating a leadership void. This paved the way for the emergence of younger and more extreme militants, who acquired arms and by 2001 initiated their first violent attacks. Then, from 2004–05, a polarized power struggle developed in Bangkok that led to violent incidents in the streets of the capital and fighting at the border to Cambodia. If it had not been for the polarization between a "network monarchy" and a "political economy network" and the weakness of several successive governments who were not in control of the armed forces, it is likely that the border dispute would not have turned violent.

The escalation of the southern insurgency in 2003–04 and the border conflict with Cambodia 2008–14 must thus both be understood against the background of political changes in national politics after the Asian Crisis. At first the political reforms following the crisis seemed

to generate a more stable democratic system, with the government of Chuan Leekpai (1998–2001) reducing the army's political prerogatives and ensuring better civilian control (Chambers 2013: 242–244). However, the new constitution, and changes in the electoral system favouring big parties, also enabled the Thai Rak Thai party to win a resounding victory in 2001 and thus Thaksin's subsequent attempts to monopolize political power. He reversed his predecessor's policy by wooing the military, increasing its budgets and boosting its advisory role, while placing his own people in influential army commands. This had the two tragic consequences of weakening civilian control and provoking a negative reaction from traditional elites both within and outside of the armed forces (Croissant and Kuehn 2009: 197; 204; Croissant et al 2013: 160–166; Chambers 2013: 247–256). As someone with little experience from the south Thaksin – apparently acting at that time with the full backing of the army and most of his advisors – responded to the outbreak of the Malay Muslim insurgency with a heavy-handed approach that discredited the army and played into the hands of the insurgents. Through “dynamic interaction” (Askew 2010a: 236) this provoked a feed-back mechanism that weakened Thaksin's authority, thus paving some of the way for the September 2006 military coup (McCargo 2012: 69). The struggle that followed produced a series of weak governments whose legitimacy was questioned by one or the other side, and who were equipped with a malfunctioning state apparatus. While concentrating on their fight against each other both factions of the Thai political elite proved unable or uninterested in earnestly addressing the southern conflict.

What made Thailand deviate from the peace trend elsewhere in the region? Behind the escalation of Thailand's conflicts were the dramatic economic and social changes in the boom years 1985–96, the shock of the 1997–98 crisis, the rise of Thaksin and failure of the 1997 constitution, and the emergence of a power struggle that weakened state capacity. The boom transformed the Thai countryside. Peasants who used to live in poverty enjoyed remarkable improvement and started to benefit from state services such as schooling, health clinics and credit institutions. They got a positive interest in what the state was doing, while at the same time noticing that the price for their rice was not sufficient for them to catch up with other social groups and urban regions. Almost everyone got richer than before, while some got much richer than others (Hewison 2012: 148–50). The north, northeast and deep south lagged behind the booming Bangkok and the tourist sites. Wealth shifted within the upper classes. New fortunes were built in sectors such as tourism, services, media and telecommunications while old companies went into decline. A key to success in new lucrative businesses was access to decision making on government concessions and contracts. This provides a background for the rise of Thaksin, a new type of politician. At first he was widely admired, but his pro-poor policies, self-righteousness, disdain for human rights, and his attempts to place his own people in influential positions, made him more controversial as prime minister than anyone since the days of Phibun Songkhram (prime minister 1938–44 and 1948–57).

So even a middle-income East Asian country can enter into a spiral of political violence if its central political institutions succumb to bitter rivalries, and large groups of people mobilize in support of opposite factions. Where rapid social changes are not accompanied by a strengthening of political legitimacy, state capacity and accommodation of popular interests, governments may be unable to handle new and old conflicts.

Although much was new, Thailand's recent conflicts have been impregnated by historical legacies and influenced by economic and social changes in the years of economic boom. During the Cold War, Thailand was known for its vacillation between civilian and military rule. Successful coups were made in 1947, 1951, 1958, 1971, 1976 and 1977, mostly followed by many years of military governance before new elections were held. Even a powerful general like Prem could be subjected to coup attempts. Thailand's three most recent coups took place in 1991, 2006 and 2014. Each time the military used its power to boost its own budgets. The military has remained an independent force in Thai politics, and all civilian governments have had to face the risk of provoking a coup. We propose that lack of civilian control over the armed forces is the most likely factor setting Thailand apart from those countries that form the regional peace trend. In the region's main growth countries the armed forces are under civilian control: China, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam, even Laos and Cambodia. In some of them the control is taken care of by a Communist Party, in others by elected governments. With respect to military political autonomy Thailand resembles Myanmar, the Philippines and – until some years ago – Indonesia. All of these countries, however, are in a process of professionalising their armed forces, while the Thai army has boosted its political role and pushed elected politicians aside. It now tries to design a reactionary political system where elected representatives have only partial power. If the ongoing strengthening of democratic institutions continues in Myanmar, the Philippines and Indonesia, with soldiers concentrating on their real profession, then Thailand may come to stand out as “the sick man of East Asia.”

Endnotes

- (1) We are grateful to a number of people (including anonymous reviewers) who have commented on previous versions of this article in Bangkok, Pattani, Yala, Uppsala and Oslo, and would like to express special thanks to Marte Nilsen, who gave us some highly pertinent suggestions for revision.
- (2) Interview with spokesperson for PPP, Kuthep Saikrachang, Bangkok 13 November 2008.

- (3) The Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP) has not so far resolved if these casualties were victims of “one-sided violence” or “battle deaths” in an “armed conflict” between the government and an organized party. Thus the 91–92 fatalities are not included in any of the UCDP datasets, but listed as “uncertain” (UCDP 2015b: Additional info).
- (4) Interviews with observers in Bangkok, May and September 2014.
- (5) See Mark Harris, ‘The end of military adventurism in Thailand?’, 25 May 2010: <http://www.ssresourcecentre.org/2010/05/25/the-end-of-military-adventurism-in-thailand/> (date of retrieval: 12 Jan 2015).
- (6) Interview with former foreign minister Tej Bunnag, Bangkok 10 September 2012.
- (7) See the news reports cited in the Wikipedia article “Cambodian-Thai border dispute” at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambodian%E2%80%93Thai_border_dispute#cite_note-109.
- (8) “Thailand said stoking border tension,” *Bangkok Post* 1 Jan. 2015: <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/security/453645/thailand-said-to-bolster-border-troops> (date of retrieval: 6 Jan 2015).
- (9) “Tearful reunion as former PULO leader, other inmates released under royal pardon,” *Khabar* 11 Dec. 2013: http://khabarsoutheastasia.com/en_GB/articles/apwi/articles/features/2013/12/11/feature-02?change_locale=true (date of retrieval: 8 Jan. 2015).
- (10) Lecture by Professor Chaiwat Satha-Anand, Uppsala University, 16 December 2014.
- (11) There can be several reasons why the DSW figures are higher than the UCDP’s. First, DSW may have access to more data. UCDP relies mainly on news reports while DSW gets its data from the security forces, hospitals, media, and directly from local journalists. The UCDP probably errs on the low side. However, this explains only a part of the discrepancy. UCDP does not (and shall not) include killings when there is little indication that they were carried out by either a state agency or an armed group. It is often difficult to distinguish between a conflict killing and a criminal murder. This is probably the main reason for the discrepancy. Either DSW includes deaths that should properly be categorized as crimes or it has access to information allowing it to distinguish more reliably than the UCDP between criminal murders and conflict

killings. Askew (2010e: 122–3) considers much of the violence in the Deep South as criminal while Srisompob and McCargo (2010: 164, 178–80; McCargo 2008: 73) see it as predominantly political. Both have a point. Yet Srisompob and McCargo are most probably right in their general characterisation of the southern violence as a politically motivated insurgency. There is also a third contributing factor to the DSW/UCDP discrepancy. While DSW counts all conflict-related deaths in one category, UCDP distinguishes between deaths resulting from battles between two armed groups (the state and the ‘Patani insurgents’) and one-sided violence perpetrated against civilians. Since 2005, UCDP reports only one-sided violence perpetrated by the insurgents, not by the Thai army and police. This is because killings by state agencies did not reach the UCDP threshold of 25 deaths in one year. DSW does not use any threshold, but includes all deaths. If the three reasons together account for the difference between the two statistical datasets, it seems likely that the total number of conflict-related deaths (the sum of armed conflict battle deaths and deaths in one-sided violence) is somewhere between the UCDP and the DSW figures, but closer to the DSW than the UCDP. We may add that the Internal Security Operations Command Region 4 Forward Command Emergency Notification Centre recorded 4,884 people killed from 4 January 2004 to 30 September 2012 (ICG 2012). This figure is a little lower than that of Deep South Watch but much higher than the UCDP’s.

- (12) Mark Askew has objected to some of the criticism against Thaksin, claiming that SBPAC had for a long time failed to detect the new emerging militant networks (Askew 2007).
- (13) Interview with Chaturon Chaisang, Bangkok 17 June 2010.
- (14) *Bangkok Post* (2011) ‘Election results 2011 regional level,’ <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/election/map-south> (accessed 27 June 2012).
- (15) “Yingluck meets Malaysian leader: Najib pledges to help solve strife in South” (Thanida Thansubapol, *Bangkok Post* 9 Sep. 2012: 1); “Neighbourly spirit needed to stop violence: Deep South” (Achara Ashayagachat, *Bangkok Post* 12 Sep. 2012: 11); “Yingluck, Abhisit will join forum on unrest” (*Bangkok Post* 13 Sep. 2012: 3); “Army talks with 2 top separatists” (*Bangkok Post* 15 Sep. 2012: 1).

- (16) Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, "South talks a cause for cautious optimism," *Bangkok Post* 9 Dec. 2014: <http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/448412/south-talks-a-cause-for-cautious-optimism> (date of retrieval: 8 Jan 2015).

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