

ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand, by Duncan McCargo. Singapore: NIAS/National University of Singapore Press, 2009, 235 pp.

There is a considerable body of literature relating to the conflict in Southern Thailand (Pattani) contributed by Thais (both Malay Muslims and Thai Buddhists) and non-Thais including those from within the region and outside. These studies provide myriad interpretations on the violence waged by Malay Muslims against the Thai state in the south ranging from *jihād* to economic grievances and separatist aspirations. *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand* provides new ground in the study of the conflict both in its central arguments and the sources consulted to offer a refreshing interpretation of this seemingly endless conflict which in the last nine years alone had claimed more than 3,000 lives. The book took a critical swipe at all concerned parties including former premier Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–2006) and the Thai security forces which it views as "core component of the problem." The book catalogues the damning repression and shortcomings of the Thai security forces in the way it handle the conflict with the militants who had invoked Islam as a rhetorical tool to galvanise support from various spectrum of Malay Muslims. These are contentious issues and open to debates. However the book provides fascinating reading for those interested in minority problems like those of Southern Thailand.

The book's central argument that the conflict is about the question of legitimacy is compelling. Based on Muhammad Hafez's *Why Muslims Rebel*, McCargo argues that "the militant movement forms part of a political process, abetted by the state's initially successful but ultimately corrosive attempts to enlist the Malay Muslim elites through a process of cooptation and coercions. The state's offer of greater political participation gradually exclude Malay Muslims from effective involvement in the management of their own affairs. As a result the moderate leaders who were captured by the state lose their credentials and legitimacy. Repressive state actions by the Thaksin government (which was also attempting to claim legitimacy and to draw it away from the monarchy network) allowed militants to discredit moderate leaders and claim moral legitimacy for a violent struggle. The militants forged a new form of exclusive structure and attempted to justify their increasingly anticivilian violence. The course open for the state is a combination of bold strategy for political inclusion (he suggests some form of autonomy) and firm action against the perpetrators of the violence" (pp. 11–12). Taking into consideration the failure of virtuous rule and the shortcomings of representative rule after it was discredited by the military blunders of 2004, McCargo advocates the "enlargement of political space by embracing some form of participatory rule, giving Malay-Muslims a much

greater say in running their own affairs, within the broad umbrella of the Thai nation state" (p. 18). This participatory legitimacy might be offensive to the Thai majority and the Thai state but offer the best hope for an acceptable settlement.

McCargo reiterates the conflict is not a *jihad*; instead it is a local insurgency fomented by a ruthless and well organised militant movement which appropriated Islam as its ideological frame, a legitimising source. As he writes "where states are able to monopolise or at least to dominate legitimacy and identity resources, broad-based rebellion is impossible; but when a significant proportion of these resources can be exploited by anti-system actors, the conditions for rebellion are met" (p. 12). The absence of a creditable intellectual class – liberal Muslim scholars who could articulate the community's case in a way acceptable to both Muslims and non-Muslims – opened the vistas for religious extremism.

As if to mock the arm chair analysts and the way they collect their data McCargo lived for a year at the Pattani campus of the Prince of Songkhla University (PSU) from September 2005 to carry out fieldwork in the turbulent zone. This is highly commendable; for obvious reasons many researchers are unwilling to do it. A curious and cautious "Mat Salleh" with a 1989 growling Mercedes must have appeared exotic to the locals and probably got along better with these southerners who distrust outsiders including fellow Muslims and those from the state bureaucracy.

The sources of the study are impeccable if not unconventional. The extensive fieldwork and interview materials that the author had conducted or assisted by others formed the basis of the book. The PSU affiliation smoothen things out either with the locals or the suspicious security forces. This affiliation enabled him to create an extensive network of informants that include local or national politicians, community leaders, National Reconciliation Committee (NRC) members, human rights activists, Islamic teachers, *imams*, monks, academics, journalists, lawyers, security officials (army, police and militias), victims and perpetrators of the violence. Some 270 interviews were completed including repeats with the same source. Perceptive observers like McCargo could see the subtle (and not so subtle) nuances of local politics through seminars and workshops held at the PSU campus which were attended by local academics, intellectuals and others. In these gatherings participants openly talked about the problems affecting them and the lower south.

Other sources that he had consulted include a large number of secondary ones both in English and Thais including reports by the International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch, unpublished primary sources including a collection of anonymous leaflets that were distributed in Pattani between 2004–2006, a set of essays written by participants in army run "surrender camp," a large number of depositions ("confessions") taken by security forces and lecture materials prepared by security personnel. McCargo must have been aware of the proliferations of Jawi literature; these might have been translated/transliterated

for him. In any studies on the Malay Muslims reference to them is equally important.

The book's arguments are detailed in four main chapters each titled Islam (Chapter 1), Politics (Chapter 2), Security (Chapter 3) and Militants (Chapter 4) respectively while the conclusion appears in the last chapter. Suitable sub-topics in each chapter ensure a smooth flow of the argument which ends with a conclusion for the chapter. For the reader not used to either Thai or Kelantan Malay terms a glossary is provided although it is incomplete. Equally useful is the index which is thoughtfully done. Readers would be better served with a bibliography sparing them from tedious rummaging of the Notes during unscheduled needs.

Chapter 1 discusses Islam and its use by the state. McCargo reiterates that Islam in the south had undergone far reaching changes since the 1970s which had weakened religious elites like the *imams* and *babors* (*tok guru*); the traditional roles of mosques and *pondoks* as community institutions were also undermined. The changes were caused by both internal and external factors notably the tension between modern and traditional Islam and state intervention in the election of *imams* and Islamic councils. Another important factor is the state requirement for *pondoks* to change into private Islamic schools. In the end these *babors* became rich businessmen while *imams* were transformed into active vote canvassers; consequently they were alienated from the ordinary villagers leading to a crisis of leadership making Pattani open to significant increase in violence after 2004. McCargo contends the violence is closely associated with the traditional *pondok* rather than Wahabism which has considerable appeal to the intellectual class while other scholars see Wahabism as contributory factor. Thus the resurgence of violence "reflects a disappointed, dissenting, and divided Muslim community, whose most capable leaders were captured by Bangkok," leaders who could articulate their aspirations *vis à vis* the state and the Thai majority.

The local elite-state competition is discussed in Chapter 2. Representative politics for the deep south is beset with many contradictions. McCargo asks the valid question of who should represent the Malay-Muslims when the state's legitimacy had been in question since 1902; if the state is not legitimate then the mediator is equally illegitimate and liable "to a process of corrosion and self-destruct." To prove his point McCargo examines the political career of Den Tohmeena, a son of the famed teacher Haji Sulong Abdul Kadir, as well as members of the Wadah group that Den helped to establish in 1986 who include Wan Muhammad Nor Matha (Wan Nor), Najmuddin Umar, Aripin Utarasint, Muk Sulaiman (Nik Mahmud Sulaiman), Paisal Yingsamarn and Buranudin Useng. These politicians managed to hang on to public office thorough the control of *imams* and the provincial Islamic council besides close association with major Bangkok based political parties including Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party and the Democrats. By allowing the state to domesticate his

reputation for dissent, Den triggered his own rejections by his Pattani supporters (p. 69). Meanwhile Wadah proved ineffective "to build political negotiating power with mainstream political parties and the state." McCargo claims they were viewed with suspicion by Bangkok which is not surprising. We are not certain if these politicians are viewed as prostitutes which is quite the norm among Thai Buddhists. In the end they, including Den and Wan Nor, discredited themselves in the eyes of local supporters and were rejected by the electorates. From 2006 the politics of despair was on the rise at a time when the state was unwilling/unable to consider substantive decentralisation. After 2006 the southern voices had become as fragmented as ever while the "failure of representative politics had created an open space where violence could thrive."

Equally explosive is Chapter 3 which examines issues of justice, the army, police and the militias. On the issue of justice some of the more contentious issues include the criminal justice system, how the suspects are identified, arrested, interrogated, prosecuted, tried and imprisoned. Malay Muslims lack confidence in the system that brings few persecutions and fewer still convictions. These were contributed by a host of causes notably political interference, arrests and confessions becoming a form of theatre, lack of experienced prosecutors, lack of capable lawyers and problems with the judges. In the end the Malay Muslim notion of injustice is related more to the conduct of state officers and the shortcomings of the judicial process.

McCargo's indictment of the army, police and the myriad militias including those organised by the Interior Ministry is damning. In varying degrees all were core components of the complex southern problem; the militias were ill conceived during the Thaksin rule but had inflicted irreparable damage by the time these were abolished. The military (with the exception of the rangers) seems to be the least problematical yet, little could be expected from them. Like the army in Myanmar and Indonesia the Thai army had the ignominy of involvement in domestic political repression. This is further complicated by the muddle thinking of the military on many issues while their excessive attachment to and display of force do not bode well for improving state-Malay Muslim relations. By 2006 the army presence in the south was approximately 20,000 comprising various elements; all share the common problem of discipline, low morale, poorly equipped and prone to making blunders like the Kru-ze (Gerisek) siege and the Tak Bai arrests of 2004 which wiped out gains that have been painstakingly built over the years. These blunders further alienate the Malay Muslims and the vicious circle of violence.

McCargo was critical of the police force which was detested not just in the south but country wide, much more than the army. The police is popularly viewed as dishonest, accused of abusing power, exploiting the locals and hostile to the local culture. Endemic police-army rivalry complicates matters in the south. Things became worst when a former police officer, Thaksin Shinawatra, took charge of the nation between 2001–2006 making wholesale changes to fairly

workable arrangements that had been put in place earlier by the Fourth Army. Nor is the situation improved with the introduction of Malay Muslim officers. The mistrust towards the police is so deep that efforts of dedicated individual officers or reformist commanders could be readily undermined by the actions and attitudes of the men on patrol (p. 121). The root problem is that their organisational culture – heavy drinking, petty corruption and human right abuses – is just incompatible with the values and beliefs of the Malay Muslims. As he wrote, "the security policies of the Thai state were a lamentable catalogue of criminal blunders, negligence, incompetence, lack of coordination and sheer misdirection. Thailand could not hope to normalise the security situation through dialogue; militants were only likely to engage in serious negotiations when they understood that an armed struggle was unwinnable."

The militants and its different shades are covered in the last chapter which is the most controversial part of the book. Based on his readings of the simultaneous attacks by militants in 2004 on an assortment of military, police and non-military targets in Pattani, Yala and Songkhla provinces McCargo posed many question on the militants, its recruitment, structure, whether it is an Islamic movement, aims, and connections with previous separatist movements. One crucial element is the use of magic and spells with claims of invulnerability from bullets by some of the naïve and unthinking attackers who were mostly young men. These men were easily enlisted for doubtful causes and to McCargo, such "spectacular display of wild fury by disenchanted Malay Muslim youth do not bode well for the state's legitimacy and authority in the south."

To McCargo the violence is spearheaded by small cells of locally based youth who view themselves as fighters in the post-separatist period. They could easily blend with the surrounding after each sortie. Their recruitment was based on the invocation of Pattani history, and Malay oppression by the Siamese since 1902 and abuses by myriad types of state officials. He rejected any connection of the movement with salafist; rather the militants came from the *pondoks* or Islamic schools who easily succumbed to jihadist rhetoric while the preponderance of a traditional form of Islam laced with magical practices clearly indicates the absence of any modernist influences (Wahabism). Recent studies on the Malay Muslim educational institutions show the importance of those trained in the Middle East, Malaysia and Indonesia between the 1950s–1980s; they held teaching positions in many *madrasahs* including those that opened its door to girls. Surely these modernist teachers must have considerable impact on their students on the other dimension of jihad – the uplifting of the community through various form of knowledge.

Tearing Apart the Land is a controversial study of the Pattani conflict. Its major arguments are based on solid evidence besides well supported assumptions. Overall the well-crafted book is a superb attempt to unravel the southern conflict in an intelligent manner, to make sense of a senseless violence which could provide a better understanding to Thais, Malay Muslims and

outsiders including regional neighbours. The book is useful for the policy makers, students, and the laymen who are interested in Southern Thailand. For those still in the field the book had definitely set a high standard of research, something that is difficult to emulate.

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