

It wasn't PAS who killed those 80 boys, Mr Thaksin

THE TERM 'MILITARY/POLICE INTELLIGENCE' is beginning to sound like a joke — not least for the reason that there seems to be precious little intelligence in many of the so-called intelligence reports we hear of. The latest contribution to this world of non-letters is the so-called intelligence report leaked by the *Thai Nation* newspaper. It purports to be a 'high level' document left on the desk of Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The report claims that leaders of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) were somehow involved in helping or supporting the opposition groups in Southern Thailand. The basis of this claim seems to be a meeting that PAS leaders were alleged to have organised in Malaysia. PAS insists that no such meeting took place. The report does not mention the fact that the recent spate of violence in Southern Thailand has attracted the concern and attention of people all over the world, not just the Islamists of Malaysia.

There are many ways one can read and react to the Thai intelligence report. The cynical approach would be to simply point out that it was no more than a feeble attempt at white-washing the recent killings of more than eighty civilian protesters at the town of Tak Bai. Most of them were killed when crumpled into trucks, piled on top of one another, to endure a gruelling five-hour journey to a police detention centre. The death toll appears to be rising, as more deaths are announced.

Others might argue that this was just an attempt to distract attention from the general breakdown of law and order in Patani, a region that has witnessed long periods of violence and unrest since the 1960s and where the Thai security forces have been behaving with a characteristic lack of finesse bordering at times on brutality.

No-one would deny that there are indeed militant groups that now seem to be operating in the region, but to solve the problem the Thai government should begin by looking at its own record of uneven development, corruption in police and army and the general neglect that Patani has suffered since the 1960s. Despite the spectacular development of Thailand in the 1980s (which climaxed with its equally spectacular collapse in 1997), Patani remains one of the poorest and under-developed regions in ASEAN. Is it a surprise then that there is now a legion of young, angry Thais who feel that they have been cheated of their share of the nation's wealth?

And as for 'Islamic terror' bogeyman, it should be noted that Prime Minister Thaksin was one of the first ASEAN leaders to embrace President Bush's discourse of the 'global war against terror'. He was subsequently labelled one of America's 'major non-NATO allies' in the world. President Bush seemed less concerned about

VIEW



FARISH A NOOR

Paranoia will not alter the fact that the rise of political Islam in ASEAN has been the result of political, economic and cultural development in the region. While some of the Islamist groups may have taken the violence option, most of them are law-abiding and have always operated within the bounds of their countries' constitutions

Prime Minister Thaksin's authoritarian approach.

The violence being meted out in Patani is a continuation of the violent campaign against alleged drug dealers and criminal gangs in the country. The campaign led to the loss of more than 2,000 lives and has been widely condemned by Thai NGOs for its lack of transparency and disregard for the rule of law.

The latest fiasco in Patani reeks of the same obfuscation and opacity. The so-called intelligence report that has been conveniently leaked to the press appears to have been the work of an officer whose own knowledge of the Malaysian Islamic party (PAS) is shallow at best. To claim, as the report does, that PAS is somehow involved in the Patani disturbances as a result of its failure at the 2004 Malaysian elections is too simplistic to be taken seriously. One suspects that its original aim was to find an external scapegoat to blame for Thailand's internal problems that should have been addressed with more openness.

This is not the first time that members of the so-called 'intelligence' community have tried to besmirch the name of PAS. A few years ago another

er sweeping condemnation issued from the writings of Rohan Gunaratna — an intelligence expert whose book on the Al Qaeda was full of information derived from local ASEAN intelligence reports. Gunaratna's work hinted at possible linkages between PAS and another Malaysian Islamist movement, ABIM, to alleged Islamist militant groups in Southeast Asia. (Ironically the book also suggested a similar link to the ruling UMNO party in Malaysia.) Despite the author being taken to task for his sweeping statements, the damage to the image and reputation of PAS has persisted.

It should be noted here that PAS — despite its conservative neo-fundamentalist ideology — is and has always been a constitutional party. Many attempts by the state-controlled media to link PAS to allegedly militant groups, ranging from the Persatuan Angkatan Sabillullah in the past to groups like the Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia (KMM) recently have proved baseless accusations.

The whole affair should be a warning to the intelligence agencies of ASEAN, all of whom have been working closely together in the past and all of whom remain equally secretive. No amount of paranoia or exaggeration will alter the fact that the rise of political Islam in ASEAN has been the result of the political, economic and cultural development of the region. While some of these Islamist groups may have taken the violence option, most of them are law-abiding and have always operated within the bounds of their countries' constitutions. Demonsising parties like PAS and linking them to bogus militant groups does little to inform the public, erode their popularity, or solve the problem of religious militancy and intolerance.

If the governments of ASEAN truly wish to address the question of Islamic radicalism in a meaningful way, they will have to start by addressing economic, political and cultural concerns in an open, rational manner. The government of Thailand should look at its own record of uneven development, corruption, abuse of power and abuse of human rights in Patani before blaming others. Militancy may be on the rise in Patani today but Prime Minister Thaksin and the leaders of Thailand should ask themselves what they have done — or failed to do — that allowed the situation to get out of control.

Prime Minister Thaksin should also remember that blaming others is not and will never be the answer to his government's mistakes. Remember, Mr Thaksin: it wasn't PAS who killed those eighty boys in Patani. It was your own security forces.

Dr Farish A Noor is a Malaysian political scientist and human rights activist