

11-1-2009

**Duncan McCargo. Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand. NY, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.**

Saroja Dorairajoo

Chinese University of Hong Kong, b117665@mailserv.cuhk.edu.hk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Dorairajoo, Saroja (2009) "Duncan McCargo. Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand. NY, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol1/iss1/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

**Duncan McCargo. *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand*. NY, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.**

This is the book on southern Thailand that needed to be written. Much work, in the form of journal articles or book chapters, has been produced on the violence in Thailand's Muslim south, which thus far has claimed around 3,700 lives and has conferred upon the area the reputation of Southeast Asia's most violent region. But no full-length book, seriously outlining and examining the issues revolving around this violence, has been previously attempted. McCargo's effort, therefore, deserves praise.

As a political scientist, McCargo has resorted to both textual analyses as well as fieldwork interviews to substantiate the data he presents. His textual data comes from anonymous leaflets distributed in the deep south between 2004 and 2006, essays written by suspected militants in an army-run "surrender camp," depositions or "confessions of arrested militants," and published works in English and Thai on the current violence. McCargo also carried out about 270 in-depth interviews with local and national politicians, community leaders, National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) members, human rights activists, Islamic teachers, imams, monks, academics, journalists, lawyers, security officials, and victims and perpetrators of the violence.

McCargo is generally in agreement with the view of many of his informants that a militant Muslim movement with post-separatist aspirations is behind the current violence. As such, he takes on the task of understanding the nature of this movement by asking the following questions: What conditions created this movement? How is the movement organized, and who supports it? Is it essentially a political movement? How much Islamist or jihadist thinking or rhetoric does it incorporate into its own rhetoric? In an attempt to answer these questions and to explain the violence in southern Thailand, McCargo applies the arguments of Mohammed Hafez, who argues in his work, *Why Muslims Rebel*, that political-institutional exclusion, in combination with indiscriminate repression, provides conditions that are ripe for large-scale rebellion. McCargo says the disenfranchisement of the Thai-Malays, as well as repressive state actions by the former government of Thaksin Shinawatra, have directly led to the current violence. McCargo lays out the mix of factors, viz. politics, attitudes, and practices of security forces, militancy, and Islam that have contributed to the violence that seems to have been fanned furiously by Thaksin's incompetent government. Though several other analysts have alluded to these factors, none have explored them deeply or substantiated them with field data as McCargo has, and for this, credit goes to him.

While his work is generally deserving of praise, much of McCargo's argument rests too specifically upon the principle of legitimacy, which he argues the Thai state seems to have lost in the Muslim south. McCargo acknowledges that legitimacy is a complex concept and relates the state's loss of legitimacy in the southern region to two factors: (1) participation/non-participation in elections, as seen in the high numbers of spoilt Muslims votes in the 2001 parliamentary elections in Yala province and the corresponding rejection of Muslim candidates, seen as supporters of Thaksin's government and (2) the level of political violence in the Muslim south since 2001.

Despite McCargo's coherent presentation of this notion of legitimacy, however, the idea that the role of legitimacy alone is responsible for a people's acceptance or

rejection of a government seems highly exaggerated in McCargo's work. A government's "legitimacy" to rule in many modern postcolonial Asian and African states is not predicated upon a people's wholesale acceptance of the government. The state has various mechanisms that it uses to "coerce" a people to accept its rule. (One such mechanism attempted in Thailand was the social contract that the Thai state formed with southern Malay-Muslim elite in the 1980s, in which the Malay-Muslims were rewarded with material and political rewards in exchange for peace in the region. However, even this attempt to encourage acceptance of the government ultimately resulted in violence when the Malay-Muslim elite concentrated on enriching their coffers rather than on fulfilling the needs of the Malay-Muslim mass, the majority of whom were poor rural villagers alienated from the riches and spoils of the land.) Political scientist Jason Johnson, in his March 2009 review of Duncan McCargo's book, concedes that the crisis in legitimacy in southern Thailand may be a crisis for the Malay-Muslim *elite*, which is quite disconnected from the Malay-Muslim masses. This, Johnson argues, may "explain why slightly more than half the casualties of the violence have been Malay-Muslims."

While the notion of legitimacy may be a well-conceived argument, it disregards other social forces at the grassroots level, which, while focusing on helping Malay-Muslim rural folks and the poor, also often increase the potential for violent conflict. These forces include the many NGO organizations run by both Muslims and Buddhists, as well as the lax immigration practices in both Malaysia and Thailand that allow thousands of young Malay men and women to cross the border to work in Malaysia to earn salaries sometimes higher than those of Thai bureaucrats and civil servants. Though intending to help to make the lives of Malay-Muslims tolerable in Thailand's Muslim south, these forces can exacerbate the potential for violence, more so, perhaps, than any lost legitimacy of the Thai government.

Despite McCargo's tendency to overestimate the role of legitimacy in the history of violence in southern Thailand, he does convincingly clarify some misperceptions that continue to find a place in the analysis of Thai violence. McCargo argues that the southern Thai conflict is neither an Islamic jihad, nor is it linked to international terrorist outfits. While he acknowledges the involvement of *pondok* teachers and ustads in mobilizing scores of young Muslim men to become militants, he asserts that "Islam serves simply as a mobilizing resource and a means of framing increasingly shrill justifications for the anti-civilian violence that all too often develops a chilling momentum of its own" (p. 187). The real reasons for the violence, he argues, are local historical and political grievances, not religious ones (p. 188). McCargo explains that *pondok* teachers and ustads have been at the forefront of co-opting young men into the movement, which the state has *perceived* as Islamic terrorism. In return, the government then targets the Islamic provincial councils, interferes in the teaching of Islam, and co-opts private Islamic school owners, thus seeming to re-affirm the fact that the conflict is religious in nature.

In spite of his ability to analyze and clarify many critical elements of the violence plaguing southern Thailand, McCargo does not answer some important questions. For instance, why should the fight for Malay identity and independence be taken up by a new generation of poor rural Muslims? Why have religious teachers and ustads taken up the cause of historical and political grievances, especially when the earlier separatist concerns were primarily echoed by the Malay elite and nobility, which lost its political

and economic power once the Thai state began to take over the administration of the Malay-dominated southern provinces? Why is the call for an independent Malay-Muslim state of Patani, which was earlier called for by the Malay elite, now being echoed by poor rural Muslim religious teachers? The answers to these questions would be extremely important to support McCargo's argument of a crisis in legitimacy of the Thai state in Muslim southern Thailand.

While the reasons for the violence as argued for by McCargo clearly need more investigation, what McCargo's book shows is a failed state's efforts to deal unsuccessfully with a group of Muslim militants who have used the state's incompetency and prejudices to their own advantage to continue to wage a battle of violence in the Muslim south. The mighty Thai state, which in historical glory was one of the most powerful kingdoms in Southeast Asia, today cannot even fend off a gang of militants because of its own corruption, inefficiency, and failed government and security forces. The study of violence in the Muslim south is really an illustration of an inefficient Thai state.

Saroja Dorairajoo, Ph.D.  
Chinese University of Hong Kong  
b117665@mailserv.cuhk.edu.hk