

Two Versions of the Same War

Foreign Information Manipulation in the Cambodian-Thai Conflict



Introduction

The Cambodian-Thai border conflict, which broke out in late May 2025, has produced not only military casualties and diplomatic breakdowns but a parallel contest over information. Throughout the heightened conflict period, including both rounds of military clashes (24–28 July and 7–27 December 2025) that unfolded on the ground, both countries saw the deployment of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) to justify their respective country's military posture and to delegitimise the adversary. These operations were directed at the citizens of the opposing state, but also at international observers.

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference: As defined by the European Union, “a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner, by state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory ([European Union External Action, 2023](#))”. Importantly, FIMI does not require the use of disinformation – manipulation of framing, emphasis and context can constitute an operation without necessarily using a “false” claim.

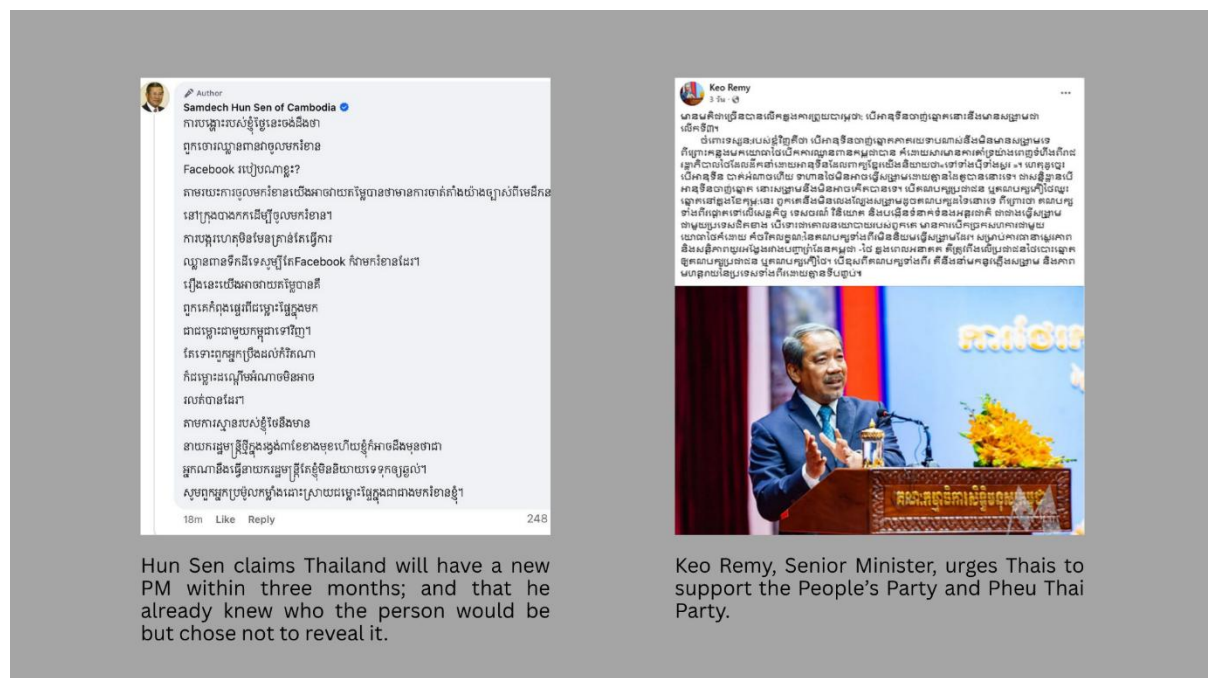
What distinguishes the information environment in this conflict is that FIMI is not confined to anonymous or fringe actors. Leaders on both sides have either amplified contested narratives directly or condoned their circulation. The result is two largely sealed information environments, each reinforcing a singular national account: one in which cross-border scrutiny is structurally absent and in which the volume of messaging consistently outpaces the capacity for independent verification.

This article examines FIMI patterns originating from both sides¹. It documents how, in the absence of independent cross-border verification, citizens on both sides are exposed primarily to state-aligned narratives and how those narratives, left unchallenged, continue to foreclose the conditions for dialogue and de-escalation.

FIMI Operations from Cambodia

A defining feature of Cambodia's information operations is the deliberate intervention by senior political leadership in Thai domestic politics. In fact, Cambodia leaked an audio recording of a phone call between then-PM Paetongtarn Shinawatra and Hun Sen ([Prachathai, 2025](#)) before the outbreak of the military conflict ([Srijaem & Em-ocha, 2025](#)) – and this not only triggered a judicial ruling to remove PM Paetongtarn and a government transition in Thailand ([Thepgumpanat & Setboonsarng, 2025](#)), but also contributed directly to the subsequent military escalation.

Hun Sen has continued to use personal platforms to insert himself into Thai political affairs throughout the conflict escalation. He claims longstanding support for former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra ([Sanglee & Ratcliffe, 2025](#)) and asserts intimate knowledge of Thai political succession, including claims that he knew who Thailand's next prime minister would be ([KhmerTimes, 2025a](#)). Government senior ministers went further, publicly advising Thai voters in the 2026 general election against supporting Anutin Charnvirakul – a move interpreted by Thailand's People's Party as a reverse strategy that would consolidate rather than undermine support for Anutin ([Rome, 2026](#)).



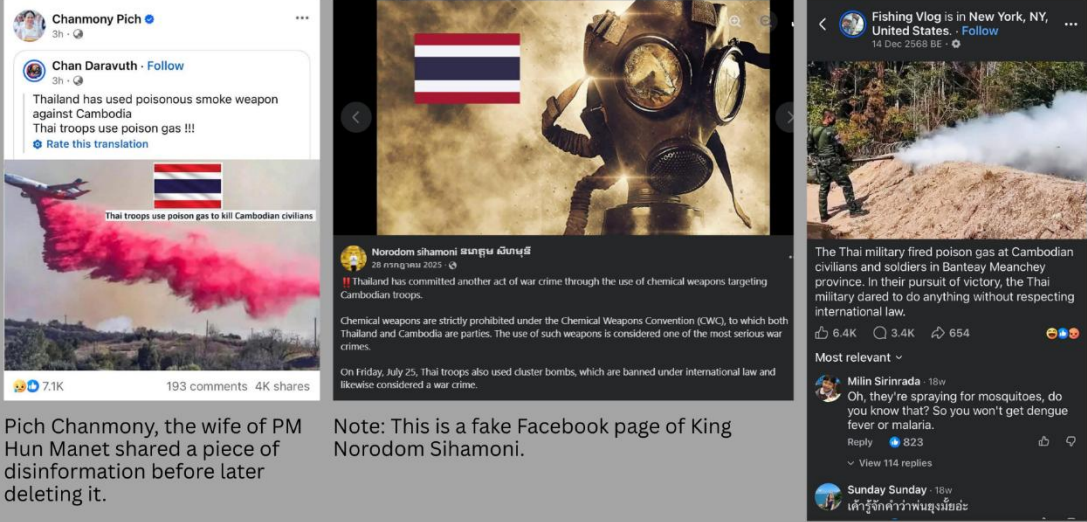
Hun Sen claims Thailand will have a new PM within three months; and that he already knew who the person would be but chose not to reveal it.

Keo Remy, Senior Minister, urges Thais to support the People's Party and Pheu Thai Party.

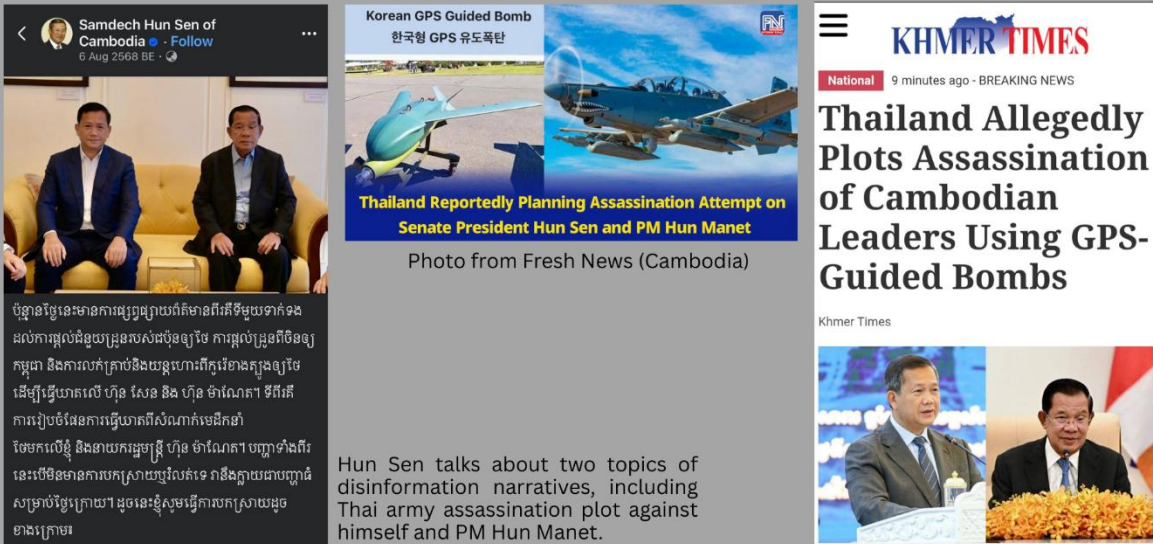
Cambodia also conducted disinformation-based operations intended to counter Thailand's defensive-war framing. Spokesperson Maly Socheata alleged that Thai forces had deployed unspecified poison gas against frontline soldiers ([Ministry of Information, 2025](#)). The image provided as evidence was neither taken during the border conflict nor depicted poison gas: it was recycled footage from a wildfire-suppression mission in Southern California in January 2025 ([AFP, 2025](#)). Pich Chanmony (Cambodian

¹ This article draws on a representative selection of FIMI narratives to illustrate the scope and character of information manipulation in both countries. The cases documented here are not exhaustive.

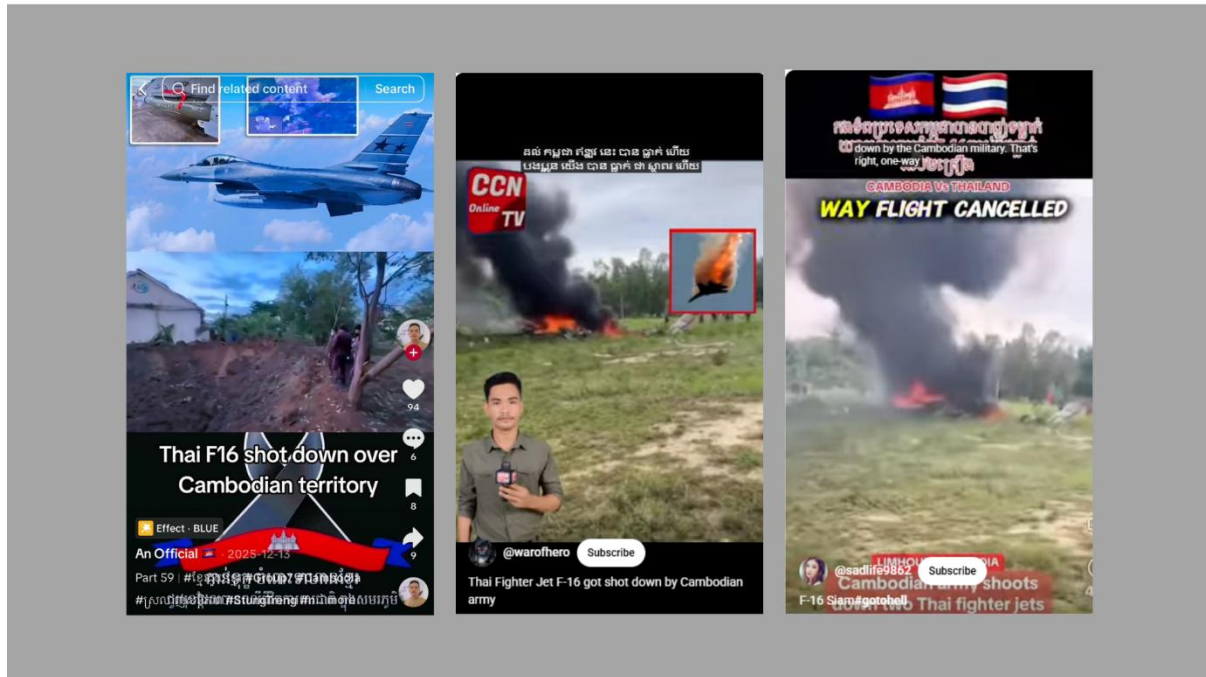
PM Hun Manet's wife) also falsely amplified these details by sharing disinformation images on her Facebook personal account ([CNA, 2025](#)). The net effect was counterproductive: by grounding a legitimate concern (the use of white phosphorus, which Thailand later acknowledged) in fabricated evidence, Cambodia's grievances were met with disbelief from both Thailand and international onlookers.



Cambodian media also reported that the Thai military was planning an assassination of Hun Sen and Hun Manet ([KhmerTimes, 2025b](#); [KhmerTimes, 2025c](#); [PressOCM, 2025](#)). The claim appears to have originated in Thai social media speculation before being recirculated and amplified as an established narrative; no official Thai statement supported it, and the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs formally denied any such plans ([MOFA, 2025](#)).



Cambodian media and online influencers also circulated a fabricated video purporting to show a Thai air raid operation, and that an F-16 fighter was shot down by Cambodian forces. The video was used to frame as evidence of a Thai air raid successfully repelled, projecting an image of Cambodian military capability and successful resistance to bolster public morale and reinforce a narrative of Cambodia as a resilient underdog against a more aggressive and powerful adversary. The video was subsequently debunked when the footage used was identified as recycled material from the Russia-Ukraine war ([Madhusoodan & Menon, 2025](#); [The Star, 2025](#); [Ab News, 2025](#)).

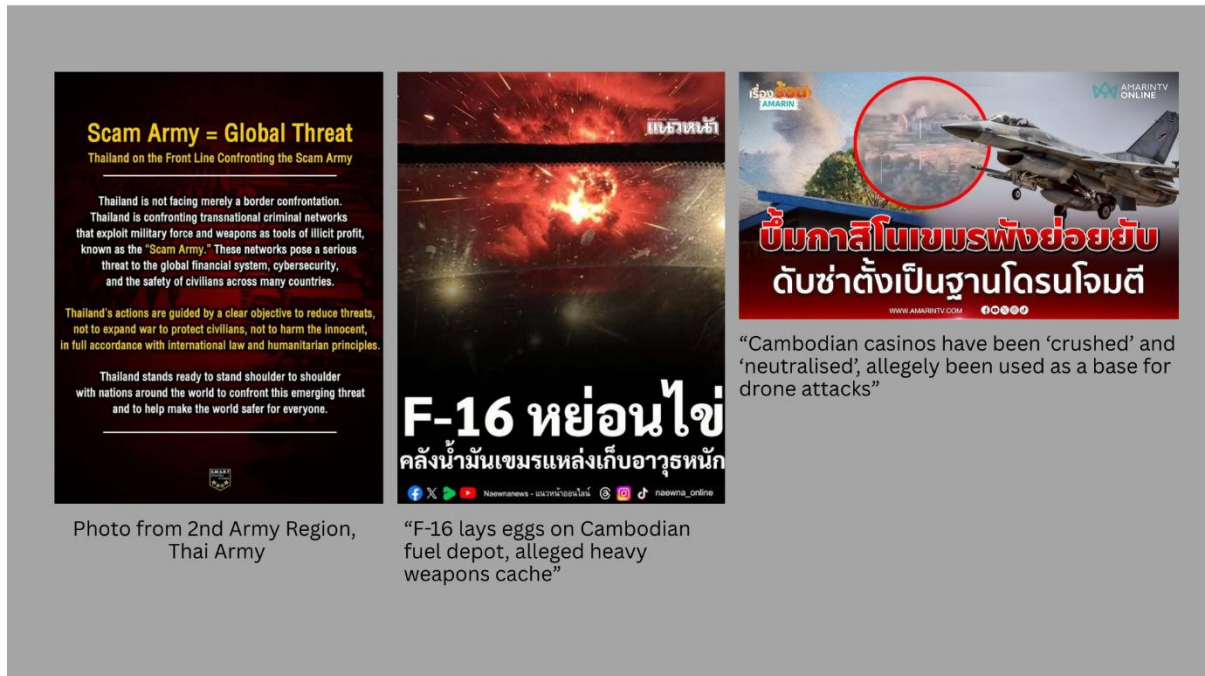


While international observers have raised concerns about the proportionality of Thailand's military deployment, Cambodia's recourse to fabricated evidence in making those claims ultimately undermined the credibility of what may have been legitimate grievances.

FIMI Operations in Thailand

Three main organised functions of Thai FIMI operations will be discussed in this section: justifying military escalation and the weapons deployed; and delegitimising Cambodia's position. Many such narratives were created, deployed and amplified under the #TruthFromThailand campaign.

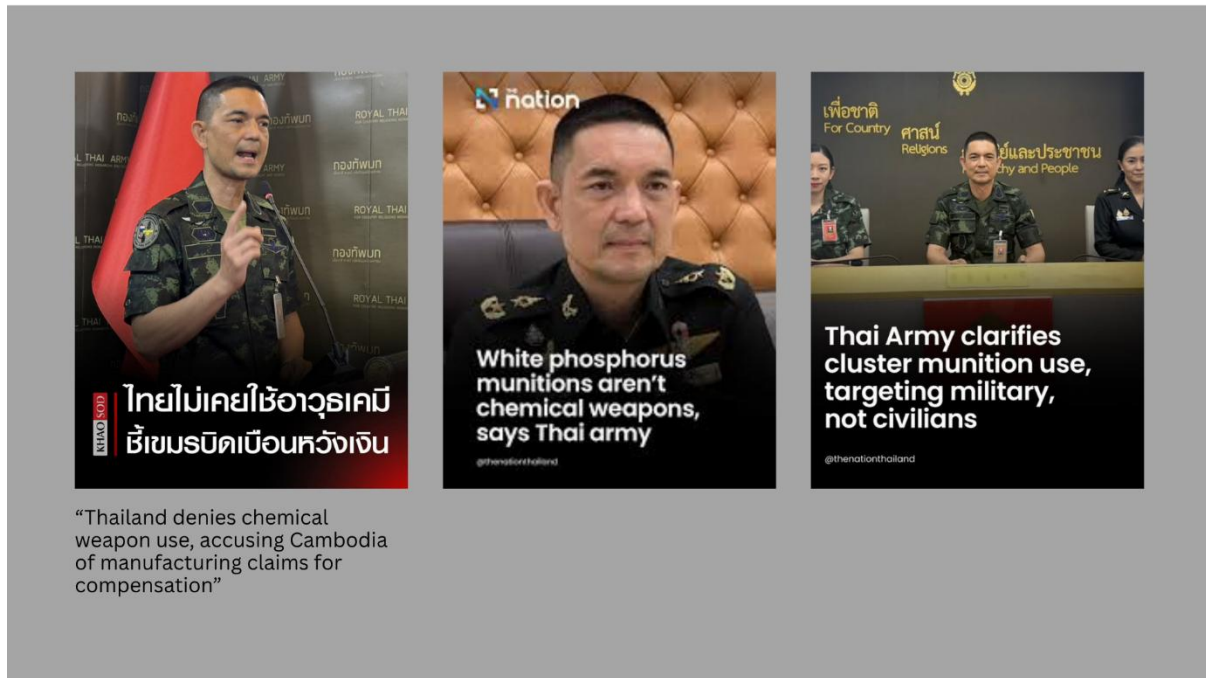
First, the primary narrative advanced by the Thai military frames its actions as defensive rather than aggressive ([Royal Thai Armed Forces, 2025](#)). The deployment of F-16 fighter jets to strike Cambodian military positions, for instance, was presented as a proportionate response ([Khaosod, 2025](#); [The Nation Thailand, 2025](#)). The Thai military has not, however, provided substantive responses to questions about the proportionality of these strikes. Further, the colloquial framing of F-16 airstrikes as "laying eggs", then accompanied by jokes and cheers, further undermines Thailand's characterisation of its military operations as defensive and proportionate.



At the same time, the government of then-Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra also sought to frame military operations as extensions of its anti-online scam campaign, positioning strikes against targets in Cambodia within a law-enforcement narrative intended to carry legitimacy for both domestic and international audiences ([Head et al., 2026](#)). This framing is not only unverified, but it is also illegal. The use of military force does not constitute a recognised instrument of international law enforcement against cybercrime.

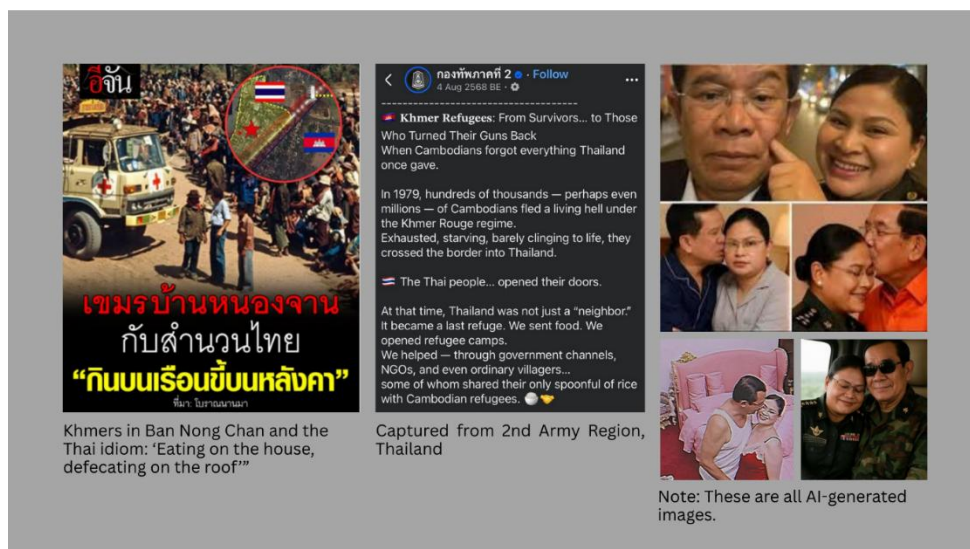
The Thai military also faced allegations of deploying cluster munitions ([KhmerTimes, 2025d](#)) and poison gases (later revealed as white phosphorus) during the military clash in violation of international law ([KhmerTimes, 2025e](#)). The military initially denied both before acknowledging their use only once publicly available evidence made denial untenable, though maintaining that deployment was strictly within military contexts and consistent with international law ([Royal Thai Army, 2025a](#); [Royal Thai Army, 2025b](#)). No independent assessment has been conducted to evaluate these claims ([Cluster Munition Coalition, 2025](#)). In the absence of such verification, Cambodian media have reported that unexploded cluster bomb submunitions killed Cambodian children who mistook them for toys ([Seavmey, 2025](#)) and that white phosphorus caused chemical burns and respiratory injuries among those exposed ([Pichbormey, 2025](#)). Meanwhile, the original denials were seized upon within Thai FIMI discourse to discredit Cambodian accounts of weapons use as fabricated, foreclosing scrutiny of the underlying humanitarian concerns.²

² It is worth noting that Cambodia's initial reporting on white phosphorus was itself accompanied by a fabricated image which undermined Cambodia's own credibility on the issue. Thai information operations were quick to foreground this discrepancy, using Cambodia's evidentiary failure to cast doubt on the underlying allegation.



Second, beyond the justification of war, Thailand's FIMI strategy also involved delegitimisation. For one, narratives were created to paint a picture of Cambodia being supported by major powers seeking to gain an advantage in the conflict against Thailand. Some Thai media outlets heavily promoted reports of Russian mercenaries being involved in the conflict ([Top News, 2025](#)), a claim the Russian embassy denied ([ThaiPBS, 2025](#); [KhmerTimes, 2025f](#)).

There were also widespread conspiracies among Thai netizens discrediting Cambodia. One claim persists that Cambodian residents in disputed border areas are descendants of refugees who declined to leave Thai camps established during the humanitarian response to the Khmer Rouge era ([PPTVHD, 2025](#); [Asian SEA Story, 2024](#)). No supporting evidence has been produced. A separate trend sought to manufacture a Deepfake romantic scandal involving Senate President Hun Sen and Cambodian Ministry of Defence spokesperson Maly Socheata³. These claims were equally without an evidentiary basis.



³ An AI-generated image portraying a fabricated romance scandal between Cambodian Senate President Hun Sen and Ministry of National Defence Spokesperson Maly Socheata has circulated widely across Thai social media. The post can be viewed [here](#).

Taken together, whether or not Thailand genuinely regards its actions as defensive, the cumulative effect of these operations has eroded the credibility of that position.

A War-Ready Public and a Complicit Information Environment

Several conditions make the information disorder in the conflict context inflammatory, but also structurally untenable for independent verification to happen. Long-standing adversarial narratives, embedded in education systems and public culture on both sides, have historically framed the neighbouring state as a national threat ([Hinton, 2006](#); [Khongphianthum, 2024](#); [Sindhuprama & Thanalertsomboon, 2025](#)). Episodes from ancient conflicts to more recent ones, like the burning of the Thai Embassy in 2003 ([Aglionby, 2003](#); [Naren, 2003](#)) and the 2008–2011 border dispute ([Cheang, 2008](#); [BangkokPost, 2008](#); [Mass Communication Organisation of Thailand, 2009](#)), are continuously recounted to sustain this framing. This produces a population already primed toward an antagonistic posture.

Into this environment, state actors on both sides have shown a clear willingness to stoke rather than temper hostility. As documented in the preceding sections, government officials, military spokespeople and aligned influencer networks have all – whether through deliberate disinformation or the amplification of unverified third-party claims – fed narratives that worsen the conflict.

What forecloses a corrective response is the condition of the media and civil society sectors on both sides. A portion of the media and civil society landscape on both sides has also shown no reluctance to participate in the conflict's information dimensions: government-aligned NGOs, influencer networks, engagement-driven outlets and pro-state platforms have functioned as active contributors to FIMI operations rather than independent voices ([Sriyai, 2025a](#); [Sriyai, 2025b](#)).

Furthermore, in both countries, but more so in Cambodia, press restrictions and the threat of punitive action have left most outlets reporting in close alignment with the government ([Yalirozy, 2025](#); [CamboJA, 2026](#)) or the military ([Rojanaphruk, 2025](#); [Prachatai, 2025](#)). Meanwhile, commercial pressures mean that media organisations face audience pushback and revenue risk when coverage diverges from dominant nationalist sentiment. Where independent outlets have attempted balanced reporting, they have done so against the nationalist sentiment and considerable institutional headwinds.

Conclusion

What makes this particularly consequential is that the conflict, while originating in a sparsely populated border zone, has, through sustained information operations, become a conflict between peoples. It is at that people-to-people level – rather than at the frontier – where the conflict's long-term trajectory will be determined, and where any sustainable management of it must begin.

Therefore, as long as FIMI operations succeed in maintaining two irreconcilable versions of events – and as long as the mechanisms that might challenge those versions remain either constrained or complicit – the structural foundations for any comprehensive discussion of the conflict remain absent.



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