

THAILAND in Perspective

An Orientation Guide



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Profile

Introduction

Thailand occupies a central location within Southeast Asia and is the only country in the region to avoid colonization, in large part because of its strategic position as a buffer between British India and French Indochina during the colonial period.¹ During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, political pressures forced the Thai king to relinquish several territorial claims, first to France in what are now modern-day Laos and Cambodia, and later to Britain in what are now Burma and northern Malaysia.



© hnik / Flickr.com
An island in Phang-Nga Bay National Park

Thailand has experienced many changes over the last century, including a change in name. For much of its history, and up until 1939, Thailand was known to outsiders as Siam (or variants of Siam). The Thai people, for their part, have always called themselves Thai rather than Siamese, although several other ethnolinguistic groups also live within the country's modern borders. Seven years before the official name change, a revolution transformed the nation from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. This form of political rule persists to this day, despite several periods of military domination over the government throughout the subsequent 75-plus years.

Modern Thailand has seen periods of remarkable economic development, as well as a dramatic collapse during the late 1990s. Deregulation, privatization, and an increasing focus on an export-oriented economy drove large amounts of investment into the country during the 1980s. By 1995, the World Bank declared Thailand the world's fastest growing economy. However, the "Asian flu" economic crisis of 1997, which began in Thailand and eventually spreading throughout much of Southeast Asia, put a sudden halt to this boom period.²

Today, Thailand has largely recovered from its economic collapse, despite suffering the devastating effects of the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004. The tsunami killed thousands in southern Thailand and left many of the survivors without homes or jobs. In rebounding from both economic and natural disasters, the Thai people have demonstrated great resilience in the face of hardship.³

¹ *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism, and Separatism*. Christie, Clive J. "1. Introduction [p. 7]." 1996. London: I. B. Tauris & Co.

² *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "The Economy of Thailand [p. 69]." 2004. Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO.

³ The World Bank. "Thai People Tell Their Stories." No date. <http://go.worldbank.org/XOECHJ66J0>

Facts and figures⁴

Location:

Southeastern Asia, bordering the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand.

Area:

514,000 sq km (198,000 sq mi)

Border countries:

Burma 1,800 km (1,118 mi), Cambodia 803 km (499 mi), Laos 1,754 km (1,090 mi), Malaysia 506 km (314 mi)



CIA map
Map of Thailand

Natural hazards:

Land is sinking in the Bangkok area as a result of the water table depletion. Periodic droughts may also occur.

Climate

Tropical; rainy, warm, cloudy southwest monsoon (mid-May to September); dry, cool northeast monsoon (November to mid-March); southern isthmus always hot and humid.

Environment—current issues:

Air pollution from vehicle emissions; water pollution from organic and factory wastes; deforestation; soil erosion; wildlife populations threatened by illegal hunting.

Population:

65,068,149 (July 2007 est.)

Median age:

32.4 years (2007 est.)

Population growth rate:

0.663% (2007 est.)



© Steve Evans
Thai girls

⁴ Information in this section comes from the following source: Central Intelligence Agency. CIA World Factbook. "Thailand" 6 March 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html>

Life expectancy at birth:

72.55 years (2007 est.)

HIV/AIDS—adult prevalence rate:

1.5% (2003 est.)

Major infectious diseases:

degree of risk: high

food or waterborne diseases: bacterial diarrhea and hepatitis A

vectorborne diseases: Dengue fever, Japanese encephalitis, and malaria

animal contact disease: rabies

water contact disease: leptospirosis

note: Highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza has been identified in this country; it poses a negligible risk with extremely rare cases possible among U.S. citizens who have close contact with birds. (2008)

Sex ratio:

at birth: 1.05 male(s)/female

under 15 years: 1.047 male(s)/female

15–64 years: 0.976 male(s)/female

65 years and over: 0.834 male(s)/female

total population: 0.979 male(s)/female (2007 est.)

Nationality:

noun: Thai (singular and plural)

adjective: Thai

Ethnic groups:

Thai 75%, Chinese 14%, other 11% (1994 census)

Religions:

Buddhist 94.6%, Muslim 4.6%, Christian 0.7%, other 0.18% (2000 census)

Languages:

Thai, English (second language of the elite), ethnic and regional dialects



Literacy:

definition: Persons age 15 and over who can read and write.

total population: 92.6%

male: 94.9%

female: 90.5% (2000 census)

Country name:

conventional long form: Kingdom of Thailand

conventional short form: Thailand

local long form: Ratcha Anachak Thai

local short form: Prathet Thai

former: Siam

Government type:

constitutional monarchy

Capital:

name: Bangkok

Administrative divisions:

76 provinces (*changwat*, singular and plural); Amnat Charoen, Ang Thong, Buriram, Chachoengsao, Chai Nat, Chaiyaphum, Chanthaburi, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Chon Buri, Chumphon, Kalasin, Kamphaeng Phet, Kanchanaburi, Khon Kaen, Krabi, Krung Thep Mahanakhon (Bangkok), Lampang, Lamphun, Loei, Lop Buri, Mae Hong Son, Maha Sarakham, Mukdahan, Nakhon Nayok, Nakhon Pathom, Nakhon Phanom, Nakhon Ratchasima, Nakhon Sawan, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Nan, Narathiwat, Nong Bua Lamphu, Nong Khai, Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, Pattani, Phangnga, Phatthalung, Phayao, Phetchabun, Phetchaburi, Phichit, Phitsanulok, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, Phrae, Phuket, Prachin Buri, Prachuap Khiri Khan, Ranong, Ratchaburi, Rayong, Roi Et, Sa Kaeo, Sakon Nakhon, Samut Prakan, Samut Sakhon, Samut Songkhram, Sara Buri, Satun, Sing Buri, Sisaket, Songkhla, Sukhothai, Suphan Buri, Surat Thani, Surin, Tak, Trang, Trat, Ubon Ratchathani, Udon Thani, Uthai Thani, Uttaradit, Yala, Yasothon



© ScubaBeer / Flickr.com
A statue at the Grand Palace

Independence:

1238 (traditional founding date; never colonized)

National holiday:

Birthday of King Phumiphon (Bhumibol), 5 December (1927)

Constitution:

Constitution signed by King Phumiphon (Bhumibol) on 24 August 2007

Legal system:

Based on civil law system, with influences of common law; has not accepted compulsory International Court of Justice jurisdiction.



© Ben Klocek
Celebrating the king's birthday

Suffrage:

18 years of age; universal and compulsory

Government:

chief of state: King Phumiphon Adunyadet (Bhumibol Adulyadej) (since 9 June 1946)
head of government: Prime Minister Samak Sundavavej (since 29 January 2008); Deputy Prime Minister Mingkwan Saengsuwan (Mingkwan Sangsuwan) (since 7 February 2008); Deputy Prime Minister Sahas Banditkun (Sahas Banditkul) (since 7 February 2008); Deputy Prime Minister Sanan Kachornprasat (Ana Kachornparsart) (since 7 February 2008); Deputy Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat (since 7 February 2008); Deputy Prime Minister Surapong Suebwonglee (since 7 February 2008); Deputy Prime Minister Suwit Khunkitti (since 7 February 2008)
cabinet: Council of Ministers

note: There is also a Privy Council.

elections: None; monarch is hereditary; according to 2007 constitution, prime minister is designated from among members of House of Representatives; following national elections for House of Representatives, leader of party that could organize a majority coalition was usually appointed Prime Minister by king; Prime Minister is limited to two 4-year terms.

Legislative branch:

Bicameral National Assembly, or Rathasapha, consisted of the Senate, or Wuthisapha, (150 seats; 76 members elected by popular vote representing 76 provinces, 74 appointed by judges and independent government bodies; all serve six-year terms) and the House of Representatives or Sapha Phuthaen Ratsadon (480 seats; 400 members elected from 157 multi-seat constituencies and 80 elected on proportional party-list basis of 10 per eight zones or groupings of provinces; all serve four-year terms); after coup in September 2006, coup leaders appointed an interim National Assembly with 250 members to act as Senate and House of Representatives

elections: Senate - last held on 19 April 2006 (next to be held on 6 March 2008); House of Representatives - last election held on 23 December 2007 (next to



© Rootje / Wikipedia.org
Prime Minister Sundaravej

be held in December 2011)

election results: Senate - percent of vote by party - NA; seats by party - NA; House of Representatives - percent of vote by party - NA; seats by party – People Power Party 233, Democrat Party 164, Thai Nation Party 34, Motherland Party 24, Middle Way Party 11, Thai Unity Party 9, Royalist People's Party 5

Judicial branch:

Supreme Court or Sandika (judges appointed by the monarch)

International organization participation:

Asian Development Bank, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, Association of Southeast Asia Nations Plus Three, Association of Southeast Asia Nations Regional Forum, Association of Southeast Asia Nations, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, Bank for International Settlements, Colombo Plan, East Asian Summit, Food and Agriculture Organization, Group of 77, International Atomic Energy Agency, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), International Civil Aviation Organization, International Chamber of Commerce, International Criminal Court (signatory), International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, International Development Association, International Fund for Agricultural Development, International Finance Corporation, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, International Hydrographic Organization, International Labor Organization, International Monetary Fund, International Maritime Organization, International Mobil Satellite Organization, International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), International Olympic Committee, International Organization for Migration, Inter-parliamentary Union, International Organization for Standardization, International Telecommunications Satellite Organization, International Telecommunication Union, International Trade Union Confederation, Multilateral Investment Geographic Agency, Nonaligned Movement, Organization of American States (observer), Organization of the Islamic Conference (observer), Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (partner), Permanent Court of Arbitration, United Nations, African Union/United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, United Nations Mission in Sudan, World Tourism Organization, Universal Postal Union, World Confederation of Labor, World Customs Organization, World Federation of Trade Unions, World Health Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization, World Meteorological Organization, World Trade Organization

GDP—real growth rate:

4.5% (2007 est.)

GDP—composition by sector:

agriculture: 10.8%
industry: 45.3%
services: 43.8% (2007 est.)

Labor force—by occupation:

agriculture: 49%
industry: 14%
services: 37% (2000)

Telephones—main lines in use:

7.073 million (2006)

Telephones—mobile cellular:

40.816 million (2006)

Radio broadcast stations:

AM 238, FM 351, shortwave 6 (2007)

Television broadcast stations:

111 (2006)

Internet users:

8.466 million (2006)

Airports:

106 (2007)

Airports—with paved runways:

total: 65

over 3,047 m (1.89 mi): 8
2,438 to 3,047 m (1.51–1.89 mi): 11
1,524 to 2,437 m (0.95–1.51 mi): 23
914 to 1,523 m (0.57–0.95 mi): 17
under 914 m (0.57 mi): 6 (2007)



© rollerboogie / Flickr.com
Thai keyboard

Military branches:

Royal Thai Army (RTA), Royal Thai Navy (RTN, includes Royal Thai Marine Corps), Royal Thai Air Force (Knogtap Agard Thai, RTAF) (2006)



US NAVY photo
Royal Thai Navy helicopter

Military service age and obligation:

21 years of age for compulsory military service; 18 years of age for voluntary military service; males are registered at 18 years of age; 2-year conscript service obligation (2006).

International disputes:

Regional: Southeast Asian states have enhanced border surveillance to check the spread of avian flu.

Malaysia: Separatist violence in Thailand's predominantly Muslim southern provinces prompt border closures and controls with Malaysia to stem terrorist activities.

Laos: Talks continue on completion of demarcation with Laos but disputes remain over several islands in the Mekong River.

Burma: Despite continuing border committee talks, Thailand must deal with Karen and other ethnic rebels, refugees, and illegal cross-border activities, and as of 2006, over 116,000 Karen, Hmong, and other refugees and asylum seekers from Burma. Thailand is studying the feasibility of jointly constructing the Hatgyi Dam on the Salween River near the border with Burma.



© neil-san / Flickr.com
Border with Burma

Cambodia: Cambodia and Thailand dispute sections of historic boundary where boundary markers are missing; Cambodia claims Thai encroachments into Cambodian territory and obstructing access to Preah Vihear temple ruins awarded to Cambodia by the International Court of Justice decision in 1962.

China: In 2004, international environmentalist pressure prompted China to halt construction of 13 dams on the Salween River that flows through China, Burma, and Thailand.

Illicit drugs:

A minor producer of opium, heroin, and marijuana; transit point for illicit heroin en route to the international drug market from Burma and Laos; eradication efforts have reduced the area of cannabis cultivation and shifted some production to neighboring countries; opium poppy cultivation has been reduced by eradication efforts; also a drug money-laundering center; minor role in



© Dion Cranmitch
A field of opium poppies

methamphetamine production for regional consumption; major consumer of methamphetamine since the 1990s despite a series of government crackdowns.

Geography

Introduction

Thailand, although not a particularly large country by world standards, is a remarkably diverse nation made up of several distinct geographical regions. Within its borders lie rugged mountains, fertile flood plains, sandy beaches, arid plateaus, and tropical forests. Thailand's unusual border shape—most notably its narrow southern portion extending down the Malay Peninsula—makes it the only nation in mainland Southeast Asia to have coasts with direct access to both the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. The country's many beaches, mountains, and cultural attractions, supported by strong infrastructure and relatively few security concerns, has made it one of the most popular tourism locations in Asia.



© SqueakyMarmot / Flickr.com
Khao Sok National Park, Surat Thani province

Area

Thailand occupies a central spot within mainland Southeast Asia. To the west and northwest, it is bordered by Burma, to the northeast and east by Laos, and to the southeast by Cambodia. To the south lies the Gulf of Thailand, an inlet of the South China Sea. A long section of the Malay Peninsula runs south from the main part of the country all the way down to the Malaysian border. At the narrowest part of this peninsula, known as the Isthmus of Kra, the Gulf of Thailand lies to the east and the Burmese border to the west. Just south of the Isthmus of Kra, however, begins a stretch of the Malay Peninsula where Thailand has two coasts, one on the Andaman Sea (a part of the Indian Ocean) and the other on the Gulf of Thailand.

Geographic Divisions

Central Plain

A large percentage of Thailand's population lives in the central plain, a large drainage basin for the Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Chao Phraya River). This area is the agricultural heartland of Thailand and is often referred to as the country's "rice bowl."^{5,6} The south-flowing Chao Phraya is fed by headwaters in the mountains to its north, as well as by smaller tributaries running from the low mountains and hills to the east and west of the central plains.

⁵ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Country Study: Thailand. Tuchrello, William P. "Physical Setting: Regions." September 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+th0049\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+th0049))

⁶ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "Thailand's Geography, Demographics, and History [p. 9]." 2004. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO.

To the north, the central plain consists of gently rolling terrain. At the southern end of the central plain, near where the Chao Phraya enters the Gulf of Thailand, is a flat river delta. Bangkok and its many suburbs are located in this region. To the southeast of the Chao Phraya River basin lies another area of rolling plains bounded by the Cambodian border to the east, the Dong Phraya Yen Mountains to the north, and the Gulf of Thailand to the south. Inland from the coast, the southern part of this southeastern region gets progressively hillier as one travels eastward toward the Cambodian border.

Mountains

Northern Thailand is the most mountainous part of the country. The mountains in this area, while rugged, are only of moderate height, reaching a maximum of 2,576 m (8,541 ft) at Doi Inthanon near the city of Chiang Mai. The rivers of this region form deep and sometimes wide valleys as they flow southward toward the central plain.⁷



© Vyacheslav Stepanyuchenko
Mountains in southern Thailand

A few of the northern mountain rivers, however, actually flow northward and eastward to the Mekong River, which forms the Thailand-Laos border for a brief stretch in this region. While most of the northern mountains eventually level off into the central plains, a western extension of the mountains continues southward along the Burma-Thailand border and into the Malay Peninsula.

Upland Plateau

Thailand's northeastern region, known as Isan, is a large plateau bordered by the low-elevation Dangrek Mountains to the south along the Cambodian border, the Phetchabun Range to the west, the Dong Phraya Yen Mountains to the southwest, and the Mekong River to the north and east. Irregular ranges of low hills populate the northern half of the upland plateau, creating a drainage divide that separates rivers flowing to the northeastern section of the Mekong River border from those that flow to the southeastern section. The soils of the upland plateau are largely impermeable; they are frequently flooded during the rainy season and parched throughout the rest of the year.⁸ Despite being a largely rural area, the upland plateau contains two of Thailand's larger cities, Nakhon Ratchasima and Udon Thani, in the southern and northern parts of the plateau, respectively.

⁷ Thai National Commission on Irrigation and Drainage. Vongvisessomjai, Suphat. "Chao Phraya Delta: Paddy Field Irrigation Area in Tidal Deposit [p. 2]." 2006. http://www.rid.go.th/Thaicid/text/10_1ChaoPhraYaDelta.pdf

⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Khorat Plateau." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9045338/Khorat-Plateau>

Peninsular South

From the northernmost portion of the Bay of Bangkok southward to the Malaysian border, Thailand's western edge is defined by a long, narrow stretch of land that forms the spine of the Malay Peninsula. At the northern end, Thailand's peninsular region is marked by an extension of the northern mountains. Here the peaks of the Bilaukaung Mountains define the border between Thailand and Burma. Near the town of Prachuap Khiri Khan, the distance between this border and the Gulf of Thailand to the east shrinks to just 13 km (8 mi), the narrowest point along the peninsula.⁹



© Marc Aurel
Khao Lak beach on the Indian Ocean, Thailand

From Prachuap Khiri Khan, the Thailand-Burma border follows a southwestern path to the Andaman Sea and the Isthmus of Kra, which at its minimum width of 40-48 km (25-30 mi) is the shortest distance between the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea.¹⁰ Further south, Thailand enjoys coasts on both the eastern and western sides of the peninsula. Many of Thailand's most popular beach resorts, including the island of Phuket, are located on the Andaman side of the peninsula, while the largest southern Thai port, Songkhla, lies on the coast along the Gulf of Thailand.

Topographic Features

Mountains

Several mountain ranges define Thailand's geographical regions and political borders. In the far north, the mountain jungles of the Tanen Range (Tanen Tong Dan) lie astride the Thailand-Burma border between the Mekong River to the east and the Salween River to the west. Extending southward from the Tanen is the Dawna Range, which forms the western boundary of the central plain. To the east, the upland plateau of northeastern Thailand is bounded by the Dangrek Mountains (Phnom Dangrek) to the south, the Petchabun Range (Thiu Khao Petchabun) to the west, and the Dong Phraya Yen Mountains to the southwest.

Valleys, Plateaus, and Lowlands

In central Thailand, the Chao Phraya Valley is the defining feature of the central plain. This sedimentary plain has been built up from many centuries of flooding as the northern rivers flow southward toward the Gulf of Thailand. To the northeast, the upland plateau

⁹ Planetware.com. "Prachuap Kiri Khan, Thailand." 2008. <http://www.planetware.com/thailand/prachuap-khiri-khan-tha-pp-pppr.htm>

¹⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Isthmus of Kra." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9046175/Isthmus-of-Kra?refresh=Y>

of the Isan region is often referred to as the Khorat (or Korat) Plateau, although the Khorat Plateau technically continues beyond the Mekong River into west-central Laos.¹¹

A significant portion of Thailand's coastal areas consist of naturally low-lying mudflats and mangrove swamps that are frequently flooded during high tides or storm surges. Deforestation, however, has markedly reduced the area in which mangrove forests still survive. Since 1960, over 50% of Thailand's original coastal mangrove forests have been converted to rice paddies and, more recently,

to sites of aquaculture, primarily shrimp farms.^{12,13} Most of Thailand's remaining mangrove forests are found along the Andaman Sea coastlands.^{14,15}



© BKKcrew / Flickr.com
Rice paddies

Climate

Thailand has a tropical climate that features three distinctive seasons: the dry/cool season of the northeast monsoon (November–February), the hot season (March–April), and the rainy season of the southwest monsoons (May–October). However, within Thailand, variations from these general patterns do exist. For example, during the northeast monsoons, which for most of the country bring winds that blow in over land rather than the sea, parts of the southern peninsula can receive substantial rainfall. The influx of precipitation results from moisture that is picked up by winds passing over the Gulf of Thailand. Mountains also affect rainfall patterns.¹⁶ The Andaman Sea coast is the wettest area of Thailand in large part because its regional mountain ranges trap the moisture from the southwest monsoons that come in off the Indian Ocean.



© Kyle Simourd
Rainy night in Pattaya, Thailand

¹¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Southeast Asia: Geology and Relief: Mainland Southeast Asia." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52753/Southeast-Asia#510040.hook>

¹² *Aquatic Area Data—A Compilation*. Sundquist, Bruce. "Chapter 9: Aquatic Areas and Wetlands." 2004. <http://home.alltel.net/bsundquist1/la9.html>

¹³ Ecological Society of America. Barbier, Edward B. "To Replant or Not to Replant Natural Barriers? Perhaps That is the Wrong Question." 12 March 2007. <http://www.esa.org/esablog/?p=28>

¹⁴ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. "Study on Coastal Zone Environment Management with Emphasis on Mangrove Ecosystem to Assist in Poverty Alleviation." No date. <http://www.unescap.org/icstd/SPACE/documents/MANGROVE/ExecutiveSummary.html>

¹⁵ AllBusiness.com. Quick Frozen Foods International. "Thailand Shrimp Farmers, Exporters in Bind Over Threat to Turtles, Mangrove Swamps." 1 July 1996. <http://www.allbusiness.com/wholesale-trade/merchant-wholesalers-nondurable/574717-1.html>

¹⁶ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "Thailand's Geography, Demographics, and History [pp. 12-14]." 2004. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO.

Temperatures are warm and relatively steady throughout the year, generally averaging between 25 and 29°F (77 and 84°F).¹⁷ In the mountainous regions of the north, however, temperatures may dip close to freezing in December. Morning fog is also common in these regions during this time of year. Coastal areas see the least amount of variation because of the moderating effects of the ocean environment. Humidity is extremely high for almost all of Thailand during the southwest monsoon months.^{18,19}

Rivers and Lakes

Mae nam, the Thai phrase for river, translates as “mother water,” and the importance of rivers throughout Thai history is difficult to overemphasize. Thailand has 25 major river systems, and to this day they serve as major shipping routes for the country’s agricultural and natural resource products.²⁰



© Vyacheslav Stepanyuchenko
Lake Mae Hong Son

The Chao Phraya River (Mae Nam Chao Phraya) is the most important river of central Thailand and has long been crucial for transporting traditional Thai products, such as rice and teak wood, southward to the port of Bangkok. At 365 km (225 mi), the Chao Phraya is not particularly long, but its length is deceiving because the river is fed by several important tributaries that flow out of the northern mountains. These include the Wang, Yom, Ping, and Nam, all of which flow southward. The Chao Phraya begins at the confluence of the Ping and Nam Rivers at the city of Nakhon Sawan. From there it winds in a serpentine path to the Bay of Bangkok with only a 24 m (80 ft) drop in elevation along its entire course. Numerous port facilities are built along the shores of the river south of the central part of Bangkok, and frequent dredging is required to enable deep-water vessels to enter this stretch of the river.²¹

The Mekong River, one of the world’s longest rivers, runs along much of Thailand’s northeastern and eastern borders. In the Golden Triangle region where the Thai, Laotian, and Burmese borders come together, the Mekong hosts two Thai river ports, Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong, that provide an economic entryway for products coming from and going to Yunnan Province in China.²² Just beyond Chiang Khong, the Mekong veers east into Laos, but ultimately turns south and once again becomes the Laos-Thailand border

¹⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Thailand: Land: Climate.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52648/Thailand>

¹⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Thailand: Land: Climate.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52648/Thailand>

¹⁹ BBC Weather Centre. “Country Guide: Thailand.” 2008. http://www.bbc.co.uk/weather/world/country_guides/results.shtml?tt=TT002890

²⁰ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. “Thailand’s Geography, Demographics, and History [p. 4].” 2004. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO.

²¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Chao Phraya River.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9022468/Chao-Phraya-River>

²² Business-in-Asia.com. Thailand Board of Investment. “Major Thai Ports and Maritime Projects.” 2005. http://www.business-in-asia.com/thai_ports.htm

upstream from the Laotian capital of Vientiane. Several Khorat Plateau rivers flow into the Mekong along this long stretch of border between the two countries. The longest of these tributaries is the Mun River, which flows for 673 km (418 mi) from its headwaters near the southwestern corner of the Khorat Plateau.²³

Population and Cities

Urban Area	<i>Population 2000 census</i> ²⁴	Region
Bangkok (Krung Thep)	6,355,144	Central Plain
Samut Prakan	378,741	Central Plain (near Bangkok)
Nonthaburi	291,555	Central Plain (near Bangkok)
Udon Thani	222,425	Upland Plateau
Nakhon Ratchasima	204,461	Upland Plateau
Hat Yai	187,920	Peninsular South
Chon Buri	183,317	Central Plain
Chiang Mai	174,438	Mountains
Phra Pradaeng	171,544	Central Plain (near Bangkok)

²³ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Mun River." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9054261/Mun-River>

²⁴ CityPopulation.de. Brinkhoff, Thomas. "Thailand: City Population." 19 August 2007. <http://www.citypopulation.de/Thailand.html>

Lampang	148,199	Mountains

Bangkok (Krung Thep)

Much of Bangkok presents itself on a large scale, including the city’s formal ceremonial name: *Krung Thep Mahanakhon Amon Rattanakosin Mahinthara Ayuthaya Mahadilok Phop Noppharat Ratchathani Burirom Udomratchaniwet Mahasathan Amon Piman Awatan Sathit Sakkathattiya Witsanukam Prasit*. For most Thai, however, Bangkok is known by its short-hand name, Krung Thep (roughly translated as “City of Angels”).



© Barry Yanowitz
Bangkok, Thailand

Bangkok is a capital city in all senses—it is the dominant industrial, financial, political, cultural, medical, transportation, and academic center of Thailand. Its population is more than three times larger than that of the combined populaces of Thailand’s next nine biggest cities (several of which are Bangkok suburbs).²⁵ Not surprisingly, it also suffers from many of the common maladies of the world’s megacities: legendary traffic gridlock, bad (but gradually improving) air pollution, water pollution (in the Chao Phraya River and the extensive canal system that connects to it), and densely populated slums lining the edge of the urban core.^{26,27}

Until 1971, modern-day Bangkok was divided between two cities on opposite banks of the Chao Phraya River: Thon Buri, on the west bank of the river, and Krung Thep on the east. Thon Buri is the older part of the city and briefly preceded Krung Thep as the capital of the Kingdom of Siam during the late 18th century.²⁸ This part of the city retains the many *khlongs* (canals) that served as the main thoroughfares of the metropolis in the pre-automobile era.

Today, the main part of Bangkok lies on the east bank of the Chao Phraya, encompassing both the historical and current Royal Palaces, the central business district, and most of the

²⁵ CityPopulation.de. Brinkhoff, Thomas. “Thailand: City Population.” 19 August 2007. <http://www.citypopulation.de/Thailand.html>

²⁶ New York Times. Fuller, Thomas. “Breathing Easier as the Battle for Blue Skies Pays Off.” 6 March 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/06/world/asia/06thai.html>

²⁷ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. “Thai Society and Contemporary Issues: Congestion, Pollution, and Poverty in Bangkok [pp. 184-191].” 2004. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO.

²⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Thon Buri.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9072218/Thon-Buri>

tourist districts. Factories and manufacturing plants are now mostly located near the warehouse regions around port areas and in industrial parks on the outskirts of the central city.²⁹

One of Bangkok's primary environmental problems is land subsidence due to the over pumping of groundwater. From 1980 to 1990, the average subsidence rate in the city was 5–10 cm/yr (2–4 in/yr). Since then, restrictions on groundwater usage have significantly slowed—but not halted—the city's subsidence.³⁰ Flooding, a common occurrence in Bangkok during periods of rainy weather, has worsened as the city slowly sinks.³¹

Chiang Mai

Chiang Mai is by far the largest city in Thailand's mountainous northern region. It serves as a transportation center for the area, hosting the only international airport and the northern terminus of the nation's rail system.



© Stuart Barr
A crowded street in Chiang Mai, Thailand

Beginning in the late 13th century, Chiang Mai was for many years the capital of the northern Lanna kingdom. Its name translates to “new walled city,” and while the wall is now mostly gone, a moat still surrounds the original area of Chiang Mai. The city has traditionally been the religious center of northern Thailand, and its 300 *wats* (Buddhist temple complexes) are nearly equal in number to those found in much larger Bangkok.³²

In recent years, Chiang Mai has evolved into a relative tourist mecca due to its vibrant display of traditional Thai culture, most notably seen in its abundance of traditional Thai handicrafts. The size and population of the city have ballooned in response to governmental initiatives designed to establish Chiang Mai and other Thai cities as regional centers in order to reduce the pressures of growth on Bangkok.³³ As a result, Chiang Mai's urban area has expanded from 15 km² (5.8 mi²) in 1952 to 339 km² (131 mi²) in 2000,³⁴ and the number of visitors to the city has increased substantially.

²⁹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Bangkok: The Economy: Industry.” 2008.
<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-24898/Bangkok>

³⁰ Regional Resource Centre for Asia and the Pacific, United Nations Environment Programme. *State of the Environment, Bangkok, 2001*. “5. Land Subsidence.”
http://www.rrcap.unep.org/reports/soe/bangkok_land.pdf

³¹ *Planet Geography*. Codrington, Stephen. “Chapter 6: Drainage Basins and Their Management [p. 174].” 2005. Sydney, Australia: Solid Star Press.

³² *Thailand*, 10th Ed. Footscray, Victoria. “Chiang Mai Province [p. 319].” 2003. Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

³³ GeoComputation. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on GeoComputation*. Tran Hung and Yoshifumi Yasuoka. “Integrating Spatial Statistics and GIS for Regional Studies in Thailand [p. 2].” 2001.
<http://www.geocomputation.org/2001/papers/tran.pdf>

³⁴ Modelling and Simulation Society of Australia and New Zealand. *Proceedings International Conference on Modelling and Simulation*. Sangawongse, S. and C. H. Sun, B. W. Tsai. “Urban Growth and Land Cover

Nakhon Ratchasima

Also known as Khorat or Korat, the city of Nakhon Ratchasima is located near the southwestern corner of the Khorat Plateau. Its geographical location has made it something of a gateway city for those entering the Khorat Plateau from metropolitan Bangkok, which lies 250 km (155 mi) to the southwest.³⁵



© Gavin Tung
Buddhist temple in Nakhon Ratchasima

The city has grown significantly over the last 50 years, becoming a transportation center and growing industrial and business hub. Trade in local agricultural products, such as rice, maize (corn), livestock, tobacco, and animal hides and skins, is a major part of the economy. Local industries, such as textile weaving and sugar and rice milling, are also important.^{36,37}

For many United States Air Force veterans, Khorat is one of the best known cities in Thailand due to the presence of the local Khorat Royal Air Force Base. U.S. forces used the base for launching bombing raids on nearby Laos and Vietnam during the Vietnam War, and today it continues to be one of the most important air bases used by the Thai Royal Air Force.

Songkhla/Hat Yai

Near the Malaysian border on the Gulf of Thailand lies Songkhla, the most significant port on Thailand's peninsular section. Songkhla's southern location orients its local trade products (mostly rubber, frozen and canned seafood, and wood products) toward Malaysia and Singapore to the south.^{38,39} The city itself lies on a narrow peninsula that separates the large lagoon known as Thale Sap from the Gulf of Thailand, and its main port is on the opposite side of the inlet that leads from the ocean into the Thale Sap.

Songkhla's role as a port is mostly limited to one of regional importance due to several structural limitations. The shallow draft of the Thale Sap inlet does not allow larger deep-water cargo vessels to dock there, while the lack of heavy lifting equipment and

Change in Chiang Mai and Taipei: Results from the SLEUTH Model [p. 2623].” 2005.

<http://www.mssanz.org.au/modsim05/papers/sangawongse.pdf>

³⁵ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. Footscray, Victoria. “Nakhon Ratchasima Province [p. 485].” 2003. Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

³⁶ MSN Encarta. “Nakhon Ratchasima.” 2007.

http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761574262/nakhon_ratchasima.html

³⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Nakhon Ratchasima.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9054720/Nakhon-Ratchasima>

³⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Songkhla.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9068697/Songkhla>

³⁹ Asian Development Bank. “Reevaluation of the Songkhla and Phuket Ports Project in Thailand [p. 9].” December 1996. <http://www.adb.org/Documents/PERs/RE24.pdf>

immediate access to railroads complicates both the loading and land transport of cargo.^{40,41}

Hat Yai, one of Thailand's larger cities, is located about 30 km (18.6 mi) inland from Songkhla and is the commercial center of southern Thailand. The city's rapid growth has been spurred by its role as a primary transportation hub. Major rail and highway connections lead southward from the city to the nearby Malaysian border and northward to Bangkok. The city is also home to an international airport.⁴²



Over the last several years, both Songkhla and Hat Yai have been subject to sporadic terrorist bombings carried out by separatist groups operating out of the border region.^{43,44} Insurgent activity in the region was initially confined to the three southern provinces located south of Songkhla and Hat Yai, but such activity has recently spread northward.

Ayutthaya

Ayutthaya is a medium-sized provincial capital located 86 km (53 mi) north of Bangkok. The main part of the modern city lies on the eastern portion of an island formed by the confluence of the Chao Phraya River with two other rivers and an interlinking canal. Little on this part of the island would suggest that this was once the site of one of the world's largest cities and the Siamese capital for over 400 years.

Ancient Ayutthaya was destroyed in 1767 by invading Burmese forces, an event that contributed to the subsequent growth of Bangkok, which became the new capital city 15 years later. Today, the ruins of the old city, some of which are partially restored, are one of Thailand's top historical attractions for visitors. The ruins mostly lie in a historical park that occupies much of the western part of Ayutthaya's riverine island, and today this park is designated as one of Thailand's five UNESCO World Heritage sites.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Thailand.com. "Phuket and Songkla." 2008.

http://www.thailand.com/exports/shipping/phuket_songkla.htm

⁴¹ Transport Engineering Laboratory, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Project ASIAMAR. "2: The Competiveness in the Asian Maritime and Intermodal Freight Transport [p. 18]." 28 September 2005. http://hermes.civil.auth.gr/asiamar/assets/docs/Deliv_D3.2.pdf

⁴² Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Hat Yai." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9039491/Hat-Yai>

⁴³ Jamestown Foundation. *Global Terrorism Analysis*, Vol. 3, No. 37. Abuza, Zachary. "Hat Yai Bombings Mark Shift in Tactics by Thai Insurgents." 26 September 2006.

<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2370141>

⁴⁴ Sydney Morning Herald. Associated Press. "Bomb Blast Kills Two in Southern Thailand." 4 April 2005. <http://www.smh.com.au/news/World/Bomb-blasts-kill-two-in-southern-Thailand/2005/04/04/1112489380630.html>

⁴⁵ UNESCO. World Heritage Sites. "Thailand." 2008. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/th>

Udon Thani

Udon Thani (also known as Udorn) is the largest city in the northern part of the Khorat Plateau and, like Nakhon Ratchasima to its south, it went through a boom period during the Vietnam War when the United States military utilized the nearby Udorn Royal Air Force Base.⁴⁶ The city today is an industrial and commercial center for the surrounding region; its major products include rice, livestock, freshwater fish, and timber.⁴⁷



A tuk-tuk in Udon Thani, Thailand

In 1994, the First Friendship Bridge was built across the Mekong River, linking the nearby Laotian capital of Vientiane with northern Thailand. With the opening of the bridge, located only 50 km (31 mi) from Udon Thani, flights into and out of Udon Thani International Airport quickly became popular low-cost alternatives for those traveling between Bangkok and Vientiane. Work is also underway to link Vientiane to the Thai rail line that runs through Udon Thani.⁴⁸

Environmental Concerns

In recent decades, the Thai government has instituted, with varying degrees of success, several measures designed to reduce environmental degradation throughout the country. One of the nation's most urgent environmental problems is deforestation, a major contributor to other environmental issues such as soil erosion and threatened wildlife resources. From 1961 to 1995, it is estimated that the natural forest cover of Thailand was reduced from 53.3% to 25% as a result of logging and agricultural activities.⁴⁹

In 1988, after heavy rains and massive runoff from deforested mountain sides produced deadly flooding and landslides in southern Thailand, the Thai government banned all future logging outside mangrove forests and plantations (logging in mangrove forests was later banned in 1996 in order to halt their rapid decline). As a result, Thailand's wood imports grew dramatically after the ban, but subsequently slowed due to the country's financial crisis in the late 1990s. In addition to the restrictions placed on logging, increasing amounts of Thailand's forests were set aside as national parks or wildlife

⁴⁶ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. Footscray, Victoria. "Udon Thani Province—Udon Thani [p. 515]." 2003. Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

⁴⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Udon Thani." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9074089/Udon-Thani>

⁴⁸ RetireAsia.com. "Travel to Laos from Thailand, Direct from Malaysia; from Singapore, via Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur." 2008. <http://www.retire-asia.com/lao-travel.shtml>

⁴⁹ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. Footscray, Victoria. "Facts About Thailand—Ecology and Environment [p. 24]." 2003. Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

sanctuaries.⁵⁰ Despite these efforts, however, Thailand's forests have continued to decline in area, although at a much slower rate.^{51, 52}

Thailand also faces major challenges in the areas of water supply and quality. The country holds the lowest ranking in East Asia for annual per capita water availability, and it ranks 14th in the world in industrial organic water pollution.⁵³ Within Bangkok, the city's many canals have long received untreated wastewater, often leading to outbreaks of disease. Although private residences in the city are required to have septic systems, high groundwater levels and impermeable clay soil limit their effectiveness. In the 1990s, officials initiated the construction of a centralized water treatment system consisting of seven wastewater treatment plants to be built in stages over the following years.⁵⁴ Even so, today only 40% of the total wastewater from the areas served by the plants is treated effectively.⁵⁵



© Geoff Burns
A building destroyed by flood

Natural Hazards

The most common natural disasters to strike Thailand are weather related: droughts, tropical cyclones, floods, and debris flows. Northeastern and northern Thailand are most subject to drought conditions, although no part of Thailand is completely immune.⁵⁶ The lowland areas of the central plain frequently flood during the summer monsoon season, while the northeastern upland plateau and the coastal plains of the southern peninsula are subject to flashfloods during periods of intense rainfall. Flooding is generally the most deadly of natural disasters to strike Thailand in a given year, although droughts often affect more people and, at times, prove more costly in terms of economic repercussions.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations. "6. Impacts and Effectiveness of Logging Bans in Natural Forests: Thailand—Sureeratna Lakanavichian." 2001.

<http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/003/X6967E/x6967e09.htm>

⁵¹ Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations. "6. Impacts and Effectiveness of Logging Bans in Natural Forests: Thailand—Sureeratna Lakanavichian." 2001.

<http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/003/X6967E/x6967e09.htm>

⁵² ChiangMaiNews.com. Chiang Mai University Forest Reforestation Unit. "Go Carbon Neutral!" 1998–2008. <http://www.chiangmainews.com/carbonneutral/forru.php>

⁵³ The World Bank. Environment in East Asia and Pacific. "Thailand Environment." 2008.

<http://go.worldbank.org/5XB27I9200>

⁵⁴ Institute for Global Environmental Strategies. "Bangkok Wastewater Treatment Project: The Achievement of Public and Private Efforts." 2002. <http://www.iges.or.jp/kitakyushu/sp/water/2/Bangkok.pdf>

⁵⁵ *ScienceAsia*, Vol. 33. Polprasert, Chongrak. "Water Environment Issues of Bangkok City, Thailand: Options for Sustainable Management." 2007. [http://www.scienceasia.org/2007.33\(s1\)/v33s_057_058.pdf](http://www.scienceasia.org/2007.33(s1)/v33s_057_058.pdf)

⁵⁶ Center for Hazards and Risk Research, Columbia University. "Thailand Natural Disaster Profile." 2005. http://www.ldeo.columbia.edu/chrr/research/profiles/pdfs/thailand_profile1.pdf

⁵⁷ Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, Ministry of Interior, Kingdom of Thailand. "Thailand Country Report [pp. 3–5]." January 2006.

Generally, Thailand is not affected by geophysical natural hazards, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. However, its low-lying Andaman Sea coast has recently proven to be disastrously vulnerable to tsunamis generated by earthquakes. In December 2004, a massive earthquake in the coastal regions near the northwestern tip of Sumatra led to the deadliest disaster in Thai history.⁵⁸ The coastal provinces of Phang Nga, Krabi, Phuket, and Ranong each suffered more than 100 deaths from the resulting tsunami, with over 78% of the nearly 5,400 casualties occurring in Phang Nga.⁵⁹ These provinces constituted some of the most popular coastal tourist locations in Thailand, and as a result, nearly 2,000 foreigners were among those who died.⁶⁰ In terms of economic losses, both the tourism and local fishing industries were devastated.



© Zaladore / Flickr.com
Flooding caused by the tsunami of 2004

http://www.disaster.go.th/html/english/info_center/country_reports/01_Thailand_Country_report_2006b.pdf

⁵⁸ United Nations Thailand. "Tsunami 2004 and its Impact." September 2005.

<http://www.un.or.th/tsunamiinthailand/Tsunami2004anditsimpact.html>

⁵⁹ Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, Ministry of Interior, Kingdom of Thailand. "Thailand Country Report [p 5]." January 2006.

http://www.disaster.go.th/html/english/info_center/country_reports/01_Thailand_Country_report_2006b.pdf

⁶⁰ Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, Ministry of Interior, Kingdom of Thailand. "Thailand Country Report [pp. 5]." January 2006.

http://www.disaster.go.th/html/english/info_center/country_reports/01_Thailand_Country_report_2006b.pdf

History

Introduction

“Thailand” is a relatively recent name for a kingdom that has existed for many centuries. Prior to 1939, most foreigners knew it as Siam. The present kingdom traditionally traces back to the 13th century C.E., although people have lived in the area for at least 10,000 years.⁶¹ Ancient inhabitants of the region were early users of metallurgical techniques. Bronze artifacts found at Ban Chiang, a site in northeastern Thailand, date to the first half of the 2nd millennium B.C.E.^{62,63}



© Micki Kimmel
Ancient coffins made from trunks

Early History

The Thai people are descendants of a larger group of people that now inhabit an extensive swath of South Asia extending from northeast India in the west to southern China in the east and southward to the central Malay Peninsula.⁶⁴ Collectively, these people speak languages belonging to a linguistic group known as Tai-Kadai, and today they form the majority populations in Thailand and Laos, and the largest minorities in Burma, Vietnam, and China.⁶⁵

Somewhere between the 8th and 10th centuries C.E., the Tai-speaking people began to migrate from their homeland in present-day northern Vietnam. They settled in a region extending from southeastern China to the northern parts of mainland Southeast Asia.^{66, 67} By the 11th century, they moved into areas that now make up the central part of Thailand.

⁶¹ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. “Facts about Thailand—History [p. 12].” 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

⁶² *Thailand*. “Prehistoric Thailand [p. 50].” 1999. London: DK Publishing.

⁶³ University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Expedition, Vol. 43, No. 2. “Bronze from Ban Chiang, Thailand: A View from the Laboratory.” 2001.

http://www.museum.upenn.edu/new/research/Exp_Rese_Disc/Asia/banchiang/bronzelab/index.shtml

⁶⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Thailand: History.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274233/Thailand>

⁶⁵ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. “Facts about Thailand—History [p. 12].” 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

⁶⁶ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. “Facts about Thailand—History [pp. 13, 14].” 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

⁶⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Thailand: History.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274233/Thailand>

Little is conclusively known about the inhabitants of this region prior to the Tai migration, especially before the 6th century C.E. However, there is greater historical evidence for the period from the early 6th century C.E. onward. Archaeological findings dating from the 6th to 11th century C.E. depict the existence of a series of city-states centered around Nakhon Pathon, located west of the Chao Phraya River in the lower central plain of modern-day Thailand.⁶⁸ The artwork of this period's culture (known as the Dvaravati culture), reflects a strong Indian influence, with numerous reliefs and statues displaying images of Buddha, Vishnu, and Shiva. The Dvaravati culture is thought to have been spread via the Mons, who entered the central plain through southern Burma.⁶⁹



Around the same time, the southern area of Thailand on the Malay Peninsula was influenced by the Srivijaya Kingdom, a Mahayana Buddhist empire centered in Palembang on the southern part of the Indonesian island of Sumatra. The small southern Thai town of Chaiya in Surat Thani Province was a Srivijayan regional capital, and its ruins and artifacts reflect strong Srivijayan Mahayana Buddhism influences.⁷⁰

The Khmer Empire

Between the 9th and 13th centuries C.E., the Khmer of Cambodia expanded their empire northwestward into the Khorat Plateau and ultimately into the central plain of Thailand. At its height, the Khmer domain extended over about one-half of modern Thailand, reaching as far as Chiang Mai in the northern mountains. The Khmer located their capital at Angkor, and today the city's temple complex (Angkor Wat) is one of the world's most famous landmarks. The Khmer Empire was originally influenced by a mixture of Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism, but by the 13th century certain Khmer disciples and missionary monks from Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka) helped convert the empire to Theravada Buddhism.⁷¹



© Ahoerstermeier / Wikipedia.org
Ruins of Wat Kaew, Chaiya, Thailand

In the beginning of the 12th century C.E., some of the early Tai migrants worked as mercenaries in the Khmer armies. The Khmers called these outsiders “Syam,” for reasons

⁶⁸ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. “Facts about Thailand—History [p. 14].” 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

⁶⁹ Buddha Dharma Education Association and BuddhaNet. “Buddhism in Thailand.” 2008. <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/thailand-txt.htm>

⁷⁰ ThailandMuseum.com. “Chaiya National Museum: History.” http://www.thailandmuseum.com/thaimuseum_eng/chaiya/history.htm

⁷¹ Buddha Dharma Education Association and BuddhaNet. “Buddhism in Cambodia.” 2008. <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/cambodia-txt.htm>

still debated by historians.⁷² As the Tai eventually began to develop their own kingdoms in what is now Thailand, the region became known as Syam or Sayam, later to be transliterated into English as “Siam.” During the period of Khmer rule, the city of Lop Buri, located 154 km (96 mi) north of Bangkok, was a provincial capital. Today its restored ruins provide some of Thailand’s best examples of the Khmer architectural style, which bears heavy influence from Hindu beliefs and practices.^{73, 74}

The Khmer Empire eventually weakened during the mid-13th century C.E. As it did, two local Tai chieftains in a remote provincial outpost on Thailand’s northern central plain successfully led a revolt against Khmer control. The rebellion led to the establishment of the first notable Tai kingdom, and today the rebellion is marked by many as the beginning of the modern Kingdom of Thailand.

Sukhothai and Lanna Kingdoms

The new Tai kingdom located its capital in the city of Sukhothai. From its beginning, the kingdom served as a base for Theravada Buddhism, as did the city of Chiang Mai in the neighboring Tai kingdom of Lanna, which arose at roughly the same time. The Sukhothai kingdom peaked during the reign of its third ruler, Ramkhamhaeng (c. 1279-1298 C.E.), who extended its domain of influence southward to the city of Nakhon Si Thammarat on the Malay Peninsula, northward into Laos, and westward to Burma.⁷⁵



One of Ramkhamhaeng’s primary accomplishments was the development of the Thai alphabet, and most of what we know about the ruler’s other achievements comes from a stone inscription dated to the year 1292. It was discovered in 1833 by the future King Mongkut (Rama IV), who at the time was a Buddhist monk, and it is considered to be the earliest written expression of the Thai language. It should be noted, however, that some academics doubt the authenticity of the 1292 inscription, commonly referred to as “Inscription No. 1.”⁷⁶

After King Ramkhamhaeng’s death, the Sukhothai kingdom slowly declined as its vassal states broke away, with some becoming subservient to the northern Lanna Kingdom and

⁷² *Thailand*, 10th Ed. “Facts about Thailand—History [p. 15].” 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

⁷³ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. “Lopburi Province [p. 247].” 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

⁷⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Thailand: History: Mon-Khmer Civilizations.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52673/Thailand>

⁷⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Ramkhamhaeng.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9062600/Ramkhamhaeng>

⁷⁶ The Nation. Hongthong, Pennapa. “Centuries-Old Stone Set in Controversy.” 8 September 2003. <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/page.arcview.php?clid=2&id=85194&usrssess=>

others gaining their independence.⁷⁷ By 1320, Sukhothai was once again no more than a local kingdom vying for importance with other small kingdoms.⁷⁸ One of these kingdoms—the Ayutthaya—was beginning to emerge in a region south of Sukhothai. It soon developed into one of the most important and long-lasting dynasties in Thai history.

North of Sukhothai, the Lanna (or, more formally, Lan Na Thai, meaning “million Thai rice fields”) developed out of the Mekong River valley around 1259 C.E. There, a local chieftain named Mangrai consolidated power among several competing factions. By 1296, King Mangrai moved his capital southward from the Mekong River region to the newly built city of Chiang Mai (translated as “new walled city”) on the Ping River.⁷⁹ Within what is now northern Thailand, the Lanna Kingdom remained a separate and autonomous realm until the 19th century, although during much of the 17th and 18th centuries it fell under Burmese control.⁸⁰

Early Ayutthaya Kingdom

Ayutthaya initially emerged as a small city-kingdom on the northwestern edge of the declining Khmer empire during the 14th century. It was founded by Prince U Thong, who through strategic intermarriage was able to consolidate power over the local Khmer ruling family in Lop Buri and a small former Sukhothai kingdom in Suphan Buri (at the time known as U Thong) located southwest of Lop Buri.⁸¹ ⁸² Prince U Thong established his capital of Ayutthaya on an island in the Chao Phraya River and took the name King Ramathibodi I on his crowning in 1351 C.E. One of Ramathibodi’s most important achievements during his 18 years on the Ayutthaya throne was the codification of the Siamese legal system, which changed little over the next 500 years.⁸³



During the 14th and 15th centuries, the Ayutthaya Kingdom grew increasingly powerful. The Sukhothai Kingdom, after over a century of decline, became a vassal state about 1378 C.E. and subsequently a province of Ayutthaya in 1438 C.E.⁸⁴ ⁸⁵ To the east,

⁷⁷ United States Muay Thai Association. “Siamese and Thai History and Culture, Part 2: Sukhothai.” 16 October 2004. <http://www.usmta.com/history-2.htm>

⁷⁸ *Thailand*. “The Kingdom of Sukhothai [p. 54].” 1999. London: DK Publishing.

⁷⁹ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. “Chiang Mai—History [p. 352].” 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

⁸⁰ *Thailand*. “Lanna and Burmese Kingdoms [p. 58].” 1999. London: DK Publishing.

⁸¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Ramathibodi I.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9062578/Ramathibodi-I>

⁸² *A Traveller’s History of South East Asia*. Barwise, J. M.; and N. J. White. “Classical South East Asia, 500-1500: Ayutthaya [p. 60].” New York: Interlink Books.

⁸³ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Ramathibodi I.” 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9062578/Ramathibodi-I>

⁸⁴ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. “Thailand’s Geography, Demographics, and History [p. 32].” 2004. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Ayutthaya overran Angkor in 1431 C.E., forcing the Khmer to abandon their famed capital.⁸⁶ Eventually, Ayutthaya rulers gained control over all of modern Thailand, with the exception of the eastern parts of the Khorat Plateau and the far north, where Lanna armies repelled the Ayutthayan forces.

Ayutthayan rulers adopted many of the Hindu-influenced traditions of their former Khmer overlords. One of these was the concept of *devaraja*, the attribution of divine associations and powers to the King. As such, only royal family members were allowed to look upon the King's face, and he could decide upon the life and death of any of his people.⁸⁷

Later, during the reign of King Trailok (1448-1488), authorities organized the kingdom into a hierarchical system in which each person was assigned a number that signified his relative status and the extent of his landholdings. The administration devised similar hierarchies for the kingdom's provinces, and it formalized the responsibilities of military and civilian departments. . During King Trailok's reign, this well-defined central administrative and societal structure proved useful throughout the many years of warfare against the Lanna Kingdom.

Middle and Late Ayutthaya Kingdom

During the 16th century, Ayutthaya increasingly found itself in conflict with the Burmese, who conquered the Lanna capital of Chiang Mai in 1558 C.E. From 1569 to 1584 C.E., the Burmese gained control of Ayutthaya and made it a tributary state, but they were ultimately driven out by Crown Prince (and later King) Naresuan. The culminating Battle of Nong Sarai (1593) between Naresuan's army and the forces led by a Burmese crown prince is now one of the legendary stories of Thai history. Chronicles of the battle tell how Naresuan killed the Burmese prince in a duel carried out on elephant back.



© Adam Carr
Statue of King Naresuan, Ayutthaya

In the 17th century, Ayutthaya emerged as an important trading center. Chinese and Muslim merchants had long conducted lucrative trade through the port of Ayutthaya, but Western traders, initially from Portugal and Spain, and later from the Netherlands, Denmark, England, and France, increasingly found their way to the kingdom's capital city.^{88, 89} The end of the century, however, saw an abrupt change in Siam's openness to

⁸⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: The Ayutthayan Period, 1351-1767." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52675/Thailand>

⁸⁶ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "Thailand's Geography, Demographics, and History [p. 33]." 2004. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

⁸⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: The Ayutthayan Period, 1351-1767." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52675/Thailand>

⁸⁸ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. "Facts about Thailand—History [p. 17]." 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

the West. Much of the blame for this change in policy is attributed to a Greek translator by the name of Constantine Phaulkon, who between 1675 and 1688 became one of Ayutthayan King Narai's most powerful advisors. His court intrigues on behalf of the French in Ayutthaya, culminating with the appearance of French warships shortly before Narai's death in 1688, unleashed a power struggle that ended with Phaulkon's execution and the beginning of over 150 years of virtual Siamese isolation from Western influences and trading alliances.^{90, 91}

The period following Narai's death was a high point in terms of Ayutthayan artistic expression. Ornate Buddha images and beautiful manuscript boxes, temple doors, and alms bowls intricately decorated with inlay are characteristic of this period.^{92, 93} Despite this artistic flowering, however, the end soon came for the Ayutthayan kingdom. In the 1760s, the Burmese once again conquered the Lanna kingdom to the north and continued southwards toward Ayutthaya. In 1767, after a 15 month siege, the Burmese destroyed the city, leaving only the scattered ruins that can be seen today in Ayutthaya Historical Park.

Beginnings of the Chakri Dynasty

Following the razing of Ayutthaya, Phraya Taskin, a half-Chinese, half-Thai general, fled southward. After raising new troops, he returned to Ayutthaya, where he defeated the Burmese garrison. Three years later, Taksin defeated other contenders to become the new Siamese king. With Ayutthaya in ruins, he moved the new capital to the more secure location of Thon Buri, on the western bank of the Chao Phraya River, where metropolitan Bangkok is located today. After taking the throne, Taksin relinquished control of his army to his two brothers, whose command proved quite successful. Within a little more than a decade, the Siamese kingdom extended its control over much of Southeast Asia.

King Taksin's reign became increasingly insecure as he began to lose his mental stability. Imagining himself to be a reincarnation of the Buddha, he insisted that the Buddhist monkhood and all royal subjects accept this claim. In 1782, local officials overthrew King Taksin and executed him soon after. They then offered the royal crown to Chao Phraya Chakri, one of the King's two



© Hdamm / Wikipedia.org
Statue of King Rama I, Bangkok

⁸⁹ Mahidol University. Sawasdee Magazine. "The Kingdom of Ayutthaya (1351-1767)." 1 November 2002. <http://www.mahidol.ac.th/thailand/ayutthaya.html>

⁹⁰ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "Thailand's Geography, Demographics, and History [p. 35-36]." 2004. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

⁹¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Narai." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9054835/Narai?refresh=Y>

⁹² Thailand's World. "Thai Ayutthaya Style Art." 2008. <http://www.thailandsworld.com/index.cfm?p=195>

⁹³ Thailandcentral.com. Assumption University. "Thai Arts: Lacquerware." 2003. <http://www.thailandcentral.com/Eart.html>

brothers who commanded the royal army.⁹⁴ Chakri took the name Ramathibodi (the name given to the first of the Ayutthaya kings), later to become known as Rama I.

Rama I's ascension marked the beginning of the Rattanakosin era, named after the capital city that he established directly across the Chao Phraya River from Thon Buri. Today this city is known as Bangkok or Krung Thep, and, for this reason, the Rattanakosin era is also sometimes referred to as the Bangkok period.⁹⁵ Officials deemed Bangkok's location to be superior for defensive purposes, an important consideration given the continuing attacks by the Burmese (e.g., in 1785, Rama I's forces repelled nine Burmese armies totaling 144,000 troops that attempted to reclaim the Siamese kingdom).⁹⁶

King Mongkut

From 1782 to the modern day, nine kings have ruled during the Chakri dynasty. The early Chakri kings hoped to restore Ayutthaya's cultural heritage, which the Burmese attacks of 1767 left largely devastated.⁹⁷ Numerous temple complexes and royal buildings were constructed during these reigns, including Bangkok's famous Grand Palace, which served as home to the king until the mid 20th century.

One of the most famous Chakri kings was Rama IV, also known as King Mongkut. During his 17 years on the throne (1851-1868), the kingdom loosened the trade restrictions with Western nations that had been in effect since the late 17th century. Mongkut also instituted educational reforms, spearheading the development of a school system modeled after those in Europe. Prior to becoming king, Mongkut spent 27 years as a Buddhist monk and was instrumental in developing the Thammayut order, a Theravada Buddhist movement that sought to eliminate some of the superstitious practices that had become intertwined with some of the religion's central teachings. This order later became the basis of the modern Thai monkhood.⁹⁸

As Thailand opened up to the West, it quickly came under pressure to make concessions in order to facilitate trade relations. In 1855, the British envoy John Bowring negotiated a treaty with the Thai royal government that granted Britain extraterritorial rights over its citizens living in Siam and removed trade restrictions such as duties and



courtesy of Wikipedia.org
Sir John Bowring

⁹⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Taksin." 2008. www.britannica.com/eb/article-9071023/Taksin

⁹⁵ Tour-Bangkok-Legacies.com. "Rattanakosin—Growth of Old Bangkok and Dawn of a New Era." 2005. <http://www.tour-bangkok-legacies.com/rattanakosin.html>

⁹⁶ Simply-Thai.com. "The Rattanakosin Period." 2007. http://www.simply-thai.com/Thailand_History_Rama_1_Bangkok_15.htm

⁹⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: The Early Chakri Kings and a Resurgent Siam." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274236/Thailand>

⁹⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: Mongkut and the Opening of Siam to the West." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274237/Thailand>

taxes.⁹⁹ The Bowring Treaty, as this agreement would come to be known, proved to be the first of several such treaties with Western powers over the next half century. Unlike the Bowring Treaty, however, many of the succeeding contracts required the King to cede territorial claims to parts of the Siamese kingdom.

King Chulalongkorn

After King Mongkut died in 1868, his 15-year-old son, Chulalongkorn, succeeded him, although a regent assisted the boy for the first five years of his rule. Like his father, Chulalongkorn (who reigned as King Rama V) was a reformer who continued the process of transforming Siam from a medieval kingdom into a modern nation. During his 42 years in power, Chulalongkorn eliminated slavery, developed a governmental ministry system similar to those in Europe, made primary education compulsory, and instituted the rule of impersonal law. The overhauled governmental administrative structure made tax collection possible, which in turn financed the building of schools.¹⁰⁰



courtesy of Wikipedia.org
King Chulalongkorn of Siam

Chulalongkorn's greatest challenge, however, was to maintain Siamese independence during a time when much of the world was quickly being carved up into colonial realms administered by Western nations. France, in particular, was very expansive in its designs on Southeast Asia. Between 1867 and 1907 a series of agreements between Siam and the French basically ceded all Siamese claims to the territories that today form the countries of Laos and Cambodia. The largest of these concessions came in 1893 when Siam and France negotiated a treaty in which Siam renounced all claims to territories on the left (east) bank of the Mekong River. Britain also received territorial concessions from King Chulalongkorn. The King relinquished territories in what are today eastern Burma and northern Malaysia in exchange for the revocation of some of the British extraterritorial rights and assistance in financing a Bangkok-to-Singapore rail line.¹⁰¹

After King Chulalongkorn's death in 1910, his son Vajiravudh (Rama VI) ascended the throne. Vajiravudh was a strong nationalist, and he emphasized in his writings the need for his subjects to be loyal to king, country, and religion. His emphasis on loyalty was no doubt influenced by a failed plot by military officers to overthrow him in 1912, the first of many coup attempts marking Thailand's history over the last 100 years.¹⁰² Vajiravudh also aligned Siam with the Allied forces during the last years of World War I, a move that

⁹⁹ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "Thailand's Geography, Demographics, and History [p. 42]." 2004. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

¹⁰⁰ MSN Encarta. Wyatt, David K. "VII. History. D. Colonialism Averted." 2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_10/thailand.html

¹⁰¹ MSN Encarta. Wyatt, David K. "VII. History. D. Colonialism Averted." 2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_10/thailand.html

¹⁰² *Thailand*, 10th Ed. "Facts about Thailand—History [pp. 18-19]." 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

strengthened his hand when subsequently trying to negotiate with European powers over the elimination of the remaining extraterritorial rights remnant from earlier treaties.¹⁰³

Revolution

Vajiravudh's reign was not a long one. He died in 1925, and because he had no sons, the crown passed to Prajadhipok (Rama VII), his only remaining brother. Prajadhipok's reign began ominously, with the kingdom's coffers nearly empty due to his predecessor's penchant for extravagance. As financial chaos led to ministerial bickering and bureaucratic inertia, public confidence in the government began to weaken.¹⁰⁴ The new King responded by replacing most of the cabinet ministers, often with royal family members, and creating a supervisory Supreme Council of State consisting of five senior members of the royal family.¹⁰⁵ Although the moves helped eliminate the governmental paralysis that ensued in the wake of Vajiravudh's death, the lasting effect was to further cement the dominance of the royal family in governmental affairs. This came at a time when Siam's rising educated middle class increasingly expressed its desire for a government that drew upon the abilities of a wider segment of society.¹⁰⁶



courtesy of Wikipedia.org
King Prajadhipok

Several European-educated Siamese grew politically radical during their studies abroad, and when they returned home in the 1920s, they began organizing against the royal family-dominated government. Two of these students were Pridi Phanomyong and Phibun Songkhram, who together founded the People's Party in 1927. They and their followers (who were known as the Promoters) became the nucleus of a group that eventually plotted the overthrow of the royal dynasty. The resulting bloodless coup occurred on 24 June 1932 while the King was away from Bangkok. Ultimately, the King was persuaded to continue his rule under a constitution, thus bringing to an end many centuries of Siamese rule under an absolute monarch.

The new government leaders were far from a unified political front. Pridi Phanomyong headed a group that wished to take Siam in a socialist direction. Other leaders were much more conservative, and they opposed Pridi's economic plan. As political tensions ran high between the factions, a group of royalists led by one of Prajadhipok's cousins attempted a countercoup in October 1933. Although there was no evidence that the King

¹⁰³ MSN Encarta. Wyatt, David K. "VII. History. D. Colonialism Averted." 2007.
http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_10/thailand.html

¹⁰⁴ *Thailand: A Short History*, 2nd Ed. Wyatt, David K. "The Rise of Elite Nationalism, 1910-1932 [pp. 221-222]." 2003. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

¹⁰⁵ *Thailand: A Short History*, 2nd Ed. Wyatt, David K. "The Rise of Elite Nationalism, 1910-1932 [pp. 223]." 2003. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

¹⁰⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: The Last Absolute Monarchs of Siam." 2008.
<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52680/Thailand>

collaborated in this failed plot, his position grew untenable and he left for England, abdicating the throne in March 1935.

World War II

After King Prajadhipok's abdication, the National Assembly offered the throne to his nephew, Ananda Mahidol, who was 10 years old and studying in Switzerland at the time. A regency council ruled for the young King while he completed his studies, and he did not take the throne until December 1945, shortly after Japan surrendered in World War II.¹⁰⁷



Meanwhile, the military began to take a more assertive role in Siam's political affairs. When the prime minister retired in 1938, Phibun Songkhram, now an army field marshal and minister of defense, became the new prime minister of Siam, with Pridi Phanomyong becoming the new minister of finance. Phibun was an unabashed nationalist, which in Siam translated as a pro-Thai, anti-Chinese ethnic stance. One of the first acts of the Phibun regime was to change the nation's name to Thailand.¹⁰⁸ As nationalism took hold in the country, the government increasingly confronted the French in an effort to reclaim the territories that King Chulalongkorn had ceded to the French in Cambodia and Laos. Relations between Thailand and Japan strengthened as Phibun saw in Japan a model of an Asian country that had embraced Western technology and methods in order to modernize and thus fortify themselves against Western colonial ambitions.¹⁰⁹

In December 1941, only hours before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces entered Thailand and demanded access through the country in order to stage an attack on British forces in Burma and Malaya. With few options available, Phibun signed a Treaty of Alliance with Japan. In January 1942, Thailand declared war against the United States and Britain.¹¹⁰

As relations with Japan warmed up in the years prior to 1941, Pridi Phanomyong resigned his ministerial position and became a regent for the absent Ananda Mahidol. While serving in this position, Pridi also directed the Free Thai group, an anti-Japanese underground resistance movement. As Japan's fortunes declined in the last years of the

¹⁰⁷ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Study: Thailand*. "History: 1932 Coup." September 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+th0029\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+th0029))

¹⁰⁸ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Study: Thailand*. "History: Phibun and the Nationalist Regime." September 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+th0030\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+th0030))

¹⁰⁹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Study: Thailand*. "Phibun and the Nationalist Regime." September 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+th0030\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+th0030))

¹¹⁰ The declaration of war against the United States was never delivered by Seni Pramroj, the Thai ambassador in Washington. Thus, the U.S. never declared war on Thailand. Seni would later become one of the leading figures in the Free Thai resistance and serve as the prime minister of Thailand for brief periods in 1945-46 and 1975-76.

war and Thai public opinion turned against the Phibun regime, the prime minister was forced to resign and was replaced by a civilian prime minister. During this civilian regime, Pridi maintained a significant behind-the-scenes role.¹¹¹

The Postwar Period

The years 1946 and 1947 were tumultuous ones for Thailand. Pridi Phanomyong became prime minister in March 1946. Three months later, newly returned King Ananda Mahidol was found dead in his bedroom from a gunshot wound. Suspicion mounted against the prime minister, who was known in the past for his anti-royalist stance. However, there was no evidence to implicate him in the King's death (which may, in fact, have been accidental).¹¹² Pridi resigned in August 1946, and he subsequently fled the country in November 1947 when a military coup overthrew the civilian government. Pridi eventually ended up in China and later France, where he would die in exile in 1983.¹¹³ In the meantime, Ananda Mahidol's younger brother, Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), ascended the throne, and he continues to reign to this day.



courtesy of Wikipedia.org
A monument to King Bhumibol

By 1948, Phibun Songkhram was once again prime minister. The anti-Chinese tenor of his previous period as prime minister evolved into anti-communism when China came under Communist rule in 1949. Fears of a Communist insurgency in Thailand spread after the Communist invasion of South Korea in 1950. Chinese residents in Thailand found themselves the target of close monitoring by the government and subject to numerous restraints. Phibun and his military colleagues closely aligned the Thai government and military with the United States as a means of preventing any Communist insurgency activity within the country, a policy that continued even after another bloodless coup forced Phibun to flee in 1957.¹¹⁴

Phibun's replacement as prime minister was General Sarit Thanarat. As authoritarian regimes go, the Sari period had mixed results. While the government virtually suspended or banned all freedoms and political activity, it did institute some important reforms, including anti-corruption measures against the police force, campaigns against organized crime and opium smuggling, and initiatives to increase rural development and improve

¹¹¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Pridi Phanomyong." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9061357/Pridi-Phanomyong#12907.hook>

¹¹² *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "Thailand's Geography, Demographics, and History [p. 52-53]." 2004. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

¹¹³ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: The Postwar Crisis and the Return of Phibun." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52683/Thailand>

¹¹⁴ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "Thailand's Geography, Demographics, and History [pp. 54-55]." 2004. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

the country's educational system.¹¹⁵ Sarit's legacy suffered significant damage, however, when reports about his moral corruption emerged after his death.¹¹⁶

The Vietnam War and Its Aftermath

After Sarit died in 1963, his deputy commander, Thanom Kittikachorn, succeeded him and subsequently held power for a decade. During this period, Thailand saw a major influx of U.S. military forces, who used bases in Thailand as staging areas for campaigns during the Vietnam War. The Thai economy enjoyed a significant boost from American financial aid and the investment in infrastructure to support the military bases.¹¹⁷ However, as the economy surged, increasing calls came for the restoration of political rights.¹¹⁸ In addition, a rising gap between the poor and rich, as well as continued governmental corruption fueled increased anti-governmental feelings in economic "have-not" regions.¹¹⁹

By 1973, student and worker protests against the government triggered escalating confrontations with the police and military forces. On 14 October 77 students were killed in violent protests in Bangkok.¹²⁰ When the army commander refused to use any additional force against the students, King Bhumibol stepped in and urged Thanom to go into exile.¹²¹ The King subsequently chose a civilian interim prime minister to replace Thanom, and for a brief period Thailand returned to a parliamentary democracy. By October 1976 however, with Communist governments now established in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the military once again stepped in and installed a conservative administration that proved more repressive than the military-led regimes of the past.^{122, 123}



© Eunheul / Flickr.com
Memorial for the massacre of 1973

¹¹⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Sarit Thanarat." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9065782/Sarit-Thanarat>

¹¹⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: Military Dictatorship, Economic Growth, and the Reemergence of the Monarchy." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52684/Thailand>

¹¹⁷ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "Thailand's Geography, Demographics, and History [p. 55]." 2004. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

¹¹⁸ MSN Encarta. Wyatt, David K. "VII. History. I. Struggle for Democracy." 2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_11/Thailand.html

¹¹⁹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: Military Dictatorship, Economic Growth, and the Reemergence of the Monarchy." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52684/Thailand>

¹²⁰ BBC On This Day. "October 14, 1973: Thai Army Shoots Protesters." 14 October 1973. http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/14/newsid_2534000/2534347.stm

¹²¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: The 1973 Revolution and Its Aftermath." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52685/Thailand>

¹²² Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: The 1973 Revolution and Its Aftermath." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52685/Thailand>

¹²³ MSN Encarta. Wyatt, David K. "VII. History. I. Struggle for Democracy." 2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_11/Thailand.html

A year later, as the Communist Party of Thailand continued to marshal support in the countryside, another October coup brought General Kriangsak Chomanan to power. Despite being a military leader, he proved relatively open to sharing power in a democratic environment. Under his brief period of leadership, the government developed the model for a new political system. In the resulting arrangement, the military shared power with the democratically elected parliament, and the King mediated any conflicts between the two entities.

A Move to Democratic Rule

In 1980, Kriangsak resigned in the wake of a crisis tied to Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, which pushed the Khmer Rouge forces and Cambodian refugees to the Thailand border.¹²⁴ Deteriorating economic conditions also contributed to Kriangsak's fall from power.¹²⁵ General Prem Tinsulanonda became the new prime minister. Unlike his previous military predecessors, Prem eventually stepped down from his army post and became a civilian leader. During his eight years of rule, he survived two coup attempts. He is credited with eliminating the threat posed by the Communist Party through means of amnesty programs and military action. He is also known for bringing about a system of "semi-democracy" to the Thai political scene.¹²⁶



DoD photo
General Kriangsak Chomanan

In 1988, the nation held elections and selected Chatichai Choonhavan, a retired general, as its new leader. Choonhavan's short regime was marked by rapid, double-digit economic growth and prolific corruption. By 1991, another military coup brought Choonhavan's time in power to an end.¹²⁷ The coup leaders promised elections for the following year, but one of them, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, rescinded his promise to not seek the prime minister position. Political protests once again gripped the country, and, in what was becoming a common Thai political tradition, the King stepped in to mediate the crisis. Suchinda resigned, and the King appointed a civilian interim prime minister. Thus began an unprecedented period of democratic rule in Thailand. From 1992 to April 2006, all Thai governments consisted of political parties with a majority in the nation's parliament.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "Thailand's Geography, Demographics, and History [p. 58, 59]." 2004. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

¹²⁵ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Country Study: Thailand*. "Military Rule and Limited Parliamentary Government, 1976-1983." September 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+th0042\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+th0042))

¹²⁶ MSN Encarta. "Prem Tinsulanonda." 2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761580152/prem_tinsulanonda.html

¹²⁷ New York Times. Myans, Seth. "Chatichai Choonhavan, 76, Ex-Prime-Minister of Thailand." 7 May 1998. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9500E5DF1531F934A35756C0A96E958260>

¹²⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: Partial Democracy and the Search for a New Political Order." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52686/Thailand>

The Last Coup?

In the 2001 elections, the first to be held since the ratification of a new, ground-breaking constitution in 1997, the party of Thaksin Shinawatra, a Sino-Thai telecommunications entrepreneur, won a landslide victory. Running on a platform promising better and more affordable health care for the poor, devolution of power from the central government to local agencies, and larger investments in education, Thaksin gained a reputation as a populist.¹²⁹

Thaksin's party won re-election by an even larger majority in the 2005 elections. However, after this high-water point, his administration suffered a precipitous downturn in popularity the following year. Numerous factors led to the public's loss of confidence in Thaksin: allegations of family corruption, unhappiness over the handling of the Malay Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand, and concerns among some Thais that Thaksin had violated Thai *lèse majesté* laws (i.e., giving offense to the monarch).¹³⁰

In September 2006, a military junta staged a coup while Thaksin traveled outside the country. With the King's support, the junta appointed retired general Surayud Chulanot as the interim prime minister. Elections were held the following year, and although Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party was banned from participating, a proxy Thaksin group, the People Power Party (PPP), won the most parliamentary seats. PPP leader Samak Sundaravej, a Thaksin supporter and former TV cooking show host, became the new prime minister.^{131, 132}



© James Gagen
Tanks in Bangkok during the coup of 2006

¹²⁹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: Populist Democracy and Thaksin Shinawatra." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274239/Thailand>

¹³⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: History: Populist Democracy and Thaksin Shinawatra." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274239/Thailand>

¹³¹ MSN Encarta. Wyatt, David K. "VII. History. L. Military Coup." 2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_12/Thailand.html

¹³² BBC News, International Version. "Samak Sundaravej." 28 January 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7212682.stm>

Economy

Introduction

Once labeled one of the “Asian Tigers” because of its fast-growing economy, Thailand was the first of several East Asian countries to see its economic gains leveled during the financial crisis of 1997–98. Since then, the economy has rebounded and is now one of the strongest in Southeast Asia. Extensive foreign investment in Thailand has focused on developing export-oriented industries, and, today, computers, integrated circuits, automobiles, clothing, and numerous other manufactured items are shipped from Thailand to countries around the world.¹³³



© 3dom / Flickr.com
Internet café in Bangkok

Industry and Manufacturing

The manufacturing sector has led Thailand’s economic growth since the 1980s. It dominates Thailand’s exports and, overall, accounts for more than 35% of the nation’s gross domestic product (GDP).¹³⁴ Over the years, the mix of products has evolved and diversified. Prior to 1960, Thailand’s manufacturing sector was dominated by food processing, which accounted for over one third of total manufactured products. In the 1960s, the government initiated an import-substitution program to stimulate the manufacture of products for the internal market. By the 1970s, however, Thai economic growth began to slow, and, in response, government policy changed to favor the development of industries producing export-oriented products.¹³⁵

Today, Thailand is a leading manufacturer of textiles and clothing, footwear, electronic equipment, automobiles and automotive parts, cement, and chemical and petroleum products.¹³⁶ Food processing also continues to be important. In particular, the electronics assembly industry, including items such as hard disk drives and integrated circuits, has grown quickly during the 1990s



© Natalia Osiatynska
Scarves being woven on Thailand

¹³³ Thailand Board of Investment. “Application Approved.” April 2008.

http://www.boi.go.th/english/download/boi_statistics/32/0803_app_en.pdf

¹³⁴ The Economist. “Country Briefings: Thailand.” 24 October 2007.

[http://www.economist.com/countries/Thailand/profile.cfm?folder=Profile%2DEconomic Structure](http://www.economist.com/countries/Thailand/profile.cfm?folder=Profile%2DEconomic%20Structure)

¹³⁵ Nanzan University. National Identity Office, Royal Thai Government. “The Characteristics of Thai Economy: The Manufacturing Sector.” No date. <http://www.nanzan-u.ac.jp/~sinouye/thaidata/thaiecon.html>

¹³⁶ MSN Encarta. Coxhead, Ian. “V. Economy of Thailand. E. Manufacturing.” 2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_6/Thailand.html

and 2000s and now contributes nearly one third of Thailand's total exports.¹³⁷

Agriculture

Thailand has traditionally maintained an agrarian economy strongly dependent on rice cultivation, processing, and exportation.¹³⁸ While agricultural production has continued to modestly increase over the last few decades, it has been eclipsed by the rate of growth in the manufacturing and services sector. Today, roughly 11% of Thailand's GDP comes from the agricultural sector, with rice continuing to be the most important crop. The extent to which the country's economy has changed is demonstrated by the following statistic: in 1956, over 40% of Thailand's exports were generated by rice, but by 2001, with the overall tonnage of Thai rice exports having expanded by over 600% since 1956, the export value of this rice represented less than 2.5% of Thailand's total export revenue.¹³⁹ The boost in rice production during this period of time was partly due to the increasing use of high-yield varieties of rice.



© Dave Turnbull
Floating market, Bangkok

Rice continues to be the most important crop in Thailand's agricultural economy, and the country maintains its role as one of the world's leading rice exporters. The chief areas of cultivation are in the Chao Phraya River basin and the Khorat Plateau.¹⁴⁰ Other important market crops include cassava, maize (corn), kenaf (a fiber crop similar to jute), longans (tropical fruit related to lychees), mangoes, pineapples, durians (a specialty fruit of Southeast Asia known for its strong odor), cashews, vegetables, and flowers. Major cash crops grown primarily for export include rubber, sugar cane, and coffee, all of which typically come from large plantations.¹⁴¹

Fisheries are also significant contributors to Thailand's agricultural output. Thai fishing fleets work waters in both the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, with more than two thirds of the marine catch coming from the latter area.^{142, 143} Inland waters are also fished for freshwater species such as carp and catfish. The fastest growing segment of the

¹³⁷ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. "A Case Study of the Electronics Industry in Thailand." 2005. http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/iteipc20056_en.pdf

¹³⁸ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "The Economy of Thailand [p. 75]." 2004. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

¹³⁹ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "The Economy of Thailand [p. 76, from National Statistical Office of Thailand]." 2004. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

¹⁴⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: Economy: Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52658/Thailand>

¹⁴¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: Economy: Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52658/Thailand>

¹⁴² Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. "Fishery Country Profile: The Kingdom of Thailand." May 2000. <http://www.fao.org/fi/fcp/en/THA/profile.htm>

¹⁴³ Royal Danish Embassy – Bangkok. "Sector Overview: The Fishery Industry in Thailand [p. 2]." April 2007. <http://www.ambbangkok.um.dk/NR/rdonlyres/5CE2A89A-6708-43E0-90BD-37F924C3C71B/0/SectorOverviewFisheryIndustryinThailandApril2007.pdf>

fisheries industry, however, is aquaculture. Along the coasts, many of the mangrove forests have been cut down to allow for the development of shrimp farms, which make Thailand one of the world's biggest producers of marine shrimp.¹⁴⁴

Banking and Currency

The basic unit of currency in Thailand is the *baht* (international monetary code: THB). In April 2008, the exchange rate was about 31.6 THB to the United States dollar (USD).¹⁴⁵ Until July 1997, the THB was pegged to the USD at a 25-to-1 conversion rate. When depreciation pressures forced the government's Bank of Thailand to finally let the *baht* "float" on the international monetary markets, the exchange rate quickly plunged, bottoming out at a 56-to-1 rate in January 1998.¹⁴⁶ This massive depreciation led to a major recession in Thailand, the first attack of a regional financial crisis that later became known as the "Asian flu."



One of the results of Thailand's financial crisis of 1997 was the collapse of the country's banking system. By mid 1999, nearly half of the loans held by Thai banks were non-performing.¹⁴⁷ As a result, the Bank of Thailand was forced to close 56 finance companies.¹⁴⁸

Since the economic meltdown of 1997, the banking industry has slowly regained its stability. In 2004, the Thai Parliament passed a bill requiring all finance companies to become banks, a measure that, in turn, forced such institutions to meet higher capitalization and risk-control criteria.¹⁴⁹ The reform has led to a somewhat belated reform of the industry (compared with Thailand's neighboring countries). In 2004, the state-controlled Thailand Military Bank and the Industrial Finance Corporation merged with the DBS Thai Danu Bank of Singapore.¹⁵⁰ Numerous other mergers and acquisitions

¹⁴⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. "Fishery Country Profile: The Kingdom of Thailand." May 2000. <http://www.fao.org/fi/fcp/en/THA/profile.htm>

¹⁴⁵ XE.com. "Universal Currency Converter™ Results: 1.00 UST to THB." c.1995–2008. <http://www.xe.com/ucc/convert.cgi>

¹⁴⁶ *Thailand: A Global Studies Handbook*. Hoare, Timothy D. "The Economy of Thailand [pp. 72, 73]." 2004. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

¹⁴⁷ Encyclopedia of the Nations. "Thailand: Banking and Securities." 1007 <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Asia-and-Oceania/Thailand-BANKING-AND-SECURITIES.html>

¹⁴⁸ Asian Development Bank. "Country Partnership Strategy: Thailand (2007-2011) [p. 6]." April 2007. <http://www.adb.org/Documents/CPSs/THA/2007/CPS-THA-2007-2011.pdf>

¹⁴⁹ Business Week. Balfour, Frederik. "Bank Reform in Thailand: Better Late than Never." 5 April 2004. http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/04_14/b3877099_mz035.htm

¹⁵⁰ Business Week. Balfour, Frederik. "Bank Reform in Thailand: Better Late than Never." 5 April 2004. http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/04_14/b3877099_mz035.htm

have followed, which have placed an increased share of the Thai banking industry under the control of foreign investors.^{151, 152}

Trade

In a little over 25 years, Thailand has transformed from a nation that primarily exported agricultural products to one that is strongly dependent on manufacturing exports. In 1980, roughly 25% of Thailand's total exports were manufactures, but by 2003 that percentage had tripled to 75%.¹⁵³ Overall, Thailand runs a positive trade balance in most years, although the margin between overall value of imports and exports is narrow because of the country's dependency on petroleum imports.¹⁵⁴

Thailand's top trading partners are the United States, Japan, China, Singapore, and Hong Kong. The United States is the leading destination for Thailand's exported goods, while Japan is the leading source of Thai imports.¹⁵⁵ Thailand's export growth, however, has recently been strongest among nontraditional trading partners, such as India, China, and a few countries in the Middle East.¹⁵⁶ Thailand's leading export products are computers and peripherals, integrated circuits, automobiles and automotive parts, textiles and garments, and rubber and rubber products.¹⁵⁷ Among exported agricultural products, rice and frozen shrimp are predominant.



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Rubber plantation

Thailand's major imports are raw materials and intermediates, such as components for electrical assembly (USD 51.9 billion); capital goods for use in producing other goods, such as manufacturing machinery (USD 33.1 billion); fuels and lubricants (USD 25.4 billion); nondurable consumer goods, such as food and clothing (USD 9.5 billion); and durable consumer goods, such as electrical appliances (USD 6 billion).¹⁵⁸

¹⁵¹ Hg.org. Tilleke & Gibbins International Ltd. "The Financial Sector Master Plan: Inspiring Changes among Thailand's Banks." 3 August 2005. http://www.hg.org/articles/article_1058.html

¹⁵² Asian Bankers Summit. Bidaya, Thanong. "Unlocking the Value of the Institution in Global Marketplace." 15 March 2006. <http://www.asianbankerforums.com/summit2006/speech.asp>

¹⁵³ MSN Encarta. Coxhead, Ian. "V. Economy of Thailand. J. Foreign Trade." 2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_7/Thailand.html

¹⁵⁴ International Trade Centre/World Trade Organization. "Trade Performance HS: Exports and Imports of Thailand (2006, in USD Thousands)." http://www.intracen.org/appli1/TradeCom/TP_TP_CI.aspx?RP=764&YR=2005

¹⁵⁵ International Trade Centre/World Trade Organization. "Trade Performance HS: Exports and Imports of Thailand – 00 All Industries." 2008.

http://www.intracen.org/appli1/TradeCom/TP_TP_CI_P.aspx?TY=T&IN=00&RP=764&YR=2006

¹⁵⁶ Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Thailand." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

¹⁵⁷ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. "A Case Study of the Electronics Industry in Thailand [p. 16]." 2005. http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/iteipc20056_en.pdf

¹⁵⁸ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Thailand [pp. 15, 16]." July 2007. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Thailand.pdf>

International Organizations

Thailand's trading relations with its neighbors are coordinated through the regional Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Founded in 1967 by Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore, ASEAN has since grown through the addition of Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, and Cambodia. ASEAN developed into a potent regional organization in the 1970s as the Vietnam War came to an end and the region began to prosper economically. Later, after the end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, ASEAN members demonstrated greater political independence, and the association emerged as a forum for the settlement of regional disputes.¹⁵⁹



In 1992, the association's six original members signed the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, which they phased in over the next eleven years. Newer members Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma are still phasing into the agreement. However, within all of ASEAN, 99% of traded goods between members have already seen tariffs reduced to no more than 5%.¹⁶⁰ ASEAN has also recently negotiated a free trade agreement with China, with tariff eliminations to be phased in between 2010 and 2018.¹⁶¹

Investment

Thailand's rapid economic growth in the 1980s was fueled by an influx of investment in the nation's manufacturing sector. Low labor costs, openness to foreign investment, and strong governmental encouragement of the private sector were among the factors that transformed Thailand into a leading industrial economy of Southeast Asia.¹⁶² Japanese companies have long been among the major investors, supplying about one third of Thailand's foreign investment.¹⁶³ A large part of this investment has supported the automotive industry, which produces trucks and cars for both domestic and external markets. Plants built by Toyota, Honda, Mitsubishi, Isuzu, and Mazda have made Thailand one of the world's leaders in automobile and automotive parts assembly.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "ASEAN." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9068910/ASEAN?refresh=Y>

¹⁶⁰ Thailand Board of Investment. Thailand Investment Review, Vol. 17, No. 6. "Thailand's Free Trade Agreements." July 2005. http://www.boi.go.th:8080/issue/200507_17_6/17.htm

¹⁶¹ Thailand Board of Investment. Thailand Investment Review, Vol. 17, No. 6. "Thailand's Free Trade Agreements." July 2005. http://www.boi.go.th:8080/issue/200507_17_6/17.htm

¹⁶² Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Thailand." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

¹⁶³ Business-in-Asia.com. BOI Investment Review. Kurado, Atsuo. "Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO)—Bangkok." October 2005. http://www.business-in-asia.com/automotive/jetro_interview.htm

¹⁶⁴ Business-in-Asia.com. Runckel, Charles. "Thailand Automotive Industry Update 2005." http://www.business-in-asia.com/auto_article2.html

The rapid increase of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Thailand slowed significantly during 2006, partly as a result of political instability leading up to the military coup in September.^{165, 166} After the coup, one of the first moves by the military's appointed cabinet was to propose an amendment to Thailand's Foreign Business Act that would have tightened restrictions on foreign ownership in some key industries. This move was seen as a response to the sale of Shin, the largest Thai telecommunications company (at that time owned by former Prime Minister Thaksin Pongsudhirak's family), to an investment arm of the Singapore government. The Thaksin family's sale of Shin was one of the key factors behind the protests that contributed to Thaksin's ouster by the military junta.¹⁶⁷ After negative reaction concerning the amendment's potential effect on foreign investment in Thailand, officials withdrew the proposal in August 2007.¹⁶⁸



© Shane Bartley
Car show in Bangkok

Energy and Mineral Resources

Energy

Although Thailand produces oil and natural gas from fields primarily located offshore in the Gulf of Thailand, these resources are insufficient to meet the country's needs. A little less than 37% of Thailand's oil liquids consumption comes from domestic sources, with the remainder supplied by imports.¹⁶⁹ A higher percentage of Thailand's natural gas consumption (roughly 75%) is met by domestic production, with imports via pipeline from Burma's Andaman Sea gas fields supplementing these sources.¹⁷⁰

While there is little likelihood that Thailand's oil production and reserves will increase significantly in the near future, the country has identified new natural gas reserves and is actively developing these untapped offshore resources. Among the projects underway is a joint development venture with Malaysia on three blocks that lie within the two

¹⁶⁵ International Herald Tribune. Fuller, Thomas and Wayne Arnold. "Thailand Threatens Fresh Restrictions on Foreigner Investors." 9 January 2007. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/01/09/business/baht.php?page=1>

¹⁶⁶ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. World Investment Report 2007. "Country Fact Sheet: Thailand." http://www.unctad.org/sections/dite_dir/docs/wir07_fs_th_en.pdf

¹⁶⁷ International Herald Tribune. Fuller, Thomas and Wayne Arnold. "Thailand Threatens Fresh Restrictions on Foreigner Investors." 9 January 2007. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/01/09/business/baht.php?page=1>

¹⁶⁸ The Nation. Khanthong, Thanong. "Power Struggle Seems Likely to Sideline Business Laws." 10 August 2007. http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2007/08/10/business/business_30044468.php

¹⁶⁹ Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy. "Country Analysis Briefs: Thailand [p. 2]." April 2007. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/Thailand/pdf.pdf>

¹⁷⁰ Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy. "Country Analysis Briefs: Thailand [p. 4]." April 2007. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/Thailand/pdf.pdf>

countries' overlapping claims on Gulf of Thailand resources near their mutual border.¹⁷¹ Thailand and Malaysia will share in equal measure the gas resources and development costs in the Joint Development Area.

The fossil fuel industry in Thailand is dominated by PTT, which is Thailand's largest company in terms of generated revenues.¹⁷² Foreign companies carry out most of Thailand's oil production (Chevron alone produces more than 75% of Thailand's crude oil), while PTT controls much of the downstream activities, such as the network's pipelines and refining.¹⁷³ The company partially privatized in 2001, selling off 32% of its equity.¹⁷⁴ Recently, however, a lawsuit filed in the wake of this sale has forced the company to divest its extensive gas pipeline system by returning it to the national government.¹⁷⁵

Lesser percentages of Thailand's energy needs are supplied by coal (nearly 14%) and hydroelectricity (2%).^{176, 177} Thailand's coal production declined in 2006 (the most recent year with available data), necessitating the import of about 27% of the country's coal requirements.¹⁷⁸

Minerals

Mining is an important part of the Thai national economy, producing materials for construction, industry, and export. Overall, mining and quarrying generate a little over 2% of Thailand's GDP.¹⁷⁹ The five most valuable minerals produced in Thailand are coal (lignite), gold, gypsum, limestone, and zinc. The country is one of the world's



¹⁷¹ Petronas.com. "Malaysia-Thailand Joint Development Area." 2005. <http://www.petronas.com.my/internet/corp/centralrep2.nsf/0ddc209ca3aa90e848256e9900178727/c4558306e7e36a4748256a95002e8983?OpenDocument>

¹⁷² CNNMoney.com. "Fortune Global 500: PTT." 23 July 2007. <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/global500/2007/snapshots/7174.html>

¹⁷³ Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy. "Country Analysis Briefs: Thailand [p. 2]." April 2007. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/Thailand/pdf.pdf>

¹⁷⁴ Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy. "Country Analysis Briefs: Thailand [p. 2]." April 2007. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/Thailand/pdf.pdf>

¹⁷⁵ Bangkok Post. Fernquest, Jon. "PTT Pipeline Divestiture: What Next?" 17 December 2007. http://www.readbangkokpost.com/business/oil_and_energy/ptt_pipeline_spinoff_what_next.php

¹⁷⁶ Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy. "Country Analysis Briefs: Thailand [p. 7]." April 2007. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/Thailand/pdf.pdf>

¹⁷⁷ U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior. Wu, John C. "The Mineral Industry of Thailand, 2006 [p. 25.5]." February 2008. <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2006/myb3-2006-th.pdf>

¹⁷⁸ U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior. Wu, John C. "The Mineral Industry of Thailand, 2006 [p. 25.5]." February 2008. <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2006/myb3-2006-th.pdf>

¹⁷⁹ U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior. Wu, John C. "The Mineral Industry of Thailand, 2006 [p. 25.5]." February 2008. <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2006/myb3-2006-th.pdf>

largest producers and exporters of feldspar and gypsum. Thailand is also one of the world's leading exporters of cement.¹⁸⁰

Standard of Living

After Singapore and Malaysia, Thailand is the highest ranking country in Southeast Asia on the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index (HDI), a yearly summary of the relative well-being of each country's people. The HDI uses literacy rate, average life expectancy at birth, average education level, and GDP per capita as its indices for this measure. Thailand ranks 78th among the world's nations, slightly ahead of China (ranked 81st) and slightly behind Colombia (75th).¹⁸¹ Among the four indices, Thailand ranks relatively high for its literacy rate (45th among all nations) and GDP per capita (65th), but its overall ranking is dragged down by a relatively low average life expectancy (102nd).¹⁸²

Thailand faces several developmental challenges. One of these stems from the nation's changing demographics. Because the country's fertility rate has decreased and its average life expectancy has increased since the beginning of the nation's industrialization in the 1960s, the number of senior citizens is expected to double over the next 20 years. Most current senior citizens have no social security or access to health care, and thus the government will need to dramatically increase expenditures in this area in order to support a large population of dependent seniors.¹⁸³



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Old woman

Another lingering problem for Thailand is income disparity. Although the average monthly income in Thailand is nearly THB 8,000 (USD 253 at April 2008 exchange rates) and the GDP per capita is nearly USD 3,200 (placing the country within the upper range of developing economies within East Asia), these statistics mask a wide divide between the nation's extremes.¹⁸⁴ The bottom 10% of the Thai population receives 2.7% of the country's total household income, whereas the top 10% earns 33%.¹⁸⁵ Rural and urban

¹⁸⁰ U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Department of the Interior. Wu, John C. "The Mineral Industry of Thailand, 2006." February 2008. <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2006/myb3-2006-th.pdf>

¹⁸¹ United Nations Development Programme. "2007/08 Human Development Index Rankings." 2008. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>

¹⁸² United Nations Development Programme. "Thailand: The Human Development Index—Going Beyond Income." No date. http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_THA.html

¹⁸³ Asian Development Bank. "Country Partnership Strategy: Thailand (2007-2011) [p. 8]." April 2007. <http://www.adb.org/Documents/CPSs/THA/2007/CPS-THA-2007-2011.pdf>

¹⁸⁴ International Monetary Fund. World Economic Outlook Database. "5. Report for Selected Countries and Subjects." April 2008.

[http://imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2008/01/weodata/weorept.aspx?sy=2006&ey=2007&scsm=1&ssd=1&ort=country&ds=.&br=1&c=518%2C564%2C516%2C853%2C522%2C566%2C924%2C534%2C536%2C578%2C537%2C544%2C548%2C582&s=NGDPDPC%2CPPPPC&grp=0&a=&pr.x=25&pr.y=7](http://imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2008/01/weodata/weorept.aspx?sy=2006&ey=2007&scsm=1&ssd=1&sort=country&ds=.&br=1&c=518%2C564%2C516%2C853%2C522%2C566%2C924%2C534%2C536%2C578%2C537%2C544%2C548%2C582&s=NGDPDPC%2CPPPPC&grp=0&a=&pr.x=25&pr.y=7)

¹⁸⁵ Bangkok Post. "Thailand: Facts and Figures." 2008.

<http://www.bangkokpost.com/economicyearend2007/factsandfigures.html>

standards of living vary widely as well. The poverty rates in the country's rural northern and northeastern regions are 16.2% and 17.2%, respectively, whereas Bangkok's poverty rate is only 1.6%.¹⁸⁶

Tourism

Thailand is one of the top tourist destinations in Asia, and the tourism sector typically contributes about 6% of the nation's GDP. Nearly 50% of Thailand's visitors are from East Asia, predominantly from Japan and Korea. Another 28% come from Europe. Most foreign visitors arrive via Bangkok's new Suvarnabhumi International Airport, one of the busiest in all of Asia.¹⁸⁷



© Casper Moller
Tourists at an elephant camp

Many of the tourists visiting Thailand travel to the coastal areas in the southern part of the country. The Andaman Sea side of this region was badly damaged by the December 2004 tsunami, and the result was a falloff in tourism revenue as a percentage of the GDP in 2005.¹⁸⁸ The industry rebounded in 2006, with tourist arrivals jumping by 20%, but this growth slowed in 2007, with foreign arrivals increasing by 4.65%.¹⁸⁹ The first part of 2007 actually saw a smaller increase in travel to Thailand, a development widely attributed to political uncertainty following the September 2006 military coup and safety concerns after terrorist bombings in Bangkok on 31 December 2006.^{190, 191}

Parts of Bangkok and some other areas in Thailand have developed a sex tourism sub-industry, and this has unfortunately translated into problems with child prostitution and sexually-transmitted disease. For several years, Thailand had the highest number of HIV carriers in East Asia, and some estimates put the number of people working in the Thai sex industry at over one million.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁶ Asian Development Bank. "Country Partnership Strategy: Thailand (2007-2011) [p. 8]." April 2007. <http://www.adb.org/Documents/CPSs/THA/2007/CPS-THA-2007-2011.pdf>

¹⁸⁷ Bangkok Post. Theparat, Chatrudee. "Filling in for Absent Asians." <http://www.bangkokpost.com/economicyearend2007/tourism.html>

¹⁸⁸ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. "Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific. 23 – Tourism." 2008. <http://www.unescap.org/stat/data/syb2007/23-Tourism-syb2007.asp>

¹⁸⁹ Baht&Sold.com. Bangkok Post. "Latest Thai Tourism Statistics Released: Statistics Underline New Tourism Trends." 15 April 2008. <http://www.bahtsold.com/news?id=559>

¹⁹⁰ BizAsia.com. "Bangkok's Bombings to Affect Thailand's Foreign Tourism from Mid-2007." 2 January 2007. http://www.bizasia.com/tourism/_e3cyg/bangkok_bombings_impact.htm

¹⁹¹ Bangkok Post. Theparat, Chatrudee. "Filling in for Absent Asians." No date. <http://www.bangkokpost.com/economicyearend2007/tourism.html>

¹⁹² BBC News. Head, Jonathan. "New AIDS Fears in Thailand." 25 June 2001. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1406932.stm>

Transportation

Thailand has an extensive network of roads and railways, especially in regions in which the topography is amenable to development.¹⁹³ It is also the home of one of Asia's regional air hubs, Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport. The country has several sea ports, with the largest ones located in Bangkok and Laem Chabang. The latter port, the largest in Thailand, is relatively new and is located southeast of Bangkok on the northern Gulf of Thailand.



© Kok Leng Yeo
Train Station, Kanchanaburi

Not surprisingly, Bangkok is the center for all forms of transportation in the country. It is also one area of the country in which the number of roads is insufficient to handle the amount of traffic. Its streets and highways are notoriously clogged, which is not surprising given that only 8% of the city is paved, compared with 16–20% for other large Asian metropolises.¹⁹⁴ In 2004, the city introduced the country's first underground mass transit system, a 21-km (13-mi) route that presently serves 18 stations and connects to posts on the city's two above-ground Skytrain routes, which opened in 1999. Despite these first steps in mass transportation, the rail systems are still principally confined to the central region of the city, and they have done little to reduce traffic in suburban areas.¹⁹⁵ Plans are in development, however, to extend the systems to outlying regions.

Business Outlook

In the decade since the financial crisis of 1997, Thailand has made remarkable strides in restoring vitality to its economy and reestablishing itself as an investment magnet. By 2003, real per-capita income and the poverty rate had returned to their pre-crisis levels, and they have since continued to improve. There was initial concern that the political instability of 2006, culminating in a military coup, could have a negative impact on the nation's economy and investment environment, but these fears quickly ebbed. The elections of 2007 restored a democratically elected government, and in early 2008 deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra returned to the country to face corruption and conflict-of-interest charges. Despite his claims to the contrary, some observers worry that Thaksin will eventually return to a political leadership role, thus potentially triggering another political crisis and the return of economic uncertainty.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Thailand [p. 17]." July 2007. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Thailand.pdf>

¹⁹⁴ BBC News. "Bangkok to Combat Traffic Congestion." 21 December 2001. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1723804.stm>

¹⁹⁵ Agence France Presse. "Bangkok's Air Pollution Slowly Evaporating." 25 October 2007. <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5igofs7w3nkCpfcg3-NRTBLB3fJg>

¹⁹⁶ International Herald Tribune. Associated Press. "Thaksin Returns to Face Charges in Thailand." 28 February 2008. <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/02/28/asia/AS-GEN-Thailand-Thaksin.php>

Recent economic indicators have been positive. Economic growth has been steady if unremarkable over the last few years, averaging between 4.5 and 7.1% since 2002.¹⁹⁷ Inflation spiked somewhat in 2005 and 2006, nearing an annual rate of almost 5%, but it decreased significantly in 2007 to 2.3%.^{198, 199}

Overall, the economy continues to depend on exports to sustain growth, as the growth rate of domestic demand (private and government consumption plus gross fixed investment) has continued to decrease.²⁰⁰ Export revenues continued to grow strongly in 2007, increasing by 18.1%. However, Thai economists remain concerned about the high value of the *baht*, which impairs the competitiveness of Thai products on the international market. In addition, an economic slowdown and the declining value of the dollar have hurt Thailand's export growth with the United States, which is traditionally its top market for exports.²⁰¹



© petersmk99 / Flickr.com
Bangkok skyline at night

¹⁹⁷ World Bank. "Country Snapshot: Thailand." 2008.

<http://rru.worldbank.org/BESnapshots/Thailand/default.aspx>

¹⁹⁸ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. "Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2008; Thailand." March 2008.

<http://unescap.org/survey2008/notes/thailand.asp>

¹⁹⁹ World Bank. "Country Snapshot: Thailand." 2008.

<http://rru.worldbank.org/BESnapshots/Thailand/default.aspx>

²⁰⁰ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. "Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2008; Thailand." March 2008.

<http://unescap.org/survey2008/notes/thailand.asp>

²⁰¹ Bangkok Post. Fernquest, Jon. "Thai Exports Fall with Strong Baht and U.S. Slowdown." 14 January 2008. http://www.readbangkokpost.com/business/international_trade/thai_exports_fall_with_strong.php

Society

Introduction

“Made in Thailand. What the Thai do themselves.
Sing a song with meaning, dance a dance with style.
The *farangs* secretly admire it, but the Thai don’t see the value.
Afraid to lose face, that their values aren’t modern enough.
Made in Thailand. Hey, who’s going to do something about this?
(I think someone should be responsible.)”

Made in Thailand –Carabao (Thai *phleng pheua chiiwit* band)

Carabao’s satirical lyrics from its 1984 hit *Made in Thailand* reflect an opinion sometimes voiced by Thais—namely, that in their rush to embrace the cultural cachet of Western and Japanese brands, the Thai people have lost sight of the richness of their own culture and the quality of the products that they produce. This situation is most evident in Bangkok. Nonetheless, Thai “culture” (a word that really has no equivalent in the Thai language) continues to express itself beneath the Westernized veneer of the large cities and tourist areas—through its people, its religion, and its fabled artistic traditions.²⁰²



Ethnic Groups and Languages

Thailand is an ethnically diverse country, although the majority of the population (roughly 75%) is categorized as ethnic Thai.²⁰³ However, within the broad Thai grouping there is a significant amount of variation in culture and language. Central or Standard Thai is spoken by the majority of Thais in a wide region encompassing the Chao Phraya River basin, the northern part of the southern peninsula, and much of the area southeast of Bangkok. Thais to the north speak Northern Thai, also known as Phayap, Khon Mung, or Lanna. To the northeast, in the Khorat Plateau region, the predominant language is Isan (or Northeastern Thai), which some consider to be a dialect of the Lao language. Finally, in much of the southern peninsula,



²⁰² *Thailand*, 10th Ed. “Society and Conduct [p. 43].” 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

²⁰³ MSN Encarta. Thailand: People and Society of Thailand: Ethnic Groups.” 2007.
http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_3/Thailand.html#s15

Southern Thai (or Pak Thai) is the primary native language.²⁰⁴ All of these languages are part of the Tai-Kadai language family.

The Chinese are the largest minority population in Thailand, estimated to be anywhere from 10% to 14% of the total population.^{205, 206} Most Chinese Thai are descendants of immigrants who came to Thailand beginning in the mid 19th century. Many have thoroughly assimilated into Thai culture, speaking Thai as their primary language and practicing Theravada Buddhism.

There are several other minority ethnolinguistic groups in Thailand, most of whom live near Thailand's borders. In the southernmost four provinces on the southern peninsula, a region that was a separate Malay sultanate until the late 19th century, the Patani Malay dialect is widely spoken and Islam is the predominant religion. In eastern Thailand near Cambodia, Northern Khmer and Kuy are commonly spoken idioms, although Northeastern Thai is often a second language among speakers.²⁰⁷

Hill Tribes

In the northern and western regions of the country, several groups of people who have yet to assimilate fully into mainstream Thailand are collectively known as the "hill tribes," a classification first used by the Thai government in 1959.²⁰⁸ Generally the hill tribes are disparate, semi-nomadic groups who over time have migrated southward and westward into northern Thailand from Tibet, southern and central China, Burma, and Laos. They include the Karen, who live in the western border regions and are the largest hill tribe group (47.9% of the overall hill tribe population); the Akha (7.2%), Lahu (11.2%), Lisu (4.1%), Mien (4.8%), and Hmong (16.5%), tribal groups that have immigrated to Thailand since the mid 19th century and generally live at higher altitudes in the hills than the other hill tribes; and the Lua (2.4%), H'Tin (4.7%), and Khamu (1.1%), smaller tribal groups who have long lived in regions near the Laotian border.^{209, 210}



²⁰⁴ Ethnologue.com. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 15th Ed. Gordon, Raymond G. Jr., Ed. "Languages of Thailand." 2005. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=TH

²⁰⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: People: Chinese." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274200/Thailand>

²⁰⁶ MSN Encarta. "Thailand: People and Society of Thailand: Ethnic Groups." 2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_3/Thailand.html#s15

²⁰⁷ Ethnologue.com. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 15th Ed. Gordon, Raymond G. Jr., Ed. "Languages of Thailand." 2005. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=TH

²⁰⁸ *Multiculturalism in Asia*. Toyota, Mika. "Subjects of the Nation Without Citizenship: The Case of "Hill Tribes" in Thailand [p. 116]." 2005. Oxford, Engl: Oxford University Press.

²⁰⁹ *Multiculturalism in Asia*. Toyota, Mika. "Subjects of the Nation Without Citizenship: The Case of "Hill Tribes" in Thailand [pp. 110]." 2005. Oxford, Engl: Oxford University Press.

During the latter part of the 20th century, when the term “hill tribes” began to take on a pejorative meaning, the Thai government initiated efforts to better integrate the hill tribes into Thai society.²¹¹ The tribes had become increasingly associated with perceived problems (e.g., opium cultivation, susceptibility to communist infiltration, swidden, or slash-and-burn, agriculture) in the northern border regions. Officials instituted crop replacement and anti-narcotic programs in order to address the opium issue. As opium cultivation declined and the threat from communist infiltration receded, forest conservation became the most prominent issue driving the government’s hill tribe policies. Because many hill tribes farm within protected forest areas, there has been an ongoing controversy within Thailand concerning their continued use of the land. One problem for the hill tribes, especially for those who have immigrated to Thailand since the end of the Vietnam War, is that many are still not Thai citizens, and thus they have few if any legal grounds to support them.^{212, 213}

Religion

Theravada Buddhism is the most widely practiced religion in Thailand. About 95% of the majority ethnic Thai population follows this school of Buddhist belief, which first became the state religion during the Sukhothai Dynasty in the 13th century.^{214, 215} Throughout the country there are thousands of Buddhist *wats*, which are monastery temples that usually include prayer rooms, libraries, meeting halls, living quarters for monks, reliquaries, and bell towers that summon monks for prayers.²¹⁶



© nyana_ponika / Flickr.com
Monks Collection Alms in Chiangmai

Buddhism in Thailand is anything but static. Thailand’s form of Theravada Buddhism is often described as syncretic because it incorporates elements from other religions and belief systems, such as Hinduism, animism, and ancestor worship.²¹⁷ It is common to see shrines devoted to Hindu Brahman deities throughout the country’s regions. In urban

²¹⁰ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Case Study on Education Opportunities for Hill Tribes in Northern Thailand. “1.3. Hill Tribes in Thailand—General Background.” May 2002. <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/004/AC383E/ac383e04.htm>

²¹¹ Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. Buergin, Reiner. “‘Hill Tribes’ and Forests: Minority Policies and Resource Conflicts in Thailand [p. 6].” July 2000. http://www.sefut.uni-freiburg.de/pdf/WP_7e.pdf

²¹² Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. Buergin, Reiner. “‘Hill Tribes’ and Forests: Minority Policies and Resource Conflicts in Thailand [p. 12,15].” July 2007. http://www.sefut.uni-freiburg.de/pdf/WP_7e.pdf

²¹³ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Case Study on Education Opportunities for Hill Tribes in Northern Thailand. “1.3. Hill Tribes in Thailand—General Background.” May 2002. <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/004/AC383E/ac383e04.htm>

²¹⁴ MSN Encarta. “Thailand: People and Society of Thailand: Religion.” 2007. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_3/Thailand.html#s15

²¹⁵ BuddhaNet.com “Buddhism in Thailand.” 2008. <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/thailand-txt.htm>

²¹⁶ *Thailand*. “The Wat Complex [pp. 28, 29].” 1999. London: Dorling Kindersley.

²¹⁷ MariMari.com. “Religion.” 2004. http://www.marimari.com/content/thailand/general_info/religion/religion.html

areas many residents have integrated spirit mediumship into the mix of nominal Buddhist religious beliefs.^{218, 219} Other Thai Buddhists have embraced a form of Buddhism that promotes both an active engagement on issues related to social reform and the environment and an ongoing dialogue with practitioners of other religions. The Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993) is most closely associated with this latter school of Buddhism.²²⁰

Traditionally, most Thai males spend a few months during adolescence in the *sangha*, the community of Buddhist monks. However, as the country has become increasingly urbanized and more Thais attend secular schools, both the percentage of Thais entering the monkhood and the amount of time Thai boys spend as monks have decreased.²²¹

After Buddhism, the only other religion that has a significant percentage of adherents in Thailand is Islam. Somewhere between 4% and 10% of all Thais are Muslim (estimates vary widely).^{222, 223, 224, 225} Most of Thailand’s Muslims live in the southernmost provinces on the Malay Peninsula. In four of these provinces (Satun, Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat), the Muslim population represents the majority. The people inhabiting the latter three of these provinces predominantly speak a local dialect of Malay. However, Satun Province, unlike the other three, was never part of the semi-autonomous Pattani Sultanate. Its Muslim population mostly speaks southern Thai and has generally assimilated with the ethnic Thais in the region.²²⁶

Traditions: Celebrations and Holidays

Many of Thailand’s public holidays are in some way associated with the monarchy, including Chakri Memorial Day (April 6, commemorating King Rama I and the founding of the Chakri Dynasty), Coronation Day (May 5, commemorating King Bhumibol’s coronation in



© Daniel Grosvenor
Water-soaked participants, Songkran festival

²¹⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Thailand: People: Religion.” 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52654/Thailand>

²¹⁹ *Rogue Flows: Trans-Asia Cultural Traffic*. Hamilton, Annette. “The Moving Zones of China: Flows of Rite and Power in Southeast Asia [p. 44].” 2004. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

²²⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Thailand: People: Religion.” 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52654/Thailand>

²²¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Thailand: People: Religion.” 2008.

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-52654/Thailand>

²²² MSN Encarta. “Thailand: People and Society of Thailand: Religion.” 2007.

http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561385_3/Thailand.html#s15

²²³ Asia Times. Ehrlich, Richard S. “Wave of Violence Shakes Thailand.” 7 January 2004.

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/FA07Ae03.html

²²⁴ Global Policy Forum. Christian Science Monitor. Bures, Frank. “Muslim Unrest Flares in Thailand.” 7 January 2004. <http://www.globalpolicy.org/nations/sovereign/sover/emerg/2004/0107flare.htm>

²²⁵ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State. “International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Thailand.” 14 September 2007. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90155.htm>

²²⁶ Minorities at Risk Project, University of Maryland. “Assessment for Malay-Muslims in Thailand.” 31 December 2003. <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/assessment.asp?groupId=80002>

1950), Chulalongkorn Day (May 23, the day of King Rama V's death), the Queen's Birthday (August 12), the King's Birthday (December 5), and Constitution Day (December 10, the day the country became a constitutional monarchy).

Buddhist holidays include Visakha Bucha (usually in May), also known as Visakha Puja, a day of temple worship commemorating the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha; Vassa (usually in July), traditionally the beginning of the Buddhist "Lent" period when young males enter the *sangha* (Buddhist monkhood) for three months during the rainy monsoon season; and Mahka Bucha (usually in February), commemorating the Buddha's first sermon to 1250 enlightened monks. The celebration of the last of these holidays culminates in Thailand's many *wats* with a candlelight walk around the main assembly hall.

Perhaps the most festive, and certainly the lengthiest, of Thailand's many public holidays is Songkran, the celebration of the Thai New Year. From April 13th to 15th, when the weather is typically extremely hot in Thailand, Thais celebrate by using hoses, buckets, water guns, and even elephant trunks to blast each other with water.²²⁷ Thais also bathe Buddha images in water during this period of celebration, and they attend religious observances and ceremonies in Buddhist temples across the country.

Cuisine

The food of Thailand represents a mixture of influences ranging from China and India to Malaysia and Laos. Like most well-known national cuisines, Thai food is typified by several regional variations and is also marked by "royal" (high) and "common" (low) distinctions. Nevertheless, certain common characteristics are found in much of Thai cuisine.

One of these commonalities is the use of fresh herbs and spices. Garlic and chilies are common ingredients, as are galangal root, black pepper, tamarind juice, turmeric, cilantro, ginger, cumin, shallots, and coconut milk.^{228, 229} Ground peanuts are often used in the condiments accompanying dishes. Thai food's tanginess is supplied by lime juice, lemon grass, and fresh coriander, while *nam pla* (fish sauce) and *kapi* (shrimp paste) provide salty flavors.²³⁰



© pirateparrot / Flickr.com
Pad Thai

²²⁷ Los Angeles Times. Derby, Susan. "Travel: Celebrate the Songkran Festival (sans Water) in L.A." 10 April 2008. <http://travel.latimes.com/daily-deal-blog/?p=1679>

²²⁸ CuisineNet.com. "Thai Cuisine." 1996. <http://www.cuisinenet.com/glossary/thai1.html>

²²⁹ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. "Thai Cuisine [p. 225]." 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

²³⁰ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. "Thai Cuisine [p. 225]." 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

Rice is the fundamental grain in the Thai diet and is typically served as the base of the meal, often in the form of rice noodles. In northern Thailand stickier short-grain rice is favored, whereas southern Thai prefer the puffier long-grain variety.^{231, 232} Northern rice is often steamed and pressed into balls.²³³

One of Thailand's most famous dishes is Pad Thai, a stir-fried rice noodle dish that is sold at food stands and carts in all of the major cities. Unlike the orange-red variety (the color comes from tomato paste or ketchup) served in Thai restaurants in North America, Pad Thai in Thailand is a lighter dish. In addition to rice noodles, the basic Pad Thai ingredients include tamarind pulp, *nam pla*, chilies, shallots, sugar, lime juice, bean sprouts, and usually prawns or shrimp.

Curries and soups are a standard part of Thai meals. Northern curries tend to be milder than those of central and southern Thailand. The hot curries of southern Thailand are often tempered by the use of coconut milk.²³⁴ The most well known Thai soup is Tom Yum, which has a distinctive sour and spicy flavor that arises from the inclusion of lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, and galangal, all of which are inedible and sometimes strained out before serving. The basic Tom Yum soup can also include prawns (Tom Yum Goong), chicken (Tom Yum Gai), fish (Tom Yum Pla), or mixed seafood (Tom Yum Taleh).

Arts

Music

As in most places in the world, Thai music consists of a mixture of styles that range from traditional to Western-influenced pop genres. Classical Thai orchestras—traditionally the ensembles that performed at the royal court—are known as *piphats*. They originally accompanied classical dance dramas and shadow puppet theatre, but today *piphats* often perform alone. *Piphats* consist of anywhere from five to more than 20 players, and they feature oboes, gongs, xylophones, fiddles, and a circular set of tuned gong-chimes known as a *khong wong yai*, which is the principal melodic instrument of the ensemble.^{235, 236}



© Steve Evans
A 6-person Piphat

²³¹ CuisineNet.com. "Thai Cuisine." 1996. <http://www.cuisinenet.com/glossary/thai1.html>

²³² Chow.com. Guilbert, Juliette. "Beyond Uncle Ben's: A Rice Primer." No date.

<http://www.chow.com/stories/10378>

²³³ Chow.com. Guilbert, Juliette. "Beyond Uncle Ben's: A Rice Primer." No date.

<http://www.chow.com/stories/10378>

²³⁴ ThaiFocus.com "Thai Food & Cooking." No date. <http://www.thaifocus.com/thaifood.htm>

²³⁵ National Geographic. "Thailand Artists." 2008.

http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com/worldmusic/view/page.basic/country/content.country/thailand_829?fs=www3.nationalgeographic.com&fs=plasma.nationalgeographic.com

One of the more popular musical genres in Thailand is *luk thung* (translated as “children of the fields”), which has frequently been compared to American country and western music. The lyrics often recount the hardships of the rural poor, and the musical tempos tend to be slow. The city of Suphanburi, home to the *luk thung* megastar Pompuang Duangjan and other well-known *luk thung* performers, has become representative of the genre, much as Nashville became the symbol of American country music.²³⁷

Mor lam, a regional song style from Laos that spread to Isan (northeastern Thailand), has become increasingly popular nationwide. The *khene*, a mouth organ made from a double row of bamboo reeds fitted through a timber soundbox, is the principal instrument that accompanies the *mor lam* singer. As *mor lam* has grown in popularity, it has evolved into more of a modern pop genre. One of the most popular of these new styles is *mor lam sing*, a high-energy version that mixes electronic instrumentation and medleys of *luk thung* and *mor lam* songs with lots of dancing. Some *mor lam sing* performances are sexually provocative, and, at times, they can precipitate run-ins with the local police.

Theatre and Dance

Contemporary dramatic performance in Thailand spans a wide range of genres, from those originating from royal court performances centuries ago to more recently evolved styles. One of the traditional court styles is *khon*, which uses dance to dramatize stories from the *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the Hindu Ramayama epic.²³⁸ The masked dancers’ head coverings and costumes are extremely elaborate and often decorate the covers of tourist brochures for Thailand. Another style of classical dance-drama is *lakhon*, which also dramatizes *Ramakien* stories, but may use Thai folk tales or *Jatakas* (stories about the former lives of the Buddha) as source material. Unlike *khon*, which is only performed by male dancers, *lakhon* includes both male and female performers; however, *lakhon nai*, the formal version originally performed strictly for the royal court, uses only female dancers.²³⁹ Modern *lakhon* performances are often commissioned for shrine worship or produced as part of festivals at rural Buddhist temples.²⁴⁰



© superkimbo in BKK / Flickr.com
Traditional dancers in a shrine, Bangkok

In rural areas, a raucous form of theatre known as *likay* is still performed by travelling troupes, usually during Buddhist festivals. Although originally performed for King Rama

²³⁶ N. Scott Robinson: *World Music and Percussion*. “Gallery: Khong Wong Yai.” 1999.
<http://www.nscottrobinson.com/gallery/khongwongyai.php>

²³⁷ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. “Music: Thai Pop [p. 50].” 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publication.

²³⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Thailand: Cultural Life: The Arts: Drama and Film.” 2008.
<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274226/Thailand>

²³⁹ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. “Theatre and Dance [p. 52].” 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

²⁴⁰ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. “Theatre and Dance [p. 52].” 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

V during the funeral commemoration of Queen Sunantha, *likay* has become much more of an entertainment for the masses than the other Thai dance-dramas with roots in royal court performances.²⁴¹ Accompanied by *piphat* orchestras, *likay* troupes perform romantic-comedy stories using melodrama, slapstick, improvised dialogue (which is sung), and beautiful costumes. In recent decades, *luk thung* music and political commentary have been incorporated into many *likay* performances.²⁴²

In southern Thailand, shadow puppet theatre, known as *nang*, continues to be popular, although like most traditional forms of Thai theatre, it is gradually losing its audience to television and movies. The most commonly performed version is *nang talung*, named after southern Phattalung Province, where puppeteers developed their style using Malay models.^{243, 244} *Nang talung* puppeteers manipulate several articulated, two-dimensional leather puppets behind a backlit screen. In *nang talung* performances, the puppet characters act out stories from the *Ramakien* and other forms of classical and folk drama.²⁴⁵

Traditional and Decorative Arts

Thailand's rich history of artistic production demonstrates a range of styles, influences, and media. Thai art traditionally carries a religious theme, and, accordingly, Buddhist iconography dominates the country's artistic landscape. This is particularly true in the fields of painting and sculpture. Before the 20th century, Thai painting was mostly limited to depicting Buddhist narratives (such as *Jakatas*) on temple walls and in manuscripts, although artists often painted detailed scenes of daily life as well. Thailand's sculptural works (primarily images of the Buddha) are well known for their contribution to Buddhist art. For example, the smooth, curvilinear bronze images of Buddha produced during the Sukhothai period are renowned for their gracefulness and originality. And, of course, many of the country's most famous architectural sites are ancient temples or Buddhist reliquary monuments (known as *chedi* or *stupas*), which exhibit a variety of Indian, Khmer, Mon, Burmese, and other influences.^{246, 247, 248}



²⁴¹ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. "Theatre and Dance [p. 53]." 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

²⁴² Footprint Thailand Handbook. Eliot, Joshua and Jane Bickersteth, Nataphon Buranakul, Sophia Buranakul. "Culture [p. 828]." July 2003. Bath, Engl: Footprint Handbooks, Ltd.

²⁴³ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. "Theatre and Dance [p. 53]." 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

²⁴⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Southeast Asian Arts: Thailand: Popular Plays and Puppets." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-29532/Southeast-Asian-arts>

²⁴⁵ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. "Theatre and Dance [p. 53, 54]." 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

²⁴⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Southeast Asian Arts: Visual Arts: Thailand and Laos." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/556535/Southeast-Asian-arts>

In terms of handicrafts, Thailand maintains strong traditions in weaving, nielloware (the molding and intricate engraving of silver or metal alloys), lacquerware, and mother-of-pearl inlay. The latter of these forms, called *khruang muk* in Thai, peaked in the late 17th and early 18th centuries during the Ayutthayan period. Developed from a Chinese model, the Thai inlay process involves the use of lacquer to fix tiny pieces of shell to wooden surfaces. Ayutthayan artists demonstrated extraordinary skill in creating elaborate mother-of-pearl designs on temple doors, manuscript boxes, alms bowls, and other religious and secular items. Such delicate imagery ranged from ornate patterns to depictions of religious tales, including scenes from the *Ramakien*. Today, the production of lacquerware and mother-of-pearl crafts is most prevalent in Chiang Mai province.^{249,}
250

Traditional Dress

In most areas of Thailand, especially in cities, the majority of Thais dress like their counterparts in Western countries. Traditional dress is primarily reserved for holidays and formal occasions, such as weddings. Employees at some upscale tourist-oriented hotels and Thai restaurants also frequently wear traditional clothing.

The *pha sin*, a long tube skirt similar to a sarong, is a common element of traditional women's clothing in Thailand, especially among the ethnic groups of lowland areas.²⁵¹ It is usually either brightly colored with no pattern or decorated with horizontal stripes. The main body of the *pha sin* is seamed along the vertical edges. Separate waist bands and hems are sewn on at the top and bottom, respectively. The *pha sin* is usually made from cotton or silk.



© Steven Kohus
Thai dancers in traditional clothing

In central Thailand, the *chong kraben* was at one time the traditional lower garment for both men and women but was discouraged by the government after the Second World War.²⁵² It consists of a cloth wrapped around the waist and then passed between the legs and tucked in the back, creating the look of pantaloons or loose-fitting trousers. Until the 20th century, many Thai women either did not wear tops or they wore a *pha sabai*, a long piece of cloth that

²⁴⁷ Assumption University. The National Identity Office, Office of the Prime Minister, Royal Thai Government. "Thai Arts." 1995. http://sunsite.au.ac.th/thailand/Thai_Arts/index.html

²⁴⁸ *Thailand*, 10th Ed. "Facts about Thailand—Arts [pp. 35-39]." 2003. Footscray, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications.

²⁴⁹ Assumption University. The National Identity Office, Office of the Prime Minister, Royal Thai Government. "Thai Arts: Lacquerware and Mother of Pearl Inlay." 1995. http://sunsite.au.ac.th/thailand/Thai_Arts/inlay.html

²⁵⁰ *The Arts of Thailand*, Rev. Ed. Van Beek, Steve and Luca Invernizzi Tettoni. "The Minor Arts [pp. 220-223]." 1999. Periplus Editions (HK), Ltd.

²⁵¹ Bookrags.com. Encyclopedia of Modern Asia. "Clothing, Traditional—Thailand." 2006. <http://www.bookrags.com/research/clothing-traditionalthailand-ema-02/>

²⁵² SunSite Thailand. National Identity Office, Royal Thai Government. *Thai Folk Arts and Crafts*. "Isan Thai Cloths." http://sunsite.au.ac.th/thailand/Thai_Handicraft/Thai_Cloths/women_isan.html

was draped across the chest and over the shoulder.²⁵³ The *pha sabai* is still used today, but it is now worn over blouses.²⁵⁴

Traditional clothing for men was never as elaborate as that of women, and it has mostly fallen out of favor today. In the past, men would sometimes wear shorter versions of the *chong kraben* as a loincloth, often exposing tattooed thighs, and they would frequently go bare-chested, except in cooler climates where cotton shirts would be worn. In both warm and cool climates, a cloth draped across both shoulders would commonly be donned for special events. Plaid cotton cloth known as *pha khao ma* provided a multipurpose garment for use as a sash, headband, belt, bag, scarf, or towel.²⁵⁵

Folk Culture and Folklore

At times, it may seem difficult to catch a glimpse of traditional Thai culture beneath the modern Western lifestyle lived by many Thais. Certainly the most remote hill tribes have managed to preserve some of their original culture, but even in these areas packaged cultural tourism has had an inevitable effect on the local tribal customs and practices by placing commercial value on these activities.²⁵⁶

In many ways, Thai culture is best observed in the Buddhist rites and celebrations that remain an integral part of the nation's fabric. King Rama VI once described Theravada Buddhism as one of the three pillars of Thai national identity (the other two being the monarchy and the Thai language), and his assessment would still be accepted by many Thai people today. The haircutting and ordination ceremonies that young Thai males participate in prior to their brief period in the Buddhist monkhood are links to ancient Thai culture, as is Loi Krathong, the festival of light that celebrates the Buddha.²⁵⁷ Like many festivals with a religious origin, Loi Krathong (translated literally as "float a raft") also carries symbolic meaning for the Thai people. During the festival, which occurs on the full moon of the 12th lunar month, people flock to rivers and canals to launch banana leaf rafts or coconut shells carrying flowers and candles.²⁵⁸ In addition to honoring the Buddha, Thais



© shugyou / Flickr.com
Loi Krathong offerings floating down a river

²⁵³ Bookrags.com. Encyclopedia of Modern Asia. "Clothing, Traditional—Thailand." 2006. <http://www.bookrags.com/research/clothing-traditionalthailand-ema-02/>

²⁵⁴ SunSite Thailand. National Identity Office, Royal Thai Government. *Thai Folk Arts and Crafts*. "Isan Thai Cloths." No date. http://sunsite.au.ac.th/thailand/Thai_Handicraft/Thai_Cloths/women_isan.html

²⁵⁵ Bookrags.com. Encyclopedia of Modern Asia. "Clothing, Traditional—Thailand." 2006. <http://www.bookrags.com/research/clothing-traditionalthailand-ema-02/>

²⁵⁶ REST (Responsible Ecological Social Tours) Project Thailand. "Community Based Tourism and Indigenous Peoples: Challenges and Opportunity." No date.

http://www.rest.or.th/forum/medias/Hill_Tribes_and_Cultural_Tourism_in_Thailand.doc

²⁵⁷ Thai-Blogs.com. Barrow, Richard. "Ordination at a Temple." 21 March 2006. http://www.thai-blogs.com/index.php/2006/03/21/ordination_at_a_temple?blog=5

²⁵⁸ Inside Thailand. "History of Loi Krathong Festival." 2007.

<http://thaitour76.blogspot.com/2007/11/history-of-loi-krathong-festival.html>

symbolically cast away their fears, anger, and imperfections with the launching of their Loi Krathong boats. Some people include fingernail and hair cuttings on their rafts as a physical symbol of their spiritual cleansing.²⁵⁹

Thailand has a rich collection of traditional folk tales that have been told over the years by Buddhist monks, local storytellers, and family members. Some of these stories are animal origin tales that explain why certain animals behave or look the way they do. Other tales hold moral lessons, often conveying messages from Buddhist philosophy. Numerous elements from Khmer (Cambodian), Mon (Burmese), and Chinese folklore have been incorporated into these tales, and the *Jataka* tales (stories of past lives of Buddha) provide another rich vein of material.²⁶⁰

Sports and Recreation

The national sport of Thailand is *muay Thai* (Thai boxing), which is similar to kickboxing but differs in several key elements. First and foremost, elbows and knees are used in addition to fists and feet, and any part of the body may be targeted. Before each bout, *muay Thai* boxers wear amulets around their head and arms and perform a five-minute ritual dance in homage to their teacher.^{261, 262} *Muay Thai* matches are fast paced, very violent, and shorter than international boxing matches (they consist of only five three-minute rounds). Frantic ringside betting and music performed by traditional *piphat* ensembles are additional elements of this uniquely Thai sport. Several *muay Thai* boxers have used their skills to great success in international boxing, including Khaosai Galaxy, who was the world's Super Flyweight champion from 1984 to 1991.²⁶³

Similar to the American game of hacky sack, *takraw* is another popular Thai sport in which players try to keep a rattan ball from touching the ground using only their feet. In international competition, *takraw* is played with two teams of three players who try to pass the ball over a net (as in tennis or volleyball) using only their feet and head.



© Mikhail Esteves
Boys Playing Takraw

Football (soccer) is also quite popular in Thailand, and the English Premier League (EPL) is avidly followed by millions of Thais. Thailand's burgeoning interest in the game has recently influenced actions taken in the political arena. In 2007, while living in exile in

²⁵⁹ Buddhist-Festivals.com. "Loy Krathong (The Festival of Floating Bowls)." 2007. <http://www.buddhist-tourism.com/buddhist-festivals/loy-krathong.html>

²⁶⁰ *Thai Tales: Folktales of Thailand*. Vathanaprida, Supaporn. "Introduction [pp. xv–xvii]." 1994. Englewood, Colo: Libraries Unlimited.

²⁶¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: Cultural Life: Sports and Recreation." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274231/Thailand>

²⁶² Bangkok-Thailand.org. "Muay Thai—A Fighting Tradition." 2007. <http://www.bangkok-thailand.org/bangkok/sp020529.htm>

²⁶³ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Milbert, Neil Francis. "Khaosai Galaxy." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9343202/Khaosai-Galaxy>

London, former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra became majority owner of the Manchester City EPL team. Shortly thereafter, and just before the 2007 parliamentary elections in Thailand, Manchester City signed three Thai players. These signings were immediately followed by the announcement that the Democratic Party, Thaksin's arch-rival, had signed an agreement with the EPL team, Everton, for a series of football clinics in Thailand.²⁶⁴

In addition to spectator sports, Thai people pursue numerous forms of leisure and recreational activities. Temple festivals are popular in rural regions and they attract middle class visitors from urban areas as well. Thai urbanites participate in popular athletic activities, such as gym exercise, golf, and tennis, and they commonly attend concerts, movies, and nightclub shows.²⁶⁵

Gender Issues

Increasingly, education and the pursuit of a career are viable options for Thai women who do not wish to marry and immediately start a family. Statistics have shown a dramatic drop in Thailand's fertility rate (from over six births per female in the 1960s to fewer than two per female in the late 1990s). The average age of first marriage for women has also risen from 22 in 1970 to 24 in 2000. In Bangkok, the average age at which a woman marries is now up to 27.²⁶⁶



© Ronn Aldaman
Young woman working in an office

Thailand has a relatively high percentage of women in its labor force when compared with other countries. In 2003, 44% of Thailand's 33 million people in the formal labor market were women. In the informal sector, the percentage was even higher (56%). In the past, agriculture was the economic sector in which the highest percentage of women were employed, but there has been a dramatic shift toward jobs in the services sector.²⁶⁷

As the fertility rate decreases, a major concern in Thailand is the corresponding aging of the population. Presently, there is only a partial social safety net for Thailand's senior citizens, and thus the burden of caring for the elderly often falls on younger family members. Statistics show that elderly Thai women who are often widowed, separated, or divorced, live longer into old age than their male counterparts, but it also follows that the

²⁶⁴ The Independent. Herbert, Ian. "City Push On at Game's Unlikely New Frontier Politics." 11 December 2007. <http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/premier-league/city-push-on-at-games-unlikely-new-frontier--politics-764324.html>

²⁶⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Thailand: Cultural Life: Sports and Recreation." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274231/Thailand>

²⁶⁶ *Journal of Population Research*. Mithranon, Preeya and Vipap Prachuabmoh. "Below-Replacement Fertility in Thailand and Its Implications." 1 May 2003. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-105659431.html>

²⁶⁷ Thailand's Gender Information Center, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Service. "Thailand Situation." No date. http://www.gender.go.th/eng/statistics/thailand_situ.htm

problems faced by the elderly will disproportionately affect women. In addition, as families become smaller, the burden of caring for elderly parents will increasingly shift to a single daughter or son rather than a number of siblings.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ Thailand's Gender Information Center, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Service. "Thailand Situation." No date. http://www.gender.go.th/eng/statistics/thailand_situ.htm

Security

Introduction

Few countries have as long a record of military coups as Thailand, but the frequent and abrupt political upheavals have had little effect on the country's development. This is in part because the changes in government tend to be quick, bloodless, and generally unproductive of dramatic shifts in the country's economic system. Tourist travel in Thailand, for example, was barely affected by the most recent coup in 2006.



© Jordan Sitkin
The coup of 2006

More worrisome for the country is the separatist violence occurring in southern Thailand. In the past, this region was somewhat economically and politically neglected, but in recent decades efforts have been made to politically integrate the area into the central Thai government and raise its standard of living. The recent period of violence has set back these efforts, and as insurgent activity has occasionally spilled over into Bangkok and into areas near some of the southern coastal tourist locations, there is concern that further escalation could negatively affect the country's tourist industry and hinder foreign investment.

Military

The Thai military consists of three main branches, with overall personnel estimated to be nearly 250,000. These branches are the Royal Thai Army (123,000), the Royal Thai Navy (77,000, including members of the Royal Thai Marine Corps), and the Royal Thai Air Force (47,500). An additional 200,000 personnel comprise the nation's reserve forces.²⁶⁹ Under Thai law, all males are required to register for the military draft at age 18, but do not begin compulsory service until the age of 21, unless they have previously enlisted. Students who enroll in three years of ROTC training are exempt from the military conscription process.²⁷⁰



USMC photo
Royal Thai Marines inside an assault vehicle

Dating back to the 1930s, Thailand has a long history of military coups. Because of this, the loyalties of senior military officers to governmental officials are closely analyzed. One of the precipitating factors in the 2006 coup was the attempt by Prime Minister Thaksin to promote some of his allies to command the 1st Army and 1st Infantry

²⁶⁹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. "Country Profile: Thailand." July 2007.
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Thailand.pdf>

²⁷⁰ Bangkok Post. Nimkannon, Oratip. "Training for War so that We May Live in Peace." 10 October 2006.
<http://www.bangkokpost.com/education/site2006/cvoc1006.htm>

Divisions, which are both crucial units responsible for the security of Bangkok.²⁷¹ Samak Sundaravej, the newly elected civilian Prime Minister and a Thaksin ally, named himself to head the Ministry of Defense because of the critical importance for his People's Power Party to maintain influence over the military chain of command.²⁷²

Military spending has jumped dramatically since the September 2006 coup, with the defense budget increasing by over 33% in 2007 and an additional 24.3% in fiscal year 2008. The ongoing insurgency in southern Thailand has been cited as one of the reasons for the budget hikes, as has the need to invest in military equipment and training after the Thaksin regime neglected these areas during its five years in power.²⁷³

U.S.–Thai Relations

The United States and Thailand have long had close military and economic relations. Throughout the Cold War, Thailand was one of Washington's closest allies in Southeast Asia. The two countries were founding members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization in 1954, and the group's 1954 Manila Pact remains in effect, pledging that each member would "act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes." This security commitment was reinforced in 1962 by a joint communiqué signed by Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman and U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk. The communiqué declared "the preservation of the independence and integrity of Thailand as vital to the national interest of the United States and to world peace."²⁷⁴ Combined, these two documents represent the basis of the United States' security commitments to Thailand.²⁷⁵ In 2003, Thailand was made a Major Non-NATO ally of the United States, a designation that gives financial, cooperative, and military advantages to non-NATO countries whose armed forces have close relationships with the U.S. military.



RTMC and USMC during jungle survival training
© slagheap / Flickr.com

Following the military coup in September 2006, the U.S. cut off about USD 29 million in aid that had been channeled through programs such as Foreign Military Financing and International Military Education and Training. The U.S. reinstated the aid in February

²⁷¹ Asia Times Online. Crispin, Shawn W. "Thailand: All the King's Men." 21 September 2006. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/HI21Ae02.html

²⁷² Asia Sentinel. Ten Kate, Daniel. "Thaksin's Shadow Party Takes Aim on the Military." 6 February 2008. http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1030&Itemid=31

²⁷³ OpinionAsia. Chachavalpongpun, Pavin. "Thai Military Budget Set to Rise. Again." 28 August 2007. <http://www.opinionasia.org/ThaimilitarybudgetsettoriseAgain>

²⁷⁴ *Trans-Pacific Relations: America, Europe, and Asia in the Twentieth Century*. Kislenko, Arne. "The Vietnam War, Thailand, and the United States [p. 224]." 2003. Westport, Conn: Praeger Publishers.

²⁷⁵ Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Thailand." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

2008 when the democratically elected administration of Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej took office.²⁷⁶

Economically, the United States and Thailand are major trading partners; the U.S. is the top export market for Thai products and the third largest importer to Thailand. The balance of trade between the two countries leans substantially in Thailand's favor.²⁷⁷ Negotiations began in 2004 to establish a Free Trade Agreement between the two countries, but discussions were halted in 2006 after the Thai Parliament was dissolved and the interim government was subsequently overthrown in a military coup.²⁷⁸

Relations with Neighboring Countries

Cambodia

Relations between Thailand and Cambodia, which have fluctuated over the years, reached their most recent nadir in January 2003, when rioters in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh burnt down the Royal Thai embassy and several Thai businesses. The riots were triggered by the alleged comments of a Thai actress, who supposedly stated that she would only perform in Cambodia when the Cambodian government returned the Angkor Wat temple complex to Thailand. Such sentiment, whether or not the actress ever expressed it, fed into the general resentment that some Cambodians have toward Thais because of their belief that the Thais have a condescending attitude toward them.²⁷⁹

Another contentious issue between the two nations concerns the historic Preah Vihear temple (known as Khao Phra Wihan in Thai), which is situated on a cliff that straddles the Thai-Cambodian border. Recently, the Cambodian government requested that the temple be listed as a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site, a proposal that Thailand has protested. While the International Court of Justice ruled in 1962 that the Preah Vihear was under Cambodian sovereignty, the surrounding lands that would be included in the World Heritage site designation are still contested by both countries.²⁸⁰ In April 2008, Thailand officials censured the Cambodian government for sending



²⁷⁶ Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Thailand." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

²⁷⁷ Office of Commercial Affairs, Royal Thai Embassy, Washington, D.C. "Thailand-U.S. Trade." 2008. <http://oca.thaiembdc.org/Web Content/Thailand-US Trade.pdf>

²⁷⁸ Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Thailand." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>

²⁷⁹ Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. 14 May 2003. "Report to the Congress on the Anti-Thai Riots in Cambodia on January 29, 2003." <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rpt/20565.htm>

²⁸⁰ SoutheastAsianArchaeology.com. Bangkok Post. "Politics and Preah Vihear." 19 February 2008. <http://www.southeastasianarchaeology.com/2008/02/21/preah-vihear-dispute-has-a-social-cost/>

troops to the area around Preah Vihear. The alleged deployment was immediately denied by the Cambodian spokesperson.²⁸¹ Ironically, the border in this region is primarily a colonial era artifact, as the people on both sides are ethnic Khmers.

Economically, the two ASEAN neighbors have a very unbalanced trading relationship. Thailand is a major supplier of imports to Cambodia, but very few Cambodian goods are exported to Thailand.²⁸² The two countries also share claims to an offshore region in the Gulf of Thailand that may hold large oil reserves. Ongoing negotiations since 2001 over the development and revenue sharing arrangements for this region have not produced any results to date.²⁸³

Laos

Laos is one of the five nations in the world governed by a one-party Communist system. (The others are Vietnam, China, North Korea, and Cuba.) This fact alone strained the relationship between the two countries for many years, as Thailand maintained close relations with the United States and Laos aligned itself with Vietnam and the Soviet Union. Over the last two decades, relations between the two countries have taken a decided turn for the better. Nothing symbolizes these improved relations better than the Friendship Bridge across the Mekong River, linking the Lao capital of Vientiane to the Thai river city of Nong Khai. The bridge opened in 1994, and 13 years later, in 2007, a second Friendship Bridge across the Mekong established an additional transportation link between the two countries.^{284, 285}



© Barry Price
Friendship Bridge on the Mekong river

The two countries are still resolving refugee issues dating back to the 1970s. For many years, Thailand hosted over 100,000 ethnic Hmong refugees from Laos who fled the country after the Lao People's Revolutionary Party came to power in 1975.²⁸⁶ Roughly 90% of these refugees eventually resettled in the United States. The Hmong had

²⁸¹ Voice of America News. Veasna, Mean. "Cambodian Troops in Disputed Zone: Thailand." 11 April 2008. <http://www.voanews.com/khmer/080411-troops.cfm?rss=cambodia>

²⁸² ZIBB.com. Asia Pulse Data Source. COMTEX. "Cambodia-Thai Trade Turnover in 2007 Reaches 1.4 Billion USD." 16 March 2008. <http://www.zibb.com/article/2883348/CambodiaThailand+trade+turnover+in+2007+reaches+14+billion+USD>

²⁸³ Asia Times Online. Symon, Andrew. "Cambodia, Thailand Struggle Over Petroleum." 13 June 2007. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IF13Ae05.html

²⁸⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Nong Khai." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9056068/Nong-Khai?refresh=Y>

²⁸⁵ *Thailand Illustrated Magazine*, Vol. 24, No. 2. Jasmine. "The Second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge: A New Link between Thailand and Its Close Neighbors." April–June 2007. http://thailand.prd.go.th/thailand_illustrated/content.php?s_id=294

²⁸⁶ BBC News, International Version. Jinkinson, Bethan. "Forgotten Hmong Find New Home." 14 September 2004. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3652070.stm>

supported the U.S. in a covert war fought in Laos during the Vietnam War period.²⁸⁷ Today, about 8,000 Hmong refugees from Laos are still living in an unofficial refugee camp in Thailand's Phetchabun Province. Despite deep concerns by some refugee and human rights groups that the Thai government may forcibly repatriate some of these refugees, such deportations had yet to take place as of the end of 2007.^{288, 289}

Laos is still trying to establish itself economically as it transitions to a market economy. It is now a member of ASEAN, and fellow member Thailand is by far its most important trading partner. Over half of its known export revenues come from Thailand, chiefly from sales of copper, hydroelectric power, and timber and wood products.^{290, 291, 292} A higher percentage (nearly 74%) of Laos' known imports come from Thailand.²⁹³ Thailand is also the single largest investor in the Laos economy.²⁹⁴

Burma

Thailand's most problematic neighbor is Burma, a country that has been ruled by two successive military juntas since 1962. Nine refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border are home to more than 150,000 Burmese refugees, almost all of whom are members of the Karen and Kayah (also known as Karenni) ethnic groups.²⁹⁵ The



© Mikhail Esteves
Refugee camp between Thailand and Burma

²⁸⁷ Migration Policy Institute. Yau, Jennifer. "US in Focus: The Foreign-Born Hmong in the United States." January 2005. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/usfocus/display.cfm?ID=281>

²⁸⁸ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices—2007*. "Thailand." 11 March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100539.htm>

²⁸⁹ Refugees International. Bangkok Post. Rosenblatt, Lionel. "Repatriation of Hmong to Laos Must Be Voluntary." 14 March 2008. <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/10495/>

²⁹⁰ International Trade Centre, World Trade Organization. "Trade Performance HS: Exports of Lao People's Democratic Republic – 00 All Industries (2006, in USD Thousands)." 2008. http://www.intracen.org/appli1/TradeCom/TP_EP_CI_P.aspx?IN=00&RP=418&YR=2006&IL=00 All industries&TY=E

²⁹¹ International Trade Centre, World Trade Organization. "Trade Performance HS: Exports of Lao People's Democratic Republic (2006, in USD Thousands)." 2008. http://www.intracen.org/appli1/TradeCom/TP_EP_CI.aspx?RP=418&YR=2006

²⁹² Laos' trade data are calculated from World Trade Organization (WTO) reports from partner countries. Some countries, such as Vietnam and Laos, are either not WTO members or have only recently become members, and thus their bilateral trade statistics are not included in the WTO information.

²⁹³ International Trade Centre, World Trade Organization. "Trade Performance HS: Imports of Lao People's Democratic Republic – 00 All Industries (2006, in USD Thousands)." 2008. http://www.intracen.org/appli1/TradeCom/TP_IP_CI_P.aspx?IN=00&RP=418&YR=2006&IL=00 All industries&TY=I

²⁹⁴ Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Laos." March 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2770.htm>

²⁹⁵ Refugees International. "Burma." April 2008. <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/country/detail/2922>

two countries have had periodic clashes in recent years over sections of their mutual border that remain undefined, as well as over continued smuggling of methamphetamine by the Burmese Wa ethnic minority into Thailand.^{296, 297}

Despite these conflicts with Burma, the Thai government has been criticized on several occasions by other nations and nongovernmental organizations for being too cooperative with the Burmese military leaders.^{298, 299} Many nations, including the United States, have imposed strong economic sanctions against Burma and its leaders. Thailand, on the other hand, is one of Burma's largest investors and trading partners, and it sees its neighbor as a key provider for much of the country's energy needs. Thailand is the primary purchaser of Burma's natural gas, which is the single largest source of trade revenue for Burma. The Thai firm MDX is beginning construction of a large and controversial hydroelectric power plant on the Salween River in Burma, which will be the tallest dam in Southeast Asia upon its completion. Most of the power generated by this plant will subsequently be sold to Thailand.³⁰⁰

Malaysia

Malaysia, which shares a border with Thailand on the Malay Peninsula, is the only neighboring country of Thailand that is not a predominantly Buddhist nation. In general, the relations between the two countries have been cooperative and, in many ways, more consistently positive than Thailand's relations with its three other neighboring countries.



© Danny Howard
Railyard at the border with Malaysia

However, in recent years, there has been one significant point of contention between the two countries—namely, the ongoing insurgency in Thailand's southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, where the majority of residents are ethnic Malay Muslims who speak a dialect of Malay. The Malay government does not support the insurgency, and it has worked with the Thai government on joint development initiatives for the southern region and on programs designed to counter extremist Islamic teachings. However, the strong Thai military response against the insurgents increased pressure on officials in Kuala Lumpur to criticize what many Malays see as human rights violations

²⁹⁶ Geocities.com. Bangkok Post. Khampha, Phairath. "Thailand-Burma Conflict Grows With Hilltop Bombardment." 31 May 2001. http://www.geocities.com/chainat_prov/4406/THA-bur0105.html

²⁹⁷ TIMEAsia. Marshall, Andrew and Anthony Davis. "Soldiers of Fortune." 9 December 2002. <http://www.time.com/time/asia/covers/1101021216/story.html>

²⁹⁸ Bangkok Post. "Exim Bank to Complete Burma Loan." 16 March 2008. http://www.readbangkokpost.com/business/burmamyanmar/new_economic_focus_in_thaiburm.php

²⁹⁹ The Irawaddy. Associated Press. "Thailand's PM Scolds West for Criticizing Burma's Junta." 17 March 2008. http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=10911

³⁰⁰ International Herald Tribune. Associated Press. "Myanmar Signs Deal With Chinese Firms to Build Hydroelectric Power." 7 April 2007. <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/04/07/asia/AS-GEN-Myanmar-Hydropower-Plant.php>

against the Thai Malay population.^{301, 302} Border security and the return to Thailand of suspected terrorists who fled to Malaysia seeking asylum also caused tension between the two countries. Since the 2006 coup, however, the governments of the two countries have mostly patched up their disagreements over the southern insurgency.³⁰³

Economically, Malaysia and Thailand are key members of ASEAN and important bilateral trading partners. Both countries have been trying to increase business investment in the regions near their border, which include some of the poorer provinces and states in each country.^{304, 305} In December 2007, the two countries opened a second bridge across the Golok River, which marks the eastern part of their border. It is hoped that the increased capacity for cross-border traffic created by the bridge will help generate economic activity in the region.³⁰⁶

Terrorist and Separatist Groups

While there have been concerns that regional terrorist groups might establish links with the local separatist groups operating in southernmost Thailand, there is no evidence that the violence in the south has been aided by operational connections with transnational terrorist organizations.³⁰⁷ However, Bangkok has been used as a transit point by some terrorists, as clearly evidenced by the arrest in 2003 of al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiya's operations chief, Nurjaman Riduan bin Isomuddin (better known as Hambali), who is widely believed to be the mastermind behind the bombings of Bali nightclubs in 2002 that killed over 200 people.³⁰⁸



© Verena Fuchs
Bomb-damaged restaurant in Bali, 2005

³⁰¹ Asia Times Online. Harish, S. P. "How Malaysia Sees Thailand's Southern Strife." 8 February 2006. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/HB08Ae01.html

³⁰² Jamestown Foundation. *Global Terrorism Analysis*, Vol. 5, No. 5. Storey, Ian. "Malaysia's Role in Thailand's Southern Insurgency." 15 March 2007.

<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2370279>

³⁰³ Jamestown Foundation. *Global Terrorism Analysis*, Vol. 5, No. 5. Storey, Ian. "Malaysia's Role in Thailand's Southern Insurgency." 15 March 2007.

<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2370279>

³⁰⁴ The Government Public Relations Department, Royal Thai Government. "Making Peace Sustainable in the Deep South." 2 December 2007. http://thailand.prd.go.th/view_inside.php?id=1766

³⁰⁵ FindArticles.com. Asian Economic News. "Malaysia Unveils \$51.2 Billion Plan to Boost Northern Development." 6 August 2007.

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0WDP/is_2007_August_6/ai_n19453594

³⁰⁶ Reuters Foundation. AlertNet. Azman, Syed. "Malaysia, Thailand Open Bridge on Restive Border." 21 December 2007. <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/KLR203590.htm>

³⁰⁷ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2007*. "Chapter 2: Country Reports: East Asia and Pacific Overview." 30 April 2008.

<http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2007/103706.htm>

³⁰⁸ BBC News, International Version. "Hambali: 'Asia's Bin Laden.'" 6 September 2006.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2346225.stm>

Insurgency in the Southern Provinces

Thai authorities believe that the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Coordinate (BRN-C) is behind most of the violence in southern Thailand, which has been occurring on a near-daily basis since 2004.³⁰⁹ Other militant groups active in the region include the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) and the Pattani Islamic Mujahideen Movement (GIMP). Very little is known about any of these groups or their activities, as they have scarcely publicized their organizational goals and generally do not claim responsibility for attacks.³¹⁰

Efforts by the government in the 1980s and 1990s to better assimilate the region within the country's economic and political institutions seemed to be productive. By 2000, the Civilian-Police-Military Task Force 43 (CPM 43), a government organization created to oversee intelligence gathering in the region and better establish trust between the local populace and the government in Bangkok, estimated that no more than 70 to 80 militants were still active in southern Thailand.³¹¹

However, the relative calm in the southern provinces ended in 2001. As attacks against police and other symbols of the state increased, the Thaksin regime argued that such activity was perpetrated by criminal elements and drug traffickers rather than Muslim separatists. In doing so, they gave the police (rather than the military) the lead role in suppressing the violence.³¹²

The violence further escalated in 2004, spurring the government to organize a large-scale security mobilization in the south. Later that year, two incidents—one, a deadly raid against militants holed up at the Krue Sae Mosque in Pattani, and the other, the asphyxiation deaths of 78 demonstrators being transported in overloaded trucks after their arrest in Tak Bai district—led to protests around the country. A National Reconciliation Commission was established in March 2005 to find long-term solutions to the problems in the southern provinces, although some speculated that the Thaksin government was not truly committed to a reconciliatory approach.³¹³ The government issued emergency security powers for the region in July 2005, a move that prompted condemnation from

³⁰⁹ Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2007*. "Chapter 2: Country Reports: East Asia and Pacific Overview." 30 April 2008. <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2007/103706.htm>

³¹⁰ BBC News, International Version. "Thailand's Restive South." 15 July 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3955543.stm>

³¹¹ Human Rights Watch. *No One is Safe: Insurgent Attacks on Civilian in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces*. "II: A Brief History of Insurgency in the Southern Border Provinces." August 2007. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/thailand0807/3.htm>

³¹² Human Rights Watch. *No One is Safe: Insurgent Attacks on Civilian in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces*. "IV: Failed Government Policies and Responses." August 2007. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/thailand0807/5.htm>

³¹³ Human Rights Watch. *No One is Safe: Insurgent Attacks on Civilians in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces*. "IV: Failed Government Policies and Responses." August 2007. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/thailand0807/5.htm>

human rights organizations but garnered general support from the populace in both Bangkok and the southern provinces.^{314, 315} The emergency powers continue to the present day, but they have had little effect in quelling the ongoing attacks, which are now frequently directed against civilian targets.³¹⁶

Issues Affecting Stability

Thai Identity

The situation in southern Thailand reveals one of the most difficult challenges that the modern nation of Thailand faces—namely, deciding to what extent the country is willing to accommodate a pluralistic approach to ethnic minorities. For many Thais, the Thai identity is symbolized by three key elements: the monarchy, Theravada Buddhism, and the Thai language. While most of the country is indeed Buddhist, the ethnic Malays of southern Thailand certainly are not, nor are some of the hill tribes who follow animist traditions. Similarly, while most Thais speak Thai or a related dialect as their first language, the ethnic Malays of southern Thailand speak Yawi, a Malay dialect that is incomprehensible to most Thai speakers. Smaller numbers of other ethnic groups, mostly located around the borderlands of Thailand, also speak different languages, although for some of these groups Thai is gradually replacing their native tongue.

In the past, the government has pushed for an assimilative approach toward its ethnic minorities. The ethnic Chinese in Thailand are often pointed to as a group that has chosen to embrace “Thai-ness,” as they have overwhelmingly converted to Theravada Buddhism, taken Thai names, and become Thai language speakers.³¹⁷

Such an assimilation process has proven unworkable in the southern provinces. In many ways, the ethnic Muslim Malays in this region have more in common with their neighbors across the Malaysian border than with the Buddhist Thais of central Thailand. They also fear that nationalist sentiments among some segments of the Thai population will result in changes further marginalizing their status within the country. While Buddhism is by law the religion of the monarchy in Thailand, it has never legally been

³¹⁴ Human Rights Watch. *No One is Safe: Insurgent Attacks on Civilians in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces*. “IV: Failed Government Policies and Responses.” August 2007.

<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/thailand0807/5.htm>

³¹⁵ ABACPoll.com. Bangkok Post. “Strategy Based on Hopelessness.” 10 July 2006.

http://www.abacpoll.au.edu/in_news/2549/bangkokpost100706.pdf

³¹⁶ International Herald Tribune. Associated Press. “Bomb Explodes Near Busy Market in Southern Thailand, Wounding 13 People.” 20 April 2008. <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/04/20/asia/AS-GEN-Thailand-Southern-Violence.php#top>

³¹⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. “Thailand: People: Chinese.” <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-274200/Thailand>

the state religion, although Buddhist monks lobbied in the streets for such a designation when a new constitution was drafted in 2007.³¹⁸

Drug Trafficking

Thailand shares a long border with Burma, which is a major supply center for illicit opium and methamphetamine pills, known locally as *ya ba* (“crazy medicine”). In 2003, the Thai government waged a three-month-long “war on drugs” that was widely criticized for its human rights abuses. During the raids, there were numerous cases of extrajudicial killings of drug dealers. However, the effort underscored the grave concern felt by the government and many Thai people toward the country’s expanding drug consumption.^{319, 320} Ultimately, it is believed that the tough interdiction efforts have shifted some of the drug smuggling routes from Burma to Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia.³²¹



© Bret Saalwaechter
Opium pipes, Chian Mai

The victorious People’s Power Party campaigned in 2007 on a pledge to renew efforts to crackdown on drug traffickers. In April 2008, the government initiated a new campaign against the drug trade, but to date the suppression efforts have been significantly less dramatic than those in 2003.³²²

Outlook

Thailand’s political future is somewhat cloudy, and the present situation has made many Thais nervous. It was only two years ago that the country underwent a military coup after nearly 15 years of democratic rule, a period of relative calm unmatched in the nation’s history. A democratically elected government is once again in power in Bangkok, although many feel that newly elected Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej is merely in office temporarily while former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, now returned from exile, deals with his legal issues. For this reason, the current regime is considered fragile.³²³

³¹⁸ International Herald Tribune. Mydans, Seth. “Thailand Set to Make Buddhism the State Religion.” 24 May 2007. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/05/24/africa/thai.php>

³¹⁹ Human Rights Watch. *No One is Safe: Insurgent Attacks on Civilians in Thailand’s Southern Border Provinces*. “IV: Failed Government Policies and Responses.” August 2007. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/thailand0807/5.htm>

³²⁰ Christian Science Monitor. Montlake, Simon. “As Drug Trafficking Revives, Thais Back Another Harsh Crackdown.” 9 January 2008. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0109/p06s01-woap.html>

³²¹ Christian Science Monitor. Montlake, Simon. “As Drug Trafficking Revives, Thais Back Another Harsh Crackdown.” 9 January 2008. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0109/p06s01-woap.html>

³²² World Politics Review. McCartan, Brian. “Despite Strong Rhetoric, Thailand’s Latest Drug War a Restrained Campaign.” 1 May 2008. <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/Article.aspx?id=2040>

³²³ New York Times. Fuller, Thomas. “Turbulence is Predicted for New Chief in Thailand.” 29 January 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/29/world/asia/29thai.html>

Nevertheless, the government is moving ahead with plans to amend the eight-month-old 2007 constitution, which strengthened the powers of the government bureaucracy, military, and nonelected officials at the expense of elected government officials and political parties.³²⁴ A recent national poll revealed that 55% of Thais believe that violence and other troubles could occur if the constitutional changes are pursued.³²⁵



© beel / Flickr.com
Protestors at a rally in Bangkok, 2006

³²⁴ Asia Times Online. Macan-Markar, Marwaan. "Constitution Changes for Thailand." 11 April 2008. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/JD11Ae01.html

³²⁵ MCOT English News. Thai News Agency. "Poll: Over Half Worried About Chaos in Thai Future." 27 April 2008. <http://enews.mcot.net/view.php?id=3995>