

## **Hierarchy and Diversity in Thailand's Changing Political Landscape**

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### **Abstract**

This essay offers a critical reassessment of cultural diversity in Thailand, a concept that has had different meanings at different times in the country's modern political history. From the time the country sought to modernize its political system and during the period of state-building and militarization after World War II up until the 1980s, Bangkok-centered political development reinforced hierarchical norms and promoted a nationalist ideology that both celebrated diversity and limited the ways in which the country's minorities could be members of this Thai polity. By the 1990s and early 2000s, a period of democratization set in when minorities became more vocal in representing themselves than they had been able to do in the past. The historic 1997 Constitution gave legal recognition to the demands to play a role in the management of their cultural heritage. Drawing attention to the discursive and policy interventions on the one hand and community-level strategies for dealing with the Thai state on the other, the paper profiles two minority communities which deployed the language of hierarchy as well as rights to advocate for their interests. The concluding section outlines the conservative retrenchment Thailand is undergoing as a result of protracted military rule. Throughout, the essay argues that cultural diversity has little meaning in politically repressive conditions.

**Keywords:** cultural diversity, cultural rights, ethnic minority, linguistic minority, military coup, Thailand

## Introduction

There are many reasons why a critical examination of the concept of cultural diversity is so compelling in the context of authoritarian politics, not least of which is the fact that when the term is invoked it presumes that governments will enact policies that allow more space for difference. This ideal of a more inclusive society contains the potential for expressions of identity that make life meaningful as well as the promise for greater economic gains for those who have borne the brunt of the negative consequences of rapid economic growth. Under repressive conditions, however, the concept becomes divested of this justice potential and can readily be used to contain the differences that might challenge a regime's legitimacy. Thailand illustrates this relationship: political diversity is nearly non-existent after five years of direct military-led rule and cultural diversity is restricted to serving as a kind of window dressing. In Thailand the "expression or suppression [of the country's multi-ethnic population] has figured in the exercise of power."<sup>1</sup> As that power came to be claimed by a conservative, royalist minority that supports hierarchical norms and is comfortable with limited political participation of the people, the hoped-for arrival of genuine political equality for Thailand's multi-ethnic population appears to be farther from realization than ever.

For much of Thailand's modern history, the country's multi-ethnic character was subsumed under a discourse of "Thai-ness" in which ethnic differences were construed as mere regional differences. Craig Reynolds, the eminent social historian of Thailand, observes (1993) that, as far back as the nineteenth century, long before the term multiculturalism was invented, Siam was "accustomed to a polyethnic population." But from the 1930s through the 1970s, cultural policy in Thailand was designed to repress differences among ethnically distinct population groups. Diversity in Thailand was yoked to national integration and development projects in ways that limited the space for minority groups to express their identities in ways that could not be subsumed within the basic goal of nation-state-building. The term minority has wide and varied application to stateless non-citizens of the northern "hill tribes," Andaman sea peoples, the disaffected Lao or Khmer-speaking

minorities of the Northeast, and the Malay-Muslims in Thailand's three southernmost provinces. Hayami observes that in official and in other discourses differences were repressed in the process of nation-building. Those who did not, and do not, fit into the narrowly defined Thai-ness have therefore been deemed "others" and outsiders, threats to the unity of the homogeneously conceived nation.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the Cold War period, state-driven concepts of culture, national identity and national development largely essentialized Thailand's cultures and rendered the diversity of the country's population as a potential security threat. The country's minorities were of particular importance because of the counter-insurgency campaigns the Thai government undertook, often with generous support from the United States. Minorities were among those targeted since they were viewed as being more easily drawn to the Thai Communist Party than the majority. During the Cold War, minority languages and traditional dress were prohibited in many public settings. In schools across the country, only the Central Thai language could be spoken. Students were fined or more severely punished for uttering non-Central Thai words on school grounds. In the case of the Malay-Muslim minority in the southernmost provinces of the country, Muslim girls could not cover their heads when attending Thai government schools.

Even when pluralism became officially sanctioned, older ideas of hierarchy persisted. And these ideas of hierarchy found "expression in prejudices shaping everyday encounters between peoples who see each other as fundamentally different because of the persistence of old stereotypes."<sup>3</sup> Among the Lao and Khmer-speaking regions of the country's northeast, many people felt angry enough about their second-class citizenship status to be motivated to join anti-government protests as the country became more polarized in the 2000s.

Beginning in the early 1990s, there was a shift in the official and popular discourse in Thailand, and what gradually emerged was a more inclusive notion of Thai national identity and an emphasis on pluralized and localized forms of "Thai-ness." After the end of Cold War and continuing on into the early 2000s, NGOs, academics, and media outlets promoted a Thailand that was more pluralistic and diverse, so

that minority communities took advantage of the relatively supportive legal and discursive climate to press for greater control over natural and cultural resources. It became possible to conceive of ethnic and cultural diversity in more critical and imaginative ways than had previously been possible. Following the lead of international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Thai state agencies embraced the language of cultural diversity, local knowledge, and community-based development.<sup>4</sup>

Thailand's democratization movements in the 1990s gave rise to constitutionally-sanctioned rights for communities to have a greater role in managing cultural and natural resources and raised expectations that the greater decentralization of power would lessen Bangkok's grip on the rest of the country. The prospect that inhabitants of the provinces might have greater control over local resources inspired the hope that people outside of the majority Central Thai-speaking population might have more equal membership in the Thai polity. The aftershocks of the currency devaluation crisis of 1997 unleashed widely divergent visions of how the country should move forward. But thanks to these institutional reforms, especially the 1997 Constitution, many entered the 2000s with hope intact.

Thailand's historic 1997 Constitution was notable for many reasons, among them the inclusion of articles that for the first time explicitly gave encouragement to communities and minorities to take an active part in the maintenance and protection of their cultural heritage. Given that Thai policies on culture had been top-down and state-initiated throughout the twentieth century, hence far from the realm of rights, the idea that a group may have rights to language or be guaranteed a role in the maintenance of their cultural heritage was alien to many. In the Thai case where the central state has unilaterally enacted policies around cultural life and cultural heritage, the prospect that communities might have a say and have legal grounds on which to push for greater control over resources in the name of cultural and community survival was empowering.

### **The Beginnings of a Research Project**

My interest in the concept of cultural diversity emerged from a multi-sited small-scale ethnographic research project called “Culture and Rights in Thailand” (CRT), for which I was the senior advisor. With the establishment of the CRT program, it became possible to investigate how and to what degree communities might take a more active role in the preservation of their cultural heritage, instead of being the passive and purported beneficiaries of governmental policies designed in Bangkok with little or no input from those most directly affected by them. As Thailand was democratizing and globalizing, the international rights regime had taken up the cause of cultural diversity, advocating a “right to culture” whereby the state would protect and promote the cultural rights of minorities. It also called on states to give rights to communities to participate in managing their heritage, according to international human rights conventions. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) was a foundational document in this regard.

The CRT drew upon both these international conventions and scholarly discussions as well as on analyses of the political, social and intellectual landscape of contemporary Thailand. The 1997 Constitution unquestionably evoked a more pluralistic society and encouraged moves toward such a goal, but little was known about how, or if, the rights formalized in the 1997 Constitution were being actualized. Through the CRT project, my colleagues and I investigated how individuals and communities in Thailand expressed their identities in relation to their language, religion, and place. We also examined how—and under what circumstances—they interacted with the government in the cause of defending or strengthening the well-being of their respective communities. The communities in question included both urban residents and migrants from the countryside, ethnic minorities in the mountains of Northern Thailand as well as the Lao and Khmer-speaking minorities in Thailand's Northeast. The concept of cultural rights and the idea of a right to culture are relatively new in Thailand. The CRT sought to ascertain what local and vernacular forms of life could be supported under the international discourse of cultural rights.

Throughout the project, we raised questions regarding the ways in which the legal and strategic campaign for more rights led by various social movements during the preceding 20 years might have been effective. At the same time, we recognized that efforts to press for rights faced obstacles such as public indifference and state violence. Shortly before we were to hold the first workshop with all the participating researchers and collaborators in June 2010, the country was suddenly racked by violent protests on the streets of Bangkok that spread elsewhere. As a consequence of the subsequent polarized and deeply unsettling climate that came to prevail after the protests, we decided to make the workshop a closed session. The crucible within which the CRT project was launched then was itself a powerful reminder of what was at stake in a country where both political legitimacy and the symbols of authority were being contested. A military coup in 2006 that ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra revealed that the conservatives had felt threatened by Thaksin's popularity, especially among the people in the non-Central Thai-speaking areas of the North and the Northeast. Nevertheless, the Constitution of 2007 retained core clauses from the 1997 Constitution, including those related to protecting communities and minorities, and so the hope for both local and governmental support for cultural diversity did not yet appear entirely misplaced.

The rise of a royalist movement touched off a "color war" between political and social factions divided by region and, to some extent, by class. This color war, set in motion by years of polarization, led to massive street protests and the toppling of the democratically-elected government in 2014. Military rule, backed by much of the middle class and the royalist elites, returned to Thailand. It seemed that virtually overnight, the country was thrown backwards: the rule of law grew weak and the revival of antiquated views of ethnic minorities as depoliticized performers of cultural diversity once again prevailed. When the CRT project was first being carried out, researchers and staff of the public institution sponsoring the project were engaged in work that was both aspirational and grounded in Thailand's recent past. Even as the project went forward and the country's political polarization grew worse, few could have predicted how extensive the pushback would be against the

pluralistic and democratic gains made by Thailand and how determined the royalist conservatives would prove to be about rolling back policies encouraging greater cultural pluralism.

### **Thai-ness and Diversity: Competing Interpretations**

There is a rich body of writing about minorities in Thailand and the ways in which the process of nation-building reduced them to second-class status or deprived them of their citizenship rights outright. Some scholars frame the history of minority relations in Thailand in a more positive light, choosing instead to compare the country with others in the region where ethnic strife has been more prevalent. In his seminal study, "Politics of Ethnicity in Thailand," Charles Keyes asserts that the "apparent relative absence of ethnic cleavages in contemporary Thailand is a consequence not of the absence of premodern cultural differences in what was formerly known as Siam but of the distinctive historical processes that have shaped how these differences have been situated within the framework of the Thai nation."<sup>5</sup> In his estimation, the "inclusive vision of the Thai nation" historically promoted by the Thai government was largely successful. While the state has recognized "some cultural differences" as "ethnic differences" and "there have been occasional outbreaks of ethnic violence," in Keyes' view, Thailand has "known very little ethnic conflict," in spite of having an ethnically diverse population.

According to Keyes, Thailand has been successful because "many significant cultural differences have simply been ignored or subsumed within a vision of the country as divided not by culture but by region."<sup>6</sup> In a thought-provoking dialogue with Keyes, Streckfuss takes a less sanguine view. He argues that while Keyes' characterization is accurate at a certain level, in another sense, it is possible to argue that "Thailand's policy on ethnicity has been more like 'forced inclusion' that has sought to diminish or erase any vestiges of ethnic difference that might be in conflict with the model of official nationalism within Thai-ness."<sup>7</sup> Streckfuss maintains that there is a specific and rather narrow interpretation of what that quality constitutes. Streckfuss takes further issue with the ethnic and racist aspects of Thai national identity for

its hierarchical character. To this end he cites a study by the linguist and anthropologist Smalley, which focuses on the hierarchy that shapes social relations in the country:

The unquestioning ethnic superiority felt by the educated people of Bangkok... is reinforced in many ways. Their status, the power and control exercised by their group, its large size, their location in the heart of the country, their position at the top of the language hierarchy, institutions such as the government, education, the media, the dominant Buddhism, economic growth, relative political stability—all of these support a positive view of their ethnicity and a sense of their superiority.<sup>8</sup>

Streckfuss also observes how powerfully the concept of Thai-ness has been used to justify and inform the security laws that have identified certain ethnic groups as threats to the country's national security:

It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that an entire state complex was developed to address any threat to this perceived sense of unity... The components of this model of nationalism focusing on race were categorized and made into an all-encompassing set of state policies by the military and bodies like the National Identity Board and the National Security Council. This race-based model of nationalism was legally enforced through national security laws, in particular up through the 1980s the anti-communist act [*sic*].<sup>9</sup>

Among the groups identified as a threat to national security are the Malay-speaking Muslim Thais. At present, the Muslim minorities in southern Thailand continue to live with the stigma of being marked as different from the majority and viewed as unwilling to integrate with their fellow Thais, who are mostly Buddhist. Violence and unrest continue to worsen in the Muslim-dominated southern provinces, with the security-minded Thai government engaging in such practices as arbitrary detention. As Mark Tamthai and Somkiat Boonchoo note



in their study on national security policies in the southern border provinces over a thirty-year period, “because of their deep-seated fear of communism, the authorities’ way of thinking proved difficult to change.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The Implications of Thai-ness for Relations Between Minorities and the Majority**

In the face of a powerful nationalist ideology and hostile or indifferent state policies, minorities have had to devise strategies and adapt to changing conditions in order to deal with government officials. Whether calling for development goals that require legal rights to land or natural resources or pleading for the cultural right to teach languages other than Central Thai, the climate in which such negotiations took place has been deeply hierarchical in nature. For ethnic and cultural minorities with limited material resources, the need to negotiate with resistant state institutions is an acknowledged fact of life. As one long-time observer and leading anthropologist of Thailand’s northern minorities observed: “People are forced to bargain with the government concerning how to live their lives.”<sup>11</sup> Given their precarious legal and political standing in the country, minorities have had to prove themselves worthy of state resources. Sometimes this has meant playing up the uniqueness of their cultural identity, but doing so in a way that also demonstrates their loyalty to the Thai monarchy.

During the Cold War, the late King Bhumipol strengthened his standing in the country in no small measure by deftly directing attention and resources to the country’s farmers and minorities. His popularity grew as images of him making visits to remote areas of the country circulated in the press. He was often shown listening to villagers in one moment and issuing directives to government officials to rectify problems more effectively in the next. The late King and his mother took an interest in the minorities who lived in the mountains of the north and in the western region bordering Burma, personally sponsoring schools and health clinics. In the words of journalist Paul Handley, author of a biography of Bhumipol, “because of the publicity given the king’s

work, people in distress directed their hopes towards the king... as they had in the time of the absolute monarchy.” The result of the monarch’s active engagement in the lives of ordinary people “was to create an intimate bond between the king and his people that the government and politicians found difficult to replicate.”<sup>12</sup>

Diverse local cultures were often portrayed as deserving of royal support and patronage; the Thai king’s fatherly benevolence could, if bestowed, grant recognition to those willing and able to petition for it. Minorities in Thailand sought to improve their collective well-being during the years of the Cold War by appealing to the central authority for recognition of their claims. The traditional enactments of deference toward the monarch are still observable even in the present, when claims for improved livelihood or legal titles to land are made using the language of political rights. As the next section shows, by taking two different communities as case studies, minority groups may have adapted to altered historical conditions in dealing with the democratic and military regimes that have made up the central government. But vestiges of the Cold War period still persist, and, in certain settings and situations, gratitude or deference to high-ranking officials can still be effective in making them more responsive. Such a strategy, however, has its limits as well.

### **The Phu Thai: Working with Hierarchy to Gain Security and Recognition**

The Phu Tai of Northeast Thailand today are descended from migrants who were forced to flee across the Mekong River during the war between Siam and King Anu of Vientiane, which took place between 1826 and 1828. The Phu Tai speak a language in the Tai-language family. As a consequence, they constitute a minority group within the population of the country’s Northeast region, who speak Thai or Lao. Writing about Phu Tai villages in the 1960s, the Cornell-based anthropologist Thomas Kirsch noted that the villagers were eager to assimilate into the Thai nation and to gain opportunities for social and geographical mobility, particularly through secular education and employment in government

offices.<sup>13</sup> Despite their active participation in the Free Thai Movement and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) during and after World War II, the Phu Tai were generally perceived as a “good” and non-threatening ethnic group in post-Cold War Thailand.<sup>14</sup>

In a study conducted as part of the research project on culture and rights in Thailand, Sirjit Sunanta notes: “Since the 1960s, Ban Phu villagers have aligned themselves with Thai institutions of power; becoming *jao nai* or forging alliances with them (the powerful outsiders) are a source of pride.”<sup>15</sup> Phu Tai silk textiles, such as the brocaded silk scarves known as *pha prae wa*, which were produced under Queen Sirikit’s Arts and Crafts Project, are known as “the queen of silk textiles” and have become a highly prized commodity. In 1974, members of the Phu Tai community were granted an audience with their majesties the King and Queen of Thailand, and the queen’s recognition of their skill in weaving silk continues to be a point of pride for the ethnic group. Even today, there hangs in the community learning center an enlarged photograph of the king addressing the villagers. In this picture, which is displayed in a prominent manner, the villagers are seated on the floor of a room at Dusitalai Hall in Bangkok Palace listening to a speech by the king. An excerpt from his address is printed alongside the image. The Phu Tai recognize the roles of key institutions—the military, the officials and the monarchy—in government and strategize to forge alliances with them. This recognition was substantiated by the deputy village headman in an interview, during which he said, “we need to adjust to the government’s policies. If we don’t, we won’t get anything. In the system dominated by the officials, we have to go along with the situation... Our village will have to take [the] government’s policies as our guideline. If we do not adjust [to government policies], our village won’t be successful.”<sup>16</sup> Since the 1970s, Ban Phu has taken part in the Voluntary Development and Self-Defense Program, a state-supported initiative that attests to a close relationship between economic development and security concerns. Ban Phu did well under this program, as in 1988 it was honored with the award for the best village in the Voluntary Development and Self-Defense Program for the Northeast region.

The villagers embraced a series of developmental programs and

techniques from the central government, most of which were introduced by the Community Development Office. They are often able to adapt these programs to their own needs and priorities. A village co-op and artisans' groups for weaving and handicraft-making have all been set up. In 2006, when the government sought to promote the idea of the "Sufficiency Economy," Ban Phu was selected by the Community Development Office as a "model village" for the economic program. Evidenced by this and other awards that the village received, Ban Phu came to be recognized as exemplary of the type of local culture and ethnicity approved by the Thai government agencies. In Sirijit's view, the Phu Tai remained wary of the discourse of minority rights because of the fear that the term calls to mind the poorer, less integrated *chao khao* or upland minorities. The Phu Tai feel that they occupy a relatively advantageous position in the ethnic and cultural minority hierarchy, seeing themselves as more civilized or developed than smaller groups whose languages do not belong to the Tai language family.

At different junctures in their history, Ban Phu villagers have demanded the rights to development and access to modern institutions such as schools, which they embraced as a route to social mobility. Significantly, they have not openly challenged the cultural hierarchy in Thailand. In Sirijit's estimation, the Phu Tai people of Ban Phu sought to improve their standing in Thailand by moving closer to the central government's conception of modernity rather than by challenging cultural hierarchy itself. There is anecdotal evidence that some Ban Phu villagers took part in or were supportive of the anti-government demonstrations in Bangkok in 2010. This suggests that while the idea of cultural hierarchy might have endured through the recent past, some villagers were resisting the political hierarchy that has kept minorities in second-class positions in the country.

### **The Moken and the Fate of the Sea Nomads Minority**

The Community Network for Political and Social Reform, which represents ethnic groups nationwide, identifies forty-one sea nomad communities on the shores of the Andaman, with an estimated

population of 17,400. The Moken is one of these sea-nomad groups, or *Chao Le*. The *Chao Le* are a nomadic maritime people who have historically migrated to different islands and coastal areas in the Andaman Sea, including the Surin Islands, throughout the year. According to a report by Human Rights Watch titled *Stateless at Sea* (2015), the Moken are one of the three sea nomad groups whose nomadic way of life has been an obstacle to them in applying for citizenship or obtaining identification from the Thai government.

In December 1971, the Surin Islands were designated as a national preserve by the Royal Forestry Department. The demarcation of park boundaries and the designation of much of the region as a national marine park meant that the Moken suddenly found themselves trespassing in waters which had been their fishing grounds. Under the conservation regulations of the National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Department, their movements became more restricted. "The sea looks borderless but there is no longer freedom for us to roam freely," a sea nomad named Nui told a journalist.<sup>17</sup>

While the cultural practices and seafaring habits of the Moken are curbed by their legal standing in the country, the main concern over the years has been the violation of land rights, which are intrinsically linked to the cultural rights of the sea gypsies. Ancestral land plays an important role in their culture. Due to a lack of papers and official recognition of their seafaring ways, the Moken are finding more and more outsiders encroaching on their land. With the growth of the tourism industry in the area around Phuket and the nearby islands, the Moken and other sea nomads have been forced to change their way of life. Sea gypsies used to live aboard their boats for part of the year and then move on to one of the many unsettled islands for the rest of the year. Over time, these plots of land have been claimed by either government agencies or private entities.<sup>18</sup> Without a community rights law, these communities have had few means to protect their way of life or to press for new rights.

In 2013, *Chao Le* communities in the Rawai beach area of Phuket launched an effort to establish legal claim to the land they occupy as squatters by attempting to prove that they had been living in the area for generations. Having developed different strategies to press their claims,

the villagers knew that they would need to establish that they had been in the area for an extended time. They pointed to human remains buried in the area as one form of evidence. But they put their hopes in another source as well: film footage of King Bhumibol Adulyadej visiting the community in 1959. In still images taken from that footage, both adult and child members of the community are pictured respectfully kneeling and joining their hands in a “*wai*,” a gesture of respect for the king. In the face of threats of eviction from investors, the community’s leaders pressed their claim to remain on the land by using still images from this short clip. The dwellings in the frames of the images suggested long-term residency, they argued. And the visit of the king validated their presence at different levels: both as long-time inhabitants of the area and as faithful subjects of the king, demonstrating their respect for him.

Since the military seized power in 2014, however, the pursuit of land rights by the Moken and other sea nomads has become more difficult. There have been numerous instances of lawsuits and even outright violence against the Moken people. In January 2016, Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwon ordered the state to find a solution to a land dispute in which attacks were made on the sea gypsies by people widely speculated to be thugs hired by people interested in building on the land. The *Bangkok Post* reported that leaked documents on social media revealed that the Baron World Trade Co. had asked the Royal Thai Army to deploy troops to protect company staff during construction work.<sup>19</sup> The challenges facing the Moken are characteristic of those faced by many other minority groups in a country where, according to the UNDP Thailand Country Assessment Report (2015), the government denies the traditional rights of ethnic minorities to their ancestral lands and natural resources.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

The democracies of the 1990s and the early 2000s seemed to hold great promise for Thailand to move beyond what Morton (2016) calls a “dominant mono-cultural framing.”<sup>21</sup> More recently, however, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the new military

government, has shown a “renewed focus on nation-building, centralization and national security” that, together with increased restrictions on political activity, bode ill for ethnic groups across Thailand.<sup>22</sup> In its 2015 report, the Minority Rights Group summarized some of the consequences that military rule has had for minorities in Thailand:

Shortly after seizing power the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) set about instituting a series of reforms, including a ‘Return Forest Policy’ in June and a reforestation ‘Master Plan’ two months later, with the goal of increasing forest cover throughout the country... More land confiscation and evictions continued (throughout the first year of rule under the NCPO), and many in Isan, the north-eastern Lao-speaking region that has faced discrimination from the Thai administration in Bangkok since its incorporation into the modern state of Thailand. Indeed, by December (of 2014, only seven months after the military had seized power) Prachatai news had reported that nearly 1,800 families had been affected by the order, mostly in the north and north-east, home to large minority and indigenous populations.<sup>23</sup>

The treatment of ethnic minorities in the 2016 Constitution could not be farther in spirit from the Constitutions of 1997 and 2007. In keeping with the restrictive and moralistic frameworks that the NCPO now seeks to impose on Thailand, the relevant article circumscribes the country’s ethnic groups in the practice of their culture by insisting that public order and “the good morals of the people” should take precedence over all other considerations. Here is the passage in question, “Section 6, Article 7”:

[The State] shall promote and protect the rights of different Thai ethnic groups to voluntarily and peacefully carry out their way of life without disturbance and according to their traditional culture, customs and way of life, in so far as their way of life is not contrary to the public order or good morals of the people, or does

not harm the security of the State or public health.<sup>24</sup>

By 2016, when the long-reigning King Bhumipol passed away, not only had Thailand become a more repressive and intolerant country, but many Thais—even those who had supported the military's rise to power—had become disenchanted with life under prolonged military rule. In the words of a long-term observer of Thai politics, Shawn W. Crispin:

Many Thais have patiently endured the junta's curtailment of rights and liberties in exchange for stability after years of chaotic and debilitating street politics. Yet [Prime Minister] Prayut's rising use of the interim constitution's Article 44, a measure that gives the premier unchallenged powers, is starting to chafe even among the junta's diehard supporters.<sup>25</sup>

For Streckfuss, the expectations raised by the insistence that Thais are a single people contain within them expectations for political equality that cannot be ignored or downplayed:

Even with the values of hierarchy having made a resurgence since the new rise of the royalists since 2005, there is a belief held by many Thais that if they are part of the same race, then all within that race should be treated with respect. Thai-ification worked for a century, but there is within it *a promise that all Thais will benefit more equally*, that their votes will be held in respect, and that there will or should be a reversal of the kind of centralization that benefits those in Bangkok and nearby provinces.<sup>26</sup>

In Thailand, repression and intolerance are inextricably bound together; this combination has had far-reaching consequences not only in the political sphere but also in the area of culture. This essay has reflected on the relationship between cultural diversity and pluralism that a multi-ethnic democracy is intended to promote and protect. The May 2014 coup brought the military to power and since then, military rule has



used its authority to abolish the previous constitution and to govern by special decrees, while drafting a new constitution informed with a vision of Thai society where order and security are prized above all else. Under these conditions, policies supporting diversity have been put aside in favor of a revival of an antiquated Thai nationalism, which ultimately treats ethnic diversity as something to be contained for the sake of national security. In the absence of genuine rule of law, minorities have been particularly at risk. Their titles to land and the claims to natural resources on which these communities draw for their livelihoods have been greatly weakened.

With the retreat from democracy in so many countries, there has been a cooling of the commitment to the more equal social and political membership encompassed by the term diversity, if not outright hostility to it. In the case of Thailand, the changing political landscape has not been fueled by migration or ethno-nationalism as much as it has been by the previously existing ideological divisions within Thai society itself concerning the role of the military and the bureaucratic and political elites. In the face of these global shifts in norms and attitudes towards democracy, there is a more urgent need to reexamine constructs such as diversity. It is also necessary to scrutinize more closely the increasingly exclusive and repressive policies that undermine the principles informing projects of inclusion and justice through the recognition of community rights and social and political protections for minority groups.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>David Streckfuss, "An 'Ethnic' Reading of 'Thai' History in the Twilight of the Century-Old Thai National Model," *Southeast Asia Research* 20, no. 3 (2012): 316.

<sup>2</sup>Yoko Hayami, "Redefining 'Otherness' from Northern Thailand: Notes Towards Debating Multiculturalism in Thailand and Beyond," *Southeast Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2006): 285.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Keyes, "Presidential Address: 'The Peoples of Asia'—Science and Politics in the Classification of Ethnic Groups in Thailand, China, and Vietnam," *Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 4 (2002): 1193.

<sup>4</sup>Sirijit Sunanta, "The State and Ethnic Identity of the Phu Tai: A Case Study from Mukdahan," *Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre Newsletter*, March 2013, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Keyes, “Cultural Diversity and National Identity in Thailand,” in *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, eds. Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Keyes, “Cultural Diversity and National Identity in Thailand,” 23.

<sup>7</sup> Streckfuss, “An ‘Ethnic’ Reading of ‘Thai’ History,” 316.

<sup>8</sup> See W. A. Smalley, “Linguistic Diversity and National Unity: Language Ecology in Thailand,” quoted in Streckfuss, “An ‘Ethnic’ Reading of ‘Thai’ History,” 317.

<sup>9</sup> Streckfuss, “An ‘Ethnic’ Reading of ‘Thai’ History,” 315.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Tamthai and Somkiat Boonchoo, “National Security Policies on the Southern Border Provinces, 1974–2003,” in *Imagined Land? The State and Southern Violence in Thailand*, ed. Chaiwat Satha-Anand (Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 2009), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Anan Ganjanapan, *Local Control of Land and Forest: Cultural Dimensions of Resource Management in Northern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development—Chiang Mai University, 2000), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand’s Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 167.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Kirsch, “Phu Thai Religious Syncretism: A Case Study of Thai Religion and Society” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1967).

<sup>14</sup> Akka-amnuay Piyamas, “The Phuthai People and Their Political Roles on the Phu Phan Ranges During 1945–1980” (MA thesis, Mahasarakham University, 2002), quoted in Sunanta, “The State and Ethnic Identity of the Phu Tai,” 16.

<sup>15</sup> Sirijit Sunanta, “Negotiating with the Center: Diversity and Local Cultures,” in *Rights to Culture: Heritage, Language and Community in Thailand*, ed. Coeli Barry (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2013), 169–70.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>17</sup> Piaporn Wongruang, “Restrictions Sinking Sea Gypsies,” *Bangkok Post*, November 11, 2012, accessed November 5, 2015, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/archive/restrictions-sinking-sea-gypsies/320625>.

<sup>18</sup> See *Working for the Rights of Sea Peoples of Thailand*, a short film available at <http://www.sac.or.th/databases/cultureandrights/resources-2/community-participation-in-safeguarding-intangible-heritage-at-the-phnom-rung-historical-park/mr-suthipong-laithip/>.

<sup>19</sup> Aritta Wangkiat and Wassana Nanuam, “Prawit Steps into Sea Gypsy Land Dispute,” *Bangkok Post*, January 29, 2016, accessed November 11, 2012, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/843740/prawit-steps-into-sea-gypsy-land-dispute>.

<sup>20</sup> See United Nations, *Thailand Common Country Assessment* (Bangkok: United Nations Country Team, 2016), accessed July 2, 2018, <http://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/dam/rbap/docs/programme-documents/ccca/TH-CCA-2016.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Micah F. Morton, “The Indigenous Peoples’ Movement in Thailand Expands,”

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Minority Rights Group International, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015: Events of 2014*, ed. Peter Grant (London: Minority Rights Group International, 2015), 161, accessed May 31, 2018, <http://minorityrights.org/publications/state-of-the-worlds-minorities-and-indigenous-peoples-2015/>.

<sup>24</sup> Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Thailand, "Draft Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand 2016—Unofficial English Translation," accessed June 25, 2018, [http://www.un.or.th/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2016\\_Thailand-Draft-Constitution\\_EnglishTranslation\\_Full\\_Formatted\\_vFina....pdf](http://www.un.or.th/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2016_Thailand-Draft-Constitution_EnglishTranslation_Full_Formatted_vFina....pdf).

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<sup>26</sup> David Streckfuss and Marten Dondorp, "The Politics of Race/Ethnicity in Thailand: A Brief Overview," unpublished (2015), 9.