Southeast Asia: Burma/Myanmar and Siam/Thailand in comparative perspective

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This module will provide students with an insight into state formation, identity politics, and political and economic development in two polities on the Southeast Asian mainland: Myanmar (also known as Burma) and Thailand (previously known as Siam).

The two countries are quite similar in many ways: Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion, and Buddhist kingship was the traditional form of government. Since the 1960s, the two countries have been under military rule for extended periods. Relations with ethnic and religious minorities have frequently been conflictual—and relations with Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand and Rohingya Muslims in western Myanmar particularly so. However, the two countries also differ in important respects. Most notably, Burma experienced colonization (by Britain) while Siam, alone in Southeast Asia, managed to retain nominal independence. The two countries thus provide an excellent opportunity to consider the historical and contemporary significance of different experiences with colonialism and imperialism. Another important difference relates to economic management and development: for much of the post-WWII period independent Burma adopted a socialistic and autarkic approach to the economy, whereas Thailand embraced capitalism and globalization.

Supervision essay questions

1) What difference, if any, does colonization make? Answer with regard to EITHER state-formation OR nation-building in Myanmar and Thailand.
2) What are elections for? Discuss with reference to the modern politics of Myanmar and Thailand.

General background reading

Lectures and readings:

1. Imperialism and state formation

This lecture will outline the broad pattern of state-formation in mainland Southeast Asia, with particular attention paid to the “classical” (pre-colonial) polities, and to the changes brought about by the expansion of European imperial powers in the region.

General


Thailand


Myanmar


2. Colonialism and nationalism

This lecture will compare and contrast the dynamics of political identity formation in Burma/Myanmar and Siam/Thailand. How have “Burman-ness” and “Thainess” been imagined, and with what political implications? Was Siam fortunate or unfortunate to have avoided formal colonization?

General

Davidson, Jamie S. 2008. “The study of political ethnicity in Southeast Asia.” In Erik M. Kuhonta, Dan Slater, and Tuong Vu (eds), *Southeast Asia in political science: theory, region, and qualitative analysis*. Stanford University Press.

Thailand

[https://www.academia.edu/2273790/Contested_Nationalism_and_the_1932_Overthrow_of_the.Absolute_Monarchy_in_Siam](https://www.academia.edu/2273790/Contested_Nationalism_and_the_1932_Overthrow_of_the.Absolute_Monarchy_in_Siam)


**Myanmar**


**3. Cold War-era authoritarianism**

Following brief democratic experiments in the 1950s, the Thai and Burmese militaries seized control of their respective states. Why has military coercion come to play such an important role in government in both countries? How has that role been legitimated?

**General**


**Thailand**


**Burma**


**4. Democracy and democratization**

While militaries continue to view themselves as praetorian guards of the Burmese and Thai states, civilian politicians and civil society have gradually (and in the Thai case intermittently) been allowed a greater role in the governing of increasingly pluralistic societies. Yet democracy remains a highly contested concept, and electoral politics does not necessarily enjoy a great deal of legitimacy among important social groups. What have been the drivers of political liberalization in Myanmar and Thailand, and what are its limits?

**General**


**Thailand**


**Burma**

*Cheesman, Nick. 2014. “What does the rule of law have to do with democratization (in Myanmar)?” *South East Asia Research* 22(2): 213-232.*


**5. Ethnic conflict**

This lecture returns to the politics of national identity, but now with explicit focus on minorities. It pays particular attention to the relationship—in recent years characterized by high levels of violence—between majority Buddhist societies and Muslim minorities. Since
2004, nearly 7,000 persons have been killed in a Malay-Muslim separatist insurgency in southern Thailand. In western Myanmar, security forces stand accused of having perpetrated ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Rohingya people, several hundred thousand of whom have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh. What are the historical and political bases of Malay-Muslim and Rohingya nationalism in Thailand and Myanmar, respectively? Why are these groups proving particularly difficult to integrate into the national political order?

General

Miller, Michelle Ann (ed.). 2012. Autonomy and armed separatism in South and Southeast Asia. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, chapters 1, 7, 12, 13.

Thailand


Burma

6. Economic development

In the period leading up to World War II, both Burma and Thailand emerged as significant rice exporters for world markets. In that respect they had developed very similar economic structures under the aegis of European imperialism. During the Cold War period, however, Thailand achieved very rapid rates of economic growth, industrialization, and poverty reduction, whereas the Burmese economy stagnated. Why did Burma and Thailand experience such dramatically divergent economic trajectories? What can a comparative analysis of these two countries tell us about the political underpinnings of poverty and prosperity?

General


Thailand


Burma


Tin Maung Maung Than. 2007. State dominance in Myanmar: The political economy of industrialization. ISEAS.


**Mock exam questions**

1. How has “Burman-ness” and “Thainess” been imagined, and with what political implications?

2. Was Siam fortunate or unfortunate to have avoided formal colonization?

3. Why has military coercion come to play such an important role in government in both Myanmar and Thailand? How has that role been legitimated?

4. What have been the drivers of political liberalization in Myanmar and Thailand, and what are its limits?

5. What are the historical and political bases of Malay-Muslim and Rohingya nationalism in Thailand and Myanmar, respectively? Why are these groups proving particularly difficult to integrate into the national political order?

6. Why did Burma and Thailand experience such dramatically divergent economic trajectories during the Cold War era?

7. What can a comparative analysis of Thailand and Myanmar tell us about the political underpinnings of poverty and prosperity?

8. What are elections for? Discuss with reference to the modern politics of Myanmar and Thailand.

9. How far can legacies of the past explain contemporary political outcomes? Discuss with reference to EITHER economic development OR ethnic conflict in Myanmar and Thailand.

10. The concept of the mandala state has often been applied to the study of pre-modern polities in mainland Southeast Asia. Can the concept be useful also when considering aspects of contemporary politics in Myanmar and Thailand?

11. How and why did religion come to play a prominent role in the formation of national identities in Myanmar and Thailand? Discuss with reference to majority and/or minority nationalisms.