

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

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The post-war politics of Myanmar and Thailand are simultaneously strikingly different and strikingly similar.

The striking contrast is the degree to which the nation-state has been consolidated. For much of the period since independence from Britain in 1948, large areas of Burma/Myanmar have been controlled or contested by armed organizations pursuing rival nation-building projects in the name of ethnic groups such as the Arakanese, the Karen, the Kachin, the Mon, the Shan, the Wa, etc. Civil war has tragically become an almost constant feature of modern Burmese politics, and the government of Burma/Myanmar has never been able to extend its writ over large areas of the territory over which it is internationally recognized as sovereign. In contrast, the Thai state has been able to centralize and consolidate state power to a much greater degree. Except for insurgencies in the three Malay-Muslim provinces in southern Thailand, the territorial contours of the Thai state have been uncontested since the end of the Second World War, and minority ethnicities have not been politicized or militarized to any meaningful degree.

The striking similarity is the (limited) degree to which Myanmar and Thailand have consolidated their political regimes (type of government). Political life in both countries has been animated by struggles between strategic groups and wider publics over the normative framework that ought to serve as the basis for the political system. Myanmar and Thailand are furthermore strikingly similar in the degree to which the military has come to play a pivotal role in such struggles. Although military dictatorships have become rare in the rest of the world, the armed forces of Myanmar and Thailand remain powerful political actors, having most recently staged coups d'état in 2014 (Thailand) and 2021 (Myanmar). The 2014 coup in Thailand was triggered, in part, by urban protests against an elected government deemed dictatorial and corrupt, and it was met with a high degree of acquiescence as people were reassured that new elections would soon be held. Elections were eventually held in 2019 and then again in 2023. In contrast, Myanmar's 2021 coup was staged in the wake of a landslide electoral victory, and it triggered a massive popular backlash which soon morphed into an armed pro-democratic revolution (which is still ongoing). Reassurances from the junta leadership that new elections would be held within a year were regarded as neither meaningful nor credible. Perhaps paradoxically, the militaries in both Thailand and Myanmar justified their interventions into politics in the name of democracy, as they have done in previous coups. While all sides of these struggles pledge fealty to "democracy" as the normative basis on which the political system should rest, there is no agreement on what democracy means.

There are many possible factors that may help explain the patterns we can observe when comparing the contemporary politics in Myanmar and Thailand. However, in this module we will pay particular attention to the historical trajectories of nation-state formation and ask whether and how they may help us understand both divergence (degree to which the nation-

state has been consolidated and ethnicity politicized) and convergence (regime weakness, rooted in disagreement over meaning of “democracy”).

## Lectures

This module consists of six lectures, on the following topics:

1. Introduction and background
2. Nation-building: Burma/Myanmar
3. Nation-building: Siam/Thailand
4. Contesting “democracy”: Burma/Myanmar
5. Contesting “democracy”: Siam/Thailand
6. Conclusion

## Background reading and other resources

Supervision readings are indicated in the next section of this guide.

You are welcome to consult background readings on the politics of Myanmar and Thailand, and on the study thereof:

Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A history of Thailand*, fourth edition, Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Thant Myint-U, *The making of modern Burma*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Benedict Anderson, “Studies of the Thai state: The state of Thai studies,” in Benedict Anderson, *Exploration and irony in studies of Siam over forty years*, Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014, pp. 15-45 [originally published in Eliezer B. Ayal (ed.), *The study of Thailand: Analyses of knowledge, approaches, and prospects in anthropology, art history, economics, history, and political science*, Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1978, pp. 193-247].

Robert H. Taylor, “Finding the political in Myanmar, a.k.a. Burma,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2008): 219-237.

You may also find it helpful to explore the annual updates of critical political, economic, and cultural developments in Myanmar and Thailand that are published in the journal *Asian Survey*. To bring you up to date on recent political developments check out the following two articles:

Brenner, David. “Myanmar in 2023: Revolution in an escalating war.” *Asian Survey* 64, no. 2 (2024): 330-340.

Kuhonta, Erik Martinez. “Thailand in 2023: The more things change, the more they stay the same?” *Asian Survey* 64, no. 2 (2024): 278-287.

## Supervisions

You will have two supervisions for this module. Supervisions will be scheduled early in Michaelmas Term.

## **Essay 1: How have political elites in what is today Myanmar and Thailand sought to build unified polities, and what explains how successful those efforts have been?**

### *Core reading:*

- Callahan, Mary Patricia. *Making enemies: War and state building in Burma*. Cornell University Press, 2005.
- Hyun, Sinae. *Indigenizing the Cold War: The Border Patrol Police and nation-building in Thailand*. University of Hawaii Press, 2023.
- Scott, James C. *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press, 2009, esp. pp. 64-97, 238-282.
- Thongchai Winichakul. *Siam mapped: A history of the geo-body of a nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994.

### *Supplementary reading:*

#### Siam/Thailand

- Brown, David. *The state and ethnic politics in Southeast Asia*. Routledge, 1994, pp. 109-142, 180-185.
- Janjira Sombatpoonsiri. "Buddhist majoritarian nationalism in Thailand: Ideological contestation, narratives, and activism." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 53, no. 3 (2023): 398-422.
- Jory, Patrick, and Jirawat Saengthong. "The roots of conservative radicalism in southern Thailand's Buddhist heartland." *Critical Asian Studies* 52, no. 1 (2020): 127-148.
- Kasian Tejapira. "The misbehaving jeks: The evolving regime of Thainess and Sino-Thai challenges." *Asian Ethnicity* 10, no. 3 (2009): 263-283.
- Keyes, Charles F. "Buddhism and national integration in Thailand." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 3 (1971): 551-567.
- McCargo, Duncan. *Tearing apart the land: Islam and legitimacy in southern Thailand*. Cornell University Press, 2017, esp. pp. 1-87.
- Pinkaew Laungaramsri. "Ethnicity and the politics of ethnic classification in Thailand." In Colin Mackerras (ed.), *Ethnicity in Asia*. Routledge, 2003, pp. 157-173.
- Renard, Ronald D. "The differential integration of hill people into the Thai state." In Andrew Turton (ed.), *Civility and savagery: Social identity in Tai states*. Curzon, 2000, pp. 63-83.
- Ricks, Jacob I. "Proud to be Thai: The puzzling absence of ethnicity-based political cleavages in northeastern Thailand." *Pacific Affairs* 92, no. 2 (2019): 257-285.
- Selway, Joel Sawat. "The Shinawatra siblings: Ethnic heroes and the rise of Lanna nationalism." *Asian Politics & Policy* 13, no. 1 (2021): 105-127.
- Streckfuss, David. "The mixed colonial legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai racialist thought, 1890-1910." In Laurie Sears (ed.), *Autonomous histories, particular truths: Essays in honor of John RW Smail*. University of Wisconsin, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993, pp. 123-153.
- Streicher, Ruth. *Uneasy military encounters: The imperial politics of counterinsurgency in southern Thailand*. Cornell University Press, 2020, esp. pp. 1-35, 109-113.

#### Burma/Myanmar

- Aung-Thwin, Michael. "The British 'pacification' of Burma: Order without meaning." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 16, no. 2 (1985): 245-261.
- Brown, David. *The state and ethnic politics in Southeast Asia*. Routledge, 1994, pp. 23-45.
- Cheesman, Nick. "How in Myanmar 'national races' came to surpass citizenship and exclude Rohingya." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 461-483.
- Egreteau, Renaud, and Aung Kaung Myat. "Antagonistic framing and the social exclusion of Rohingya in Myanmar's parliamentary discourses (2011–2021)." *Asian Ethnicity* (2024): 1-23.
- Ferguson, Jane. *Repossessing Shanland: Myanmar, Thailand, and a nation-state deferred*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2021, esp. pp. 62-84, 243-254.
- Han, Enze. "Neighborhood effect of borderland state consolidation: Evidence from Myanmar and its neighbors." *The Pacific Review* 33, no. 2 (2020): 305-330.
- International Crisis Group. "Identity crisis: Ethnicity and conflict in Myanmar." *Asia Report* No. 312. 28 August 2020. Available at: [https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/312-identity-crisis-myanmar-ethnicity\\_0.pdf](https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/312-identity-crisis-myanmar-ethnicity_0.pdf)
- Lieberman, Victor B. "Ethnic politics in eighteenth-century Burma." *Modern Asian Studies* 12, no. 3 (1978): 455-482.
- Meehan, Patrick. "Fortifying or fragmenting the state? The political economy of the opium/heroin trade in Shan State, Myanmar, 1988–2013." *Critical Asian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2015): 253-282.
- Rajah, Ananda. "A 'nation of intent' in Burma: Karen ethno-nationalism, nationalism and narrations of nation." *The Pacific Review* 15, no. 4 (2002): 517-537.
- Smith, Martin. *State of strife: The dynamics of ethnic conflict in Burma*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007, esp. pp. 3-25.
- South, Ashley. *Mon nationalism and civil war in Burma: The golden sheldrake*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 2-46.
- South, Ashley. "Towards 'emergent federalism' in post-coup Myanmar." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 43, no. 3 (2021): 439-460.
- Stokke, Kristian. "Political representation by ethnic parties? Electoral performance and party-building processes among ethnic parties in Myanmar." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38, no. 3 (2019): 307-336.
- Taylor, Robert H. "Perceptions of ethnicity in the politics of Burma." *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* (1982): 7-22.
- Taylor, Robert H. *Can Myanmar's NLD government undo the gordian knot of federalism and ethnicity?* ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016.
- Thawngmung, Ardeth Maung, and Saw Eh Htoo. "The fractured centre: 'Two-headed government' and threats to the peace process in Myanmar." *Modern Asian Studies* 56, no. 2 (2022): 504-532.
- Van Klinken, Gerry, and Su Mon Thazin Aung. "The contentious politics of anti-Muslim scapegoating in Myanmar." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 353-375.
- Woods, Kevin. "Ceasefire capitalism: Military-private partnerships, resource concessions and military-state building in the Burma-China borderlands." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 4 (2011): 747-770.

**Essay 2: What has “democracy” meant to political actors, and how might it matter?  
Discuss with reference to the political experiences of Myanmar and Thailand.**

*Core reading:*

- Aim Sinpeng. *Opposing democracy in the digital age: The Yellow Shirts in Thailand*. University of Michigan Press, 2021.
- Anek Laothamatas. “A tale of two democracies: Conflicting perceptions of elections and democracy in Thailand.” In Robert H. Taylor (ed.), *The politics of elections in Southeast Asia*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 201-233.
- Wells, Tamas. *Narrating democracy in Myanmar: The struggle between activists, democratic leaders and aid workers*. Amsterdam University Press, 2021.

*Supplementary reading:*

Siam/Thailand

- Callahan, William A. “Social capital and corruption: Vote buying and the politics of reform in Thailand.” *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 3 (2005): 495-508.
- Connors, Michael Kelly. *Democracy and national identity in Thailand*. Routledge, 2003.
- Connors, Michael K. “Article of faith: The failure of royal liberalism in Thailand.” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (2008): 143-165.
- Hewison, Kevin, and Kengkij Kitirianglarp. “Thai-style democracy.” *Saying the unsayable: Monarchy and democracy in Thailand*. In Søren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager (eds.), *Saying the unsayable: Monarchy and democracy in Thailand*. NIAS Press, 2010, pp. 179-202.
- Mérieau, Eugénie. “A constitutional ethnography of monarchy: Buddhist kingship, ‘granted constitutionalism,’ and royal state ceremonies in Thailand.” *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 9, no. 3 (2022): 363-381.
- Nakharin Mektrairat. “Political discourse on Thai democracy.” In Michael K. Connors and Ukrist Pathmanand (eds.), *Thai politics in translation: Monarchy, democracy, and the supra-constitution*. NIAS Press, 2021, pp. 64-93.
- Saichol Sattayanurak. “The Thai middle class and the dynamics and power of conservative ideology in Thai society and politics.” *Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. Supplementary Issue (2023): 43-104. Available at: [https://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2433/286441/1/seas\\_12\\_SupplementaryIssue\\_43.pdf](https://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2433/286441/1/seas_12_SupplementaryIssue_43.pdf)
- Saowanee T. Alexander and Duncan McCargo. “War of words: Isan redshirt activists and discourses of Thai democracy.” *South East Asia Research* 24, no. 2 (2016): 222-241.
- Sopranzetti, Claudio. “Burning red desires: Isan migrants and the politics of desire in contemporary Thailand.” *South East Asia Research* 20, no. 3 (2012): 361-379.
- Thawilwadee Bureekul and Ratchawadee Sangmahamad. “Dynamics of Thais’ political values and orientation toward democracy.” In Yun-han Chu, Yu-tzung Chang, Min-hua Huang, Kai-Ping Huang (eds.), *How Asians view democratic legitimacy*. National Taiwan University Press 2023, pp. 310-322.
- Wichuta Teeratanabodee. “Thailand’s 2020-2021 pro-democracy protests: Diversity, conflict, and solidarity.” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (2023): 1-25.

## Burma/Myanmar

- Aung-Thwin, Michael. "Parochial universalism, democracy jihad and the orientalist image of Burma: The new evangelism." *Pacific Affairs* (2001): 483-505.
- Huang, K. P., & Chu, Y. H. (2023). "Burma's failed democratization." In Yun-han Chu, Yut-zung Chang, Min-hua Huang, Kai-Ping Huang (eds.), *How Asians view democratic legitimacy*. National Taiwan University Press 2023, pp. 338-347.
- Houtman, Gustaaf. "Sacralizing or demonizing democracy? Aung San Suu Kyi's 'personality cult.'" In Monique Skidmore (ed.), *Burma at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. University of Hawaii Press, 2005, pp. 133-153.
- Jordt, Ingrid, Tharaphi Than, and Sue Ye Lin. *How generation Z galvanized a revolutionary movement against Myanmar's 2021 military coup*. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021.
- Keeler, Ward. "Dó äyè! Dó äyè! Reclaiming political agency in Burma's democracy era." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 12, no. 3 (2022): 747-762.
- McCarthy, Gerard. "Democratic deservingness and self-reliance in contemporary Myanmar." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 34, no. 2 (2019): 327-365.
- Taylor, Robert H. "Elections in Burma/Myanmar: For whom and why?" In Robert H. Taylor (ed.), *The politics of elections in Southeast Asia*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 164-183.
- Walton, Matthew J. *Buddhism, politics and political thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge University Press, 2016, esp. pp. 163-191.
- Walton, Matthew J. "Containing the self-interested individual: Moral scepticism of political parties in Myanmar." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38, no. 3 (2019): 337-357.