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

This module addresses one of the fundamental problems in comparative politics—the creation and legitimation of political order—in the context of two polities on the Southeast Asian mainland: Myanmar (also known as Burma) and Thailand (previously known as Siam).

Burma and Thailand can be fruitfully compared to gain a better understanding of dynamics and trajectories of political change beyond the west. The two countries share important similarities, but they have also diverged in significant respects since the 19th century. In both countries, Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion, Buddhist kingship was the traditional form of government, and in the early 19th century both polities were powerful military and economic actors on the Southeast Asian mainland. In less than a century, however, Burma had ceased to exist as a sovereign entity and its monarchy disbanded and sent into exile in British India, while Siam retained nominal independence by acquiescing to serve, effectively, as an economic appendage to the British empire.

Once Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948, Burmese political elites joined their Thai counterparts in the effort to construct a nation-state that conforms to Westphalian and Weberian norms. The two countries have diverged in terms of their relative success in that political project. Myanmar, which is home to the world’s longest-running civil wars, has frequently been regarded as a “failed” state while Thailand is considered an “intermediate” state. Livelihoods in both countries were until recently largely dependent on the cultivation of rice and other agricultural commodities. However, since the 1960s, the governments of the two countries have pursued a shared ambition to industrialize their economies, with strikingly different degrees of success. As a consequence, Myanmar today stands as the poorest member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) while Thailand, following a long period of very high economic growth rates, has emerged as one of the more prosperous. Since 1997, when the collapse of the Thai Baht triggered the so-called Asian Financial Crisis, Thailand’s rate of economic growth has, however, slowed down, and the country now appears stuck in what some theorists refer to as the middle-income trap.

Amidst this divergence, striking similarities nevertheless remain. Both countries have long histories of elections, but consensus has yet to emerge on what role democratic procedures should play in the political order. Both countries have been ruled by unelected generals for extended periods since the late 1950s. Indeed, Myanmar has been described as the world’s most durable military dictatorship (1962-2011) and Thailand not only as having had more coups than any other country but also as the richest country ever to witness a successful military overthrow of a democratic government. Although military dictatorships have become rather 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). In contrast with the 2014 coup in Thailand, Myanmar’s 2021 coup triggered an immediate and massive popular backlash which has been met with deadly repression. Thailand returned to a more indirect form of military-dominated rule following elections in 2019, and Myanmar’s caretaker government has promised to hold elections in
In both countries, elected politicians in general, and Thaksin Shinawatra (Thailand) and Aung San Suu Kyi (Myanmar) in particular, are perceived by the military leadership as grave threats to their conception of the ideal political order.

Throughout the module, particular attention will be devoted to questions concerning political legitimacy and legitimation. How have rulers in Burma and Thailand sought to transform “strength into right and obedience into duty” (Rousseau)? To what extent have they succeeded? What languages of legitimation have been adopted by governments, and with what consequences for the manner of their rule? What actors matter for political legitimation? On what basis do citizens challenge the claims to legitimacy made by rulers? Although Huntington (1991) cautioned that “legitimacy is a mushy concept that political analysts do well to avoid,” this module proceeds on the assumption that legitimacy and its contestation are central features of the making and unmaking of states and regimes.

Lectures

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

1. Introduction
2. State Making
3. Nation Building
4. The Cold War and the Fashioning of the Security State
5. Development and Demands for Regime Change
6. Participation and Legitimation in the 21st Century

Background and general readings

Supervision readings are indicated in the next section of this guide. You are, however, recommended to consult background readings on the political histories of Myanmar and Thailand. The following texts are all excellent:


You are also encouraged to follow current political events in both countries. Useful online sources include:

*Asia Times* ([https://asiatimes.com](https://asiatimes.com))
*Bangkok Post* ([https://www.bangkokpost.com](https://www.bangkokpost.com))
*Frontier Myanmar* ([https://www.frontiermyanmar.net](https://www.frontiermyanmar.net))
Supervisions

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

In preparing your supervision essays, you should at a minimum draw on the starred (*) readings. You are also encouraged to sample other texts on the reading list to gain a broad understanding of central themes and issues.

In preparation for your supervision, you should familiarize yourself with some conceptual and analytical perspectives concerning legitimacy and legitimation that inform the module as a whole:


If you would like to delve deeper into conceptual and theoretical questions concerning legitimation and legitimacy, please explore the following:

Essay 1: How have political elites in what is today Myanmar and Thailand sought to build modern states and nations, and how successful have their efforts been?


Essay 2: How have rulers in Myanmar and Thailand sought to claim legitimacy, and how successful have those efforts been?


