

Southeast Asia: Burma/Myanmar and Siam/Thailand in Comparative Perspective

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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 State Administration Council has promised to hold

elections, possibly in 2023. 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:

Baker, Chris, and Pasuk Phongpaichit. *A History of Thailand*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Connors, Michael Kelly. *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand*. Routledge, 2003.

Taylor, Robert H. *The State in Myanmar*. NUS Press, 2009.

Thant Myint-U. *The Making of Modern Burma*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

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

Asia Times (<https://asiatimes.com>)

Bangkok Post (<https://www.bangkokpost.com>)

Frontier Myanmar (<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net>)

Fulcrum: Analysis on Southeast Asia (<https://fulcrum.sg>)

Global New Light of Myanmar (<https://gnlm.com.mm>)

Khao Sod English (<https://www.khaosodenglish.com>)

Myanmar NOW (<https://www.myanmar-now.org/en>)

New Mandala (<https://www.newmandala.org>)

Tea Circle – a Forum for New Perspectives on Burma/Myanmar (<https://teacircleoxford.com>)

The Irrawaddy (<https://www.irrawaddy.com>)

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 'core' readings. You are also encouraged to sample some of the supplementary readings to gain a broader and deeper understanding of central themes and issues.

In preparation for your supervisions, you should familiarize yourself with some conceptual and analytical perspectives concerning legitimacy and legitimation that inform the module as a whole. The starred readings below are particularly helpful:

- *Alagappa, Muthiah. "The Anatomy of Legitimacy" and "The Bases of Legitimacy."
In *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority*, edited by Muthiah Alagappa. Stanford University Press, 1995, pp. 9-53.
- Barker, Rodney. *Legitimizing Identities: The Self-presentations of Rulers and Subjects*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, especially pp. 1-40.
- *Chai-Anan Samudavanija. "The Three-Dimensional State." In *Rethinking Third World Politics*, edited by James Manor. Longman, 1991; Routledge, 2013, pp. 15-23. [Originally published in *IDS Bulletin* 21, no. 4 (1990): 5-9.]
- Huntington, Samuel P. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma press, 1993, pp. 46-58.

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

Core Readings:

- Callahan, Mary P. "State Formation in the Shadow of the Raj: Violence, Warfare and Politics in Colonial Burma." *Southeast Asian Studies* 39, no. 4 (2002): 513-536.
- Paik, Christopher, and Jessica Vechbanyongratana. "Path to Centralization and Development: Evidence from Siam." *World Politics* 71, no. 2 (2019): 289-331.
- Taylor, Robert H. "Freedom in Burma and Thailand: Inside or Outside the State?" In *The Idea of Freedom in Asia and Africa*, edited by RH Taylor, pp. 143-181. Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Thant Myint-U. *The Making of Modern Burma*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, especially pp. 104-29, 154-185.
- Thongchai Winichakul. "The Quest for 'Siwilai': A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-century Siam." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 3 (2000): 528-549.

Supplementary Readings:

State Formation in Comparative Perspective

- Anderson, Benedict R O'G. "Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies," in *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years*. Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014, pp. 15-45.
- Chong, Ja Ian. *External Intervention and the Politics of State Formation: China, Indonesia, and Thailand, 1893-1952*. Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 1-26, 200-223.
- Englehart, Neil A. "Resource Conflict and Ethnic Peace in Northern Thailand." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 49, no. 1 (2008): 98-110.
- Englehart, Neil A. "Representing Civilization: Solidarism, Ornamentalism, and Siam's Entry into International Society." *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 3 (2010): 417-439.
- Lieberman, Victor. *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*. Vol. 1. Cambridge University Press, 2003, especially pp. 6-66.
- Riggs, Fred W. *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity*. University of Hawaii Press, 1966, especially pp. 15-64.
- Scott, James C. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press, 2009, pp. 1-63, 238-282, 324-337.
- Vanderveest, Peter, and Nancy Lee Peluso. "Territorialization and State Power in Thailand." *Theory and Society* 24, no. 3 (1995): 385-426.

Nation Making

- Dittmer, Lowell, ed. *Burma or Myanmar? The Struggle for National Identity*. World Scientific, 2010, especially chapters 1 and 13.
- Ferguson, Jane. *Repossessing Shanland: Myanmar, Thailand, and a Nation-state Deferred*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2021, pp. 3-61, 243-254.
- Ratanaporn Sethakul. "Lanna Buddhism and Bangkok Centralization in Late Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Century." In *Theravada Buddhism in Colonial Contexts*, edited by Thomas Borchert, pp. 81-100. Routledge, 2018.

- Schober, Juliane. "To be Burmese is to be Buddhist: Formations of Buddhist modernity in colonial Burma." In *Theravada Buddhism in Colonial Contexts*, edited by Thomas Borchert, pp. 21-41. Routledge, 2018.
- South, Ashley. "Towards 'Emergent Federalism' in Post-coup Myanmar." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 43, no. 3 (2021): 439-460.
- Streckfuss, David. "An 'Ethnic' Reading of 'Thai' History in the Twilight of the Century-old Official 'Thai' National Model." *South East Asia Research* 20, no. 3 (2012): 305-327.
- Taylor, Robert H. "Do States Make Nations? The Politics of Identity in Myanmar Revisited." *South East Asia Research* 13, no. 3 (2005): 261-286.
- Thongchai Winichakul. *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994, especially pp. 1-127, 164-174.
- Turner, Alicia. *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma*. University of Hawaii Press, 2014.

Development

- Brown, Ian. *Burma's Economy in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge University Press, 2013, especially pp. 1-130.
- Furnivall, John Sydenham. *The Fashioning of Leviathan: The Beginnings of British Rule in Burma*. Canberra: Dept. of Anthropology, Australian National University in association with the Economic History of Southeast Asia Project and the Thai-Yunnan Project, 1991.
- Kullada Kesboonchoo-Mead. *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism*. Routledge, 2004.
- Larsson, Tomas. *Land and Loyalty: Security and the Development of Property Rights in Thailand*. Cornell University Press, 2012, especially pp. 30-107.
- Wasana Wongsurawat. *The Crown and the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation*. University of Washington Press, 2019, especially pp. 1-11, 156-160.

Law

- Aung-Thwin, Maitrii. "The Making of Myanmar's 1947 Constitution: Geography, Ethnicity, and Law." In *Constitutional Foundings in Southeast Asia*, edited by Tan, Kevin YL, and Ngoc Son Bui. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, pp. 111-138.
- Brown, Ian. "Law and Order, the Rule of Law, and the Legitimation of the Colonial Presence in Late British Burma." *The Historical Journal* (2021): 1-21.
- Loos, Tamara. *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand*. Cornell University Press, 2006.
- Mérieau, Eugénie. "The 1932 Compromise Constitution: Matrix of Thailand's Permanent Constitutional Instability." In *Constitutional Foundings in Southeast Asia*, edited by Kevin YL Tan and Bui Ngoc Son. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, pp. 297-318.

Women

- Bowie, Katherine. "Women's Suffrage in Thailand: A Southeast Asian Historiographical Challenge." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 4 (2010): 708-741.
- Ikeya, Chie. "The 'Traditional' High Status of Women in Burma: A Historical Reconsideration." *Journal of Burma Studies* 10, no. 1 (2005): 51-81.
- Loos, Tamara. "Sex in the Inner City: The Fidelity Between Sex and Politics in Siam." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 4 (2005): 881-909.

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

Core Readings:

- Chambers, Paul, and Napisa Waitoolkiat. "The Resilience of Monarchised Military in Thailand." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 3 (2016): 425-444.
- Loos, Tamara. "A Revolutionary Change in Thailand." *Foreign Affairs*, 7 December 2020.
- McCarthy, Stephen. "Overturning the Alms Bowl: The Price of Survival and the Consequences for Political Legitimacy in Burma." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 62, no. 3 (2008): 298-314.
- Puangthong Pawakapan. *Infiltrating Society: The Thai Military's Internal Security Affairs*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021, especially pp. 1-61, 119-150.
- Thant Myint-U. "Myanmar's Coming Revolution." *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 4 (2021): 132-145.
- Ye Phone Kyaw. "The Development of National Ideology in Myanmar: Political Socialization and the Role of the Tatmadaw since the Second World War." *Journal of Burma Studies* 24, no. 2 (2020): 147-195.

Supplementary Readings:

Legitimation in Context

- Chai-Anan Samudavanija. "Thailand: A Stable Semi-Democracy." In *Politics in Developing Countries: Volume 3, Asia*, edited by Larry Diamond, Juan Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset. Lynne Rienner, 1990, pp. 305-346.
- Chao-Tzang Yawngnhe. "Burma: The Depoliticization of the Political." In *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority*, edited by Muthiah Alagappa. Stanford University Press, 1995, pp. 170-92.
- Hewison, Kevin and Kengkij Kitirianglarp. 2010. "'Thai-style Democracy': The Royalist Struggle for Thailand's Politics," in *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand*, edited by Søren Ivarsson & Lotte Isager. NIAS Press 2010, pp. 179-202.
- Khorapin Phuaphansawat. "Anti-royalism in Thailand Since 2006: Ideological Shifts and Resistance." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 3 (2018): 363-394.
- McCargo, Duncan. "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand." *The Pacific Review* 18, no. 4 (2005): 499-519.
- Steinberg, David I. "'Legitimacy' in Burma/Myanmar: Concepts and Implications." In *Myanmar: State, Society and Ethnicity*, edited by N Ganesan and Kyaw Yin Hlaing. ISEAS, 2007, pp. 109-42.
- Wells, Tamas. *Narrating Democracy in Myanmar*. Amsterdam University Press, 2021, especially pp. 77-93, 119-145.

Elections

- Anek Laothamatas. "A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand." In *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, edited by RH Taylor, Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Morgenbesser, Lee. "In Search of Stability: Electoral Legitimation under Authoritarianism in Myanmar." *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2015): 163-188.

- Reny, Marie-Eve. "Myanmar's Transition and the Resurgence of Buddhist Nationalism: How Incumbents Seek to Hold on to Power." *Asian Survey* 60, no. 6 (2020): 1072-1089.
- Ricks, Jacob I. "Thailand's 2019 Vote: The General's Election." *Pacific Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2019): 443-457.
- Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee. "The Conundrum of a Dominant Party in Thailand." *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 4, no. 1 (2019): 102-119.
- Taylor, Robert H. "Elections in Burma/Myanmar: For Whom and Why?" In *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, edited by RH Taylor, Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Thawngmung, Ardeth. "The Myanmar Elections 2015: Why the National League for Democracy Won a Landslide Victory." *Critical Asian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2016): 132-142.

Coups d'État

- Aim Sinpeng. "Corruption, Morality, and the Politics of Reform in Thailand." *Asian Politics & Policy* 6, no. 4 (2014): 523-538.
- Anderson, Ben. "Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup." *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 9, no. 3 (1977): 13-30.
- Aung-Thwin, Michael. "1948 and the Myth of Burma's Independence," in *Independent Burma at 40 years: Six Assessments*, edited by Josef Silverstein. Cornell Southeast Asian Program, 1989, pp. 19-34.
- Frydenlund, Iselin. "Protecting Buddhist Women from Muslim Men: 'Love Jihad' and the Rise of Islamophobia in Myanmar." *Religions* 12, no. 12 (2021): 1082.
- Thak Chaloeintarana. *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism Paternalism*. Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2007, especially pp. 81-110.

Development

- Desatova, Petra. "Thailand 4.0 and the Internal Focus of Nation Branding." *Asian Studies Review* 42, no. 4 (2018): 682-700.
- Larsson, Tomas. *Land and Loyalty: Security and the Development of Property Rights in Thailand*. Cornell University Press, 2012, especially pp. 108-146.
- McCarthy, Gerard. "Class Dismissed? Explaining the Absence of Economic Injustice in the NLD's Governing Agenda." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38, no. 3 (2019): 358-380.
- Nakanishi, Yoshihiro. *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution: The State and Military in Burma, 1962-88*. NUS Press, 2013, especially pp. 1-24, 61-96, 269-316.
- Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker. "Thaksin's Populism." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (2008): 62-83.
- Phillips, Matthew. "Re-ordering the Cold War Cosmos: King Bhumibol's 1960 US Tour." *Diplomatic History* 45, no. 2 (2021): 253-267.
- Thawngmung, Ardeth Maung. "Rural Perceptions of State Legitimacy in Burma/Myanmar." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 30, no. 2 (2003): 1-40.