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ETHNICITY AND POLITICAL UNREST IN THAILAND

by

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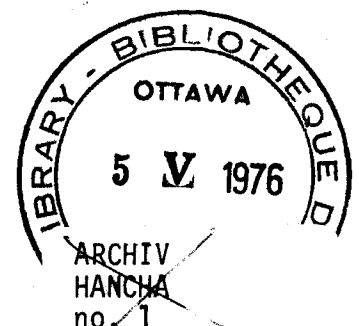
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### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The inhabitants of the present Thailand can be classified into six ethnic groups: \* Negrito, Austronesian, Mon-Khmer, Chinese, Tibeto-Burman and Thai.

The Austronesian group is composed of Malay and Chao Nam (Sea Gypsies).

The Mon-Khmer group is composed of: Sakai, Lawa, Kamuk or Puteung, Chaobon, Chawang, So, Saek, Kaleung, Ka Brao, Ka Hinhao, Sui or Kui, Khmer, Mon, Annamite.

The Tibeto-Burman group is composed mostly of Hill Tribal peoples: Musser, Akha (Ee-kor), Lisor, Karen (Karian), Meo, Yao, Tin or Ka-Tin, Kha Tong Leung (Phi Tong Lueng).

The Thai group is composed of: Thai, Lao, Shan or Ngio, Lu, Putai, Yaw, Yuai, Sanam.

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\* Source: Siam Directory 1973

There is a very little information on the first races to inhabit Thailand. Possibly this part of Asia was originally peopled by Negritos. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that Negritos up until quite recently lived as far North as Chaiya and that the primitive jungle folk called Chawang, living in the remoter parts of Chanthaburi and Prachinburi, show a marked Negrito strain.

While the later movements of the Burmese, Thai and Annamites have followed a North to South line, it seems that the Mon-Khmer people, today represented by the Mons, Cambodians and numerous so-called Ka tribes in Indochina, originally came from India. This theory is strongly supported by the philological and anthropological evidence, which shows that the present hill people of Northern India and the Mon-Khmer belong to the same stock.

The migration waves have been slow, the Mon-Khmer migration may have started from a western centre (India), while the Burmese-Thai started from two different northern centers. The Thai group (Thai, Lao, Shan) knew by the Chinese as Ailao was situated in South China, where many millions of the Thai-speaking people still remain today.

The Mon ruled most of the Chao Phraya plain as early as the 7th century A.D. while the Khmer occupied what is now Cambodia and eastern Thailand. At the same time the Ailao founded the Nan Chao kingdom in Yunnan which was broken up in the 13th century by the

Mongol armies of Kublai Khan.

Long before this time, however, there had been a constant flow of Thai emigrants to Burma and the present Shan States, Northern Thailand and Tongking, where they began to form tiny states under chieftains called "Chaos". It was, however, not before the middle and end of the 13th century that the Thai conquered Central and Northern Thailand, respectively from their Khmer and Mon masters. The mighty Thai state "Sukothai" was founded by Ram Khamhaeng in the later half of the 13th century. This kingdom was expanded down the Chao-Phraya valley and into the Malay Peninsula. The Thai thus drove a wedge between the two great branches of the Mon-Khmer group, separating the Mon on the west from the Khmer on the east. Though possibly a part of the original population fled to the hills before the conquerors, the majority remained where they were and by intermarriage were absorbed by the Thai. The Thai had a habit which adds difficulties to the task of the ethnologist. They frequently took large numbers of prisoners of war and planted them down to colonize a part of the country far away from their original homes.

The tribal peoples in the border areas of the present Thailand fronting Burma and Laos are not in significant numbers. There are six major tribes totalling approximately 200,000; the Karen, known in Thai as Karian, probably numbering about 75,000; the MEO numbering about 50,000; the EE-KOR, about 28,000; the LISOR about 19,000;

the LAHU, also known as MUSSEER, about 17,000 and the YAO about 12,000. Another large group, the LAWA, is sometimes classified as a hill tribe and there are a number of smaller groups. All the tribes are mongoloid, but their common point of origin with the Thai must lie many millenia back in human prehistory. These tribes are ethnically and culturally distinct from one another.

The fact that most of the tribes people have not been in Thailand very long since they are the most recent surge of the population movement southwards from China, is the main reason for the lack of accurate information regarding their numbers and cultures. Like the Thai people all the tribal people are represented in other countries over the border. In some cases the parent group is much larger than its offspring in Thailand. For instance, there are more Karen in Burma than there are in Thailand, and compared to the 50,000 Meos in Thailand there are nearly four millions of them in the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Kweichow.

The hill tribes belong to the Sino-Tibetan stock. They can be divided roughly into two main streams: the first being the Yao-Meo-Pateng group with close Chinese affinities, the second being the Tibeto-Burman group which is of Lolo extraction and suggests a stronger Tibetan influence. From the first group the Meo and the Yao are represented in Northern Thailand. Their origin is roughly in areas east of Kweichow and Yunnan in China. Thus, they had been exposed to Chinese influence for several centuries before they migrated into Vietnam, Laos and recently also into Thailand.

The first Chinese settlers, or permanent residents probably came to Chao Phraya valley at the end of the 13th century. The supremacy of the Chinese fleet contributed largely to the Chinese establishment in Thailand. By the early 15th century they were accepted as well recognized features in the ports of Thailand and other South-East Asian countries. It can be said that from this period onward there already existed "Overseas Chinese" in Thailand. Those Chinese who came were mostly from the coastal region of China. They left because of civil war or natural disaster. Originally they came to work and did not intend to remain and die in Thailand. Having succeeded in businesses they became trapped and remained in Thailand.

The economic success of the Chinese in Thailand created another big migration wave of the Chinese to Thailand during the beginning of the 20th century. The "newcomers" or "Sin Keh" as the old established Chinese merchants called them provided for the labor force for the expanded commercial activities in Thailand. This flow continued on until even after the Second World War. The early Chinese immigrants in Thailand have never been treated the same way as their colleagues in the European colonized countries. The Chinese immigrants in those countries were exploited by the European colonial powers which paid very little attention to their well-being and their children's education. As alien laborers and small shop owners, they were separated from the large masses of the indigenous people. No effort was made by the European rulers to develop good relations between immigrants and the local masses. The indigenous people hated both

the Chinese and the Europeans as intruders and conquerors and yet remained powerless to rebel. The Chinese were forced to cooperation with the Europeans in order to survive. After the departure of the European, local nationalism simply turned against the Chinese minorities and developed into today's racial distrust.

The situation of the Muslim minorities in the Southern part of Thailand which concentrated in the four provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun was different. The Thais have always been considered as intruders by the inhabitants of Malay peninsula since the southward expansion of Sukothai empire in the 13th century. Converted to Islam by Arab traders as early as the seventh century they had many difficulties to assimilate with the Thai-Buddhists. The relationship between the Thai-Muslims in the four southern provinces (as they are now classified by the government) and the central government have thus been a long history of fluctuations between relative amity and relative hostility which is subjected to a closer analysis in the later part of this paper.

#### Ethnic groups in Thailand under military rule: an overview

Since the coup d'état of 1932, installing a constitutional monarchy, Thailand was ruled by military strongmen for over 40 years, from Marshal P. Pibulsonggram to Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn with only short intervals of democratic government. The prime objective of the military régime is an "indivisible Thailand" which is translated into policy towards ethnic groups.

During this period, the Chinese minority has continued to enjoy a smooth process of assimilation into the Thai society. The Chinese have not been subjected to any discriminatory measures and their business interests during this period have prospered. The formal ties between Thailand and the Republic of China have helped the latter to remain close to the Thai Chinese community. This link does not represent a danger to Thailand since it is economically oriented. Taiwan simply has been one of the best places for many of Thai Chinese to make handsome profits. There has been no major effort by the Government of the Republic of China to intervene in the political assimilation of Thai Chinese into the Thai society. The Taiwan government has been too preoccupied over the contest with the People's Republic of China for the loyalty of the overseas Chinese, to intervene in Thai affairs.

The People's Republic of China, on the other hand, has directed its efforts towards support of the Thai communist insurgency movement in which Thai groups outnumber the Chinese ethnically. The People's Republic has therefore been more concerned with the ideological struggle in Thailand than with any concentration on the Thai-Chinese community simply because it is the overseas Chinese.

The main political unrest during this period has centred mainly on the communist insurgency in the North, the Northeast and in the South. Some ethnic groups have joined force with the communist insurgents in order to put pressure on the central government. In most cases, the prime objectives of the ethnic groups have been the betterment of their



living standards, their place in the society and their right to the full citizenship. The ideological struggle plays little or no part in the partnership between ethnic insurgents and their Thai communist allies. Ethnic groups who suffered most during the military regime were the Hill tribal peoples in the North and the Thai-Muslims in the South.

The Thai-Muslim population in the four provinces of the southern Thailand, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun and Yala amounts to 1.5 million people and makes up roughly 80% of the total population of these four provinces. These Thai-Muslims together with approximately 200,000 Hill tribal peoples in the North were often treated harshly and unjustly by the military governments. The Thai-Muslims work mainly as rubber planters, farmers and fishermen and they usually have a lower standard of living and fewer educational and employment opportunities than Thai-Buddhists. The Muslims have kept their own distinctive dress, religion, language and customs. In 1947 a separatist movement was created under the name of the "National Liberation Front of Pattani" (NLFP). Its objective was the liberation of the three southern provinces: Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala. Records from the Ayutthaya Dynasty show that Pattani (which then encompassed to-day's provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and half of Songkla) was a sovereign state under the then Kingdom of Siam, like several other sovereign states which are now part of Malaysia. Virtually all the rulers had Malay names and they were succeeded with only a few

exceptions by their sons when the central government sent emissaries to rule the state. The only surviving member of the former Pattani rulers is Tunku Yala Nasae currently living in political asylum in the Kelantan State of Malaysia. Tunku Yala has in the past been a prominent leader. However, he is no longer regarded as "active". During a recent interview, he maintained that he has no position or any formal connection with the NLFP. He however urged that the Thai government give complete autonomy to the three Southern provinces "because the majority of the people there are unique, with their customs, religion and tradition greatly differing from the rest of the country". The suppressive measures used by military governments had worsened the situation. The leader of NLFP, Por-Yeh, was forced to go underground in 1947. Among many incidents, the downing of the then celebrated Muslim leader Hayi Sulong occurring when Thailand was ruled by Marshal P. Pibulsongkram and Police Chief, General Pao Sriyanond, has remained a major sore point against the central government. Another bitter memory from the administration of Marshal P. Pibulsongkram was his "Westernisation" programs before World War II, one of which allegedly forced the Muslim population to raise pigs. Up to now it can be said that the liberation movement has scored no big successes.

The Hill tribal ethnic groups represent another minority group problem. During the post war period, Hill tribe peoples living in the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, Laos, Burma and Thailand, have experienced three kinds of situation:

- (i) In the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam they have been welcomed with "open arms" by the central governments. They enjoy legal rights, and have autonomous or semi-autonomous regions. Political integration has been successful.
- (ii) In countries which were colonized, such as Laos, Burma and Vietnam, the western colonialists, French and British, generally protected the hill tribal peoples against the claims of the majority lowland culture. They provided higher education to the tribal peoples and often recognized local leaders, customary legal systems, and a degree of autonomy. This policy resulted in some difficulties in the post-colonial period, since the colonizers produced highly educated tribal leaders whose claims on behalf of their own peoples were not accepted by the newly independent central governments.
- (iii) The Hill tribal peoples in Thailand fall into a third category, worse in many ways for them. They have never been received with "open arms" from the government. In addition, due to the fact that Thailand has never been colonized by any western power, the tribal peoples have never had any foreign protection. They thus enjoy none of the legal rights and privileges which their brothers enjoyed in British-occupied Burma or French-occupied Vietnam, the rescinding of which by the Rangoon and Saigon governments led to subsequent revolts in their respective territories.

Thai military government of the past 30 years, faced with minority group unrest, have succeeded in diverting public attention from the root causes of this problem, by labelling all unrest as "communist insurgency". This may have been a useful short-term domestic and international public relations play, but in the long run has exacerbated ethnic problems.

Current problems: an analytical approach

The overthrow of Thanom-Prapas military regime by the students on October 14, 1973, opened a new era in the Thai experience with democracy. The downfall of the powerful Thanom-Prapas clique came as a surprise for the Thai public. For since 1932, military juntas have only been replaced in power by other military juntas. But student power alone would not have toppled the government unless circumstances were very much in the students' favour. Despite the unconstitutional nature of their regime, it was always understood that the generals ruled with the acquiescence of both the king and the populace. When it became clear that the generals lacked both, they were finished. But the installation of democratic governments after 1973 did not solve the problem of minority groups in Thailand. The present government continues to carry out the centralization policy when it comes to local administration. The bureaucracy, one of the most powerful institutions in Thailand, emerged intact from the political turmoil and continues to play a dominant role in the post-military régime.

The Thai-Muslim problem in the four southern provinces constitutes the most serious ethnic group problem in Thailand. There is still no significant change in the government's policy from the military régime and the problem is so complex that there is no ready-made solution.

The Thai-Muslim separatist movement is not the only movement operating in the four southern provinces of Thailand. There are also the Malay communist insurgency which from time to time crosses the border to escape attack from the Malaysian government's forces, the Thai communist insurgency which is not composed of solely the Thai-Muslims, the Chinese-Communist insurgency (a dissident group of the Communist Party of Malaysia) and in addition to these movements, there are ordinary organized bandits with no political affiliation.

To understand the problem of Thai-Muslims in the southern part of Thailand, many factors have to be taken into account:

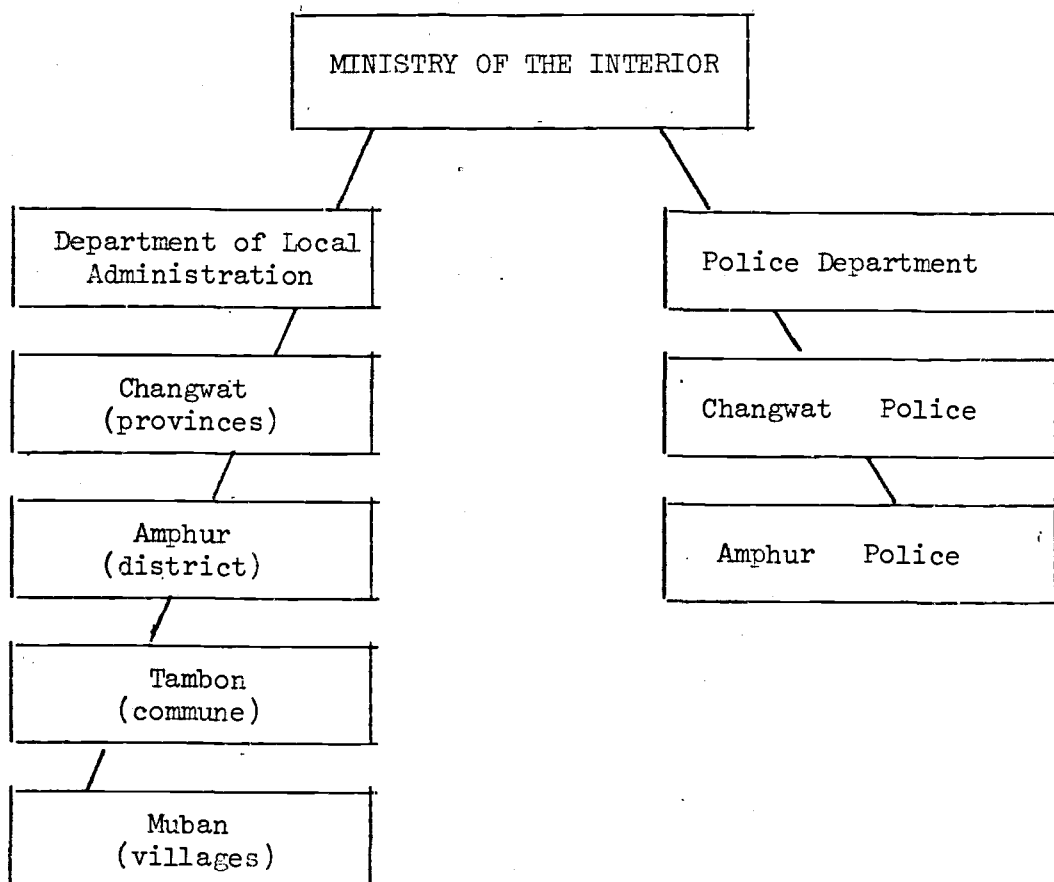
(i) The Process of Assimilation

The process of assimilation is very slow. Inter-marriage between a Buddhist and a Muslim is almost impossible due to rigid Islamic law. Unlike the Chinese who by the second or third generation were completely integrated into the Thai customs and culture, the Thai-Muslim remains today culturally separated from the Thai-Buddhist as he was centuries ago. In this regard, the government, even under the military régime (except for a short period of Marshal Pibul's administration) has always been tolerant. The Muslims are free to

worship their religion and free to apply Islamic law in marriage and inheritance matters where Muslim judges preside. The policy of cultural pluralism has always been followed by the central governments.

(ii) Administration

Local administration seems to be the main problem not only for the Thai-Muslims in the four southern provinces but also for people in the rural area in general. Administration at the local level in Thailand is highly centralized. Administration and law enforcement at the local level in Thailand can be viewed roughly as illustrated by the following diagram:



With the exception of the Kamman (head of Tambon) and Puyaiban (head of Muban) both of whom are elected, chiefs of other administrative units (governor of the provinces, Nai Amphurs for the Amphurs) are appointed by the Minister of the Interior, and the working structure in both the Department of Local Administration and the Police Department is highly hierarchical and innovative. This leads to the patron-client relationship between the "gouvernants" and the "gouvernés". When it comes to the "Buddhist gouvernants" and the "Muslim gouvernés" the situation gets worse. In a recent interview by the Bangkok Post, a devoted supporter of NLFP said that "So long as the Police still harass the local Muslim people and government officials continue to exploit us, we will carry on fighting toward our objective of setting up a self-ruled independent state. If the Thai government ignores our plea and insists on suppressing us by force we will become even more determined. The three Southern provinces (Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat) will then explode in flames".

(iii) Economic factors

The provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat have always been the economic underdogs of Southern Thailand. The average per capita income from agricultural production of these three provinces is only \$30 per year while the remaining southern provinces reached the annual average of \$130. The main income of these three provinces is derived from rubber. Recently, the villagers have very much suffered from the fall in the price of rubber. Five years ago, rubber was selling for \$.75 per kilo; now a kilo sells for \$0.25-\$0.30. The problem of

big landowners has aggravated the situation, usually plantation workers split the tapped rubber on a 50-50 basis, with greedier landowners taking two thirds of the produce; these workers are even harder hit by the fall in rubber price.

The problem of hill tribal peoples is not as complicated as the Thai-Muslim problem. However, the government has to act very fast before it is too late.

General Saiyud Kerdpol, deputy commander of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) pointed out that the Thai government is persuing the phantom of a "technical solution" to the problems of the North, vainly believing that some yet-to-be discovered agricultural innovation will end both opium culture and the revolt in the hills. Thai officials are almost completely oblivious to the political questions involved, and to the alternatives. This means not just citizenship, with a few tribal votes sprinkled in among an enormous number of lowlanders. What is crucial is participation in the bureaucracy and real power to act as coherent group in politics. Compounding the complexity of this problem for the government is the lack of education among the hill tribes which condemns them to economic backwardness and necessarily, to the lack of leaders who could represent them in the bureaucracy. General Saiyud's message here is "lack of education among hill tribal peoples".



The Monarchy has played a very important role in improving the living standards of the hill tribal peoples. Both the King and the Queen have encouraged the hill tribal peoples to set up cooperatives, develop farming, help market their products. The royal program is so successful that the Hill tribes have whole-heartedly accepted the King as their natural sovereign. The Monarchy has thus become the common link between the hill tribes and the lowlanders. However, the program under the royal patronage is only limited to a small number of hill tribal peoples around Chiangmai area, there is still a large number of them spread around the mountainous region in the northern part of Thailand who need help from the government.

Communist terrorists constitute the main obstacle to government access to the hill tribal peoples. They want to prevent governmental agencies from extending their works into the hills. In doing so they are successful in isolating the hill tribal peoples from the government and thus facilitate the task of converting them to communism and arming them to fight the government forces.

Contrary to the widespread believe that Laotians in Thailand represent another ethnic group unrest for the Thai government, the fact is that the Laotians belong to the same ethnic group as the Thais. The sole problem with the 5 million Laotians in the northeast is communist insurgency. Thailand's active communist insurgency began there in 1965. Left-wing politicians traditionally have a large number of supporters, mainly because of the relative poverty of this dry and arid region.

With the communist take-over in Laos, the problem of Northeast Thailand will certainly deteriorate unless the government comes out with an effective integrated development program for this part of the country.

Another main concern in the northeast is the 50,000 Vietnamese, most of whom migrated to Thailand after the second World War to escape the hostilities in Indochina. Thai government policy for the past 20 years has been to send them back to Vietnam. The question of repatriation was first agreed between the Thai government and the Hanoi government in 1959. The escalation of the Vietnam war interrupted the program. This question was raised again when a delegation of North-Vietnamese government visited Bangkok in May 1975 and it is likely that this programme will soon be resumed. Meanwhile, the danger of the Vietnamese minority in Thailand becoming "pomme de discorde" between Thailand and North Vietnam is prominent.

#### Prospect for the future

It is time for the Thais to come out with constructive ideas rather than blaming the government for the mistakes of its predecessors over the last forty years. They can no longer afford to be "a silent majority". Political participation at all levels is urgently needed. The figures of the last general election, held on April 4, 1976 are far from being satisfactory: only 40% of voters in the whole country turned out at the polls with only 27% in Bangkok.

It is likely that the new coalition government will be more stable than the last one and thus will be in a better position to undertake drastic reform.

The problem of ethnic groups is one of the most serious problems to be tackled by the new government. Violent suppression by former governments has already proved to be a fatal policy. Decentralization seems to be the answer to many problems in Thailand, including ethnic minorities.

Bangkok has to cease to rule the countryside like conquered provinces. More autonomy should be given to the provinces. Local political organs such as village council should be given more authority. There should be no need to refer every complaint lodged by villagers to the Ministry of the Interior in Bangkok for action which usually never takes place.

Police forces should be localized. Certainly many police functions such as intelligence gathering and crime labs need to be centralized in Bangkok. This does not however, prevent the delegation of more power to local police when dealing with such local matters as village defence and apprehension of petty offenders. A framework should be designed so that police officers and bureaucrats in the provinces would be responsive to the rural public rather than to ministries in Bangkok. The ultimate goal would be an elected local government with a loose supervision from Bangkok.

Within the framework of such reform the ethnic groups will have access to self-government at the local level, and this is their prime objective. Once this objective has been reached there will be no reason for them not to voluntarily cooperate with the government at the national level. The separatist movement will die a natural death.

To help prepare the rural population for more autonomy, the government should undertake a "mass education" program leading to more political consciousness and active participation of the public in civic affairs.

The situation in Thailand and in its neighbouring countries allows no room for hesitation. Drastic reforms should be immediately undertaken before "the Land of Smiles" turns into "the Land of Blood and Tears".



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