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Focus: Thai nationalism is antithetical to democracy

By Nidhi Eoseewong

The Thai "national culture" does not run well on the tracks of the democratic system. This is the reason why Thailand's progress on the road of democracy has always been one of fits, starts and jolts.

[Prof Nidhi Eoseewong is a noted historian and social activist based in Chiang Mai, who initiated the "MidNight University". This translated article will appear in a publication associated with the Documenta 12 art event in Germany.]

Sanitsuda Ekachai, in her column in the Bangkok Post, asked what flaw it is in Thailand's culture that makes us always wind up, if not with crooked politicians, then with military dictators? I am trying to cure a case of the hiccups by pondering an answer. The first ones that flooded into my head were the ones that we hear so often:

Thais lack patience and endurance.

Thais prefer to look for quick, superficial solutions rather than principles that offer long-term benefits.

Thai society is too weak to find political solutions to big problems on its own, so we elect leaders to act as bosses rather than servants.

Then, when the boss misbehaves we have to find a new boss by way of the ballot box.

Democracy is a culture of which Thais are not a part. And so on.

This seems to be working. My hiccups are going away, so I've been able to focus my mind enough to formulate some questions and answers of my own.

The answers are all true, but at the same time each one invites a lot of new questions.

I'll start with a simple one: Are the traits mentioned above part of a permanent, unvarying Thai culture, or of one that changes in response to the prevailing situation?

I think that some Thais would answer one way and some the other. I myself would say that there is change because I believe that culture is the product of relationships that are always changing according to what is taking place around it. But believing



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that, I then have to ask: when these traits appeared and under the influence of what situation? I will try to answer just this question, without mentioning the many others that it invites.

But before answering I'd like to point out that the cultural traits cited above cannot be explained in terms of Thai history once you go back a certain distance into the past. In fact, sometimes we encounter their opposite. For example, it is said that Thais lack endurance, but we did put up with many ineffectual or oppressive monarchs. King Prasatthong, for example, is said to have been extremely cruel, but he died naturally on his sickbed.

At the same time it can be said that patience and endurance haven't been pushed to excessive levels by the Thais of the past. Thai history provides more than a few examples of public uprisings against resented rulers, especially in the North and in Isan. And cases of citizens simply walking away from public registry districts without notification to the authorities were common throughout Thailand.

Before saying that Thais prefer the quick and superficial, it is important to specify the situation. There are people who use a large part of their income to make merit and offer charity in the hope of rewards in their next life, or of attaining Nirvana. How can they be called impatient or interested only in quick fixes and superficial measures?

Nor can it be said that democratic principles are absent from Thai culture. Thai tradition has great respect for the minority voice, especially in the countryside. Even when the wishes of the majority are being followed, care is taken to ensure that the minority do not lose face. This respect for the minority opinion can be called the soul of Thai-style democracy. Otherwise we would have a tyrannical system where 19 million or 16 million voices always decided everything.

On the other hand, it is also true that so much consideration is given to the minority opinion because the channels that Thai culture offers for dissent are traditionally very narrow, so it is necessary to try to "swallow" the minority view and counter it gently.

This is why it is difficult to talk in absolute terms about a democratic culture. I doubt that a culture that is purely democratic exists in any society. We admire the idea of a culture founded on democratic principles, but in trying to create it we only choose those features of Western-style democracy that we want and casually discard those that don't fit our specific case.

Therefore, I think it is necessary to understand the conditions facing Thai culture as it is now, and what it is that makes us fall victim to the destiny that Ms Sanitsuda speaks of.

Even if some aspects of it are the same as they were in the ancient past, the conditions in which it exists now are different. The force that sustains the culture consists exclusively of the conditions that we happen to encounter now, and is not a heritage that we have been handed down from the past.

I believe that the culture which does not allow us to govern ourselves as a democracy is entirely one that came into being together with the formation of our nation state in the recent past. Consequently, it can be called a "national culture", and this Thai "national culture" does not run well on the tracks of the democratic system. This is the reason why Thailand's progress on the road of democracy has always been one of fits, starts and jolts.

Thailand's attainment of nationhood occurred gradually under a

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system of absolute monarchy, beginning during the reign of King Rama V, and it did not come into being independent of the absolute monarchical system. On the contrary, it was constantly directed, guided and managed by that system.

Thai nationalism is of a kind that has spread down from above. The upper strata of the social structure were the first to be assigned importance in the nation, and the phenomenon gradually spread downward to the lower strata of the social structure, the common people.

This process was the direct opposite of the pattern which nationalism has followed in many other societies, where the lower levels of the structure were the first to acquire importance.

As a result, when the Thai people began to realise that there was a new entity - the Thai Nation - that they were a part of, and that it was an important aspect of their identity, the nation already had an anti-democratic nature. Since then the ideals of nationalism in Thailand have been used to obstruct or oppose the attainment of democratic ideals right up until the present.

The Thai revolution of 1932 changed the system of government from absolute monarchy to a constitutional one, but it wasn't a genuine populist revolution. It opened the way for politicians, and especially military leaders, to use the nation as a tool to destroy the democratic rights and freedoms of the people, and with their assent or at least an unwillingness to resist on their part, too.

I think that this cultural weakness in Thai society under the democratic system that we hear about so often is partially the result of the newness of the nation that has shaped itself in Thailand only recently, and not a national trait that has been passed down through the ages.

At the same time, there are many more aspects of this weakness whose causes I suspect can be found in Thai nationalism. For example, our impatience in the arena of politics - our unwillingness to allow democracy the time it needs to correct and stabilise itself. This tendency is connected with the national "spirit" that we have conceived.

What do we mean when we talk about a national spirit? I think it is primarily a memory connected with the country's past or, to put it another way, the nation's history. And as we well know, memories of a nation's history, any nation's history, are entirely constructed. I think that the Thai history that we remember teaches us that Thais are incapable of waiting.

This is because Thai history is a record of leaders and great men, not of the nation as a whole. So people infected with this kind of national spirit always look to leaders to solve problems. They don't think that they themselves have the potential to solve national problems.

I've already said a lot about this issue, and don't want to say any more.

There is one more area of Thai history that I would like to discuss, and I wonder if there are others who will agree with me: When we read Thai history, I get the sensation that it always moves directly ahead in a straight line, with no meandering or a zigzagging off to the sides. No matter what part of history is taken as a starting point, development is seen to take place in stages.

Beginning with the unification of the country, there is incessant advancement: the consolidation of power at a central point, contact and trade with foreign countries. If an enemy sacks the capital, after a short time sovereignty is restored and the country

is back on its way ahead. Make some adjustments to bring things up to date and you have the modern and progressive country that we see today.

Whatever wanderings that do occur in the line of history are very short-term and are caused by the harmful actions of outsiders. Those who embrace the Thai national spirit, therefore, have no awareness of long periods of suffering. They count on a process of change in which they move ahead into the future together with a population strong in body and mind. I think that anyone possessed by a spirit of this kind will not have the patience to deal with problems, because he will feel that any problem that persists over time is unnatural.

(Compare this view with the history of China, especially that of the Warring States Period, before there was a single Chinese emperor, which went on for centuries. The annals of China record much more misery than happiness among the Chinese people. Problems were more natural than the lack of them.)

Unnatural events are portents of bad things to come, and must quickly be set right. Any method can be used to put them straight, just as long as they are corrected. Other matters can be dealt with later.

In conclusion, it may make some people uncomfortable, but it has to be said that if democracy is to be securely established in Thai society, we will have to revise our concepts of nationhood and of nationalism, because our nation, as we have been taught to embrace it, is an enemy of democracy, and has always subverted it.

(I also think that there will be people who have read this far and make an alternative conclusion: Protect our "nation" then, and don't get all caught up with democracy.)

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