

Resource conflict and ethnic peace in northern Thailand

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Abstract: *Although northern Thailand has experienced both ethnic discrimination and resource conflicts, neither has produced significant organised violence. The relative absence of ethnically mobilised natural resource conflict in northern Thailand is due in part to the historical pattern of state formation, and in part to the Thai state's capacity to deter and mediate conflicts before they escalate into organised violence.*

Keywords: *Burma, ethnic conflict, resource conflict, state capacity, state formation, Thailand*

Introduction

It is easier to explain why something happened than why it did not, and so accounting for the lack of violent ethnic and resource conflict in northern Thailand poses a challenge. Northern Thailand is ethnically diverse, with numerous conflicting interests over the control of natural resources. Yet there has been remarkably little violent conflict over either resources or ethnicity. This relative peace is in sharp contrast to neighbouring Burma/Myanmar, where similar ethnic diversity and resource endowments have produced almost 60 years of civil war (Lintner, 1994; Smith, 1999).

In general, we can think of the relationship between ethnic conflict and resource conflict running in either of two directions. Ethnic grievances could lead to competition for resources, as it has in Myanmar. There aggrieved ethnic groups with access to armed force have sustained insurgencies through the exploitation of natural resources, including timber, gems, jade, and the conversion of upland forest to opium production.

On the other hand, resource conflict could lead to ethnic conflict. This may happen when availability of a newly tapped resource gives aggrieved groups additional leverage or capacity to sustain armed conflict, as in Aceh. It could also happen when a group begins to exploit

resources in a way that conflicts with existing uses by other groups. The resistance of the Penan of Borneo to logging is an example of such a conflict.

In northern Thailand, this latter trajectory is most relevant. If ethnic conflict were to erupt, the cause would most likely be the use of upland forest resources by minority groups, and its impact on the livelihood of lowland farmers. Such frictions have occurred, and although resources have generally been the immediate cause, they often assume an ethnic character because ethnicity overlaps economic interests. Plenty of ugly ethnic chauvinism has been displayed in these conflicts, and upland communities have suffered a long history of discrimination at the hands of lowlanders and the Thai state. Lack of grievances therefore does not explain relative ethnic peace in northern Thailand: there are plenty of grievances to go around.

This essay explores two related reasons for ethnic peace in Thailand, one having to do with the historical roots of Thai state formation, and the other with the relative strength of the Thai state. Historically, the Thai state incorporated ethnic groups on a non-ethnic basis, in contrast to most neighbouring countries, and this has had a long-lasting legacy for ethnic relations in the country. While Thai government policy towards northern communities has been inconsistent, it has generally leaned towards ignoring

or assimilating ethnic groups, rather than following a colonial strategy of playing them off against each other and thereby exacerbating conflict. The major exception to this rule is the Muslim minority in the south, which is dealt with separately later.

In addition, the Thai state generally has the capacity to deter and mediate conflicts before they precipitate organised violent conflict, whether over resources or over ethnicity. A relatively strong state based on citizenship rather than ethnicity has thus contributed substantially to the absence of large-scale organised violence in northern Thailand.

Gravel and forest, water and cabbage

I begin with two vignettes to illustrate some important features of the practice of protest and the meaning of ethnicity in northern Thailand.

Gravel and forest

In 1996 a small Shan community in northern Thailand organised a protest against a gravel mine.¹ Although some villagers supported the project because it would bring jobs to the area, most opposed it because they were worried about contamination of their water supply, dust and increased truck traffic on the roads. The protest involved bussing villagers to the provincial government offices to address the provincial council and the governor, the latter a central government civil servant. A ceremony to ordain trees in a newly established community forest followed. Bands of yellow and white cloth were wrapped around the trees as monks chanted, symbolically making associating the trees with the Buddhist monkhood.

The fact that these Shan were not of Thai ethnicity did not prevent them from employing very Thai forms of protest, binding villagers to the central government and Thai national culture. They addressed their complaint to central government officials, and they followed with a ceremony that linked them to the state religion, the King and Bangkok elites. Tree ordinations have become a favourite mode of environmental protest across Thailand, because it draws on Buddhist symbolism to protect not just the trees but the resources under and around them (Darlington, 1998; Tannenbaum, 2000).

The popularity of such rituals was enhanced when the King requested that trees be ordained in honour of the 50th anniversary of his rule, a gesture that demonstrated *par excellence* how mainstream the idea had become (*Bangkok Post*, 1997).

In contemporary Thailand protests, even when conducted by regionally or ethnically distinct groups, have tended to follow cultural idioms familiar to central Thais. The repertoire of protest and contestation is typically aimed at a national audience, relying on national media and hoping to generate interest and sympathy across the country. It therefore tends to draw on central Thai cultural symbols, and exclusive ethnically based organisation has been rare.

Groups such as the Shan who resemble the Thai in key respects have had an easier time winning acceptance from the Thai majority. Thais have long evaluated ethnic groups on a spectrum based on certain characteristics, most importantly the practice of Theravada Buddhism and wet rice agriculture. Most civilised are those groups who, like the Thai, practise both. Such groups include the Mon, Lao, Lue, Phuan and the northern Thai people called *khon meuang*. Further down the spectrum are groups who sometimes grow wet rice and practise Buddhism, but sometimes do not. These groups include the Shan and Karen, the latter being the most numerous upland minority group in the country (Keyes, 1997: 217). Further down the spectrum are those who reside in upland areas, often practise animist religions or Christianity, and grow dry rice. Groups that rely on swidden agriculture in particular are considered very different from, and inferior to, the Thai. These include the Hmong, as well as smaller groups, including the Akha and Lisu.

This ethnic spectrum has been the basis for much discrimination in Thailand, but the policy of the central government is currently that all these groups should be part of the Thai nation in the sense of being citizens. While discrimination certainly occurs, both in daily life and often in official policy, it is not a major barrier to inclusion in the Thai nation and its political life. Even if they are considered inferior, they are still Thai in the civic sense.² The government has encouraged assimilation in various ways, for instance, by sponsoring Buddhist missionary activities (Kamala, 1997) and providing

education in central Thai. If educated in Thai schools and fluent in the central Thai dialect, members of these groups can often 'pass' as Thai if they wish.

Today most Thai think of hilltribes as the only significant minority groups in the north. However, until relatively recently lowland northerners now considered Thai also were regarded as ethnically distinct. The northerners now called *khon meuang* were less than a century ago called Shan or Lao by missionaries and foreign diplomats. The chief city of the region, known in Thai as Chiang Mai, was usually referred to in English by the transliteration of its Burmese name, Zimmay. Yet today the *khon meuang* are considered unproblematically Thai. Like Italian- or Irish-Americans, they may be perceived as having interesting cultural idiosyncrasies, but these represent colourful localisms rather than non-Thai characteristics. Charles Keyes refers to this as an 'ethnoregional' rather than 'ethnic' difference, meaning that 'cultural differences have been taken to be characteristic of a particular part of the country rather than of a distinctive people' (Keyes, 1997: 213). In fact, some elements of northern Thai culture are picked up by central Thais for their own purposes, such as the cursing ritual discussed later.

Water and cabbages

In 1998 lowland northern Thai villagers mobilised by a Buddhist environmental non-governmental organization (NGO), the Dhammaanat Foundation, engaged in a series of protests that included blockading roads into the mountains and burning in effigy five prominent professors at Chiang Mai University.³ They were angry about what they perceived as the diversion and contamination of water by Hmong uplanders, and claimed to be protecting watersheds from further degradation.

Tensions between lowland farmers and the Hmong had been simmering since the early 1980s, and were based in part on stereotypes of the Hmong common among Thais. The majority of refugees in northern Thailand are Hmong fleeing war in Laos and Burma. The Hmong in this dispute were Thai citizens, although it is unclear whether the protesters understood this. Like most Hmong, they were not Buddhists.⁴

These Hmong were perceived by Thai audiences stereotypically, if not accurately, as non-Thai intruders.

The Hmong are notorious for their former practice of burning forest to prepare fields for opium cultivation. When fields were exhausted, they would repeat the process in a new area. This highly destructive practice drew relatively little attention until the 1970s, when the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) forbade the moving of villages within forest boundaries. Enforcement was stepped up in the 1980s when the Thai government, in response to foreign pressure, began eradicating opium production. With the aid of foreign and domestic NGOs, including the royal family's Royal Project, Hmong were encouraged to switch to cash crops, particularly cabbage. The Hmong responded, in part because the cabbages yielded almost as much income as raw opium had. However, cabbage required more intensive inputs of water, fertilizer and pesticides. Downstream water flow and quality was affected. Lowland farmers growing wet rice noticed the change in water quality.

This incipient conflict was mobilised by a Thai monk, Phra Phongsak Techadhammo. A native of the area who had studied under the famous social activist monk Buddhadasa Bhikku, Phra Phongsak returned to found a forest monastery in 1983. He was shocked to find little forest left. The lowland forest had been largely cleared by loggers and farmers, and the upland forests were being severely degraded by the same actors. With assistance from a wealthy noble, he created the Dhammaanat Foundation, which attracted mostly urban, middle-class professionals as members, including a number of RFD employees.

As Pinkaew (2000) points out, the Dhammaanat Foundation adopted a double standard: forest destruction by the lowland farmers was regarded as a changeable behaviour linked to poverty. As non-Thai and non-Buddhists, however, the Hmong were regarded as intrinsically destructive, and the only solution the Foundation could see for the problems they caused was relocation (Luangaramsri, 2000: 60). Because the Hmong were illegally residing in protected watershed areas, the RFD tended to agree. However, others, including prominent academics and international NGOs, infuriated

the lowland farmers by supporting the Hmong, pointing out that they were already altering their agricultural practices by reducing cabbage production, switching to less polluting crops such as fruit trees and flowers, and voluntarily reforesting some areas.⁵

This conflict has not been resolved. The police and security forces have restrained the lowland farmers from using violence, causing them to resort to symbolic violence such as burning the Hmong's academic supporters in effigy and using a northern Thai cursing ritual, which has recently entered the national repertoire of protest (Rajah, 2005). Government officials have negotiated with the Hmong about resettlement, but this is impossible until a resettlement area can be located. In an environment of increasing land pressure in the lowlands and increasingly strict forest conservation measures in the uplands, the probability of finding such a site is low.

In this case the Thai protestors failed to get what they wanted, despite apparently having numerous advantages: Thai ethnicity versus non-Thai, Buddhist versus non-Buddhist, official support from the RFD versus illegal squatters. The Hmong have not relocated, and have actually entrenched their position by recruiting outside supporters. Despite the symbolic violence – cursing, burning in effigy and some property damage – there has been little actual violence, none of it organised.

Two remarkable facts emerge from these vignettes. One is that ethnically non-Thai groups can successfully launch protests using shared national symbols. Ethnic identity does not debar them from employing strategies associated with the dominant ethnic group. The other is that the state does not tolerate the use of violence, even by Buddhist ethnic Thais against non-Buddhist non-Thais. The state itself has sporadically deployed violence against these groups, but typically it has been in the context of dealing with threats that were not perceived as specifically ethnic in nature, most importantly in defeating the communist insurgency of the 1960s and 1970s.

In general, ethnicity has been secondary to citizenship, and the state prefers to deter or mediate conflicts rather than permit citizens to engage in private violence. Neither of these policies is natural or obvious, and they stand in

contrast to many of Thailand's neighbours. Indeed, neither has been consistently applied in Thailand: these are tendencies, not absolutes. Thai governments bombed Hmong villages in the 1970s and permitted right-wing vigilantes to attack suspected communists in the 1970s (Tapp, 1989; Pasuk and Baker, 2002). Yet overall the Thai state has not tended to foster ethnic antagonisms or permit others to do so. To understand why, we need to look to the formation of the Thai state in the nineteenth century.

The expansion of the Thai state

It is fashionable to depict the expansion of the central Thai state in the nineteenth century as a form of imperialism (Anderson, 1978; Thongchai, 2000; Loos, 2006). The central Thai polity began to exert greater influence over peripheral kingdoms, gradually transforming suzerainty into sovereignty. Rulers of these smaller polities in what is now northern Thailand may have seen this encroachment as a form of illegitimate domination, much as the rulers of Vietnam, Malaysia and Burma saw European encroachment, although there is no historical evidence of this view. However, it is clear that the process of state formation in Thailand had quite different implications than it did in its colonized neighbours.

In Europe's overseas colonies, only tiny numbers of Europeans actually came to the colonies. Colonial administrations depended on the availability of native elites willing to cooperate with colonialists (Robinson, 1972). To ensure a steady supply of such elites, European colonial powers encouraged ethnic divisions, exacerbating them where they had not been important before, or even creating them.⁶ Frequently they empowered minority groups, giving them privileged places in the colonial administration. Such privileged minorities could be trusted to be loyal because they were dependent on the colonial regime for their position.

In Thailand, in contrast, there was little incentive for the central government to create such divisions. Far from emphasising ethnic differences, it was important for the expanding Thai regime to project an impression of unity. Conflict and disunity could have invited intervention by foreign powers.⁷

Creating the impression of unity was facilitated by traditional Thai political strategies, which had tolerated and even celebrated diversity. On an ideological level, the traditional political system glorified the kingly ideal of a universal monarch. On a more practical level, Thai kings tended to tolerate a great deal of diversity and local autonomy in the interest of retaining as many people as possible in the political hierarchy.

The primary function of the traditional Siamese political system was to control labour rather than land. Land was abundant; what was in shortage was the labour to make it productive. In this context, any king wanting to increase his power needed to encourage the allegiance of any and all available groups (Englehart, 2001). Insisting on ethnic purity would have been counterproductive, even irrational, because it would have arbitrarily limited the pool of labour available.

An immense variety of groups were integrated into the Siam kingdom: Burmese, Indian, Karen, Khmer, Lao, Mon, Shan, Thai, Vietnamese and others. This ethnic diversity reinforced an ideological identification of the king as a world-conquering *chakravartin*. These were ancient kings of such great karmic merit that the entire world spontaneously submitted to their rule. The model for such a monarch was the Indian emperor Ashoka, an important early patron of Buddhism (Strong, 1983). Thai monarchs adopted this image as part of the official court ideology, using it to justify their rule and link themselves to the Buddhist religion (Quaritch-Wales, 1965; Akin, 1969; Wilson, 1970; Tambiah, 1976; Piyachat, 1983). The profusion of ethnicities was not a problem in the old system: kings positively gloried in it.

This ideological position fit comfortably with the autonomy enjoyed by most local leaders. Leaders with influence over groups of commoners had to be given ample leeway and incentives to bring their people into the system. A significant advantage of local leaders was knowledge of where their followers resided, which was vital in the dense jungle that dominated much of the kingdom. When local leaders died without an heir, their followers were sometimes lost to the manpower system because no one else could locate them. In addition, central government officials were constantly worried about com-

moners and their leaders 'fleeing to the forest' and thereby disappearing from the official patronage network. They conducted periodic expeditions to find and register unregistered commoners, and kept elaborate records, but even so they never came close to including all commoners in the official manpower system. People joined when they were persuaded to do so, usually by a local notable of some kind, who was rewarded with an official title and rank.

Ethnic minorities were included in this system as manpower groups, typically under headmen of their own ethnicity who struck deals with higher-level officials in a way similar to headmen of Thai ethnicity. Leaders of minority communities were welcome to bring their followers into the official hierarchy and to be rewarded with titles and honours in the same way that Thai leaders were. The status of particular communities was not a function of ethnicity, but rather of their recent history and the political acumen of their leaders.

Because the system was personalistic, ethnicity was not a threat to the kingdom, which did not have a distinctively Thai character to threaten. It was only with the coming of the modern state that connected citizens directly to the central government that the creation of a homogenous Thai national identity became important (Reynolds, 1991; Barmé, 1993).

When the central Thai polity began to expand its authority in the nineteenth century, it built on the traditional structure of authority. Many suzerain principalities were folded into the expanding Thai state wholesale. Ethnic minorities were included in the Thai state not as ethnic groups *per se*, but as constituent elements of these principalities. As a consequence, these groups did not share a common ethnic history with respect to their inclusion in the Thai state. They were included at different times under different circumstances, depending on when and how their communities were integrated into the state.

Resource conflicts set off by this process tended to be not between ethnic groups but between political networks centred in provincial towns. These units, called *meuang* in Thai, were the backbone of provincial administration in Thailand. They comprised not just the officials of the towns, but the networks of followers they organised through local headmen. Such net-

works were often multi-ethnic in composition, although the lowest-level units were typically made up of a single ethnic group. Because these decentralised networks were based on personal allegiance rather than territory, the same resources might be exploited by more than one *meuang*.

Take for instance the case of Thak and Thoen, neighbouring *meuang* that coexisted peacefully until the state-building process territorialised authority. Disputes then arose over timber rights. European-owned timber companies operating in the region treated *meuang* officials as owners of the timber, and paid substantial sums for the right to log. It became vitally important for officials to have their authority over particular tracts of forest recognised by the central government. The problem was that Thak and Thoen both claimed rights to the same forest. Both Thak and Thoen were able to make good cases for their respective claims, both having settled villages in the region, suppressed banditry and extracted resources to send to Bangkok as taxes in kind. Until the timber dispute arose, these two *meuang* had overlapped territorially.⁸

This example provides a remarkable illustration of the non-territorial nature of the traditional Siamese political system, but it is equally noteworthy for another reason: despite the fact that it occurred in an ethnically diverse area, the ethnicity of the villagers in the disputed area did not figure in the appeals made by either *meuang* to the Ministry of the Interior. The Minister of the Interior clearly understood the ethnic diversity of the area, noting in passing that most of the Thoen villagers were Lao and most of the Thak villagers were Thai, but this was an antiquarian note not considered relevant to the problem at hand.

Across the border in Burma colonial state formation was very different. At roughly the same time that the central Thais were consolidating their state, the British were building a colonial administration that later became the basis of the Burmese state. The British inherited a situation in which ethnicity was already more marked and conflictual. Burmese kings apparently put a higher value on ethnic assimilation than the Thai had.⁹

The British reinforced and exploited ethnic divisions in Burma to consolidate their relatively weak administration. Most importantly, they

gave special status to the Shan and Karen.¹⁰ They also recruited the army from particular ethnic groups, notably the Kachin and Karen, while including few Burmans. The British were able to maintain the peace during their administration, but these ethnic imbalances bred disaster after independence. The Burman majority and the minority ethnic groups were suspicious of each other, and each had legitimate grievances. The fact that the British created ethnically pure military units meant that some ethnic groups had armed force at their disposal after independence. These groups could use revenues from natural resource exploitation – timber, gems, jade and later opium – to finance rebellion. The result has been 60 years of continuous conflict.

In contrast, Thai state formation entailed remarkably little violence. Tensions and conflicts developed during the process, but the bloodshed was minimal, especially when compared with the bloody history of state building in Europe.

In northern Thailand the most important conflict was the 1902 Shan rebellion. Shan had been integrated into the northern *meuang* for a long time before central government officials arrived on the scene, but the new system of administration had a particularly severe impact on them.

The demarcation of the border with British Burma encouraged cross-border crime. The very existence of the border meant that bandits could slip across easily, while the authorities on either side needed to make time-consuming arrangements to capture or extradite them.¹¹ Long-distance cattle trade was a Shan specialty, and many Shan had friends and relatives on both sides of the border. This gave them a kind of competitive advantage in banditry, which led to all Shan being perceived stereotypically as thieves by central government officials.¹²

Between 1891 and 1902 Shan gangs were involved in a series of violent incidents, giving the Shan a bad name.¹³ In response, central officials tried to implement an internal passport system aimed primarily at the Shan. This made it difficult for Shan cattle traders to earn their livelihood (Ramsay, 1979: 292). Northern Thai village headmen also made it difficult for Shan migrants to acquire land for farming and housing, and they were denied permission to build temples.¹⁴

In July of 1902 a Shan gang attacked the town of Phrae.¹⁵ The conduct of these Shan was strangely specific for a bandit raid. After defeating a group of policemen, they cut the telegraph line and attacked the home of the Siamese Commissioner. Recruiting help from the local community, they also looted central government offices. They broke open the jail and released all the prisoners, dressing them in the Commissioner's clothes. They announced an end to taxation, and enlisted the help of locals to hunt down and kill central Thai officials. All other property and people – northern Thai, Shan and European – went conspicuously untouched. The Shan were clearly out to get the central Thai, and they got ample assistance from the local population.¹⁶ The rebellion was subsequently broken after the Shan gang launched a similar but abortive attack on Lampang.

Traditional local elites had divided loyalties in the Shan rebellion. The central government was usurping the authority of local rulers, but some had found positions in the new administration (Ramsay, 1979: 291; Tej, 1981: 41–43). The ruler of Phrae fled to French possessions after the raid, amid rumours that he and other local officials had conspired with the Shan.¹⁷ While the leadership and initiative for the raid clearly came from the Shan bandits, they were aided and abetted by both the local population and the rulers. This suggests that the rebellion is best understood in economic and political terms, rather than ethnic ones. The 'ethnic' grievance was really an economic one: the hampering of the cattle trade. This assumed an ethnic dimension because the cattle traders were mostly Shan. Violent resistance was enabled by the fact that armed Shan gangs were thriving in the area. Yet it appears to have been encouraged by northern Thai rulers and abetted by the local northern Thai population.

Class and status in Thai opposition movements

Notably, the Shan rebellion was the most serious armed conflict faced by the central government in the north until the 1970s.¹⁸ This relative quiescence persisted even while the Thai central government was weakened and distracted by successive coups and counter-coups after 1932: violent ethnic and regional resistance was exceedingly rare until the 1960s. The violent

opposition that developed in the 1960s was not ethnic, but rather a Communist insurgency.

The Thai government initially perceived communism as a Chinese immigrant problem. The Chinese had long been a privileged minority in Thailand, although high immigration rates had led to a brief backlash against the urban Chinese community in Thailand (Skinner, 1957). Many Chinese immigrants in Thailand in the 1950s retained strong ties to China, and were influenced by the Communist victory there (Chai-Anan *et al.*, 1990: 50). The Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) was founded by immigrant Chinese, and largely responded to directives from the Chinese government. It initiated violent resistance in 1965, in the impoverished north-eastern region of Isaan. There the party received assistance from Laos, and in Isaan it recruited Thai peasants of Lao ethnicity. However, the CPT rapidly made common cause with a number of other disaffected groups, including poor Thai peasants, hilltribes, labour activists, Muslim secessionists in the south, and after 1976 radicalised students fleeing a vicious crackdown by the military.

In the north the CPT actively recruited Hmong, who often joined to escape harassment by Thai officials. CPT recruiting was assisted by the Thai government's decision that all Hmong were sympathetic to the insurgents, leading to indiscriminate attacks on Hmong villages. However, the Hmong were only one aggrieved group among many that joined the CPT. Furthermore, they often found grounds for new grievances, 'encountering within the CPT the same sort of ethnic discrimination which they had suffered from before joining the CPT' (Tapp, 1989: 77).

The insurgency thus did not have any distinctive ethnic or regional character. The CPT fought a national insurgency, incorporating many groups with grievances against the government regardless of ethnicity.

Similarly, the most effective non-violent opposition movements in Thailand have not had a distinctive ethnic character. Those based on economic grievances have had the greatest appeal. Pioneering in this respect was the Peasants' Federation of Thailand (PFT), which had roots in the north but was a national organisation. The organisation was founded in 1974 by farmers from the north. Despite its regional origins, the focus of the organisation was national. It

recruited members from all over the country, rapidly enrolling 1.5 million members. Its goals were predominantly national as well: the passage and enforcement of legislation to protect tenant farmers from high rents and other abuses (Pasuk and Baker, 2002: 315–316). After the 1976 military crackdown, it was suppressed and many of its leaders were assassinated.

The Assembly of the Poor is a successor to the PFT in spirit, founded in 1995. Although the founders of the organisation came from Isaan, it too is a national organisation. It was conceived as a decentralised, cooperative network to enable poor farmers to engage with the government. In 1997 in a dramatic 99-day protest in Bangkok, they extracted a number of important concessions from the government. Many of these were subsequently rolled back by the next government during the 1997 currency crisis, but the organisation persists and conducts local actions (Baker, 2000; Missingham, 2003). Like the PFT, the Assembly of the Poor emerged from a distinct regional setting, but its achievements stemmed from the fact that it became a national organisation. It conspicuously deployed symbols of loyalty to the Thai nation, including flags and portraits of the royal family, and its success depended in part on engaging the sympathy of audiences around the country.

Because the Thai government is highly centralised, effective protest movements are ones that capture a national constituency. Furthermore, by regional standards, Thailand has a relatively high-capacity state, which enables the government to constrain the behaviour of protest movements in important ways. It can deter violence and mediate conflicts by striking credible bargains with disaffected groups.

State capacity

The contemporary Thai state is relatively effective by regional standards. It has more capacity to deter and resolve conflicts peacefully than most neighbouring states, and thus violent conflict organised on any basis has been uncommon.

State capacity refers to the ability of the state apparatus – the civil service, police and military – to translate government policy into action. High-capacity states typically have a competent bureaucracy, a professional military and effective policing. While Thais are fond of complain-

Table 1. State capacity indicators for Thailand and neighbouring countries, 2000

	Tax/GDP	Government effectiveness
Malaysia	18.9	0.68
Thailand	14.2	0.21
Cambodia	NA	-0.27
Laos	NA	-0.67
Burma	2.97	-1.31
World average	19.7	-0.01

Sources: World Bank (2005), Kaufmann *et al.* (2005). The Malaysia tax/GDP figure is for 1997, the closest year for which data are available. No tax data are available at all for Cambodia and Laos.

ing about bureaucratic corruption, ineffective and corrupt police and a politicized military, in comparison with conditions in neighbouring countries, Thailand is relatively good. Only Malaysia has a more effective state, and all of Thailand's other neighbours – Cambodia, Laos and Burma – are markedly worse. Table 1 shows the ratings of these six countries on two standard indicators of state capacity. The first is tax revenue as a proportion of GDP. This is a good general indicator of state capacity because in order to collect revenue states must be able to collect information about society, assessing appropriate levels of tax based on that information, and prevent revenue from being siphoned by corrupt officials (Arbetman and Kugler, 1997; Fauvelle-Aymar, 1999; Lieberman, 2002). The second is Kaufmann *et al.*'s (2005) scale of government effectiveness, which measures the ability of governments to enact their stated policies. It ranges from 2.6 (best) to -2.6 (worst). Of the six countries listed only two – Malaysia and Thailand – have a positive score on Kaufman *et al.*'s scale. These are also the countries with the highest tax as a proportion of GDP.

State capacity is important for preventing violent conflict in at least two ways. First, a high-capacity state has tremendous coercive powers at its disposal. Weber stylised this as a 'monopoly of the legitimate use of force'. While there are few genuine monopolies, effective states do have a massive preponderance of force that discourages violent challenges. Burma again provides a useful contrast: at independence the state clearly lacked control over coercion because there were numerous armed

groups in the country, including gangs, resistance cells left over from the Japanese occupation and thugs controlled by local political bosses (Taylor, 1987; Callahan, 2003; Englehart, 2005). In addition, a large segment of the armed forces was organised into ethnic units, providing a strong temptation to leaders of those ethnic groups to rebel. One of the primary reasons violent conflict erupts is that potential rebels can hope to succeed against weak governments (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). In Burma at independence the state looked extremely weak, and ethnic rebels with long-standing grievances from the British colonial period took advantage of this.

In Thailand, in contrast, it has long been clear that insurgency will not be able to succeed against the military. This was demonstrated in 1902, and again in the 1970s. Recent extremist violence in southern Thailand thus has taken the form of terrorism rather than outright civil war, because insurgents cannot directly challenge the military power of the state.

The second reason that a strong state tends to reduce violent conflict is that it can mediate disputes more effectively: strong states can make credible commitments. Weak states cannot make such commitments, because it is well understood that they cannot keep them. This sharply reduces their options in bargaining with aggrieved groups or mediating conflicts between groups. Azam goes so far as to argue that 'the ability to commit credibly is the relevant basis for distinguishing between weak and strong states' (Azam, 2001: 435). Credible commitments might include promises to alleviate conditions for aggrieved groups, but might also include threats to repress or sanction them if they continue to protest or use violence to register their demands. The concept of state capacity does not assume that states are good, but only that they can effectively achieve their goals.

Here again there is an important contrast between Thailand and Burma. In Thailand the government was able to demobilise the CPT in part by making credible offers of amnesty to fighters. In Burma, in contrast, the government has not been very successful at getting rebels to lay down their arms, in part because the rebels are suspicious of promises made by government negotiators. Insurgents who have agreed upon ceasefires have nearly all insisted upon retaining their arms.

Centralisation, combined with state capacity, has helped defuse specifically ethnic mobilisation and protest in Thailand. Groups with grievances find that local authorities can help only with relatively minor matters. Major issues must be addressed at the national level. This means that national organisations are generally more effective than local ones. By definition those national organisations need to be inclusive, and they mobilise around shared national symbols rather than ethnically particular ones. Pre-eminent is Buddhism, which has become identified with the Thai nation to such a degree that it is constantly invoked by political entrepreneurs on all sides of any question.

Another important symbol is the monarchy, which provides the basis for an emotional appeal to a Thai nation that is not necessarily defined in ethnic terms. Loyalty to the royal family can serve as an anchor for nationalist sentiments among minority groups, a phenomenon that recalls the ancient ideology of the *chakravartin* and one that recent governments and the royal family have encouraged. Thus, the royal family has been very active in development projects benefiting uplanders since the 1960s. According to Jane and Lucien Hanks, anthropologists who have worked in the northern uplands since the 1950s, 'uplanders in every village believed that since all land was "owned" by the king he was their proper patron. Their loyalty was rock firm' (Hanks and Hanks, 2001: 140). This relationship is useful for the monarchy, because it helps build the throne's symbolic importance and ensures that it will not be sidelined again, as it was by military regimes between 1932 and the 1950s. The relationship also benefits uplanders by securing a patron and allowing them to demonstrate their loyalty to the Thai nation that has so much control over their lives, without necessarily having to share other markers of Thai identity such as practising Theravada Buddhism or speaking central Thai fluently.

Using the monarchy allows opposition groups generally to demonstrate their loyalty to the nation while objecting to the policies of the government, for instance, by displaying photographs of the king and queen. Recognition by the monarchy can provide a major boost to a movement.

In countries that are more decentralised, mobilisation at the local or regional level may be effective. This encourages organisation along ethnic and regional lines, making ethnic conflict and secessionist impulses more likely. In Burma, for instance, the high degree of autonomy permitted certain ethnic groups under British rule allowed them to develop a strong sense of separate identity and organisations that provided the basis of secessionist rebellions after independence.

Proving the rule: Muslim separatism in Patani

Southern Thailand provides an important and telling contrast with the peaceful north. In the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, there has been serious organised ethnic violence. The reasons for this violence mirror the reasons for its general absence in the north.

The provinces marked by violence were formerly part of the Patani sultanate, which had a long history of conflictual relations with the Thai. The sultanate alternately recognised and resisted Siamese suzerainty for centuries, depending on the opportunities afforded by regional politics. The Siamese ultimately annexed Patani at gunpoint, subsequently dividing it into three provinces to weaken local resistance.¹⁹

Thai government in the former Patani resembled a colonial administration more than anywhere else in the kingdom. Central Thais dominated the administration, playing local groups off against each other. They favoured the local Thai Buddhist minority in various ways, including access to government employment. They created special Islamic family courts, drawing legal distinctions between Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims (Loos, 2006). As a consequence, ethnic Malay Muslims did not enter the national community in the way that northern ethnic groups did.

In addition, the Thai state was weaker in the south than elsewhere. The region was considered a hardship post, and so lower-quality civil servants and military officers tended to be posted there. The region was notorious for official corruption, malfeasance and incompetence, which only added to Muslim grievances.

The situation calmed beginning in the 1980s. The central government began treating local

grievances more seriously, establishing two new agencies to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation with the Muslim communities. Attacks dropped sharply as a consequence, so much so that many analysts assumed the insurgency was a spent force (e.g. Rabasa, 2003).

The government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra apparently agreed with this assessment. In an attempt to disrupt strong patronage networks supporting the opposition Democratic Party in the south, Thaksin dissolved the special administrative agencies for the south and gave the police control over counter-insurgency there (Croissant, 2005). Shortly after, Thaksin launched his notorious war on drugs, essentially giving police a free hand to assassinate suspected criminals.

The uncertainty and fear generated by the war on drugs gave new life to the insurgency. According to a member of an insurgent group interviewed by Human Rights Watch, 'villagers were desperate and requested us to give them protection. We gave them training . . . in parallel with political indoctrination about the struggle for independence. This is how we re-established control of the population' (Human Rights Watch, 2007: 14). The newly revitalised insurgency thus benefited from repressive tactics on the part of the government. The result was an enormous escalation in the level of violence: according to the National Reconciliation Commission, there were 82 attacks in 2001, 84 in 2002, 1843 in 2003 and 1703 in 2004 (National Reconciliation Commission, 2006: 9).

As separatists, the insurgents repudiate the standard Thai repertoire of protest. They attack symbols of the Thai nation, assassinating monks and burning schools. In doing so, they emphasise that they do not regard themselves as part of the Thai nation.

Conclusion

Many observers of Southeast Asia in 1948 thought that newly independent Burma had exceptionally bright prospects, compared with those of neighbouring Thailand. Burma had higher per capita income, a more diversified economy, high literacy rates, a democratic government and abundant natural resources. So why did Burma collapse into conflict while

Thailand, with a similar ethnic composition in the north, has improved steadily?

In Burma ethnic grievances and tensions from the British period erupted into armed conflict as soon as the country became independent. Many of the ethnic groups involved were already organised to pursue collective violence, having been trained as military units or organised as irregulars during the Japanese occupation. The military weakness of the central government tempted these groups to address their grievances through military action. Natural resource conflicts were drawn into this insurgency, as both sides turned to natural resource exploitation to finance the conflict.

In northern Thailand, in contrast, there has been little collective violence organised along ethnic lines. The relatively high-capacity state has preferred assimilation, and has been able to suppress or mediate incipient conflict.

Culturally diverse groups therefore have incentives to participate in a national forum, rather than emphasising their distinctiveness and turning it into a political cleavage. Keyes (1997: 197) argues that 'what makes cultural differences "ethnic" differences is a political setting that separates the stories . . . that people tell about their heritage from the officially sanctioned stories that are told about the common heritage of those who are said to belong to the same nation.' In northern Thailand different ethnic groups – even if they face discrimination – participate in a common heritage.

Popular protest on environmental issues in the north has thus typically employed Thai, monarchist and Buddhist idioms virtually identical to strategies used elsewhere in the kingdom. It is addressed to the central government or its local representatives, invokes Buddhism as a legitimising ideology and pays overt respect to the King and Queen as symbols of the Thai nation. It seeks national media attention to win the interest and sympathy of a national audience. More particularistic strategies are likely to alienate central Thai audiences and lead to failure.

Ethnic violence has plagued southern Thailand, but there separatists have not desired to participate in the national community. They see themselves as members of a community defined by the old Patani sultanate, not a Thai national community. Hence particularistic strategies are

appropriate for them, and violence – which tends to harden ethnic and religious boundaries – is functional.

Ethnic peace in northern Thailand is thus due to a strong central government that was created free of the legacies of colonial ethnic politics. This peace is not perfect, and it certainly has not always been just, but the Thai record seems quite good in contrast to its neighbour to the west.

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Notes

- 1 I am indebted to Nicola Tannenbaum for sharing this incident with me. See her published account in Tannenbaum (2000).
- 2 As of 2001, all uplanders born in Thailand are eligible for Thai citizenship (Yindee, 2001). Currently about 200 000 of the roughly one million uplanders are considered illegal aliens ineligible for Thai citizenship. These are refugees who entered the country after the National Statistical Organisation began its hilltribe population survey in 1985. These people have been permitted to stay in the country on rolling one-year extensions, a policy that cannot be altered anytime soon because it would in practice be impossible to distinguish the refugees from the additional approximately 200 000 uplanders entitled to citizenship who lack documentation (Aguettant, 1996).
- 3 This account is based on Renard (1994), Luangaramsri (2000), Buegin and Kessler (2000), Rajah (2005).
- 4 Most were animists, and a few were Christian.
- 5 Other Hmong villages have adopted similar strategies, in part to remake their image as destructive opium growers into stewards of the forest, akin to the reputation enjoyed by the Karen ethnic minority (Tomforde, 2003).
- 6 The seminal work in this tradition is Cohn (1990).
- 7 The French administration in Laos, for instance, actively tried to recruit political leaders from the Lao principalities of what is now north-eastern Thailand, on the ground that they had assumed all claims held by the Lao monarchs of Luang Prabang. See Thai National Archives, Bangkok, Thailand (TNA) R. 5 M. 2.25/5, 2.25/6, 2.25/7, 25/27, 25/28, 25/29, 46/8, 58/18 and 208. The British similarly attempted to claim ethnic groups and principalities that had been subject to the King of Burma, although their claims were based on political affiliation rather than ethnicity *per se*. A summary of the British view of their Siamese border

issues can be found in India Office Records, The British Library, London, UK (IOR) L/P&S/18/B62/1 and 2.

- 8 TNA R. 5 M. 2.1/15. Lest it be thought that this is a peculiarity of the north-west, Piyachat and Theerachai both note the same phenomena in the north-east. See Piyachat (1983: 65–66) and Theerachai (1985: 194). So does Khomnet, who focuses on the central plains (Komnet, 1991: 140).
- 9 When the British annexed Pegu, for instance, they found that Karen living in the area had numerous grievances against Burmese officials who governed them under the old regime. The British redressed this situation by appointing Karen officials to govern Karen settlements, an arrangement that satisfied the Karen but also reinforced ethnic divisions. IOR L/P&S/5/218 Enclosures to Secret Letters from India, #7 of 18 February, 1854, pp. 139–154. The British also claimed that the Burmese kings had attempted to extinguish the Mon language in the region. IOR V/10/2 Report on the Administration of Pegu for 1855–1856, p. 22.
- 10 See for instance IOR P/2431 (November 1885), P/2660 (December 1886) or P/2882 (February 1887). For a telling view of British attitudes towards different ethnic groups, see the Indian Army Field Manual in IOR V/27/280/5, entitled ‘Races of Burma’.
- 11 See for instance TNA R. 5 B. 1.2/28 Thi 75/50 or R. 5 M. 58/89.
- 12 TNA R. 5 M. 58/77.
- 13 TNA R. 5 B. 1.2/31 Thi 211/110, M. 2.12 K/41 and M. 63/1.
- 14 TNA R. 5 M. 63/3.
- 15 TNA R. 5 M. 63/3, from which the following account is derived.
- 16 Not all local groups were anti-Thai, however. Chinese figured very prominently on the list of those the central government rewarded for assistance in suppressing the rebellion. Chinese economic interests were served by the centralisation programme. TNA R. 5 M. 2.4/15.
- 17 TNA R. 5 M. 63/4, M. 63/10, Tej (1981: 34–36).
- 18 There were additional conflicts in other parts of the country, similarly brief and localised. See Tej (1981).
- 19 The conflict is thus about politics as much as religion and ethnicity. In Thailand’s other majority Muslim province, Satun, the situation resembles the north much more closely, with Muslims identifying ethnically as Thai. I am indebted to Thongchai Winichakul on this point.

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