

Indigenous Peoples' shifting engagements with the Thai state¹

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SINCE THE EARLY 2000S a coalition of ethnic minorities in Thailand has promoted a sub-national social movement under the global banner of 'Indigenous Peoples'. Initiated by leaders of the 10 so-called 'hill tribes' in the North, the movement has since expanded to include representatives of an additional 30 ethnic groups from within and beyond the North. Recent estimates place Thailand's populations of 'hill tribes' at 1.2 million people and lowland ethnic groups at 4.9 million people. The expanding Indigenous movement thus has the potential to represent some 6.1 million people, comprising 9 percent of Thailand's total population of roughly 68 million people.

The Indigenous movement in Thailand officially began in August 2007 when a coalition of grassroots organizations representing 24 ethnic groups organized Thailand's first annual 'Festival of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand' on the occasion of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples. At a follow-up event to the festival in the same year, the Network of Indigenous Peoples of Thailand (NIPT) was established. Its goals were to campaign via public demonstrations, media campaigns, and bureaucratic lobbying for legal recognition of Indigenous Peoples by the Thai state in order to gain and protect their basic rights to citizenship, land, and their distinct identities. The Indigenous movement emerged during a period in Thailand when the state, at least rhetorically speaking, was striving to reframe the nation in a multicultural rather than mono-cultural fashion. The movement has been variably supported and obstructed by the Thai state; supported because of the state's new multicultural rhetoric yet obstructed because of the state's top-down approach to multiculturalism.

In recent years the Indigenous movement has shifted its strategies away from public demonstrations towards independent media productions and bureaucratic lobbying. Between 2014-2016, the movement especially worked to establish direct ties with state agencies overseeing the review of national legislation and the constitutional reform process initiated by the current military regime. It has further decided to focus its limited time and resources on lobbying for the passage of a state law governing the 'Council of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand' (CIPT), a new, independent quasi-state organ comprised of Indigenous representatives with the central mandate to advise the state on policies and plans of relevance to Indigenous Peoples.

Since November 2014 the NIPT has lobbied several state agencies, including the Prime Minister's Office, for advice and support in its efforts to have the military-appointed National Legislative Assembly (NLA) review its draft legislation governing the CIPT. The NIPT was eventually successful in having the draft legislation forwarded to the NLA in July 2015. As of early October 2016, however, the NLA had yet to review the legislation due to its concern with other matters deemed more pressing.

Between November 2014 and March 2016, the NIPT further lobbied for, first, official recognition of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand, and, second, legal recognition of the CIPT in each of the two successive constitutional drafts drawn up by different military-appointed Constitutional Drafting Committees. The NIPT eventually gained official recognition of Indigenous Peoples in the first constitutional draft released to the public in April 2015. Its success was, however, short-lived, as just five months later, on 6 September 2015, the military-appointed National Reform Council rejected that first draft. The second and final constitutional draft, which was released to the public in March 2016 and ratified via national referendum on 7 August 2016, did not include any reference to 'Indigenous Peoples' whatsoever. Regardless, the NIPT's success in gaining recognition of Indigenous Peoples in the first draft of the constitution was significant given the Thai state's longstanding stance of non-recognition of Indigenous Peoples.

Despite constitutional and legal setbacks the NIPT has moved forward independently of the state in bringing its vision of the CIPT to fruition. On 9 August 2015, the NIPT publicly declared the CIPT to be fully functioning with 190 representatives from 38 different Indigenous groups (five representatives per group) and two sub-national level Indigenous Councils. As of early November 2016, 40 different Indigenous groups and three sub-national Indigenous Councils were affiliated with the CIPT. The membership has expanded such that the CIPT has administratively divided its constituents into five geographical regions – the upland North, the lowland North, the Northeast, the east and west of Central Thailand, and the South. At present, however, the movement faces the problem of insufficient funding to take these developments forward in an expeditious manner without losing its current momentum.

Official state recognition of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand seems highly unlikely in the near future given both a long history of non-recognition and

the current military regime's renewed focus on nation building in a mono-ethnic fashion, centralizing state power and budgets, and national security issues in relation to which upland Indigenous Peoples have long been held suspect. In this political climate any claims for state recognition as a distinct group within the larger Thai nation are likely to fall on deaf ears at best, and, at worst, evoke suspicions of separatism as in the case of the far South and, more recently, the North and Northeast. Meanwhile, the grassroots Indigenous movement has expanded to become a national movement potentially representing some 6.1 million people. The Thai government has accordingly paid ever greater attention to the movement and provided certain opportunities for its growth, albeit largely on the state's terms.

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References

- For more in-depth analyses of the emerging politics of Indigeneity in contemporary Thailand see Morton, Micah F. 2016. 'The Indigenous Peoples' Movement in Thailand Expands'. *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Perspective* 68:1-12; Baird, Ian G., P. Leepreecha & U. Yangcheepsujarit. 2017. 'Who should be considered "Indigenous"? A survey of ethnic groups in northern Thailand'. *Asian Ethnicity* 18(4):543-62.

Right: In March 2012, several hundred Indigenous Peoples from various parts of Thailand staged a two-day long peaceful demonstration – a form of 'street-lobbying' – in front of Government House in Bangkok in order to call on the then administration of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra to follow through and expand on two ministerial decrees issued in 2010 by the interim government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. Those decrees call for the 'revitalization' of the 'ways of life' of the ethnic Moken and Karen. The decrees contain sections on issues such as land management, citizenship, culture, and education, and call for the establishment of 'Special Cultural Zones' for each group. In this photo, Indigenous representatives are holding a sign on which the following words are written in Thai: "We declare this area a 'Special Socio-cultural Zone for Ethnic and Indigenous Peoples.'" Photograph by the author.



China's 'shame offensive' directed at Thailand?

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SOUTHEAST ASIA has become a major focus of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as it constitutes a significant sea lane for China's maritime trade. Mainland Southeast Asia also offers China alternative routes to seaports for its landlocked provinces; the sub-region is hence included in Beijing's plan to develop transport links and industrial parks. Thailand has realised that situating itself in China's blueprint is economically beneficial and Thai leaders have expressed their support for the BRI since its first launch. Thai Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha, for example, has lauded that this initiative would enhance Thai-Chinese strategic partnership. However, Prayut was not among the heads of government attending the inaugural Belt and Road Initiative Summit during 14-15 May 2017 in Beijing. How can we interpret this event to understand the current stage of Sino-Thai relations and the broader Southeast Asia's relations with China?

The Sino-Thai relationship has been cordial, marked by no major conflicts. Beijing's endorsement of the 2014 military coup in Bangkok has even deepened ties, as the Thai military has favoured China's policy in many aspects. Therefore, the recent lack of an invitation for Thailand's premier to the BRI summit raised eyebrows among policy analysts, the media and members of the public. The Thai leader was the only absent leader from the sub-region,

and the Chinese must have also understood that the omission would cause Thailand to 'lose face'. Small countries in the Pacific that don't lie on the major maritime routes were even invited. So, what were the reasons for Prayut's exclusion from the summit?

There are in fact two possible reasons for that exclusion. The first is the delay in the Sino-Thai high-speed railway project. The project started in 2012, but the political situation in Thailand terminated the earlier deal due to parliamentary disapproval and Yingluck was ousted by the military coup in 2014. Despite Beijing's endorsement of the military government in Bangkok, Thailand renegotiated the deal. It eventually announced it would finance the entire project domestically rather than with credit from China, although it would grant concessions to China for the construction of railways and the operation of trains. Yet there are still a number of unresolved issues on which the Chinese will not give. These include the use of Chinese workers and Chinese materials, which would contravene Thai laws and regulations.

The second reason may be related to Prayut's acceptance of United States President Donald Trump's invitation to visit the White House later this year. Beijing may want to signal Bangkok that it will not tolerate being treated as second choice in Thailand's diplomatic games. Before the BRI summit, United States President Donald Trump made a phone call to three Southeast Asian leaders, including those of the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand with invitations to Washington. While Philippine President Duterte was non-committal, the Thai government accepted the invitation and enthusiastically arranged an official visit, on 3 October 2017. These diplomatic snubs may suggest that China is departing from its 'charm offensive' strategy and that it is now more willing

to exercise political pressure explicitly when its interests are even indirectly affected. Southeast Asia states may need to craft a more careful hedging strategy in order to deal with the dissatisfied rising power.

China's charm offensive diplomacy has focused on carrots, but now it is more willing to use its stick. Beijing is not reluctant to adopt shaming and intimidation when its national interests are affected. It looks like minor diplomatic intimidation, but it allowed Beijing to send a message about its unhappiness with the current situation. However, China has still offered Thailand a second chance, as it has invited Prayut to attend the BRICS summit in Xiamen in September 2017.

Furthermore, Beijing's more assertive approach may also develop into a situation in which regional states need to choose sides. In the case of Southeast Asia, China is now pressuring the region to favour China's regional leadership. Singapore's position in both the South China Sea disputes and in supporting the American role clearly does not align with Beijing's objectives. The omission of Singapore's leader from the BRI Summit has also suggested Beijing's unhappiness with the city-state's strategic posture in favour of Washington. In Thailand's case, the likelihood of Thai-American appeasement may also play a role besides the railway issue. Beijing is perhaps sending a signal that it is unsatisfied being treated only as a political cushion and secondary power on which Bangkok can fall back whenever its relations with Washington grow rough.

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