

Overall, this study offers a thorough and original examination of the regional dynamics of Thailand's economic development. Through his detailed examination of the past, Porphant is able to throw the country's present-day problems into sharp relief; underlining, for instance, the way in which the recent political turmoil is a symptom of long-established wealth inequalities between different regions. As such, this book will be of use not just to historians, but to anyone with an interest in Thailand.

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*Thailand: History, Politics and the Rule of Law* by James Wise (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2019). ISBN: 9789814841542 (paperback). S\$34.60. 680 Baht.



Anyone with at least a passing interest in Thailand will be familiar with the political turmoil that has afflicted the country for much of the last fifteen years and has led to the current military-dominated government. Understanding the causes behind the series of judicial and military coups that overthrew a succession of elected governments under the direction of Thaksin Shinawatra, and the sustained red and yellow-shirted streets protests in Bangkok opposed to, or in favour of, these interventions, is more difficult, however. While there are a number of journalistic accounts offering on the ground, eyewitness reports of these events, they often lack insight into the long-term factors that influenced said events. The specialised academic literature, meanwhile, might be too obscure and diffuse or even just inaccessible—locked behind journal paywalls or hidden away in out of print volumes in

university libraries—for the interested layperson. It is with this reader in mind that the former Australian diplomat, James Wise, has written *Thailand: History, Politics and the Rule of Law*.

As the Australian ambassador to Thailand between 2010 and 2014, Wise observed much of the country's political unrest first-hand and had direct access to some of the key actors. During an earlier posting to the country, he also witnessed the impact of the Asian Financial Crisis and the introduction of the so-called People's Constitution in 1997. In this book, Wise combines his diplomatic experience with a solid understanding of the academic literature to produce a highly readable and lucid account of the development of the kingdom's political, social and legal systems since the 19th century. In doing so, he is guided by the adage that to understand the present one must understand the past and the

belief that Thailand must be judged on its own terms rather than by Western standards of governance. He also confesses to having some sympathy for all Thai political leaders and government officials, given the challenges and constraints they have faced and their undoubted success in delivering a relatively high level of socio-economic development compared to most other countries in Southeast Asia. Indeed, the conundrum of why Thailand has prospered, despite persistent political instability over the last 100 years, is one of the questions that Wise seeks to answer.

For Wise, the fundamental cause of the recent political strife is “the absence in Thailand of an agreed understanding on where political disputes should be mediated and arbitrated, and on the absence of an agreed understanding on how political conflicts should be arbitrated and, where necessary, adjudicated” (p. xix). In contrast to Western-style political systems in which there are three branches of government—the legislature, the executive and the judiciary—Thailand has two additional ones: the monarchy and the military. The first part of the book, therefore, takes an institutional approach in detailing the development and interrelationships of these five state institutions since the late 19th century. Wise identifies three inflection points in this process, specifically: the administrative and legal reforms of King Chulalongkorn in the 1890s that solidified the authority of the absolute monarchy, the 1932 coup by the People’s Party that replaced absolutism with constitutional government and introduced a legislature, and, lastly, the implementation of the 1997 constitution, which was designed to strengthen the legislature, the executive and the judiciary vis-à-vis the military. What becomes clear, however, is that, for most of the time since 1932 and as is readily apparent today, it is the military, often in alliance with the monarchy, that has managed to hold the upper hand over the other branches of government. This dominance is not solely down to the machinations of the military or the monarchy, though; as Wise shows, neither the judiciary nor the legislature have done much to promote or protect their institutional interests as conceived in the Western sense of governance. One of the judges involved in the 2001 corruption case against Thaksin, for instance, questioned whether the Constitutional Court had the right to judge him given that he had been elected democratically. Similarly, Thailand’s oldest political party, the Democrats, boycotted both the general elections in 2006 and 2014. Nevertheless, it is still surprising that Wise assigns the main blame for the political crisis of 2013-2014 to the judiciary and the legislature, explaining that neither institution has “accumulated stabilising, dispute-settlement responsibilities that are commonly exercised by legislatures and judiciaries in conventional parliamentary democracies” (p. 90). In comparing Thailand to Western democracies, Wise seems to ignore the logic of his own arguments. It is precisely because the Thai military, with the monarchy’s support, has repeatedly been able to overturn electoral democracy and consistently interfere with the judiciary for their own ends that Thailand is not a conventional parliamentary democracy. Blaming the legislature and the judiciary for being too weak to stand up to more powerful forces thus comes across as a case of blaming the victims.

In the remainder of the book, Wise attempts to explain why the legislature and judiciary have been unable to adopt the essential conflict mediating and resolution roles they have elsewhere. Part Two of the book examines, first, the enduring legacies of

the traditional Siamese sociopolitical system and, second, the development of Thai nationalism and its influence upon contemporary politics. In the first case, the formal status hierarchy of the past might have disappeared, but the concept of one's place in society being dictated by one's karma persists. So too do the informal patron-client relationships that undergirded the traditional hierarchy and encompassed everyone in the kingdom. The result today is a political system that still revolves around personalities and personal relationships, rather than institutions, and in which many people still believe that not all are equal in terms of their moral worth, in their right to lead or in the value of their vote. During the 2013-2014 political crisis, therefore, people on both sides of the political spectrum looked for culprits to blame and saviours to resolve it. As Wise concludes astutely: "In all cases, the focus was on who should govern Thailand .... The question of how Thailand might be governed more effectively did not arise" (p. 141, emphasis in the original).

Like nationalism in other Asian countries, meanwhile, Thai nationalism emerged as a response to the kingdom's encounter with Western imperialism in the 19th and the early 20th century. Wise outlines how the absolute monarchy formulated a nationalism that emphasised loyalty to the king as the sole protector of the Thai nation and privileged Central Thai culture and values over those of other subject ethnic groups. Although the People's Party initially tried to legitimise their new regime by adding constitutionalism as an element in the national ideology, Phibun Songkhram, the military strongman who came to power in the late 1930s, reverted to ethnonationalism instead. Ever since, Thai political leaders of all persuasions have exploited nationalistic sentiments for their own ends, often at the expense of democratic ideals. It is here that some of the weaknesses of this book, and other such introductory syntheses of academic literature, become apparent: that is, firstly, oversimplifying complex and diverse realities by reducing them to either/or binaries and, second, relying on and reproducing frameworks and concepts that might be out of date and/or erroneous without attempting to critique or reformulate them. Following earlier studies, Wise divides Thai nationalism into an 'official' top-down strand and a 'popular' bottom-up one. The problem here is that he locates the origins of this popular nationalism in an 1885 petition by an extended member of the royal family and senior diplomat to Europe, which called for a constitutional monarchy as a means of dismissing Western criticisms and blunting the colonial threat. Wise then goes on to note the strong similarities between the two supposedly distinct strands of nationalism as promoted by the absolute monarchy, on the one hand, and the new commoner elite, on the other, concluding that, under Phibun, "a modified popular nationalism became the new official nationalism" (p. 168). But given these similarities and the elite origins of both forms, it would surely be more accurate to speak of there being just varieties of official Thai nationalism.

The third part of the book, in which Wise examines the reasons why the Western concept of the rule of law has failed to take root in Thailand, is more robust. The traditional Siamese legal system was informed by the Buddhist concept of a universal cosmic order, the maintenance of which depended on upholding various rules and obligations. Rather than outlining people's rights as in the case of Western law, Siamese law was thus concerned with duties. Moreover, the cosmic order, and by extension

the earthly social order, was hierarchical, with one's position in it being dictated by one's karma. The idea of human inequality was, thus, inscribed in the legal system. Lastly, with its focus on maintaining order and harmony, traditional means of conflict resolution revolved around achieving a compromise between the two parties. Although Thailand adopted a Western-style legal system during the reign of King Chulalongkorn in order to end the practice of extraterritoriality for Western subjects, "introducing a new legal consciousness .... was qualitatively harder" (p. 205). Translating Western legal terms and concepts such as 'liberty' into Thai proved difficult and attempts to clothe the constitution in Siamese-Buddhist idioms perpetuated traditional beliefs. Even today, people in rural areas prefer to seek justice in cases of personal injury through the traditional means of negotiation and compromise rather than through lawyers and the courts. As Wise highlights, one of the main problems here is that the rule of law lacks champions to promote and uphold it, even among legal professionals. Western ideas of law and constitutionalism thus remain unfamiliar and foreign, with the result that "many Thais still prefer to be ruled by men than by the law" (p. 197).

Ultimately, Wise argues that the reason Thai society has been unable to agree on how and by whom political disputes should be resolved is due to the co-existence of two competing forms of political legitimacy: a traditional one based on humans existing in a moral hierarchy, and a modern one informed by the concepts of democracy, equal rights and the rule of law. For proponents of the former, the king and his representatives should be the final arbiters of disputes. For those who believe in the latter, however, it is the legislature, and by extension the electorate, that should hold this power. Or, in some cases, it should be the judiciary. While the monarchy and the military, the two institutions most closely associated with the traditional legitimacy, might dominate the country at present, Wise suggests that in the long run the modern form is likely to prevail. Voter turnout indicates most Thais favour a democratic form of government and recent military governments have had to adjust to changing expectations by paying lip service to constitutional ideals at the very least.

Wise writes in clear and simple prose, using some memorable analogies and turns of phrase. When discussing the development of Thai ethnonationalism, for instance, he states that: "Phibun was the son that [King] Vajiravudh never had" (p. 164). The book is rounded off with an appendix that includes a list of historical periods, kings and prime ministers, followed by short biographies of past and present political figures. Wise also provides a useful list of books and articles for further reading, with brief summaries of each.

Judged in terms of its overall purpose of providing an introduction to Thai politics for the general reader, this book is an undoubted success. Indeed, it covers many of the topics and themes that one would expect to find on a university course focusing on Thailand, including ones taught by this reviewer. Thai specialists, meanwhile, will find many of Wise's observations insightful and thought-provoking. Recent incidents of protest and counter-protest indicate that Thailand's long-standing political conflict is no nearer to resolution; as such, this book is both timely and likely to remain relevant for the foreseeable future.

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