Thailand: Political Culture Essay, Research Paper

INTRODUCTION

For us to be able to study political culture, it is imperative that we first learn how to define it. Political culture refers to the attitudes, beliefs and values, which underpin the operation of a particular political system. These were even seen as including the knowledge and skills about the political system, positive and negative emotional feelings towards it and the evaluative judgments about that system.

Particular regional, ethnic or other groups within a political system which are referred to as “subcultures” have their own way of dealing with the political system that the political culture in one country can be united or may even be diverse. This has been given greater focus because of the fact that the influence of the individuals involved in this vary significantly due to geography, religion, ethnicity and even the economy.

Studying political culture may help us understand of how a certain people react to certain political events and developments in certain societies and it may also help us be aware of the reasons for tension within a community and even in nations.

This paper aims to study the particular political culture of Thailand and further examine the causes of how it came to be now. It also aims to examine how this particular kind of political culture has influenced the way that the government is run today and most of all, its effects on the other sectors and parts of the community.

Wide research has been done to resolve this particular study. The resources include encyclopedias, books on the country, articles of newspapers and the Internet. There has also been interaction on the part of the researcher and people from the said country by means of the chat room.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory that would best serve the out puts of this paper would be the one on the relation of democracy and development. It is composed of two theses; one that says, “Development causes democratization”. This is backed up by many political theorists and will be discussed furthermore in the analysis as applied to the case of Thailand.

The other one stresses, “Development does not lead to democracy of even further democratization”. It stated different reasons for this such as (1) statist economic development which says that the government of that certain country is involved or even controls the economic development of their country so, there is intervention on the part of the government in terms of the economy; (2) culture as a factor where the people in the government and the society accepts the thought of development in the economy and also the government but they do not apply it because they want to preserve the traditional cultures of the people; (3) racial and ethnic division; (4) external factors such as intervention from foreign countries and even the IMF or the World Bank and; (5) political factors. This thesis holds true for countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia where we can see that they are economically developed but there is no democracy in the country because of two or more reasons stated above.

THAILAND

Prathet Thailand (“Land of the Free”) or Kingdom of Thailand is located in the Southeast Asia. Previously called Siam, it has a total land area of 198, 456 sq. miles (514, 000 sq. km.). Located in mainland Asia, it extends for about 985 miles (1, 585 km) from north to south and about 510 miles (821 km) from east to west. It is bordered on the north and west across the Salween River by Burma, on the north and east across the Mekong River by Laos, on the southeast by Cambodia and on the south across the Isthmus of Kra by Malaysia.

LAND

It is mainly divided into four regions: the Northern Mountains which is mainly full of forests of evergreen and teak trees; the Khorat Plateau which covers about 30% of its land area and is the most populated; the Central Plains which is the most fertile area and where the Thais plant their rice and lastly, the Southern Peninsula which is mostly covered by dense jungles, home to many animal species.

Thailand boasts of its being the only nation in Asia to have avoided colonial domination so it has managed to preserve its traditional society, religious traditions and its ancient India-derived conception of governmental authority. However, with the onset of new technology, even though its society is traditional, it has managed to catch up with other European countries. Proof of this is the fact that if you go to Thailand, you will see tall skyscrapers on one side and see the smaller shacks and the “wats” (temples) on the other side.

PEOPLE

Thailand’s population of 61,230,874 (July 2000 est.) is largely divided into many races but what seems to dominate is the Mongoloid race or the Chinese. Most of the people in Thailand are ascendants of Thai-speaking people who have migrated from Southern China. Other members of the population include other immigrants from neighboring countries like Cambodia, Vietnam and Burma. But, in the urban cities like Bangkok, there is also a mix of Japanese, Indian and European people.

There are also other people who live in the hills and have accepted the traditional way of life. These people in rural villages usually survive by fishing, lumber, mining and agriculture, where they grow their own food like corn, cassava, fruits and rice. These small villages have their own schools and a “wat”.

Thais are 95% Buddhists but mostly Theravada Buddhists but, other religions include Islam, Christianity and even animism. Its official language is Thai and other languages used are English, Chinese, Malay and other tribal languages.

ECONOMY

Thailand’s currency is bath where 1 baht = 100 satang. Before 1960, Thailand relied mostly on rice and it natural reserves of tin and also on rubber and teak. However, in the 1960’s, more roads were constructed, more forestlands were developed and banks loaned money to farmers which they used for irrigation, dams and even tractors. This began the new era f technology for the economy of the country. Today, Thailand has on of the most stable economies in Southeast Asia, operating on free enterprise, which depends on rice and manufacturing.

One of the major sources for its economic stability is the agriculture business. Majority of Thais are farmers who own their lands. Rice production takes up 25% of the total land area of the country. But, they do not rely solely on this. They also plant bananas, cassava, corn, cotton, jute, pineapples, soybeans, tobacco, and sugar. Thailand is also known as the 3rd largest producer of rubber for international market.

But they are also involved in manufacturing of cement, food products, plywood and textiles, particularly silk. They also fish for anchovies, mackerel and shellfish but they also have their own fishponds. Aside from that, they also mine tin, lead, manganese, tungsten and iron ore. They also make use of their vast forests of teak and other hard trees. However, nowadays, one of Thailand’s highest contributors to their economy is tourism where about 4 million people visit its temples and beaches every year.

GOVERNMENT

Thailand’s government is one of the most centralized and bureaucratic in the world. Though national acts have been passed to decentralize it and give autonomy to the local administration, it has not been successful because very little power is given to them. The country is divided into 72 provinces but is also subdivided into 576 districts more.

Thailand’s political history is considered to be most colorful and amazing because it has changed its Constitution a dozen times since 1932. King Bhumibol signed the latest Constitution on October 1997. There have also been numerous changes in the government but with no bloodshed. However, nowadays, its form of government has rested on constitutional monarchy.

The monarch is considered the sacred head of the country and is also considered the moral leader of the state. Though the monarch has no governing powers, he is still considered as the symbolic head of the state. But, he is given the position as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. He also appoints the country’s Prime Minister on the recommendation of the President of the National Assembly. The present monarch is King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) and his wife, Queen Sirikit. He is considered to be the longest reigning monarch since 1950.

The Prime Minister holds the executive power of the state and has the highest authority over political appointments and also of national security. He rules the country with 44 other ministers, which he chooses. The Premier holds the term of 4 years.

Thailand’s National Assembly (Rathasapha) is bicameral with the Upper (Senate) or Wuthisapha and Lower (Congress) House or Sapha Phuthaen Ratsadon. The Senate is composed of 200 members (as of March 2000) who are replaced every 6 years; of whom are chosen by the Prime Minister. Congress, on the other hand, is composed of 500 members (as of March 2000), replaced every 4 years and is elected by the people. The Senate President is considered to be the President of the National Assembly while the Speaker of the House, the Vice-President.

There are no elections in the country except for the one choosing the House of Representatives. The monarchy is hereditary while the Prime Minister is chosen from among the members of the House of Representatives. So, whichever party has majority in the House of Representatives has the greater chance of getting to be the Prime Minister

Thailand’s political parties were severely restricted for several decades following the 1932 change of government but have multiplied since that time. Many parties serve as the personal political machines of individuals or small groups, and few represent defined ideologies. More than a dozen parties contested the elections of 1996. Among the most prominent were the centrist Democrat (Prachathipat) Party; the New Aspiration Party of former prime minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh; and the Chat Thai (Thai Nation) Party, associated with the military.

Thailand’s judiciary is composed of the Supreme Court, highest court of law in the country. Under it is the Court of Appeals and also magistrate’s courts and provincial courts. The country is also a member of many different international organizations such as the UN, and other UN agencies like the IMF, UNESCO, FAO and ASEAN.

A PEEK INTO THAILAND’S PAST . . .

The First Kingdom People have lived in what is now Thailand for at least 20,000 years, with groups migrating from India and southern China about 4,000 years ago, and more recently from Myanmar (Burma) and Cambodia. In many ways, though, the history of Thailand (known as Siam until 1939) can be said to begin with the founding of the independent kingdom of Sukhothai in 1238. This period of great cultural growth lasted just a century, a time during which the tiny kingdom absorbed elements of neighboring cultures. From China came fine potters who established the famous kilns at Sawankhalok, and contact occurred with India via the trade route. From Cambodia, Thailand absorbed elements of administration as well as architecture. When King Ramathibodi assumed the throne in 1350, he moved his kingdom to Ayuthaya – one of the world’s most fertile areas, situated where three great tributaries join to form the mighty Chao Phraya River. The Ayuthaya kingdom flourished during the next four centuries, conquering Cambodia and the surviving states in the north. Foreign Influence During the 17th century, the country opened its door to the West, establishing contact with England, Denmark, Japan, and France. Trade flourished; Siam had its place in the world and was known for its fine cloth, spices, metals, and semiprecious stones. The Burmese, who had waged war with Siam almost continually since the 15th century, sacked Ayuthaya in 1767. The days of the Burmese overlords were numbered however, and their reign was shortly terminated when General Phya Tak proclaimed himself king. When the general, who became known as Taksin the Great, was executed by his ministers in 1782, the crown passed to General Chao Phya Chakri, who took the name Rama I. The founder of the present dynasty of Thai kings, he moved his capital to the eastern bank of the Chao Phraya River and named it Krung Thep – Bangkok. Rama I reined for some 27 years and successfully kept the Burmese at bay. The British and Thai governments concluded a commercial treaty in 1826. Because of the rights and privileges obtained by this agreement, British influence increased in Thailand throughout the remainder of the 19th century. However, the statesmanship of King Mongkut (fictionalized in The King and I and Anna and the King of Siam) and his son King Chulalongkorn the Great enabled Thailand to avoid the fate of colonization that befell its neighbors, although the negotiations ended up costing Thailand a great deal of territory. The World Wars Siam entered World War I (1914-18) on the side of the Allies in July 1917 and subsequently became a founding member of the League of Nations. In June 1932 a small group of Thai military and political leaders organized a successful revolt against the absolute monarchy. Supported by Japan, the new government negotiated with France the return of territory ceded since 1893. Thailand’s relations with Japan became increasingly friendly, and when World War II broke out, Thailand capitulated immediately to the Japanese invasion to avoid “unnecessary bloodshed of its people,” and in fact declared war on the United States and Great Britain in 1942. However, the pro-Japanese government was overthrown two years later, and the new leadership encouraged sympathy for the Allied cause. Thailand resumed diplomatic relations with the United States in 1946 and became the 55th member of the United Nations on 15 December 1946. A Time of Unrest The last half of the 20th century has been marked by internal political difficulties. In 1947 a military junta seized control of the government. The ensuing dictatorship was overturned in 1951. A subsequent coup by the military seven years later resulted in the suspension of the constitution. Political rights slowly regained ground throughout the 1960s, but military rule was re-established in 1971. Student-led demonstrations in 1973 resulted in the appointment of a civilian cabinet, but instability reigned throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, with the government often changing hands. First, in the 1980’s the government was known to have been democratic but in 1991, the military leaders staged a coup removed the Premier from his office and appointed an interim civilian government. In February 1995 the government passed a sweeping pro-democracy package that amended almost all the articles of the constitution passed in 1991. The changes included lowering the voting age from 20 to 18 years, and Thai citizens were guaranteed due process and equal justice under the law.

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THEORIES ON POLITICAL SYSTEMS

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ANALYSIS

Thailand has one of the most diverse cultures in the world that this culture is one of the greatest influences on the way that the Thai people go about their lives. It also influences all the other parts of the government and the society including the government and also the way that they handle their economy. Thus, Thailand’s political culture is as complicated as their culture.

With the use of the theories on political culture by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, Thailand’s political culture is very hard to examine. Its political culture seems to fit all the theories involved. First, it is a participant political culture because although the people do not vote for the chief executives, they still consider themselves as a big factor in the election process. However, it also fits in the parochial type where some of the people are distanced from their national government. These people are the farmers who just want to go on with their lives without having to connect with the national government. Still, Thailand also has a subject political culture because some other group of people view themselves as subjects wherein their lives are directed by the political process above them. The youth of Thailand fit into this type because they are very passive about it and they do not want to discuss it. They seem to think that they can do without it.

With this, we can see that the combination of all these three political cultures make up a different kind of political culture called a civic culture. This is the most ideal culture and this type of political culture leads to a stable democracy. Thus, here we can see that Thailand has acquired a very stable democracy because of the way that the people think and the diversity of the political culture.

However, this is already established because as said in the theoretical framework, Thailand is a democracy because of the development of its economy. Theorists like Karl Marx, Max Weber and Barrington Moore support this theory. It says that there are many reasons as to why the government of Thailand is in this state.

First, is the maturity of the economy. The idea behind this is that with the rise of economic development in a country, the higher will the political development go. This holds true for Marx’s sociological model where he says that the economy is the base in the society that affects the superstructure or all the other sectors in the society. Whenever there is economic change, there is also a great chance that all these other sectors will experience change. Second, is the shift to export-oriented industrialization where in the business sector of the government will also affect the democracy of the country. The fact that there is industrialization needs the government to adjust a bit to fit the type of business that they are trying to assume. Third, is the liberalization, privatization and marketization of the economy. When the people in the government want this type of economy, the government is further democratized to suit the needs of the investors in the country.

With all these information given, we can further conclude that Thailand’s political culture is very much a big factor in its success as a country and also in the government. It is very much ideal because of the way that it has affected the peoples life. Though, Thailand has been very quiet with regards to the development of their politics, we can see that it is very successful to the point that it has attained stability in terms of the economy hence the stability in all the other sectors like the society and the government.

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