Thailand

The Asia Foundation

The Asia Foundation has worked in Thailand since 1954. In cooperation with partners in government, civil society, academia, and the private sector, the Foundation promotes peaceful conflict resolution, encourages citizen engagement in the political process, and supports innovative programs that help to build more responsive and transparent systems of governance throughout the country.

GOVERNANCE REFORM

For many years The Asia Foundation has supported local efforts to strengthen and sustain responsive institutions of democratic governance. The circumstances surrounding the 2006 coup d'état and the national political crisis that brought Bangkok close to the brink of public order collapse in May 2010 reflect an ongoing collision between competing social and political coalitions in a period of unprecedented social and economic change in Thailand. In this charged political environment, the Foundation assists government agencies and civil society to inform debate on constitutional reform and to strengthen accountability mechanisms in the formal justice system.

PROMOTING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Since Thailand became a constitutional monarchy in 1932, the country has had an unprecedented 17 constitutions, each of which has endured less than five years on average. As part of the election campaign on which it swept to victory in 2011, the Puea Thai government pledged to amend the controversial 2007 Constitution. While recent efforts to define the mechanics of the amendment process have generated significant controversy, there is strong consensus among civil society and thoughtful political leaders that the institutional arrangements for constitutional reform should be complemented by supplementary mechanisms for public consultation and input, which will in turn help political actors reach a common understanding. The Foundation supports the efforts of dynamic civil society coalitions and public policy institutions to inform the substance of the constitutional reform process, raise public awareness and understanding of reform options, and channel public views and expectations.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE ADMINISTRATION

Access to justice and personal and community security count among the fundamental rights of a society and the basic foundations on which broader good governance practices and national development build. Thailand does not experience crime, political violence, or human rights abuse on a scale approaching some conflict-torn countries, yet the specter of violence and the breakdown of law and order loom large in public imagination, stirred by violent conflict in the Deep South and the political tensions of the last decade. Citizens place little confidence in a criminal justice system that routinely compromises investigations, relegates suspects who are eventually acquitted for lack of evidence to languish in pre-trial detention, and fails to bring those responsible for grievous human rights abuses to justice.

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port, the Foundation enhances the capacity of police, prosecutors, forensic pathologists, legal service organizations, and the media to collaborate in the application of forensic investigative techniques and in raising public awareness of the role of forensics in strengthening criminal justice administration. Complementary criminal justice initiatives create space for government, academia, civil society, the criminal bar, and the print and broadcast media to collaborate in activities that raise public confidence in the police and other criminal justice agencies through dialogue and cooperation between communities and the police who serve them and other reform measures.

CONFLICT MITIGATION IN THE DEEP SOUTH

Since 2004, Thailand's southern border provinces of Yala, Narathiwas, and Pattani have faced the resurgence of an indigenous separatist movement and communal conflict that has shattered a tradition of peaceful coexistence among the Malay-Muslim majority population and the minority Buddhist community. The conflict has claimed more than 5,000 lives, left thousands more injured, and exposed men and women of the Deep South to an environment of persistent tension and insecurity. While the causes of the conflict are complex, The Asia Foundation and its local partners recognize that understanding and addressing the core grievances of the majority Malay-Muslim population is critical to the peace process. The Foundation works to establish the social, legal, and political conditions that are essential to restore confidence, improve state-society relations, and lay the groundwork for lasting peace.

SAFEGUARDING LOCAL IDENTITY

While Thailand is a predominantly Buddhist country, the three southern border provinces have a unique religious, cultural, and linguistic identity that distinguishes the Malay-Muslim community from the rest of the country. For decades these differences have been poorly understood and accommodated by central government policy makers, fueling grievances and contributing to the sense of alienation that is a major factor behind militancy. In keeping with the government's policy to allow for greater cultural space, the Foundation works with secondary schools to create opportunities for students to discuss local history in a depoliticized manner, while also exposing government officials and community leaders to models of state-minority cooperation and alternative approaches to preserve identity without resorting to violence or threatening national unity.

OVERCOMING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

While the majority of citizens of the Deep South speak Patani-Malay as their native language, Thai is the working language of the civil service. The resulting scope for misunderstanding between Malay-Muslim citizens and government officials contributes to the ongoing conflict. To bridge this language divide, the Foundation supported the development of Patani-Malay language learning tools for police, courts, and other government officials, works with local government agencies and the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) to train native Patani-Malay speakers to work as police translators and court interpreters, and supports local initiatives to promote the use of bilingual Thai-Yawi signs and the restoration of traditional village names to their Patani-Malay origins.

EMPOWERING LOCAL LEADERS AND COMMUNITIES

To lay the groundwork for enduring peace in the Deep South, the Foundation works to strengthen the capacity of community leaders to facilitate dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives that reflect the aspirations of citizens. It works with Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders, dynamic civil society actors, local government officials, business owners, women, and other respected community members, with the aim of restoring trust and empathy and building a resilient social fabric. Drawing on the relevant experience of other Asian countries, the Foundation also promotes improved safety and security through greater understanding, communication, and cooperation between community members and security forces working in the Deep South.

GAUGING PUBLIC OPINION, STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

Efforts to quell violence and broker peace in the Deep South have tended to focus on central authorities and high-ranking local officials, with less attention paid to the views of the public at large. What do ordinary citizens see as the most pressing issues in the Deep South? Do Malay-Muslim youth who have grown up in the conflict environment share experience and aspirations in common with their peers in other parts of Thailand? In cooperation with local technical and civil society partners, the Foundation conducts perceptions surveys and other research to explore different issues. The results inform efforts to assist and strengthen communities and establish baselines from which to measure the impact of program activities. The Foundation's 2010 survey of the Deep South is frequently cited by policy makers, while its recent survey on the circumstances of youth will inform its work with a new generation of leaders.

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

In 2011, Thailand faced its worst flooding in half a century, with the industrial and rice-producing provinces that surround Bangkok bearing the brunt of the disaster. The flooding resulted in more than 800 deaths, affected nearly 14 million people, and caused economic losses that exceeded $45 billion. While climate change projections suggest that natural disasters of this kind are certain to occur more frequently in Thailand in years ahead, the 2011 crises underlined that neither government, industry, nor vulnerable communities were adequately prepared to cope with such a disaster. In response, The Asia Foundation provided immediate legal, environmental testing and monitoring, and other support to affected communities, and launched new environmental governance initiatives to enhance community, private sector, and local government engagement in Thailand's flood rehabilitation and recovery program.

SUPPORTING FLOOD RECOVERY AND MITIGATION

A post-flood environment governance initiative undertaken by the Foundation in partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation places particular emphasis on the interests and voice of citizens and communities that have historically been excluded from policy planning and implementation in Thailand. The Foundation is working to improve coordination and collaboration of key stakeholders in national plans and policies for water management and natural disaster preparedness. The project includes assistance for the government to establish a fair and transparent post-disaster compensation scheme; plans to draft standard operating procedures for industrial estates and factories to manage chemicals and toxic materials in the event of future flooding; and development of government plans to manage water in normal and emergency situations.

ASSESSING DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

While the $46 billion economic loss from the 2011 flooding was unprecedented—ranking fourth in modern history—the Thai economy is affected by flooding and drought to some degree on an annual basis. While Thailand has initiatives in place to help the industrial sector prepare for and adapt and respond to natural disasters, the smaller businesses that comprise the greatest percentage of business enterprises in the country and contribute 40 percent to GDP are typically left out of the equation. Few small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have adequate access to information or contingency planning capacity to meet the risks associated with natural disasters. The Foundation is conducting a survey to assess disaster preparedness among Thai SMEs. The survey is focused on the challenges that SMEs face and their understanding of disaster risk management and related regulations for businesses. The results and recommendations will lay the groundwork for program initiatives to better equip SMEs to meet future disasters.

STIMULATING ECONOMIC GROWTH AND REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS

While Thailand has experienced several decades of transformative economic growth that has not been dramatically affected by recent political turbulence, in the contemporary global economy no country can rest securely on past performance or allow political tensions to distract economic policy makers. Thailand must take active measures to ensure future economic growth in an increasingly competitive regional and international trade and investment environment. Through a series of new economic program initiatives, The Asia Foundation aims to strengthen Thailand's leadership role in the establishment of the Asian Free Trade Area (AFTA) whose success is dependent on political and economic readiness.

The Foundation is supporting an evaluation of women entrepreneurs in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines to identify—through a combination of interviews, focus group discussions, and survey research—the economic, legal, financial, and social and cultural constraints to women's entrepreneurship. Informed by this research, the Foundation will create a regional network of women in trade across the four focal countries that will provide opportunities for women entrepreneurs to share business models, strategies, and lessons learned and to strengthen their capacity to grow their businesses and conduct trade.

Existing barriers to trade facilitation—including the free flow of goods, services, capital, and labor—force Southeast Asian consumers to pay higher prices. In response, the

Foundation is supporting research on regional trade facilitation and the avoidable cost of economic non-cooperation to consumers in the ASEAN region. The study will articulate and rank the harm that these barriers exact and recommend practical policy reform initiatives to reduce them. The Foundation will also conduct research and provide recommendations on the policy steps and political actions that Thailand and other major ASEAN economies can take to avoid the middle income trap.

SUPPORTING THAILAND'S ROLE AS AN NON-TRADITIONAL DEVELOPMENT PARTNER

The current international aid architecture is largely the product of consensus among OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors around the purpose of aid, where it should be directed, and how it should be managed. This consensus is being challenged, however, by the increasing presence of non-Western development partners that are not members of the DAC or who have newly joined the group. In Asia, Thailand has assumed a place among these non-traditional development partners that provide financial and technical support to less developed countries in Asia and in the broader global arena. While Thai development assistance is still relatively modest in scale, it is valued by recipient countries and Thailand's own development experience holds valuable lessons learned for neighboring countries. To enhance Thailand's international development assistance capacity, The Asia Foundation works with the Thailand Development Cooperation Agency (TICA) and academic specialists in the field through a regional project on Asian Approaches to Development Cooperation that includes periodic dialogue meetings between China, India, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand and visits to Asian development partner countries. The country-specific program activities that flow from the regional dialogue include analysis of Thailand's policies for aid to Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and other neighbors in the sub-region and exchange of experience with traditional OECD-DAC development partners.

BOOKS FOR THAILAND

Each year, 80,000 new English-language books and software from North American publishers are shipped to Thailand and donated to more than 550 institutions by the Books for Thailand Foundation (BTF), a partnership between The Asia Foundation and local business leaders and philanthropists. Under a new pilot initiative with BTF, the Foundation is helping train elementary school English teachers for the introduction of tablet computer programs and developing an application for students on climate change and environmental sustainability, in furtherance of the Royal Thai Government's commitment to introduce tablet computers in schools across the country.

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