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Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict
The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism

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Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict

The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism

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Foreword

Ethnic and religious issues have, in the last few decades, confounded many social analysts by refusing to disappear. The “liberal expectancy” among social analysts used to be that modernisation would blur ethnic distinctions, achievement would replace ascription and particularistic criteria, and wide-ranging communication and education systems would homogenise populations. The “radical expectancy” was that differences in religions, languages, and culture would be swallowed up, perhaps even across national boundaries by emergent class consciousness. Instead, religion and ethnicity continue to cut across and envelop almost every facet of Southeast Asian life. Indeed, if anything, such divisions in many societies have become sharper, ethnic and religious interest groups more insistent, and opposition more politicised and strident. Much of this activity seems to be increasingly played on the urban stage — and this at a time when the pace of urbanisation in Southeast Asia is increasing rapidly, to the extent that by the turn of the century, cities such as Manila, Bangkok, and Jakarta could have populations of more than 10 million each. In these settings, Southeast

Asian ethnic, religious, and linguistic complexities are likely to be even more challenging than in the past.

It was therefore only natural that among other aspects of the Southeast Asian social and cultural scene, the Institute should identify the study of contemporary religion as one of its key areas of interest. Southeast Asia is after all not only home to all the major religions of the world — Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism — but the geographical spread of these is such that the bonds that bind their adherents at one and the same time defy and accentuate political and territorial divides and boundaries. The case of Islam is especially striking in this respect, as its followers are present in significant numbers in almost every Southeast Asian country, and in several of these across constraining political borders. Acting on this, a group of Southeast Asian scholars met in 1980 and proposed a project to increase our understanding of Islam in its regional context.

Towards this end, two clusters were identified. The first of these was centred on the nature of Islam in the region, Islam and societal change, and Islam and education. The second concentration was to be on Islam and problems of economic development.

The completion of the first cluster of research activities saw the publication of three volumes: *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia*, *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia*, and *Muslim Society, Higher Education and Development in Southeast Asia*.

Building on the foregoing studies, work commenced on the second cluster of research, that is, “Islam and the Economic Development of Southeast Asia”. The research here too is in three phases, spread over three years. They are: Islamic banking; Islam and resource mobilisation through the voluntary sector; and Islam and the role of the private sector in economic development.

The project on Islam stimulated considerable interest in not only other major religions in the region, but also issues relating to ethnicity and development, another of the Institute’s long-standing and primary areas of research. Moreover, the experience gained in managing the project on Islam proved valuable in terms of co-ordinating comparative research involving numerous scholars from diverse backgrounds and

disciplines — with the result that the Institute was encouraged not only to plan parallel projects on Buddhism and Christianity in South-east Asia, but also to think in terms of developing a longer-term *programme* of research that would encompass all its projects on contemporary religions, together with those that might grow out of the Institute's interests in ethnicity, urbanism, and related areas.

To facilitate this, the Institute convened a meeting in 1985 of senior Southeast Asian social scientists to discuss issues of social change in Southeast Asia, in order to identify firm areas of research and a sharper focusing of such research and associated activities. The group were unanimous in their conclusion that it was “essential and desirable” to encourage research on social issues in Southeast Asia, in particular religion, ethnicity, urbanism, and population dynamics.

To allow for proper planning and incremental research, the group felt that work in these areas could be most effectively developed within the structure and support of a *programme*, rather than as *ad hoc* projects. Accordingly, it was proposed there be established a programme of research to be known as the “Social Issues in Southeast Asia (SISEA)” programme. This programme would address itself to the nature, persistence, and impact of religions, ethnicity, urbanism, and population change in terms of their intrinsic dynamism and potential for societal conflict, coexistence or co-operation in the context of development, stability, and nation-building.

SISEA would also allow for the consolidation of the various publications emanating from the Institute's work in ethnicity, religion, urbanism, and population change within a single and integrated series, “Social Issues in Southeast Asia”. *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism* by Dr Peter A. Jackson, who was a Research Fellow in Australian-Southeast Asian Relations at the Institute in 1987–88, is the latest addition to the series.

SISEA and the preparation of *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism* have benefited greatly from the financial support provided by the Ford Foundation and by the Federal Government of Australia. The Institute would like to record its appreciation of all such help and support and to express

the wish that the various numbers of “Social Issues in Southeast Asia” will circulate widely amongst all concerned with the social dynamics of the region.

In wishing the volumes in the “Social Issues in Southeast Asia” series all the best it is clearly understood that responsibility for facts and opinions expressed in them rests exclusively with the individual authors, editors, and compilers, and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Institute or its supporters.

K.S. Sandhu
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Notes on Transliteration and Translation

The accurate transliteration of the many vowel sounds of the Thai language using the limited Roman alphabet must always involve a number of compromises, in particular, when diacritical marks are not used. However, the transliteration system used in this study, using the following principles, attempts to present as accurate a phonetic rendering of Thai terms as possible.

1. All Thai terms are transliterated phonetically and no attempt has been made to reflect the Sanskrit or Pali origins of words. Some exceptions to this principle are allowed where a non-phonetic spelling of a proper name is already well established. Where a Thai term has a clear Sanskrit or Pali origin the source term is occasionally included in parentheses after the phonetic rendering for clarity's sake, for example, Phra Phothisarak (Bodhiraks'a) and Wat Mahathat (Mahadhatu).
2. The English letters or letter groups most similar in sound to Thai consonants are used wherever possible, for example, *jor jaan*, *chor chaang*, and *yor yak*.

3. Wherever possible short vowels are written with a single letter, that is, *a, e, i, o, u, y*, while long vowels are written with double letters, that is, *aa, ee, ii, oo, uu, yy*. The exceptions are the vowels *ae, or* and *oe* (“er”), whose respective short and long forms are both transliterated in the same way because of the awkwardness of using four letters, that is, *aeae, oror, oeo*, to stand for the long vowel forms.
4. For the sake of brevity, and in order to follow the already established ways of spelling certain proper names in English, long vowels are often not marked when transliterating proper names, for example, Mahathat, not Mahaathaat; Uppaseno, not Uppaseenoo.
5. Where the Thai letter *yor yak* is the final part of a diphthong, the English letter *y* is used rather than *i*, that is, *naay* (Mister), not *naai*; *noey* (butter), not *noei*; and so forth. The English letter *y* is thus used to represent the Thai vowel as in *nyk* (to think) and *dyan* (month) as well as the semi-vowel *yor yak*. This double usage only rarely leads to possible confusion in words such as *yyyt* (to stretch) or *ryay* (regular), but the correct representation of the letter will usually be evident from the context.

Quotes translated from Thai by the author are indicated by “(T)” in the text.