

BOOK REVIEWS

***Political Change in Thailand*. Edited by Kevin Hewison.** New York: Routledge, 1997. 301pp.

During the last two decades, the focus of literature on Thailand has shifted from the military to civil society. Until recently, however, most studies have looked at civil society in very general terms; few attempts have been made to look at the specific components of civil society, and at the way they interact with various institutions. *Political Change in Thailand* is a welcome step in that direction. A well-written introduction by Hewison is followed by fourteen chapters that carefully analyse both a wide variety of institutions (the military, the monarchy, Buddhism, the stock market, political parties, the bureaucracy) and a number of components of civil society (labour, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], the media, the medical profession, and business). While this book includes a variety of perspectives, the essays are of a high standard, making it difficult to discuss each in the kind of detail it deserves. Therefore, I would like to discuss briefly two of the essays that deal with aspects of Thai politics that have received little attention in the past.

Perhaps the least studied political institution in Thailand has been the monarchy. As Kevin Hewison observes in his chapter on the role of the monarchy, this is partly due to self-censorship by scholars because of the sensitivity of the topic. Yet Hewison demonstrates that scholars can write about the monarchy while still observing sensitivities. Hewison's argument can be summarized briefly as consisting of three parts. First, that there has developed a "standard total view" of the monarchy, which depicts the current King "as a popular, egalitarian,

'elected' and constitutionally correct monarchy ... and as the architect of democratic development" (p. 63). In the second part of the argument, Hewison examines the writings of the King and his councillors and finds that they are ideologically conservative, primarily concerned with order and stability. This, Hewison then argues, has led the monarchy to "become increasingly involved in politics" to ensure order and stability (pp. 73–74). While Hewison's argument is convincing, it does raise two questions. First, the chapter does not distinguish carefully enough between the monarchy as an institution and the current monarch. Admittedly, this is a difficult task in the Thai case, as the current King has essentially created the modern constitutional monarchy during his long successful reign. Still, it is not clear whether the conservatism is institutional, or ideological. Secondly, Hewison implies that the conservatism of the monarchy tends to place it on the side of the military and the bureaucracy, rather than with civil society (p. 74). However, the emergent democracy in Thailand, which is usually credited to this civil society, is very conservative. None of the dozen-odd political parties can be characterized as "left", and indeed there has not been a leftist party in Thailand since the late seventies. Furthermore, worldwide, militaries, not civil society, have posed the greatest danger to monarchies in this century. Generally speaking, it is in the interest of any monarchy to limit the political role of the military, a fact the Thai monarchy must know well. Thus, it seems likely that the monarchy has been supporting democracy, albeit of a rather conservative type. Despite these reservations, Hewison's essay is convincing, sensitive, and respectful.

A second understudied element in Thai politics is the media, the subject of Thitinan Phongsudhirak's chapter. Thitinan employs the theoretical framework of Pharr, which classifies media into four types: spectator, servant, watchdog, or trickster (p. 218). Thitinan then argues that a major change in the Thai media took place during the early nineties, as the media went from servant of the state to watchdog, as a consequence of an "inept" opposition (pp. 217–18). For the electronic media, this argument is quite convincing, particularly since television and radio stations were all owned by the state at the time of the 1992 uprising, which is the focus of Thitinan's transition. For the press, however, the argument seems less convincing. The press has, at least since the turn of the century, had elements of all these types. To take a few examples, as Copeland has argued — and Thitinan mentions (p. 219) — during the twenties, the press poked fun at the government through the use of cartoons. In the fifties, during the Phibun period, *Siam Rath Weekly Review* ran a photographic essay of the government's "Constitution Fair" with all the photos depicting people from the waist

down. In a society where the feet are considered low, this was a clever and powerful attack on the government. And in 1977, when the government sought to justify its authoritarian rule through an emphasis on law and order, a censored press reacted by highlighting every crime story it could seek out. Of course, the press, or at least some papers, also served the state in each of these periods. Thus, as Thitinan seems to find in his chapter, the situation is much more complex than his argument. Indeed, even after 1992, when he believes the media began to play more of a watchdog role, Thitinan indicates that bribery of individual journalists by politicians, in effect buying a media “servant”, has been a problem (p. 228). What seems to have changed most, in fact, is the way politicians influence the press. In the past, leading politicians often owned newspapers. Now they are more likely to seek to influence individual reporters and columnists. Thitinan ends by concluding more simply, and more convincingly, that when the opposition is weak, the media can play a powerful oppositional role.

There are a number of other excellent chapters in this book, and indeed all of the chapters raise interesting and important issues for consideration. Those interested in following up the arguments, however, will find a major flaw in the bibliography. The Thai language sources are translated into English without a transliteration. This makes it very difficult to locate original sources. Providing transliteration and translation is standard practice. Despite this bibliographical flaw, this excellent collection of essays will be of great use to those attempting to understand the development of civil society in Thailand.

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Transforming the Tatmadaw: The Burmese Armed Forces Since 1998. By Andrew Selth. Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence, No. 113. Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, 1996. 202 pp.

Ever since Myanmar (then known as Burma) closed its doors to the outside world in the early 1960s, there had been a dearth of published material on all aspects of the country’s economy, state and society. Even after the ruling military junta decided to open up the economy to foreign investment and tourism in late 1988, academic publications on