



# Thailand

**Assessment:** Fair

**Trend:** ↓

Capital: Bangkok

Type of Government: Constitutional monarchy

Head of Government: Prime Minister Chinnawat

Thaksin (since January 2001)

Minister of Foreign Relations: Sathianthai Surakiat

Population: 61,797,751

Human Development Index Ranking: 70

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thailand has a **fair** record of support for democracy abroad during the period of 1992-2002. A society undergoing its own democratic transition, Thailand's government has stated that democratic principles are a moral compass for Thai policy. It has demonstrated continued support for regional and international efforts to bring about peaceful democratic transitions in conflict areas like East Timor. However, Thailand has repeatedly tailored its approach to issues of democracy promotion abroad to conform to its national economic and security interests. While the administration of Chuan Leekpai (1997-2001) was a vocal advocate for democracy and human rights abroad, foreign policy under the current center-right government led by businessman Thaksin Shinawatra is primarily focused on economic cooperation. Overall, the Thaksin government has not demonstrated an interest in keeping democracy promotion as a foreign policy priority.

## FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

Prime Minister Thaksin, in an address to the Thai Parliament shortly after winning elections, stated that Thailand's general foreign policy objectives are to support the principles of security, development and international peace building, to promote a more proactive role for Thailand in the region, and to preserve and protect the country's rights and national interests.

In practice, promoting Thailand's international economic and trade interests has formed the cornerstone of its foreign policy, and the constant search for new economic opportunities and natural resources has strongly influenced relations with neighboring countries. The 1997 Asian financial crisis, which resulted in political and economic instability as well as a decline in Thailand's bargaining power, served to strengthen the economic dimension of its foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

Thailand is located in the middle of the Southeast Asian peninsula bordering five non-democratic countries, with which it tries to maintain cordial relations. As a middle-ranking power in the region, Thailand has focused most of its attention on issues of concern to the peninsula and has not sought to distinguish itself as a leading advocate of democracy in Asia or in the world arena. It has relied on regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has no mandate related to democracy and human rights, for diplomatic action. Its weaker economic and political position relative to other countries in the world does not equip Thailand with much leverage to influence or shape events in other countries.



## RESPONSE TO OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS

Thailand's traditionally pragmatic approach to foreign policy is evidenced by its international organization with a binding commitment to defend democratic governments against illegal overthrows. It did not support international attempts to isolate the military junta in Burma and failed to take any action in response to the coup in Fiji in 2000.

Thailand's policy of accommodation towards Burma is based on a complex set of economic and security ties that result from existing conflicts, Burma's natural resources wealth, Thai economic interests in Burma, refugee flows, and a shared border almost 1500 miles long. Despite pressure from the United States and Europe to join efforts to isolate the Burmese junta, Thailand's strong economic interests in Burma compelled it to adopt a more pragmatic policy of continued engagement. Then-Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudth stated that the U.S. and European actions "will have no impact on Burma's bid to become a member of ASEAN...Thailand still maintains the policy of constructive engagement with Burma. There has been no change."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the Chuan government did press for democratic freedoms in Burma, and advocated a policy of constructive engagement among the members of the ASEAN countries, which voted to admit Burma in July 1997. The Thaksin government has not made democracy a priority in its relations with the military junta, prompting critics to charge that Bangkok is overly conciliatory. In the 2002 annual military reshuffle, Thaksin appointed as Army Chief General Somtad Attanand, who supports a soft-line approach toward Burma; his predecessor was known for his hard-line stance towards Burma.<sup>3</sup>

In response to the overthrow of the elected cabinet in Fiji in July 2000, Thailand supported ASEAN's decision to continue economic relations with the island country. Thailand deflected overtures from India about imposing economic sanctions.

## RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES

Thailand has a fair record of response to the manipulation of electoral processes. As a member of various regional organizations, the Thai government has issued joint statements of support for electoral observation and has endorsed reports by independent monitors. However, Thailand has not interrupted diplomatic relations or

response to the overthrow of democratically elected governments in Burma and Fiji. Even though Thailand at times has voiced support for democracy clauses introduced at regional and international fora, it does not belong to any independently campaigned for international isolation of a regime engaged in electoral malpractice. Thai governments have been willing to support election monitoring efforts, as evidenced by the government's permission for non-governmental organizations such as the Asian Network for Free and Fair Elections (ANFREL) to establish regional offices and organize international conferences in the country. An independent election monitoring team from Thailand also observed the Cambodian elections in 1998.

## PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

Thailand does not have an international assistance program, as it lacks adequate budgetary resources to provide foreign aid in most cases. It has, however, demonstrated its readiness to promote international democracy by cooperating and complying with international requests for other types of support to facilitate peaceful transitions to democracy. This includes assisting with peacekeeping operations and diplomatic negotiations. The country also has a good record of ratifying international protocols and agreements dealing with respect for human rights and democratic values. For instance, Thailand is a signatory in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and actively participates in the Asia-Pacific human rights forum. It is also a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1985 and its protocol in 2000, the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 and consider to sign its two optional protocols, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1996, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1999. Thailand also endorsed the Warsaw Declaration which promotes international and regional approaches to defend democracy.

At the regional level, Thailand and the Philippines first proposed the idea of "flexible engagement" which later became "enhanced interaction" among the ASEAN countries. The concept of "flexible engagement" sought to make the honored tradition of non-interference in ASEAN more elastic. Surin Pitsuwan, Thailand's Foreign Minister at the time, proposed that the principle of non-interference be submitted to



“reality tests” because there are domestic problems that have a regional impact and in such cases ASEAN members “should be able to express their opinions and concerns in an open, frank and constructive manner.”<sup>4</sup> Since the principle of non-interference was consistently used as a shield to ward off external criticism of poor democratic or human rights performance, “flexible engagement” would have opened the door to promoting greater accountability from ASEAN members on these issues. Not surprisingly, the concept did not get a warm reception at the ASEAN Summit of 1998. ASEAN members compromised, announcing the concept of “enhanced interaction” which means the countries of ASEAN agree that when there is a transnational problem such as drugs, smuggling or piracy they will convene and discuss them.

The Chuan government pushed for the participation of Thai troops in the historic peacekeeping operations in East Timor under the auspices of the United Nations, and a Thai officer served as the Commander for the UN peacekeeping mission. In addition to peacekeeping operations, Thailand has also participated in activities to encourage local communities to practice sustainable development.

More recently, Thailand displayed its support for the peaceful settlement of internal strife in a neighboring democracy by agreeing to host the Sri Lankan peace talks. Through these negotiations, the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) hope to arrive at a political settlement to resolve the conflict in Sri Lanka.

Though its responses to democracy challenges overseas may not be impressive relative to other countries, the Thai government has continued to support democracy strengthening at home. The 1997 Constitution provides unprecedented guarantees for human rights, accountability, transparency and citizen participation in the political process. Even so, its role as a model of democratization in Southeast

Asia is often undermined by its paramount focus on regional economic and security concerns.

### **POLICY TOWARDS ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS**

Thailand’s policy towards entrenched dictatorships reflects the continued primacy of pragmatism over principle. The 1997 Asian financial crisis affected Thailand’s relations with major international powers, and in particular its relations with China. Sino-Thai relations have continued to warm since 1975, and the two countries became even closer when China became the first country to help Thailand by pledging US\$1 billion to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout fund. The U.S. and Europe did not provide comparable assistance. Sino-Thai relations reached a new high in February 1999 with the signing of a joint statement on a “Plan for Action for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>5</sup>

Because of China’s growing economy and potential market for Thai exports, Bangkok views China as a close friend and even a strategic partner.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, business in Thailand is dominated by Sino-Thais who view China as offering immense economic opportunities. Thus, China meets both the security and economic interests that most significantly shape Thai policy. Thailand has sought to engage China in regional affairs by encouraging Beijing’s involvement in regional organizations and initiatives such as ASEAN Plus Three.<sup>7</sup> But it has avoided criticizing China’s treatment of political dissidents at home

Despite China’s growing influence in Thailand, Bangkok did not succumb to Beijing’s efforts to interfere with Falun Gong practitioners who had planned to hold an international meeting in Thailand. Chinese officials had made it known that they wanted Thailand to ban the meeting. The Chuan government, in keeping with its stated commitment to human rights, decided to allow the meeting to go ahead, though they set conditions on the participants’ activities. The Thaksin government, despite China’s stepped up efforts to prevent the meeting, also agreed to permit it.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thailand. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Thai Foreign Affairs B.E. 2540-2543. Bangkok: 2001, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> “Thai Prime Minister Shrugs Off U.S. Sanctions on Burma.” Deutsche Presse-Agentur 23 Apr. 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Matichon Weekly Vol. 1147 (9-15 August 2002), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Thailand. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Thailand's Non-Paper on The Flexible Engagement Approach. No. 743/2541 Bangkok, 27 July 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Snitwongse, Kusuma. “Thai Foreign Policy in the Global Age: Principle or Profit?” Contemporary Southeast Asia No. 2 (August 2001), pp. 189-212.

<sup>6</sup> In 1994, Thailand declined a request from the United States to position U.S. Navy supply ships in the Gulf of Thailand. The reason for the decline was understood to have considered China’s expected unfavorable reaction.



<sup>7</sup> This includes the 10 ASEAN countries plus China, Japan, and Korea. The first official meeting was held in July 2000 in Bangkok.

<sup>8</sup> Snitwongse, pp. 189-212.