

**Multiculturalism in Thailand:  
Concept, Policy and Practice  
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The workshop was organized by Dr. Sirijit Sunanta and Dr. Alexander Horstmann on behalf of the new PhD program in Multicultural Studies opened successfully at Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA) at Mahidol University in Salaya, Thailand in August 2012 with the first cohort of PhD students accepted. It was organized together with Dr. Chayan Vadhanaputhi, Director of the two participating centers at Chiang Mai University, the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) and Center of Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD) and Senior Advisor of the PhD program in Multicultural Studies at RILCA. The aim was to discuss the state of multiculturalism as a political position and policy in Thailand. The main question was if multiculturalism as an ideological position has arrived in Thailand and how multicultural policies impacted on ethnic minorities in Thailand. Another question asked was if Thailand has quit the assimilation model and implemented multicultural policies that sincerely aimed to accommodate diversity. The workshop concluded that multicultural policies are not yet sincere and although some encouraging signs of rethinking the cultural others and community participation indicate change, Thailand is not yet prepared to grant substantial rights to ethnic minorities, let alone self-government. Migrant populations are completely outside of government policies and the state is mostly repressive. Multicultural policies do not

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only include identity and cultural heritage, but also full access to education, social welfare and full rights of political participation. The special cultural zones (khet wathanatham phiset) seem to be a crucial indicator of government honesty and commitment to multiculturalism and some of the speakers in the workshop are committee members.

In the first panel, “Multiculturalism in Thailand: A new framework and its challenges”, Dr. Chayan Vadhanaputhi provided a foundational analysis of different theoretical concepts of multiculturalism in Southeast Asia. He argued that ethno-nationalism prevailed in Thailand and that Thailand in the 1950s had a strong nationalist and civilizing project in which ethnic minorities were seen as problem and troublemaker which had to assimilate to mainstream Thai national identity to benefit from modernization. This led to a state of discrimination and exclusion. Only in the 1980s Thailand has applied a policy of selective multiculturalism and selective ethnic pluralism, although selective multiculturalism has not replaced the assimilation model. Cultural rights for ethnic minorities are still outstanding, and ethnic minorities are exoticized and used for tourist purposes. Thailand is not granting rights of self-determination or self-government to national minorities and the sincerity of selective multicultural policies have yet to be proved. Chayan contrasts state multiculturalism with critical multiculturalism and argues that initiatives should come from civil society rather than from the state.

Dr. Sirijit Sunanta (RILCA) likewise critically reviewed the experience of multiculturalism in Thailand and in the West. Even in the countries of origin, like Canada and Australia, governments have partially withdrawn from multiculturalism and the concept as a policy has come under increasing controversy. Sirijit argued that the concept may be state-centered, ethnocentric and bad for women. Multiculturalism in the West is squeezed between the left and the right. Sirijit argued that multiculturalism as a discourse and policy has not really arrived in Thailand, although there are some changes that are more than cosmetic. It has to be seen if and how much a rethinking of diversity takes place in Thai society.

Dr. Olivier Evrard (CESD, IRD) in his presentation questioned the appropriateness of the terminology of multiculturalism in the context of mainland

Southeast Asia. Like Chayan, he referred to the ethno-spatial order and the civilizing project of the hill communities in Northern Thailand. He argued that multiculturalism has replaced older terms and narratives and he maintains that there are competing concepts of cultural pluralism existing side by side. Evrard referred to concepts of hybridity, creolization and spaces of dispersion to emphasize the complexity and contradictions underlying current multicultural policies in mainland Southeast Asia. He said that even France emphasizes universal rights on the detriment of partial group rights. He also distinguished formal from substantive citizenship. Substantive citizenship includes full access to education and full political participation.

In the first panel, speakers suggested that the application of multiculturalism in Thailand is far from certain and that multiculturalism exists side by side with other competing and contradicting models, such as ethno-nationalism. The following panel focused on the perception of rights in Thailand. In her conceptual presentation, Dr. Coeli Barry (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre) conceptualized different types of rights, namely collective rights, community rights and cultural rights. She argued that Thailand has a history of impunity and has basically withdrawn collective rights from ethnic minorities. Barry argued that cultural rights have huge political implications, and that recognition of rights is essential for giving back people their right to cultural identity, history and dignity. Barry stated that the idea of rights has still to be promoted by civil society and that ethnic minorities claim ownership of cultural heritage. International rights frameworks need to be contextualized to become effective in the local context.

Dr. Prasit Leepreecha (CESD) gave a comprehensive introduction to the rise of indigenous rights movements and how indigenous people form partnerships with local and international NGO's to claim access to social welfare and rights. He described how civil society was able to empower community leaders from hill tribes who now regularly participate in the UN forum on indigenous rights. The Thai government is not able anymore to simply ignore the citizenship and rights claims of indigenous people.

Dr. Tiamsoon Sirisrisak (RILCA) presented his work on community rights and contested ownership of cultural heritage in Chinatown of Bangkok. The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration has plans to modernize Bangkok that conflicts with the maintenance of cultural heritage by the communities. Tiamsoon argued that while the BMA does not invite the community to participate in urban planning, the community although divided organizes activities in their place to raise consciousness for the significance of cultural heritage in their neighborhood. The outcome is open to contestation. Tiamsoon concluded that urban modernization is state and business driven, and does not consider community needs.

The practice of multicultural policies was deepened in the next panel. Dr. Malee Sitthikriangkrai (CESD) is advisor of the special cultural zones project. This pioneer project is funded by the ministry of culture and aims to strengthen marginalized communities. The project was initiated by civil society actors and a pioneer project of Karen communities in Northern Thailand and Moken communities in Southern Thailand is now underway. Although the project is supposed to strengthen the identity of Karen and Moken, there are a number of problems arising. Neither Karen nor Moken have substantial rights to use environmental resources and conflicts with the Environment and Forestry department are rampant. Bilingual education is practiced, but local teachers are not recognized by the Ministry of Education. The project stops short to grant the communities any substantial rights and customary law is not recognized. Malee thus confirms the general statement of Barry that the government is not yet prepared to shift ownership and substantial cultural rights to the minorities. Karen communities however are able to use their internal strength to pressure the government for more accommodating policies.

Prof. Emeritus Dr. Suwilai Premsrirat (RILCA) gave an overview of national language policies that followed the assimilation model. Her project aims to preserve endangered languages and promotes multi-lingual education. The government does not yet provide teachers and funds to support native languages. Suwilai gave particular significance to the introduction of multi-lingual education in the Deep South as a means to reduce ethnic conflict there. This point was taken up by Dr. Panadda Boonyasaranai (CESD) in her case study of the multi-lingual Akha. The

non-recognition of minority cultures in Southern Thailand was again discussed by Ngamsuk Ruttanasatian. Dr. Kwanchit Sasiwongsaroj (RILCA) provided a detailed picture of health policies in Thailand and how they impact on migrant's access and exclusion from these policies.

The final panel again reminded that multiculturalism is state-centric and that a lot is to be gained to look at agency of borderland communities and refugee-migrants. The presentation of Dr. Alexander Horstmann (RILCA) emphasized that migrants are not even considered for multicultural policies and are controlled in state spaces. Thailand has not signed the refugee convention and refugees are hence not protected. Worse, refugees have been routinely abused by state authorities and are not even considered of equal value. Alexander thus showed how refugee-migrants organize themselves to create spaces for themselves. Dr. Mukdawan Sakboon (CESD) highlighted that many people in Thailand are still stateless and face many obstacles to receive proper citizenship.

Clearly, multiculturalism is on the map of Southeast Asian Studies. The workshop was well received great outside attention and both RILCA and CESD agreed to exchange faculty and students, develop workshops and conferences, publications, and training to government ministries and civil society.