

# Thailand

## *Ethnicity in Thailand*

### *Group selection*

The country's population is approximately 85 per cent ethnic **Thai**. Thais are composed of four major Thai-language groups: the Central Thai comprise about 32% of the population, Northeast Thai (Thai Lao or Lao Isan) make up 30% of the population and the Northern Thai (Yuan) and Southern Thai (Pak) each number about 6.5 million. Other Thai-speaking minorities include the Phuthai, Phuan, Saekm Khorat Thai, Shan, and Lue. Non-Thai minority groups who speak other Tai family languages include Le and Phutai.

The main minority groups are **Chinese** 6-7.2 million (est. 10-12%), **Malay** 3 million (2000 Census, 5%), Mon, Khmer and highland ethnic groups 600,000-1.2 million (2000 Census, 1-2%).

The religious setup consists of Buddhists 94.6%, Muslims 4.6%, Christians 0.7%, and other 0.1% (2000 census) <sup>(4432)</sup>.

<sup>4432</sup> [CIA, 2010]

There is no official political group organized along ethnic lines and ethnicity does not constitute the basis for an official policy of discrimination in Thailand. Ethnicity does not play a significant role in national Thai politics although the southern region of Thailand with its Muslim Malay majority has been subject to systematic discrimination based on national policies. Unlike the pre-World War II period when there was a certain degree of discrimination against ethnic Chinese, Malay Muslims and, to a lesser extent, Thai-Lao (in the Northeast), this has not been the case during the last several decades throughout which a national Thai identity has been promoted. An assimilationist policy was proposed based on the Central Thai identity with the result that most of the representatives of the government are either from Central Thailand or had absorbed the perspective of that region. The government took the position that all Tai people should be accorded all the rights, privileges, and opportunities that went with being a citizen. In the 1980s, members of non-Tai minority groups were afforded similar rights, and efforts were made to incorporate them into the Ekkalak Thai.

*Thai*

Tai-speaking groups dominate the political system of Thailand. Although politically, socially, and culturally dominant, the Central Thai did not constitute a majority of the population and barely exceeded the North East Thai (Thai-Lao) in numbers, according to a mid-1960s estimate. At that time, the Central Thai made up roughly 32 percent of the population, with the Thai-Lao a close second at about 30 percent. The Thai-Lao were essentially the same ethnic group that constituted the dominant population of Laos. Due in part to the diversity within Tai-speaking groups, many ethnic minority groups have successfully assimilated with the Thai majority and are able to access power through this assimilated identity.

*Mon*

Mon settled chiefly in the North and the central plain, e.g., at Nonthaburi, Ayutthaya, Lop Buri, Uthai Thani, and Ratchaburi. They maintained a social organization similar to that of the Thai and other lowland cultures. Although their language was related to Khmer, the Mon incorporated a large number of Thai words into their vocabulary. Moreover, language differences became less important as Mon children, educated in Thai schools, learned Central Thai. In general, the Mon were more integrated into Thai society than any other non-Thai group as of the late 1980s.

*Chinese*

Chinese make up roughly 10-12 per cent of the population of Thailand. Because of a long history of intermixture with ethnic Thais, precise figures on their actual numbers are hard to ascertain. With the exception of a small minority, the majority of the Chinese are Thai-Chinese. A 1913 Nationality Law gave citizenship to the Chinese. Thai authorities started to enforce laws that also mandated the assimilation of citizens. In the 1930s and 1940s, various laws and other measures excluded members of the Chinese minority from about 27 different professions. Because of severe restrictions on Chinese immigration that were put into effect in the early 1950s, the great majority of Thailand's Chinese had by the late 1980s been born in Thailand. Not only did most Chinese speak Thai, many also acquired Thai names (in addition to their Chinese ones) and were Mahayana Buddhists. Assimilation of the various Chinese communities was a continuing process. Chinese were encouraged to become Thai citizens, and in 1970 it was estimated that more than 90 percent of the Chinese born in Thailand had done so. When diplomatic relations were established with China in the 1970s, resident Chinese not born in Thailand had the option of becoming Thai citizens; the remaining permanent Chinese alien population was estimated at fewer than 200,000. According to the 2000 Census, Chinese citizens in Thailand numbered 60,700. The Chinese identity is politically

important and many Sino-Thai politicians use their cultural identity (language, values) to get other Sino-Thai people to vote for them. However, they do not present themselves as "leader of Sino-Thai" peoples in Thailand and they keep a Thai identity (name, surname) in their official functions. The minority is generally thought to be economically advantaged in relation to the majority Thai population, with some reports that they may control more than 80 per cent of Thai business interests.

### *Malay Muslims*

Malay Muslims number over one million and are located primarily in southern Thailand having a markedly different culture, religion, and language. Ethnic Malays comprise about 5 per cent of Thailand's estimated population in 2007 of 65 million (about 60 million in the 2000 Census). Almost all of them are Sunni Muslims and live primarily in the four southernmost provinces (Yala, Narathiwat, Satun and Pattani) where they constitute more than 70 per cent of the population (and close to 90% in the province of Pattani), near the border with Malaysia. Their language is a variety of Malay, of the Malayo-Polynesian family of languages, and is closely related to Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Indonesia. Although Islamic religious and cultural practices accentuated the differences, more divisive and destabilizing were economic and political factors. In the past, Central Thai administrators from the national government assigned to the South often spent their time amassing personal fortunes rather than attending to the welfare of the people of the region. Government provision of health, education, and welfare services was inadequate or nonexistent. It was also the drive by Thai authorities to close down traditional Malay schools in the 1960s which led to the creation of the separatist BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional) by a former headteacher of one of these pondok traditional schools. In the 1980s, King Bhumibol and government leaders, especially those from the South, were deeply involved in rectifying inequalities. The more conciliatory policies towards the minority in the 1980s were followed by a marked decrease in the level of violence involving the Malays for much of the 1990s, but promised measures in the areas of the language of education and development did not materialize. The election of Thaksin Shinawatra as prime minister in 2001 was followed by the dismantling of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre, which had been set up in 1981 under General Prem and resulted in regional autonomy for the Malay Muslim minority. Following these and other measures seen as leading to a centralization of control over the region and a series of broken promises affecting the minority, the level of discontent increased and resulted in renewed insurgent attacks. Promises made under Yingluck Shinawatra to restore autonomy were later disavowed in 2011.

*Hill Tribes*

As many as 20 different hill tribes, totaling 1 million people according to some estimates, live in Thailand. The population of the Hill Peoples of Thailand were estimated in the late 1990s as follows: Akha (35,000), Hmong (50,000), Karen (20,000), Kui (100,000), Lahu (65,000), Lisu (18,000), T'in (30,000), Yao (36,000), Chong (6,000) and Chaobon (15,000). In December 2009, Thailand deported about 4,000 ethnic Hmong back to communist-ruled Laos, deeming them to be economic migrants and not official refugees. A lot of "ethnic" people have trouble obtaining a Thai ID card, which determines their ability to vote. This issue is often related to local conditions (local officials, personal history) and not to ethnic affiliation per se (some Shan, who are member of a Tai-speaking group can have problems to get a Thailand ID card). There is undoubtedly a problem of discrimination against non-Tai people (hill tribes) in Thailand but this cannot be considered as an official principle and among a single ethnic group, you can find people very well integrated (politically, economically) and others marginalized.

*Shan*

Separate from Thailand's own small Shan minority, Thailand does not recognize people from Shan state in Burma as refugees, and refuses to permit the establishment of refugee camps for ethnic Shan, fearing a larger number of civilians fleeing repression from north-eastern Burma. The group has no political power in Thailand and due to the influx of Shan refugees from Burma, even Shan who have been resident in Thailand for decades often experience discrimination. Only about 30,000 Shan live in Thailand, mainly in the Maehongson province, west of Chiangmai and near the northwestern border. Instead, those Shan who reach Thailand eke out an existence as migrant workers, often without legal status. The Shan have been subject to expulsion by the Thai state during periods of relative calm in Burma. Human Rights Watch has called on the government of Thailand to offer sanctuary to refugees fleeing abuses in Shan state in accordance with international law <sup>(4433)</sup>.

<sup>4433</sup> [Human Rights Watch, 2009]

*South Asians*

In 1979, the Ministry of Interior estimated that there were 60,000 Hindus and Sikhs in Thailand (0.13 percent of the total population). The South Asian community, however, was largely apolitical and attempted to blend into Thai society. Currently, about 60,000-80,000 South Asians also reside in Thailand and despite maintaining a group identity based on religion, language and occupation, many are being assimilated into Thai society through citizenship and intermarriage. <sup>(4434)</sup>. The Sikh Council of Thailand estimates the Sikh community to have a population of approximately 70,000 persons, most of which reside in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Nakhon Ratchasima,

<sup>4434</sup> [?]

Pattaya, and Phuket. According to government statistics, there are an estimated 2,900 Hindus in the country, although Hindu organizations estimate the population to be closer to 10,000 persons (<sup>4435</sup>.

<sup>4435</sup> [US Department of State, 2005]

### *Power relations*

#### *Malay Muslims*

Malay Muslims are a minority in Thailand as a whole, but a majority in the southern provinces bordering Malaysia which include Kala, Narathiwat, Patanni and Sohghkla. In the late 2000's Malay Muslims' demands for greater autonomy and language rights still remain largely ignored. Most government jobs - including teaching positions in state schools - continue to be occupied by ethnic Thais, despite Malay Muslims representing the vast majority of the population in the southern provinces. Only after 2005 were recommendations by the National Reconciliation Commission (established to address some of the grievances of the Malay Muslims) to have Malay taught in state schools seriously considered. In 2006, small tentative steps in this direction had started for primary education, but by the end of 2006 they remained largely unimplemented. The National Reconciliation Commission had also recommended in 2006 that Malay be made an additional working language for administrative offices in the southern provinces, recognizing that many Malay Muslims were in fact disadvantaged and even excluded from accessing government services - and jobs - because of the exclusive use of the Thai language by government officials.

Despite continued violence, in some ways the September 2006 coup in Thailand led to improved management of the conflict in the South. The military-installed civilian government, headed by former army commander General Surayud Chulanont, made an historic apology to southern Muslims for past abuses and announced an end to blacklisting of suspected insurgents. However according to a March 2007 International Crisis Group report "attempts to accommodate Malay Muslim identity such as the introduction of the Patani Malay dialect as an additional language in state primary schools and to promote its use in government offices have fallen flat in the absence of high-level political support" in spite of the fact that the coup was led by a prominent Thai Muslim, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin. As a result, the insurgency in the south continued unabated throughout 2009. Government statistics reveal that just over half of those killed were Muslims. Human rights groups accuse the elected government, which took office in January 2008, of leaving southern policy to the military. Reports of torture and other ill-treatment at the hands of the security forces increased significantly between mid-2007 and mid-2008 (<sup>4436</sup>). In 2009, steps were taken by the Thai Cabinet to approved a draft bill on southern border provinces administration, as proposed by the Ministry of Interior, and in line with the Government's policy statement delivered on 30 December 2008 that a new organization be set up specially to handle

<sup>4436</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2009]

administration in the southern border provinces.

### *Chinese*

Chinese are the largest ethnic minority group in Thailand and are to a large extent assimilated into Thai society, while maintaining distinct cultural markers such as use of the Chinese language and adherence to Buddhist-Taoist-Confucian religious practices. Despite the Chinese roots of deposed Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, there does not appear to have been any anti-Chinese aspect to the military coup or in subsequent political events. Current Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva comes from a wealthy family of Thai-Chinese origins but did not utilize this identity in his political activity.

### *Hill Tribes*

The government does not recognize the existence of indigenous peoples in Thailand. It maintains that they are migrants and thousands of them continue to be denied registration for an identification card. Non-citizen hill tribes are among the most vulnerable groups. Without proper political status, they face expulsion when their temporary stay expires. Without nationality and treated as second-class citizens, they suffer multiple discrimination, including lack of access to land and deprivation of basic human rights (<sup>4437</sup>). Though the registration schemes have reduced the number of ethnic minorities who still have not been able to obtain citizenship, requirements such as the need to demonstrate literacy in the Thai language constitute an unreasonable barrier for many.

<sup>4437</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2009]

### *Shan*

The Shan minority in Thailand remained marginalized in the 2000s.

*2002-2017*

Despite the political turmoil of the late 2000's which saw PM Thaksin Shinawatra ousted in a September 2006 military coup, the approval of a military-drafted constitution through a popular referendum in August 2007, and widespread protests and a rapid turnover of Prime Ministers in 2008, the relative access to power of Thailand's different ethnic groups remained unchanged in this period.

*Malay Muslims:* The renewed ceasing of government in 2014 by a military junta lead by Prayut Chan-o-cha did not substantively alter the situation of Malay muslims. They still are discriminated by the use of Thai as the only official language. This barrier effectively blocks the populations access to government positions and leads to a local administration that although the majority of the population in the southern provinces being Malay that consists nearly solely out of ethnic Thais. The renewed announcements by General Prayut to enforce a Thai language policy in the region also contributed to a continuing state of discrimination (<sup>4438</sup>, <sup>4439</sup>).

<sup>4438</sup> [US Department of State, 2016]

<sup>4439</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2017]

*Hill tribes:* The political situation of the Hill tribes was close to change for the better after the coup d'état in 2014. The proposed 2015 constitution for the first time acknowledged the existence of native people and committed to secure their land rights and preserve their cultural traditions. These ideas have nevertheless not made it into the 2017 constitution on which a popular referendum was held during the course of 2017. The matter of indigeneity stays a contested issue as the military government reintroduced the classification as hill tribes which as historically been used to distinguish between what were perceived as the real Thais and the peoples living in the mountainous regions of the north (<sup>4440</sup>).

<sup>4440</sup> [Baird, I. G., Leepreecha, P., Yangcheepsutjarit,

*Chinese:* The situation of the large Chinese minority in Thailand did not change substantively in the updated time frame. The Chinese stay a very good integrated minority in Thailand with a large part of the population having at least partly Chinese ancestry. There are no barriers to political participation based on Chinese heritage. As Chinese ancestry is rather a matter expressed in cultural practices such as the use of Mandarin than being perceived as a politically relevant factor the Sino-Thais are continued to be coded as irrelevant (<sup>4441</sup>, <sup>4442</sup>).

<sup>4441</sup> [US Department of State, 2016]

<sup>4442</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2017]

*Shan:* The situation of the Shan did not substantively change in the time-period since the last update. The Shan are still denied the acceptance as formal refugee group. The displacement without acceptance in Thailand has led to the adoption of a visibility/invisibility strategy trying to maintain their own culture when among themselves but at the same time trying to blend in with the Thai population as good as possible. This strategy enables the people who are officially regarded as illegal immigrants to keep their own cultural roots while blending in with Thai society (<sup>4443</sup>).

<sup>4443</sup> [Howes, L., Hammett, D.,2016]

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## Political status of ethnic groups in Thailand

*From 1946 until 1952*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Thai	0.74	DOMINANT
Chinese	0.14	DISCRIMINATED
Malay Muslims	0.035	DISCRIMINATED
Hill Tribes	0.01	IRRELEVANT
Shan	0.005	POWERLESS

*From 1953 until 1971*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Thai	0.74	DOMINANT
Chinese	0.14	POWERLESS
Malay Muslims	0.035	DISCRIMINATED
Hill Tribes	0.01	IRRELEVANT
Shan	0.005	POWERLESS

*From 1972 until 1976*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Thai	0.74	SENIOR PARTNER
Chinese	0.14	JUNIOR PARTNER
Malay Muslims	0.035	DISCRIMINATED
Shan	0.005	POWERLESS
Hill Tribes	0.005	IRRELEVANT



Figure 907: Political status of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1946-1952.

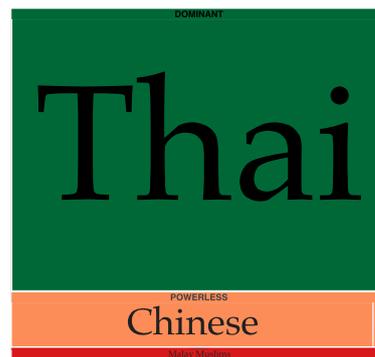


Figure 908: Political status of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1953-1971.

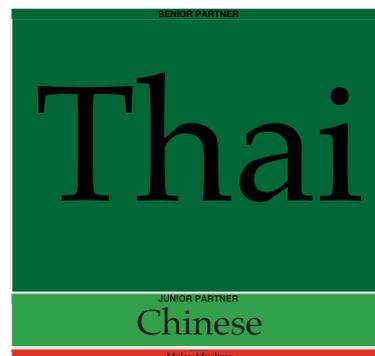


Figure 909: Political status of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1972-1976.

*From 1977 until 1979*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Thai	0.74	DOMINANT
Chinese	0.14	IRRELEVANT
Malay Muslims	0.035	DISCRIMINATED
Shan	0.005	POWERLESS
Hill Tribes	0.005	IRRELEVANT

*From 1980 until 1998*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Thai	0.74	DOMINANT
Chinese	0.14	IRRELEVANT
Malay Muslims	0.035	POWERLESS
Hill Tribes	0.01	IRRELEVANT
Shan	0.005	POWERLESS

*From 1999 until 2001*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Thai	0.74	DOMINANT
Chinese	0.14	IRRELEVANT
Malay Muslims	0.035	POWERLESS
Hill Tribes	0.01	POWERLESS
Shan	0.005	POWERLESS

*From 2002 until 2017*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Thai	0.815	DOMINANT
Chinese	0.12	IRRELEVANT
Malay Muslims	0.05	DISCRIMINATED
Hill Tribes	0.01	POWERLESS
Shan	0.005	POWERLESS



Figure 910: Political status of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1977-1979.

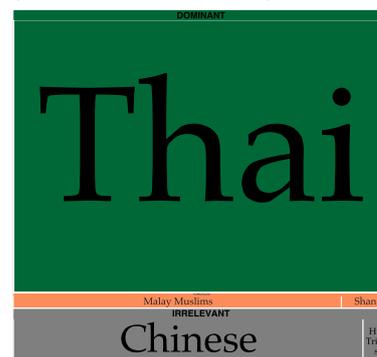


Figure 911: Political status of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1980-1998.



Figure 912: Political status of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1999-2001.

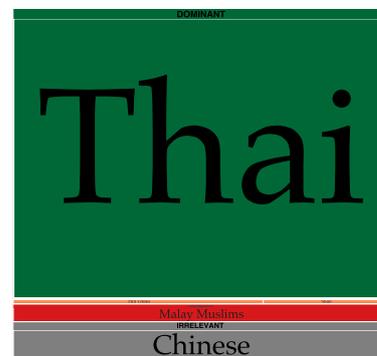


Figure 913: Political status of ethnic groups in Thailand during 2002-2017.

## *Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Thailand*

*From 1946 until 1976*



Figure 914: Map of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1946-1976.

Group name	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
■ Thai	454 530	Regionally based
■ Malay Muslims	36 458	Regionally based
■ Shan	907	Regionally based
Chinese		Dispersed

Table 307: List of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1946-1976.

*From 1977 until 1998*

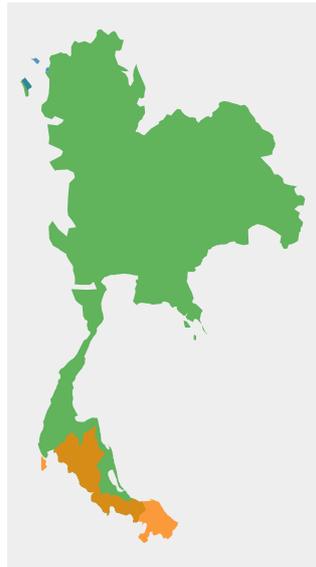


Figure 915: Map of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1977-1998.

Group name	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
■ Thai	454 530	Regionally based
■ Malay Muslims	36 458	Regionally based
■ Shan	907	Regionally based

Table 308: List of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1977-1998.

*From 1999 until 2017*

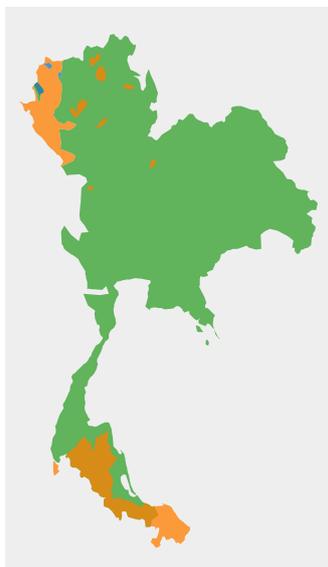


Figure 916: Map of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1999-2017.

	Group name	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
■	Thai	454 530	Regionally based
■	Malay Muslims	36 458	Regionally based
■	Hill Tribes	25 411	Regionally based
■	Shan	907	Regionally based

Table 309: List of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1999-2017.

## *Conflicts in Thailand*

*Starting on 1946-05-06*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of France	Government of Thailand		1946-05-06			

*Starting on 1951-06-29*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Thailand	Military faction (navy)		1951-06-29			
Government of Thailand	CPT		1966-12-30			

*Starting on 1965-12-30*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Thailand	Patani insurgents	Malay Muslims	1965-12-30	Explicit	Yes	Yes

*Starting on 1975-12-14*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Cambodia (Kampuchea)	Government of Thailand		1975-12-14			

*Starting on 1982-06-15*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Laos	Government of Thailand		1982-06-15			