

Thailand

Ethnicity in Thailand

Group selection (2010-2013 update)

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.

The strength of assimilationism in Thailand led to several Thai Prime Ministers of ethnic Chinese origin (like Banhan Sinlapa-acha and Thaksin Shinawatra). The most recent (2006) coup was led by a Thai Muslim, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin. Thailand is among the very few Southeast Asian countries in which national censuses completely ignore items such as mother tongue and ethnicity. There are no political organisations based on ethnicity (apart from Shan refugees from Burma, for example). However, the Muslim insurgency in the South might change the overall picture in the future. Though Thailand had given representation on the local level to Muslims in the South (provinces of Satul, Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala), the democratically elected but increasingly authoritarian regime of Thaksin Shinawatra fuelled ethnic and religious tensions in these southern border provinces leading to thousands of deaths.

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.

Chinese: While 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. 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.

Malay Muslims: In the South, the language, religion, and culture of the Malay or Thai Muslims were markedly different from those of other Thai. 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.

Shan: The Shan form a small minority in Thailand as a result of Thailand's occupation of some Shan states during World War II. 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.

Hill Tribes: The highland groups or hill tribes include: the Kui (called Soai by the Thai), which totaled between 100,000 and 150,000 in the mid-1960s; the Tin, about 20,000; and several smaller groups, including the Lua (also called Lawa), about 9,000; the Khmu, about 7,600; and the Chaobon, about 2,000. The Kui were said to be largely assimilated into Thai society. The figure for the Khmu pertained only to those presumably living in the highlands in a more or less traditional setting. Substantial numbers were said to be pursuing a Thai way of life. 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.

Other Minority Groups and Refugees:

Khmer: If long-term resident Khmer and Khmer refugees were both included, there were perhaps as many as 600,000 to 800,000 Khmer living in Thailand in the 1980s. Many of the long-resident Khmer were said to speak Thai, sometimes as a first language, and religious and other similarities contributed over time to Thai-Khmer intermarriage and to Khmer assimilation into Thai society. Newly arrived Khmer, however, were not yet assimilated.

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.

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. ⁽³⁴⁵⁵⁾. 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, Pattaya, and Phuket. There are currently 17 Sikh temples in the country. 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. ⁽³⁴⁵⁶⁾

³⁴⁵⁵ [?]

³⁴⁵⁶ [US Department of State, 2005]

Vietnamese: Approximately 70,000 Vietnamese live in Northeast Thailand, having come to the country as refugees during waves of immigration in the mid-19th century and during the Vietnam War.

Alongside official minorities in Thailand, there are some 340,000 refugees in Thailand. Around 140,000 live in nine camps along the Thailand-Burma border and about 200,000 more elsewhere. Most are from ethnic groups such as the Karen, Karenni and Shan, fleeing the war in Burma.

Power relations (2010-2013 update)

Periodization: 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.

Group selection (-2009)

Percentages given for the different ethnic groups: 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 the Shan, Le and Phutai.

Main minority groups: 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%)

Religion: Buddhist 94.6%, Muslim 4.6%, Christian 0.7%, other 0.1% (2000 census) ⁽³⁴⁵⁷⁾

³⁴⁵⁷ [CIA, 2010]

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. 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. According to the 2000 Census, Chinese citizens in Thailand numbered 60,700.

Muslim Malays: Muslim Malays number over one million and are located primarily in southern Thailand. 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.

Hill Tribes: As many as 20 different hill tribes, totalling 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.

Power relations (-2009)

Thai: While important leaders have emerged from ethnic minority or mixed backgrounds, ethnic identity is largely irrelevant in national Thai politics where the major cleavage is urban/rural.

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 ⁽³⁴⁵⁸⁾. 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 administration in the southern border provinces.

³⁴⁵⁸ [Minority Rights Group International, 2009]

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 ⁽³⁴⁵⁹⁾. 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.

³⁴⁵⁹ [Minority Rights Group International, 2009]

Shan: The Shan minority in Thailand remained marginalised in the 2000s.

Other Minority Groups and Refugees :

Mon: The Mon constitute today a dispersed minority - except perhaps for a few areas bordering Burma - that has been largely absorbed into general Thai society to the extent that relatively few young people speak the Mon language today. They are in many ways indistinguishable from Thailand's ethnic majority and are not targeted for discrimination by the state or other Thais. Mon refugees from neighbouring Burma, however, have a very different experience, as their lack of Thai citizenship leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and excludes them from a number of facets of life in Thai society. Long-established members of the Khmer minority for

their part, like the Mon, do not seem to experience a great deal of discrimination or obstacles in Thai society.

Refugees: Today, 150,000 Burmese (of various ethnic groups) reside in 9 Thai temporary displaced persons camps assisted by the Thai Burmese Border Consortium and UNHCR. Hundreds of thousands of other Burmese, particularly the Shan, live as illegal migrants without access to refugee status or assistance despite having experienced persecution and conflict in Burma. 6,000 Laotian Hmong asylum seekers are being held in an Army supervised camp at Petchabon, without any access to UNHCR or resettlement. The Thai government permits UNHCR to facilitate the international resettlement of Burmese registered in camps, and over 50,000 have been resettled, mainly to the United States, to date. However, the government has given no indication of when it will be able to screen the 70,000 unregistered camp dwellers or assess the claims of thousands of other asylum seekers outside these camps (Refugees International, 2010)

Hmong: The remote Hmong encampment in Phetchabun Province, about 200 miles north of Bangkok, is a remnant of an Indochinese refugee population that once numbered 1.5 million. The Hmong population in Thailand included migrants from Vietnam, survivors of the Khmer Rouge government in Cambodia and hundreds of thousands of Hmong who crossed the Mekong River from Laos. Since the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the United States has processed and accepted about 150,000 Hmong refugees in Thailand for resettlement in the United States. However, in 2009, approximately 4,000 Hmong were forcibly repatriated to Laos by the government of Thailand (3460).

³⁴⁶⁰ [Mydans, 2009]

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 influx of civilians fleeing repression from northeastern Burma. 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 (3461).

³⁴⁶¹ [Human Rights Watch, 2009]

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



Figure 748: Political status of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1953-1971.



Figure 749: 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 2013

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



Figure 751: Political status of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1980-1998.



Figure 752: Political status of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1999-2001.



Figure 753: Political status of ethnic groups in Thailand during 2002-2013.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Thailand

From 1946 until 1998



Figure 754: Map of ethnic groups in Thailand during 2002-2013.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■ Thai	441 668	Statewide
■ Malay Muslims	35 990	Regionally based
■ Shan	2 781	Regionally based
Chinese		Dispersed

Table 218: List of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1946-1998.

From 1999 until 2013



Figure 755: Map of ethnic groups in Thailand during 2002-2013.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
Thai	441 668	Statewide
Malay Muslims	35 990	Regionally based
Hill Tribes	25 493	Regionally based
Shan	2 781	Regionally based
Chinese		Dispersed

Table 219: List of ethnic groups in Thailand during 1999-2013.

Conflicts in Thailand

Starting on 1946-05-07

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of France	Government of Thailand		1946-05-07			

Starting on 1951-06-30

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Thailand	Military faction (navy)		1951-06-30			
Government of Thailand	CPT		1966-12-31			

Starting on 1965-12-31

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Thailand	Patani insurgents	Malay Muslims	1965-12-31	Explicit	Yes	Yes

Starting on 1975-12-15

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Cambodia (Kampuchea)	Government of Thailand		1975-12-15			

Starting on 1982-06-16

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Laos	Government of Thailand		1982-06-16			