The Thai Ethnocracy Unravels:
A Critical Cultural Analysis of Thailand's Socio-Political Unrest

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Abstract: *Jan Nederveen Pieterse's model of ethnic relations is applied to the socio-political unrest of Thailand in the early 21st century. This paper argues that Pieterse's model of global multiculture and multiethnicity complements Marxist and neo-Marxist explanations of the political unrest in a dialectical relationship. Thus, structural factors such as the economy and the political system are dialectically influenced by cultural and ethnic politics. The use by the royalist elite of state power to install and then defend a national culture (based on a civic religion) is explored in a variety of activities and spheres such as education, the media, usage of public space, economic public policy, religion, and foreign policy. Increasing efforts to defend the Thai ethnocracy are revealed to reflect its weakening vis a vis competing ethnicities and cultures seeking a place in the national culture and socio-political institutions. Finally the paper concludes that renewed calls for greater autonomy for minorities and for the renaming of the country to its old name, Siam, are signs that the country is moving to Pieterse's third stage of ethnic relations called "ethnic competition" which explains the recent exponential increase in socio-political unrest throughout the entire country.*

1. Introduction

Thailand was considered to be one of the most democratic countries in Southeast Asia until the 2006 Military Coup (Albritton & Bureekul, 2004, 2007). Nevertheless, that view hides the internal fissures in the Thai political system that existed before and after that period of greater democratic openness. Thus, the democratic period between 1997 and 2006 was actually a shift in the balance of power in favor of the new socially mobile elite and the provinces vis a vis the

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palace and the capital (Murphy, 2009). The following section provides a brief historical overview of the Thai socio-political system starting with the fall of the absolute Monarchy in the 1930s and ending with the 2006 Military Coup. In addition to that some symptoms of socio-political unrest such as violence in the Muslim South, polarization of the country between urban and rural dwellers, and problems with Cambodia over the border are introduced.

2. Thai Politics Then and Now

A group of foreign trained military officers launched a coup against the absolute monarchy in the early 1930s. The result was the abolition of the absolute monarchy and the drafting of the first constitution (Wyatt, 2003). Thailand, then known as Siam, remained deeply in the control of Bangkok elites, especially the military forces and the bureaucracy. This intervention by the military was the beginning of the continuing influence of the military in Thai politics. However, it is important to note that the symbolic power of the monarchy was kept virtually intact and that the change did not affect the lives of the common people outside of the capital (Handley, 2006; Ungpakorn, 2007). The change in the political system was made to look as if it was the King's idea and the constitution, his gift to the people. In terms of resources and land ownership, very little changed.

This period was followed by a rise in Thai nationalism and the subsequent change of the country's name from Siam to Thailand (land of the Thais). Reflecting the pre- World War II rise in nationalism and fascist ideology in Thailand, Luang Phibunsongkhram encouraged the promotion of central Thai culture as the defining national culture and discouraged minority groups from expressing their culture (Kiong & Bun, 2001; Ungpakorn, 2007; Wyatt, 2003, p. 241; Yegar, 2002). Thailand decided to side with the axis powers and allowed Japan to occupy the country so as to attack British Malaya and British Burma (Means, 2009). A change in government at the end of the War led to Thailand switching sides to the allies and the subsequent return of Luang Phibunsongkhram. Thus, his nationalist policies continued but this time with the support of the royalists (Handley, 2006). The post-war period was marked by a succession of

military strongmen ruling with the support of the Palace and of the United States. Cold War anti-communist fears led the United States to support military rule in Thailand so as to stop the spread of communism from spreading to the heart of Southeast Asia (von Feigenblatt, 2009c; Neher, 2002).

Legitimacy for the military rulers depended on defending the country from the communist threat and acting in the name of the monarchy (Handley, 2006). Therefore, the newly recreated monarchy was used by and used the military so as to rule the country in what Duncan McCargo calls a "network monarchy" (2008, pp. 8-9). The Monarchy was promoted as a semi-sacred institution charged with maintaining stability in the country and selflessly mediating between the armed forces and the bureaucracy. Gradually a golden triangle was established which included the Palace, the armed forces, and the bureaucracy. That golden triangle irradiated from the capital and ruled the entire country through its network. Over the years most resources in the country were centralized under the control of the golden triangle and strengthened the Thai elite both financially and in terms of influence (Handley, 2006; Ungpakorn, 2007).

The end of the Cold War and greater international pressure for the promotion of democracy and human rights led to the opening of greater political space in Thailand (Mulder, 1996; Neher, 2002; Pongsudhirak, 2008). There was an exponential growth in the number of nongovernmental organizations and of political parties. Most importantly it opened up enough political space for the newly rich to enter politics (Pongsudhirak, 2008). This was important because for the first time, large numbers of Chinese entrepreneurs entered politics and weakened the traditional golden triangle (Kiong & Bun, 2001). Furthermore, the transition to formal democracy in the early 1990s gave the provinces a lot of potential power to influence politics through the ballot (Albritton & Bureekul, 2004). Before, that time the provinces had always being ruled according to the interests of the capital but for the first time the majority of the population could influence the political process through the electoral process.

Thaksin Shinawatra, a Sino-thai entrepreneur, rose to prominence during this period (Murphy, 2009; Ockey, 2007). He was an outsider in the golden triangle in that he had

started his career in the police force rather than the more powerful army and that he was from an ethnic minority (Pongsudhirak, 2008). Shinawatra quickly mobilized the newly rich, the rural masses, and the progressive intellectuals in order to build the strongest political party Thailand had ever seen, the Thai Rak Thai party (von Feigenblatt, 2009b; Lintner, 2009). TRT won two landslide elections and gained complete control over parliament. Nevertheless, Shinawatra's rise to power alienated the old Thai elite, the military, and most importantly, the Palace. A movement was formed, the Yellow Shirts, misleadingly named the People's Alliance for Democracy, to fight the Shinawatra government and defend traditional Thai politics (AHRC, 2009; Hamlin, 2009). This led to massive protests and the polarization of the entire country. The capital was mostly aligned with the Yellow Shirts who represented the royalists and the military, while the provinces were mostly supportive of Shinawatra and greater democracy.

A coup was launched in 2006 and removed Shinawatra and abolished the 1997 constitution. This brought the golden triangle back to power but the new elections held in 2007 under a new constitution brought back to power allies of the exiled former Prime Minister Shinawatra (von Feigenblatt, 2009b). This led to more unrest and the forceful occupation of the two international airports by the Yellow Shirts and the removal of the PM Somchai Wongsawat by the electoral commission (Pongsudhirak, 2008). A second silent coup was launched by the royalists through the courts which disqualified several parties in the ruling coalition and thus brought the government down. Then the military and the royalists pressured the remaining small parties to form a new government with the royalist Democrat Party. This brought to power the ultra conservative Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva in December 2008 (Hamlin, 2009; Promyamyai, 2009).

Protests continue to this day, now by the Red Shirts, a movement encompassing Shinawatra's supporters, progressive intellectuals, and democratic activists (Murphy, 2009; Promyamyai, 2009). This has led to a level of political unrest unseen in Thailand for decades. Unrest in the capital is worsened by an increase in the violence in the Muslim South and Yellow Shirt protests for a stronger approach to

foreign policy with Cambodia (McCargo, 2008; Rerksirisuk, 2009). Some symptoms of the level of unrest are the increased efforts by the government to censor the media and renewed efforts to promote royalist propaganda and nationalism (AHRC, 2009).

3. Theoretical Framework

This study follows a critical approach to cultural conflict based on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (Faubion, 2007, p. 47; Stuart Sim, 2005). Jan Nederveen Pieterse's model of ethnic relations serves as the main theoretical framework used to analyze the ethnocultural conflict taking place in Thailand (Pieterse, 2007, 2008). Pieterse's model states that the difference between nationhood and ethnicity is that nationhood is the culture of the dominant group while ethnicity is that of the subaltern (Pieterse, 2007, p. 16). Moreover, Pieterse's model of ethnic conflict divides cultural relations into four ideal types based on the level of competition over control of the national culture (2007, p. 33). The first type is called "domination ethnicity" or ethnocracy and refers to the cultural despotism exercised by one group over the rest of the population in a given nation-state. In other words, the culture of the dominant group is defined as the national culture and all other cultures are forcefully repressed. A second type is enclosure ethnicity which refers to a state in which one group's culture is dominant while minorities are forced into ghettoes where they can practice their culture while remaining marginal relative to national culture. Thirdly, competition ethnicity is when some ethnic groups are powerful enough to challenge the dominant group's right to define the national culture and usually involves strife and political unrest as a new balance of power is negotiated. Finally, Pieterse's optimal type is that of optional ethnicity. This final stage refers to a nation-state in which an individual has the freedom to choose an ethnic identity at will depending on the circumstances and thus ethnic identity becomes fluid and less polarizing than in the other ideal types. It should be noted that the previously mentioned types are just heuristic devices in order to place

societies in a continuum ranging from an ethnocracy to an ideal cosmopolitan society rather than examples of real societies. Moreover, the author shares with Pieterse in the normative assumption that the ideal type of society is one in which identity and ethnicity is optional rather than ascribed (Pieterse, 2008).
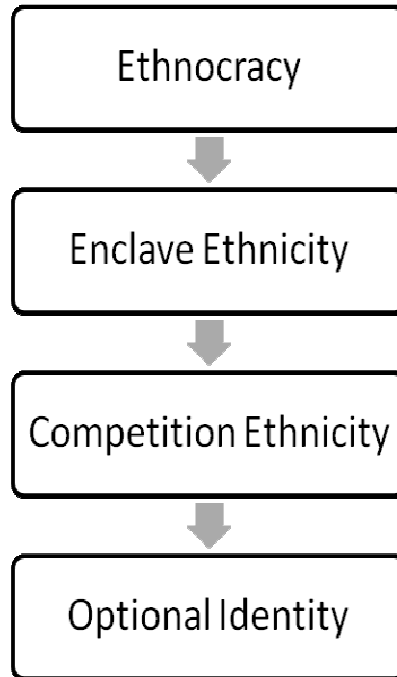
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Fig. 1. Simplified Representation of Pieterse's Model of Ethnic Domination.[1]

Pieterse's model is complemented by Avruch's view on the influence of culture on conflict and his poignant criticism of simplistic definitions of culture as unitary (Avruch, 1998, p. 18). Furthermore, Avruch's criticism of realists' exclusion of culture in international conflict is very important when considering Thailand's foreign policy as will be shown in later sections since only if culture is taken into consideration can we make sense of recent developments (1998, p. 27). Finally, Avruch's flexible but nuanced conception of culture is very similar to that of Pieterse in that it is multidimensional, situational, and just one part of the set of

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[1] Movement is not always linear and backtracking is possible. Also some instances of enclave ethnicity can coexist with other stages.

identities available to an individual (Augsburger, 1992; Avruch, 1998).

4. Methodology

This study is based on a critical documentary analysis of the available literature on Thai cultural politics as well as of sample newspaper articles critical of the Thai ethnocracy. Key themes are identified and are then explained through the theoretical framework described in the previous section. Thus, the central method is content analysis. Nevertheless, the findings are then complemented with the brief historical overview provided in the introduction and thus an element of historiography is applied to the findings.

5. National Culture as a Recent Creation

Thai national culture is a recent creation in that what is considered to be traditional Thai culture today did not exist in that form more than a hundred years ago (Mulder, 2000; Wyatt, 2003). Its origin can be traced to the reign of King Chulalongkorn in the late 19th century (Handley, 2006). Chulalongkorn adopted the European trend of nationalism and centralization that was then prevalent and actively implemented it in Siam. Some of the actions that he took were to attempt to clearly define Siam's borders, promote a civic religion based on the Chakri Dynasty (monarchy), the palace controlled council of monks (religion), and the culture of central Siam (the Thai nation) (Ungpakorn, 2007; Wyatt, 2003). The promotion of civic culture faced some temporary setbacks during the coup which brought about the end of the absolute monarchy in the 1930s and during a few years after World War II (Handley, 2006; Ungpakorn, 2007). Nevertheless, the rise of Rama the IX after World War II saw a renewed effort by royalists and nationalists to reestablish the primacy of civic culture in the entire country as a way to strengthen the monarchy. It should be noted that the present version of civic culture, largely based on an idealized vision of central Thai culture is a recent creation which combines aspects of fifth reign nationalism, Cambodian kingship, and personalistic populism (von Feigenblatt, 2009b). In summary, present day Thai civic culture defines

Thailand as the land of central Thais, with a single religion, Theravada Buddhism, and under the Chakri dynasty. King Rama IX is at the center of this revival and represents the semi divine spirit of the Thai nation. It has taken many decades of government and royalist propaganda to spread civic culture and its spread has been uneven. Bangkok and the central provinces are the most widely acculturated while the levels of socialization in other regions vary widely.
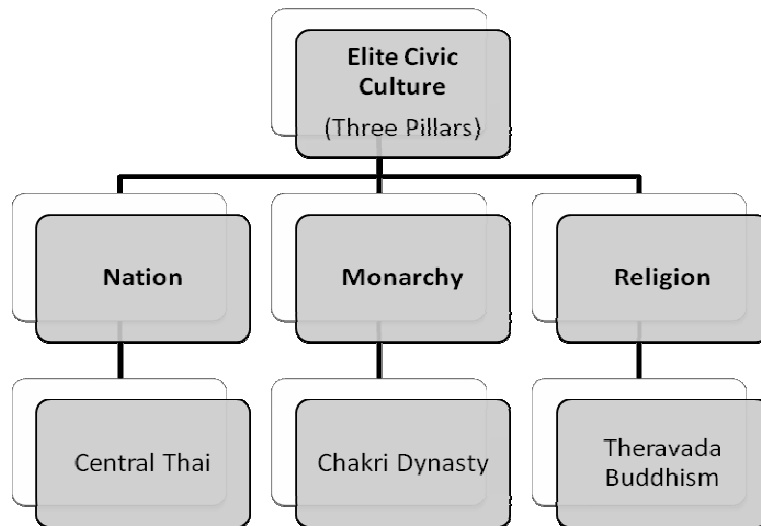

Fig. 2. The Three Pillars of Thai Elite Civic Culture

6. Ethnocracy in Education

The Thai education system is highly centralized especially at the primary and secondary levels. Books and the curriculum have to be approved by the Ministry of Education and are standard for the entire country (Somwung Pitiyanuwat, 2005). More than eighty percent of school hours in primary school are devoted to the teachings of "morals", religion, and civics (Somwung Pitiyanuwat, 2005). "Morals" in this context refers to the values of the elite such as respect for authority, seniority, and filial piety (Mulder, 2000). The religion that is taught is a highly ritualized Buddhism which emphasizes form rather than substance. Reading of the sutras is discouraged and instead most of the time is spent learning about religious rituals, festivals, and a selected list of basic

lessons from Buddhist philosophy. Finally, civics is a class that openly teaches civic culture. It includes the teaching of a highly distorted view of Thai history as well as the duties of a good Thai subject. Students are taught to respect the three pillars of the country: the monarchy, religion, and the nation. Much emphasis is placed on the teaching of fabricated legends such as how the King voluntarily decided to grant the people a constitution in the 1930s and how Thailand has always been a unitary state with a unitary history (Ungpakorn, 2007).

This leads to a discussion of history books and brings to mind a scene from the classic movie Anna and the King of Siam. In one scene Anna asks the students to point at Thailand at a map of the world and the map shows Thailand covering about a third of the world. When Anna shows them a more accurate map, all of the students protest that Thailand could not possibly be so small in comparison to the rest of the world. This distortion of reality in the way world and regional history is taught in schools is still a reality. History books are not just objective repositories of historical facts but rather political statements of how the past supports the present. This is an issue that has come up in China as well as Japan in terms of national historical memory with important repercussions for public policy as well as the national ethos.

The attempts of some conservative Japanese historians and politicians to play down Japan's role during World War II and to excuse its military expansion as a result of the need for resources has direct policy implications in terms of Japan's present role in relation to security in the Asia Pacific and the World. In other words, it is a way to promote nationalism and a stronger foreign policy (von Feigenblatt, 2007; Glenn Hook, 2005; Lind, 2009; Mulgan, 2008; Sakamoto, 2008; Smith, 1997). On the other hand China's recent revision of history books has stopped demonizing Chinese businessmen and instead has started blaming foreign powers for China's weakness in the early 20th century. This new interpretation supports the present policy to allow some to get rich first in China's guided capitalism (Wang, 2008).

In summary, the use of education as a tool for the spread of civic culture has important political and socio-

economic repercussions. Following Pieterse's model of ethnic politics, Thailand's elite has used education as a means to marginalize alternative interpretations of history and to interpret historical events and religio-philosophical principles in a way that supports its continued rule over other ethnic groups (Pieterse, 2007, pp. 18-20). The moral values taught promote submissiveness and deference to elite rule as well as delegitimizes alternative sources of authority such as minority religious leaders and even democracy (McCargo, 2008, p. 5). Thus, education in Thailand supports the hypothesis that it is an ethnocracy in which a small group in the capital imposes its preferred culture on the rest of the population.[1]

7. Ethnocracy in the Media

There is widespread censorship of the Media in Thailand (Reporters-Without-Borders, 2005). Censorship is achieved through legal and extralegal means. In addition to that there is an official government channel for official propaganda. Legal means to censor the media are the use of the *lese majeste* law which makes it a criminal offense to insult the King, Queen, Crown Prince, and the Regent (Le-Coz, 2009; Macan-Markar, 2009). In practice the law is interpreted very loosely and can be used to prosecute anyone doing or saying anything unfavorable about the monarchy or projects related to the monarchy (Hanthamrongwit, 2009). Another set of laws deals with the censorship of the media based on the protection of morals. This set of laws allows the government to filter the internet, television, and the radio, *inter alia*, based on charges of fomenting amoral ideas (Reporters-Without-Borders, 2009). The original intention of this law was to restrict pornography, the sale of alcohol, and tobacco but in practice it is used as an excuse to censor ideas opposing the elite and its view of national culture and international events. Abuse from the authorities is widespread as evidenced by resent cases in which the media

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[1] It should be noted that some minority groups in Thailand have moved on to the second stage in which they survive as enclaves. One such examples, is the Chinese community in Bangkok.

was censored both through judicial and extrajudicial means. One example of an instance of the use of the *lese majeste* law to censor the media was the recent ban on the sale of an issue of the Economist that included an article hinting at the King's role in Thai politics (Le-Coz, 2009). Another recent use of the *lese majeste* law to silence the media was the charges against the academic, Giles Ungpakorn of Chulalongkorn University due to some ideas in his book about the 2006 Military Coup which implied that the coup only benefited the Thai elite including the monarchy (Ungpakorn, 2007).

An example of a mix between legal and extralegal censorship is the case of a popular radio host who interviewed the exiled Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. Jom Petpabradab was forced to resign from his job after more than twenty years working for that radio station, MCOT (Reporters-Without-Borders, 2009). According to his account, an official from the Prime Minister's office called the president of the radio station to complain about the interview alleging that it was inciting social unrest. The president of the radio station was ordered to report to the Prime Minister's office within twenty four hours (Reporters-Without-Borders, 2009). Thus the government raised the specter of accusing the radio station of inciting unrest and thus put considerable pressure on the coworkers of the journalist to exercise self censorship. Finally, Mr. Petpabradab decided to resign due to fears of other extralegal actions of the government against him or his coworkers (Reporters-Without-Borders, 2009). It should be noted that the interview was especially sensitive at the time because Shinawatra has challenged the Privy Council from exile and thus attacked the ruling elite (Le-Coz, 2009; Ungpakorn, 2007).

Those are just some ways in which the ruling elite exert control over the media to perpetuate the Thai ethnocracy. Nevertheless there are other ways such as monopolistic control of cable television by a single network which censors the already censored signal received from Singapore and adds royalist propaganda during commercials. Another example is how most private and public web-pages show pictures of the King or other members of the royal family before leading to the actual home page. This happens in most newspapers, except

Prachathai, which do so out of legal and extralegal pressure from the bureaucrats who issue the licenses to operate and other powerful members of the elite. A very subtle censorship also takes place in terms of Thai news meant for foreign consumption. Thai and English versions of the same newspaper tend to present the same news from very different points of view and sometimes even different sets of news. The Thai version is framed by civic culture and royalist propaganda while the English version tends to be more neutral and follows international standards. What this means is that the same news, for example a development project in a province, is depicted as effective due to the King's blessing and infinite wisdom in the Thai version, with no explanation about the actual role the King played in the planning and implementation of the project (Handley, 2006). The English version just praises the results of the project while mentioned in passing that it is sponsored by the King.

In summary, the media is an important battleground in the war for control of the public sphere. Traditional control of the media by the elites through a mix of legal and extralegal pressure has resulted in its use for the promotion of Thai civic culture to the exclusion of alternative views. Watching Thai television gives the impression that all of Thailand is represented by the Palace and State Rituals. The rise of the internet momentarily threatened the elite's control of the media but was quickly tackled through the use of advanced filtering software from Singapore as well as the use of the *lese majeste* and other laws (Reporters-Without-Borders, 2005).

8. Ethnocracy in the Use of Public Space

Public Space in Thailand is more contested than ever before in the country's history but it is still mostly controlled by the elite. By public space, parks, malls, cinemas, airports, and other widely accessible spaces are meant. Public space is very important in that it is the most difficult part of the public sphere to control. The media could be controlled easily by the government through intimidating or co-opting the few outlets available in the past. It is not so easy to control public space due to the human resources and

surveillance necessary to do so. Nevertheless, the government has historically tried to do so through a mix of symbolic and coercive techniques. Some examples are the construction of royalist monuments, the naming of public venues with royalist names, the use of propaganda in parks and highways, and the singing of the national anthem two times a day in public places (Hanthamrongwit, 2009).

All of the previously mentioned examples have the common goal of promoting the elite's culture throughout the country. Monuments to get this message across are built depicting members of the elite in heroic postures in the service of the nation, religion, and king. Those monuments that do not go along with this highly selective view of history, such as the monument for democracy, are redefined so as to give the impression that they too are part of the elite view of history. Naming is a powerful way of spreading the message to the majority of the population and it is very cost effective. Singing the national anthem two times a day in public reminds the people of the mantra of nation, religion, and king regardless of where they are or what they are doing. It is expected that people stop what they are doing to sing the anthem even if they are waiting for the train. Finally, huge billboards, the royal crest, and the flag decorate government buildings, schools, temples, stores, and even shopping malls. In summary, royalist control of the culture presented in the public space serves a parallel function to schools in that it is the site where the adult population gets its civic education on a daily basis. All measures from billboards to singing the national anthem give a common message stressing loyalty to nation, religion, and king. For any discordant symbols or messages there is always the *lese majeste* as well as other extrajudicial means.

9. Ethnocracy in Religion

The dominant religion in Thailand is Theravada Buddhism. This form of Buddhism stresses that it is impossible for most people to reach enlightenment and nirvana and that the best that can be done is to accumulate merit through highly ritualistic actions such as giving food to monks and donating money to temples (Gunaratna & Acharya, 2006; McCargo, 2009). Religious texts are in Pali

and Sanskrit and most people cannot read them. Monks know the prayers by heart but most ignore what they mean. The highly centralized council of monks, the Sangha, is under the direct control of the Palace, and is mostly concerned with form rather than essence. Religious teachings are carefully filtered and chosen to support a neo-confucian view of the world centered on the three pillars (McCargo, 2009). Moreover, official Theravada Buddhism in Thailand is syncretic in that it combines Buddhism with Cambodian religious worship of spirits and the believe in the King as a demigod who is the father of the nation (Ishii, 1994). A shift towards animism and Cambodian kingship can be seen from the middle of the Ninth Reign to this day. Old festivals dating to the 16th century were revived such as fertility festivals headed by the King. Those festivals in addition to the patronage of several important temples by the Palace, stress the religious nature of the monarchy. Thus, the King is no longer just a temporal ruler but is also a religious figure (Ishii, 1994). Buddhism was molded and adapted to fit this ideal through the invention of relatively recent rituals of changing the robes of Buddha images in important temples by members of the royal family and members of the Privy Council as well as by stressing the King's role as the father and sometimes spirit of the Nation (McCargo, 2009). A more overt sign of the King's religious power is the practice of producing amulets (Handley, 2006). The Palace produces and blesses its own amulets which are then sold to the general public. Some amulets have the King's hair and are considered to be even more powerful. This is a clear way to give the message that the King is inherently linked to religion in Thailand.

In practice the Thai elite exerts pressure on religious minorities to fit this mold through measures such as attempting to centralize them by appointing royally approved heads, sponsoring Mosques and Churches, limiting the possible proselytizing in minority schools, and finally by attempting to translate and edit religious texts (Ishii, 1994; McCargo, 2009). The government established the office of Chularachamontri, at the beginning of the ninth reign to centralize the Muslim community in Thailand (Ishii, 1994, p. 458). In theory, the King appoints a Chularachamontri who becomes the official religious head of the entire Muslim

community in the country and leads local imams and Islamic councils. The purpose of this was simply to bring the Muslim community under the control of the Palace and the central government (Ishii, 1994, p. 459). If successful this measure would have allowed the Thai elite to control the religious practice of Islam in Thai territory as well as secured the loyalty of the Muslim population. Needless to say, it never worked because the Chularachamontri appointed in Bangkok is never recognized by the majority of the Muslim population of the country and thus they are mostly symbolic figures. Other attempts, such as sponsoring Mosques and Churches have had mixed results. The practice has been highly effective with Christians, who are mostly Chinese, while it has not been very effective with mosques, since most Muslims are Malay. One thing that is clear is that sponsoring minority religious buildings has the purpose of spreading the message that the King is the father of all, regardless of religion (Ishii, 1994).

One of the more successful attempts to control minority religious practices was the coerced registration of Muslim Religious schools in the Deep South. Through a shrewd combination of incentives and intimidation, the central government was able to introduce the Thai curriculum (including civic education), in the large private education sector of the border provinces (von Feigenblatt, 2009c; McCargo, 2008). Something similar to this was achieved with catholic schools a long time ago (since the 17th century). Catholic Schools are forced to teach civic religion as well as Buddhism and they are discouraged from proselytizing (Kiong & Bun, 2001; Wyatt, 2003). What this means is that it is very difficult to convert Buddhist students to Christianity.

In summary religious practice in Thailand is syncretic in that civic religion is open to aspects of religions other than Buddhism as long as those components fit into civic religion and accept the three pillars of religion, monarchy, and nation as a their basis. The result of this is that it is not hard to find Christians who think that the King is divine and Buddhists who think that the fertility ritual headed by the King actually works. Thus, the control of religion or rather its management is another site in which the elite exerts its control over culture.

10. Ethnocracy in Economic Policy

Most studies dealing with economic policy concentrate on control of resources and economic inequality (Anderson, 2006; Miller, 2009). This section deals with economic policy from a different angle, culture. Thai economic policy is dialectically related to culture in that culture is used to defend certain economic policies and at the same time certain economic realities influence the kind of culture that is promoted. Thus, Ungpakorn's analysis of the 2006 Military Coup as a "Coup for the Rich" is very helpful in that it brings to light the economic benefits that the Thai elite was defending by launching a coup (2007). Nevertheless, his traditional Marxist analysis needs to be complemented with a closer look at the role of culture in the struggle over economic policy.

There are two main camps of economic policy in Thailand progressives and conservatives. Progressives tend to favor Thailand's integration in the global economy through an expansion of the service sector and the rise of a strong middle class. Members of this group are mostly newly rich Thais, ethnic Chinese in urban centers, and a majority of the rural population (Albritton & Bureekul, 2007; Chye, 2008; von Feigenblatt, 2009b; Hamlin, 2009; Murphy, 2009; Ockey, 2007). Conservatives favor a continued reliance on heavy industry and farming since their fortunes tend to be older and thus heavily concentrated on real estate. For Conservatives, development should be gradual and based on the capital, Bangkok. While the two groups are ideal types in the Weberian sense, the two groups are represented by Thaksin Shinawatra and his supporters and the Palace and the Military on the conservative side.

Conservative economic policy is based in the theory of "self sufficiency economy". This theory was promoted by the Palace and parts of the Sangha as an alternative to rapid globalization. Self-sufficiency economy is an economic philosophy based on Thai elite moral values such as risk aversion and respect for hierarchy (Ungpakorn, 2007). Among other things it stresses the importance of avoiding consumerism by only wishing to have the minimum necessary "appropriate" to one's station in life. On a more

macro level it implies avoiding free trade agreements and an emphasis on food security. Basically self-sufficiency economy is a call to return to a historical utopia in which Thailand was supposed to be a self sufficient realm in which the farmer and the soldier were happy with their lot in life. In practice, self sufficiency economy recommends the provinces to remain mostly agricultural while the capital concentrates on the modern sector of the economy. It should be clear by now how the ideas of self sufficiency economy resonate with Thai elite culture. Hierarchy is strengthened as well as a rejection of redistribution from the rich to the poor (Ungpakorn, 2007). Buddhist ideals of detachment and karma are used to support the status quo in which the Palace and the military control most resources. Furthermore, by stressing the importance of farming in the provinces and food security, the Thai elite is justified to continue ruling and benefiting from economic growth in the capital.

In summary, economic policy in Thailand is inextricably connected to cultural politics. Self-sufficiency economy and the conservatives have had the upper hand during most of the modern history of the country with the exception of the time when PM Thaksin Shinawatra was in power. The rise of the progressives will be discussed in the later section of this paper in relation to the recent increase in the intensity of the defense of ethnocracy by the Thai elite. For now it suffices to state that culture in economic policy had the purpose of protecting the economic interests of the elite over those of the rural population and the newly rich.

11. Ethnocracy in Foreign Policy

Thailand's foreign policy has historically been aligned with that of the United States due to the communist threat in Southeast Asia (Heidhues, 2000; Neher, 2002). Realist thinking was the norm through most of the twentieth century. However, a recent change in Thailand's foreign policy is that symbolic issues have become increasingly important. A good example of an extreme case of this is the conflict with Cambodia over the Preah Vihear temple ("PAD vow to reclaim Thai soil at miniature Preah Vihear," 2009). This temple is located a few miles into Cambodian territory

and historically was part of the Khmer Empire (Gottesman, 2003). Disputed ownership of the temple was taken up to the United Nations which ruled that the temple belongs to Cambodia. The issue remained dormant for many decades until there was a recent attempt to make the temple UNESCO World Heritage (AHRC, 2009). This attempt coincided with the recent military coup and subsequent return to power of the Thai elite. The Royalist Yellow shirts have held constant protests near the border using nationalist rhetoric to compel the government to retake the temple by force if necessary. Democrat PM Abhisit has shown his willingness to make the dispute over the temple with Cambodia a major foreign policy issue and Thai troops have exchanged fire with the Cambodian Army on several occasions. This emphasis of the present Thai government on this issue is surprising since it may endanger the stability of ASEAN which is another important issue for the government (Promyamyai, 2009). Therefore, the increasing importance of symbolic issues in Thailand's foreign policy is a sign of how culture has permeated the calculations of foreign policy makers and also reflects the concerted approach of the Thai elite to defend the ethnocracy it rules. This argument is supported by Avruch's criticism of realism as an explanation for international conflict (Avruch, 1998). The assumed anarchy of the international system of nation-states and rational calculation based on economic and military power cannot properly explain Thailand's foreign policy. A more nuanced explanation needs to include culture as an explanatory variable in addition to the internal political situation as explained in previous sections. In conclusion, Thailand's foreign policy is influenced by a complex array of factors ranging from culture to internal political considerations, and is limited by external security needs such as the stability of ASEAN (von Feigenblatt, 2009a, 2009b; Rolfe, 2008; Simon, 2008).

12. Increasing Intensity of the Thai Elite's Defense of Ethnocracy

The first few years of the 21st century are full of signs of an increase in the intensity of the defense of the Thai Ethnocracy. Greater censorship and attempts to strengthen

the *lese majeste*, greater control over *pondoks*, greater use of intimidation, a sharp increase in the quantity of Royalist propaganda, and the promotion of singing the anthem in public places, are some of the signs that the Thai elite is attempting to defend its control over national culture ("Government campaign for National Anthem to be sung across the country," 2009; Macan-Markar, 2009). The democrat party and the military have supported this push for a stronger promotion of elite civic culture through programs such as the "United and Strong Thai Project" which was approved by the cabinet in early August, 2009 ("Government campaign for National Anthem to be sung across the country," 2009).

The United and Strong Thai project promotes singing the anthem at 6 pm every day starting September 20 and ending on the 5th of December to celebrate the King's birthday ("Government campaign for National Anthem to be sung across the country," 2009). Political unrest and violence were mentioned as reasons for the project by its proponents in the cabinet. It is also important to mention that the project will be presided by military troops and bureaucrats at the village level and governors appointed by Bangkok at the province level. An aim of the project is to encourage love for the "nation" and to connect the nation to its symbol, the monarchy ("Government campaign for National Anthem to be sung across the country," 2009).

Another example of how the Thai elite has increased the intensity of its defense of the Thai ethnocracy are the calls by Prime Minister Abhisit and his cabinet to strengthen the *lese majeste* to prosecute implied and indirect criticism of the monarchy (Macan-Markar, 2009). One of the ways in which this is happening is through a system in which the government encourages average citizens to report their neighbors and colleagues to the police if they criticize the monarchy. Needless to say this has proven to be problematic in that most accusations are due to personal reasons rather than true violations of the law. Nevertheless, the promotion of the implementation of the *lese majeste* has pushed all criticism of the monarchy underground due to the constant fear of being reported by someone.

Other examples of an increase in the defense of the Thai Ethnocracy are the increasing oversight of the Ministry

of Education over *pondoks*, private Muslim schools in the South, the flooding of the streets with Royalist propaganda including yellow shirts and amulets, and the use of intimidation by the military and government officials to pressure people to wear yellow shirts every monday to show respect to the King (Le-Coz, 2009). This rise in the intensity of efforts to promote the culture of the Thai elite raises the question of why it is happening at this time. According to Pieterse's typology in an ethnocracy there is almost complete control over national culture by a single ethnic group until at a certain point in time that dominance is contested by other groups (2007). The next section explores some of the signs of movement towards enclave ethnicity and ethnic competition.

13. Signs of Movement Towards Enclave Ethnicity and Ethnic Competition

Recent developments in Thailand show that there is some movement towards enclave ethnicity and ethnic competition. Calls for autonomy in the South in terms of language, religion, and culture, dissent from intellectuals, journalists, and youth, calls for more democratic participation in rural areas and the Northeast, calls for greater opening of the economy by the newly rich, and even some calls for a change of name back to Siam by some prominent academics show that the primacy of Thai elite culture is being contested ("Former Thammasat Rector calls to change country's name to Siam," 2009; McCargo, 2009; Murphy, 2009).

The high profile of some of the voices of dissent as well as the unrest they bring about is almost without precedent in Thai history. This is not the first time there is opposition to a government but it is the first time when the opposition is not only against the government but the entire system of elite rule (Murphy, 2009). Furthermore, opposition not only comes from the ranks of the newly rich, or radical intellectual, but from the young, and the vast majority of the

rural population (Pongsudhirak, 2008).[1] The following letter written by a former rector of Thammasat University, a prominent historian, to PM Abhisit aptly summarizes the contested nature of Thai culture and how it relates to politics:

> University of Moral and Political Sciences
> (UMPS: Thammasat University)
> Bangkok 10200, Siam (Thailand)
> 28 April 2009
> Your Excellency: Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva,
> cc-To Whom It May Concern:
> In view of the fact that Your Excellency have announced that you are considering amending the Constitution to promote reconciliation, harmony and democracy, I would like to request that you take the following three proposals into consideration.
> First: To amend the words 'Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand' to read either 'Constitution of the Kingdom of Siam' or 'Constitution of Siam,' in order to promote 'unity,' 'harmony,' and 'reconciliation' in our country, whose more than sixty million citizens include over fifty distinct ethnic groups with their own languages: Thai, Tai, Yuan, Lao, Lue, Melayu, Mon, Khmer, Kui, Teochiu, Cantonese, Hokkien, Hailam, Hakka, Cham, Javanese, Sakai, Mokhaen, Tamil, Pathan, Persian, Arab, Ho, Phuan, Tai Yai, Phu Tai, Khuen, Viet, Yong, Lawa, Hmong, Karen, Palong, Museur,

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[1] Attitudinal Studies also show a shift in attitudes in favor of democracy and a reduced role for the military (Albritton & Bureekul, 2004, 2007).

> Akha, Kammu, Malabari, Chong, Nyakur, Bru, Orang Laut, Westerners of various kinds, people of mixed descent, etc, etc.
>
> Second: To abolish the Senate, so that the country will have a single legislative body freely elected by the citizenry.
>
> Third: To enact a democratic law reinstating the autonomy and dignity of the 'Province of Thonburi,' which were taken away and destroyed by an undemocratic, authoritarian decree in 1971-72.
>
> I very much hope that you will consider these proposals,
>
> Yours sincerely,
>
> Charnvit Kasetsiri
>
> Former Rector
>
> The University of Moral and Political Sciences
>
> (UMPS-Thammasat University)
>
> ("Former Thammasat Rector calls to change country's name to Siam," 2009)

14. Conclusions

The first section of the paper provided a general overview of Thai history and how culture has shaped politics. Secondly the theoretical framework was explained and a typology of ethnic domination was introduced based on Jan Neverdeen Pieterse's model of ethnic competition as well Avruch's concerns over the role of culture in international relations (Avruch, 1998; Pieterse, 2007). Subsequent sections explained why Thai National Culture can be considered a recent creation based on the triumvirate of nation, monarchy, and religion. Other sections continued the theme of exploring the role of national culture on a variety of spheres such as education, the media, usage of public space,

religion, economic policy, and foreign policy. Then signs of an increase of the intensity of the elite's defense of national culture were presented as well as some signs of movement towards ethnic competition.

The increase in the intensity of the traditional elite's defense of national culture shows that it is aware that culture has an important influence over control of resources and political influence. Recent developments such as political unrest in the provinces and violence in the Deep South can be interpreted as signs that other ethnic groups are starting to contest the hegemonic control over the definition of national culture by a small central Thai elite. The letter written by the former rector of Thammasat shows how symbolic changes such as the name of the country are linked to many other issues such as recognition of the culture of other ethnic groups, political participation, and possibly economic policy. Even raising the possibility of renaming the constitution as the constitution of Siam rather than the constitution of the Kingdom of Siam raises the possibility of a republic and thus challenges one of the three pillars of national culture (Ungpakorn, 2007).

In conclusion Thailand is moving from being classified as an ethnocracy to the stage of ethnic competition in which one group remains dominant but other groups struggle against that dominance. This shift in the cultural balance of power explains the recent political unrest and polarization of the population into two camps, conservatives (yellow shirts), and an amorphous coalition of progressives with little in common except that they want recognition and greater voice in the way the country is run and policy made. The critical analysis provided in this paper shows how a cultural explanation of the polarization of Thai society complements a more traditional Marxist explanation of the political unrest. Culture and politico-economic factors are dialectically related in that cultural domination influences the way political and economic power is divided. The relationship also flows in the opposite direction economic and political power influence the definition of national culture and in turn shapes the culture of the population (Bayart, 2005). Taking into consideration the dialectical relationship between culture and socio-political power it is possible to conclude that economic and political power will slowly shift from the

traditional elite to the newly rich and possibly the rural population. This process will not be smooth as seen in recent massive protests in Bangkok and constant bombings in the South but it is certainly an important step in making Thailand/Siam a better place for a majority of the population by providing for their identity needs as well as their other basic needs of food and security.
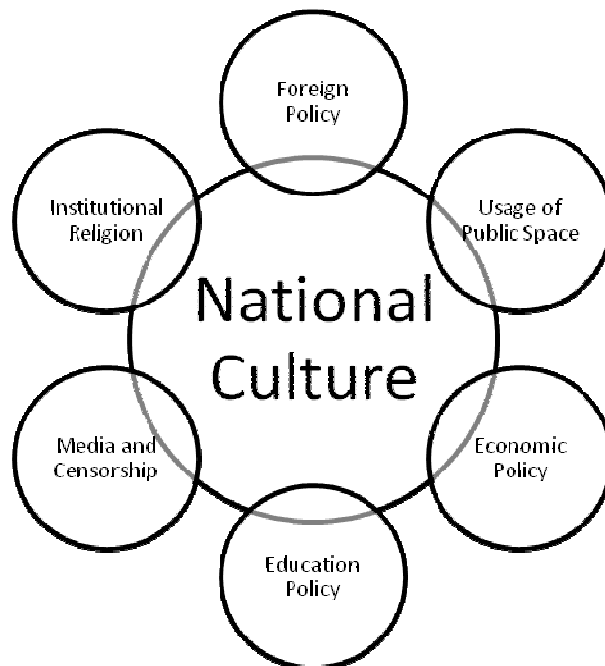

Fig 3. Dialectical Relationship between Culture and Policymaking[1]

15. Recommendations

One of the possible ways to avert the violence and political unrest brought about by ethnic competition would be for the government to take the initiative in reforming the system. Singapore could be used as the role model to emulate since

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[1] Figure 3 shows the dialectical relationship between national culture and different policy areas. The relationship flows in both directions in that culture influences the different policy areas while the policy areas influence national culture. National Culture is the generic term for the official culture promoted by the nation-state.

it is ruled by a strong government based on the ideal of mutual respect for cultural differences (Yew, 2000). Singapore is moving from ethnic competition to optional ethnicity and in the process has benefitted from the best its ethnic groups can offer. National culture in Singapore is defined around the diversity of its population and most importantly by the ideals of tolerance and hard work. The Thai elite should take the lead in the transformation and thus avoid the present social polarization and the resulting negative externalities.

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