

RESEARCHERS AT THE INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

---

**Singapore | 16 Apr 2015**

---

***Survey Findings on Freedom and Democracy under the Prayuth Government and Buddhism Reforms in Thailand.***

**Special Feature:**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- In collaboration with Thailand's National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA)<sup>1</sup> which conducts regular surveys in Thai society on a variety of issues, ISEAS' Thailand Studies Programme will be publishing selected findings for ISEAS Perspective readers for a snapshot of Thai politics and society.<sup>2</sup> This issue carries the findings of two different surveys - *Freedom and Democracy under the Prayuth Government* and *Buddhism Reforms in Thailand*.
- When asked about the level of freedom under the current government to pursue their livelihoods, the vast majority of respondents (86%) stated that they enjoyed such freedom. While the majority of respondents (63%) reported that they enjoyed political

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information on NIDA please contact Assistant Professor Dr. Suvicha Pouaree, Director of NIDA Poll. The survey relied on random sampling from NIDA Poll's master sample database. Data was collected through telephone interviews.

<sup>2</sup> The co-ordinators for the Thailand Studies Programme are Mike Montesano and Terence Chong. For more information please visit <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/thai.cfm>

freedom under the current government, a significant minority (23%) stated that that they did not.

- When asked if Thailand had become more democratic under the Prayuth government than before the military coup of 22 May 2014, 36% of respondents claimed that the country had become more democratic, 39% stated that the country enjoyed the same level of democracy, 23% reported that Thailand enjoyed less democracy under Prayuth, and 2% were unsure. Experts note that non-graduates were more likely to believe that Thailand was now more democratic because of the association with increased law and order.
- With regards to institutional reforms in Thai Buddhism, 53% of respondents believed that reforms must take place immediately. 24% stated that such reforms must take place *but not* immediately, while 19% confirmed that reforms were not necessary. 4% were not sure. Experts explain that the primary cause of public concern is the misbehavior of Buddhist monks, and this included internal conflicts.
- On the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand, 11 % of respondents stated that the Council was ‘highly’ effective while 25% believed that it was ‘quite’ effective. Conversely, 34% reported that the Council was ‘quite’ ineffective and 19% believed that the Council was not functioning at all. 11% were unsure. Experts say this is because the Council is deemed to be ‘irrelevant’ and beyond the monitoring of the public and government sectors.

## INTRODUCTION

The Thailand Studies Programme at ISEAS will be presenting selected findings in a series of ISEAS Perspective. These provide a snapshot of Thai politics and society. This project is made possible through collaboration with Thailand's National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) which conducts regular surveys in Thai society on a variety of issues.

The present issue carries the findings of two different NIDA surveys. The first is on *Freedom and Democracy under the Prayuth Government* and the second deals with *Buddhism Reforms in Thailand*.

### 1. Survey on Freedom and Democracy under the Prayuth Government

The National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) in Thailand conducted a survey on 25-26 March 2015 to understand public attitudes towards democracy and personal freedom under the military government. The survey sampled 1263 Thai citizens across every region, education level, and occupation. 20% of respondents were based in Bangkok and its vicinity; 20% were from Thailand's central region; 19% were from Thailand's northern region; 20% are from Thailand's north-eastern region; and 21% were from the country's southern region. 51% and 49% were male and female, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Freedom to Pursue Livelihood*

When asked about the level of freedom under the current government to pursue their livelihoods, 52% of respondents stated they enjoyed 'a lot of freedom', 34% stated that they 'somewhat' enjoyed freedom, 11% stated they do not have much freedom, while 2% stated that they do not have freedom at all. According to Professor Dr. Sombat Thamrongthanyawong from the ASEAN and Asia Studies Center, NIDA, the findings suggest that "The majority of public, in general, do not have anything to do with politics." In addition, Dr Sombat observed that the less educated segments of the population were "part of that group that did not have any role in politics directly. Therefore, they feel that they still enjoy a good level of freedom with respect to their livelihood."

---

<sup>3</sup> 9.3% of respondents were aged 18–24 years old; 30.4% were 25–39 years old; 46.8% were 40-59 years old; and 13.5% were 60 years old and older. 95.3% were Buddhists; 4% were Muslims; and 0.7% were Christians and others. 27.1% were single; 68.2% were married; and 4% were widowed, divorced, or separated. 25% of respondents had graduated from elementary school or lower; 30% had graduated from secondary school or its equivalent; 8.3% had graduated with diploma or equivalent; 30.3% had graduated with bachelor's degree or its equivalent; and 6.37% were postgraduates or its equivalent. 16.5% of respondents did not have any income; 18.5% had monthly incomes not exceeding 10,000 Baht; 30.6% had monthly incomes between 10,001–20,000 Baht; 13.7% had monthly income between 20,001–30,000 Baht; 6.7% had monthly incomes between 30,001–40,000 Baht; 7.1% had monthly incomes of more than 40,000 Baht or higher; and 7% did not specify their incomes.

### Political Freedom

When asked about the level of political freedom under the current government, 30% stated that they enjoyed a lot of political freedom, 32% stated that they ‘somewhat’ have political freedom, while 23% reported that they do not enjoy political freedom. Those who reported enjoying political freedom under the current government noted that martial law helped in maintaining peace and order. Conversely, those who claimed that they did not enjoy political freedom pointed to martial law as the cause.

Respondents were also asked about the need for political movements (using both peaceful and violent means) in opposition to General Prayuth Chan-ocha’s government and the National Council for Peace (NCPO). 44% of respondents stated that it was inappropriate to initiate any political movement at the moment because the country was not ‘normal’ yet, with many not wanting the country to experience turmoil again. Moreover, these respondents believed that the government needed the opportunity to work for the country. Another 40% stated that any oppositional political movement had to be expressed in a peaceful manner. These respondents believed that this was necessary to avoid violence and that communication had to take place in a peaceful manner based on a democratic system. However, 8% believed that all political movements should be allowed in any form, peaceful or otherwise, as guaranteed by democracy. These respondents considered the right to perform such activities a personal right. About 6% were unsure or did not specify any answer.

According to Dr Sombat, those who felt that there was a curb on political freedoms attributed it to martial law, which prohibited political rallies and criticism of the junta and its policies. However, those who did “not normally participate in political activity both directly and indirectly... still see themselves as having normal political freedom”.

### Democracy then and now

Finally, respondents were asked if Thailand was more democratic under the Prayuth government than before the military took over on 22 May 2014. 36% of respondents claimed that the country had become more democratic because people were more disciplined and flexible in their notions of democracy, especially when reforms in various areas had to take place. Another 39% stated that the country enjoyed the same level of democracy because they did not see much political or institutional transformation under the Prayuth government. 23% reported that Thailand enjoyed less democracy under martial law, and that the country was ruled by an unelected government. 2% were unsure.

Dr Sombat noted that the majority of respondents who believed that Thailand was more democratic under the Prayuth government were non-graduates. 64% of respondents who believed that Thailand was now more democratic had qualifications lower than a bachelor’s degree. Dr Sombat also suggested that these respondents feel that they are “able to live their life with more freedom and security than before *coup d’etat*... because they do not have to face any dangers caused by hostile political groups.”

## 2. Survey on Buddhism Reform in Thailand

NIDA conducted a survey on ‘Buddhism Reform in Thailand’ on 26-27 February 2015 to understand contemporary attitudes towards Buddhist institutions. Respondents were Thai citizens who professed to be Buddhist, while the sample cut across every region, all education levels, and various occupations, with a total sample size of 1249.<sup>4</sup> Approximately 20% of respondents were based in Bangkok and its vicinity, 20% were from Thailand’s central region, 20% were from the northern region, 20% from the north-eastern region and 20% from the southern region. 57% and 43% of the respondents were male and female, respectively.

### Institutional Reforms

When asked about the need for institutional reforms in Thai Buddhism, 53% of respondents believed that reforms must take place immediately. 24% stated that such reforms must take place *but not* immediately, while 19% confirmed that reforms were not necessary. 4% stated that they were not sure.

According to Associate Professor Dr. Surasit Vajirakachorn, Graduate School of Social and Environmental Development, NIDA, the public’s desire to see institutional reform is shared by many Buddhist philosophers. “For example, Phra Paisal Visalo said during a special speech at Payap University in Chiang Mai on 28 July 2003, ‘The most obvious decline of Buddhism is the misbehavior of Buddhist monks. It includes conflicts and the division of clergy into factions and the neglect of ecclesiastical leaders to solve this particular problem.’”

For Dr Surasit, the misbehavior of Buddhist monks may have been caused by changes in society. Unlike the more rustic countryside temples of the past, many temples are now located in big cities and embedded in contemporary popular culture. “Today’s parsonages are often equipped with air-conditions for comfort and wellbeing. Moreover, these have audio stereo systems, televisions, videos, and computers, which mainly serve entertainment purposes.”

### The Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand

Respondents were also asked if they believed that the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand was effective as an institution in maintaining Buddhist Principles and the order of clergy. 11 % of respondents stated that the Council was ‘highly’ effective while 25% believed that it was ‘quite’ effective. Conversely, 34% reported that the Council was ‘quite’ ineffective and 19% believed that the Council was not functioning at all. 11% were unsure.

Dr Surasit notes that the Sangha Supreme Council has become irrelevant. Its administrative features are centrally organized. As for its history, it was established during King

---

<sup>4</sup> For more information contact Assistant Professor Dr. Suvicha Pouaree, Director of NIDA Poll. The survey relied on random sampling from NIDA Poll’s master sample database. Data was collected through telephone interviews.

Chulalongkorn's era more than 100 years ago without any mechanism for monitoring. The Sangha Act has been revised many times, and the current version is Sangha Act (No. 2) B.E. 2535 (1992). The management of the clergy, for example, still takes place without monitoring from the public and government sectors. Meanwhile, senior monks who have authority in the Sangha Supreme Council have an average age of 76 years old. At 90 years old, Somdet Pra Maharachmakhalajan is the acting Supreme Patriarch, The eldest member of the council is Somdet Pra Mahaveerawong at 97 years old, and the youngest one is 60 years old. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of the public did not believe the Singha Supreme Council was effective.

---

**ISEAS Perspective** is published electronically by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies  
30, Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Pasir Panjang, Singapore 119614  
Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955  
Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735

Homepage: [www.iseas.edu.sg](http://www.iseas.edu.sg)

ISEAS accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed. Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.

Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.

Editorial Chairman: Tan Chin Tiong

Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng

Production Editors: Benjamin Loh, Su-Ann Oh and Lee Poh Onn  
Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Francis E. Hutchinson and Daljit Singh