

Thailand



The Asia Foundation

The Asia Foundation has worked in Thailand since 1954. The Foundation promotes peaceful conflict resolution, encourages citizen engagement in the political process, and supports innovative programs that will build more responsive and transparent systems of governance throughout the country. As Thailand's political context has changed dramatically in recent years, the Foundation places a priority on strengthening effective institutions of democracy and resolving conflict in the three Muslim-dominated southernmost provinces.



RESOLVING CONFLICT IN THE SOUTH

Thailand faces violent unrest in the southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat where the population is predominately Muslim. While the causes of conflict are complex, The Asia Foundation recognizes that identity, education, economic opportunity, and participation in local decision-making are the basis from which peaceful development will emerge.

Situated between Buddhist Thailand and mostly Muslim Malaysia, these border states have a cultural and linguistic identity that is distinct from mainstream society in both countries. This unique identity has long been threatened by Thai ethno-centric government policies and alienation among the Muslim community has been a major driving factor for militancy. In keeping with the government's evolving policy to allow Thai-Malays in the south greater cultural space, the Foundation supports locally-driven efforts to preserve this cultural identity and reduce the motivation for armed insurgency.

Foundation programs in the south are designed to create equal rights and opportunities for Muslim citizens. The Foundation has partnered with southern educational institutes to reform the secular curriculum of private Islamic secondary

schools (*pondok*) so that students will have a better chance of advancing economically and socially within Thai society. To enable Muslim citizens to interact with Thai officialdom using their own Pattani-Malay dialect, the Foundation supported the publication of Thailand's first Pattani-Malay/Thai/Malay dictionary and the development of additional complimentary language tools for government officials and NGOs.

Distrust of the central Thai government is high in these three provinces and the Foundation works to combat impunity by improving the use of forensic science at crime scenes through the education of law enforcement officials and medical practitioners. Working closely with the Muslim Attorney Center (MAC) in the south, the Foundation has also set up a unique legal aid program known as the Southern Paralegal Advocacy Network (SPAN). Based on its successful mobile legal aid clinic for people affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, SPAN is a network of paralegal volunteers trained to provide basic legal services within their communities and throughout the southernmost provinces. In addition to assisting MAC lawyers and Thai-Malay citizens on specific legal issues and cases, SPAN paralegals provide civic and legal education trainings through workshops held in schools and commu-



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Many of The Asia Foundation's programs empower women throughout Thailand.

In the mountains of the north, Foundation-supported trainings enable hill-tribe women to enter the political arena and run for elections.

In the troubled southernmost provinces, the Foundation helps widows and women victims of violence to seek legal recourse and make their voices heard in the public arena.

nity halls, as well as in prisons. Not long after SPAN was established in early 2009, it received a pan-Asian award for being part of “a new generation of human rights defenders.”

Programs such as these lead to reconciliation by establishing social, legal, and political conditions that can address the immediate grievances of the Thai-Malay population. In addition, the Foundation works with a prestigious Thai think-tank to conceive and advocate a peace plan that could establish the framework for lasting peace in the south.

ENABLING CIVIC PARTICIPATION

In cooperation with the World Bank and partner organizations, The Asia Foundation designed a unique participatory training program called Civic Participation in Local Governance (CPLG) to provide the tools, skills, and encouragement needed for citizens to actively participate in local governance. Attended by government officials, civic leaders, and representatives of grassroots NGOs, CPLG workshops cover topics such as community rights, ordinances, and development plans.

With assistance from Foundation staff, groups like the National Counter Corruption Commission and the Election Commission have adapted the CPLG curriculum for use in their own programs. CPLG meetings are also tailored to the varied circumstances of communities throughout Thailand. In the north, the Foundation supported a local NGO using CPLG trainings to boost the political involvement of hill-tribe women. In the northeast, CPLG workshops have dealt with specific environmental problems such as water management and the disposal of hazardous waste. In the southernmost provinces, CPLG meetings provide a much-needed forum for open discussion and the CPLG content has been adapted as a radio script so that community radio stations can broadcast it to an even wider audience.

The Foundation recently supported the development and production of a weekly television talk show. Called *Let's Talk Rights*, the Thai-language show features debates between policymakers, government officials, academics, and citizens on important issues, such as land disputes, human rights, community rights, and gender equality. *Let's Talk Rights* began broadcasting on Thai PBS

in November 2009 and is already receiving a record number of call-ins from public viewers.

SUPPORTING POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

Since Thailand's military coup in September 2006, The Asia Foundation has worked toward reestablishing responsive institutions of democratic governance. The Foundation assists Thai reformers within government and civil society to further inform debate on constitutional reforms and rebuild accountability mechanisms. Working with government officials and civil society leaders, the Foundation aims to ensure the participation of civil society in drafting key legislation that will promote democratic values and processes. To ensure that opinions from Thai citizens were represented, the Foundation conducted a nationwide opinion poll in 2009 that gauged the national mood toward election reform, participation in politics, amending the constitution, and more. Published in Thai and English, the completed survey enables lawmakers, politicians, academics, and the media to better assess the process of democratization and measure Thai voters' knowledge of and attitudes toward democracy and political reform.

Additionally, the Foundation works to cultivate young leaders from marginalized groups across Thailand, including tribal minorities in the north, those at risk of human trafficking in the northeast, and the Thai-Muslim population in the south. The Foundation has held civic education workshops for hundreds of marginalized youth. Workshop participants have been supported to conduct a questionnaire of youth needs and design and implement youth-run projects. The program seeks to establish a new generation of democratic leaders who will have the knowledge and skills to assert their rights and participate in the political and social transformation of their communities.

In Thailand, The Asia Foundation's programs are also funded by the United States Agency for International Development, the U.S. Department of State Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, the Royal Netherlands Embassy, and the United Nations Democracy Fund.

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization. Through its programs, the Foundation builds leadership, improves policies, and strengthens institutions to foster greater openness and shared prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. It is funded by contributions from corporations, foundations, individuals, and governmental organizations in the U.S., Europe, Canada, Australia, and Asia, and an annual appropriation from the U.S. Congress.



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