

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

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Special Feature

Thailand Surveys: On Priorities in Domestic Issues and On Reactions to International Criticism on Human Rights

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In collaboration with Thailand’s National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA),¹ which conducts regular surveys of Thai society on a variety of issues, ISEAS’ Thailand Studies Programme² publishes selected findings for *ISEAS Perspective* readers. These offer snapshots of Thai politics and society.
- This issue carries the findings of two different projects – *Survey on domestic issues that the Prime Minister should prioritise* and *Survey on reaction to criticism from the US, EU and Human Rights Watch of Thailand for violating human rights*.
- The first survey found that the top three concerns amongst the Thai public were the rising cost of living and the economic downturn; the drought and irrigation challenges facing agricultural sector, resulting in damaged crops and a lack of drinking water for livestock; and rising agricultural production costs, coupled with low commodities prices.
- The same survey also found that the two ministries that the Thai public believed needed to improve their performance were the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and the Ministry of Commerce.



¹ For more information on NIDA please contact Assistant Professor Dr. Suvicha Pouaree, Director of NIDA Poll, at nida_poll@nida.ac.th. The surveys relied on random sampling from NIDA Poll’s master sample database. Data were collected through telephone interviews.

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

- Thailand has also recently come in for international criticism over a variety of human rights issues such as human trafficking, the arrest of 14 college students, and the extradition of illegal Uyghur immigrants back to China.
- The majority polled believed that such international criticisms were an attempt by the US to interfere in Thailand's internal affairs. This was followed by Thais who believed that these criticisms were, in fact, part of a political game between the US and China in which the former uses Thailand as a means to criticise China.

INTRODUCTION

ISEAS-Yusof Ishak's Thailand Studies Programme collaborates with Thailand's National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) in selecting for publication in *ISEAS Perspective* findings of surveys conducted by NIDA. NIDA surveys seek to provide snapshots of contemporary Thai politics and society. The present issue carries the findings of two separate surveys.

1. Survey on domestic issues that the Prime Minister should prioritise

A survey was conducted to ascertain to which domestic issues the Thai public wanted Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to give priority and which ministries they felt most needed to improve in performance. Ever since the 22 May coup, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) has sought to shore up its legitimacy with the Thai public. Initially justified as a means to bring much needed law and order to a country rocked by street protests and demonstrations, the NCPO has had to make the transition from focussing on law and order concerns to addressing the multitude of long-term challenges facing Thailand. Without the requisite experience in government, Prime Minister Prayut has found this transition difficult to make. The Prime Minister's weekly television programme serves to assure the nation that the NCPO is aware of its tasks and highlights the efforts made thus far. Nevertheless, if the sluggish economy refuses to pick up, public discontent may rise again.

What are the issues that are worrying Thais? What are the nature of their concerns? The survey was conducted from 29 to 30 June 2015, sampling 1,252 respondents and cutting across every region, education level, and occupation.

Table 1A: Which domestic issue should the PM give priority to?

Domestic Issues	Poll Percentage
Rising cost of living and economic downturn	33.2
Drought and irrigation challenges	29.9
Rising agricultural production costs	21
Completion of constitution drafting	4.3
Implementation of Section 44 (to fight corrupt government officials)	2.4
Stopping college students from resisting the government	1.5
Others	6.4
All issues are equally important	0.4
Don't know/did not specify	0.6
Total	100

The survey revealed that the rising cost of living and the economic downturn was the most pressing issue for 33.2 per cent of the Thai public. Not far behind, at 29.9 per cent were the drought and irrigation challenges facing agricultural sector, resulting in damaged crops and a lack of drinking water for livestock.

Coming in third, at 21 per cent, was the concern over rising agricultural production costs, coupled with low crop price. Far behind were concerns such as the need to complete drafting the constitution, the need to implement Section 44 for bringing corrupt government officials to justice, and the desire to stop college student from resisting the government. Meanwhile, under 'Others' were concerns that the government should pay attention to the spread of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, the legalisation of casinos, the country's problems with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the auditing of security standards for Suvarnabhumi Airport, the relationship with the US, minimum wage and foreign labour issues, unemployment, forest encroachment, drug problems, and crime rates. 0.4 per cent of respondents stated that all issues were of equal importance while 0.64 per cent did not specify their views, or were not sure.

According to Associate Professor Adis Israngkura, School of Development Economics, National Institute of Development Administration, the survey results may surprise urban Thais as they show that most Thais are not interested in political issues. The majority of citizens are worried about the economy and the rising prices of goods and services. Assoc Prof Adis notes that the draft Constitution, which has now been rejected, only interested a small fraction of Thai people. In short, the majority of respondents want to see real work on

the part of the NCPO government which would actually result in improved living conditions for people.

Which ministry needs to improve the most?

Table IB: Which ministry needs to improve in performance the most?

Government Ministries in Need of Improvement	Poll Percentage
Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives	37.5
Ministry of Commerce	20.4
Ministry of Interior	6.8
Ministry of Social Development and Human Security	3.5
Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment	3.3
Ministry of Finance	3.1
Ministry of Education	3.1
Ministry of Labour	2.8
Ministry of Defence	2.6
Ministry of Justice	2.2
Ministry of Transportation	2.1
Prime Minister's Office	2.0
Ministry of Public Health	1.6
Ministry of Energy	1.2
Ministry of Tourism and Sports	0.9
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	0.7
Ministry of Industry	0.4
Ministry of Culture	0.08
All ministries need improvement	0.6
The performance of all ministries are quite satisfying.	0.3
Did not specify/were unsure	4.0
Total	100

The survey also asked respondents which government ministry they felt needed to improve in terms of performance and effectiveness. The Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives came out on top with 37.5 per cent of respondents believing that it needed to improve. This was followed by the Ministry of Commerce with 20.4 per cent. A distant third and fourth were the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security at 6.8 per cent and 3.5 per cent, respectively. Meanwhile 0.6 per cent of respondents believed that the Prime Minister needed to motivate all government ministries while 0.3 per cent believed that all government ministries were already working hard, and that their performances were quite satisfactory. 4.0 per cent did not specify their views or were unsure.

2. Survey on reaction to criticism from the US, EU and Human Rights Watch of Thailand for violating human rights

Thailand has recently come in for international criticism over a variety of human rights related issues. The US, the UN, the European Union (EU) and international organisations such as Human Rights Watch have accused Thailand of violating human rights on various issues such as, human trafficking, the arrest of 14 college students, and the extradition of illegal Uyghur immigrants back to China. The UN called Thailand’s action “a flagrant violation of international law”, while the US also condemned the deportations, and voiced deep concern about protection of asylum-seekers in Thailand. Amnesty International said that the Muslim Uighurs could face detention or torture in China.³ Nonetheless little has been known about what ordinary Thais think of the barrage of international criticism. This survey sampled 1250 respondents from across every region, education level, and occupation.

Table 2A: Survey on reaction to criticism from the US, EU and Human Rights Watch of Thailand for violating human rights

Public Reaction	Poll Percentage
Criticisms are an attempt by the US to interfere in Thailand’s internal affairs.	37.9
Criticisms are part of a political game between the US and China, with the former criticising the latter through Thailand.	22
Criticisms are the US’s attempt to expand its influence over the Asia-Pacific region.	16.2
Criticisms are attempts by the West to create a positive image for itself.	14.2
Criticisms are expressed with good intentions and are part of the West’s roles and responsibilities.	13.6
Thailand has truly violated human rights with respect to these issues.	10.9
Criticisms are expressed with good intentions from international organizations.	10.4

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/07/09/world/asia/ap-as-thailand-uighurs.html? r=0> (accessed 20 Sept 2015)

Criticisms are attempts to engender a positive image for these international organisations.	10.4
Criticisms are part of the plan by influential Thai groups to overthrow the General Prayut's government and NCPO.	4.8
Others	0.4
Did not specify/were unsure	7.2
Total	100

37.9 per cent of Thai respondents believed that the criticism over human rights was an attempt by the US to interfere in Thailand's internal affairs. 22.0 per cent stated that these criticisms were, in fact, part of a political game between the US and China in which the former uses Thailand as a means to criticise China. 16.2 per cent perceived this criticism as the US's way to expand its influence over the Asia-Pacific region, while 14.2 per cent believed that the West was trying to create a positive image for itself through such criticisms. However, 13.6 per cent noted that such criticisms were articulated by the US and international organisations with good intentions. Interestingly, only 10.9 per cent of respondents believed that Thailand had violated human rights with respect to these issues. 4.8 per cent noted that all these criticisms were part of a plan by some influential Thai groups to overthrow the Prayut government.

This survey comes prior to Prime Minister Prayut's address to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York. According to news agencies, "On Mr Prayut's agenda is convincing world leaders that his government is tackling human trafficking and returning democracy to the Thai people. But he is expected to face some tough questions, particularly those concerning the repression of human rights as well as on elections in Thailand, which have been delayed several times."⁴

The survey went on to ask if respondents were worried about such international criticisms. While the Thai government has been relatively defensive about these criticisms, little is known about how ordinary Thais feel about them.

⁴<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/thai-pm-prayut-to-give/2147678.html> (accessed 25 Sept 2015)

Table 2B: How worried are you over international criticisms?

Public Reaction	Poll Percentage
Very worried	14.0
Somewhat worried	28.0
Not quite worried	21.3
Not worried at all	36.3
Did not specify/were unsure	0.4
Total	100

Approximately 42 per cent of Thais – a significant minority – were worried or somewhat worried over the negative international scrutiny. Conversely, the majority – approximately 58 per cent – were not very worried. In light of such figures, public support for the government’s stance on human rights will continue to be divided while the issues themselves remain contentious.

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