

Peace and Conflict Studies in Thailand: The Primacy of the State's Narrative of Security

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Peace and conflict studies in Thailand is considerably influenced by the security narrative prescribed by the state and manipulated for political purposes. The field of study consequently promotes the interests of the Thai state rather than exploring the socio-political factors that have sustained the longevity of conflicts in the first place. This outcome is most evident in the cases of violence in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand—Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—and the ongoing political conflict between royalists and their opponents. Because the focus is on national security, the field often overlooks the human aspect of peace and conflicts. This state-centric focus has influenced Thai peace and conflicts studies to take an inward-looking approach, raising the possibility of it disconnecting from international scholarship.

Keywords Deep South, human security, monarchy, Muslim minority, national security, Thailand

Introduction

Peace and conflict studies is a relatively new area of study in Thailand, partly because the country emerged into the modern world carrying fewer traumatic experiences when compared to its formerly colonized neighboring states. Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia to have never been officially colonized by external powers. The delayed foray into the field of peace and conflict studies was also, in part, because of the state's controlled narrative on national security for its own political interests. During the Cold War in which Thailand sided with the United States, the communist threats dominated the narrative of national security (Rolls 1994, 94). The controlled narrative has legitimized the state's overwhelming attention to national security, rather than the security of the people. Accordingly, this has significantly influenced the state's solutions for political and social conflicts, especially in the case of the Deep South

in which the Muslim minority has been a target of ethnic prejudices. In this article, I seek to answer some questions to provide the sociology of knowledge on peace and conflicts pertaining to Thailand. First, this article examines the origins of peace and conflict studies in Thailand to determine critical junctures that led to the surge of study in this field. Second, it explores the trajectory of peace and conflict studies in Thailand in conjunction with socio-political transitions in the country. Third, it discusses the disciplinary nature of peace and conflict studies in Thailand as well as the disconnect between the Thai focus on local conflict and insecurity issues and Western studies' approach to conflict and security. Finally, it addresses challenges of and prospects for peace and conflict studies, including in the context of the current period in which the monarchy has entered the realm of political conflict. Discussions about the monarchy are strictly prohibited. It is protected under the *lèse-majesté* law. *Lèse-majesté*, or the crime of injury to royalty, is defined by Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, which states that defamatory, insulting, or threatening comments about the king, queen, and regent are punishable by three to 15 years in prison. A critical study of the monarchy as the source of political conflict is therefore considered off-limits (Ferrara 2015, 9).

This article argues that the domain of peace and conflict studies has continued to be defined by the Thai state according to the official narrative of national security. This official narrative has, in turn, influenced both university peace studies curricula and the publications offered at universities. The state's self-denial of local grievances—be they those of the Muslim minorities in the southernmost provinces of Thailand, or the pro-democracy movements fighting to overcome despotic institutions—has served to shape the scope and content of peace and conflict studies, if not to censure them altogether should they deal with issues deemed too destabilizing to the state's power (such as the sovereignty or the institution of monarchy). But occasionally, this official narrative has been challenged by some segments of the society, as reflected in a 2016 survey (see details in this article) of university students that shows their ambivalent attitude toward the government in the management of existing problems in the Deep South. Also notable are many of the academic and non-academic institutions cited in this article that critically challenge the state-centric perspective and advocate human security in their curricula and/or activities. Aside from certain confinements within peace and conflict studies, the available courses in peace and conflicts in Thailand are, to an extent, region-oriented. While these studies offer numerous benefits because they delve into local issues affecting communities, they have the tendency of isolating those issues from the rest of the country and the world.

The Origin

The idea behind the setting up of peace and conflict studies was first formed in

the 1970s at the height of the Cold War. While the Cold War gripped nations of the world with terror, it provided Thailand with the legitimacy of despotic leaders who deemed communism to be a threat to national security and used it to antagonize their political opponents through different forms of violence. While it is true that communists in Thailand's neighboring countries—Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—were real and present dangers, there were countless victims inside Thailand who died in the name of communists and communist sympathizers, as seen in the 1976 massacre at Thammasat University in which students protesting the dictatorship were accused of being communists. For a long while, there had been no investigation into the atrocity and information had remained limited, and thus the truth was unknown. Nor had there been any collective coming-to-terms with what happened or who was/were responsible; Thai society refused to confront this dark episode in its history. In recent years however, attempts have been made in the Thai academic community to investigate the massacre. For example, Thongchai Winichakul, a Thai historian and a survivor of the massacre, examined state violence against the people using the 1976 massacre as his case study. His 2020 book, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok*, offers a new approach and initiates a research trend of re-interpreting the state's brutality by highlighting the shifting political conditions and context of the time, the influence of Buddhism, the royal-nationalist narrative of history, and the role played by the monarchy as moral authority and arbiter of justice. Examination of these factors unravels the Thai state's high degree of manipulation involved in controlling the discourse of peace and conflicts and specifically in producing a collective false memory of the massacre—that it never took place (*ibid.*, 8-9).

Accordingly, at the time of the Cold War, peace and conflict studies tended to focus on threats to the Thai state, rather than state violence. A few actors were identified as threats to the Thai security. While communists were declared to be enemies of the Thai nation, the Muslim minority in the southernmost provinces (Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat) were perceived as a serious menace to the nation's territorial integrity. Communists and the conflicts in the three southernmost provinces both dictated the national security narrative.

The Pattani kingdom was once a protectorate entity of Siam (Thailand's former name) and was broken up by the power of colonialism. At the beginning of the 20th Century, Siam and Britain signed an agreement that divided the Pattani kingdom into two parts—one was merged with the Muslim state of Malaya and the other was merged with the Buddhist kingdom (Siam) and put under Bangkok rule (Davisakd 2008, 78). The disintegration of the Pattani kingdom instigated protracted conflict between the Muslim community and the Thai Buddhist state. In recent times, a serious blow to the peace effort in the troubled region occurred in 2004 when violence was used against Islamic militants as well as the general populace. In April 2004, thirty-two gunmen took shelter

in the Krue Se Mosque in Pattani. Previously, more than one hundred Islamic militants carried out attacks on ten police outposts across Pattani, Yala, and Songkla provinces. After a standoff lasting several hours, soldiers attacked and killed all thirty-two gunmen. In October the same year, another tragedy took place. Around 1,500 people demonstrated in front of a police station in Tak Bai (a district in Narathiwat province), calling for the police to release their detained friends. Many demonstrators were arrested and transported to an army camp in Pattani. They were handcuffed and stacked atop one another in trucks. Five hours later, when the trucks arrived at the camp, seventy-eight detainees had died from suffocation and organ collapse. The two incidents—Krue Se and Tak Bai—effectively renewed a profound mistrust between the Muslim community and the Thai state (McCargo 2007, 4-5). The failure to assimilate the Muslim minority with the Buddhist majority represent both the root cause of the unending ethnic/religious conflicts in the Deep South as well as a factor that has escalated the violence in the area. At this early stage of peace and conflicts studies, however, the focus was not on the failure of the policy of the state but was instead on the violence, the insurgency, and the separatist movement to justify the state's hard-hitting approach. In the eyes of the Thai state, the Muslim separatists were (and continue to be) seen as "perpetual threats" (Thanet 2007, 4).

Because of the state's control of the national security narrative, the definition of peace is inevitably manipulated and can be highly politicized. Peace in Thai is *santiphap*—a term constructed of two words: *santi* (peace) and *saphap* (state or condition). In other words, *santiphap* is translated as the state or condition of peace. For the Thai state, peace is defined in relation to national security. The Thai National Security Council defines peace as conditional to three factors: security of the monarchy, national unity, and prevention of conflict in the Deep South (Office of the National Security Council 2019, 13). The academic community in Thailand defines peace more broadly as consequential to the absence of political conflicts (Chaiwat 1990, 117-22), but continued to follow the state's direction. Even in the aftermath of the massacre at Thammasat University, little attention was paid to violence committed by the state against its own people. Certainly, a perspective from the victims of the state's violence was available but scant (works on this topic include those of Karin Zackari [English], Tyrell Haberkorn [English, Thai], and Boonlert Visetpreecha [Thai]).

Peace and conflict studies were first established in Thailand in the 1980s. Striving to promote research on the conflict in the Deep South, Chulalongkorn University offered a "general knowledge course" in 1985 that incorporated a topic on "humans and peace." In 1989, Sukhothaimathirath University listed peace studies as one of the elective courses, and by 1993, Chulalongkorn's Faculty of Education had established its own peace studies center. Subsequently, peace and conflict studies began attracting more students, prompting the proliferation of research units in various universities, from Khon Kaen University, Mahidol

University to Prince of Songkla University (Tassanee 2007; Poonyarat 2016). This first phase of peace and conflict studies, while embracing the looming end of the Cold War, continued to concentrate chiefly on the violence in the southernmost provinces of Thailand.

The second phase started in the late 1990s, the time in which democratization was made possible. The 1990s in Thailand were tumultuous times. In 1991, the military staged a coup overthrowing the Chatichai Choonhavan government. A year later, when the coup leader, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, appointed himself as prime minister, protests erupted. He ordered a deadly crackdown on pro-democracy forces, resulting in fifty-two people killed, 175 disappeared, and 700 injured. The deadly crackdown is known as the Black May incident. Suffering from the public's fury and resentment, the military retreated to the barracks, enabling democratization (Anusorn 2019, 59). The peak was the proclamation of the 1997 constitution, dubbed the most democratic charter Thailand had ever seen.

Democratization allowed the scope of peace and conflict studies to expand beyond research on political violence in the Deep South. In an interview, Mark Tamthai of the Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace at Thailand's Payap University explained that peace studies in Thai universities at that point in time was centered around critical social issues, such as the environment (the building of Pak Moon dam or the Yadana pipeline, for example) (author's interview with Mark Tamthai, associated faculty and founder of the Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace, Payap University, January 27, 2020). At the same time, there were attempts to approach the conflicts in the Deep South differently by highlighting the underlying socio-political factors, which represented a challenge to the state's narrative on security. Both the environmental issues and the conflicts in the Deep South shared one common theme: the failure of the government's development policy. This theme, in that moment, gained prominence in peace and conflict studies in Thailand (Somchai 2017). Accordingly, peace and conflict courses were designed to produce peaceful solutions to the conflicts by examining the ethnic and religious factors. Courses included seminars, lectures, debates, and simulations for students in a search of an end to the protracted conflicts. Peace and conflicts studies, however, was not confined to academia. In fact, several civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, particularly in the context of the violence in the Deep South, even before interventions from the academic community. Hence, peace and conflict studies in Thailand have combined the "direct peace education" from experiences of those in the CSOs/NGOs with the "structural peace education" that formed peace and conflicts studies in classrooms (Jäger 2014).

Fareeda Panjor and Yasmin Sattar (2021, 48-49) argue that in the early stage of peace and conflict studies concerning the Deep South, the focus was only on

the state's narrative of security; that is, the violence was instigated by insurgents in the three southernmost provinces, rather than the state's mismanagement of the situation. This influence of the state's narrative can be found in several publications, such as *National Unity and the Problems of the Three Provinces of Thailand* (Sahaphan Nisit Naksuksa Chaopaktai Haneg Prathet Thai 1974), "Thai Muslim" (Kachadpai 1976), and "The Administrative Policy of the Thai Government Towards Thai Muslims in the Southern Provinces 1932-1973" (Piyanat 1991). The difficulty in accessing the conflict area did not allow scholars to properly conduct fieldwork and, therefore, had to rely on the state's information about the local situation, which, reflecting the official narrative of security, assigned culpability to the insurgents. This limited research, however, did not mean that other aspects of the peace process were lacking. Knowledge of peacebuilding and non-violent solutions had already been cultivated in academia through scholarly conferences and publications. Subsequently, Thai universities introduced peace studies into their programs, as mentioned earlier. They also adjusted the program to include the religious beliefs of the areas—Buddhism, Christianity, Islam—thus highlighting the cultural element in the analysis (Tassanee 2007). The courses available at Thai universities were useful for spurring new ideas about peace and conflicts among students (Kasama 2015). Students were an important target group since they were vulnerable to violence and victimization. Positive thinking among this population group was consequently crucial for promoting sustainable peace in the Deep South. Since the major eruption of violence in the Deep South in 2004, the academic community in Thailand has encountered a new reality. Peace and conflict centers across different universities, including those outside the conflict zone, began to cooperate more among themselves and with other CSOs/NGOs, within the means of their own capacities and financial resources. Courses at the master's and doctoral levels underwent major overhauls, training more specialists in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Universities offered venues for people of different backgrounds to debate and express their views on culture, religion, and local history. They strove to groom specialists from the conflict zone.

Tracing the lineage of Thai peace and conflict studies demonstrates that it was born out of both the Cold War politics that regarded communists as a threat to national security and the prolonged conflicts in the nation's Deep South. The scope of studies was subsequently enlarged to integrate critical issues affecting democracy, made possible by Thailand's successful democratization in the late 1990s. In this period, development issues were prominent, which were related to the underdeveloped state of the southernmost provinces and the environmental crisis in the country. However, the narrative on security continued to be influenced by the Thai state with an emphasis on the legitimacy of the political regime, as evidenced in earlier publications and courses offered in the universities that seemed to concentrate on the consequences of the conflict rather than the cause of

it. As a result, in the post-Cold War period, while the conflicts in the Deep South continued to gain public attention, the trajectory of peace and conflict studies moved toward an unyielding focus on the devastating impacts of the insurgency, even terrorism, with little concern for the political and socio-economic factors that nurtured local grievances in the first place. This situation has changed little, even to today, as a new wave of political conflict is defining Thai politics (Pavin 2020, 11-13). In 2022, the focus of peace studies has remained on the conflict in the Deep South and the political conflict at the national level, but it is compromised by the state's vision of these conflicts. Meanwhile, the environmental issue has become less of a focal point among students and scholars in this field.

Trajectory of Peace and Conflict Studies

While ethnic conflicts aggravated the southernmost provinces following the resurrection of violence in 2004, Thai politics fell into deep turmoil. The political rise of Thaksin in 2001 threatened the old establishment, which consists of key institutions, including the monarchy, military, judiciary, and senior bureaucrats. Leading his party's platform with populist policies, Thaksin was able to win the hearts and minds of the supporters, mainly from the far-flung regions of Thailand. The powerful position of the old establishment in politics was thus contested by a populist leader who propagated social welfare to attract poor constituents. To rid Thaksin from politics, a troop of royalists, clad in yellow (yellow is the color of Monday which is the birthday of King Bhumibol Adulyadej), took to the streets calling for his resignation. The protests, lasting many months, instigated the military to stage a coup in 2006. But removing Thaksin in this way escalated the already tense political situation. Poor constituents felt that their voting right had been taken away. What followed was relentless political conflict between the two sides of the Thai political divide, yellow versus red (the latter was crudely identified as supporters of Thaksin).

From 2006, Thaksin's proxies continued to dominate electoral politics, but these governments were short-lived, including that of his sister, Yingluck, who was also toppled in 2014. Also during this period, Thailand suffered one of the worst violent confrontations in its modern history. In 2010, the royalist government of Abhisit Vejjajiva violently cracked down on red-shirt protesters, killing almost 100 and injuring more than 2,500 people. Protestors had been calling for fresh elections as Abhisit's assumption of power had only been possible because of the dissolution of the pro-Thaksin's ruling party. Abhisit, together with the army, used force to disperse the protesters. Until today, no one has been brought to justice for the killing of red-shirt protestors (Montesano 2012, 4-5). The lingering pain caused to the red shirts redefined peace and conflict studies in Thailand as academics called for the state to be held responsible for the use

of violence. It is therefore evident here that there is an inexorable connection between socio-political changes and the trajectory of peace and conflict studies. The emergence of Thaksin and the red shirts has shifted Thailand's politics. As Thaksin challenged the political elites—those who have long-held control over the narrative of security—he opened a space for a new interpretation of peace and conflicts in the society.

It is also useful to investigate external sources of influence that have affected the course of the democratic movement in Thailand, particularly the role of China. China is known to have exported autocratic norms to its neighbors (Bukh 2021; Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2014). In the Thai case, China has become not just a critical economic partner, but also a potential model of governance. Thailand's embrace of China's model of governance is a consequence of both the protective pact among Thai elites and China's influence as an authoritarian centre of gravity (Raymond 2019, 341-42). At the time of writing, Thai politics have dominated by non-elective institutions, and leaders continue to search for political recognition of its regime from powers of the day. China stands ready to endorse the Thai regime at the expense of the democratic movement in Thailand. This situation has prolonged both the power of the regime as well as the political crisis, which has impacted peace inside the country.

As already stressed, peace and conflict studies in the past, which centered around political and social (ethnic) conflicts were an amalgam of classroom courses and the practice of CSOs/NGOs. Thus, conflict resolution and peacebuilding tended to be skills-based and aimed for win-win results. In reality, the win-win results were difficult to achieve, particularly if the security-focused narrative of the state remained unchanged. According to Tamthai (author's interview with Mark Tamthai, associated faculty and founder of IRCP, Payap University, January 27, 2020), peace and conflict studies has slowly taken a turn from a skills-based approach to the realization that the nature of the types of conflict in Thailand—both the violence in the Deep South and the political polarization—requires a conflict transformation approach with in-depth research into the root causes. But Tamthai insisted, "I say 'slowly' but perhaps more accurate to say, 'very slowly,' as some still hope to deal with conflicts without society having to change." It has been a slow process because Thai authorities have upheld the state's position in perceiving both the conflicts in the Deep South and the political polarization as "extrinsic" to the Thai nation. This means that, whereas the Thai state has assigned culpability to the Muslims in the Deep South, Thaksin and the red shirts have been depicted as threats to Thai stability (and, at present, the anti-monarchists as a menace to the monarchy). Such positioning has influenced the way in which peace and conflict studies has been developed. Therefore, to move away from this biased position and to find an approach that seriously explores the root causes, it is imperative that the Thai state comes to terms with its role in the conflicts.

To explicate the state's position vis-à-vis the conflicts in the Deep South and the political polarization, it is essential to discuss the state's perception of threats. It is this perception of the state that has dictated narratives about security and conflicts in Thailand. The political regimes in Thailand often equate themselves with the state. For the military regime, creating an atmosphere of insecurity legitimizes its political role (Puangthong 2021, 11-12). Just as wars give legitimacy to the existence of an army, insecurity similarly justifies the military's presence in politics. Enemies are created to provide a context of the nation under threat, even when, in fact, what is under threat is the regime itself (Pavin 2011, 1021). Also, even when Thailand is governed by democratic regime, the perception of threats remains pivotal in formulating and executing an assertive policy that demands total public support. The elected government of Thaksin showed that Bangkok's policy toward the Muslim community in the Deep South was meant to highlight the violence committed by the insurgents, rather than to address critical issues that led to the insurgency in the first place (McCargo 2015). Meanwhile, in the context of political polarization, the state's approach to the opposition is similar to their approach to Muslims in the Deep South. Since the coup of 2006, the political fault line has continued to be drawn on the monarchy. For decades, the military has helped redefine the position of the monarchy as the most important institution of Thailand. The monarchy has also been assigned as one of the most sacred national identities, in need of being safeguarded by the military (Napisa and Chambers 2017). The Cold War enabled the military's mission of defending the monarchy, apparently from the threat of communism. National security was then tied to the security of the monarchy. Protecting the monarchy became equated with protecting national security. The military thus claimed its right to remain in politics by defining the those critical of the regime as enemies of the monarchy. This standpoint forced the opposition to become anti-monarchists, which justified the state's harsh policy, which includes the use of lèse-majesté law, and in this digital age, the Computer Crime Act, to control criticism against the monarchy and the regime that supports it on the Internet (Harding and Leyland 2011, 244).

From this perspective, the Thai state has a tendency of employing conflicts as a legitimizing device for its own stability (Panuwat 2017). The three southernmost provinces have continued to be detached from the politics in Bangkok. It has also been known that successive governments dispatched incompetent officers to work in the area, seemingly as punitive measures against them. Meanwhile, the Muslim minority has been branded as "trouble" particularly by some segments of the Buddhist community. Also, information about the Deep South has been controlled by the state, affecting research on peace and conflicts in the area. Similarly, restrictions on the discussion of the monarchy have been sternly upheld. The monarchy is today a symbol of political divisiveness, and indeed the source of conflict and violence in politics. So far, any critical discussion of the

monarchy is prohibited. Academics wishing to conduct research on this subject must do so “at their own risk.”¹ Academics could be threatened with jail terms should they write critically about the monarchy (Streckfuss 2010). Similarly, activists and lawyers who raise their voice on this very issue could also be harassed by the state. Those residing inside Thailand are compelled to either self-censor or not speak about the monarchy at all. Those residing outside Thailand may be able to speak more freely on the subject but are at risk of being banned from returning to Thailand. It is also possible that to carry out research on peace and conflicts in Thailand, the monarchy must be left out. A professor from the Faculty of Political Science at Ubonratchathani University (author’s interview, Ubonratchathani University, March 5, 2022) informed me that, to apply for a research grant, one must ensure that the study does not involve any discussion of the monarchy in a critical manner. On the other hand, research that promotes the royal institution are likely to be financially supported by the state (see Chulalongkorn University, “Center for Peace and Conflict Studies,” n.d.). In the end, as Tamthai reiterated, an effort to go to the root causes of the conflicts, which will inevitably require the societal change, remains arduous (author’s interview with Mark Tamthai, associated faculty and founder of the Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace, Payap University, January 27, 2020).

Localization of Peace and Conflict Studies

There exists a gap between local peace and conflict studies and this field of study in the West. In this case, the narrative of security being influenced by the Thai state suggests some incongruities between Thailand’s peace and conflict studies and that of the liberal Western world. The Thai state seems to have attempted to make the local security situation so “exceptional” that it must be exempted from being measured up against the Western standard, both in terms of managing and resolving the conflicts (Bodetti 2017). For the Southern conflict, the emphasis has been on the localization of the problem by explaining it through a narrow ethno-nationalist struggle, even though the resurgence of the conflict coincided with the rise of global terrorism. This is not to conclude, however, that global terrorism played a role in the Islamic insurgency in Thailand. Rather, understanding the global trend could widen an understanding of local problems. It is true that local and global perspectives on peace and conflicts can be both complementary and conflicting. Either way, international scholarship can be helpful and valuable, at least from the viewpoint of sharing best practices in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Tamthai opines that the linkage to peace studies in the West is gradually moving from a “follow that path” approach toward a more “taking certain lessons from” approach. Though there are still places that see peace studies as a field with

universal truths, and so it must be learned from experts, the poor track record of such an approach has led to the realization that, just as all conflicts are “local,” all attempts to deal with such conflicts are “local” as well. As it is known, Western peace education often promotes awareness of issues, drawing comparisons and learning from experiences of other countries, conducting training programs in the skills of conflict resolution, civic or citizenship education, and introducing curricula on peace and conflicts at schools and universities (Askandar 2003). Students can read literature from other periods and other parts of the world and apply it to their own situation (Powers 2006). Ian Harris asserts that peace education is an equation: peace education = providing knowledge about problems of violence + strategies for peace (Harris and Morrison 2014). In Thailand, however, peace and conflict studies reflects local problems that require local knowledge and solutions. While this approach may be seen as tailor-made and well-suited to the local reality, the downside is the lack of a global perspective. This lack of global perspective can create an echo chamber, engineering inward-looking solutions, thus missing an opportunity to learn best practices from elsewhere. The nature of education in the southern border provinces is very different from that of other parts of Thailand (Kumpee 2013). Without a global perspective, the ethnic conflict in the Deep South is frequently interpreted against the backdrop of the Thai Buddhist society, creating a supposedly exceptional case that needs an exceptional solution. This exceptionalism, however, is frequently exploited by the state as it implements certain policies that fail to follow international norms and practices.

The following section demonstrates the extent to which curricula and courses offered by the Thai universities mentioned in this article are shaped or influenced by the official narrative of security. Additionally, some have upheld a conservative position, as part of maintaining their reputations as established institutions. The case of Chulalongkorn University, the country’s oldest university founded by King Vajiravudh in 1899, shows that allying with the state is a part of confirming its conservative identity. Its endorsement of the military coup in 2014 reaffirmed the university’s pro-state position (Parpart 2021). Consequently, this type of educational establishments tends to adopt the official narrative in their design of courses and publications in the peace and conflict studies. It is essential to mention that most of these institutions belong to the state, hence depend on a national budget to run various programs within the campuses.

Chulalongkorn University

The old peace and conflict studies center at Chulalongkorn University was replaced by four new research units. Established in 2005, one year after the flare-up of the southern conflict, the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies at Chulalongkorn University was an initiative to respond to the urgent need for policies on building harmony in the Deep South (Chulalongkorn University,

“Center for Peace and Conflict Studies,” n.d.). The second unit is at the Faculty of Political Science, which offers a Master of Arts in international development studies. This master’s program has an elective course on conflict resolution, which stresses local conflicts, the observation of the use of violence in conflicts, and the exploration of various possibilities of non-violent approaches to conflict resolution (including mediation, negotiation, and mechanisms in democratic decision-making processes) (Chulalongkorn University, “Master of Arts,” n.d.). The Rotary Peace Fellowship Program represents the third unit at Chulalongkorn University. The Rotary Peace Professional Development Certificate program in Peace and Development is a twelve-month interdisciplinary fellowship program that balances theoretical, practical learning, and project-based contribution with the emphasis on building “positive social systems” through the concept of “positive peace building” (Chulalongkorn University, “The Fellowship,” n.d.). The fourth unit is located within a program called “Focus on the Global South,” with a combination of the study of democracy and other topics such as criminalization of dissent and violence against promoters of peace, human rights, and justice (Chulalongkorn University, “Revisiting Deglobalisation” n.d.).

Mahidol University

The Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP) at Mahidol University is the outcome of a merger between the Center for Human Rights Studies and Social Development (CHRSD) and the Research Centre for Peacebuilding (RCP). The new institution combines the experience and perspective of both centers. The IHRP is interdisciplinary and conducts research on peace, conflict, justice, and human rights. The CHRSD was established in 1998, and for more than ten years, it served as an academic institution specializing in human rights and providing postgraduate education as well as training programs to students, human rights workers, human rights defenders, members of civil society organizations, and government officials. The Master of Arts in Human Rights program started by the CHRSD was the longest running graduate degree program in human rights in Asia. As for the RCP, it was founded in November 2004 as a research center with the impetus to be part of the peaceful solution to conflicts in Thailand, especially in the Deep South (Mahidol University, n.d.). Vachararutai Boontinand, Director of the IHRP, informed me that the peace part of the program is devoted to theories of peace and conflict and violence (author’s interview with Vachararutai Boontinand, Director of the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, January 25-February 2, 2022). It is also devoted to the concepts of subculture, identity, and interest-groups in the context of the Deep South. State-led counter-violence methods are discussed in the program, but there is a stronger focus on human rights in the curriculum since the program covers both peace and human rights. There are also course sections that discuss local political conflicts, both at the master’s level and for an elective course at the bachelor’s level.

Prince of Songkla University

There are two peace centers at the Prince of Songkla University. First, the Peace Studies for Southern Development Research Unit at the Prince of Songkla University was set up as a research hub on conflicts in the Deep South. Its primary role is to provide education at both undergraduate and graduate levels to respond to the urgency for resolving the conflicts. Second, the Institute for Peace Studies is an academic institute dedicated to the training of specialists in peaceful conflict resolution, as well as in engendering a mutual understanding to bring peace specifically to the southern region, leading to the need for constant research and the development of activities that enhance academic skills. Currently, the Institute for Peace Studies is planning to establish the College of Interdisciplinary Peace Studies in response to current and future conflicts of all kinds in society (Engvall et al. 2020; Prince of Songkla University, n.d.). However, like other universities, Prince of Songkla University is not free from state intervention. In February 2021, I was invited by the Faculty of Economics to give an online lecture on a topic related to international relations. After the delivery of my lecture, Don Pramudwinai, Deputy Prime Minister, ordered an inquiry into the invitation, citing that it was inappropriate to invite “a person who is hostile towards the nation, the monarchy and national security to lay those problems on young people” (Mongkol 2021).

Other Institutions

At Khon Kaen University, the Institute for Dispute Resolution (IDR) was set up with the support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), exemplifying the interaction between indigenous local scholarship with international scholarship, through the exchange of knowledge between local and foreign scholars (Asia Research News, n.d.). The IDR serves as a center for peace studies devoted to the understanding of different types of local conflicts, such as land use, resource and environmental mismanagement, failing healthcare (Pirie 1998, 531-32). CIDA was able to provide specific knowledge on, for example, environmental management and healthcare to its counterpart at IDR. But this type of cooperation has remained limited due to its contractual nature and insufficient funds.

The Peace Resource Collaborative (PRC) was established in 2014, as a joint initiative of eight academic institutions to provide knowledge, expertise, and skills to help transform the conflict in the Deep South. The collaboration of the eight institutions commenced in 2011 with the creation of the Insider Peacebuilders’ Platform (IPP), a diverse network of individuals from within the region as well as from other parts of Thailand, for exploring and sharing ideas around the peaceful settlement of the conflict. In 2017, the IPP network created a governance structure of its own through the annual election of an IPP committee. In the same year, the PRC started to broaden its scope of work beyond the Deep South, in recognition

of the fact that society, in general, would benefit from a better understanding of ways to transform actual or potentially violent conflicts. The PRC has two offices, one in the Faculty of Political Science at Prince of Songkla University (Pattani Campus) and also one in the Faculty of Political Science of Chulalongkorn University. The PRC is currently funded by international organizations and embassies interested in peace building, highlighting the cross-border cooperation that encourages the exchange of local and international scholarship (Peace Resource Collaborative n.d.). Without the state's involvement, there is a considerable degree of freedom in the conduct of peace and conflict studies which does not necessarily echo the official narrative of security.

There are also other institutions dedicated to peace and conflict studies, namely Siam University (n.d.), the International Institute of Peace and Development Studies, the Asian Resource Foundation Pattani, Cross Cultural Foundation, Deep South Watch, Duay Jai (Hearty Support) Group, Justice for Peace Foundation, Muslim Attorney Council, Pattani Forum, People's College, People's Empowerment Foundation, Thailand Peace Network Foundation, the Office of Peace and Governance at King Prajadhipok Institute, Universal Peace Federation, the Peace Information Center (established in 1988), the Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace at Payap University (which offers a PhD in peacebuilding), and the School of Social Innovation at Maw Fah Luang University (which offers both undergraduate and master's level courses in peace and conflict). It is important to note that several, if not the majority, of courses, training, and publications on the subject of Thailand's southern conflict and/or political polarization are organized or produced by institutions and/or scholars of other disciplines.

From the discussion above, the major characteristics of these institutions are noticeable. First, because the conflict in the Deep South has long-occupied the national agenda, most existing institutions were compelled to support research in the affected southernmost provinces as part of their efforts to justify the state's financial support (Phansasiri 2016). It is almost impossible to imagine a peace center without research on the Deep South. Second, in closely examining the curricula of these institutions, it becomes evident that while several research approaches are used in the analysis of the conflict in the Deep South, little attention is paid to the human aspect of the conflict (Surangrut and Nithi 2018, 227). Conflicts in the Deep South continue to be analyzed through the state-led security lens. As the research on peace and conflicts are motivated by the idea of national security, other relatively new concepts (like human security) have failed to gain serious attention from existing research centers. Human security is categorized as non-traditional security—an area of study considered in Thailand as new, unfamiliar, and even inaccessible, when compared to the traditional security. Third, a global perspective has remained important but has failed to penetrate the localization of peace and conflict studies in Thailand (Slocum-Bradley 2008, 94). The program at Khon Kaen University may have served

as an example of the local-global linkage, but overall, the general lack of an international perspective presents a lost opportunity for further joint studies and more exchanges of lessons and expertise.

It is imperative to underscore that given different aspects of peace and conflict studies in Thailand, from the insurgency in the Deep South, today's political conflict, and other issues in the locality, it can be said that another key characteristic of peace and conflict studies in Thailand is its multidisciplinary nature. As the main concentration has been on the violence in the South, peace and conflict studies is supplemented by an exploration into other studies of anthropology, ethnography, history, as well as law. Similarly, regarding the Thai political crisis, brought about by the clash between the political elites and the Thaksin faction, peace and conflict studies is complemented by other studies in the social sciences, including political science and sociology. In the two cases, these are a part of area studies with a specific focus on Thailand. The multidisciplinary nature of Thai peace and conflict studies emphasizes the need for a deeper cooperation between local and international scholarships.

Challenges and Prospects

There remain challenges in further promoting peace and conflict studies in Thailand. First, as Tamthai suggested, since going to the root causes of the conflicts is of utmost importance, a serious, systematic learning process must be encouraged. Tamthai explained, "We do not know enough about ourselves, about the different sacred values that are clashing, about potential cultural resources that might help, or might hinder, the search for a better way to live together" (author's interview with Mark Tamthai, associated faculty and founder of the Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace, Payap University, January 27, 2020). On this point, education is the first step to develop human resources. In 2016, a survey was conducted among twenty-four students in the Peace Program at Songkla University by a group of scholars from Hatyai University (Thailand) and the School of Government at Universiti Utara Malaysia. There were three research questions: (1) What are the causes of problems (in the Deep South)? (2) What are the obstacles of the solution to the problems? (3) How to alleviate the conflict? The survey results show that while most students misunderstood the peace process and conflict resolution (primarily because of the insufficient learning, communication, and discussion about the problem among themselves and with the state authorities), some agreed with the secession situation between the state and the separatists. This latter group also agreed that the Muslims aggravated people inside the conflict area to resist the authorities, through the historical distortion (Kumpee et al. 2016, 3). The results undoubtedly reflect the degree to which the state has continued to dominate public opinion regarding peace and

conflicts in the Deep South. Tamthai suggested that students need to develop a self-doubt approach as a way to move forward toward sustainable peace. He said, “The ‘I am completely right (moral) and you are completely wrong (immoral)’ stance, though long standing in the world, is a change stopper” (author’s interview with Mark Tamthai, associated faculty and founder of the Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace, Payap University, January 27, 2020). Given that the ethnic conflict in the Deep South has involved cultural sensitivities, the self-doubt approach could help provide a needed dialogue between both sides of the conflict.

Second, peace and conflict studies must be independent from the state’s narrative of security. This narrative has been state-centric to justify the state’s iron-fist policy and to demand public support for official policies. The narrative also dominates analyses of threats to security: threats are externalized which removes the state from any involvement or responsibility. Hence, the Deep South has typically been explained away as a conflict engendered by the Muslim others. Similarly, the insecurity generated by political divisiveness has been described as inflicted by the enemy of the royal institution. The findings of the above survey also reveal that the students have a negative perception of their government. They blamed the government for the lack of justice in the administration of the southernmost provinces, for the insufficient provision of education, for ignoring the social and cultural aspects of the problem, and for forcedly implementing policy for the Deep South from Bangkok even when it was unsuitable and out of place. These findings confirm that young students today are expressing critical views about the state and that the official narrative is being challenged. To sustain this critical trend among young students, the promotion of a systemic learning process must be encouraged. Importantly, the state’s narrative regarding security needs to adjust to the changing political and social environment.

Third, greater attention must be paid to the human aspect of security. In part, this represents an endeavor to shift the narrative of security away from that of the state to redefine peace and conflict based on the political and socio-cultural factors that affect the people, rather than the state. Human security as a field of study has been sidelined by the overwhelming concentration on the security of the nation-state. The making of the narrative of security and threats in Thailand is arbitrary because it has involved shaping and reshaping the narrative according to the changing power interests of Thai political leaders. Scholars explain this narrative construction through the actor-centric security paradigm. In this paradigm, security is an essential component of absolute sovereignty and the cornerstone of national interest, thus placing the security of the nation-state at the center of analysis. From this viewpoint, the state is forever preoccupied with the need to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity from foreign and domestic enemies at the same time as it defends itself from all kinds of threats to its interests. Externally, wars are unavoidable. Internally, political stability and social order is imperative. The priority is to ensure security with the military

being assigned a primary role in the safeguarding of the nation-state. Under these circumstances of the actor-centric paradigm, peace is untenable.

In the Thai case, several factors are responsible for the existence of state-centric security. From the unending ethnic insurgency in the Deep South to the relentless political conflicts of the past two decades, the security condition was used by the state to ensure its authority as the most important institution capable of defending the country. This explains why the military rule in Thailand has endured, effectively because the army claims to protect national security; yet, exactly what they protect and have protected remains obscured (the last military coup took place in 2014, after which the coup leader, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, appointed himself as prime minister and remains in place after a disputed election in 2019). Arguably, the international community has adopted three narratives of “security.” These are: national security, global security, and human security. Whereas the first two narratives have gained much attention from governments primarily because the interests involved align with those of the state, the last has more often been ignored because it is regarded as compromising state interests. This state-centric mindset has similarly dominated Thailand, which has been at the expense of the security of the Thai people—promotion of human rights and support for human security have been compromised. The fact that the atrocious human security situation persists today in the Deep South as well as among pro-democracy activists in Thailand are testaments to the arbitrary definitions of security and threats to the state.

Finally, the nature of peace and conflict studies in Thailand has remained largely localized. While there are benefits in the localization of peace and conflict studies, as this article has suggested, widening the horizons of the field is equally beneficial in terms of learning best practices from other societies with different political backgrounds. Networks among peace centers and cooperation between universities and with CSOs/NGOs in their efforts to develop peace studies have been on-going. For instance, there are several collaborative networks between public and private universities in six universities, namely Yala Islamic University, Prince of Songkla University (Pattani Campus and Hatyai Campus), Hatyai University, and Thaksin University (Songkla Campus) under Southern Thailand Universities for Peace (STUfPeace). In March 2007, the Research and Education for Peace, University Sains Malaysia and the Japan International Cooperation Agency organized a youth-oriented program “Dreamkeepers.” The program was intended to promote the “peace dream” by creating and supporting the dreamkeepers (youths of southern Thailand). As a result of this Dreamkeepers Program, participants formed the network they called the Southern Thailand Peace Network (STPN) and opened it for other institutes to participate. STPN realized that its vision needed to include all universities in southern Thailand. Therefore, members changed their name from STPN to the Southern Thailand Universities for Peace, or STUfPeace. Apart from initiating activities together,

members of STUfPeace have sought to find ways to enhance peacebuilding and create a culture of peace through education. STUfPeace members have encouraged students to engage in peace activities inside and outside the university. They promote peace education among university students and youth groups in southern Thailand (Kumpee 2013).

The usefulness of this collaboration is not only for the exchange of best practices, or the joint academic activities that promote harmony within the educational institutions, but also for building solidarity in pushing for a new narrative of peace and conflicts, different from the one upheld by the state. This collaboration will help break down structural tensions in education while rupturing unequal power relations and hegemonies that reproduce systems of domination and social exclusion at the macro-level (Pherali 2021). The main objective for this collaboration is to serve as a tool for grassroots political socialization, a basis for sustainable peace. This collaboration should also extend outside Thailand's own regions to include greater cooperation with other institutions in Southeast Asia and beyond. While countries in the region may encounter different kinds of conflicts and hence implement different policies for achieving peace, the transnational cooperation among academic institutions will serve as a symbol of unanimity in steering their own country away from state-manipulated narratives of security and conflicts.

Conclusion

Peace and conflict studies in Thailand has concentrated on the ethnic conflict in the Deep South and political upheaval that began almost two decades ago. This article aimed to answer four questions about the origin of peace and conflict studies in the country, the trajectory of the field in relation to socio-political transitions in Thailand, the disciplinary nature of these studies, and the challenges and prospects for the field. Peace and conflict studies is traced back to the Cold War period in which threats to the nation came to define the narrative of security. The first phase of peace and conflict studies commenced in the 1980s, with a specific focus on the violence in the three southernmost provinces. The second phase arrived in tandem with the success of democratization in the late 1990s, and the focus expanded to cover other critical social issues, such as environmental degradation. However, the Thai concern over the environment proved to be short lived. In the new millennium, with the advent of Thaksin as prime minister, political conflict started to fester because of the growing power of his government, which was perceived to be a menace to the position of the traditional elites. The coup in 2006 toppled Thaksin, but the crisis refused to subside. Instead, another kind of crisis grew and this time it deeply polarized the society—the royalists on one side and the pro-democracy force on the other. The

political crisis has not ended, up to the writing of this article, and it now runs parallel to the ethnic conflict in the Deep South.

Peace and conflict studies has remained influenced by the official narrative of security, as noticeable in the various pro-state courses and publications. Instead of delving into the root causes of the existing conflicts, those involving in peace and conflict studies seek to develop a methodology for understanding the conflicts and to devise a solution that does not require a seismic shift of the society. The state's domination of the narrative of security provides an answer to why peace and conflict studies has been slow to respond to the need for a new interpretation of security and society. This article underlines that the state-controlled narrative on security stands in stark contrast with another narrative on human security, which has remained fully unexplored in Thailand. Attention must be paid to the human aspect of security to find the right balance within peace and conflict studies, which has long been influenced by the state. Finally, the localization of peace and conflict studies may be useful for an in-depth understanding of local conflicts, but a greater collaboration with other academic institutions and CSOs/NGOs within the country and beyond the Thai border is imperative to expanding perspectives on peace and conflicts. Thailand can learn considerably from the security situations in the region and the world and adopt best practices by adapting them to the Thai cases. The side benefit is to weave networks and solidarity with those involved in this area of studies so that together they can help shift the narrative on security to be more people-centric and less state-controlled.

Notes

1. I have written a number of books and articles about the problems with the monarchy (including Pavin Chachavalpongpun, forthcoming; 2022a; 2022b). Books on this subject can also be found in, for example, Puangchon Unchanam's (2020) book, *Royal Capitalism*, which has been published in both English (University of Wisconsin Press) and Thai (Fa Diew Kan Books). Recent books in Thai by Asa Khampha (2021) and Nattapoll Chaiching (2020) about the intersection of the monarchy and the state have also been published by Fa Diew Kan Books. Sommut Books is preparing to re-issue Chanida Chitbundit's (2007) book on royal projects and hegemony.

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