

Special Segment: Teaching Southeast Asia

Focus upon Three Southeast Asian Nations INDONESIA, MALAYSIA, AND THAILAND

By Linda Cuadra and Sara Van Fleet



Indonesia

Few nations claim the breadth and depth of ethnic groups, cultural practices, languages, and lifestyles as Indonesia. With over 250 million people scattered across over 7,000 islands, and 700 languages and dialects in use, Indonesia seems to defy the idea of nation or state.

Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims of any nation in the world, but not all Indonesians are Muslim. Most people living on Bali practice a special form of Hinduism. In the eastern part of the archipelago, some areas are home to concentrations of Catholics and Protestant Christians. Some groups, such as the *Toraja*

(Sulawesi) and the *Toba Batak* (Sumatra) continue to practice more animistic religions, sometimes alongside other world religions.

Islam takes a different form in Indonesia than it does in other parts of the world. It arrived in the islands after Hindu and Buddhist influences in the fourteenth century. In some parts of Indonesia, Islam was assimilated into local practices that combine several belief systems. In other parts, such as the Aceh Special District, Islamic practices relate more to those of Malaysia and the Middle East.

Indonesia's international business and trade trajectory has waxed and waned since Suharto left power in 1998. The current trends are toward internationalization and diversity, moving away from resource extraction and domestic and

offshore manufacturing toward the communications, services, and energy sectors. The country has a huge role to play in the international energy sector, having significant reserves of oil and natural gas. Indonesia is also blessed with about every type of renewable or alternative energy (wind, riverine, tidal, wave, geothermal, and biodiesel, to name the most feasible).



Malaysia

While Malaysia has many different ethnic groups, they are not as disparate as those of Indonesia. Malaysia is an unusual mix of three major groups: Malay (50.1 percent), Chinese (22.6 percent, sometimes called "Straits

MALAYSIA

Geography and Population

Area: 127,355 square miles; slightly larger than New Mexico

Population: 30 million (50.1 percent Malay, 22.6 percent Chinese, 11.8 percent indigenous, 6.7 percent Indian)

Government

Freedom House rating from "Freedom in the World 2015" (ranking of political rights and civil liberties in 195 countries): Partly Free

Type: Constitutional Monarchy

Chief of State: King Tuanku Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (since April 11, 2012)

Head of Government: Prime Minister Mohamed Najib bin Abdul Najib Razak (since April 3, 2009)

Elections: Kings elected by hereditary rulers, chosen from among their ranks (serving five-year terms); prime minister chosen by the leader in the House of Representatives that has the majority support of the members of the House

Legislative Branch: Bicameral parliament, consisting of the Senate (Dewan Negara, seventy seats; forty-four appointed by king, twenty-six elected by state legislatures, serving three-year terms, two-term limit) and House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat, 222 seats, elected in the 222 constituencies, serving up to five-year terms)

Judicial Highest Courts: Federal Court (chief justice and four judges)

Judges: Appointed by monarch with advice from prime minister, serve until sixty-five

Economy

During the last three decades, Malaysia has successfully shifted its economy from exporting raw materials to one that includes manufacturing, services, and tourism.

GDP: \$746.8 billion

Per Capita Income: \$24,500

Unemployment Rate: 2.9 percent

Population Below Poverty Line: 3.8 percent

Inflation Rate: 3.1 percent

Agricultural Products: Palm oil, rubber, cocoa, rice, timber, pepper
Industries: Rubber processing/manufacturing, oil palm processing/manufacturing, petroleum and natural gas, electronics, logging

Society

Religion: 61.3 percent Muslim, 19.8 percent Buddhist, 9.2 percent Christian, 6.3 percent Hindu

Life Expectancy: 74.52 years

Literacy Rate: 93.1 percent

Major Contemporary Issues

Political and Economic Reforms: The Heritage Foundation's *2015 Index of Economic Freedom* lists Malaysia as "mostly free" noting improvements in freedom from corruption, business freedom, and trade freedom.

Freedom House's "Freedom in the World 2014" (complete 2015 data is not yet available as of press) tells a different story in terms of freedom in daily life. Malaysia is listed as "Partly Free." Malaysian Muslims are subject to shari'a law (many aspects of life are controlled by these laws), and some government oppression exists.

Trafficking: Malaysia is a destination country for labor and sex trafficking. They are listed as Tier 2 by the US Department of State, meaning that the country does not fully comply with the standards of the department's Trafficking Victims Protection Act but is making efforts to do so.

SOURCES

CIA. "The World Factbook: Malaysia." Last modified June 20, 2014. <http://tinyurl.com/7rqppq>.

Freedom House. "Freedom in the World 2015." Accessed February 11, 2015. <http://tinyurl.com/knwvzk6>.

—. "Malaysia, Freedom in the World 2014." Accessed January 26, 2015. <http://tinyurl.com/p3aqtmj>.

The Heritage Foundation. "2015 Index of Economic Freedom: Malaysia." Accessed April 27, 2015. <http://tinyurl.com/84rxrow>.

THAILAND

Geography and Population

Area: 198,116 square miles; slightly more than double the size of Wyoming
Population: 67 million

Government

Freedom House rating from “*Freedom in the World 2015*” (ranking of political rights and civil liberties in 195 countries): Not Free

Type: Constitutional Monarchy

Chief of State: King Phumiphon Adunyadet (since June 6, 1946)

Head of Government: Acting Prime Minister Niwattamrong Boonsongpaisan

Elections: Prime minister is elected from members of the House of Representatives and limited to two four-year terms

Legislative Branch: Bicameral National Assembly (Rathasapha) consisting of the Senate (Wuthisapha, 150 seats, serving six-year terms) and the House of Representatives (Sapha Phuthaen Ratsadon, 500 seats, serving four-year terms)

Judicial Highest Courts: Supreme Court of Justice (court president and six vice judges), Constitutional Court (court president and eight judges), and Supreme Administrative Court (varies, number is set by the Judicial Commission of the Administrative Courts)

Judges: Supreme Court judges chosen by the Judicial Commission of the Courts of Justice, approved by monarch, no term limit; Constitutional Court judges, three from Supreme Court, two from the Administrative Court, four chosen by Selective Committee for Judges of the Constitutional Court, confirmed by Senate, single nine-year terms; Supreme Administrative Court judges chosen by Judicial Commission of the Administrative Courts, appointed by monarch, no term limit

Economy

Due to a market economy, proinvestment policies, and large industrial and agricultural exports, Thailand’s economy has seen steady growth over the past decade.

GDP: \$990.1 billion

Per Capita Income: \$14,400

Unemployment Rate: 1.0 percent

Population Below Poverty Line: 13.2 percent

Inflation Rate: 2.1 percent

Agricultural Products: Rice, cassava, rubber, corn, sugarcane, coconuts, soybeans

Industries: Tourism, textiles, agricultural processing, tobacco, computers and parts, tin, tungsten

Society

Religion: 93.6 percent Buddhist, 4.9 percent Muslim, 1.2 percent Christian

Life Expectancy: Approximately 74 years

Literacy Rate: 93.5 percent

Major Contemporary Issues

Instability of Government: In May 2014, then-Prime Minister Yinglakh Chinnawat was removed from office, and a military coup d’état occurred shortly after by the Royal Thai Army. The constitution was suspended, and the Senate election results were declared invalid. As of January 20, 2015, a constitutional drafting committee (handpicked by the Thai military) is meeting and developing a new constitution.

Human Trafficking: Thailand is a source of both sex and labor trafficking and also a transit country for trafficking. Currently, Thailand is listed as Tier 2, which means the government does not fully meet the minimum standards for eradicating trafficking.

SOURCES

CIA. “The World Factbook: Thailand.” Last modified June 20, 2014. <http://tinyurl.com/2zeej6>.

Freedom House. “Freedom in the World 2015.” Accessed February 11, 2015. <http://tinyurl.com/knwvzk6>.

Kurlantzick, Josh. “Asia Unbound: Thailand’s Next Constitution Becomes Clearer.” Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed January 13, 2015. <http://tinyurl.com/nuoy33z>.

Chinese”), and Indians (6.7 percent). Today, another 10 percent of the population is referred to as “Orang Ulu” or “Orang Asli”—roughly translating to “original (indigenous) people.” The remaining percentage of the population are a mix of ethnic groups from around the world

Beginning in the sixteenth century, Chinese came either voluntarily or as conscripted workers to the Malay peninsula. When the British colonized Malaysia, people from the southern part of India were brought in to work in rubber and tea plantations. People from other parts of the world eventually settled along the peninsula (but rarely on Kalimantan, the Indonesian name for the island of Borneo, which is shared with Malaysia and Brunei), and this mix of people make up a small percentage of the country’s population today.

Malaysia’s people suffered especially harsh treatment under the World War II Japanese occupation. After the war, strife continued between guerilla Communist forces and those who just wanted to go back to the old ways of life. Malaysians refer to this time as “The Emergency.”

Even though virtually all citizens self-identify as Malaysian, balancing ethnic demands is a challenge. In recent years, there has been

political pressure to extend shari’a law. The question of whether this is agreeable to the population at large, or even applicable to non-Muslims, has created a degree of ethnic and religious tension in Malaysia.

Like Singapore, Malaysia worked diligently to educate its people after nationhood. For this and other reasons, many international companies opened offshore plants in Malaysia, and it became part of the silicon boom during the 1970s–1990s. However, education and employment gaps that exist between ethnic groups that have raised tensions, especially between Malays and Chinese. Malaysian law provides for a kind of affirmative action—certain quotas are required for ethnically Malay employees.

Thailand



More people have been aware of activities in Thailand as of late due to the ongoing political/constitutional crisis and the protests in Bangkok. The crux of the issue is one that may be difficult for many to grasp. The key issue is who has the right, or is right, to rule? Some Thai people believe that only certain people are

qualified to vote and that the monarchy should be upheld. Others favor a more democratic form of government. Currently, the country remains under martial law.

According to University of Washington Professor Emeritus Charles Keyes, Thailand has experienced thirty-two military coups since 1932, one of the highest rates in the world. The current coup seems to be a continuation of one begun in 2005, when royalists, the military, and some middle-class people started a movement to oust the prime minister and replace him with a military president backing the king. Generally, the Yellow Shirts in the news are the royalists, elites and military; the Red Shirts are the people of northern Thailand, academics, artists, and many members of the middle class who want to reestablish the constitution and democratic government. The country still has *lèse-majesté* laws—laws that protect the monarch against any real or imagined slander or libel. Recently, journalists have been deported or imprisoned through enforcement of *lèse-majesté*.

Siam became Thailand in 1939; during the Pacific War, the government reverted to the name Siam. Thailand managed to avoid direct colonialism before and during the war through

Special Segment: Teaching Southeast Asia

careful diplomatic decisions and programs. Most Thai citizens profess Theravada Buddhism; however, there are significant minority groups in the north, northeast, and south that practice Islam and Christianity. Surrounded by Malaysia, Burma, China, Laos, and Cambodia, Thailand's government must deal delicately with issues such as immigration and refugees. ■

RESOURCES

INDONESIA

Taylor, Jean Gelman. *Indonesia: Peoples and Histories*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

This book depicts the breadth and depth of cultures and histories throughout the Indonesia archipelago, considering history from the viewpoint of different groups on different islands. This is a fantastic source about the complicated experiences and stories of what became the modern state of Indonesia. Taylor's prose style is quite readable, flowing more like stories than a textbook. Much of the history is told through cultural artifacts—coins, carvings, textiles, gravestones, and arts.

Toer, Pramoedya Ananto. *Buru Quartet (This Earth of Mankind, Child of All Nations, Footsteps, and House of Glass)*. 1980–1988; Reprinted by New York: Penguin Books, 1996–1997.

Indonesia's most renowned author composed these books verbally when he was a political prisoner of Suharto and his regime on Buru Island, Indonesia. The stories span the time period of rising national consciousness in Indonesia, from the end of the nineteenth century until *merdeka* (freedom) from Dutch rule and independence for Indonesia. The stories combine important cultural aspects of Indonesia, ethnic issues, religious ideology, class tensions, and even romance.

Kartini, Raden Adjeng. *Letters of a Javanese Princess and Letters by Kartini, an Indonesian Feminist, 1900–1904*. 1920; Reprinted by Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2005.

The two volumes gather together many of the letters written by an actual Indonesian princess. The time period covers from Kartini's midteens through marriage. Typically, girls were not educated in much of Indonesia, and certainly elite girls' families kept education to a minimum. However, Kartini's father indulged his daughters, even allowing them to attend school with common people. An early feminist, Kartini's biographical writings are filled with her conflicting feelings about love, duty, family, education, and modernity. At one point, she is offered a scholarship to attend university in Europe and must decide between familial duty and her own desires. Though written over 100 years ago, the letters breathe with enthusiasm and life, as though written just yesterday.

MALAYSIA

Eng, Tan Twan. *The Gift of Rain and The Garden of Evening Mists*. New York: Weinstein Books, 2009 and 2012.

These two beautifully wrought, evocative novels depict Malaysia before, during, and after World War II and "The Emergency," a time of political national crisis in Malaysia from 1948–1960. The protagonists struggle with self-identity and ethnic clashes with Japanese and Europeans, and suffer through the struggle for independence in Malaysia. Both books were long-listed for the Man Booker Prize

for Fiction, a literary prize awarded each year for the best original novel written in English and published in the UK.

Hooker, Virginia Matheson. *A Short History of Malaysia*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003.

Hooker's book does a good job of summarizing human settlement in Malaysia, the country's ancient history, and the wealthy power centers that rose and fell over time. This book is accessible for university and high school students, but may be a stretch for middle-schoolers. The book brings the reader into the current century, but much has changed in Malaysia in recent years, especially with regard to censorship, gender issues, and the proliferation of demands for *sharia* (Islamic law). If using this as a resource, it would be helpful to consider current Malaysian politics and people from some of the online newspapers discussed above.

THAILAND

Cornell's Southeast Asia Program (<http://einaudi.cornell.edu/>) has a number of teaching resources related to Thailand, with some materials appropriate for teaching at the elementary level, such as a curriculum unit on "The Elephant as a Key Symbol in Thailand" (grade level is indicated on almost all of the Cornell resources). Their lending library is a good place to start: <http://tinyurl.com/mbtbnwm>. Refine your search for Thailand and grade level, and check out the wide array of documentary and feature films and the extensive music and performing arts offerings.

Also, see Cornell's curriculum unit on Buddhism in Thailand (ninth-twelfth grades, <http://tinyurl.com/lqswdxu>) and check out the downloadable PowerPoint presentation "Rural Environment and Society in Southeast Asia," which examines broad definitions of the environment in Southeast Asia and the range of contemporary environmental issues and problems that currently affect the region: <http://tinyurl.com/ozwt267>.

The University of Hawai'i Center for Southeast Asian Studies offers a "one-stop shopping list" of links to resources for learning about Thailand, from general information sites to language learning, newspapers, film resources, forums, blogs, and publications: <http://tinyurl.com/oqrv8v3>.

The BBC has an informative, up-to-date, and accurate overview of Thailand with sections on facts, leaders, media, and a timeline. Some sections include links to related stories and video and/or photo archives: <http://tinyurl.com/phfqdrr>.

For honors high school and introductory-level undergraduate teaching, Charles Keyes's book *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation State* (1987) provides an excellent introduction to Thailand's geography, history, people, culture, religion, and politics. Keyes's recent book, *Finding Their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State* (2014), picks up where *Buddhist Kingdom* leaves off and provides important background information and explanations for understanding the issues plaguing contemporary Thai politics. Teachers interested in this subject should also look at Grant Evans's short 2014 article, "The Seismic Shifts Behind the Coup in Thailand": <http://tinyurl.com/pvv8kt6>.

For those interested in delving deeper into the many issues involved in Thailand's contemporary political situation, the journal *Cultural Anthropology* provides blog

posts in their "Hot Spot" series that examine the crisis from a variety of angles: <http://tinyurl.com/qxebxc>.

Also recommended for upper-level high school or introductory undergraduate instructors and students is Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit's *A History of Thailand* (2014). The book offers a lively and accessible account of Thailand's political, economic, social, and cultural history. In addition to exploring how the Thai monarchy managed to establish the foundation of a new nation-state at the turn of the twentieth century, the authors track Thailand's economic changes through the 1980s economic boom, globalization, and the evolution of mass society. Originally written in 2009, the updated 2014 edition sheds light on Thailand's recent political, social, and economic developments, covering the coup of 2006, the violent street politics of May 2010, and the landmark election of 2011 and its aftermath. It shows how in Thailand today, the monarchy, military, businesses, and new mass movements are players in a complex conflict over the nature and future of the country's democracy.

Baker and Pasuk's exploration of Thai history extends to literature in their vibrant English translation of the Thai literary epic *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, which tells the story of a love triangle between a woman and two suitors, one rich and one poor (see a summary in this 2010 BBC article: <http://tinyurl.com/np68ayd>). The English translation is written in lively prose, complete with annotations and over 400 line drawings. There is also an afterword explaining the work's historical background, social context, and poetic style.

Another literary classic that brings Thai history alive is Kukrit Pramoj's *Four Reigns (Si Phaendin)* (1981). The book tells the compelling story of one woman's life both inside and outside the royal palace in Bangkok over the reign of four Thai kings. The text also gives insight into the social and political issues facing Thailand from the 1880s through the turbulent years of World War II.

One of Thailand's most entertaining and enduring modern novels is Botan's 1969 *Letters from Thailand* (translated by Susan Fulop Kepner). The story is a gripping family saga of the immigrant Chinese experience in urban Thailand.

Many of the US Department of Education-funded National Resource Centers for Southeast Asian Studies have developed or acquired excellent resource materials for K-14 educators. These resources include books, lesson plans, curricula, PowerPoint presentations, films, digital photo and art collections, and music. Items can be searched online, downloaded, or (if in hard copy form) mailed out for a loan period. See <http://tinyurl.com/o7a4d6e> for a list of centers.

SARA VAN FLEET is Associate Director of the University of Washington Southeast Asia Center. An Anthropologist, Sara's focus is upon contemporary cultural issues of mainland Southeast Asia.

LINDA CUADRA is a Master's student and Graduate Assistant for the Southeast Center of the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle.