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 Malay”), and Indian (7.1 percent). The two largest states, Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah on the island of Borneo, have different histories and cultures.

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: $476.8 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

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 High 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 Yinglak 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**


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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 sharia 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 about 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
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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

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, carved objects, textiles, gravestones, and arts.


Indonesia’s most renowned author composed these books verbally when he was a political prisoner of Sukarto 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.


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 written by an actual Indonesian princess. The time period spans from 1880s through the turbulent years of World War II. Another literary classic that brings Thai history alive is Kukrit Pramoj’s Four Reigns (St Phathan) (1981). The book tells the compelling story of one woman’s life both inside and outside the royal palace in Bangkok over the 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.

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/mbtonbw. 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 (nineth-twelfth grades, http://tinyurl.com/ljoxwdu) 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/osx2t67.

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/oqr8v3.

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/phf4dr.


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/qsebnc.

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.

One of Thailand’s most entertaining and enduring modern novels is Botan’s 1969 Letters from Thailand (translated by Susan Fulop Keper). 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/oy7a4d6e for a list of centers.

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