ICWA LETTERS

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Matthew Wheeler, a former RAND Corporation security and terrorism researcher, was studying relations among and between nations along the Mekong River.

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Unfinished Business: Regionalism, Nationalism and Democracy in the Mekong Region

By Matthew Z. Wheeler

It's good to be back in the mid-Atlantic. I was born and raised about an hour's drive from here, in Baltimore. Although I spent many of my last years in Maryland wishing I was somewhere else and many years since then about as far from here as possible, I still have a deep affection for the Baltimore/Washington, D.C. area. It still feels like home.

It's also great to be back at the Cosmos Club where, almost three years ago, I first met Peter Martin. At that time, of course, my Fellowship existed only as an idea, a dream. Today, I am fortunate and grateful to be here to talk to you about the reality of my two years in Southeast Asia.

It's enormously difficult to distill the thoughts and impressions of two years in into a short morning's talk, especially two years as an ICWA Fellow. One of the great things about ICWA is that Fellows are expected to be open to the unexpected. Fellows are encouraged to be flexible, to embrace the unforeseen as it arises, and not to cling too tightly to our proposals when circumstances or interests change. As a result, Fellows often end up writing about things they never expected to write about. My fellowship followed this pattern.

There's a lot to say about the past two years, but in the interest of time I'm

Matthew Wheeler Photo: Charles Dharapak

going to focus on just a few issues. I'd like give you an idea of why I was excited to go to the Mekong Region as an ICWA Fellow to learn about regional integration and disintegration, which was the original focus for my fellowship.

I also want to talk about national integration and nationalism. Over the course of my Fellowship, I found that disintegration—or conflicts between states—can often be traced to conflicts within states. I found that these problems of national integration were a much more immediate issue than regional integration, so I'm going to talk about that as well, looking specifically at how it is playing out now in southern Thailand.

Finally, I want to talk about democracy, or rather the lack of it, in mainland Southeast Asia, again with special reference to Thailand, where I was based and where I spent most of my time as an ICWA Fellow.

Regional Integration and Disintegration

First, let's look at regional integration and disintegration. Mainland Southeast Asia, or the Mekong Region, includes five nations, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The Chinese province of Yunnan is usually included in contemporary descriptions of mainland Southeast Asia.

In order to understand why integration in the Mekong Region interested me so much, it is important to remember just how divided the region was not so long ago.

For many of us, the word "Mekong" still conjures up images of insurgency and war. In 1988, when I first began to pay serious attention to the region, it was still a battlefield. Indeed, this region has seen so many wars in the last 50 years that historians have had to number them.

The First Indochina War began just as World War II ended. It continued until 1954, when France surrendered its colonial possessions, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

The Second Indochina War began just four years later. It is known to most of us as the Vietnam War, but known to most Vietnamese as the "American War." The Third Indochina War, which began with the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, drove the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime from power. That war was already a decade old when I first began to study the region in 1988.

At that time, then, the Mekong Region seemed a land of perpetual war. In 1988, a 50-year-old Vietnamese would have known only about 10 years of official peace. Her counterparts in Burma, Cambodia and Laos would have known little more.

Let's revisit 1988 and take a little tour of the region.

- Tens of thousands of Vietnamese troops still occupied Cambodia, where they fought a grinding guerrilla campaign mounted by the Khmer Rouge and other rebels in what some called "Vietnam's 'Vietnam'."
- The Khmer Rouge remained a going concern and, in spite of presiding over the mass murder of nearly 2 million Cambodians, their return to power was a real prospect.
- Vietnam was treated as an international pariah state, shunned by Asia, burdened by U.S. sanctions and completely dependent on the Soviet bloc.
- Thailand and Laos fought a short but serious border war over disputed territory.
- The Communist Party of Thailand finally collapsed, and the last of its guerrilla fighters came down from the hills.
- A military *coup d'état* in Thailand toppled the first elected prime minister in almost 20 years.
- Vietnamese and Chinese naval vessels clashed in a disputed area of the South China Sea (known to Vietnamese as the East Sea) and more than 70 Vietnamese sailors were killed.
- The Burmese Army crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy movement, killing hundreds and imprisoning thousands.
- The Burmese Army was also battling more than a dozen ethnic insurgent groups. These rebel groups controlled much of Burma, especially border areas.

But something else happened in 1988. Thailand's Prime Minister, a former general named Chatichai Choonhavan, called for the transformation of mainland Southeast Asia from a battlefield to a marketplace. Although it wasn't long before Chatichai was deposed in a *coup d'état*, his catchphrase—battlefield to marketplace—struck a chord. It captured the sense that in a post-cold-war world, the peace and prosperity that had so long eluded the Mekong Region, could, at last, become a reality.

So I began to pay attention to the Mekong Region just as things started to change. There was a real sense of optimism after the settlement of the Cambodian civil war in 1991, much of it focused on plans to bring economic development to the region.

When I first applied to ICWA, I was interested in the idea of the "Greater Mekong Subregion," or GMS. This is what the Asian Development bank calls mainland Southeast Asia. In 1992, the ADB proposed a raft of schemes designed to encourage trade and economic growth by building the infrastructure that the region sorely lacked.

I was especially attracted to their proposed "transport corridors"—road, rail and river links aimed at linking resources, labor and markets across the Mekong Region.

Now I wasn't attracted to these proposals because

I'm an aficionado of development schemes, but because there was something thrilling to me about the prospect of literally linking together the far-flung parts of a divided region.

One reason I found it thrilling was because I had been studying the region's history, especially the early 19th century before European colonies replaced indigenous kingdoms. I wondered what would happen in the Mekong Region, in this new regional order, with governments free from ideological commitments and obligations to superpower patrons. Would old, pre-colonial rivalries return, bringing the region into conflict again? Would greater commerce and interaction between former enemies bring about a sense of common identity, or reveal new dimensions of conflict and competition?

There has been great change in the region since 1988. Regional integration is now evident in many spheres. For example, all of the Mekong-region countries are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). All of the Mekong countries have embraced the principle of market economics. Governments are working to establish an ASEAN Free-Trade Area. Trade among the Mekong countries is growing. There is even a nascent sense of regional identity associated with Mekong, evident, for example, in the Southeast Asia Games and in the rise of intra-regional tourism.

This past summer, for example, I went with more than 100 Thais in a caravan of 40 four-wheel-drive SUVs on a road trip through the borderlands of northern Thailand, Laos, Yunnan and Burma. It was billed as the "4 Nations Autoventure," or, alternatively, "The 5 Chiangs trip," referring to Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Chiang Khong (all in Thailand), Chiang Rung (in Yunnan) and Chiang Tung (in Burma). The trip was organized by a group of Thai tour companies in cooperation with the Chiang Mai province tourism authority. The idea was to assess the possibilities for running tours in this "4 Nations" area.

It was interesting to observe the attitudes of the Thai tourists to the neighboring countries. The Thais on this trip were most taken with the Tais, their ethnic cousins in Yunnan. We went to a Tai village—a tourist trap, actually—for what was billed as a Tai wedding ceremony. Young and attractive Tai women in brightly colored traditional dress picked grooms from among the men in our group. Then we all enjoyed the spectacle of an abbreviated but raucous Tai wedding, complete with dancing and playful little competitions.

The performance played quite strongly and skillfully on Thai stereotypes of Tai women as uninhibited and freer than their Thai counterparts with respect to sexual mores. It also played on the idea of the Tai as bearers of an unspoiled Tai culture, a culture once common to Thai-speakers throughout the region, but one that Thailand has largely lost in its rapid economic development. It was if Thais had gone to Yunnan to get a glimpse of their ancestors.

The "Five Chiangs" trip also reflects integration in more concrete ways. This trip wouldn't have been possible even a couple of years earlier, the principle obstacle being in Shan State. In southern Shan state, Burmese government control has been shaky at best. This area is dominated by an ethnic group called the Wa, but Burmese control has grown stronger during the two years of my fellowship. In northern Shan State, in the region on the Chinese border, the Burmese government has ceded authority to a Sino-Shan militia in exchange for a cease-fire agreement. Although Chinese still pour through the border pass here to gamble in the casinos of Mong La, there is no permanent Burmese authority on the other side of the Chinese border to execute the passport formalities.

Another impediment to travel in the region was the state of the roads. In March 2003, I went by road from Mae Sai in Thailand to Chiang Tung, and from there to the Chinese border. At that time the road wasn't complete, but Chinese construction crews were working at a furious pace.

When I passed this way again with the caravan in June, I found the road was tarred all the way to from the Chinese border to Mae Sai in Thailand. That means that you can drive the route from Kunming to Bangkok on a safe, all-weather road. Indeed, I read just a day after I got back to Thailand from the caravan trip that Thai trucks had begun to transport produce to China using the Shan State route.

Nationalism and National Integration

While regional integration is real enough at many levels, I was far more impressed during my fellowship with the power of the forces working against regional integration. The most powerful of these forces is fierce nationalism.

The potency of nationalism in the region was demonstrated by the anti-Thai riot that broke out in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, in January 2003. An angry mob went on a rampage, attacking Thai businesses and burning the Thai Embassy. What was their grievance? What had driven these young men to violence?

They were angry because of reports that a Thai actress, who was quite popular in Cambodia at the time, had claimed that the magnificent temples of Angkor Wat belonged to Thailand. The comments attributed to the young actress, which she tearfully disavowed, were a reminder that western Cambodia had once been controlled by Thailand, and had long been within the Siamese sphere of influence.

But the comments that Angkor Wat didn't belong to Cambodia meant more than that. Angkor Wat is the sym-

bol of Cambodian national identity. The temples are a reminder to Cambodians of past glory, prowess and empire. The words attributed to this Thai starlet were perceived as an insult to Khmer dignity.

The riot shocked Thai people. They asked each other, "why do they hate us?"

They didn't know that many in Cambodia perceive Thais as slick businessmen, greedy and rapacious. When my wife Ruang and I went to Angkor Wat, a young postcard seller, a child, declared to us as a matter of fact that Thais hate Cambodians. I know it disturbed Ruang to hear this, especially because she was so excited to be there, and she liked the place and the people. She was also disturbed to find that most of her friends weren't interested to hear about her trip to Cambodia, in contrast to her earlier trips to the U.S. and U.K.

But here's the interesting thing about the riot in Phnom Penh. Several people I talked to there told me that the mob was probably a put-up job and may have been organized by elements in the ruling party. We know for sure that Cambodian police did nothing to control the mob until the violence had already gotten out of hand. Cambodia's Prime Minister, Hun Sen, might have benefited from stirring up hatred of Thailand. Hun Sen's opponents accuse him of being a Vietnamese stooge. Anti-Vietnamese sentiment runs deep in Cambodia. Re-directing Cambodian xenophobia away from Vietnam would be good for Hun Sen politically.

The point I want to emphasize is that, in view of the country's tragic recent history, Cambodian national identity is quite fragile and apparently much in need of defending.

This fragility—the diaphanous, imagined quality of national identity—is one of the reasons that nationalism remains so virulent.

Why is that? It's because the leaders of weak states need *official* nationalism. If they don't control all their own territory, if they don't have the legitimacy that comes from ruling well, if they don't command the allegiance of the entire population, they need nationalism to forge a sense of common and exclusive identity within states that are ethnically diverse and historically fractious. "Diverse and fractious" describes each of the Mekong states. In the Mekong Region, national integration is very much an ongoing process.

I want to talk in greater depth about what's happening in southern Thailand.

Nationalism is increasingly being advanced by the government as a solution to the festering problem of separatism in the three Muslim-majority provinces on the southern border.

I understand that the violence there has been attracting international media attention. It is certainly the biggest story in Thailand, and—because it has this Islamist element—it attracts attention as part of the global war on terrorism. Beyond these reasons, though, I think it illustrates quite clearly the problem of national integration.

Since the beginning of this year, Thailand's southern-border provinces have become the most politically violent place in the region. More than 500 people, Muslims, Buddhists, officials and militants, have been killed there. Last month was the deadliest month yet, with more than 100 killed.

The problem in southern Thailand has a long history. The south is populated mostly by ethnic Malays who speak a Malay dialect and who may or may not speak Thai as a second language. The Malays are Muslims, who constitute only about 5 percent of the Thai population. In the deep South, however, Muslims are the majority. They have long resisted assimilation into Thai Buddhist society, which they see as a threat to their Malay Muslim identity.

These southern provinces once constituted an Islamic sultanate called Patani. It was a center of trade and Islamic learning in Southeast Asia. Patani had been a tributary kingdom, showing a kind of perfunctory allegiance to Bangkok. That changed in 1902, when Bangkok asserted direct administrative control over these Muslim provinces. The result has been unrest and periodic violence ever since. The Muslim reaction to Bangkok's policies of assimilation has been resistance, usually passive, sometimes violent. In other words, the integration of the Malay Muslim population into the Thai nation is, at best, incomplete.

In my first newsletter, "Thailand and Terrorism after Bali," I mentioned the violence in southern Thailand. At that time, the Thai government insisted that killings, arson attacks and occasional bombings in southern Thailand had no connection to Muslim separatism or to Islamist extremism in other parts of Southeast Asia. The violence this year, however, has forced the government to acknowledge that a separatist movement is active in the region.

There have been hundreds of violent incidents in the south this year, but two stand out. On April 28 young Muslim militants staged coordinated attacks on police posts in three provinces. Most were armed with nothing more than knives and machetes. More than 100 of them were killed. Thirty-two men were killed in the revered Kreu Se mosque in Pattani Province where they had taken shelter after killing a policeman. The army assaulted the mosque after several hours' standoff, killing all inside. I remember seeing television footage of soldiers at the mosque entrance, firing their weapons in an almost casual way. Human rights activists and local people were outraged by the government's handling of the Kreu Se

siege, calling the use of force excessive and unnecessary. The men inside the mosque were surrounded. Why not wait them out?

Indeed, the senior officer on the scene, General Panlop Pinmanee, who ordered the assault, was recalled to Bangkok and temporarily relieved of command. It is not clear whether General Panlop was aware of the significance of Kreu Se mosque to Thailand's Malay Muslims or the significance of the date, April 28. On that date in 1948, after two days of mass protests against Thai rule, dozens of Muslims were killed in clashes with Thai police near Kreu Se mosque.

The mosque is an important symbol for local Muslims, and its history illustrates some of the reasons that Malay Muslims are resentful of the Thai state and the economic power of local ethnic Chinese.

According to legend, Kreu Se mosque was built more than 400 years ago by a Chinese merchant who converted to Islam and married a local noblewoman. The legend holds that the roof of the mosque roof was never finished because of a curse. Kreu Se was cursed by the Chinese merchant's sister, Lim Ko Niew, who traveled from China to Patani with the aim of convincing her brother to renounce Islam and return to his family. When he refused, Lim Ko Niew hung herself, but not before placing a curse on the mosque so that its roof could never be completed.

Now, it would seem a simple matter to disprove the curse. Just build a roof, right? But local Muslims have been prevented from lifting the legend of the curse because the mosque is listed by the Fine Arts Department as an historical site, which means that changes to the building are prohibited.

What's more, Lim Ko Niew has become a sort of diety, an icon of Confucian values and her cult is a major tourist attraction, promoted by the Pattani Tourism Authority. The cult of Lim Ko Niew brings thousands of ethnic Chinese tourists from all over the region, especially from Malaysia.

The curse is a central part of the legend and the cult. To disprove it would be bad business. So, Muslim interest in restoring the holy place is subordinated to Thai profits and Chinese cultural traditions. It's just a small example of the kind of thing that makes many Muslims feel as if they are second-class citizens in Thailand.

I visited Kreu Se some months after the massacre. It was pockmarked with bullet holes. Construction workers were busy mixing cement and sawing boards for the restoration project. After the incident, you see, the government decided to restore the mosque as a good will gesture to the Muslim community. The curse may yet be lifted.

I had heard that Lim Ko Niew's grave was near the mosque, but I was surprised to see that the mosque and the grave site sit side by side. Only an iron fence separates them. It is worth noting that this is not the original gravesite. It was moved about 50 years ago.

I asked a Muslim shopkeeper near the mosque how he felt about having the grave of the Chinese Islamaphobe so near the holy mosque. He said, "I don't mind. After all, they're brother and sister." But he went on to talk about fleets of tour buses, crowds of Chinese tourists, the noise of firecrackers and gongs, and then said: "I don't like it."

So, Kreu Se mosque is not just an old, unfinished building. It is a symbol of Muslim pride as well as a reminder to Malay Muslims of their relative lack of power. It was no accident that the men who took refuge in the mosque chose to die there. They are now remembered as martyrs.

After the Kreu Se incident it was difficult to imagine that the Thai government could do much more to worsen the situation and further alienate Muslims. On October 25, however, they managed to do just that. Police and soldiers killed six Muslims protestors in Tak Bai, Narathiwat Province after a protest turned violent. Two days later came the revelation that 78 Muslim men who had been taken into custody in Tak Bai after the riot had suffocated to death, stacked one on top of the other, five bodies high, in the beds of army trucks. Prime Minister Thaksin refused to apologize for these deaths. He said the detainees died because they were weak from Ramadan fasting and that the incident was just an unfortunate accident.

The Tak Bai incident and the government's poor handling of it have pushed the situation in the south to the breaking point. People in the south are scared and frustrated. Neighboring leaders in Malaysia and Indonesia have demanded explanations from Thaksin about what is happening with their Muslim brothers and sisters in Thailand.

Thaksin's government has been utterly unable to come up with a response that might ease the tension. He has reshuffled his cabinet twice this year, hoping that new ministers will solve the problem. In March Thaksin sent one of his ministers, Chaturon Chaiseng, to the south to study the problem and come up with a plan. In April, Chaturon proposed a seven-point plan. Chief among his recommendations was, "Police must stop torturing, abducting and murdering people." He also proposed lifting martial law and offering amnesty to accused separatists. Unfortunately, Chaturon's plan was put on a shelf after the April 28 attack

After the Kreu Se incident, I talked with a Muslim political scientist in Bangkok who said that the situation was very dangerous, and that while Chaturon's plan was good before Kreu Se, it was now necessary. After Tak Bai,

it is difficult to imagine what the Thai government could do to win the confidence of Muslims in the south.

Thaksin seems to have been driven to distraction by the southern crisis. Nothing works. Every thing he does makes the situation worse. His latest plan will be deployed later tonight. Royal Thai Air Force transport planes will drop tens of millions of origami paper cranes on Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. These paper cranes, considered a symbol of peace in Japan, are intended to demonstrate somehow the concern of the entire Thai nation for the security and welfare of the southerners, Buddhists and Muslims alike.

The Cosmos crowd; Matt's wife Ruang and Dr. Roger Cliff of the RAND Corporation

I think that paper cranes are probably not going to the trick.

A little more than a week ago I had lunch with a Thai friend. He's been a journalist for 26 years. In that time he's seen a lot and has a good feel for what is happening in his country. When I saw him he was in a state of deep despair. He said he feels the clock has turned back to 1976, when there was a kind of anti-communist hysteria in Thailand. This anti-communism was officially sanctioned, and it was directed at domestic opponents. It reached fever pitch in 1976, after the communist victories in Indochina, and it culminated in the lynching of student protestors at Thammasat University in Bangkok. These murders were perpetrated by a state-sponsored paramilitary organization called the Village Scouts. My friend was especially disconcerted by a speech made by her Majesty, Queen Sirikit, who had just returned from two months residing in the south. She told Thais not to blame the government for what's happening there. She said there should be more concern about the welfare of southern Buddhists. She said that she would start to carry a handgun, and learn to use it.

These comments, coming from the most revered authority symbol in the country, point to a deepening divide between Malays and Thais. My friend said he fears that, as in 1976, the situation has become so polarized that a violent explosion is inevitable. In this case, that means something like communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims.

Just days ago there was a rally by more than 10,000 Village Scouts in Bangkok. Although they called for an end to violence in the south, a rally of the long-dormant Village Scouts looks to me like a prelude to greater violence.

The final chapter of Thailand's national integration has yet to be written.

Democracy and the Lack of It

Earlier I said I was going to talk about democracy. I had always wanted to look at this issue, but I was surprised by how much democracy, or rather the lack of it, featured in what I saw and what I wrote about.

First, let's acknowledge that the Mekong Region is not a hotbed of liberal democracy. Consider Laos, China and Vietnam—the region has the highest concentration of communist countries on earth. Burma is hardly worth mentioning in this regard. A military dictatorship since 1962, it has a long and well-documented record of human-rights abuses.

Cambodia is a bit more complicated, as I learned when I went there to see the national election in 2000. Cambodia is what we might call a "ballot-box democracy."

It has periodic elections that are certified free and fair by the international community, but the political playing field tilted toward the ruling party by an entrenched system of political patronage. Consider that since 1993, national elections have yet to produce a transfer of power and that after the 2003 election that I reported on, it was 11 months before the contesting parties could agree on a power-sharing arrangement. That means 11 months without a legislature, hardly the picture of a healthy democracy.

As usual, Thailand is the exception in the region. It enjoys a reputation as a responsible international player and the leading democracy in Southeast Asia, but during my time

as an ICWA Fellow, I saw a slide toward authoritarianism.

For decades, politics in Thailand followed a cycle of military coups and caretaker governments. This cycle seems to have been broken, and since 1992 there has been a process of democratic consolidation in Thailand. This democratic trend gathered pace in the wake of the 1997 economic crisis. It caused enormous hardship for a country that had recently enjoyed some of the highest growth rates in the world.

In 1997, Thailand adopted a new constitution. It provided for several independent government, oversight bodies, designed to stamp out corruption and conflicts of interest and ensure that government would function more honestly and transparently than it had during the boom years.

But economic hardship in Thailand did not only bring a desire for reform. It brought a desire for relief, for deliverance from hard times. With the nation down and out, nationalism grew more intense. Many Thais accused foreign interests and institutions, such as George Soros and the International Monetary Fund, for causing the economic crisis and profiting from Thailand's pain. Rampant globalization was seen as a destructive force and one to be opposed.

In these difficult circumstances, the former policeman and ultra-rich telecom tycoon, Thaksin Shinawatra, rose to power at the head of a political party called *Thai Rak Thai*, or Thais Love Thais. Thaksin appealed to voters for many reasons. As a rich man, he argued, he had no need to be corrupt. As a successful CEO, he had the experience and can-do attitude needed to turn the economy around. He proposed generous programs to spread money around the country including a program to distribute about $1,200 to every village. He proposed a scheme for 30-baht health care, so that a visit to the doctor would cost less than $1. He proposed a moratorium on debt.

Thaksin is a political innovator. Not only did he put forward actual policies, a novelty in Thai politics, he based those policies on research about what voters wanted.

In contrast to old-school political parties that represented business and military interests, Thai Rak Thai's populist platform gave the appearance of a party that put people first. Thaksin also brought a new kind of media savvy to Thai politics, marketing himself and his party like a new product. Thailand had never seen anything like it before.

The result was victory at the polls in 2000 and the launching of a political juggernaut. But before Thaksin could take office, he was indicted by the National Counter-Corruption Commission for failing to fully disclose his assets as required by law. If found guilty in this matter by the Constitutional Court, Thaksin would have been forced to step down from the premiership and would have been barred from politics for five years.

After Thaksin took office, the Constitutional Court acquitted him in a controversial 8-7 decision. This victory over the new, independent oversight bodies set the tone for Thaksin's term thus far, with the prime minister treating all efforts to question him or his policies as an affront to the will of the Thai people.

Thaksin is the most powerful leader Thailand has known. Even Thailand's military dictators didn't have the control over the bureaucracy, media and society that Thaksin enjoys today. His party has an overwhelming majority in Parliament. He has tamed the bureaucracy. Thailand's once-lively and independent media have learned to censor themselves, disciplined by Thaksin's control of huge advertising sums. Thaksin's relatives and old classmates have quickly risen to the top echelons of the Army and police force.

One would think that a leader enjoying such complete control, as well as broad popular support, would feel a sense of confidence. Thaksin, however, seems to be remarkably insecure. The slightest criticism gives him fits. If this intolerance were manifested merely in his regular outbursts against know-nothing academics, disloyal NGOs and ungrateful superpower allies, there would perhaps be little impact on Thailand's civil society. But Thaksin takes this intolerance to extremes. He demonstrated an early willingness to employ, or at least tolerate, the use of force against troublemakers and those who would challenge him. The result has been chilling, and it has forced potential critics to think carefully about the risks of speaking out.

The most important instance of Thaksin's forceful approach to policy was the three-month-long drug war he launched early in 2003. Roughly 2,500 people were murdered in the kingdom during those three months, as government officials and police raced to meet Thaksin's targets for drug dealers put out of action. Many of those killed in the course of the drug war were small fish, former drug users, or others who somehow ended up on government blacklists.

The drug-war killings were appalling, but they were also quite popular in Thailand. A Suan Dusit poll of 10,000 people during the height of the campaign showed 90 percent approval. In another poll, 70 percent hoped that the government would continue the policy.

Thaksin's drug war was not only a blow to human rights and rule of law. It also looked a great deal like a return to Cold-War mentality when Thai security forces operated death squads to combat communists. General Panlop, the man who ordered the attack on Kreu Se mosque, had earlier made an explicit analogy between the methods he'd used as a younger man against communist suspects and the anti-drug campaign. And I fear that the suggestion of a return to a Cold-War

mentality and Gestapo tactics is not overstated.

Consider the disappearance of a prominent Muslim lawyer, Somchai Neelapaijit, in March this year. At the time of his disappearance, Somchai represented four Muslim men who had been arrested in southern Thailand and charged as members of the regional terror group Jemaah Islamiyah. These men were arrested in June, 2003, just in time for Thaksin's meeting here in Washington, D.C., with President Bush. Somchai was also collecting signatures calling for an end to martial law in the south. Somchai was a troublemaker.

After his apparent abduction, Thaksin said Somchai was probably enjoying a little time away after quarrelling with his wife. Later, a cabinet minister let slip that Somchai was already dead. Several policemen have since been arrested in connection with a conspiracy to abduct and kill Somchai.

Somchai's case and the extra-judicial killings during the drug war have tarnished Thailand's reputation as a defender of human rights and called into question the Thai government's respect for the rule of law. It's a reminder that democracy is not an easy form of government. Democracy can be difficult to define, and even more difficult to realize in practice. However, we can all probably agree that democracy is more than elections. A good rough-and-ready measure of a democracy is a system in which the poor and powerless can bring a rich and powerful wrongdoer to justice. By that measure, democracy in Thailand has a long way to go, and an even longer way to go in the other Mekong countries.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, I want to echo Joseph Battat's comments from last night about the importance of the ICWA mission. The fact that area expertise—knowledge of places, people, culture, history—is held cheap by some important people in this town, means that the value of the Institute's mission is growing.

Fellowships are investments, and though Peter sometimes warned me away from "essaying into expertise," these investments are at least in part designed to deepen a pool of knowledge about different parts of the world. Go to a foreign place, live, observe, report. It's a simple idea, but I believe it has never been more important.

I want to thank the trustees for giving me the opportunity I have had these past two years. Peter told me once that the purpose of an Institute Fellowship is not merely to study this or that, but to help a Fellow become who they are. I needed that help more than I knew and I will always be grateful to the Institute for giving it to me.

My thanks go also to Brent Jacobson and to Ellen Kozak. Every step I took as a Fellow, every word I wrote, and indeed this morning's event, wouldn't have been possible without their efforts. I want to acknowledge their fine work.

Let me also thank Peter Martin for giving me a chance in the first instance, for helping me become a better writer, and for his steady support in matters great and small.

While I have the chance, I also want to thank my parents. I could live a thousand lifetimes and never begin to repay them for everything they've done to give me choices in this life.

Finally, I thank my wife Ruangsasitorn for her love, support and understanding.

Thank you.

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