

Climate change governance and (il)liberalism in Thailand : activism, justice, and the state

Governing Climate Change in Southeast Asia

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10 Climate change governance and (i)liberalism in Thailand

Activism, justice, and the state

Adam Simpson and Mattijs Smits

Introduction

Climate change will affect all of Southeast Asia. In Thailand, as in many countries, these impacts may well be catastrophic (Marks 2011; Simpson 2018). In this chapter, we situate the effects, responses, and governance of climate change in Thailand in the context of the literature on environmental authoritarianism (Beeson 2010) and concomitant activist responses. The debate around environmental authoritarianism primarily focuses on whether less liberal regimes can contribute to better environmental outcomes (Sonnenfeld & Taylor, 2018). There is, however, an additional component in this debate. The primary rationale for addressing climate change is to ensure better outcomes for human society in the near and distant future. There is no other *raison d'être* for broad-based climate change action. The earth and most of its lifeforms would likely continue in a world where human civilization has been destroyed by climate change. Since climate action is, therefore, primarily based on the concept of intergenerational justice, policies should similarly be driven by values of climate justice for those already living (Robinson & Shine 2018). Therefore, policy outcomes for climate change mitigation and adaptation should be achieved through actions that reduce inequalities and inequities, thereby avoiding the worst impacts of climate change on human society.

Thailand provides a fascinating case study in this regard. Its history is characterized by persistent illiberalism and authoritarianism (Pavin Chachavalpongpun 2021) but also by periods of liberalism and dynamic environmental activism, particularly compared with much of Southeast Asia (Elinoff and Lamb 2020; Simpson 2014; Unger & Patcharee Siroros 2011). Thai movements have undertaken campaigns against specific fossil fuel projects such as the Bo Nok Coal-Fired Power Station, which was successful, and the Trans-Thai Malaysian Gas Pipeline, which was not (Simpson & Smits 2017). Thai environmental movements have been at the forefront of the fight for climate justice (Simpson & Smits 2018), but the magnitude of the climate crisis, equitable climate change mitigation, and adaptation also require governments responsive to civil society activism.

Despite some significant environmental victories, the ability of environmental movements in Thailand to substantially influence policy and political outcomes has always tended to reflect accommodation by existing political power structures. These power structures, often allied to the monarchy and linked to structural inequality (Hewison 2014a), run deeply through Thai society and stretch back to its earliest history. In turn, this political history is deeply intertwined with energy and (later) climate politics, discourses, and infrastructure development. For example, some of the largest hydropower dams in the country carry names of royal family members, showing the relations between energy development, state-led modernization projects, and the ruling elite (Smits 2015). The energy sector is a crucial part of Thai efforts to mitigate climate change, since in 2016 the sector contributed 77 percent of Thailand's total greenhouse gas emissions (Pemika Misila et al. 2020).

Thai national politics has been volatile since the transition to constitutional monarchy in 1932, with periods of democratic rule interspersed with regular coups and military rule. A period of stability in the late 1990s and early 2000s ended with a coup in 2006 and then another in 2014, with which the country is still grappling. Soon after the 2014 coup, its leader, General Prayut Chan-ocha, established a military-dominated national assembly, which duly elected him as prime minister (Veerayooth Kanchoochat & Hewison 2016).

An election in March 2019 under a military-authored constitution was profoundly flawed (Human Rights Watch 2019) and resulted in General Prayut removing his uniform to become a 'civilian' prime minister. Since the coup, the government has provided mixed messages regarding its commitment to climate change mitigation and renewable energy. For instance, General Prayut has opposed electricity from renewable or alternative energy sources on the basis that it results in higher power bills while also committing Thailand to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20 percent compared with the business-as-usual (BAU) scenario by 2030, according to Thailand's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) (Bhuridej 2020, p.3).

In 2020 however, despite restrictions on political gatherings of more than five people and as the country grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, persistent mass democracy protests erupted across Bangkok, with predominantly young Thais demanding reform of the monarchy and the constitution. The 2020 protests focused primarily on political transformation rather than climate change, but previous protests by young Thais have petitioned the government to declare a 'climate emergency' and cease using fossil fuels (Patpicha Tanakasempipat 2019). A resurgence of demonstrations in early 2021 indicated that the conflict was likely to be protracted, although the military and monarchy have a history of outlasting protesters (Baker 2016). Regardless of the political outcome, it is expected that Thailand's economy will continue making some progress towards decarbonization. Still, it may not be enough to avoid the catastrophic impacts of climate change (International Energy Agency 2021). If left to the current military-backed government, it

may further entrench the military within society, both politically and economically, at the expense of equity, efficiency, and justice.

For a long time, Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries only marginally contributed to global climate change. This impact is now increasing: in 2018, the region had over 8 percent of the global population, over 6 percent of global GDP, and around 5 percent of global energy demand (International Energy Agency 2019). To capitalize on recent technological advances while addressing this impact, there is now evidence of a policy shift within the government towards renewable energy, but the traditional bureaucratic channels and tendering processes are being bypassed. It looks more like the process is primarily designed to benefit the military rather than promote equity and efficiency (Greacen 2021). This demonstrates that democratic checks and balances, including civil society activism and participation in economic decarbonization, are crucial, not only to ensure that it occurs at all but also to ensure a focus on climate justice so that it does not worsen inequalities (Bulkeley, Edwards & Fuller 2014; Simpson and Smits 2018). It appears that the military is aware of this power within civil society since it has introduced a new illiberal NGO law in 2021, which threatens to undermine Thailand's status as both the regional hub for international NGOs and a home for a dynamic domestic civil society sector (Kavi Chongkittavorn 2021).

There is limited literature on the climate change governance activities of civil society organizations in Thailand (Haris, Mustafa & Ariffin 2020). In this chapter, we examine the potential for civil society influence under illiberal regimes, which are common throughout Southeast Asia. We then review Thailand's climate and energy policies and the impact of environmental organizations and movements, with a case study on the Thai Climate Justice Network (TCJ). The TCJ demonstrates how the ability of environmental organizations to organize, campaign, and influence society on climate justice has fluctuated with the nature of the contemporary political regime.

Climate change governance under illiberal regimes

The competition and contestation around energy and climate change governance is usually the result of the respective interests that drive the policy processes (Clapp, Newell & Brent 2018; Simpson 2007). A push for energy security is often instigated by national political economy interests and pursued by both liberal and illiberal political regimes (Simpson 2013b). In contrast, climate change concerns and policies have been primarily driven by liberal regimes at both the national and international level with "authoritarian discourses, state violence, and state-sanctioned private violence ... increasingly evident in efforts to keep fossil fuels flowing" (McCarthy 2019), although some authoritarian states have gradually adopted climate policies and rhetoric (Myers 2020). In less developed or middle-income countries, such as Thailand, these contrasts appear starker due to the extreme variations

in political regime type, which is reflected in the different opportunities available to civil society actors to influence policy.

The rise of climate change as a global issue and the emergence of authoritarian China as the world's largest carbon emitter has ignited debates regarding the efficacy of illiberalism in tackling both energy and climate security and environmental issues more broadly. This development has given rise to illiberal environmental governance conceived as “environmental authoritarianism” by Beeson (2010), which Gilley (2012, p.288) synonymizes with “authoritarian environmentalism”. Beeson identifies two dimensions of this concept: an unresponsive state that prohibits or ignores democratic or civil society activism, and the state compunction to obey environmental policies at the expense of individual freedoms.

Beeson (2010) and Shearman and Smith (2007) argue that authoritarian regimes in East and Southeast Asia, due to rapid reaction times and the mobilization of state resources, may prove more capable of responding to complex environmental problems than some of the region's democracies. China is the oft-quoted source of this argument, primarily due to its immense recent solar and wind power investments. As Gilley (2012) argues, however, this approach is better at producing policy outputs than outcomes, although even the policies themselves can be fragmentary. Local officials in China “regularly fabricate their energy use reports” and central authorities are often more concerned with pleasing party bosses rather than producing effective outcomes (Gilley 2012, p.297). Opaque policy processes, in addition to limits on civil society activism and free speech, make it extremely difficult for the public monitoring of targets; in a democratic country these might be undertaken by civil society or a free media, which would be likely to result in more coherent policies and better implementation and outcomes (*ibid.* p.298).

Opacity of governance, a lack of free media, and civil society restrictions also mean that injustices are ignored, misrepresented, or receive little domestic attention (Human Rights Watch 2021). In general, civil society organizations can only influence environmental outcomes when they have political space to advocate (Pacheco-Vega & Murdie 2020) but their influence is also highly dependent on their strategies, tactics and operation, with community-level projects providing a key route to effect change under extreme illiberalism (Simpson & Smits 2018).

The literature in this area is limited and somewhat inconclusive with major journals giving the issue only partial attention (Hayes et al. 2021; Meyer & Chang 2021). Fredriksson and Wollscheid (2007) suggest that democratic regimes result in better environmental policies than the alternative, while Neumayer (2002) claims that they do not necessarily result in better outcomes. Povitkina (2018) finds in a study of 144 countries that carbon emissions are only lower in democracies within low-corruption contexts; if corruption is high there is no noticeable difference between authoritarian and democratic regimes. Shahar (2015) argues that freely operating environmental movements and associated democratic modes of governance offer a better route for energy and climate security.

Stevenson and Dryzek (2014) argue that deliberative forms of environmental policymaking are crucial for addressing a problem as complex and as integrated into energy and economic concerns as climate change. However, genuine public participation and deliberative decision-making are extremely limited throughout Southeast Asia (Beeson 2010). Hobson (2012, p.976) argues that climate change activism can either promote or impede democratization, but there is little evidence that illiberalism provides better outcomes.

On balance, it is difficult to determine whether a democratic regime will definitively result in better climate policies and outcomes (Pickering, Bäckstrand & Schlosberg 2020). States remain the best placed actors to facilitate socio-ecological transformation due to their powers to regulate, tax, and redistribute (Eckersley 2021). Nevertheless, the ability of environmental activists to highlight climate risks and associated injustices in countries such as Thailand provides a key pathway for societal awareness and resultant climate action that ameliorates, or at least does not worsen, existing injustices.

Climate change impacts in Thailand

While Thailand faces a plethora of long-term environmental issues, the impacts of global climate change are likely to exacerbate existing environmental issues significantly. Climate change is expected to result in more temperature extremes, affecting regional weather and climate patterns in Southeast Asia. Much of Thailand is low-lying, coastal, or otherwise susceptible to weather extremes such as cyclones that are likely to increase in frequency and intensity by climate change as water temperatures increase. Although too much water is often a significant contributor to insecurity, drought is also becoming a problem due to increased monsoonal variability. The most devastating potential impacts of global climate change will affect different geographical areas through many climate-related disasters, including droughts, landslides, floods, and tropical cyclones (Webersik 2010, p.85).

The 2011 floods inundated most of central Thailand and were the worst in 50 years. This critical event is an example of the political economy of climate change impacts and associated social inequalities. Climate change has resulted in substantially increased pre-monsoon rainfall in the Chao Phraya River Basin in recent decades and a significant sea-level rise at the river outlet, which increased the severity of the 2011 floods. Other non-climate-related environmental impacts, which are common across Bangkok and Thailand as a whole, such as land subsidence, deforestation, urbanization, and removal of natural attenuation basins (like wetlands), also contribute to flooding (World Bank 2010, p.25).

Although many parts of Thailand experienced the 2011 floods, not all communities or people were affected or treated equally. The management of floods and other disasters in Thailand has been organized by elites and their bureaucracies to be deployed in ways that serve their interests and not those of more politically marginalized groups. This was particularly evident in the

2011 floods where privileged areas of the industrial sector and the associated Thai elites' assets were protected while other, less fortunate areas with less political and economic connections were sacrificed (Lebel, Manuta & Garden 2011; Marks 2015; Salamanca & Rigg 2016).

This preferential treatment is replicated in flood resilience policies for Bangkok, prioritizing economic assets and structural flood protection, with little attention on adaptation measures and the social impacts in less privileged societal groups (Laeni, van den Brink & Arts 2019). Prioritizing dominant players in policies that mitigate or adapt to climate change have the effect of reinforcing structural inequalities within society and undermining the pursuit of climate justice (Archer & Dodman 2015; Bulkeley, Edwards & Fuller 2014). Therefore, Thailand's institutional structure and inequitable political economy hinder its capacity to adequately address climate change (Marks 2011), and limits the involvement of civil society in decision-making processes where they could advocate on behalf of vulnerable or marginalized communities. While Thailand has historically offered more political space for civil society than many of its Southeast Asian neighbors (Simpson 2018), this opportunity has been limited since the 2014 coup.

Climate change governance in Thailand

Despite decades of government instability in Thailand, with democratic governments regularly removed by military coups, the country has been a reliable international participant in the various United Nations climate change agreements. The government ratified the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in December 1994, and its two key milestones: the 1997 Kyoto Protocol in August 2002 and the 2015 Paris Agreement in September 2016 (UNFCCC 2020).

As a UNFCCC Non-Annex 1 country, however, the requirements for emissions reductions for Thailand have been minimal, and greenhouse gas emissions steadily increased from around 81 Mt in 1990 to almost 250 Mt in 2013, with the proportion of natural gas emissions gradually increasing to 84 Mt, while oil contributed 95 Mt and coal 69 Mt (International Energy Agency 2020). Nevertheless, total carbon emissions have not increased recently, with a slight but steady decrease observable since 2016.

Under the Kyoto Protocol, over 150 Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects were registered in Thailand. More recently, the Thai Greenhouse Gas Management Organization (TGO), an independent public organization set up by the Thai government, tried to develop new and voluntary market-based instruments to mitigate climate change (Smits 2017).

The central government has also taken up climate change adaptation and mitigation policy. The Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning (ONEP), under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, developed Thailand's first Climate Change Master Plan in the period 2010–2012 during relatively liberal democratic governments (Simpson & Smits 2019).

Since the 2014 coup, there has been some progress on climate change policy, with Thailand submitting its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) to the UNFCCC in October 2015, stating that it intends to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 20 percent from the projected business-as-usual (BAU) level by 2030 – a reduction of 111 Mt-CO₂e to 555 Mt-CO₂e (Rawewan Bhuridej 2015). Cabinet approved an updated Climate Change Master Plan 2015–2050 in July 2016 (ONEP 2015). In May 2017, Cabinet endorsed Thailand’s NDC Roadmap on Mitigation 2021–2030, including sectoral action plans and progress reports to the ONEP every six months (Teerapong Laopongpith 2019).

Energy policy and activism

The recent decrease in Thailand’s carbon emissions is partly due to three decades of largely progressive policy innovation in energy and the environment, particularly compared with the rest of Southeast Asia (Greacen & Greacen 2004). However, it is also partly due to importing energy resources from its more authoritarian neighbors – notably Myanmar and Laos – while exporting the associated environmental problems (Simpson 2015, 2018; Smits 2015). Since energy accounts for around three-quarters of Thailand’s climate emissions, these energy policy shifts have been crucial to reducing emissions (Bhuridej 2020, p.3). This policy innovation was the result of both relatively amenable governments and the region’s most dynamic environmental movements, which experienced notable early successes in the 1980s with the blocking of Nam Choan Hydroelectric Dam in Kanchanaburi Province in 1988 (Forsyth 2001, p.5; Rigg 1991, p.46) and a ban on logging in 1989.

Following the dam’s blocking, the state-owned Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) began focusing on cross-border energy projects to import energy from the then more authoritarian neighboring countries, Myanmar and Laos. Projects included the Yadana, Yetagun, and Zawtika Gas Pipelines, and a range of proposed dams on the Thanlwin (Salween) River in Myanmar, as well as the Nam Theun 2 Dam, Xayaburi, and Don Sahong Dams in Laos. These projects reduced the domestic emission intensity of electricity production but had adverse impacts on local communities’ social and environmental well-being in Myanmar and Laos (Piya Pangsapa & Smith 2008; Simpson 2007, 2013a). From the early 2000s, when gas from the Myanmar Yadana pipeline started flowing, gas often contributed around 75 percent of Thailand’s electricity, with approximately one-third imported from Myanmar (International Energy Agency 2020; Simpson 2014).

Despite the continued dominance of EGAT and associated state energy utilities in Thailand’s electricity market, it has one of the most progressive renewable energy policies in the region, with reforms dating back to 1992 establishing markets with feed-in tariffs for independent power producers, small power producers, and very small power producers (initially 1 MW).

There are now many small entrepreneurs active in this sector (Sopitsuda Tongsovit & Greacen 2013).

Although it was essentially the government's neoliberal tendencies that launched the energy reforms, civil society and NGOs have also been influential in its development. Nevertheless, over the last decade, there have been some backward steps regarding energy governance. Much of the effective energy and electricity governance structures that had been established over the 1990s and 2000s were undermined with the success of the renewable energy sector creating fertile ground for well-connected corporations to extract rents. With high rents added onto costs, inevitable price increases were associated with renewable energy in general, causing potentially long-lasting damage to community support for the renewable energy sector as a whole.

This outcome seems consistent with General Prayut's lauding of fossil fuels as an energy source. For instance, he instructed the Energy Ministry in mid-2015 to boost 'public understanding' about the high cost of producing electricity from renewable energy sources, which he argued would lead to higher power bills (*Bangkok Post*, 14 August 2015). The Prime Minister also used his absolute authority under Section 44 of the Interim Constitution to exempt all kinds of power plants, gas processing plants, and other utility plants from regulations under the Town and City Planning Act (*Prachatai*, 22 January 2016).

In May 2015, the National Energy Policy Committee approved Thailand's first Power Development Plan 2015–2036 (EPPO 2015). The first public hearing for the formulation of the PDP 2015 was held in August 2014 (Chavalit Pichalai 2015), three months after the coup, which had banned protests and restricted political freedoms (Hewison 2014b). Journalists and activists had been arrested for voicing opposition to the military government resulting in a less than conducive environment for dissenting voices.

Activist groups critiqued the process of developing the PDP 2015, and its focus on large hydropower and coal, with new coal-fired power stations slated for the south of the country. The Network of People Affected by the Power Development Plan 2015, supported by the Thai Climate Justice Working Group, wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister and the Minister of Energy requesting the cancellation of PDP 2015 and the establishment of a more transparent and democratic process (Network of People 2015).

The first Alternative Energy Development Plan 2015–2036 (AEDP 2015) was developed under the PDP 2015 and administered by the Department of Alternative Energy Development and Efficiency within the Ministry of Energy (DEDE 2015). This provides a framework for boosting renewable energy use in the country, although the beginnings of this energy transition had already begun, even with limited government support (Simpson & Smits 2017).

Renewable energy comprised around 17 percent of the total final energy consumption in 2015, but much of this was drawn from longstanding large hydroelectric dams (IRENA 2017). Potential increases in the percentage of

renewable energy under most plans tend to rely on the importation of large hydropower from Laos, which displaces not only local populations but also causes negative impacts on downstream livelihoods and environments (Green & Baird 2020). Renewable energy was anticipated to increase to 28 percent in 2036 under the business-as-usual (BAU) model. The International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) estimated that with relatively modest changes to policy settings, these estimates could be increased to 37 percent (IRENA 2017).

From the mid-2010s, an increase in the use of biofuels and, to a lesser extent, wind and solar PV resulted in increasing shares within total electricity production, with a concomitant reduction in the proportion of large hydro and coal power. By 2019, natural gas provided around 65 percent of the electricity in Thailand, with solar PV and wind contributing around 2.6 percent and 1.9 percent, respectively (see Table 10.1).

While solar and wind together still only contributed less than 5 percent of the total, their installed capacity increased significantly after 2015, with solar doubling and wind increasing fivefold in four years (see Table 10.2).

Nevertheless, the government continued to provide conflicting signals to the energy sector. In March 2018, for example, the Minister of Energy announced that the government would stop purchasing electricity from renewable energy projects for five years due to increased electricity costs (Sopitsuda Tongsopit 2018). As indicated above, however, electricity cost increases during this time

Table 10.1 Main sources of electricity (GWh)

	2019	Percentage of Total
Natural gas	127,442	65.1
Coal	34,390	17.6
Bioenergy	18,508	9.4
Hydropower	6,434	3.3
Solar	5,182	2.6
Wind	3,655	1.9

Source: International Energy Agency (2020)

Table 10.2 Renewable energy installed capacity (MW)

	2015	2019	Percentage increase
Hydropower	3,639	3,667	0.7
Bioenergy	3,231	4,258	31.8
Wind	234	1,507	544
Solar	1,425	2,987	109.6

Source: IRENA (2020)

can be attributable to rents extracted by businesses with close connections to the military government, rather than issues relating to the technologies themselves.

Despite this vacillation over renewable energy, the government unveiled a revised PDP 2018–2037 (MoE 2018a), which the National Energy Policy Council approved in January 2019, two months before the March 2019 elections – the first since the 2014 coup, and the first held under the 2017 constitution drafted by the military. The new plan provided expanded ambitions for both renewable energy and the role of private operators, with the contribution from coal sharply decreasing from earlier estimates (Chatrudee Theparat & Yuthana Praiswan 2019). The plan reduces the proportion of power generated by the state-run EGAT from 35 percent in the previous plan to 24 percent, with small solar power operators particularly encouraged. Total power capacity by 2037 is expected to be 77,211 MW, with 5,857 MW imported, mainly via hydropower dams in Laos and Cambodia. The contribution of natural gas was expected to fall to 53 percent and coal to 12 percent, with non-fossil fuels increasing to around 35 percent (Hong 2019).

Despite the current small contribution of solar to total electricity, Thailand has installed the most solar capacity in Southeast Asia and was also the first to institute the equivalent of a feed-in tariff (Sopitsuda Tongsopit & Greacen 2013). Under the 2019 rooftop solar program, the Energy Ministry expects rooftop solar to reach 10,000 MW by 2037 (Pugnatorius 2020; Solar Magazine 2019). This contributes towards the goal in the updated Alternative Energy Development Plan 2018 (MoE 2018b) of installed solar power increasing to 15,574 MW by 2037, a fivefold increase from 2019 and around 20 percent of the total. The previously time-consuming licensing process for rooftop solar was streamlined into a notification process with owners able to sell excess electricity to the grid.

While the above-mentioned developments as laid out in the various Thai PDPs have always received a substantive amount of criticism from civil society actors, there were at least technocratic principles underpinning them (Greacen 2021). In 2021, however, the army started to explore alternative avenues by announcing its plan to develop up to 30,000 MW of solar farms on its own land without involving the Ministry of Energy, let alone NGOs. Given that the Thai energy systems already have excessive amounts of overcapacity (up to 59 percent in 2020), this unprecedented move is likely to further enrich the military at the expense of efficiency and equity. Instead of mitigating climate change, it is more likely to further entrench military power and do so behind closed doors, far removed from any civil society interference (Greacen 2021).

These changes in government policy towards a more favorable view of solar energy accompanied a new government discourse around ‘Thailand 4.0’ (Archanun Kohpaiboon 2020). Under this discourse, Prayut and the government began to see a range of new technologies and their delivery through mechanisms such as ‘Smart Cities’ as key to both continued economic growth

and political survival. However, the sometimes anarchic nature of hi-tech development is not well suited to the top-down decision-making and the picking of winners, which is a characteristic of the military regime and its semi-civilian successor. In addition, ad hoc and contradictory policy positions – such as those relating to renewable energy – and corruption and political instability have led to difficulties in attracting hi-tech foreign investments to the country.

Climate activism: The Thai Climate Justice Network

Having sketched the historical and more recent developments in national climate and energy politics in Thailand, we now zoom in on a case of a specific civil society organization in this field: the Thai Climate Justice Network (TCJ). We do this to show how particular organizations navigate the changing landscape of climate and energy policy in Thailand. In particular, the pendulum of authoritarianism versus more liberal regimes the country has seen over time.

TCJ was a network of around ten Thai civil society groups set up in 2008 to work on climate mitigation in the agriculture, energy, and forestry sector. The network organized events, campaigns, and other activities on diverse topics related to climate change through its Facebook presence and website. As a network organization, activities were also linked to the interests and objectives of the different member organizations. It generally adopted a very critical stance towards climate change policy in Thailand.

An early essential activity of the TCJ was to critically follow and comment on the development of the Climate Change Master Plan, developed by ONEP in 2010. TCJ saw this as a key policy document and, therefore, a pivotal issue to campaign on for people to understand the whole picture of climate change. They tried to join the public meetings and influence the Master Plan. ONEP, meanwhile, tried to keep TCJ out of these negotiations. The Director suggested they were open to public dialogue with civil society organizations who were interested in implementation or policy formulation; still, he was concerned about NGOs like TCJ because he “did not want them to destroy the process” (personal communication with ONEP Director, 20 April 2015).

The above example shows that it is difficult for organizations like TCJ to influence the policymaking process in Thailand. First, they are often not welcome to engage in policy dialogues if they are seen as being ‘too critical’. Secondly, it is not easy to target the most relevant policies. In this case, the Climate Change Master Plan proved to be relatively unimportant in the political landscape in Thailand. TCJ eventually characterized it as a ‘paper tiger’ because, according to them, ONEP did not have the power to influence certain key sectors, such as agriculture and energy.

Another focal point of TCJ was the use of market-based climate policy instruments, such as Payment for Ecosystem Services and carbon markets. They critiqued some of the many CDM projects in Thailand, raising concerns

about rice husk gasification causing excessive local pollution, and funding for the controversial Mae Mo lignite power plant (UNFCCC 2016). In 2013, they wrote an open letter about Thailand's REDD+ readiness plan (REDD Monitor 2013), where they criticized the limited opportunities for civil society organizations to provide input on this plan and for failing to include the plight of forest communities. They also argued that REDD+ had the potential to aggravate conflicts.

This example shows that there is still plenty of scope within illiberal governments to make use of global governance instruments that function under liberal (market-based) governance. The irony is that there is often no requirement of adhering to liberal principles within these instruments, such as freedom of consent and public participation, which is a persistent critique of mechanisms such as the CDM and REDD+ (Pearse and Böhm 2014; Newell, 2012).

Although TCJ had some successes, the 2014 coup was a major setback and a major shift towards a less liberal regime. It affected the work of TCJ in two main ways. First, in the immediate aftermath of the coup, people were totally absorbed with the political situation and its immediate consequences. The general interest in, and ability to discuss, environmental issues in large groups decreased. TCJ had planned to launch an extensive campaign, but this was difficult and attracted little attention at the time. The second consequence was that the coup meant less space for civil society organizations to work. In the first period after the coup, the government imposed martial law which prevented political gatherings of more than five people. Under the new constitution, Prayuth replaced martial law with Article 44, a law granting the leader absolute power (Corben 2016). The concentration of power was also felt by the TCJ, who argued that the military government was pushing forward projects without taking public participation into account (Simpson & Smits 2018). These cumulative impacts eventually led TCJ to cease all public activity.

Conclusion

This chapter analysed energy and climate governance in Thailand through the lens of environmental authoritarianism. While this debate mainly centers on whether liberal or illiberal regimes contribute to better environmental or climate outcomes, we also investigated the role played by civil society and whether such regimes contribute to climate justice. The Thai political context generally alternates between more and less liberal regimes, and we mapped the parallel developments and fates of climate policy, energy policy, and activism in the country.

At a general level, the political developments over the last few decades in Thailand demonstrate that we cannot simply state that illiberalism or environmental authoritarianism necessarily does, or does not, result in climate action. This is partly because the changes in regimes in Thailand tend to be frequent, so there is some continuity of governance and bureaucracies within the state, whatever the regime in power. Nevertheless, the political changes mask more profound underlying social and political inequalities and processes in the country, and the

effects are not immediately visible. Thus, while climate and energy governance in the context of Thailand has been relatively progressive on some fronts, achieving just and equitable outcomes has proved complicated, and civil society is often barred from participating in or critiquing the direction of climate and energy policy.

For instance, the government's relatively liberal renewable energy policies are nevertheless rife with technocratic and elitist processes that, particularly during military rule, serve to reinforce the political and economic dominance of the military at the expense of transparency, accountability, and societal equity. Given that the rationale for climate action is intergenerational justice, it seems clear that climate mitigation or adaptation which exacerbates contemporary inequalities and injustices is little better than no action at all. The rise and fall of the Thai Climate Justice Network demonstrates the barriers to civil society activism in Thailand, particularly under more illiberal regimes. The group was eventually silenced in the aftermath of the 2014 military coup. It is difficult not to conclude that climate justice outcomes would be better served when these civil society organizations have the political space for policy critique and advocacy.

These developments in Thailand, where climate change governance is linked to activism, justice and the state, hold broader relevance for other countries in the region. This is not only because Thailand is one of the most significant contributors of greenhouse gas emissions in Southeast Asia but also because of the importance of understanding climate change governance under less liberal regimes, which are plentiful throughout the region. To the north and west of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia are critical examples of states with longer histories of stable illiberal governments, whereas to the east Myanmar has returned to a much less liberal regime following a coup in 2021. In these and other countries in the region and the world, it is essential to look beyond the immediate political situations and investigate both the immediate and longer-term political economies of states to determine the consequences for climate and energy governance and justice. With the impacts of climate change becoming more severe and the regional share of global greenhouse gas emissions growing, adaptation *and* mitigation will become increasingly important in Southeast Asia. While it is clear that climate action is possible under more illiberal regimes, without the participation and support of civil society, these countries may either fail to meet their targets or achieve these targets while exacerbating injustices within the country, which undermines the entire rationale for action.

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