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Jacob RICKS
Singapore Management University, JACOBRICKS@smu.edu.sg

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State Institutions in Northeast Thailand: Lao Ethnics and the Thai Identity

Jacob Ricks
Assistant Professor of Political Science
School of Social Sciences
Singapore Management University
10 Canning Rise, Level 05
Singapore 179873

The largest community of ethnically Lao people in the world is not in Laos; numbering about 3.4 million, they compose only slightly over half the country's population (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). Many more Lao people live across the Mekong River in Thailand. While the Thai government does not differentiate the Lao in its census, scholars have used language, one of the main identifiers of ethnicity, to identify Lao ethnics, estimating that the number of Lao in Thailand ranges between 13 and 18 million, populating the country's northeastern region (Draper & Peerasit, 2016; Keyes, 1997; 2003; Lewis et al. 2015; Suwilai et al., 2004). In other words, there are potentially five times as many Lao people in Thailand as in Laos. For Thailand, then, the Lao are a significant presence, making up almost one-third of the total population. Indeed, according to some estimates, the Lao-speaking population is almost as large as the population of native central Thai speakers, with some scholars claiming that "more people in Thailand speak Lao as their first language than central Thai" (Platt, 2013: x; Smalley, 1994).

With such a large Lao population geographically concentrated in northeastern Thailand, one might expect to find political movements grounded in the Lao or the northeastern regional identity, especially since the Lao suffer many systemic disadvantages, both economic and political (Draper & Selway, 2019). Indeed, theories of ethnic politics predict that such movements could easily exist (Wimmer, 2013: 102-104). Yet the ethnically Lao people in Thailand do not evidence any major political movements associated with their ethnic identity (Ricks, 2019). Indeed, while they still refer to themselves as Lao among co-ethnics (Saowanee and McCargo, 2014), many eschew the identifier of Lao when interacting with outsiders, preferring instead to be designated Thai or *Isan*, a term from Pali meaning "Northeast" that the Thai state adopted to refer to the Lao within their borders (Iijima, 2018). Pressures for regionalism have been largely bypassed or suppressed (Keyes, 1967). In other words, despite some potential indicators that would favor a regional movement, the Lao in

Thailand appear to have no major political movements, at least relative to other parts of Southeast Asia discussed in this volume. In that sense, they serve as a puzzling negative case.

Why have we not seen the rise of an ethnic or regional movement in northeast Thailand? What is the propensity for ethnic mobilization today? How do the Lao view their ethnic, regional, and national identities?

I address these questions by first outlining over a century of government policies that the Thai state implemented to impress upon all parties that Lao people are Thai people, maintaining there is no significant difference between the two, either ethnically or linguistically (Grabowsky, 1996; Iimima, 2018; Keyes, 1997). Then, utilizing original survey data as well as interviews, I underscore both underlying grievances as well as potential for ethnic mobilization that still exist among Isan people. Despite this, I also present evidence suggesting that Thai nationalism has the capacity to overpower the potential for regional movements. In short, the Thai state's century-long nation-building strategy has largely precluded opportunities for regionalism to flourish.

This chapter, then, demonstrates the strength of government policies in shaping ethnic identities. Nationalism can trump ethnic identities. Such findings are in line with a growing body of literature on the strength of nationalism, which can change the behavior of large ethnic populations (Charnysh, Lucas, and Singh, 2015; Wimmer, 2018). At the same time, though, the regional identity of Isan people has become strong, raising the potential for future political action.

Unifying Thai Identity

Thailand is often considered ethnically homogenous. This perception, though, is the result of a century-long series of government policies, designed to unify all people within Thailand under a single, government-approved "Thai" ethnicity (Streckfuss, 2015; Selway,

2007). Efforts to homogenize the nation focused on language, religion, and symbols of national unity, such as the monarchy (Thongchai, 1994; Vella, 1978). Portraying unity, both to external and domestic audiences, has masked a great deal of ethnic and linguistic diversity, which has been perhaps most successful in the country's northeast, a region encompassing the Khorat Plateau, extending from the Phetchabun range in the west to the Mekong River in the east. Today the region is divided into twenty provinces and houses approximately one-third of Thailand's population, the vast majority of whom are ethnically Lao.

The decision to turn the Lao in this region into Thais was begun under the centralization reforms during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910). Chulalongkorn ruled as Siam's[1] absolute monarch during the zenith of Western colonial power in Southeast Asia, at a time when the kingdom faced significant pressures and threats. For a state that had depended upon mandala-style relationships with its vassals found across mainland Southeast Asia, the imposition of European concepts of governance and rule necessitated rapid adaptation. Western powers extracted multiple concessions from the kingdom, including unequal treaties, extraterritoriality, and drawing new borders that constrained the Siamese, spurring feelings of national humiliation along with the threat of colonization (Thongchai, 1994; Strate, 2015). Chulalongkorn responded to the European menace by transforming the kingdom's system of rule, adopting an internal colonial-style bureaucratic system, and seeking opportunities to stymie potential claims that the British or French might leverage to further colonize the kingdom. This included reducing the potential for ethnic tensions between the Siamese rulers and people who found themselves within the newly drawn boundaries of the state.

The Siamese government had long looked upon "the Lao as an inferior breed;" a people that had been involved in warfare and rebellion against the Siamese state (Breazele,

[1] The country would change its name to Thailand in 1939.

1975: 213). As the Siamese state adjusted to its new boundaries, concerns rose that the Lao would see themselves as linked to their kin under French colonial power, which might spur the French to declare suzerainty over more land or the Lao to rebel against their Thai rulers. King Chulalongkorn expressed apprehension when considering whether the Lao would choose to support Thai claims to the area: "The bloody Lao consider themselves a separate race from us. Would they be loyal to us; or would they rise up in mutiny?" (quoted in Breazele, 1975: 238-239). The differentiation of ethnics posed great danger for the Siamese palace's claims on the west bank of the Mekong.

The palace deliberately developed a set of policies to identify the Lao and other ethnic minority groups within the Siamese boundaries as belonging to Siam through shaping and defining what it meant to be Thai. The mechanisms through which the Thai state consolidated "Thai-ness (*khwampen Thai*)," operated through both positive and negative reinforcement. First, on the positive side, the Thai elite, a relatively homogenous group, used their homogeneity and dominance over the political system to reward those who adopted and embraced Thai-ness. This operated through a few mechanisms, but perhaps the most influential was the creation of an ethnic and linguistic hierarchy wherein the state-approved Thai identity was granted much higher status and recognition than any other.

The identity, though, was not exclusionary. Skinner (1960) argued that in 19th century Thailand, incentives existed that rewarded Chinese immigrants who abandoned their old ethnic identities to become Thai; indeed, there was upward social mobility for those who adopted Thai-ness. Thus, the Chinese chose to become Thai in Siam, while their counterparts in Java found no such benefits to assimilation. Similar incentives for willing assimilation to other ethnic groups, including the Lao (Dararat, 2003), although it appears that the traditional Lao elites received fewer benefits than their Chinese-ancestry counterparts (Vickery, 1970).

Kukrit Pramoj (quoted in Smalley, 1994: 322-323), who served briefly as prime minister, explained the fluid nature of *khwampen Thai*:

> A Thai is not a person who is born by blood … if you do something to yourself, then you become a Thai. [This] means you accept Thai values, Thai ideals, mostly you become a Buddhist. You worship the Lord Buddha, his teaching and the holy order of monks. And you respect your parents, you respect your teachers, … you are loyal to the king and … to the Thai nation, and you accept all kinds of ceremonies, you wear amulets around your neck, figures of the Lord Buddha, you get ordained as a Buddhist monk, you add the Thai ceremonies at home whether wedding or anniversary or things like that. You enjoy life in the Thai way and you have the same sort of Thai escape mechanisms when trouble arises… The Thais know each other. [We know] whether or not another person is a Thai … regardless of … skin color or religious belief. Because the various religions like Christianity and Islam have been established in this country for centuries and the people of those two religions including the Taoists from China … became Thai because they accepted all kinds of Thai values, ideas and customs even though their religious beliefs remain from the beginning.

Language was an important part of this hierarchy, and central or Standard Thai became privileged above the alternative languages which served as the primary indicators of ethnicity (Ricks, 2020). The Thai state sought to spread Standard Thai throughout the country, reducing the perception of the language's exclusivity (Diller, 2002). National education policies developed to carry out the endeavor, and the use of local languages was strongly discouraged with mandated use of Thai script, "so that, at a minimum, the Lao language spoken [in the North and Northeast] would be induced to become more like Thai" (Breazele, 1975: 259-260). Smalley (1994: 340) noted:

> The language hierarchy in Thailand is one dimension of a larger ethnic hierarchy, and language is one of the most significant elements of ethnicity there. Because people accept the linguistic and ethnic hierarchy, on the one hand, and soften its levels with porous linguistic and ethnic boundaries, Thailand's unity in diversity becomes possible.

In sum, acting as a carrot for alternate ethnicities within the Thai geo-body, the high-status of the Thai ethnicity, primarily through language, encouraged its adoption.

At the opposite end of the scale, the Thai state also carried a big stick to threaten those who might adopt alternate identities. This forced consolidation of Thai identity was developed through Chulalongkorn's administrative system, and it was promoted especially by

his brothers. Prince Damrong pushed for the adoption of a singular Thai identity by ordering provincial officials to stop referring to their subjects as Lao. He wrote, "people in Bangkok have long called [the peoples of northern and northeastern Siam] Lao. Today, however, we know they are Thai, not Lao" (quoted in Keyes, 2003: 187). Government documents were modified to replace the term Lao with Thai (Iijima, 2018). State schools were expanded, teaching Standard Thai. Along the way, local dialects were banned, and materials written in the tongues were destroyed (Liu & Ricks, 2012: 498-499).

When Chulalongkorn died and his nationalist son took the helm, the Thai identity became even more pronounced with a focus on nation, religion, and the monarchy. Vajiravudh had been educated in England, where he gained an appreciation for the power of nationalism and the ability of the state to encourage national identity. During his fifteen years on the throne (1910-1925), the nature of Thai-ness became central to the creation of the nation (Vella, 1978). This system of "official nationalism" reinforced social hierarchies and ensconced a Thai-centric worldview as the basis of the national identity (Anderson, 1983).

After the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932 and the rise of the military in politics, ethnicity and the potential for regionalism became an issue of national security, and the first government of Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram (1938-1944) adopted multiple manifestations of what it meant to be a proper "Thai," which ranged from proper greetings, proper behavior, proper language, as well as culinary specialties, including the invention and spread of the popular dish *phad thai* (Kobkua, 1995; see also Diller, 2002). The effort at consolidating Thai-ness went so far as to change the name of the country from Siam to Thailand to better align the Thai ethnicity with the country's boundaries. Phibun also continued the unification of a central religious identity (Ricks, 2008). The Phibun government was so successful in completing the consolidation of the Thai identity that after

the end of his first term as prime minister in 1944, "the establishment of Thai as the national language would never again be questioned" (Keyes, 2003: 192).

The government stick, though, was not limited to forced adoption of Thai language in schools and Thai practices, it also evidenced itself as suppression of regional movements. These included brutal quelling of the Holy Man rebellion in 1902 as well as suppression of Buddhist movements in the North under the direction of Khrupa Sriwichai (Bowie, 2014). Later in the 1950s, with the military in power, political leaders from the northeast were murdered by the state to reduce the propensity for ethno-regionalism. These efforts, though, probably fueled rather than hindered the growth of the Communist Party of Thailand during the 1960s and 1970s. The CPT, though, never became a separatist movement. By this time, even facing massive inequalities between urban Thais in Bangkok and rural Lao in northeast Thailand, the Thai identity had sufficient root that there were no calls to break away from Thailand and join Laos (Somchai, 2002; Keyes, 1967).

Thus, the Thai state sought to consolidate the Thai identity using both positive and negative reinforcement. Throughout the past century, successive Thai governments continued to promote a unified Thai identity to reduce the propensity for threats to the state from within, which has served to neutralize challenges from alternative ethnic groups.

Regionalism's Potential

Despite these assimilation policies, the Lao people of northeastern Thailand have also developed a deep sense of pride in their regional identity, which is most often publicly referred to as Isan. The Isan identity became more public during the 1990s at the same time as other regional identities throughout Thailand have become more evident (Jory, 1999; Draper et al., 2019). Some scholars have suggested that the identity is becoming a potential focal point for political mobilization, wherein the Lao people of Isan engage in resistance to

the Thai state (McCargo and Krisdawan, 2004; Saowanee and McCargo, 2016; 2019). The influence of the identity has a potentially significant impact on politics, as the Thai Rak Thai party and its successors have all found strong support throughout northeastern provinces. Here, drawing upon results from two original surveys as well as 23 semi-structured interviews,[2] I provide additional evidence of potential sources for regionalism in Isan.

First, people of northeastern Thailand have long been subject to derision by central Thais who look down on northeasterners as lower class (Sophornthavy, 2017). As I conducted interviews with Isan people in 2017, I was alerted to a meme being shared on Facebook among Isan youth, using Thai script imposed on a rice field with the message, "Are you ashamed if you speak your home language and someone calls you a yokel?"[3] The statement reflects the experience of many Isan people who have suffered slights due to their use of Isan language or a strong accent when speaking central Thai. The sentiment was reflected in interviews. One laborer from Nakhon Phanom related his experience working in Thailand's central plains, "When they heard us speak Isan, they would say, 'This one is from Lao.' And they wouldn't like us. Usually they didn't speak well with us … Isan people must endure... we have to endure their insults. We can't respond. Just endure them" (interview, Sakon Nakhorn, 24 July 2017). Other interviewees related similar experiences, although approximately half of them reported never having personally been disparaged due to their Isan identity despite being aware of such occurrences either through friends or media.

To better gauge how widespread this sentiment is spread among Isan people, I included two questions in an online survey of 400 Isan people conducted in May 2020. First,

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[2] Information presented here draws from three sources: (1) an original online survey conducted between 12 May and 1 June 2020 among 400 Isan people; (2) an original face-to-face survey conducted among 750 Isan people in January 2016 (reported in Ricks 2020); and (3) semi-structured interviews conducted with 23 Isan people from December 2016 through July 2017 (reported in Ricks 2019). As the online survey relied on respondents who had voluntarily joined an online survey sample, we must be careful about extrapolating these survey results to a wider population. For a deeper discussion of online samples versus face-to-face surveys see Duffy et al. (2005).

[3] In Thai: อายหรือไม่..หากต้องพูดภาษาบ้านเกิด แล้วมีคนบอกว่า "บ้านนอก"

I asked them whether Isan people are generally treated worse, better, or the same as most Thai people. Second, I asked them whether people from their home province are generally treated worse, better, or the same as people from Bangkok. In both cases, a significant number marked that Isan people were treated worse. In the first question, 39.6 percent (146 of 369) of those who answered the question noted that Isan people are treated worse than most Thai people. In the second question, 46.4 percent (169 of 364) responded the same regarding people from their home province in relation to people from Bangkok. Only 9.5 percent (35) and 15.7 percent (57) respondents marked the respective "better" category, with most other responses falling in "the same" category (50.9 percent or 188 and 37.9 percent or 138, respectively). While the survey cannot be considered completely representative of Isan people, it should be troubling that between one-third and one-half of respondents feel their group is treated poorly. Such resentments could provide fodder for ethnic mobilization.

Second, as the main identifier of regionalism in Thailand is language, I conducted two separate survey experiments, conducted four years apart, to test the impact of Isan language overtures on political opinions among Isan people. One of those experiments occurred in January 2016 and is reported in Ricks (2020). The other, conducted via an online survey in May 2020, repeated those methods. In both experiments, respondents heard a short audio clip from a political speech. Through random assignment, approximately half of respondents heard the Central Thai version of the speech, while the other half heard Isan. The substance of the speech was the same, and it was recorded by the same individual, meaning it only varied on language. The respondents then ranked their responses to a series of statements regarding the speech based on a five-point Likert scale ranked from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.[4]

[4] For more details on the experiment, see Ricks (2020).

Table 1: Isan Language Treatment Effects		
	Survey Experiment	
Statements	**In person, 2016**	**Online, 2020**
I would trust the speaker to represent my village.	0.229** (0.070)	0.257** (0.085)
The speaker would be a good Member of Parliament from my region.	0.106* (0.062)	0.220** (0.085)
The speaker would be a good member of the sub-district government.	0.098* (0.056)	0.290** (0.075)
I would consider voting for the speaker if he were running for office.	0.152** (0.068)	0.184** (0.085)
The speaker likely understands the challenges facing me and my family.	0.177** (0.073)	0.226** (0.086)
The speaker likely comes from the same social class as I do.	0.022 (0.087)	0.375** (0.096)
The speaker was likely born in the same region as me.	0.774** (0.075)	0.851** (0.080)
The speaker likely has a similar background to my own.	0.330** (0.087)	0.534** (0.086)
The speaker and I likely share some of the same political opinions.	0.254** (0.074)	0.224** (0.090)
The speaker is well-prepared for national leadership.	0.001 (0.074)	0.077 (0.088)
The speaker would likely be able to represent my interests in policymaking.	0.142** (0.068)	0.189** (0.086)
The speaker is well-educated.	0.072 (0.058)	0.028 (0.076)
The speaker's suggestions are good.	0.188** (0.062)	0.263** (0.079)
The speaker is persuasive.	0.291** (0.071)	0.217** (0.081)

Notes: The cells record the difference of means between the group which heard the Isan language clip and the group that heard the informal standard Thai language clip. Standard errors in parentheses. In the 2016 survey, 248 individuals heard the Isan treatment, while 250 heard the Central Thai treatment. In the 2020 survey, 211 heard Isan, while 189 heard Central Thai.
* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$

Comparing responses between the Central Thai language treatment group and the Isan language treatment group demonstrates that the impact of the Isan language was largely consistent across both surveys, shown in Table 1.[5] The only major difference is seen in the

[5] The Ricks (2020) survey used a formal bureaucratic standard Thai linguistic treatment group as the baseline comparison group for analysis. This repeat of the experiment, though, only included two linguistic treatments, and here I use the informal standard Thai treatment group as the base category.

response to the statement “The speaker likely comes from the same social class as I do,” wherein respondents in the online experiment displayed a significant difference between the two treatment groups, while in the face-to-face survey, they did not. Such a difference may have been due to different demographics, as the survey sample in the online version of the experiment exhibited higher socio-economic status than their counterparts in the in-person survey.

The overall results demonstrate that, on average, respondents who heard the Isan language clip reported higher agreement levels to almost all statements presented to them across both surveys. The two exceptions in both surveys include perceptions of the education level of the speaker and whether respondents judged the speaker to be well-prepared for national office. In both cases, we saw no significant difference in responses between the two treatment groups.

Respondents in the Isan language treatment group, in contrast, ranked the speaker higher in regard to the twelve other statements ranging across topics such as feelings of kinship, whether the speaker would be a good representative, and the speakers’ appeal measured by persuasiveness. Respondents who heard the Isan language clip were also more likely to indicate an interest in voting for the speaker if he were to campaign for office in their area. It appears that exposure to Isan language can truly impact an Isan individual’s opinion about a politician, with the language having a much more positive impact that exposure to central Thai.

Such consistency across two survey experiments conducted four years apart from each other, besides providing some scientific comfort due to receiving similar results from different populations, further suggests that a coherent Isan identity based on linguistic ties does exist and is capable of moving Isan people to action. Such potential was noted by Isan people during interviews. One interviewee explained, “when you use the local language it

gives a feeling of being personal (*pen kanton kaneng*), and you can trust each other. There's familiarity. There's trust" (interview, Khon Kaen, 19 July 2017). Others noted that the use of Isan language in political discourse would be more effective than Thai, at least at the local level.[6] While Lao ethnics in Isan have adopted the Thai national identity and see themselves as Thai, their distinct language provides the capacity for a degree of ethnic distinction and identification that has the potential for political action (see also Saowanee and McCargo, 2019).

In sum, the survey and interview data presented here suggest that the Isan identity is strong and can, through language, change people's behavior. This is potentially linked to collective and individual experiences of exclusion at the hands of central Thais (see also McCargo and Krisadawan, 2004; Saowanee and McCargo, 2014), which could contribute to an aversion to being identified as Lao ethnics. Despite this, though, we have not seen the emergence of strong region-based movements in recent years, meaning the Isan identity appears constrained relative to ethnic-based violence seen in other countries or even within Thailand (McCargo, 2008).

Thai Nationalism Among the Lao

While the data presented above does suggest there are potential bases for the emergence of regionalism, we have additional data that shows Isan people have largely embraced their identity as Thais. I contend that this provides evidence that Thai nationalism moderates any pressure for ethnic-based regional movements.

In the online survey, I asked respondents to rank how strongly they identify with both their country as well as their region. In both questions, well-over 90 percent responded either "strongly" or "very strongly," suggesting that national and regional identity are both

[6] Almost all interviewees, though, argued that using Isan language at a national level was inappropriate.

important to the group. Variation occurred between the categories, though. For the question on identification with Thailand, 53.9 percent (215 of 399) chose "very strongly" while 38.4 percent (153 of 399) chose "strongly," but respondents returned "very strongly" at 72.8 percent (291 of 400) and "strongly" at 24.0 percent (96 of 400) regarding Isan identity. This suggests that regional identity may have a stronger pull than national identity, but it also shows that most respondents felt strongly connected to Thailand.

Some interviewees had expressed similar sentiments, wherein they were proud of being both Thai and Isan, but the Isan identity was closer to their hearts. One native of Sisaket province living in Bangkok said, "I'd say I'm 55 percent Isan and 45 percent Thai because almost 90 percent of [Isan people] use Isan. And our existence is Isan. That's stuck in ourselves. We come to Bangkok to work, but it's just work. Our hearts are still in Isan" (interview, Bangkok, 14 December 2016). Another stated, "I think [the stronger identity] is Isan. It's very deep in me. The Thai identity is more acceptable in society, but it's not as close. Isan identity is part of our community, and people take it as part of the area. It's also important for the community to pass it on. Thai symbols are always there, and they aren't as deep, but they're accepted. It's more important for the community to carry on the local identity" (interview, Khon Kaen, 19 July 2017). Such opinions, combined with the survey data, suggest that for many, the Isan identity is just as strong or stronger than their Thai identity.

At the same time, though, many interviewees expressed the sentiment that there is no conflict between being Thai and being Isan. For instance, when one interviewee, an Ubon native living and working in Bangkok, was asked whether he felt prouder of being Thai or being Isan, he responded, "I have to be proud of both. Both are part of me, so I must be proud of both. Isan people are always Thai, so we can be proud" (interview, Bangkok, 16 December, 2016). Similar statements came from multiple other interviewees who emphasized

that Isan people are Thai people. In another interview, when the same question was posed, the respondent said, "I'm very proud of being Thai. It doesn't matter if you were born in Isan or the north or the south. I'm proud that I was born in Thailand" (interview, Khon Kaen, 6 April, 2017). While some interviewees expressed reservations about the military junta that was ruling Thailand at the time (2014-2019), all interviewees confirmed that their Thai identities were a source of pride.

Large-scale surveys, conducted by the Asian Barometer and World Values Survey between 2007 and 2013, also provide evidence that Isan people feel strongly committed to their Thai national identity. On average, Isan speakers gave more positive answers about feelings of national identification than their counterparts from other regions of Thailand. Four waves of the surveys asked respondents to rank their level of pride in being a Thai person. Among the 1,761 Isan speakers across all the surveys, only nine responded that they were not proud of being Thai. The remainder ranked their response as "proud" or "very proud." These findings suggested that Keyes' (2014) was correct in his evaluation that the Lao people of northeastern Thailand have adopted a Thai identity. Indeed, "Isan people display greater commitment to the national identity than native speakers of central Thai" (Ricks, 2019, p. 271).

The online survey provides another piece of evidence that the Thai state's nation-building program has been successful. Respondents were asked how they preferred to be identified. The question was posed: "Many people from Northeastern Thailand like to refer to themselves as Lao, while others prefer to use the term Isan. When you are with your family and friends, which of the following terms do you use to refer to people from the Northeast part of Thailand?" Respondents were given the choices of Lao, Isan, Thai-Lao, or no response. All 400 of the panelists responded to this question, with 19 choosing Lao (4.75 percent), 33 choosing Thai-Lao (8.25 percent), and 348 choosing Isan (87 percent). This

suggests that, at least among respondents, an overwhelming majority prefer to identify by the state-endorsed moniker rather than link to their ethnic identity.

Furthermore, regional pride appears to be most associated with politically neutral indicators. Returning to the online survey, I included a set of questions meant to tease out sources of regional pride among respondents, giving us a snapshot of respondent's sources of regional pride. This included asking respondents to rank their pride levels regarding Isan identity, traditional practices, food, language, history, leaders, and influence in Thailand. While feelings of pride were evident across most of the indicators, Isan food, language, and traditional practices evoked the strongest feelings of pride among respondents, with all three receiving over 70 percent of responses in the "Very Proud" category. On the other hand, regional leaders were marked relatively low, with over 30 percent of respondents indicating that they were not proud of leaders. Isan's influence in Thailand and the history of the region also received substantially lower marks than food, language, and traditional practices. This suggests that regional pride is largely focused on relatively benign factors, while the region's history, leaders, and influence in Thailand, which were the target of state suppression in history, have less impact.

Despite the potential impact of language on political opinions and the continued presence of grievances among the Lao against central Thais, the evidence reviewed here suggests that there is little to fear regarding that the potential for Isan identity to transform into a regional movement. The Thai state's efforts to create a Thai identity among Isan people has largely achieved its goal, imbuing them with a strong sense of Thai nationalism and nesting regional identity within a framework of nationalism. The Lao people of northeastern Thailand have thus adopted a Thai identity and become part of the Thai nation. They see themselves as Thais, and they imagine their ethnic identities as a subset of being

Thai rather than an alternate ethnic group. The Thai state's century-long efforts at top-down nation-building appear to have been successful.

Conclusion

The ethnically Lao people of northeastern Thailand have experienced over a century of integration efforts by the Thai state. These policies were begun under colonial threat, which was used to justify brutal suppression of ethnic identity and regional mobilization efforts. Now, over a century later, the identity of the Lao people has evolved into a regional identification as Isan, with the people of the region expressing a strong commitment to Thai nationalism. Being Thai has become a part of their identities, but being Isan is also an important identifier nested within a Thai identity.

It is important to note that the assimilation of the Lao identity during Thai nation-building occurred under authoritarian regimes, specifically the absolute monarchy and the military dictatorships that followed. The brief periods without direct military rule that followed the fall of the absolute monarchy (1933-1938) and the end of World War Two (1944-1947), saw the rise of northeasterners to political prominence, some of whom treated ethnicity as an important political issue (Dararat, 2003; Keyes, 1967). In an alternate history, wherein the military had not dominated politics and crushed ethnic Lao leaders, perhaps we would have seen the rise of an Isan regional movement, but the long legacy of authoritarian rule in Thailand still hinders recognition of Lao identity.

This has a potential implication for Thai politics, wherein regional identity has the potential to be an enduring political cleavage. We already see that the Thai Rak Thai party and its successors (People Power Party and Pheu Thai) have found a strong base of support among Isan people. While these parties do not explicitly campaign on ethnic or regional grounds, for many in Isan, the identification has become clear. For instance, a man from

Mahasarakham living in Bangkok declared, “I’m Isan, so I vote Pheu Thai (*phom khon isan, phom long phak pheu thai*)” (interview, Bangkok, 15 December 2016). Similar sentiments can be found throughout the region.

While such potential for mobilization may be concerning for the Thai military and Thai elites, I would suggest that the rise of any Isan-based political activities should not be seen as a threat to the Thai nation (Ricks, 2019). Isan people see themselves as Thai. They are proud of their country. Isan political mobilization is, instead, about democratic engagement of a group that has long been excluded in Thailand’s growth.

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