

# Elites, Climate Action and the Future: Reflections on Two Cases from Thailand

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**ABSTRACT**—Like other Asian megacities, Bangkok is suffering from the “heat island” effect and from deteriorating air quality. While means to counteract these problems are well known, little has been done. The urban elite which dominates policy making has shown little interest in climate change, and seems confident in its ability to protect itself from its effects. By contrast, in the northern city of Chiang Mai, the persistent problem of haze prompted the formation of a broad-based coalition which planned an innovative approach to managing forest to minimize fires. This case shows the importance of democratic process and coalition building for action to combat climate change. The coming generations will need to strengthen and exploit the democratic process in order to supplant the old elite and institute policies to manage the impact of climate change.

Traditional elites are a form of heritage. They are social constructs formed in the past, which have survived into the present with some remaining authority based on their age and their historical role. In some cases, their accumulated knowledge and their attachment to other forms of heritage can serve as a counter to the destructive aspects of modernity. A prime example of relevance to this conference is the 2015 encyclical of Pope Francis known as “*Laudato Si*”. In this passionate document, the Pope invoked the memory of St Francis to call for “a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet” (Francis 2015).

In Southeast Asia, the traditional elites have mostly been destroyed or sidelined. Colonialism followed by nationalism largely devastated the old political elites clustered around traditional rulers. With only a few exceptions, landed elites have diminished in importance with the rise of the urban economy. The new secular states have been careful to limit the authority of religious leaders within the religious sphere and prevent their intrusion into politics.

In Thailand, the traditional religious establishment, the Buddhist Sangha, has produced several thinkers who have articulated ideas about the economy and the environment. These thinkers are important as individuals, but the Buddhist Sangha as an institution has been carefully isolated from politics. As detailed elsewhere in this volume by Ajan Chaiwat and Phra Anil, Buddhist monks sometimes play important roles in local campaigns over issues such as protecting the environment or managing waste. But the Sangha has produced nothing with the same force and reach as a papal encyclical.

Across Southeast Asia, the dominant elites today are the new urban elites underpinned by the modern urban economy and the modern political structures of bureaucracy, military, judiciary and parliament. They are sometimes allied with or fused with remnants of traditional power, including old rulers, aristocrats and landed gentry, but their mentality is shaped by the modern urban economy in a globalized world. Any significant action on climate issues requires the support and participation of these elites.

In this article, I examine the role of these urban elites by briefly reviewing two case studies of climate issues in Thailand in the last few years. The first issue is about the implications of global warming and urbanization. The second is about the management of forests. In the conclusion, I reflect on some implications for the politics of climate action in the future.

### City, heat, power

The combination of several aspects of climate change – more erratic weather, migration, rising temperature and deteriorating air quality – is creating critical conditions in Asian cities, including Thailand’s capital, Bangkok.

Across the world, climate change is undermining old livelihoods and forcing people to move. This “human flow”, as the artist Ai Weiwei called it, can be seen at the southern border of the US and the boats crossing the Mediterranean into Europe and the English Channel into Britain. In Asia, it is less obvious but present and increasing.

Recently the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (UN-IPCC) confirmed that the Indian monsoon, which affects South and Southeast Asia, is becoming more erratic, bringing more droughts, more heatwaves, and, especially, more local instances of flooding, often of spectacular severity (UN-IPCC 2021: 118–20, 1094–96; Srinivasan



Figure 1. Flooding in Khon Kaen by Storm Podul (photo: Chakkrapan Natanri, Bangkok Post, 1 September 2019)

2019; see Figure 1). This erratic weather means that every year some marginal farmers reach the point where they cannot survive. Their last resort is their feet. They migrate.

In Asia, such migrants mainly move to the cities because land elsewhere is no longer available and the city offers their best chance of finding work. They target the larger cities, the national and regional capitals, because these cities have much better economic opportunities and much better social infrastructure as a result of past development policies. Urban growth in Asia is concentrated in megacities. Of the world's sixty largest cities, forty-two are in Asia.

Thailand fits this pattern. Between the 1997 financial crisis and 2020, some three million people, a quarter of those remaining in agriculture, left the villages. Over these two decades, one-in-five people moved from rural to urban areas, whether because they moved to the city or the city moved to them. By 2020, the urban population had overtaken the rural at 51.4 per cent. Bangkok has long been a “primate city,” far larger than its nearest rival. The population of Greater Bangkok grew from ten million in 2000 to eighteen million in 2020.

Megacities have mega-problems – of congestion, traffic, air pollution, water supply, waste disposal, and much else. Global warming compounded by the concentration of population and economic activity creates a micro-climate, a “heat island.” Bangkok is now several degrees hotter than the surrounding countryside (Figure 2), and recently the authorities have begun to count “heat deaths” in the mortality statistics. Atmospheric pollution has significantly deteriorated over the past decade. Some is caused by crop

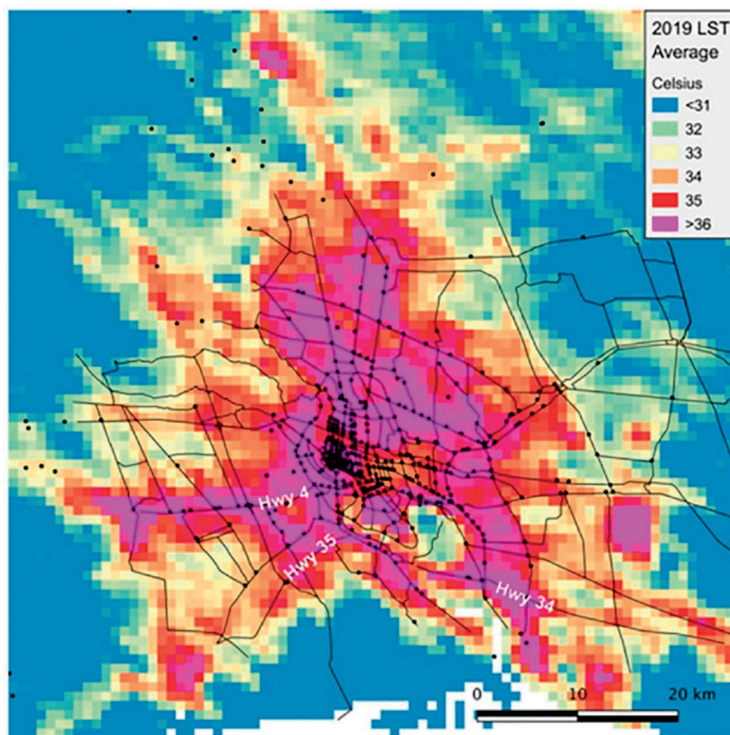


Figure 2. Temperature difference in Bangkok (source: Bentley et al., *Asian Geographer* 2020, via Marks and Connell 2023)

burning and forest fires, but most is locally generated by traffic, construction, and industry (Marks and Connell 2023).

Across the world, urban planners and architects have been creative in proposing solutions including green cities, sponge cities (which can store excess water for use later), 15-minute Cities (where residence, work and shopping are within a journey of that time), and ecologically appropriate buildings. Two decades ago, the Chinese government understood the trend of urban concentration and laid plans for “new-type urbanization” focusing on “equality, happiness, health, the green economy and efficiency” (Yu 2021). Some Chinese cities have adopted such ideas, especially Xixian, and there are showcase projects elsewhere (UN-IPCC 2021: 984).



Figure 3. Benjakitti Park, Bangkok, at its opening in December 2021 (photo: Chris Baker)

Two major problems in Bangkok are traffic and the lack of green space. Bangkok has only 3.3 square metres per person, the lowest for any Asian city, and only one square meter of parks per person. The authorities try to boost these figures by including “golf courses, street medians, underdeveloped land, shrubs, and undeveloped land along the coast” (Marks and Connell 2023: 9). Recently the city acquired a new green space, Benjakitti Park (Figure 3), which is exceptionally beautiful, and urban activists have helped to develop several local “pocket parks,” but these are too small to have any impact on the statistics or the micro-climate.

The Bangkok traffic has been a focus of complaint since the epic jams in the boom years of 1986–1997 through the recent years of steadily deteriorating air quality. Yet there have been no policies to restrict the ownership or usage of vehicles. The number of cars in the city grew from 4.2 million to 10.7 million over 1999–2019. Mass transit systems have developed slowly. Any proposals to restrict vehicle access by zoning or by

limiting provisions for parking evoke howls of protest from car owners. Free use of the car has become a symbol of middle-class self-assertion.

The policies needed to combat the heat island effect and deteriorating air quality are quite simple—controls on traffic, better urban architecture, more greenery. There are NGOs, activists and academics who have been pushing for such measures for many years, but without significant result. The urban elite which ultimately dictates policy on such matters has shown little interest in climate change, even though they are subject to its effects. Why is this so?

Thailand's governments have pursued growth while paying only lip-service to equity, resulting in high levels of inequality in income and especially in wealth. This pattern has emerged while hierarchical structures from the ancient regime still linger in language and norms of behaviour. In addition, the weak rule of law means that money, social status, and personal networks can be leveraged to secure privileges as a matter of everyday course.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the social elites focus on protecting *themselves* from the impact of climate change rather than society as a whole or humanity as a whole. The rich and powerful establish preferential claims on resources that are becoming scarcer—on space, nature, clean air, safe water, and tolerable temperature. They establish these claims through market mechanisms, especially the real estate market, but also through their political influence. Luxury real estate projects sell privileged access to urban greenery, cleaner air, and safer streets (Figure 4). They promise to insulate their residents from “urban chaos.” Helicopter services promise to save them from “traffic chaos.” The well-off invest in systems to heat, cool, and filter air at the expense of everyone else. And they do everything possible to evade paying taxes to fund policies for better infrastructure and more welfare. These trends will intensify



Figure 4. Bangkok condo advertisement, January 2023.

as urban environments deteriorate with more crowding, more heatwaves, more air pollution, more competition over water.

### People, forests, haze

The second case offers a partial exception to the general picture outlined above. This case concerns the critical levels of air pollution in northern Thailand, especially in the city of Chiang Mai. This case requires some background on the debate over the protection of forests.

In the mid-20th century, half of Thailand's forest cover was lost, mainly to the expansion of agriculture. In the 1980s, government resolved to protect what remained, ideally by emptying these areas of people. However, several million people were already living inside areas defined as forests; some were long-settled there, and felt they had the right to remain; some were recently imported for political reasons and had often been promised they would be allowed to stay; most wanted to remain; in total they may have been a quarter or more of the rural population; they were denied rights to land, a basic asset of a rural economy and society. This set the scene for debates and disputes over people and forests. As described by Suwichan and Greene elsewhere in this volume, forest communities argued that they should be allowed to remain resident in the forests because they had the expertise to protect them. The authorities, and especially the army, argued that people destroyed forests and had to be removed. This debate raged in policy forums and academic space, while on the ground communities struggled to establish local rights and authorities sometimes used force to evict them.

The context of this debate changed in the early 21st century because of tourism and global warming.

Domestic tourism increased as the urban population became larger and richer, swelling the demand for recreation. International tourism boomed on low-cost air travel and heavy government promotion. Forest resources were targeted by tourism entrepreneurs, ranging from international and local hotel chains down to community homestays. The urban population became more interested in the forests as sites for recreation and entrepreneurial opportunity.

In northern Thailand, seasonal air pollution worsened steadily from the later 2000s. The contributing factors included traffic, industry, construction, and crop burning, but also forest fires, intensified by the warming climate (Marks 2022). The problem was especially acute in Chiang Mai, where it affected the health of large numbers of people, and also had a major impact on tourism because the seasonal spread of the haze overlapped with the peak period for international tourist arrivals in the cool season (Figures 5, 6). In 2019, the air pollution in Thailand was declared the worst in the world. Many people in Chiang Mai became interested in management of the neighboring forests, especially in Mae Chaem district, to the west and upwind of the city.

This district was a microcosm of the history of forests outlined above. Between the 1970s and 2010s, virtually all of the district was declared as national park or reserved forest, yet all these areas had some resident communities. Forest officials claimed that the communities damaged the forest and wanted to remove them. Karen communities



Figure 5, 6. (above) Haze over Chiang Mai (photo: TTRWeekly, 25 March 2019); (below) forest fire on Doi Suthep with lights of Chiang Mai in the background, April 2020 (photo: Chiang Mai Volunteer Drone Team via WWF)

responded that the exploitation by external elements (loggers, maize businesses) was the major cause. They made various proposals to show that they could live in and protect the forests sustainably, as well as increasing the forest cover with trees (Nualnoi and Olarn 2023). They joined social movements demanding community rights over land. When the air pollution peaked in the late 2010s, a broad coalition including NGOs, activists, forest villagers, sympathetic forest officials, public health specialists, other government officials, Buddhist monks and business associations (especially those interested in tourism) came together to design new way of managing the forest in order limit the air pollution

The “Mae Chaem Model”, which evolved from these discussions, began with arrangements to minimize the haze by developing water resources to moisten the forest

and by deploying villagers as forest guards. The programme was then extended to reviving degraded forests and replacing monocrop farming with agro-forestry in order to limit the pollution caused by the burning of maize waste and the large application of pesticides. Large areas were planted with bamboo, used as raw materials for making furniture which provided a source of secure income for villagers and reduced the dependency on mono-cropping. Other commercial crops include coffee, fruit trees, and vegetables. A report by the Thailand Development Research Institute found that the scheme had multiple benefits:

The change resulting from switching the farming practices in Mae Chaem to chemical-free sustainable agroforestry comes with many dimensions. The farmers are enjoying better health. Relationships within their families have improved. So has their sense of well-being. The consumers, meanwhile, are safe from foods contaminated by toxic farm chemicals. With better health among the locals, the central government has less of a financial burden in taking care of people suffering from chemical poisoning. The environmental impact is also impressive. The forests are returning, serving as a carbon sink to alleviate climate change. Such local efforts help significantly save the country's resources in tackling environmental problems. (Kannika and Natthaporn 2020)

Villagers cooperated in these schemes in the hope that they would be rewarded with some improvement in their land rights, but became less enthusiastic when some officials continued to arrest villagers for land encroachment. The villagers responded by ceasing to police forest fires. The haze returned with a vengeance in 2019–2020. Somkiat Meetham, a local environmental activists claimed: “If the officials believe they can look after the forests by themselves, let them. This is what the local villagers feel... Land rights and community-based forest conservation is the answer. Yet, power and prejudice prevail.” (Sanitsuda 2020).

Although the scheme temporarily failed, the incident was a turning point in the long-running debate over people and forests. The haze showed that the issue of managing the forests could not be separated from the issue of the forest communities; the issue of forest communities could not be separated from the issue of right to livelihood; and the issue of livelihood could not be separated from the issue of sustainability for both people and trees. The realization that these issues coincided formed the basis for a broad-based coalition including both elite and non-elite interests. The resolution of these issues continues to be a focus of struggle. To put it another way, democratic process matters.

## Conclusion

In Thailand and in other countries of Southeast Asia, the modern urban elite aspires to be part of a global elite. It often identifies itself more closely with the global elite than with the rest of its own society. This is a function of the high level of inequalities in these societies—inequalities in income, wealth, access to politics, rights and respect.

The urban elite in Thailand has shown little interest in the issue of climate change.



Many in this elite are investors or entrepreneurs in businesses that are heavy emitters, such as power generation, plastics, automobiles or plantation agriculture. They see no reason to support policies which they perceive as having little impact on them as businessmen or human beings. They argue that economic growth is more of a priority than climate change or social justice. They are confident that they can use the privileges afforded them by their wealth and by the weak rule of law to protect themselves from the impact of climate change. Of course, this trend is not special to Thailand or Southeast Asia, but may be more pronounced because of the exceptional power of these elite coalitions and the weakness of the democratic mechanisms for opposing them.

Popular politics in Southeast Asia are still in their infancy. In several more advanced countries, the development of the mass participation, political parties and civil society seen today took several centuries. In Southeast Asia, the parallel process is only around two generations deep. The pace of economic change over these two generations has been so fast and disorienting that the nascent political systems tend to be unstable and prone to authoritarianism. Of course, politics in advanced countries are often vulnerable to elite capture or swayed by ideology and misinformation, but there is generally more space for debate.

Because the currently dominant elite have this attitude to climate issues, Southeast Asia has had very little presence in the global movement to manage the impact of climate change. This should not be. Those who can make a difference are those in the younger generations who will have to live with the impact. They have a tough task ahead. They will need to strengthen the democratic processes which give a larger portion of the population access to the power needed to bring about change. They will need to ally across national boundaries to maximize their strength.

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