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Thailand is the dream of most Germans (males). The sex industry has a 15% share of the Thai BIP and therefore is an important part of the economy. The tourists contribute only a minor part – the largest portion comes from inland traffic.

Chris Silvester

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The Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej, otherwise honored by the title Rama IX, serves as a talisman made by folded paper money. For a foreigner this combination seems very strange especially in a country with harsh legislation on lese majeste.

The City of Angels in the Land of Smiles

Bangkok's full name is **Krung Thep Mahanakhon** which means »City of Angels« and is placed in the »Land of Smiles« according to Thai denomination

Travelling in foreign countries is especially nice when friends are expecting you. Therefore I followed an invitation to Thailand where I toured mostly on my own but always supported by friends via cell phone. .



Thailand embodies all clichés from sex tourism to mendicant friars, golden temples and friendly smiling people, go go girls with attached numbers and languishing lady boys, innumerable massage parlors and freshly fried insects and spiders to eat, and ...

Even before I set my foot on Thai soil, my head was filled with Thailand's internal affairs. My interest in Thai politics continued after I reached home and inspired me to compose this article. One of the ongoing controversies of this destination was a long lasting quarrel on the legitimacy of Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat's government. He was accused of corruption and buying votes a behavior exhibited by every Thai government.

The worst liability was his wife who is the sister of his ousted predecessor, Thaksin Shinawatra. Prime Minister Thaksin was deposed by a military coup while taking part in the annual meeting of the United Nations in New York in autumn 2006.

Color codings

The succeeding pro Thaksin government was fiercely attacked by the People's Alliance for Democracy PAD, a loose union of various protesters, believed to be guided by upper circles supportive of the military and the royal court. The PAD people wear yellow shirts all

Pattaya: *The Thais protect themselves against the sun, not because of fear of skin cancer but because a tanned skin is not fashionable while the tourists exchange their pale skin for the color of a grilled sausage..*





Stranded goods on the Shore of Pattaya during Christmas season: The farang (western males) drinking beer and playing cards while their shivering Thai girls lay apathetically aside.

cluding to the King who is associated with the color yellow. The demonstrators in yellow shirts gain the blessing of God for their deeds, and by implication, of the king who is venerated as a living God in Thailand. In contrast to the yellow shirts the opposition wears red shirts. Despite the fact that they do not question the king's status they were seen as traitors to the monarchy.

Restricted voting

The PAD wants a new voting system which excludes the poorer people from the countryside. The »uneducated« voters would be given only one third of the deputies because they are unable to understand democracy. Two thirds of the deputies would be determined by a high ranking council. This proposal sounds absurd, but it gained prominence as a result of the well orchestrated protests of the PAD, when thousands of followers in yellow shirts blocked the airports of Bangkok during the Christmas season 2008. After the protesters occupied the control tower of Suvarnabhumi International Airport all flights in and outbound were cancelled.

Airport hijacked

The CEO of the Thai Airport Authority justified the closing because

of fears for passengers who might be injured by the riots and the threat to the equipment on ground.

Every airport of any importance is highly protected by armored guards. They should serve to deter terrorists to enter the area altogether. Therefore one is deeply irritated how simply the Bangkok hub came to a stand still. Even the police and the military remained passive and confined themselves to avoid a chaotic situation when the PAD supporters



Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport went into operation in September 2006. The tower measures 122m believed to be the highest so far. Foto: AOT

brought in supplies for the occupiers. The explanation of their obvious standoffishness: They wanted to avoid bloodshed because the PAD had put women and children in the first row when the security forces marched in. This was seen as a lame subterfuge. The government was unable to block the roads to the air



The Grand Palace: *the Beauty and the Glory in the name of King and Buddha*

port to starve out the thousands of PAD protesters within the huge building. The blockade was lifted after eight days after the high court had dissolved the coalition parties of the pro Thaksin government. Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat accepted the verdict and stepped down.

Abhisit Vejjajiva, born in Newcastle upon Tyne in Britain, from the Democrat Party was elected the new prime minister with the votes of some treacherous deputies benevolently supported by the military. Now Abhisit tries to distance himself from the illegal PAD actions, while his foreign minister Kasit Piromya boasts of his part in the airport blockade to foreign journalists by saying, *»The protests were a lot of fun. The food was excellent. The music was excellent.«*

Politics and Economy damaged

At the same time the cabinet, with foreign minister Kasit Piromya as confessing lawbreaker on board, passed a law to enforce safety and security at airports. The Airports Authority of Thailand AOT will be entitled to disperse protesters and arrest intruders. The

finances for disturbance at and around airports were considerably increased. The yellow shirts were so successful in their political demands that they have set a shining example for the opposition on how to act. The forthcoming ASEAN conference will be relocated to Hua Hin 120 kilometers south of Bangkok to avoid clashes. This gathering of 15 Asian states will be the Abhisit Vejjajiva's first test of strength.

Anyway, the damage to the Thai economy is huge already. According to the official AOT figures only 797,315 passengers checked in at Suvarnabhumi International Airport in December 2008. This figure is less than half compared with the peak months in springtime 2008.

Empty Airport

The airport was designed to handle 45 million passengers per year, including transit passengers. If the stagnation continues, the huge futuristic airport will accommodate less than 20 million passengers in 2009. Bangkok would suffer a major setback in its ambition to become the ultimate hub in East Asia. Eight weeks after the airport closure the AOT reduced the landing fee by 20 percent. All 15 AOT members of the board resigned.

The situation in Bangkok escalated and the date of my departure from Frankfurt was imminent. I had no clue if my plane for Bangkok would take off or an alternative destination in the area was a possibility.

As usual in such circumstances I couldn't get in touch with Lufthansa Airline by phone. I sent an e-mail on the 28th of November and asked if I could postpone the journey a few days: My flight was due to December 1st.

The reply came on the 3rd of December finally: *»Since your request is dealing with a future flight, we advise you to addressing our central reservati*

on office in Thailand by phone +66 0 2 264 2400. Our local colleagues can give you detailed information on the situation at the Bangkok airport.« This was a fantastic suggestion by Lufthansa's desk! Calling to Thailand from Germany and inquire about postponing the flight of the day before yesterday?

Chaos for airline passengers

Presumably 300,000 travelers were trapped in Thailand plus some hundred passengers in Ho Chi Minh City for formerly Saigon because no planes came in from Bangkok to pick them up. You can hardly imagine how the stranded passengers suffered. They flocked in to Bangkok with no money left at the end of their holiday, no spare clothing, and no medicine. Businessmen missed important meetings, freelancers lost opportunities

to earning money. Reliable information was hard to get, communication with Thai authorities was difficult. Tourists were sent across the city driven by rumor and hope to book a flight. Families with small children were climbing steep pedestrian overflies; they want to reach provisional counters set up in Hotels always on the other side of the road. Everybody had only one desire: »Get out of Thailand as soon as possible.« Nobody could tell you how long the blockade would last.

Questions swirled: Was there a possibility of catching a flight from Phuket, a resort 800 kilometers south of Bangkok and how to get there. Or if the military airport just outside Bangkok would be open for civilian aircrafts? All these proposals were no real alternatives for the mass of tourists; they served only to

calm angry people. First and business class passengers were the only ones who got treatment without additional costs.

Good luck

I was lucky enough to postpone my flight from Frankfurt. I arrived at Suvarnabhumi International Airport by the first regular Lufthansa flight after the closure of eight days ended. Approaching Bangkok with relief I became aware it was the second time in a similar situation in the year 2001. It was after 9/11 when I flew with the first regular Lufthansa flight to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv after all planes were grounded for three days. *see qualitalk 23* ■

Lese Majeste is heavily punished in Thailand. When Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva took office his very first initiative dealt with Lese Majeste. The punishment was increased from five to twenty years in prison; the fine for insulting the monarchy could go up as high as one million Baht.

The Information and Communication Technology Minister, Ranongruk Suwunchwee said in an interview with the Thai English newspaper Bangkok Post that over ten thousands websites with unfavorable content were in circulation in the country.

Censorship

Some 2,300 websites have been banned, while more than 40 lese majeste cases not relating to internet sites are being looked at by the police. Minister Ranongruk Suwunchwee has requested a 500 million baht budget for her crusade against

»inappropriate« websites. She admitted that no guideline exists for banning a website. In a commentary this censoring was brand marked as »Cyber Gestapo«.

Foreigners be aware!

Meanwhile Justice Minister Pirapan Salirathavibhaga is planing together with Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya a campaign to educating foreigners. The visitors should develop a feeling for the uncompromising laws when discussing the Thai monarchy. The embassies abroad would be involved into the education efforts. In his speech in parliament Minister Pirapan justified the law enforcement with Thai people's deep desire to defend the Royal Family as »our Father and Mother. The Father and Mother of the land. Lese majeste is a matter of national security. It's about protecting our revered institution« His conclusion was: »Elsewhere Anti Terror laws require on immigration to put

Lese Majeste

Insulting the Royal Family is a Severe Crime in Thailand and is punished without Pardon



*The Economist, print edition,
Jan 29th 2009*

*This issue was banned because of the cover and the article **Thailand** – **A sad slide backwards***

off shoes and belt. They have their laws we have ours – they must respect us!»

Lèse majeste is a suitable instrument for denouncing critics and putting de tractors behind bars. It is not known how many people are sentenced for in sulting the monarchy. Only if foreign ners are convicted, the jurisdiction is under scrutiny, as recently in the case of the Australian writer Harry Nico laides. He had been chained during his hearing in court and was sentenced for six years in prison. Because the Austra lian repented his wrongdoing the impi rsonment was reduced to three years.

The British magazine The Econo mist of Jan uary 2009 was forbidden in Thailand because the cover featured a digital picture of Buddha – hence the li ving King Rama IX, which was seen as inappropriate. The article associated Queen Sirikit with the recent uproar, which came close to high treason for the present government *see excerpt* . ■

**Excerpt from The Economist
printed edition, Jan 29th 2009**

»There was a time, after the passing of its liberal 1997 constitution, when Thai land looked like it was becoming a role model for democracy and pluralism in

Asia. The country’s elite still want it to be seen as a progressive, democratic country and a serious diplomatic actor.

Unfortunately, in recent years it has slid backwards. This started with ab uses by Mr. Thaksin, followed by the Army’s 2006 coup, and then the tacit backing that Queen Sirikit, some gene rals, and Mr. Abhisit’s Democrat party gave to thuggish anti Thaksin prote sters, one of whose leading sympathi zers is Mr. Abhisit’s foreign minister. Yet, while soldiers act with impuni ty and royalist rioters get soft treat ment, the country’s anachronistic lèse majesté law is enforced rigorously.

America and its allies have long turned a blind eye to such stains on Thailand’s reputation, because King Bhumibol and his army were staunch anti communist allies. Recalling that relationship, next month America is due to hold annual war games with regional allies in Thai land, a source of prestige for Thai gene rals. But the cold war is long over. Pre sident Barack Obama should threaten to move the games elsewhere until the Thai army is tamed. That would hurt the generals in their soft spot, their self esteem, while doing little damage to America’s interests or Thailand’s people.«

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