

# Book Review

Tyrell Haberkorn, *In Plain Sight: Impunity and Human Rights in Thailand*. Wisconsin, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, January 2018. 312 p. ISBN: 978-0-299-31440-8.

In her new book, Tyrell Haberkorn, Associate Professor in Asian Languages and Culture at Wisconsin University, takes a close look at state violence and impunity in Thailand from the 1950s to date, while also reflecting on human rights activism. This unique contribution to Thai studies that links Thailand's history with a global human rights historiography, expands on Haberkorn's earlier work on state and para-state violence, impunity, resistance, law and justice in Thailand.

The book begins with the Thai authoritarian regimes after the end of World War II, and specifically the ideas about how to control people considered "political dangers". The book ends with the 2017 military rule that seized power through a coup in 2014 and its use of law to repress political opposition. Haberkorn does not adhere to the common narrative of social disruption through coups and regime changes that dominate Thai modern historiography but instead demonstrates the repetition of a specifically violent state order. Haberkorn finds that the institutionalisation of illegitimate state violence and impunity is a character trait of the modern Thai nation-state (pp. 6-7, 220). Merging the scholarly approaches of James C. Scott and Ranajit Guha, Haberkorn insists that impunity "demands a reading of state documents against the grain in order to identify a different kind of hidden transcript: indications of complicity and participation in violence, anxiety, and the evasion of responsibility by

the state itself". (p.112) Haberkorn exposes how engagement in a nascent international human rights regime in the 1950s and 1960s, when the Thai state not only contributed to the UN human rights year-book and participated in drafting the genocide convention but also promoted human rights at home, could co-exist with human rights violations in Thailand. The quoted speeches of field marshal Sarit Tanarat (1958-1963) are a case in point: human rights in Thailand could be limited through a nationalistic discourse and by creating legal exemptions (Chapter 2). This is an early form of impunity for state violence in the era before the international monitoring of human rights was well developed. In the later chapters dealing with the recent past and present, Haberkorn shows how impunity for human rights violations takes form in the judiciary itself, with judges writing its history (Chapter 6).

The book is not an exhaustive account of state and para-state violence in Thailand – an impossible task given that so much of it is undocumented – but it offers an insightful, nuanced analysis of instances where impunity has been created. It is both thematically organised and follows what the author calls a "new and partial chronology of Thai history". The local Thai timeline adheres to the global history of human rights outlined by Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn that regards the mid and late 1970s as a "breakthrough" moment for human rights as a popular movement (2013). This turn is largely

attributed to US president Jimmy Carter's human rights-promoting administration in 1977, which also opened up opportunities for the Thai human rights movement. Thailand was a close ally of the US during the cold war and the US withdrawal from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in 1975 resulted in the Thai state becoming increasingly fearful of communism. Indeed, this fear provided the backdrop to the massacre of student activists and subsequent coup on 6 October 1976 just three years after an attempt to bring democracy to the country. In the repression that followed, local human rights groups worked on solidarity and wrote reports about political prisoners. The reports were distributed among international solidarity networks and Amnesty International, which had not previously campaigned explicitly for cases in Thailand. Haberkorn unearths the global turn of Human Rights from the state archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and concludes, "[...] the files indicate a growing realization within the MFA that the meaning of human rights was changing and neither they nor other state officials were its sole arbiters any longer, even within Thailand." (p. 151)

The evidence for the establishment of human rights advocacy in Thailand in 1977 is strong, but questions remain about what preceded it and what followed. The major part of the book is dedicated to the violence and movement during the politically turbulent 1970s while the 1980s and 1990s serve mostly as a passage towards the 2000s. Haberkorn touches on the decrease in legal and extrajudicial violence during the 1980s, but does not follow up on how this affected the development of human rights activism in Thailand. As Haberkorn's study points towards paying attention to legal institutions and advocacy for legal redress, it is also relevant to ask what impact formal human rights institutionalisation in the late 1990's – yet another period

when Thai history is clearly aligned with global human rights trends – might have had on the practice of state violence and impunity. Unfortunately the international links and world politics are missing in the chapters dealing with recent times.

Haberkorn convincingly demonstrates that the very same legal institutions that could work to the benefit of human rights have been, and are continuously being, used to violate both humans and their rights. While the main focus of the book is on the state's violations and the impunity embedded in the Thai state, the people subjected to the violence and their resistance are not forgotten and the book praises their struggles. It is sadly also a reminder of what the institutionalisation of human rights have not been able to do for the people of Thailand.

Haberkorn's book is an important contribution to the body of knowledge on this subject and with its incredible richness in detail and analysis, it will for a long time be a standard reference for everyone writing on human rights in Thailand. All who are interested in Thai political history and in understanding the Thai state should read it. The book is also relevant to those not familiar with Thailand but concerned with methods of studying history of human rights violations and the quests for justice in (post-) authoritarian states.

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**References:**

Eckel, J., Moyn, S. (2013). *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.