

For the LOVE OF SIAM

University of Moral and Political Sciences  
Bangkok, Siam  
9 January 2008

Dear 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies Participants

1. On June 24, 1939 the Phibun Government proclaimed a change in the country's name from 'Siam' to 'Thailand.'
2. The Phibun Government justified the change on the 'racist-nationalist' grounds that 'the government finds it suitable to call the Nation by a name that represents the country's majority and is popular with the people.'
3. The reasons cited by the Phibun Government concerning the ethnic majority are not true, and are contradicted by historical evidence.
4. There is great ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity among the people of our Nation. There are Thai, Lao, Lanna, Isan, Mon, Khmer, Kui, Techieu, Kwantung, Hokkien, Hailam, Khe, Cham, Javanese, Malays, Sakai, Sea Nomads, Tamils, Persians, Arabs, Pathans, Ho, Phuan, Shans, Black Tai, Phu Tai, Khyn, Viat, Yong, Lua/Lawa, Hmong, Mien, Yao, Karen, Po, Palong, Muser, Akha, Khammu, Melabri, Chong, Nyagur, Farang (different nationalities), Khaek (different nationalities), etc – in total over 50 ethnicities and languages.
5. The first two Constitutions, dated June 27 and December 10, 1932, both used the name Siam. In the many subsequent draft constitutions there were debates on changing the name of the country back to 'Siam', for instance in the constitutions of the years 1949 and 1968.
6. Therefore to reflect better the reality of the country's ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, and to be faithful to historical evidence, the name of the country in any future constitution should be Siam. This is in keeping with the basic principle of 'Respect for Ethnic, Linguistic, and Cultural Diversity, and the Happiness of the Nation and the People.' And, no less important, 'True Democracy.'
7. To express agreement with this letter, please send an individual or group letter directly to:

President of the Parliament  
Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers  
President of the Supreme Court  
Buddhist Monks, Priests, Ustaz, etc.  
Rector, Deans, Directors, Head-masters, Teachers  
Ambassadors and Consuls  
Heads of Political Parties and Local Politicians  
Governors, Mayors,  
Chairperson of the Provincial Administrative Organizations  
and Tambon Administrative Organizations

Representatives of Grass-roots Organizations, Kamnan and Village Heads

Yours respectfully,  
Charnvit Kasetsiri

**SIAM or Thailand**

by

**B. Terwiel**

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**FOCUS / HISTORY AND NOMENCLATURE**

**Siam or Thailand: what's in a name?**

*Some reflections on the circumstances prevalent in the late 1930s, when Siam became Thailand*

**BAREND JAN TERWIEL**

Some countries change their names. For example, in 1935 the country hitherto ubiquitously known as Persia pronounced itself henceforth to be called Iran. A more recent case of a country announcing that it wished to be known under a new name was when, in 1989, Burma became Myanmar \_ a change that was not accepted by some countries such as the United States.

Such name changes are usually not made lightly; it doesn't bear thinking how many letterheads suddenly have to be altered when a country decides to change its name. The reasons for making a change may be symbolic, wanting to underline a change of regime or the beginning of a new era. Often, however, the renaming of a country marks a quite complex ideological statement.

Why was the name Siam abandoned?

One argument often used is that the name Siam was imposed upon the Thais by foreigners; that the word "Siam" was not indigenous.

It is, indeed, a fact that the word Siam was used already centuries ago, not by the Thai people to indicate their own country, but by foreigners.

The situation whereby a country is called by one name by the people inhabiting it and by a quite different name by people not living there is by no means unusual, and generally, when no offence is meant with the foreign appellation, no offence is taken.

In Europe, for example, there are people who call their country Suomi, outsiders call it Finland. The Germans call their own country Deutschland, quite different from the word Germany, used by English-speaking people, or Allemagne in French. The French, in turn, have no problem when Germans use the term Frankreich. The people who call their country Espana do not object when strangers call it Spain.

In the same way, up to 1939 the Thais were not only used to the fact that outsiders called their country Siam, they were not in the least offended by this and themselves proudly used it when dealing with outsiders.

When people referred to their own country in the Siamese language, various combinations of words were used. The oldest expression describing the whole country was Mueang Thai, already accounted for in the 17th century by the French ambassador Simon de La Loubere.

Other commonly used names of the country in the Thai language were: Krung Thai, Prathet Thai, Krung Siam and Prathet Siam. The word "krung" must be seen as somewhat more formal than "mueang," and the word "prathet" derived from Sanskrit being the superlative of the words for "country."

On bilingual coins, banknotes, stamps, seals and letterheads prior to 1939 we find usually in European characters simply the word Siam, while in Thai characters the word was spelled Sayam, or one of the five indigenous options mentioned above was used.

In formal state documents the name of the country could be couched in even more elaborate compounds, stringing together a whole series of honourable, pleasant-sounding words describing the wealth, extent and power of the realm.

King Mongkut (r. 1851-1868) is well known as being most sensitive towards the proper use of the Thai language. How pleased he was with the word Siam is clear by his frequent use of it. Thus he called the country that he ruled Prathet Siam. When he signed international agreements he wrote after his name Rex Siamensis (and not Rex Thai). He called the deity protecting the state: Phra Siam Thewathirat, or "Lord Protector of Siam." In early issues of 19th century coins the country is at first called Krung Siam, then Siam Ratchananachak (the Realm of Siam) and finally Rat Siam (Siam State). On stamps the words Krung Siam proudly served for about 50 years until October 1939, when the law proposing the name change was signed by the regent and thus became effective.

What was the real reason for changing the name in 1939?

The Siamese government's announcement of a change in the country's name was published on the seventh anniversary of the overthrow of absolute monarchy, on June 24, 1939.

As for the official reason for making the change, the announcement blithely mentioned that the people preferred the word "Thai" to the word "Siam." Like many official statements appearing at that time, this was pure government propaganda, not really reflecting the will of the people. The government of that time believed in a strong leadership, rather as educator of the people, guiding them in turbulent times, making decisions in what it believed to be their interests. No opinion poll had been consulted and the discussion of the matter just prior to it becoming law in October 1939 was by no means an endorsement.

As far as we can see from letters to the editor, at least some spokesmen for "the people" were by no means pleased with the new construct. Particularly the word "Thailand" caused critics to raise their voice.

In order to examine what really motivated the government to make the change of name, let us quickly note the situation prior to 1939.

Why did the Phibun government in 1939 announce that the people preferred the word "Thai"?

In order to understand the measure, it is necessary to consider the situation two months prior to Germany's invasion of Poland and the outbreak of World War Two. The Thai government was aware of the tense international situation, but saw the distinct possibility that a major armed conflict would result in a dramatic weakening of European powers.

Japan was engaged in a vicious war in China, and a dramatic weakening of the French and British positions in Southeast Asia would result in the possibility of a reordering of Asian borders.

Such a rearrangement, it was felt in government circles, could greatly benefit the Siamese nation for two reasons.

The first was the feeling that during the past 80 years much territory had been lost to the colonial powers. The second was the newly gained knowledge of vast numbers of close relatives living beyond the borders.

As for the first reason, during the period between 1867 and 1907, in a series of treaties with Britain and France, Siam had ceded traditional rights over vast territories, agreeing to withdraw its borders to those it holds at present.

Historians such as Thongchai Winichakul have pointed out that these outer regions had only been part of a sphere of influence that waxed or waned with the relative power of the central region, and that territory that was far away from the capital often usually was not ruled directly.

Nevertheless, in the 1920s and 1930s there was a growing feeling in Siam that the country had been served very badly in the confrontations with neighbouring colonial powers.

Particularly the French were singled out as having enriched their colonial empire at Siam's cost, beginning with the declaration of Cambodia to be a French protectorate in 1867, followed by the annexation of Laos in 1893, the loss of territories on the right bank of the Mekong River in 1904, and finally the loss of three provinces to Cambodia in 1907.

Similarly, the British had gained four provinces in the Malay Peninsula at Siam's cost. The painful loss of large territories was openly deplored and school maps were distributed showing the extent of territorial losses.

As for the second reason, reports of millions of people living in areas adjacent to Siam who spoke languages closely related to Thai had been given wide publicity. It had not escaped the Siamese government's notice that Italy had succeeded after World War One to take possession of parts of its "irredenta". Even more spectacular, in Germany a very effective propaganda had succeeded in movements to "assist" or "liberate" German-speaking minorities beyond German borders, of which the merging with Austria in March 1938 had resulted in a spectacular redrawing of the map of Europe.

Luang Vichit Vadhakarn, who headed the Department of Fine Arts, was the chief proponent of the change of name. Judith Stowe in her book *Siam Becomes Thailand* has described how Luang Vichit claimed that the Thais comprised not only the 13 million within the country, but also a further 23 million scattered through southern China, French Indo-China and British Burma. To unite them all and focus their loyalty, Luang Vichit asserted that the name of the country had to be changed.

Contemporary observers also pointed out that the change of name was not simply a rejection of a name that had been imposed by foreigners, it was at the same time a preparation for the Thai to assume a leading role among all Thai peoples.

The former British ambassador Sir Josiah Crosby also clearly identified the underlying reason why Phibun's government decided to change the word Siam to Thailand. Crosby stated: "The fact that the official change of nomenclature should have been made in coincidence with the launching of the Pan-Thai movement may be interpreted not unfairly as the indication of a desire to familiarise outsiders with the claim of Siam to be regarded as the mother-country of all peoples of Thai race."

Typical for the thinking of the 1930s and early '40s, it did not occur to the proponents of a larger united land of all Thai peoples to ask themselves whether or not the peoples speaking related languages were interested in joining such a new venture, nor whether they were willing to accept Bangkok's rule.

Nevertheless, a growing number of Thais could be forgiven for dreaming of a much larger country, one including northern Burma, parts of southern China, Laos, large parts of Indochina and major extensions on the Malay Peninsula.

The dream of more than doubling their territory, at first a murmur with the weakening of the colonial powers and China, became a distinct possibility, a scenario whereby a subtle, clever leadership should be quick to act when opportunity would present itself. Premier Phibun was just the man for this difficult task, a master at playing off \_ telling the British the Thais would remain neutral at all costs while at the same time secretly manoeuvring towards a pact with the Japanese.

It was in this situation, inspired by a mixture of nationalistic and irredentalist motivations that the name change of 1939 took place.

When Luang Vichit Vadhakarn proposed the idea of a name change for the country, this triggered a lively debate. It was by no means clear what should be chosen. In editorials and letters to the editor, some passionately wished to retain the old name.

Those who saw grounds for change were divided on whether to choose "Mueang Thai" or "Prathet Thai." Phibun was at first inclined to choose the latter, but he was aware that most Europeans would not easily take to the new name.

Apparently, on June 23, merely one day prior to the formal announcement the Phibun government decided to choose a compromise and coined the word "Thailand." Crosby's overall advice in 1945 regarding the country's name was that because of the heritage of chauvinism surrounding the change, it would be desirable that the words "Siam" and "Siamese" should again be employed.

Throughout the past 60 years, there have been a number of intellectuals who are in agreement with Crosby.

In recent times, as a result of dramatic political changes, many almost forgotten names have been resurrected. After almost a century of being Leningrad, the time-honoured St Petersburg was re-installed.

The name Siam never died out, it being irrevocably linked with Siamese twins and Siamese cats.

Should a Thai government ever wish to indicate the beginning of a new era, it could hardly find a more effective symbol than a re-investiture of the old name.

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