
From Drug War to Green Rush: the Evolution of Drug Policy in Thailand

"The world has lost the war on drugs, not only Thailand"
General Paiboon, former Justice Minister of Thailand¹

Introduction

When General Paiboon, Thailand's Minister of Justice, declared in 2016 that the war on drugs was lost, and that the military junta was considering removing methamphetamine from the list of dangerous narcotics, and decriminalising kratom and cannabis, he shocked reporters around the world. One news outlet expressed its surprise, "[these] are startling statements in a country that, as it stands, still executes drug traffickers²." Even more shocked were his countrymen who just a decade earlier, had lived through a war on drugs that killed more than 2,000 people.

Fast forward to the year 2019: Thailand is caught up in a 'green rush'. Cannabis is the new gold, and everything 'ganja' is cool. Who could have predicted the seismic changes that swept across Thai society in the span of three years?

Thailand's recent experience with the legalisation of medical cannabis tells a story involving failing criminal justice institutions, health epidemics driven by risky drug usage, and a throwback to social attitudes of a previous era with regard to the use of cannabis. The evolution of the policy options considered in the fluidly changing environment is explored through the perspectives of central policymakers in Thailand. The case is a first in the region and examines how well-scoped, even well-intentioned policies, can easily get out of hand if not managed well.

¹ Amy Lefevre, "Soaring prison population prompts Thailand to re-think 'lost' drug war." *Reuters*. July 17, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-drugs-thailand-prisons/soaring-prison-population-prompts-thailand-to-re-think-lost-drug-war-idUSKCN0ZX01J>

² Patrick Winn, "Thailand is moving closer to decriminalizing meth." *PRI*. September 8, 2016, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-09-07/thailand-moving-closer-decriminalizing-meth>.

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Background - Cannabis in Thailand and the world

Historically, Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries have taken a zero-tolerance approach to drugs, in the hopes of creating a drug-free society. Measures taken to eradicate drugs included using harsh punishments such as the death penalty and government treatment programmes.³ In Thailand, under the 1979 Narcotics Act, heroin, amphetamine, methamphetamine, ecstasy and LSD were classified as Category 1 drugs which carried the heaviest punishments. Cocaine, codeine, methadone and morphine were Category 2 and cannabis, magic mushrooms and kratom, Category 5⁴.

From 2003 to 2004, to counter the rising use of methamphetamine, the Thaksin administration launched an all-out war on drugs. The Thai government compiled lists of persons suspected of involvement in drugs, encouraged drug users to surrender voluntarily and had the police raid drug hideouts.⁵ According to a poll at that time, three quarters of the public were in favour of the war on drugs⁶. The war resulted in an estimated 2,800 deaths⁷ and 56,000 arrests.⁸

In 2006, Thaksin was ousted in a *coup d'état*. Yet successive governments continued with the conservative stance on drugs. While new tweaks to drug policies were announced every few years, the underlying policy stance remained unchanged – continuing with harsh penalties and law enforcement methods that at times breached human rights in order to achieve a ‘drug free’ Thailand⁹. Although the language has shifted towards calling for drug users to be treated with compassion and as patients rather than criminals, this has been mostly rhetoric. In practice, drug users continued to be harassed by the police and stigmatised by society¹⁰.

Meanwhile changes were afoot in the international community. Countries such as Israel, Canada, Australia and some states in India legalised medical marijuana in 2016.¹¹ Even in a traditionally staunchly anti-drug country – the United States – the public have taken a softer stance on drugs. By the end of 2016, more than half of all American states had legalised medical marijuana and more than one-

³ Bryce Pardo, Beau Kilmer and Wenjing Huang, "Contemporary Asian Drug Policy." (2019).

⁴ Jeerawat Na Thaland and Paritta Wangkiat, "Meth in the madness." *Bangkok Post*. September 11, 2016, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/special-reports/1083380/meth-in-the-madness>.

⁵ Pardo, Kilmer and Huang, "Contemporary Asian Drug Policy."

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ James Windle, "Drugs and drug policy in Thailand." *Improving Global Drug Policy: Comparative Perspectives and UNGASS 2016* (2015).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Brian MacIver, "Cannabis legalization world map." *Cannabis Business Times*. June 29, 2017, <https://www.cannabisbusinesstimes.com/article/cannabis-legalization-world-map/>.

fifth of Americans lived in states where recreational marijuana was legal.¹² This was a sharp departure from the days of Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, when drugs were viewed as the “greatest domestic threat” and the resulting war on drugs led to militarised raids on homes and severe punishments.¹³ This change was credited to President Obama, who called for marijuana to be treated as “a public-health issue, the same way [the US does] with cigarettes or alcohol.”¹⁴ Additionally, in 2016, the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs issued a statement calling for decriminalization as one crucial factor in solving the drug problem.¹⁵ Prominent leaders, past and present, including Paul Volker, Kofi Annan and Richard Branson also actively promoted drug law reforms¹⁶.

Key Actors

Paiboon Khumchaya

A former military general, he became the Minister of Justice after Thailand’s 2014 military *coup d’etat*¹⁷ and subsequently spearheaded discussions on drug law reforms. In December 2016, he was appointed to sit on the King’s Privy Council and ceased to be the Justice Minister¹⁸.

Prayut Chan-ocha

Another former military general, he became the Prime Minister of Thailand after the 2014 military *coup d’etat*.¹⁹ He continued in this post after winning the 2019 General Election²⁰.

Anutin Charnvirakul

Leader of the Bhumjaithai – Proud to be Thai – Party, he ran on the promise of legalising household cannabis plants. A close friend of Nevin Chidchob, he became the Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand and Minister of Public Health after the 2019 General Election.

¹² German Lopez, “It’s official: 2016 was marijuana legalization’s biggest year ever.” Vox. December 29, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/12/29/14054172/marijuana-legalization-2016>.

¹³ German Lopez, “How Obama quietly reshaped America’s war on drugs.” Vox. January 19, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2016/12/19/13903532/obama-war-on-drugs-legacy>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Rasmon Kalayasiri, Teerayuth Rungrunirundorn, Robert Ali, and John Marsden, “Regulation and Decriminalisation of Illegal Substances in Thailand.” *Journal of Health Science and Medical Research* 37, no. 2 (2019): 157-162.

¹⁶ Pardo, Kilmer and Huang, “Contemporary Asian Drug Policy.”

¹⁷ Royal Thai Consulate. “News update: Members of the cabinet.” *Royal Thai Consulate*. September 4, 2014. [http://www.thaiembassy.org/chennai/en/news/4113/49286-Members-of-the-Cabinet-\(01092014\).html](http://www.thaiembassy.org/chennai/en/news/4113/49286-Members-of-the-Cabinet-(01092014).html).

¹⁸ Hui Yee Tan, “Thai King picks junta-linked men for privy council.” *The Straits Times*. December 7, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/thai-king-picks-junta-linked-men-for-privy-council>

¹⁹ Royal Thai Consulate, “News update.”

²⁰ Jitsiree Thongnoi, “Thailand’s Prayuth Chan-ocha: the military man with staying power.” *South China Morning Post*. June 6, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3013460/thailands-prayuth-chan-ocha-military-man-staying-power>

Nevin Chidchob

Former Member of Parliament who was known as the 'Kingmaker' for his ability to trade favours and switch to the winning side. As of January 2020, he was Chairman of Football Club Buriram United,²¹ he was a major financial sponsor of the Bhumjaithai Party and a close friend of Anutin. In April 2019, he hosted the largest cannabis festival in Buriram, Thailand, which drew more than 20,000 visitors over the course of three days.²²

Problem – Effectiveness of the war on drugs and the costs of prohibition***Was the war on drugs actually effective?***

Since becoming Justice Minister in 2014, Thailand's drug policy – largely a continuation of former prime minister Thaksin's zero-tolerance approach to drugs – had been weighing on General Paiboon's mind. Since 2003, the war on drugs had resulted in an estimated 2,800 deaths,²³ 56,000 arrests and 285,000 surrenders.²⁴ These numbers were tarnished by claims of torture and extrajudicial killings by the police or the military, although the police claimed these involved drug cartels silencing potential informants. In 2007, an investigation conducted by the interim military government found that half of the killings were unrelated to drugs.²⁵

According to national household surveys, self-reported use of methamphetamine declined from 3.87 percent and 1.86 percent in 2001 to 0.46 percent and 0.08 percent in 2003 among adolescents and adults respectively. Among cannabis users, user rates dropped from 1.5 percent in 2001 to 0.18 percent in 2003²⁶. However, General Paiboon took these statistics with a pinch of salt – who knows how many drug users lied about their drug usage for fear of prosecution? Moreover, research by the U.S. State Department showed that while the crackdown on methamphetamine which limited supply and doubled the price of the drug in pill form pulled down consumption, drug addicts soon switched to other drugs such as crystallised methamphetamine, or 'ice'.²⁷ More recent research at the time casted

²¹ The Asian Voice, "'Kingmaker' of Thai politics transform rural hometown into sporting boomtown." *The Straits Times*. June 8, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/kingmaker-of-thai-politics-transform-rural-hometown-into-sporting-boomtown>

²² Chayanit Itthipongmaetee, "Straight outta Buriram comes new 420 weed fest." *Khaosod English*. March 6, 2019, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/featured/2019/03/06/straight-outta-buriram-comes-new-420-weed-fest/>

²³ Windle, "Drugs and drug policy in Thailand."

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Chaisiri Angkurawaranon et al., "Trends in the use of illicit substances in Thailand: Results from national household surveys." *Drug and alcohol review* 37, no. 5 (2018): 658-663.

²⁷ Pardo, Kilmer and Huang, "Contemporary Asian Drug Policy."

doubt on the war's effectiveness by claiming that 550,000 people were using drugs in 2003 at the start of the crackdown, rising to 600,000 in 2007, then to 1.6 million in 2012 and 1.8 million in 2014.²⁸

Overburdened and ineffective prison system

As Justice Minister, General Paiboon had also seen up close how dysfunctional the prison system had become as a result of the war on drugs. Thailand's prison population had grown from 80,000 to 320,000²⁹ in two decades and this was largely attributable to drug-related offences. It had surpassed Indonesia to become the Southeast Asian nation with the highest incarceration rates. Some 70 percent of the Thai prison population was estimated to be serving time for drug-related offences.³⁰ Thailand's female incarceration rate was also high. Its female prison population ranked fourth in the world, trailing just behind the United States, China and Russia.³¹

Inmates served long sentences, typically ranging from 15 years to life,³² which contributed to overcrowding. Why not simply build more prisons, General Paiboon thought. Then again, it might not be the most effective use of resources – of the 270,000 criminal court cases pending at the time, half of them involved low level drug offences.³³ Channeling more resources towards tackling a small number of big-time drug traffickers would do more towards eradicating drugs than pursuing the masses of small-time offenders. Every year, the Thai government spent over THB10bn (approximately US\$320m) on the prosecution of 150,000 to 200,000 drug cases, with the majority of them drug users and small-scale retailers. For example, 80 percent of heroin and cocaine-related cases involved less than 3g of drugs. Approximately 90 percent of ice and amphetamine cases involved less than 10 grams, while 95 percent of cannabis cases involved less than 100 grams.³⁴ These amounts were much lower than the highest penalty threshold in Thailand.³⁵

²⁸ PPTV Online, “ซีรีส์: ช่าแหละความล้มเหลว “สงครามยาเสพติด” ตอนจบ (คลิป) [Series: Dissection Failure “Drug War” ending (clip)].” PPTV HD 36. October 15, 2016, <https://www.pptvhd36.com/news/%E0%B8%9B%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B0%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%94%E0%B9%87%E0%B8%99%E0%B8%A3%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%99/16745>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hui Yee Tan, “Thailand to stress rehab over jail for drug users.” *The Straits Times*. July 16, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thailand-to-stress-rehab-over-jail-for-drug-users>

³¹ Pardo, Kilmer and Huang, “Contemporary Asian Drug Policy.”

³² Amy Lefevre, “Soaring prison population prompts Thailand to re-think 'lost' drug war.” *Reuters*. July 17, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-drugs-thailand-prisons/soaring-prison-population-prompts-thailand-to-re-think-lost-drug-war-idUSKCN0ZX01J>

³³ Pardo, Kilmer and Huang, “Contemporary Asian Drug Policy.”

³⁴ Prachatai, “Wiraphan Ngammi: 'Drug users are not criminals.'” *Prachatai*. November 23, 2018, <https://prachatai.com/journal/2018/11/79747>

³⁵ Siam Legal, “Criminal Drug Offences in Thailand” Siam Legal., <https://www.siam-legal.com/litigation/criminal-defence-drug-offences-in-thailand.php>

General Paiboon also pondered about Thailand's justice system. Rather than reducing criminality, it was in fact producing more criminals. The criminal justice system is not inert; prison has a warping effect. People who were locked away could ironically gain access to wider connections in prison, especially given their crowdedness, and become more efficient, effective and hardened criminals when they were released.³⁶

HIV epidemic

Additionally, General Paiboon was drawn to information from the Ministry of Health about the link between mass incarceration and a Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) epidemic. Blood-borne diseases like HIV spread readily by sharing needles. As the prisons became increasingly understaffed, drugs found their way into the prisons and pre-trials facilities.³⁷ With needles being less readily available than drugs, needle sharing behaviour had become more pronounced, and made places of mass incarceration a breeding ground for blood-borne diseases like HIV and Hepatitis C Virus.

Moreover, the war on drugs had created a climate of fear that could drive risky drug consumption. Many drug addicts remained underground for fear of imprisonment and forced treatment. Consequently, they engaged in riskier consumption patterns and were less likely to seek treatment for HIV.³⁸ In a country that had been identified by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC)'s HIV programme as a 'high priority country' and where approximately 1.1 percent of its population were living with HIV, there were growing calls for drug law reforms.³⁹

Restriction on use as traditional medicine

Prior to being banned in 1932, cannabis was used as an ingredient, a kitchen condiment, and traditional medicine for centuries. Historically, traditional Thai medicine recipes and Thai massage practitioners used cannabis as an analgesic and sedative to provide pain relief. Labourers and farmers too used it as a muscle relaxer and painkiller.⁴⁰ This perception of cannabis still had a place in the minds of Thai people despite its inclusion in the criminal code. Using cannabis as a traditional medicine was often cheaper than conventional western medicines and was relied upon more by the poorer segments of society. The

³⁶ Hui Yee Tan, "A failing drug war triggers new approach in Thailand and Myanmar." *The Straits Times*. August 6, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/a-failing-drug-war-triggers-new-approach-in-thailand-and-myanmar>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Pardo, Kilmer and Huang, "Contemporary Asian Drug Policy."

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Eric Blair, "History of Cannabis Use and Anti-Marijuana Laws in Thailand." *Thailand Law Forum*. July 11, 2011, <http://www.thailawforum.com/history-of-marijuana-cannabis-thailand.html>

prohibition of cannabis therefore cost them more as it raised the risk they faced in procuring it illegally or increased their financial burden in substituting cannabis with conventional medicine.⁴¹

Lost decades of medical cannabis research

A long history of recorded cannabis uses for medicinal purposes in Thailand could have given it a competitive edge as medical usage of the plant grew worldwide. Cannabis had claimed benefits in treating epilepsy, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease and in reducing cancer patients' pain. While treatments using cannabis could have unwanted side effects,⁴² could they be outweighed by the potential benefits?

The years of prohibition in Thailand had stunted research, manufacturing and commercialisation of cannabis that could have been potentially very lucrative for the nation. With its tropical climate, fertile soil conditions, naturally occurring and sought-after strain of cannabis, competitive production costs, and traditional medicine knowledge, the country was naturally suited to benefit from for cannabis production. While the ban stood, this potentially lucrative area of medical development remained untapped.⁴³

It was clear to General Paiboon that the policy stance of the previous governments on drugs including cannabis had undesirable knock-on effects and should not be viewed in isolation. Was there another way? If not a zero-tolerance approach, then what?

Policy options - Status Quo, Full Decriminalization, and Partial Decriminalization

Option 1: Continue with a conservative policy towards drugs

General Paiboon knew that this was the option with the least resistance. He had a deep appreciation for the power of the status quo in reinforcing itself and locking out change. No doubt it appeared the less controversial stance, especially since this was the approach taken by all the countries in the region. However, Thailand's bloated prison system and HIV epidemic were prompting calls for prison reforms, including from influential people like Thai Princess Bajrakitiyabha Mahidol.⁴⁴ Additionally, the drug law reforms in countries around the world and the UN statement calling for the decriminalisation of drugs had uncovered pockets of support for a more liberal approach. This was especially so since the United States, a close ally of Thailand, was also seeing shifts in its own drug policy.

⁴¹ Kanupriya Kapoor and Panarat Thepgumpanat, "Weeding out foreigners: strains over Thailand's legalization of marijuana." *Reuters*. December 12, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-cannabis/weeding-out-foreigners-strains-over-thailands-legalization-of-marijuana-idUSKBN1OB0D0>

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Kapoor and Thepgumpanat, "Weeding out foreigners."

⁴⁴ Winn, "Thailand is moving closer to decriminalizing meth."

Option 2: Decriminalise methamphetamine, kratom and cannabis

Upon careful consideration, General Paiboon decided that the zero-tolerance approach had to evolve – methamphetamine and softer drugs like kratom and cannabis ought to be decriminalised. A decade of friction at the Myanmar border had been already undermined a no-tolerance approach as drugs were illicitly injected into Thailand⁴⁵ by drug cartels with the tacit approval of the Myanmar military⁴⁶. Many people had also turned to Malaysia to purchase kratom and cannabis.⁴⁷

The domestic drug market, unlike in some parts of the world, was mostly non-violent.⁴⁸ The main risks they posed were health-related. By legalising methamphetamine, kratom and cannabis, the Thai government would be able to oversee the price and quality of these drugs, which would help in turn to regulate the harmful effects. Methamphetamine could be manufactured in government-regulated facilities instead of unhygienic hideouts, and then dispensed in controlled dosages. The drugs would be heavily taxed and the proceeds would go to funding drug rehabilitation centres.⁴⁹ Additionally, decriminalising methamphetamine could help to alleviate prison overcrowding, given the large drug-related prison population.⁵⁰ Decriminalising these drugs would help unwind stigmas people had towards drug users, who were hesitant to access voluntary rehabilitation and HIV treatment.

However, the Thai society was by no means unanimous in its support for legalisation. Much of the anti-drug sentiment among Thais had in fact been nurtured by the United States. In the past, the Thai people had a comfortable relationship with cannabis and kratom, using cannabis as a condiment in boat noodle soup⁵¹ and chewing kratom for an energy boost.⁵² However, under the influence of the United States which funded anti-drug policies in Thailand (the US Drug Enforcement Agency had an office in Thailand), anti-drug and anti-marijuana sentiments had seeped into the mindsets of the Thai people. Even though the United States was changing its view of drugs, General Paiboon knew that these deeply ingrained ideas about drugs would not be easily undone.

“Right now, Thai people see drug users as essentially evil people that need to be punished”

- *Pascal Tanguay, International Drug Policy Consortium*⁵³

⁴⁵ Windle, "Drugs and drug policy in Thailand."

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Assawin Pakkawan, "Paiboon stands by delisting pot, krathom plan." *Bangkok Post*. November 19, 2016, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1138965/paiboon-stands-by-delisting-pot-krathom-plan>.

⁴⁸ Windle, "Drugs and drug policy in Thailand."

⁴⁹ Winn, "Thailand is moving closer to decriminalizing meth."

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Aroonsrimorakot, Laiphrakpam, and Metadilogkul, "Social, religious, recreational and medicinal usage of cannabis."

⁵² Kalayasiri et al., "Regulation and Decriminalisation."

⁵³ Winn, "Thailand is moving closer to decriminalizing meth."

"We told them that narcotic drugs are bad, get rid of them all. It's not easy to educate society (now), particularly when you have to go against the concept that has been planted in their heads. It's like telling people in Thailand not to eat rice."

- Justice Jaran Pukditanaku⁵⁴

General Paiboon proved to be right. There was considerable public backlash regarding decriminalising methamphetamine⁵⁵ after it was announced in June 2016. The Thais still saw methamphetamine as an evil drug and were afraid that the new policy direction would create more harm than good.⁵⁶

"Has the government forgotten about the plight of so many people who have suffered at the hands of this type of drug? Does the government want to use the brisk trade in meth to stimulate the sluggish economy?"

- Ladawan Wongsriwong, former Deputy Labour Minister

In response to the criticisms, General Paiboon clarified that the government would not legalise methamphetamine after all. Instead, it would review and possibly reclassify drugs, including methamphetamine, which remained a Category 1 drug, in the same category as heroin.⁵⁷

In December 2016, General Paiboon was appointed as a councillor to the King and he resigned as the Justice Minister. With that, the key person pushing for drug law reforms left the stage.

Option 3: Legalise medical cannabis

Prayut Chan-ocha, Prime Minister of Thailand, sensed with his political acumen that sentiments on the ground were changing with regards to cannabis. Countries that had legalised cannabis had built a strong case for doing the same in Thailand. Moreover, General Paiboon had opened a can of worms by broaching the subject of drug law reforms, and prompted a national debate that shifted the conversation around drugs from a hard-and-fast moral rule to a utilitarian cost-benefit perspective. While decriminalising methamphetamine proved to be unpopular, decriminalising cannabis for medical purposes had been gaining traction, especially among healthcare professionals.

Cannabis is a plant that contains two types of chemical compounds: cannabidiol (CBD) and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Both compounds reportedly help to reduce pain, nausea and anxiety in low

⁵⁴ Tan, "A failing drug war."

⁵⁵ Bangkok Post, "Experts find meth idea a bitter pill to swallow." *Bangkok Post*. June 17, 2016, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1012181/experts-find-meth-idea-a-bitter-pill-to-swallow>

⁵⁶ Tan, "Thailand to stress rehab."

⁵⁷ King-oua Laohong, "Government 'won't legalise' meth." *Bangkok Post*. June 23, 2016, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1012181/experts-find-meth-idea-a-bitter-pill-to-swallow>

dosages. THC is a psychoactive compound that produces a euphoric sensation (a 'high') when taken in large doses. Unlike THC, CBD does not produce many harmful side effects even in large doses.⁵⁸ Cannabis has been shown to be less addictive than opium and upon withdrawal, manifests primarily psychological symptoms rather than physical ones.⁵⁹

In recent years, scientists and doctors around the world, including in Thailand, have turned their attention to cannabis as a potential treatment for diseases such as cancer, diabetes, arthritis, heart disease and insomnia and so on. However, because cannabis remained a classified narcotic, research into its medical effectiveness was scarce.⁶⁰ So far, the evidence on whether cannabis could help with serious illnesses was mixed.⁶¹

Those opposed to cannabis cited evidence which showed that cannabis use over the long run was linked to an increase in primary psychotic disorders, including schizophrenia.⁶² There was also weak evidence showing that some groups could be genetically more susceptible to the negative effects of cannabis use. Another concern was that getting high on cannabis could lead to cognitive impairment and increase the likelihood of accidents.⁶³ There was also the question of enforcement – how would authorities ensure that cannabis use was strictly regulated for medical purposes, and not abused for recreational purposes?

Prayut knew he was holding a politically significant card. The question was should he play it? With the 2019 general elections coming, he would seem a fool not to.

Resolution – Legalizing medical cannabis

By 2018, Thailand was governed by a military junta led by Prayut Chan-ocha. Provisions of the country's constitution known as Article 44 gave the military junta absolute power to issue any order deemed necessary to "strengthen public unity and harmony".⁶⁴ The prime minister was permitted to unilaterally enact legislation or overrule any regulation without a court warrant.⁶⁵ His power allowed him to enact legislation outside the traditional democratic process which involved deliberations among stakeholders.

⁵⁸ Kimberly Holland. "CBD vs. THC: What's the difference?." *Healthline*. May 20, 2019.

<https://www.healthline.com/health/cbd-vs-thc#drug-testing>.

⁵⁹ Kalayasiri et al., "Regulation and Decriminalisation."

⁶⁰ Aroonsrimorakot, Laiphrakpam, and Metadilogkul, "Social, religious, recreational and medicinal usage of cannabis."

⁶¹ Kalayasiri et al., "Regulation and Decriminalisation."

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Thai Parliament. "Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (Interim) B.E. 2557 (2014)" *Thailand office of the council of state*. 2014. https://library2.parliament.go.th/giventake/content_give/cons_temp2557E.pdf

⁶⁵ The Straits Times. "What you need to know about Article 44 of Thailand's interim constitution" *The Straits Times*. April 7, 2015. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-12/why-is-medical-marijuana-a-high-ranking-priority-for-thailands/11860408>

The absolute authority afforded to the Prayut government attracted some pro-cannabis groups to lobby him. Health practitioners, civil servants and social groups put pressure on the government to legalise medical cannabis. In particular, Thailand's medical fraternity recognized the importance of the medicinal properties of cannabis and advocated to the Narcotics Control Board of Thailand. Legalising cannabis would involve granting lower income groups greater accessibility to the medical cannabis. To assuage concerns about misuse, the medical fraternity proposed that usage be regulated responsibly by over-the-counter sale only to patients with a valid prescription from their doctors.⁶⁶

"Cannabis legalization process must be done by this government otherwise, we will lose this chance."

- Dr. Apichai Mongkol, former secretary-general of the Department of Medical Sciences

"As the social and scholars networks, we beg the prime minister to decriminalize cannabis and kratom from the narcotics list, by leveraging the Article 44."

- Dr. Samlee Jaidee, Assistant Professor at Chulalongkorn University and president of Public Health and Development Foundation⁶⁷

"This is an urgent mission to legalize cannabis, Thailand will economize the cost of medicine imported and make 100 billion baht a year from growing cannabis."

- Prapat Panyachatraksa, former president of the National Farmers Council and former Minister of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives⁶⁸

The pro-cannabis pressure from various groups proved sufficient. The military government voted internally in favour of medical legalisation. The Thai cabinet agreed in principle with legalising medical cannabis and proposed that the Narcotics Control Board and the National Legislative Assembly conduct further study.⁶⁹ After public and stakeholder hearings, Thailand's parliament voted to amend the Narcotic Act of 1979 to approve medical cannabis on 25 December 2018 and Thailand became the first in Southeast Asia to legalise medical cannabis. The Narcotics Act B.E. 2562 (2019) came into effect on 19

⁶⁶ Sayam Aroonsrimorakot, Meena Laiphrakpam, and Orapun Metadilogkul, "Social, religious, recreational and medicinal usage of cannabis in India and Thailand." *Journal of Thai Interdisciplinary Research* 14, no. 4 (2019): 43-50.

⁶⁷ Dailynews. "Request PM Prayut to Use Article 44 to Unlock Marijuana and Kratom" *Dailynews*. October 12, 2018. <https://www.dailynews.co.th/politics/671038>

⁶⁸ Max Walden. "Why is medical marijuana a high ranking priority for Thailand's military?" *ABC News*. January 13, 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-12/why-is-medical-marijuana-a-high-ranking-priority-for-thailands/11860408>

⁶⁹ Matichon. "NLA aim to legalize marijuana-kratom as a New Year Gift" *Matichon*. October 30, 2018. https://www.matichon.co.th/local/news_1203800

February 2019. The Thai government expected this policy to help them gain favour in the upcoming national election.⁷⁰

“This is a New Year’s gift from the National Legislative Assembly to the government and the Thai people”

- Somchai Sawangkarn, chairman of the drafting committee⁷¹

Policy design: Conditional legalisation

“Recreational marijuana will never be permitted in Thailand because it's not time to smoke pot and laugh all day”

- Prayut Chan-ocha, Prime Minister of Thailand⁷²

Drafting of the amended narcotic laws was transferred from the Justice Department to the Ministry of Health, reflecting the shift towards seeing the drug situation as a public health issue. Surveys on cannabis legalisation by the Research Institute for Community Happiness and Leadership Foundation showed that 80 percent of a sample group supported legalisation of medical cannabis, while 93 percent rejected full legalisation for commercial purposes because of concerns about youth consumption, negative effects, increased crime and subsequent social problems.⁷³ The government positioned themselves and the amendment clearly against legalisation for recreational and commercial purposes. Given that those opposed to the new drug policy came from conservative groups who were their main supporters, the military junta government was cautious in introducing the policy just months before an upcoming election.

The medical cannabis legalisation was thus designed with several conditions regarding non-commercial and non-recreational purposes. A licensing regime was put in place. The revision of the narcotic law allowed cannabis to be used only for scientific, medical and research purposes. Only patients who had obtained a prescription from medical doctor or registered Thai traditional medical personnel were

⁷⁰ BBC. “The government - NSA pass cannabis bill as a New Year Gift” BBC. November 7, 2018.

<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-44119656>

⁷¹ Patpicha Tanakasempipat, Panarat Thepgumpanat. “Thailand approves medical marijuana in New Year's 'gift'” Reuters. December 25, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-cannabis/thailand-approves-medical-marijuana-in-new-years-gift-idUSKCN1OO0CK>

⁷² Bangkok Post. “Regime vetoes recreational weed use” Bangkok Post. November 1, 2018.

<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1568058/regime-vetoes-recreational-weed-use>

⁷³ Bangkokbiznews. “Poll suggests the Thais does not agree liberalization of marijuana and kratom” Bangkokbiznews. November 25, 2018. <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/news/detail/819493>

permitted to use cannabis.⁷⁴ Cannabis cultivation was permitted exclusively to applicants that were either a government agency, medical practitioner, higher education institution, social enterprise or agricultural cooperatives. The private sector and households were ineligible.⁷⁵

In addition, the cabinet assigned the Ministry of Public Health and the Narcotics Control Board to monitor all aspects of the policy implementation, including the permission to manufacture, import, export, sell, or possess by conducting evaluations every six months during the first five years.

Enforcement problems: Upsurge in recreational consumption

By the end of 2019, the Narcotics Control Board reported that the number of illegal drug users had risen by 130,000 after medical cannabis was legalised. Recreational users had increased due to the improved public perception of marijuana and greater ease of access. Despite the fact that cannabis remained an illegal drug and was supposed to be available only to patients with prescriptions, many users believed that legal consumption was not limited to medical purposes. Illicit channels, including online ones also leveraged the improving image of cannabis to boost sales.⁷⁶ This caused confusion about the illegality of recreational cannabis, leading to numerous Thais and foreigners being arrested or fined for recreational use.⁷⁷

“The policy has led to cannabis becoming a readily available source of recreational drugs”

- *Niyom Termsrisuk, Secretary-General of the Office of the Narcotics Control Board*⁷⁸

Policy Development – From medical to commercial purpose

Expansion of cannabis policy

In the 2019 national election, public attention veered towards headline-grabbing news about the policy proposals of Bhumjaithai, a Thai political party. “Free Cannabis”, it read; their campaign aimed to liberalise cannabis even further from medical to commercial purposes. The party promised to let every household grow up to six cannabis plants domestically.

⁷⁴ Rehm, J., Elton-Marshall, T., Sornpaisarn, B., & Manthey, J. (2019). Medical marijuana. What can we learn from the experiences in Canada, Germany and Thailand?. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 74, 47-51.

⁷⁵ Max Walden. “Why is medical marijuana a high ranking priority for Thailand's military?” *ABC News*. January 13, 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-12/why-is-medical-marijuana-a-high-ranking-priority-for-thailands/11860408>

⁷⁶ Bangkok Post. “Cannabis use increases after legalisation” *Bangkok Post*. December 18, 2019. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1819049/cannabis-use-increases-after-legalisation>

⁷⁷ Pattaya Today. “New Thai cannabis law but recreational use is still illegal. Tricky transition period for medical users” *Pattaya Today*. <https://pattayatoday.net/new-thai-cannabis-law-recreational/>

⁷⁸ Bangkok Post. “Regime vetoes recreational weed use” *Bangkok Post*. November 1, 2018. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1568058/regime-vetoes-recreational-weed-use>

The Bhumjaithai party focused on the significant economic benefits of commercialising the plant. Cannabis liberalisation around the world had created a global market for cannabis worth US\$10.82bn in 2018. The global market value was expected to more than double in size to reach US\$24.07bn by 2025.⁷⁹ In its election campaign, the Bhumjaithai party promoted cannabis as a lucrative commodity that could help poor farmers earn up to THB400,000 to 600,000 (US\$13,000 to US\$19,500) a year. Anutin Charnvirakul, the Bhumjaithai party's leader, claimed that the export price for cannabis was as high as THB70,000 (USD2,230) per kg and cannabis would replace rice as the new Thai cash crop.⁸⁰

The grassroots responded well. The Bhumjaithai party won 51 of the 500 seats in the House of Representatives, a 50 percent increase from the last election. The 2019 election produced a hung parliament with two major coalitions competing to form the government – the pro-military coalition led by the Palang Pracharat Party and the Democrat Party with 204 seats, and the anti-military coalition led by Pheu Thai party and Future Forward with 245 seats.⁸¹ The 51 seats held by the Bhumjaithai party was the key to a majority. Aware of their bargaining power, Anutin offered partnership in exchange for support for its 'Free Cannabis' campaign.⁸²

"We will not join any coalition which rejects our free cannabis policy, instead we will then join the opposition"

- Anutin Charnvirakul, Bhumjaithai party's leader

The Bhumjaithai party eventually sided with the pro-military coalition of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha. Anutin became the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Health, overseeing the government's cannabis-related policy. In July 2019, Anutin made amending the narcotics law one of the top priorities for the Thai government.⁸³ CBD extracts from cannabis containing less than 0.2% THC was

⁷⁹ Korakrit Comchitranukij. "Legal Marijuana: Truth or Myth" *Prachatai*. November 8, 2016.

<https://prachatai.com/journal/2016/11/68734>

⁸⁰ Reuters. "Green economy? Thai party campaigns on marijuana as cash crop" Reuters. March 1, 2019.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-election-cannabis/green-economy-thai-party-campaigns-on-marijuana-as-cash-crop-idUSKCN1QI3J8>

⁸¹ Hannah Ellis-Petersen. "Thailand's military-backed PM voted in after junta creates loose coalition" *The Guardian*. June 5, 2019.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/05/thailand-military-backed-pm-prayuth-chan-ocha-voted-in-after-junta-creates-loose-coalition>

⁸² Thai PBS World. "Bhumjaithai to join a coalition but only if its "free kanja" policy is accepted" Thai PBS World. May 21, 2019.

<https://www.thaipbsworld.com/bhumjaithai-to-join-a-coalition-but-only-if-its-free-kanja-policy-is-accepted/>

⁸³ Channel News Asia. "Cannabis among top priorities for new Thai government" Channel News Asia. July 22, 2019.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/cannabis-among-top-priorities-for-new-thai-government-11743002>

removed from the narcotics list in August 2019.⁸⁴ In September 2019, he proposed new legislation permitting household cannabis cultivation.⁸⁵

Despite his enthusiasm to free up cannabis cultivation, however, Anutin was circumspect about the prospect of legalising recreation use of cannabis. Although legalisation for medical use and allowing limited cultivation did not change the illegality of using cannabis recreationally, recreational users nonetheless surged in 2019. If a commercial cultivation law were successfully legislated, cannabis would become even more easily accessible. Consequently, the number of recreational users could skyrocket. It remained unclear how the Thai government planned to regulate, if at all, the appropriate usage of cannabis in such a case.

“Legalisation of recreational use is the next step but is unlikely to happen in the four-year term of the current government”

- Anutin Charnvirakul, Minister of Public Health

Thus far, liberalisation had been pursued only with regard to the supply side, leaving recreational cannabis consumption illegal. Tackling the market asymmetrically was concerning. After liberalising cultivation, it was hard to predict its effect on recreational cannabis consumption.

Rapidly changing public perception of cannabis

The public perception of cannabis legalisation had changed drastically in just a year. A recent poll by the Bangkok Post showed that more than half of Thais surveyed in 2019 supported full legalisation of cannabis,⁸⁶ a rapid reversal from 93 percent who opposed in another 2018 survey.⁸⁷ Some pinned this down to campaigns run by special interest groups to improve the image of cannabis once the legalisation of medical cannabis came through. Thailand’s Prime Minister, Prayut Chan-o-cha, also personally promoted cannabis by inhaling an oil and applying to the back of his ears – whether this was medically sanctioned was conveniently left ambiguous. Prayut commented that medical cannabis represented a potential treatment option especially for low-income groups and added that he was going to purchase

⁸⁴ Sara Brittany Somerset. “Thailand Includes Low Level Cannabis And Hemp Extracts On Its Approved Medical Marijuana list” Forbes World. August 2, 2019.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarabrittany Somerset/2019/09/02/thailand-includes-low-level-cannabis-and-hemp-extracts-on-its-approved-medical-marijuana-list/#1cef5597883c>

⁸⁵ Reuters. “Thais allowed six cannabis plants per household under draft law” Reuters. September 13, 2019.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-cannabis/thais-allowed-six-cannabis-plants-per-household-under-draft-law-idUSKCN1VY0XL>

⁸⁶ Max Walden. “Why is medical marijuana a high ranking priority for Thailand’s military?” ABC News. January 13, 2020.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-12/why-is-medical-marijuana-a-high-ranking-priority-for-thailands/11860408>

⁸⁷ Bangkokbiznews. “Poll suggests the Thais does not agree liberalization of marijuana and kratom” Bangkokbiznews. November 25, 2018. <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/news/detail/819493>

cannabis oil for himself.⁸⁸ In addition, the Ministry of Public Health launched its first full-time medical cannabis clinic in Bangkok to relieve the supply bottleneck some experienced in getting prescriptions from qualified medical practitioners.⁸⁹

Epilogue

In 2019, the commercialisation package proposed by the Bhumjaithai party, which included six plants per household, was still being considered by parliament. It was a marker of how rapidly the policy on cannabis had evolved in Thailand. With the increasing likelihood that cannabis usage could be extended for recreational purposes, this raised the question if other drugs could soon be similarly legalised. Thailand's move from drug war to green rush was being watched in the region; let it not be a case of a sudden rush of blood to the head.

Suggested discussion questions

1. Can you provide examples of how a particular framing / reframing of an issue seemed to have a hugely catalytic effect on the issue being addressed?
2. Why is it that the status quo is so powerful at maintaining itself? How can its inflexibility be 'unlocked'?
3. How did the three main protagonists of the case study create such a big impact with their ideas?

⁸⁸ Dan Kingston. "Thailand's Prime Minister Uses Cannabis Oil at Public Event" *AZ Marijuana*. December 16, 2019. <https://azmarijuana.com/marijuana-news/thailands-prime-minister-uses-cannabis-oil-at-public-event/>

⁸⁹ Max Walden. "Why is medical marijuana a high ranking priority for Thailand's military?" *ABC News*. January 13, 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-12/why-is-medical-marijuana-a-high-ranking-priority-for-thailands/11860408>

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