

# National development plan introduces the 'Ethnic Question' for the first time

written by กองบรรณาธิการ | April 4, 2018

By *The Rational Actor*. Seriously.

Last year, something quite momentous happened as regards all of Thailand's [officially recognized 62 ethnicities](#). The Twelfth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021) employed the term 'ethnicity' for the first time ever.

This is a major step forwards for a state that in principle has a 'unity in plurality' approach to ethnic minorities but in practice is employing 'Thainess' as an overarching national ideology to instill 'core values' in those ethnic minorities like the Thai Lao of the Northeast and the Khon Meuang of the North.

Almost all of Thailand's ethnic minorities were recognized back in 2011 in the first Thailand country submission to the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination as part of Thailand's commitment to the International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. However, the majority have never been recognized in domestic legislation, for example a cabinet resolution or legislative act. The exception are ten uplands ethnic minorities, recognized via the Tribal Research Institute before it was subsumed into the Ministry for Labour and Social Welfare and then dissolved.

The result of the state's avoidance of specifically mentioning its ethnicities has been reflected in the lack of specific state planning for ethnic minorities. For example, the first eleven national economic and social development plans, devised by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) simply avoided mentioning any ethnic groups or even the term 'ethnicity'. Instead, they refer to 'groups' or 'areas' or 'regions'.

This has now changed. Using the word *chattiphan*, basically 'ethnic community', the Twelfth Plan mentions 'ethnicity' in three, very important ways - though none of them refer to specific ethnic communities, and entire regions are overlooked.

The first mention is in Section 4 (Development Strategies: Strategy for Environmentally-Friendly Growth for Sustainable Development). The relevant text (my highlighting here and throughout) reads:

The focus should be put on the Community Forest Bill, with an emphasis on protecting communities' rights, way of life, culture and local wisdom. The livelihoods of the **ethnic** groups living in conservation areas and the up-stream areas of watersheds should be protected by creating a sustainable harmony between human beings and the forests. (Subsection 3, Clause 3.7, Paragraph 3.71)

The Twelfth Plan could here be generally referring to any ethnic minorities. Though some of the strongest proponents of the Community Forestry Bill have been amongst the mountain peoples, the issue affects Thai ethnic communities in the Northeast. The mention of 'ethnic groups' at least recognizes that Thai ethnic groups are relevant in development strategy.

The second mention concerns Thailand's 'Deep South' and is in Part 4 (Development Strategy: Strategy for Reinforcing National Security for the Country's Progress towards Prosperity and Sustainability.) This reads:

Prevent and resolve the unrest in the southern border provinces by peaceful means with local public participation based on differences in identity and **ethnicity** to eliminate conflict and reduce violence according to the royal-initiated strategy of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama 9, following the principles "Understand, Access and Develop," and to create opportunities for economic and social justice development in the area. (Section 3, Subsection 3.1, Paragraph 3.1.3.)

This reference to ethnicity in the context of the South Thailand Insurgency, one of the world's worst low intensity conflicts, is absolutely groundbreaking as the official line is that the Thai Malays of the Deep South are not a separate ethnicity. Instead, the official demonym is 'Thai Islam,' i.e., a religious categorization. This official recognition that ethnic considerations are in play has huge potential implications for Thai Malays, who may now self-identify as Thai Malays, secure in the knowledge that the Twelfth Plan has opened up the 'ethnic issue' in the 'Deep South'.

The third reference concerns the North and is in Part 4 (Development Strategies: Strategy for Regional, Urban, and Economic Zone Development):

Developing potential tourism clusters, namely: (1.1) Lanna Cultural Tourism Cluster and **Ethnic** Tourism in Eight Provinces of Upper Northern Provincial Clusters: by enhancing the uniqueness of Lanna culture with its distinct identities and local wisdom to develop creative tourism services and products; (Section 3, Subsection 3.1, Clause 3.1.1, Paragraph 1)

[Lanna](#) is more of a regional name rather than a recognized ethnic community of Thailand. The mention of 'ethnic tourism' and plural references to 'identities' suggests, however, that the Plan is referring to more than just the Khon Meuang of Chiang Mai and the North but also to various mountain peoples for whom ethnic tourism is one potential, sometimes controversial, source of income.

Each of these three references to ethnicity is in itself important - and the decision of the NESDB to begin employing the term is almost revolutionary. Still, specific minorities are not mentioned. In the past, they have been, in another government planning context, cabinet resolutions. Specifically, the Abhisit government took baby steps towards what is sometimes called [ethnodevelopment](#) in 2010. Thailand officially recognized the right of the "Sea Peoples" (*chao lay*) to restore their livelihoods (traditional fishing) via a cabinet resolution on 2 June, 2010, and the right of the Karen to restore their livelihoods (rotational farming) via a cabinet resolution on August 3, 2010. Thus, ethnic communities in other regions of Thailand, especially the Northeast, but also the Central Region and South, may rightfully wonder at the absence of the 'e' word as regards regional planning for them in the Twelfth Plan.

In fact, Section 27 of the Thai Constitution guarantees freedom from discrimination by ethnicity. This means that, in principle, now the NESDB has begun mentioning 'ethnicity' in national planning in the contexts of the North and Deep South, it should also begin using the 'e' word with other regions. There is an 'affirmative action' paragraph in Section 27 which would permit promoting one ethnicity that was disadvantaged. However, 'ethnic tourism' is possible anywhere in Thailand, and

the NESDB does not make the case that ethnic communities in the North are especially disadvantaged.

To conclude, the Twelfth National Economic and Social Development Plan is one that could go down in history for opening up the 'ethnic question' in Thailand. It could lead to affirmative action at the ministerial level for disadvantaged and vulnerable ethnic minorities. However, much will depend on whether the ethnic communities themselves become aware of the fact that the NESDB has opened up the 'e' question - and what they do once they see the potential of ethnic-based planning for improving their livelihoods.

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