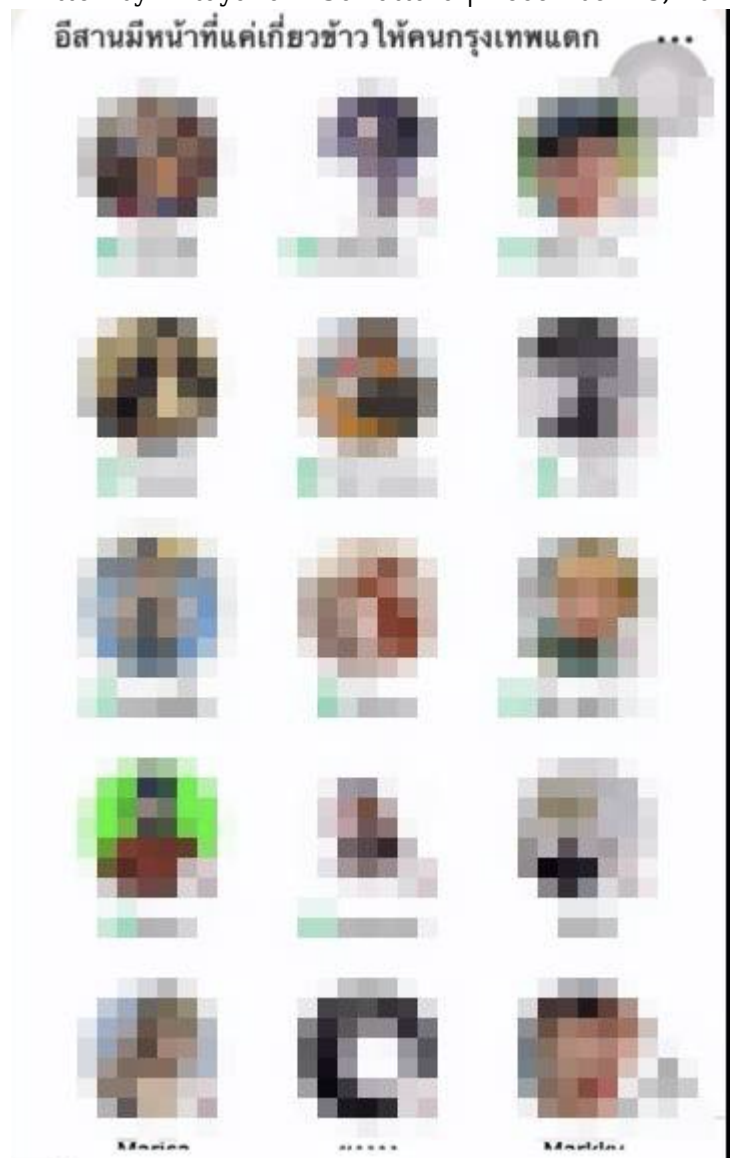


# Millions en masse in Isaan, by whom may they be defeated?

written by Witayakorn Sowattara | December 13, 2021



***To gain more insights to the recent controversial Clubhouse session where participants jeered at Isaan people, award-winning writer Wittayakorn Sowat explores the Siam government's history of internal colonialism which has exploited, suppressed, and belittled Isaan people, making them into obedient subjects. Although many of the Lao Isaan people presently have made great strides, social prejudice persists.***

Wittayakorn Sowatara

If I started this article by saying I didn't feel that upset about those insulting jokes made at the expense of Isaan people's expenses that were recently made on Clubhouse, you dear readers might become angry with me. But please hear me out.

If we are not in too much denial, we should realize that throughout the process of state centralization that began under the absolute monarchy regime, the Bangkok elites have thought of others as barbarians. It's not different from how the western colonizers looked at the local people of

their colonies, that they were barbaric, or that they were less human. To say it in the mildest possible way — they did not think of others as equal, or as important as they were. Therefore, it legitimized their claims of governance over these lands. That's what history has told us.

The Thai elite may have inherited a colonialist mindset, judging from the way they treated the territories under their rule. Many studies point out that internal colonialism was the way the Siamese kingdom governed. The most prominent one might be a research by Chaiyan Rajchagool about the absolute monarchy's colonial rule and the establishment of the modern Thai state. And actually, at the beginning of this modern state formation, the Thai (Siam) government killed so many people in the Isaan region and took so much of their resources, leaving behind just enough for the people not to starve to death. That has continued even until now.

### **For what?**

Because Isaan has a border connected to Laos, the majority of people in Isaan share the same culture with the Lao people in Laos. Some live close to Cambodia. These are the neighbors that the centralized Thai government looks down upon and belittles. Because of that, the Isaan people on this plateau, regardless of their ethnic background, want to be Isaan. They want to be Isaan, as the central government defined them to be. They want to be Thai, be Thai Isaan. They don't want to be Lao or Khmer because Thai people look down on these ethnicities.

On the surface, it looks like we just belittle or reject, or, to sugarcoat it a little, are not willing to accept our own origins. However, looking at a deeper level, we've been inculcated to disdain our own identity. And this feeling of self-loathing, including a yearning of becoming Thai, is a void that the Thai state never tries to fill, but instead turns it into a justification to suppress and exploit the people under its rule.

If we are being honest, are there any Isaan people over 35 years old who proudly speak Lao, Khmer, or their hometown dialect when they are in the Central region or Bangkok? (I'm not calling it Isaan "dialect." I insist that there is no such thing as Isaan dialect. Most people still think Lao language is Isaan dialect, but if they speak Khmer, that won't be called Isaan dialect although the speakers are also in Isaan, like in Surin, Buriram or Si Sa Ket. It's discrimination within a discrimination, as people are being duped by the homogenization of the Bangkok central government). To be more specific, when was the last time we spoke our mother tongue confidently in Bangkok? In what year?

Think about it. When did the word *siao*, which means a sacred friendship, become *bàk siao* that Thai people use to mock us? And when does this word become liberated from being used as a slur and an insult?

Furthermore, we are oppressed even about how we spell in our language. Try pronouncing the word *siao*, how is that the same as the way Lao or Isaan people pronounce it at home? We pronounce it *siao*. It's not right. What's wrong with you, to force us to spell it as *siao*? Pronouncing the word in that tone, for us it actually means coming loose. That's the extent of how much we are oppressed and coerced.

Or if anyone had ordained before 1987, back then all the good schools, whether Pali or Thai programs, were in Bangkok. We had this saying that finding a temple in Bangkok was more difficult than earning 10,000 baht. (At that time, a wagon of rice, or a ton, cost more than 2,000 baht). Even more hurtful, many temples put up a sign "No Lao/Isaan novices."

I believe it was one of the reasons that the Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya expanded its first campuses to Isaan, where now most of its campuses are located (because Isaan people are poor,

therefore many choose to become ordained to get an education). And I'm sure that it was all thanks to Phra Phimoldhamma (Art Asapho). He must have seen this problem and was disturbed. Besides, his temple, Wat Mahathat, could not possibly accommodate all the novices coming from Isaan.

Speaking of him, it pains me so much to see some who have left the monkhood and later prospered in life instead of choosing to be bootlickers. They for sure are fully aware of how these dictators so badly hurt the monk who gave them an opportunity in education. How ungrateful.

During the past 30 years, Isaan singer Phongthep Kradonchamnan released a song called "Lao," (I'm not sure from which album), which is clear evidence of how much Isaan people have been discriminated against.

"Lao" by Phongthep Kradonchamnan: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9L3DfFyMi0A>

As this is the truth, the things that those people said on Clubhouse actually reflected reality. The reality is that this is the legacy of sentiment about Isaan people that they have inherited. They did not have this stereotype just come up out of nowhere.

The important question is this. Thailand has come to a point where there are so many successful, famous, and wealthy Isaan people, and the young generation from Isaan are confident to converse in their mother tongue in public (it is only Lao Isaan people who still say they speak "Isaan"). Why does this prejudice persist?

I think there's a reason, and it's related to politics. It's about the people's voices, which is how democracy works.

The victory of the New Aspiration Party was the beginning of Isaan people starting to feel the power of their "voices." We must also acknowledge that the major stronghold of the Thai Rak Thai Party under the 1997 Constitution was in the Isaan region, which was a former mainstay of the New Aspiration Party. All the promises given by the New Aspiration Party, with some already triggered into motion, were cancelled by the traditionalist government of Chuan Leekpai. The Thai Rak Thai Party (under Thaksin Shinawatra) was able to restore those promises, and he was even more successful in terms of policy.

The Isaan people who had long suffered, being torn from their home and family as they had no choice but to emigrate to Bangkok and became laborers under the past administrations, suddenly turned into a "new middle class." The "semi-democracy" that had robbed the Isaan people of their opportunities under Prem Tinsulanonda's government, shifted to a thriving democracy with a growing economy under the 1997 Constitution that came from a credible referendum process.

In terms of art and culture, some had fought and laid the path well before that. We can clearly see that *mor lam*, Isaan traditional music, has gained such a strong local fanbase that it doesn't need an audience from the Central Region. It has also been able to expand the market across the country. Pornsak Songsaeng was the most evident case, then it was Sala Kunnawut. We don't even have to mention the popularity of the culinary culture. But everything reached its peak in the social media era.

What a convergence. The 1997 Constitution helped democracy flourish. The Isaan people became an emerging middle class. Then, social media arrived. It all helped each individual to realize their true potential. The potential of the Isaan people, in particular, who had been systematically oppressed by the central administration, have been unleashed since then.

It's the same in politics. One third of Thailand's population is in Isaan. Any party that can get a hold

in Isaan will be able to take over the country. Therefore, it's not really a surprise that Isaan artists have often been able to dominate the nation's top music charts.

I'd really like someone to survey how many of the Youtube channels that generate income from original content belong to Isaan people, compared to the rest of the country.

Back to the same question. Thailand has come to a point where there are so many successful, famous, and wealthy Isaan people, and the young generation from Isaan are confident to speak in their mother tongue in public, as internet influencers, as superstars. Why does this prejudice persist?

Before giving an honest answer to their question, I'd like to point out a political connection of this phenomenon. The mindset of those speakers on Clubhouse is the same mindset that they historically share with Thai aristocrats, who have been responsible for undermining the people's power and development through all these years.

It's the very same group that wrecked the people's rule of law and demolished the democratic 1997 Constitution. The prices of rice fell from 20,000-50,000 baht per ton to only 4,000-5,000 baht, thanks to these people. Isaan makes up One third of the population but has been allocated only 6% of the federal budget. Compared to what Bangkok receives, the proportion is 1:24, meaning Isaan people get only 1 baht out of every 24 baht Bangkok people receive.

That is to say that Bangkok kids get 240 baht while Isaan kids get only 10 baht. If we convert that money into the amount of food kids need to nourish their body and brain, what would that tell you? Isn't it because they don't think of Isaan people as equal, or even as much of a human being?

It's this very same group that has destroyed freedom of the press and online expression by passing these ridiculous laws to suppress the people and they snatch up the power for themselves and their cronies.

The only way to put an end to this abhorrent attitude, which is a cultural inheritance of the state's centralization process, is to advocate for democracy and advocate for the people's constitution. Democracy leads to decentralization, so we can distribute our resources equally, instead of unloading all of them into the Central Region as it is now.

The next foreseeable battle is the coming election. Isaan people must rise up to give a lesson to those trashy dictators and their cronies. Otherwise, they will be able to keep abusing and insulting us. We would be nothing but tramps who can only beg and wait for their kindness.

*Note: The title of this article was derived from the poem "Isaan" of Nai Phi.*

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