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Is Thailand's second war on drugs destined for failure?

By **Saksith Saiyasombut & Siam Voices** Jul 06, 2011 9:00AM UTC

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By *Alastair Mordey (guest contributor)*

If the Pheu Thai pre-election rhetoric is to be believed, some sort of a state-sponsored crackdown on drugs seems bound to follow in the wake of their recent election victory. Prime Minister-elect Yingluck Shinawatra made the following pledge while out on the campaign trail, "We'll announce a new war on drugs. We'll root them out from society in 12 months."

The battle against drugs internationally can never be won comprehensively. By definition the very nature of battle is adversarial, and the final eradication of illicit drug use is only attainable through a shift in awareness amongst the populations and subcultures who participate in it. This will take a very long time. The force of addiction upon addicted individuals is so strong that the prospect of dire consequences such as arrest, prison or even death are seldom strong enough to curtail it. Addiction, full blown, is stronger than any controlling force, as is the motivation of the nihilistic and destructive elements in all of our societies who produce and sell drugs. Like insurgent guerilla armies they have the upper

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hand, they don't have to play by the rules and they have little to lose.



A Thai policeman stands in front of a pile of seized drugs. Pic: AP.

Both addicts and suppliers are often from lower socio-economic groups, which is not to suggest their culpability is less, but only to highlight the compelling forces which drive addicts to medicate themselves, and criminal fraternities to make money and gain power . In the end it cannot be a battle, but has to be an evolution in society brought about by education to prevent addiction, a sophisticated psychological treatment for those already addicted and efforts to raise living standards to reduce poverty, which is clearly a key cause of addiction.

It is undoubtedly sensible for most societies to have controlling mechanisms placed on the flow and distribution of narcotics. Even the legalization of so called recreational drugs like cannabis has caused problems in cities like Amsterdam and London. Amsterdam's liberal drugs laws have attracted addicts from all over Europe, making the centre of the city somewhat unsalubrious. Parts of South London which experimented with a softer policy on cannabis possession found that criminal elements took to the streets to sell with impunity



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making the environment intimidating for other citizens.

If governments could have restricted the availability of alcohol and tobacco in the same way they do illegal drugs then many of them would probably have done so. As American prohibition demonstrated this was simply not a practical solution due to the simple fact that a large proportion of the population were already using them and so, when prohibitive attempts failed, the US ultimately turned instead to education. Tobacco consumption has plummeted in the US since the 1960s due mainly to long term public health campaigns and awareness raising which has changed trends and reduced the social acceptability of this drug.

A similar approach should be employed with illegal drugs. I am not suggesting that enforcement efforts should be relaxed but they also need to be accompanied by education programs. Teaching potential drug users about the dangers of drugs, or offering existing drug users assistance to stop can be just as effective a weapon in the 'war' on drugs as the threat of draconian prison sentences. We can significantly reduce illegal drug use just as we have done with legal drugs, through community and residential drug treatment programs and long term public health campaigns which undermine the acceptability, trendiness and desirability of drugs.

In Thailand, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand has encouraged community development work via agriculture which has opened up alternative income streams and virtually eradicated opium production. If alternative economies are developed like this in South American and Middle Eastern countries the international supply line could potentially be cut.

Attempting to reduce the supply and availability of illegal drugs should not be the sole focus dictating political policy. Governments need to look at reducing the actual demand for drugs either through offering effective education to potential users or scientifically and medically proven treatment services to existing users.

Alastair Mordey (BA hons, RDAP, ADAP) is the Program Director and Head Counsellor at The Cabin addiction treatment centre in Chiang Mai. He is a certified and accredited addiction counsellor with over 10 years experience working in treatment services. For more



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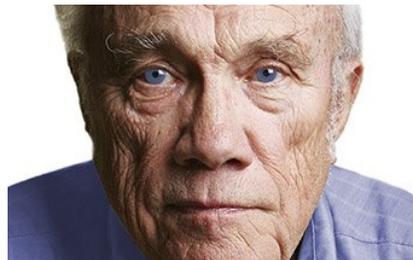
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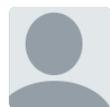
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Jonny Taylor · 3 years ago

From an expat viewpoint, I feel a new 'war on drugs' must be approached with some number of fatalities the last time around. Some foreigners here should also be a lot n along a well known beach just last week when I saw three 'farangs' openly smoking : People should be aware (and I'm sure that they are) that the penalties for marijuana harsh as for other 'harder' drugs. Thailand is not a place to come and use recreational socially acceptable within modern day Thai culture.

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Jimmybyrne36 · 3 years ago

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Jay James · 3 years ago

Just a comment from a western perspective. Thailand may seem liberal upon first vis cautious at all times, particularly when it relates to drug use or possession. Like most offenses, for example, do not usually lead to long-term jail sentences. However, hefty accompanied with being barred from future entries into Thailand can result. **Thailand** drugs might not be difficult to find, and there is an active drug scene in the country. 4

... drugs in Thailand, there are numerous reports of setbacks around certain courts not only elsewhere. So if you delve into an adventure of finding marijuana for recreational use or if you have the idea of dealing drugs in Thailand, you're re doing it at your own risk

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Albert Park · 3 years ago

The war on drugs is wars on drugs in Thailand. The Democrat Party-led government on drugs. This has been in the media, with several reports of killings by police and all are daily on this. So Yingluck follows in the footsteps of Thaksin and Abhisit on this. I given where it was deserved for the initiation of alternative income schemes in the nc agencies hard at work on this and to credit this to one person is a gross misrepresenta

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Gravel-rash · 3 years ago

Patiwat, I don't dispute your cynicism re motivation, however there was a dramatic (last crack down. Ruthless killing may not be appealing and there will always be colla military term, however it does work to a degree. Although as the article pointed out s sellers (especially the well connected) sell regardless of the potential consequences.

As I understood it there was was no enthusiasm for a police or military investigation own people indicted. They were up to their necks in it all same as Taksin. Hence the t that was never intended to find anything, just kick the topic off the front page.

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จะรู้ไปทำไม · 3 years ago

Abhisit reopened a Surayud-era investigation into Thaksin's extrajudicial killings duri He boasted that the International Criminal Court would be brought in to hear the ca investigation find? What charges were filed? NOTHING.

Face the facts, Alastair: any time the words "drugs" and "Shinawatra" are mentioned justice or alleviation of addiction... it's about scoring points of political gain.

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Simonlewis11 · 3 years ago

Great article and shows that the problem needs to be tackled from all angles. While c

needed, no country has managed to eradicate drugs that to date. So education and treatment alongside more draconian measures to help those caught in the trap of addiction. At the same time, it wants to be a drug addict so the people who are should be given the help they need.

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