

THAILAND

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PUBLIC ARE ACUTELY AWARE OF THE INCREASE IN EXTREME WEATHER AND HEAVY FLOODING

Extreme weather events such as droughts, heavy rain, storms and extreme temperatures have become increasingly regular occurrences in Thailand over the past few years. In 2011, for instance, large swathes of the country suffered serious damage after being hit by devastating floods. While January 2014 brought Bangkok its coldest recorded temperatures for 30 years, by April the temperatures had been so high for so long that the extensive use of air conditioning systems caused electricity consumption to surpass the previous year's peak. Large sections of Bangkok also lie less than a metre above sea level on average. Given that the capital is the economic heart of the country and home to millions, the effects of rising sea levels could be devastating. As a result, Thailand's policy makers, scientists, the media and the public are, as a rule, very aware of climate change and its possible consequences.

However, the second half of 2013 saw a renewed escalation of the political conflict between anti-government protestors and the opposition, which has now left numerous people dead or injured. This means that the public, policy makers and the media are focused almost exclusively on the political and social conflict between the two camps. Given that climate change is not an issue in the conflict, general awareness of the topic has declined. Key public institutions have stopped functioning as a result of the unrest. Parliament, for one, was dissolved in early December 2013, but it is not yet clear when new elections will be held. An interim government is currently in place but has only limited rights. The breakdown of some political institutions and the limitations of others are also to blame for the fact that, at the political level in particular, discussions about climate change are almost non-existent. The political conflict, which led to the military imposing martial law across the whole country on 20 May 2014, is dominating media reporting and political and public discussions throughout Thailand, and has largely forced other important issues, among them climate change, off the public agenda.

THAI POLICY MAKERS GENERALLY SEE ENERGY SECURITY AS A HIGH PRIORITY

Thailand is currently the second largest consumer of energy in the ASEAN region. Since the country has only small deposits of petroleum and natural gas, it is currently highly dependent on imports of these fossil fuels. Among ASEAN countries, Thailand is second only to Singapore in terms of the size of its net oil imports. Thailand imports more than 60 percent of the energy it consumes, at a cost that equates to 11 percent of its GDP. Rapid economic growth in some parts of Thailand, a structural shift from an agricultural economy to one based largely on industry and services, and the emergence of a middle and upper class with strong purchasing power have all combined to cause a significant rise in energy consumption and hence also in energy imports. Petroleum and natural gas currently meet around 80 percent of the country's energy demand, making them Thailand's most important sources of energy today. Furthermore, demand is expected to keep rising in the coming years. Calculations done by the Thai energy ministry assume that energy demand will grow by 4 percent each year over the next few years. Experts say the country will be facing a shortfall in its energy supply as early as 2020. In particular, coal, renewable energies and possibly also nuclear energy are expected to meet the rising demand. They are also expected to fill the gap being left by the decline in domestic gas production. Estimates say that Thailand's gas production could fall by 50 percent between 2017 and 2024. Despite additional efforts to improve energy efficiency and thereby at least curb the rise in demand, Thailand will remain heavily dependent on oil, gas and electricity imports in the coming years.

Energy security is a big locational advantage and crucial to ongoing economic growth. Thailand is acutely aware of this, which is why the government has accorded energy security a high degree of importance on its political agenda. The state oil and gas company, PTT, has expanded globally in recent years and now owns, among other things, an 8.5 percent share in a gas field in Mozambique. The government elected in 2011 thus also aimed to secure and improve energy security and energy efficiency. In an effort to reduce dependency on energy imports, the government has set a target of having renewable energies cover 25 percent of consumption by 2021 and of making manufacturing 25 percent more efficient in terms of electricity consumption over the next two decades.

Thailand is also considering using nuclear energy as an alternative to fossil fuels. If the political conflict and the resulting paralysis affecting legislation and administration continue for much longer, there is a good chance that the country will be unable to take the political steps necessary for achieving these goals in time.

DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS OF GERMANY'S ENERGY TRANSITION – OPENNESS FOR RENEWABLE ENERGIES AND NUCLEAR ENERGY

Given the geographical, linguistic and cultural distance that separates Thailand and Europe, Thailand follows only a few, specific political developments in Europe. Germany's energy transition is one of the relatively few topics that receives attention from experts in Thailand. Germany also has a very good reputation in Thailand regarding its engineering expertise in general and its competence in renewable energies in particular. Thailand is extremely interested in German technologies for renewable energies and energy efficiency. State agencies in Thailand also have close links with Germany's environment ministry, and the staff exchange information on issues relating to the climate and the environment.

With regard to the nuclear phase-out, though, Thailand does not see Germany as setting an example it should follow. In 2011, following the disaster at Japan's Fukushima nuclear plant and the radiation it released, the Thai government initially said it would turn its back on nuclear energy. However, in light of rising energy demand and the foreseeable decline in domestic natural gas production, Thailand has returned to thinking out loud about introducing nuclear energy and building nuclear power plants from 2020.

THAILAND WANTS INDUSTRIALISED COUNTRIES TO TAKE MORE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CLIMATE PROTECTION

So far, Thailand has not set itself any binding targets for reducing greenhouse gases within the scope of international climate change policies. It is, however, supporting the process of reaching a multilateral deal on climate change. It has signed and ratified the Kyoto protocol, and has hosted a variety of international conferences on the topic over the past few years. Given that extreme weather events and a further rise in sea levels would affect Thailand particularly badly, the country is doing its best to help bring about a global deal on halting climate change. It believes that industrialised countries have a particular responsibility

in this regard. Speaking at an international conference in late 2010, Thailand's environment minister said that, while the challenges of climate change required an approach based on the principles of equality and unity, they also demanded a differentiated division of responsibilities. Thailand also believes that technology transfer from industrialised countries to developing and newly industrialised countries is extremely important for promoting green technologies.

What is certain is that Thailand will be hit especially hard by the effects of climate change and that a growing demand for energy and a high level of dependency on imports will make its energy supply more prone to shortfalls in the future. Politicians and the public are aware of both these issues. However, years of political conflict and the resulting standstill are blocking the planning and implementation of further essential measures for avoiding climate change, adapting to its effects and improving energy security. The best example of this is the official national strategy for addressing climate change, which came into force in 2008 and expired in 2012. A new plan for a national strategy from 2013, which would have continued on directly from the previous one, was drawn up several years ago and now exists as a draft. However, the country's political instability and numerous changes of government mean the document has still not been approved. The dissolution of Thailand's parliament in December 2013 will keep the draft on the back burner for some time to come.