



ITP Research Form

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Paper Title: **The Commercials Make No Sense (And Neither Does This Title.)**

Abstract:

Free speech in Southeast Asia takes on a much different form than we have become accustomed to in the west. In a country where expressions against the government or sovereign are patently criminal, how can citizens express themselves while avoiding prosecution for their thoughts?

We explored this question through the lens of two small children we met in Myanmar and Thailand. Through an analysis of the legal backdrop, paired with on-the-ground interviews with people who operate in these systems every day, we were surprised by our findings.

We have concluded that, despite the reputation of Thailand as a bastion of democracy and freedoms in Southeast Asia, the current political climate makes that reputation disingenuous. Thailand, in its current iteration, is a country where political opposition to the party in power is frequently met with prosecution for speech offenses. From magazine editors who print (or even re-print) criticisms of the government, to people on the ground protesting the current government, speech prosecutions run the socio-economic gambit. All this despite the fact that there is a guarantee of free speech in the Thai constitution, and only one law that restricts speech on the books.

Myanmar, on the other hand, is extremely repressive on the books. Only a few short years out of a repressive and isolationist rule by the military Junta, Myanmar's code contains hundreds of artifacts of that repressive system. However, in practice Myanmar couldn't be more different. In general, our in-country research indicated that the Burmese feel completely free to express themselves, though there is a significant problem with self-censorship, particularly among older citizens that still have the repressive regime fresh in their minds.

Ultimately, we found that, when compared with each other, Myanmar citizens enjoy much more practical freedoms of speech, though they must live with the specter of these repressive laws, which remain on the books. There are issues with the novelty of the speech, and the law as applied and the laws as enacted need to be brought into attenuation, but the law as applied remains less concerning than that of Thailand. Between the two children that we used as our lens for this paper, we are confident in our Burmese child's ability to speak his mind and contribute to the marketplace of ideas in his country, whereas we are more than slightly concerned for our Thai child's ability to do so.