



With help from a soldier, a boy in a camouflage outfit plays with a rifle. Thai culture perpetuates many values that come with militarism. (Photo by Patipat Janthong)

How our education sustains dictatorship

After eight decades of trying to foster civilian rule, Thailand is still under a military government. So what went wrong?

The standard line is to blame the military and its political and business alliances for working to preserve their monopolistic and feudal system. But this may just be part of the answer.

One of the incontestable truths about power is that it only works when we accede to it. Fear plays a big part in this, especially in Thailand, where dissidents are often met with violence and the justice system has totally broken down.

But more important, perhaps, is how society has come to endorse military dictatorships and become part of the system of oppression itself.

So what is it that enables militarism to stay so deeply entrenched in the public psyche?

The political and business elites embrace military dictatorships because they benefit from this kind of monopolistic system. So do the bureaucrats who derive power from centralised administration with the military at its apex. What amazes me, however, is how many well-educated members of the

middle-class and working professionals endorse military rule when they are the precisely the ones who would benefit the most from a meritocratic or democratic system.

Remember how Thai university leaders and alumni turned out in full force to support the calls for military intervention from politician Suthep Thaugsuban during the anti-Thaksin Shinawatra protests he led from late 2013 to 2014? The result was bloodshed, the May 2014 coup and the current "Big Brother" society that seems destined to remain in place for years to come.

There is clearly something wrong with our education system. There have been many calls for reform to help Thai students compete with their peers in other countries. Though it is an important step, raising the average score in aptitude and other tests represents a narrow goal -- and one that cannot easily be attained under the current system. We can basically kiss goodbye to academic excellence and innovative ideas when students operate under an authoritarian system that values military-like obedience over free thinking.

Take the following news story. A primary school teacher shaved one of his student's head to punish the boy for not adhering to the soldier-like rule on permissible haircuts. Defying this was considered an outrageous challenge to school authority. The furious teacher humiliated the boy further by posting photos of his head being shaved on Facebook.

This is unacceptable. Yet the Education Ministry remains silent because such abuse is part of an authoritarian school culture. Following a public uproar, the teacher issued an apology but not to the student. He asked forgiveness from his superiors for causing trouble but he gets to keep his job as if nothing happened.

In the name of order and discipline, the Education Ministry forces all students in public schools to comply with strict rules on hair length and uniforms, or face severe consequences including being expelled. This represents a scarier form of "education".

For the establishment to maintain the status quo, young minds need to learn and internalise how to submit to the powers-that-be and their rules, no matter how silly or oppressive they may be. Education in this context becomes a weapon for brainwashing.

Hence the education system's emphasis on unquestionable submission to seniority and people in higher power. The young gradually learn that to succeed in this abusive system, they need to become the abusers.

The hazing rituals in colleges and universities that often turn deadly is also rooted in the kind of militarism institutionalised by this education system. Violence is deemed a necessary tool to create collective order. They may call it unity and harmony. I call it fascism.

Right after the coup, a state-run kindergarten near my house introduced a weekly routine to make children accept military rule. As soldiers barked orders to the frightened toddlers to turn left or right, to keep silent, and stop crying, their mothers stood by helplessly watching yet another generation learning how to submit to military power.

The Thai education system does not only uphold militarism, it also perpetuates many other values that come with it -- for example, sexism, authoritarianism, ultra-nationalism, racism, and the urge to suppress (even destroy) different views that are seen as a challenge to power.

Thanks to this, patriarchy permeates all of our lives. Nuns are treated as monks' servants; women are primarily seen as wives and mothers, or as sex objects; domestic servants play the role of virtual slaves; and nurses are just cheap help, way below physicians in status and pay.

Thanks to an obsession with race, territory and "sameness", the highlanders and southern Malay Muslims are discriminated against as "outsiders" and "threats to national security". The migrant workers' slave-like conditions are ignored and dissidents are routinely sent to jail or executed in extra-judicial killings.

Meanwhile, the traditional hatred against neighbouring countries persists in history textbooks because territorial nationalism and stories of warrior kings glorify the military and serve the establishment.

It's one thing if the military tries to hold on to power. It's another when the citizenry comes to embrace militarism, subscribing to the same fascist ideology, condoning rights violations, and becoming part and parcel of an abusive system.

As long as the education system keeps corrupting young minds, Thai students will continue to lose out in the international arena. Problems like sex trafficking and gender discrimination will stay in place.

As long as total obedience remains our society's ultimate cultural value, there's little hope of stopping the coups and military rule.

Bron: Sanitsuda Ekachai, former editorial pages editor, *Bangkok Post*, 25 mei 2017.