Isomorphism and Decoupling: Processes of external and internal legitimation in Southeast Asia

Sascha Helbardt, Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam and Rüdiger Korff, University of Passau

Abstract:

How is it possible to analyse the seemingly contradictory modernization processes of Southeast Asian states? On one hand, the states feature the universal characteristics of modern states, while on the other, seemingly traditional patterns such as patronage, cronyism, etc. are an integral part of the administrations. Furthermore, the states and bureaucracies are rather stable and able to provide a framework for rapid economic development. This article combines a neo-institutionalist perspective that allows to ‘decouple’ organisational structures from action structures, and thus take the discrepancy between the modern form and pretended ‘Asian’ content of the states into account. Furthermore, it considers the additional concepts of ‘multiple modernities’ and ‘contested institutionalism’. Thus, different modernization processes that lead to universalism resulting from interdependencies of organisations within a global organisational field are present, as well as particularism, which enable diversity in action. Thailand and Myanmar are chosen as case studies, because Thailand always followed a strategy of international integration, in contrast to isolationist Myanmar.

1. Introduction

Southeast Asian states exhibit far-reaching and obvious differences in systems of government and administration. However, turning to the organisational structures of the states, these differences are far less pronounced. All follow procedures such as elections, and use emblems like constitutions, parliaments, commissions etc. Furthermore, the extent of Southeast Asia’s global political and economic integration is high. Southeast Asian states entered the global level, are part of defence alliances, attract foreign investment, and are members of international bodies such as the G20; yet for the legitimization of their administrations particular local or regional traditions are applied. Thus, Southeast Asian states can either be classified as quite homogenized, modernized, and globalized following (with some deviations particularly with regard to the degree of democratization) the pattern of modernity, or as highly diverse due to prevailing particular cultural traditions and pre-colonial as well as colonial histories.

The view that Southeast Asian states are diverse or follow - more or less - universal principles results from the perspectives taken in studies on the region. Many scholars focus on the role of the states within international and regional networks such as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) (Weatherbee/Emmers 2005), whereas others focus on the internal processes of nation building and state formation (Day 2002; Trocki 1998). Central to the first perspective are contracts and alliances between states, international agreements, acceptance of rights agreed upon by the United Nations etc. The basic assumption is that the states, as nation-states, follow – more or less - the universal pattern of modern sovereign states. In contrast, studies that adhere to the second perspective highlight the states’ internal structures, politics and administration, and outline why policies resulting from international agreements are hardly implemented. These studies indicate that the internal workings follow their own rationalities based on charisma, patrimonialism, or ties between bureaucracies and business (Ersatz-capitalism, bureaucratic capitalism) (Keyes et al. 1994, Tarling 1998).

Applying the neo-institutionalist perspectives developed by Meyer/Rowan (1991), and DiMaggio/Powell (1991) on the question of diversity and similarity of Southeast Asian states the studies can be differentiated between those that focus on the formal organisational structure and those that concentrate on the action structures of the states and bureaucracies. Our argument is that Southeast Asian states exhibit features of decoupling (DiMaggio/Powell 1991) between an organisational structure that is closely related to universal (global) forms and an action-structure based on — frequently — invented traditions. This decoupling results from the states’ attempts to solve the dilemma that exists between internal legitimation from those working within the bureaucracies and the citizens and external legitimation from other
states and international business or development organisations. The puzzling contrast between pretended particular traditions dating back to pre-colonial states and expressive modernity and integration of the states into global politics and the world economy reflects this decoupling. Accordingly, an action structure that refers to unique traditions plays a role in internal legitimation, while an organisational structure showing universal features is relevant as the basis of international recognition (Meyer et al. 1997).

2. Unique or universal? Southeast Asia’s state formation in theoretical perspectives

Diversity of state formation in Southeast Asia is described as a major characteristic of the region. Eisenstadt (1973) notes, ‘there may arise a great variety of post-traditional orders, and that some such types are developing now in Southeast Asia’ (Eisenstadt 1973: 3). As such, patrimonialism, clientelism and the dominant role of the bureaucracies comprise the main features of Southeast Asian states and politics. In a recent discussion of a political science analysis of Southeast Asian politics, Kuhonta et al. (2008) ask,

‘… do states in Southeast Asia possess rational-legal foundations that allow them to govern efficiently? […] The Philippines ranks as the stand out patrimonial state in the region. Thailand (1932 – 1988) and Indonesia (during the new order) have generally been categorized as bureaucratic polities, in which clientelism and some bureaucratic procedures are both present’ (Kuhonta et al. 2008: 33).

With regard to state bureaucracies, Day (2002) maintains:

‘The Southeast Asian administrations […] exhibit a hybrid mixture of characteristics, some of them ‘cosmological’ in the mode of early Southeast Asian states […] or “familial”, again what historians usually associated with “pre-modern” state forms […] even though there was undoubtedly growing pressure over the course of this period to ‘rationalize’ bureaucratic structures and practices in response to the needs of an increasingly territorialized and exploitative state system’ (Day 2002: 167f).

The reason for such diversity might be traced to the diversity of pre-colonial states as well as colonial transformations and cultural diversity most clearly expressed in religions and ethnicity, which is often combined. Not only are all world religions present in Southeast Asia, all colonial powers also had colonies in the region. Furthermore, the split between East and West during the Cold War went straight through Southeast Asia (Korff 2010).

For Europe Eisenstadt (1973: 253ff) and Hobsbawm (1992) argue that nationalism relativated and even dissolved the political and administrative relevance of such communal
differentiations with its ideology of the nation as a unified cultural, political and even economic unit. Even though nationalism was a major ideology in the struggle for independence in Southeast Asia and for the post-colonial states, cultural pluralism, ethnic differences and a strong internal centre – periphery differentiation were maintained, as were differences between the new states. These are, for example, shown in the pattern of state formation, reaching from socialist revolution in Vietnam and Cambodia to subsistence socialism in Laos (Luther 1983), as well as nationalism and isolationism in Burma¹ and Indonesia during the Sukarno period, or bureaucratic rule in Thailand.

Nevertheless, even when the highly diverse context of pre-colonial states, colonial modernization and post-colonial state formation are taken into consideration, surprising similarities persist. On one hand, as Rüland (1998, Rüland et al. 2005) notes, one-party or semi-one-party rule is widespread, and not limited to Vietnam. In Singapore, the People’s Action Party (PAP) always maintains at least a two-thirds majority, as does the Barisan Nasional in Malaysia. Formerly, the Golkar in Indonesia and the BSPP (Burmese Socialist Programme Party) in Myanmar resembled such a single-party rule within authoritarian military-based governments.

An even more striking similarity is that during the 1960s a shift from charismatic political leadership by the leaders of the struggle for independence to bureaucratic leadership occurred. The fall of Sukarno, one of the most charismatic leaders of newly-independent Indonesia, who was pushed aside by Suharto, exemplifies this. At the same time, in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh and Nguyen Giap lost their political influence to party bureaucrats, Le Duan and Le Duc Tho (Großheim 2009). Although Lee Kuan Yew is portrayed as the charismatic leader of Singapore, in the 1960s he was PAP’s organiser, while Lim Chin Siong and Fong Swee Suan were popular leaders who were put in jail by the British under the Internal Security Law. (Hack 2001:234ff; Trocki 2006:114ff). A less expressive, similar shift occurred in Malaysia and Cambodia during the late 1960s.

When looking at the changes in Southeast Asia one might speak of either ‘successful modernization’, like the famous 1994 World Bank report, describing new tiger states, or arguing that ‘occidental rationalization’ (Schluchter 1979) cannot be applied to Southeast Asian states due to persisting ‘Asian values’ (Mahathir 1999). Applying the concept of ‘multiple modernities’ permits a perspective to analyze modernization processes in Southeast Asia while maintaining specifics that result from cultural, social, and historical experiences. For Eisenstadt (2002), multiple modernities refer to a contested process, in which a core

¹ There is a little confusion concerning the names of these countries. Until 1939, Thailand was internationally known as Siam while Myanmar was established as the international name for Burma after the coup in 1989. Here, we will refer to the countries using the current names.
meaning of modernity, namely that ‘the future [is] characterized by a number of possibilities realizable through autonomous human agency’ (Eisenstadt 2002: 3) becomes universal, while allowing for highly diverse pattern of institutionalization.

Applying this concept of multiple modernities, Witttrock (2003: 58) notes that modernity is a global condition that affects action, interpretations, and institutions across nations and their respective civilizational roots. Even though we have historical continuities, this global condition leads towards similarities and even uniformity. Uniformization of different organisations is the starting point for the analysis by Meyer et al. (1997). They refer to worldwide models that define and legitimize agendas for local actions and structures of policies of nation-states. With the concept of “multiple modernities” one can recognize different trajectories in different countries, while with neo-institutionalism one can focus on how global institutions are integrated into organisations. This institutionalization of world models into structures of states can be explained by isomorphism of organisations (Meyer et al 1997: 145). ‘Nation-states are more isomorphic than most theories would predict, and change more uniformly than is commonly recognized.’ (Meyer et al. 1997: 173).

The interesting aspect of this isomorphism is following Meyer/Rowan (1991) that the universal or global formal structures are rationality-myths, ceremonies and emblems rather than regulatives of acting within an organisation. For example, in Southeast Asia modern administrative departments have computers, formal regulations for efficiency, promotion and access, in which, nevertheless, patronage, personal relations, and family status are decisive criteria for a career; or, furthermore, where a bureaucratic rank is an important status marker that has little implication of the work a person does.² Meyer/Rowan (1991) and DiMaggio/Powell (1991) explain this discrepancy as the ‘decoupling’ of organisational and action structure. Decoupling allows isomorphism of the organisational structures of states that result from interdependencies and interactions between states or international organisations. For the internal workings of the organisations these represent rationality myths and ceremonial procedures rather than rationalities that facilitate efficiency. The action structure of an organisation is quite independent from the isomorphic organisational structure, as it is based on rationalities of acting and decision making within the organisation. Both refer to different functions and aspects of legitimation. Additionally, as any organisation is always interdependent on other organisations, and states are integrated into inter-state power differentials, external legitimation is necessary. The organisational structure serves as a form of external legitimation towards other organisations. Thereby institutional aspects of the organisational structure do not have to enhance efficiency of an organisation. As a result

² In Thailand, various people such as Thaksin Shinawatra or the sons of the politician Chalerm hold the ranks of police officers, but certainly do not work in the police force.
organisations can maintain vocabularies of efficiency, rationality, and legitimacy that facilitate reproduction and thus stability through external recognition and acceptance, independent from what is actually undertaken (Meyer/Rowan 1991: 49ff). Development discourses and goals such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) etc., which are ceremonially addressed in most official speeches of states and international development organisations serve as such rationality myths. A common feature is that they remain on a general and abstract level to which everybody can agree. However, conflicts emerge when these development concepts are to be implemented, for instance when they affect the action structure of the organisation.

In their analysis DiMaggio/Powell (1991) argue that isomorphism results from an ‘organisational field’. Organisational fields are defined as ‘those organisations that, in the aggregate constitute a recognized area of institutional life’ (DiMaggio/Powell 1991: 64). The integration of an organisation into an organisational field works through the integration of those institutions regulating interactions between organisations into their own structure. In an organisational field we therefore have both connectedness and structural equivalence. As such, institutional isomorphism emerges because ‘organisations... respond to an environment that consists of other organisations responding to their environment, which consists of organisations responding to an environment of organisations’ responses’ (DiMaggio/Powell 1991: 65).

Organisational fields are similar to networks in which relations between organisations are institutionalized and thereby receive cultural meaning based on the mutual consensus of involved organisations. Isomorphism may result from mimetic processes in the sense that something is just a copy, or that it arises from coercion, when institutionalization is based on force, or from normative means like international contracts. It is important to note that an organisation or state can only receive recognition and legitimacy within an organisational field when the institutions themselves are internalized. As such, a brief historical overview of the modernization and state formation indicates that colonialism certainly is a process of coercive isomorphism, while much of the early state formation after independence followed a mimetic pattern. With globalization normative isomorphism gains relevance.

Reformulating multiple modernities in a neo-institutionalist view it becomes apparent that ‘multiple modernization’ proceeds along two main lines: on one hand as the universalization of modern organisational structures, and on the other as particularistic rationalization of action structures in a process of contested institutionalization. As such, seemingly contradictory ideologies can be explained: To differing degrees, all state ideologies in Southeast Asia point toward the uniqueness and strength of cultures and their heritage, and even argue that ‘western’ concepts do not fit these cultural traditions (Sheridan 1999). At the
same time, the ideology of progress, modernity and international importance shall indicate how advanced these countries already are.

The analysis in the following two case studies of Southeast Asian states, Thailand and Myanmar, follows the perspective of modernity as a universal and, at the same time, highly particular processes. Here, the focus is on isomorphism and decoupling as aspects of internal and external legitimation of the states. Implicitly, isomorphism is relevant if a policy of international integration is followed. As such, Myanmar and Thailand resemble opposite poles on a continuum. Since the reforms of King Chulalongkorn in the late 19th century, Thailand follows a policy of international integration, while since the coup of Ne Win in 1962 Myanmar adheres to an isolationist policy. As these policies result from actors, we will to consider the historical context in which actors (or strategic groups) formed that push forth policies such as international integration or isolation as means to influence state formation as a process of contested institutionalization. State formation thus proceeds along tensions of international demands from the organisational field and internal demands from strategic groups. Decoupling is a means to accommodate these tensions. A basic problem is that the isolationist nature of Myanmar and authoritarian control means that studies about Myanmar are far more limited compared to those on Thailand.

Even when we refer to strategic groups (that emerge around the common interest to appropriate new resources) the formation of these groups and their influence on state formation is not in the focus of our study (for this question refer to Evers 1973; Evers/Schiel 1988, 1992; Berner 2001, Berner/Korff 1991). We are more interested in the relation between outside pressures and internal socio-political processes. In this framework the sequence and formation of strategic groups within the country accounts for similarities and differences of the institutional structure of the states. Strategic group analysis and a neo-institutional perspective do not exclude each other. For example in strategic group analysis the internal workings of the bureaucracy in between demands from international organisations and other states and internal as well as popular legitimation, is less analysed, which is the main focus of neo-institutionalism.

2. Thailand: Isomorphism and decoupling as solution of contradictory modernization

Bureaucratic modernisation in Thailand began with the establishment of a modern Thai military in the second half of the 19th century. A military was considered a necessity for maintaining the country's independence in the face of expanding colonial powers. Consequently, the armed forces enjoyed a higher degree of organisation than other parts of the bureaucracy or civilian actors (e.g. the economy). After the fall of the absolute monarchy
in 1932, the Thai military — almost continuously — ruled the country in an autocratic fashion until 1973. A diffuse notion of national security allowed it to legitimize its rule in various areas, including, for example, development. At the centre of the resultant ‘bureaucratic polity’ (Riggs 1966) was a bureaucracy that dominated politics and did not serve external, non-bureaucratic interests. Instead, the bureaucracy itself became the centre of political rivalry between different networks of officials. At the top of these networks were cabinet ministers, mostly high-ranking bureaucrats, which responded to the demands of their clientele, i.e. subordinate officials.

At the same time the bureaucratic polity tended to stress the efficiency of its structures, which formally resembled universal models of functionally specialized administrations. Local aristocrats were replaced by modern administrators from the centre (Chaiyan 1982). Under King Chulalongkorn (1853 – 1910), Europeans were invited to teach ‘techniques of administration’. The department staff was initially trained abroad and local training facilities such as the Chulalongkorn University were established. These were designed based on modern — western models, or rather following models of colonial administration. Access to the bureaucracy was regulated by rather formal criteria such as a university degree, preferably from a foreign university, and career patterns were similar to those of bureaucrats in Republican France or the Indian Civil Service. With regard to the rationality of this organisation, Riggs illustrates that ‘the essential question is not the formal or intrinsic rationality of the organisational design, but rather the motivational forces which give it life’ (Riggs 1966: 347).

The guiding norms of everyday bureaucratic action were therefore not to solve politically defined problems through administrative functions, but rather to reduce officials’ workload or to reduce conflicts between the bureaucracy and the public. Services to the citizens were, in this system, irrelevant. The Thai term for bureaucrat Kha Ratshakarn literally translates to ‘slave of the king’. In this sense the bureaucracy were required to work for the political powers, not a generalized public. Nevertheless, many regulations were produced to regulate the inner working of the administration based on a legal codex, as well as to control and administer the population. However, these intricate regulations were mere emblems that had little relevance for actions; the public could accept the existence of a bureaucracy, but did not expect much of it. It was assumed that the bureaucracy served the interests of its member to extract resources from the people. Thus, to be a bureaucrat meant power over the common people and chances for enrichment, and as such, most university graduates gain employment within it. Until the early 1970s, almost all university graduates expected to obtain government employment (Jacobs 1971). Thinapan/Likhit (1989) note:
‘political leaders, including military officers, civilian bureaucrats and academicians, still cling to the idea that the country should be ruled by a small group of elites. This elitism is based on the logic, whether right or wrong, that they are the most appropriate and qualified group to hold the sceptre of power and handle the reins of administration”. (Thinapan/Likhit 1989:177f)

Patron-client networks play a central role in the internal legitimation of power within Thailand’s bureaucracy (Chai-Anan/Morell 1981). These networks regulate the distribution of resources, including status, power, or money. Instead of distributing positions within the bureaucracy according to the skills of an official, personnel assignment is organized by, on one hand, the relevance of the position and, on the other, the power of the protagonists. For example, the position of the commander of the Fourth Army in Southern Thailand, a very lucrative position due to the large sums of money that flow to the region’s counterinsurgency measures against the Malay Muslim rebellions and due to the illicit trade that occurs at the Thai-Malaysian border (Helbardt 2011), is assigned not to soldiers, who are well-acquainted with the region, but to Army Generals with close connections to the Thai queen. Although, according to Riggs (1966), these informal networks and mechanisms play a role in all bureaucracies, they became the dominant action structures in Thailand, as the country, at least until the 1970s, lacked extra-bureaucratic forces that effectively controlled state officials.

In a strategic group perspective, the bureaucracy and military were dominant, not the least because besides political power, they controlled large parts of the economy through state enterprises and alliances with business. Such an overlapping is well indicated by leading bureaucrats and generals holding key positions in private enterprises. (Berner/Korff 1991). The interpenetration of bureaucracy and business was an important feature of Thailand’s bureaucratic networks. Businessmen (often with Sino-Thai background) delivered the resources that were necessary to stabilize the bureaucratic patronage networks. Army and police generals received money or held posts in the board of directors of private companies. In return, bureaucrats offered the businesses government contracts, licences and political protection. The pattern is similar to the so-called ‘Tycoon System’ (Studwell 2010) in which economic and administrative functions are differentiated but are also interwoven as a result of personal relationships (Phipatseritham/Yoshihara 1983). An elite consensus emerged which ensured that even high-ranking bureaucrats who lost positions in the top echelons of power could still provide businesses with necessary access to political resources. Additionally, the businesses could establish relationships with the new leading factions. Similar informal networks could also be found on the local level, where petty traders, village headmen, and police officers play an important role. Local businesses act as vote brokers for
politicians or provide district officers with various goods in return for (construction) contracts (Nelson 1998, 2004).

The best means to reduce internal competition over economic resources within the bureaucracy, and struggles between the bureaucracy and business as strategic groups, was economic growth. Economic growth allowed a ‘win-win situation’, and thus reduction of conflicts. Therefore, all actors shared an interest in the country’s economic development, although the dominant networks shifted regularly. This made the bureaucracy surprisingly dynamic (Rasiah/Dragsbeck-Schmidt 2010; Jomo 2004).

At least since the intensified engagement of the USA in Thailand with the cold war and especially the war in Vietnam (Thailand as anti-communist bastion) economic growth meant strong integration into the anti-communist alliance and the world economy. During the Vietnam War, the United States sent troops and military advisors to Thailand. The US served as a role model for Thailand’s military organisation and was the country’s main provider of weapons. In the field of economics, the US and Japan also exerted a significant impact. American consultants not only advised the military (JUSMAG or Joint US Military Advisory Group Thailand), they also shaped economic policies and planning. The latter was especially relevant for Thailand’s establishment as a legitimate international trading partner and place for foreign direct investment (FDI). Hence, the government adopted standards and economic policies as demanded, for example, by its bilateral partners as well as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Consequently, massive FDI entered the Thai economy and, up to the Asian Crisis in 1997, Thailand enjoyed one of the highest growth rates globally. In 1994, the World Bank Report (World Bank 1994) celebrated Thailand as one of the ‘Tiger states’. In the field of political organisations, Thailand formally adopted regular elections, at least since the 1970s, including a parliament, judicial system and various independent commissions (like the anti-corruption commission). Thailand’s bureaucracy officially described itself as a professional ‘meritocracy’.

All these aspects of the organisational structure are more or less fully in line with the global requirements of a modern state. As such, the state administration demonstrates strong isomorphy that allows it to play an accepted role among other international organisations, whether they are international development organisations like the UN, enterprises and business, or other states. Within the country, the bureaucratic elite sought legitimacy by referring to Thai Buddhism and the monarchy, which was propagated as the foundation of Thai culture since the 1950s. Earlier, during the authoritarian rule of Field Marshall Phibun Songkhram (1938-1944; 1948-1957), the Thai state strove for legitimacy by using a combination of fascist nationalism in which the monarchy was almost non-existent. This nationalism followed the European example, arguing that all those living in Thailand were
ethnic Thais, with the exception of some Chinese in the cities and the hill tribes in remote areas. After the fall of Phibun, the ruling networks of bureaucracy and the monarchy justified their status by presenting itself as the guarantors of Thai independence since the 14th century Sukhothai era, asserting that this elite was responsible for the country’s independence and modernisation during colonial times. Working in the spirit of the Thai king, the symbol for national unity, only the royalist bureaucratic elite could provide stability and development. In this sense, the access to the bureaucracy was decisive for social mobility (Evers 1966).

Non-bureaucratic elites, which threatened the rule of the bureaucracy via other models of legitimacy, were labelled as a threat to the nation or the monarchy. Although thereby they could be discredited, they could not be fully dissolved and had the tendency to re-emerge again. A case in point is the ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006), who, as telecom magnate and billionaire, not only curbed the vested powers of bureaucrats, but also introduced the idea of a ‘CEO-style’ government (and administration) as the key for Thailand’s ability to survive the pressures of globalization. Although the CEO talk remained rather vague and neoliberal, the idea of a slim and responsive - business-like - administration was rather popular with a population, that was fed up with a bureaucracy that was said to be corrupt and ignorant towards the needs of its ‘customers’. (Udomchoke 2007). This change of the acting structure and of legitimacy it encouraged are noteworthy. Evidently, the bureaucracy is successful. Interestingly, modifications occur at the behest of the demands and expectations of the people, as the administration is increasingly viewed as an organisation that ought to fulfil the tasks demanded by the population and not to act solely as an instrument of the elites.

In the case of Thailand, there is seemingly a discrepancy between pointing out specific Thai aspects of the bureaucracy, politics, and state ideologies on one hand, and adherence to international standards on the other. Furthermore, it is evident that this works, as high growth rates and the willingness of foreign enterprises to invest in the country indicate. Thailand provides the interesting case of a state whose internal working is characterized by struggles and conflicts between different factions and strategic groups, but these do not affect integration into the international organisational field. An indication for internal tensions are coup d’état and changes of the constitution. Since the Second World War, 11 coups took place (2006 as the last) and 18 constitutions had been prepared (the current constitution was promulgated in 2007). Together with revolts like in 1973, 1992, 2008 and 2010 these indicate shifts in the figuration of strategic groups and attempts to establish new institutions regulating

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3 To use management terminologie like Chief Executive Officer was supposed to indicate efficiency, businesslike administration etc.
the internal working of the state administration and economy, a process that can be looked at as contested institutionalization of modernity.\textsuperscript{4}

That these internal dynamics hardly affected integration into the international organisational field is due to internal struggles are not affecting the isomorphy of the organisational structure. Even during periods of autocratic rule a constitution existed, elections took place etc. In addition, international integration provided a high degree of continuity of the state even during periods of rapid changes. Finally, especially after the sixtieth international recognition, the inflow of development, military etc. aid, foreign investment and tourism provided for economic growth and win-win situations among competing groups. In conclusion, decoupling has itself been an important factor for the modernization of Thailand. Myanmar is just the opposite. The isolationist policies combined with authoritarian military rule make Myanmar an international outcast second only to North Korea; this has only changed in April 2012.

3. Myanmar from isolation as a basis for independence to a search for isomorphism

In Myanmar the empirical research situation is still extremely difficult. Since the coup of Ne Win in 1962 social science research within the country has hardly been conducted. Local studies either do not exist, or are not accessible. Even basic statistics do either not exist, are not reliable or not allowed to be used.\textsuperscript{5} Therefore, to date, most analysis of the administration in Myanmar remain speculative and are derived from very limited hard data. Nevertheless, certain insights are possible, using existing literature and some preliminary interview data from a new research project. Most of the studies are historical studies, and we follow this approach here as well.

Colonialism had two decisive effects in Myanmar. First, through the use of the divide et impera principle a plural society emerged that was characterised by ethnic and/or religious groups with few commonalities. Internal cohesion of the group was more important than an inter-ethnic or national consensus. The only bonds for these groups are the ‘market’ and (British) administration (Furnivall 2010). The creation of a plural society had an impact on the

\textsuperscript{4} For example, the four coup from 1947 to 1958 aimed at the establishment of the bureaucracy/military as autocratic political and economic power, while the revolt in 1973 reduced bureaucratic rule and allowed for more political power for big business and professionals in a more pluralistic semi-democratic system. With shifting degrees of autocratic versus more pluralistic rule this system worked quite well until the Asia crisis. Since the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra, the coup of 2006 etc. the elite increasingly faces popular demands and the state losses of legitimacy.

\textsuperscript{5} One problem for the calculation of economic growth is that the official exchange rate is rather irrelevant. Partly due to the large informal economy, basic data concerning monetary supply etc. do not exist. Thus, nobody knows how large the economy really is and whether it growth or shrinks.
independence movement. Those fighting for independence were overwhelmingly ethnically Burman, young university graduates. Indian and Chinese immigrants as well as ‘ethnic minorities’ at the periphery were hardly part of the independence struggle. The second effect of British rule was the complete abolition of the monarchy. As such, it could not serve as a model for state formation in an independent polity. Instead, until 1962, the British model of democracy with its centralising features was a normative governmental structure. Attempts to create a federal state through the Panglong Agreement⁶ (1947) failed because the concessions it established were seen as to be too far reaching. (Taylor 1987; Korff 2010). When this Panglong treaty was not honoured by the government, and minority’s cultural and political rights were challenged, civil war and separatist groups evolved.

Under the armed resistance of different opposition and separatist groups, the democratic model became increasingly difficult to uphold internally. In order to preserve national unity, the army, under Ne Win, conducted a coup d’état in 1962 (Taylor 1987). As the military had played a decisive role in Myanmar’s independence, it considered itself to be the guardian of national unity and independence. (Steinberg 2001). In order to secure national independence, the economy was nationalised, political opposition declared illegal, and the country withdrew from most international organisations and bodies, in an effort to become a completely self-sustaining entity. (Taylor 1987).⁷

The extension and enlargement of military functions after the coup of 1962, (the military took over the civil administration) not only led to economic inefficiencies (military and economic structures are not easily compatible), but also to a far-reaching detachment from reality. Since the military perceives itself as the guarantor of national unity and stability, criticism of the military, either internally or externally, was considered an attack on the integrity of the state and the nation of Myanmar (Callahan 2005). Unity in the military thus became a central value, because it is only as a single unit that the military can fulfil its function as the guarantor of the state (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2009). Moreover, the military often perceives the population as a sort of enemy or antagonist, which simply does not understand the requirements of national unity and therefore has to be compelled to work for its own good (Callahan 2005). The military saw itself as a public good to maintain the most important public good of the nation: independence. Due to the overwhelming dominance of the military or rather some leading persons within it contestations over institutions was limited.

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⁶ Many of the formerly indirect ruled states of minorities did not support independence, not the least because they were afraid of dominance by the majority burmans. The Panglong Agreement provided the base for a federal structure guaranteeing the minority autonomy and even the right to leave the union. Still today this agreement is taken as base for re-conciliation.

⁷ This policy was discussed as dissociation and alternative development in the late seventieth.
Within the country no organisation challenging military rule was allowed to exist, thus, only external organisations could be a threat. As any threat to military rule was interpreted as threat of independence, all external contacts were looked at with utmost suspicion. Nevertheless, a limited level of international integration had to be maintained, not the least to purchase weapons. This required some form of isomorphy. The establishment of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) can be regarded as an attempt to create isomorphous structures. The party was founded after the coup in 1962 and when all civil servants had to be members of the party in 1964, it became a mass-organisation. As a result instead of a military dictatorship, Myanmar was a ‘one party state’ quite similar to other post-colonial states. During the regular and irregular party congress’ General Ne Win was elected as the chairman until he resigned and the BSPP was dissolved in 1988. (Taylor 1987).

Despite - or maybe because of its far-reaching isolation - the country and its state structures were more or less accepted - or at least tolerated internationally. Claiming a socialist agenda with the “Burmese way to socialism” provided links to the eastern block, while maintaining a distance to the socialist world allowed for some support from the west. Many states had their embassies in Myanmar, a few provided development aid, but because Myanmar was neither important for the world economy, nor for international politics the country was on no ones agenda. Thus, violent suppression of protests and student revolts like in 1974 remained entirely internal affairs. This only changed in 1988. The resignation of Ne Win was seen as a chance for protests and reform by the people. Soon it lead to a full scale rebellion, which was ended brutally by a coup d’état in the same year. The coup group formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) as the new government of Myanmar. When Myanmar became a member of ASEAN, SLORC was renamed SPDC (State Peace and Development Council),

Since the revolt in 1988 and the end of the Cold War, an alternative model of state constitution and isomorphous legitimacy became available in the figure of Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung Sang, the national independence hero. She campaigned for a Western-inspired model of democracy and her party: the National League for Democracy (NLD). Overwhelmingly the NLD won elections in 1990. Suu Kyi demanded to form the government, but the SLORC claimed the elections had only been held to decide the composition of a constituent assembly, the National Convention (Steinberg 2001). During the next twenty years the National Convention prepared a new constitution. In 2010 elections were held that were won by the Union State Development Party (USDP), a newly-founded party comprising former members of the military.

The coup in 1988 marked a shift away from socialist policies towards a market economy. The entry into ASEAN, the referendum over the constitution in 2009 and elections in 2010 can be
interpreted as attempts by the ruling group to gain international recognition and legitimacy through isomorphous structures. In fact, the socialist one party system changed into a market economic multi-party system, even though most candidates of the parties were former officers. While these attempts were to some extent successful internally, internationally the Aung San Suu Kyi’s model of democracy prevailed. Consequently, the military government was an international pariah, while Aung San Suu Kyi was regarded the proper role model. Quite as a surprise, the new elected government started a policy of opening and liberalisation. It introduced a sort of two-chamber and federal system under civilian control and immediately after the elections, Suu Kyi was released from nearly twenty years of house arrest and talks were started with her. Suu Kyi is now a member of parliament and public demonstration of democratization.

Many reasons have been adduced for the abrupt change, most of which must remain speculative. Probably the government believed that not only was it itself in danger, national unity was also threatened by economic hardship and dependence on China, one of the few countries that did not adhere to the international sanctions. The military’s strategies to gain international recognition and legitimacy like market economy, a new constitution, multi party elections in 2010, etc. had thus far not worked as a means to increase international acceptance. In contrast, the model of the opposition with Suu Kyi as leading figure was obviously successful, as the opposition had received far-reaching international support. Only with the opposition in parliament the existence of a multi-party system might be internationally recognized, as well as democratization and economic liberalization.

Even though under the constitution the dominance of the military is still guarantied, the new policies and the integration of the NLD into parliament as opposition are modifying the organisational structure of the state. They make the state more compatible with the organisational field and allow for interactions. The action structure of the administration is, so far, hardly affected by these changes. Nevertheless, indicators for enhanced international integration are the temporary dissolution of sanctions by the EU. In addition Myanmar will hold the ASEAN-chairmanship in 2014. Of huge importance is that Myanmar will host the Southeast Asian Games in 2013, what will likely increase the country’s prestige. Finally the ASEAN Economic Council’s economic meeting will take place in Myanmar in 2015. An economic and development discourse has begun, which employs all the current international terminology like good governance, equity, participation etc. The success of this strategy is

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8 Ethnic minorities currently fear that their concerns will fall by the wayside. Violent encounters have re-emerged against the Kachin Independence Army. The recent violent conflict in Rakhine state with the Rohingya is another example for tensions with the minority groups in Myanmar that are obviously not reduced by the political changes. The minorities in fact fear that Myanmar’s international legitimacy will come at their expense
indicative in the immense influx of international organisations, politicians, and business people into the country, who until recently would have strictly refrained from dealing with Myanmar and its government.

4. Conclusions: Different ways of decoupling

In contrast to Myanmar, Thailand pursued a policy of international recognition, and indeed, this recognition was seen as a precondition for the country’s independence and development. While in Thailand the continuing decoupling of organisational and action structures were never problematic, for Myanmar the picture is more indeterminate. In both Thailand and Myanmar, isomorphous organisational structures and processes that are perceived to define a state are present, including a constitution, elections, parliament, cabinet, ministries with their departments, courts, regulations for immigration, and so on. However, these elements are judged quite differently in both countries.

In Thailand, the acceptance of institutions from the organisational field of international relations and international economics is intended to demonstrate internally as well as internationally that the state is properly developed and modern. Conversely, in Myanmar, the public demonstration of isomorphous paraphernalia aims to prove that the state fulfills international requirements and that sanctions, etc., are unjustified. Instead of establishing a policy of decoupling, the government saw the sanctions as unjust punishment, as an attempt to reinstate colonial and imperialist hegemony. The government was not able, as Thailand was, to introduce isomorphous structures and simultaneously decouple them from internal action structures.

The decoupling of state’s organisational and action structures and the corresponding external and internal legitimacy allows us to understand the rationality of the employment of emblems, formal procedures, and myths of rationality as sensible strategies within an organisational field. The examples, Thailand and Myanmar, also illustrate, however, that it is possible to use external acceptance as an instrument of internal legitimacy as is the case in Thailand. As such, modernity results from different processes that overlap, affect, and enforce each other. External recognition implies better chances for investment and thus economic growth which in turn enhances internal and external legitimacy. The organisational field of international politics and economy played an important role even for the military in Myanmar. There, however, the integration into the organisational field of international state relations failed for the government while it became important for the opposition. Only recently, when the opposition and Aung San Suu Kyi were integrated into the mainstream political process, the state received the international recognition it sought.
Eisenstadt (2002) maintains that the institutionalization of modernity is connected to tensions between pluralistic and universalistic or totalitarian visions. Institutionalization of pluralism means that the ‘recognition of the legitimacy of multiple individual and group goals and interests, as a consequence allowed for multiple interpretations of the common good’ (Eisenstadt 2002: 5). As far as institutionalization is a contested processes, it depends in how far strategic groups are forced to take into consideration other interests and diverse understandings of the common good. Following such a perspective, a reason for the differences between Thailand and Myanmar with regards to organisational isomorphy is that in Thailand hardly ever one strategic group could emerge as undisputed elite. Even during the period of authoritarian bureaucratic/military rule, struggles between existing or emerging strategic groups remained. Institutionalisation was therefore always a contested process, requiring compromises and the search for win-win situations. As a result, modernity was more pluralistic. This allowed more easily for isomorphy and to distinguish between internal and external legitimation, as both could be connected within a pluralistic structure. In Myanmar, the military as fully entrenched, undisputed dominant power did not have to compromise, and could push forth a totalitarian process. In fact, any compromise or pluralism would have endangered it own position. Isomorphy was far more difficult in such a totalitarian structure.

From the two cases we conclude that the willingness and ability for decoupling depends on the contestation over modernity as either more pluralistic or totalitarian. An entrenched elite that does hardly face any opposition can push towards totalitarianism, and does not need to or cannot decouple organisational from action structure. In contrast, competing strategic groups provide for a higher degree of pluralism that makes decoupling far easier.

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