

BRIEFER

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Thailand Forecast: Floods, Droughts and Political Instability

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The devastation caused by Thailand's recent floods is vast. Two million people across [26 provinces](#) were affected by the event, at least 527 people were killed, and a quarter of the country's important rice crop may have been [decimated](#). But beyond these headlines, the flood waters present a very harsh lesson in resilience. Climate change, weather, geography and politics all conspired to teach this lesson – but not just to Thailand. It is a warning to a world facing myriad risks in the ecological landscape – risks that are exacerbated by the volatility of political institutions, and the uncertainties that come with them. The challenge, for Thailand and the globe, will be to make the task of managing these risks impervious to the politics of the day, and responsive to the challenges of the future.

Rain, climate change and geography

Thailand is accustomed to dealing with large amounts of rain. But recently, an erratic monsoon season caught the government off-guard. From January to September of 2011, the monthly totals for average rainfall far surpassed the average monthly rainfall for the last 30 years. This was in

stark contrast to the monsoon season of 2010, which dropped an [unusually small amount of rain](#) on the country, precipitating a drought. This extreme shift from low rainfall one year, to high rainfall the next, arguably led to the Thai government's unfortunate decision in 2011 to keep [too much water in the dams upstream of Bangkok](#), thus exacerbating the floods.

Climate change makes matters worse. Climate projections for Thailand threaten [increases in extreme weather events](#), and rainfall variability. A joint [World Bank-Asian Development Bank \(ADB\) report](#) released in 2010 projects that Bangkok's flood-prone areas will experience more extreme weather, and a [2009 ADP report](#) asserted that Thailand is already experiencing more frequent and destructive extreme weather events than in the past. These climate projections will exacerbate existing risks and vulnerabilities, such as the sub-optimal location of people and infrastructure in Thailand's lowlands. The Chao Phraya river's flood plain, for example, is full of urban and industrial settlements. This has [exposed significant numbers of people and critical infrastructure to flooding](#), as natural routes for flood waters have been turned

into settled communities. On top of this, the country has just emerged from a period of extreme political instability.

Political instability

The response to the recent floods has been complicated by the recent political instability in Thailand, and the serious tensions that remain. This volatility included a bloodless military coup in 2006, the creation of a new constitution and elections in 2007, a political and constitutional crisis in 2008, and violent government crackdowns on organized protests from 2008-2010. While the long period of instability formally ended with the elections of July 2011, which brought the Pheu Thai Party to power, the political situation remains fragile. The fight that continues is between the so-called “red shirts,” “yellow shirts,” and their respective political allies. The red shirts are a popular movement made up primarily of rural farmers and urban working class that support the current ruling Pheu Thai Party, and Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. The yellow shirts are a looser group of royalists, businesspeople and urban middle class who are fiercely opposed to the ruling Pheu Thai Party, more closely aligned with the military and the opposition Democrat Party, and very critical of the current government.

The tensions between these factions seem to have been exacerbated by, rather than diminished by, the recent flood crisis, and have directly affected its management. The in-fighting has led to some notable breakdowns in decision-making, including a [showdown](#) between the opposition party governor of Bangkok, and the central government (which assumed emergency control over disaster-response in the city through the creation of the Flood Relief Operations Command). This led to a delay in deploying 800,000 sandbags, which were refused by the city’s governor.

These tensions have also led to accusations of favoritism in disaster-response decisions by different levels of government. Since the floods began, central Bangkok, a wealthier, yellow shirt stronghold sympathetic to the city’s governor and hostile to the central government, has stayed largely dry, while poorer areas, often bastions of red shirt and central government support, have been inundated. But when a [redirection of flood waters ordered by the central government](#) threatened to increase the likelihood of flooding in central Bangkok’s strongly yellow shirt population, the Bangkok Governor decided to openly challenge the legality of the prime minister’s decision to assume emergency powers over the city. This contest, fueled by hostile factions, has led some government insiders to [predict that a no confidence challenge](#) to the new government is likely within the next few months – a frightening prospect of instability in the flood’s aftermath.

Lastly, [the difficult relationship between the ruling party and the military](#) has also reared its head during the flood response, with the opposition party demanding that the prime minister grant emergency powers to the army chief Prayut Chan-o-Cha, and the prime minister refusing to do so. Pro-Pheu Thai media have even [warned](#) of a potential “water coup” by the army – the memory of the military coup of 2006 not far from some minds. Though unlikely, it is a message that has not likely resulted in better cross-government cooperation.

Capacity constraints

Even without the backdrop of recent political instability, longer-term governance challenges have left the [Thai bureaucracy not fully prepared](#) to effectively manage such extreme weather events. [Experts have suggested](#) that Thailand currently treats floods as “ad-hoc disasters in need of short-term relief,” and that the country does not have a cross-government, long-term policy to prevent floods and mitigate their damage. Water manage-

ment is currently spread across a dizzying array of government agencies, and there has been no central authority in place with the capacity to coordinate water-management and flood relief. Indeed, this led to the central government's need to create the Flood Relief Operations Command (FROC) in September 2011, as a reaction to the flood crisis – an [implicit failure of the government bureaucracy](#). In addition, Thailand's Meteorological Department has complained of an [inadequate rainfall prediction system](#), stating “No one expected rainfall would be this much. Right now our system, including hardware and software, is obsolete.” Requests for a [reasonably inexpensive overhaul](#) of the system have been held up by politics since 2009.

Regional and global implications

The implications of this forecast of extreme weather events, political instability and lack of government capacity go well beyond Thailand's own borders, and indeed, well beyond the borders of Southeast Asia. Global food security is of particular concern. Thailand is responsible for about 30 percent of global trade in rice, and [experts are estimating](#) that as much as a quarter of Thailand's primary rice crop could be destroyed by the floods. On the global market, this has already led to an export price jump of [12 percent](#), and that number is likely to climb. This is especially alarming given that another globally significant rice-producing region, the U.S. state of Arkansas, also experienced both [major flooding and drought this year](#), reducing their crop by [32 percent](#). The global electronics and automotive supply chains, heavily dependent on Thai manufacturing, have also been hard hit by the floods. A [quarter of the world's](#)

[“sliders,” an essential component of hard disk drives, are manufactured in one Thai plant](#) in Bang Pa-In, and that plant is submerged in stagnant water. In the automotive industry, Thailand is such a [critical link in the global supply chain](#) that “the flooding has forced Toyota to slow production in factories in Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, North America, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Africa and Vietnam.”

De-politicizing responses to a climate-changing world

Rainfall variability led Thailand to drought in 2010, and abnormally high levels of rainfall in 2011. Climate change is likely to bring even greater annual rainfall variability to the area, which will make drought and flood management all the more difficult. That management is hard enough without the added complication of political instability and Byzantine, resource-constrained bureaucracies. But the reality is that these political fights, and institutional weaknesses, will not likely go away anytime soon, and will have both regional and global consequences. We should therefore keep a close eye on the impacts of climate change on politically fractious places like Thailand, and seek solutions that can weather both the climatic and political storms. In particular, policies and plans for preventing and responding to climate-related disasters should be impervious to political circumstances. That's a goal that Thailand, and the world, can aspire to.

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