Impact of Japanese Military Presence in Thailand: Internal Colonization under Phibunsongkram’s Authoritarian Rule

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In the history of the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia during World War II, Thailand seemed to fare better than most of its neighbors which were caught in the crossfire. Although Phibunsongkram and so-called ‘pro-Japanese’ figures in his government willingly joined the Japanese aggression against Southeast Asia, Thailand escaped from direct Japanese rule and the fate of a defeated state. Some might say that the adept diplomacy of the Thai government rescued Thailand at the last moment.

However, we have to reconsider why Phibun was inclined to Japan at that time. In fact, Phibun’s major policies, including the campaign for the recovery of the “lost territories,” and his Ratthaniyom policy, clearly show that his collaboration with Japan was not an inevitable choice to secure Thai sovereignty, but was an effort to secure his regime’s political legitimacy.

Therefore, the goal of Phibun’s internal and external policies was ultimately aimed at obtaining legitimacy for his authoritarian rule. Phibun’s authoritarian rule was merely a continuance of Thai “official nationalism” and moreover, through internal colonization, he struggled to gain legitimacy for his rule from the newly defined Thai people and contesting political groups, utilizing Japan as a threat and as an Asian model of a strong state. Phibun’s vision of a new Thailand under his authoritarian rule was halted by the mysterious sudden resignation of his government in 1944, but the legacy of authoritarian rule and Thai internal colonization remained after World War II.