

CHAPTER 4

HUMAN RIGHTS SURVEY HOW DO THE THAI VIEW "HUMAN RIGHTS"?

In determining the research design, there were various considerations which came into play. Having identified the research problem and having determined the purpose of the research and a theoretical framework, the questions and methodology were formulated with awareness of the limitations of the questionnaire scope and implementation in this study.

It was decided that "human rights" awareness is a researchable topic, given the time, resources and availability of data, and that the topic is of sustainable interest. Other considerations included the questionnaire design and the interpretation of responses. Having decided on the methods, numbers and focus groups, it was determined that face-to-face interviews, although time consuming, would be the best way to be able to fully interpret respondents' answers, rather than post or group distribution.

Effort was made to keep the questions as simple as possible, without using jargon, including relevant questions only. It was in the formulation of specific questions that scanning of newspapers and journals was most useful. Effort was also made to avoid easy-to-misunderstand questions, although some misinterpretations were, in retrospect, apparent.

Listening to the respondents' interpretations and reasoning behind questions was deemed more useful than just giving multiple-choice questions and answers. It was thought that this would enhance the validity of the responses in accurately representing the real human rights situation and general feelings and awareness about human rights issues, although it also meant that the target number needed to be reduced by half.

Rather than detailed coding, it was thought that quoting of the most frequent and interesting responses would accurately represent people's awareness and responses, allowing for a more ordered, critical and reasoned exposition of the information which could be acquired from the survey.

The survey questions, formulated in English and then translated into Thai, were implemented on 19 occupational groups and rounded up into 8 main categories (businessmen, politicians, middle-class, white/blue collar workers, urban poor, farmers and monks). The survey was implemented on both men and women in various age groups (under 20, 20-30, 30-39, 40-49, over 50) and regions (primarily in and around Bangkok). The only personal questions pertained to the respondent's place of birth (in Bangkok or whereabouts outside Bangkok) and education (no education, elementary, vocational, secondary or tertiary).

As for the eight categories, "businessmen" ranged from senior executives to small business owners, "middle class" covered academics, media, doctors, engineers, and professionals in general. "White/blue collar" covered various industries, from financial companies to those in other

industries such as textiles or electronics, "urban poor" covered street vendors, taxi and tuk tuk drivers, as well as slum dwellers.

The method included interviews and the distribution of questionnaires to samples within the main group categories. As for the actual survey composition, it included a section for the respondent's personal information and then a section with general and more specific questions. At the same time, the aim was also to keep the overall format of the questionnaire as simple as possible.

The following shows the final format of the survey which was implemented over a period of two months from June 2 - August 2, 1998.

QUESTIONNAIRE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AWARENESS IN THAILAND

SECTION 1:

A: Please circle your age group:

1. under 20
2. 20-30
3. 30-39
4. 40-49
5. over 50 years

B: Were you born in Bangkok? If not, where do you come from?

C: Please circle your most recent education:

1. no education
2. elementary
3. vocational
4. secondary
5. university

SECTION II:

1. Place the following in order of importance to you: (a) honesty toward family and community; (b) carrying out one's responsibilities toward one's family and in society; (c) harmony within one's family and society; and, (d) showing gratitude to one's family and society.

1.

2.

3.

4.

2. Do you think it is more important to be honest and responsible or harmonious and appreciative?

3. Does the term "human rights" mean anything to you?

4. What is your definition of "human rights"?

5. What rights do you think "human rights" include (e.g., rights of children, the disabled, ethnic minorities, others)?

6. Do you think some rights are more important than others? Which and why?

7. What "rights" do you think people have in Thailand?

8. Of these, what rights do you think the Thai Government tends to overlook?
9. Do you think these have increased or decreased compared with the past?
In what respects?
10. Do you think "human rights" are universal?
11. Have you ever heard of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights"?
12. Does the Universal Declaration of Human Rights mean anything to you?
13. What is your definition of a "human rights violation"?
14. Do you think any of the following are acceptable in certain cases?
Under what circumstances?
 - a. summary executions
 - b. the death penalty
 - c. limiting the rights of the disabled
 - d. limiting the rights of people with HIV/AIDS
 - e. limiting the rights of ethnic minorities
15. Do you think there is any connection between "human rights" and political systems?
16. Do you think that "human rights" depend on something such as economic development? Anything else?

17. Do you think that Thailand is committed to developing "human rights" as an integral part of society? If so, why and since when?

18. Do you think the independent status of human rights commissions should be protected? How?

19. Do you think Thailand fulfills its international obligations in terms of upholding "human rights"?

20. How do you think "human rights" can be defended in practice?

21. What do you think are the main problems facing "human rights" in Thailand today?

22. How could other countries help Thailand develop "human rights"?

23. Are "human rights" relevant in your life now? In what way?

24. How do you think a culture of "human rights" can be fostered?

25. Do you think attitudes toward "human rights" in Thailand differ from those in other countries? Why?

SUMMARY OF QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES:

SECTION I:

The questionnaire was carried out on 250 people in total. The original target figure had been 500, but the format of the questionnaire, the length of responses, and time incurred to translate and interpret the responses made it necessary to reduce the original targets. As for the percentages of respondents in each age group, the figures are as follows:

1. under 20 - 10%
2. 20-30 - 40%
3. 30-39 - 10%
4. 40-49 - 22%
5. over 50 years - 18%

2. As for the places of birth of the respondents, 36% were born in Bangkok, while the native place for 64% is somewhere outside of Bangkok, most frequently, Isan, followed by areas adjacent to Bangkok.

3. When asked to circle their most recent education, respondents' percentages were as follows:

1. no education - 0%
2. elementary school - 5%
3. vocational school - 15%
4. secondary - 35% (mostly to junior high level)
5. university level - 45%

SECTION II:

1. When asked to place honesty toward family and community, carrying out one's responsibilities toward one's family and in society, harmony within one's family and society, and, showing gratitude to one's family and society, in order of importance, it is interesting to note that the overwhelming majority of respondents chose (b) and (d), carrying out one's responsibilities toward one's family and in society and showing gratitude over (a) and (c), honesty and harmony. Interestingly, only one respondent, a 19-year-old shop assistant, selected (a) honesty, while the most frequent answer among business world respondents was (c) harmony.

2. While the Thai monks' responses tended toward "honesty" and "harmony", as did those of the unemployed, the employed respondents tended toward "responsibility" and being "appreciative".

3. In response to the question of whether the term "human rights" has any meaning to them, every respondent said "yes" or that "human rights" are in some way "important in society" in general.

4. When asked to define "human rights", the respondents' definitions included the following range:

"having the right to make one's own decisions"

"for individuals to have the same rights as others to live"

"for all people to have the right to freedom in all respects"

"to do the proper thing and not bother others"

"the right to free will"

"the right to freedom without bothering others"
"having all the "proper" rights"
"to have equal rights and the right to express one's own opinions"
"the right to equality for all"
"equal rights"
"to be able to follow one's own morality, listening, speaking, reading and thinking to the full, irrespective of the "laws""
"self-reliance"
"rights pertaining to the self"
"rights which enable people to live in society without causing inconvenience to others"

5. When asked about the kinds of rights thought to be included within the term "human rights", the responses included the following:

"the rights of country people and those residing in slums"
"the rights of all in every respect"
"the rights of women and the elderly"
"the rights of the elderly and country folk"
"the rights of children, the disabled, ethnic minorities and women"
"all kinds of rights, for example, the right to free elections"
"the rights of all people, including women, children and the elderly....the right of children to an education, the right of women to have the same rights as men, the right to respect for the elderly"
"the rights of individuals and the right to democracy"
"women's and political rights"
"all rights including the right to work without discrimination"
"rights for all including those of women and monks"

"every conceivable right"

"the rights of children, ethnic minorities and others"

6. When asked whether they consider some rights more important than others, while most stated that they think all rights are of equal importance, some added comments to the following effect:

"human rights are more important than, say, political rights"

"the right to an education is more important because it also contributes to the nation's development"

"the right to vote"

"no rights are more important, because everybody should have equal rights"

"no rights are more important, at the same time, people should not be given rights that could cause extensive damage to others"

"all rights are equally important"

"no rights are more or less important, but a number of disadvantaged groups are not afforded the same rights as others in Thai society"

"the disadvantaged and disabled are not afforded the same rights as others"

"equality is important"

"the right to life - people's lives are inter-connected, life is the most important thing"

"all rights should be of equal importance"

7. When asked about the kinds of rights people have in Thailand, the responses ranged as follows:

"political rights, including the right to vote"

"the upper and middle classes are afforded every right"

"freedom of religion and education, the right to select a marriage partner, and so on"

"the right to decide for oneself"

"the right to freedom"

"rights to education and protection of one's self and one's assets"

"the right to vote"

"political rights" (most frequent answer)

"Thailand should make laws which protect the rights of the disabled and the elderly"

"I wouldn't know"

"the right to hold elections"

"people in Thailand are afforded all rights"

8. While "the rights of children" and "the right to an education" were the most frequent answers to the question of which rights they think the Thai Government tends to overlook, respondents' answers also included the following:

"the rights of those who live in the slums"

"the rights of minorities"

"rights to safety, security and protection"

"the rights of the disabled"

"the rights of children, the disabled, the poor and the elderly"

"the government should pay more attention to upholding the rights of the disabled and the elderly"

"the rights of the poor"

9. In response to the question of whether the rights of these "overlooked" groups have increased or decreased compared with the past, while some tuk tuk and taxi drivers feel that "people's rights have decreased", most respondents expressed the opinion that their rights had increased:

"because individuals have greater freedom to express their opinions"

"because people have expanded freedom"

"because people have more education"

"because there have been improvements, but not to the same extent as in the West" (pertaining to women's rights)

"because of increased health and welfare budget by the government"

"because of the new Constitution"

10. In response to the question of whether they think "human rights" are universal, all respondents who said they understood the question agreed that they believe human rights are universal. A small percentage of respondents said they could not understand the question or did not know.

11. As for familiarity with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, while some people, including those in higher echelon jobs, such as an account executive, replied that they are not familiar with the document, the overwhelming majority responded that they had, at least, heard the title.

12. When it came to specifying whether the Universal Declaration has any special meaning to them, comments included the following:

"it seems important for individuals"

"it seems important for individual freedom"

"it has some relevance, but not in every respect"

"it's important for the rights of every individual, regardless of race or religion"

"it sounds important"

13. When asked for their definitions of a "human rights violation", there were various responses as follows:

"infringing on the rights of others"

"infringing on the democratic rights of others"

"violating the legal and moral rights of others"

"infringing on the freedom of others"

"cheating others"

"infringing on the fundamental rights of other human beings"

"restricting the rights of people to act as individuals"

"when someone else infringes on my rights as an individual"

"when the government uses its power to violate the rights of the common people to force its own will and opinions"

"infringing on the rights of others without their permission"

"I don't know"

"violations of the rights of individual people"

14. Regarding circumstances under which a respondent feels that the rights of certain individuals could be restricted, the overwhelming majority agreed with the death penalty for heinous crimes and summary executions in certain circumstances. Although an associate university professor did not find any of the circumstances acceptable, many found certain limitations acceptable, as indicated by the following answers:

"the rights of the disabled, under certain circumstances" (business woman over age 50)

"the death penalty for heinous crimes" (unemployed)

"summary executions and the death penalty for vicious crimes" (tuk tuk driver)

"the rights of people with HIV/AIDS should be limited to control the spread of disease" (unemployed)

"the death penalty, perhaps" (company employee)

"the death penalty in extreme cases" (shop assistant)

"the death penalty and rights of ethnic minorities" (monk)

15. 100% of respondents replied that they think there is a connection between "human rights" and political systems. Some added that they think there is "a very close connection".

16. While the overwhelming majority of respondents were of the opinion that "human rights" depend on something such as economic development, some said they "don't know". Other comments included:

"human rights also depend on political systems and religion" (company employee)

"human rights depend on lots of things like expenses and the cost of living" (shop assistant)

"human rights depend on budgets and human resources" (unemployed)

"human rights shouldn't really depend on economic development. I think the unfortunate reality is, however, the system tends to overlook the rights of the less advantaged as economic development progresses" (company employee)

"money comes into play" (clothes shop assistant)

"education and public works projects can impact human rights issues"

(monk)

"education" (monk)

"the extent of the nation's development effects human rights" (blue collar worker)

"individual abilities impact human rights. For example, the more skillful get managerial positions" (taxi driver)

17. Answers were mixed when it came to the question of whether the respondent thinks Thailand is committed to developing "human rights" as an integral part of society, although few gave specific reasons for their responses. Some replied "yes", saying that "human rights" are "a means of bringing about more equality among the people". One person noted that "governmental promotion of human rights, in itself, is a means toward an end - national development". Another said that "the government is promoting national development parallel to "giving" the people various rights". Some responded that "Thailand has been committed to developing "human rights" since its contact with the West from the times of Rama IV or V." One said that the government's commitment is much more recent, "in the past 5 or 6 years, during the more recent period of economic development". One respondent's justification was "because we have some organizations in Thailand linked with Amnesty International" (university professor).

Although in the minority, some were notably less positive about the government's commitment with comments such as "only a little".

18. As for the protection of the independent status of human rights commissions, the respondents who answered this question all answered "yes", adding comments as follows:

"they should be protected by the authorities"

"they have to be protected to be able to promote their activities"

"under protection, they would be able to fairly and swiftly carry out their activities"

"protection is needed for them to work effectively"

"sometimes there is a need for them to be independent"

"so they can carry out their work adequately"

"for the protection of the members"

"so the members do not have to face discrimination"

19. Responses were somewhat divided concerning whether the respondents feel that Thailand fulfills its international obligations in terms of upholding "human rights". There were also comments such as:

"some, but not all" , "in theory but not in practice" and "there's plenty of room for improvement".

20. When asked how they think "human rights" can be defended in practice, there were various responses:

"with the cooperation of various countries"

"through the legal system and by punishment when violations take place"

"by subsidizing health, welfare and living expenses while establishing legal framework"

"by establishing rules and regulations for the protection of "human rights"'"

"the best way would be by establishing a legal system which protects "human rights"'"

"those institutions responsible for the protection of "human rights" should join together so they can pool their financial and human resources to produce the best results"

"the government should provide guidance so that the concept spreads among the people"

"there wouldn't be any problems if the government provided housing for the people"

"the government should provide adequate support"

"equal education should be provided"

"rules on the protection of human rights should be formulated"

"the rights of all kinds of people should be protected"

"by declaring their protection under the Constitution or laws"

21. As for what respondents feel are the main problems facing "human rights" in Thailand today, the overwhelming majority replied the economy and unemployment, but other interesting comments included:

"Thai people lack knowledge about "human rights"'"

"the real meaning has yet to permeate into society"

"the people with status and education have all the rights"

"those with higher education, power and assets tend to ignore the "human rights" of the less advantaged"

"the rights of women and children"

"the right to education"

"the weak are taken advantage of"

"political concerns"

22. When asked how other countries could help Thailand develop "human rights", again, the responses centered around the provision of support for economic development. Other notable comments include:

"foreign countries should provide support, to develop "concepts" not just industries"

"financial support, not to mention knowledge and information"

"the experience and knowledge from advanced countries"

"support for the Thai Government"

"technical support"

"educational support"

"continuous backup"

"by openly publishing criticisms concerning the problems concerning human rights violations in Thailand"

23. To the question of the relevance of "human rights" in the lives of the respondents, while some replied that they don't find them of direct importance in their own lives, those who do find some close relevance cited women's rights, individual rights, or that human rights come into play

through employment, education, public welfare, economic and women's issues among the reasons. One respondent said he is conscious of human rights issues "mainly because of violations reported in neighboring countries such as Myanmar and Tibet"

24. As for means of fostering a culture of human rights, responses ranged as follows:

"education"

"building up understanding about human rights after the establishment of laws that would ensure the implementation of legal action against violators"

"spreading awareness via the media along with education in schools"

"provision of knowledge and information so that people are made aware and can understand human rights issues"

"education from a very young age"

"human rights should be taught to the people by the government, like providing education or rearing children"

"education from an early age should encourage people to think for themselves"

"develop people's hearts and minds by providing knowledge"

"nurture hearts with education"

"education on such issues should be conducted everywhere, not just schools, but also in slum areas and the country"

"people should be educated to pay more attention to others"

25. As to whether the respondents feel that attitudes toward "human rights" in Thailand differ from those in other countries and why, while there was a considerable percentage of undecided and some respondents who don't see any difference, "the fundamentals of human rights are the same in all nations" and "fundamental rights are common to all countries", the majority did seem to think that attitudes toward "human rights" differ in Thailand.

Here are some of the reasons cited:

"attitudes differ in different countries depending on culture and political system"

"rights allotted in each country are not uniform"

"yes, because value systems differ in each country"

"yes, because there are different classes in Thailand, rich and poor"

"yes, because of different religion, culture and education"

"yes, because of the lack of education about human rights"