



J.J. RAYNOR  
Class of 2009  
Charlotte, NC

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Famous for its beautiful limestone karsts and dense palm and rubber plantations, Krabi, Thailand is home to an innovative program created by the Population and Community Development Association, my host throughout my stay in Thailand. The Youth Village Council Initiative was designed to introduce village youth to the processes of democratic representation. PDA's Village Youth Councils function as youth governments that not only teach the young people of the villages about democracy, but also help the youth design income generating projects that provide additional revenue for community projects and compensate the members of the youth government for their time.

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## DEMOCRATIC DREAMING: A JOURNEY TO LEARN AND TEACH DEMOCRACY

Working with the Village Youth Councils and asking tough questions about an experiment in democracy gone wrong, I learned just as much if not more about the intricate struggle between democracy and development as the youth going through the program.

When I came to work with the Village Youth Council Initiative in the summer of 2007, times were interesting for democracy as a whole in Thailand. A 13 year stretch of uninterrupted democratic government in Thailand, a feat in a country which has experienced 43

coups in its history, had just ended with the overthrow of its last democratically elected

prime minister by a military coup. Learning about and practicing democracy in a country home to a recent military coup and governed by a military junta, the village youth who participated in the Village Youth Council Initiative were in a slightly ironic position. Working with them, it quickly became apparent that these young people were less concerned with the democratic process of joining the village youth councils than they were with improving their livelihoods and the livelihood of others in their villages through the income generation projects the councils started. These youth were living one of the paradoxes of development – that for many seeking to rise out of poverty, effective government matters more than effective democracy.

After a month in the south of Thailand, I bade farewell to the most beautiful surroundings I have ever

seen and moved, literally, into the Cabbages and Condoms Restaurant in Bangkok. The transition was at once easy and difficult. In Bangkok, I was no longer one of only a few English-speakers in the area, but I missed the easy friendships and hospitality I had found in the south.

In addition, after spending so much time in Krabi, where a polo shirt sometimes felt risqué, it was shocking to move into the upstairs quarters of a family planning themed restaurant. Marveling at the mannequins clothed in

condom suits, the condom lamps, and the condom jokes that serve as The Cabbages and Condoms Restaurant's décor, I had a hard time believing that Thailand was really experiencing a condom shortage. I had an even harder

time believing that the culture of this urban megacity was at all related to the rural way of life I had come to know in Krabi. However, it did become much clearer how, with such giant divisions between urban and rural lifestyles, a thirteen year stretch of democracy could disappear over night.

Throughout my trip I saw signs of hope for democracy in both rural and urban



environments. Both populations were educated about democracy, informed about voting processes, and knew where their interests lay as electorates. It was that last part

that was the problem. The deep divide between the needs of poor, rural Thailand and the interests of Thailand's booming urban centers posed the greatest barrier to a true



return of democracy. The most tragic victim of Thailand's 2006 coup was not its democracy, but its national unity.

Living and working with students who had just experienced the violent overthrow of democracy in their country made me appreciate how fragile democratic institutions can be. Now back in North Carolina, I recognize many of the same challenges surfacing in our own country that led to the coup in Thailand. Looking at a map, it is hard to say if red and blue are meant to represent political affiliations or population densities. Either way,

the reality red and blue represent is divisive – and potentially destructive for our democracy. Our democracy is stronger because it is older. At the

end of the day, however, democracy will not work if the majority does not respect the rights of the minority and the minority cannot respect the rule of the majority. This is true in Thailand and it is true in America. In teaching Thai youth about democracy, I learned a lot about democracy myself.

