

Thailand's most organized criminals are police

Friday 23 January 2009, by [THI Awzar](#) (Date first published: 30 March 2008).

According to the United Nations, the Royal Thai Police are organized criminals.

That, at least, is the inference to be drawn from looking at its Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which was adopted in 2001 and which defines an organized crime group as involving at least three people acting in concert over a period of time “with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences... in order to obtain... a financial or other material benefit.”

It would be hard to overstate the extent to which Thailand's police fit this definition. A browse through a few newspapers of recent weeks alone reveals as much.

In February there was the case of the border patrol unit that abducted and tortured people to extract money and force them to confess to narcotics charges. So far over 100 complaints have been lodged against it, the majority from persons serving jail terms, and also one policeman. Although the low-ranking officers involved have surrendered, investigators have reportedly said that there is no evidence to link their wrongdoing to their superiors.

Then was the car scam, which came unstuck when a victim of theft went to police headquarters to file a complaint and found his vehicle sitting in the parking lot: not impounded, being used by personnel.

The police had colluded with rental companies to steal perhaps over 1,000 new automobiles by fraud. So far, only a few of the cars have been recovered. Many will have been sold into Cambodia and Burma. The operation apparently stretched over a wide area and involved police from various units, including Special Branch and cyber crime. Senior officers have already sought to exonerate some, saying that they will face only internal, not criminal, inquiries. The hire company directors have been arrested.

Similarly, 21 police forensics staff accused of taking money for the cost of formalin that was never administered have been let off the hook and three civilian employees blamed in their stead. Joking about this case, cartoonist Chai Rachawat wrote in the Thai Rath newspaper that it is anyhow better for police to steal from the dead than from the living: his picture (above) depicts skeletons standing in coffins and yelling as a policeman makes off with the loot.

Aside from these incidents, police have been implicated in a number of recent killings: some execution-style, another in which a leading forensic scientist has said that their account of what happened does not match the evidence. Torture and other abuses meanwhile go on as normal.

Thailand's police did not become an organized crime gang by accident. The modern force was from the beginning intended both as a criminal and political agency, monopolizing the drug trade and murdering or detaining opponents, including other police. It quickly became unstoppable as, historian Thak Chaloemtiara notes, while people whispered about its crimes “investigation was

impossible, for the crimes were committed by the police themselves.”

Its heyday as an unsurpassed crime venture may have been in the 1950s, but until now the police force remains beyond the law and answerable unto itself. The institutional features of its criminality, including the routine use of force and self-financing of individual officers and stations, speak to how incidents of the sort described above are organized, not haphazard.

These conditions present persons interested in improving the work of the police with profound and peculiar difficulties. For some three decades there has been talk of reform, and a few attempts, including one by the interim prime minister of the recent military government. But all have failed, in the same way that attempts to turn any other organized crime group into a legitimate enterprise against the will of its members could not possibly do otherwise.

But had any attempts at reforming the Royal Thai Police succeeded, would it really have made any difference? Wouldn't a reformed organized crime group remain what it is at its roots? How different are reformed organized criminals from their unreformed counterparts?

These questions could be cause for despair. After all, if things are that bad, then why bother? There are indeed many who think in this way, and do not believe that the police in Thailand can ever be significantly changed. Unsurprisingly, when this sort of thinking becomes widespread, it guarantees that things go on as usual. Without hope that anything can be done about the police, nothing can.

On the other hand, pretending that things aren't as bad as they really are also ensures that things go on as usual. It allows people to fool themselves into thinking that a few quick fixes, like decentralizing and better training, may result in improvements. Superficially, they might. But anybody who looks honestly and seriously at the work of the police in Thailand for long enough will be obliged to acknowledge that it will take much more than this.

That's why the U.N. definition is helpful. Let's be honest and describe Thailand's police as they are: organized criminals in uniform. If this much can be admitted, then it might be possible to get down to the business of what to do about them.

P.S.

From Rule of Lords.

<http://ratchasima.net/2008/03/30/thailands-best-organized-criminals-are-police/>