

Securitizing Drug Tourism: Cannabis Legalization and Policy Reversal in Thailand (2019–2025)

Theresia Nelvina Putri Christanti^{1*}; Laras Ayu Sekar Arum² ; Helena Eka Putri³ ; Renitha Dwi Hapsari ⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Faculty of Social, Cultural, and Political Sciences, UPN "Veteran" Jawa Timur, East Java, Indonesia

*Correspondence : renithadwi.hi@upnjatim.ac.id

Date of submission: 25 February 2026 | Date of acceptance: 2 April 2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines the emergence of drug tourism in Thailand in the context of cannabis decriminalization and its securitization as a national security issue during the period 2019–2025. After Thailand's legalize medical cannabis in 2019 and removed cannabis from Category V narcotics list in 2022, the country became the first in Southeast Asia to adopt a relatively liberal cannabis policy. This policy shift created new economic opportunities, particularly in the tourism sectors, and encourage the growth of cannabis based tourism in major destinations such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket. However, the rapid expansion of cannabis commercialization and consumption also raised concerns regarding public health, youth exposure, and Thailand's international tourism image. Using the securitization theory proposed by Buzan et al., this study analyzes how drug tourism and cannabis use were reframed by the government as a social security threat. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach based on policy documents, official reports, and media sources. The findings show that the Thailand government gradually securitized the phenomenon of drugs tourism by framing recreational cannabis use as a threat to social order and public health, which led to tighter regulations and discussion on reclassifying cannabis as a controlled substance. These findings highlight a policy dilemma between the economic benefits of tourism and the need to maintain social stability and public health. Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding the application of securitization theory in the study of drug policy and tourism in developing countries undergoing policy transitions.

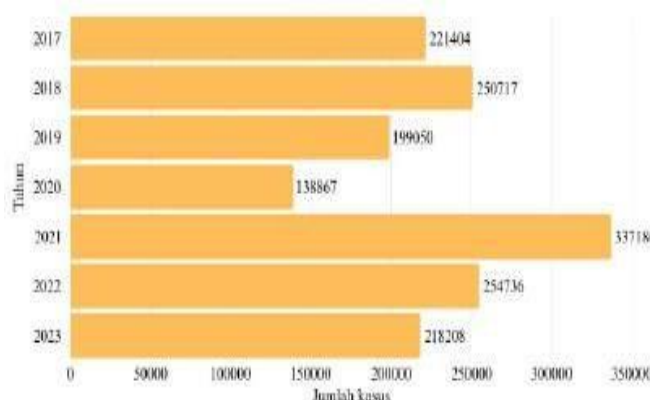
Keywords

Drug Tourism, Cannabis Legalization, Thailand Drug Policy, National Security

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in the flow of illegal drugs, particularly those crossing through border areas into Thailand and countries in the Mekong subregion. Easy access to domestic and international transportation has led to Thailand being exploited as a transit country for exporting drugs to third countries. The number of drug-related cases in Thailand has fluctuated but saw a significant increase in 2021. During the COVID-19 pandemics, or around 2020, drug activity temporarily declined, but smugglers quickly adapted by leveraging online marketing and delivery services, leading to a sharp rise in detected cases. Thailand also faces prison overcrowding due to the high number of drug offenders, who account for over 70% of the total prison population. Prison capacity, which should only be around 110,000 people, is over 300% over capacity, raising serious concerns. The Thai Government is responding to this challenge through the interception of illegal drugs and crackdowns on domestic and international smuggling networks (ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center, 2024).

Figure 1. Number of Drug Cases in Thailand, 2017-2023



Source: (ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center, 2024)

Figure 1 above illustrates the number of drug-related cases in Thailand. Thailand began legalizing cannabis for medical and research purposes on January 1, 2019, through Act No. 7 B.E. 2562 (2019), making it the first country in Southeast Asia to do so. Through this legalization, the government aims to boost the national economy and utilize cannabis as a new commercial commodity (BBC, 2022). The government subsequently updated narcotics regulations via the Narcotics Act B.E. 2564 (2021) on November 8, 2021. This regulation removed cannabis from Schedule

V narcotics and represents the government's effort to promote cannabis as a commercial crop. Consequently, there was a surge in cases in 2021, as illustrated in the graph above. Under these regulations, cannabis may only be produced and sold for medical purposes with official authorization. The public is permitted to possess a certain amount of cannabis, provided they have a doctor's prescription and a government certificate. This policy indicates that the use of cannabis for medical purposes is no longer considered a criminal offense. However, if someone sells, exports, or uses cannabis without official authorization, they may still face criminal

penalties (Saepuddin, 2023). Under this law, Thailand has decriminalized cannabis, meaning that growing, selling, or using it for medical purposes is no longer a crime. Previously, cannabis had already been used in traditional medicine in Thailand. The government believes that legalizing cannabis for medical use could provide a more affordable treatment option, particularly for patients with cancer and epilepsy. However, the government's failure to follow through has caused the situation to spiral out of control. The weak regulatory framework has led to a surge in the number of cannabis cafes and dispensaries found in various locations, and cannabis is even being used as an ingredient in food. Major cities such as Chiang Mai and Bangkok have hosted cannabis festivals and made them a major attraction for tourists, but this situation has sparked complaints regarding cannabis use among children and in public places (Regan & Olarn, 2025). In response to criticism of the recreational use of cannabis, the government plans to tighten regulations again in 2024 by restricting cannabis to medical use only. The government then reviewed the situation and drafted additional regulations regarding its use.

In early 2024, Thailand's Prime Minister announced plans to reclassify cannabis as a controlled substance and lower the possession limit for methamphetamine for personal use. This policy marks a significant shift in the government's approach to drug control following several years of implementing more lenient regulations. On June 18, 2024, the Minister of Public Health set a new limit for personal possession at one pill or 20 milligrams of crystal methamphetamine (Thailand Bail, 2022). With these stricter limits, possession exceeding the stipulated amount will result in immediate criminal prosecution, rather than an opportunity for rehabilitation. Regulations regarding narcotics were subsequently expanded through the Narcotics Code in Ministerial Regulation B.E. 2567 (2024), which took effect on September 21, 2024. This regulation permits tourists undergoing medical treatment to carry medications containing Schedule II and III narcotics for personal use, provided the quantity does not exceed a 90-day supply as prescribed (Thailand FDA, 2021). Furthermore, effective June 26, 2025, pursuant to regulations published in the Royal Gazette, cannabis use has been further restricted and limited to medical purposes only, with prescriptions valid for 30 days; recreational use is prohibited, and violators may face criminal penalties. These regulations also govern the cannabis distribution chain by prohibiting online sales, vending machines, and sales in sensitive areas. Additionally, cannabis consumption is permitted only at licensed facilities under medical supervision as part of the government's efforts to enhance control over cannabis use in public spaces (Legal500, 2025).

Since the decriminalization of cannabis on June 9, 2022, Thailand has become the only country in Southeast Asia to legalize cannabis. This policy has opened up new economic opportunities, particularly in the tourism sector, and attracted international tourists seeking legal access to cannabis products. This phenomenon has subsequently sparked what could be called "drug tourism", which is

transforming the dynamics of Thailand's tourism industry. Whereas tourists previously came to enjoy natural beauty, cuisine, and entertainment, they are now venturing into "cannabis tourism" as an additional attraction. However, although cannabis use is legal, the Thai Government continues to enforce strict regulations. Current restrictions on cannabis use include a ban on use in public places, restrictions on purchases by foreigners, and a minimum age requirement for accessing cannabis products (Thai Law Online, 2025). This situation presents a dilemma for the Thai Government. On the one hand, there is economic potential through new tourism, growth in local businesses, and increased job opportunities. On the other hand, however, there are challenges related to public health risks, underdeveloped regulations, and the perception of the destination shifting toward "drug tourism", which could impact its international reputation. (Sirithai & Poonpoksini, 2025) note in their study "Cannabis in Thailand's Transnational Era: A Health and Social Perspective" that Thailand faces two dilemmas: cannabis as a medical treatment and cannabis as a narcotic, which highlight the social and regulatory uncertainties of this transitional era. This article will provide a comprehensive analysis of how drug tourism is framed as a security issue, as well as the Thai Government's response through policies, regulations, and management strategies in the context of cannabis decriminalization.

This study cannot be separated from previous research, which serves as a basis, point of comparison, and reference. Assanangkornchai et al., (2022) examined patterns of medical cannabis use in Thailand following its legalization in 2019 through a cross-sectional study of 485 respondents. The results indicate that the majority of users consume cannabis in the form of oral cannabis oil extracts on a regular basis, primarily for the treatment of cancer and other chronic conditions most cannabis is obtained from illegal sources, as access to official sources remain limited. Most respondents perceived cannabis as having positive benefits, but information about cannabis was obtained primarily from social media rather than healthcare professionals. Thus, this study emphasizes that the use of cannabis for medical purposes requires strengthened regulations and education from relevant authorities. The second research paper from Saepuddin (2023) show that Thailand has removed cannabis from the category of controlled substances and legalized it for medical and economic purposes, while Indonesia still classifies cannabis as a Schedule I controlled substance, prohibited for both medical and recreational use. These policy differences are influenced by each country's policy orientation.

Although previous studies have addressed public health and policy comparisons between Thailand and Indonesia regarding cannabis legalization, there are still limited studies on how the phenomenon of drug tourism is constructed as a security issue. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how the phenomenon of drug tourism in Thailand is constructed as a security issue through the process of securitization. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the research question: how

does the Thai Government securitize drug tourism in response to the legalization of cannabis during 2019-2025.

Method

This study is based on a qualitative approach and employs a descriptive-analytical research method. This approach was chosen in order to gain a deep understanding of and provide an in-depth explanation of the phenomenon of drug tourism in Thailand, particularly how this issue is perceived as a security threat and subsequently addressed by the government through drug policies. The unit of analysis in this study consists of Thai Government drug policies and policy responses related to cannabis regulation and the phenomenon of drug tourism. The data used in this study were obtained based on criteria of policy relevance, source credibility, and direct relevance to the issues of cannabis legalization, the phenomenon of drug tourism, and security discourse in Thailand. The author collected and analyzed various written documents relevant to the research topic, such as laws and official policies of the Thai Government, reports from international and regional organizations such as UNODC and the ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center, academic journal articles, as well as national and international media reports (Susilawati, 2020). The collected data was then analyzed using qualitative analysis, with the aim of exploring the information in greater depth and more comprehensively (Creswell, 2014). The findings were also linked to the theory of securitization. The analysis focused on how the Thai Government frames cannabis and drug tourism as serious issues that could threaten national security. To enhance the validity of the research findings, data triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from various sources, such as government policy documents, reports from international organizations, and media reports. This process aimed to ensure the consistency of the information and minimize potential bias in the analysis.

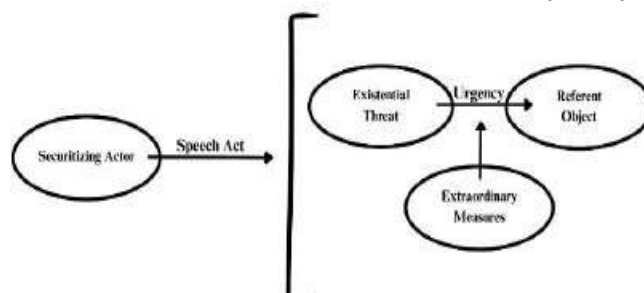
The scope of this study is limited in time, covering the period from 2019 to 2025, from when cannabis was legalized for medical purposes until the reimposition of strict restrictions on its use. This timeframe was chosen as it reflects a significant shift in Thailand's drug policy. Following the legalization of cannabis in 2019, the Thai Government subsequently updated regulations by removing cannabis from the Schedule V narcotics list in 2021. The legalization of cannabis in Thailand was not intended for personal recreational use, but rather for medical purposes. In 2021, the public could purchase cannabis but were required to present a valid medical prescription. However, the government's failure to enforce these regulations effectively led to the policy's collapse. The surge in cannabis sales, along with the proliferation of cannabis cafes and shops in major cities like Chiang Mai and Bangkok, began to attract foreign tourists seeking to consume cannabis for recreational purposes or drug tourism. Concerned by this situation, the government re-regulated cannabis use, leading to stricter controls by 2025.

Result and Discussion

Understanding Drug Tourism and Securitization

According to (Valdez & Sifaneck, 1997), drug tourism is defined as “a phenomenon in which people are drawn to a specific location due to the availability of legal or illegal drugs and related services.” This definition addresses three issues related to the phenomenon of drug tourism, namely: (1) who is considered a drug tourist; (2) which locations are considered drug tourism destinations; (3) and which substances are categorized as drugs. Locations where drugs are easily accessible and consumed by tourists are defined as drug tourism destinations (cannabis tourism destinations, where cannabis is an illegal plant), whether explicitly or implicitly. These places may include countries or regions that legalize or tolerate the use of certain drugs, such as cannabis, or areas known for illegal drug trafficking and open consumption practices. In this context, drug tourism not only reflects tourists’ interest in recreational experiences related to drugs or substances, but also illustrates how local policies and cultural values influence tourists’ travel patterns and consumption behaviors. Regarding the identification of who can be categorized as a drug tourist, the definition proposed by (Valdez & Sifaneck, 1997) is still considered too narrow. That definition covers only tourists who meet two main criteria: first, those for whom drug use is one of the primary motivations for traveling; and second, those who already have prior knowledge of the availability of drugs at their destination.

Figure 2. The Securitization Process as Described by Barry Buzan



Source: (Sezer Özcan, 2013)

Based on Figure 2. Buzan et al. 1998 explain that securitization is the process by which a political issue comes to be perceived as an existential threat by a securitizing actor toward a referent object, resulting in emergency measures that go beyond the rules that normally apply. This concept explores threats to the referent object and the securitization process regarding threats, whether non-military or military in nature. It is not easy to assess whether the securitized issue raised is truly a threat; no security theory provides an explanation for an objective measure of security. Furthermore, every country and nation has different thresholds for defining a threat. Securitization does not necessarily have to be carried out by the state; non-state actors or other social entities can do so through public forums by raising or demonstrating that the issue is a matter of such importance that it requires handling that goes beyond standard procedures.

An issue can be classified as an existential threat when it is perceived as more important than other issues, such as those concerning the survival and existence of the referent object. An issue becomes a security issue not because the existential threat actually exists, but because it is presented as such. In security discourse, an issue is exaggerated and presented as a matter of the highest priority and labeled as a security issue, so that the actors involved can claim the need and the right to address the issue with emergency and extraordinary measures. There is no single universal standard for all cases regarding what is considered an existential threat, each referent object has distinct characteristics and needs.

Securitizing move is the first step in securitization—an effort by an actor to convince the audience that an issue constitutes an existential threat. Securitization is achieved through a speech act by demonstrating the existence of an existential threat that requires emergency action, as well as the audience's acceptance of the issue. There are three approaches to performing this speech act: referent objects, securitizing actors, and functional actors. First, referent objects are entities perceived as facing an existential threat and possessing a fundamental right to exist. In traditional security terms, these referent objects are states whose survival is tied to sovereignty and national identity. However, securitizing actors can construct anything as a referent object. Second, securitizing actors are the individuals or groups performing the security speech act. The actors typically involved in this role include political leaders, bureaucrats, government officials, lobbyists, and pressure groups. They generally do not speak about security for the sake of their own survival, but to defend the security of the state, the nation, civilization, or a community, a principle, or a larger system. Lastly, there is the functional actor, an actor who influences the dynamics without being the referent object or the initiator of securitization on behalf of the referent object, yet whose actions or presence have a significant impact on decision-making. The success of a speech act depends on internal and external conditions. Internal conditions require the actor's discourse to include an existential threat, a point of no return, and a potential way out. Meanwhile, external conditions relate to the social position or authority of the securitizing actor and the urgency of the threat, thereby facilitating acceptance by the audience. This securitizing move is considered successful if it can influence intergroup relations and trigger rule changes.

Furthermore, the steps or extraordinary actions taken by the government in response to an existential threat are referred to as extraordinary measures. The very nature of such a threat, which endangers the nation's survival, serves as justification for the use of extraordinary measures to address it. This mechanism allows the state to take action, assume special powers, or utilize whatever means are necessary to halt developments deemed threatening. Securitization is successful when others follow suit, thereby creating a widespread social and intersubjective construction of the referent object. This is not determined by the party carrying out the

securitization, but rather when the audience accepts that something truly constitutes an existential threat to shared values. This success has three components: an existential threat, emergency measures, and the impact on inter-unit relations through the suspension of normally applicable rules.

1. Securitizing Move

An issue can be considered as a security threat when securitizing actors make statements that shift the issue from the realm of normal politics to the realm of security, requiring immediate action

a. Actor

In this policy-making process, Cholnan Srikaew, Thailand's Minister of Public Health, emerged as a key figure driving the re-evaluation of cannabis legalization policies. He emphasized that cannabis use must be strictly limited to medical and health purposes, necessitating that the government re-tighten regulations that had previously allowed for recreational use. This process was also supported by the ONCB as a functional actor, although the ONCB is not the primary political decision-maker, the agency provides data, investigations, and technical recommendations. Thailand's ONCB prepared a resolution to reinstate cannabis as a Schedule V narcotic, a move marking a reversal of the 2022 cannabis regulation policy (Thailand Tribune, 2024). An internal vote also showed that a majority of committee members support the reclassification, which, if approved, would once again criminalize the recreational use of marijuana starting January 1, 2025 (Bangprapa, 2024). In addition, the ONCB supports new draft regulations that tighten controls on the production, import, export, sale, and possession of cannabis, including a ban on over-the-counter sales and restrictions limiting cannabis use to medical purposes only (Connor, 2024). The media has taken note of how the ONCB has actively urged the government to tighten regulations and close legal loopholes that have emerged since the initial legalization.

Beyond the ONCB's role as a functional actor, other state actors also play a significant role in this policy process. The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) has emerged as the primary institutional actor leading the process of reclassifying cannabis as a Schedule V narcotic while drafting specific legislation that restricts cannabis use to medical purposes. In carrying out these regulatory functions, the Thai Food and Drug Administration (FDA) played a role in the technical aspects of implementation through the operation of the "Pluk Kan" application for cannabis cultivation registration, oversight of sales licenses, and the management of cannabis's removal from the narcotics list during the initial phase of legalization. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister serves as the coordinating actor directing overall policy, as reflected in Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin's directive emphasizing the restriction of recreational cannabis as a government priority. The Department of Health under the MoPH has also contributed by establishing guidelines for controlling THC levels and overseeing commercial sales to minimize the risk of

misuse. Additionally, the establishment of the Cannabis Control Board (CCB) as a new agency demonstrates efforts to institutionalize stricter oversight, particularly in the management of licenses for the production, import, export, and distribution of medical cannabis. The involvement of these various actors indicates that the reversal of Thailand's cannabis policy is not merely the result of technical guidance from the ONCB, but also reflects interagency coordination in addressing cannabis as a threat to social security. (DW, 2024).

b. Speech Act

As reported by (The Straits Time, 2024), on February 28, 2024, Thailand's Minister of Health, Cholnan Srikaew, stated, "Without the law to regulate cannabis, it will be misused," emphasizing that without clear legislation, cannabis would be widely misused, particularly for recreational purposes. "The misuse of cannabis has a negative impact on Thai children. In the long run it could lead to other drugs." Cholnan expressed concern that legalizing cannabis without strict controls could influence the younger generation and encourage the misuse of other drugs. Cholnan also stated that under the new draft law, cannabis would be classified as a "controlled plant," meaning that commercial use, cultivation, and import/export would require official permits. He also said, "Smoking cannabis is likely to require a doctor's note" emphasizing that cannabis could still be used legally, but only for medical purposes and with a prescription or doctor's authorization. Health Minister Cholnan Srikaew's statement demonstrates his role as a securitizing actor who actively constructs the cannabis issue as a threat to social security. Through his speech act, Cholnan not only highlights legal loopholes—particularly the absence of age restrictions on cannabis use—but also elevates the issue from the realm of ordinary health policy to a matter of national security.

c. Referent Object and Audiens

Cholnan states that children and youth groups in Thailand are in a vulnerable situation and are framed as a referent object, an entity perceived to be under threat and in need of protection (Arbar, 2024).

The primary audience for this speech act includes the Thai public, particularly parents and educators who have expressed concerns about the effects of cannabis on children and young people, as well as policymakers at the cabinet and parliamentary levels who have the authority to legitimize regulatory changes. Additionally, the statement is explicitly directed at an international audience, including foreign tourists, to emphasize that recreational cannabis use is no longer tolerated in Thailand (Reuters, 2024).

This framing serves as a securitization strategy by positioning children and young people as vulnerable referent objects in need of protection. The impact of this speech act is evident in subsequent policy developments, where the legislative audience responded by submitting a draft bill restricting cannabis to the cabinet the following month, aimed at limiting cannabis use to medical purposes only by the

end of 2024. At the same time, the general public and cannabis businesses, including approximately 20,000 cannabis shops, became a secondary audience directly affected by the ban on cultivation without a license and the threat of penalties in the form of fines of up to 60,000 baht, thus demonstrating how the discourse of securitization is applied in concrete policy (Arbar, 2024).

2. Existential Threat

One of the countries in Southeast Asia with the largest legal cannabis market in Asia is Thailand. Between 2019 and 2025, drug policy in Thailand underwent various changes. Historically, Thailand implemented a “War on Drugs” policy during Thaksin Shinawatra’s administration in 2003, aimed at halting drug trafficking. This approach was highly repressive, involving police and military operations designed to arrest drug dealers and users en masse over a three-month period from February to April. This policy succeeded because Thailand implemented quotas for arrests and seizures for law enforcement agencies. As a result, the “War on Drugs” campaign arrested 52,000 drug producers and dealers, and 300,000 users were rehabilitated. Although the “War on Drugs” campaign was considered successful because drug circulation rates decreased, it also drew significant international criticism. This is because 2,800 drug offenders were executed, but half of them were later found not to have committed drug-related crimes, a result of mass killings carried out in violation of legal procedures. Consequently, this policy is viewed as a threat to human rights (The Nation Thailand, 2025).

Since then, Thailand has faced growing pressure to improve its efforts to combat drug abuse. The year 2019 marked a turning point in Thailand’s drug policy, shifting from an initial “zero-tolerance” approach to a limited public health approach. It was also the year Thailand officially became the first country in Asia to legalize medical cannabis (Assanangkornchai et al., 2022). The Thai Government has proposed amendments to the Narcotics Act B.E. 2562, which cover regulations on narcotics regarding production and distribution, as well as regulations related to medical advancements, research, and local traditions. A major milestone in this policy shift occurred in 2022, when cannabis was officially removed from the list of Schedule V narcotics. This removal was carried out via the Ministry of Public Health’s “Notification B.E. 2565,” issued on February 9, 2022 (Act et al., 2022). This policy has actually boosted the cannabis industry and given rise to drug tourism.

The phenomenon of drug tourism in Thailand has emerged as a result of the loosening of regulations regarding cannabis legalization, making Thailand the only country in Asia that permits the legal consumption of cannabis. Drug tourism in Thailand has provided a boost to the local economy, particularly in tourist destinations such as Bangkok, Phuket, and Chiang Mai, following the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Local entrepreneurs have identified a significant market opportunity in the cannabis sector by offering cannabis-based products to foreign tourists with a strong interest in the evolving cannabis culture.

This has led to the growth of thousands of cannabis shops in tourist areas, creating thousands of jobs and contributing to destination diversification. Whereas foreign tourists initially visited Thailand primarily for its beaches or culture, they are now increasingly drawn to cannabis-focused destinations (Lopez, 2023). The phenomenon of drug tourism in Thailand has emerged as a result of the loosening of regulations regarding cannabis legalization, making Thailand the only country in Asia that permits the legal consumption of cannabis. Drug tourism in Thailand has provided a boost to the local economy, particularly in tourist destinations such as Bangkok, Phuket, and Chiang Mai, following the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Local entrepreneurs have identified a significant market opportunity in the cannabis sector by offering cannabis-based products to foreign tourists with a strong interest in the evolving cannabis culture. This has led to the growth of thousands of cannabis shops in tourist areas, creating thousands of jobs and contributing to destination diversification. Whereas foreign tourists initially visited Thailand primarily for its beaches or culture, they are now increasingly drawn to cannabis-focused destinations (Boyle, 2025).

The rapid growth of recreational cannabis use in Thailand has also raised concerns for the Thai Government. Media reports indicate that there is a loophole in cannabis regulations regarding age restrictions for cannabis users. Although there are rules regarding use and a ban on sales to tourists under the age of 20, enforcement is said to be “extremely difficult” due to limited oversight, since monitoring is carried out by health officials rather than the police, allowing many shops to continue selling cannabis without strictly verifying the buyer’s age (Peter, 2025). In addition, the increasingly free use of cannabis in public spaces has raised concerns and sparked complaints from local residents and conservative communities who feel that their social environment is changing too rapidly. The increasingly evident negative impacts could also damage Thailand’s image as a family-friendly tourist destination and reduce its appeal to tourists as tourist areas turn into open venues for cannabis use (TTW, 2025). Needless to say, this situation has sparked complaints from members of Thailand’s tourism industry. The legalization of marijuana in Thailand is seen as an existential threat, a threat that is believed to have the potential to destroy the target entity.

3. Extraordinary Measures

Within the context of international law and human rights, extraordinary measures refer to the exceptional powers or actions granted to authorities to address situations that are outside of normal parameters, where threats to public order, national security, or social stability require a rapid response that deviates from standard legal procedures. Extraordinary measures are steps taken when an issue is considered a very serious and urgent threat to the state or society. Under these circumstances, the issue is no longer treated as a routine political matter but as a security issue requiring a swift and decisive response. Therefore, a state feels

compelled to take special measures that are not typically employed under normal circumstances, such as expediting policy decisions or temporarily setting aside standard political and legal procedures, with the aim of preventing the threat from spreading further or causing greater harm. These extraordinary measures are implemented after the government or authorized state officials declare that a particular issue constitutes a serious threat to national security or public safety. This declaration is made through an official statement or public policy, which in securitization theory is referred to as a “speech act.” Through such statements, the public is convinced that the situation at hand is an emergency. Because it is deemed an emergency, policies that are unusual, even those considered strict or harsh, can be accepted by the public. Thus, the speech act serves as the basis for justification, enabling the state to secure support for taking extraordinary measures. Extraordinary measures can take various forms, ranging from the issuance of emergency policies, the restriction of certain rights, the massive mobilization of resources, to the use of state power to suppress or eliminate existing threats. These steps are typically not implemented under normal conditions because they have the potential to restrict public freedoms or exceed the limits of state authority. However, in emergency situations, such actions are considered legitimate and necessary to ensure public safety. Thus, extraordinary measures represent the final stage of the securitization process, in which an issue has been successfully framed as a serious and urgent threat. These actions reflect the state’s efforts to eliminate the threat by mobilizing all available resources and capabilities, even if this requires deviating from normal political practices (Wahyudiono & Al-Farauqi, 2021).

The mass shooting incident at a daycare center in Nong Bua Lam Phu Province, which killed 37 people, including children, highlights a serious threat to public safety that demands a swift, decisive, and extraordinary response from the state. In this regard, the Thai Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o- Cha has implemented extraordinary measures, a series of policies of an exceptional nature that go beyond standard law enforcement mechanisms. These policies are manifested through intensified security operations, stricter monitoring of drug trafficking, and accelerated efforts to apprehend individuals involved in illicit drug trafficking networks. At the same time, the government has also strengthened rehabilitation programs for users as part of a national strategy to curb drug trafficking while minimizing the resulting social impact. This extraordinary approach reflects the government’s efforts to restore stability and rebuild public trust amid the crisis triggered by the tragedy (Tribunnews, 2022). The Thai Government’s implementation of extraordinary measures can be seen as a policy response stemming from two concerns. First, the significant circulation of illegal narcotics in the region, estimated to be worth over US\$130 billion in Southeast Asia by the end of the last decade, poses a serious threat to national security and governance. Second, the occurrence of large- scale violent incidents has prompted the government to

increase its focus on public safety, including gun control and the regulation of illicit drug trafficking (UNODC, 2019). Major incidents, such as the tragedy at the daycare center in Nong Bua Lambu—which sparked public outrage and calls for the government to take decisive action—demonstrate that political and emotional pressure from the public can accelerate the implementation of stricter policies. However, this situation also increases the risk of abuse of authority, such as the tendency to profile or criminalize individuals who have not actually been proven to have used drugs. Various reports and humanitarian organizations have also noted that the government responded swiftly to the incident by reviewing gun control regulations and drug policies (Vorasi Satienlerk & Perawongmetha, 2022).

4. Output

In line with increasingly repressive policy trends following the tragedy and growing public pressure on the government to strengthen controls over illicit drugs, the regulatory direction for cannabis in Thailand is shifting toward a much stricter approach. This shift is driven not only by the scale of the narcotics threat and previous incidents of violence, but also by the government's need to demonstrate its ability to respond effectively in maintaining public safety and order. Starting June 26, 2025, the Thai Government officially reimposed stricter regulations on recreational cannabis use and its potential negative impacts on public health. These new regulations were announced by the MoPH and gained legal force upon publication in the Royal Gazette, in accordance with Thai procedures stipulating that official rules take effect upon being recorded in the country's official gazette (Thai FYI, 2025). Under these regulations, cannabis, specifically the flowering buds which contain high levels of THC, is classified as a controlled herb under the Protection and Promotion of Thai Traditional Medicine Knowledge Act B.E. 2542 (1999). Thus, although cannabis has not been reclassified as a narcotic, this change in status places cannabis flowers under a much stricter regulatory framework compared to the previous period of liberalization (ILCT Ltd, 2025).

The implementation of this policy has resulted in the recreational use of cannabis once again being considered illegal. The use of cannabis is now strictly limited to medical purposes, and accessing medical cannabis requires a prescription from a licensed healthcare professional. Furthermore, the purchase and distribution of cannabis may only be conducted through entities that have obtained official authorization. (AFP, 2025). The new regulations also tighten the mechanisms governing the sale and distribution of cannabis. Sales via vending machines, online platforms, and commercial advertisements, as well as sales in the areas surrounding sensitive locations such as places of worship, public parks, schools, and tourist areas, are strictly prohibited (The Straits Times Newsroom, 2025). In addition, stores or facilities that were officially licensed to sell and distribute cannabis products, generally for medical purposes or in accordance with previous regulations, and were operating during the liberalization period are now facing significant regulatory

pressure. Without a transition period, many of them are forced to cease operations or adjust their business models to meet new requirements, such as the obligation to obtain licenses, provide documentation of the plants' origin, and restrict sales to users with medical prescriptions (ILCT Ltd, 2025).

From a securitization perspective, the framing of the cannabis issue in Thailand constitutes a securitizing move that actively constructs a threat through a speech act by Thailand's Minister of Health, Cholnan Srikaew, as the securitizing actor. Through his statements regarding the potential for cannabis abuse and its impact on children and young people, Cholnan does not merely convey information but shifts this issue from the realm of ordinary health policy into an urgent social security issue. This speech act is directed at several audiences, ranging from the domestic public (especially parents and the educational community) to build a collective perception, to policymakers at the cabinet and parliamentary levels who have the authority to legitimize regulatory changes.

Additionally, the statement is also indirectly aimed at an international audience, including tourists, as a signal that Thailand will once again tighten restrictions on cannabis use. This speech act serves not only as a means of communication but also as a political instrument to shape public perception and foster support for stricter policies. Such threats are intersubjective in nature, as they become "real" not solely based on objective evidence, but because they are accepted and believed by the audience. In this context, children and young people are constructed as referent objects to reinforce the legitimacy of the policy. The success of securitization is evident in the support for stricter cannabis regulations. However, this process also reveals political interests, where the government selectively determines who is protected, while other groups—such as business operators and adult users—are the ones affected. Thus, securitization functions not only as protection but also as a means for the state to define threats and direct policy.

Conclusion

This study shows that the emergence of drug tourism in Thailand cannot be separated from changes in drug policy, particularly the legalization of cannabis since 2019. Initially, this policy was intended for medical purposes and economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in practice, the loosening of these regulations has instead encouraged recreational cannabis use and attracted foreign tourists. As a result, Thailand has emerged as a major drug tourism destination in Southeast Asia, particularly in tourist cities such as Bangkok, Phuket, and Chiang Mai. This situation has given rise to various issues, ranging from weak oversight and increased cannabis consumption in public spaces to concerns about its impact on children and Thailand's tourism image. Through a securitization theory approach, this study found that the Thai Government subsequently framed drug tourism as a threat to social security and public health. Government officials, particularly the

Minister of Health, issued statements emphasizing the dangers of unregulated cannabis use, especially for the younger generation. In this process, the public, particularly children and young people, was positioned as the group in need of protection, while the government acted as the primary agent driving policy change. Relevant agencies, such as the Office of the Narcotics Control Board, provided support by supplying data and technical recommendations. As a result of this process, the government has taken extraordinary measures by tightening cannabis regulations once again and banning its use for recreational purposes.

The case of Thailand demonstrates that overly lenient drug policies without strong oversight can trigger non-traditional security issues. The management of drug tourism must be approached in a balanced manner, while taking into account public health, social security, human rights, and the sustainability of the tourism sector. However, this study has limitation, namely the scarcity of academic sources that specifically address the phenomenon of drug tourism resulting from the legalization of cannabis in Thailand. Consequently, the analysis in this study relies heavily on sources from the mass media, which, although relevant and up-to-date, lack depth in terms of scientific analysis. Based on this, future research is recommended to examine in greater depth how changes or shifts in cannabis regulations have a broad impact on social, economic, and security conditions in Thailand. Furthermore, for other developing countries, these findings serve as an important lesson to remain cautious and consider adopting a zero-tolerance policy toward cannabis, given its far-reaching impact not only on public health but also on social security and political stability.

References

- Act, N., Code, N., Health, P., Board, N. C., & Notification, C. (2022). *Legal news flash issue 11* (Vol. 11, pp. 0–2).
- AFP. (2025). Thailand moves to require a doctor's approval for cannabis sales, unsettling a budding industry. *Fortune Asia*.
- Arbar, T. (2024). Thailand larang ganja rekreasi, sanksi hukum lebih berat. *CNBC Indonesia*. <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20240229201707-4-518746/thailand-larang-ganja-rekreasi-sanksi-hukum-lebih-berat>
- ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center. (2024). *ASEAN drug monitoring report 2023*.
- Assanangkornchai, S., Thaikla, K., Talek, M., & Saingam, D. (2022). Medical cannabis use in Thailand after its legalization: A respondent-driven sample survey. *PeerJ*, 10, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.12809>
- Bangprapa, M. (2024). Critics slam Thai government's approach to cannabis. *Bangkok Post*. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/special-reports/2828723/critics-slam-govts-approach-to-weed>
- BBC. (2022). Thailand cannabis: From a war on drugs to weed curries. *BBC News*.

- Boyle, G. (2025). Cannabis becoming a turn-off for Phuket tourism. *Bangkok Post*.
<https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/easy/3053836/cannabis-becoming-a-turn-off-for-phuket-tourism>
- Connor, J. O. (2024). Narcotics suppression bureau voted to reschedule cannabis as an illicit drug by January 1st 2025. *Thai Examiner*.
<https://www.thaioxaminer.com/thai-news-foreigners/2024/07/05/narcotics-control-board-voted-to-reschedule-pot-as-a-illicit-drug-by-january-1st-2025/>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*.
- DW. (2024). Thailand perketat lagi aturan konsumsi ganja. DW.
<https://www.dw.com/id/thailand-memperketat-aturan-legalisasi-ganja/a-69034168>
- ILCT Ltd. (2025). Thailand's legal reversal on cannabis: Restriction to medical use only. *Legal500*.
- Legal500. (2025). Thailand's legal reversal on cannabis: Restriction to medical use only. *Legal500*.
- Lopez, R. (2023). Thailand to clamp down on cannabis use in major U-turn on drug policy. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/22/thailand-to-clamp-down-on-cannabis-use-in-major-u-turn-on-drug-policy>
- Peter, Z. (2025). As Thailand does U-turn on legal cannabis, businesses scramble to survive. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2025/7/2/as-thailand-does-u-turn-on-legal-cannabis-businesses-scramble-to-survive>
- Regan, H., & Olarn, K. (2025). Thailand was the first country in Asia to legalize marijuana: Things didn't go as planned. *CNN*.
- Reuters. (2024). Thailand seeks public opinion on draft to end recreational cannabis use. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thailand-seeks-public-opinion-draft-end-recreational-cannabis-use-2024-01-10/>
- Saepuddin, A. Y. P. U. (2023). Studi komparasi antara Indonesia dengan Thailand terkait kebijakan legalisasi ganja. *Parhesia*, 1(1), 70–80.
<https://doi.org/10.29303/parhesia.v1i1.2578>
- Sezer Özcan. (2013). *Securitization of energy through the lenses of Copenhagen School*.
- Sirithai, N., & Poonpoksin, W. (2025). *Cannabis in Thailand's transitional era: A health and social perspective*. Ministry of Public Health.
- Susilawati, I. F. (2020). Studi literatur problematika evaluasi pembelajaran dalam mencapai tujuan pendidikan di era merdeka belajar. *Konferensi Ilmiah Pendidikan Universitas Pekalongan*.
- Thai FYI. (2025). Health minister signs new regulation classifying cannabis flower as controlled herb. *Thai FYI*.
- Thai Law Online. (2025). *History of cannabis laws in Thailand: A comprehensive guide*.
- Thailand Bail. (2022). *New Thailand drug law (June 2024) for meth*.

- Thailand FDA. (2021). *Guidance for travelers under treatment carrying personal medications containing narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances into Thailand*.
- Thailand Tribune. (2024). The ONCB is preparing to submit a resolution to reclassify cannabis as a narcotic. <https://thailandtribune.com/the-oncb-is-preparing-to-submit-a-resolution-to-reclassify-cannabis-as-a-narcotic-to-the-board-by-the-end-of-july/>
- The Nation Thailand. (2025). Thaksin declares war on drugs again, vows community scans for pushers. <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/policy/40050522>
- The Straits Times. (2024). Thailand to ban recreational cannabis use by end of 2024, says health minister. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thailand-to-ban-recreational-cannabis-use-by-year-end-says-health-minister>
- The Straits Times Newsroom. (2025). Thailand reclassifies cannabis bud as a controlled herb, restricts sales and advertising. *The Straits Times*.
- Tribunnews. (2022). Imbas penembakan massal yang tewaskan anak-anak, PM Thailand nyatakan perang terhadap narkoba. *Tribunnews*.
- Travel and Tour World. (2025). Cannabis legalization in Thailand: Phuket's tourism reputation at risk. <https://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/cannabis-legalization-in-thailand-phukets-tourism-reputation-at-risk-with-effects-spreading-to-pattaya-and-krabi/>
- UNODC. (2019). *Transnational organized crime in Southeast Asia: Evolution, growth and impact (SEA-TOCTA 2019)*.
- Valdez, A., & Sifaneck, S. J. (1997). Drug tourists and drug policy. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 27(4), 879–897.
- Vorasit Satienerk, & Perawongmetha, A. (2022). Thailand massacre: Ex-cop kills 24 children in knife and gun rampage. *Reuters*.
- Wahyudiono, T. O. H. N., & Al-Farauqi, M. D. A. (2021). Proses sekuritisasi pandemi COVID-19 di Indonesia. *Ilmu Politik dan Komunikasi*, 11.