

Taste: Flying Off the Shelves in Thailand

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BANGKOK -- The disappearance of a lively guidebook from Thai bookstores is giving journalists here yet another reason to worry about the growing erosion of press freedom under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Two weeks ago, Thailand's major book chains bowed to government pressure and pulled "**Bangkok Inside Out**" (Equinox, \$20, 175 pages) off local shelves, according to authors Daniel Ziv and Guy Sharett. The book, part of a small, quirky travel series, apparently caught the attention of the government-run Cultural Surveillance Center, which deemed it mocking in tone -- and unsuitable for sale.

"This book does not give the right image to outsiders," opined Ladda Thangsupachai, the center's director. "Noted were negative depictions of the selling of fake goods, gambling, gay performances and places such as Patpong (a local red-light district)." Particularly offensive, she added, was a photograph of a half-naked girl on the lap of a foreigner.

An outright book ban isn't allowed by the Thai constitution, which guarantees freedom of the press. Instead, Ms. Ladda delegated the matter to police, who informed book stores to remove the offensive title or face fines and possible legal action. And overnight, it vanished.

Mr. Thaksin is not known for his openness to criticism. But while "Bangkok Inside and Out" may not be your typical guidebook, it's hardly political. This zany tome offers small, snapshot segments on offbeat topics like amulets, the tiny pink napkins at hole-in-the-wall diners and street dogs. The guide won widespread praise but only modest sales of 4,000 copies since its release last November.

"We don't even understand the reason," Mr. Ziv told me. The 35-year-old Canadian calls it a

"de-facto ban," since no official action has been announced. "We only found out about it when we read about it in a local paper," adds Israeli-born Mr. Sharett, Mr. Ziv's 35-year-old co-writer.

For the authors, it could be the death-knoll for the spunky travel series launched in Jakarta, where Mr. Ziv has lived for the past six years. After writing "Jakarta Inside and Out" in 2002 for Jakarta publisher Equinox, he teamed up with Mr. Sharett, a Thailand-based foreign correspondent.

"If they prevent us from selling this book in Thailand, than this entire project is dead," laments Mr. Ziv, who says 80% of sales are in Thailand. The authors argue that the Thai authorities are missing the point. The book "oozes enthusiasm for Bangkok and Thailand," notes Mr. Ziv.

Especially irksome to observers and the authors alike is the arbitrary nature of the ban. This week, the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Thailand registered its concern in a letter to the Ministry of Culture. "We mainly want to get clarification," said FCC board member Dominic Faulder. "If laws have been broken, we want to know what laws they are."

The tempest comes at a volatile time. Bangkok has been gripped by an explosive feud between media magnate Sondhi Limthongkul and Mr. Thaksin. Mr. Sondhi, who owns print publications and one of Thailand's top-viewed Web sites, is a staunch critic of Mr. Thaksin. Many here fear a showdown on Dec. 9, when Mr. Sondhi has called for half a million Thais to join him in a downtown park to protest the government.

The disappearance of "**Bangkok Inside Out**" has shocked a community of journalists that is already worried about censorship. "It definitely sends a message," says Joe Cummings, who has authored various Lonely Planet guides -- including the award-winning Thailand edition -- for 15 years. The Foreign Correspondent Club's Mr. Faulder adds: "This affects us all, anyone who reports on Thailand. If the justification is 'negative to Thailand,' that could apply to any of us."

Mr. Gluckman is a Bangkok-based writer.