Examining the legal oddities of alcohol

En route to a mid-afternoon barbecue a few weekends back, I rushed in to a shop to pick up the obligatory bottle of Amarone and was politely reminded that I was both too early and too late to do so. Whether it’s a prohibition on giving alcohol to a moose (Alaska) or it being illegal to become intoxicated while in possession of a cow (Scotland), the world is full of liquor laws that make one wonder “why?”

Thailand is no exception, and today we will examine a few of its alcohol consumption laws that leave many scratching their heads.
NO AFTERNOON DRINKING

The sale of alcohol, other than by bars, restaurants and hotels, is banned in Thailand between midnight and 11am, which is standard practice in much of the world. I've never felt the need to complain about this; if you are trying to buy booze at 3am, you probably have already had too much to drink and we'll all benefit from you being thwarted in your efforts. However, the sale of alcohol is also banned between 2pm and 5pm. This ban only applies to so-called Type 3 and Type 4 sellers _ those who are licensed to sell liquor and spirits in quantities below 10 litres per occasion. Thus, retail shops such as 7-Elevens and Big C supermarkets are put in the same position as wholesalers (being Type 1 and Type 2 sellers) and can only sell in quantities above 10 litres, while bars, restaurants, and hotels remain exempt. Because you were wondering, that's at least 30 beers or 14 standard bottles of wine.

If your mother tries to buy a bottle of Irish Cream with which to fortify the coffee for her afternoon bridge club, she'll be thwarted; if your university-aged son wants to buy ten cases of beer, he will sail right through. Really?

The reason given in the text of the relevant Ministerial Regulation is to enhance "the government's policies towards controlling the consumption of liquor and tobacco for the benefit of society, in the case of liquor by decreasing the times for retail liquor sales". Yet the choice of the hours of 2pm to 5pm must have had a more specific purpose than that. One popular school of thought is that it is designed to help prevent underage drinking. Classes typically finish for the day by 2pm, and the theory is that wayward students might then run to the nearest 7-Eleven and start drinking.

Yet the ban is in place seven days a week. If it were designed only for students, wouldn't it be okay to buy a cold beer on a hot Saturday afternoon?

VOTE EARLY AND VOTE OFTEN

The Election Commission of Thailand bans the sale of alcohol at any retail outlet, and the serving of alcohol in all bars and restaurants, during elections. This applies to all elections, be they local, municipal or national. It also applies during periods of advanced voting (for those who live outside their registered constituency), which takes place the weekend before the general election. The blanket ban on alcohol is from 6pm Saturday until midnight on Sunday, as elections are held on Sundays.

Bans of the same nature have a long history throughout the world, though they are gradually being repealed with no apparent ill effects. Only two US states and two Canadian provinces still retain prohibitions on the sale of alcohol during elections. Of the many things blamed for hanging chads and other recent US voting problems, alcohol wasn't one of them.

The reason alcohol is banned during elections, or why 6pm is the chosen time at which the ban is instituted, has never been explained publicly. Some speculate that it's to ensure that people are not so hung-over that they forget to vote, while others suggest that it is to prevent loose-lipped political conversations during elections.

Historically, other jurisdictions cited the perils of trading alcohol for votes as the primary motivation. This sounds like an accurate and warranted justification if the epic HBO show Deadwood is to be trusted, which it usually is for all of life's important questions. And remember, when faced with a difficult decision just ask yourself, "WWSD" _ what would
Swearengen (Ian McShane's character in Deadwood) do?

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