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CONCEPT OF PEOPLE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA:
A CURSORY CONSIDERATION

Withaya Sucharithanarugse

Preliminary

To talk about people can be a very contentious subject. Even without concept involved, the term “people” has quite varied meanings. Taking the Shorter Oxford of English Dictionary as an example, there are three meanings of particularly interest for our purpose here. It means: (1) persons in relation to a superior or to some or to whom they belong such as subject of a king, servant of God etc.; (2) commonalty as distinguished from nobility and ruling or official class; and (3) (particularly in politics) the whole body of enfranchised or qualified citizens considered as the source of power. In practice, whenever people is mentioned especially in historical context, the three meanings are fused. The fact that “people” constitute a nation is very significant when we consider the process of decolonization in Southeast Asia. People have been involved and used very heavily by the nationalist elites in their struggle against colonial powers. Foremost nationalist often refer to them as “my people”. People are glamorized as well as exploited politically. The Philippines are known for their utilization of the “people’s power” in their fight against Marcos’s regime. Naturally, the term “people” has a very strong political connotation. However, the connotation itself can be of positive or negative depending on circumstances. When leaders want to use people to fight colonial powers, they glorify people. But when they are opposed by the people in development projects that destroy forest, people are condemned as ignorant and backward. People may or may not be organized and it seems that organized people lost the authenticity of “people-ness”. We now call the organized group, the non-governmental organizations or NGOs. The sense is that NGOs are not people any more. In other words, the true people must remain loose, not structurally led, and somehow non-committal. This contradicts the fact that present day
People in Traditional Context

Let us look into the two great traditions of Asia; that is China and India. Old Chinese records are abound with the advises since antiquity down to Confucius and other sages that the emperor who governs by the mandate of heaven must look after the people. Confucius’s Analects provide a large number of examples of this kind. A passage from the Analects reads (de Bary, 1960, p. 33):

Tzu Kung asked about government, Confucius said: “The essentials are sufficient food, sufficient troops and the confidence of the people”. Tzu Kung said: “Suppose you were forced to give up on of these three, which would you let go first?” Confucius said: “The troop”. Tzu Kung asked again: “If you are forced to give up one of the two remaining, which would you let go?” Confucius said: “Food. For from of old, death has been the lot of all men, but a people without faith cannot survive”.

Mo Tzu, an opponent of Confucius, although gave absolute authority to the king in order to enforce a unified order, also believed that it was men’s intention to adhere to the same standard in order to avoid disorder, “they selected the most virtuous and most able man of the world and established him as the Son of Heaven”. That is the ruler is created by the will of the people in order to save them from anarchy (Yu-lan, 1948, p. 58).

Meng Tzu or Mencius has a lot to say about people as well. Selections from Mencius which is a book at a place says (de Bary, 1960, p. 93):

“Here is the way to win the empire; win the people and you win the empire. Here is the way to win the people; win their hearts and you win the people. Here is the way to win their hearts; give them and share with them what they like, and do not do to them what they do not like. The people turn to a humane ruler as water flows downward or beasts take to wilderness”

(IVA: 9)
It was Mencius who advocated the right of the people to revolt. It is argued that ideally a king of a state has to be a sage. Mencius talked about a sage named Yao who was supposed to live in the twenty fourth century B.C.. As he became old he passed his throne to another sage named Shun. Emperor Shun passed it on to a younger sage named Yu. Specifically on the right to revolt, it is contended

“If a ruler lacks the ethical qualities that make a good leader, the people have the moral right of revolution. In that case, even the killing of the ruler is no longer a crime of regicide. This is because, according to Mencius, if a sovereign does not act as he ideally ought to do, he morally ceases to be, a sovereign and, following Confucius theory of rectification of names, is a mere fellow, as Mencius says (Mencius, IIb, 8). Mencius also says: The people are the most important element (in a state); the spirits of the land and the grain are secondary; and the sovereign is the least (Mencius, VIIb, 14). These ideas of Mencius have exercised a tremendous influence in the Chinese history, even as late as the revolution of 1911, which led to the establishment of the Chinese Republic” (Yu-lan, 1948, p. 74).

Indian sources are of two kinds; that is Hinduism (or Brahmanism) and Buddhism. In case of Hinduism what has to be considered is caste and people in general. Caste is a group of people following certain customs since caste rules are not rigid, they can change themselves or be adapted. It has been argued that in modern time, particularly in cities, caste will be watered down, if not broken down. Yet at the village, people of the same caste may consider caste as a sort of club (Mabbette, 1968, pp. 15-17). People of different caste may worship different gods or deities or even local ones. Judging from moral teachings in form of tales such as Hitopadesa, Gathasaritsakara, it may be surmised that society needs peace and order and as such proper behavior of all groups of people are prescribed while rulers must also be examples. However, the position of the ruler is that of god or semi-god or reincarnation of god, thus, he must be obeyed and his power is absolute. The Devaraja cult, practiced in those days both in India and Southeast Asian countries such as Java, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and
Tagalog name, meaning the most venerable supreme society of the sons of the people) or K.K.K., sometimes referred to fondly as Sons of the People, was created in July 1892. It was supposed to have members of no less than 100,000 by conservative estimation. It was Andreas Bonifacio who wrote a credo called Decalogue or Duties of the Sons of the People which embodied the moral principle of the society or Katipunan. The rivalry between Bonifacio and Emilio Aguinaldo caused break up of the Katipunan. In the end Aguinaldo prevailed over Bonifacio who was shot dead. On November 1, 1897, the Biak-na-Bat constitution was declared with four articles on the bills of rights (Majul, 1967, pp. 1-6). The main thinkers among the Katipuneros from Rizal down to Jacinto, Mabini and Bonifacio discussed man in society, liberty, equality, dignity and self-respect. Mabini, in his two later works called the True Decalogue and the “Constitutional Program for the Philippine Republic” asked Filipinos to develop virtues like truthfulness and industry, love of God and country. He maintained that all authority not sanctioned by the people should not be recognized (Majul, 1967, pp. 22-42). These leading figures also discussed “welfare of the people” which was supposed to be the beginning and the end of government in accordance with “satisfaction of the desires of the people” (Majul, 1967, pp. 48-9).

It is a controversy whether the revolution against Spanish rule by the Katipunan was by the people or by the mass as claimed by Agoncillo (Agoncillo, 1956 and 1960) while the leader of Katipunan like Santiago V. Alvarez (1996) did not make the people the bone of contention. Agoncillo argues that the revolution was mass-based and the Katipunan was “a distinctively plebian society” and “none of its charter members were of the middle or aristocratic class” who “opposed the position taken by the mass of the people” although he also said the masses “not accustomed to the intricacies of the rational processes … are moved by the impact of feeling and passion and refuse to see, if reminded by their intellectual betters, the probable effects of their planned actions” (Agoncillo, 1966, pp. 1, 45, 96). Paredes, in his introduction to the Memoirs of Alvarez (1996) put it this way:

“(Alvarez) recalls with clarity the commitment of the people to their vision of freedom, glimpsed in such utopian community as Kakarong. With equal force,
Alvarez captives the mix of courage cruelty that accompanied revolution warfare. Alongside man and women who served with inspiring selflessness were craven dissemblers who betrayed their comrades and abused unarmed civilians”.

But the mass is too broad especially when used politically. Among them are found certain groups or even “classes” for example, the inquilinos of Cavite as a social class (Borromeo-Buehler, 1985). Thus, mass is not exclusively peasants, rather comprehending those who are not urban elite or illustrados. Mass denotes the rural poor coupled with the so called intermediate classes. The pre-Hispanic Philippines worshiped deities and ancestors known later as anito or anitism, a form of belief that was detested by Spanish Catholic (Hislop, 1971). The parish priests who performed administrative, economic, political and social functions were direct target of the peasant who still adhered to the folk beliefs despite Hispanization through practice of cult or sects. Because of this condition, Lee (1971) argues about” religious uprisings as follows:

“Among the most thoroughly documented instances of this type of insurrection occurring in the pre-modern Philippines are included the Igorot uprising in 1601, the revolts of Bohol and Leyte in 1621 and 1622 respectively, the Cagayan Valley rebellion of 1625 and 1627 the Oton (Panay) insurrection of 1663 and the protracted resistance movement of Dagohoy from 1744 and 1828. While each of these examples, and many more, have unique characteristics growing out of the particular grievances addressed and the particular responses initiated by the colonial authorities, several common characteristics are noteworthy”.

Lee pointed out that the movement called the Cofradia de San Jose, founded by Apolinario de la Cruz of Tayabas (more information is provided by Sweet, 1970) was an example of cult built around a personality with Catholic tradition that appealed to the local people or indios as mechanism to address and rid of colonial exploitation. Cofradia was but an example of the 19th century. The combination of plight of peasants, folk belief, Catholicism this kind of cult or sect
Insurrections and rebellions against the Chinese by the Vietnamese have been natural occurrences. It was pointed out that the Chinese armies deplored “the Chiao Chih (Vietnam) people relying on a remote inaccessible land, like to rebel” (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1987, p. 27). The one during 40-43 A.D. was led by famous two sisters. The second century A.D. seethed with rebellions against the Chinese (Taylor, 1981, pp. 57-70). The Vietnamese, to forestall the Chinese attack, even launched attacks against the Chinese first. Normally, the Vietnamese emperor claimed ownership of the land within the nation. He took care of cultivation and he would be the first to plough the land. Dike system was maintained by the court. But it was known that in actuality the royal authority stopped at the gate of the village, thus leaving the village quite autonomous. The village notables would bargain with officials. The well-known peasant rebellion was the one known as Tay-Son rebellion of 1773-1802. Its leader destroyed the Ly dynasty and the youngest of the three sons proclaimed himself Emperor Quang Trung.

After the Chinese, the people of Vietnam had to fight against the French. David Marr (Marr, 1971, pp. 22-76) described very well the anti French efforts since the time of King Gia Long who founded the Nguyen dynasty in 1802. Local leaders ignored orders from Hue and attacked French units. But the most celebrated episode was one of the Can Vuong (Loyalty to the King) Movement of 1884 to 1897. The whole affairs was to keep the institution of emperor against the French encroachment. It was led by courtiers, local leaders who engaged peasantry and even some minorities like the Muong (traditionally the Viet people marginalized minorities). At times it could be called a mass movement which had never reached a national proportion. This formed traditional role of the people in their fight against foreign oppression at call of their leaders either local or national ones. Wellknown early Vietnamese nationalist like Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) who was very liberal in thinking and very outward-oriented was in touch with the Can Vuong movement, when planned future resistance especially for independence of Vietnam wanted to utilize the Can Vuong remnants and assorted mountain bands to force foreigners out of the country (Marr, 1971, p. 101). During the French rule (1850’s-1945) great social changes took place in Vietnam. Marr (1981 pp. 3-4) succinctly pointed out that even before WWI, three major
changes occurred: (1) total conquest by the French, (2) reorganization of land-use system, and (3) penetration of cash economy. Particularly, the land-use system effectively ruined the traditional peasant community. Coupled with market or money economy, peasantry was helpless, while workers in factories in big cities emerged in greater numbers. Intelligentsias were divided into collaborators and non-collaborators, fractioned into numerous political parties.

It was the radical wing of the Vietnamese nationalists that captured peasants and workers through the movement created in 1925 by Ho Chi Minh known as the Revolutionary Youth League of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh prescribed that revolution was the true alternative, not reformism, revolutionary unity must be stressed at all cost and revolution must be firmly supported by the masses (Duiker, 1976, pp. 203-4). The communist paid great attention to the peasantry during 1930-1931 and 1936-1939 through what was known as the Peasant Question (Chinh and Giap, 1974) White (1974, 1979) studied this problem and described how the communists could successfully capture full support from peasantry and workers. Long (1978) also gave good description of the situation. We know that peasant problem persists well into 1960’s. But it seems that after adopting the system of cooperativization (Moise, 1976), the problem was largely taken care of. It was not fortuitous that the communists could capture the mass because there were other groups and parties, all of which failed to attract support. After Ho Chi Minh, party disciplines gave way to personal struggle for power and gain. Party members and those close to them benefited from the system. Corruption was widespread. Being part of the apparatus even becoming a humble soldier stands the chance to fare very well in life in comparison with other profession. To stimulate agricultural production, the Vietnamese emulated the Chinese model by sort of adapting profit-sharing system, that is if a peasant produces more on his allotted plot of land, the surplus is his and he can freely market it. After Doi Moi, buying and selling or trading is more lucrative. It could be said that the embourgeoisement of the party, the bureaucrats is now extended to certain sectors of urban dwellers. State organ has us to believe that the rural folks and workers are doing well and we rarely have cases of rural or urban protests. All have become very formalistic and in situation like this it can be said that relationship between party and peasantry and workers is that of government and
decade of Suharto’s era. While Sukarno styled himself as the one who led people into action demanding the return of West Irian, urging people to “crush” Malaysia, Suharto, on the contrary, saw himself as father of Indonesia people and this father knew best. People had to obey. People were not supposed to act.

Very briefly about Thailand, in olden days the Thais, except those of nobility and officialdom, were all prai. Prai must be under control off a nai. Prai have to render service to the king or nai. Peasant rebellions in Thai history were surprisingly minimal and those recorded as such were mostly the case of people or prai mobilized into power struggle of the leaders. However, folk literature of various kinds were never lack of mockery, criticism or scathing remarks about authorities even the religious ones. Thai kings up to the present reign always consider themselves as popularly elected according to the old Buddhist theory mentioned at the beginning. King Rama VI’s famous state ideology of nation, religion and king was based on supposition that people saw it as such and his official nationalist propaganda was based on the same assumption. Rama VII in his Democracy in Siam also insisted on this theory. In the present reign state has emphatically mentioned that His Majesty ruled for the people especially using the popular phrase “We will reign by Dharma for the happiness of all people”. The coup group that staged a “revolution” in 1932 toppled absolute monarchy, called itself Khana Rassadorn or People’s Party. When pressed for the fact that no ordinary people were involved in the attempt, the answer was that before that time there were only nobility and people; thus, People’s Party. Pridi’s “Outline of Economy” to do away with private land-ownership aiming at resolving land problems in Thailand once and for all was the only serious attempt so far to relieve peasantry. National development initiated by Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat in 1961 has transformed Thai society especially the rural areas to the effect that rural plights became more and more exacerbated in later years. The Communist Party of Thailand embraced a large number of rural areas during their heydays and served as champion of the rural population. Political and social changes at 1973-76 caused the emergence of mass politics that has remained until present. Workers and farmers/peasants got organized during the period for political action against the state. Since then, state authorities have to face successive demands, demonstrations, protests from groups of organized
people. Students, intellectuals and professionals cooperate with the poor and the unprivileged. This promotes the emergence of true functioning of civil society. The process of drafting the 1997 constitution and the mise en place of the constitution confirm the proper place in Thai society of the civil society organization. Public hearings are often called for.

**To Conceptualize people**

Form a very sketchy description, it is obvious that relations between state of old and present and the people do not differ significantly. In the old days, people exist for the state. State acts more as protector than provider. People seem to exist independely and this may be what they want. Relationship with state is through rendering service, paying taxes and all kinds of levy, serving in the army in time of war. Other than that people live on their own. It could be said that people rather prefer autonomy vis-a-vis state such as the case of Vietnamese villagers. Perhaps only religion alone that really binds people and state together. But we know that nationalism especially the one against colonialism effectively cement people and state through nationalist elites. But after independence and with nationalism subsided, people are alone again until party politics come along and periodically capture their support. Political changes in certain countries from authoritarianism to democracy allow for emergence of civil society where people are properly represented and organized. Injustice within the society in a general sense affords the civil society its continuing role. However, it can be contended that civil society itself does not necessarily embrace people in totality. Yet the fact that people are well aware that they must organize themselves in order to protect their own interest could be couched in terms of civil society. Democratization must however prevail. State authority is not yet prepared for the role of the civil society and participative politics. State organs must be restructured; that is why reform becomes keyword. Perhaps, people and civil society are not fighting war with state as such, rather with capitalism that dominate the whole world. Economic crisis in Southeast Asia and East Asia serves as a conscience to check on state action and strong tendency in the society to go full consumption society. This economic crisis once again points to how prone people are to state policy. To conceptualize people becomes very complex.
Commitment to community is the root of interaction that binds people together. Community spirit is what is needed for local development where local initiative will be more in demand since the time for bottom-up process of development is now called for. This will not encourage parochialism for in the present world community there is hardly a self-contained entity. Local identity is a cultural aspect that cannot be avoided; and even with competition in existence, this should not be seen as negative. Competition should mean creativity.

5. Diversity in a society is unmistakable particularly differences in idea and thinking. People must be encouraged to express their views and their hopes. Debates must be welcomed. Mass medias always look for them and they appear either in print or on air every day. Difference needs not be division, rather this should be looked at as a process of formulating a societal agreement whenever reached binds all sides together.

6. Civil society must be encouraged. People normally do things together as a group. Group means solidarity. Articulation and aggregation of idea is done through group. Groups mediate, arbitrate state and people, the role of which formerly performed by bureaucracy. Civil society and state support each other, not antagonistic to each other. People need political education, civil society does that job by way of its practical function, not by offering short courses as bureaucrats are fond of doing. Politicians, state officials and people must understand each other and have to work together.

7. That people’s plights and sufferings will be redressed by ratu adil/holyman/hero/has to be altered. Present-day politicians have been doing that kind of business for they promise to be with the people and serve the people. We know what they can or cannot do. People have to rely on themselves, establishing their own organization and network. In time of trouble or crisis, opinion leaders will emerge. People can learn from them and can work with them. However, these leaders are no saviour.
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