Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

I would like to thank the Institute of Asian Studies and especially its Director, Dr Supang Chantavanich, for inviting me to edit the 2002 issue of *Asian Review* on the theme of “Popular Movements”.

Across Asia, the 1990s saw an upsurge of movements about environment, gender, corruption, media freedom, labour rights, cooperatives, land rights, forests, dams, marine resources, and much besides. For Thailand, as I suggest in my contribution to the volume, this upsurge is significant because of the absence of any previous mass movement in the country’s history. These movements combine elements of the “new social movements” discovered in the west since the 1970s, but in fact are neither specially “new” in their concerns nor exclusively “social” in their approach. They concern “old” issues of class and livelihood, and they overflow into politics.

Moreover, the adoption of “old” or “new” approaches is a matter of dispute within these movements. Somchai Phatharathananunth details how the Isan NGOs in the 1980s fiercely debated the merits of grassroots work (the community culture approach) or political mobilization (the political economy approach). He shows that the debate was resolved not at the theoretical level but in the course of struggle. The multiplication of issues concerning livelihood and natural resources made political mobilization an imperative.

The same has been true in the Philippines. Jaime Mendoza Jimenez details local opposition to a government-backed, land-grabbing property development. In background, the case is similar to many campaigns in Thailand. But the campaign differs for one important reason: the leftist movement of the 1960s and 1970s was never totally destroyed. The local campaign takes its place in a national framework. As Jimenez stresses, there is a strong emphasis on training and ideology.

Again the Philippines, Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem shows how some, like the community culture school in Thailand, turned to grassroots work, but focused on the cooperative movement rather than community revival. Initially the results, measured by the expansion of the cooperative movement, were spectacular. But ultimately, as for Thailand’s community activists, the politics were stacked against them. They faced the power of the rice cartels in the grain market, and the complexity of patronage politics in the administration.
Labour movements have had equal difficulty trying to manage the opportunities and threats of the globalization era. Napaporn Ativanichayapong traces the Thai labour movement from the 1973–1976 era to the present. Trade unions have weakened on a global scale as a result of the growing power of international capital. Napaporn argues that labour activism must build social alliances to overcome its own weakness, and shows how this strategy succeeded during the 1973–1976 period and was revived successfully in the 1990s over specific issues of interest to women labour. But she warns that trade unions must not cede leadership of labour issues to other organizations which may be sympathetic about labour issues but are not directly affected by the outcomes.

While trade unions have weakened, other forms of popular organization have strengthened, particularly movements which engage with environmental issues. Tim Forsyth warns us to examine carefully the claims that such organizations make both about the constituencies they represent and the environmental goals they want to achieve. There are many variants of environmentalism, and he directs us to ask clearly “who will benefit?” from any particular campaign.

This new phase of popular movements marks a stage of maturity in the emerging politics of the more democratic states of Asia. These movements are here to stay.

I would like to thank all of the authors for responding to my request by producing such excellent articles, and to thank Chris Baker for help with the editing.

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