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RECENT POPULAR MOVEMENTS IN THAILAND IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Pasuk Phongpaichit

ABSTRACT

The last decade has seen an explosion of popular movements in Thailand. Although many share characteristics with “new social movements” (identity issues, networking), they also resemble “old” movements in their class base and political concerns. Because Thailand had no mass nationalist or revolutionary movement, these movements are the first political assertion by the “little people”. Many campaigns concern environmental destruction and competition over natural resources. Women have a large role, in contrast to the male domination of formal politics. Many issues are class-based but expressed in ways which facilitate cross-class alliances.

INTRODUCTION

Since around 1990, Thailand has seen an outburst of demonstrations, protest marches and new organizations by people of various walks of life. In 1978 there were 42 demonstrations and protests marches, rising to 170 in 1990 and to 988 in 1994 (Praphat, 1998: 34, 35, 39). These protests have not been just one-shot events. In most cases participants have organised into a movement to demand their rights, or to fight to protect the environment and their livelihood on a long-term basis.

This paper is based on a research project on social movements in Thailand, funded under the Thailand Research Fund’s Senior Researcher (medhi wijai awuso) programme, and carried out between 1999 and 2001. The project covered eight movements by eight research teams. The sample of movements was not “representative” in any scientific sense. But it includes many of the most prominent movements, and it indicates something of the variety. This upsurge of political activity cannot be assigned to one group, one grievance, one cause. The movements are both varied and complex. Collectively they mark a
significant change in Thai society and politics. The aim of this paper is to understand something of that change. Let me first summarize the eight studies.

Kritiya Atchwanitkul and Kanokwan Tharawan study the movement among women to gain full control over their bodies and sexuality, using four specific cases: the struggle for the rights of women to abort; the campaign for the right to choose a woman as a lover; the women’s movement about AIDS; and the fight to eliminate violence against women. Voravidh Charoenlert deals with women workers’ struggles for health and safety in work places. Nalinee Tanthuvanit and Sulaiporn Chonvilai study the roles of poor rural men and women in fights against dam projects which destroyed natural forests and fish breeding grounds and thus took away their means of livelihood and dispersed their communities. Sayamon Kaiyunwong, Atchara Rakyutitham, and Krisada Bunchai study the northern hill farmers’ movement to win rights to manage local natural resources and to maintain their cultural identities. Praphat Pintoptaeng and Anuson Unno cover the movement by small-scale fishermen in southern Thailand to protect the coastal environment. Maneerat Mitprasat examines the slum dwellers’ movement for housing rights and for participation in urban development. Nualnoi Treerat and Chaiyos Jirapruekpinyo trace the rural doctors’ movement against bureaucratic and political corruption in the public health ministry. Narumol Tapchumpon and Charan Ditthapichai focus on the movement for the new constitution of 1997 and its aftermath.

These studies range from the northern hills to the southern coasts, from hill minorities to educated civil servants, from local issues about natural resources to national concerns over constitutional principles. The nature of the peoples’ struggles, their novelty and variety, have motivated the research project. These social movements are not only the expression of discontents of the present, they also represent the collective wishes of large numbers of people. “Society itself is shaped by the plurality of these struggles and vision of those involved” (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992: 5).

Social movements are controversial. Some political analysts have argued that modern social movements are a dangerous delusion: because these movements emphasize civil society rather than class, networks rather political parties, local action rather than the capture of the state, they result in a futile populist strategy with no hope of success against the entrenched power of the internationalized capitalist state (Brass, 1994). Defenders have responded that such criticism simply ignores
contemporary realities. Class has become much more complex in the
globalized, post-industrial world (Veltmeyer, 1997). States are unlikely
to be overthrown by old-style movement parties because modern states
have impressive resources and broad foundations of tacit support. Social
movements have arisen precisely because of these characteristics of the
modern world, and we need to reconcile to these facts rather than cling
to an idealised past (Omvedt, 1993; Byres, 1995).

Several thinkers have rediscovered the Gramscian discussion of
hegemony as a way to reconcile social movements with leftist thinking.
Whereas old-style political movements sometimes succeeded in
capturing the state, they then often failed to disturb deeper hegemonic
ideas such as the domination of one group over another, the exclusion of
minorities, the necessity of hierarchy, or the privileges of an elite. Social
movements, by contrast, mount direct attacks on such hegemonies from
the base of civil society.

Social movements and NGOs have also been criticised, for retarding
the development of a political party system which would truly represent
the society, and particularly the urban and rural mass. By deflecting
people’s interest away from the establishment of political parties, these
critics suggest, social movements and NGOs cede this realm to old elites
and business gangs who directly represent only a minute proportion of
the population. Social movement activists respond that party politics are
not the only type of politics, nor necessarily the most effective for the
mass of the people given current structural conditions and money politics
(see below).

The plan of the paper is as follows. First a brief summary is given of
the worldwide theoretical debate on social movements, which has
developed since the 1960s. Second, the learning from past debates is
analyzed. Third, this is followed by a discussion of the main features of
recent popular movements in Thailand. The paper ends with a conclusion
and dedication.

INTERNATIONAL DEBATES ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social movements are simply collective actions—many people acting
together. The phrase “social movement” has taken on new meanings
since the 1960s when it was first used to describe anti-war, anti-nuclear,
student rights, feminist, gay, and environmentalist movements. Some
writers dubbed these campaigns as “new social movements” because
participation cut across class lines and included a large number from the
educated white-collar middle class. The "new" tag distinguished these movements from movements which were class-based, such as trade unions, communist parties, and socialist movements. The "social" tag was used because the movements were not directly political. They had no aim to capture or overthrow the state. They tacitly accepted the political framework of liberal democracy. Some movements wanted to establish different cultural identities, or make the society accept different ways of life (gay, lesbian). Many were about the quality of life, and the assertion of the rights of the individual or community.

The US debate

Political scientists argued that these movements demanded new theoretical approaches, different both from the Marxian paradigm of class, and from mainstream theories about interest groups and political recruitment. The first attempts at theorizing in the 1960s and 1970s were in the US.

These attempts focused not on why the movements took place (this was seen as being self-evident), but on how they were organized, and why some were more successful than others. The resource mobilization theory purported to show that the success of a movement depended on the resources available (people, money, allies), and the ability to mobilize these resources (by persuasion, organization, networking). Resource mobilization theory was wholly about the strategy to make a movement succeed in demanding a change in government policies or legislation. It focused on political action, and paid no attention to civil society.

A variant of this approach became known as political process or political opportunity theory. This approach analyzed the success or failure of movements in terms of the "opportunities" available. If the government is strong and committed to repression, then the political opportunity is small and the movement likely to fail. And vice versa. Analysts in this school paid less attention to the "resources" available, but concentrated on the interaction between the movement on the one hand and the state or other forms of established power on the other.

Western European debate

Debates in Western Europe began a little later than in the US, in the 1970s. From the start, the debates differed from those in the US. This reflected the big difference between the two continents in political history and in the traditions of political theory.
The subject of debate was essentially similar—nearly new movements about the environment, women and sexual identities. But instead of focusing on strategies and on the requirements for success or failure, the European debate focused on why these non-class-based movements arose.

The early theorists came mostly from Marxist traditions of political economy. They were concerned that Marxist analysis of social movements, which stressed the importance of consciousness, ideology, social struggle, and solidarity, seemed inadequate to characterize and explain the new movements. They argued that theories which stressed the primacy of structural contradictions, economic classes, and crisis in determining collective identities were inappropriate to understand movements which did not appear to have a class base, and did not seem to be related to any crisis or structural contradiction.

However, the European theorists were not at all impressed by the US theories of resource mobilization and political process. They asserted that present day collective action is not confined to negotiations and strategic calculations to gain political access. Rather, movements involve issues of social norms and identity, and the struggles take place in the realm of civil society rather than in the realm of politics.

The prominent European theorists such as Alain Touraine and Jurgen Habermas linked the upsurge of new social movements to the failure of the democratic system in post-modern society to guarantee individual freedom, equality, and fraternity. In the view of these theorists, the state has become more subject to the market, and democratic processes are being crushed by the growing power of authoritarian technocracy. The power which people once enjoyed through their role in the production process has been eroded by technology and managerial technique. The main socioeconomic role of individuals is not as workers but as consumers, and in this role they are manipulated by the technologies of media and markets.

For Touraine, as the technologies of state control, of mega-corporation economics, and of mass communications advance, so the liberty of the individual is diminished (Touraine, 1995). For Habermas, the expanding structures of state and market economy colonize the public and private sphere of individuals, which he calls the lifeworld. This lifeworld includes the domains in which meaning and value reside—such as family, education, art, religion. So private life becomes steadily more politicized by this double encroachment (Habermas, 1973; Foweraker, 1995: 6).
For Habermas, social movements are defensive reactions to protect the public and the private sphere of individuals against the inroads of the state system and market economy. Similarly, Touraine sees participation in social movements as the only way in which the individual can recover liberty. For both Habermas and Touraine, the main role of social movements is the mobilization of "actors" or "subjects"—their terms to refer to human beings in their full role as free and creative members of a pluralistic society, as opposed to victims of state and market domination.

Social movements in the European theory involve a process of self-awareness to create human and social identities, which are free of the domination of the technocratic state and the market. But the creation of these identities is part of the process of a social movement, not its ultimate goal. The social movement is a collective form of action to contest the abuses of political and economic power, and to change the political and market institutions in order to produce a better society. Social movements come into conflict with existing norms and values. As put by Cohen and Arato (1992: 511), "collective actors strive to create group identities within a general identity whose interpretation they contest".

Both the US and Europe are advanced industrial societies with established democratic systems, yet the analysis of social movements in the two continents has differed very widely. Foweraker explained this difference by reference to the historical context. Western Europe has a history of social democracy, welfare states, institutionalized trade union movements, and strong corporatist traditions linking trade unions with the state (Foweraker, 1995). European theorists try to explain the appearance of a new type of social expression by reference to shifts in society and culture. They conclude that the new social movements are concerned with the construction of new social and political identities in opposition to the power of market and state.

In the US by contrast there has been no tradition of social democracy, no trade union corporatism, and no powerful labour movement. Social movements are thus explained not as a consequence of social or structural change, but simply as part of the political manoeuvring whereby groups mobilize resources to gain political representation and to realize social changes. The US theorists are not interested in why social movements arise. They concentrate on why some succeed and some fail.

**Debates in Latin America**

The debate on social movements in the developing world surfaced first in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Latin America—as a result of
the close historical connections between Europe and that region, and because of the heavy American involvement there. Latin American theorists found that many of the insights of the western debate were useful because many movements (women, gay, environment) were either concerned with similar issues, or were linked to the US and Europe in increasingly international arenas of debate. However, the Latin Americanists also found that local movements, which arose in the region in the 1980s had many features which required extension or adjustment of the western theories.

First, the early movements in Latin America were primarily urban movements resulting from problems of rapid urbanization due to industrial development, capitalization of agriculture, and resulting shifts from rural to urban areas. These urban social movements often revolved around the demand for public utilities, or access to land and water. The movements gained momentum in part because of the crudeness of the government reaction. Thus the movements themselves were affected by the repressive policies of the state and the suppression of traditional forms of organization, such as trade unions and political parties.

Second, older forms of organization and agitation such as trade unions and agrarian movements did not disappear. But many new social actors come onto the scene, such as women, teachers, students, ethnic groups, as well as environmental movements.

Third, the movements often involved struggles to establish rights. These included rights to livelihood, rights over the body, rights to land, and "the right to have rights". Such movements were not so much expressions of civil society, but rather something much more basic: attempts to create or recover civil society in the face of state power, dictatorial repression, and exclusionary hegemonies. (Foweraker, 1995: 6).

Fourth, these movements were not divorced from the political process, but often by necessity overflowed from civil society into the political realm. Often movements were locked in contest with authoritarian regimes. As part of their strategy, they demanded democratization, political participation, and constitutional change. While some movements appeared to have the post-modern, non-class-based, networking form of the European model, others were much more obviously class-based and directly political.

Fifth, these movements were much more likely than European versions to be concerned with material issues of access to and control over resources such as land, water, and the means of livelihood.

Sixth, while European theory situated new social movements as an
extension of the traditions of liberal individualism, many social movements in Latin America were based in communities, leveraged community solidarities, and demanded community rights. Foweraker, for example, studied how the Chiapas movement drew on customary practices within the community as part of network building, and evolved demands for the rights of Mexican Indians as a community (Foweraker, 1992).

Finally, in Latin America the success rate was not impressive. Repression by the state was tougher and more effective in disrupting and preventing any meaningful success.

Latin American theorists adopted some of the vocabulary and approaches of the western literature, but found that they confronted some important differences. At the close of the 1980s, theorists advanced some tentative conclusions. First, they argued that the question of the class base of social movements was an empirical matter. In the advanced world, many movements were either middle-class or cross-class. But in Latin America, most were attempts by the poor and disadvantaged to gain basic rights and improve their economic standing. Second, they proposed that the success or failure of movements was related not simply to the local strength of the state, but also to the neo-colonial framework and the international backing for local state power. Touraine’s observations about the domination of state system, market economics, and mass communications had to be modified to stress the extreme nature of this domination in the situation where the power base of state, market, and communication media was remote from the local context and hence even more difficult to oppose.

In the early 1990s, two new developments in the Latin American movements prompted still further extension and adaptation of social movement theory. The first development was a much larger prominence of rural social movements, with the spread of land-grab movements and the explosion of the Chiapas peasant resistance. The second was the paradoxical development in the political economy, which saw a revival of democratic forms of government running in parallel with rapid widening of the gaps between rich and poor, powerful and powerless.

The explosion of rural movements further emphasized the importance of competition over resources. It also drew the focus back to issues of identity, culture, and community. Many of the movements in Latin America were centred among minority groups, which drew some of their movement’s strength from reassertion of identity. Even in cases where ethnicity was not such an explicit issue, movements drew on a
background of rural identity and culture raised in opposition to a dominant urban ideology of market and state. Similarly, movements drew on concepts of community, which found little place in the theories worked out within the liberal-individualist traditions of the west.

The paradox of democracy and social division drew attention to the special conditions of subordinate societies within an increasingly globalized world. Latin American theorists argued that the region’s urban centres and urban elites were being annexed (politically, economically, and culturally) to a globalized world system dominated by the USA. In this process, the power of the national state was diminished. Hence, even though dictatorships were being replaced by democratic politics, there was no space for meaningful negotiation of social and economic demands. The strength of internationally backed repression meant that local political defiance was increasingly ineffective. The decline of trade unions and welfare provisions was evidence of this trend. Hence social movements acquired a new importance as a basis for defiance (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992; Escobar, 1995; Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998).

Debates in India

In the 1980s, the debate spread more widely in the developing world. In India there was a long tradition of socialist and communist movements prior to the 1980s. The social movements in the 1980s took on new features in several respects. To begin with, many old causes declined in importance. The trade union movement, for example, had previously campaigned heavily for nationalization of industries or for increasing the state’s role in managing privately owned industrial enterprises. Over the 1980s, this issue disappeared. Similarly, the movement for land reforms—in the sense of reallocating land from big landlords to the landless—diminished in importance. At the same time, movements related to community, minorities, religion, women’s rights, natural resources, and the environment grew in importance. Untouchables demanded that the government increase their quota of civil service posts. Environmental movements protested against big dam projects and demanded alternative development strategies. Local communities demanded rights to manage local resources. Small farmers demanded specific forms of government support. None of these new movements adhered to the old socialist ideology and none seemed to have a definite idea of an “ideal society”.

According to Omvedt (1993), the social movements in India in the 1980s differed significantly from those occurring previously. The
participants showed no interest in class analysis, but insisted on the specific nature of the exploitation they suffered. They were unimpressed by socialist ideology as a way to explain their position. They rejected alignment with leftist political organization as a strategy for redress.

Omvedt concluded that these new movements in India required researchers and analysts to reimagine the whole of Indian society. The varied movements expressed a new cultural dynamism. Although the individual movements were scattered and diverse, together they amounted to a rejection of old ideologies and values, namely the dominant high-caste Brahmanism, the state system constructed since independence, and the integration of Indian society into post-cold war global capitalism. The aim of the movements was to find new ways to affect change (Omvedt, 1993: 313, 318).

Orthodox Marxists reacted strongly against Omvedt’s analysis. Utsa Patnaik argued that the emphasis on culture and identity were signs of backwardness and anti-modernism. Brass (1994) argued that the new movements were suffused by various forms of false consciousness (post-modernism, communitarianism), and were a threat to the traditions of socialist political organization. But Omvedt countered that leftists had to accept the new movements for what they were, rather than arguing that they should be something different. She urged theorists to analyze new social movements in order to adapt old ideas of class analysis and political mobilization to fit with the new reality. In her view there must be a reinterpretation of revolution (Omvedt, 1993: 312, 319).

**LEARNING FROM PAST DEBATES**

Two things emerge from the above discussion. First, the movements, which emerged in Thailand in the 1990s have many similarities to the Latin American and Indian cases. Second, the theorists in Latin America and India found many useful elements in the studies of social movements in the west, but also found many differences in their local situations. Before turning to the Thai experience, let us summarize four key areas where the Latin American/Indian debates have modified or rejected the western models.

**Double domination**

Touraine (and other European theorists) argue that new social movements are specific to a post-modern society—by which he means a society in which the major part of the workforce are educated, skilled,
white-collar, and probably in service industries. However, the technocratic states, market forces, and mass communications which Touraine identifies as the forces oppressing humanity and making social movements necessary, are clearly present in societies which cannot yet be called post-modern. Indeed, this domination is a global process. Hence the diminution of liberty, which this dominance entails is also present in non-western societies, and also needs to be opposed. Indeed, many of the new movements in the non-western world have been focused precisely against the power of the state, the expansion of big business at the expense of small, and the monopolies over modern communications.

But the problems have become more complicated in non-western countries by the extra dimension of subordination or dependency to a western dominated world. The dominating forces which Touraine identifies are globalized. The big businesses are multinational. The mass communication systems are US-owned and global in scope. National state systems are being weakened and coopted. Touraine talks about social movements contesting directly against corporate and state power. In non-western countries, the contest is more complex because these powerful forces are more remote, and the balance of power even more unequal. Social movements in developing countries must be seen in the context of a double repression: at the local level by the power structure of the society and the market forces in question; and at another global level by the forces of world capitalism and multinational corporations.

Social or political

Theories constructed for the west are concerned with movements, which focus on the quality of life, rather than on the material aspects of life. The movements’ actors are often those in the middle class. In non-western countries, where the material aspects are still a problem, many social movements are about bread and butter issues, particularly access to resources. The actors involved in many cases are the underprivileged, the marginalized, workers, and poor farmers.

In a sense, Latin America and other similar parts of the world are experiencing at the same time two different types of movement (“old” and “new”) which in the western case took place in two historically separate phases. Moreover, these two types cannot be simply separated. Because they exist in the same place and time, they are inevitably interrelated—through people, organizations, network, shared context.

Two important features of the recent movements in the developing
world have been struggles for livelihood, and demands for basic rights. In most cases, the struggles are by definition political, because they have to challenge the political control of resources, and the political arrangements for the allocation of rights. Hence, it is questionable how far these movements deserve to be labelled “social”, in the sense that this suggests they are not “political”. It is also questionable how far they deserve to be labelled “new” when much of their content is very traditional. Because of this, the use of the term “new social movement has declined in use, and been replaced by “popular movement” or “people politics”.

From democracy to people politics

Many of the movements in developing countries since the 1980s aimed to establish or strengthen democratic systems and structures in the belief that this was an important precondition for removing oppression, allowing participation, and hence overcoming many of the inequalities and injustices in the society and economy. But recent experience suggests that this democratizing goal is important but insufficient. States have retained their authoritarian character even while taking on many of the outward forms of democracy. They have access to modern technology and communications of social control. Their authoritarianism is sometimes reinforced by global forces. The theoretical equality under a democratic system is ineffective when there are large differences in income leading to “money politics”. In these circumstances, democratization is ineffective in challenging economic inequalities or embedded social hierarchies.

Hence there has been a shift away from democratization to “people politics”, which implies more direct participation of people in the decision making process on matters which affect their livelihoods and their ways of life.

Individual and community

Touraine, and other western thinkers are writing firmly in the historical traditions of western liberalism with its emphasis on individualism. Touraine is explicit in wanting to revive the French Revolution ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity—especially liberty. However, in the non-western world, which has a different historical tradition and a much shallower experience of advanced capitalism, such an emphasis on individual liberty is either absent or much weaker. Often it is an import with uncertain local roots. Local traditions of philosophy and political practice place more emphasis on the role of communities
and groups. Touraine has to go through some complex argument to explain why a social movement (which involves collective actions) is a way for an individual to reclaim liberty. In the non-western context, this stage of the theorizing can be (and often already is) conveniently bypassed. Communities are resurrected, reinvented, or reimagined as the basis of new movements of defiance against the power of state and markets, as well as the guide for alternative development of a desirable future society.

Many social movements in the developing world since the 1970s have been based in poor, peripheral, or minority communities. The Chiapas movement in Mexico is a classic case in point. In Thailand movements among small farmers, small fishermen, and hill peoples all have a base in the community, or are community movements, not individual movements. Chairat (1995) has analyzed the discourse on community culture in Thailand as a social movement based in the village community. These movements have pressed for alternative development strategies, or imagined ideal future societies, different from those of the ruling mainstream. Sometimes they have sought to protect community rights against the inroads of market individualism. Sometimes they have actively revived community solidarity and community cultures as a political strategy. Sometimes they have demanded that the broader society accepts and respects the culture and values of a minority or repressed community.

In sum, while European theory describes movements which operate in civil society, reject old forms of political organization, challenge post-modern forces of state and market, and seek to defend traditions of liberal individualism, those that have appeared in the non-western world seem to be very different. They are often movements of the poor and oppressed. They cannot avoid confronting the political structure. They are increasingly involved in combating forces of globalization. They are often based in the community and draw on its strengths.

**RECENT POPULAR MOVEMENTS IN THAILAND**

The upsurge of popular movements in Thailand over the past decade obviously shares many similarities with the experience of Latin America and India—the broad base of participation, rejection of old forms of organization, emphasis on environment, and role of community discourse. But there are certain ways in which the details or emphasis of the movements in Thailand have been importantly different.
Historical shift

A large number of movements of great variety have arisen within a very short space of time. In a broad sense, this is a result of changes in the global and local context. The end of the cold war has led to the decline of dictatorship. The opening up of democratic politics has created more space for social agitation and political expression. The global discourse on topics such as rights, identity, and environmental protection has stimulated reactions within Thailand. At the same time, the rise of the modern state, market-oriented economy, and new forms of global power (hegemonic states and dominant multinationals) has caused conflicts over resources, dislocation of communities, and erosion of ways of life. In sum, the combined impact of democratization, economic growth, and globalization creates contradictory results. They encroach on people’s lives and livelihood, and at the same time they open up political opportunities and give legitimacy to social movements.

The new movements in Thailand include a wide variety of social groups. But the significant fact is the large participation by the “little people” who have traditionally been excluded from a political voice. These include hill peoples, small fishermen, marginal peasants, slum dwellers, and working women. They have become more assertive than before about their rights and roles in society. This is partly explained by the passing of the cold war and the era of dictatorial rule. But there has also been an important synergy between these various different movements. The space created by one movement is available to another. Experiences feed on one another and become cumulative. The sum of several movements is greater than their individual contributions alone.

This upsurge is significant because it represents a break from the past. Thai society has had little or no experience of mass political mobilization. Nationalism was orchestrated by the elite. With no colonial control, there was no anti-colonialist mass movement. Socialism was crushed within the context of the cold war. Hence the social movements of the 1990s represent some of the first, sustained examples of mass social action. With an ever faster pace of globalization, social movements are definitely here to stay in Thailand.

Democratic limits

In different ways, various movements express frustration over the poor operation of Thailand’s parliamentary democracy. The rapid rise of “money politics” has stimulated middle class support for the movement for constitutional reform and campaigns against corruption such as that...
in the public health ministry. The failure of representative democracy to provide any meaningful representation for poor and marginal groups has prompted many agitational campaigns. Despite wide differences in social background, these various movements share a feeling that politicians and bureaucrats imagine themselves as a ruling caste rather than as public servants.

This shared perspective can at times become a basis for common action. The Assembly of the Poor supported the constitutional movement although the constitution was peripheral to its major concerns. Many of the activists in campaigns over the constitution and corruption have lent moral and organizational support to little people’s campaigns for rights and resources. Of course, such cooperation has strict limits. But in the short term it helps to create a snowball effect of benefit to many contemporary movements.

**Environment**

About half the movements covered in the research project on social movements in Thailand are concerned in some way with the environment and competition over natural resources. Over the past half century, natural resources have been captured and destroyed for private gain, with the process often justified by discourses about development and national interest. Those most sensitive to the loss of such resources are the little people who depend most heavily on nature for their livelihood and culture. The attempts to halt this process and protect both resources and livelihoods has become a trend which transcends any particular local campaign, and acts as a common base for alliance between groups of varying background.

The past pattern of development assumed that lots of little people could be sacrificed in the business of creating modern industrial society on the model from the west. But the recent movements show that it has become more difficult to maintain that belief. The government will have to think more seriously in pursuing old policies and strategies without regards to the effects on people.

**Women**

One striking feature of this upsurge of popular movements has been the role of women. This includes involvement in movements on specifically female issues (abortion, aids, violence against women), but also a leading role in other campaigns. Women have been a major force in the labour movement, in slum campaigns, in rural protests, and in the
constitutional campaign. This is significant because it offers a strong contrast to the extreme male bias in Thailand’s formal public life. The female share among parliamentarians, senior bureaucrats, and local politicians is very small.

Traditionally women had a strong role in Thai society. In the realms of the family and local community, there have never been traditions of suppressing the female contribution. The male bias in formal politics developed within the modern bureaucracy and political system based on western models. The strong and often leading roles taken by women in modern popular movements represents a reassertion of traditional female power.

**Culture, identity, alliance**

As in other developing countries, Thai social movements mobilise concepts of culture and identity to build solidarity and inspire action. This is similar to earlier western movements, but also importantly different. The cultures and identities mobilised are very often those of the poor, the peripheral, and the excluded. This gives these movements some of the moral power (against injustice) of old-style class-based action. But at the same time, the fact that these movements are not founded explicitly on class concepts and motivated by class antagonism makes it easier for them to mobilise support from a broader public. Appeals to universally acceptable concepts—protection of the environment, health for all, no corruption—make it possible for movements of the underprivileged to build support from the educated middle class, through the links forged by NGOs.

**NGOs**

Around the world, the role of NGOs has become controversial. To what extent do they actually create the movements, which they claim only to facilitate? What is the moral or political justification for their role? Are they a force for democracy, or are they helping destroy democracy by diverting attention from parties, parliaments, and other official democratic institutions? Are they part of the globalizing forces which are undermining sovereignty and national government? Our study did not set out to be an in-depth analysis of the role of NGOs. But the above questions are so much part of current debate that it is worth offering some tentative conclusions which arise from the research project.

In terms of its resource base, the Thai NGO movement remains rather weak. The numbers of people directly involved on a full-time basis are
small. Funding is very limited. Foreign funds and assistance are available and important, but they are not large.

At the same time, NGOs have played an important role in all of the movements studied in the project. It is probably fair to say that without the NGO contribution, several of these movements would be significantly weaker and less effective. What then explains the fact that the NGO movement is weak in resources but able to exert such an impact? In part this is simply due to the levels of effort and commitment on the part of a small number of people. But there are also structural and strategic aspects.

The roles which the NGO workers play are very specific. They accumulate practical political experience which allows them to serve as effective advisors on strategy and tactics. They act as transmitters of information between groups and across movements, which allows local groups to shorten the learning curve. They have contact networks which can bring in expertise (from international sources, academics, researchers), and which can pass out publicity to the press and other media. They have educated skills which are important for compiling documents, conducting negotiations, framing publicity, and so on. In none of these roles do the NGOs have the ability to create movements, though they certainly can contribute to making them stronger. The NGO workers themselves argue that whatever role they have is dependent on the strength of the popular movement which they assist.

This NGO role has arisen because of the upsurge of popular movements on the one hand, and the authorities’ attempt to combat these movements by a mixture of constructive neglect or the exercise of traditional power on the other.

Often the NGOs are described as a “middle class” element. As a recent study has shown, many of the older (1970s) generation of Thai NGOs did have middle class backgrounds, and were motivated by political commitment; however, those of the new generation (1990s onwards) are more likely to come from a rural or urban lower-class family, to have climbed the ladder of educational achievement, and to have made a decision to remain true to their roots.

Strategies

Among those in Thailand committed to social and political change, three general strategies for action are being debated. The first is to work within the existing system and to press for changes in law, law enforcement, institutions, and mindsets, through various forms of social
action and political lobbying. The second alternative is to form a political party to provide a more direct channel for change. The third alternative is the so-called New Anarchism—people should just ignore the state, pursue their preferred way of life, and seek strength within the community and through networking between communities. 

Most popular movements in Thailand adopt the first option. The anarchist solution is problematic because of the intrusive power of the state (particularly its control over natural resources), and because of the difficulty of evading various forms of hegemony handed down from history. The option of establishing a new political party has been actively debated in recent years, but to date most activists fear that the result would be infighting, disunity, and distraction from the goals of direct social action and counter-hegemonic political activism.

CONCLUSION AND DEDICATION

The project on social movements, upon which this paper is based, was an academic research project, but it was also conceived as a contribution to the movements being studied. All of the principal researchers and their assistants working on the eight case studies were chosen because they are committed activists. I hoped they would profit in some way by being asked to research these movements and reflect on the forces behind them, the strategies adopted, the successes, and the failures. That much was intentional. But beyond that, the subjects of the research got involved in the project in ways that I had not expected. In an early work-in-progress seminar, an activist was orchestrating the fishermen’s blockade of Phangnga bay over his mobile phone from the back of the room. At the final seminar in October 2000, several of the dam protesters attended and cheered on the researcher. Leaders of the doctors’ movement came to the presentation on the public health scandal, contributed advice and information, and insisted on presenting a garland to the research team. And one man from the Hmong hill community attended the seminar to get tips on how to help his home village, which had been ransacked a few days earlier by vigilantes covertly encouraged by the forest department. One of the important aspects of modern popular movements is that they are not confined within any formal frame.

This research is dedicated to all those who believe that Thai society can and should be moved ahead by collective action of various kinds.
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All the studies are published in Pasuk et al. (2002).


See chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 in Pasuk et al. (2002).

See chapters 2 and 3 in Pasuk et al. (2002).

For an excellent analysis of NGOs and social movements see Missingham (2000). See also Prudhisan and Maneerat (1997), Narong (1999), and Somchai (2001) on the northeast.

See Somchai’s contribution to this volume on the debate within the NGOs working in the northeast of Thailand with regard to the community culture approach and the political economy approach.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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