

People's struggles in Thailand - II - Popular movements from the 1980s on

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The French original had to be much shortened because of editorial constraints. An even longer version is now under preparation and will be posted online in French... as soon as possible.

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During the 1980s various social movements appeared in Thailand for democracy and against capitalist globalization, including village organizations to preserve forests, peasant struggles against construction of dams, and workers' mobilizations for higher wages. Nevertheless, in the early 1990s these popular movements lacked national coordination, due to the demise of a left political party (revolutionary or reformist) with a significant national influence. The decline of the Thai communist insurrection paved the way to new conflicts within the dominant class, opening a new political cycle of resistance, which crystallized over the question of the constitution.

New Political Cycle

In the late 1970s, after five decades in power, the army maintained considerable influence. With a thousand generals, the army's presence was felt throughout society. A growing segment of the “civilian” bourgeoisie sought to diminish this influence and was also worried about the increasing economic strength of the royal family. This wing of the civilian bourgeoisie wanted its political clout to correspond to its economic power, and sought to eliminate the burdens imposed by administrative bureaucracy, red tape, commissions, and subcommissions. Seeking to open the country to foreign

investments, it criticized the inefficiency of some 70 state enterprises. In unison with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, it demanded a “rationalization” of the public sector, including a number of privatizations, and an increase in the prices of public services.

The conflict within the civilian and military elite revolved around the budget and government institutions. Business pushed for the establishment of a properly parliamentary regime: the role of the Senate should be limited, military officers should no longer have the right to be elected and to take government functions. The army itself was the scene of some dissidence. The political game remained largely modeled by the military factions.

In April 1981 the “Young Turks” attempted a coup d’état. These middle-rank officers claimed to defend traditional values, being at the same time anti-communist and anti-capitalist. They dissolved their group after a final coup attempt in 1985. With the “Democratic Soldiers,” for the first time in Thailand a “reformist military” current emerged. They had been, like Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, involved in the political side of counterinsurrection and concluded that communism was just a reaction to the wrongdoings of capitalism.

General Athit Kamlang-ek – strong man of the military command, right-wing populist demagogue, and close to the queen – wanted a democracy maintained under the tutelage of the military. For him, the army was the only guarantee of the general interest, while the political parties only represented particular interests. Another officer, General Chatichai Choonhavan, who became prime minister in 1988, broke off with the traditional military concept of “guided democracy” and opted for a parliamentary (but elitist) regime, closer to the will of the civil business class. He gave priority to profits above security policy. After a long political-military career (he led a coup d’état as early as 1947), he became a powerful businessman in the textile and banking industries.

Crisis of 1991-1992

“Democracy” through constitutional reforms against the military or “democracy” through military-led reforms against the political parties – the use of the word “democracy” showed the lasting impact of the 1973-6 people’s mobilizations: it had become a useful catch-word to gain popular legitimacy. The 1991-2 crisis confirmed that the country was not ready to accept another dictatorship.

The army took power in February 1991 and chose a civilian as prime minister, Anand Panyarachun. The military denounced the “money politics” of the influential provincial businessmen, but compromised itself into private enrichment by negotiating juicy contracts in armaments and communications. The 1991 coup d’état revived democratic mobilizations, spearheaded by the Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD). But the king intervened to calm down the situation, ending street demonstrations. In March 1992 the pro-military party Samakkhitham won the elections and a military junta took power. Democratic mobilizations started again and built in intensity. On May 17, 200,000 demonstrators – members of the middle class, rural migrants, workers and students, among others – marched in Bangkok, as well as in the provinces. The military junta sent in troops who opened fire: 40-60 people died during three nights of violence. On May 20 the king intervened again, this time for General Suchinda Kraprayoon, the chief of the junta, to resign and for new elections to be called in September 1992.

The 1991 coup and the bloody repression that followed dealt a severe blow to the status of the army. The general staff had to accept the principle of the “depoliticalization” of its role. The decline of the military, very sensitive during the 1990s, paved the way to neoliberal economic reforms and to the integration of the country into capitalist globalization.

Acceleration of Socioeconomic Transformations

The country changed at an accelerated rhythm. The demographic growth rate declined. The economic center of gravity swung to the towns. Bangkok became a tentacle town with more than 10 million inhabitants. The best-paid urban wage-earners and professionals began to play a stronger public role; their tastes westernized with the development of a consumer society. Women from relatively prosperous families entered massively into higher education and occupied quite a significant number of qualified jobs and responsibilities in banks, finance, and administration – but did not join the ranks of senior executives in industry and the bureaucracy. Political power remained patriarchal: in 1995 only 2 percent of village heads were women.

Asian capital came to Thailand, from Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, in the form of assembling industries (automobiles, home appliances) and manufacturing of toys, textiles and garments, and information technology. Production turned more and more towards the world market. The tourist sector was in full boom. Labor became one of the main products of exportation, in particular to Middle East building sites. In 1985–95 the industrial labor force nearly doubled, reaching 5 million. This industrial boom attracted new migrants from neighboring countries. Most came from Burma and others from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and China. In 1997 the population of migrant laborers in Thailand ranged from an estimated 1–3 million. Migrants were employed in the fishing industry, fruit plantations, and sweat shops, and as domestic workers, without civic rights or social protection. By the mid-1990s women comprised half of Thai wage earners.

In the early 1980s agriculture still represented nearly half of exports, but a decade later dropped to only 10 percent. The economic importance of the peasantry quickly declined, though they remained an important demographic segment of society, composing the majority of the population until the beginning of the 2000s. The rural world lost its significance in the kingdom's cultural imagination, while in the 1970s the countryside inspired many writers, poets, and popular singers. Urban migration became massive, especially in the Northeast where a million people a year moved to towns. With the sex tourism boom, Thailand became a center of AIDS epidemics, provoking the first deaths at the end of 1980. HIV cases were probably 600,000 in 2000.

1997 Financial Crisis

Thailand had the sad privilege of being the starting point of the 1997–8 international financial crisis. The social shock was very brutal: a ruined urban middle class, 2 million wage earners laid off right away, bankruptcies, etc. A part of the urban labor force returned to the villages. Others tried to survive in the informal sector. What was a disaster for many was a good chance for a few. Foreign investors bought bankrupted enterprises at extremely low prices. During the three years that followed the crisis, more capital entered Thailand than during the previous eleven years of booming economy. It came with the benediction of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

This was the first structural crisis of neoliberal capitalist globalization, the new mode of class domination and organization of the world market. Its political consequences included the fall of the Suharto regime in Indonesia, loss of legitimacy of neoliberal ideology, and loss of authority of its international institutions such as the IMF and World Bank in Thailand. Beyond financial speculation, this crisis revealed the significant influence of capitalist globalization to spreading social insecurity, economic precariousness, and the tyranny of the market in all spheres of life. It also contributed to the development of new international links between social movements within the Global Justice Movement and the World Social Forum. One of the most active organizations in this process, Focus on the Global South, is based in Bangkok. People's Thailand has been an integral part of the renewal

of internationalism. However, linguistic barriers – few people speak foreign languages – have meant that the integration of local popular movements into international activities is slower than in other countries.

Diversity and Convergence of Struggle

The expansion of the capitalist market and implementation of neoliberal policies in every sector of society fostered the development of a diverse array of social resistance in Thailand. While the centralization of struggles could not operate as in the 1970s (because of the defeat of the Communist Party of Thailand), new ways of converging had to be found.

The situation remained particularly difficult in unionism. At the end of the 1970s, legal unions remained essentially subservient to patronage and all “political” activities were prohibited. The noose loosened the following decade and at the end of the 1980s a few (temporary) victories were gained on issues such as social security, the minimum wage, and the privatization of public enterprises. But after the coup d’état of 1991 these favorable laws were put into question, unions were banned in public enterprises, and repression considerably hardened.

The development of free trade zones (where employers are not under the usual legal constraints) and of work at home (evaluated, at the end of the 1980s, at about 800,000 people in textile production) made the organization of workers especially difficult. The arson attack in May 1983 at the Kader Toy Factory gave a lift to protests, so big was the emotion resulting from the death of 188 employees and 500 others injured because there were no protection measures whatsoever. Struggles developed to reinforce legislation protecting the health and security of workers.

In the 1980s demographic pressure in the countryside was lessened because of migration to the cities. Nevertheless, inequalities increased between regions that had access to the urban market and could commercialize their products (rice fields giving way to fruit and shrimp) and others hit by poverty, debt, and falling prices. This fall was particularly brutal with the devaluation of the baht following the financial crisis of 1997. Peasants then developed new forms of struggle, blocking roads to pressure the government to sustain prices and cancel debts. Faced with an unstable market, some peasants turned again to forms of cooperation and mutual aid, aiming at self-sufficiency or attempting to combine production for home-consumption, local exchanges, and the market.

The rural world also faced many other kinds of aggression in addition to the dictatorship of the market. The extension of urban and industrial zones reversed a historical trend. In the past, cultivated areas did not stop growing; now they declined. Ecologically destructive plantations like eucalyptus spread (particularly in the Northeast). Customary rights on forest use by villages were denied by big, often illegal, logging exploitation (especially at the Burmese border). Huge infrastructure projects, like dams, did not benefit local populations; on the contrary, they often deprived them of traditional resources. The “American” era of development led to an overexploitation of natural resources. Thailand, so richly endowed with natural resources, became a country where conflicts over their use multiplied, placing into conflict the state, enterprises, and peasants over access to forest, rivers, lakes, the sea, and beyond. The villagers responded to commercial logging and overfishing through petitions to local authorities, and quasi-military operations to destroy company equipment.

New Movements

The establishment of the first non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Thailand dated back to the end of the 1960s, but at that time they were not militant. They began to radicalize and to widen their activities (on rural conditions, human rights, etc.) after the October 14, 1973 upheaval, but the repression that followed the 1976 coup d'état put a brake on their activities and forced some of their founders into exile –together with well-known personalities like Dr. Puey Ungpakorn, former governor of the Bank of Thailand and former rector of Thammasat University. The following decade, elements defending a “this-worldly” Buddhism or actions based on local communities (the “community culture movement”) systematized criticisms of the authoritarian policies of modernization “from top to bottom” dear to the international financial institutions. This contributed to the building of a new activist culture and influenced the subsequent evolution of NGOs.

The activities of NGOs expanded again during the 1980s: they started to intervene on questions of the environment and were more involved in social rights and working conditions in industrial zones. They were considerably reinforced in 1985–7 when they occupied the space left vacant by the CPT crisis, and played a significant role in the democratic mobilization of 1992.

The NGO movement had a strong identity, but it was not politically homogeneous. There were significant differences of orientation between associations, especially on the question of relationships with the state. In the words of researcher Dulcey Simpkins, some NGOs were more “collaborationist” (without giving to this term the very pejorative meaning it can have) and others were more “autonomist” – they could look for the “patronage” necessary to their legal registration or on the contrary renounce it. Some NGOs actively supported social struggles, others were para-governmental bodies, and others limited themselves to charitable activities.

In the 1990s the left debated NGOs’ role. Could they claim to represent the population and become a force in themselves, or should they support more socially representative and rooted social movements? Should they try to build a new consensus on development with the administration and private companies, or should they facilitate the expression of social radicalism? Did they gain an unjustified power over people’s organizations because of their international and media links, and because of their control of important financial flows?

Various types of people’s organizations and social movements also formed in the 1990s. Independently from submissive unions, some informal “labor clubs” appeared in the popular suburban areas of Bangkok. Centers of initiatives like the Thai Labor Campaign, with links to international solidarity networks, helped to revive campaigns against privatization and for the reinforcement of social legislation and to popularize struggles engaged in factories (e.g., Thai Durable Factory, Almond Workers). Several peasant movements were reconstituted in the beginning of the 1990s, like the Small Scale Farmers of the Northeast or the Northern Farmers Network.

In this framework, feminist movements seemed strangely discreet. To be sure, there were programs of feminist studies in the universities and quite a number of feminist associations. Many struggles, especially in factories, were initiated by female workers. Women activists often played a key role in information, local radio, and coordination of militant unions, social movements, NGOs, and community organizations. Feminist movements prepared for the Fourth World Conference on Women organized in Beijing by the United Nations in September 1995, but the mobilization ended with the conference. After the 1997–8 financial crisis a new network was created to favor multi-level and multi-sector coordination of organizations: the People Alliance for the Advancement of Women. This alliance aimed at the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, and at the

utilization of the clause of the 1997 Thai constitution allowing the petitioning of parliament by collecting 50,000 signatures.

However, the visibility of the feminist struggle did not correspond to the actual participation of women in mobilizations. Due to the absence of a feminist movement, as such, there was great difficulty in linking women's specific demands on violence, equal wages, and legislation on the family to global issues and economic policies. Those who spoke in the media were mostly individual personalities from relatively well-to-do backgrounds whose vision of feminism was quite different from the popular classes of women. After the September 2006 coup d'état, a new network came to light but with an English name ("We Move"), a choice with a strong middle-class connotation.

The legacy of the 1970s was not totally lost. Militants who had lived through the struggle of this radical decade – or even who had been members of the CPT – often played an active role in the emergence of new movements. They had an experience of political work both in villages and popular suburbs. In the 1980s it helped the organization of local resistance and, most importantly, to connect urban and rural networks. Opposition to the building of dams, in particular, has been an occasion to bring together into a common struggle a great variety of solidarity networks. This process began as early as 1982, against the construction of the Nam Choan Dam. This resistance movement included residents of the villages directly affected, progressive militants and sympathizers from the neighboring towns, Thai NGOs and international ecological groups, monks and singers, journalists and academics. Thus, a growing number of links were made between social sectors.

In the 1990s the struggle against the Pak Mun Dam took on national dimensions with a march to Bangkok and a protest camp in front of government house. This hydroelectric dam was built in 1994. It blocked the migration of fish, provoking a drastic reduction of stock for the local community living upstream (more than 20,000 people). They had opposed the construction of the dam since 1990 and later sought to shut it down, pursuing the struggle for years. On March 23, 1999, 5,000 villagers began a permanent occupation of the site. In June 2001 the government decided temporarily to reopen the sluice gates. It was an important victory, but in spite of an impact study which proved the critics of the dam right, the sluices were closed again in November 2002.

The establishment of the Assembly of the Poor on December 10, 1995 (International Human Day) gave a permanent framework to these dynamics of convergence. It built a loose network linking locally rooted activist groups without central leaders and coordinated by a minimal secretariat. The social movement was initiated by this Assembly much more than by NGOs. The Assembly of the Poor primarily included rural movements from the North and the Northeast, but also welcomed fishing communities from the South and a few labor organizations. It did not represent all peasant organizations, far from that, for its establishment was an outcome of the division within these movements. Those who represented a peasantry with relatively stable living conditions aimed at defending their income by developing, in particular, political lobbying. On the other hand, those who participated in the Assembly represented sectors living in precariousness: they fought for the securitization of access to land and forests, against the construction of dams, etc. The flexible way in which the Assembly's network functioned represented a break from both the "centralist" tradition of the CPT and the "lobbyist" traditions of organizations operating through clientelist linkages.

The Pak Mun Declaration was issued on December 14, 1995, four days after the creation of the Assembly, in the village of Dan Kao (province of Ubon Rachathani in the Northeast). The poor spoke to the leaders of the country and to public opinion: "The people must set up the country's development direction. The people must be the real beneficiaries of development. And the poor must participate in decision-making involving development projects that will affect them." The Assembly published a 125-point action program. It helped to link local demands to global stakes. It also reflected new relationships (socioeconomic and cultural) between the countryside and cities,

provoked by the commercialization of agriculture and village-town migrations. Often, the rural cadres of the movement had temporarily worked in workers' suburbs or as migrants in the Middle East, or had been teachers.

The Assembly also gave new life to forms of struggle successfully tested in the early 1990s - marches, "invasions," and occupations that received important media coverage for the struggles. In 1996 the Assembly organized a spectacular demonstration in Bangkok. The following year it did it again, gathering more than 20,000 people and occupying the surroundings of the seat of government for 99 days. The encirclement ended after the Chavalit government acceded to some demands.

The victory was only temporary. The state reneged on its pledge after a change of government and the accession of Chuan Leekpai to the premiership. The repression was severe and the movement responded by recentering its action on local struggles more than central mobilizations. The Assembly of the Poor's model of organizing has been questioned by activists, and it was not a panacea. But the Assembly considerably renewed the militant experience of the social movements.

Crisis of Democracy

At the turn of the century it looked as if the army no longer wished to play an open political role in the kingdom. The coup d'état of September 19, 2006 proved that this was not so. It revealed how deeply Thai democracy was in crisis after the Thaksin years.

Thaksin Shinawatra was linked both with provincial businessmen and heavyweights from Bangkok's bourgeoisie. His election as prime minister in 2001 heralded a new step toward a wheeler-dealer style of parliamentary regime. It seemed that the civilian bourgeoisie wished to free itself from the traditional compromises with the Palace and the army and exercise directly political power, but the coup d'état of 2006 was a severe reminder that neither the royal clan nor the military was ready to lose its privileges.

Thaksin knew well the importance of the army. He placed trusted people in key positions. He leant on it to pursue a policy of repression against irredentist Muslim movements in the South. Before becoming a politician, he was a businessman who had built a fortune and an empire in telecommunication with licenses and concessions obtained from the military and the government. After the 1997 financial crisis, he judged that it was time to reform the system. He was not hit by this crisis because the service sector in which he had invested was protected from international competition by state licenses. He created his own party, the Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love the Thais), and strengthened links between business and politics.

Thaksin did not content himself with offering political levers to businessmen. He developed a nationalist and populist profile, relying on the unpopularity of the IMF-imposed economic reforms. With the help of his clientelist networks in the North and the Northeast, he consolidated a rural mass base, implementing efficient social programs in the countryside. In the name of the fight against drugs, he allowed the police to summarily shoot down alleged traffickers: 1,200 people were assassinated in such a way in 2003 alone.

Thaksin's populist policy insured him a lasting electoral success. In 2005 his party won an unprecedented 377 of the 500 seats in parliament. But he implemented a neoliberal program of integration into capitalist globalization. He initiated a bilateral free trade agreement with China and attempted to do the same with the United States. The inner contradictions of his policy became obvious. His authority crumbled around three issues. First, resistance to neoliberal policies strengthened when Thaksin accelerated talks with the United States on the free trade agreement: on

April 9, 2006, in Chiangmai, around 10,000 demonstrators tried to penetrate into the building where negotiations were being held between Thai and American representatives.

Second, from the end of the 1990s various armed Islamic resistance movements reconstituted in the provinces near Malaysia. They sometimes had the same name as in the 1970s -like the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) - but the cadres and the ideology had changed: there were no more socialist references, which were often replaced by fundamentalist influences.

Third, the repressive policy of the Thaksin government in the three provinces of the far South, where the majority of the population is Muslim, led to a bloody dead end. Murders and massacres became frequent. The behavior of the governmental armed forces raised a public outcry, as when, in the region of Tak Bai, the army transported 1,300 persons under such terrible conditions (piled on top of one another) that at least 79 of them died of suffocation. Rebellion intensified and Thaksin recommended summary executions, declared a state of emergency, and gave full powers to the military. His policy became more and more unpopular and the Palace imposed the nomination of General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, a Muslim, at the head of the army. The general staff distanced itself from the prime minister.

Thaksin took advantage of two terms in office to enrich himself and his friends in a shameless way. In 2006 he decided to sell his industrial empire Shin Corp. to the telecommunications holding company Temasek, controlled by the Singaporean state. Through a secret company in a tax haven and by means of a transfer of ownership to his children, he evaded Thai regulations and did not pay a single baht in tax on the sale. This became another enormous scandal.

From January 2006 mobilizations multiplied in Bangkok to demand the resignation of the prime minister. By tens of thousands, intellectuals, the urban middle class, and members of the Democrat Party demonstrated in Bangkok. Nevertheless, Thaksin won again in the April elections: his party received 16 million votes against 10 million abstentions. However, as opposition seats were not issued (due to a boycott), parliament could not be convened. The king intervened on television to declare with an unusual straightforwardness that the elections were not democratic. The Constitutional Court invalidated the ballot. New elections were planned, which Thaksin would have probably won again. He could also hope to reinforce his control of the military hierarchy on the occasion of the October 1 promotions. Just before this date, a putsch put an end to his ambitions.

The coup d'état of September 2006 took place without a single shot being fired. It enjoyed the support of Thailand's urban public opinion and provoked only very mild criticisms internationally. The coup was nonetheless a grave event: it meant the political comeback of the army and it sanctioned a structural crisis of democracy. By dint of wheeler-dealing and nepotism, politicians had discredited the parliamentary regime, and Thailand became one of a growing number of countries to reconstitute themselves under regimes of more or less military power, endangering the fundamental democratic freedoms gained during the 1990s.

Thai progressives split over the question of the coup d'état. Many militants regarded the military as the lesser of two evils. Others immediately denounced the return to power of the military. Thai popular movements have not been able to define their own political answer to the crisis, independently from the moves of the Palace and the general command. Beyond tactical issues, what was at stake was the capacity of progressive forces to act politically. This issue was largely eluded after the trauma of the 1970s. In reaction to the authoritarianism of the CPT, many of the best NGOs and associations became autonomist and localist, having in that sense an anarchist vision. The dominant radical currents were "movementists," whether consciously or not. Very few militants raised the issue of rebuilding one (or several) radical parties, or reflected on what could be the relationships between such parties and the social movements, to avoid the authoritarian model of

the CPT. The 1980-90 generation did not have a historical “founding experience” of the scope experienced in the 1970s, and thus lacked a common framework of collective politicization.

The coup d'état of 2006 could have plunged Thai progressive movements into crisis. It did not happen. In spite of everything, the first Thailand Social Forum was held as planned in November 2006. And it was a success.

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* On the International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest, see on ESSF:

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