

NGO ROLES IN GRASSROOTS' RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE

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1. Introduction

This paper attempts a discussion of social movements in Thailand over the interwoven issues of poverty, the environment, and rights of the poor people. Thailand has only recently experienced true representative liberal democracy. Rapid industrialization from around 1985 to about 1995 has evoked a faith in the trickle-down development philosophy among the middle class. At the same time, the accelerating process of globalization has intensified the global network of mass media, as well as other non-state cooperation. NGOs, as organizations interested in providing alternatives to mainstream development, have also flourished. Some even perceive the roles of NGOs in Southeast Asia and other developing countries as equivalent to the emergence of a civil society that will further act to promote true liberal democracy. Demonstrations and clashes, especially in the last two years, between the Assembly of the Poor and successive governments over environmental issues, the rights of the poor, etc., has provoked public concern. Concepts like the environment, the role of the government, rights, and poverty need to be examined.

2. NGOs in Thailand: Formation, Expansion, and Networking; and the Role of the State

As Pasuk Pongpaichit (1999) remarks, it is usually assumed in the modern world that the role of the State will be minimized and there will be an expansion of civil society and other community organizations that can more effectively take care of the day-to-day problems within the community. Thailand's new constitution of 1997 seems promising with its recognition of a community's rights to manage their own affairs. However, Pasuk points out the different approaches towards the process of "civilizing the state." The first is the middle-class approach with its faith in industrialization, modernization, and liberal representative democracy.

"This approach has adopted the term *pracha sangkhom* to translate "civil society" and has been active in strengthening community organizations, especially in provincial urban centers."

Pasuk, 1999: 26

Pasuk says that this middle-class approach wants to

"modernize Thailand's peasant society out of existence. This can be done by draining the poor away from the villages to the city, and by upgrading the peasants into capitalist farmers through education and technology."

ibid

The second approach, she says

"has less interest, less optimism about changing the state through politics or through new rules. Rather it concentrates on battle within society – to defend and extend local rights, to enlarge the political space available to local groups, to break down the culture of dominance by bureaucrat or boss. These battles are fought by demonstrations, protests, networking, and attacks on the dominant cultural discourse. This strategy requires regular skirmishes with the state – particularly over the contested control of local resources of land, water and forests, which are so crucial for livelihood and well being."

ibid

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Pasuk further says that

“The difference between these two approaches to civilizing the state is partly a matter of class, the first *pracha sangkhom* approach is largely urban with roots in the modernist middle class. The second approach is rural, and has roots among the poor, but this class difference is blurred by alliances and networking. More importantly, the two have a very different vision of a future of Thailand. For the first, the state can only be civilized when Thailand’s old rural society is modernized out of existence. For the second, the era of globalization creates opportunities to break down the patronage system from below, and enable both urban and rural society to coexist and achieve greater freedom.”

ibid: 27

Pasuk cites the case of villager protest against the construction of the Pong Khun Petch Dam in Chaiyaphum Province, where villagers occupied a forest plot where the dam was supposed to be constructed and were driven away by armed authorities. The incident took place in November 1998. She draws attention to the fact that state authorities and local influential power cooperated against the protest. However, she admits that, “only a very few years ago, a couple of small, poor, and relatively defenseless villages would never have been able to resist such a project” (ibid: 20).

Leaving aside Pasuk’s argument about the suppressive role of the state over rural communities for the time being, let us now turn to the emergence of NGOs and grassroots movements and how they manage to carve a space for themselves, despite strong state opposition (is the state really still strong?)

After four decades of “development,” where industrial growth was achieved partially with income from agricultural exports earned at the expense of opening up forests for agricultural production, awareness of the need to conserve the environment was felt in government circles. As a result, the National Environment Board (NEB) was established in 1975. However, this awareness of the need to conserve the environment, especially the approach adopted by the Forestry Department, has been attacked by most NGOs as too conservative. The belief, shared by many senior officers in the Forestry Department, that people cannot live in the forest has caused much confrontation between villagers and NGOs on one side, and the Forestry Department on the other. Despite the fact that the Forestry Department recently admitted that certain “community forests,” forests near the village looked after by the villagers, may be feasible, they still maintain that villages cannot be settled in what is defined as conservation forest and first-class watershed.

More complicated is the fact that there is now a tendency to move away now from a simple conservationist approach towards neo-liberal management or market-oriented principles, such as polluter-pays approaches (cf. Hirsch, 1994). This neo-liberal strategy is perhaps more evident in water management than in other resources, such as forests. Often, this new approach in resource management has been criticized by NGOs and some academics as ideas dictated by international donor agencies, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), or the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Hence, the market-oriented approach is not only blamed in itself, but is further complicated with issues like neo-imperialism vis-à-vis nationalism.

As has been already largely documented, NGOs in Thailand have greatly expanded in number since around 1980, during the Prem government. There are many kinds of NGOs, such as welfare organizations working with children. There are also other kinds of NGOs more concerned with the issue of rights, especially human rights (against dictatorships). Many NGOs working in rural areas are interested in “alternative” agriculture, non-chemical produce for sale in green markets, as well as integrated agriculture and crop diversification to allow for natural biological balance and reliance on self-sufficient consumption rather than market-oriented production. However, after a period of time working in villages a number of NGO workers have become aware of the important issues of conflicts between villagers and state authority over forest encroachment (cf. Quinn, 1997). In the north, conflicts usually involve ethnic minorities living in state conserved forests. In the northeast, lowland peasants are being evacuated out of the forests, despite the peasants’ accusation that it was initially the state that settled them

in the forest during the 1970s as a counter force against communist expansion into rural areas. As a result NGOs have shifted their interests to issues of rights over resources.

According to Niran Kultanan (1994), the Northeast Development Workers Club was established in 1981, and between 1983 and 1985 the approaches utilized in field were “community culture,” “political economy,” “integrated development,” and “health and development.” However, in 1991

“the government launched the ‘Project for Land Allocation for the Rural Poor Living in Degraded Forests’, or the *Khor-Jor-Kor* project. The scheme was implemented by the royal Thai army, during the period of the Chatichai government, and carried out in 352 different forests in the Northeast” (Niran, 1994: 54). “Villagers were...to be relocated to a smaller section of their earlier land within the newly demarcated “deteriorating” forest reserves. However, a sufficient area for resettlement could not be identified in time, and the struggle between the people and the various state agencies concerned assumed serious proportions. People’s protest movements were taking place across the region, and the awareness of the rights of people over their natural resources, such as land, was growing. The government/military were unable to accept this growing awareness of the people. It was at this stage in the “conflict” that the *Isan* NGOs established the “*Isan* Forest and Land Committee,” covering 47 forests in 17 provinces, so as to catalyze people’s organizations in the region” (ibid., 55).

In 1985, Thai NGOs formed a network group, the NGO Coordination Committee on Rural Development, or NGO-CORD. In 1990 the northeast NGOs established four working principles to (1) strengthen local people’s organizations (POs) and occupational network groups; (2) develop alternatives so as to increase farmers production; (3) conserve and preserve natural resources, and protect the rights of people to farm land and common property resources; and (4) elicit the cooperation of the various social action groups and pressure groups (ibid., 53).

During the conflict between the villagers and the state, as the villagers attempted to resist being relocated, a coup d’etat took place, and the military government went ahead with the relocation program. According to Niran, the villagers joined the middle-class protest against the military in the hope that a civilian government would not pursue the program (Niran, 1994: 56). The new civilian government did put a halt to the relocation program.

As conflicts concerning rights over natural resources continued, NGOs chose to become more “active” (rather than take the “passive” community culture approach) and became preoccupied with training programs and the formation of cadres. More emphasis was also placed on organizing campaigns.

The Assembly of Northeastern Farmers was established in 1992 to watch over land and forest conflicts in the region. They propagated the notion of community forestry and advocated the idea that people can live with the forest. Apart from this, several other organizations were formed, establishing cooperating between villagers and NGOs, such as watershed networks and dam networks (incorporating members from 10 construction sites in the northeast) to monitor possible conflicts with government agencies. In 1992, the Assembly of Small Farmers was established. This formation was a reaction against the government plan to erect the Council of Agriculture. Peasants feared that this would only benefit large agribusiness, who would be disproportionately represented in the council and who would influence national agricultural policy at the peasant’s expense (cf. Prapass, 1998: 54-59).

The Assembly of the Poor was formally founded at Thammasart University on 10 December 1995 (Human Rights Day), with witness from NGOs from 10 countries (ibid., 68). From 11-14 December, members helped draft the Mul River Declaration, stating that economic policies that one-sidedly emphasize growth can be dangerous to the process of social development, and that urgent needs must be met for revision and alternatives in development vision, thoughts, and strategies in order to achieve progress for a “borderless humanity” (ibid., 69).

The Assembly was loosely comprised of member organizations categorized in terms of issues facing each member group, such as the land-forest issue, the dams issue, problems affecting people and the environment from large-scale governmental projects, workers affected with sickness from the workplace, and problems of slum dwellers. This issue-based organization was manifested in the assembly's first demonstration in 1996 (after several unsuccessful petitions to the government). In later demonstrations, problems identified and petitioned to the government had increased, which suggests an increase in membership within the network (Prapass, 1998: 70–75).

The longest protest, in terms of duration, that the Assembly attempted took place from January through May of 1997 (during the Chawalit government) in front of the Government House in Bangkok. As a result, the government agreed to look at the requests of the Assembly. However, the Chawalit government had to resign later due to the economic problems which caused the devaluation of the *baht*. The Chuan government that took office thereafter refused to pay compensation for projects already completed, causing another round of discontent among members of the Assembly.

In an interview with Bamrung Kayota, a (the?) leader of the Assembly, Prapass recorded that (1998: 64) Bamrung said that gunfights against the government had proved ineffective, and that solving conflicts through legal procedures was also useless. The most effective weapon of the poor is to march, in order to realize their power.

In the north, conflicts over land and forest have also been critical. The complication of the problems in the north was not only relocation from the forests, as faced by the northeastern farmers, but also to problems of nationality, as most cultivators in the upland area are ethnic minorities or "hill tribes." In 1994 the Northern Farmers Development Network (NFDN), later known as North-Net, was founded. This organization was comprised mostly of farmers in upland area affected by relocation from forests when, in 1992, the government declared a serious intention to conserve 25 percent of the forest. NFDN originated out of upland farmers who had been loosely formed under the Mae Wang Watershed Network to solve irrigation and forest degradation in the Mae Wang Watershed in Chiang Mai. However, as being relocated from the forest was unique to upland villages, upland villagers, with the help of NGOs, formed a group (initially called "*Nuai Neua*," which can be translated as northern unit or upper (upland?) unit). Members from other villagers in other watersheds, who faced similar relocation problems, joined force with this group. After several useless petitions to the government, in 1995 20,000 villagers from 50 upland communities (cf. Pratuang, 1997: 145) marched southward to make their requests to Bangkok. The demonstrators met with the minister in charge in Lamphun Province. They asked for compensation to those who had already been relocated, for government to stop further relocations, to expedite the Community Forest Law, to drive business interests out of the forests, and to set up a working committee of four parties (i.e., village leaders, academics, NGOs, and government officials) to oversee the problem. Pratuang suggests that this demonstration was greatly inspired by the Northeastern Small Farmers Network's marches (Pratuang 1997: 145).

3. Contesting Issues over "Rights" and the "Environment"

Demonstrations in the past five to ten years in the north and northeast have tended to be associated with problems over land and forest issues, and, to a slightly lesser extent, with problems associated with dam construction. In the north, problems associated with water resources have tended to be between upland and lowland communities within a single watershed (cf. Tanabe, 1984, Tanet, 1994). However the largest protest that took place in the north was over the construction of the Kaeng Sua Ten Dam, where protests took place among many conservationists beyond the construction site. As new social movements were usually over land and forest issues or dam construction, and usually involved conflicting interpretations over issues such as "rights," "the environment," and the "marginalized" or the poor, we now look at some of these issues in relation to incidents that took place in the north, in comparison with the northeast.

3.1 *The North*

Most of the crucial environmental conflicts in the north seem to revolve around upland forest encroachment. The conflicts intensified, according to Pratuang (1997), from 1992 on as the government

took another tough measure to relocate people from conservation forests and first-class watersheds. In 1994, North-Net, comprised of members from at least 50 upland ethnic minority villages, with support from NGOs, emerged to protest against this government measure and demanded the right to continue living in the forest. They promoted the idea that people can live with the forest, and demanded that the government expedite the Community Forest Law. (Later, disagreements took place between the government draft and the peoples' draft; see, for example, *Samatcha pa chum chon* [Assembly of Community Forests], 1999). The group later joined with the Assembly of the Poor and members from the North and marched with others in the massive protests in Bangkok in 1998, 1999, and 2000.

What appear to be the factors that united North-Net with the Assembly of the Poor and members from the northeast was their poverty and marginalized status. Upland farmers in the north farmed mostly in the forest reserve area, as did their northeastern peers. Both groups faced constant threats from state agencies of being relocated. Neither had legal ownership over their land and both tried to demand some legal recognition. With support from NGOs, both endorsed the idea of community forestry and insisted that people can live with the forest.

Farmers in the north and northeast's marginality, in terms of lack of legal security over land property, insecurity over livelihood in farming in the forests, and their poverty resulting from insufficient farming is an accepted "fact", even in government's publications like National Economic and Social Development Plan. Conflicts between farmers and government agencies, especially with forestry officials, seem to be over environmental issues. Despite the fact that in the past decade the Forestry Department has accepted the idea of community forestry, they still have reservations about conservation forests and first-class watersheds, in which they insist that no villages can be settled.

On the issue of "rights," government agencies have insisted that encroachers do not have legal rights, while the farmers, refusing to be called "encroachers," have insisted on the right to subsistence. Northern upland ethnic minorities have made claims of their ancestral cultivation practices, which are conservational. This is most widely found among Karen cultivators, who form a majority within North-Net. However, because a fair number of hill people lack citizenship (estimated to be over 100,000 people), their right to claim cultivation plots has been somewhat insecure.

In the past two to three years, conflicts have taken place in the Mae Klang Watershed. Lowland farmers accused upland cultivators, especially the Hmong, of forest destruction and over-consumption of water for commercial cultivation (e.g., cabbages). Lowland farmers claimed that these activities have decreased water for cultivation in the lowland, especially during the dry season. Lowlanders protested against the Hmong cultivators, the NGOs who supported their continued settlement in the upper watershed, and academics. (cf. Chusak, 2000). The lowlanders accepted the conservationist middle-class attitude of conservation of "pure" natural forests, supporting what Chusak called a "dark green" middle-class conservationist approach, such as that held by the Thammanart Foundation.

3.2 The Northeast

Land and forest issues in the northeast are also serious problems and a source of conflict between farmers and the state. Rather than claiming past ancestral cultivation practice like ethnic minorities in the hills of the north (even though northeastern villages can be claimed to be as old as northern settlements), the northeastern farmers' confrontation with the state seems to be more acute. They accuse the state as being responsible for resettling them in the forests to set up villages as government bases against communist insurgencies in the 1970s, and of relocating them out of the forests when their task was done to smaller and less fertile plots of land. Though some villages may clash with other adjacent villages when competing over scarce resources, conflicts between villagers are not as severe as between the uplanders and lowlanders in the north, where cultivation and competition over scarce resources is complicated by ethnic issues.

On the environment issue, northeastern farmers also insist that people can live with the forest and supported community forestry. As a matter of fact, previous attempts by the government in the 1980s to plant eucalyptus trees in degraded forests in the northeast (to supply paper-pulp factories) were bitterly contested by many villagers, as these trees were considered to be damaging to the environment, damaging

to soil quality, and of course the plantation of such trees meant reduction in potential farm land for farmers. The Project for Ecological Recovery (PER), an NGO concerned with recovery of nature, had been active in supporting the villagers to rally against eucalyptus plantations.

On the “rights” issue, though not involving complications with citizenship like the hill dwellers, villagers in the northeast have had to prove their de facto utilization of their plots by aerial photos. A number of villagers did not want to use this kind of proof, which they argued was too unreliable—aerial photos may not be able to spot small plots in the forests (while the Forestry Department claim that small plots can be spotted)—and preferred the testimony of their neighbors. In some cases, there were several claims to a single plot of land, as farmers may farm and leave the plot while others rotate to utilize their plots. Although all parties want compensation from the same plot, the government will pay only to a single occupant, or recognize the rights of a single occupant.

3.3 *The Pak Mul Dam*

Pak Mul, a point on the Mul River Sanctuary to the Mekong, had been considered a good spot for dam construction since the 1960s. The logic was that a significant amount of water in the Mul River was wasted into the Mekong River unnecessarily, while northeastern farmers lack sufficient water to farm in the dry season. However, early estimates for compensation were been believed too high for the government at the time, and the project was shelved.

The revival of the project began in 1989 during the Chatichai government. As the irrigation department would not pay for electricity to pump water from the dam to serve irrigation canals and farmland effectively, the construction of the dam was devoted solely to hydropower generation and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) became responsible for the project. Despite protests against the dam’s construction as early as 1990, said to involve some 2,000 protesters (Wandee, 2000: 89–107), construction went on. As a matter of fact, protests took place on multiple occasions and during construction, but the protesters were too small in number and did not receive sufficient public attention. Some protesters later said during interviews that they were afraid of the government formed after the coup. Compensation was provided for land lost as a consequence of dam construction, but none was provided for the loss in opportunity cost to fishers in the Mul River, as compensation for opportunity cost due to government projects had never been given before. However, after complaints and protests by fishers, in 1995 EGAT agreed to pay a compensation of 90,000 *baht* to families who lost their fishing careers. However, only 30,000 *baht* was paid in cash, while 60,000 *baht* was put into a cooperative fund, where families will receive an equivalent sum of share holdings in the cooperative.

During 1995 and 1996, several petitions were put forth and many protests took place, especially over the loss of fish species and fishing opportunities. Dam fishing was not allowed during the time when fish spawn. This meant a periodic loss of income for fishers. Moreover, villagers claimed that fish from the Mekong were unable to jump up the fish ladder to spawn.

People affected by the dam joined force with protesters in the Assembly of the Poor and with other 47 affected groups in 1996. When the Banharn government resigned and a new election was called, protesters had to start renegotiating with the new government. The now well-known 99 days protest (from January to May 1997) in front of the Government House, organized by the Assembly of the Poor, was somewhat successful. The Chawalit government agreed to look into the problems of all affected groups. People affected by the dam were promised 15 *rai* of cultivable land, or, if land could not be found, a compensation of 500,000 *baht* per family. However, the Chawalit government had to resign because of the 1997 economic crisis, and the new Chuan government refused to pay compensation for projects already completed and compensated for, leading to another round of protests. This begun by an occupation by villagers to establish a village called *Mae Mul Mun Yun* in EGAT property. The first village was established in 1999 on the bank of the dam, and in May 2000 occupation of the dam itself took place, followed by a demonstration by the Assembly of the Poor and its alliance supporters in front of the Government House. Demonstrators from the Pak Mul Dam proposed that EGAT should open the dam gates to see if fish in the Mekong would come up to spawn. They insisted that if the government would not honor the Chawalit government by paying compensation (15 *rai* of land or 500,000 *baht*),

then they did not want the compensation. But they maintained that the government must take back the dam, since they did not want it, and bring back their old way of life.

Writing in 1994, Ubonrat Siriyuvasak compared two cases of news reports of protests to stop construction of the Kaeng Krung and Pak Mul dams in the early 1990s in an article called “Environmental Discourses in the Thai Media.” She classified environmental groups in Thailand into the conservation view, the reformist view, and the environmentalist view. The conservationist view was only concerned about conserving or protecting the environment. The reformist view emphasized effective environmental control policy. The environmentalist view emphasizes the “humanist” approach.

On 15 August 1989 the cabinet approved construction of the Kaeng Krung Dam in Surath Thani Province to generate hydropower. The first protest was initiated in September by conservationists who provided information on the dam’s impact on plants and wildlife species. Later in 1990, environmentalists and politicians joined the protests by holding several public debates in Bangkok. The agendas, as summarized by Ubonrat, are “wildlife conservation; water quality and its affect on the living conditions of local people; the benefits of electricity as opposed to the preservation of forests; long-term political interests vis-à-vis capital gains by loggers; government logging agencies and politicians; and additional issues of ‘freedom of expression,’ ‘the right to know,’ and the right of access to public information and to the public media” (Ubonrat 1994: 31).

In short, problems of environmental concerns of wildlife species, human impact on local conditions, and potential corruption from logging profits if construction of the dam was to take place (550,000 cubic meters of logs worth about 500 million *baht*, according to the protesters), are all interwoven with the issue of the right of the people, both middle class and locals, to know and take part in government decision-making. Ubonrat points out that local politicians are also in conflict about the issue, which somewhat weakens the side of the local supporters. During these protests and public debates, organizations like Wildlife Fund Thailand (WFT) and PER were very active. Finally, the cabinet decided to stop the Kaeng Krung Project.

Ubonrat analyzes the role of the media in presenting the views of all parties concerned in three stages. (1) “The press was eager to concentrate on the political rivalry involved in the case, and thus assisted in sustaining the articulation of a new environmentalism. But in its writing the press tried to define the issue according to its method of news presentation. And violence was a part of the logic of such presentations.” (2) The press managed to convey the messages of the environmentalists. (3) The political dimension was the decisive factor. “The plan could be averted because of a strong alliance between the people, the environmental movement, and certain political parties. But where this was lacking, such as in the case of the Pak Mul Dam...the project was approved...if it is only the people’s interests that are at stake, the environmental campaign stands to lose.” Ubonrat suggests that “environmentalists must therefore make an attempt to convince the media, as much as politicians, about their cause in order to gain wider public support” (Ubonrat, 1994: 36). The failure to prevent the construction of the Pak Mul Dam may be due to the fact that there was no conflict between politicians or political parties concerning the construction of the dam. Despite presentation of the news by the press, “these were more interests in violence than in any understanding of the clashes near the dam site...There were several newspapers...(English and *Phuchadkarn*) which published full accounts of the protests with detailed chronologies. They presented arguments of the potential impact of the dam on the livelihoods of villagers, and on the effect on the river itself. However, their environment discourse came far too late in the struggle and the papers failed to get any serious support from the environmentalist groups” (Ubonrat, 1994: 36).

Bearing Ubonrat’s suggestions in mind, I would add another difference between the Kaeng Krung in the South and the Pak Mul in the northeast. In the northeast, despite the fact that the Pak Mul is going to be a pure hydropower dam, I doubt if this fact is really is well understood by the public, who may be clouded by the fact that the dam would prevent loss of water sources in Thailand into the Mekong River. Second, in the case of Pak Mul there have not been stories of trees being flooded or logs that would be gained (since most land would be farm land or *Pa bung pa tam*, only busheries) compared to the richer forest in Surath Thani, hence receiving less interest from the public.

4. Nationalism, Transnationalism, and Grassroots Movements

Rigg (1994: 23) suggests that, “Inherent in many alternative development ideologies is a distrust of the state.” One can add that distrust is also directed against big business, though big business may be said to hide behind the state. As a matter of fact, distrust of the state may not only be among Marxists, neo-Marxists, and alternative developmentalists, but may be found also among neo-liberals. While Rigg may be right about NGO’s distrust of the state, one may add that NGO’s distrust of international lending agencies, which “hide behind the state” by directing a state’s large-scale project through their provision of conditioned loans, is also on the increase.

On 9 June 1999, after the major economic crisis in Thailand in 1997, and after the World Bank published a report on Country Assistance Strategy to Thailand and announced a program to provide financial support of US\$300 million to the Thai government to assist in rural development, NGO - CORD issued an invitation to the Bank authority in Thailand to a seminar. The Bank’s policy is to support Thailand in the following: (1) competitiveness program (2) governance program and (3) social and environmental program. The feedback from NGOs attending the meeting was less than positive. NGOs criticized the Bank’s idea to urge the Thai government to sell major state enterprises as a push for the Thai government to “sell the nation.” Neo-liberalist environment management, which was viewed by the Bank as “effective” (for example projects involving the buying and selling of water usage rights, or user-pay in irrigation schemes that used the Bank’s loans), was viewed by NGOs as a threat to national economic independence, as it would enable private (and possibly foreign) interests to control Thailand’s natural resources cheaply. The NGOs accused the Bank of using Thailand’s economic crisis to filter into and exert more influence in the country’s economy and natural resources (cf. Kuronen et al., 1999: 231–265, esp. 241). During the seminar, one female leader from the Pak Mul Dam stood up and talked about her and her neighbor’s hardship after their fishing resources had been destroyed due to the construction of the dam, which is one among several that has been built with the financial loans from the Bank. She wanted the Bank to state its responsibilities. According to the article, the Bank’s authority pretended not to hear (ibid., 242).

On the issue of good governance, many NGOs expressed the view that the Bank was partially responsible for bureaucratic expansion (to cope with modern development), and hence the corruption among bureaucrats that followed. To suggest “good governance” as a remedy for the damage inflicted was only to sustain a sick governmental body. NGOs also suggested that the Bank’s idea to further support big business (and the belief in trickle-down effects) ignores the roots of development, where resources are unequally distributed. The Bank’s support of “civil society” does not bring about true grassroots’ participation, as the Bank’s support provided through the government has been seized upon by the government to set up state-supported “civil society” groups at the provincial level manipulated by influential people in the province rather than the poor (ibid., 243-244). “Civil society forums” and “public hearings” at the provincial level were only a stage performance of “peoples’ participation.”

4.1 *Pak Mul and the Assembly of the Poor: Contesting Discourses on “Rights,” “the Environment,” “Marginality,” and “Nationalism”*

4.1.1 *State vis-à-vis popular rights*

Despite the initial “defeat” in its efforts to prevent construction of the dam in the early 1990s, the Pak Mul case has not been “finalized.” Villagers have continued to return to the front of the Government House to complain about the loss of fisheries and adverse effects on their living conditions. The protests in 2000 from the occupation of the dam in May, and demonstrations in front of the Government House, with the Assembly of the Poor in July-August, resulting in public debates with governmental authorities in Thammasart Meeting Hall in August, both received good press coverage. Certain issues raised by the Assembly of the Poor have been promised (once again) to be looked into. However, the government maintains that they will not compensate projects that have been finalized and settled (like the Sirinthorn Dam). The loss of fish and, subsequently, how to regain once-rich natural fisheries in the Mul River, still remains a problem.

Prapass (1999), who did a detailed study on the 99-days demonstration by the Assembly of the Poor in front of the Government House during the Chawalit government, reviewed some strategies and supports

of the NGOs to the poor. Most NGO leaders and leading villagers tend to agree that villagers' best weapon is their feet. Only through marching can they demonstrate their potential and power, since negotiating over legal matters would not enable them to win, as government agencies would have more knowledge in legal matters. However, marching must also involve large numbers. One NGO leader estimated that not less than 20,000 people would be forceful enough to bring government into a discussion of their problems. One leader quoted a statement by a minister in the Chawalit government making the accusation that demonstrators did not represent "the people"; "fewer than 10,000 demonstrators represent 'the people'" —the minister was quoted as having said something similar to this effect.

According to Prapass, demonstration can be both a goal and a means. First, the purpose of demonstration is to exert pressure, hence number and activities are important. Second, demonstrations enable the poor to experience their power first hand. Experience gained can thus be built up to enhance further courage. Third, the demonstration must convey the message of suffering (rather than threats to viewers?) in order to gain public support. (Prapass, 1999: 153).

Despite the fact that during demonstrations, physical clashes between protestors and the police, or verbal exchanges between NGOs and government officials and members of cabinet may take place, many NGOs have said that they do not want to seize state power. One said that what they wanted was "green politics" and true popular participation in the decision making of large projects that may affect their lives, or "grassroots democracy." (ibid.: 150).

4.1.2 Poverty, marginality of the people, and accountability of the NGOs

The latest demonstration by the Assembly of the Poor and the Pak Mul case have provoked the public's concern on the discourse of poverty. As demonstrators set out to camp in front of the Government House, there had been news reports in the press and other media about the obstruction of traffic in the area, which is already congested. Of course, this is not the first time that such complaints took place within the media, claiming to express the concern of middle class. The demonstrators had been well prepared for this kind of accusation and had tried not to block traffic. While camping, there was an exhibition in the protest area of photographs of life before and after the construction of the dams. Students sympathetic with the movement also marched around with posters saying that the poor are not "others."

Apart from accusations about the traffic nuisance, columnists in some newspapers questioned the source of financial support of the poor. While NGOs in other circumstances may accuse the government of being "traitors" by selling national interests to foreigners, others accuse the NGOs (rather than the poor) of accepting money from foreign organizations in order to create problems for the nation, and hence the accusations of "traitors" are also directed at NGOs. Some even accused NGOs of having a more comfortable life, staying in hotels during demonstrations while the poor have to face hardship in their make-shift residence in front of the Government House. Some said that villagers were misled by NGOs to join the demonstrations with the threat that those who do not join will not receive any benefits (if there is a settlement). These accusations are not new; they have been taking place since the earlier Assembly of the Poor demonstrations. What appeared as a new "invention" in these verbal fires in the last incidence in August 2000 was the issue that, while the majority of the protestors were poor, some of their leaders may not be so poor. A comparison of the protesting poor was made with "another poor," the "deserving poor" who may actually be poorer, but who are unable to join demonstrators and who may suffer more. There were also questions as to how demonstrations found their financial support, and the Assembly had to demonstrate that some protestors did seek out a daily wage during the demonstration, and that they received support in terms of rice and other food from other villagers who could not join, or from donations from villagers in money, though in very small amounts. But the poor did not eat much anyway, so was the message conveyed to the public.

According to Prapass (1999: 219), poverty as defined by the Assembly of the Poor does not only mean lack of factors of production, nor lack of bargaining power in the market economy, nor poverty caused by declining prices of agricultural produce. Instead, poverty must be defined in terms of lack of power and opportunity to oversee the development process. Poverty therefore involves power relationships between

the state and the poor. The target of the Assembly of the Poor must involve a readjustment of power relationships to an extent that local communities can determine the administrative process and utilization of local resources. The state must acknowledge the rights and the body of “indigenous knowledge.” There must be new rules of the game set up for true participatory democracy where power can be checked. This involves not only representative elections, but also a more direct checking mechanism of state policies, like public hearings etc. Prapass made reference to Kothari’s (1984) argument that representative politics is only a myth where a ritual of casting a ballot is performed at regular intervals to provide justification for the government having been elected by the people. This ritual is only a construction of discourse to de-politicize people out of the political space. Grassroots movements must see through this and must regain their political space by inventing new political means (rather than to follow the old electoral myth), and this must involve a construction of a new popular discourse of politics.

4.1.3 The environment

In most land and forest disputes, the contesting discourses have always involved debates about whether people can live with the forest (as has already been discussed in a number of papers), setting apart the conservationist views (propagated by the middle class) and the environmentalist/humanist views (propagated by NGOs). In the north of Thailand, environmental issues are always related to humanist perspectives of the rights of poor people to make a living and “prove” that past practice of forest conservation by ethnic minorities are viable. Environmental debates over water resources share certain similarities, as well as differences. In the case of the Pak Mul Dam, that past ways of life are being threatened by the destruction of nature (i.e., dam construction) is a major point of protest raised by the local people, a human ecological concern, one might say. On the side of the dam builders, dams will bring electric power to supply expanding industry and more employment. “It does not do that much damage to the environment,” is the usual argument. In the case of the Pak Mul, EGAT bought television time to propagandize that the construction of the dam does not cause damage to the fish. The footage showed that a man’s fear that his pot of preserved fish would be emptied (due to the construction of the dam) was only a nightmare; fish were jumping (very happily) from the Mekong along the constructed steps of the dam. That lately the public has not believed the story seems to suggest that the Assembly of the Poor may have “won” over the public on the issue of the loss of fisheries.

The Thai public no longer seems convinced that large projects will not cause damage to the environment. Supporters of large projects have to present a “trade-off” between the “fact” that “the environment will of course be affected,” the response that “we will try to take care that as little damage as possible is done,” and the claim that there will be greater benefits to the “public,” either in terms of “growth,” “employment,” “national prosperity,” etc. That minorities (local people directly affected by the projects) should sacrifice for the majority of people is an often-cited statement of those on the side of the authorities; that the minorities have already sacrificed enough was the response by the protestors, and is now also familiar to the public.

The politics of the environment in situations of scarce resources will become more and more intense. Though it is usually argued that it is the government who holds the final decision to determine where to declare a reserve forest or whether and where large projects should be constructed, in the case of Thailand one may find that the government will not be able to do this easily without listening to the “public,” which is varied. Despite the fact that NGOs may accuse cabinet members of being traitors by “selling national interests and resources” to foreigners, while officials and some people may accuse the NGOs of taking foreign money to instigate protests to threaten national security, both will remain major players in the environmental public scene in Thailand.

5. Towards a Civil Politics

5.1 Patronalism, Developmentalism, the State, and the Distant Others

In discussing the process of nation building during the reign of King Rama the fifth, Thongchai suggested that “it is true that nationhood purports to be an integrated self. Yet it is in fact an organic body within which differentiated but integrated components must work together in an orderly manner” (Thongchai 2000: 54). In discussing the distance between the elites and the masses, or subjects, in Thailand, drawing a comparison with colonial societies under white rule, anthropologists have observed the distance between

“we” the rulers and “they” the ruled, as a dichotomous distinction. In the case of “Siam,” Thongchai suggested an addition of a category of “their,” where he suggested that the Thai elites viewed the distant others as “their” subjects, belonging to, and under the protection of the elites. In discussing the “differentiated space and the temporality of civilization,” Thongchai discussed the hierarchy of geographical space in the Thai elitist social thoughts from the mountain/forest to rural areas, and from rural areas to a city like Bangkok—the hierarchy of the social order from the hill tribes to villagers to the city people (with the West and Westerners being at the furthest end of civilization and modernity). Despite the overturn of the system of absolute monarchy in 1932, this attitude of patronage over the “subject” has not diminished. The entrance of the “modern developmental” state in the 1960s and the need for central planning and a strong state to implement those plans has enforced further attitudes of patronage among governmental agencies. The state defines the “nation” and “national interests” and endorses policies to promote “national development.” The need to catch up with modernized nations and to “develop” has resulted in the build-up of a strong “nation” and strong governmental bodies at the expense of a “civil society.”

Apart from the patronalistic attitudes of state agencies, there is another crucial issue of control of resources. During the period of absolute monarchy, land resources were considered royal property. Private property in land was only recognized in the reign of King Rama the fifth, when land title deeds were being gradually issued. Before that, traditional practice recognized usufruct rights where ordinary peasants could stake a claim by clearing and cultivating the land. The build-up of the modern state created a distinction between royal land and state land. As a modern state is supposed to be a representative government on behalf of the people, state property may be viewed as property under the protection of the state for the benefit of the whole population. However, Macpherson (1978) suggested that a distinction should be made between private property, common property, and state property. He suggested that property should be viewed as a “right” not as a thing. While private property is the right to exclude someone from the use of one’s property, common property is the right not to be excluded. State property may at first sight appear similar to common property, but in fact the state may grant certain rights to a specific group of people, excluding others from the use of the resources. As such, it is different from common property. Recent debates over community forestry law and irrigation law have raised issues over whether the legal definition of natural resources, such as forests and water, should be specified so that they are considered as state property or as belonging to the population (see Kobkul, 2000; Chusak, 2000).

In discussing the interrelations between politics and resource use in the colonial period in Southeast Asia, Bryant (1998) specified certain traits underlying such relations. First, colonial powers tried to maximize commercial production and establish administrative functions to fulfill such needs. Second, colonial rule territorialized control over resources and people, and set up inventories to allow efficient control and location. Third, the underlying philosophy in such management rested in “the firm belief of colonialists in the power of European science and technology to promote general social and economic well-being.” Despite independence, and even entering the modern period, such practices are still undertaken by indigenous states, Thailand included (see Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995; Santhita, 2000; Anan, 2000).

As is well known, state agencies in Thailand have usually taken a very patronalistic approach in their administration. For example, the Royal Forestry Department has typically takes the attitude of “protector” of the forests; the Royal Irrigation Department usually adopts the attitude of “provider” of irrigation water. This is coupled with their claim of (superior) utilization of western scientific knowledge and management.

5.2 The Politics of Social Justice

While Stott’s distinction over the elitist and mass views towards the environment (elites viewing the forests as thammachart for aesthetic reasons and the rural masses viewing the forests as a place to make a living) may provide an insight to differentiated perceptions of different groups towards the environment (Stott, 1991), there has been an attempt to work towards a more detail analysis that goes beyond class lines. Netdao (2000) attempted at least five classifications: (1) Local people who are not directly negatively effected by large-scale projects and who will accept the “virtue,” logic, and justification of state (capitalist) economic policy. (2) The marginalized in the locality who are directly and negatively effected represent and express the idea of “ecological socialism.” This group of people will not accept the attempt

on the part of the state to transfer resources that are common property into private property, which will result in their being excluded from the utilization of such resources. (3) The middle class who have adopted the “technology base” in their thinking. They live in and are dependent upon the market-oriented economy. (4) The environmentalist middle class, who emphasize the virtue of scientific understanding and management of the environment, but who ignore the “spiritual” aspect of nature. (5) The middle class who have adopted the “ecological socialism” approach, and who uphold fair treatment in the sharing of resources and harmonious existence with nature. Apart from suggesting a divergence of perception within various groups within society, a certain implication suggesting the superiority of hindsight and moral responsibility of the second and fifth group can be noticed, a hierarchical classification of those adhering to the commodification of resources, those who are technical conservationist, and those who hold a holistic view of humans and nature. One can make a comparative note of this classification with a statement made by Bamrung Boonpanya, a long standing NGO worker in rural area, who discusses his standpoint by saying that “we are not on the left (because we do not believe in a single party control of the state), we are not on the right (because we do not adhere to the sacred power of capital and technology), we are the ones who look ahead into the future and see how humanity can live with others in happiness and how humans and the environment can exist in harmony (Bamrung, 2000: 5).

Another example of the “western” progressive discourse of development and a counter discourse of “non-western” harmonious existence of man and nature can be made. King mentioned Amare Tegbaru’s study of northeastern Thai villagers and noticed that the government’s development discourse was similar to European colonial worldviews. At the same time villagers’ resistance to such dominating discourse has involved the infusion of “environmentalism with moral values, linking to Buddhist concepts of harmony, justice, and equality” (cf. King, 1998: 14). (For a comparative note, see also Taylor, 1997).

Apart from philosophical base of harmonious existence within traditional oriental values, there has also been an emphasis on the strength of popular movement. For example, Zawawi, in attempting to represent Southeast Asian trend towards environmental issues, has argued that the “capitalist-oriented developmentalism” and “hegemonic” discourse, “must be opposed by one that embraces elements of indigenous environmentalism, ‘practical technology,’ and a people-based approach underpinned by notions of participation, empowerment, and choice” (Zawawi, 1998).

The debate over the commodification of natural resources vis-à-vis the traditional way of life of harmonious existence with nature also implies social injustice in the former and more social justice in the latter. The social injustice resulting from commodification of resources is related to state responsibility as a leading agency of such policy formulation and implementation. At the same time, while the state is being attacked in this manner, state agencies tend to look down upon the proponents of traditional way of living as being romantic (hence non-rational).

5.3 The “Rational” Public and the “Expressive” Social Movement

Despite strong state build-up, Vandergeest has observed a process of transformation from “royal subjects to that of citizenry,” occurring not only among the middle class but also among rural inhabitants (Vandergeest, 1993). This took place within the centralizing process of nationalization. The 1932 “democratic revolution,” while maintaining patronalistic attitudes toward “subjects,” and by imposing regulations and discipline on the subjects in order to maintain state power, by imposing a modern school system and the enforcement of central Thai as a national language, and by enforcing a central national legal codes, has provided a space for a conceptualization of the modern concept of citizenship. As time passed by, the concept is being contested. With an increasing literacy rate and the expansion of the mass media, not only in written form, such as the newspapers, but the audio-visual form, such as radio and television, villagers can experience events from other places, and see how people live in another parts of the country and other parts of the world, and can demand their rights. The central legal codes, while constraining, may also be enabling, and can provide a new avenue for villagers to stake a claim for fair treatment. From a case in Satingpra District in the south of Thailand, rather than allow outsiders to take away the sand resources from their community, villagers formed a roadblock and demanded that the district authority come to enforce the law on their behalf.

Though the words “citizen” and “rights” were perhaps first documented in the Thai constitution of 1932, they have only received widespread public attention within the past 10 years. In a fairly well known book, *The Turn of the Time (jud plian hang yuk samai)*, published in 1994, two years after the “May disruptive events” in 1992, Thirayuth Boonmee raised an interesting idea for the construction of a “strong society” to raise social consciousness and build a fair society where people will be aware of their rights, demanding fair and transparent governance, and putting an end to dictatorship in Thailand. Though placing emphasis on the rise of the political consciousness of the middle class, Thirayuth added that society must recognize traditional (rural?) society and strive to preserve its strength, morality, and strong community consciousness. This can be interpreted as a proposal for an alliance of the urban middle class and rural villagers. On the one hand, there is a proposed liberal alliance. According to Anek (1997), the rural sector is still very much under the patron-clients obligation of local influentials, so that they cannot fully and freely express their views. A strong local organization must be encouraged in order that villagers can achieve freedom of expression, and can become more “liberal” in their speech and outlook. On the other hand there is a proposal for an alliance that is more popular oriented, that is, asking the middle class to appreciate the traditional rural way of life, as propagated by a certain group of NGOs known as the Community Culture School (see Chatthip, 1991; Pasuk, 1999).

While concepts like citizen and citizens’ rights may be fairly recent, the words “public,” “public hearing,” and “public opinion” may be even more recent in the Thai context. “Public” and “public opinion”, as well as citizen and citizens’ rights, are western concepts arising with the development of civic bourgeois class. The idea of a public space implies the idea of equality and liberality, such as a public space within a large city (cf. Berman, 1990). The word “public” can also mean “the popular,” or “the people” (cf. Webster Dictionary), and a word like “public opinion” can imply the opinion of the people. In the American context, “public opinion” is usually conducted through surveys. Ideas or opinions may differ, but the ideas of the majority become the public opinion. Researchers have tried to evaluate if ideas expressed by the public are based on enough information and “true” knowledge and found that this may not necessarily (if not most of the time?) be the case. Such a research question, however, is based on the preconception and the belief of researchers that an action and decision of a modern human should be based on reason and rationality. Public opinion implies mutual respect, in which each component that constitutes the public possesses “equal” knowledge to enable a “fair” judgement and viewpoint. Therefore, as an important condition for equal participation, the public should have the right to “public” information. This can mean direct access to governmental information. Information from governmental sources can also be indirectly obtained through the mass media. The problem is how one can know that information thus provided is not propaganda, distortion, one-sided, or even misinformation? Apart from governmental information there are alternative sources that are non-governmental, for example an independent scientific association (value-free?), social movement organizations (scientific “value-free,” or expressive moral code?). But then again, how can one distinguish between “fact” and “message?”

In the case of a “public hearing,” this can mean an arrangement of a public venue or “forum” for each proponent to express his or her viewpoints. This, however, can lead to a confrontation of different perceptions, (mis)information, differentiated political stances, moralities, and claimed superiorities (either knowledge or morality). The public, or the popular, is not homogenous. In a public hearing one will encounter diverse compositions of people, such as officials, the middle class, the grassroots, and NGOs (performing the function of “organic intellectual” in the Gramscian sense). Each may vie for a “strategic positioning” utilizing “expressive” movement tactics rather than the “Western” Weberian rational action. (cf. Hetherington, 1998).

As public opinion and public hearings are fairly recent developments in the Thai context, one may find that in a number of cases, confrontations and conflicts have arisen, not only in verbal exchanges, but also in the use of physical force. The physical conflicts, and the claim that it is necessary curb the activities of “dissidents” to maintain law and order, have enabled the government to justify the use of force. However, it has been suggested that government agencies will need to change their attitudes towards “conflict,” not viewing it purely in negative terms, but also perceiving its positive function as a way to bring hidden problems out into the open and discuss them so that the problems can be solved rather than remain hidden. As Kasien (1997: 137) remarks, “civil society is not a society without conflicts, but it is a society which tries to solve conflict with civility.”

In analyzing the causes of the confrontations and misunderstandings among government agencies and protestors, Chantana (1998: 28-33) suggested that there is a “gap” in perception and evaluation, which needs to be resolved. The first point is that the government has thought that decision-making process is the responsibility of the government, and that they believe their undertaking has been done according to existing bureaucratic rules and regulations. The issues raised by protestors have been seen as “personal” problems of minorities trying to protect their own small group’s selfish interests. Second, the government views protestors as illegitimate opponents. NGOs are especially viewed as outsiders. Third, the government views the protestors as making requests by unlawful demand. Sometimes the government has already been in the process of carrying out the demand, but protestors are too impatient, and hence the government is not willing to “listen” to what they thought has already been said. Fourth, the government is not prepared to accept and endorse structural change, but only negotiation within the frame of existing structure. Chantana called for a change in the perception of governmental agencies.

Turton (2000: 28) has suggested that Thailand is still “in the era of expansion and consolidation of the national state administrative system, the national market and infrastructure.” This involved the “re-positioning” and “re-spatializing” of “minority” and “indigenous”, and may one add, ‘rural’ people. The displacement and dispossession of these people, due to many large-scale projects in the name of national development, has caused many hardships, the manifestations of which are being expressed in various modes and channels. Internal pressures from the rural as well as middle class (though sometimes conflicting and sometimes cooperating), as well as external pressure from international community, be they governments or non-governmental groups, will lead to the state having to minimize or concede their monopoly in the decision-making process and allow other sectors to become more involved. This is not only a stage performance where people are allowed to have a say only to be forgotten later. The right to participate is not only “freedom of speech” but must get deep down into specific issues that will directly or indirectly affect the lives of those involved. This must include the right to determine/negotiate a compensation if one is to be made, to determine/negotiate a changing mode of life that may take place, the right to determine/negotiate property rights, the right to know the degree of “risks” that may incur, etc. This may involve the right to demand/negotiate broader issues involving “structural change.”

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have used the words “the government” and “the NGOs” as if there was a single government and a single NGO, which is of course not exactly accurate. During the large demonstrations of the Assembly of the Poor in July and August 2000, there had been much comparison of the Chawalit government and the Chuan government. Within NGOs who work with grassroots people there are also those who are considered more “militant” and those who are more compromising, not to mention the more “middle-class” conservationist NGOs, who are more “nature-oriented” rather than “people-oriented.” Pasuk Pongpaichit’s remarks about “local influentials” who may join force with central authorities and infiltrate the provincial “civil society,” or *pracha sangkom*, to claim the legitimacy of representing the “people” is well worth noticing, as these groups can be another active local player in the environmental scene.

That the political space in Thailand has been opened up and that there are more pluralities within the society that are being recognized is without doubt. The mass media has played an important role in relaying to the “public” all movements that are taking place, and “actors” seem to be aware that they are “acting” in front of the “public.” The Thai “public,” which is heterogeneous, will have to learn more and more to judge not on who performs better and not on preconceived ideas, but to weigh between the various sources of “information”, as well as morality issues, with the goal of social justice in mind.

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