

## アジア市民社会公開シンポジウム

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<https://doi.org/10.15017/13851>

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出版情報 : 法政研究. 75 (4), pp.262-159, 2009-03-06. 九州大学法政学会  
バージョン :  
権利関係 :

## Civil Society in Thailand : An Overview<sup>1</sup>

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This article on Civil Society in Thailand : an overview will be divided into three main sections. The first section defines what is meant by Civil Society in Thailand; the second discusses the beginnings and development of Civil Society in Thailand and the third identifies what it is that poses as a challenge for Civil Society in Thailand.

### Defining Civil Society in Thailand

The term Civil Society was first used in Thailand only in the early 1990s, more precisely in the aftermath of the May 1992 massacre. After that time, despite the fact that many sides Civil Society was being mentioned by more and more sectors yet it should mainly refer to the forces beyond the state, the forces that exist to challenge as well as to monitor the power of the state. Since the term Civil Society has lent itself to numerous definitions in Thailand the definitions given by three important intellectual and social leaders will be considered – Thirayuth Boonmi, Chai-anant Sumudyanich and Dr. Prawase Wasi.

*The use of the term “Civil Society” to refer to people with great political strength to negotiate with the state.*

This way of thinking is clearly seen in the proposal made by Thirayuth Boonmi in “A Strong Society” published in 1993<sup>2</sup>, soon after the May 1992 massacre.

In his article Thirayuth differentiates between “consciousness at the community level” and “consciousness at the social level” by saying that the former derives from the common bond that exists within a small scale society where all the members are familiar with each other. However, when the society becomes larger the conscious-

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<sup>1</sup> Paper prepared for present on Symposium entitled ‘Asian Civil Society for Asian State and Society’ 1-2 November 2008 at Faculty of Law, Kyushu University, Japan.

<sup>2</sup> Thirayuth Boonmi, Strong Society (Bangkok : Mingmit 1993)

ness at the social level becomes pressured with the realization that each individual has a personal stake from being a member of the same community as seen for example in problems such as poverty and the environment each of which we all are responsible in offering solutions and every individual has the right to demand that they be represented.

Social consciousness marks the initial stage in the formation of civil society, what Thirayuth terms as “a strong society” in the second, third and fourth stages of the development towards civil society. According to Thirayuth these are the stages of that development:

1. The emergence of social consciousness
2. The emergence of social institutions especially urban phenomena such as the October 14, 1973 student uprising when the middle classes were made to realize their rights and civil liberties so that in less than twenty years later in the May 1992 massacre they would be able to stand up against military power. For the common folk reforms in the local administration needed to take place so that people would come to fully realize their rights and find a voice for themselves.
3. The emergence of a common ideal in society, an ideal based on the principles of a liberal democracy endowed with economic, scientific and technological advancements as well as principled administrators for the country.
4. Institutions with social ideals and groups of organizations may not yet have materialized but if a variety of institutions with a good level of maturity and responsibility that are accepted by society they could become institutions or wide-spread mini-institutions. This factor could contribute towards greater equilibrium for Thailand that could perhaps avoid the cycle of military takeovers.

*The use of the term “Civil Society” to refer to a “Force of Unity – Reconciliation” at both the horizontal and vertical levels of society*

In this sense the clearest explanation could be found in Chai-anant Samudyanich’s explanation that traces the origins of the term as a western concept referring to all sectors that are not in the government sector which according to Chai-anant’s definition do not refer merely to the people’s sector in general but

those people who form themselves in groups as well as organizations that weren't established by the state and outside any state jurisdiction.

Since the development of Thai society is quite different from the western model of social development, in many instances one will find that there is state intervention when the state lends its assistance in the setting up of organizations responsible for serving society. These organizations whose mission is that of rendering a "service to society" function in a way that is similar to the role played by civil societies do in the west. Civil society in the Thai context therefore does not separate the government sector entirely it but for Chai-anant it is a formation where all sides form a partnership together<sup>3</sup>.

*The use of the term "Civil Society" to refer to community strength*

This view is seen most clearer in the ideas of Dr. Prawase Wasi who sees community organization at the heart of sustainable development. The existence and importance of joining forces at the local level is something that brings about economic prosperity. At the same time a "community" or "community mindedness" depends on free organization where all sides come freely to form themselves together of their own volition. This will bring about values known as spirituality when the emphasis is more towards foregoing selfishness and achieving community spirit instead – fervently wishing to work for the betterment of the community and reducing selfishness.

In order for community organizations to be able to operate efficiently they must be "pentagonal" and multifaceted comprising various sides be it the government and private sectors, NGOs, community leaders and academics working together so as to be free of quarrels and bickering.

One could say that the general meaning of civil society in Thailand of the three thinkers and political activists aforementioned refers to a social force outside the government system. It is a new force that rose to prominence after the political crisis in the early 1990s, a force that balanced state power or in some cases challenged it by trying to create a space for themselves with some organizations more

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<sup>3</sup> Evolution of Civil Society in Thailand (Thailand Development Research Institute, 2000)

structured and established while others were loosely formed and organized. Nevertheless, civil society in Thailand is not merely a social force that came into being out of a vacuum but derives from at least two significant political changes in Thailand as in the student uprisings of October 1973 and the protests against Gen. Suchinda Kraprayoon in the May 1992 massacre. Furthermore, the social basis of well educated persons, the role of intellectuals, thinkers and artists as well as increased freedom of the media that came to formation in the decades between 1970-1990 all served as the socio-economic basis for the growth of civil society in Thailand.

### The Development of the Civil Society Sector in Thailand: The Social, Economic and Political Base (1970s-1990s)

The first factors on which the growth of Thailand's civil society was based upon is the socio-economic base. Many Thais benefited from the expansion in the opportunities for education. It could be said that the youth who took part in the student movement of 1973-1976 were not a product of old style bureaucracy neither were they those whose objective it was to enter government civil service. Through the years the numbers belonging to this group would continuously expand with an increasing number of schools and open universities education was made available to those from the provinces and those whose parents were not civil servants while the numbers of those who found employment in the private sector was also on the rise and constantly expanding. These were the crucial factors contributing to an urban economy that this new group of people would identify with and belong to. Furthermore the growth of this group would also fuel consumers of public media namely newspapers, television as well as media in the form of fiction, songs and drama. Together, the increase in population outside the government sector and changing forms of mass media nurtured an environment of free thinking and discussion on topics related to social and political concerns leading to the changes that took place in the early 1970s. At the same time it was also this group who became a part of the movement that spearheaded protests and demonstrations against the Thanom-Prapas dictatorship in October 1973 as well as the formation of several non-

governmental organizations.

There are at least two other factors that helped strengthen Thailand's civil society – increased cooperation with non-governmental organizations and the waning political role on the part of the military. In the case of the former, the creation of several NGOs played a significant role in supporting civil society movements. Some of the forerunners of these NGOs are for example the Rural Development and Restoration Project (1967), the Catholic Council of Thailand (1973) and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (1975) paved the way for several smaller NGOs to emerge in the late 1970s. Working closely with the rural folk, these organizations concentrated on rural development and proposed concepts on self-sufficiency. Their significance in reinforcing the public sector was manifested most clearly in the collaboration of both sides after the May 1992 incident when importance was given to bridge NGO activists and “the middle class.” The former who had previously worked in promoting democracy had come to perceive the necessity that the passion on the part of the urban middle class required the support of the rural sector. At the same time those NGO workers in the rural areas also came to see that demands such as land for livelihood or such financial compensation, as in the case of construction of dams, also required support and understanding from the middle class since NGOs were constantly being accused of being the mastermind behind various demonstrations or were funded by foreign sources to create domestic unrest and turmoil. It was crucial therefore that cooperation between the middle class and NGO activists was not a matter of going against the government but merely a way to demand the rights of the marginalized sector who for so long had been ignored, neglected and disenfranchised from the development efforts. The result was that the growth of the civil society sector went hand in hand with support from the Non Government Organizations.

With greater exposure on the part of university students in the rural areas in the mid 1980s several NGOs would become a formation of anti government farmers and members of the middle class who refused the authority of the state and wished instead to protect the rural sector. It was because of such movements and efforts by the NGOs that the problems of the rural people came to the forefront at the national level despite the fact that the civil society concept was not yet popularized.

Nevertheless, the period between the mid 1980s and the early 1990s saw the creation of political space for various activist movements. Aside from the problems of the rural sector demands for greater access to resources and other rights of the hill tribes, slum dwellers, small scale fisher folk and those groups demanding gender equality would also be very vocal in making themselves heard.<sup>4</sup>

Anuchart and Kritaya did a good summary on civil society growing in 1990's. They suggested that the debate on 'civil society' extended to new talks on 'new social movements' and 'people politics' with significant political protests at Pak Mun Dam, Yadana pipeline, Bo Nok Power Plant and growing prominence of activities on participation, decentralization, community, and, most of all about "rights" –women's rights, 'homosexual' rights, indigenous rights, minority rights, the right of the poor<sup>5</sup>.

In the case of a diminished political role for the military that paved the way in providing political space for the civil society sector since society had come to accept political activism by those groups who had long suffered under military dominance. After the May 1992 incident had ended army personnel were pushed back to their barracks for various reasons such as a strengthened democratic system that no longer allowed military intervention in politics since public support had diminished.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the perception of high-ranking military personnel had also been altered seeing instead that the military should no longer involve themselves in political matters.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the fact that it would take many years before the military could regain its power the armed forces could never occupy the same position of dominance it had once enjoyed. In the 1990s no military strongman had as important a role that Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda held a decade earlier. Subsequent governments even transfer-

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<sup>4</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand Economy and Politics (Second Edition)* (Oxford University Press 2002) p. 386

<sup>5</sup> Anuchart Phuangsamli and Kritaya Archavanitkul, *Thai Civil Society: The Making of Thai Citizens* (Bangkok : Amarin 1997) p. xxxii

<sup>6</sup> Surachat Bamrungsk, "Thailand: Military professionalism at the cross road" in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.) *Military Professionalism in Asia : Conceptual and Empirical Perspectives* (Honolulu : East-West Center) p. 84

<sup>7</sup> Surachart Bamrungsk, "Changing patterns of civil-military relations in Thailand's regional outlook" in David R. Mares (ed.) *Civil-Military Relations : Building Democracy and Regional Security in Latin America, Southern Asia and Central Europe* (Boulder : Westview 1998) p. 195

red some generals away from key positions in the armed forces and state enterprises especially those with close ties with former Prime Minister Gen. Suchinda Kraprayoon. From then on top military officers from various batches of the military cadet school would be appointed to the position of army commander in chief for only short intervals<sup>8</sup>.

Aside from this, the military would also be limited by the media and scrutiny from the general public. In 1993 construction plans for a new general headquarters were scrapped after faced with public criticism. Reports in several newspapers claimed that the contracting company undertaking the construction had shareholders who were prominent generals such as high ranking officials suspected for involvement in the scandal surrounding the burglary of a precious diamond from Saudi Arabia. When fighting broke out at the border between Thailand and Burma or Thailand and Laos rumours were rampant that it was a result of Thai military officers and their business dealings across the border. Similarly when large number of arms were confiscated in the border area between Thailand and Cambodia it gave rise to suspicions that the Thai generals were trading arms with the Khmer Rouge.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, the growth of the non-governmental sector as a result of economic growth and expansion in education as well as the work with non-governmental organizations on social issues especially through collaboration with the middle classes in bringing the problems of the rural population to the national level plus the expansion of political space after military prominence had waned all played a role in empowering Thai civil society in the 1990s. Discussions on the role of civil society was therefore accompanied by terms such as “social movements” and “people politics.”

## Challenges for Thai Civil Society

This article seems to have described a phenomenon by which civil society in

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<sup>8</sup> Tamada Yoshifumi, *Myths and Realities : The Democratization of Thai Politics* (Kyoto University Press and Trans Pacific Press, 2008) pp. 70-73

<sup>9</sup> Pasuk and Chris Opcit., pp. 415-417

Thailand had flourished and attained a position of power. It did, however, face some questioning during the era of Thaksin administration (2001-2006) in the sense that populist policies and the phenomenal strength of the Thaksin government. Its had created two big negative effect to civil society. First it was patronized people by state, in fact leader through Thaksin leadership. Second Thaksin clearly marginalized NGOs and their leaders role in public spaces. In fact the elected political leader should open more political spaces for NGOs, social movements and media, however, he described them as either opposition or destruction to democracy which meant, in fact, against his leadership. Even thought they are genuine mechanism of civil society and liberal democracy.

*Thaksin policies and people*

Thaksin Shinawatra achieved massive personal popularity, as demonstrated by scenes of public acclaim and high endorsement at the general election in 2005 and 2006. No previous Thai elected political leader had courted or achieved such popularity. Thaksin claimed his policies won people's heart, however, its was not empowered people, its had been utilized for Thaksin political purposes when he was facing serious political difficulties and the most negative impact that its turned people dependency direct to state and leader instead.

Firstly, when Thaksin went in to the constitution court in his first term 2001, Thaksin fast-tracked the three policies (cheap health-care, agrarian debt relief, village fund) that formed the major part of his campaign and put them into practice while the case was still in court.

Thaksin ordered his cabinet to hasten the implementation of the health care scheme. The cabinet first met to discuss about the project in February 2001. It was first tested in April and put into effect nationwide (except for Bangkok) in October 2001<sup>10</sup>. The debt relief scheme for farmers was also realized in October 2001 alleviating more than 2.3 million farmers of their financial woes<sup>11</sup>. In September 2001, the village fund scheme was launched in over 75,000 villages nationwide with

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<sup>10</sup> Viroj NaRanong and Anchana NaRanong, "Universal Health Care Coverage : Impact of the 30 Baht Health-Care Scheme on the Poor in Thailand" *TDR Quarterly Review*, 21,3, 2006 pp. 3-10

<sup>11</sup> Bangkok Post 18 October 2001

an allocation of 5.3 million baht<sup>12</sup>.

Once his rhetoric touched the people they immediately warmed up to him and became his political shield. Dr. Sem Pimpuangkaew (MD.), a senior citizen, leading intellectual and a respected NGO leader, was instrumental in gathering ten thousands of signatures in support of Thaksin. He found no quilty by the constitutional Court.

Secondly, in late March 2004, Thaksin came under harsh attack by the media and the public for mishandling the escalating violence in the three border provinces in the South. Shortly after came the news of the massacre at Krue Se Mosque where 108 people were killed. This took place soon after an incident whereby 78 Moslems who faced charges for surrounding the Tak Bai police station in Narathiwat Province had died after being suffocated in cramped conditions<sup>13</sup>. During his campaign for election 2005, Thaksin got a chance again.

One month before the general election in February 2005, Thaksin took another trip to the rural areas in the North and the North-East. According to election laws, he could not distribute gifts or money to voters. Thaksin won their support by promising them more than he ever did in his first campaign. His dream project were to expand the village fund, to issue title deeds to land holders, to provide community wells, to cut down energy costs, to give out free livestock, to offer training for low income people, to lower educational expense.

Then he won election landslide again. He got 19 million votes, however, for such policies gave minor people empowerment, on the other hand, they heavily dependent on state. Its created top-down relationship among state and people. These policies never provide public spaces and grass root autonomous bodies to either counter or challenge state. People should be taming as followers. On the other hand, its turned people to be subject direct to leader and state. It was very clear when we scrutinized Thaksin relation and attitude with NGOs.

### *Thaksin and NGOs*

<sup>12</sup> Worawan Chadoevwit, "Thailand's Grass Roots Policies", TDRI Quarterly Review, 18,2, 2003 pp.3-8

<sup>13</sup> Ukrist Pathmanand "Thaksin's Achilles' Heel : The Failure of Hawkish Approaches in the Thailand South" Critical Asian Studies Vol. 38 No. 1 2006 pp. 73-94

Prior to the 2001 election, Thaksin and his aides toyed with schemes to ally civil society groups to his party. In particular, Thaksin appeared in public with the Assembly of the Poor, the most prominent activist coalition of the 1990s. He promised to act on their agenda of complaints and won their endorsement for his election campaign.<sup>14</sup>

The Assembly of the Poor's major demand was decommissioning the Pak Mun Dam which disrupted the ecology of a major river and the livelihoods of people depending on it. Thaksin visited the Dam before the studies were even completed. The Assembly of the Poor turned hostile<sup>15</sup>. Subsequently Thaksin avoided arrangements with civil society groups which might place him under some obligation to deliver against his promises. Once in Power, when he got 19 million vote in 2005 general election, Thaksin de-legitimized NGOs role as major part of civil society. Thaksin told NGOs that they no longer had any role because there was no need for intermediaries between the leader and the people. After the landslide 2005 election victory, Thaksin constantly repeated, "...I have the votes of 19 million of people..."<sup>16</sup>

In his public criticism of opponents, he focused especially on people associated with Thailand history of democratic development such as Thirayuth Boonmi or with the liberal reform pressure of the 1990s that are Prawese Wasi and Anand Panyarachun.

In Thaksin 2005 election speeches, he suggested to his audience that the bundle of liberal democracy, rule of law, freedom of criticism, human rights, oversight by parliamentary opposition, checks and balances on the executive had done little for them in the past, and that making him into a powerful executive would deliver them greater benefit. He described criticism by press or opposition as "destructive" and exhorted his audience, "we want politics with meaning, don't we? We want politics which have something for the people, don't we? And this politics which is just destructive, can we get rid of it yet?"<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bangkok Post 19 December 2000

<sup>15</sup> Bangkok Post 8,9 January 2003

<sup>16</sup> Thaksin Shinawatra, Thaksin's Election Speech, Sanam Luang, 4 February 2005

<sup>17</sup> Thaksin Shinawatra "Thaksin's Election Speech", Sanam Luang, 4 February 2005

## Conclusion

In the year 2008, Thailand politics went in to very complicate political confrontation and divided political camps. It means that civil society is losing into very confused phenomena as well. Since 2006 after four prime minister (Thaksin Shinawatra, Surayud Julanond, Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat), a coup d'etat September 2006<sup>18</sup> and clash September-Black October 2008 with four die and more than 500 in jure, many civic groups grew as mushroom. They claimed they are representing either civil society or people politics, but, almost of them are just organized mass. Under name 'Caravan of the poor-CP', 'People's Alliance for Democracy-PAD', 'United Democracy against Dictatorship of Thailand-UDDT', they were occasionally assembled farmer groups from the northeast, the rural people from the north, labour union members, merchant, Intellectual, student and Bangkok Taxi drivers for show of support their political campaign. Organized mass remain blossom as far as their political target not finish and it is a matter of fact on politics, but how Thai society understand actual civil society. And how civil society in Thailand revatilized their role as alternative.

## From East Asia Summit to ASEAN Charter: Indonesia and the Politics of Regional Integration in the Post-Asian Crisis

Syamsul Hadi

### Introduction

In March 2004, the Research and Development Section of Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked our institution, Centre for International Relations Studies, University of Indonesia, to assist them in formulating Indonesian position concerning

<sup>18</sup> See Ukrist Pathmanand, "A Different coup d'etat?" *Journal of Contemporary Asia* Vol. 38 No.1 (2008) pp. 124-142.