

Change: Civil Society, Street Politics and Democracy in Contemporary Thailand

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Abstract

Since the French Revolution, street demonstration has symbolized a force that leads to political change. The successes of political movements that have involved public participation and demonstration, such as Salt Satyagraha in India, the March on Washington in the United States, EDSA in the Philippines, and the June Democratic Uprising in South Korea, have transformed street politics into a symbol of democracy and human rights throughout the world. In Thailand, three major street movements led to political change in the 20th century: those of 14 October 1973, 6 October 1976, and May 1992, which contributed to a stable democratic system through 2006. In the 21st century, the meaning of “civil society” has changed in many countries. While the referendum is replacing street politics in Europe, North America, and Australasia, street politics remain intact in Asian states that allow it. The Saffron Revolution in Myanmar and Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong represent democratic principles and place street politics at the core of civil society in Asia.

Even so, a change within the structure of civil society in Asia is occurring that is contributing to Thai society’s ever-changing landscape: the involvement of political parties in civil society can no longer be denied. While some parties and politicians in civil societies have long existed, it is a first in Thai history for political parties to be founded and operate in civil society for political advantage. This change in social structure has attracted rival political parties to form movements through political supporters, which is related to this study that will focus on the leadership and organization of Thai civil society since the start of this century.

Keywords: *civil society, political participation, street politics, democracy, civic culture, political parties, political leadership*

Now a new ideal or counter-vision, or at least a slogan-contrast, was required,
and appropriately enough it was found in Civil Society...

(Gellner, 1994:3)

1. Introduction

As Ernest Gellner noted, until the 1970s the term “civil society” had been relegated largely to the study of philosophy and was absent from the study of politics. It was put to use to understand contemporary politics by reformers in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries seeking to escape totalitarianism (Gellner, 1994:1). In Eastern Europe, civil society was non-existent and needed to be created. The idea gained currency that “In extensive parts of the world, what it denoted was absent. This lack came in due course to be strongly felt and bitterly resented: eventually it turned into an aching void” (Gellner, 1994:1).

In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that “civil society” quickly became an ideal, “a shining emblem” (Gellner, 1994:1), rather than a concept. And as it was translated into different circumstances, the ideal was locally contextualized so it came to have different meanings in different places. In Eastern Europe and Latin America, labour and the Catholic Church were considered important civil actors as they led the fight for democracy. In America, where democracy was secure, mundane bowling leagues, clubs and federations became a focus of attention. In the Middle East and Africa, lineage groups, particularly tribal groups, were credited with a leading role. In Asia, civil society came to be conceived in terms of the middle classes and their NGOs, even as scholars saw the middle class as illiberal and NGOs as often compromised. Yet in Thailand, despite middle-class support for the 1976 coup, the group was seen as a positive force for democracy. Civil society was envisaged as a powerful force for

democracy, a force superior to politics and business: an unsullied, oppositional force with the power to overcome soldiers and corrupt politicians alike.

2. Objectives

This research explores the following points:

1. The nature of civil society in Thailand;
2. The change of Thai civil society in the 21st century;
3. The roles of political parties in civil society;
4. The evolution of leadership within civil society;
5. The future of civil society and political parties in Thailand.

3. Methodology

This paper combines secondary research with elements of primary research through observation, and focuses on qualitative analysis to understand case studies of both leadership and followers. Resources consist of primary sources from numerous scholars such as Gellner (1994), McCargo (1997), Pasuk (1997), Missingham (2003), Baker and Pasuk (2004), and Ockey (2004). Secondary sources comprise articles from numerous scholars such as Albritton (2007). Electronic resources draw on Websites such as Wat Onoi, Matichon, and ASTV Manager.

4. Literature Review

Civil society made its way into scholarly literature on Thailand only in the 1990s. Thirayuth Boonmi, in a collection of newspaper articles published in 1993 and titled *Sangkhom Khemkhaeng* [Strong Society], deemed civil society a “third power” and the only hope to resolve Thai political problems. In summarizing Thirayuth’s work in 1995, Gawin Chutima claims that, “Obviously, even though he does not use the word NGOs, the groups he mentions cannot be anything else” (Gawin, 1995, pp. 142-43). Gawin also links the NGOs, and by extension civil society, to the middle class, claiming, “It is no doubt that the people in NGOs come from the middle class, and the NGOs owe their fundamental strength to the student and intellectual movement of middle class people” (Gawin, 1995, p. 140). Naruemon Thabchumpon also saw NGOs as central to civil society, claiming, “NGOs in Thailand have filled a vacuum created by the inability of political parties, trade unions and peasant associations to expand popular participation” (Naruemon, 2002, p. 183). The key role for NGOs, she argues, was to link “elite-urban” and “rural-popular” elements of civil society (Naruemon, 2002, p. 187). In his work on the Assembly of the Poor, one of the most successful “rural-popular” organizations, Bruce Missingham (2003, p. 189) provides clarification of the relationship between NGOs and mass movements, citing a 1997 Assembly of the Poor video:

Our advisers comprise NGO workers and village leaders with campaign experience. They act as *phi liang*, coordinating negotiations with the state, communicating with the media and allied organizations in the city, administering the preparation of negotiation documents and summarizing our issues to explain to the public.

As Missingham explains, “To refer to the activists as *phi liang*, therefore, suggests that they occupy a superior position with a responsibility to care for and guide the villagers” (Missingham, 2003, p. 189). Finally, Pasuk Phongpaichit’s Wertheim Lecture (1999) to the Thai Studies Conference summarizes and exemplifies this idealization of civil society. Like Missingham, Gawin and Naruemon, she notes the “catalytic role” of NGOs in the organization of civil society. She then argues that civil society has become “a repository of hope,” i.e., that people have transferred their belief in democracy to a belief in civil society as “the route to a better political future.” In the process, they have abandoned faith in democratic institutions (Pasuk, 1999, pp. 10-12).

The literature on Thailand frequently attributes two characteristics to civil society. First, civil society is seen as an independent force, an idealized force that can bring about democracy in opposition to the state and the political system. It is seen as both separate from and superior to political institutions. Second, while civil society and its movements are conceptualized to include the general public, it is seen as

organized and led by middle class-educated activists who know better than those they seek to help. This paternalistic view differs little from state paternalism, and even employs the same *phi liang* vocabulary.

Politically, prior to the ascendancy of Thaksin Shinawatra as prime minister in 2001, Thai governments have dealt with civil society on an *ad hoc* basis in reaction to movements that aggressively made demands, especially those that came to Bangkok to demonstrate. In some cases, such as the Ban Khrua demonstrations against the building of an expressway through the community, movements were effective; in other cases, they were ignored, but not in a way that indicates an overall strategy on the government's part. Thaksin was the first prime minister who sought to deal with civil society systematically. He set out to co-opt those who could be co-opted, and to discredit those who could not, either by dividing them from their supporters, or through more devious means, such as directing the Anti Money Laundering Unit to investigate movement leaders and using legal maneuvers to minimize movements and the effectiveness of civil society (Pasuk & Baker, 2004, pp. 145-48). Thaksin's genius lay in providing funding for development to communities and their activists. For activists concerned primarily with community development and not with politics or political empowerment, this provided them with opportunities that had been previously unavailable. Many activists, such as "slum angel" Prateep Ungsongtham, found common cause with Thaksin in development efforts. Others, often middle-class activists from Bangkok, were concerned that such policies disempowered individuals and communities and corrupted civil society, which outweighed the benefits of development. In many cases, those who opposed Thaksin saw civil society as a third way in politics, a means of rescuing democracy from corrupt politicians, and they wanted to maintain it as an oppositional force free of the flaws of parliamentary rule. Such activists saw Thaksin as buying the loyalty of their constituents, so that at some level, competition existed philosophically and for the support of individuals. Many communities, such as Ban Khrua, were left internally divided, as some community leaders sought benefits from Thaksin's policies, while others found common cause with NGO activists in opposing Thaksin. Similarly, the Assembly of the Poor split, with one of its NGO activist leaders seeking to bring the Assembly into the anti-Thaksin People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), while most of its members were supporting the pro-Thaksin United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). Pasuk and Baker (2004, p. 147) conclude that as a result of Thaksin's tactics, "civil society become superfluous," though perhaps it should be seen rather as a key battleground between competing visions of development and democracy.

5. Contemporary Civil Society

The two most powerful movements in contemporary civil society have grown, in part, out of this divide engineered by Thaksin. This division is only part of a larger conflict driven by politics and politicians that has come to encompass civil society. The two most powerful movements to emerge have been the PAD, along with its later evolution as the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), and the UDD. To understand Thai civil society and its relationship to politics, it is beneficial to explore the leadership, followers and money behind the movement. The PDRC's emergence in 2013-2014 provides the most significant movement in Thai politics. Therefore, this research will focus heavily on the PDRC and its predecessor PAD as a case study.

To understand the PDRC, it is important to view the PAD as its foundation. The PAD developed from a split between Thaksin and media executive Sondhi Limtongkul, who had been close associates. Thaksin had helped rescue Sondhi's business during the Asian economic crisis, and Sondhi had helped Thaksin in his efforts to attain favorable media coverage. While their relationship had become increasingly troubled over time, the falling-out came when, on his television talk show of September 9, 2005, Sondhi read a letter from a follower with the pseudonym "Luk Kae Longthang (Lost Lamb)", which explained how the misbehaviour of the oldest lamb against its siblings led to serious concerns by their father (Pintong, 2006, pp. 128-130). This caused public concern as well as public interest (Manager 2006, pp. 19-20). Sondhi then took his programme to the streets, holding public rallies in place of the television broadcast. Since then, street politics has become a symbol of civil society in 21st century Thai politics.

The PAD/PDRC's main support rests on the Democrat Party. After 2008, PAD support went into decline due to the lack of Democrat participation. Following introduction of the Universal Amnesty Bill of 2013, the middle-class movement revived, drawing from the old PAD support group under the leadership of

former Democrat members and former PAD core leaders, and became the PDRC. The PDRC has become one of the largest and most significant movements in Thai civil society since the start of the 21st century.

6. Leadership

The PAD's leaders are Sondhi Limtongkul, Major General Chamlong Srimuang, Somsak Kosaisuk, Pipob Tongchai and Somkiat Pongpaiboon; additional (or second-generation) leaders include Sirichai Maingam, Saranyu Wongkrajang, Sawit Kaewan, Maleerut Kaewkar and Sumran Rodpetch. Moreover, a few others have played significant roles, including the coordinator, Suriyasai Katasila; PAD speaker Pantep Puapongpun; Prachai Liaopairath; Sarocha Pornudomsak; Chaiwat Sinsuwong; Rosana Tositrakul; Kasit Birom; General Patompong Kesarasuk; Squadron Leader Prasong Sunsiri; Commissioner Pratin Santiprapop; and, to a lesser extent, General Panlop Pinmanee and Major General Manoonkrit Rupkajon.

Despite this long list, the movement is primarily led by Sondhi Limtongkul and Chamlong Srimuang. Sondhi comes from a Thai-Chinese migrant family based in Sukhothai. His family owns a publishing company and distributes a Chinese-language newspaper in Bangkok (Limtongkul & Pornudomsak, 2003). Sondhi is not only a media tycoon, but also an able orator and media personality. By carefully employing his talents and assets, he has managed to gather supporters from the elite, entrepreneurs, small-business owners, students and especially the urban middle class. In particular, the middle class comprise the audience for his programs, which has allowed him to communicate with them directly and develop them into a mass movement. Sondhi was the first person to lead a mass movement to oust Thaksin and was able to incite tens of thousands of people to support his movement.

The second key leader, Chamlong Srimuang, has considerable experience in bringing down governments through street demonstrations. His involvement in street politics began during the elected Democrat government of Seni Pramoj, on October 6, 1976, while still an active duty military officer. This bout of street politics culminated in the massacre of Thammasart University students; subsequently, Chamlong tried his best to convince supporters that he had little involvement with this incident. However, he admitted he was involved with Mrs. Chongkol Srikanchana (Leader of Housewives Group and Rightwing Movement) to pressure the government at Royal Plaza even as he denied responsibility for the massacre (McCargo, 1997, pp. 33-41).

Chamlong again became involved in street politics in May 1992, when he led a movement to demand that junta leader General Suchinda Kraprayoon resign. Despite knowing the high likelihood that the military would shoot demonstrators, Chamlong chose confrontational tactics and soldiers did open fire (McCargo, 1997, p. 263). From these and earlier events, Chamlong earned a reputation as inflexible and uncompromising, qualities that contribute to his propensity to take his causes to the streets, rather than work through parliamentary channels.

Giles (2006, p. 312) argues that the PAD's executive power belongs to a group of old men with little respect for women or younger generations. Led by this older generation, many of their demands, including the return of a non-elected prime minister, are conservative rather than transformative. From 2008 to 2013, the PAD leaders experienced significant decline in support. By 2013, the PAD and its network had to integrate into the PDRC Movement. While Sondhi showed neither support nor opposition to the PDRC, ASTV and Manager Media gave significant backing to PDRC activities. Compared with the PAD, Chamlong was less active in the PDRC, while the Dharma Army and its larger Santi Asoke Buddhist sect are still active in it.

The most significant change in movement leadership is the rise of politicians. The faction that created PDRC comprises Democrat Party members Suthep Thaugsuban, Sathit Wongnongtoey, Wittaya Kaewparadai, Issara Somchai, Taworn Namesian, Chumpol Julsai, Chaiwut Bannawat, Putthipong Punnagan, Sakolti Pattayakul, Nattapol Teepsuwan, Ekanut Promphan, Tankhun Jitissara and Chitapas Birombhakdee Krisdakorn. The second group comprises PAD leaders Pipob Thongchai, Prasong Soonsiri, Somkiat Pongpaiboon, Somsak Kosaisuk, Samran Rodpetch, Saranyu Wongkrajang and Anchalee Paileelak. A third group comprises new leaders: Professor Seri Wongmontha from Naresuan University and Venerable Buddha Issara's abbot of Wat Onoi, Nakhon Pathom.

It is undeniable that among all PDRC leaders, Suthep Thaugsuban, former Secretary General of Democrat Party and Deputy Prime Minister of Democrat Administration, is most prominent. Similar to Chamlong, Suthep is an experienced politician as well as an exceptional orator. Referred to by supporters as “Uncle Kamnan” (District Headman), Suthep has been involved in national politics since 1979 as MP from Surat Thani. Throughout his long political career, he has been one of the most influential politicians as he was the key informateur of many Democrat-led coalitions. Suthep nominated himself to the Secretary General of PDRC, which was well accepted by PDRC supporters.

Beyond Suthep, the PDRC brought in a new generation of speakers. They may not be powerful enough to be considered leaders, but it is undeniable that these icons of a young generation have attracted significant numbers of young followers. Chitapas Birombhakdi Krisdakorn, who worked as deputy speaker of the Democrat Party, is among the most popular figures in social media. She has attracted large media attention in traditional and social media.

The most prominent leader among those without direct political connections is Venerable Buddha Issara, the abbot of Wat Onoi, Nakhon Pathom. He set up a stage at Government Complex that attracted significant followers from upcountry. The official website of Wat Onoi states that Buddha Issara was ordained in 1979 but left the monkhood in 1980 to enlist for two years of military service, after which he was ordained again in 1983. In 1989, Buddha Issara established Wat Onoi, of which he became an official abbot in 1995. In 1999, Buddha Issara sought an appointment to the Sangha position of the District Magistrate. In his official account, he claims he stepped down from this position in 2001 upon realizing that it brought about a wicked desire for power. A contrary account suggests that he was under investigation by Sangha for submitting false information related to his appointment. Still, it is undeniable that Buddha Issara has had considerable numbers of followers throughout his period as a monk. Moreover, these followers showed their dissatisfaction toward Sangha in the same manner as the Santi Asoke group of Chamlong Srimuang.

7. Followers

Giles noted that the PAD’s most important constituencies are the “capitalist” and middle class, which are generally, though erroneously (Ockey, 2004, Albritton & Thawilwadee, 2007, Giles, 2006), thought to have been the primary force of Thailand’s democratic movement since 1973. This group includes not only those with large-scale capital, but owners of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Included are a number of high profile “capitalists” and aristocrats (Giles, pp. 48-50). Giles argues that these groups comprise the most powerful faction within the PAD, and direct their policies and movement (Giles, p. 309). However, they are not well-organized, so their influence is largely felt in the form of constraints on decision-making rather than in active policy-making. Giles argues that the PAD’s organization and policies are in line with NGOs, which means they specialize in a “narrow range of capitalist and middle class interests, while the wider policies were very vague in order to maintain cooperation from other sectors in the society” (Giles, p. 304). Here, like Missingham, Pasuk, and others, he sees NGOs as inherently middle class, which for Giles means they are conservative. In 2013, the conservative elite, middle class, and small-business owners of Sino-Thai descendants remained at the PDRC’s core. Significant numbers of shops in Sino-Thai ethnic areas decided to shut their businesses on regular basis to join the PDRC throughout its active periods.

The Dharma Army, an organizational unit within Santi Asoke, has long drawn from a similar constituency.¹ Jackson (1989, p. 66) describes the followers of Santi Asoke as “the less highly educated strata of the middle class... merchants, tradesmen, and small businessmen.” Jackson noted that Santi Asoke was founded, in part, as a protest against the perceived corruption in the Sangha, so that in decrying Thaksin’s corruption, the Dharma Army found common cause with Sondhi. The anti-Sangha movement including the Dharma Army has expanded significantly under the PDRC. The entrance of Buddha Issara into the movement allowed the anti-Sangha group to expand even further. The originality of Buddha Issara’s status as senior monk allowed the anti-Sangha movement to be much more participatory in PDRC’s activities.

¹ Santi Asoke’s basic structure is outlined in Apinya (1993, p. 163).

Beyond this lower middle class and “capitalist” strata are several other groups, most also associated with the middle class. The National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT) distanced itself from the PAD and PDRC after they called for a non-democratic selection of a prime minister. Still, many university students were recruited from schools such as Chulalongkorn University, Rangsit University, Bangkok University, the National Institute of Development Administration, and Ramkhamhaeng University. There are also significant numbers of institutions (or the executives of those institutions) that favor the PAD/PDRC and are willing to promote the movement through academic means. Staff participate on the PAD/PDRC stage, give interviews to newspapers, and can influence students. In 2013, large numbers of students moved into different directions from NSCT, by joining and even speaking on PDRC stages against the government of Yingluck Shinawatra.

Many unions of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and bureaucrats supported the PAD/PDRC, although, they did not necessarily follow their union leaders. Included among the working class unions, such as the State Railway of Thailand, were other unions of middle class professionals. Furthermore, this group expanded to the unions of medical doctors, Ministry of Health officials, and Thai Airways. Some NGOs also joined the PAD/PDRC (Matichon, 2008, p. 71).

One additional group should be mentioned: the Southern Thailand PAD/PDRC contingent, which was bussed in from various provinces in the South. Their participation resulted largely from criticism by the Thaksin and Yingluck administrations that southern PAD/PDRC members are Democrat Party supporters and joined because the Democrat supported PAD/PDRC’s desire to overthrow the administrations through street politics. Thailand has clear political divisions: the Thai Rak Thai and its successor parties command voters from the North and Northeast, whereas the Democrats command voters in Bangkok and the South. Therefore, it is hard for the Democrats to distance themselves from the PAD/PDRC in Bangkok and southern Thailand.

The PDRC’s formation in 2013 demonstrates that its core remains within the Thai middle class, especially among the aristocrats, middle class, SOEs, Sino-Thai ethnics, southern Thais, and SMEs. Therefore, little difference exists between PDRC and PAD supporters, though the size of PDRC supporters is much larger. Their main argument cites the immoral passage of the 2013 amnesty bill, which the Yingluck administration passed by employing a suspicious procedure. By then, dissatisfaction with the administration had reached its peak. Numerous newspapers and online media used phrases such as “E-Ngo” (“dumb lady”) to identify Yingluck when she spoke poorly. Her low approval rate sunk even further on accusations of corruption over a disastrously expensive rice-buying scheme to prop up farmers by promising to pay them at prices far above market levels. This led to significant numbers of followers joining the PDRC in a bid to oust the government.

8. Conclusion

Examining the nature of civil society through its leadership and followers in the context of a large-scale social movement highlights important features. The current movement has demonstrated that civil society cannot stay above politics, just as it could not in the past. In 1976, civil society movements on the left and especially on the right were closely connected with politicians. In 1992, the two best-known leaders of the uprisings were Chamlong Srimuang, leader of the Phalang Dharma party, and Chawalit Yongchaiyudh, leader of the New Aspiration Party. Both sides of the current movement have been guided largely by politicians: Suthep and his factions for the PDRC. A deeper understanding of civil society requires an examination of the relationship between civil society and politicians, and in particular of the reason civil society turns to politicians for support, and even for leadership, in times of crisis.

Some reasons for politicians having played prominent roles in civil movements can be discerned from the analysis presented here. Politicians such as Suthep are skilled orators who can influence a crowd. Politicians can provide an organizational structure and committed followers for a range of issues. As shown with the PAD and PDRC, new forms of technology can create a near-organizational structure: for the PAD/PDRC, the 4G internet network and social media, along with media organs including ASTV Manager, Bluesky Channel, and even RSU Wisdom TV. However, such structures do little to promote commitment to a cause. It is easy to ignore a message over the internet, a Line message or phone call, but if one is a member of the Dharma Army or a politician’s support network with one’s friends and acquaintances, it is

difficult to ignore a call for action. Furthermore, even well-organized civil society networks, such as state enterprise unions, may struggle to compete with political organizations. Because civil society networks are generally issue-oriented, they can have difficulty in maintaining loyalty, as seen in the defection of the NSCT and the Metropolitan Electricity Authority from the PAD/PDRC. On the other hand, political networks are loyal and committed to their leaders over the long term on a range of interests. This greater commitment seems to be the key to the role of politicians when civil society movements set out to overthrow a government.

Another striking feature of civil society when it becomes involved in large-scale movements is the complex and divided organizational structures that tend to develop. To form a large-scale movement, it is necessary to combine smaller organizations. However, smaller organizations have leadership that cannot be easily bypassed. In some cases, organizations large and small, and old and fledgling, cooperate uneasily as they work out power relations among them. Both PAD and PDRC leaders have struggled to retain supportive groups and control followers.

The idealization of civil society has had an interesting impact on the discourse of protest. Because civil society is envisioned as pure, accusations of paid protestors have become a rhetorical weapon in attacking a movement. Of course no large-scale movement can sustain a protest without assisting its members, whether it be with food, transportation or money, so hypocrisy lurks behind such accusations. At the same time, these accusations contain a bias: poor people cannot afford to fund their protests, so such attacks are a means of privileging middle-class protests. As civil society is meant to be above politics, a second means of attack has been to attribute opponents with political ambition. Thus Chamlong was forced to forswear political ambitions during the 1992 protests. In a similar manner, Suthep and his Democrat group decided to ordain into the monkhood to avoid such criticism.

Further observations can be made regarding civil society and democracy. For a long time, politics has carried highly negative connotations in Thailand, epitomized by the phrase, *nakkanmuang nam nao* [dirty water politician]. Consequently, there has been a tendency to insist that other institutions, from the monarchy to the courts to the military to civil society, remain somehow above politics: pure and unsullied by the dirty water. Whether intended or not, this discourse has delegitimized the parliamentary system; it is not trusted to solve political crises. Inevitably, crises lead to demands for intervention from one or another institution seen as above politics, which precludes parliament and renders it ineffective in resolving crises.

Finally, visions of civil society as a force for democracy, of the middle class working with the poor against the selfish interests of politicians, and of civil society actually being civil look increasingly implausible. The PAD/PDRC have openly called for coups on many occasions, as well as a new form of government with a non-elected prime minister and a largely appointed parliament. Furthermore, Bangkok-based NGO activists in two cases examined here (Ban Khrua and the Assembly of the Poor) sought to lead constituents into the PAD/PDRC against their wishes and interests. This willingness of the middle class, activists and civil society more generally to abandon democracy's basic principles contradicts the ideal established in the literature. Yet the idealization of civil society that is precisely the problem. In conceiving of civil society as a third way, as a repository of hope against a corrupt but democratic system, as necessarily oppositional, it became inevitable that civil society would find itself openly opposed to the democratic system. Only a greater recognition that civil society cannot be above politics, but must be fully engaged with politicians and the political process, can lead to a better outcome.

9. References

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