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Somchai Phatharathananunth (2006), *Civil Society and Democratization. Social Movements in Northeast Thailand*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press

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It has rarely been more difficult to make sense of Thai politics than today. The country is split between two camps, the conservative-royalist yellow shirts and the red shirts, who support Thaksin and the political organisations associated with him. Mass rallies by both camps dominate every aspect of domestic politics, including the occasional ousting of the government. At the same time, these coloured movements defy a simple comparison with the so-called “colour revolutions” of other countries or any conventional classification in terms of left or right.

In struggling with the problem of how to explain the present situation, political analysts have resorted to stereotypical explanations from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Following prominent analysts such as Anek Laothammatas, author of *A tale of two Democracies* (1995), it became common sense at that time to interpret the destructive dynamics of Thai politics as a reflection of the big split in Thai society, with a democratically conscious Bangkok-based middle class on the one hand and rural masses of poor farmers in Isan on the other. According to this stereotype, these poor masses in Isan, the impoverished north-eastern region of Thailand, were caught up within persistent patron-client relations which made them prone to vote-buying. This made Isan the power base for corrupt politicians who were messing up the democratic system.

Confronted with the consistent and clear electoral success of Thaksin and parties associated with him through all the elections since 2001, these stereotypes have been recycled. The red shirts, whose stronghold is in Isan, are still stuck within patron-client structures, and this time it is not so much vote-buying but the populist promises of Thaksin which have corrupted them. On the other hand, the yellow shirts portray themselves as the Bangkokian middle class, with a deeper understanding of democracy that goes beyond numerical majorities and gives them the right and the obligation to fight the majority held by Thaksin and his supporters in parliament.

Against the backdrop of these simplistic explanations, it is worthwhile to reconsider Somchai Phatharathananunth’s work on social movements in Isan – an in-depth study of the farmers’ protests that emerged in the 1990s, when, for the first time, the “rural masses of Isan” appeared physically in Bangkok with mass rallies and could no longer be ignored in national politics. Somchai set out to study these movements precisely in order to counter the stereotypes prevalent at the time. He concluded that the poor farmers’ movements were examples which confirmed “the important role of social

movements in democratic deepening” (p. 212) – a conclusion very much contrary to the general perception.

The book is the Somchai’s Ph.D. thesis, based on fieldwork from the late 1990s, and it is not at all self-evident that it still qualifies as a central work on Thai politics with high value for today’s discussions. When it was published in 2006, at the height of Thaksin’s power, Somchai felt he had to write an epilogue since it appeared that his study had been overtaken by events that seemed to have fundamentally changed Thai politics: the ascent of Thaksin, with Thai Rak Thai enjoying a huge majority in parliament, made it look as if Thailand was on the way towards a one-party system. Thaksin’s political project, with its dual-track economic policy, seemed to serve both the urban business class as well as the rural masses. Drawing on his pro-poor policies, he managed to silence social movements, either by embracing them or through sheer suppression. Democratic progress in the sense of the protection of fundamental rights and popular participation in political decision making through politically active civil society groups seemed to have come to a halt – or even to have been reversed.

Only three years after its publication, however, Somchai’s book is again highly topical: street politics has come back to Thailand, the government is facing huge mobilisations and rallies, and much of today’s situation reminds us of the 1990s (which also explains why analysts tend to use the outdated models of that time). Once again, the people of Isan, their political priorities during past elections, and their capacity to mobilise are largely being denounced as anti-democratic, corrupt and a threat to democracy.

Isan as a Laboratory for Grassroots Democracy

Somchai counters this view by taking a radically different perspective. Instead of researching “vote-buying”, “patron-client relations” or the like, he focuses on farmers and rural grassroots movements – how farmers organise themselves; how they take decisions, prepare for rallies, perform street protests, etc. He presents an abundance of data – historical data as well as data from the 1990s, the main period of investigation – and paints a picture of Isan as a region where we find continuous innovations in democratic organising: small initiatives developing new networks, deepening their organisations, creating institutionalised structures, and expanding from local to regional and then national networks or organisations. Without directly addressing the stereotypical view of Isan as a stronghold of political corruption, he presents a completely opposite picture of Isan. The abundance of his data, as well as his unpretentious manner of presenting it, is a major achievement in itself.

Somchai focuses on the Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan (SSFAI), which was founded in 1992 as a loose network of grassroots movements, each concerned with a specific problem, such as access to land, environmental damages caused by state-initiated development projects, and the pricing of agricultural products. In the spirit of the times, the SSFAI was largely influenced by NGO leaders of the so-called *community cultural school*, who believed that the solution to problems lay in strengthening the village community and a retreat from a market-oriented capitalist economy to a community-oriented self-sufficient economy.

Somchai describes the group's expansion into a more integrated network and its change of strategy during what he calls the radical period of the SSFAI, 1993 through 1995, when it became famous for organising protest marches on the friendship highway between Isan and the Central Plain. The subsequent chapter describes the internal problems which arose after most of the SSFAI's protests failed to achieve its goals. This led to a change in strategy, a split in the organisation and eventually to the establishment of another network, the Assembly of the Poor. The Assembly managed to stage a three-month protest in the form of a siege of the government house in 1997, thereby achieving unprecedented concessions from the government and becoming famous for its innovative internal organisation and highly symbolic and radical protest. The closing chapters of the book follow the SSFAI during the years 1997 and 1998, when – despite its former splits – it managed to expand into a nationwide organisation.

What makes the book so valuable is the detailed data on the development of the SSFAI's organisational structures: How did the movement integrate different local groups? How did they institutionalise decision making and leadership? How did they interact with the state? The main achievement of Somchai's study is to trace the extent to which these organisational developments were the result of interaction with the state.

Protest, Organisation, Co-option, Innovation

When the SSFAI was founded, the main objective of its leaders was to raise political consciousness. However, after the economic situation of many of its member groups worsened, the SSFAI decided to put pressure on the government in the form of protests. One strategy was to block roads such as the highway from Isan into the Central Plain of Thailand. This is where Somchai begins his description of how the strategy and the organisation co-evolved: blocking roads gains significant attention in the media and might be effective for putting pressure on the government, but it also causes much trouble for bystanders and is highly unpopular among common population. This is why the SSFAI changed its strategy to marching on one line of the

highway in the direction of Bangkok. According to Somchai, it was somehow unexpected that this form of protest would trigger a strong reaction from the authorities, who employed massive security and riot police forces to stop the march. This state reaction in turn meant that the protesters had to organise in order to overcome police barricades; they had to organise where to get water and food once the police confiscated their supply; and they had to set up their own security units to guarantee a disciplined non-violent protest despite the intrusion of plainclothes police officers into the rally. "Every day the farmers had to prepare themselves for unexpected incidents that might be caused by the authorities during the march. To cope with such situations, they had to remain alert, act with discipline and help each other, which boosted their solidarity" (p. 103).

The confrontation with the state authorities, however, is not the only example of interaction with the state which led to new organisational structures. Somchai describes how in 1997 the government approved one of the SSFAI's demands and allowed members of the SSFAI to join a programme under which farmers received loans and the means of production to start new kinds of agricultural production. The SSFAI demanded participation in the subcommittee that supervised the implementation of the programme in order to prevent corruption among the state officials in charge. However, it turned out that some of the representatives of the SSFAI used their position to expand their own power, started to run in elections for political parties, and eventually engaged in corrupt practices in connection with the allocation of the state funds.

Somchai points out that it was exactly this kind of experience which led to a split in the movement and influenced the organisational structure of the Assembly of the Poor, which was founded later and evolved into the most prominent and internationally recognised social movement from Isan in the mid-1990s. The experience with corrupt farmers' leaders led to innovation from below as well as the establishment of new rules and strategies, for instance, a strict ban on political parties, the restriction of the role of NGO leaders, and a flat, non-hierarchical structure.

From this data we get a picture of the development cycle of social movements which points to general tendencies: The cycle starts with organisational innovation by grassroots movements which confront the state (SSFAI in its radical period). This phase may be followed by the co-option of parts of the movement into state structures (SSFAI during its compromising period), and Somchai provides us with a detailed description of the trajectories of this process. In consequence of such co-option, another phase of protest starts, carried out by movements which react to this co-

option with specific organisational innovations (founding of the Assembly of the Poor).

Somchai's study is valuable not only because of the description of this cycle but also because of his discussion of the social basis of the different movements in connection with these developments. An earlier study by Baker (2000) tried to link the Assembly of the Poor and the SSFAI with so-called "old farmers' movements" and "new farmers' movements", respectively. This distinction goes back to studies on rural movements in India (Lindberg 1992; Brass 1995). Old farmers' movements, according to Lindberg, were "organized around the major contradiction in a pre-industrial, class-divided agrarian society – the contradiction between landed and non-landed groups" (Lindberg 1992: 209, cit. p. 20). New farmers' movements, on the other hand, were made up of farmers who were already successfully engaged in commercial farming and whose problems were centred more on the price of their agricultural produce, as well as the price for "fertilizers, electricity and the terms for credit from state-sponsored financial institutions" (p. 20).

Somchai argues that this distinction is not mirrored in the membership of the SSFAI and the Assembly of the Poor, which also means that the mode of production is not a criterion for the organisational structure of the respective group. What we can also draw from the study (although this is not as clearly spelled out in the book as the argument against Baker (2000)) is that there is also no direct connection between the radicalism of the protest strategy and the radicalism of the demands of a group. The Assembly of the Poor, which became famous for its uncompromising radical protests, did not call for a revolutionary change in Thai society; its demands for compensation in connection with big infrastructure projects were quite weak and not at all radical.

In this way, Somchai's study provides us with a rich empirical basis for the argument that the dynamism of an organisation is very much a dynamism of its own – independent from the social basis of the protesters and independent of the radicalism of the demands. As such, it might also serve as a first step towards an explanation of why symbolic protest forms like the siege of the government house were so easily and successfully taken up in 2008 by the People's Association for Democracy – the yellow-shirted royalist-conservative movement, which is very different from the Assembly of the Poor in terms of its social basis as well as its political agenda.

However, as valuable as it is, Somchai's data sometimes suffers from a slightly artificial embedding into the theoretical framework of the resource mobilisation theory. This school of thought tries to explain the emergence of social movements on the basis of the fundamental assumptions of ra-

tional choice theory and basically assumes that collective protest can be explained through individual benefit-seeking by the single members of a protest movement. A crucial element of this theoretical framework is the idea that in order to gain momentum, movements have to mobilise and invest resources into protest in a political environment that is open enough to promise opportunities for success.

Whenever Somchai elaborates on the assumptions of this theory, one gets the feeling that these parts of the text are artificially inserted: the data presented does not really serve as an argument for the theoretical assumptions, nor is it apparent why a specific theoretical claim should go together with a specific development of the movement. On the contrary: when opportunity structure theory predicts that an open political space is needed for movements to develop – rejecting ideas of pauperisation, which would take economic need as the fuel for social movements – the data from Isan seems to be a counter-example to the opportunity structure. According to Somchai, the emergence of new movements and the radicalisation of their demands were closely connected to the worsening of the farmers' economic situation and saw one climax, the anti-Kho Jo Ko movement, under the military government following the coup d'état in 1991.

The concentration on resource mobilisation theory as the dominant social theory goes hand in hand with the choice of a specific theory of democratisation: Somchai claims that the underlying goal of all democratic demands is the “right to have rights”. This idea which goes back to Hannah Arendt's idea of democracy, based on a specific idea of general universal citizenship. At least since the 1993 UN conference on women's rights, it has been taken up by many progressive movements as a leading paradigm; however, this has been done at the expense of more materialistic concepts which stress actual material equality over formal equality as citizens.

Reading through Somchai's findings, one gets the feeling that it would have been much easier to accommodate his data using concepts from critical theory, and since Somchai himself cites Antonio Gramsci and Nicos Poulantzas, it seems as if the author himself had in mind a number of concepts which, under different circumstances, might have unfolded as a coherent theoretical foundation for the thesis.

What old and new farmers' movements have in common is that they are struggling for control over the means of production – be it access to land or control over investments from state funds. If we accept this as the fundamental motive behind the movements, and if we follow Poulantzas's theory of the state as a capitalist state and Gramsci's notion of civil society and an integrated state, some of the theoretical problems which Somchai addresses disappear: On the basis of these theoretical concepts, it would be

possible to explain why social movements have to challenge the state by inventing new forms of social and political organisation if they want to obtain democratic control over their means of production. Given the capitalist nature of the state, it would also be possible to explain why involvement in state structures bears the danger of being co-opted into an economic logic that yields corruption and new economic inequality.

Still, Somchai's study is an abundant source of very detailed and highly interesting data on social movements in Isan. It is absolutely worth reading, especially against the background of the present discourse in Thai politics, which is again denouncing Isan as a region of vote-buying and political corruption.

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Wolfram Schaffar

- Akademischer Rat, Institut für Sozialwissenschaften, Abteilung Politikwissenschaft der Stiftung Universität Hildesheim, Germany <wolfram.schaffar@gmx.de>