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Betwixt Droughts and Floods: Flood Management Politics in Thailand

Naila Maier-Knapp

Abstract: Attempting to create greater understanding of the political dynamics that influence domestic disaster relief and management (DRM) in Thailand, this article takes a closer look at these dynamics by outlining the main actors involved in flood-related DRM. It acknowledges the importance of international and military actors but emphasises the role of national and subnational authorities. The article then identifies the central issues of DRM governance as capacity and bureaucracy and discusses these through a chronological assessment of the flood crisis in Thailand in 2011, interweaving the colourful domestic politics with various political cleavages and dichotomies, and thereby distinguishing between three main dichotomies which it considers as the central drivers of the political dynamics and institutional development of DRM. These issues can be summarised as old versus new institutions, technocracy versus bureaucracy and centralised (but with direct people-orientation through greater channels of citizenry participation) versus decentralised bureaucracy with an indirect orientation towards people.

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Keywords: Thailand, floods, disaster relief and management, bureaucracy, decentralisation

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Introduction

With the increased involvement of East Asian countries in international disaster relief, developing and semi-developed¹ countries in neighbouring Southeast Asia are benefitting from this outward projection of material and financial assistance. At the same time, this increasing disaster relief and management (DRM) assistance is making these Southeast Asian countries aware that the great powers have bestowed another dimension of great power politics upon them. Concomitantly, DRM constitutes a growing political game intra-regionally in Southeast Asia at the level of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), manifested in the rising institutional proliferation, examples of which being the ASEAN Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ERAT) in 2008; the Standard Operating Procedure for Regional Standby Arrangements and Coordination of Joint Disaster Relief and Emergency Response Operations (SASOP) in 2009; and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance, launched in 2011. This growing realm of interaction and regulation reinforces both the national and international/regional level from legal, military, ideological and economic perspectives.

However, this two-level game of mutual influence appears over-emphasised if one seeks to better understand the disaster relief politics of developing or semi-developed countries in Southeast Asia in their entirety. In spite of normative reservations, the DRM capacity of developing ASEAN member states is undoubtedly contingent on interaction with external partners. Within semi-developed and developed ASEAN economies, the relationship is somewhat different and the impact of international DRM influence is seemingly more moderated, albeit to variable degrees. Here, the domestic political agendas appear central in informing the politics of national disaster relief and risk reduction. Although this article² recognises that the trends on the international level create an

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- 1 Understanding that there are countries in Southeast Asia which have developed significantly in the last three decades, but have not yet reached Western understandings of a developed country, this article introduces the term “semi-developed” to bridge the conceptual space between “developing” and “developed” countries in Southeast Asia.
 - 2 I would like to thank the SEATIDE project and the Centre for History and Economics at the University of Cambridge for their research support. Furthermore, I am most grateful for the time and insights that Thai representatives of the Office of National Water and Flood Management Policy, Royal Irrigation Department, Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, National Disaster Warning Centre, provincial administrations and Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre shared with me.

environment conducive to capacity-building, policy innovation and structural harmonisation within all ASEAN member states which impact on national DRM politics, the degree of practical influence at the domestic level is highly variable, circumstantial and nuanced. Therefore, this article emphasises the domestic political dimension as the main and constant shaper of DRM in many economies of Southeast Asia.³

This article emphasises the domestic level because it assumes that in many semi-developed and developed Southeast Asian countries, the political interests of political and business elites are the most important and constant factor informing decision-making. In this context, this article builds on the notion of “elite capture” in DRM in Thailand as the central premise, presuming that “flood and disaster management are organised in such a way that it makes it easy for elites to deploy experts and technical tools in ways that serve their interests” (Garden, Lebel, and Manuta 2011: 53). The idea of elite capture in Thailand offers a good case-in-point for understanding the central DRM political issues and shapers that could be applicable to other ASEAN member states, since Thailand’s “colour”-divided politics act as a clear and traceable primary political overlay in the public sector (see Chachavalapongpun, Chongvilavan, and Michel Montesano 2012).

Given Thailand’s fluctuation between civilian and military governments and its experiences in the recent phase of military “civilianisation”,⁴ the armed forces there seem to play the predominant role in the domestic politics of DRM. In addition to the domestic setting, a variety of contemporary international conditions are conducive to the important role that armed forces play in DRM in the Asia-Pacific. These range from the aforementioned rising engagement of East Asian militaries in

3 Here, I intentionally use the word “many” instead of “all”, because sometimes international influence is implicit and difficult to detect and disentangle from domestic processes.

4 For the concept of “civilianisation”, this article is inspired by Janowitz (1963: 116–117). Janowitz defines civilianisation as a process that locates the military as an institution within society, thus premising the contingency of its development on societal processes. In particular, technological advancements necessitate institutional change within the military to emulate large-scale civilian institutions. Projecting the concept of civilianisation into the twenty-first century, this article presumes the same interdependence between the military and the societal context but extends the definition to a more generic one that relates to the notion of role expansion. That is, it understands civilianisation as a process by which the military’s role is extended into the civilian realm, and the military inserts itself into the day-to-day activities of ordinary civilians, whether in the aftermath of a coup or in regular politics.

DRM to current competitive arms processes in Asia (see Hartfiel and Job 2007; Engstrom 2013). Nevertheless, in spite of this international backdrop and the Thai military's current political leadership, this article acknowledges that the domestic landscape of DRM actors is more diverse. Alongside the armed forces, there is a multitude of civilian DRM actors in Thailand.

By highlighting the multiplicity of domestic stakeholders and, hence, the multifaceted political interests in DRM in Thailand, this article qualifies scholarly preoccupation with the international and national "militarisation"⁵ of disaster relief and underlines the role of bureaucracies as central shapers of DRM politics at the national and provincial levels.⁶ In light of this analytical focus on Thailand's bureaucratic apparatus, this article begins with a snapshot of the many government agencies and issues pertinent to flood-related DRM before delving into the chronology of the severe floods in Thailand in 2011 and the national and sub-national responses to these floods.

This article structures the empirical examination of the 2011 floods around two thematic issues. These two overarching themes are capacity and bureaucracy, which are discussed prior to the institutional overview and empirical case study. Capacity is pervasive at all levels of governance and pertains to aspects of information, budget, hardware and technology. Bureaucracy is intertwined with aspects of capacity but further touches upon the issue of centralisation and the notion of subsidiarity.

5 Drawing upon the broader environmental context of the Asia-Pacific and pre-existing multi-perspective definitions of militarisation, this article assumes a generic understanding of domestic militarisation of DRM that is understood as the wider acceptance of armed forces in DRM, facilitating a functionally and structurally extended role of the military that meets with wider acceptance domestically. By recognising the importance of institutional and popular acceptance – that is, a third party – for some form of legitimisation of the process, the definition of the concept is stretched to encompass micro-processes and the everyday lives of non-military citizens. In keeping with the case of Thailand, when middle-class families deem the Royal Armed Forces an educational and professional institution able to take care of their sons their whole lives – thereby ensuring the well-being of the family – they implicitly support a broader societal notion of militarisation.

6 Despite the increasing DRM involvement of other East Asian militaries in Thailand, such as China providing assault boats and amphibious boats to assist during the floods in mid-October 2011, this article treats these instances as irregular and goes from the premise that the two-level rationale does not constitute a constant and contingent variable for DRM politics in Thailand.

Issue of Information Capacity

After the Indian Ocean Tsunami in December 2004 revealed the gaps in early-warning systems and communication of the DRM sector in Thailand, authorities ensured that information on the impact and forecast of natural disasters would now be readily available en masse and in real time. Improved information-sharing, rapid technological advancements and institutional proliferation have catapulted DRM to becoming one of the most advanced sectors of human organisation in Thailand. State and non-state actors are actively using social media for early-warning systems and informal information-sharing, creating networks that are maintained even at official levels to connect central bureaucracies to subnational bureaucracies.

While the abundance of information reflects transparency, the management of information flows at the national level indicates that information practices could be improved if they were made more cross-agential and less conducive to disseminating selective information. For example, in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami, the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation (DDPM) within the Ministry of Interior was strengthened in all four aforementioned aspects pertaining to capacity. Specifically, in the last six years, DDPM has taken the lead role in DRM and has become the most trusted and main source of information for domestic media, international news outlets, state agencies and non-state organisations. Official partners, which channel disaster relief aid or host publicly accessible global databases, are in constant dialogue with DDPM. That is, DDPM is not only the preferred source of information, but also acts as the gatekeeper of information – an important role, given that information on natural disasters and DRM can be sensitive and politically delicate.⁷

Issue of Budgetary Capacity

The issue of budgetary capacity for DRM is currently another problematic area for DDPM and other state agencies. With the new government in 2011, government regulation related to the DRM budget allocated a fix

7 While in the immediate aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami global datasets suggest a wide array of sources for information, ranging from Christian charity groups to United Nations country offices, the last six years have seen information flows mainly originate from DDPM. It appears that there are international organisations and national and international media outlets that exclusively rely on information from DDPM. At the same time, DDPM proactively delivers information to the media.

yearly budget to account for all natural disasters in one year. This budget did not take into account worst-case scenarios and was significantly lower to previous years. Mismanagement and alternative use of the funds prompted the government at the time, under Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, to lower the DRM budget and condition its usage in relation to all natural disasters, although smaller amounts for emergency funding remained available. The yearly figures of damage caused by natural disasters exceeded the designated budget and additional funding for relief and recovery was necessary in many cases. This was, however, dependent on the liaison of the local municipalities with the provincial administration, as well as the relationship of the provincial level with Bangkok, and it compelled authorities at the local level to become more engaged in rigorous bureaucratic documentation.

While, at first glance, this budgetary regulation from the Yingluck government curbed financial demands and forced authorities to invest in timely and thorough verification and processing of claims, it did not lower the actual financial demand. Considering that the Yingluck government had to manage the costliest floods in the history of Thailand, the budget appeared disproportionately low to the reality that her government was facing. This budgetary regulation from her government has not deterred insincere claims, but has instead created bureaucratic requirements for additional funding that have led to a financial and administrative backlog that has burdened the succeeding government, which has issues of its own.

The budget for disaster relief and risk reduction is the most laborious issue of the national and provincial bureaucracies. In particular, the local DDPM desk officers based at the provincial administrations are liaising incessantly with the central government and the local districts to ensure timely verification, immediate lodgement of claims and appropriate disbursement. With the new government of 2014 and the opportunity for new legislation and regulations, provincial governments are hoping to ease their administrative burden and are proposing a new DRM budget to the central government. As of September 2014, this proposal calls for more funds to be initially available and should be, according to provincial DDPM officers, either up to 20 million THB per disaster or in total approximately 50 million THB (Interview with local DDPM officer in Suphan Buri 2014).

Issue of Hardware and Technological Capacity, and the Significance of the Military

The issue of budgetary capacity extends to the acquisition of hardware and technological capacity. On the one hand, the availability of funds determines the response of governmental actors and underlines centralised working modes, resulting in greater availability of material resources for flood prevention in Bangkok or centrally monitored early-warning technology, for example. On the other, it is the administrations in the various districts themselves that can improve capacity-building of hardware and technology and alleviate their own administrative burden through effective governance styles. Ongoing issues of governance and capacity-building highlight the importance of accessible and available military hardware and technology. While the civilian authorities appreciate access to military hardware, the “disciplinary” manpower and the experience of armed forces in disaster relief and reconstruction, they do not want to divert financial resources from the civilian sector or curtail civilian attempts to build capacity in DRM.

Furthermore, provincial and local authorities are cautious in declaring disasters or dispatching armed personnel as an initial response. If armed forces are deployed immediately, this signals a security response to the population and implies higher levels of emergency. In addition to this, sending armed forces into areas of ongoing conflict between soldiers, paramilitary and rebel groups – albeit for a different purpose – is a delicate matter that could aggravate the conflict-torn provinces in Southern Thailand. In a nutshell, although the first response of civilian authorities will always focus on community-based and civilian responses, they are ultimately dependent on the military for effective DRM.

Armed forces in Thailand have been and will be a constant force in Thailand’s political and civil life. Their presence has now increased and is felt within the DRM structures at all levels. For example, more military personnel are now based throughout the national and subnational bureaucratic apparatus and attend meetings of subnational administrations on natural disasters. These soldiers have a monitoring and stabilising role to ensure peace and order. They have neither adopted new functions within these local administrations nor been actively incorporated into the decision-making processes. This increased presence of Thai armed forces is also evident at the working level of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Some NGOs are now accompanied by military personnel when conducting fieldwork and engaging local communities in disaster preventive activities (Interview with former officer of the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre 2014).

Overview of the Core Civilian Authorities in Flood-Related Early-Warning Systems, Relief and Recovery

While the preceding paragraphs have given attention to the military as an actor in DRM, the core capacity of Thailand's DRM sector is a large bureaucratic apparatus of 30 to 40 state and state-affiliated agencies. Since the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, this bureaucratic apparatus of specialised ministries, agencies and committees has expanded and deepened on the national, provincial and district levels (Huaisai et al. 2006: 12–14). Notwithstanding the bureaucratic diversity, largesse and technocratisation which facilitate the abundance of expertise and verified information, there appears to be room for improvement in terms of developing an integrated national approach, in particular among the following eight state agencies/ministries.

These institutions deserve a closer look because they are the core DRM institutions and hold considerable responsibility in early-warning systems, relief and response in flood-related DRM: DDPM within the Ministry of Interior; the Royal Irrigation Department (RID) within the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MAC); the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) within the Ministry of Energy; the Meteorological Department of the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT); the Department of Water Resources (DWR) within the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MNRE); the National Disaster Warning Centre (NDWC) within MICT; the Ministry of Public Health (MPH); and the Office of National Water and Flood Management Policy (ONWF) within the Yingluck cabinet.

Earlier on, in regard to the issue of information capacity, this article introduced DDPM as the lead coordination centre for national and integrated DRM and outlined its role as the gatekeeper of information on natural disasters. DDPM maintains local offices within administrations on the subnational level, which act within the general guidelines of the central office in Bangkok. Its institutional structure is comparable to a concentric three-dimensional spider web linking to the subnational offices hierarchically. Other state agencies, including RID and EGAT, are similarly concentrically structured, facilitating horizontal cross-agential communication at the respective levels while maintaining the Bangkok office as the apex.

In regulating water shortage⁸ and water excess in rivers, canals and dams (10 per cent of Thailand's territory), RID has been the central authority (Interview with ONWF officer 2014). Because it is located within MAC, RID's water policies mainly concern irrigation and drainage efforts geared towards realising the broader agricultural objectives of the Ministry. Since the 2000s, significant improvements have been made in terms of legal provisions and RID coordination with other agencies (Garden, Lebel, and Manuta 2011: 49). However, since the 2011 floods, ministries and metropolitan authorities have become vocal and expressed further need for enhanced cross-agential communication.

Specifically, RID in Bangkok was put under the most scrutiny when the floods in 2011 devastated the country; in the aftermath of that, it called for improved cross-agential and Bangkok-to-province coordination. While RID controls most of the dams and their water management, EGAT is the managing authority of the major dams, including the Bhumibol and Sirikit Dams. These two dams severely impacted the water levels of Thailand's main rivers in 2011, in that year EGAT focused more on minimising loss in national electricity production than on creating additional retention capacity.

Although this article has introduced DDPM as the focal point for hazard-/disaster-related information, the Meteorological Department and its local offices also hold this function and complement DDPM as information provider. The Meteorological Department and its local offices gather data and evaluate and release weather and climatic information to the public. Prior to the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, the Meteorological Department was the primary organisation in providing early warning and informing the decisions of other state agencies. Alongside DDPM and the Meteorological Department, there are other agencies that are engaged in early-warning activities. For instance, MRE concentrates on mudslides and landslides, and NDWC warns about a broad range of natural disasters, from earthquakes and tsunamis to floods and droughts.

NDWC is a relatively young state agency that experienced considerable teething problems reminiscent of those of the slightly older Department of Water Resources. Huaisai and colleagues observed of the Department of Water Resources that

8 Noteworthy is that RID, in collaboration with MAC, is also responsible for the rain-making programme, employing aircraft for cloud-seeding to create artificial clouds and rain.

as a newly established department, coordinating with other agencies with a long-standing mandate for organisation and budgeting of water disaster-related programmes and projects proves to be challenging without the passage of an enabling law that defines the framework, mandate and organisation of water disaster-related management in the country (Huaisai et al. 2006: 17).

In spite of similar problems of institutional integration, the political context of NDWC was further complicated by the tense political situation and the occurrence of the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004. NDWC was created as an institutional response to the catastrophe to enhance information-sharing and early warning on tsunamis,⁹ earthquakes and other natural disasters in Thailand. Under political pressure from various sides concerning poor leadership, not only in preventing and managing the Indian Ocean Tsunami crisis, Thaksin hastily pushed for the establishment of NDWC as a new civilian unit within the Office of the Prime Minister; NDWC opened its doors for the first time on 30 May 2005. However, Thaksin was ousted by a military coup in September 2006 before he could pass the law to officialise NDWC. The new military government transferred NDWC to the Meteorological Department without establishing clear lines of authority. Over many years, NDWC was caught up in a legal limbo as a quasi-government agency.

Being tasked to provide early warning on all kinds of natural disasters; collect, analyse and disseminate information on disasters to relevant agencies and the public; and conduct disaster warning and relief drills with related agencies, NDWC's mandate is similar to that of DDPM. Thus, NDWC had and still has to compete against DDPM and other established agencies to carve out its niche responsibilities. Beyond the similarity in mandate, its outreach operability resembles that of DDPM, in the sense that it has developed an information and communication network throughout Thailand. The so-called "people's network" with over 200,000 members connects local knowledge with structures of governance and offers participatory channels. In contrast to DDPM's network, NDWC's network aims to retrieve and provide information informally at the civil society and grassroots level, through radio (Big FM and Looktung radio stations), telephone and online social media.

Despite competing mandates with other state agencies, NDWC works closely with many of them, including DDPM, RID, EGAT and the Meteorological Department. At the ministerial level, it collaborates

9 In 2005, NDWC put in place 79 warning towers in coastal provinces and launched a US-funded deepsea buoy in the Indian Ocean to detect tidal waves.

with MRE, and to a lesser extent MPH and MAC. MPH is also involved in tasks related to early warning. However, its focus is on raising preparedness of the medical infrastructure in the recovery phase, in which it mainly provides material, medical and psychological support. In light of the importance of Thailand's agricultural sector and its vulnerability to weather patterns, MAC is another ministry pertinent to flood relief, recovery and reconstruction, from the distribution of new seedlings to financial compensation for farmers.

Finally, in response to the 2011 floods, the former government of Yingluck set up new institutions on the national level that could harness the water-related competences of the various state agencies and focus on the effective and coordinated management of water-related disasters. Created to act as coordinating bodies between the various ministries and agencies involved in various aspects of flood management are: the National Water Resources and Flood Policy Committee (NWRFPC), the Water and Flood Management Commission (WFMC) and ONWF. The task of NWRFPC, chaired by the prime minister, is to develop policies. It is supported strategically and administratively by WFMC, which is chaired by the Minister of Science and Technology. These new institutional structures are supported operationally by the ONWF and its sub-units located within the Office of the Prime Minister. Having recruited and incorporated technocrats from other ministries into ONWF – predominantly RID and the Department of Water Resources – the former PM ensured that cabinet decisions were expertise-driven.

On 22 May 2014 the Yingluck government was ousted, jeopardising the future of the young ONWF structure. Similarly to NDWC, which was also an institution supported by the Shinawatra political coalition, ONWF is now experiencing a phase of high institutional uncertainty about its future. Having been created to ensure technocratic support for an efficient management of future natural disasters by “single command” of the PM, ONWF's mandate has been linked to the Office of the Prime Minister and did not have the time to integrate into Thailand's broader decentralised DRM bureaucracy. Designed and staffed to address water-related disasters specifically, these technocracies competed against units within established agencies and seemingly contributed to further inflation of Thailand's bureaucratic apparatus, although most of the expert staff wore two hats and have been borrowed from established state agencies. At the same time, the established agencies themselves are undergoing transformations and incorporating more expertise-driven and technocratic components. Technocratisation and institution-building processes

in Thailand's bureaucratic apparatus are delicate and require special balancing and negotiation skills.

Furthermore, complicating NWRFP's – and hence, ONWF's – situation is its engulfment in a legal battle since 2012. These institutions are facing allegations that certain planned projects did not comply with the Constitution, breaching Articles 57(2) and 67(2). These articles spell out that authorities must carry out environmental and health impact assessments prior to the implementation of schemes that have the potential to cause adverse environmental and social impacts (*The Nation* 2014). ONWF's difficulties are symptomatic of the broader issue of political allegiances in Thai politics. The overlay of colour politics has strongly determined the institutional dynamics and degree of people orientation of the newly created institutions. Similar to other sectors, DRM appears subject to elite capture, suggesting that institutional innovation and shuffling also occur for the purpose of consolidating political power of any ruling government.

These described state agencies constitute the core capacity in Thailand's flood management bureaucracy. While cross-agential coordination takes place among them, they seek to work rigidly within their jurisdiction. Thereby, scholars have observed that these and other – here unmentioned – agencies tend to disregard the impact of their work on others (Huaisai et al. 2006: 16). Divergence of functions and interests inhibits and complicates inter-agential relationships. At the same time, this divergence can spur cooperation among different institutions, since this compels them to develop knowledge and understanding of each other's interests.

This aspect of mutual learning through verbal interaction is demonstrated well by the water quota system. In light of the annually recurring droughts in Thailand, the water quota is pre-determined for each ministry. There are instances where MAC might require more water for farmers while, simultaneously, the Ministry of Industry might need more water for industrial sites. In these situations, where various ministries have differing client groups and interests, dialogue is important. For example, water basin committee meetings have become established pathways in resolving conflicting interests. Such meetings also involve representatives¹⁰ from the affected local communities who could be politicians, Buddhist spiritual leaders, police officers or military officials.

10 These community leaders can have any professional background as long as they are respected persons who have contributed and brought wealth to the community. In particular, in regard to DRM, military officers are appreciated and respected in light of their expertise and experience.

Research on the 2011 floods has confirmed the continuity of long-standing institutional problems related to inter-institutional rivalry and the lack of cross-agential coordination. Already in 2006 it has been said that the “persistence of organisational interests has not resulted in creative competition, but rather a diminished overall capacity to reduce the risks of flood disasters” (Huaisai et al. 2006: 16). Concomitantly, poor coordination is exacerbated and institutionalised as a result of bureaucratic competition that starts at higher levels within the agencies (Huaisai et al. 2006: 16). For these reasons, coordination efforts in DRM have been, and still are today, negligible among state agencies (see Shook 1997; Huaisai et al. 2006; Foran et al. 2012).

Civil Society Input and Decentralisation

These institutional assessments may be gradually changing; however, state agencies are still competing with each other to ensure competent and responsible execution of their individual functions. Institutional and functional rigidity helps prevent administrative overstretch and competency encroachment, but delimits institutional learning and input from civil society and the community. Although “politicians increasingly view flood disasters as opportunities and have been instrumental in making the bureaucracy more responsive to public inputs”, political responses at multiple levels have not necessarily translated into real action or catered to the needs of the poor and vulnerable (Foran et al. 2012: 134 and 139).

While these bureaucracies are mainly located in Bangkok, many of them entertain local offices and rely on the principle of subsidiarity as the working mode. These offices are responsible for the initial response, and they function autonomously to a certain degree. Floods that cannot be managed at the local level are relegated to the next higher level: from the local administrative level (*tongtin*) to the district level (*amphoe*) to the provincial level (*jangwad*). The socio-economic and political inhomogeneity among the 77 provinces and within their districts complicates the implementation of subsidiarity, which has, in practice, led to high dependency on the central authorities in Bangkok. At the same time, administrative and budgetary capacity is still concentrated, giving the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) an advantage in terms of access to resources and policy-making. Opportunity of access for the provinces has increased through decentralisation reforms, despite the enhanced entrenchment of Thailand’s central bureaucracy throughout the kingdom. Thereby, the state bureaucracy overlaid rather than replaced local structures (Huaisai et al. 2006: 14).

The preceding paragraphs clarified issues of capacity and centralised bureaucracy, which are key to understanding disaster relief politics in Thailand. The discussion of the individual institutions highlighted the significance of colour politics and further indicated secondary political cleavages that can be subsumed under second-order power politics. These stem from, first, the hierarchical bureaucratic/technocratic divide between the centre and the provinces and, second, the intra-agential as well as inter-agential tensions due to diverging institutional interests, approaches, layers of allegiances and mandates. These cleavages can be broadly categorised as the following three dichotomous sets: old versus new institutions, technocracy (emphasis on effective expertise translation) versus bureaucracy (administrative thoroughness) and centralised but with direct people orientation versus decentralised with indirect people orientation. The two central issues and the three dichotomies will be fleshed out through the following chronological discussion of the floods in 2011 and the various institutional responses to them.

The Case of the 2011 Floods

The year 2011 was a turbulent one for Thailand. On top of the political circus that culminated in the dissolution of Parliament on 10 May 2011, Thailand was challenged by a series of storms. Moreover, in April, the government led by Abhisit Vejjajiva of the Democrat Party was still dealing with the financial burden from the 2010 flooding when the flood crisis in the South unfolded. The floods in the South required additional financial and material attention, leading to the cabinet's approval of new flood relief and compensation schemes. In addition to the financial burden from the floods in 2010 and the floods in the South in early 2011, the Abhisit government had to deal with popular backlash, since there were accusations against some state agencies which had allowed flooding of some rural areas to protect the metropolitan region in 2010.

While the South was battling floods, the North was affected by droughts. The divergence and variability in seasons across the country is a phenomenon to which authorities are accustomed. Towards the end of June, amid the ending drought season in the North, the first of a series of tropical storms hit Northern Thailand. On 25 June, the monsoon season set in, while 17 provinces were still considered drought disaster zones by DDPM. The Department was aware of the early storm season; it warned of Tropical Storm Haima on 21 June and dispatched personnel into the areas that were predicted to be in the path of the monsoon. On 24 June, the Department of Mineral Resources issued a storm warning.

Other ministries and agencies also released warnings and were on alert. After the storm hit, DDPM provided regular daily reports and monitored the flood situation, while keeping an eye on the drought situation in other parts of the country. Local DDPM and MRE offices provided timely updates on the risk of flash floods and landslides. On 28 June, MPH ordered local hospitals to be ready for the health-related impact on the population affected by the storms and floods. In early July, MPH was involved in distributing material support, including medical kits. Despite the political vacuum, it appeared that DDPM and other agencies could continue their mandates effectively at all levels.

On 3 July, the political vacuum was on its way to being ended after nationwide elections saw a landslide victory of the Pheu Thai Party and their candidate for prime minister, Yingluck, re-introducing supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra into power. Another chapter of “red” leadership was opened, and immediately the incoming PM was under pressure to make her mark and deal with the unfolding flood crisis (Pongsudhirak 2011). However, it was not until early August that the new leadership was sworn into power.

At the end of July, Tropical Storm Nock-ten hit Thailand’s northern and northeastern provinces, causing the Yom and Nan Rivers to swell. The northern and central provinces flooded and hindered the release of water from the major dams further upstream. These dams were just in the process of adjusting their water release cycle from dry season to monsoon season. Safeguarding against unpredictable early- or late-season storms on the basis of worst-case-scenario storage capacity in dual-purpose reservoirs is impossible and commercially undesirable (Jachowski et al. 2012).

In 2011, the seasonal change proved to be a serious challenge for the authorities who managed the dams in the North. Fearful of droughts and a loss in electricity generation, RID and EGAT did not immediately release the same amounts of water as they had in previous years. Nonetheless, it seemed that until early July the capacity levels in the dams were similar to the previous year, until these levels spiked at the end of July. In hindsight, on 13 October Smith Dharmasarojana, the former director-general of the Meteorological Department and former chairman of NDWC, criticised the lack of coordination among the established and large-scale state bureaucracies of RID, EGAT and the Meteorological Department. He claimed that they failed to submit an appropriate water retention and release figure to all agencies (Fernquest 2011). Although Tropical Storm Haima was downgraded to a tropical depression before hitting Northern Thailand and caused localised floods only in the Nan

and Sukhothai Provinces, the upstream dams and rivers of the Chao Praya and neighbouring rivers started amassing water, and the makings of the crisis began.

When Nock-ten struck, the political vacuum was not yet resolved, but the functioning of the ministries, agencies and the military in situations of natural disasters appeared to be in regular working mode. The vast and closely networked array of government agencies seemed capable of executing their mandate with a central government that was not yet fully functioning.¹¹ For example, on 28 July, the Thai Meteorological Department and RID issued a storm warning. Additionally, MPH was actively providing situation updates and sharing its assessments with other agencies, dispatching medical helpers and distributing material assistance.

On 3 August, Royal Thai Army (RTA) Commander-in-Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha expressed concern over the flood situation and ordered his troops to assist and provide equipment immediately. This included the dispatch of engineers of the RTA's Department of Army Engineers and the provision of 250 mobile catering trucks (Government of Thailand 2011a). However, in a time of political vacuum, the movement of troops and equipment – as well as the heightened visibility of the RTA in the media, just days before the inauguration of the new government – added pressure to the incoming prime minister, who was already engulfed in political tensions. Although these military movements were conducted cautiously within the context of disaster relief and mitigation, Thailand's political history suggests that a certain degree of wariness is always warranted.

When Yingluck took office on 5 August, and her cabinet was officialised five days later, the flood crisis was already of a severe magnitude. Furthermore, several low pressure formations brought continuous precipitation to the North of the country. Seemingly on a daily basis, DDPM declared new flood disaster zones, putting pressure on the new government. In addition to this, the opposition party's activism compelled the government to act. The opposition Democrat Party worked alongside civil society to open flood centres in three affected regions (Government of Thailand 2011b). Finally, on 25 August, the new government declared its policy on managing the floods and noted that the water-retention capacity within the Bhumibol and Sirikit Dams was at

11 This, of course, is conditioned by the organisational structure and mandate. For instance, neither DDPM's function as an assessor of what constitutes a disaster zone nor NDWC's and the Meteorological Department's early-warning tasks require governmental authority at any step of the mandate's execution.

maximum levels. While in early August only ten provinces were declared flood disaster zones, at the end of August, over 20 provinces were affected and water levels in the major dams were dangerously high – Sirikit Dam was at 94 per cent of its capacity (Hungspreug 2013). The preceding drought in many provinces and the early onset of considerable monsoonal precipitation added to the management complexity of releasing water from the dams.

By 10 September, all provincial authorities were aware of the ongoing or imminent floods and devised plans accordingly. However, the month of September is a crucial month for the final rice harvest before the annual flooding of the central provinces. Local farmers in Nakhon Sawan and neighbouring provinces requested a delay of the opening of the dams and sluice gates for drainage. Even though authorities were aware that some small dams were not designed to hold back those water masses of 2011 for another one or two weeks, provincial governments and state agencies including RID/MAC and the Department of Water Resources understood the basic necessity of this September harvest for the farmers in the Central Plains.

On 3 September, the Yingluck government supported the farmers and announced the upcoming approval of a policy that would release less water to allow the rice farmers downstream to complete their harvest. This was a signal from the incipient government. It did not clarify issues of livelihood and compensation, but made local authorities comfortable enough to accept the will of the farmers (Interview with Deputy Governor of Suphan Buri 2014). On 14 September, Bang Chomsri Dam in Sing Buri broke, flooding neighbouring areas and destroying the rice harvest of farmers in Nakhon Sawan. This accumulation of higher water masses and the delayed release exceeded expected water masses further downstream and thus, impinged on flood preparedness in Bangkok and affected BMA severely.

The situation in Suphan Buri Province was similarly threatening for local rice farmers. RID Bangkok recommended an immediate water release and drainage within Suphan Buri to ease floods and imminent flooding in BMA. The authorities in Suphan Buri held provincial meetings with input from the local population and established that there were two districts that needed particular protection and that their rice harvest could be ensured through a two-week delay in water release, until 30 September at the latest (Interview with Deputy Governor of Suphan Buri 2014). The dams in Suphan Buri did not break, but upon water release BMA again was the victim of a centralised policy that lacked

provincial follow-through, raising questions about the extent to which the principle of subsidiarity should apply on the subnational levels.

Political leaders and agencies in Bangkok were infuriated with Suphan Buri's autonomous handling of the matter. Heated debates took place in Parliament, crystallising a strong component of power politics. Although existing studies on floods elsewhere in Thailand have described district and provincial authorities and their knowledge as "meaningless", since key and final decisions are made in Bangkok (Huaisai et al. 2006: 16). In practice, political allegiances and the personal status of politicians can trump or circumvent central decision-making. They can influence the extent to which central policies and recommendations are enforced one-to-one on the provincial level, such as in the case of Suphan Buri where provincial authorities enjoyed favourable conditions in terms of power politics. The province is the stronghold of Banharn Silapa-archa – coalition partner of the prime minister at the time – who backed Suphan Buri's degree of autonomy from Bangkok (see Nishizaki 2011).

At the end of September, Tropical Storms Haitang, Nesat and Nalgae had busted the retention capacity of the major dams. Smaller dams and barriers downstream could no longer delay the imminent devastation in and around BMA. By early October, the natural disaster became a full-blown economic crisis. For example, lower levels of rice production pressured the government to quickly make good on its promise to implement the rice subsidy scheme that it campaigned on in the election. On 7 October, the scheme was launched. Beyond the agricultural pressures, there were enormous industrial pressures on the new government. Major industrial complexes of multinational corporations in Ayyuthaya were inundated. Within hours, the floods halved the yearly profit of many of these companies and destroyed the confidence of foreign investors. In the aftermath, the Yingluck government invested in economic shuttle diplomacy to reassure foreign investors. While Yingluck committed to institutional improvement in DRM, which was meant to appease both foreign and domestic audiences, it seemed that the government's urgency to act and reach out to foreign and domestic audiences was expedited only once large-scale devastation occurred at industrial sites.

The human plight varied from affected province to province and district to district. It clearly showed that provincial and district authorities were preoccupied with protecting and evacuating their own industry and people. They failed to coordinate with each other on material support, water pathways and evacuation centres. While in one evacuation

centre there may have been plenty of food, the centre in a neighbouring district might have lacked food altogether, although it might have hosted triple the number of refugees than the first centre (Interview with RID officer 2014). Furthermore, experiences of past floods have indicated the problem of corruption in regard to material support post-disaster (Huai-sai et al. 2006: 16). Corruption is entrenched and relates to the notion of elite capture introduced in the beginning. Pitsom Meethom and colleagues (Meethom, Pantaku, and Poaponsakorn 2014) from the Thailand Development Research Institute have shown, for instance, that in metropolitan areas land use and zoning laws have been changed by politicians to serve business interests and land developers. They exemplified the Thaksin government as a flood culprit because it had the Suvarnabhumi Airport built in a water catchment zone.

The high tide aggravated the flood situation, compelling the central government to engage in make-shift and reactive institution-building, as well as pro-active public diplomacy. The Yingluck government formed the Flood Relief Operations Command (FROC) on 8 October. Amid the institutional acts of desperation and the political tensions, opposition leader Abhisit Vejjajiva of the Democrat Party and Yingluck reached out to each other, signalling political reconciliatory efforts in a time of crisis. On 11 October, Yingluck informed Abhisit and fellow Democrat Party representatives about the ongoing and prospective flood relief operations. However, on 14 October, Abhisit and the military called for the PM to declare state of emergency. Possibly wary of the consequences that could feed the political power of the rival political factions if such a suggestion were to be implemented, the PM, in turn, opted to invoke the Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Act of 2007, giving herself and the government greater authority to manage the floods.

The invocation of this act and with it the single-command principle was unprecedented. Empowering the PM and cabinet (thus, national and centralised decision-making), this law could trump provincial interests and mitigate the BMA's degree of affectedness. However, political leadership and activism remained similar to the situation pre-invocation. This is not to say that Yingluck did not commit to asserting her authority through the single command. In some instances she did, albeit ambiguously: Often times, she attempted to please local protesters, although this may have clashed with the interests of some subnational authorities. Other times, decisive orders empowering local authorities against local protesters were given too late. For example, by the time Yingluck ordered the closure of the Phra-in Racha sluice gate in Khlong Raphipat in

Ayutthaya Province north of Bangkok, local RID officials could no longer close the gate due to the strong flood currents (Fredrickson 2011a).

On 16 October, Yingluck continued with flood activism. She and the Minister of Science and Technology, Prodrasop Surasawadee, witnessed the launch of a new operation to manage the floods. Ships were launched on the Chao Praya River to accelerate flows and propel water downstream into the ocean. Meanwhile in BMA and neighbouring provinces, people were increasingly stockpiling food and ATMs were running out of cash. On 17 October, media outlets and Yingluck attempted to curb this spreading panic and assured the people that the floods had mitigated. However, the very same day of her announcement, the Rangsit area of BMA was severely flooded, evoking greater disapproval of the official information policy.

In early November, the dispute between BMA Governor Sukhumband Paribatra from the Democrat Party and the Pheu Thai central government delayed the effective protection of the metropolitan area. When the BMA asked FROC to instruct RID to open twenty sluice gates in Nong Chok District in Chachoengsao Province to drain water from the metropolitan area through the Bang Pakong River, this demand was only partially realised. Kamolvej (2014: 110) described the standoff between BMA and FROC/central government as reflecting “poor collaboration and unity of command”. While she acknowledged that the ineffectiveness of the central government forced BMA to go ahead with implementing flood measures within BMA jurisdiction without FROC leadership, she criticised BMA’s actions as inconsiderate of neighbouring provinces (Kamolvej 2014: 110). Indeed, the provinces of Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, Nakhon Pathom and Samut Sakorn suffered from BMA’s water release policy, which even led to Nonthaburi Province considering legal charges against BMA at the end of November.

Overriding BMA flood management, Yingluck succumbed to the pressure of local protesters north of Bangkok, who demanded an opening of various sluice gates in BMA to facilitate water run-off from the northern provinces. The Klong Sam Wa sluice gate bordering BMA was one such major dispute. Governor Sukhumband and his advisors resisted, because the opening of this sluice gate would definitely cause flooding within four parts of BMA. He said, “Without a written order, I will not do it no matter how [strong] the pressure” (Fredrickson 2011b). On 5 November, the political clash intensified when BMA suggested drafting a new flood management plan, if FROC did not manage to spell out an immediate plan for BMA and provide the material support for the purpose of drainage that had been requested more than a week prior.

Sensitive to provincial and local political interests, FROC could not meet the demands of BMA. Cabinet attempted to ease the political pressure on itself and FROC, and approved further committees to assist in the post-flood recovery. As an ad hoc institution, FROC was overburdened by its task of managing these uncontrollable water masses in 2011. Kamolvej (2014: 111) stated that FROC was not qualified to negotiate and explain during the disaster and, above all, FROC “failed” in terms of communication to the Thai authorities and people.

On 27 November, during the no-confidence motion debate concerning General Pracha Promnok, the head of FROC who was also the Minister of Justice, General Pracha defended himself and FROC and made a conspiracy theory about the flood a topic of parliamentary debate. He referred to the Chinese story of the Kongbeng plot, where water was retained just to be released upon the enemy. He claimed that the previous government purposely refrained from implementing similar water control measures in 2009 and 2010, because the government then knew that it would lose the national elections on 3 July. He questioned why there was lack of water release from the Bhumibol and Sirikit Dams after Tropical Storm Haima hit. Former PM Abhisit defended his government’s conduct and asked why the incoming government did not begin with flood management work the day they were sworn in, since this was allowed by law.

In the end, it appears that the various political parties were playing the blame game on the basis of legal provisions and scientific data and could, indeed, only agree on the fact that heavy monsoonal rain saturated the absorptive capacity of the Central Plains, and by the time the major dams discharged water, the absorptive capacity was overstrained and unmanageable for any government. Countrywide bureaucracies had concentrated on preventive structures and capacity that could not hold up in a worst-case flood scenario such as this one. The catastrophe made clear that these bureaucracies needed to incorporate greater scientific data into policy implementation. Furthermore, it underlined the necessity for improved water disaster-related construction and institutionalisation at all levels. The former was addressed through, among other strategies, the construction of higher roads acting as barriers, new canals and dike projects, some of which triggered further inter- and intra-provincial controversy.

Institution-building was enhanced on the national level in 2012 when NWRFPCC, WFMC and ONWF were created within the Office of

the Prime Minister.¹² With the creation of these institutions, a more systematic and expertise-driven understanding of flood management was introduced among the state agencies and attempted to be mainstreamed. The systematisation of the understanding of flood-related DRM included the compartmentalisation of the main river basin area into three zones from North to South and the practical consolidation of the single-command system contingent on the four levels of disaster and response.¹³

During and in the aftermath of the floods, Yingluck's decision-making also reflected the normative continuation of her brother's political rhetoric and agenda. In particular, the aspects of people orientation and decentralisation were emphasised, although the invocation of the single command system suggests otherwise. In reference to the single command, political power shifted to the cabinet and gave a renewed focus to the civilian government. Although the single command system favours effectiveness over the principles of subsidiarity and decentralisation, the government appeared unchanged in its implementation of flood management policies, particularly from a BMA perspective.

Ongoing legal issues since July 2012 related to the PM's water management plan point towards the gap between the government's guideline of people orientation and actual input from civil society. While the Supreme Administrative Court may have dismissed the case brought against Yingluck and the water-related agencies – involving staff from the now in limbo NWRPC (Bangprapa 2014), the mere fact that this case was brought to court by a civil society organisation (CSO), the Stop Global Warming Association, and 45 village representatives exhibited the disconnect between policy-planning and people orientation, raising questions about the extent to which people orientation contributed to political ends. Nevertheless, because of the extensive geographic scale of the 2011 floods and the considerable stretch of state capacity, state institutions are now giving greater recognition to non-state actors and have actively authorised state auxiliary organisations and CSOs to assist and even act on their behalf.

Local CSOs are especially important in defending human rights and raising local awareness that could change the safety culture and scepticism towards guidelines from Bangkok. For example, the former director of DDPM, Montree Chanachaviboonwat, once expressed concern about the number of deaths by drowning and electrocution in November

12 Please refer to the overview of core flood-related institutions discussed.

13 These four levels are based on the geographic scale of affectedness (sub-district, district, provincial, national) and the scientific determinants of severity that are specific to the type of disaster.

2010, saying that “the safety culture of the people is quite low [...]. Some went to pray and had to swim through the water. Others went fishing” (IRIN 2010). Although some state agencies and CSOs are still bemoaning the lacking attention to early-warning systems and DRM drills in some rural areas, overall, the safety culture of the Thai people seems to have improved. In interviews, military, state and CSO representatives have ascertained that in the aftermath of the 2011 floods, Thais are showing greater seriousness towards most of the recently installed early-warning mechanisms and drills (Interview with RTA officer 2011; Interview with former officer of the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre 2014; Interview with local DDPM officer in Suphan Buri 2014).

Conclusions

In the beginning, this article introduced the two thematic issues of capacity and bureaucracy as the central issues shaping domestic DRM of semi-developed countries in Southeast Asia like Thailand. It further noted three dichotomous sets pertaining to the domestic politics of DRM in Thailand (old versus new institutions, technocracy versus bureaucracy and centralised but with direct people orientation versus decentralised with indirect people orientation). Through the discussion of the central agencies in water-related DRM and the floods in Thailand in 2011, this article placed the two central issues and the three dichotomies into a specific empirical context.

The overview of the core agencies revealed problems of inter-institutional competition and coordination, in particular. While institutional innovation and shuffling indicated in the institutional overview also served the purpose of consolidating power politics along the lines of the colour divide, it was mainly the narrative of the 2011 floods that explicated these colour-based political tensions through the stand-off between BMA and FROC/central government. Most importantly, the illustration of the flood crisis highlighted the delicate relationship between the central authorities and the authorities on the subnational level. In spite of Thailand’s centralised political system, the principle of subsidiarity applies and, seemingly, local authorities ultimately determine the level of enforcement of central government policies. In particular, this related to issues of water release for drainage and appropriate openings of the sluice gates. Local implementation diverged from the orders and guidelines from the state agencies in Bangkok, disgruntling BMA and impacting BMA flood prevention severely. At the same time, it was the central agencies and BMA that did not necessarily agree with the orders

given by FROC/central government, crystallising a rather confused and diffuse picture of national flood management. While it appears that many realms of governance are sensitive and highly contingent on decisions in Bangkok, the flood crisis as a political crisis has made clear that the decentralised bureaucratic system is sufficiently established to maintain effective local-level governance in some provinces in times of central government crisis – or, rather, non-existence of the central government.

Aside from the politics cleaving around the tension between the centre and the subnational levels, the politics of DRM also emerged in relation to institutionalisation processes. For instance, there was the tragic role of FROC: As a temporary institution under a new government, it was particularly challenged and seemed neglected among the established institutions. This example and the discussion of NDWC and ONWF exemplified the dichotomy of old versus new institutions. ONWF and other flood-related institutions created post-2011 by the interest of a particular government are now facing difficult times of consolidation. While they were created to raise the confidence levels of foreign investors and presented as the urgently needed people-oriented and technocratic institutional response to harness various areas of expertise of the many state agencies, their efficacy is ultimately contingent on the cooperative attitudes of the established bureaucracies, which are also increasingly developing along expertise-driven and participatory lines.

The final paragraphs of the flood chronology showed that actual people orientation was difficult and even a paradox within niche-specific and smaller state agencies. In attempting to please the grassroots level and work toward people's interests, technocracies as well as bureaucracies sometimes do not use the people's input practically and decentralise effectively. The Dusit Poll (2011) conducted on 27 November at the height of the flood crisis was telling of the relational deficit between the people and the bureaucracy/technocracy. It suggested that Thailand's population was satisfied with Yingluck's management of the floods and impressed by the hands-on support of the military, but sceptical of the work of the various state institutions. In conclusion, it appears that the overlay of colour politics acted as the overarching site of political contestation. The political and disaster-centric perspective of the study further confirmed that the two central issues and the three dichotomies were integral political stumbling blocks for effective and genuinely people-oriented DRM.

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