

Why have most Thai NGOs chosen to side with the conservative royalists, against democracy and the poor?

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In the present political crisis in Thailand, it is shocking that most Thai NGOs have disgraced themselves by siding with the Yellow Shirt elites or remaining silent in the face of the general attack on democracy. It is shocking because NGO activists started out by being on the side of the poor and the oppressed in society. To explain this situation, we must go beyond a simple explanation that relies on personal failings of individuals or suggestions that NGOs have 'underlying bad intentions', or that they are 'agents of imperialism'.

At the start of the anti-Thaksin protests, many NGOs joined the PAD¹ demonstrators. This was understandable because the top leadership of the PAD contained people with NGO connections. At the time it was legitimate to protest against the excesses of the government, although it was questionable whether the NGOs should have joined forces with conservative royalists like Sonti Limtongkul. Soon, however, NGO involvement with the PAD, and then the military junta after the coup of 2006, went far beyond anything that can be classified as genuine support for freedom and democracy. At every twist and turn in the crisis, the majority of NGOs ended up on the side of the elite and the oppressors. There is a real need to re-assess tactics and strategy.

After the 2006 coup, some Thai NGO leaders, such as Rawadee Parsertjaroensuk (NGO-Coordinating Committee), Nimit Tienudom (AIDS network), Banjong Nasa (Southern Fisher Folk network), Witoon Permpongsajaroen (Ecology movement) and Sayamon Kaiyurawong (Thai Volunteer Service) etc. put themselves forward in the hope that the military would select them as appointed senators. Earlier, NGO activists such as Rawadee Parsertjaroensuk and Nimit Tienudom attended PAD rallies. Nimit claimed at a rally on 23rd March 2006, that most Thaksin supporters 'did not know the truth' about his government². This is patronising to the poor. Many NGO leaders such as Nimit, also told their members not to protest against the military junta at the closing ceremony of the Thai Social Forum in October 2006, although the leadership of the NGO-Coordinating Committee supported this protest. Immediately after the coup, even the Thai staff of Focus on Global South supported the coup³, although Walden Bello maintained a principled opposition to dictatorship. Some NGO activists became government appointees under the military junta. Most had illusions that the military would clean up

¹ PAD= misnamed 'Peoples Alliance for Democracy', the Yellow Shirts.

² *Prachatai* 23/3/2006 www.prachatai.com.

³ <http://focusweb.org/the-thai-coup-democracy-and-wearing-yellow-on-mondays.html?Itemid=93> by Chanida Chanyapate and Alec Bamford

Thai politics with their new constitution. During the Thai Social Forum itself, large Thai NGOs like *Raks Thai Foundation* brought yellow-shirted (royalist) villagers to the forum. This NGO receives a large amount of money from the Thai state. This raises the issue of 'GNGOs', i.e. government funded NGOs. A large source of funds for Thai NGOs today comes from the state funded 'Office of the Thai Health Promotion Fund'⁴.

It is interesting to compare a number of statements made by NGO-COD (the NGO national Coordinating Committee) about the violent PAD protests throughout 2008, with the statements made in April 2009 about Red Shirt protests. The substance of the difference is in the emphasis. In May, June and September 2008, Pairoj Polpet, as NGO-COD chairperson issued statements calling for the pro-Thaksin government to respect the right of the PAD to 'peaceful protest'. In June 2008, NGO-COD called on the pro-Thaksin government to resign. Elected PAD and NGO senator, Rosana Tositrakul, stated that the government had no right to disperse the PAD protestors who had seized Government House. It is important to note that the pro-Thaksin government did not use the army or live ammunition on the PAD. Police use of tear-gas, may however, have caused one death.

Later, in April 2009, after the Democrats had been manoeuvred into power by the army and PAD, NGO-COD called on the Red Shirts to stop 'violent protests' and later praised the voluntary ending of Red Shirt protests as a way to build peace. They called on the government to 'only use legal means to disperse protestors'. One day later, the army and the government used live ammunition to disperse the Red Shirts, killing and injuring many. An NGO-COD statement a week later *did not* call on the government to resign⁵. The Consumers' Association, AIDS networks and Slum Dwellers group, under the leadership of Nimit Tienudom and Saree Ongsomwang, went further and denounced the Red Shirt protests on 13th April, but not the actions of the government.

How did the Thai NGOs become so reactionary, siding with the conservative elites against the poor in the suppression of democracy? There is an urgent need to analyse this problem because NGO activists started out as the champions of the rural poor. Could it happen elsewhere? Is there a general lesson to be learnt here?

In the 1980s Thai NGOs worked under the slogan 'the answer is in the villages', reflecting a respect for ordinary villagers. Despite being well-meaning, the lack of politics in the NGO movement, and also a lack of democracy and accountability has let them down and they have been increasingly drawn to reactionary right-wing politics.

⁴ www.thaihealth.or.th

⁵ *Prachatai* May, June, September 2008, 13, 15 & 23 April 2009. www.prachatai.com.

After the 'collapse of communism' the NGO movement turned its back on 'politics' and the primacy of mass movements and political parties in the 1980s. Instead they embraced 'lobby politics' and community anarchism. The two go together because they reject any confrontation or competition with the state. They reject building a big picture political analysis. Instead of building mass movements or political parties, the NGOs concentrated on single-issue campaigns as part of their attempt to avoid confrontation with the state. This way of working also dove-tails with grant applications from international funding bodies and leads to a de-politicisation of the movement. The NGOs also oppose representative democracy because they believe it only leads to dirty money politics. But the direct democracy in village communities, which they advocate, is powerless in the face of the all-powerful state. It also glorifies traditional and conservative village leaders.

Initially the NGOs loved-up to Thaksin's *Thai Rak Thai* government. They believed that it was open to NGO lobbying, which it was. *Thai Rak Thai* took on board the idea of a universal health care system from progressive doctors and health-related NGOs. But then, when they were wrong-footed by the government's raft of pro-poor policies that seemed to prove to villagers that the NGOs had only been 'playing' at development, they rushed over to love-up to the conservative royalists. Such an about-face was only possible by ignoring politics, international lessons and any theory. NGO leaders argue proudly that they are the 'true activists', not bookworms or theoreticians. This explains why they can justify to themselves the support for the 2006 coup and why they have failed to defend democracy since. Instead of bothering to analyse the political situation, they beat a path to lobby generals, governments of every shade and anyone who has power.

Granted, the political situation was extremely messy and difficult. In 2006 you had *Thai Rak Thai*, a big business party with a record of Human Rights abuses and corruption. On the other hand you had the army and the conservative royalists, with a history of human rights abuses and corruption. There was not much to choose from between the two. But *Thai Rak Thai* had power through the electoral process. In this situation the NGOs should have remained neutral and with the poor and they should have opposed the coup. But they were angry that *Thai Rak Thai* had won over their supporters and were distrustful of *Thai Rak Thai's* use of the state to build welfare programmes and stimulate the economy. This distrust came from an anarchistic distrust of the state. For many NGOs, welfare should be organised by communities. But this anti-state position opened the door to accepting a neo-liberal concept of a small state, a view shared by the conservative royalists. Their anarchistic rejection of representative politics, also allowed them to see 'no difference' between a parliament controlled by *Thai Rak Thai* and a military coup.

Since the poor voted on mass for *Thai Rak Thai*, the NGOs have become viciously patronising towards villagers, claiming that they 'lack the right information' to make political decisions. In fact, there was always a patronising

element to their work. Many Thai NGO leaders are self-appointed middle class activists who shun elections and believe that NGOs should 'nanny' peasants and workers. They are now fearful and contemptuous of the Red Shirt movement, which is starting a process of self-empowerment of the poor. Of course, the Red Shirts are not angels, but in today's crisis, they represent the poor and the thirst for freedom and democracy.

The NGO movement's relationship with NGO and trade union leaders in the PAD was also a factor. The top PAD leadership was made up of a coalition between (1) Sondhi Limtongkul: conservative royalist media tycoon and owner of the *Manager Group*; (2) Chamlong Simuang: leading light in the reactionary and anti-abortion Buddhist *Santi Asoke* movement; (3) Somsak Kosaisuk: retired leader of the railway workers union; (4) Pipop Tongchai: advisor to the *Campaign for Popular Democracy* and 'NGO elder'; (5) Somkiat Pongpaiboon: activist working with teachers' groups and farmers; and (6) Suriyasai Takasila: ex-student movement bureaucrat.

What the NGO, student and trade union activists in the PAD leadership had in common was a lack of any genuine mass base. People like Pipop did not lead NGO-COD. Somsak never managed to get a strike going on the railways to protect working conditions or oppose privatisation. They were people who had become bureaucratised and distant from ordinary activists. Instead they looked to other forces which could mobilise people and resources, including the conservative royalists. Nevertheless, they were able to call on personal support from many NGO networks and state enterprise unions 'for old times sake'.

In general terms, what we can say about the Thai experience is that the NGO movement is now lined up with the elite against the mass of the population⁷. It is no longer possible for progressive people to work with them⁸. Unless serious splits and changes occur, they cannot be regarded as part of any civil society movement for Thai democracy.

What are the international lessons for NGO activists? What we can generalise from Thailand is that NGOs run the risk of taking the wrong side in any serious social conflict. Actually, everyone can make mistakes, including left-wing parties! But for NGOs, there are three major reasons which might cause mistakes:

1. Funding pressures. NGOs increasingly receive money from local governments and imperialist organisations like the World Bank. They are 'GNGOs' and can become reluctant to oppose the elites.

⁶ In Thai they refer to themselves as *Pi Liang*.

⁷ One honourable exception is the Thai Labour Campaign, which has consistently opposed the coup and any destruction of democracy. <http://www.thailabour.org>

⁸ As I used to believe when I wrote: 'NGOs: Enemies or Allies?' *International Socialism* Journal 104, Autumn 2004, U.K.

2. Lobby politics mean there is always a tendency to be opportunistic, being prepared to work with authoritarian governments.
3. Rejection of politics, especially class politics. This lack of politics means that in difficult and messy situations NGOs do not have the necessary theory to be able to choose the side of the poor or democracy. What is needed is more political theorising and more open debate. NGOs also need to be committed to building mass movements, rather than relying only on lobby politics.

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