

# Grassroots NGOs and Political Reform in Thailand: Democracy behind Civil Society

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## Abstract

This article argues that behind the concept of civil society is a real opportunity for populist forces to drive democracy forward. In Thailand, the participatory role of non-governmental organisations, particularly at grassroots level, is very important. By advocating people's participation and empowerment, grassroots NGOs may be in a position to expand notions of democracy, from mere parliamentarism to genuine participatory democracy. In the Thai case, however, success will depend upon whether the grassroots non-governmental organisations (GNGOs) are able to establish a linkage between 'elite-urban' and 'rural-popular' elements in Thai civil society. The key question is whether these organisations are able to democratise Thai civil society and create an enhanced form of participatory democracy.

## Introduction

In Thailand, NGOs can be considered part of the organisational life in the sphere of civil society. They are a 'driving force' for democratisation behind Thai civil society. This is illustrated by the key role they played in the struggle for Thai democracy during the crisis of 1991-92. In collaboration with the middle class and civic organisations, NGOs were able to organise demonstrations in major cities outside Bangkok

and thereby expand the struggle which led to the collapse of the military government headed by General Suchinda. By linking with people's organisations, especially at the grass-roots level, they have also filled a vacuum created by the inability of political parties, trade unions and peasant associations to expand popular participation. They contend that a strong civil society permeated by a culture of tolerance is a prerequisite for the attainment of full democracy. For NGOs, democracy does not mean simply representative democracy, where people vote every five to six years to elect rulers who take decisions on their behalf; rather they view democracy as fundamental to justice, equality and a 'sustainable society'. They, therefore, argue in favour of 'grassroots level, participatory democracy in which people decide the fate of their communities, in which they take a fair process of collective decision making about their resources' (Bhasin 1992: 105).

In the view of NGOs, a strong civil society has four important characteristics (People's Plan 1992: 99):

- the poor are organised and politically influential;
- voluntary associations are politically independent of the state;
- a culture of tolerance exists; and
- substantive equality of access prevails for all groups without discrimination.

True democracy involves popular participation at all levels so that the people have a say in the way in which they are governed. Democracy is intertwined with the issue of land and social justice for rural people and other disadvantaged groups (*Our Voice* 1993: 102).

To restore the 'true' meaning of democracy, NGOs propose the empowerment of the people. Whereas a formal democratic political system is more concerned with representation and political institutions such as political parties, elections and legislatures, rather than popular participation, NGOs maintain that elections are pointless unless people are aware of the real choices and the meanings of those choices, and

have full information on policies that will affect them. For NGOs, progress towards democracy means the building of civil society, expansion of democratic space, popular participation, effective control of the public agenda and just distribution of resources (*Our Voice* 1992: 101).

One issue currently being put forward by the NGOs to create a participatory democracy is substantive political reform. The NGOs have demanded good governance, freedom from corruption and accountability of state and other authorities to the people. By calling for substantive political reform, Thai NGOs have played a key role in broadening political participation. They have collaborated with other civic organisations in an attempt to create an opportunity for populist forces to push for democracy from within the sphere of civil society.

In this article, I shall focus on the role of grassroots NGOs in the political reform movement since they propose a new, participatory democracy which offers a great deal more for the ordinary people than electoral politics alone. They have tried to provide the necessary forums where the voice of marginalised people can be expressed. From their networks, activities and impacts on the state decision-making process, grassroots NGOs may be considered as a populist force within civil society which may help to strengthen Thai democracy.

I shall argue that behind the concept of civil society is a real opportunity to engage citizens as a driving force to foster participatory democracy. However, the possibility of success will depend upon whether these grassroots NGOs are able to establish a linkage between 'elite-urban' and 'rural-popular' elements in Thai civil society.

### **Civil society and non-governmental organisations: theoretical perspectives**

In the current debate over the meaning of civil society, the only point on which most authors agree is that civil society is

located within society's 'public sphere' and is made up of associations that are separate from the state but relate to it (Bibic 1994: 54). Most authors concur that civil society is very important for democratisation, both as a counterweight to state power and as a means to greater democratic legitimacy and effectiveness (Baker 1997: 3). In this article, I shall, however, use Cohen and Arato's definition of civil society (Cohen and Arato 1994: ix):

a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication.

According to Cohen and Arato, the concept of civil society emphasises the central role of independent organisations in the process of democratisation. They argue that social movements keep a democratic culture alive because 'movements bring new issues and values into the public sphere and contribute to reproducing the consensus that the elite model of democracy presupposes but never bothers to account for' (Cohen and Arato 1994: 20). In their view, the politics of NGO movements constitute a 'dynamic element', which will link collective action with the democratic potential of civil society.

### ***Definition of grassroots NGOs***

In a number of countries in Asia, the term 'people's organisation' is used as a generic label for a diverse range of organisations that are not part of the state structure, are not engaged in normal commercial activity, and which relate their activities to a vibrant development discourse (Clarke 1995: 8). In the Philippines NGOs are distinguished from people's organisations (POs): the latter being associations of people at grassroots level organised by people themselves. In Bangladesh POs are usually indistinguishable from NGOs. Similarly in Thailand, no distinction is generally made between the two kinds of organisations, especially between grassroots



non-governmental organisations (GNGOs) and people's organisations (POs). In this article, however, I shall make a distinction between GNGOs and POs. People's organisations are defined as 'local, self-reliant, membership-based associations which organise and mobilise in support of collective welfare goals', while NGOs are 'private, non-profit, professional organisations with a distinctive legal character, concerned with public welfare goals' (Clarke 1995: 8). The core work of GNGOs is to bring about 'empowerment', i.e. to enable the poor, through collective action, to take part in the decision-making processes that directly affect them (Ruland and Ladavalva 1993: 60). Community forest organisations, landless associations, irrigation associations, environmental networks and local political associations with accountable leaderships are all examples of GNGOs. As they believe in participatory democracy, these organisations pursue a participatory approach and democratic practice in order to achieve a public goal. Therefore, a grassroots non-governmental organisation (GNGO) will be defined as a '*local, non-profit organisation with a democratic structure and mode of operation concerned with public welfare goals*'. Its characteristics are as follow:

- distinct from the state and from other political institutions, in particular political parties;
- non-profit-making and readily distinguishable from private and public profit-making corporations;
- reliant on voluntary effort, but still having paid staff or training programmes, even at the local level;
- less formalised groups than public registered organisations, i.e. most grassroots NGOs in Thailand are unregistered organisations as they try to prevent state control by avoiding official registration;
- committed to securing benefits for their particular membership, though they still articulate their aims and objectives within a development discourse and pursue public or collective welfare goals;

- primarily membership-based and democratically accountable.

Grassroots NGOs normally play a role in the political arena, particularly by encouraging the democratisation process. Currently, the GNGOs in Thailand believe that democracy needs to provide an opportunity for popular initiatives and citizens' participation (Tandon 1994: 45).

### ***Grassroots NGOs, civil society and democracy***

There are two broad perceptions of the political role of grassroots NGOs as a dynamic element of civil society. First, GNGOs are viewed as an important agent for 'democratisation' and vital components of a 'thriving civil society' at the grassroots level. In the Third World, particularly, NGOs are defined as 'public institutions of civil society, engaged in the process of strengthening civil society in its relationship *vis-à-vis* the state and the ruling elite' (Tandon 1994: 113). They are supposed to 'act as a counter-weight to state power—protecting human rights, opening up channels of communication and participation, providing training grounds for activists and promoting pluralism' (Ruland and Ladavalva 1993: 60; Lador-Lederer 1963: 217).

Second, NGOs are increasingly seen as a mechanism of grassroots organisations for solving economic and social problems. The political element in the socio-economic development programmes of NGOs is emphasised by an insistence that poverty is a political as well as an economic condition (Bratton 1994: 569):

[Poverty] arises because people do not have access to power; this is, the capacity to do what they want and win compliance from others. Poor people have little or no control over the material and institutional conditions under which they exist. They experience great difficulty in making decisions about their lives. In short, the poor lack the political 'clout' to make their preferences 'stick'.

## Grassroots NGOs in Thailand

In Thailand there is a marked contrast between the cities and the countryside. This situation can be described as that of 'two societies in one country': one is the 'elite-urban' civil society; the other is 'rural-popular' civil society (Vitit and Taylor 1994: 47). As a result of thirty years of national economic development policy, the elite-urban civil society (i.e. progressive civil servants, the business community and the middle class) is increasing and gaining more political power. These elite-urban groups are concentrated in Bangkok and urban centres. They can be considered as a force for democracy as long as they play a role in opposing the bureaucracy, especially the military. They have created a growing communications network of the mass media to encourage a free debate on society, politics and change (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 327). They are now demanding political reform in order to achieve a more efficient and 'rational' administration, rather than the present corrupt and paternalistic *modus operandi*.

However, economic development has not helped to foster political participation among peasants. On the contrary, development has concentrated economic and political power in the hands of certain social groups, thereby causing marginalisation and disempowerment of the villagers (Suthy 1994: 97-98). Rural people have not only been neglected, they have also been indirectly controlled by the paternalistic practices of local government officers. Inequality can clearly be seen in the income distribution problem. It is within this context of development that grassroots NGOs have emerged as an essential part of a social democratic movement in Thailand.

Throughout recent Thai history, grassroots NGOs have played a critical role in strengthening people's organisations and grassroots social movements. They have translated a theoretical concept of people's empowerment into community projects and 'community organising' (Ruland and Lada-valya 1993: 72-73). These GNGOs can be seen as the core of

civil society because they have established themselves as a popular voice of conscience. They have been at the forefront of popular democratic struggles, providing a forum for radical students, workers, farmers, professionals and vulnerable social sectors to voice their protests. By strengthening the network of people's organisations and grassroots movements, the GNGOs have been able to put pressure on the government to recognise the concept of community rights over natural resources. They have proposed the idea of decentralising power to communities, which in essence means giving the people the right to self-government, the right to natural resource management, the right to form groups and establish various organisations in the communities, and the right of access to information, in addition to the right to vote in the general election. Their aim is to try and establish a linkage between 'elite-urban' and 'rural-popular' elements in Thai civil society today. I shall first outline the background surrounding state policy and the GNGOs' strategies for creating a political space for people's participation. Second, I shall explore their networking with other NGOs and other civic groups. Third, I shall analyse the role of GNGOs in strengthening Thai democracy, especially their role of advocating participatory democracy in Thai civil society.

## **Impacts of state policy and strategies of GNGOs**

Since the 1958 coup led by General Sarit, Thai political development has been characterised by either martial law or semi-democratic government while the economic and social policies have been guided by five-year plans—created by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB). Through the implementation of the national development plans, the economic growth rate of the country has remained over 7% per annum for the last ten years. However, this

development policy has resulted in four crucial problems (Suthy 1994: 84-86):

- a dual process of concentration of economic and political power in the corporate and state sectors, and the marginalisation of the majority of people;
- widening gaps in regional and sectoral distribution of gains from the development process;
- a rapid depletion of natural resources which constitute the rural people's life-support system; and
- a rapid erosion and decay of the environment.

Problems of inequality—both in terms of the allocation of resources and benefits and the power to influence the policies of the state—have become the prime mover of grassroots NGOs. These organisations proposed a concept of participatory democracy and people's empowerment as a way to change economic and social conditions, to balance the bargaining power among groups of people, and to bring about conflict resolution through democratic means. During the economic boom of the 1980-90s, particularly, the government's economic policy emphasised the development of three main industries: exports, tourism and agribusiness in order to attract foreign direct investment. Such a policy, however, has led to land speculation and land price hikes. The confrontations and political conflicts over the control of natural resources have become a nation-wide crisis. There were 754 protests between 1994 and 1995, 334 of which focused on the use of natural resources. During the conflicts, ten leading activists were killed, nine people were injured and twenty were arrested (Naruemon 1997: 255). Within the context of heightened conflicts, affected villagers have been forced to unite within either permanent or ad hoc organisations in order to deal with government agencies. Some grassroots organisations have been networking with national and regional NGOs while others have continued to work at grassroots level.

There are four strategic arguments which lie behind grass-roots NGOs (Jaturong 1994: 102-104):

- They argue that the choice of development strategy is a basic right of the people. The central government should not determine the country's development strategy without asking consent from the rural people, as the latter are the ones most directly affected by state development projects.
- The aim of development is the 'good life', not economic growth; and having a 'good life' must be consonant with nature (so as to improve the standard of living of the rural people without destroying the natural balance).
- Diversity of communities must create a diversity of development concepts. Therefore, state policy needs to attach a lot of importance to community culture and popular wisdom.
- The negative impacts of globalisation need to be reconsidered. Civil society, therefore, has to 'find a solution to [enable] various sections of society ...to live together in peace'.

The GNGOs are characterised by the following goals (Jaturong 1994: 61):

- Create a process of people's participation at village level;
- Search for alternatives to social problems together with the villagers;
- Participate in the decision-making process, inform the public about villagers' views and propose alternative policies to the government;
- Put forward the idea of a decentralisation of power to local communities in order to create a participatory democracy;
- Establish a positive relationship with other civil society organisations.

In order to attain these goals the GNGOs adopt four major strategies for their activities (Suthy 1994: 101):

- search for an alternative livelihood;
- networking with NGOs and POs;
- policy advocacy for people's empowerment and community rights to natural resources management; and
- strategic-alliance-building with other civil society groups in order to participate in public policy-making.

As a result, grassroots NGOs in Thailand have met with some success in their campaigning for grassroots community democracy. They have been able to enlarge the people's political space in public policy by creating popular participation in the state decision-making processes.

### ***Networking among NGOs and their relations with other civic groups***

Most NGOs in Thailand, particularly at the grassroots level, are non-registered organisations in order to circumvent state control. Under the 1942 National Cultural Act, applicants have to state that they have no political objective and 'will not be involved in political activities' if they want to register their organisation as a foundation and/or association. Even though the 'no political objective condition' was changed after the May 1992 events, any foundation with the explicit objective of working in the public interest has to maintain at least 100,000 baht in cash and 100,000 baht in other assets (Amara and Nitaya 1997: 71-73). At present the actual registration comes under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior, i.e. the Police Department and the Department of Local Administration (LAD). Applicants have to submit all documents, i.e. a profile of the organisation, a statement of its objectives, location, management (accounting system, capital and assets) and other data to the Interior Ministry.

Thai NGOs encompass several types of organisations, such as groups, projects, networks, forums, assemblies, confederations, federations, associations and foundations. According to their activities, Thai NGOs may operate in any of the following areas: agriculture and rural development; child and

youth development; labour problems; hill-tribe and minority groups; women's groups; religious groups and their development; education; human rights and advocacy; environment and natural resources; slum development; public health; social and community services; consumer protection; appropriate technology; and democracy (Thailand Development Support Committee 1997: 61-261).

Since the 1990s, the GNGOs have formed networks with national and regional NGOs in order to co-ordinate and bolster their activities. Many groups have formed single co-ordinating bodies in order to focus on a specific issue, such as the environment, public health or human rights. Networks are also created to launch protest campaigns against state policy or to put forward specific initiatives, as evidenced in the mass mobilisations initiated by, for example, the Forum of the Poor, the Network of Community Forest Campaigns and the Network of Farmers Facing the Soil Salination Problem. All these organisations link together people who have suffered from similar problems into regional or national networks for collective action. These networks were instrumental in the anti-military struggle in 1992, and they have been active participants in the process of political reform in Thailand.

The political role of grassroots NGOs in Thai civil society was initiated after the 14 October 1973 student uprising as a result of the changing relationship between the state and the people. The 1973 uprising saw civil society for the first time playing a role in Thai politics. Since then, both national and grassroots NGOs have established themselves as a major force within Thai civil society. They have begun to form alliances with other social groups in order to gain wider support and legitimacy. For example, since 1987 grassroots NGOs working on development issues and national NGOs working for political and human rights have begun to co-operate. Many NGOs working on the same issues or with the same target groups have formed networks for policy advocacy. In this process, the GNGOs have received increasing support



from the 'elite-urban' civil society (Banthorn 1993: 7). GNGOs can count among their supporters many academics and media people, and also a few government officials. In order to maintain popular support within civil society, the GNGOs have resorted to various strategies, including maintaining positive relationships with socially concerned government officials; receiving technical and information support from academics and the urban middle class; as well as creating public forums to inform and open dialogue with other civic groups on policy issues. These activities of NGOs, particularly at grassroots level, have contributed to the Thai NGOs being presented as 'the voice of conscience' fighting for justice on behalf of the common people. They were named as the 'People of the Year' by a leading political magazine at the end of 1990 (Gawin 1994: 148).

### ***The role of GNGOs in furthering Thai democracy***

At certain political junctures, when fundamental freedoms and civil liberties in Thai civil society were violated (as in the case of the February coup of 1991), the Thai NGO networks and civil society groups were well equipped for active participation in the broad-based, multi-class, anti-military coalition to restore democracy in Thailand. The Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD), for example, was reorganised by a coalition of NGOs, student leaders, academics and social activists from labour organisations, the mass media and other professional associations after the 1991 coup. By involving grassroots organisations, the CPD was able to mobilise ordinary people and link their everyday experiences and concrete economic problems to the abstract process of amending the constitution. Through NGO networks, particularly at the provincial and grassroots level, the CPD was able to create and strengthen a multi-class, pro-democracy coalition during the 1991-92 crisis which became an important and dynamic political force.

Since May 1992, GNGOs have come to defend the rights of local communities by taking an active role in policy advocacy

work (such as proposing a community forest bill) as well as highlighting the plight of affected people and bringing it into the realm of public debate. One example is the campaign of GNGOs and people's organisations against the military-led Resettlement Project for Poor People Living in Degraded Forest Reserves, known as the Khor-jor-kor (KJK) project. The KJK project planned to move 5.8 million people who farmed on what was classified as degraded forest areas all over the country into resettlement villages under military control. Meanwhile, the vacant land they left behind would be used for fast-growing tree plantations. After the 1991 coup, the military planned to resettle some 275,000 people from 364 villages in 21 forest reserves in 17 provinces of the Northeast as the first stage. By denying land rights to the villagers, the project has turned out to be an operation that excludes the poor, low-educated peasants from their livelihood (Pasuk 1994: 33-39). To solve their problem, peasants who were affected by the KJK project set up the Northeast Forest Conservation Club comprising representatives from seven provinces in the targeted areas. With support from GNGOs and urban-civic groups, affected villagers organised rallies calling for the abandonment of the programme. The KJK project was finally stopped in July 1992, when affected villagers and GNGOs staged Thailand's biggest protest rally ever and blocked the Friendship Highway in Nakorn Ratchasima. This strategy was considered as a twin strategy with the pro-democracy May events movement which organised the rally and blocked the Raja-damnoen Avenue during their protest against the military. The mass rally was, however, not supported by the elite-urban civil society because they feared that the military might use civic disruption as a pretext to 'restore order' as the mass rallies often ended up as bloody confrontations. The elite-urban dwellers suggested that the villagers should attend seminars in order to learn the importance of democracy rather than create their own uprising (Sanitsuda 1992: 3). However, Bamrung Poonpanya, an NGO leader, argued that direct action by the villagers would be a valuable

contribution to participatory democracy in Thailand. To achieve this goal, GNGOs need to promote the concept of people's empowerment and participation in concrete terms. However, the question arises as to whether the GNGOs will succeed in bringing democracy to Thai civil society, especially participatory democracy. Even though the NGOs have been able to establish linkages between 'elite-urban' and 'rural-popular' civil society through their political participation, they have failed so far to create a participatory democracy in a deeper sense.

### **The role of the Forum of the Poor in the Thai political reform movement: a case-study**

The Forum of the Poor is a coalition of grassroots NGOs and villagers from all over Thailand. This organisation has played a key role in pressing the government to solve villagers' problems resulting from the state's top-down policy. It was set up in mid-December 1995 at the Pak Moon dam in Ubon Ratchathani province in the Northeast after a number of local people who had been adversely affected by state policy for many years got together to air their common grievances. The Forum has helped create a public space for citizens' participation in Thai civil society. It has been in a position to advance the struggle and to press the state to take account of local concerns when planning policy. In this way it has assisted in the people's empowerment and struggle for participatory democracy.

#### ***Background of Thai political reform***

Thailand has a political history of long periods of authoritarianism alternating with shorter periods of 'semi-democratic' government. The word 'Thai democracy' has been propagated by the state as electoral politics, which means that the only time people are supposed to participate in politics is at elections, thus Thai politicians have become 'electioneers'

rather than 'representatives'. In 1991, moreover, the military legitimised their coup by citing corrupt politicians who had abused the system by vote-buying, and who then had used state power to amass personal wealth.

The poor peasants are the main targets of vote-buying politicians, and the PPR have been accused of selling the country short, sacrificing the national good for a handful of silver, thus undermining democratic principles. However, the poor can hardly be blamed for taking money thrown around like confetti at election time by politicians who preach democracy yet have a slender grasp of the concept. Somkiat Pongpai-boon, an advisor of the Forum of the Poor, argues that the brand of democracy touted by politicians has failed to secure a decent standard of living for the rural poor. Indeed, some interpret the poor's complicity in the vote-buying as a protest vote that says 'nothing is improving in the current political system'. In Somkiat's view, 'since the installation of the representative democracy in 1932, the Thai political system has not yet served the poor. It is simply under the control of, and works for, the capitalists and the bureaucrats' (Somkiat 1997: 1).

To make the Thai democratic system more legitimate, efficient and participatory, Thai civil groups have since the May 1992 events engaged in discussions of political reform through the concept of constitutional reform. For them, the political reform essentially means democratising the constitution in order to provide the legal structure for the creation of a better political system. Ideas surrounding political reform in Thailand depend on both the political context and the key players in Thai politics, such as the state (the military and civilian bureaucrats), the political society (politicians and political parties), the economic society (business groups and urban technocrats), and civil society (including the middle class, media and NGOs). These groups have different agendas on political reform, even though they have agreed that the Thai political system has to move beyond electoral politics, which hitherto has been monopolised by traditional politi-

cians and the bureaucrats. For example, the military and the business groups want to use the electoral process to recruit an effective elite outside the parliament to run the country, whereas GNGOs propose decentralisation of power to communities and expansion of grassroots participation.

### ***The role of the Forum of the Poor in Thai political reform***

The role of GNGOs can be exemplified through the activities of the Forum of the Poor and its networks. Their activities include the process of participation, mobilisation and networking, as well as proposing a people's constitution.

#### **1. The participatory role in the political reform process**

According to the Forum of the Poor, the political reform process can only begin to function meaningfully through an active public dialogue. Therefore, in co-operation with the middle class and civic organisations, GNGOs set up a public forum—Forum of the Poor—in which villagers could have a dialogue with NGO staff, academics and civil society organisations on substantive political reform. Members of the Constitutional Drafting Assembly (CDA) were also invited to meet the villagers in the various branches of the Forum in order to 'receive public opinion and write a constitution that would reflect the true aspirations of the people'. At the 'political school', villagers were able to have face-to-face discussions with the constitution drafters, politicians and other elite groups. The agenda and policy issues raised in these dialogues were based on people's concrete problems. For example, the concept of community rights to natural resource management was put forward mainly by the Northern Farmers' Network, while the Northeastern organisations were more concerned with the impact of state development projects and environmental degradation as well as land rights and farmers' debts. Through these dialogues, speakers from the grassroots were given the opportunity to voice their grievances and express their ideas on how their problems

should be handled and to press the CDA to include concrete measures in the new constitution.

## **2. Mobilisation and networking with other civic organisations**

Many grassroots NGOs were able to mobilise villagers to voice their problems and present solutions when the CDA provincial committees held official public hearings in each province. Villagers from grassroots networks were able to submit their own versions of a new constitution to CDA members at provincial level. The Forum also co-ordinated with other civil groups to set up a co-ordination committee to campaign for civic forums which would provide input to the new constitution. Through this campaign, grassroots NGOs were able to create a national network on the constitution which included thirty pro-democracy organisations, people's organisations and eleven NGO networks, as well as the NGO Co-ordinating Committee on Rural Development, the Labour Congress of Thailand, the Political Reform Assembly, the Women's Network for the Constitution, and the People's Assembly for the Constitution in eight regions (*CPD Newsletter* 1997: 11-12).

## **3. The proposal for substantive political reform**

In the Forum's view, grassroots democracy means a democratic system that responds to the needs and aspirations of the grassroots. Therefore, the new constitution should result in a reform of the bureaucracy and a decentralisation of power to allow more autonomy for local communities and people's organisations in the decision-making process affecting their economic and cultural life, as well as to restore their right to manage local resources. Their proposal to the CDA addressed four main points: people's rights, bureaucratic reform, state welfare policy and the decentralisation of power. Their demands were as follows (*Bangkok Post* 1997: 1):

- People should have the right to consider projects involving natural resources and public land in their communities.
- The public must have the right to sue the government if it fails to implement the land reform as stipulated in the new constitution.
- A new administrative court should be independent of government control.
- An office for a parliamentary 'Ombudsman' must be set up to monitor the bureaucracy.
- The government should provide compensation for people affected by state development projects, and set up a fund to assist them.
- Welfare should be extended to farmers nationwide.
- Villagers should be given funds to prevent them from running into debt, instead of having to borrow money from the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operatives at high interest rates.
- The state should set up a fund to protect sick workers.
- Free education should be provided from primary to vocational level.
- The state should help slum dwellers buy their own land.
- Administrative power must be decentralised to local organisations with personnel chosen through elections.
- The constitution must specify what taxes are to be collected from Bangkok and local provinces.

***Reactions of existing political power groups on the role of grassroots NGOs***

During the political reform movement, the middle class, and particularly the media, seemed to support the idea of introducing substantive political reform while the bureaucracy and politicians seemed to be unhappy with the participatory role of the GNGOs. The relationships between the GNGOs and existing political power groups were not altogether

smooth and sometimes even became confrontational. The reason is that all these groups have their own agendas and interests with regard to introducing a new political structure.

### **1. The state**

The military and conservative bureaucrats generally feel that people's participation is a threat to national security. For them, 'whenever there is a protest rally by villagers, these grassroots NGOs, student movements or other sympathisers will always support villagers without understanding the situation. Many of the NGO leaders are agitators' (Suthy 1994: 42-45). In rural areas, the military still sometimes uses the 'Anti-Communist Law' as a mechanism to control democratic movements. According to this law, police or military officers from the rank of sub-lieutenant and above can make an arrest without a warrant. On the issue of political reform, in particular, the bureaucracy has opposed both the concept and the NGOs' agenda. Many of this sector were senators: they vowed to reject a new draft constitution when it went before parliament (*Bangkok Post*, 27 June 1997).

### **2. The political parties**

Thai political parties generally lack grassroots support and policy-making capabilities. They are 'political cliques' or 'political factions', rather than mass organisations and are dominated by certain personalities and by the influence of money. 'Real political parties', on the other hand, are characterised by mass membership, a sophisticated administrative structure, local branches, a representative leadership, ideological cohesion and concrete political platforms (McCargo 1997a: 103). As Thai political parties are generally distrusted by the public (as political actors), their participation in any extra-parliamentary activity is limited. On the question of political reform in Thailand, the political parties supported the role of grassroots NGOs in blunting the power of the bureaucracy as long as NGO activities did not affect their own legitimacy. However, many politicians disagreed with the idea of substantive political reform as it would affect not only



the electoral system, but also the paternalistic ways of Thai politics and their own vested interests. Through a system of vote-buying and paternalistic networks, political parties could gain sufficient votes to oppose the new constitution, especially in rural areas. Therefore, the role of NGOs in creating substantive political reform seemed an impossible task.

### **3. The economic society**

Historically, the business groups (such as the Industrial Association, the Bankers' Association and the Chamber of Commerce) and urban technocrats have tried to prevent popular political participation by using state interference. As many problems faced by the poor, both rural and urban, are caused by the government's economic and development policies and the capitalist mode of production, the business groups have reacted in an anti-democratic way to safeguard their own economic interests. Though business and elite-urban groups agreed with the NGOs in backing the 1997 constitution, they were unwilling to support people's participation in order to create substantive political reform. During the 1997-98 economic recession in Thailand, they prevented people's participation in the state's decision-making process on the ground that this might affect the economic climate.

The technocrats, on the other hand, agreed with the role of NGOs in creating a public forum for citizens' participation in the Thai political reform process. However, in many instances there is a conflict of interests, as many problems faced by the peasantry are caused by the lifestyles of urban consumers. The technocrats still see economic development as taking precedence over the short-term interests of the grassroots. Thus, through their reactions to the political reform process, the urban forces have shown that they want an elite model of democracy rather than a participatory democracy.

#### **4. The civil society**

The role of the different civil society groups can be seen through an analysis of the positions of the academic groups, the media and the middle class.

The academics generally supported the idea of people's participation in the political reform movement. They promoted the Democracy Development Committee, which argued that eight basic problems in the Thai political system needed reform (Prawes 1992: 1):

- the dominance of money;
- the monopolisation of politics by a minority;
- the difficulties faced by good and able people in entering politics;
- dishonest and corrupt behaviour;
- parliamentary dictatorship;
- the persistence of political conflict and instability;
- the poor standard of administrative and legislative functions; and
- the lack of political leadership.

However, through their legalistic training, the academics had a fixed idea of the procedural processes. Their agenda on political reform can be considered as an academic project to prevent violent social disorder by creating a political structure to cope with the stresses caused by socio-economic and political upheaval.

The media represents one of the elite-urban civil groups in Thailand. During the political reform process, the media cooperated with the grassroots NGOs in an attempt to stimulate public discussions. In collaboration with the Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA), various interest groups from the grassroots were able to air their opinions at meetings organised by the provincial-level Public Hearings Committee. With support from the media, the pro-democracy NGOs organised call-in radio programmes in order to address political and social reform issues. At the provincial

level, moreover, the debates held in these provincial forums were broadcast live. However, the media are not interested in pursuing ideas of substantive political reform in order to create a wider concept of democracy if it affects the economic situation.

Finally, we come to the role of the middle class in Thai political reform. Even though the Thai middle class played a key role in the struggle for democracy in the May 1992 events, they have their own political agenda. Although they might share a common interest in reducing the power of the bureaucracy, they believe in representative rather than participatory democracy. For them, political reform means maximising the fairness and effectiveness of elite decision-making, devolving power downwards where possible, and retaining good contact with the citizens. Some of them even backed the state's decision to prevent popular participation if this helps to ensure political stability.

### ***Impacts of NGOs and the possibility of substantive political reform***

Influenced by the political reform campaigns of the GNGOs and civil groups, the CDA has drawn up a six-point plan dealing with the basic rights of the people. It seeks to set out their right to participate in the political decision-making process by guaranteeing individual freedom and fundamental rights in the public laws. The six points are as follows (CPD 1997):

- To enhance and guarantee individual freedom and fundamental rights by empowering people to sue governments or government agencies that have violated their basic rights.
- To liberalise the mass media, particularly the electronic media (to be controlled by an independent body), and promote freedom of information and expression.
- To promote good governance and accountability of state officials and other power groups by establishing an administrative court and constitutional tribunal. Also to

nullify the self-amnesty decrees which perpetuate official impunity, in particular on the issue of enacting a *coup d'état*.

- To promote greater decentralisation of power and wealth by empowering grassroots organisations and encouraging more popular participation through elections of local institutions.
- To foster greater public participation in politics at all levels by accepting community rights and allowing public access to official information.
- To encourage civic duties, such as allowing citizens to create a movement to guard against a *coup d'état* or any attempt to destroy the constitutional order.

Through all these means, grassroots NGOs have been able to play a key role in strengthening civil society by providing forums for the 'voice of the people' to be heard. During the political reform campaign, grassroots NGOs have actively supported a new charter, while the bureaucracy and politicians mobilised their supporters to oppose it. Through their facilitative role in the political reform movement, GNGOs have been able to establish a linkage between the 'elite-urban' and the 'rural-popular' segments in Thai civil society. However, the feasibility of achieving substantive political reforms seems questionable under the current economic conditions. For instance, the concept of people's rights, bureaucratic reform, state welfare policy and the decentralisation of power, which were all proposed by the villagers and grassroots NGOs, have not been emphasised in the new constitution.

Although the NGOs may have created a better public understanding of the weaknesses in the current political system, they have failed to educate the public with regard to the correlation between the new constitution and the political economic system. In the current situation, the new constitution seems to be a sophisticated procedure of a representative democracy rather than of a participatory democracy.

## Conclusion

Thai civil society is the public sphere standing between 'political society' (the state and political parties) and economic society. In Thailand, civil society is the most important factor not only in the transition from authoritarian rule, but also in the consolidation of democracy. The most active groups behind Thai civil society are NGOs, particularly those working at the grassroots level. The GNGOs have played a crucial role in defending popular rights. The reason is that they view human development as the key to overall development in the country. This idea has led them to advocate and work for the basic rights of the poor.

The GNGOs working in Thai civil society include pro-democracy advocacy groups involved in promoting systematic political change; groups involved in programmes to enhance civil skills; and organisations seeking to provide greater protection for the rights of marginalised citizens and greater opportunities for public participation in the decision-making process. These GNGOs believe that people's participation and empowerment are the key elements of a participatory democracy.

One issue being put forward by the GNGOs and civil society organisations is substantive political reform. Through the participatory role of the NGOs in the political reform process, Thai civil society has become increasingly involved in the political arena, hence increasingly democratised. They have promoted a participatory democratic society by bringing the 'voice of the voiceless' into the public debate. However, substantive political reform seems unlikely to be achieved during the current economic crisis.

By developing their ability to challenge the government's previous virtual monopoly on information and resources, GNGOs have helped to expand the spatial parameters of civil society and have encouraged a growing number of citizens to take part in and thus influence the democratic process. Due to the economic crisis, however, the GNGOs might need to

develop a new strategy to advance the democratisation process. Whether the GNGOs can achieve a broader and more substantive form of democratisation in Thai civil society remains to be seen.

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