

Book Review

Civil Society and Democratization: Social Movements in Northeast Thailand

By Somchai Phatharathananuth
Copenhagen, Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2006.

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This book presents a progressive scholarship pertinent to contemporary Thai politics. It de-centers modern politics in Thailand as a field of studies by putting the civil social movements first. It also reveals the true face of Thai democracy beyond its ailing parliamentary system. Casting ballots and institutionalized politics are real for some, but the most meaningful measurement of Thailand's democratic progress is the activist battles on the street and down to the village heartland. Drawing on key theoretical approaches concerning civil society and democratization, the book challenges both a conventional paradigm emphasizing on the elite-centered process of democratization and some overwhelming scholarly attentions on elite as well as urban-based, middle class as the powerful negotiators and makers of Thailand's "minimal democracy". It further interprets the political activism from the periphery as the grass-root struggle for citizenship rights, which are the most fundamental ingredient for accountable and transparent democracy. Altogether, the book strongly contributes to both critically grounded political science and the studies of civic social movements at the turn of twentieth-first century Thailand.

Somchai Phatharathananuth (2006) argues that while Thai politics is dominated by money and exclusive influence of the self-interest ruling elite, there is a glimmer of hope of civic democracy in a number of politically active social movements beyond Bangkok. In the relatively open and transitory period of Thai politics between post-May1992 and the birth of "elected capitalist absolutism" (Chaiwat Satha-Anand 2004), led by Thaksin

Shinnawatra in early 2000s, the struggles of “the right to have rights” (p.1) as demonstrated by the Small-Scale Farmers’ Assembly of Isan (SSFAI) and the Assembly of the Poor (AOP) are his showcases. With an insight from his long experience working as an academic activist with these grass-root movements and engaged ethnographic fieldwork, he sets forth a thesis that “the capacity of self-organization independent from the state” (p. 210) is one of the most important elements in order to nurture the accountable and transparent democracy in Thailand.

The civil society is relocated to the countryside and powered by the social movements of marginalized farmers based in Northeastern Thailand (also known as, Isan), the region with a long history of political radicalism. Somchai Phatharathananuth (2006) recounts the eventful struggles and fates of SSFAI and AOP, arguably two most active civil society organizations since the defeat of popular movements in October 1976 and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the early 1980s. He supports his central argument with the following features. First, he provides a depth of full accounts of the active life of SSFAI and AOP, especially through series of interview with their leaders, countless participation in their activities, and well documentation of media reports. The behind-the-scene accounts of power struggles among their leaders and their effects are particularly remarkable. They help set the book away from presenting unpolished or romanticized views of farmers’ movements. Secondly, he systematically locates these social movements within the historical roots and contexts of political radicalism adopted by the peasants in the Northeastern Thailand. Although his historical accounts rely on the plain secondary sources and effortlessly repeat some dominant discourse, they suffice to provide some highlighted backdrops to the rise of civic social movements in question. Lastly, he interprets the peasant struggles within the “big picture” of realities of post-peasant and “post-development” (Keyes 2002) situations and their ramifications. It is important to recognize that members of SSFAI and AOP (and other Isan villagers) are post-peasantry villagers, who are caught up in the global processes of modernization and democratization.

While I agree with the author’s central thesis and overall approach to provincialize Thai democratization, I have my own list of comments. Civil society presented in this book is defined for both generalized and specific

purposes, but does not cover some other localized or Thai-ized varieties of civil society. Civil society as a concept and a political practice is indeed transplanted into the fertile soil of Thai political culture. While I am aware that it is beyond the coverage of his research, some descriptions of public discourses of the civil society, promoted by the Thai government such as, *prachakhom*, *pracha sangkhom*, and other forms of civic actions in the sectors like healthcare, tourism, environmental conservation, and subdistrict's public affairs administration, should not be ignored. They too have provided a public sphere or space for action, which to some extents "make it possible for population to organize itself independently from the state" (p.12). They also exemplify some co-opted versions of progressive civil society produced by some public intellectuals and NGOs, as the Thai state has managed to practice their own counter-discourses. The author apparently provides an impression of rather one-sided and purposefully selected discourse of civil society from activist intellectual perspective. The strength and weakness of civil society in the Thai context are not fully assessed.

It is rather ironic that the author intends to move away from elite democracy by focusing on social movements from Northeastern Thailand, yet he is found himself representing primarily elitist views of grass-root democracy through the eyes of SSFAI and AOP's leaders. The leaders are vital to the life of the movements, but they do not make the civil society exclusively by themselves. The lack of inputs from rank and file members, especially women and the elderly, gives an impression of a rather homogeneity and controlled accounts of the social movements. An extensive use of interviews with leaders, formal written documents, and media reports sustains the author's insensitivity to internal difference and stratification concerning local or ethnocultural origin, gender, and class within the movements. Their goals in joining the movements are not necessarily the same over the years, since they came from different areas in the region and raised different kinds of issues. Men as well as women, the leader as well as the follower, the youth as well as the elderly, make history together. They are frustrated together in their painful contributions to the movements. They thus should be represented fairly.

Democratization is always culturally and historically contested and needs to be spelt out within its cultural and political contexts. It cannot be

assumed as automatic consequences of the overall processes of political organization, mobilization, and negotiation. Democratization can further enriched or fully captured through “democratic experience” and multiple narratives of clusters of different people involved in the social movements. True democratization at the grass-root level must not be limited only to the visions and words of the leaders. It should feature or open itself to contested versions from both inside and outside the movements. In other words, I found Somchai’s narratives do not represent diverse voices and human experiences of the marginalized people whose life and community have been under a complex historical process of radical transformation. I also think that he does not trace complex leadership, networks and alliances of SSFAI and AOP, which span far beyond the Isan proper.

Notwithstanding the abovementioned comments, this book adds some distinctively Thai experience of struggles for civic democracy to the global calls of democratization. It tells some compelling stories of what do the struggling attempts to define civic democracy mean to members of social movements and how true spirit and consciousness of democracy are conceived, articulated and transformed into political activism at the local-national-global junctions. For students of modern politics in Southeast Asia, particularly Thai politics and other fields of Thai studies, I highly recommend this book.

References

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