

Civil Society and Democratization: Social Movements in Northeast Thailand. By Somchai Phatharathananunth. Copenhagen, Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2006. Bibliography, Index, 251 pp.

This book presents a progressive scholarship pertinent to contemporary Thai politics. It de-centres modern politics in Thailand as a field of studies by putting 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 the elite-centred process of democratization and overwhelming scholarly attention paid to the 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 a 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 twenty-first century Thailand.

Somchai Phatharathananunth (2006) argues that while Thai politics is dominated by money and the exclusive influence of the self-interest ruling elite, there is a glimmer of hope for civic democracy in a number of politically active social movements beyond Bangkok. In the relatively open and transitory period of Thai politics between post-May 1992 and the birth of "elected capitalist absolutism" (Chaiwat Satha-Anand 2004) led by Thaksin Shinawatra 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 insight from his long experience working as an academic activist with

these grass-root movements and engaged in 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 nurturing accountable and transparent democracy in Thailand.

Civil society is relocated to the countryside and powered by the social movements of marginalized farmers based in Northeastern Thailand (also known as Isan), a region with a long history of political radicalism. Somchai Phatharathananuth (2006) recounts the eventful struggles and fates of SSFAI and AOP, arguably two of the 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. Firstly, he provides deep accounts of the active life of SSFAI and AOP, especially through series of interview with their leaders, numerous participation in their activities, and good documentation of media reports. The behind-the-scene reports of power struggles between their leaders are particularly remarkable. They help set the book apart from the many unpolished or romanticized views of farmers’ movements that are available. Secondly, he systematically locates these social movements within the historical context of political radicalism adopted by the peasants in the Northeastern Thailand. Although his accounts rely on secondary sources and repeat some dominant discourse, they suffice to provide backdrops to the rise of the civic movements in question. Lastly, he interprets peasant struggles within the “big picture” of the realities of post-peasant and “post-development” (Keyes 2002) situations. It is important to recognize that members of SSFAI and AOP (and other Isan villagers) are post-peasantry villagers, who are caught up in global processes of modernization and democratization.

While I largely agree with the author’s central thesis and overall approach to provincialize Thai democratization, I have my own list of comments to make. 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 transplanted onto the fertile soil of Thai political culture. While I am aware that this may be beyond the coverage of his research, some description of public discourses of civil society promoted by the Thai Government such as, *prachakhom*, *pracha sangkhom*, and other forms of civic actions in sectors such as healthcare, tourism, environmental conservation, and subdistrict public affairs administration, should not be ignored. They too provided public space for action, which to some extent “make[s] it possible for the 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 counteracting discourses. The author apparently provides a rather one-sided and purposefully selective discourse on civil society from an activist intellectual perspective. The strength and weakness of civil society in the Thai context are not fully assessed.

It is ironic that the author attempts to move away from elite democracy by focusing on social movements from Northeastern Thailand, yet finds 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 civil society exclusively by themselves. The lack of input from rank-and-file members, especially women and the elderly, gives rather homogeneous 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 ethno-cultural 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 parts of 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 fuse in their painful contributions to the movements. They should therefore 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 be further enriched or captured through “democratic experience” and the 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 find that Somchai’s narratives do not represent the diverse voices and human experiences of the marginalized people whose life and community have been undergoing a complex historical process of radical transformation. He fails to trace the complex leadership, networks and alliances of SSFAI and AOP, which span far beyond Isan proper.

Notwithstanding these comments, this book adds something distinctive to the Thai experience. It tells compelling stories about what attempts to define civic democracy mean to members of social movements and consciousness of democracy is conceived, articulated and then transformed into political activism at the local, national and global junctures. 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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