

NOTES

Becoming “Red”: The New Brand of Thai Democracy with a Provincial Base

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At the 2011 International Conference on Thai Studies¹, I was invited to moderate the discussion of four papers in the panel “Becoming Red: The Red Shirt Movement and their political practice in northern Thailand”. The theme of this panel reflects dialectical engagement between the country’s academic community and emerging political dynamics on the ground. With “Red” having become the dominant color in Thai politics, especially since the last general election on 3 July 2011, I found the presentations and subsequent discussion during the panel highly thought-provoking. Several intellectually noteworthy outcomes warrant further debate for their implications for the rise of the “Red Shirt Movement” in contemporary politics.

In the present Note I wish to share key points that I raised with the panel audience after having read the papers and listened to the oral presentations. I argue that the rise of the Red Shirt Movement is fueled by a growing class-based political consciousness and identity among people living in the Thai countryside and elsewhere. Such a consciousness and identity have driven development of a new brand of popular democracy that strongly contests the legitimacy of the Bangkok-based power elite and their allies – especially the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD). I begin here with an overview of the four papers presented at the panel before offering my conclusions.

The panel was organized by anthropologist Pinkaew Laung-Aramsri and her colleagues from Chiang Mai University. It featured papers and reports that stemmed from their research on the recent political activism of the Red Shirt Movement in its northern Thai heartland. The four papers dealt with related themes in the growth of this popular political movement at grass-roots level.

¹ The Eleventh International Conference on Thai Studies was hosted by the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, of Mahidol University, in Bangkok from 26 to 28 July 2011.

Designed as the anchoring piece in the panel, Pinkaew’s presentation² described the political consciousness, identities and “social memories” of the Red Shirt Movement in the Chiang Mai area. She showed how the northern branch of the Movement has become the key ideological flagship of the nation-wide grass-roots campaign for political change since the bloody governmental crackdown on the Movement’s widespread insurrection in May 2010. The red shirt has become the icon of the popular struggle for democracy. Identifying themselves as a group of second-class provincial citizens living at the edges of the nation’s Bangkok-centered political system, the Red Shirt people demand justice for themselves and a transparent democracy.

In the second paper³, Aranya Siriphon unveiled how and why the community radio networks were effectively utilized as a communication-cum-political resource, a power-enhancing technology for mobilizing support from the audiences and recruiting new members to the Red Shirt Movement in Chiang Mai and neighboring provinces. Contrary to the public perception that they were exclusive communication networks of Thaksin supporters for voicing anti-government or anti-monarchical propaganda, the Red Shirt community radio stations (e.g., Rak Chiang Mai 51 Radio 92.5 MHZ and Fang Democracy Radio 93.0 MHZ) demonstrated that they could produce relevant political messages, create a collective sense of ownership and empower people in their mission to “fight” for democracy. The community radios evidently succeeded in creating and maintaining “political imagined communities” as much as they mobilized their audiences into a popular social movement. The coded information and new vocabularies coined by the leadership of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD; e.g., *phrai* for villager/commoner vs. *ammatt* for overlord, and *song mattrathan* for the “double standards” that prevail in civil society) and circulated via the community radio networks had “awakened”⁴ village audiences and transformed them into active political forces demanding their rights and justice.

The contents of the third paper⁵ was closely related to that of the second. Suebsakun Kidnukorn documented intensive political campaigns of groups of

² “Becoming Red: An Ethnography of the Red Shirt Movement in northern Thailand” by Pinkaew Laung-Aramsri, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University.

³ “Red Shirt media and the network of Red communication” by Aranya Siriphon, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University.

⁴ “Gendering politics: Rural women and their role in the Red movement” by Noppon Archamas, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University.

⁵ “Redefining democracy from the margin: The Red Shirt experience in Fang District, Chiang Main Province” by Suebsakun Kidnukorn, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University.

Red Shirt villagers in the Chiang Mai districts of Fang, Mae Ai, and Chairakan. Under such local leaders as village headmen, school teachers and small business owners, Red Shirt villagers came together in local networks with strong links with national- and provincial-level leadership through the community radio and satellite TV stations and online channels. As the networks flourished, their notion of democracy grew more sophisticated. National politics, economy and a sense of citizenship became manifest to them as a highly interconnected complex whole. Through and in relation with Thaksin's activities, they learned something about the shortcomings of the Thai political system and their own disadvantaged positions at the peripheries. Suebsakun argued that the sum of their political experience since 2006 Coup was a new political culture and new political space occupied by the Red Shirt Movement. Their mission was to fight for their people's rights and to define and assert their own version of political truth.

In the final paper⁶, Noppon Archamas traced some changing gender roles and identities of working-class women, such as female market vendors ("*mae kha*") who became members of the Red Shirt Movement. He chose San Kamphaeng Municipal Market in San Kamphaeng District (Thaksin's hometown) as the site of his ethnographic fieldwork. Female market vendors became politically active during Thaksin's years in power, having benefited from his populist projects. They began to realize how deeply their everyday life and well being were affected by national politics. Based on sentiments of attachment to Thaksin who shares their same birthplace, local women's groups became allied in their passion, fighting for Thaksin and for themselves as Red Shirt members in the Chiang Mai area. Traditional notions of gender no longer constrained them. They were no longer passive housewives or market vendors, but "politically awakened ones" (*maekha phu tuen ru*) who now knew in their hearts that being women or small business people posed no obstacle in their struggle for popular democracy. Their market was effectively turned into an everyday space for political exchanges and encounters.

Overall, the four papers make valuable contributions to the study of contemporary Thai politics through the lens of local scholars who engaged with activists and organizations of the provincial Red Shirt Movement. The four presentations taken together give us the following insights into the nation's ongoing political crisis.

First, the papers collectively argue that small, provincial people make democracy. Democratization should not, and must not, be exclusively an asset of the elite. While Bangkok is the center of political power, voices from the provinces

⁶ " 'Gendering' politics: Rural women and their role in the Red Shirt Movement" by Noppon Archamas, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University.

must count. The papers document how provincial groups have asserted themselves and attempted to take part in national politics during a difficult, ideologically divisive time of radical democratization.

Second, the papers add human agency to the study of Thai politics, showing that a society’s passage to democracy can be understood through an account of personal experience. All four researchers have produced impressive ethnographies of how and why the Red Shirt Movement in the Chiang Mai area is on the rise. The stories told in the papers are indeed eye-opening. Villagers, market vendors and local leaders are very passionate in their fight for democracy. They are far different from the stereotypical images of peasants easily bought and brainwashed by politicians. Actually they are quite sophisticated political activists with a strong, if new, faith in parliamentary democracy. In short, the papers help “de-victimize” the Red Shirts who have been systematically portrayed as unpatriotic Thaksin cronies and anti-royalists in most of the mass media, at least under the leadership of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva.

Third, the papers strongly “provincialize” Thai democracy by decentralizing and refocusing it for provincial voters. So, what does that signify? I believe at least two observations are noteworthy here. On the one hand, provincially basing Thai democracy means taking the theater of democratization away from Bangkok-centric, elitist institutional and individual proponents. The four presentations revealed many possible ways of truly understanding people’s political views and activities, beyond the urban cant of provincial voters being rebellious, subversive, or seditious. On the other hand, creating a provincial basis for Thai democracy is a way to open up a vast and fertile space to redefine and contest what democracy and politics actually mean to the people living outside the metropolitan sphere. The stories of Red Shirt people in Chiang Mai remind us that democracy is closely tied to livelihood and embedded in a strong sense of localism. They demonstrate that justice, freedom, and equality are not just abstract or wishful notions.

Finally, the papers capture the changing world of the Thai countryside and its people. We all understand how impermanent is life and how constant change is inevitable. Nonetheless, the scope and depth of change in the Thai countryside and among the rural population has been much more extensive than most people could have imagined. They are no longer the places and people of the romantic, even mythical images once held by the urban middle class and elite. Thai provincial communities have been radically transformed in the past three or four decades through their direct participation in the “rural urbanization”⁷ of the economy as well as globalization processes. No one could have frozen them in time. Villagers have

⁷ Thompson, Eric C., *Unsettling Absences: Urbanism in Rural Malaysia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), p. 5.

become sophisticated and cosmopolitan along the lines of their urban counterparts, as they have experienced the world beyond their birthplace as migrant workers in urban and overseas destinations. Their everyday life offers them opportunities and channels for socioeconomic mobility. Provincial people nowadays have access to, and take advantage of, modern education, mass media, computer and telecommunication facilities, and other government services. Most importantly, village economies no longer depend on traditional farming and seasonal crops. People's livelihood is strongly linked with global chains and flows of goods, services, labor, finance and ideas. Manifestly, villagers have become active consumers and participants in the market economy just as urbanites have. It is impossible to control people's political thoughts under the changing environments in the Thai countryside. The programs of guided democracy and other official ideologies of times past have proven ineffective. "Provincials" are as capable as anyone else in the country of producing their own visions and applications of democracy.

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I would like to caution readers that the four papers presented at the "Becoming Red" panel should be viewed as part of a work in progress – like interim reports on a master project. While the papers are ethnographically strong, the scholar-authors need to strengthen their work conceptually and analytically. My main criticism is that they seem to have adopted an uncritical and ahistorical approach in charting the rise of the Red Shirt Movement.

History, agency, and context are much needed here. The papers do not fully attempt to show the interconnections between the Red Shirt Movement in Chiang Mai and their larger organizations at the national and other local/regional levels. I question the seeming homogeneity of their accounts and whether they represent what has really happened within the Movement. There must be different voices, views and interests within the Movement reflecting differences in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, ideology and locality. The collective tone of the four papers was celebratory. They sounded close to glorifying the Movement and aiming to "talk back" to the power elite and Bangkok-centric media and scholars. I believe that more critical and cautious views would be more appropriate.

Nevertheless, this academic panel offered much of academic value and some useful stories to the Thai public and all scholars who are truly concerned about the future of democracy in Thailand. We have been shown how highly dynamic is our political situation and how uncertain and unpredictable an enterprise it is. The question that remains in my mind is, "What's next?"