People's Politics in Thailand:
A Critical Study of the Assembly of the Poor, 2001-2010

by

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds

School of Politics and International Studies

July 2013

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Acknowledgements

Finally, the biggest thanks of all go to my family, especially my parents, for everything they have given me all my life. Only with their endless love and continual support that I was able to complete this journey.

Abstract

In 1997, the Assembly of the Poor (AOP) successfully organised a 99-day protest, which was widely hailed as 'a historical moment' for people's politics in Thailand. However, following the creation of the first Thai Rak Thai government in 2001, the AOP's political role has gradually declined.

This thesis aims to investigate the factors behind the AOP's decline between 2001 and 2010. It argues that, because of inherent internal weaknesses and the recent political changes, the development of AOP in the 2000s has increasingly been influenced, if not determined, by external factors. First, the thesis re-examines the movement's internal elements in a more critical view, which evidently contrasts with early writings on the AOP. It argues that some of the AOP's key features, such as its loose structure, are partially to blame for the movement's decline. NGO activists' roles in the movement are also critically reassessed.

More importantly, the thesis also systematically explores the external elements, known as the political opportunity structure (POS), which have increasingly influenced the AOP's development and mobilisation. This approach has been overlooked by most literature written on the movement. The study emphasises two sets of elements of the POS: stable and volatile components. As for stable elements, which are structurally embedded, the list includes the cultural structure, institutional structure, and prevailing strategies. These elements have impeded, not only the AOP, but also other people's movements for decades. On the other hand, the two influential volatile elements for the AOP during this period are the elite divisions and media access. During the Thaksin government, his control over the elites significantly restricted the AOP's campaigns, while the lack of media access had adverse impacts on the movement during this highly polarised period.

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Abbreviations

AOP	Assembly of the Poor
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CDA	Constitution Drafting Assembly
CPD	Campaign for Popular Democracy
CPT	Communist Party of Thailand
DP	Democrat Party
EGAT	Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand
FFT	Farmers Federation of Thailand
NESDB	National Economic and Social Development Board
NGDO	Non-Governmental Development Organisation
NGI	Non-Governmental Individual
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NGO-CORD	Committee on Rural Development
NSM	New Social Movement
NSO	National Statistical Office
PAD	People's Alliance for Democracy
PKY	Pho Krua Yai Assembly
POS	Political Opportunity Structure
PPP	People's Power Party
RISTT	Institute of Science and Technology of Thailand

RMT   Resource Mobilisation Theory

SFT   Student Federation of Thailand

SMO   Social Movement Organisations

SSFAI   Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan

TRRM   Thailand Rural Reconstruction Movement

TRT   Thai Rak Thai Party

UBU   Ubon Ratchathani University

Chapter I: Introduction

A. Introduction

Grassroots movements are an important political means for marginalised groups in the developing world to address not only short-term economic problems but long-term socio-political issues as well. In modern Thai history, the first grassroots movements briefly emerged in the mid-1970s, but later they were brutally suppressed by rightwing groups and the military government. A decade later, Thailand saw a sharp increase of grassroots mobilisation and protests as response to the socio-economic problems in the countryside, which had mostly been caused the state-led development. From that point onwards, grassroots politics was strongly associated with people's groups and their movements. But it was not until 1997 that grassroots politics achieved new heights when the Assembly of the Poor (hereafter: AOP) successfully organised a famous 99-day protest and won billions of baht in concessions from the government. Although some major concessions were later reversed by the later government, the achievements of the AOP gained during the 1997 protest are still seen as a historical moment for grassroots politics in Thailand.

Several studies have been devoted to Thai grassroots movements, especially the AOP, in different dimensions, but inadequate attention has been paid to understanding the influences of the political surroundings. Despite the evidence that some components in the political environment partially determine the types of actions and strategies chosen by the movements (Meyer 2004: 128), this inadequacy persists. Moreover, it is argued that the movements of the marginalised groups in Thailand are fundamentally weak, owing to their lack of efficient mobilising structure and the lack of long-term commitment of the members (Uchane 2007). The shortcomings of the internal components leave the movements vulnerable to external changes. Without analyses on

the influence of internal factors, one may not be able to fully understand the dynamics of the AOP and other grassroots movements in Thailand.

External factors have become even more crucial than ever at the present time when Thailand is at political crossroads. Back in the 1990s, Thailand underwent major political reforms, which resulted in several changes towards a more liberal order (see Connors 2002). This has supposedly brought about greater political opportunities for the popular movements in the decades to come. But in reality, those expected increased opportunities have never really materialised. First, Thai politics in the first half of the 2000s was marked by political stability under Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) and the political dominance of the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (see Naruemon 2006). But during this period, the country became increasingly divided into two major camps. The situation became even more complicated after the military coup of 19 September 2006; the country then experienced several episodes of political turbulence marked by a change of constitution, several changes of governments, the court-ordered dissolutions of major political parties, and a series of protests and incidents of political violence. From that point onwards, Thailand has become highly polarised. Political groups were divided not only pro- or anti-Thaksin lines but also over other issues, including pro- and anti-coup, and pro- and anti royal intervention. Changes in Thai politics in this period have been taking place rapidly and at times radically.

This is unfortunate for people's movements, especially the AOP, since their political fate is partially determined by these political events. One of the ramifications of these changes is that people's groups and their campaigns on environmental, land and poverty issues have become increasingly less relevant in the eye of the public. More politically and ideologically-oriented movements, namely the yellow- and red-

shirt[1] movements—with more radical strategies, strong connections with the elite, and greater number of supporters—have become major instruments for political changes. Structural and national political issues, rather than local ones, have become central to political manoeuvring. Political activists who had previously worked with AOP in the 1990s have now been deeply divided over the colour-coded national conflict. As a result, the 'people's sector' has been fragmented and weakened. Without full support from leading activists, the AOP and other people's groups are now seen less as political actors and more as political spectators.

To understand these changes, this thesis aims to investigate the factors behind the AOP's decline between 2001 and 2010. It argues that, because of inherent internal weaknesses and the recent political changes, the development of Assembly of the Poor in the 2000s has increasingly been influenced, if not determined, by external factors. Internally, I explore the AOP's mobilising structure and assess its strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, I utilise the concept of political opportunity structure (hereafter: POS) as main theoretical instrument in explaining the political development and mobilisation of the AOP in this period. The major questions this research seeks to answer are:

1) How has the AOP been organised?

2) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the movement's structure?

3) What are the components of the POS that have impacted the AOP's development and mobilisation?

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[1] The yellow-shirts are also known as the People's Alliance for Democracy, which kicked off its official campaign in early 2006 as anti-Thaksin movement. But after adopting a pro-monarchy position, the movement has become increasingly yellow-oriented (yellow is associated with Monday—the day that the King Bhumibol was born). On the other end, the red-shirts started off as the pro-Thaksin, but after the coup, the movement has become increasingly associated with demands for some radical democratic changes.

4) How have these components affected the AOP's development and mobilisation in the 2000s?

5) And how have the AOP reacted to these impacts caused by the POS?

The relationships between the POS and the movements can be explained as follows. The POS is a set of features of a political system that determines the likelihood that a social movement would successfully emerge or mobilise. The POS can act as a facilitator or obstacle to the movement. But sometimes the POS can be changed. According to McAdam (1982: 41), the POS is shaped by the political events or broad socio-political processes that have impacts on the structure of political establishment.[2] A change in the POS can be intentional and unintentional. The events, for example, can be outcomes of actions taken by individuals or groups for political purposes. Sometimes, unplanned developments occur, despite having political meaning attached to them. Sometimes, movements could, as a result, change their fate by taking some political actions that can consequently affect the POS.

In the case of Thailand in the 2000s, the political dominance of Thaksin and the power struggles of the pro- and anti-Thaksin camps account for a series of short-term political events. These events, coupled with other long-term processes, have contributed to the changes in the POS of Thai grassroots movements. Consequently, the movements felt compelled to respond to the changed POS in ways that may help them survive or succeed in relation to the new structure.

Moreover, it should be noted that, as opposed to early writings on the AOP, such as Suthy (1997) and Prapas (1998), this work takes a more critical view of the movement. In this thesis, the movement participants are not always treated as

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[2] For example, political events can be government parties winning general elections or a formation of an anti-government networks, and broad socio-political processes can include a continual change of socio-economic structure in favour of the elite groups or a gradual change of socio-political climate that supports the excluded groups.

ideologically-motivated actors, using an idealised participatory democratic approach, but they are also viewed as political actors with self-interested political actors with pragmatic political strategy. The role and the influence of the non-governmental individuals (hereafter: NGI), in particular, will be critically analysed more in this research since it has been understated early studies on the AOP. In this thesis, the term, non-governmental individual is specifically used to refer to those who work for development-oriented non-governmental organisations (hereafter: NGO) in Thailand. According to Lewis and Kanji (2009: 7-12), there are a number of terms, including non-governmental individuals, which are used as references to NGOs and their workers, depending on historical and social contexts. As for this study, the term 'non-governmental individual' is chosen to partially emphasise the individualistic nature of their working style. As will be demonstrated later in Chapter II, these NGIs do not necessarily work for NGOs, but on the contrary, many NGOs have been established to facilitate their personal works. This explains why many Thai development-oriented NGOs are short-lived (Riska 1999) and have no clear organisational structure.

Also, unlike most works written on the AOP, which explain the AOP as one movement of diverse groups but with shared long-term goals (see Suthy 1997, 2004; Prapas 1998; Kanoksak 1999; Baker 2000; Missingham 2003; Naruemon 2006), this thesis rather views the movement as a highly fractionalised alliance with a number of short-term goals, goals which are not necessarily shared by all the component groups.

It is essential first to explore the historical background of Thai politics as well as the struggle of grassroots groups. The next section will also provide the political backdrop of the emergence of people's groups, notably the AOP in the 1990s.

B. Background

The elites have been the dominant force in Thai politics. Between 1930s and the 1960s, Thai politics was, according to Wilson (1966) and Riggs (1966), essentially defined as a 'bureaucratic polity,' and Thai politics was a political competition between bureaucratic elite groups and factions. Other political institutions or groups, Wilson (1966: 277-278) contends, were weak, and the idea of parliamentary democracy had not yet emerged in Thailand. Moreover, he asserted that the vast majority of Thais were not interested in politics; he described them as individualistic, status-conscious, and politically passive people (ibid: 45-71). This cultural explanation was along the same lines as Embree (1950) and Benedict (1952) who argued that the loosely structured social system is a crucial factor for the lack of group and self-discipline among Thais. This attitude is believed to have developed into political passivity among the Thai populace. Other authors, notably Hindley (1968), also stressed the politically apathetic role of the Thai masses during this period.

This political setting changed as Thailand entered the 1980s. A new consensus between elite groups was reached and Thai politics in this period is generally defined as semi-democracy (Chai-anan 1989). While the role of the bureaucratic elite remained strong, the elected politicians were allowed to share some of the power. The 1980s also saw the beginning of what was later known as money politics, which largely involved illegally activities, such as vote buying and corruption, by politicians and businessmen (see Callahan and McCargo 1996). This rise also marked the emerging power of the provincial capitalist politicians after the bureaucratic elites were defeated in the May popular uprising in 1992.

However, the dominant power of the Thai state has never been without local challengers. Thailand, according to Missingham (2003: 20), has a long history of protest and rebellion organised by peasants. Peasants revolts appear to have occurred in

different periods from the seventeenth century to 1959 and in many regions, notably the Northeast. During the 1930s and 1940s, MPs from the Northeast and civilian groups also played a key role against the military dictatorship (see Somchai 2006: 38-44). And from the mid-1960s to late 1970s, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), which was the strongest non-bureaucratic force outside Bangkok, mounted serious assaults on the Thai state. In 1974, Thailand saw the emergence of the first grassroots movement, the Farmers Federation of Thailand (FFT). But its activities soon ended after the violent attacks of the rightist forces in 1975 and 1976 (see Morell and Chai-anan 1981; Turton 1978).

The non-governmental organisation movement also re-emerged in the 1980s. Thai NGIs had been working with the grassroots since the late 1960s, but they ceased their operation after the 1976 coup due to the government's repressive strategies towards non-bureaucratic groups. However, Prudhisan and Maneerat (1997: 199-200) argue the movement revived because: 1) political conditions were more open in the 1980s, 2) former student activists in the 1970s became the disillusioned with the armed struggle strategy, 3) government-funded poverty reduction schemes became available, and 4) career opportunities in the private and government sectors were also lacking. With the influx of these new NGIs, large organisational structure was also replaced by small issue-based organisations, and their activities were no longer concentrated in Bangkok areas. As conflict increased in the late 1980s, the role of NGIs in many areas, especially the Northeast, also became more political and confrontational (Somchai 2006: 61; Callahan 1993: 163).

Increased local conflicts in 1990s resulted in a rising number of protests. The situations for the farmers' activism in the early 1980s had not changed much from the last decade. The protests of the farmers might have increased in number, but they were less radical, more sporadic, and short-lived—similar to those of the late 1970s (Prapas

1998: 27). However, as the problems escalated in the 1990s, the number of protests significantly increased and the protests became more organised. In 1990 during the Chatichai government, the number of protests on land-water-forest issues was only 58, but the number skyrocketed to 279 protests in 1994 and 335 protests in 1995 (ibid: 30).

Arguably, the turning point of the Thai grassroots politics took place as the military tried to implement one of the most ambitious state schemes, known as *khor jor kor*, to relocate 9,700 villages (around six million people) out of 1,253 different selected forests throughout the country (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 83). Implementation faced fierce resistance from the locals. The village protesters were also joined by students and activist groups. In 1992, the protesters hit the national media as they organised a rally of 4,500 participants, marching from the Northeast to Bangkok, which soon resulted in the suspension of the programme (ibid: 84).

The anti-*khor jor kor* movement, according to Pye (2005: 206-227), has several long-term political impacts, including the emergence of new grassroots political groups and actors. It also "provides a powerful learning experience for villagers" (Missingham 2003: 159) in engaging collective action. These new leaders would play a central role in the different movements and organisations in later periods. Somchai (2006: 72) suggests the anti-*khor jor kor* movement was the first important grassroots activism in the region since the collapse of the CPT, and it marked a new stage of radical movements in Thailand. Furthermore, the anti-*khor jor kor* protests also signified a rural-urban alliance, which would be the basis of people's politics afterwards.

In 1992, almost two decades after the collapse of the FFT, another strong, nationally-recognised grassroots movement, the Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan (SSFAI), [3] was founded. The movement's demands were mainly on two main

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[3] Isan is referred to the North-eastern region of Thailand.

issues: land rights and income (Somchai 2006: 93, 105). The movement also sought to build an alliance with other social groups and classes, including NGIs and school teachers. But soon, there were internal disagreements and scandals, which finally led to a split among the leaders. The movement became significantly weakened afterwards.

As the SSFAI was in its decline, another strong grassroots movement, the AOP, was also formed. The Assembly of the Poor was officially founded on 10 December 1995 as 250 villagers' representatives [4] and NGO delegates gathered at Thammasat University in Bangkok during a conference, entitled 'Assembly of the Poor: The Consequences of Large-scale Development Projects.' The event was also joined by representatives from NGOs from other countries. Another site for the conference was located at the Mun River in the Northeast, where two local conflicts over large dams were taking place (Missingham 2003: 38). The founding of the AOP was marked by Mun River Declaration, which stated that movement was a "platform (*wethi*) for mutual learning and exchange of knowledge about our problems by poor and disadvantaged people in society" (ibid: 39). It aimed "to build the power and cooperation of the poor at the local, national and international levels to convince the public that states must manage resources in ways that ensure equity and fairness for all people, free rights, and popular participation and self-determination" (Missingham 2003: 39).

As a public launch event, the AOP marched from Hua Lumphong railway station to the ASEAN Summit (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) to present the Declaration to ASEAN delegates (Missingham 2003: 39). This attracted considerable media and public attention. The AOP then submitted a petition to the government that included a detailed list of its members' grievances (Assembly of the Poor: 1996, quoted in Missingham 2003: 39). In late March 1996, the AOP staged its first massive protest

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[4] These villagers represented: the Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan, the Northern Farmers' Network, the Network of People Affected by Dams, the Isan Farmers' Assembly for Protection of Land Rights, and a network of urban slum dwellers.

against the Banharn Silpa-archa government's unresponsive handling of their grievances. Approximately 12,000 people joined the campaign, and the protest lasted five weeks. The collective action gained an extensive media attention and public recognition (Missingham 2003: 129). Despite that, the protest was fruitless in terms of solving the problems of the villagers; Banharn's coalition government soon collapsed and officials refused to take any further action (ibid: 129-130).

For the next move, the AOP was aware that in order to get something tangible from the new Chavalit Yongchaiyudh government, their protest had to be massive, lengthy, and attractive to the media. And they did just that. The AOP rapidly expanded its networks and was able to mobilise over 25,000 participants. The protests stayed in front of Government House for ninety-nine days (from 25 January 1997 to 2 May 1997) and gained even more extensive media coverage and public support. The protest was a significant political phenomenon in many ways. Although the 99-day protest no longer holds the record for the longest lasting protest ever staged in Bangkok,[5] it was the first time that such a massive and lengthy political demonstration had taken place in the capital. Prapas (1998) notes that it was the first time that affected villagers and the government delegates were put at the same level at the negotiation table. Historically speaking, it has not been too often that the mighty Bangkok government was surrounded and barraged by powerless rural villagers (Baker 2000).

The government recognition and level of compensation the AOP received were certainly extraordinary. Baker also writes, "Although far short of the AOP's original agenda, concessions on this scale were totally unprecedented" (2000: 23). The list included: giving compensation packages to almost 7,000 families for their loss of land and livelihood caused by dam projects; cancelling one dam project and reviewing five

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[5] The PAD announced that their protest against the government led by People's Power Party outlasted the 99-days protest by the AOP. The PAD's protest lasted 193 days from 25 May 2008 to 3 December 2008.

others; and ending summary eviction from 'forest' lands and admitting the principle that long-settled villagers should be allowed to stay in 'forest' zones. In total, the government's immediate cost was 4,657 million baht (ibid.).

However, the success of the AOP was short-lived. After urban-biased Chuan Leekpai became the prime minister following the collapse of the Chavalit government in late 1997, he reversed the land settlement and dam compensations promised by Chavalit. Thereafter, any outstanding government promises were simply ignored by state officials (Missingham 2003: 201-202). The AOP was further hit by the 1997 economic crisis, which turned the public as well as the media against the poor protesters. Street protests were feared to cause the country a bad image for foreign investors (Baker 2000: 24-26; Rungrawee 2004: 545; Prapas 1998: 136). Realising its increasing unpopularity in the capital, the movement then experimented a *dao krajai* (literally, scattered stars) tactic. Instead of concentrate on one massive rally in Bangkok, which required more resources, the AOP staged smaller protracted protests in several local AOP bases. The strategy turned out to be a failure (Rungrawee 2004: 546).

However, the prospect of the AOP was briefly boosted at the beginning of the Thaksin government (2001-2006). At first, Thaksin appeared to be sympathetic with their cause of struggle (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 144). The early optimism turned into a bitter end as the government refused to agree to the AOP's major demands, notably the permanent opening of the Pak Mun Dam's sluice gates. The conflict became intensified in late 2002. The AOP staged a prolonged protest to pressure the government to change its decision. But the protest was proven to be fruitless as the villagers were forced to leave Bangkok in early 2003 empty-handed. The AOP organised another massive protest in March 2005, but it lasted only two days and once again yielded nothing.

The AOP came back to the capital in February 2006, amid the heating political conflict between the government and the anti-Thaksin groups. The villagers took a radical approach as they occupied a Ministry of the Agriculture and Cooperative building to make demands over their unsolved grievances. Key cabinet members rushed to negotiate with the protesters, but a dead end ensued; the negotiations were halted after the Thaksin publically announced a surprise political move, the dissolution of the parliament. After both actions, the protesters left Bangkok with no success. These failures of the AOP during the Thaksin governments resulted in a further decline of the movement. Since 1997, the AOP has not been able to mobilise a protest as massive as in the past, and the protests have not yielded anything near what the 99-day protest did. This clear decline of the AOP is also evident in academic studies, which will be discussed in the next section.

C. The Assembly of the Poor in Literature

The literature on the AOP can be divided into two periods, the early rising period (1997 – 1998) and the later decline period (1999 - present). Work produced during the early period, mostly captures the excitement of a new grassroots movement with a new strategy, new qualities, and a potentially bright future in the Thai political arena. This considerably contrasts with studies of the later period, which offer a more cautious analysis stressing the AOP's limitations. The discussions also move towards external factors, notably the strength of the Thaksin government. As the AOP became weakened, the development of the movement became increasingly influenced by outside factors.

In one of the earliest studies, Suthy (1997) describes the AOP as a new social movement—a description which, as Uchane argues (2007: 151), has been widely used ever since. Suthy (1997) points out that the AOP can be seen as a new social movement because it comprises of different social classes, addresses previously unaddressed

issues, adopts direct political actions, and seeks to build a new more equal relationship between the people and the state. Similarly, Kanoksak (1999) views the movement as a new social movement with non-class interests. He adds that the AOP's political struggle is the continuation of the movements in the past but with a new approach. Prapas (1998) argues that the AOP should not be recognised merely as an interest group because the movement address some long-term public issues, such as environmental problems. Some of the achievements, he argues, include the creation of a decentralised organisational structure, participatory culture among its members, collective leadership, a new resource mobilisation structure, non-violent practices, and an alliance with NGOs and other allies.

In these early studies, one can find stress on the following common features: a more democratic and decentralised structure, direct political actions, new non-violent strategies, the link between the AOP with the role of strengthening the civil society, the recognition of the AOP as a new social movement, the multi-class alliance, and the tackle on the previously unaddressed issues, especially environment. These descriptions clearly distinguish the AOP from the failed radical movements in the 1970s as well as the less successful movements in the 1980s and 1990s. By branding the AOP as a new social movement and linking the movement with civil society and environmentalism, the authors not only emphasise on the AOP's 'unique' qualities but also attempt to appeal the middle-class groups. After the 1992 uprising, which many middle-class protesters participated, democratisation, civil society, and the middle-classes were believed to be closely linked. Since the 1980s, environmental issues can also appeal to the middle-classes. The attempt to label the AOP as new social movement or an environmental movement certainly links the AOP with the middle-classes, who had an increasingly vocal voice in Thai politics in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The early works also show an apparently optimistic view. On one hand, the optimism is to some extent justifiable since it clearly reflects the strong political standing of the AOP during and immediately after the major 1997 protest. On the other hand, as Uchane (2007) points out, it reveals the lack of 'critical culture' among the members of the Thai 'people's sector.' This is ironic, given that many of these people consider themselves as vocal radical leftists. However, this can also be argued that some of these authors (Suthy and Prapas) have worked closely with the movement, so their supportive and uncritical views come as little surprise. Also, in a country where political struggle is fiercely contested like Thailand, academic work is another contested space. Academics working *on* movements often feel pressure to work *with* or *for* the movements.

Academic works in the later period of decline contrasts greatly with earlier writings. While the sympathetic tone remains intact, more critical points and cautious view are offered. Sorot (1999) argues that country's centralised political structure has forced the villagers adopt extra-parliamentary political approach. Although he recognises some positive impacts that the SSFAI and the AOP have created, he downplays the achievements of the two in strengthening civil society. Kanokrat (2003) reveals some failures faced by the anti-Pak Mun Dam movement (part of the dam group in the AOP).[6] In terms of framing processes, she argues that the movement leaders failed: 1) to promote the culture of participatory democracy to the public at large, 2) to inform the public about the long-term goals and demands of the movement, and 3) to create a common understanding about long-term goals even among movement participants themselves (ibid: 243-244).

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[6] Although the study does not focus directly on the AOP as a whole, it reflects similar problems faced by the AOP. Moreover, Anti-Pak Mun Dam group has an important role in the movement because of: 1) the size of the affected people, 2) the organisational readiness, 3) the long experience and developed ability of the village leaders, and 4) the leading role of its advisers in the AOP.

The change of economic and political climate after the 1997 protest had significant impacts on the level of mobilisation of the AOP. While Baker (2000) recognises some significant contributions of the AOP to Thai political history during the highly symbolic protest in 1997, he also identifies the reverse effects of the 1997 economic crisis and the rise of the Chuan government on the AOP. Likewise, Rungrawee argues that the media plays a pivotal role in the AOP's political strategy. She points out that after the 1997 economic crisis hit the country, the media immediately turned its back on the protesters (2004: 545). Missingham (2003) also recognises the limitations of the AOP in the post-1997 period. In conclusion Missingham cautions: "Any claim that the Assembly of the Poor is democratizing society or transforming structures of inequality in Thailand in any far-reaching way would be overly optimistic. [...] In terms of material outcomes of the AOP's protests and petitions, the movement has had significant but limited success" (2003, 220).

Moreover, Naruemon (2006) views the limited participatory nature of Thai democracy, the 1997 constitution, and the rise of Thaksin as major obstacles to the mobilisation of the AOP in the late 1990s and early 2000s. She recognises the limitations in the AOP's 'dual strategy,' which involves demonstration and negotiation, and how it could be significantly disrupted by the change of socio-political environment. Prapas and Uchane (2006) argue that the AOP, which uses the extra-parliamentary politics as their main strategy, has to depend on the media access for their political campaign. They observe that due to many factors, the movement had not been able to gain adequate media attention recently. Moreover, they also notice that the content of reports on the movement during the Thaksin government appeared to focus on the dramatisation of the conflicts between the protesters and the government rather than the AOP's demands and the background of villagers' problems. Partially because

of this, it came with no surprise that the public showed little sympathy to the villagers during the Thaksin government.

Additionally, Uchane (2007: 164) challenges the claims made in early writings as he argues the AOP should more appropriately be viewed as an interest group with some unique features. He raises some serious questions about some underlying principles and features of the AOP. Uchane (2007: 163), for example, questions the legitimacy of the image promoted by the AOP and its supporters as an environmental movement or a new social movement. He also argues factors, such as the focus on short-term objectives, massive and prolonged protest strategy, the changing situation (inside and outside the movement), and the complex organisational structure and relationships between groups, have significantly weakened the movement.

More critical views and more emphasis on external factors are clearly evident in academic studies of the later period. This reflects the declining political position of the AOP as well as the rising internal chasm. The later studies agree that there has been an increasing pressure for the movement to rethink its strategy. The role of NGIs in the movement, which was had previously been seen as strengthening force, has been put in dispute. To emphasise the important of the internal factors, Kingkarn (2008: 40-41) correctly argues that internal elements are crucial factors because only movements with internal strength would have capacity to withstand the external pressure and continue to be a challenging force in an unfriendly political environment. As the movement itself became weakened, external aspects have been increasingly influential in the later works.

D. Social Theories and the Political Opportunity Structure

Before discussing the theoretical model used in this thesis, it is essential to address some approaches in social movement study. The classical model, which was employed in early studies, focuses on the relationship between structural strain and people's discontent of the social or political system. Classical theorists believe that social movements arise when people are highly disrupted by the system. To them, the movements function as a kind of psychological therapy for these movement members. This model clearly views collective actions as irrational behaviour of psychologically disoriented members of the society (McAdam 1982: 6; Meyer 2004: 126). However, later studies suggested otherwise. The approach is criticised as not offering logical explanation for the emergence of the insurgence of the marginalised groups for rational political goals.

Rooted in European traditions, new social movement theory (NSM) rejects the traditional Marxist traditions that solely focus on actors and actions deriving from capitalist economic production and class relationships. Instead, the approach, according to Buechler (1995: 442), focuses on 'other sources of identity,' such as gender and ethnicity, as the definers of their collective actions, and NSM theories are also based on "a diverse array of collective actions that have presumably displaced the old social movement theory of proletarian revolution associated with classical Marxism" (ibid.). In terms of methods, Cohen (1985) views the movements as reflecting an abandonment of the old dreams of revolution, and the replacement of revolutionary goals with a quest for structural reforms. On the other hand, Habermas (1981) believes that the NSMs can function as protection of civil society space against state encroachment.

a. Internal Factors: Mobilising Structure and Framing Processes

A movement also needs to a suitable mobilising structure to achieve its goals. One approach, known as resource mobilisation theory (RMT), seeks to explain how organisation can be structured under constraints of limited resources. RMT suggests that without some support from some members of the elite groups, an emergence of functioning movements is unlikely (McAdam 1982: 21). Whereas traditional theories assume that a movement's participants tend to be irrationally motivated by discontent, RMT explains that a social movement is collectively formed and institutionalised by rational actors (Meyer 2004: 127). Any actions taken are carefully calculated in terms of costs and rewards. The resource management skills of leaders are highlighted as crucial factors for mobilising a successful movement. However, RMT is criticised for its failure to explain the emergence of movements instigated by resource-lacking groups (see McAdam 1982). Despite these criticisms, this approach is still useful in evaluating how organisational resources are managed, how grievances are defined, and how strategies are formulated and employed by the movement leaders. In the context of a society such as Thailand that has a rigid system of social hierarchy, the role of leadership and its requisite skills in mobilising the masses should not be underestimated.

Another social movement approach, known as 'framing processes,' focuses on how social movements can gain political leverage by bringing certain issues or presenting ideas, beliefs, or values to the public. These strategic actions are aimed at gaining more support, creating sense of unity, as well as legitimising their collective actions. Moreover, Tarrow (1998: 21-22) argues that framing defines 'us' and 'them'— meaning that framing creates certain collective identities among the movement participants, which essentially separate them from movement outsiders. However, framing theories are often criticised for their failures to understand cultural constraints

surrounding the movements (Benford and Snow 2000: 622). And to mobilise a successful movement, the activists have to be able to select appropriate issues or concepts that help them to achieve their goals. Movement organisers are therefore required to possess some skills to control the framing processes.

b. External Factors: Political Opportunity Structure

Developed in the 1980s, the political process model focuses on the influences of the wider political system in facilitating or impeding the growth of social movements. The movements and their supporters are viewed as only one of the factors within the political process. According to McAdam (1982), the political process model outlines three essential factors: the first two involve elements within an organisation and the last one focuses on the importance of political opportunities conditioned by political environment. First, organisational resources are required if a movement is to succeed. Similar to RMT, the availability of resources and the skills to manage them are required in order to sustain or expand the movements. It is also necessary for activists to be skilful in formulating political strategies and tactics. Second, a psychological factor called 'cognitive liberation'—meaning the belief that collective action can bring about change to society—is crucial for mobilising popular support.

The third factor is the availability of political opportunities. Wars, political realignments, prolonged unemployment and other socio-political conditions can have a great impact on the public support for social movements (McAdam 1982: 41). In his work, the changes in policy and political environment overtime, such as the collapse of cotton economy in the south, the migration of African Americans to the north, made it possible for movements mobilise for public support. Meyer points out the importance of political environment factor in the political process theory as follows:

The primary point of the political process approach was that activists do not choose goals, strategies, and tactics in a vacuum. Rather, the political context, conceptualized fairly broadly, sets the grievances around which activists mobilize, advantaging some claims and disadvantaging others. [...] The wisdom, creativity, and outcomes of activists' choices—their agency—can only be understood and evaluated by looking at the political context and the rules of the games in which those choices are made—that is, structure (2004: 127-128).

In addition, the strength of this model also has to do with the fact that it allows the researchers to understand non-elite-based movements (McAdam 1982: 36-40), which are likely to be found in developing countries. It can also be used to understand not only the emergence and development of a movement but also the decline of a movement in a given political environment over time.

Many social movement theorists focus solely on external factors, known as the political opportunity structure. According to Van Der Heijden, the POS is generally referred to "specific features of a political system (e.g., a country) that can explain the different action repertoires, organizational forms and impacts of social movements, and social movement organizations in that specific country" (2006: 28). These specific features "jointly determine the strategies of the members of the political system in general, and of political authorities in particular, with regard to the mobilisation of social movements" (Kriesi et al. 1995: xv). The POS is shaped by the occurrences of political events or broad socio-political processes that have effects on the structure of political establishment (McAdam 1982: 41). Such events or processes serve as mechanisms to maintain or disrupt the existing political status quo. According to Meyer (2004: 128) the term the 'structure of political opportunities' was first explicitly introduced by Eisinger (1973) to explain the presence and absence of riots over race

and poverty in American cities in the early 1960s. Eisinger (ibid.) seeks to study the complex relationship between political environment and political behaviour by exploring various environmental conditions and the likelihood of urban riots.

Several other writings have been devoted to clarify and utilise the concept. Kitschelt (1986: 63) argues that there are four factors that determine the openness of the political system; 1) the number of political parties, factions, and groups functioning in electoral politics, 2) the capacity of legislatures in independently developing and controlling policies, 3) the access to the decision-making process, and 4) the availability of demand-collecting mechanism. Kriesi et al. (1992; 1995) suggests that the components of the POS include the followings; 1) the nature of existing cleavage, 2) the formal institutional structure, 3) the informal strategies used by the elite groups against their challengers, and 4) the structure of the electoral alliance. This narrower specification of the POS used by Kitschelt (1986) and Kriesi et al. (1992; 1995) is contrasted with earlier works by McAdam (1982) and Tilly (1978), which offer a broad range of factors. Such simple specification is, Kitschelt (1986) argues, expected to offer better explanation of the strategies utilised by the challenging groups in each country. But by doing that, researchers risk simplifying and flattening "simplifying and flattening a broad range of factors critical to the development of a social movement over time" (Meyer 2004: 131).

Other studies on the grassroots movements are devoted to examine the factors within the political environment that enable the excluded groups to emerge in developing countries. The movements in these developing nations usually face difficulty trying to survive in the state-controlled political structure. Osa and Corduneanu-Huci (2003), for example, attempt to identify the POS that enables non-elite groups to challenge authoritarian governments. Borrowing Tarrow (1998), the first four factors employed in the study include: 1) elite divisions, 2) less severe state

repression, 3) media access, and 4) influencing allies (Osa and Corduneanu-Huci 2003: 612). Osa and Corduneanu-Huci (ibid.) add a fifth factor to their study, namely the availability of social networks. This model is designed to understand the emergence of social movements in authoritarian states, and therefore, its applicability to the more open political system of Thailand must be cautioned. Lundy (1999), on the other hand, does not offer a concrete conceptualisation of the POS of the mobilisation of environmental groups in Jamaica, but she does mention the issue of limited applicability of the First World theory to Third World countries in terms of participants' profile, their motives and goals, and most importantly the political circumstances surrounding the movements.

Political Opportunity Structure and the Assembly of the Poor

Although the available paradigms in social movement studies are not entirely helpful in explaining Thai POS, many elements of these theories are more or less relevant to the case. In order to apply the idea of POS in this work, the re-conceptualisation of the idea is therefore necessary for this research project. The re-conceptualised POS, however, has to be cautious as Gamson and Meyer point out that: "The concept of political opportunity structure is [...] in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up every aspect of the social movement environment" (1996: 275). Also, the concept of POS may explain a great deal but the approach may not be applicable to other cases (see Goodwin and Japer 2003, quoted in Meyer 2004: 126).

In this thesis, two main sets of POS components are utilised. The first set involves stable POS elements, which are deeply embedded in the political system. Social movement theorists view these components as essentially fixed and given elements, which are beyond the control of the movement activists (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 277; Kriesi et al. 1995: 26). Changes only occur to these permanent components through either slow transition or revolution (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 277). The

analysis on elements is certainly useful in comprehending the structural barriers that grassroots movements in a given political structure are up against over the long period of time. In Thailand, these elements have adversely impacted the development and mobilisation of grassroots movements for decades.

As for the stable components, I propose the use of dominant culture, institutional structure, and prevailing strategies because these three have played an essential role in partially determining the development of the Thai grassroots movements. First, studies show that cultural structure can have significant impacts on social movements. A cultural shift in western societies during the post-war period, for example, partially gave rise to 'new politics' issues and Green movements (Inglehart 1977; 1990). Likewise, Saichol (2005; 2008) argues that the idea of Thainess, which is an important part of the Thai culture, creates limited space for the poor to obtain justice, freedom and equality.

Second, in terms of institutional structure, Kriesi et al. (1995) propose an influential model that can assess how the stable aspects of the POS affect social movements. Generally, the prospects of the movements are influenced by the strength of the state. The stronger the state is, the less like the movements would succeed. The state strength, according to Kriesi et al. (ibid.), is determined by the degree of decentralisation and separation of power. They argue that the greater degree of decentralisation, the more the access points, and less the capacity of the state to act. Similarly, the more the degree of separation of power (between different branches and within each branch), the more constrained the state is capable to act. Moreover, they also contend that three political arenas, namely parliamentary, administrative, and direct democracy, also have to be taken into consideration to further measure the strength of the state. These factors are helpful in determining the strength of the Thai state and how the villager protesters have been restricted from gaining access to the

system. As the AOP seeks not to topple the government, its success mostly relies on its capacity to influence the government to resolve the grievances of its members as well as change the laws that damage the livelihood of the villagers. The access to the political system is therefore one of the crucial factors that measure the movement's success.

Third, studies suggest the link between the prevailing strategies and the development of social movements (Tarrow 1998; Kriesi et al. 1995; Gamson and Meyer 1996). For example, repressive strategies can be used to deter non-elite challengers from taking any collective action (Tarrow 1998: 80). According to Kriesi et al. (1995: 34-36), the prevailing strategies are structurally embedded and they are closely connected with the country's history and tradition. However, the application of this concept to the AOP case has to be made cautiously. Unlike many other grassroots movements, the AOP's primary goals are not to bring down the government or radically to change the political structure, so the use of state repression against villagers has been relatively limited.

The second set of components involve volatile elements, which includes elite divisions and media access. Unlike the stable components, these elements constantly change and they can be influenced by the movement activists (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 289). In most studies, elite divisions are cited as the most important factor that influences grassroots mobilisation. Generally, splits among the elite, according to Tarrow (1998: 79), provide incentives to the non-elite groups to challenge the system. The divisions also encourage groups within the elite to take the opportunity to assist the grassroots protesters to challenge the opposing elite group for their political gains (Schock 2005: 33-34; Jenkins and Perrow 1977). On the other hand, the presence of elite support or being allied with the elite may also encourage the challengers take risks

since they may be provided with some sort of protection or assistance (Tarrow 1998, 79).

However, in the AOP case, having influential allies do not produce significant impacts on the movement. Although elite allies can provide the movements with media some coverage or funding opportunities, their role is rather restricted. As Thailand is a developing democracy, it is essential that elite groups both inside and outside the parliament are taken into consideration. While elected elites officially control the political powers, bureaucratic elites effectively function as a stabilising force. Military interventions and coups throughout the history ensure that the Thai government has to find a way to control the armed forces (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: Chapter IV). The degree of division or unity among these elites has significant impacts on the general political structure as well as the political opportunities for the AOP.

Equally important, social movements have to depend on media access in order to carry out successful political campaigns. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993: 116) argue the movements are dependent on the media for three main purposes: 1) conveying their messages, 2) validating their status and actions, and 3) broadening the audience. In democracies, the media access can help the movement gain more members (Vliegenthart et al. 2005; Smith 1999, quoted in Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2012: 392). In non-democratic regimes, the media also plays a key role in facilitating the grassroots mobilisation (Osa and Corduneanu-Huci 2003). Similarly, media coverage contributed considerably to the achievements of the AOP during its 99-day protest in 1997 (Prapas 1998: 131-135; Baker 2000: 20). Rungrawee (2004) argues that the protesters deliberately and actively carry out their collective actions in order to gain the media attention. Prapas and Uchane (2006) contend that the AOP have to depend on the media because its main strategy involves extra-parliamentary activities and non-institutional channels. They add that due to many factors, the movement has not gained the media

access it once had. This has adversely affected its campaign in the recent years. Unfortunately, after the political polarisation began in late 2005, no new study has been conducted focusing on the link between AOP's mobilisation and media access.

However, while the thesis emphasises on external factors, namely the POS, it also attempts to assess the internal components of the AOP. As shown in the previous section, although authors have written extensively on this subject, most of these writings have more or less overlooked the influence of NGIs on the movement and have failed critically analysed the movement's goals, strategies, and structure. The resource mobilisation approach, which has already been discussed, will be used to deal with this subject.

E. Methods

In order to understand the Assembly of the Poor, this thesis uses both documents and empirical data. For documents, primary and secondary sources are utilised to portray an accurate picture of the movement and its political surroundings. The thesis reviews extensive academic writings on the AOP, people's movements, and Thai politics. These documents provide the analyses on the internal elements of the AOP, general knowledge of the people's movement, and the political environment in different periods. The selection of documents for study is, of course, a political act in itself. The selection of materials is both systematic and reflexive, so that my biases as researcher are appropriately and adequately evident. As the thesis aims to look at the movement from a critical perspective, it emphasises the arguments from later writings on the AOP, which tend to offer a much more cautious and critical view. Some official documents, such as the movement's statements, are also examined to add details to study. In terms of language, the thesis uses both English and Thai documents in order to broaden the views on the movement.

In the media access section, newspapers and weekly magazines are also used extensively to understand the link between the media and the AOP's political opportunities. The section analyses the news reports from the Matichon news clipping online database, between January 2000 and December 2010. The database provides news reports from over 30 sources (see FAQ, Matichon News Clipping Online Database), including all major newspapers, in both Thai and English. This method shows the media space that the movement has gained over the years. When the AOP's news reports are compared with the political events in the same period, this to a certain extent reveals the connection between AOP's activities and the national politics. The use of news report counts in an analysis is also used in Forsyth (2001), as he accesses the relationship of social and economic class and environmental social movements in Thailand.

As for empirical data, the thesis fieldwork was conducted in various provinces in Thailand, mostly in Bangkok where the AOP's regular meetings were usually held. The fieldwork covered the period between February 2010 and January 2011. During the fieldwork, mostly qualitative methods were used, including semi-structured and unstructured interviews, non-participant observation, and group discussions. A great deal of information came from the discussions during and after the AOP's meetings, which I regularly attended during the fieldwork in Thailand. I also attended other related events, including a demonstration and a meeting with a government representative and the state officials. I was also allowed to attend an exclusive meeting that was open only to the AOP leaders. Some valuable information came from these events.

The list of people I interviewed and discussed in groups included the AOP advisers, leaders and rank-and-file members, academics, a reporter, and a member from the Thaksin government (see Appendix A). The selection of the interviewees, who

worked or had worked with the AOP, was made according to their positions in the AOP, the depth of their understanding, and their views towards the movement. Age and experience of the interviewees were considered as part of the criteria. For those outside the movement, their selection was based on their professions and their role in the movement's development. Political views of the interviewees were taken into consideration because yellow-shirt supporters tend to be less critical of the movement than red-shirt sympathisers, who tend to be more radical. These criteria ensured that the information and insights from the interviews were in-depth and balanced. Unfortunately, there was some limitation for the field research as well. Since there were only a handful of women working as AOP's advisers, their voices might be underrepresented in terms of number in the interview. However, extra attention was given to these female voices to make sure that their views are adequately covered in this study.

In terms of format, the interviews were either semi-structured and unstructured depending on the circumstances, the issues, and the interviewees. Some unstructured interviews were conducted in certain situations, such as general discussions with rank-and-file movement members outside the meetings. In most cases, semi-structured interviews were used to gather information from the selected interviewees. Some important open-ended questions were prepared in advance, but they were occasionally adapted to suit the interviewees. Note taking and recording were used during the prepared interviews. However, in cases, where recording was not possible, only note taking (during or after the interview) were employed. In some sensitive issues, such as internal conflicts, measures were taken to ensure the interviewees full anonymity. Interviews were conducted both in central Thai and North-eastern Thai dialects, both of which I speak fluently. Sometimes, the use of the North-eastern Thai dialect helped me

to gain trust from the interviewees, who were from the Northeast and could not speak the central Thai fluently (McCargo and Krisadawan 2004).

Regarding transliteration, all Thai words are transcribed into English by using the Leeds Romanisation system (see Savitri 2002: xi-xii). But for personal names, English spellings follow informants' and subjects' own preferences, as shown in their business cards or personal Facebook pages.

F. The Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into two parts, which deal with the AOP's internal and external components. Chapter II and Chapter III discuss the internal elements, such as the influential role of NGIs and the AOP's internal organisational structure. Regarding external elements, Chapter IV examines the stable aspects of the POS, while Chapter V investigates the volatile components. The detailed organisation of the thesis is shown as follows.

Chapter II discusses the influential role of the NGIs in Thai politics and the people's movements in the recent years. Since the NGIs have an important position in the movement, their thoughts and strategies have considerable impacts on the movement. The chapter argues that many of these activists, who have adopted the community culture approach, show a conservative tendency and non-political strategy. While these traits may have helped the villagers resolved some local issues, the strategies also have adverse impacts on grassroots activism and the people's movements in the long term.

Chapter III aims to reconstruct an understanding of the AOP in a more critical view. The chapter discusses some problems regarding goals and strategies of the movement. The pursuit of short-term goals by the majority of AOP component groups may have helped the movement expand in the early years, but as the struggle dragged

on, many AOP members simply left the movement. The chapter argues that those who joined the movement primarily for short-term interests tended to show low commitment, and were more likely to leave the movement, once their goals were realised or they found a better option to achieve their goals. Moreover, the loose structure and the lack of institutionalisation have significantly weakened the movement in the recent years. The weakened mobilising structure has in effect limited its success in pressuring the government outside the parliament, since the mass protest strategy heavily relies on numerical strength.

Chapter IV shows that the three stable aspects of the POS, namely the cultural structure, the institutional structure, and prevailing strategies, have mostly limited the development and mobilisation of the people's movements in Thailand. These structural components helped to explain why in the last few decades grassroots movements have not been able to reach their full potentials. First, the core of the cultural structure, the Thainess discourse, has made it difficult for the villager protesters to campaign for justice, freedom, and equality (Saichol 2005: 1). Second, the chapter also shows that the Thai state should be considered as a strong state mostly under the control of the elite groups. This has effectively limited the non-elite groups from gaining the access to the system. Third, the use of violent means as the prevailing strategies of the elites has negative effects on grassroots activism.

Chapter V discusses the volatile aspects of the POS, which have allowed grassroots movements to occasionally emerge and develop over the years. These components include the elite divisions and media access. The first element, the elite divisions, had an important effect on the AOP during the Thaksin government. After having consolidated the powers, Thaksin was able to considerably control the elite groups inside and outside the parliament. This enabled the government to pursue its populist policies as well as weaken the people's movements, especially the AOP.

Although the government began to lose the elite control in late 2005, the AOP was unable to materialise from this elite cleavage. Apart from the weakened mobilising organisation, the AOP lost its capacity to gain the media access during this polarised politics. Most media attention turned to the national conflicts and coloured movements. This lack of media access significantly hindered the AOP's development in this period. An analysis on the news reports shows that the media would give the media space to the AOP only when its activities were somehow linked with colour-coded conflicts.

Chapter VI provides the summation of the thesis and reaffirms the key argument, which states that since the early 2000s, the development and the mobilisation of the AOP has been increasingly influenced by the external factors. This decline of the AOP is caused by the movement's weakened mobilising structure as well as the changing political opportunity structure. As a result of the this weakened position, the movement has become increasingly engaged in more controversial strategies, including lobby politics. The chapter also reveals that the limited mobilisation of the AOP is not an isolated incident, but rather an experience which has been shared by other Thai people's movements. Moreover, it argues that the prospects of the AOP could be quite limited, due to its internal weaknesses and the on-going political polarisation. This chapter also examines the theoretical contribution of the thesis. By examining the external elements, this thesis offers a different perspective in understanding the AOP. Additionally, this study contributes to the study of social movements and political opportunity structure, which has been based mainly on the emergence and development of social movements in either developed countries or non-democratic ones.

Chapter II: Making Sense of the Political Activism of Thai Non-Governmental Individuals

A. Introduction

Many things have politically in Thailand changed since the coup in 2006, including the constitution, nature of political conflict, the increase of street violence—the list goes on and on. But among these changes, perhaps the least publically discussed development is how ideas or concepts related to Thai politics should be defined. Basic political terms, which are already contested, such as democracy and sovereignty,[7] have also become even more highly debated than never before. A decade ago, fierce public debates over these issues would be unthinkable. The control over the definition gives the control over power distribution and political categorisation. Similarly, the term, 'people's sector' has also become openly contentious. Back in the 1990s, the term would mostly be used to refer to NGIs and villager leaders, which is an indicator of the closeness between the NGIs and the people. It also indicates the legitimacy of the NGIs to speak on behalf the people. However, after the post-2006 political crisis began and some NGIs performed widely questioned roles, such as supporting the coup or violent crackdown of the red-shirts, the term has become another space for political contestation. For example, Suriyan Tongnoo-ied, the Acting Secretary General of the Campaign for Popular Democracy, who had previously worked with the AOP and other people's movements, publically showed his support for the use of military suppression on the red-shirt protesters in April 2010 (*Prachatai*, 10 April 2010; Atchara 2010; 12-

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[7] Dressel (2010), for example, discusses the contestation of the two notions of legitimacy—the enduring trinity (nation, the religion, and king) and the alternatives (constitutionalism, popular sovereignty, performance). Although he does not see this as a competition of two main political groups to redefine the term democracy, in a way, this actually is. This is because both camps claim to represent two types of democracy—the Thai-style democracy (see Hewison 2009; Surin 2007) and the modern democracy. The main differences of these two types of democracy include the sources of powers, the distribution of powers among political groups, and the people's rights and role in the system.

13). This caused some conflicts among his fellow NGIs (Fieldnotes, 25 September 2010) and the activist circle (*Thai E-News*, 8 October 2010).

An interview with an outspoken NGI, Baramee Chairat, who has worked with people's movements such as the SSFAI and the AOP, reflects this view:

> NGIs probably played the most important role in the people's sector in the past. NGIs and the people's sector tended to be close together and were inseparatable. I think the NGIs were the first to use the term people's sector when they did a presentation for or negotiation with the government. But now, I think NGIs and the people's sector began to share increasingly fewer things in common. NGIs have their own political stance, thoughts, direction which I think […] are not compatible with those of the people's sector. […] NGIs may publically announce that they are part of the people's sector, but the terms NGO and people's sector can no longer be used anonymously like before. […] I think the role of the NGOs has changed from checking on the government to working more with the government. And this direction is different from that of the villagers, the people's sector—especially judging from the recent political situation. It is clear to me that the directions of the NGIs and the villagers are [now] different ones (*Prachatai*, 30 August 2010).

This interview contains several interesting points. First, Baramee is widely known in NGO circles, so his comments reveal some serious ideological conflicts among the NGIs themselves. Second, the interview was part of a video series conducted by a group of a more radical element of the people's sector, the Thai Social Movement Watch, which allies itself with the progressive wing of the red-shirt movement. This is

a clear attempt to redefine the term people's sector from the red-shirts' point of view. Third, the interview raises an interesting point when it suggests that the Thai NGIs and the villagers/people no longer go to the same direction. Thai NGIs have always been known to be working closely with the people, and that is where their legitimacy derives (Shigetomi 2004a). So this begs some serious questions about the role of the 'NGO movement'[8] in the people's politics and the democratisation process in Thailand in the past three decades.

This chapter is therefore an attempt to analyse the political thoughts and strategies of the Thai NGIs, and how these elements have impacts on the overall political structure and the emergence and development of people's movements. Although the NGIs make up only a small number of individuals, they occupy positions of considerable power and influence over the formal and informal decision-making processes of these movements. According to Missingham (2003), their influence derives from their position in the structure, communication skills, and considerable grassroots activism experience.[9] Outside the movements, their sources of influences stem from their intellectual capability and their representativeness of the grassroots voices (Shigetomi 2004a). The strengths and weaknesses of these NGIs will shed some light on the internal capability of the AOP (next chapter) as well.

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[8] The term 'NGO movement' is widely used in many academic studies of Thai NGOs (see Quinn 1997b; Pasuk and Baker 1997; Missingham 2003; Somchai 2006; Kasian 2004). In some works, this usage reflects a more positive view on the NGOs, which was prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s. For others, it appears to emphasise some common characteristics of the NGIs, such as backgrounds, forms of activism, and interest in social justice (Simpkins 2003: 162). However, in a more critical view suggests otherwise. Simpkins, for example, writes that:

> a closer look at the NGO sector reveals that it is not an organized, coherent movement concentrating its efforts on specific policy issues, but rather a shifting agglomeration of disparate, even separatist, groups with different agendas, diverse visions of democracy, and extremely thin membership, dominated by luminaries of the activist era (ibid.).

Another critical view on the Thai NGOs, led by Giles, accepts the existence of NGO movement but rather criticises their anti-radical Left and pro-conservative elite tendency (see Giles 2010).

[9] Although the study by Missingham (2003, especially chapter 5) only covers the AOP, this pattern of relationship between the NGIs and the villagers is commonly found in other people's movements in Thailand.

Although there are various kinds of NGOs in Thailand, this thesis only focuses on what Quinn (1997b) calls people-centred NGOs, (which Prudhisan and Maneerat 1997 call NGDOs, or non-governmental development organisations), also widely known as development NGOs, which advocate development-related issues, such as popular participation, alternative development, and empowerment. Despite their 'non-political' stance and a number, these NGIs often find themselves deeply involved in political activism and street politics—certainly far more often than their NGO counterparts who work on welfare issues.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section is a review of the historical background of the development NGOs. The second section is devoted to understand how the NGIs are characterised. The discussion includes their political thoughts, and strategies. Unlike most earlier works on the NGIs, criticisms are also emphasised in this chapter's discussion.

B. Background

Before discussing the characterisation of the Thai NGIs, it is imperative to understand some of the historical background of the activists. The discussion emphasises not only the development of the NGOs in different periods but also the political context. The history of Thai NGOs can be classified into four main periods, according to the changes of the political environments and the roles of the NGIs in the political processes. These periods include: 1) the period of emergence (1960s – mid-1970s), 2) the re-emerging period (1980s), 3) the people's sector period (1990s – early-2000s), and 4) the period of decline (mid-2000s – present).

a. The Period of Emergence (1960s – mid-1970s)

The emergence of development NGOs came during the 'development period.' It can be traced back to the formation of Thailand Rural Reconstruction Movement (TRRM). Founded in 1967 by a progressive technocrat, Puey Ungpakorn, the TRRM was aimed to tackle social development issues at the grassroots level (Shigetomi 2004b: 46; Sheldon 2001: 167). The TRRM was also based on philosophy of improving the lives of the rural villagers by working closely with them (Missingham 2003: 27). This philosophy is reflected in the NGO's long-held slogan, 'the answer lies in the villages.' Despite its critical view on the state-led development, the NGO was still allowed to function without confronting the military government (Shigetomi 2004b: 47). Along with other NGOs, the TRRM were also associated directly and indirectly with student and pro-democracy movements as well as NGOs in the later periods (Sheldon 2001: 167).

In the 1970s, Thailand faced a period of turbulence. The first turning point came as the 'Three Tyrants' [10] regime was overthrown by the people in October 1973. Suddenly, a combination of factors, such as a weak state, perceived support from the King (Handley 2006: 211), and the public perceived sense of changes (Prapas 1998, 24) and a boost of political confidence among the masses (Kanoksak 1987; Giles 2006b: 572), led to a brief period of democratic euphoria. Hundreds of urban students went to the villages and educated the people about their rights and duties in a democratic system (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 303), while thousands of rural villagers took the streets and demanded justice (Kanoksak 1987). NGOs also found a new political space. Many NGOs were founded in this period. Some of these newly-emerged NGOs had connection with religious groups. The first human rights watchdog, the Union of Civil

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[10] Three tyrants refer to General Thanom Kittikachorn, General Prapas Charusathien, and Colonel Narong Kittikachorn, who led the military regime in the late 1960s and early 1970s and played a leading role suppressing the student uprising in 1973.

Liberties, was founded during this time. Part of the work of NGOs in this period was democracy promotion. Unlike the NGOs in the past, the NGOs were more critical of the state-led development and were seeking alternative approaches to development (Shigetomi 2004b: 46). The open space and threat imposed by the right-wing groups appeared to radicalise some of these NGIs.

However, on the morning of 6 October 1976 thugs and right-wing groups organised a massacre at Thammasat University, and later in that day a coup was staged to oust the civilian government. Over a hundred students were killed and 1,300 more were arrested during the incident (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 311). As a result, hundreds more were forced flee to the jungle and join the armed struggle. From that point, the democratic period ended abruptly, the political space for NGOs' activities suddenly shrank, and it became almost impossible for them to continue working in the villagers (Shigetomi 2004b: 47).

b. Re-emerging and Radical Period (1980s – Early 1990s)

The NGOs re-emerged in the early 1980s, which was caused by the changes in many socio-political conditions (see Prudhisan and Maneerat (1997: 199-200). Prudhisan and Maneerat (1997) describe the early 1980s as the period of proliferation, reorientation, and networking. They explain that: "This growth period for NGDOs was marked by a proliferation of small localised NGDOs, often established by development workers who had resigned from larger NGDOs due to differences over ideology or methodologies" (ibid: 200). The NGOs' change of approach came in the mid-1980s as they adopted a more people-centred development and focused more on local histories and cultures (ibid.). This approach, known as community culture, was soon adopted and widely used among Thai NGOs (Shigetomi 2004b: 48). There were also attempts to create networking between the government and the NGOs and between the NGOs themselves. The attempts were made by the government and the National Economic and Social

Development Board (NESDB). [11] The NGO Coordinating Committee on Rural Development, (NGO-CORD) [12] was also founded in 1985 to increase cooperation among NGOs themselves (Shigetomi 2004b: 49; Prudhisan and Maneerat 1997: 201).

The initially cooperative atmosphere turned confrontational as conflicts over resources escalated in the late 1980s. The export-oriented economy expanded, and so local resources were transformed into economic capitals. This strategy caused economic and environmental problems in some rural areas, and it soon led to the confrontation between local groups and the outsiders (Prudhisan and Maneerat 1997: 201). The late 1980s saw a sharp increased number in environmental conflicts. These included rock salt mining in the Northeast, prawn farming in the South, and the most high-profile case, the Nam Choan Dam project (see Rigg 1991). As the conflicts became intensified, the role of local and smaller NGOs, especially those in the Northeast began to more political and confrontational.

The political role of NGIs notably increased in the 1990s. The turning point for grassroots politics was marked as the government tried to implement the controversial *khor jor kor* project in the early 1990s. This resulted in fierce resistance from locals, and the project was finally suspended (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 83; Pye 2005). This marked the new official role of the NGIs as 'supporters' for the anti-*khor jor kor* movement as well as the subsequent movements. But it was not until the May crisis in 1992 that the NGIs assumed another political role. Apart from Chamlong Srimuang and the Student Federation of Thailand (SFT), it was the NGOs, especially the Campaign

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[11] The government led by Prem Tinsulanond set poverty reduction as its primary goal, and so it supported the NESDB, which already had some connection with NGOs through Puey. The progressive technocrat was once the chair of the board and was close to the NGOs from his role with the TRRM. These attempts resulted in two seminars in 1981 and 1982 with NGOs. Although some government agencies initiated regular consultation with NGOs at the local level, most of cooperation between the government and NGOs remained limited; it mostly involved holding joint seminars and exchanging ideas (Shigetomi 2004b: 48-49).

[12] This was later changed to NGO-COD.

for Popular Democracy (CPD), who played an important part in the movement. Partially, the NGIs were able to organise and mobilise the movement which eventually overthrew the Suchinda (Shigetomi 2004a). Callahan, for example, argued that it was the NGI's non-violent action that provided the spark in 1992 May event, which later was transformed into broad-based mass demonstrations (1998: 111). They later became considerably involved in the political reform, including drafting the new constitution, and so they came to be seen as a 'driving force for democratisation' (Naruemon 1998: 31).

c. People's Sector Period (Mid-1990s – Early 2000s)

The May 1992 crisis and its aftermath had many long-term impacts on Thai politics. After the crisis, the bureaucratic and the elected elites were significantly weakened. The bureaucrats lost their role as 'national defenders' after their actions led to a number of deaths during the crisis (Shigetomi 2004a), while the politicians were also seen as an obstacle to the reform in this period (see Connors 2002; Shigetomi 2004b: 53). The drawback of the state sector gave rise to the anti-state actors, the 'people's sector.' According to Nelson (2007: 5-6), the terms people's sector (*phak prachachon*) and people's politics (*karnmuang phak prachachon*)[13] have been used in discursive politics by non-state political actors, who were organised in the forms of NGOs, people's organisations, social movements, grassroots groups, and protests. Nelson observes that: "The term has the positive, even normative, connotation of citizen empowerment against all those in political and economic power" (ibid.)

In that period, the NGIs' political role was significantly heightened as they became the face of the people's sector and were seen as 'agent of change.' Equally important, the May crisis to some extent changed the public perception of street

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[13] According to Prapas Pintobtaeng, *karnmuang phak prachachon* was first coined by Chai-anan Samudavanija to signify the people's struggle against the semi-democratic system and money politics in the 1980s (A Report on ASEAN People's Forum 2009: 41).

politics—from simply 'un-Thai' to somewhat more acceptable. This change of perception in turn helped to legitimise extra-parliamentary activities, which were usually used by NGOs. Terms, such as popular participation and direct democracy, which were often used by these groups to assert their role in the decision-making process gained political legitimacy as never before. Coups and elections were no longer the only ways to secure political power. Grassroots activism gained unprecedented legitimacy. For much of the 1990s, mass protests by farmers from the Northeast became an annual event in the Thai capital.

Moreover, the NGIs' political role was radically extended after they became engaged in the 1990s reform. Their goal was to make the democratic system in Thailand "more legitimate, efficient, and participatory (Naruemon 1998: 46). The most important part of the reforms was the constitution, which the NGOs were able to broadly participate in the drafting process (Shigetomi 2004a: 299-303; Connors 2002: 47-52). For the first time, 'NGO agendas,' such participation and community rights, were added to the country's constitution. Equally important, the May crisis and the 1990s political reform effectively unified the people's sector, and this unity in turn strengthened these groups' position in the political arena immensely.

In December 1995, the NGIs took another important step when the AOP was founded. The formation of the AOP increased the political position of the NGIs in at least three important ways. First, working with the AOP gave them something they did not possess—mass support. The political power of the NGIs normally came from their knowledge, but without strong pressure from the public or the street, their proposals were easily ignored. The alternative agriculture group, for example, was a small group, which was led by a handful of NGIs with only a few dozens of families. By joining the AOP, the group could lend mass support from the villagers from other groups and increased its bargaining power (Fieldnotes, 11 October 2010).

Second, it was the first time that people's movement reached out to national audience as they repeatedly staged massive and prolonged protests in Bangkok in the mid-1990s. This also put the NGIs in the national spotlight, so from that point onward, their opinions did matter. Third, the decentralised structure of the AOP helped the NGIs to shake off the *moe thi sam* (literally, third-hand) image, which was usually portrayed by their opponents and generally perceived by the public. The NGIs are often seen as the people who attempt to stir the harmonious relationship between the government (the ruling) and the villagers (the ruled) (see Attachak 2006). It helped them to strengthen their 'supporting' role, thereby legitimising their involvement as well as the actions of the movement as a whole. The movements and the NGOs, according to Quigley, were seen as playing "a role in spreading democratic values, fostering participation, and nurturing the skills and confidence necessary for Thais to act as citizens in a consolidating democracy" (1996: 226). Unfortunately, their success did not last long. The achievements from the 99-day protest were drastically reduced after the after 1997 economic crisis and the rise of Chuan government (see Rungrawee 2004: 544-546; Baker 2000: 25). Popular participation and direct democracy became secondary to political stability and economic recovery.

The role of NGIs revived briefly in the early 2000s during the early years of the TRT. During the policy-making process, Phumtham Wechayachai, a former-student-activist-turned-NGO-leader-turned-politician, set up several meetings in different locations between TRT leaders and local groups, which later resulted in key pro-poor policies.[14] The influence of the NGIs came from informal channels as well. Phumtham and 'October generation' activists-turned-politicians, who played an important role in the TRT, also acted as communication channels for their former comrades in the NGOs

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[14] Phumtham Wechayachai, Interview, 19 January 2011.

to the party leaders. The seemingly cooperative atmosphere continued after Thaksin became the prime minister.

But not long afterwards, this was proven to be a tactical move to suppress the NGOs and their supporters (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 144). In 2002, twenty leading Thai NGOs and forty-four of their foreign supporters were put under investigation by the Anti-Money Laundering Office (ibid: 145). Thaksin repeatedly depicted the NGIs as corrupt recipients of foreign donors. For example, Thaksin said, "Some of them want to make their presence felt. They record their rallies on video and send the tapes overseas to get financial support" (*The Nation*, 31 July 2002, quoted in Pasuk and Baker 2009: 147). Under Thaksin, the NGOs were labelled as third-hand by the government and they were no longer needed in the Thai political life (Pasuk and Baker 2008: 69; 2009: 144-149). During this period, the political influence of NGOs was significantly weakened.

d. Period of Decline (Mid-2000s – Present)

In the second half of the 2000s, the NGIs' political role was further reduced by the 'coloured' conflict. The conflict began in late 2005 when the media mogul Sonthi Limthongkul began protesting and accused Thaksin of abuse of power, conflict of interests, and violation of royal privileges (see Suparak 2006; Kasian 2006). While the anti-bureaucratic wing of the people's sector was convinced that supporting the popularly elected government is a necessary step to normalise the traditional unelected elite, the majority of the NGIs saw Thaksin's actions as unacceptable. The NGIs joining forces with conservative groups to form an anti-Thaksin movement, also known as the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), was partially a response to latter view. But the clear chasm in the people's sector surfaced as the PAD called for a royal

intervention in late February. While the majority of the NGIs were still with the PAD, some simply left the stage.[15]

The people's sector was divided further when the military overthrew the Thaksin government on 19 September 2006. Some NGIs, mostly the younger generations, came out and publically opposed the coup, while many senior NGIs appeared to be either silent or publically supportive of the coup. The situation did not improve as many NGIs continued to support the post-coup nationalist PADs and conservative elite groups. One of the contentious issues in this period was whether or not they should vote for the military-supported 2007 constitution. The anti-coup groups, led by Jon Ungpakorn, publicly announced their vote-no stance to the draft, but the other pro-PAD NGIs, led by Boonyeun Khongpetchsak, declared that NGIs were free to make up their own minds regarding this issue (Atchara 2010: 7). In 2008, many NGIs, notably those close to the Campaign for Popular Democracy, continued to show support for the PAD.

However, what many see as the last straw occurred in 2010. After the crackdown on the red-shirt protesters in April and May, which resulted in more than ninety deaths and over two thousand injuries, the military-installed Abhisit government appointed three reconciliation committees.[16] These committees were strongly criticised for its pro-government inclination. The majority of the committee members showed clear support for the PAD. It was clear that these committees were set up for a political purpose—to reduce the political pressure arising from the use of excessive violence. Many of NGIs, such as Saree Ongsomwang and Rewadee Prasertcharoensuk, and people with NGO connection, including Dr. Poldet Pinprateep and Prida Tiasuwan,

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[15] Suriyasai Katasila, Interview, 28 July 2010.

[16] These committees are the 19-member National Reform Committee, presided by Anand Panyarachun, the 27-member Assembly for National Reform, headed by Prawase Wasi, and the 9-member Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Kanit na Nakorn.

were also included in the committees. Those, who were not appointed, also tried to take advantage of this opportunity (see Atchara 2010). This led to some serious conflicts among the NGIs.

Since the beginning of the Thaksin government, the NGIs have not been able to retain the same degree of political power as they did in the 1990s. This weakened position has been caused by both internal and external factors. Internally, the NGIs have not been able to unify the people's sector and build a strong mass movement as they did in the 1990s. And as mentioned above, the activists have been heavily divided over coloured conflict. Externally, the coloured conflict left little room for non-coloured movements to mobilise. Since the 2006, the public perception on extra-parliamentary politics also changed considerably. Street politics, which was previously seen as one of the political channels for the non-partisan, marginalised voices to gain social justice, has now become viewed as a political space for state challengers with party ties to overthrow the government. The NGIs' role in the democratisation process has now been reversed; many of them, who have directly and indirectly supported the conservative PAD, are now seen by the more radical wing as an anti-democracy force. Instead of being an agent of change, the NGIs now appeared to be an obstacle to change.

C. Characterisation of Thai Non-Governmental Individuals

There are many works that try to characterise the NGIs in different aspects (see Simpkins 2003; Giles 2006a; 2006b; Thongchai 2008a; Atchara 2010; Kengkij 2010). These recent works offer a much more critical view on the NGIs than those produced in the 1990s. Yet, most works on NGIs do not sufficiently address the diverse nature of the NGO circle. This section is yet another attempt to characterise the NGIs in terms of political thoughts and strategies. In this section, I offer another approach to understand them by proposing criteria that can be used to categorise the two main groups of NGIs

in terms of political thoughts. The second part of the section is also devoted to understand the NGI's strategies in terms of forms and channels. The section also discusses how these thoughts and strategies have impacts on their actions, the political structure, as well as the development of the people's movements.

a. Thought

In terms of political thought, Thai NGIs may be roughly divided into two main schools of thought: the political economy and community culture (Somchai 2006).[17] While there are critical differences between these two (see below), it is important to understand that both of them share similar ideas regarding development and popular participation. They both oppose state-led development while support grassroots popular participation. They agree that state-led development has adverse impacts on local communities and popular input from the bottom can be a remedy for problems in the villages. Their interpretations of the participation may however differ. The political economists see this as a necessary step to create a more equal society as well as strengthening democratic institutions in the country, while the community culturalists view this as protection for local villages from the capitalist influence.

In order to understand the differences between these two groups, I propose that three main criteria may be used to classify these two. The criteria include: 1) the view on capitalism, 2) the level of analysis, and 3) the mode of participation. The first

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[17] The idea is developed from Somchai (2006), which divides the activists into two groups, political economy and community culture. However, elsewhere these two groups may go by different names. The political economy may also be called structuralism, radicalism, or Marxism (see Simpkins 2003; Giles 2010), while community culture (a direct translation from the Thai term, *wattanatham chumchon*) may also named as communitarianism (see Pfennig 2005; Kengkij and Hewison 2009). Moreover, a comparable analysis of these two ideological groups in the activist circle is also found in A Day Weekly (7-13 January 2005). In the magazine, there is a debate between two academics (Giles Ungpakorn and Prapas Pintobtaeng), representing two groups of activists, the Marxists and the NGIs (see "*Karn lakmad rawang khon chaikhob kab Marxists*" 2005: 24-27). While the debate is about two groups of people, the insiders and outsiders of the NGO circle, there are some similar elements with the discussion in this chapter, such as their view on capitalism and party politics.

doctrine, that of political economy, has a leftist tendency, and its roots can be traced back to the radicalism in the 1970s. While these political economists are influenced by Marxist ideology and clearly against the capitalist imperialism, they do not reject the influence of the market economy entirely. For those who believe in Marx's historical materialism, this is a necessary step to move Thailand from being a semi-feudal state run by conservative elite to the next mode of production, capitalism.[18] But for some, it is just impractical to work against the global economy as capitalism has already penetrated into the villagers' everyday living (Somchai 2006: 65-66). Recent studies on the red-shirt movement and their socio-economic background support the view (see Naruemon and McCargo 2011; Apichat et al. 2010; Keyes 2011).

These political economists believe in changes at the structural level. As Marxists, they believe that meaningful changes only occur in the system, so to achieve that, some sort of mass mobilisation is required. Their mode of participation includes parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activities. Outside the parliament, they propose a mass-based political organisation to increase bargaining power vis-à-vis the state (Somchai 2006: 65-66). As conflict escalates, they are prepared to take a more radical step, such as prolonged mass protest or seizing state properties. Moreover, the political economists do not hold disgust for party politics. They believe that meaningful changes can be achieved only through having some control over state authority. So they are not

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[18] This idea, which portrayed Thailand as semi-feudal or semi-colonial state, came from the Maoist doctrine and it was a dominant idea among the CPT members. It was mostly used to describe Thailand in the 1970s and 1980s (Giles 2001: 156). However, some Marxists still hold this view today. They particularly see the domination of conservative elites in Thai politics as an indicator of semi-feudalism. It was part of the reason why many leftists gave support to the TRT—the party which they believed to represent the '*thun mai*' (literally, new capital or new money) (Suriyasai Katasila, Interview, 28 July 2010). The new capital, they argue, would transform Thailand into a full capitalist state by overthrowing the '*thun kao*' (literally, old capital or old money), and as the historical materialism argument goes, the class struggle would eventually lead to an end of all the exploitation in Thailand. However, this view that Thailand is a semi-feudal is conclusively rejected by those who left the CPT in the 1980s (Pasuk and Baker 1997: 384). Many of these non-believers later worked as NGIs.

shy to show support for 'suitable' parties. Some went further and formed mass parties themselves. But so far, there has been no success story.

However, leftist ideology never actually gained formal recognition and wide popularity in Thailand, even during its peak in the 1970s. Similarly, today most leftists in Thailand are either some 'uncles' in their sixties or seventies, who spent years in the jungle with the CPT, or some new generation activists. Some of these activists also work in NGOs.[19] Although many of these NGIs from time to time seek advice from the uncles, their influence in the NGO circle is still fairly limited. It is because the most influential group in the NGO circle, according to Atchara (2010: 9), is that of mid-ranking and senior NGIs (40s and above), who played an important part in reviving the NGO work in the 1990s, such as Wanida Tantiwittayapitak, Watcharee Phaoluengthong, and Sanan Chusakul. The majority of these NGIs appear to be community culturalists. It is therefore safe to say that the leftists are the minority, and their leftist ideology is only a subordinate view among the NGO circle.

The second doctrine, community culture, which is a dominant ideology among the NGIs (Shigetomi 2004b: 48), emerged in the 1980s after the failure of the CPT's armed struggle against the Thai state. Utilising historical analysis, Chatthip Natsupha, a prominent Thai scholar, proposed the idea that there is a Thai essence in community culture which, he believes, is an 'antidote' to the aggression of capitalism (Thongchai 2008a: 579). While this idea is welcomed by some activists as they see it as tool to struggle against capitalism, it has also been criticised for its conservative and nationalist tendencies (Thongchai 2008a: 579; Kengkij 2009b). Unlike the political economists, the community culturalists hold a more pessimistic view towards capitalism. I would argue that these culturalists are not personally against capitalism. Many of them enjoy a luxurious life and work closely with wealthy capitalists

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[19] Suriyasai Katasila, Interview, 28 July 2010.

themselves. But, in their view, capitalism has negative impacts on the villagers. The community culturists see capitalism as the primary cause of poverty and social ills in the rural communities. They see villagers as highly vulnerable to exigencies of the free market economy.

Also, instead of emphasising structural changes like the political economists, community culturalists prefer the answer-lies-in-the-village approach, which basically highlight local-based solutions to the problems in the rural life. Their proposed solutions are based on the Thai 'essence,' which includes cultural qualities, such as sense of cohesion, solidarity, harmony, and *nam jai* (literally, care for others or hospitality), self-sufficiency (Thongchai 2008a), local wisdom, traditional practice, Buddhist values, local history, and identity (Somchai 2006: 62-64). This emphasis on the local issues has an important impact on people's movements; it ensures that the movements only use issue-oriented form of activism. Ironically, this view is also supported by some western ideas, such as new social movement, postmodernism, and environmentalism. Thai NGIs often cite these concepts to legitimise their actions (see Uchane 2007).

The community culturalists hold contempt for party politics. They see Thai politicians as immoral agents of capitalism and political parties as sham organisations under control the capitalists for their own self-interests. Elections, for them, are simply a dirty business of buying votes, thereby viewing as an illegitimate source of power. Moreover, unlike the political economists, the community culturalists do not seek to control the state authority, but rather they prefer that more autonomy be vested in local communities. They believe that the control of the resources by local population not only satisfies the local demands better but also empowers the villagers. As a result, instead of party politics, the culturalists prefer to conduct political campaigns outside parliament and defend their local autonomy.

One important lesson from the recent political crisis about the community culturalists is that while they do not trust the bureaucratic elite, they find it acceptable to build an alliance with bureaucrats to counter the politicians.[20] But apparently for them, all politicians are not equally 'evil.' During the anti-Thaksin campaign, many NGIs openly gave their support to the Democrat Party (DP), largely because they opposed the powerful TRT. They also saw it necessary to join hands with the one group of politicians to fend off another (Fieldnotes, 19 August 2010). The expansion of the TRT was seen as a threat to their grassroots activism. In this respect, the community culturalists could be quite pragmatic.

However, it is not to say that these two groups can be clearly defined. First, the proposed three criteria are only a rough categorisation of the NGIs for the purpose of this thesis. But for some reason, if other factors, such as their view on traditional elites, are added to the criteria,[21] the groupings may look considerably different. Second, many Thai social activists cite ideas from both perspectives, sometimes interchangeable, which may not be surprising given that most of the Thai NGIs share similar backgrounds, and they have been more or less influenced by the 1970s radicalism. Besides, they are both to a certain degree critical of the Thai state and the elite-controlled political structure.

The dominance of community culture in the NGO circle has provoked many criticisms. First, it is blamed for weakening people's movements. The NGIs, who play the leading role in organising the movements, tend to limit their goals at the local level.

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[20] In their defense, they argue that Thaksin became a dictator and was too powerful for normal check and balance mechanisms in the democratic system to function properly. And allying with the bureaucrats, for them, was a necessary step to move the country forward and create a better democracy in the future. However, as time passes by, their argument has become more and more unconvincing because five years after the coup, while Thaksin is no longer in that 'too powerful' position, and yet the NGO leaders' support for the bureaucrats and the use of undemocratic methods remain unchanged.

[21] These factors are in fact quite relevant for the examination of the role of NGIs in the current political development. But it is however not as useful for studying the people's movement.

They make sure that the movements do not aim to subvert or supplant state authority, or to make excessively radical demands. The advantage of this tactical preference is that they can avoid the 'paid mob' image, which they are usually labelled by the public and their opponents. Such an image would damage their legitimacy as genuine victims of misdirected-state development projects. Given their limited goals, governments are also reluctant to counter protestors with openly harsh measures.

However, these limited goals also have some setbacks. They effectively limit the capability of these movements to mobilise as one powerful movement for structural change. At times, these smaller local movements maybe unified under one larger movement, but the goals of the umbrella movement would be only to 'assist' the local movements to achieve their goals in the communities. But given the diverse nature within the movement, it is almost impossible to effectively mobilise and develop this national movement for meaningful and structural changes. As noted, the goals are mostly short-term, and once the grievances are solved, most members would simply stop their activities. And because of this, many radical activists became disillusioned and simply left the movements for more radical groups, such as colour-coded pro- and anti-Thaksin movements.[22] The list includes some people from the Friend of the People group and the Campaign for Popular Democracy.

Second, NGIs can become a conservative force. The Thai NGIs are often understood as 'progressive' and 'pro-democracy' groups mainly because they tend to find themselves on the street leading or assisting anti-government protesters whose livelihood is destroyed by the state projects.[23] The logic is simple; the Thai state is

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[22] Suriyasai Katasila, Interview, 28 July 2010.

[23] Before the 2000s crisis began, there was a perception that the expansion of the political space was an integral part of the democratisation process in Thailand. As a result, it is believed that street politics was an important development for the democratic structure, and those engaged in extra-parliamentary were perceived as part of the progressive groups. Likewise, Supalak

made up by the elite, the exploiters, and so their opponents would easily qualify as progressive and pro-democracy groups.

Yet, as Thongchai (2008a) points out, this progressive position may be dramatically changed when they feel threatened by capitalism. The adoption of local 'Thai' values or even the symbols of Thainess by NGIs in order to resist the perils of capitalism directly or indirectly, has the potential to make them an ally of conservative elites. Ironically, in order to struggle against capitalism and its agents, which include businessmen and the politicians, the NGIs have adopted conservative discourses, such as nationalism and moralism, which were used by the conservative elite against them in them in the past. The irony did not end there. This fear of capitalism partially transformed them into an anti-democracy force, and they ended up helping bureaucratic elite to bring down the democratically elected government in 2006 and afterwards.

On the other hand, Sirote Klampaiboon, an academic who has closely worked with the NGIs, argued that many senior NGIs, such as Pipop Thongchai, Dej Phumkacha, and Rosana Tositrakul, have not changed their ideological position regarding conservatism. Rather, it is the public that has changed its perception since the 2006 coup. After the military intervention, critics began to view these NGIs in a different light. Sirote added that these activists have always opposed capitalism. They saw the market economy as the source of many serious socio-economic problems. But before the 2006 coup, the public saw their ideas as a form of progressive thinking. However, after the coup, many changed their perception and viewed these ideas were essentially linked to conservative concepts such as sufficiency economy and Thainess.

(2006), a senior journalist and a former student activist, writes an interesting account about his perception of the street politics and the degree of democratisation as follows:

> I had this wrong impression about political demonstrations for a very long time. I assumed that the more the people demonstrated on the street, the more the country became democratic. But the anti-Thaksin demonstrations by the PAD revealed the fact that it did nothing to improve the country democracy. On the contrary, it might have taken us away from being democratic.

But he also explained that the NGI's fear of capitalism could be overwhelming, and hence could push the activists to adopt an anti-democratic stance, and so to espouse pro-military and pro-monarchy positions and sentiments.[24]

This also indicates that the NGIs can also be highly practical and flexible when it comes to political manoeuvre. To explain this twist, Giles (2006b) explains that partially this has to do with the 'disillusion' of these former student activists with the communist movement, which resulted in their abandonment from adhering to theory and principle. This is not a simple rejection of Marxist ideas, but a rejection of any grand theory or principle. This works well with the NGIs because community culture offers small local-based theories with fluid nature. This is also supported by the widespread of post-modern idea of rejecting 'grand narrative,' which was popular among the Thai intellectuals (ibid.). Moreover, this practical attitude is caused by the nature of their work at the local level, which requires them to be adaptive and flexible. Similarly, Preecha also notices that most NGIs do not "base their performances on specific approaches" (1999: 21).

Some blame the NGIs' lack of sufficient theoretical knowledge and framework for this setback. Atchara (2010: 21) argues that they do not have much knowledge about contemporary political ideology, and they do not really understand important ideas, such as liberalism, conservatism, socialism, and democracy. Their understanding on important issues, such as history and political structure, is also limited. This lack of theoretical insights is caused by the reliance on personal experiences as main source of information. According to Krisada (2006, quoted in Atchara 2010: 21), instead of learning from reading books, the Thai NGIs rely on learning from the experiences of more senior NGO leaders from the same network or group. The experiences are usually passed on though discussions, forums, and meetings.

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[24] Sirote Klampaiboon, Interview, 12 January 2011.

While this approach is very useful in understanding local issues (see Quinn 1997a), this reliance on personal experiences also has some setbacks. First, it creates the uncritical culture among the NGIs. Krisda observes that although meetings and discussions are held regularly for NGO works, most of them only focus on strategic planning or public campaigning. But these events are mainly aimed to support each other's ideas rather than fairly criticise them (Krisda 2006, quoted in Atchara 2010: 21). Second, this indicates seniority and patronage culture within the activist circle. Some may find these ironic, given that they are the ones who usually raise critical voices against the others and show contempt for the patronage culture in the bureaucratic system.

Third, some cast doubt on the NGO approach in solving problems in the villages. Rigg criticises the NGO development strategies as ideologically driven and impractical. He argues that their strategies are mainly constructed from polarities, and they simply seek to defend the villages from the market economy (Rigg 1994, quoted in Quinn 1997b: 10). Quinn (1997a: 110-112) argues that in some circumstances, the NGO approach can also be fruitless. In some cases, the failure is caused by the local people being accustomed to the handout approach. In other cases, the complex nature of the locations is responsible to this fruitlessness. Quinn also observes that the weakness of the NGO approach lies in its time-consuming and geographically limited nature. Moreover, she argues that this approach can only be fully applied to communities where the people are willing to be self-sufficient and be kept away from the global economy (ibid: 112). Without that consent, the NGOs will not find cooperation, let alone success. From the leftist point of view, the NGO approach is not as effective in addressing the needs of the people in the villages as that of a strong populist government. Kengkij and Hewison write:

> While TRT's 'populist' policies were unlikely to address inequality and power, the government did seek to address various problems that had bedeviled rural communities for decades in terms of health care, debt and production. Communitarian ideas, while having some localized successes, were remarkably unresponsive to the poor's broader needs and demands. Those involved with social movements recognized this and understood that the communitarian vision was perceived by the rural masses as too idealistic and less grounded than the TRT's pro-poor policies (2009: 462).

The proponents of this view support the formation of a mass party with some socialist policies rather relying on the existing parties, which mostly utilise the mixture of populist schemes and money politics.[25]

b. Strategies

Self-limiting Radicalism

Since the re-emergence of the NGOs in the 1980s, the NGIs have mainly employed self-limiting radicalism. Cohen defines it as "a self-understanding that abandons revolutionary dreams in favor of the idea of structural reform, along with a defense of civil society that does not seek to abolish the autonomous functioning of political and economic systems" (1985: 664). Dryzek et al explain that "[...] movement generally does not wish to capture, overthrow, or even share state power [...] even as its members may look to radical paradigms beyond industrial society" (2003: 11). For the new

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[25] For example, Somchai (2008: 106) studies the elections in 2001 and 2005 in the Northeast region, and he argues that the TRT's success did not derive from one single factor, but rather due to the combination of two strategies, old-style money politics and policy-based campaigns. The TRT's successors, the PPP and the PT, have also employed similar strategies. This approach has now been adopted by other major parties, including the DP which voiced strong opposition to the TRT's populist schemes in the past.

social movements in the West, the adoption of this approach is merely to protect civil society space against state encroachment (Habermas 1981).

In developing countries, many view this approach as a 'non-political strategy' because these grassroots challengers only seek to make limited changes and distance themselves from party politics (Giles 2010). For the movements in these countries, including Malaysia and Thailand, the reasons for adopting self-limiting radicalism include problems concerning funding opportunities (Pornamrin 2008: 24), the adoption of post-Cold War politics, and the repressive practice of the semi-authoritarian state (Giles 2010: 81). Moreover, as previously discussed, for Thai NGIs, community culture doctrine, the distrust of party politics, the public perception of street politics also play an important part in making them adopt this non-political strategy.

On the other hand, this limit of political goals effectively enables the NGIs and people's movement to utilise considerably radical tactics with much less harsh consequences. The people's movements have employed numerous radical tactics, such as prolonged encampment and occupying government buildings, only to pressure the government to solve their local or single-issue problems. Hundreds of AOP members, for example, stormed Government House on a few occasions in 2000 and seized the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives building in 2006. While some of these villagers were charged with breaking the law, compared with the fate of those taking part in the red-shirt movement the consequences they suffered were much less severe.

NGOs and People's Movements
The NGIs employ two forms of mobilisation, through NGOs and people's movements. The NGIs' first form of mobilisation is made through NGOs. While there are around 20,000 NGOs in Thailand, only fewer than one thousand of them are the development-oriented NGOs (Gawin 2004: 64). But the figure of active NGOs was much smaller. In 2000, there were probably around 140 active NGOs (Pasuk 2000: 8). It should be

noted, however, that accurate figures for active NGOs in Thailand has never been clear since not all of them are officially registered. A directory made by Thai Development Support Committee in 1997, listed only 465 NGOs (Riska 1999). The estimated figure is far greater than the figure in the official record. In 1993, for example, it was estimated that there were approximately between 10,000 and 20,000 NGOs (Amara 1993: 11).

The percentage of unregistered NGOs is even greater for grassroots, development-related NGOs. The main reason for this failure to register of these NGOs has to do with the government-imposed requirements of endowment or membership (ibid: 10). Registered NGOs must also declare in a written statement of objectives that they are non-political (ibid: 7). Many development-oriented NGOs are short-lived (Riska 1999), as they do not have permanent structure or lasting resources. A number of them are ad hoc organisations, which are simply founded to support certain goals or projects in a given time. Some NGIs work for one organisation, but officially they belong to and get paid by another (Missingham 2003: 117). This flexible practice is partially due to the limited funding opportunities (see Gawin 2004; Simmons 2003: 85-86) as well as the patronage culture with NGO circles.

Given this flexibility, it is not always easy to tell which actions NGIs undertake on behalf of their organisations and which ones they undertake as individuals. In such an environment, senior NGIs in particular have more freedom to assert their political goals as individuals more than the younger counterparts. Their sources of power include personal networks, knowledge, working and communicative skills, and well-respected status in the activist circle. According to Pornamrin (2008: 23), the reputation of these NGO leaders is among the top factors that attract funding to their organisations. It is also widely known among the NGO circle how connection with

board members of funding institutions can be transformed into funding opportunities.[26] Many board members of these institutions, including the Thai Health Promotion Foundation and the Community Organizations Development Institute, are either senior NGIs themselves or those with NGO connections. This patronage system and funding issues also cause serious conflicts among the activists. Despite these advantages, it is usually more fruitful for these leaders to take action on behalf of or with organisations. This is because the Thai public does not perceive NGIs as a having clear function in the socio-political structure. People working for NGOs often complain of having to explain to the people what their job entails (Gawin 2004: 62-63).[27] Apart from the available resources, being part of an organisation gives them one more advantage—a more credible status in the public eye.

This direct role of NGIs and NGOs in the political process was evident during 1990s political reform period. NGOs, such as Women and Constitution Network and the Union for Civil Liberty, played an important part in the drafting process of the 1997 constitution and its organic laws. Other NGOs also participated other areas, such as public hearings and election monitoring (Shigetomi 2004a: 299-303). This role of the NGIs has also continued in the 2000s, especially during the anti-Thaksin protests in

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[26] After the withdrawal of foreign donors from Thailand to less economically developed countries in the late 1980s, the Thai NGOs have heavily depended on quasi-state institutions, such as Thai Health Promotion Foundation, Thai Research Fund, and Community Organisations Development Institute, for financial support. The activities of these organisations are controlled by boards of directors, which are currently dominated by medical doctors, academics, NGO leaders, and their like-minded acquaintances. Many of them are conservative reformists and community culturalists.

[27] The Thai public sees philanthropic NGOs as legitimate organisations, and they simply call them *munnithi* (literally, foundation). But a different story goes for development NGOs. Most people simply use the English term, NGO to call those working for the NGOs, even though the term has been translated to Thai as *ongkorn patthana ekkachon*. The main reason may be obvious; NGO is a lot shorter than *ongkorn patthana ekkachon*, so it is a matter of convenience. But it also reflects how *foreign* the concept of NGOs is to most Thais. Gawin interestingly writes: "A person working with a nongovernmental organisation may find him/herself being asked by a reporter or member of the public, 'Are you from an NGO or a foundation?' Two different answers immediately solicit different attitudes and reactions" (2004: 63). This sums up quite well how the NGOs and NGIs are viewed in the Thai society.

2006. While many people's movements refused to join the anti-government camp, the majority of NGIs did (Supalak 2006). Many of took part as organisations while others joined the protests as individuals.

The work of the NGIs can also be done through people's movements. The relationship between grassroots movements and the NGIs have been formed since the late 1980s. Their relationship may correctly be described as 'symbiosis' since both gain something from each other—something they lack (Chantana 2004a: 220). The movements can utilise the knowledge and network the NGIs possess while the NGIs can also use the movements' masses. The mass support gives the NGIs more bargaining powers for their agendas. The NGIs generally position themselves in 'supporting role' in this relationship. This relationship was developed during the anti-*khor jor kor* project period in the late 1980s and became more institutionalised in the 1990s in the SSFAI and the AOP. In this arrangement, the NGIs' primary role is to provide assistance to the main actors, the villagers who are affected the state development projects.

For the NGI's supporters, they are believed to be as playing a positive role in the democratisation process, given their supporting role in politics of the marginalised groups. Preecha contends that "NGOs have become involved in the protest movement as 'resources' rather than as full 'actors' by providing linkages and networks" (1999: 1). For him, the NGOs merely functions as social movement organisations. He concludes that "it was the poor, not the NGOs, who actually staged the protest" (ibid: 26). The NGOs' intervention only occurs when the conflict escalates. Similarly, Quinn (1997b) also sees NGOs as interventionists. The intervention, Quinn explains, "will not provide 'magic bullets' or ready-made formulae to be replicated by other NGOs. Rather, it will reveal the complicated reality of social relations and conflicts among the different actors who compete to utilise and control productive resources" (ibid: 2) in

local communities. The NGO intervention is believed to empower the grassroots people, thereby strengthening the democratic structure. It should be noted that the political struggle in the 1990s mostly revolved around development issues, and so it is understandable why the NGIs were seen as representing a progressive voice in the past.

However, their critics opposed this view arguing that by adopting the patronage relationship with the villagers, the NGIs have effectively reversed the democratic development in grassroots politics. Giles, for example, writes that there is "always a patronising element to their practical work" (2010: 76). He contends that the NGIs are the self-appointed leaders who believe they should *nanny* [28] villagers and workers (ibid.). Rigg and Tjelland also raise some serious questions about the relationship between NGIs and the villagers. They argue that it is the NGIs that have the real power, not the villagers, as they would like the public to believe. This unequal relationship is made possible mainly due to pervasiveness of the patronage culture in Thai society (Rigg 1994; Tjelland 1995, quoted in Missingham 2003: 98-99). Rigg also writes that "most NGO activists accept that villagers are by nature passive [...and...] there is a tendency for [NGO] facilitators to become leaders, to take decisions without consulting the people, and to create a hierarchy of relationships" (Rigg 1994, quoted in Missingham 2003: 98). In sum, Rigg and Tjelland "argue that NGOs do little more than incorporate villagers into unequal patron-client relations with little real opportunities for grassroots democracy or empowerment" (Rigg 1994; Tjelland 1995, quoted in Missingham 2003: 8).

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[28] He specifically uses the term 'nanny,' which is sarcastically translated from the Thai term, *phi liang*. The term *phi liang* is generally used to describe the NGIs who work to support local people's movements, such as producing documents, providing information, and maintaining and coordinating local groups (Missingham 2003: 44-45; Prapas 1998: 99-102).

Formal and Informal Channels

In terms of channels, there are two main ways for the NGIs to gain political influence: the formal and informal ones. The NGIs work though formal channels, which include appointed committees and legislature. First, the committees can be appointed by the government for issue-solving purposes, by National Economic and Social Development Board for planning strategies, or by independent bodies, such as National Human Rights Commission, for fact-finding reasons. Most of these committees involve resource management and development issues. However, it must be noted that appointing committees can also be used cynically by governments as a delaying tactic. A number of appointments are made, especially by the government, simply to appease the heated conflict. These committees are usually appointed without legally binding terms, so the government can ignore their recommendations if they want to.

The NGOs also initiate or support law proposals for the parliamentary consideration. Since the 1997 constitution onwards, this channel has been more open to the extra-parliamentary groups. Part of the reason has to do with the fact that many former activists and their allies have been able to enter the Senate, either via election (according to 1997 and 2007 constitution) and selection (according to 2007 constitution). High-profile senators with NGO connections include Niran Pitakwatchara, Rosana Tositrakul, and Prasan Maruekapitak. Since then, these parliamentarians have also functioned as another channel for NGO issues. However, critics raise questions regarding this practice in reality. Despite the seemingly open mechanisms set by the 1997 and 2007 constitutions, the direct popular input has been very limited. The obstacles to this process include the high costs, inconvenient procedures in gathering signatures, and the bureaucratic red-tape.

However, the most important obstacle of all is that the law proposals from non-elite groups often receive little or non-cooperation from the government and the

parliament. The lesson from the past decade is that without some sort of support from political parties, bills proposed by NGOs would be delayed, turned down permanently, or amended by the parliament with little or no regard of the original draft (*Prachatai*, 25 April 2013).

This raises some questions concerning the NGIs' capability to create structural changes without a party structure. First, the single-issue movements with loose structure may be helpful in addressing some needs in the villages, but it certainly not as effective as party in delivering policies at the national level. The TRT's success in addressing the local needs in its populist schemes is often cited as the NGOs' failure (Kengkij and Hewison 2009: 462). Second, in a Marxist view, by rejecting a formal political party and not taking control of the state power, the NGIs basically allow the capitalist state to be strengthened and maintain the exploitive structure (Giles 2006b).[29] Third, without a party structure, the NGIs have considerably relied on lobbying politics, which offers little or no accountability to their constituency. Without permanent access to the formal structure, NGIs are sometimes forced to take any offered opportunities—even if it means they would be viewed as opportunists. The recent so-called reconciliation committees are good example of this drawback.[30]

Moreover, the NGIs also work through informal channels, which are intended to put pressure on the government. Their activities usually involve public campaigning,

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[29] This view is often countered that there is no convincing explanation how such a left-wing party would emerge, not to mention function, in the current Thai political structure. The prospect of a left-wing party in Thailand would sound even less convincing if one considers the fact that no left-wing party has achieved anything substantially, if not ceased to function at all, since the late 1970s. Another feasibility question is raised by Kasian as he observes that the people's sector is made up only by small groups of people with great diversity in terms of backgrounds, interests, and demography, so it would be difficult to build a party based on these groups. Even if they could build a party, he doubts if the party would be successful in elections (2003: 44).

[30] Atchara (2010) explains that while some NGIs understand the political motive behind the establishment of these committees, they are convinced that their involvement should be seen as non-political and it is for the greater good. Some, however, simply take side and have little sympathy for the dead and injured during the 2010 crackdown.

giving press conferences, organising seminars, and giving public talks. Unlike the formal channel, the public is their target audience, and so, they have to depend on the media to send their message across. It is therefore vital for NGIs to create networks with reporters. It is generally much more difficult for young NGIs to contact the media than the more senior NGIs, unless some sort of 'special' connection is established. Apart from their accumulated skills and knowledge, these networks with the media put the senior NGIs in a very influential position (Fieldnotes, 25 September 2010). Publications are also used to communicate with the public. Recently, new information technologies, such as DVDs, e-mails, websites, and viral videos, have also been employed as part of the campaign strategies.

To accomplish this goal, the NGIs considerably depend on the use of discursive politics. The discursive tactics used by the NGIs generally serve two main purposes. First, it is used to explain the problems with the state development projects and how they negatively impact the local population. This tactic is also supposed to put the pressure on the government and state officials by portraying them as the oppressors or exploiters while depicting villagers as victims to the public eye.

Second, the NGIs resort to another discursive tactic in order to defend their credibility as story tellers as well as to portray the image of the villagers as victims. They use both 'western' theories, including critical theory, post-modernism, and environmentalism, and 'indigenous' Buddhist principles for these purposes. These discursive strategies are used to show that the villagers' mobilisation is non-political, and their actions are therefore legitimate. However, the public usually views the villagers as politically passive people, so many are suspicious of their grassroots activism. Elite opponents easily exploit this opportunity by labelling the villager protesters as paid mobs organised by their political opponents. On the other hand, the

NGIs are seen as third-hand who comes between the traditional harmonious relationship between the elite patrons and the villager clients (Attachak 2006).

But as previously discussed, this strategy relies heavily on the NGIs' ability to communicate with the public through the media. Despite the increasingly important role of the new media, the support from the traditional media remains most crucial. But to gain the media attention is not an easy task. It depends on many internal and external factors. This strategy is therefore not always effective, especially for smaller issues or movements. Since the 2005-06 political crisis began, the NGIs have not been able to gain the media attention they once could. Most media space is given over to colour-coded-conflict-related news (see Chapter V).

D. Conclusion

This chapter reviews the historical background of the NGIs since the 1960s to the late 2000s. It is classified into four main periods: the emergence period, the re-emerging period, the people's sector period, and the period of decline. It should be pointed out that the NGIs, who were seen as progress elements in the 1980s and 1990s, have now become grouped with conservative groups. Thongchai (2008a) argues that the main culprit for this drawback is their fear of capitalism, which makes the NGIs resort to conservative discourse of community culture since the 1980s. It should however be noted that Thaksin is the other main factor for this twist. Others may see Thaksin as an agent of capitalism, but for many NGIs, he is the face of *thunniyom samarn* (literally, evil capitalism). And because of this fear, the NGIs turned to what they saw as the *lesser evil*, the conservative elites.[31]

In terms of political thought, the Thai NGIs may be roughly divided into two main schools of thought: the political economy and community culture. Both of them

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[31] Suriyasai Katasila, Interview, 28 July 2010.

share similar ideas, such as alternative development and bottom-up participation. But these two groups mainly disagree in the following criteria, the view on capitalism, the level of analysis, and the mode of participation. However, the majority of the NGIs fall into the second group, the community culturalists, and they are criticised for weakening the people's movement, having conservative tendency, and ineffectively dealing with the needs of the people in the villages.

Generally, the NGIs and the people's movements employ self-limiting radicalism, which can basically defined as focusing of limited political ambitions. This approach allows the NGIs to radicalise their tactics to pressure the government. In terms of mobilisation form, the NGIs focus on employing two main strategies—mobilising as part of NGOs or people's movement. These two forms can be used either separately or simultaneously depending on the issue, the level of pressure, and the audience. Moreover, the chapter also discusses the two main channels used by the NGIs, the formal and informal. The formal channels include appointed committees and law proposals, while the informal ones involve campaigning and discursive politics. However, the disadvantages of NGO strategies include the limited capability to bring about structural change, the tendency to adopt lobbying tactic, and excessive dependency on the media.

Chapter III: Making Sense of the Assembly of the Poor

A. Introduction

While the political environment underpinning the development of the AOP is the focus of this thesis, without building some understanding of the AOP's internal operations, a complete picture of the movement cannot be portrayed. Most studies of the AOP view internal factors, such as the collective leadership and the loosely-structured organisation, as integral to the AOP's success. Baker (2000: 16) believes that deploying collective leadership could prevent problems, such as cooptation of key individuals and the use of violence against leaders. Suthy (1997: 95-96) argued that bringing together small groups under one national umbrella movement was a 'political synergy,' which could exponentially amplify the bargaining power of the member groups. Elsewhere in the developing world, internal factors have played an important role in the development of social movements. Makino and Shigetomi observe that in developing countries, "organizational conditions have a great influence on how social movement organizations develop, and shape the forms and directions of the movements" (2009: 228).

Theoretically, the resource mobilisation approach proposes that internal elements, such as resources and organisation, play an important role in allowing a movement to emerge as well as to develop, as opposed to the classic theory which focuses on role of structural strains of rapid social change (see McCarthy and Zald 1977; Jenkins 1983; and McAdam 1982). Drawing conclusions from many authors, Jenkins argues that "grievances are relatively constant, deriving from structural conflicts of interest built into social institutions, and that movements form because of long-term changes in group resources, organization, and opportunities for collective action" (1983: 530).

The mobilising structure can be in both formal and informal forms. While latter had not been given much academic attention until the last decade, the former comprised the key focus of social movement studies since the 1970s. The social movement organisations (hereafter: SMO), according to Kriesi, "constitute crucial building blocks of the mobilizing structures of a social movement" (1996: 152). These internal elements, therefore, play an essential role in the movement's mobilisation and development.

The internal elements are even more relevant for the movements in developing countries, such as Thailand, where political opportunities are generally limited and resources are scarce (see Makino and Shigetomi 2009). The purposes of this chapter are, therefore, to investigate the on-going debates concerning the AOP's internal components, and how these factors have contributed to the movement's recent decline. This chapter argues that the pursuit of short-term goals by the villagers as well as the idea of self-limiting radicalism of the NGIs have resulted in an adoption of loose structure and limited degree of institutionalisation. Such a structure may have helped the AOP to achieve numerical strength during its early waves of protest, but with a lower level of commitment, the movement soon became significantly weakened. The chapter has one main section, examining the characterisation of the AOP.

B. Characterisation of the Assembly of the Poor

This section is an attempt to critically analyse how the AOP's internal elements—including the goals, actors, formal organisational bodies, structure institutionalisation process, and strategies—have impacted on the movement. It also discusses the weakness and strengths of these elements.

a. Goals

The goals of AOP can be divided into 2 levels: 1) the immediate level and 2) the structural level. According to Prapas (1998: 88-89) the first goal of AOP was to address the immediate problems of its members, which were partially or entirely the results of misguided state development projects, unjust laws, and government policies. These goals usually involved financial compensation and the cancelation of problematic state projects. At the structural level, the AOP also aimed to put a stop to state policies that have been pursued without grassroots participation and caused problems in rural communities.

More ambitiously, the movement sought to change the relationships between the state and the people. People, according to the AOP, "must be those who control the direction of development [and] must truly benefit from development. Poor people must be part of the decision-making process in [any] development projects that affect the people's lives" (Leaflet No. 1, *ruampalang prasanjai su chai khonchon* [Consolidation, Unified Heart to the Victory of the Poor], March 1997, quoted in Prapas 1998: 87) By taking part in the movement, attending meetings and negotiations, networking, and interacting with other social groups, Missingham argues, AOP members had "expanded the social domains available for political association and contesting the power of the state" (2003: 199).

On a more subtle level, the AOP, according to Naruemon (2006), also challenged narrowly defined conceptions of democracy in Thai politics. By connecting democracy and participation with the development process, the AOP contested the idea of representation in the narrow terms generally used in Thailand. She points out the struggles of the AOP indicate that democracy was not only about election results, but also about debate, dialogue, and the decision-making process, especially on issues concerning the livelihood of the poor. The AOP also sought to empower the ordinary

people by including the marginalised groups in the political system through direct actions (ibid: 207). Unlike some other organisations, in which rank-and-file members were not required to *ok raeng* (literally, work), the AOP demands its members to regularly participate in its activities, such as meeting and protests, and pay for any costs deriving from the activities. This practice aimed not only to solve their resource problems, but was also expected to empower its members.

However, what really mobilised the AOP was not long-term goals, which were more or less shared among the members, but rather short-term ones. Being aware of this weakness of the people's movements, politicians often exploit it by the use of cooptation, which frequently worked in their favour. This is also one reason why Thai people's movements are highly fragmented. The Thai villagers are quite pragmatic and well aware of their options (Somchai 2008: 119). Since their primary interests are based on their short-term goals, their main commitment would be to groups that would be more likely to yield the results with the smallest investment. This was evident as the AOP's struggle dragged on: many local groups became exhausted and left the movement for what they saw as better options. For example, in early 2010, some land rights groups, which were typically among the most desperate groups in the alliance, left the AOP and joined the Land Reform Network partially for this reason.[32]

The emphasis on these immediate goals also has some drawbacks in terms of commitment. To explain this, Naruemon Thabchumpon, an academic who worked with the AOP for a long time, noted that many advisers showed some concerns about the level of commitment of the AOP members. According to her, they drew an interesting comparison between the AOP and a 'clothes line.' She explained that if we put clothes in the sun, when they dried they would be immediately removed from the line. Similarly, the villager members would also leave the movement instantly, once their

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[32] Watcharee Phaoluengthong, Interview, 23 August 2010.

problems were solved. [33] This indicates how little long-term commitment many villagers had for the movement.

To solve this commitment issue, during the 1997 protest, there was an agreement among member groups that they would not leave the protest camp unless all problem cases were resolved. This was proven effective at the time, but as the villagers got more desperate, the agreement soon became void. An AOP adviser from alternative agriculture group, Ubol Yoowa, pointed out that not every group can wait for a long period of time for resolution. [34] The land rights groups in particular were the most economically insecure ones. These were some of the main reasons why the number of the AOP member has decreased over the years. But this does not happen to those activists who work closely with the movement. These people tend to be less pragmatic and more committed to the movement than rank-and-file members (Fieldnotes, 10 October 2010).

In terms of achieving goals, it has been a mixed result. Uchane assesses the success of the AOP as follows:

> If the achievement of the AOP is measured by the success in solving its members' problems, then it can be said that the AOP has achieved a little. But if it is measured by its success in easing the members' immediate problems (e.g. the villager not being forced out from their land or the state projects being frozen), then the AOP should be seen as having achieved some success (2007: 174).

In other words, the AOP was more successful in solving short-term problems of its members than finding long-term solutions for them. It should be noted that while the

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[33] Naruemon Thabchumpon, Interview, 19 January 2011.

[34] Ubol Yoowa, Interview, 16 August 2010.

AOP proposed changes at the structural and policy levels that would benefit the people at the grassroots (see Naruemon 2006; Prapas 1998; Missingham 2003), its main emphasis remained mostly on goals at the local level. These long-term proposals are drafted and pushed mostly by the NGIs with limited support from the villagers. Similar with Uchane (2007: 174), Baramee observes that the AOP has been to some extent successful in pushing for local grievances, but when it comes to policy proposing, its success has been fairly limited.[35] The AOP's proposed policies would not be passed by the parliament without significant support from other groups from the people's sector, especially the NGIs (see Ekpon 2007: 220-221).

The goals of the movement are also linked with how the movement should be viewed. The already suggested, the early writings on the AOP seem to suggest that the AOP should either be viewed as a new social movement or an environmental movement (Uchane 2007: 162-166). The new social movement argument went more or less as follows: the AOP is formed by an alliance of multi-classes with new strategies, including non-violent and extra-parliamentary means, to work on new issues, such as widening participation and improving the environment (Suthy 1997). AOP members could be viewed as environmentalists because they rejected state-oriented development, which they argued had caused environmental degradation and disasters. The villagers also demanded that their environmentally friendly livelihoods be respected (Missingham 2003).

However, these claims should be treated as a strategic move by the AOP's middle-class supporters rather than a balanced analysis. These claims were purposely made to differentiate the AOP from failed class-based movements in the past, as well as to appeal to the emerging role of the middle classes in the political process in the 1990s. Some AOP supporters projected their own wishful thinking onto the movement.

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[35] Baramee Chairat, Interview, 17 December 2010.

Also, these claims made by middle-class supporters became problematic for the AOP's campaign because they did not necessarily reflect the reality of the movement. For example, while many of AOP's public campaigns are based on long-term green environmental reasons, their key demands, at least for the majority, often involve short-term economic interests. Economic demands, such as requests for financial compensation for those adversely affected by state projects, are hardly new issues and not exactly environmentally-related matters.

This portrait of the movement as a new social movement or an environmental movement has created a massive gap between the movement's public discourse and the real demands of the majority of the members. Besides, one of the problems that stemmed from this image was that it swayed the public from more substantive debates involving human rights issues. The government's construction of state projects without local consent often involved clear human rights violation for the local population, and it was only fair that the affected villagers should be fairly compensated for their losses.

b. People

The AOP consists of three main groups of actors: 1) the local villagers, labourers, and slum-dwellers, 2) academics and students, and 3) NGIs. The first group, local villagers, labourers and slum-dwellers, are the largest component, and they comprised the grassroots constituency. In other words, they were the 'poor' (*khonjon*) in the Assembly of the Poor. While most AOP members could be categorised as rural dwellers working full-time or part-time in agricultural sector, but some, especially those from Work-Related and Environmental Illness Group were actually from the urban areas and worked in the industrial sector. The grassroots element played various roles in the movement. Most of the people in this group were only rank-and-file members and had a relatively passive role, including attending local meetings and supporting other movement activities. But some villagers, mostly the experienced ones,

play a more active role, including attending the PKY assembly meetings, representing their problems to state officials or the government, or working as NGO workers in the locale. This active role of these key villagers is a unique feature of the AOP, which does not necessarily appear in other people's movements in Thailand.

The second group includes academics and students. The primary role of the academics is being advisers, but sometimes they also engage in other supporting activities such as producing documents, giving interviews, giving public lectures on development issues, and sitting in government-appointed committees. Academics such as Bantorn Ondam and Prapas Pintobtaeng, who had close ties to the movement since the beginning, have sat on many appointed committees on AOP-related issues. The students' role in the movement is mostly limited to assisting the movement during the protests and meetings. Some work with the movement's youth programme. The villagers give special respect to the academics not only because of their advice and expertise, but because their credentials and their political connections can also boost the movement's public legitimacy as well as bring in resources from funding institutions. It is safe to say that to the movement, their status as academics is as important as their knowledge, if not more so.

The third group is made up by NGIs. Senior NGIs mostly work as advisers, while the younger ones are either join the secretariat team or become *phi liang* (literally, carer or nanny). As advisers, they are expected to give advice and support to the movement. Their works include recommending legal and policy changes, providing channels to other organisations and state agencies, and attending appointed committees. The secretariat team and *phi liang* play more active role in providing information and support, producing documents, maintaining and coordinating local groups, and communicating with the public as well as other organisations (Missingham 2003: 44-45; Prapas 1998: 99-102). The major different between the secretariats and *phi liang* is

that the secretariats mostly work with *pho krua yai* while *phi liang* mostly work with local groups. But, it is worth noting that some NGIs play multiple roles in the movement, from *phi liang* to adviser.[36]

On the other hand, Chantana (2004a; 2004b) argues that AOP members consist of the two main groups with different approaches and goals. She argues that the AOP can be viewed as a "symbiosis between the interest-based groups (in this case, development victims) and the cause groups (policy advocacy NGOs in particular), in order to gain greater legitimacy for non-parliamentary politics" (Chantana 2004b: 220). This view clearly indicates differences in terms of goals and strengths of these two groups of actors. Advisers, for example, tend to concern themselves with long-term goals and getting public support while villagers are inclined to focus more on their short-term economic interests (see Figure 3.1). Although the cooperation of these groups expands the networks, which in turn increases their bargaining power, their collaboration and mobilisation is rather limited. Occasionally, this causes tensions within the movement.

Figure 3.1: Symbiosis of the Two Political Groups

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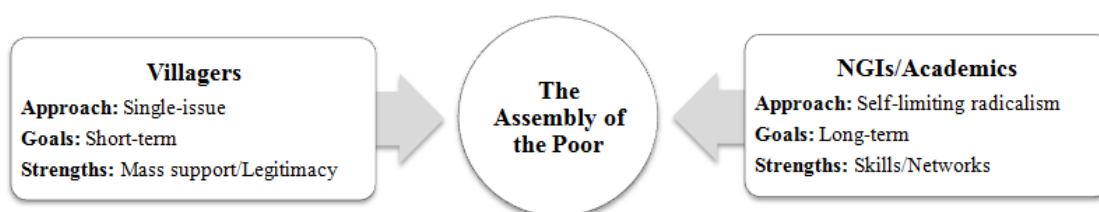
[36] Baramee Chairat, for example, is a *phi liang* for Sirindhorn Dam group and some other land-related cases, but many people also recognise him as an adviser. At times, he has also worked as part of the secretariat team. This is also true with Hannarong Yaowalers and Watcharee Phaoluengthong.

The Non-Governmental Individuals and Their 'Supporting' Role

Although formally NGIs are supposed to be in a supporting position, in practice it is a little more complex. While the first group, the poor, makes up the majority of the movement according to the above structure and is supposed to be the group making decisions, in reality this is not always the case. Authors argue that at times NGIs do not only play 'supporting' roles (see Missingham 2003: Chapter VII; Naruemon 2006: Chapter II; Uchane 2007: 169-170, 175-177). Uchane (2007) correctly argues that the role of NGIs in the AOP has been understated. The activists can assert their 'influence' either during or outside PKY assembly meetings (Missingham 2003: 187-190). Under the formal structure, their assertions would be treated merely as 'advice' but sometimes, the advice can have great influence. Somchai (2006: 163) notices that the proposals made in PKY assembly meetings by advisers rarely face disagreement from the village members.

One AOP adviser once told me it is very rare for villagers to openly and strongly oppose the advisers. During my fieldwork, I observed that it was not uncommon for NGIs to intervene during the PKY assembly meetings when there were disputes or confusions. The NGIs did not always act as neutral party. Sometimes, they could be very assertive and made sure the villagers took their 'advice'. According to a villager leader, Anont Sripen, most NGIs, not only AOP advisers, acted in this manner. The villagers had to accept this role of the NGIs because they had to depend on the activists concerning many issues.[37]

Several factors contribute to this influential role of the NGIs. Partially because the villagers have to rely on their ability to acquire financial support, provide information,[38] negotiate with the government officials,[39] produce media and

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[37] Anont Sripen, Interview, 25 September 2010.

[38] Prapon Singkaew, Interview, 27 December 2010.

publication, and build lobbying networks. Although the villagers have gained experiences over the years of struggle, this reliance on the NGIs remains evident. One of the villager leaders complained that the lack of advisers (mainly the NGIs) has made it much more difficult for them to gain access to state officials (Fieldnotes, 11 January 2012).

Mutual trust, which has been built from working closely together over the years, was also another important factor (see Shigetomi 2004a). During my fieldwork, many NGIs expressed the importance of this trust as the key to working with the villagers. Other contributing factors include the NGO workers' more advanced literacy, communicative, and general office-related skills (Missingham 2003: 145). While there are some village leaders who are capable to communicate effectively, typical villagers struggle to articulate their thoughts as well as present their cases clearly. This does not include a number of villagers who still struggle to speak standard Thai. Most of the NGIs who work with the AOP are good in communication and public speaking.

Critics see this leading role of the NGIs as a result of a typical 'Thai-style' organisational structure or undemocratic tradition in the movement (Giles 2010: 151). Social movements in Thailand, including the AOP, according to Giles, "are dominated by unelected *Pi-liang* (NGO "nannies" or advisers) and *Pu-yai* (NGO "elders"). There is a real problem with [...] a lack of internal democracy. Young people are expected to respect and listen to their elders in the movement and positions are never up for election" (italicised in original text, ibid.). Although the academics are put in a 'respected' position, they are not considered as insiders by senior NGIs. The NGIs often defend this patronage relationship, since they see it as part of local culture, which

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[39] It is not only negotiating skills that the villagers do not have. One of the problems faced by the villagers while negotiating with the government officials is the linguistic barrier. Most villagers speak local dialect, and as a result, many struggle to speak to the officials directly. The NGIs, who speak central Thai fluently, often simply work as translators.

needs to be respected. This argument is clearly in line with the community culture doctrine which emphasises on respecting what they see as local traditions or characteristics of 'Thainess'.

However, proponents of the influential role of the NGO workers argue that it is necessary that the activists have their say in the movement's development process. From a Marxist point of view, the villagers have potential, but without going through a proper development process, their ability may never be realised. It is therefore necessary for the activists to step in and '*jad tung*' (literally, organise) the mass. The villagers are expected to learn about the political process in a democratic system, understanding their basic rights, and developing legal knowledge, and the necessary communicative and managerial skills. These knowledge and skills are required in getting immediate problems solved for the members.

But more importantly, the members are expected to understand the importance of the long-term objectives of the movement. The members are expected to get some sort of ideological and thought training to improve their commitment to long-term causes and to unify various local groups for common goals. In principle, the final say belongs to villagers because the PKY assembly, which comprises the representatives from local groups, constitutes the highest power in the movement. So ideally, the activists are expected to influence the mass by 'organising' it, but in the end, it is the village members who decide what to do,[40] and their decisions have to be respected by all parties.

Despite this critical mission to promote long-term political change, critics question NGIs' success. Based on the assessment of the anti-Pak Mun Dam group, Kanokrat (2003: 243-244) points out that the NGIs failed to create a common

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[40] Nitirat Sapsomboon, Interview, 14 January 2011.

understanding about the long-term goals to the members. Uchane (2007: 177) observes that the ability to organise the mass by NGO workers is compromised by the nature of their work. NGOs' primary mission is to work on their funded projects with short-term contracts. Their focus as a result has to be on the projects, which may or may not share the same goals as the movement. Short-term contracts also mean financial instability and constantly changing conditions, which certainly have adverse effects on the long-term movement. Time and efforts are consequently devoted more to fulfil the project requirements rather than the needs of the movement. The constraints also derive from the focus on basic tasks like producing data, which is not necessarily useful for achieving movement goals, rather than the organisational mission. Due to the bureaucratic requirements set by the funding institutions, which are now mostly state or quasi-state agencies, tasks such as producing paperwork and document could be very time-consuming.

An NGI who has worked over a decade in anti-Pak Mun Dam movement, Somparn Kuendee also agrees that working on projects can be counterproductive for the movement as it requires a great deal of time and effort. She noted:

> I think these projects have been troublesome. Local NGIs spend almost all of their time working on project proposals, reports, and accounts only. What about working on developing the villagers' thinking? In order to mobilise the people, they need proper way of thinking. Even with economic constraints, family problems, or limited time, but with the right thinking, they can be mobilised. They can manage. [...] Organising the people has not been sufficiently done by NGIs. It is just not enough.[41]

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[41] Somparn Kuendee, Interview, 26 December 2010.

Some villagers also complain that these projects were not relevant or not supportive of the movement's course of struggle. In order to survive, the NGIs have to amend the purposes of their projects to qualify the terms and conditions set by the funding institutions. Not only did they not support the movement, sometimes it also takes away time and human resource from the organising task (Fieldnotes, 11 January 2011). Somparn also added some of them left the movement devote themselves entirely on their projects. Part of the departure has to do with time constraints, but in many cases, this is due to conflict over the projects.[42] To be fair to the NGIs, some villager leaders also left the movement for the same reason.[43]

There are other serious problems that derive from this unequal relationship. First, this highly personalised leadership is prevalent among the Thai NGO activists. The AOP's loose structure means the influence of these people remains substantial. This structure allows the leaders to intentionally or unintentionally build *pom khai* (literally, a fortress or territory) to defend their informal authority.[44] These fortresses have to a certain extent impeded the unification process of the AOP. This is especially true with big local groups with sufficient size and resources to mobilise on their own.[45] The dam network groups, for example, are more autonomous and seeking cooperation from them is much more difficult than other groups (Fieldnotes, 11 October 2010).

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[42] ibid.

[43] During the Thaksin government, many populist policies, such as village funds, required that the villagers organised themselves in groups. Many villager leaders joined these local groups. As the project required a considerable amount of documents and routine work, many were too busy for the AOP activities (Naruemon Thabchumpon, Interview, 19 January 2011; Put Buntem, Interview, 11 October 2010).

[44] Nitirat Sapsomboon, Interview, 14 January 2011.

[45] It should be noted that financially Thai NGIs rely on working on projects funded by government or quasi-government agencies. Projects involving bigger number of people tend to give them some advantage in getting financial support than the smaller ones. Many Thai NGIs are very territorial, and for them, working in 'bigger cases' somehow means commanding more respect from other NGIs.

Second, critics claim that the advisers often think *on behalf* of the villagers. This influential role of the NGIs has effectively blocked the villagers' input in the decision-making process. This has a significant impact on the empowerment process of the village members. One of the villager leaders explained that those who participated in the AOP activities were more likely to show more commitment to the movement (Fieldnotes, 10 October 2010). Third, this imbalance also begs some serious questions regarding the legitimacy of the movement in the democratisation process. For example, Giles writes: "*The Assembly of the Poor* is thus led by unelected NGO activists rather than by poor farmers themselves" (Italicised in original text, 2006b: 585). Big part of the AOP's legitimacy derives from its decentralised structure, which allows substantial grassroots input. Without villagers' contribution, the legitimacy of movement would be severely undermined.

c. Formal Organisational Bodies

Within the AOP's structure, there are four main bodies: 1) the *pho khrua yai* assembly, 2) the body of advisers, 3) the secretariat team, and 4) the working group (see Figure 3.2).[46] At the top of the structure is what the AOP call *pho khrua yai* (literally, head chefs) assembly, which constitutes the collective leadership of the AOP (see Figure 3.3). Formally, the assembly represents "the highest form of authority in the movement, determining campaign goals and strategies, protest actions, and so on" (Missingham 2003: 54). The term *pho khrua yai* (hereafter: PKY), according to Naruemon (2006: 89), reflects the relationship between democracy and the economic issues. The idea of PKY assembly also, according to Baker (2000: 16), indicates a commitment to localism. The decentralised form of collective leadership is particularly hoped to prevent problems, such as the buying, co-opting, or even killing of individual leaders

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[46] Originally, there had been only three bodies, PKY assembly, a body of advisers, and a secretariat team. The fourth one, working group was added into the structure in a meeting in September 2009.

(Somchai 2006: 157; Baker 2000: 16). Members of the PKY assembly are delegates from local groups, and the size of the assembly varies from one meeting to another, ranking from more than two hundreds during its heyday (Missingham 2003: 53-54) to fewer than a hundred in the present day.

The supportive bodies include advisers and the secretariat team. The advisers or *thi pruksa* are mostly made up of senior NGIs, but a few of them are academics. During its height, dozens of them would attend the assembly meeting, but during my fieldwork in 2010 only a few would show up. Their formal role is to give advisory support and needed information, but sometimes their support goes beyond what is formally stated. The secretariat team or *kong lekhanukarn* is made up by mid-rank or younger NGIs, and their role is to carry out the tasks decided by the PKY assembly and to support the fourth body, the working group. Their role also include providing information and support for the AOP, maintaining and coordinating the network of villagers' organisations in the AOP, and communicating with the public as well as other organisations.

The fourth body, the working group, was introduced in September 2009, to take some of the responsibilities, which had previously been performed by NGIs, such coordination with other organisations and state offices. Other duties of the working groups include making decisions concerning day-to-day management, drafting annual strategic plan, releasing public statements, and representing the AOP. Currently, the group consists of five members representing five networks.[47] One of them is chosen to be *phuprasan-ngan* (coordinator), which is the head of the group. The creation of the working group was a move to address the problem of the reduced number of NGIs

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[47] According to the head of the working group, Sawat, there are no representatives from slum and alternative agriculture networks because they have not been working closely with the AOP in the last few years. Many even thought that they were no longer part of the AOP. As a result, the PKY decided to have only five active networks represented in the working group (Sawat Uppahat, Interview, 15 August 2010).

working with the AOP in recent years. But this, some may argue, also indicates the development of the ability and leadership of the villagers which has grown over the years.[48]

Figure 3.2: Formal Organisation Structure
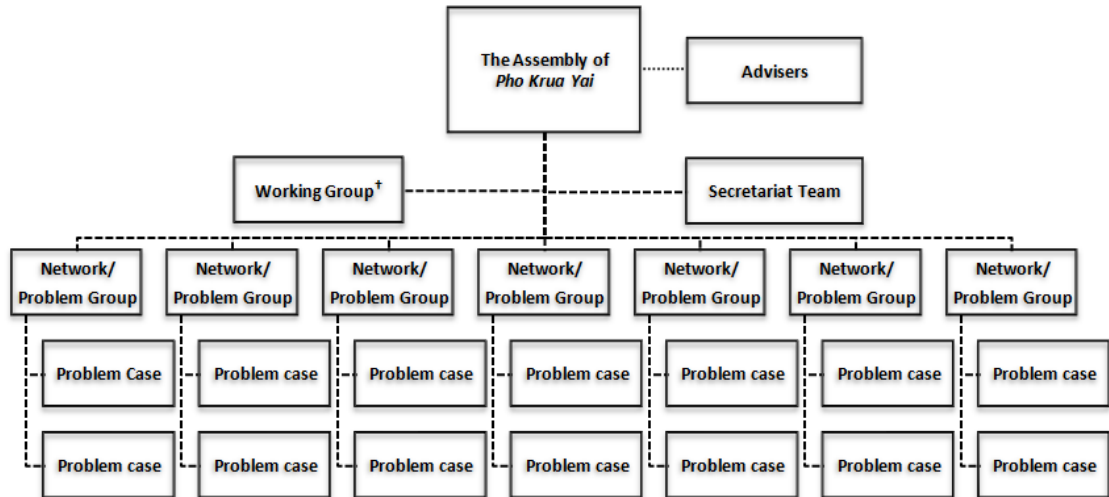
[†] The working group was introduced September 2009, while other bodies have remained largely the same since the AOP's formation.

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[48] Watcharee Phaoluengthong, Interview, 23 August 2010.

Figure 3.3: Structure of the Assembly of Pho Krua Yai
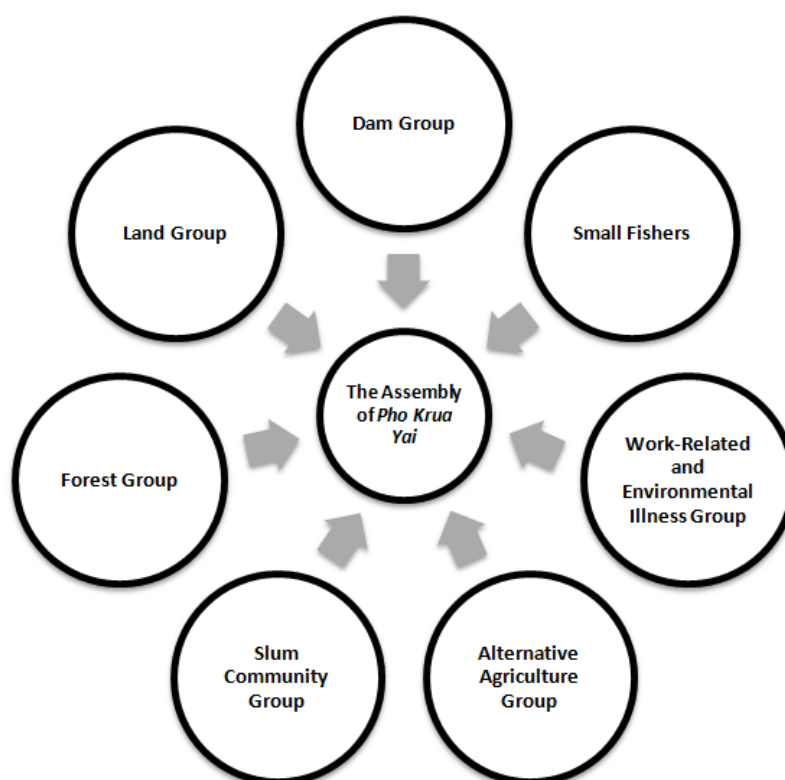
d. Loose Structure

In terms of political legitimacy, the AOP's greatest strength derives from its loose structure, which can be seen in the PKY setting as well as the autonomy of the member networks and member groups. Most authors view this as a positive democratic development at the grassroots (Prapas 1998; Baker 2000; Missingham 2003; Naruemon 2006). Although this view is by no means invalid, the pragmatic motive for this structural setting should not be ignored. I would argue that the loose structure should be seen as pragmatic design as much as an idealistic move. To better understand this structure, first it is useful to lay some background of the movement and how this view was adopted.

The AOP was not meant to be tightly structured right from the beginning. According to Baramee Chairat (2008: 51-52), the idea of the AOP originated from the group discussions, called *sewana khonjon* (literally, discussions of the poor). The

discussions were organised in 1994 by Baramee and a few other young NGIs, who were at that time working with the SSFAI.[49] These discussions were intended to provide opportunities for students, labourers, and farmers to share their thoughts and experiences. This idea was welcome by their fellow activists, including Wanida Tantiwittayapitak and Watcharee Phaoluengthong. Later the idea of transforming and expanding it into a national-level movement was introduced, and it was widely supported by the circle of the activists. A series of formal and informal meetings took place during that period between these NGIs and village leaders to discuss the terms and ideas about the new movement (ibid.). The AOP was then officially formed in December 1995. But interestingly, some essential functions, including the secretariat team, were not created at the beginning. According to Nitirat, one of the founding members of the secretariat, the team was later set up essentially because document task became burdensome, and it could not be done separately.[50] This indicates that the role of the central organisation was minimised right at the start.

But not everyone was satisfied with the loose structure. This dissatisfaction can be seen when the AOP was renamed. At the beginning, the AOP was officially known as Forum of the Poor in English, which signified its main function at the time as space for sharing ideas and support among its members. However, in 1996 the name was changed to Assembly of the Poor. According to Suthy (1998), the new English name more accurately reflected the Thai name, *samatcha khonjon*.[51] But at a more subtle level, this was also a reflection of the how the AOP should be organised and mobilised.

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[49] The meeting was funded by Wongsanit Ashram, an organisation which was founded in 1985 as part of a community for simple living, engaging in social action, and spiritual practice. The organisation is led by well-known figures such as Sulak Sivaraksa and Pracha Hutanuwatr. (see Wongsanit Ashram).

[50] Nitirat Sapsomboon, Interview, 14 January 2011.

[51] The Thai name has never been changed since its formation.

According to Nitirat,[52] the new name, for many leaders, including Bamrung Khayotha, was believed to signify a more unified, centralised, goal-oriented, and permanent AOP.[53] From that point onward, the AOP was no longer hoped to be merely a discussion space, but it was also expected to be where the collective actions were made by the people with common goals.

Despite that, the movement's loose structure persisted, and most people appeared to have embraced the loose structure idea. There are some practical reasons why this structure has been widely adopted and well maintained. First, it is a clear rejection of the controversial SSFAI model. Before the forming of the AOP, the SSFAI was the main driving force in the grassroots politics in the early 1990s. The movement adopted a centralised organisational structure and some unusual tactics for a people's movement. Some of the SSFAI leaders went as far as establishing ties with political parties (see Somchai 2006; Prudhisan 1998: 269). However, the centralised structure and these adopted tactics later led to conflicts among its leaders and corruption scandals. These issues resulted in pervasive dissatisfaction among the people's sector towards to the 'SSFAI model.' Not only did this cause the mass defection of its leaders and member,[54] it also set an example that it was never a good idea for a people's movement to become involved in party politics.[55] As a result of this, one of the goals of

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[52] Nitirat Sapsomboon, Interview, 14 January 2011.

[53] Nitirat explained that the degree of centralisation of the structure also reflects the strength of the movement. When the movement is strong, the AOP appears to be an assembly, which means the member groups working closely together. This is because by doing so, the members would benefit more from the movement. But as the AOP becomes weakened, the forum arrangement, which allows member groups to mobilise more independently, would prevail. He is convinced that currently the AOP has become more like a forum—a highly loose structure.

[54] Some authors, including Missingham (2003: 37-38) and Baker (2000: 15), believe that the SSFAI split in the early 1990s had a role to play in the founding of the AOP. Somchai (2006: 144) plays down such a claim and suggests that the role of the SSFAI is only to prepare for the founding of the AOP, while Naruemon (2006) denies the link between the split and the AOP's formation.

[55] It should be pointed out that after the May massacre in 1992, the military dictatorship lost its role in the political scene, so the politicians became the only elite force left in the formal

the AOP founders was not to repeat the same 'mistake' again, and several ideas, such as collective leadership and the non-political involvement approach, were implemented in an attempt to overcome the internal schisms among the leaders as well as improve the AOP's public image.

Second, the AOP's loose structure was well supported by the prevailing ideas which were current in the mid-1990s when the movement was founded, such as community culture and civil society. These ideas, which emphasise extra-parliamentary activism and a non party-political approach, reflect the adoption of self-limiting radicalism among the political actors in that period. As already mentioned in the last chapter, such ideas did not call for radical structural change, but rather focused on reforming the system and protecting the interests of their constituent groups. This trend was also found in academic works in that period. A number of academic works on Thai politics published during the early 1990s period were devoted to understanding non-state actors (Kengkij 2009a: 7). These trends reflected the supposedly declining political power of the traditional elite, the military and elected politicians, after the May 1992 events. Instead of taking over the state forming through a revolutionary movement or winning elections, proponents of self-limiting radicalism believed in protecting their political space in their local communities.

Third, the horizontal structure facilitated the diverse nature of the AOP (Uchane 2007: 170), and allowed the movement expand its numeral strength. Currently, the AOP is formally made up of seven groups according to the issues emphasised by different elements. These member groups have diverse backgrounds, which include different financial statuses (ranking from heavily indebted landless farmers and middle-class land-owning farmers), degrees of education (ranking from no formal education to

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political structure. As a result of this, the media and the public became more critical to the elected officials.

college degrees), locations (mostly from rural but some also from urban areas) and the numbers of people involved in each case (ranking from one family to several thousands). The diversity of their demands is also significant; they include cabinet resolutions, law or policy change, and financial compensation. The size of the compensation could rank from less than a million baht (£20,000, mostly land cases involving a few families) to billions of baht (more than £20,000,000, mostly dam cases involving thousands of families).[56] Some demands are also urgently needed (mostly forest cases involving forest encroachment claims) while others, such as policy change, will take years to resolve. Not only member profiles and demands, the diversity also includes different expectations towards and dissimilar commitments to the movement. Despite the decline in number of the grievances, the diverse nature of the movement remains a significant characteristic of the AOP. Without this arrangement, it would not have been possible for these member groups to be united as one movement.

Fourth, the loose structure has supported work of the existing groups. By the mid-1980s, there were several anti-state project groups throughout the country, especially in the Northeast. The most prominent of these groups were anti-dam project movements. Compared to other grassroots groups, anti-dam groups were the strongest and most powerful: each group represented thousands of people, and their groups were generally well organised.[57] For these groups, the founding of the AOP was by no means an attempt to replace the existing many local groups with one national organisation. The new movement was rather expected to *assist* these member groups, which were struggling at that time, to achieve their goals. To explain this, Wanida writes:

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[56] Approximately, one pound is equal to fifty baht.

[57] In general, larger groups have greater resources and adequate support from NGIs. Generally, the NGIs also prefer working with larger groups over smaller ones because of the importance of the case and better funding opportunities (Fieldnotes, 10 October 2010).

> [We] must understand that we did not join the AOP, but the AOP was
> founded by the people from Pak Mun Dam and Sirinthorn Dam and
> other networks to learn from each other and to work together. Then it
> has become a movement which is not rigidly organised but rather
> loosely structured, and each unit is autonomous and self-sufficient. [...]
> The mission of the AOP is pushing forward the proposals of the member
> groups while not asking the groups to follow the AOP's vague
> ideologies like other organisations (2008: 339-340).

In sum, the AOP's original goal was to help local groups achieve their demands, not to make its own demands and make local groups follow. As the AOP was not intended to replace the local groups, the AOP's organisational structure was consequently designed to facilitate the mobilisation of member groups.

However, there are some problems with the loosely structured organisation as well. First, the unclear structure put the movement's unity into question. According to Uchane (2007: 169-170), the AOP's structure can be viewed in three different configurations, as follows: 1) the AOP as a forum (loose structure and no obligation for its members), 2) the AOP as an assembly (some structure and some obligations for its members), [58] and 3) the AOP as an organisation (centralised structure and clear obligations for its members). This unclear structure can be problematic because different understandings lead different expectations of the movement, and this sometimes leads to internal conflicts. Some groups depend entirely on the AOP to solve their problems and want the movement to be actively engaged in politics, while others only view the movement as part of their political strategy.

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[58] In the Thai original text, he uses the term *wethi* for both the first and the second configurations, but to differentiate these two, I use forum for first configuration and assembly for the second.

Moreover, some may be in for short-term immediate interests while others may be in for longer-term structural solutions. These differences also lead to the variation in commitment to the movement and PKY assembly decision, the disagreement in resource and power distribution structure, and the dissimilarity in goal, priority, and strategy. From time to time, these dissimilar views have clashed inside the PKY assembly meetings, especially when some sort of mobilisation was needed. Outside the meetings, these conflicts mostly manifested themselves in the form of gossip and private talk, but sometimes, these frustrations escalated and led to open disputes.

Also, some unity problems emerge because not every AOP member is identified with the AOP as much as they are with their local groups. According to Uchane (2007: 175), members of local groups are tied more closely with their '*hua kao*' (literally, old heads – meaning old/local groups) than '*hua mai*' (literally, new head – meaning the AOP). This problem is less profound in small groups because they have to rely on the AOP for mobilisation, so they are more inclined to be identified and unified with the AOP. But for bigger groups with greater resources, namely dam groups, the role of AOP in their mobilisation becomes less essential. Members of these groups tend to be identified with and unified under the local groups rather than with the AOP (ibid.).

Also, according to Nitirat,[59] not all the member groups have equally benefited from being part of the AOP. Nitirat suggested that the dam groups have gained more from the AOP than the others. This happened because the dam groups, which have the numeral strength and the influential NGIs, could assert more influence on the AOP's decisions to mobilise according to their wishes. This has sometimes alienated other member groups, especially the smaller ones, which feel marginalised by the unequal power distribution. This unequal power has significantly weakened the sense of

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[59] Nitirat Sapsomboon, Interview, 14 January 2011.

equality and belonging among the AOP members, thereby reducing the movement's sense of unity.[60]

Second, the loose structure prevents the members from going beyond local interests. Since the loose structure allows local groups to mobilise on their own, one of the consequences of this flexible structure is that the member groups still focus on their own problems rather than on common interests (*Bangkok Post*, 9 January 1997, quoted in Somchai 2006: 163). AOP members are also often criticised for their inability to 'go beyond' their immediate interests (Uchane 2007: 170), and thus the movement became highly fragmented. Such a structure may encourage the local masses to participate in local issues, but it limited popular participation at the national level. Many idealistic activists became disillusioned with the AOP's limited potential for structural changes and later left the movement.[61]

Third, the resource mobilising capability of the movement is fairly limited under the loose structure. Similar to other movements in the developing world (see Makino and Shigetomi 2009), the AOP is a resourceless movement. The majority of the AOP members are rural-dwelling villagers who reside at the bottom of the socio-economic strata (Baker 2000). From the beginning, the AOP has relied on financial support channelled by allied NGOs, small donations from its members,[62] and funding from outside supporters and sympathisers. During demonstrations, the participants are expected to finance for their own activities. However, the costs of protests and other

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[60] For example, I was told by an unnamed AOP member that there was an incident during a PKY assembly meeting, where the meeting participants had voted against staging a protest against the Thaksin government. Usually, this would be final, but one of the leaders from a dam group, who wanted the protest to take place, lobbied the villagers and insisted on taking another round of voting. This incident caused discontent among some AOP members.

[61] Watcharee Phaoluengthong, Interview, 23 August 2010.

[62] It has become a custom for members to donate some of their compensation money to the AOP once they receive it. However, there is no suggested amount of donation that should be made.

mobilisation activities do not come cheap, and they remain a great burden for the members, especially the high-profile ones. After the 1997 protest, for example, many protesters were deeply indebted after spending months on the street in Bangkok.[63]

Time is also a constraint for the protesters, as many live from daily labouring in the rural areas, particularly when they have to participate in prolonged protests in Bangkok. The poor protesters solve these problems by either taking day-time jobs in demonstration areas while protesting or sending elderly members of the families to protest on behalf of their families. One can easily notice that a number of those participating protests in the recent years have been senior AOP members and sometimes their grandchildren. But these solutions have limited the political participation of the people aged between 30 and 59 (the supposedly politically active ages for grassroots politics). This has partially weakened the movement ever since.

The loose structure has offered little help to the AOP's resource mobilisation. Given the loose structure, resources are mobilised primarily to support the local groups and their grievances. As previously noted, the villagers are expected to support themselves. This is believed to have helped the movement to shake off the paid-mob image, thereby giving them political legitimacy. But by doing so, the members' primary concern is supporting their own activities, and as a result, little effort is made to support each other,[64] let alone to support the movement as a whole. In other words, most resources are mobilised to support the short-term goals, while little is left for the long-term ones. Also, with such a structure, larger groups have an advantage over smaller groups by having the connections and wherewithal to acquire more resources

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[63] Sawat Uppahat, Interview, 15 August 2010.

[64] For example, when the PKY assembly decides to stage a protest, the groups—which primarily benefit from the mobilisation—would fully commit its manpower and resources to the decisions. But the level of commitment would be far less for other groups which do not directly gain from the decision. What these groups usually do is to give the mobilising groups their *kamlang jai* (literally, moral support), which might include showing public support, a few leaders joining the demonstration, or logistic support.

for their political ends. Under such a structure, the members can largely disregard the central organisation, and so it has been left mostly in the hands of NGIs.

e. Institutionalisation

The AOP leaders' decision to go with a loose structure over a centralised one may also indicate the view of the AOP leaders on the idea of institutionalisation. Many AOP leaders are not big fans of a strong institutionalised movement with fixed political ideologies and enduring structure. This view is clearly in line with the community culture ideology, which focuses on local empowerment. One of the AOP NGO leaders, Hannarong Yaowalers also suggested that in his view, the AOP, like other people's movements in Thailand, was prone to change and would eventually cease to exist.[65] For the NGIs, the main purpose of the people's movements is to assist their NGO work. The idea of institutionalisation for the movement has clearly been secondary to the local interests, and one can see why the AOP has not been successfully institutionalised over the years of existence.

To measure this degree of institutionalisation, Van Der Heijden proposes that three components, namely the organisational growth, internal institutionalisation, and external institutionalisation, be taken into consideration (1997: 31-35). First, in terms of organisational growth, the AOP has struggled to maintain supporter numbers. The AOP was very successful in the early years as many local groups joined the movement, which eventually resulted in the historic 1997 protest. Over twenty thousand protesters camped in front of Government House for over three months; that figure was unprecedented for a lengthy protest. However, the numbers the AOP could muster significantly reduced during the Thaksin government (2001 – 2006), and this trend

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[65] Hannarong Yaowalers, Interview, 4 August 2010.

continued even after the 2006 coup. The number of cases went down from 205 in 2005 to 38 in 2010.

There are several reasons for this decrease in number. Many left because they already achieved their goals, while others believed they had never gained anything from the struggle and felt disillusioned with the AOP. A land rights group from Bantad mountain range left the AOP in 2007 partially because of this reason.[66] Also, some groups left because they became strengthened, and they felt they could take care of their own problems. Others deserted the movement because of internal conflicts (Prapas and Uchane 2006: 18-19).

Despite this massive decline, there has been no serious effort to replace those who left. There is no official or sufficient data on the number of AOP members, but it is estimated that in 2010 the members were reduced to a few thousand from about twenty to thirty thousand ten years earlier.[67] Van Der Heijden notes that the growth of a movement organisation is "both a condition for, and a further consequence of internal and external institutionalisation" (1997: 31). The decrease in number of membership has as a result important impacts on the AOP's internal and external institutionalisation.

Second, internal institutionalisation, which is measured by the degree of centralisation and professionalisation (Van Der Heijden 1997: 32), is evidently limited. Centralisation refers the availability of a command structure, such as local branches or

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[66] Watcharee Phaoluengthong, Interview, 23 August 2010.

[67] The figure varies due to the movement's poor information management system and nature of the loose structure which has little control on membership. Also, there are some conflicts of understanding regarding the membership status of certain groups. For example, I was told that the alternative agriculture group and some slum community groups had announced their departure from the AOP, but some of their leaders insisted that their groups remained part of the movement. Also, it is not uncommon for a local group to be part of more than one people's movement, given that its priority is the short-term interests. In a PKY assembly meeting, one of the NGO leaders also made a sarcastic remark that no one really left the AOP because there was no official notice. He said, "They don't really leave. They just never showed up" (Fieldnotes, 25 September 2010).

chapters, which can be used to increase the effectiveness of the movement mobilisation. The continuation of the loose structure indicates the resistance to any attempt to centralise the movement. Formally, there is no clear chain of command within the AOP structure. The main function of central bodies, which consist of the secretariat team, the advisers, and the working group, is to support and to coordinate with member groups. The final say belongs to the villagers and the local groups who comprise the movement's highest authority, the PKY assembly. It can however be argued that the central bodies (mostly made up by the NGIs) have more influence than they officially admit, and because of this, the movement structure is actually quite centralised and under the control of the central bodies. But this may not be entirely true because many of the NGIs also work as *phi liang* or advisers for local groups, so their decisions are not entirely made in benefit of the central organisations. Formally and informally, the control of the movement is, therefore, still in the hands of the local groups.

Also, the central bodies have not been suitably professionalised. The degree of professionalisation can be determined by the number of paid staff (Van Der Heijden 1997: 32). In the past, the AOP was run by NGIs who were paid by other organisations or their own projects (which might or might not involve the AOP) (see Missingham 2003: Chapter V). They basically worked for the AOP as volunteers. Not until 2010, the AOP receive funding from the Community Organizations Development Institute for a short-term project, which was used to pay for two full-time staffers, financial supports for working group members, and campaigning activities. This was the first time that the AOP had explored this funding channel.

Some people disagree with this move as they argue that working for the AOP should not be a career. In their view, the work should not be driven by a salary but rather by moral responsibility (Fieldnotes, 21 November 2010). But what these

moralists fail to address is that the salaried positions also give those who work for the AOP a full-time job as well as a full responsibility to the movement and its members. Uchane (2007: 176-177) argues having full-time staff can change the relationship between the villagers and NGIs, which has been biased in favour of the NGIs since the beginning. Although hiring paid staff has not yet yielded the results that many had hoped due to the lack of experience of the new staff members, it has noticeably created a new relationship between the secretariat team and the villagers. The villagers now have much more control over the movement affairs than they had had before.

Professionalisation can also be seen in the handling of secretarial work. In the past, movement's secretariat work had been compromised by the nature of volunteer work and the lack of proper facilities. The AOP had, for example, failed to build a decent information management system of its own. In the past, most information was stored either in the computer hard drives or the offices of volunteer NGIs. And more often than not, when they left, the valuable information would leave with them as well. Without sufficient information, the AOP has at times struggled to communicate effectively with the government officials and the public.

Moreover, after fifteen years of existence, the AOP has also failed to build a permanent office or official address. They have used the addresses of NGO offices which supported the movement.[68] Not only this has caused some postal inconvenience, but it has also caused some difficulty in effectively managing the information and documents. This is rather ironic given that many of its member groups have offices of their own. This lack of permanent infrastructure reflects how the AOP leaders view the movement and its institutionalisation.

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[68] Khematas Palprem, Interview, 4 September 2010.

Third, external institutionalisation of the AOP, which is generally measured by the change of strategy from using unconventional to conventional channels in order to gain access to the official policy process, is somewhat limited. While the AOP has recently adopted a more conventional approach, such as lobbying and formal meetings, the shift has been made mainly because of its weakened mass support. And not surprisingly, the villagers rarely get access to the decision-making process. Mostly, these meetings were set up either to postpone addressing the movement's demands or to ease political tensions. For example, when Abhisit Vejjajiva became Thailand's 27th prime minister with the support of the military in late 2008, he was strongly opposed by many pro-democracy and pro-Thaksin groups. To ease the political pressure, one of the first things that he did was setting up a series of meetings with the AOP and a few other people's movements (see Chapter V). The gesture was clearly intended to resemble what Thaksin did in early 2001 when he joined the AOP for lunch in his first day in the office. But because there was no strong political pressure outside the parliament, no meaningful outcomes were achieved from these meetings. In other words, the adoption of the conventional approach had little to do with gaining access to the system, but it should be seen as an adaptation of a weakened movement to new political conditions over which they had little control.

In sum, the AOP has not achieved much success when it comes to institutionalisation. Since the early 2000s, the movement's organisational growth has been severely stalled. The internal institutionalisation has been hindered by the communitarian ideology and the loose structure. The AOP may have changed its strategy to a more conventional one, but this change was only a response to the weakened political strength, not because of any real institutionalisation. In recent years, it has become very difficult for the movement to pursue an unconventional approach and mobilise a strong large-scale protest.

f. Strategies

The selection of strategies is a rational behaviour. It generally responds to several factors, including the goals of the movement, the organisational structure, and notably the changing political environment. In a study on anti-nuclear movements, Kitschelt (1986: 66) proposes two major hypotheses to understand how the POS affects the movement's strategies. He argues that when the political system is open and weak, assimilative strategies can be used since multiple points of access are available. But when the system is closed, disruptive strategies will be used to gain access. On the other hand, in a country like Thailand where political participation is largely limited and human rights are rarely respected, social systems are generally closed. And yet sometimes the systems are also weak, so that occasionally the state opponents are allowed to challenge power-holders.

Over the years, the AOP has employed various forms of strategies, but, the overall strategy of the AOP may, according to Naruemon (2006: 212), be described as a dual strategy approach, a combination of agitation and negotiation. As noted earlier, the system is not necessarily closed, but it is mostly inaccessible for the marginalised groups. As a result, without pressure from outside the parliament, the demands from the villagers may never be put on the negotiation table. So when the people and resources are well equipped, it is necessary to employ both sets of strategies simultaneously.

Agitation

Agitation strategies generally involve demonstrative and confrontational events, such as public demonstrations, road blockades, encampments, and building occupations. The approach has several strengths. First, it can be used to gain attention from the government of the day. This works best when the government is in a weak position. The AOP employed these strategies with great effect during the mid-1990s, since the governments of the day were unstable multi-party coalitions that needed to make

pragmatic compromises in order to remain in office. But this changed radically after 2001, when the institutional arrangements introduced with the 1997 constitution produced more stable governments (Naruemon 2006: Connors 2002) and strengthened electoral politics (Naruemon 2006: 29-30). The 1997 Asian financial crisis also caused a public clamour for strong governments (see Rungrawee 2004: 544-546; Baker 2000: 25).

Second, the strategies can also boost the movement's public visibility. Chantana (2004a) argues that the AOP have been successful in making themselves visible to the public. This in effect increases the political relevance and legitimacy of the movement. This is a useful means to educate and communicate with the public about their grievances and demands. This can be used to create public sympathy and support, which in turn be transformed into the pressure on the government (Prapas and Uchane 2006: 2). However, this public visibility also has unintended consequences. By employing disruptive strategies in order to gain the public attention through the media, the AOP risks reinforcing their stereotype as 'troublemakers' in the eyes of the public (Rungrawee 2004: 561). Their public actions may also be seen as too demanding and aggressive by Bangkokians. This negative view works against the interests of the poor because the Thai political elite tend to listen to the opinions of the urban dwellers, rather than that of those from the marginalised villages (Chantana 2004b: 229).

Third, the agitation tactics also help to build the sense of identity and unity, and confidence. Many collective activities during the protests, such as the use of symbolic artefacts, discursive tactics, and political training, are specifically designed to increase these feelings (Missingham 2003: 140-161). One of the NGIs recounted the story of villagers who gained confidence after successfully blocking a road:

After that many NGO workers believed that this way made the villagers "smart," made them feel confident, capable, and determined. They see their own potential. They feel they are equal to the governor, equal to Cabinet ministers, because this power of collective protest is very clear [...] If you give training, some sort of education, I don't know if you will get the same results. Maybe you would. But I think, up to now, this method of protest has been the best, it's useful. Pho Siang [one of the villagers] can talk with Cabinet ministers, it's become ordinary (Quoted in Missingham 2003: 159).

One of the working group members also observed that participating in collective actions has a direct impact on the members' sense of identity and unity, and confidence. He noted that those who get closely involved in the activities tended to stay with the movement for a long term and show signs of leadership (Fieldnotes, 11 October 2010).

However, the strategies can also be considerably costly as they require popular strength and resources. The strategies work best when the movement can mobilise a large number of participants as well as sufficient resources to accommodate them. Generally, to gain bargaining power with the state, their protests have to be massive and lengthy. To put sufficient pressure on the government, the AOP believe numbers really mattered. In order to get attention and any action from the government, the number of the protesters, they concluded, had to be at least twenty thousand. To put this into perspective, the late Wanida, one of the AOP's iconic leaders, explains that:

If we came only a few, we would only meet the security guards. If we came about ten or twenty, we might be able to meet with the secretary of the service centre. If we came in hundreds, might be able to meet a secretary of a minister. If we came in thousands, a deputy minister

would come to meet us. If we came in tens of thousand, a minister would come to negotiate with us. But to be able to meet with the prime minister, we need about twenty thousand (Quoted in Prapas 1998: 152, translation mine.).

Also, the protest had to be lengthy. AOP learned the lessons from the past that without continuing pressure, the government's promises would be soon forgotten. Prolonged protest was their answer to this problem. They believe a prolonged protest would allow them pressure the government during the long negotiation process and put both the government and the protesters at the same level. The AOP determined that the protest would not be called off until final decisions were reached on every issue. The agreements are also expected to be ratified as a cabinet resolution, which would instruct local officials to implement the policies (Prapas 1998: 151, 157-158). An effective protest, they believe, has to last about three months (ibid: 153).

But in recent years, both the 20,000 protestors figure and the three month period of collective action have become impossible to achieve, since many supporters have deserted the movement. Also, the weakened political position has made it much more difficult to convince the members commit their time and resources to a prolonged protest. As noted in the previous section, this explains the reason why the AOP has adopted a more conventional approach and explored more formal channels, such as meetings and petitions, which require less manpower and resources. An AOP adviser said that although the movement has taken a different path, the villagers remained committed to street politics. Strategically speaking, he explained, the threat to take their demands to the streets could still at least give them some advantage on the negotiation table (Fieldnotes, 21 November 2010).

In addition to collective actions, discursive politics also plays an important part of the AOP's agitation strategies. As explained elsewhere, non-political discourse has been used to legitimise their actions. This strategy worked considerably well in the 1990s, when the idea of civil society was widely accepted in academic and NGO circles (Shigetomi 2004b: 55). Elected politicians and the bureaucrats were often linked with terms that contain some negative connotations for the Thais, such as capitalist (*naitun*), cunning (*jaole*), self-interest (*phonprayod suantua*), the bureaucratic system (*rabob ratchakarn*), the central government (*suan klang*) and exploitation (*khudrid*). Non-state actors, on the other hand, were portrayed as self-sacrificing (*siasala*), virtuous (*khon di*), and non-violent (*santi*) people. This portrayal in good-versus-evil manner was deliberately made to help the movement gain public support. But things changed dramatically at the end of the 1990s after the economic crisis and the promulgation of the new constitution. Extra-parliamentary politics came to be viewed in a negative light while electoral politics became more accepted. The popularity of the Thaksin Shinawatra government made it even more difficult for the AOP to achieve results by staging protests.

Anti-Bangkok-led development and direct democracy discourses have also been effectively used by the movement. The AOP, according to Missingham, also contests the concept of development arguing that economic development in the last few decades brought benefits only to a few while adversely affecting the lives of many poor people. The AOP also uses the language of environmentalism, a politically powerful discourse, to attack development and to appeal to the media and the middle class (2003: 55). Also, the AOP constructed a unifying political identity of the movement participants as 'victims of development,' whose livelihood has been 'destroyed' by development (ibid: 55-57).

The AOP also claimed their rights have been violated by the state and development. Missingham (2003: 58) points out that the use of terms such as 'participation' and 'democracy' offered another 'politically charged discourse,' which had significant impact on international and Thai audience. The AOP deployed the concept of *prachathippatai thi kin dai* (literally, eatable democracy), which implied that electoral democracy has failed to solve the people's problems. The AOP's most quoted slogan, *prachachon tong kamnod anakot ton eng* (literally, the people must decide their own future) also reflects how representative democracy has excluded the people from the decision-making process. These discourses work on two levels; empowering marginalised voices as well as attacking the political elite.

But these discursive strategies are not without drawbacks. Ironically, it is the activists' own discourse that causes them unease. Although short-term interests are vital for the members, the public discourse engaged in by the movement often prioritises 'non-material' aspects. This sounds understandable given that a non-materialistic campaign would gain more public support from the middle-class and the media. However, this often makes it difficult for the villagers to explain why there are often 'material' demands attached to their non-material campaigns. This leaves the movement vulnerable to countermovement campaigns by their opponents, who seek to discredit them by questioning the motives behind their actions.

Negotiation

Once the government agrees to take demands to the negotiation table, the struggle switches to formal channels. Usually, the villager representatives, the NGIs, and academics are allowed to attend the meetings on behalf of the AOP, while the government sends a cabinet member and state officials. On rare occasions, the problems can be resolved at this stage, but mostly the villagers can expect their cases to be assigned specifically to working groups (joint committees) for evidence-proving,

fact-finding, or solution-seeking purposes. In many cases, these procedures are not actually helpful because they involve outdated laws, of dubious relevance to the issues at hand. And yet because of the highly centralised and unresponsive bureaucratic system and political party structure, the problems continue and the marginalised groups suffer the consequences. In these cases, the only ways out are to pressure the government somehow to find a way to resolve the issues through bureaucratic mechanism, or better yet, to push for legal changes. But both ways require massive pressure outside parliament. Without strong mass and media support, these changes are simply unthinkable.

However, there are some positive aspects to this strategy. The negotiation processes can be used effectively to empower the villagers. In a highly stratified society like Thailand, the rural dwellers are given little respect from the state officials. To change this, the AOP purposely pushes for what they call *wethi jeraja baeb samoena* (literally, same-level negotiation), which allows the villagers and the officials to be equally on the same table (Prapas 1998: 232). Usually, the villagers get help from the NGIs and academics with supporting information and analysis, but they are responsible for presenting their own cases and other related facts.[69]

This strategy has yielded some success, as it has helped many villagers to become villager leaders who have the confidence to be very outspoken in public settings. On one occasion, I was allowed to attend the official meeting between the villagers and the government representatives and officials. I observed that some of the villagers could speak fluently and present factually-grounded cases confidently in front of over a hundred people—many of them senior state officials. At one point, as the arguments became heated, one villager demanded that the *nai amphoe* (chief district officer), who was also at the meeting, be removed from his post (Fieldnotes, 15

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[69] See Missingham (2003: 162-168) for ethnographic details of one of negotiation meetings.

October 2010). In the past, the villagers depended on the NGIs heavily when it came to negotiations, but after more than a decade of struggle, many of them have become much more competent in dealing with the officials and legal procedures.

These skills and confidence do not come from the meetings alone; before each meeting, the villagers and their advisers usually spend one day preparing for the upcoming discussions. They actually practice role playing the meeting in advance. This also helps them learn about official procedures (Fieldnotes, 14 October 2010). However, this accomplishment should be celebrated with caution, because only a small number of local leaders of them can develop these skills.

Regarding the joint committees set up to look into problems raised by the AOP, although their appointments come with no legally binding terms, they also have some utility. As previously noted, many of these committees are merely delaying tactics, intended to appease the heated conflict; the government of the day often intends simply to ignore their recommendations. One of the villager leaders said to me once, "if you ask the villagers how many committees they have had [since the protest began], they would say they could fill a ten-wheeled truck with the committee resolutions by now" (Fieldnotes, 21 November 2010). That also explains how often the tactic is used to deal with the villagers.

However, for the AOP, these appointments are not totally useless because their findings can still be used to legitimise their claims, especially if the appointments come with impartiality and creditability. The information and recommendations from Pak Mun Dam research, which was conducted by academic teams from Ubon Rathchathani University,[70] for example, made a significant impact on the AOP's campaign against

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[70] In April 2001, the Thaksin government gave the budget of 10 million baht (around 20,000 USD) to academic teams from the Ubon Rathchathani University to study the impact of the dam on the Mun river's environment and the local fishing economy. While the research offered several policy options, it recommended that the sluice gates be kept open all year round for the

the Thaksin government in the early 2000s. Additionally, their budgets can also used to indirectly support local campaigns.

Lobbying has been left out from academic discussions on the AOP, despite its importance. This is probably because some of these academic works themselves are part of the political campaign, and lobbying does not sound very grassroots and participatory. But lobbying has in fact been a crucial ingredient for grassroots politics. Even during its heyday, the use of lobbying, according to Hannarong, played a big part of the AOP's achievements. He explained that this success was made possible because there were more than twenty *phi liang*s and these people provided the movement with a great deal of lobbying support. And since most of the lobbying activities went on behind the scenes, not many people were aware of their importance. He also explained that contacts and negotiations are usually made prior to formal meetings or public events[71]

A villager leader-turned-NGI, Kessakorn Silarak also confirmed the importance of lobbying. He noted that during the Thaksin government, deals were made between Wanida and her Octoberist comrades in the government, notably Phumtham Wechayachai and Prommin Lertsuriyadej.[72] But as it turned out, the AOP staged several protests against the popular Thaksin government, which indicates that closed-door negotiations did not always reach an agreement. Similarly, during the military government (2006 – 2007), with help from Prasarn Maruekapitak, many villager leaders from anti-Pak Mun group were given chances to meet with General Sonthi Boonyaratglin (Leader of the Council for Democratic Reform) and Prime Minister

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next five years. Thaksin finally ignored the recommendations and opted for 4-month opening of the gate as proposed by Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) (see Naruemon 2006: 171-179).

[71] Hannarong Yaowalers, Interview, 4 August 2010.

[72] Kessakorn Silarak, Interview, 19 August 2010.

Surayud Chulanont to discuss the Pak Mun Dam issues. But these efforts proved fruitless, and the issues once again remained unsolved.[73]

There are several problems regarding the use of lobbying. It clearly contradicts the philosophy that the AOP has advocated, which is participatory politics. Not only that, it thereby rejects the idea of equality among the members as well as concept of collective leadership. Since the strategy only allows a few people to get involved, not many people will be empowered through the process. Moreover, this approach is certainly not a sustainable or long-term solution because it promotes dependency on certain individuals. The role of the grassroots majority, as a result, will be severely undermined.

D. Conclusion

The AOP has both short- and long-term goals, but the movement has been mobilised mostly for short-term ends. These goals involve economic issues, such as compensation and land rights of the majority poor. This emphasis on short-term goals has caused the movement some serious problems, including commitment issues and fragmentation. Advocacy for long-term solutions may have been promoted by the movement's advisers, but such solutions have mostly failed to materialise.

The AOP consists of three main groups of actors: 1) local villagers, labourers, and slum-dwellers, 2) academics and students, and 3) NGIs. Although the first group makes up the majority of the movement and officially, they have the highest authority (through the PKY assembly and the working group) in the movement, middle-class groups have also enjoyed a considerable amount of influence. These middle-class groups are generally expected to play supporting role as advisers and members of the secretariat team. The NGI particularly have much more influence over final decisions

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[73] Somkiat Phonphai, Interview, 25 December 2010.

than the general perception, due to their higher status, greater skills and close bonds with the villagers.

The AOP is well known for its loose structure, which had previously believed to be a positive political innovation. Its practical strengths include the capacity to facilitate the diverse nature of the movement and the work of existing groups. However, the loose structure also has some faults, which include unity issues and limitations over resource mobilisation. With that structure, the movement's institutionalisation has also been fairly restricted. According to, Van Der Heijden (1997: 31-35) the process of institutionalisation can be measured by three components: 1) organisational growth, 2) internal institutionalisation, and 3) external institutionalisation. The AOP's organisational growth has been in decline since the Thaksin government. The internal institutionalisation of the movement, which is measured by the degree of centralisation and professionalisation, is also noticeably limited. Despite the change in approach to a more conventional style of campaigning, external institutionalisation is also constrained due to the AOP's weakened political strength in the recent years.

The AOP's strategies mainly involve two sets of strategies, agitation and negotiation. The movement have learned from the past experience that without the use both strategies, their demands can simply be ignored. The strategies worked effectively in the past when the movement still had their mass strength. Latterly with limited strength, they have mostly pursued negotiation tactics with limited success.

The analysis of the AOP's internal elements shows that mass strength has had a significant impact on the movement's mobilisation and development. The limited institutionalisation of the movement partially comes from the pursuit of short-term goals of the villagers as well as the idea of self-limiting radicalism of the NGIs. The loose structure might have helped the AOP to gain numerical strength in the past, but

because of the low level of commitment, the strong movement soon became a weakened one. Such a structure makes it very difficult for the AOP to maintain the mass strength in the long run. In responding to the recent decline, the movement has adopted a more conventional strategy, and yet, without continuing pressure outside the parliament, it is unlikely that the movement would achieve any meaningful victory in the near future.

Chapter IV: Stable Opportunity Political Structure: Cultural Structure, Institutional Structure, and Prevailing Strategies

A. Introduction

With the exception of the late 1990s, the development of AOP has been considerably constrained. Not only the AOP, but many other grassroots movements in Thailand have shared similar experiences. The Farmers Federation of Thailand emerged in the mid-1970s and quickly disappeared from the political scene (see Turton 1978; Morell and Chai-anan 1981; Haberkorn 2011). The Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan, which was a major force in the grassroots politics in the early 1990s, also lost its influence in subsequent years. These movements had their moments of victories as well as defeats, but the latter seem to be more prevalent. Their achievements are rather limited. These constraints can actually be traced back several decades when the modern form of Thai politics began, and they have been largely unchanged over the years.

Social movement theorists argue that not all components in the POS constantly change. They theorise that some components are deeply embedded in the political system. From the point of view of the challengers, the components are essentially fixed and given, and they are beyond their control (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 277; Kriesi et al. 1995: 26). Changes rarely occur; if they do, they would be gradual or through revolutionary changes in the entire regime (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 277).

Many studies utilise the approach to compare the success of the similar movements in different countries (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 278). Some of the notable works include Kitschelt (1986), Kriesi et al. (1992; 1995), and Van Der Heijden (1997). Kitschelt's (1986) analyses the impact of the political structure on anti-nuclear power movements in France, Sweden, the US. and West Germany. The study focuses on the openness of the political system to movements' demands and the capacity to convert

these demands into state policies. Kriesi et al. (1992; 1995), on the other hand, compare the political structures (defined as the openness of access to the state and its capacity to act) of four western countries, namely France, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, and how they impact the mobilisation pattern of new social movements. Similarly, Van Der Heijden (1997) contents that the availability of a suitable POS is strongly correlated with a high degree of institutionalisation of environmental movements in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. For example, environmental movements in France, which struggle in a closed POS, have the lowest degree of institutionalisation when compared with other European counterparts in the study.

Yet the study of these components can also be helpful in understanding the structural barriers that grassroots movements in a given political structure have to face over the long period of time. In this respect, a focus on these elements can be quite useful for the study on movements in developing countries, where an undemocratic culture is dominant, the institutional structure is relatively closed, and the use of violence against those who challenge state authority is prevalent.

As a result, this chapter is set to explore the stable aspects of the POS, and how they have impacts on the people's movements in Thailand in the last few decades. The chapter argues that in generally the stable elements of the POS have rather obstructed the emergence and mobilisation of the people's movements. Also, the chapter focuses on three main components of the POS: 1) the cultural structure, 2) the institutional structure, and 3) the prevailing strategies. In each section, the discussions include an examination of each component, a historical analysis, and the impacts on the grassroots movements.

B. Cultural Structure

Since the 1980s, authors have attempted to explore the cultural components in politics. Some focus on cultural identity as in the new social movement theory while the others seek to understand issues with cultural significance that can be used for political mobilisation (Williams 2004: 91-94). Structuralist theorists, on the other hand, have also developed theories that emphasise cultural environments and their impacts on social movements (ibid: 95). Inglehart (1977), for example, argues that there was cultural shift in western societies, which was caused by the emergence of the post-war generation. This shift gave rise to movements with 'new politics' agendas in the late 1960s. This cultural shift argument is reaffirmed in Inglehart (1990) as he maintains that this trend continued. Observers also see these changes in values as one of the factors that allowed the Green movements in the West to win parliamentary seats in the 1980s. The cultural structure also affects the choice of strategy. In a study of anti-nuclear movements, according to Nelkin and Pollack (1981: 74, quoted in Gamson and Meyer 1996: 279), German activists opted to speak about morality and civic justice, while these moral, historical, and legalistic arguments were less emphasised by the French campaigners. These differences of tactics derived from different cultural traditions in the activist community in terms of freedom of speech in the two countries.

With the unstable nature of the institutional structure in the developing countries, this cultural structure plays even more important role in the development and mobilisation of the grassroots groups. In Thailand, such cultural components are closely linked with the Thai identity and the prevailing definition of Thainess. In Thailand, political mobilisation of grassroots groups has been viewed by both the ruling elites and the Thai public as an 'un-Thai' act. Villager protesters are believed to be encouraged by foreign agents (Attachak 2006). This un-Thai label can effectively be used to delegitimise the movements, thereby legitimising the use of force against them.

The anti-communist law of 1952 was, for example, named as Un-Thai Activities Act, which allowed the use of suppression against those whom the state saw as the most un-Thai groups, Communist sympathisers (Bell 1978: 59). This shows how the 'un-Thai' label can potentially undermine and lead to the untimely collapse of a movement. As a result, what is considered as being Thai or not essentially determines the political opportunity of the grassroots challengers.

The term Thainess is a highly contested concept among the ruling classes. The role of the king, which has been in the focal point of the Thainess discourse, for example, has been subject to constant changes.[74] The change of the king's role in the political structure has affected not only the palace and the network monarchy (see McCargo 2005), but also the political landscape as a whole. Other aspects, such as the role of the people in the political structure, and the relationships between the ruling elites and the people, have also been areas of contention. But unfortunately for the non-elite groups, this power to control the definition of Thainess has largely been in the hands of the ruling classes, and they have attentively sought to define and redefine it to fit their political gains. In other words, since the formation of Thainess in the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the mainstream idea of Thainess has mostly caused adverse impacts on the grassroots groups. To understand these impacts on the AOP, the next section will utilise Saichol's (2005; 2008) analysis of the concept of Thainess and its political implications, especially for marginalised groups.

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[74] The role of the monarch was drastically changed from the benevolent ruler during the absolute monarchy period to the merely spiritual centre in the 1930s and early 1940s, and from the 1950s onward, the Thai king has thought to be the soul of the nation and a self-assumed 'check and balance' mechanism after the 1950s (Saichol 2005).

a. Characterisation of Thainess

The core ingredient of the Thainess discourse is Buddhism. Thainess, King Vajiravudh argued, has a core that is no less universal than western civilisations because it is based on Buddhism, which is considered superior to other religions in terms of rational dogma and the Buddha's royal roots (Saichol 2005: 5). Since the 19th century Chakri Reformation period, Buddhism has been significantly politicised to ensure the national security against western colonial powers as well as dominance over vassal states (see Keyes 1977; 1989). A royal-born Buddhist scholar, Prince Patriarch Wachirayanwararot (1860-1921), for example, used Buddhist ideas to define a king-centred concept of Thai nation, and this in turn helped to create a clear, indivisible ideology of the three pillars, nation, religion, and kingship (Saichol 2005: 6). Consequently, Thai kings are expected to be practising Buddhists as well as guardians of the Buddhist religion. Other ruling groups also derive legitimacy from Buddhism to rationalise their superior positions.

At the centre of the Thainess discourse, there is the king, who has been believed to be a moral and national guardian, the country's stabiliser, and the semi-divine figure (Saichol 2005; 2008). After the 1932, the role of the king as sole and absolute ruler was transformed into that of a constitutional monarch. In the new system, the king found a new role. Conservatives are convinced that the king has provided check and balance mechanisms to Thailand's underdeveloped democratic system (see Thongchai 2008b; Handley 2006). At times of crisis, he even acts as a supreme 'political referee' to resolve the conflicts (McCargo 2005: 508). Similarly, the meaning of the term 'above politics,' has also been changed to portray this supreme status of the king. Thongchai (2008b: 20) argues that before the 1973 student uprising, the term 'above politics,' had been understood as *beyond* or *out of politics*. But the royal intervention, which ended

the 1973 massacre, gave a new meaning to 'above politics,'—*on top of* or *overseeing* normal politics (ibid.).

Next, there is the idea of a Thai-style ruler, who acts as a benevolent and decisive leader. The leader is the one in control of the government and state policies. The sources of power of these leaders have differed throughout the turbulent history of Thailand. Before the 1932 revolution, it was birthright that gave the throne to the ruling king, but after 1932, the power of the ruling elite mainly come from military coups, royal appointments, and elections. On the other hand, they derive their political legitimacy from various sources, including paternalism, Buddhist-based ideas, royalism, and democracy. The ruling groups also include government officials, who have state authority and have no hesitation to use it achieve their goals. According to the King Chulalongkorn, civil servants whose functions were to serve the king, were regarded as more Thai than ordinary people (Saichol 2005: 5). Latterly, many royalist officials still see themselves as *kharatchakarn nai phrabat somdej phrachaoyuhua* (literally, the royal servants), whose functions are to serve the king, not the people, unlike the civil servants in other democratic countries. This view obviously places the officials above ordinary people.

According to the Thainess discourse, the majority of the people is placed at the bottom of the social strata. These people are believed to be royal subjects to the king as well as the Thai-style rulers. Ironically, the majority of the Thais are thought to be less Thai than the elites and bureaucrats, respectively (Saichol 2005: 5). To become a proper Thai, an ordinary Thai is taught to be politically passive and obedient to the superior. In such an environment, a patron-client relationship is a typical tie between people of different social status. Those with power consider themselves as *phu yai* (super-ordinate) while ordinary people perceive themselves as *phu noi* (subordinate). If a person is considered a *phu yai*, according to the proponents of Thainess, he or she is

obliged to provide some type of protection, financial assistance, or guidance to his or her *phu noi*. In contrast, if a person is in the *phu noi* position, he or she is expected to give his or her superior some respect, loyalty, or some sort of service (Hank 1979: 100). With little or no reference to severe punishments for disloyalty, conservative scholars portray such relationships as a harmonious, reciprocal, consensual bond. Without this guidance or control, conservative royalist intellectual Kukrit Pramoj argued, society would be full of chaos; he believed most Thais were still stupid and giving them more freedom would do more harm than good (Saichol 2005: 25).

Moreover, Thainess proponents insist that people's social status should be determined by their duties, ability, and karma. Kukrit argued that the prevailing thought on Thainess maintained a hierarchical social structure, which would in turn lead to "order, stability, peace, and prosperity" (Saichol 2005: 18). Since people's social position is decided by their duties, ability, and karma, those in the higher positions in the social stratum (who supposedly perform more important duties, have greater ability, and possess better karma) are entitled to possess additional rights (ibid.). Such a description is clearly based on a structural-functional view. Moreover, Thainess supporters also believe in the centralised structure. Since central to the idea of Thainess is the king and his servants, who are intelligent and competent in making wise decisions (based on Buddhist ethics and selflessness), it seems logical for ordinary people to support the centralised structure which allows these ruling elites to govern the country without grassroots inputs.

b. Thainess and People's Movements

It is no surprise that central to Thainess is the elites, and they are those who have the control over what the term means and who benefits from it. This is certainly not a coincidence. For decades, the discourse has been carefully produced and reproduced to minimise the threat from colonial powers as well as non-elite challengers. But there are

two main problems that stem from mainstream conceptions of Thainess. The idea of Thainess gives support to the existence of a centralised and hierarchical structure, and it also discourages political participation from the grassroots.

First, the Thainess discourse has been effectively used to justify the continuation of the centralised and hierarchical structure, and this has accordingly impeded the development of grassroots politics. The belief in a centralised system, centred around the king, has hindered the decentralisation process for decades. This belief has resulted in thousands of state projects being carried out in rural areas, while local populations are denied the right to voice any opposing views. Public support for this highly centralised structure has worked against people's movements that campaign for a more decentralised structure and greater access to the system. Since the 1980s, the NGO movement, for example, has struggled to gain public support for their decentralisation campaigns. Moreover, the idea of social hierarchy, which fosters the patronage relationship, has a significant influence on the political behaviour of Thai people. Such a belief system ensures that the ordinary people are not treated as responsible, well-informed adults; they are rather treated as dependent, irrational children who cannot take care of themselves (Connors 2003: 79).

After decades of ideological suppression, many Thais have been discouraged from participating in politics and have become politically passive. Many lack confidence and feel their voices do not matter. The lack of political orientation is mainly caused by what Saichol (2005) calls the 'know-thy-place' mentality. According to Saichol (ibid: 25), the people are urged to respect the social order and behave according to their social status. The people in the lower classes, for example, do not get to exercise their political rights by questioning those at the top. The know-thy-place principle does not tolerate disruption of the social order, and it is the job of the 'Thai-style ruler' to preserve national order by any means necessary (ibid.). The discourse is

an effective political tool to suppress non-elite opposition. One of the goals of many people's movements was that their members would be empowered and overcome this mentality. The AOP, for example, adopted a slogan that emphasises this view. It says, *the people must decide their own future*. This is opposite to the ideal solution of the Thainess discourse, one that suggests the people must obediently follow the wise guidance of the noble elites.

Moreover, the emphasis on pseudo-harmonious relationships between the ruling and the ruled has also been problematic. The Thainess scholars repeatedly emphasise the harmonious relationships between the super-ordinates and subordinates as one of the key elements of Thainess. Kukrit notes that:

> I think relationships among Thais also remain constant. Most of us who are genuine Thais are loyal to the king, respect our parents and teachers, and are aware of seniority in a sense that children respect elders, while elders are kind to children (M.R. Kukrit 1971: 266-267, quoted in Saichol 2005: 19)

Not only the rigidness of the know-thy-place mentality caused the difficulty for those at the bottom, but it has also left no room for the 'interference' from outsiders. Attachak (2006) argues that one of the tactics used by the Thai elite in dealing with the non-elite challengers is: blame 'third-hand' group, or people who come between the elites and their subjects. Their line of reasoning is as follows: when is a social unrest, even if it is caused by the elite's bad policies or incompetency, the ruling groups would blame it on a 'third hand'. It is because the relationship between the benevolent rulers and the loyal subjects is so strong, balanced, and consensual, so nothing can break this bond, unless there is an external action with malicious intentions who wants to destroy the bond and disrupt the harmonious social order. This third hand person should not be seen as a

Thai not only because of his or her bad intentions, but also because he or she must be influenced by foreign ideas. He or she should therefore be seen as a *foreign agent*.

Attachak (2006) argues that such perceptions of the structural harmony are deeply rooted in mainstream understanding of Thainess and it can be traced back to the Sukhothai period, where the kings were regarded as fathers and the people were seen as their children. And because of this public perception, elite groups have effectively portrayed non-elite, anti-government groups, who lend support to the villagers' political activism, as a 'third hand' with malicious intentions. In the past, the communists and radical students were labelled as third hand groups. In the later periods, it is the NGIs who unfortunately qualified for this label (ibid: Chapter II). Thaksin often used this tactic when dealing with the NGIs. In late 2002, he refused to allow the NGIs to assist the villagers during a televised meeting between him and the AOP members, suggesting that the presence of the NGIs would disrupt the dialogue between the government and the people.

This mentality has made it difficult for grassroots movements because outside support sometimes can be crucial to their success (Tarrow 1998: 79). This support is even more valuable for people's movements, since most of their members do not have sufficient necessary skills, such as management and communication. They have to depend on the NGIs in this respect (Shigetomi 2004a). Chantana (2004b: 239) argues that forming an alliance with the NGIs is a 'necessary' step for these movements. But the Thainess discourse turns this useful cooperation into a liability. The villagers are, according to this view, portrayed as mindless puppets, string-controlled by activists with hidden malevolent intentions. The AOP particularly attempted to solve this problem by inventing collective leadership and assigning the supporting role to the NGIs. This has considerably eased the negative public perception and increased its

legitimacy. But this 'third hand' tactic will continue to benefit the ruling elite and disadvantage grassroots activists as long as this cultural perception persists.

Second, political legitimacy, according to the concept of Thainess, does not derive from popular participation. This is contrasted with the core value of liberal democracy, where the only legitimate channel to the power is through popular participation, such as elections. But Thainess school scholars question this idea because they argue that this political process would harm the country's stability and social unity. Phya Anuman Rajathon contends that because the representatives, which come from elections, are chosen individually, they do not "represent the whole people" (1954: 1). On the other hand, the king, who observes the ten kingly virtues and four principles of justice, is indirectly chosen by all the people (ibid: 5). Others claim that political participation is a time-wasting process because it involves too much 'politics.' To solve this problem, Kukrit, proposed that there should be a 'society without politics.' Saichol writes:

> Thainess as defined by M.R. Kukrit therefore led to Thai society being a 'society without politics,' or one characterized by 'political silence,' because in his principle, both 'Thai-style ruler' and the public are outside the political space. If the ruler does not have to waste time with 'politics' (the situation of 'still politics' in today's jargon), he can fully devote his time to work in the nation's best interests. Meanwhile, the public does not have to worry that the ruler will abuse his power, because being a Buddhist (as well as respecting some monks) ensures that he would be ethical and righteous, and the king who was 'pure power' would also supervise to make sure that the ruler rules justly (2005: 24).

Thai Buddhist morals ensure that a Thai-style ruler would genuinely work for the people and protect their best interests—no time wasted. This applies not only to the king, but can also be used by people from elite groups to demand an absolute authority. This may be an extreme aspect of the Thainess discourse, which may not be shared by all Thainess supporters. But this clearly shows that the Thainess discourse can often be used to reject the notion of popular participation. Its supporters reason that such idea as political participation is ineffective and it causes social instability.

However, this view against popular participation has gradually changed. In the 1980s, the Bangkok and the provincial capitalists were allowed to participate in national politics (Anek 1992; Chai-anan 1989; Pasuk and Baker 1995; Surin 1997). Some political room was also open for grassroots activism (Prudhisan and Maneerat 1997). In the 1990s, participation appeared to be a source for legitimacy, along with security and development. McCargo (2002b: 60) observes that in this period the ruling elite opened up some political space to accommodate the increasing pressure from the grassroots. But he cautions that the change rather "illustrated shifts in the character of elite governance in Thailand, as a military-bureaucratic elite was displaced by a new elite with close ties to the business community" (ibid.). I would argue that this was not simply a change in the elite alignment, but it was also a reflection of some change in the political culture. In this period, Thailand experienced a strong movement for political reform (see Connors 2002; Naruemon 1998), which firmly emphasised the idea of political participation. This campaign resulted in the 1997 constitution—the first constitution to include sections on human rights and participation.

However, it should be noted that since the 1980s, there have been attempts to redefine the idea of Thainess. For example, the community culturists, argue that the true essence of Thainess lies in the traditional rural communities, not the one promoted by the Thai state. Chatthip Natsupha, a prominent Thai scholar and community culture

advocate, contends that these traditional villages symbolise the authentic Thai culture because they have not penetrated by western influence and capitalism (Thongchai 2008a; Shigetomi 2013). Chatthip portrays the traditional Thai village as a community with a self-sufficient economy and the villagers had strong social ties. The people were given land and provided mutual support (Shigetomi 2013: 11). This ideal Thai traditional essence, according to Chattip (1984), should be maintained because "the community was an organized way of life that provided villagers with happiness, identity, and political power" (91-95, quoted in Shigetomi 2013: 11-12). Thongchai (2008a) correctly illuminates Chattip's thought as he writes:

> [...] the important point Chatthip keeps emphasising is that this authentic essence of Thai people constitutes the culture of the Thai village. This Thai essence needs to be refreshed and revitalised to make the country strong because, we are told, 'Thai village culture is the natural culture of Thai people.' To put it the other way round, as he also asserts several times, Thai culture is the peasant culture, it is not the one promoted by the state, which is a combination of the Indian-ised, feudalistic, high culture and modernist culture favoured by the urban bourgeoisie, who are mostly Chinese (581-582).

To put it simple, instead of adopting the elite-produced version of Thainess, the culturalists promote their own version of Thainess. But his approach is proven to be problematic because not only it fails to challenge anti-democratic elements including royalist nationalism in the Thainess discourse, these supposedly new Thai elements also fall short in addressing important issues such as social inequality and human rights.

Similarly, while the AOP vigorously attacks the hegemony of the national economic development, it fails to challenge an ideology of Thainess or national identity (Missingham 2003: 61). In fact, during the campaigns the protesters even use the symbols of the nation, religion, and the king, which are important part of the elite-created national identity, in order to show their Thai collective identity and brush off the radical image (ibid: 61-62). The villagers as well as the culturalists often cite these conservative ideas along with other reformist notions, such as local participation, to attack the national development and capitalism. However, it is quite ironic that while these people's groups show their support for these supposedly pro-democratic, reformist beliefs, they also use this anti-democratic conservative national identity as part of their political campaigns. This trend became even more evident after the 2006 as the alliance of these two groups were formed to topple the pro-Thaksin groups, which were thought to represent western influence and capitalism (Thongchai 2008a).

As presented in this section, the Thainess discourse does not make it easy for Thais to embrace the idea of political participation. Thainess proponents argue against the process because they believe people are still ignorant. Despite the sharp increase in literacy rates and educational attainment in recent years, this perception continues to dominate the general public and be regularly promoted by the elite groups. The majority of Thais are still being looked down upon. The media still look at them with a sceptical eye.[75] Like other people's movements, the AOP has campaigned to increase the people's participation in the political process. It contests this perception by engaging in the politics of knowledge. The *Tai Ban* research projects were, for example, specifically designed to challenge the official view and mainstream perception of the Pak Mun villagers, demonstrating their ability to conduct research into their own

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[75] Aimpong Boonyanupongsa, Interview, 4 January 2011.

livelihood issues (see Naruemon 2006: 171-179).[76] But without political strength and an radical challenge on the Thainess discourse, the impact of their campaigns would still be limited.

C. Institutional Structure

The political opportunity of grassroots movements is generally determined by whether the challengers can gain access to the state. Authors have proposed various methods to measure this degree of accessibility to the state structure (Kitschelt 1986; Tarrow 1998). However, Kriesi et al. (1995) propose perhaps the most influential model, which suggests that one needs to look at two important factors: the access points to the state and the state capacity to act. The analysis presented by Kriesi et al. (ibid.) emphasises political structure as well as three political arenas, namely parliamentary, administrative, and direct democracy.

a. General Political Structure

State strength is determined by the degree of decentralisation and separation of power. Kriesi et al. (1995: 28-29) argue that the greater degree of decentralisation, the more the access points and less the capacity of the state to act. Also, the more the separation of power (between different branches and within each branch), the more constrained is the state capacity to act. In centralised states, Kriesi et al. (ibid: 28) observe, regional and local access points are relatively insignificant. Also, in a federalist system like the US, movement leaders have greater degree of strategic flexibility and the availability of venue shopping (Ann-Marie Syzmanski 1997, quoted in Tarrow 1998: 81).[77]

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[76] The *Tai Baan* research was a participatory resource study that involved community-based documentation of the local resources and their impacts on the livelihood of local people. Most work was usually done by local villagers under the supervision of experts. The benefits of the research were twofold: 1) it increased the legitimacy of the local wisdom vis-à-vis official knowledge and 2) it empowered the research team member by allowing them to gain new knowledge from working in the project (see *ThaiNGO*, 3 November 2010).

[77] Strategic shift of levels within the federal system.

In terms of general political structure, the Thai structure should be considered as a strong state. This highly centralised structure is arguably a political legacy of cultural structure as well as an undemocratic past. As already discussed in the last section, one of the most important elements of the Thainess discourse is that it give support to a centralised structure. The core idea of Thainess emphasises the importance of the elite groups, who are morally and intellectually superior to the people. Giving powers to the ruling groups would not lead to authoritarianism, Thainess proponents argue, because Buddhism adequately provides check and balance mechanisms to the system. For them, it is therefore wise to maintain the centralised political structure.

The undemocratic history also has its role in this continuation of the centralised structure. In the decades after the end of the monarchy, Thailand was popularly labelled a 'bureaucratic polity,' a term which portrayed Thai politics as a political competition between bureaucratic elite groups or factions (see Riggs 1966; Wilson 1966). Such a structure is apparently centralised. The centralised system partially derived from the undemocratic constitutions and temporary charters in the early period, which gave most powers to the unelected government. According to Neher (1992: 587), between 1932 and 1973, Thailand was under military governments for 36 of those 41 years. Also, the political participation of other political groups were mostly limited. During authoritarian governments, political parties were allowed to function only from 1945 to 1951, 1955 to 1958, and 1968 to 1971 (Ockey 1994: 253). In this period, when parties were allowed to function, most government parties appeared to be either controlled or co-opted by the military. In the 1980s, Thai politics was widely described as a 'semi-democratic' order where the military still played "a strong political role within the parliamentary framework" (Surin 1997: 152). Under the 1978 constitution, the bureaucrats held the power to appoint the Senate, which was given a dominant role over the lower House (Chai-anan 1989: 333-334). The weak position of elected MPs

was made possible by several provisions and procedures of the 1978 constitution and parliamentary rules (ibid: 334).

Basic democratic principles, such as human rights, participation, and decentralisation, were not formally introduced until the promulgation of the 1997 constitution (see McCargo 2002a). Along with other progressive measures, these were thought to mark a 'new turning point' for democratic development in Thailand (see Chantana 2004a: 216). Naruemon (2006: 22-29), however, argues that these so-called reforms were in fact part of the post-May uprising 'unfinished businesses' to legitimise the representative democratic system. But this was not necessarily translated into greater space for extra-parliamentary groups. In a more critical view, McCargo (1998) sees these reforms as conservative project to maintain national security and check the power of the elected politicians. These analyses correctly explain why under the new constitution political institutions, such as the government, the Senate, and independent bodies, became significantly strengthened, while the progressive elements were largely ignored. The non-elite groups, who helped pushing for the new constitution (Naruemon 1998; Chantana 2004a: 216) and hoped to utilise these channels to mobilise their causes, were left marginalised as a result.

The 2007 constitution, drafted in the wake of a military coup, also offered little help to grassroots groups. Although it has opened more access points to the system by lowering the formal requirements for popular input,[78] critics observe that these changes were only made to appease the public opposition to the military-led drafting process.[79] The real benefiters of new constitution appear to be the old-guard elite groups that

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[78] For example, the minimum signature requirement for proposing laws in the 2007 constitution are lowered to 10,000 from 50,000 in the previous constitution. The impeachment process can now be launched by collecting 20,000 signatures as opposed to 50,000 in the 1997 constitution.

[79] This measure indicated the involvement of people's groups, notably the NGIs, who sought to benefit from the military's lack of legitimacy. Some joined the drafting assembly, while the others gave public support to the military-led drafting process (see Atchara 2010; See Hewison 2007 and Dressel 2009 for the political background and the analysis of the 2007 constitution).

secure powerful positions in the Senate (74 out of 150 seats) and the independent bodies. Thus, the political participation from the bottom under the 2007 constitution remained fairly restricted.

Moreover, the degree of separation of powers in the Thai system is rather limited. In a parliamentary system like Thailand's, in contrast with a presidential one, the executive branch is not entirely separate from the legislative branch (Siripan 2006: 75). The head of the government is, for example, chosen by the parliament, and in the parliament, coalition parties make sure that the government gets the resources and bills it wants to succeed. Although the drafting of recent constitutions has been based on the idea of separation of powers, in reality the system has been significantly compromised.

The patronage relationships of the elite groups are among the most important factors that have caused this setback (Chantana 2004a: 215-216). According to Ockey (2004: 147-149), Thai bureaucrats hold significant power vis-à-vis elected politicians. The bureaucrats, for example, can delay the government policies and projects, and these delays can cause significant damage to the elected politicians. This is because their working terms are short and so, slow policy and project implementations can easily cost them their jobs. Also, bureaucrats play an important role in the law-making process, so politicians have to depend on their long experience and expertise in detailing specific procedures and regulations. This dependency can very well develop into a patronage relationships between the two elite groups (ibid.).

Political connections can easily lead to corruption or accountability problems. This is because the government may find it necessary to side with the bureaucrats even after they fail to perform their work effectively or honestly. There are countless examples of the failures caused by the incompetency or dishonesty of the bureaucrats, but there are far fewer examples of these officials being punished for their

wrongdoings. Corrupt practices by politicians are often ignored or even assisted by these same officials. These so-called 'go-with-the-flow' customs has been long embedded in the Thai bureaucratic culture. The check-and-balance mechanisms introduced by the new constitutions are also constantly criticised for failing to resolve these problems (Chantana 2004a: 216).

The close connection between the two elite groups clearly ensures state strength as well as the marginalisation of grassroots groups. Even government compensation does not come without conditions. Compensation receivers are often required to sign document papers with terms which suggest that these compensations are simply *ngoen chuayleua* (literally, financial aid) from the government (Fieldnotes, 10 October 2010). This effectively means no one has ever done anything wrong. The payment is simply made out of mercy. This tactic is used to avoid setting precedent for other state projects with similar nature.[80] The 2009 settlement which Yai Hai received from the Abhisit government, was also carefully devised to avoid setting a precedent for other cases (*Prachatai*, 10 October 2009). As a result of this restricted implication, the impacts of the villagers' victories are rather short-lived and have limited significance at the structural level (see Chapter V).

b. Three Political Arenas

In addition to the political structure, Kriesi et al. (1995) propose that three political arenas, namely the parliamentary, administrative, and direct-democratic arenas, are to be examined in order to measure the strength of the state. First, in the parliamentary arena, the Thai state has been mostly weak, except during the Thaksin government. Generally, proportional representation allows more access to the political system than plurality or majority methods. With proportional representation (without threshold),

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[80] Chuan notably used this specific reason to reverse the cabinet resolutions made by the preceding Chavalit government that award financial settlements to thousands of state-project victims (see Missingham 2003: Chapter VIII; Naruemon 2006: 181).

more parties are allowed to enter the parliament, and the movement are, as a result, more likely to find allies in legislature. Also, the number of parties in the coalition has an important impact on the strength of the state. The less the diversity and the more the discipline, the greater the capacity of the state to act.

Throughout Thai political history, three forms of electoral system have been used, namely proportional representation (also known as the party list), the multi-member district system, and the single-member district system. The first two allowed the creation of fragmented parliaments and government coalitions (see Chapter V). In contrast, the single-member district system, which was used in the 1997 constitution, helped to create the least diverse elected legislature and the strongest civilian government Thailand has ever seen during the Thaksin regime. However, it is fair to say that judging from the parliamentary area, the Thai state has been mostly weak. It is because the 1997 constitution was in use for only ten years, compared to decades of a fragmented legislature, and the 2007 constitution has also ensured greater elite control over elected politicians by dividing them.

Second, in the administrative area, the Thai state is largely weak as well. The access points and the capacity to act, according to Kriesi et al. (1995: 31), are determined by the amount of resources at the disposal, the degree of its coherence, internal coordination, and professionalisation. The greater the degree of these elements is, the stronger the state will be. The lack of these elements, on the other hand, makes the administration dependent on interest groups in the interest-intermediation system. And when the state is weak but established interest groups are strong, there is little room left for the non-elite challengers because the interest groups can very well prevent the outside challengers from getting access to state (ibid.). The Thai administration has been weak because of the lack of resources at the disposal, structural fragmentation, the

lack of internal coordination, and professionalisation, thereby having smaller capacity to act.

Moreover, interest groups in the form of political factions as well as business associations have been quite strong. Formally and informally, the gradual integration of these groups into the political structure has been increasingly apparent since the 1960s (see Anek 1992). Some of these groups, which are represented in the National Economics and Social Development Board, are proponents of state-led development schemes as well as neo-liberal policies. These plans are clearly what the AOP and other grassroots challengers have been up against. In other words, while the state has been weak in this area, little access is made available for the grassroots protesters because of the strong influence of the organised interest groups.

Third, the direct democratic function can give access points to the outside challengers. A system with direct democratic tools, such as popular initiatives and referendums, is seen as a weak state because it offers multiple access points (Kriesi et al. 1995: 32). The rights to propose bills and referendums were first introduced in the 1997 constitution. These measures were hailed as ones of the most progressive elements in the so-called people's constitution. In reality, however, grassroots groups have complained that the measures offer little help to the non-state challengers. Most of the legal processes are still dominated by elite groups. Several bills proposed by these groups end up being either severely amended or dropped from the legislative agenda. The Community Forest Bill is a good example of this. Without the availability of functional direct democratic tools, the state is certainly strengthened in this arena.

Table 4.1: Institutional Strength of the Thai State

General Political Structure	Parliamentary Arena	Administrative Arena	Direct Democratic Arena	Overall
Strong	Mostly Weak (Except during the Thaksin government)	Weak (Strong interest groups)	Strong	Strong

[†]Adapted from Kriesi et al. (1995: 33).

According to the model proposed by Kriesi et al. (1995), the institutional structure of Thai state is quite strong (see Table 4.1). The highly centralised structure and limited separation of power put the Thai state in a strong position. In the parliamentary area, the Thai state has been largely weak, with the exception of the Thaksin government period. The Thai state is also weak in the administrative arena, but with established interest groups, the non-elite challengers are left with little access to the structure. With limited direct democratic mechanisms, the Thai state has not been weakened as many had thought. All in all, the analysis of the institutional components of the state suggests that the Thai state is largely closed to outside challengers.

D. Prevailing Strategies

The mobilisation of non-elite challengers may be encouraged only by a weakness of the state, but many choose to take collective action even when the state is strong, merely because of a change in prevailing strategies. Repressive strategies are, for example, likely to deter the challengers to think twice before taking any collective action (Tarrow 1998: 80). The elite's choice of prevailing strategies, therefore, has a direct impact on the grassroots mobilisation. Kriesi et al. define prevailing strategies as "the procedures that members of the political system employ when they are dealing with challengers" (1995: 33). They argue that prevailing strategies should be distinguished from cultural

the aspects of the POS, as opposed to Gamson and Meyer (1996) who propose two stable aspects of POS, the institutional and cultural structure. Kriesi et al. (1995: 33-34) explain that the prevailing strategies can be categorised as exclusive (repressive, confrontational, polarising) and integrative (facilitative, cooperative, assimilative) strategies. Kriesi et al. (ibid: 34-36) contend that the prevailing strategies are embedded in the political system and they are closely linked with the country's history and tradition. In Germany, for example, the state frequently uses more exclusive strategies when dealing with non-elite contenders regardless of the change in regime. French elites also find themselves using more brutal tactics to counter their challengers (ibid: 34-35). On the other hand countries, like Switzerland and the Netherlands have a tradition of using integrative strategies to deal with non-elite challengers. The introduction of proportional electoral system was specifically made to accommodate the demands from these minority groups (ibid: 35).

The choice of prevailing strategies in developing countries is a different story. The elite groups are more likely to employ the more repressive strategies to ensure the survival of their regimes. As a developing country, Thailand is no exception. The Thai elite has a strong tradition of using violence against non-elite challengers, especially when these groups are perceived as threats to the government. This was even more true during the undemocratic period when the use of violent measures was systematically applied against their challengers. During military governments (1947 – 1973), the local population became the victims of systematic state killings. Governments led by Phibun Songgram and Sarit Thanarat harshly implemented massive anti-communism campaigns from 1952 to 1958. As a result of these campaigns, dissident party members were either arrested or assassinated. It is reported that 1,080 communist suspects were rounded up and many local leaders were executed (Morell and Chai-anan 1981, 84-85).

In the 1970s, the use of violence was aimed to suppress the farmer and labour strikes, and it appeared to work. The number of the strikes gradually declined. While there were 501 strikes in 1973, this number steadily decreased to 357 in 1974, 241 in 1975, and 133 in 1976 (Pasuk 1997: 335, quoted in Prapas 1998: 22-23). Farmer activists were also among the prime targets of the assassinations; four farmers' leaders were murdered in 1974, twenty were killed in 1975, and eight more were executed in 1976 (Prapas 1998: 23). In 1975 from early April to August, the number of farmers' leaders killed was at a rate of roughly one murder per week (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 307). However, no serious attempts were made by law enforcement agencies to investigate these systematic killings, and no culprits were ever brought to justice. The decrease in the number of protests over the years indicates that organised crimes against the farmers' leaders surely had an immense impact on the rest of the farmer activists.

The most terrifying incident happened in 6 October 1976 when over a hundred students were killed, and 1,300 more were arrested around Thammasat university area (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 311). The post-October massacre period, according to Prapas (1998: 25), was the 'dark age' for popular movement. Although there were still some demonstrations after the student massacre, they were very different from the protests during the democratic period. First, there was a drastic decline in the number of the protests. In 1978, for example, there were only 17 protests organised by workers, which sharply contrasted with over 200 strikes that took place only three years earlier (Prapas 1998: 27). Second, the protests were less organised and rather short-lived since there was no longer a permanent farmer coordinating organisation. Third, there were also some movements by the farmers but they appeared to be either supported or controlled by the state (Prapas 1998: 25-26). These changes in popular mobilisation indicated the effectiveness of the state suppression.

In the 1980s, the bureaucrat-led government managed to allow some open space for other non-bureaucratic groups. The 1970s student activists were encouraged to return home and resume their 'normal' lives. Essentially, the government now changed its approach from using exclusive strategies, which included intimidation and suppression, to using more inclusive means, such as cooptation, cooperation, and incorporation, to deal with emerging social forces (Chai-anan 1989: 331, 334). Consequently, there were a moderate increase in the number of protests concerning general economic issues, such as the rising prices of bus fares and sugar (Prapas 1998: 27). But generally, the role of the emerging social forces remained restricted by constant controls by the military and the government (see Chai-anan 1989: 336-337; Suchit 1987: 53-58).

The use of violence persisted in the 1990s, but it was considerably reduced when compared with the earlier periods. The 1992 Bloody May incident significantly diminished the military's political influences and paved the way for the emerging importance of political parties and civilian governments. The capacity of the civilian government to use force was much more limited than that of the military regimes.[81] This led to a steep rise in the number of protests. During the Chuan government (1992 – 1995) there were roughly two protests took place per day, or about 739 protests per year (Prapas 1998: 120). One of the most prominent farmers' organisations, the Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan, emerged and carried out some major protests during this period (see Somchai 2006: Chapter 4).

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[81] It should be noted that after the May uprising, the new government was under pressure to observe the rule of law more than the governments in the past. This was because the authorities were afraid the violence could escalate and lead to another 'Bloody May.' Also, the democratic governments learned the lesson from the Cold War period that such brutal methods would only push the confrontation further, and therefore, they learned to tolerate grassroots movements more (Somchai 2006: 110).

Despite the constraints, the use of violence remained a usual means for the Thai authorities to deal with protests. From September 1994 to August 1995, for example, three farmers were killed by the violent suppression of state forces. And it was reported that the use of force was employed to suppress and intimidate the protesters on 21 separate occasions, whereas in 11 incidents, *mob-chon-mob*[82] (literally, mob versus mob) operations were also carried out (Prapas 1998: 124). Also, the arrests of more than a hundred NGIs and local leaders were also issued during this period. Moreover, the government declared a martial law and used armed forces to violently disperse the anti-Sirinthorn Dam and anti-Pak Mun Dam protests, which altogether resulted in several injuries (ibid.).

The situation did not improve much in the 2000s. At the beginning, civil society groups responded positively to the rise to power of the Thaksin in 2001 due to his government's pro-poor policies and personal connections.[83] But after gaining political strength, Thaksin's attitude towards grassroots movements gradually changed. NGIs were systematically harassed during the Thaksin government. The activists were labelled as culprits who worked for foreign organisations to undermine the economic development of the country. In early 2002, twenty leading Thai NGIs and forty-four foreign assistants were investigated by the Anti Money Laundering Office, which was established to fight organised crime (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 145).

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[82] *Mob-chon-mob* is another counter-movement strategy, which is mostly carried out by the state or local influential figures by hiring a group of local toughs, thugs, unemployed people, or in many cases, people from another locality, to provoke the local protesters. Normally, the confrontation ends up with a violent clash between the two. This tactic is used to achieve the following goals: 1) demoralising the protesters, 2) discouraging other people to join the protest, and 2) making the public believe that there are other local groups who disagree with the protesters.

[83] Ubol Yoowa, Interview, 16 August 2010.

Moreover, protests, notably against the trans Thai-Malaysian gas pipeline and Pak Mun Dam, were met with state violence. In December 2002, a peaceful protest against the pipeline project by community activists and NGIs in Hat Yai, a town near the pipeline route, was violently suppressed by the police force. The clash left 38 protesters and 15 policemen injured (Simpson 2005: 21).[84] In the same month, an AOP protest camp in Bangkok was raided by a gang of unidentified men (*Matichon*, 6 December 2002). It was speculated that it was ordered by a general with a close connection with the government (*Khaosod*, 10 December 2002). A week later, the AOP protest camp at Pak Mun in Ubon Rathchathani was burnt to the ground by a gang of arsonists who were reportedly close to the EGAT (Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand) (*Krungthep Thurakij*, 17 December 2002). In early 2003, the protest camp in Bangkok was demolished, and the hundreds of villagers were forced to go home empty-handed.

Between 2001 and 2005, at least seventeen community leaders and activists were murdered by non-uniformed assassins. Almost all of these slain activists had led protests against development projects (Simpson 2005: 15). Yet, Thaksin seemed to turn a blind eye to the murders. This has important implications as Simpson writes:

> The lack of successful prosecutions in almost all cases has also suggested an unwillingness on Thaksin's behalf to pursue the perpetrators which could, in addition to Thaksin's attacks on the legitimacy of NGOs and environmental activists, encourage further assassination attempts on those that speak out against development projects (ibid.).

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[84] In January 2013, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled the police used excessive force against the protesters (*Prachatai*, 16 January 2013).

For a grassroots movement, surviving during the Thaksin government was one difficult task.

The prevailing strategies during the post-coup period were no better. Although there was no reported incidence of open violence, the villagers were widely intimidated during the military-backed government (2006 – 2007). During the military government, security concerns limited the AOP activities. Two months after the coup, the military government partially lifted martial law in forty one provinces. But it left thirty-five out of seventy six provinces under tight restriction. Most of these were in the North and the Northeast where the majority of the AOP members resided (*Prachatai*, 14 July 2007). For example, in Sisaket, a province in the Northeast, an assistant district officer attended an AOP local meeting and took the names of the villagers who attended the meeting. The officer then took photos of the event and made copies of villager's identification cards. That evening, military officers called on the villagers and asked more questions about the AOP activities (Assembly of The Poor, Official Statement, 29 November 2006). Under martial law, non-cooperation was an arrestable offence.

In many areas, the local officials took this opportunity and took the action against the villagers despite the on-going negotiation. In Trang, for example, the officials from the Forest Department raided the disputed lands. Open resistance to the official actions was not an option. Political activities were banned under the marital law (*Khao Sod*, 13 January 2007). Similarly, thousands of villagers from Ubon Ratchathani, Si Sa Ket, Surin and Roi Et were stopped from travelling to Bangkok by the military (*The Nation*, 22 May 2007). Many forms of intimidation were also used. In Sirindhorn district, military tanks were used to create a roadblock, and preventing the villagers from using their trucks. The villagers and their meetings received regular visits from

military officers.[85] Despite these obstacles, the AOP managed to stage a protest of around 1,000 participants at Government House in May 2007.

However, it should be noted that during the Abhisit government, military force was used during the 2009 and 2010 crackdowns on the red-shirt protesters. Between April and May 2010, the military deployed more than 67,000 troops and used 117,923 live bullets to suppress the red-shirt protesters. This armed suppression resulted in more than 94 deaths (76 civilians) and 1,283 injuries (*Khao Sod Online*, 23 May 2013). This was the clearest indicator yet that repressive strategies would continue to be an option for elite groups if they perceived the challenge as a threat.

In Thailand, the type of regime is not necessarily correlated with the choice of prevailing strategies. Although the use of violence may be more systematic and widespread during military governments, civilian governments can also use repressive strategies, if they perceive the outside challengers as threat. Early analyses, such as Prapas (1998: 120-127), suggest that regime type is an important factor that determines the number of the protests. He notes that protests are generally discouraged during the non-democratic periods because there is a strong tendency that the military elite may be more capable and willing to suppress the non-elite protesters.

However, the 2009 and 2010 military crackdowns may indicate otherwise. It was a civilian government that ordered the suppression of the red-shirt protests by armed forces that had not been trained to deal with protesters. The use of live bullets was also permitted (See (Human Rights Watch Report 2011). This clearly shows that Thai civilian governments are capable of and willing to use repressive strategies, and confirms what Kriesi et al. (1995) explains: the choice of prevailing strategies is closely linked with historical roots. In the case of Thailand, it is connected with deep-rooted

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[85] Baramee Chairat, Interview, 10 August 2010.

notions of Thai identity and the Thainess discourse. Once the challengers are perceived as threat to the national security and social order, the use of repressive tactics against the challengers may be presented as a legitimate choice. Also, it is because Thailand has developed a culture of impunity, since the country has experienced several state-sponsored mass killings, and yet no one has ever been seriously put on trial for these murders (see *Human Rights Watch*, 15 May 2012).

Unlike governments in the West, where their legitimacy to a certain extent stems from their observing the rule of law and adhering to principles of human rights, the legitimacy of Thai governments stems mostly from other factors, such as their ability to deliver development, economic prosperity, and national security (see McCargo 2002b). It was not until the 1980s that democratic principles, like political participation, were first given some importance (ibid: 58-59). But still, with limited resources and little power, poor protesters were often subjected to brutal suppression by the state. As discussed in the previous chapter, the AOP adopted a non-political approach which allowed them to use radical tactics with much less harsh consequences. But that means they have to limit their goals and make sure that their collective actions are not viewed as serious threats to the status quo.

E. Conclusion

This chapter explored three stable aspects of the POS in Thailand, and it showed that the components have rather impeded the development and mobilisation of the Thai grassroots movements. First, in terms of cultural structure, the Thainess discourse, which is largely controlled by the elite, has caused some serious problems to the grassroots movements for decades. First, its support for the existence of centralised and hierarchical structure has partially led the political passivity among Thais. The people have been led to believe that they should 'know their place', and not voice their opposition to the ruling elites. The portrait of a harmonious relationship between the

elite groups and their subjects is overemphasised by Thainess proponents, while the politically active groups, such as radical students and activists, are often labelled as 'third hand' instigators. The Thainess discourse also rejects the idea of popular participation. Not only this effectively rejects the rights of the people to participate in the political process, it also makes it difficult for the movements to campaign for a more participatory system.

Second, as regards institutional structure, by considering the degree of decentralisation and separation of power, Thailand should be regarded as a strong state. Thailand is also quite strong in three political arenas, namely parliamentary, administrative, and direct democracy. The Thai state has been largely weak in the parliamentary area, except during the Thaksin government. In the administrative area, the Thai state also appears to be weak, but this does not leave much room for the grassroots groups because Thai interest groups are rather strong and well integrated into the system. Although there are direct democracy channels available in recent constitutions, most of the legal processes are tightly controlled by the elite groups, so this area is also limited for grassroots groups as well.

Third, Thailand has a long history of the elite using repressive strategies against the people. They justify their choice of prevailing strategy by citing the Thainess discourse. It appears that during the undemocratic period, the use is violence was more systematic and more prevalent than that of the democratic period. This resulted in sharp increase in number of protests in the 1990s. However, the 2009 and 2010 military crackdowns suggest that civilian governments can also be capable of and willing to use violence against the non-elite challengers if they are perceived as a threat. People's movements, such as the AOP, have adopted a non-political approach which has enabled them to mobilise in a more radical manner without harsh consequences. But this

approach also comes with a price. Any movement has to limit its political ambitions accordingly.

Chapter V: Volatile Political Opportunity Structure: Elite Divisions and Media Access

A. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that the stable aspects of the POS, which were partially controlled by the elite groups, have made it difficult for grassroots movement to develop and mobilise. But there have been a few moments in history where the grassroots politics was allowed to flourish, such as in the mid-1970s and especially the 1990s. Other than the internal readiness, which I already discussed in the Chapter III, this chapter argues that there are other structural elements that have permitted the Thai popular movements, especially the AOP, to emerge and develop. These external elements are known as a volatile political opportunity structure. Unlike the stable aspects of the POS, these elements can change instantly. And because the volatile elements are not deeply embedded with the structure like the stable ones, these factors can also be influenced and changed by the movements. Gamson and Meyer explain that:

> The volatile elements [...] are more useful in understanding the process of interaction between the opening and closing of political space and the strategic choices of movements. The volatile elements help us to understand movement outcomes as involving structures which shape and channel activity while, in turn, movements act as agents that help to shape the political space which they operate (1996: 289).

Unfortunately, there is no consensus concerning what elements should be part of the volatile political opportunity structure (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 282-283). Different researchers utilise different sets of variables in analysing different political environments depending on various factors, such as the types of the movements and state. In this thesis, the emphases are on two changeable aspects of the VOS, the elite

divisions and the media access. Along with some others, these components are commonly used to study the movements in many developing countries (see Tarrow 1998; Schock 1999; Gamson and Meyer 1996; Kriesi 2004), and they have played an important role in facilitating and impeding the development and mobilisation of the AOP since its inception in 1995.

As for this chapter, it is my argument that the elite divisions had significant impact on the AOP during the Thaksin government, especially between 2002 and 2005, while the media access played the key role in limiting the AOP mobilisation between late 2005 and 2010 when the country was deeply polarised. During most of his term, Thaksin was able to control the elite and leave little space for grassroots mobilisation. But the elite factors no longer had a significant impact on people's movements after 2005 when the country became polarised. The AOP, however, still struggled to mobilise in this period because its organisation had been substantially weakened and the coloured politics took most of the media space. This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section deals with the elite divisions, while the second one discusses the media access and its impact on the AOP's mobilisation.

B. Elite Divisions

In terms of elite factors, instead of utilising shifting alignments and divided elites as separate factors, this thesis combines these two dimensions into one, referred to here as elite divisions. Schock (1999) employs this approach to analyse the social uprisings in the Philippines and Burma during the 1980s. In some cases where both factors share certain similarities this combination is quite useful. According to Schock (ibid: 357), the combination reflects McAdam's (1996) study on the element of instability of elite alignments. Generally, when elite divisions are present, the challengers have incentives to mobilise because a segment of the elite groups may find support from the challengers to gain some advantage over their rivals (Schock 2005: 33-34; Jenkins and

Perrow 1977). But when elite groups are unified, the political opportunities of the challengers decrease and so the challengers may be discouraged from taking collective actions.

Elite divisions vary in different political systems. In democracies, elite divisions generally occur over political or economic policies, or social issues rather than the structural system. In democratic regimes, elections are institutionalised instruments for elite realignment and so, the elite groups must seek mass support. The challengers may gain political leverage if ruling coalitions are highly divided (Schock 2005: 33). By contrast, with the lack of regular and institutionalised mechanisms in non-democracies, elite competition can potentially result in political contention (Schock 1999: 361-362). Elite divisions in democracies occur mostly in parliamentary systems, but in non-democracies, these divisions mainly involve the bureaucratic elite.

Thailand is neither a non-democracy nor a full democracy. While most governments in the recent years have come from elections, bureaucratic interventions and the violation of human rights are not uncommon in Thailand. In many cases, elected elites also show signs of authoritarianism. Elite divisions occur mostly in the realm of socio-economic policies, but sometimes elite groups are also divided over the preferred choice of political system. In Thailand, it is insufficient for students of Thai politics to understand elite divisions within the parliament alone. Given the high frequency of military coups and coup attempts, it is imperative that considerable attention has to be paid to the bureaucratic elites as well. Since the 1950s, the Thai army in particular has played a central role in stabilising and destabilising the entire political structure.

Historically, Thai grassroots challengers often mobilised during divided periods, such as in the mid-1970s and between the late 1980s and mid-1990s. The unstable political periods coupled with weak governments provided the movements with bargaining power. With regard to the AOP, the elite divisions at the beginning of the Thaksin government gave the protesters incentives to mobilise. But as the elite groups became relatively controlled by the TRT government, the AOP as well as other grassroots groups found it nearly impossible to successfully mobilise their movements.

Other elite components, like influential allies, are on the other hand less emphasised in this thesis because of their lesser relevance to the subject. The Thai elite has found forming an alliance with people's movements less fruitful for their political manoeuvres, since such movements are less interested in bringing down the government. The elite groups who have sided with these movements mostly consisted of the conservative reformist doctors and academics with limited political ambitions. Their support can occasionally help to boost the media coverage, but their role in the movement activities is restricted, especially after 2005 when intense political polarisation took place. These figures include well-known faces, such as Sulak Sivaraksa and Dr. Prawase Wasi.

Moreover, some other elite groups may side with the protesters to strengthen their political position, but these alliances are mostly short-term and fairly limited. They are by no means 'natural allies' of the AOP. The Democrat Party, for example, sided with the protesters in 2005 when they were mounting a political struggle to oppose the Thaksin government. This was quite interesting, given that only a few years before they had viewed the protesters as trouble makers and took some harsh measures against the villagers (see Baker 2000; Missingham 2003). Thaksin showed temporary support for the movement when he was trying to gain public support for his up-coming trial in the Constitutional Court in 2001. Abhisit also sided with the villagers again

when he needed to boost his pro-poor image after his government ordered a violent crackdown on the red-shirts in 2009.

a. Thaksin and the Elites

Under a new political environment and under the firm direction of former police officer turned telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, the government led by the TRT from 2001 to 2006 became the strongest elected government in Thai political history. Outside the parliament, the personal networks of Thaksin in bureaucratic circles significantly helped him keep politics under control. These factors were the key elements that effectively stabilised politics and contained the elite groups. Inside the parliament, TRT's control over the political process was greatly assisted by the 1997 constitution and election laws, which were biased against minor parties. Moreover, the TRT also attracted millions of rural voters by successfully managing electoral networks as well as offering pro-poor policies.

The Bureaucratic Elite

In Thailand, political activities do not always occur in the formal parliamentary structure. In fact, a number of significant political developments that the Thais have experienced happen outside the formal structure, such as military coups and uprisings. These events are directly and indirectly connected to the bureaucratic elites. These ruling classes have played a key role in determining the country's stability since the 1940s. However, their role in politics became less active in the 1980s and after the 1992 uprising, their open political influence has been significantly reduced. However, McCargo and Ukrist (2005: 127-129) argue that the role of the military in politics did not cease after the uprising, but it simply changed in form. They observe that that unlike a professional military which recognises its limited roles and stays under the control of the elected government, "the Thai military has never recognized clear limits to its functions, nor has it genuinely subordinated itself to civilian control. Since 1992,

it has instead been willing to pretend to accept limits and controls, on condition that it remained unreformed, with its privileges essentially intact" (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 129).

When Thaksin took office in 2001, he wasted no time to 'repoliticise' the military. McCargo and Ukrist survey Thaksin's background and argue that the billionaire-turned-prime minister was deeply interested in the military. Thaksin learnt a lesson from his admired politician, the former Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, who lost his premiership to the 1991 coup after his government had open conflicts with the army. Thaksin knew how essential it was for him to keep a good relationship with the armed forces (2005: 121-125).

For several years he not only kept them happy, but he was also able to keep the generals under his control. During his reign, Thaksin appointed his relatives and dozens of his Class 10 classmates from the Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School—where he had studied alongside future army officers as a young police cadet—to key posts in the military. More importantly, Thaksin succeeded in replacing Prem Tinsulanonda's patronage network with his own. Prem, who served as the President of the Privy Council, held strong political power and had significant influence over the appointments of military posts over the years (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 134-152; McCargo 2005). Importantly, Thaksin managed to control the leading faction of the bureaucratic elite as no other civilian leaders had been able to do before. Also, given that Prem's position was closely linked to the palace, Thaksin's successful challenge to Prem's authority reflected the dominant political position that Thaksin gained during his tenure outside the realm of party politics.

Thaksin's control over the bureaucrats had considerable impacts on grassroots politics. The control gave confidence to the government to pursue its development policy with little concern about political instability. Historically, the bureaucratic interference had been the most threatening 'check and balance' mechanism to civilian governments. Popular dissatisfactions could easily be used to justify a military coup. One can see that after having consolidated his power, Thaksin made little effort to respond to criticisms from people's groups. He knew that their dissatisfaction would not be sufficient to turn the bureaucratic elite against his government (Fieldnotes, 25 September 2010).

Also, in Thailand the bureaucrats have the resources and capabilities to control the masses. Senior officials had long viewed grassroots activism as something that needed to be closely monitored and contained. Control over these bureaucratic apparatuses gave Thaksin extra eyes and ears to check on the activities of the villagers. It is therefore important for the AOP to take the bureaucrats' political position into account, given their shaky adherence to the rule of law and poor human rights records. According to one villager, protesters had to very careful when military men were present because they could be merciless when dealing with dissidents (Fieldnotes, 10 October 2010). It was not uncommon for villager leaders to be visited military officers at home to check on their movements and plans.[86] Military cooperation certainly benefitted the Thaksin government in containing grassroots challengers.

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[86] In fact, when I was interviewing Sawat Uppahat, we were visited by a few military officers. The men came as a casual visit, and we talked only a few minutes, perhaps because I was present. Sawat said that the purpose of the visit was to gather information regarding his political activities. Sawat did not feel threatened by the visit because it was not uncommon for him, but for typical villagers this type of visit could easily be perceived as a form of intimidation (Sawat Uppahat, Interview, 15 August 2010.).

The military can also be used for 'unofficial' tasks. On the early morning of 4 December 2002, the AOP protest camp near the Government House was raided by around 30 unidentified men. It took them about 10 minutes to vandalise the tents, throw possessions into the canal, and take away protesters' signs and banners. The financial loss was around 6,000 baht (*Khao Sod*, 7 December 2002), but the psychological damage was far worse. The fact that the incident occurred right next to Government House, that the normal lights from the adjoining official buildings were mysteriously turned off that night, and that the usual police patrol did not appear, indicates that other state officials might also take part in this incident (*Matichon*, 7 December 2002).

Although there is no clear evidence proving the government was behind the raid, the government who benefitted the most from what happened. The presence of the AOP at Government House damaged the image of the administration in the eyes of the public, as well as undermining the decisive, powerful image of Thaksin (*Khao Sod*, 6 December 2002). And the raid took place only two days before a major dinner party for the King's birthday, which was hosted by the government (*Matichon*, 7 December 2002). The protest camp would have been quite embarrassing for the hosts. Despite the high profile of incident, the raiders were never identified. It was widely believed that military men, who were close to or worked with the government, were involved. The media widely speculated that the raid was ordered by Seh Ice, (Major General Triarong Intharathat) Thaksin's classmate, well known for his 'influential image.' He denied the accusation (*Khao Sod*, 10 December 2002).

However, Thaksin may not have full control over the bureaucratic elite. The military was after all quite fragmented. Cleavages in the armed forces are usually caused by cliques and inter-class rivalries. Control over the military generally derives from the ability to control the generals in the top posts, notably the Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army. Most successful military coups in the past were staged

or backed by these top officers. But one has to keep in mind that there is always competition among classes and cliques within the military. Most importantly, the palace had a significant influence within the military (see McCargo 2005). It would be extremely difficult for the generals to openly act against the monarchy or the people in the royal network, especially in recent years. Between 2002 and 2005, Thaksin may have in control of the military, but as it turned out, this control was quite limited. The premier lost his power to a military coup on 19 September 2006.

The Elected Elite

In the 2001 elections, the TRT secured 248 seats in the general elections and the figure went up to 377 out of 500 in Thaksin's second term, which began in 2005. No prime minister had ever achieved this level of success in elections before. While control over the bureaucrats gave Thaksin political stability, it was largely this parliamentary dominance that gave his government the ability to keep the grassroots groups at bay. This dominant position allowed Thaksin to reduce the political space available to grassroots activists, including the AOP. There were two main sets of factors that contributed to this success: 1) the 1997 constitution and the election system, and 2) the TRT's electoral network and its populist policies.

The Constitution

It was the 1997 constitution and the new electoral system which allowed major parties to benefit at the expense of the minor ones. A decade prior to the 2001 elections, Thai governments were generally weak and Thai politics was also unstable. Between 1992 and 2000, there were four governments, and on average, a government term lasted only two years. Two out of four were ended by corruption scandals, and another one faced its demise as the country was on the verge of economic collapse. Government coalitions were weak. Factionalism dominated political life, and faction leaders controlled the fate of the government (see Chambers 2003). During his one year term,

Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (1996 – 1997), for example, had to constantly balance the interests of six partners in his coalition to survive numerous internal conflicts (Borwornsak and Burns 1998: 238). Many saw this factionalism as the main cause for what Chai-Anan (1982) called Thailand's 'vicious circle,' which began with a weak civilian government being elected and then ended up with that government being ousted by a military junta.

There was also a public outcry for political reform. The 1992 May massacre, which was a direct result of the 1991 coup, convinced the public that the role of the military leaders should be minimised, and that a coup should never happen again. From a more liberal point of view, the reforms were primarily about increasing the transparency in government, dealing with issues such as vote-buying, corruption, and legal efficiency (see Bowornsak and Burns 1998: 234-237).

But for the conservative elite, the reform agendas were a totally different story. For them, the reforms were a necessary step to prevent violent social disorder, control the increasing influence of the politicians, and increase the political role of virtuous technocrats (McCargo 1998: 13-22). However, both liberals and conservatives agreed that the new civilian governments should be vested with more powers to guarantee their survival as well as increase its effectiveness. As a result, a series of reforms were initiated and pushed forward by a coalition of NGO activists, womens' rights groups, academics, technocrats, and conservative reformists (see Connors 2003; Naruemon 2002). These efforts were transformed into what became widely known as the 'people's constitution,' due to the unprecedented popular input.

The 1997 constitution aimed to strengthen the civilian government by creating both stronger political parties and more powerful prime ministers. The constitution aimed to create a two-party system, which was believed to be a more stable structure.

According to Rungsan (2003a; 2003b), the 1997 constitution contained some size-biased features, which punished minor parties for their smallness. By contrast, the charter rewarded major parties, notable the TRT and the Democrat Party (DP), with more parliamentary seats and resources. Rungsan (2003b: 226) argues that many drafters had previously worked for non-democratic governments in the 1970s, and preferred a political system with fewer major parties. For them, more parties meant greater negotiation costs than the government was able to pay (ibid: 225).

Although there were several measures which worked in favour of major parties, such as the 5,000 party member requirement and the party development fund,[87] it was the electoral systems that were most strongly criticised for disproportionately favouring larger parties. The constitution introduced two new electoral systems, the party list and the single-member district systems. Generally, the party list, better known internationally as a proportional representation system, is used to give more political space to minor parties. However, this was not the case with the party list system introduced into Thailand under the 1997 constitution. The charter set up a 5-percent threshold, which effectively barred parties that received less than 5 percent of the vote (most likely minor parties) from gaining parliamentary seats.

The impact of the party list on the size of the party was astonishing. Several medium- and small-sized parties were either significantly reduced in size or simply disappeared from Thai politics. In the 2001 elections, for example, thirty-two minor

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[87] Under the new Constitution, forming a party was not a burden, but it was much more difficult to operate one (Rungsan 2003b: 135). While only fifteen members were required to register a party, the party law required 5,000 additional members from different regions had to be registered within 180 days. A party was also required to establish party branches in all the regions in the country. This was a costly requirement for minor parties. Moreover, one of the innovations in the new constitution was creating the party development fund, which awards a financial support for a party, based on; 1) the number of the party's MPs, 2) party list votes, 3) the number of registered members, and 4) the number of branches of the parties. The calculation on this basis was basically to award the party that did well during the elections and had greater resources. They were mostly likely to be major parties.

parties, which altogether received 14.31 percent of the vote (4,095,687 votes), did not gain a single seat in parliament in the party list system. Only the five major parties, which captured 85.69 percent of the vote, were able to compete in the elections and gained all 100 seats allocated under the party list system (Narut 2005: 101-104).

The change of electoral system from the multi-member district system to the single-member district one also changed the Thai political landscape. According to Duverger (1954), a single-member district system has a tendency to create a two-party system. As the winner-take-all system was put in place, the two major parties became the two main beneficiaries. In the 2001 elections, for example, out of 400 parliamentary seats, two major parties (the TRT and the DP) were able to grab about three-quarters of the seats (297 seats), while nearly all the other seats (99 seats) were captured by medium-sized parties. Only four seats (about 1 per cent) were left for the minor parties (Narut 2005: 103).

The 1997 constitution also gave greater power to the prime minister, so that he or she would have greater control over the electoral machine. Unlike in the past, the new rule stipulated that once an MP was given a ministerial post, he or she had to give up their parliamentary seat. This meant once their post in the cabinet was taken away by the premier, who was vested with the power to reshuffle the cabinet, his or her political career would also be over. This measure significantly empowered the prime minister to a great degree because cabinet members would, in Sombat's words, "[…] have to think twice before going against the leadership of the premier" (2002: 205).

Moreover, the constitution also made it more difficult for MPs to switch party, thereby reducing their bargaining power. In the past, party members had had the freedom to switch parties without any time constraint, but the 1997 charter stipulated that an eligible candidate had to be a member of a party for a consecutive period of no

less than ninety days. With these measures in place, factionalism and internal conflict became much more manageable for the prime minister.

Also, check and balance mechanisms were hampered during the TRT government. Although the constitution was deliberately designed to create a 'stable politics' by eliminating minor parties and giving more powers to the executive branch, it was equipped with 'independent bodies.' These institutions were intended to provide check and balance structures (McCargo 2002a: 10-11). But these mechanisms were considerably disabled soon after Thaksin consolidated his power. Pasuk and Baker (2009: 173-174) explain that Thaksin 'managed' the constitution by controlling the Senate because the purpose of the Upper House was to check on the executive and to select the final candidates for the independent bodies. In mid-2001, Thaksin began building an effective majority in the Senate. Soon the Senate gradually installed people from Thaksin's network onto the independent bodies. In 2003, for example, five of the seven new appointees of the National Counter Corruption Commission were closely linked with the government (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 175). The Constitutional Court, which had previously been perceived as relatively independent, was also brought into the control of the government after eight out of fifteen judges were installed who had links with Thaksin (ibid: 176).

To disable the check and balance mechanisms further, the TRT expanded its size by merging with other smaller parties. The TRT successively absorbed the Seritham Party (July 2001), the New Aspiration Party (January 2002), and the Chart Pattana Party (September 2004). The merger helped the TRT to control over 300 seats in the parliament (Somchai 2008: 117). Not only this could increase their chances of winning seats in the next elections, but it also strengthened the government in the parliament. Under the 1997 constitution, at least one-fifth of the votes (100 seats) were required for a motion against a minister and two-fifths for a motion against the prime

minister. With this requirement, launching a no confidence debate against the prime minster became an impossible task after the 2005 election, which the TRT managed to win a landslide victory of 375 seats.

This was by no means coincidental. Thaksin made it clear that he targeted an absolute majority in the parliament for a stable government. Connors (2005: 372-373) argues that given the close connection between the government and business, it makes sense that Thaksin wanted to avoid facing a censure motion, which could potentially make him and his government look sleazy.

The Electoral Networks and Populism

Thaksin also controlled the elected elite by exploiting local electoral networks as well as directly luring the voters with pro-poor policy packages. Somchai (2008) has offered a detailed analysis on the electoral successes of the TRT in the Northeast. Despite the emphasis on the Northeast, Somchai's analysis can apply to the TRT's strategies at the national level. He argues that the success of the TRT derived from a combination of both old- and new-style politics.

On the old-style aspect, Somchai contends, the TRT used old tactics such as, vote buying, MP buying, and patronage networks. There were three types of candidates that the TRT was after. First, the party sought to recruit former MPs. They were believed to possess the greatest chances of winning seats. Somchai (2008: 110-111) explains that since the beginning the TRT took advantage of its vast resources to lure these candidates from other parties. This tactic was nothing new in Thai politics. Second, the TRT recruited local politicians who previously had either helped the national politicians to win elections or ran for local seats themselves. Many of them were seen as 'influential figures' (or *phu mi itthipon*) with semi-businessman/semi-gangster status. With new smaller constituencies stipulated in the 1997 constitution,

local politicians had greater chances of winning parliamentary seats (ibid.). Third, many TRT candidates were 'new faces' in politics who were from local business circles or other professions, such as teachers and policemen. Many of them were former canvassers, the wives and relatives of former MPs, and some of them were local politicians who failed to win an election (ibid: 112).

Moreover, the selection of the party candidates was not exactly participatory. Generally, candidates were picked based on their local popularity. Polls were taken regularly to determine the candidates (Somchai 2008: 112). But personal connections also had an important part in the selection process. Some candidates were chosen primarily on the basis of their connections (ibid: 113). Interestingly, Somchai concludes that these three groups of TRT candidates were selected essentially from what appeared be 'traditional political networks' (ibid: 112) and these were not "particularly new or innovative means" (ibid: 113).

The new-style politics, on the other hand, was to win votes by offering a set of policies that interested widely divergent sectors of the voters. These so-called 'populist policies' (or *pracha niyom*), according to Pasuk and Baker, "developed over time in response to social demand; that it has strong affinities with political trends elsewhere in the world owing to a common political economy" (2008: 63). Pasuk and Baker are convinced that Thaksin's populism was in fact his response to increasing political threats. They argued that Thaksin should not be described as populist but rather a modernist reformer. Before competing in the 2001 elections, Thaksin built an image of himself as a reformer whose main mission was to rescue Thailand from the 1997 financial crisis (ibid: 63-64). But once facing assets concealing charge in the Constitutional Court in 2001, Thaksin exploited all the channels that would build a public support, including producing and implementing the pro-poor policies 'with extraordinary speed' (ibid: 66). Similarly, Thaksin took another populist stance after

facing mounting opposition prior to the 2005 elections. He replaced the 'think new, act new' slogan with a more intensely populist one, 'the heart of TRT is the people' (ibid: 67). Then the premier began his 'mobile cabinet meetings' in a number of provinces, where he gave personal promises and allocated budgets based on local needs (ibid: 66-67). The tour attracted considerable media attention.

Pasuk and Baker (2008) argue that Thaksin's populism had three important messages. The first message, *I give to all of you* signified the availability of the government programme to all. Thaksin's healthcare scheme was, for example, available to all Thais, not just particular groups like the previous healthcare programme (ibid: 68). The second message, *I belong to you* suggests how Thaksin tried to make the public see him as 'public property' and that the people felt they had some ownership over him (ibid: 69). Third, Thaksin also conveyed the message, *I am the mechanism which can translate the will of the people into state action*. Thaksin built an image of himself as a strong leader with a can-do attitude who made it all possible for the government to deliver the state policies. At the same time, Thaksin blamed other agencies, including the parliament and NGOs, for obstacles to his work for the people.

Figure 5.1: Distribution of Labour Force, 2004
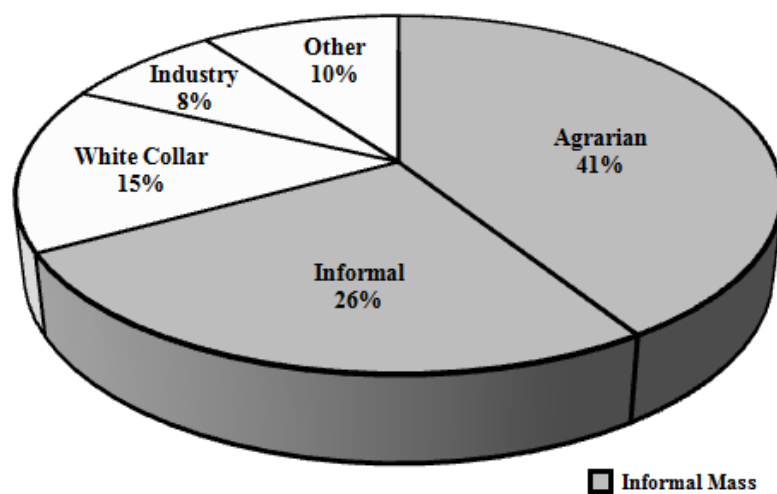
Source: Pasuk and Baker (2008: 71)

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According to Pasuk and Baker (2008), the heart of Thaksin's populism was to win the support from the informal mass (see Figure 5.1 above), which is made up by the agricultural and informal sectors. Together both groups comprise about two-thirds of country's labour force. These sectors are the result of the outward-orientated strategy of development in the last few decades. Despite the size, their aspirations and insecurities had never been sufficiently addressed by the previous governments (ibid: 72-73). With the help of former student activists from the 1970s, the TRT came up with the three-point programme, which included cheap healthcare, agrarian debt relief, and village funds.

Perhaps the most popular populist policies were the healthcare and the village fund schemes. The universal healthcare programme, widely known as *30 baht raksa tukrok* (literally 30 baht cures every sickness), was often cited by Thaksin supporters as his most celebrated legacy. It transformed the healthcare system, which had previously denied millions of poor rural dwellers access to medical treatment. The healthcare scheme covered 47.5 million people (75 percent of the population), and it helped the people save up to 10,634 million baht per year. A survey suggested that 95.7 percent of the respondents were satisfied with the scheme (Anek 2006: 93-94). Also, the government also offered the village fund scheme, which made a loan of one million baht[88] available for each village. The distribution of the loan money was largely decided by the villagers themselves. The scheme offered the loan to about 80,000 villages, and approximately 18 million villagers benefitted from it. Although critics claim that the loans were not used as investments for small businesses (only less than 10 percent were found to be used in this way), the large majority of the borrowers (94 percent) were able to pay back the money (Somchai Jitsuchon: 2006, quoted in Anek 2006: 94-95). The scheme was very popular, so that even Thaksin opponents, including

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[88] Approximately 20,000 GBP.

Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva adopted a similar approach during his premiership.

These state-offered services also have important implications in other aspects. Pitch Pongsawat, for example, argues that the people felt empowered by these policies because their demands were addressed by the government (2004, quoted in Pasuk and Baker 2008: 68). Moreover, in these schemes, every citizen was in "equal and direct relationship with the state" (Pasuk and Baker 2008: 68). The healthcare scheme also gave a new meaning to the term 'citizen'. In the past, those who had no access to the healthcare system had to depend on charity, but the introduction of the scheme suggested that it was the duty of the state to look after its citizens. Access to healthcare for the first time became people's basic right.

Thaksin's populism bypassed all the 'middlemen.' In the past, the voters were attracted mainly by the candidates and their electoral networks. But the pro-poor policies changed all this. Significant numbers of people actually voted for the party and its policies. A former NGI, Phumtham Wechayachai who transformed himself to a key adviser to Thaksin, argued that the main reason behind these populist policies was to respond directly to the people's needs and demands. The 'middlemen,' which included the bureaucrats and the NGIs, were also bypassed as a result of these policies. Phumtham explained:

> What I did in the TRT was building the policy making process. We focused on engaging in direct discussions with the people and NGIs in all areas. Thaksin himself also took part the discussion because I wanted him to understand and be in touch with the problems. So I arranged a series of discussion between the party representatives, NGIs, and academics in all regions. It was a hearing process. The people and NGIs

responded positively because no one had listened to their voices before. After the hearings, the party researchers used this information to find the solution to these problems. [...] We proposed the policies that responded directly to the needs of the people. What we the TRT did was trying to bypass the bureaucracy and go straight to the people. And that was why the all middlemen were little troubled because the TRT policies bypassed them.[89]

These policies coupled with their sophisticated electoral networks enabled the TRT to successfully mount highly effective election campaigns.[90] While control over the bureaucratic elites provided the government with a sense of security, it was control over the parliament that made it possible to create and implement the programme. The TRT became hugely popular. The party was the first to win the landslide victory of 248 seats out of 500, and better yet, it won 375 seats in the 2005 elections. Thaksin's personal popularity also rose from 30 percent in December 2000 prior to the election to 70 percent in May 2001 after the implementation of the programme took place (*The Nation*, 7 January 2002, quoted in Pasuk and Baker 2008: 66). His approval ratings remained consistent over the years. After the landslide election victory of 2005, Thaksin received an approval rate of 77.5 percent in a nationwide survey by ABAC Poll (*Irrawaddy*, 11 July 2005).

During the first five years of the TRT government, Thaksin was able to control the elite groups both inside and outside the parliament. Thaksin repoliticised the military and promoted people in his personal network to key posts. These new arrangements provided the government with stability and additional support in dealing

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[89] Phumtham Wechayachai, Interview, 19 January 2011.

[90] The TRT also utilised other political tools, which help the party win elections as well as popularity. Some of these instruments were quite new in Thai politics, such as regular polling and political marketing (see McCargo and Ukrist 2005).

with grassroots groups. Inside the parliament, the 1997 constitution and new electoral system, along with the TRT's electoral networks and populist policies gave the government considerable control over the elected elites.

b. The Assembly of the Poor and Controlled Elites

The AOP and the TRT government started off on an optimistic footing. After winning the 2001 elections, one of the Octobrists in the TRT personally assured the AOP leaders that their problems would be looked after.[91] On his very first day in office Thaksin visited the AOP's protest camp outside the Government House and had lunch with the protesters. Promises were made and the protest camp was later dissolved (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 144). The government appointed a committee, chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Pongpol Adireksan, and seventeen subcommittees to look into the AOP cases (Naruemon 2006: 188). This was followed by the government granting an opening of the Pak Mun sluice gates for four months for an environmental study (*Matichon*, 18 April 2001).[92] The government also promised that the AOP's problems would be solved within 45 days (*Matichon*, 19 May 2001). All the charges against the villagers who stormed Government House during the Chuan government were also dropped.[93]

Despite all these developments, nothing concrete actually happened. Towards the end of 2001, some villagers ran out of patience and began to put pressure on the government. In October, around a hundred villagers kicked off their 'long march' from Ubon Ratchathani to Bangkok, campaigning for permanently opening the sluice gates. As the march reached Nakhon Ratchasima, secret negotiations between the government

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[91] Kessakorn Silarak, Interview, 19 August 2010.

[92] It took the EGAT two months to comply with the order, but only after EGAT received threat from the government of possibly removing its governor (Naruemon 2006: 171).

[93] The attorney general added the AOP members had no ill intention and the pursuit of the case would not do the public any good (*Matichon*, 20 November 2001).

and AOP leaders resulted in a compromise.[94] The government ordered the sluice gates to remain open for a whole year and the march changed its destiny from the Bangkok to marching around the Northeast for a few more months. Some big-name figures, such as Sulak Sivaraksa, also visited the marchers and gave them public support (*Matichon*, 5 December 2001). In March 2002, the AOP came back to Government House and began their first encampment during the Thaksin government. Around 300 people participated in the demonstration, but later they were joined 1,000 more people. They agreed to call off the protest after the government set up another committee, chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. The protest lasted over two months.

In October, the AOP came back for a second round. The protesters took to the streets in Bangkok immediately after the government endorsed the EGAT proposal, which specified that the hydraulic gates would be open for four months and dam operations would resume for the remaining eight months. The decision was made despite the fierce opposition from the AOP. This also conflicted with a study by the Ubon Ratchathani University (UBU), which was commissioned and funded by the Thaksin government.[95] The government never gave a clear explanation why the option was chosen, but it clearly suggested a compromise. Some blamed the UBU rector, who was not in the UBU research group, for giving this idea to the government (*Khao Sod*, 4 November 2002). In November, the government passed a cabinet resolution based on the EGAT proposals. Around 300 protesters staged a protest camp at Government

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[94] Kessakorn Silarak, Interview, 19 August 2010.

[95] The UBU study, which cost the government 10 million baht, proposed 4 policy options as follow: 1) the gate was to be permanent closed for the whole year (full electricity production), 2) the gate was to remain open for 5 months and closed for 7 months, 3) the gate was to remain open for 8 months and closed for 4 months, and 4) the gate was to be permanently open (no electricity production). The research itself recommended that the sluice gates be open all year round for five more years for further study. The study argues that the dam was useless in terms irrigation and shutting it down would have no significant impact on the electricity supplies in the lower north-eastern region. Moreover, without the dam, it would be better for the local people (over 8,000 families) financially (*Krungthep Thurakij*, 5 November 2002).

House. This was joined many social activists and intellectuals. Despite the media attention, it did not protect them from the use of violence. In early December, the AOP protest camp was raided by unidentified men. Influential figures close to the government were believed to have been behind this illegal act. Both sides played the blame game for a few days, before Thaksin rekindled the protesters' hopes by paying them a visit. Thaksin promised he would look into their case and spent 7,000 baht treating the villagers to snacks and ice cream (*Bangkok Post*, 9 December 2002).

Although the protesters were supported by a number of high profile figures and studies,[96] they were no match for Thaksin. The protesters failed to mobilise a massive protest along the lines of the 1997 demonstrations, which meant less pressure was put on the government. In the beginning, there were three hundred protesters, but the figure went up to 1,000 in December. The figure was much smaller than their 99-day protest where over 25,000 people participated. Also, despite the media coverage, especially in the print media, the villagers were unable to convince the public to take their side, largely due to Thaksin's popularity.[97]

Perhaps, a poll by King Prajadhipok's Institute reflected this reality. The poll surveying public confidence on various institutions showed that the public had trust in the institutions, which were linked with stability, not conflict. The following is the list of institutions included in the survey: the army (94 percent), television (92.3 percent),[98] the prime minister (88.5 percent), the National Human Rights Commission (85.5 percent), ministers (84.7 percent), political parties (71.2 percent), the Anti-Money

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[96] Besides the UBU study, the AOP also backed their case with *Tai Ban* research (research project carried out by the villagers and supervised by professional researchers on local topics) and a study by the World Commission on Dams (see Naruemon 2006: 171-177).

[97] Actually, the Thaksin's approval ratings in opinion polls went down from 68.77 percent in February (*Phujadkarn Raiwan*, 26 February 2002) to 40.90 percent (*Matichon*, 28 October 2002), but when compared with the NGOs and street protesters, Thaksin was still far more popular.

[98] Generally, television is more controlled than the printed media in Thailand.

Laundering Office, the police (63.7 percent), newspapers (59.2 percent), and NGOs (57.4 percent) (*Thai Post*, 2 November 2002). The first five, excluding the National Human Rights Commission,[99] were associated with stability and a nationalist discourse, while rest were linked with conflict, especially NGOs. Since NGIs worked closely with the protesting villagers, this might reflect how the public perceived the AOP as well.

In mid-December, the government came up with a new tactic. Thaksin invited the villagers to a televised meeting broadcast on Channel 11. No NGO advisers were allowed to take part of the negotiation; only Thaksin and the villagers. In Thaksin's view, it was between the leader and its people, no middle men. To add more drama to the event, before the scheduled meeting the AOP protest camp at Pak Mun Dam was burnt down by dozens of masked men.[100] The incident expectedly hit the media headlines. The AOP blamed the government for failing to ensure the rule of law and protect the protesters. The government, on the other hand, raised some suspicions suggesting that the arson might be self-inflicted.

Interestingly, it was the Octobrists who played the key role in this blame game. Phumtham, for example, hinted that the timing of the incident was suspicious. He also added that the investigation of the raid had not progressed because there was not much evidence provided by the AOP members, implying that they had withheld some information. He added that "the incident was an intention to impede the dialogue, set for 20 December, between the prime minister and the villagers from taking place" (*Krungthep Thurakij*, 17 December 2002). Phumtham's statement was easily interpreted as an attempt to blame the activists for the arson because the government

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[99] The National Human Rights Commission was not invested with powers and had limited role in promoting human rights through reports and fieldwork. It largely avoided direct confrontation and preferred cooperative approach.

[100] The arsonists were later identified as local people who had worked with EGAT and had conflict with the anti-Pak Mun Dam group. The head of the group said that he was unhappy with the villagers and their protest against the cabinet resolution (*Krungthep Thurakij*, 17 December 2002).

often branded the NGIs as 'the middle men,' who tried to ruin the harmonious relationship between the leader and the people. Ironically, Phumtham himself was a former NGI.

This incident, coupled with the Bangkok raid, appeared to gain the AOP some media coverage and public sympathy, but it was still insufficient to cope with the government. The televised meeting took place as scheduled, and it lasted five hours. The villagers appeared to be nervous but they presented their cases adequately (*Bangkok Post*, 21 December 2002). On several occasions, Thaksin stressed that he was not to be pressured and he had to make decision based on 'the interests of the majority.' He once again delayed making the decision and claimed that he would have see the dam site himself. On December 24, Thaksin flew to the dam site along with two villager representatives. He insisted again that he had to take the interests of the 'majority' into account (*Khao Sod*, 25 December 2002).

Although Thaksin often asserted his neutrality, it was clear that he intended to side with EGAT. His support for the AOP at the beginning of his term was a ploy to win sympathy and support from the public over his asset-concealment case with the Constitutional Court (Simpson 2005: 9), which had since ended. While the AOP mobilised around the UBU study, Thaksin countered with some EGAT-sponsored research, which was conducted by the Institute of Science and Technology of Thailand (RISTT). But since the EGAT paid for the RISTT study, its academic objectivity was called into question. Aware of this weakness, Thaksin then ordered the National Statistical Office (NSO) to conduct a 3-day survey on 3,750 respondents from three districts in Ubon Ratchathani (*Khao Sod*, 21 January 2003). He claimed the UBU research only studied those who were impacted by the dam, but it did not include those who lived in the Pak Mun basin area. And to make this about 'interest of the majority,'

the survey was designed to include as many villages from the three districts as possible (ibid.). These people, according to Thaksin, were supposed to represent the majority.

However, critics slammed this survey's sampling method and the time constraints used when conducting it (*Khao Sod*, 20 January 2003). They questioned why the survey selected respondents who lived over 100 kilometres away from the site (*Khao Sod*, 14 January 2003). One researcher was also perplexed with the fact that the majority of the respondents (75 percent) were farmers, while the most impacted population, that of fisherfolk, made up only 20 percent of the respondents (*Khao Sod*, 21 January 2003). Naruemon points out that the selection of the respondents who were not affected by the dam project raised the question of stakeholder participation (2006: 139). Also, the NSO had only less than a week to prepare the questions and only three days to carry out the survey. There was no open debate where both sides were allowed to present their cases. Many respondents were less than prepared to voice their opinion.

Unsurprisingly, the survey results favoured the government. Most respondents (24 percent) supported keeping the gate open for four months and second group (19 percent) selected the option that read 'as the government saw fit' (Foran 2003, quoted in Naruemon 2006: 159). The villagers, however, did not back down. The protest continued, but not for long. The government finally gave the green light for a more drastic measure. In the morning of January 29, the Bangkok governor, Samak Sundaravej, citing traffic and public health laws, personally directed the demolition of the protest camp. Over 1,000 municipal police officers (*thesakit*) from all fifty Bangkok districts were deployed to knock down the camp. The protesters—mostly elders and children—were left with shocked and distressed. The officers met no resistance from the villagers, and the protesters had once again left home empty-handed (*Khao Sod*, 30 January 2003).

Later in 2003, during a PKY meeting, the AOP leaders admitted their recently weakened organisation and agreed that more work had to be done at the local level (Fieldnotes, 25 September 2010). In the next two years, most activities took place in local communities, and the AOP's political relevance has since then become gradually decreased. In March 2005, around 1,000 protesters organised a two-day demonstration shortly after the TRT won a landslide election victory (*Bangkok Post*, 16 March 2005). The protest attracted some media attention partially because of the fact that it was led by Yai Hai and received a visit by the opposition leader, Abhisit Vejjajiva (*The Nation*, 17 March 2005).

However, the protest was hardly a success. The collective action put little pressure on the highly popular TRT government. Thaksin himself paid a little attention to the protesters as he spent time with his family on a five-day vacation in Japan (*Matichon*, 18 March 2005). This indicated yet another clear sign of the AOP's decline since Thaksin became the prime minister. Suriyasai Katasila, a former adviser to the AOP, who later became the PAD spokesman, recalled his view of the AOP during the anti-Thaksin campaign in 2006. When I asked Suriyasai whether the PAD leaders tried to contact the AOP to join the anti-Thaksin campaign, he replied, "The PAD was not interested in contacting the AOP, speaking plainly. Politically, they think [the AOP] had no value. It is as simple as that. It lost its role. It declined. It has already gone."[101]

c. The Assembly of the Poor and Elite Divisions

Overall, the AOP struggled to run a successful campaign during the TRT government. The elite divisions at the beginning of the Thaksin government gave the villagers the incentives to mobilise. The AOP had long struggled with the previous government led by the DP. The pending asset concealment case in the Constitutional Court provided

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[101] Suriyasai Katasila, Interview, 28 July 2010.

the AOP more bargaining power. However, after Thaksin consolidated his powers and successfully controlled the elite groups both inside and outside the parliament, the fate of the grassroots protesters took an opposite turn. Externally, the AOP failed to persuade the public to support their cause. This failure arose despite a great deal of publicity and public attention they received. Internally, the AOP were significantly weakened during the TRT government. Many local groups were co-opted and left the movement. Not only was the protest smaller in size, the sense of enthusiasm also noticeably diminished. A villager-turned-NGI, Kessakorn Silarak recalled the difficult experience in protesting the Thaksin government.

> The problem was that there was no collective sentiment [...] if there was a collective sentiment and we came as two thousand, all two thousand would participate [the activities]. On the other hand, if we came as two thousand but only two hundred participated, we [the leaders] needed to be worried. Most people just stood still, they only followed their leaders' orders.[102]

In the past, it was easy for the AOP leaders to portray an image of evil, greedy politicians who wanted to steal local resources for their own interests. But during the anti-Thaksin protests, the leaders found it more difficult to gain support for their course. The AOP advisers, for example, who had worked with the villagers for years, tried unsuccessfully to convince the villagers to go against the premier during the anti-Thaksin protests. Most AOP members supported the AOP on key issues, but only a few felt that the government needed to be changed.

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[102] Kessakorn Silarak, Interview, 19 August 2010.

The NGIs also faced a significant setback during the TRT government. The government quite successfully tarnished the NGIs' image. Thaksin portrayed the activists as '*naina kha khwamjon*' (literally, poverty-selling agents) who stood between the benevolent government and its people (*Phujadkarn Raiwan*, 5 April 2001). Thaksin also publicly denounced the NGIs as foreign agents who benefitted from the poor as he suggested "Some of them want to make their presence felt. They record their rallies on video and send the tapes overseas to get financial support" (*The Nation*, 31 July 2002, quoted in Pasuk and Baker 2009: 147). Thaksin labelled the workers as a 'third hand' who were no longer needed in Thai political life (Pasuk and Baker 2008: 69; 2009: 144-149). It was no coincidence that the overwhelming majority of NGIs later supported the anti-Thaksin campaign. According to Prapon Singkaew, around 70 percent of his fellow NGIs joined the anti-Thaksin movement. He added it was quite a trend at the time for NGIs to oppose Thaksin.[103]

The country began to be explicitly politically divided in late 2005. This cleavage also emerged among the ruling groups. The divisions continued even after the 2006 coup, which was supposed to restore order and stability. The coup makers installed an interim government and appointed Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA) to write a new constitution. Ploy correctly sums up the primary goal of the CDA: "rather than looking at all possible institutional options and calculating their probable consequences, the CDA of 2007 chose to start with the 1997 constitution and merely introduce some changes thought to be necessary to prevent another Thaksin from occurring" (2010: 6). To achieve this, the new charter was designed to restore the pre-1997-constitution period where the elected elites were fragmented and weak.

Before the constitutional amendment in 2011, the new electoral system provided that the MPs came from a combination of multi-member constituencies (400

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[103] Prapon Singkaew, Interview, 27 December 2010.

seats) and party list (80 seats). The multi-seat constituency system allowed voters to choose more than one party, which tended to increase the chances of candidates from minor parties to win seats. Moreover, unlike the party list in the previous constitution, the new party list system had no 5 percent threshold and instead of one big constituency, the country was divided into eight constituencies. The removal of the threshold would allow more minor parties to gain seats, while the greater number of constituencies would reduce the influence of the voters from the North and Northeast (who were most likely to vote for pro-Thaksin party). The number of voters from these two regions makes up more than half of the total number of voters in the country. Under the new constitution, the executive was also deliberately undermined. For example, it is easier now for the opposition to file for a no confidence motion against the government. It takes only one-fifth of MPs(previously two-fifths) to initiate such a debate against the prime minister and one-sixth (previously one-fifth) for individual ministers (Dressel 2009: 309).

Perhaps, the most damaging is the 'judicialisation' of the politics, which may be defined as the transfer of the power from parliament to judicial and independent bodies that have limited accountability (Dressel 2009: 309). The judges as part of the unelected elites have been given a new controversial role to counterweight with elected leaders. The judges along with the heads of independent bodies, for examples, have the power to appoint half of the senate, whose primary duty is in turn check and balance the elected elites and the government. To polarise the politics further, the judges have also played a more offensive game. So far, the courts have dissolved four major parties (two pro-Thaksin), removed two pro-Thaksin prime ministers, and temporarily barred no fewer than two hundred politicians from politics (most were from pro-Thaksin parties). This assault on representative democracy has resulted in deep political divisions in the ruling groups and the rest of the people alike.

However, the unstable polity and elite divisions did not provide the AOP with political opportunities as many hoped. Internally, the AOP had been significantly weakened since the Thaksin period. The mobilising capacity of the movement was greatly reduced. The number of demonstrators has been gradually reduced since the 1997 protests from tens of thousands to no more than two thousands. And externally, as the political situation became intensified, the less radical movements such as the AOP with limited political ambitions became increasingly irrelevant. As this will be explored in the next section, the movement lost the public and media attention it once enjoyed. With limited mass mobilisation and less radical strategies, when compared with the coloured movements, the AOP was no longer a media magnet. This lack of media access has become a key obstacle that prevented the movement from running a successful political campaign from late 2005 onwards.

C. Media Access

During an interview Pipop Thongchai, one of the five core PAD leaders and a leading NGI, made some interesting points about the media and social movements. At one point he said:

> Sonthi Limthongkul had an advantage over NGIs only because he owned the media. If the NGIs had the media like he did, they would also have the power. We could find a good public speaker like Sonthi. We could find a person with courage like Sonthi. But the villagers, the NGIs, and the academics did not own the media. Sonthi had this strength and Thaksin underestimated this.[104]

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[104] Pipop Thongchai, Interview, 30 July 2010.

Pipop may have played down the role of Sonthi Limthongkul in the anti-Thaksin movement, but he certainly raised an important point. Access to the media is crucial for movement mobilisation, and Thailand is no exception.

Studies show that media access is one of the most important factors that determine the development and mobilisation of social movements. As non-institutional actors, Gamson and Wolfsfeld argue, the movements are dependent on the media for three main purposes. First, movement mobilisation depends on public discourses, and protesters need the media to convey their messages to create these discourses. Second, the media can be used to validate the movement's status and collective actions. And third, the movements need the media to expand the scale of the conflict. A broadened audience can be transformed into greater support if the media highlights positive aspects of the movements and their activities. The media as a result can generate public sympathy for the movements as well as turn mere bystanders into movement activists (1993: 116). Moreover, Koopmans (2004a) emphasises the importance of the mass media by arguing that both the challengers and authorities often no longer engage in direct, physical confrontation in concrete locations, but instead they publically interact in an indirect, mediated manner via the media. The discursive opportunities of the movement are largely determined through this process.

Successful social movements in most societies depend on gaining the access to media. In democracies, studies show that the media coverage contributes to the rise in membership of environmental organisations. Similar pattern occurs with the Dutch environmental organisations and the Friends of the Earth (Vliegenthart et al. 2005; Smith 1999, quoted in Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2012: 392). Access to the media is even more crucial in dictatorial regimes. By using qualitative comparative analysis, Osa and Corduneanu-Huci (2003) conclude that media access along with social networking are two key factors that can sufficiently produce mobilisation in non-democratic

countries. In a developing democracy like Thailand, the media also has a big role in influencing the success of people's movements. Prapas and Uchane (2006) argue that because of the lack of institutional channels, people's movements, such as the AOP, have to rely on extra-parliamentary politics as their main strategy, and this largely depends on the media coverage.

As part of the POS, media has both structural and dynamic elements. The stable aspects of the media include ownership, the pattern of media consumption and the relationship between the media and the state (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 287). Media bias is also structural. During the 1970s, studies show that the American media portrayed negative image of protests. The bias is embedded in the structure of media organisations (Koopsmans 2004a: 369). Similarly, one can say that the mainstream Thai media is not particularly fond of grassroots activism and street protests. But grassroots activism can occasionally gain significant space in the media, especially the print media. Gamson and Meyer calls this phenomenon *double role*. They explain it as follows:

> On one hand, the media plays a central role in the construction of meaning and the reproduction of culture. Journalists choose a story line in reporting events and commentators of various sorts develop arguments and images that support particular frames. On the other hand, the media are also a site or arena in which symbolic contests are carried out among competing sponsors of meaning, including movements (1996: 287).

In other words, the Thai media has an essential function in reproducing the Thainess discourse which often depicts the villagers as passive and apolitical people and so, their political activism can only occur under an influence of third party for their political or

economic interests. But the media also allows open competition for discursive space for various political groups, including people's movements. Unlike the cultural discourse, this open competition is more dynamic and forms a volatile aspect of the POS.

But how should the limited media space be distributed? The answer to this question lies in the concept of news values. According to Koopmans, news values structure how the journalists and editors assign newsworthiness to certain events. Every day hundreds of events occur but only a few are selected for media coverage based on certain newsworthiness factors, which include geographical proximity, the status of the speaker, the seriousness of conflict, the relevance of an issue, the potential dramatisation, and the novelty of a story (2004a: 373).

Generally, when the government of the day was not unified and the movement was strong, the AOP would be regarded as a major social force. And because of that, the protesters were given considerable media attention. However, as the government grew stronger and the movement became weaker, the media started to look elsewhere for their headlines. As the pro- and anti-Thaksin polarisation emerged, the AOP became significantly weakened, while the colour-coded movements rapidly became stronger, so these groups were seen as the agents of change instead. The media as a result turned their attention away from the villagers to the colour-coded groups. However, the AOP could occasionally gain media coverage when their activities were somehow linked to the colour-coded politics.

a. The Assembly of the Poor and Media Access: Historical Background

In the past, the AOP protesters had proven to be no amateurs when it came to gaining attention from the media. The protesters employed a variety of activities, ranking from prolonged encampment, sit-ins, staging plays, engaging in symbolic activities, and

occupying official buildings. Rungrawee argues the protesters deliberately and actively made their problems newsworthy to attract the media attention. She adds that:

> As a potent venue of public communication the media has enabled the AOP to push forward its agenda, allowing it to create a nationwide public conversation about the plight of Thailand's rural villagers, to rally support from other civic groups and media-consuming citizens, and to enhance the possibility for dialogue and negotiation with the government (2004: 542).

During the 99-day protest in 1997, the protesters successfully created an unprecedented amount of media coverage and gained tremendous bargaining power vis-à-vis the government as a result. Baker writes, "The protest itself came under siege by the media" (2000: 20). Prapas contends that during the historical protest, the AOP was given a large amount of media space in both electronic and printed media. But the movement gained particularly favourable coverage from the printed media due to its greater independence. During the 1997 campaign, the protesters and their demands were, for example, reported 128 times in newspapers. Most of these reports detailed positive aspects of the movement, such as its demands, the protesters' backgrounds and their daily life in the protest camp (1998: 131-135). Such coverage significantly helped the protesters to pressure the government, which in turn resulted in historic concessions for its members.

However, the fate of the movement changed its course after the 1997 economic crisis. The crisis radically changed public sentiment. Following this, the news reporting switched its focus from the dramas of street protests to the stability of parliamentary politics. Some media depicted the AOP as troublemakers, and they were afraid that the protests would give a negative image to the foreign investors amidst the financial crisis

when foreign investments were extremely needed (Rungrawee 2004: 545; Prapas 1998: 136). The crisis also brought about the nationalist sentiment, and the protesting was portrayed as un-Thai activity (Prapas and Uchane 2006: 23-27). The media itself also faced a difficult period. Media space for serious debate on social and environmental issues was sharply reduced. Reporters, who had built up sympathy from working with the movement, were either laid off or promoted to desk jobs (ibid: 23-27). Responding to this limitation, the AOP adopted a new strategy, called *dao krajai* (scattered-stars). The new approach was a failure. To summarise this, Rungrawee writes:

> Thirteen months of scattered-star actions yielded nothing of political worth [...] The AOP protests received scant publicity and the Chuan government ignored them completely. In the absence of media attention the AOP found it difficult to make its presence felt. As one media scholar put it, 'a demonstration with no media coverage is a non-event'
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> (2004: 546).

Without the drama and geographical advantage of being in Bangkok., the protests failed attract media attention.

b. The Assembly of the Poor and Media Access under the Thaksin Government and afterwards

The situation temporarily improved during the Thaksin government. At the beginning of his term, the new prime minster showed sympathy towards the villagers' problems. But after Thaksin gained popularity and consolidated his powers, the government became increasingly hostile to grassroots activism, and the media coverage of the movement began to change. It should also be noted that the noticeable decrease in the media coverage was also due to the AOP's change of strategy. The villagers believed that the government was too strong, which made it very difficult to mobilise, so they

decided to emphasise on working in their communities and expand their networks (Fieldnotes, 25 September 2010).

Not all media outlets gave the same coverage to the AOP. During this period, most of the news reports on the AOP come from four major sources, *Matichon*, *Khao Sod*, *Thai Post* and *Phujadkarn Raiwan*. Personal connections with these newspapers played a part for these reports. [105] NGIs and academics particularly had close connections with the media. [106] Equally important, as McCargo pointed out the Thai media was far from neutral (2000: 21): it was clear that the two newspapers from the Matichon Group, *Matichon* and *Khao Sod* supported the AOP campaign. During the Thaksin government, both dailies also took a harsh stance against the government on many issues. Two bestselling newspapers, *Thai Rath* and *Daily News*, on the other hand, covered the AOP activities only when confrontations were involved. These different political positions of the media organisations were partially caused by the sizes of the subscription. According to Aimpong Boonyanupongsa, the assistant chief reporter of *Khao Sod*, old newspapers with large numbers of loyal readers like *Thai Rath* and *Daily News* were more likely to adopt a conservative stance and run stories from the side of the authorities. Newer newspapers, in contrast, were more willing to take the risk and find new issues, including grassroots politics. [107]

Similarly, older reporters may be less likely to support the protesters. According to Baramee Chairat, when one senior reporter saw the AOP protesters, she said to her fellow reporters, "Go take a look. What do those bastards want?" (*pai du si puak hia ni ma tham arai*). She also told other younger reporters that whoever did the report on the

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[105] Aimpong Boonyanupongsa, Interview, 4 January 2011.

[106] Sometimes, this personal connection can help the activists to gain special access in the media. In a personal interview, Baramee Chairat told me that he even saw one of movement advisers writing a news report for the newspaper himself. Interestingly, the report also quoted the writer as a news source (Baramee Chairat, Interview, 22 December 2010).

[107] Aimpong Boonyanupongsa, Interview, 4 January 2011.

protesters would not get to share the news from her. It is worth noted, according to McCargo (2000: 57-58), that sharing news, notes, and tape-recordings is a common practice among Thai reporters. Positive attitudes towards the movement also came from experiences of newer journalists. Younger reporters, such as those from ITV (established in 1996), had a close connection with the movement for years. They often covered positive aspects of the villagers. Prapas and Uchane (2006: 24) observe that many of these younger reporters were former student activists who had previously worked with grassroots groups, such as anti-Nam Chon Dam, since the late 1980s, so they held positive opinion towards grassroots politics.

In terms of content, Prapas and Uchane 2006: 34) argue that during the Thaksin government, news reports on the AOP emphasised dramatising the conflicts between the protesters and the government. The news reports gave limited attention on the AOP demands or the background of their problems. This limitation worked against the movement, and it finally allowed the government to use aggressive measures on movement. The protest ended after the camp was demolished and villagers were forced to go home at the end of January 2003. Over the next two years, news of the AOP only occasionally appeared in the papers.

After 2005, the elite groups were increasingly divided, which normally would leave political space for grassroots mobilisation. But this did not happen for the AOP. Despite the elite cleavage, the AOP still found itself unable to mobilise a successful political campaign. It is my argument that the political polarisation and colour-coded movements took most of the media space from the AOP. As one can see from Graph 5.1 (below) that the number of news reports about the AOP was noticeably higher during the Thaksin than that during the polarised period. This is especially true in the period between February 2001 and February 2003. All the dramas and confrontation

between the two parties kept the media alert, from the surprise luncheon in the first day of premiership to the protest camp being demolished as the final showdown.

There are several reasons why the AOP was denied media access. First, as mentioned in Chapter II, the movement suffered from a significantly weakened mobilising structure. The resources were much more restricted than in the past, and the size or the movement was reduced due because many had their cases solved and left the movement for good. The political polarisation also divided the movement. Many NGIs, who had personal contacts with the media, also left the AOP, notably the Friends of the People group. Without them, it became much more difficult to gain media access.[108] Second, since the movement's primary goal was to solve its members' problems, because there were so many issues and each case involved legal complications, it was always difficult to explain all the details to the public. Unfortunately, most news readers were usually not interested in the details of this kind of conflict unless it received a great deal of public attention.[109] The longer the movement campaigned the more difficult it was for the movement to explain why their problems remained unsolved. Many simply got tired of the unsolved stories. It was also easier for the government to attack the villagers partially because the public tended to believe the authorities more than the poor. Stories from the authorities' perspective usually received more attention from the media.

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[108] Baramee Chairat, Interview, 22 December 2010.

[109] Aimpong Boonyanupongsa, Interview, 4 January 2011.

Graph 5.1: Number of News Reports Appearing in Newspapers per Four Months[†]
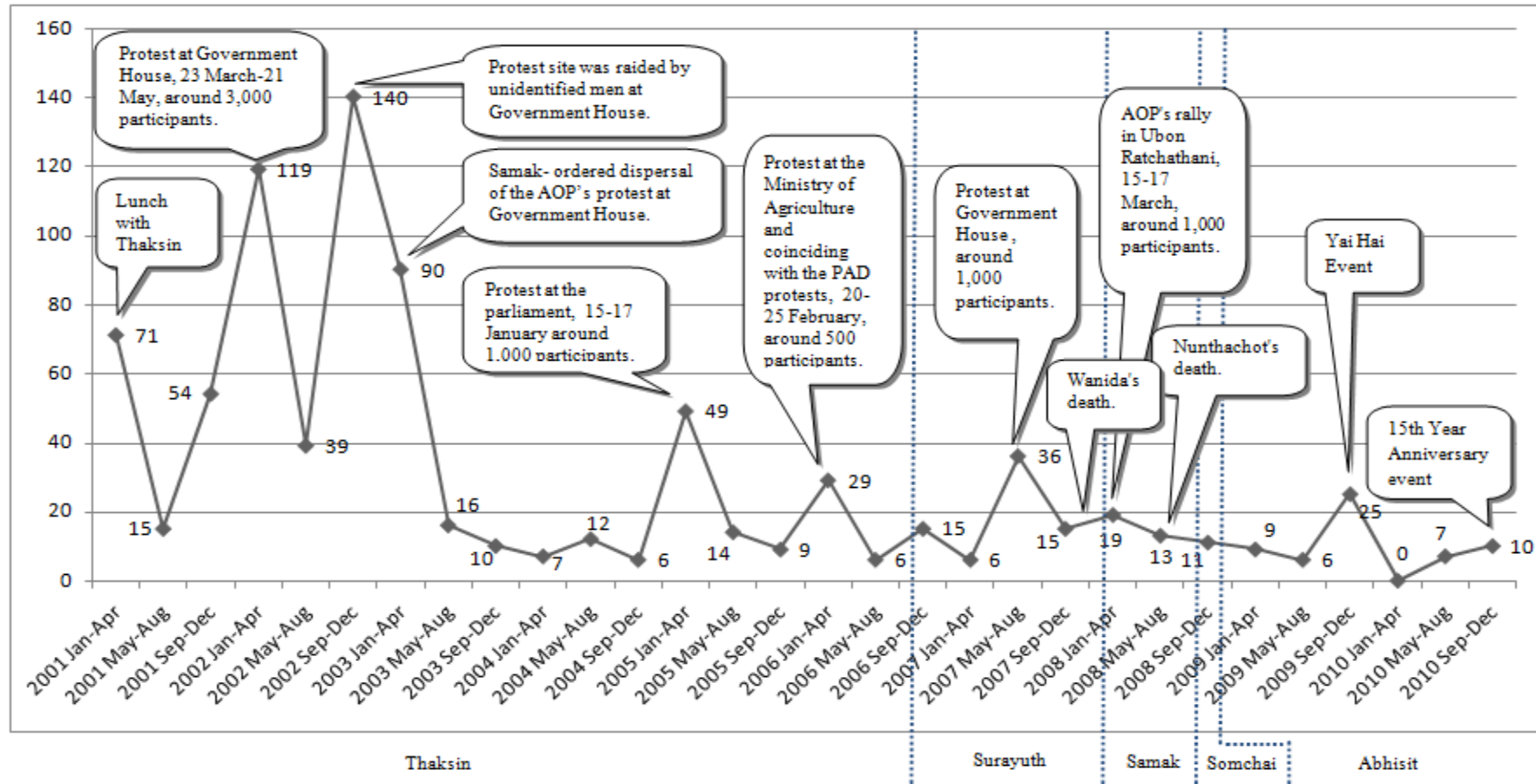
Source: Matichon news clipping online database, between January 2000 and December 2010

[†] See full timeline in Appendix C.

Third, since 2006, the public perception of street politics considerably worsened. The use of radical tactics, including violent means, by the colour-coded movements made it more difficult for the AOP to gain public sympathy. Many people could not differentiate the people's groups from the colour-coded movements. Even the media grew more cynical towards protests as they believed that the strategy of taking to the streets was being used by politicians for their own ends.[110] Moreover, given the frequency of the mass protests in recent years, many people were fed up with the extra-parliamentary politics. As a result, street protests without mass participation or political significance would often simply be disregarded by the media. Fourth, the concept of newsworthiness after late 2005 became inexorably linked with political polarisation. After the formation of the PAD, political developments grew more rapid and intensive. These stories simply kept the news desk fully occupied. And as previously mentioned, the news values are also connected with other factors, such as the actors, the possible dramatisation, and the confrontation. The post 2005 political polarisation had all of these factors. These colour-coded groups had strong connection with the elite groups, and so they could employ more radical strategies when compared with the AOP. With limited radicalism and political goals, AOP's capability to produce *newsworthy* events was much less than that of these political movements, which had vast resources and elite support.

c. Political Polarisation and Media Access

Since late 2005 the *krasae kanmaung* (the political current) or *krasae khao* (direction of the news) (see McCargo 2000: 76) leaned towards the polarised national politics, and political events with no connection with polarisation were consequently seen as irrelevant, thereby being given limited or no media attention. The chronological

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[110] ibid.

account of the AOP during this period shows how the media attention on the AOP was linked with the polarisation.

After the 2005 elections, which saw the biggest electoral victory in Thai history, many began to see the emergence of the political cleavage. Thaksin's political domination was seen as a clear threat to old elites. The polarisation began in late 2005 when groups of conservative royalists, notably the group led Sonthi Limthongkul known as *mob meuangthai raisapda* (literally, Thailand Weekly mob), began their anti-Thaksin campaigns. Sonthi's campaign was a direct response to the cancellation of his show in Channel 9, which he used to fiercely criticised Thaksin. He blamed Thaksin for the cancellation. The anti-Thaksin groups accused Thaksin of abuse of power, conflict of interests, and violation of royal powers. But it was not until the sale of the Shinawatra family's share of the telecommunications giant Shin Corporation to the Singaporean Temasek Holdings in late January 2006 that the political divisions became critical. Thaksin's opponents criticised the complex transaction as an attempt to avoid taxes and to sell a national asset to foreigners (see Pasuk and Baker 2009: Chapter 9). On February 9, anti-Thaksin groups formed the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which consisted of a variety of ideological and interest groups, ranking from ultra-royalists, conservatives, liberals, leftists, anti-privatisation activists, labour unionists, human rights campaigners, and NGIs (see Pye and Schaffar 2006; Kasian 2006). In February, the PAD staged a series of protest against the government and thousands of people joined the protests. From that point onwards, stories about the conflict between anti-Thaksin groups and the government dominated the media.

As for the AOP, after the demolition of the protest camp in 2003, the movement was largely left out of the media spotlights. But in February 2006, the AOP hit the headlines again. Around five hundreds of protesters seized the Ministry of Agriculture

and Cooperative building and demanded that their grievances be solved. The occupation appeared in all major newspapers including *Thai Rath* and *Daily News*.

But this attention from the media and government was not from the seizure alone. Many suspected that the occupation was part of the anti-Thaksin campaign. It took place only three days before the scheduled mass protest by the PAD. This speculation was not entirely far-fetched, given that many AOP advisers publically supported the anti-Thaksin groups. Furthermore, this occupation was not planned in advance.

Before the seizure, the AOP had camped at the Royal Plaza for three days demanding the government to look into their cases, but it yielded nothing. They then decided it was time to take a more drastic action—occupying the state building.[111] It worked; the move caught the media and government by surprise. Key ministers, including Sudarat Keyuraphan, rushed to negotiate with the protesters. According to Baramee, before both parties started the negotiation, Sudarat approached him and asked him privately if this had anything to do with the anti-Thaksin campaign.[112] The government also ordered 800 police officers to be prepared for to disperse the protestors. Sudarat suggested to the press that there might be someone behind the decision to seize the ministry. She also urged the protesters not to join upcoming anti-government rally (*Bangkok Post*, 24 February 2006). Unfortunately for the villagers, their collective action hit another dead end; later that day Thaksin dissolved the parliament. Without mounting anti-government campaign, the AOP occupation was less likely to gain this level of media coverage from all the papers.

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[111] Baramee Chairat, Interview, 22 December 2010.

[112] ibid.

On 19th September, the military staged a military coup and installed an interim government. The media space of the AOP was restricted further during this period. In order to suppress the political activities of the pro-Thaksin groups, the government declared martial law on more than thirty provinces—most of which were in the North and Northeast where the AOP's most active groups resided. Intimidation measures, such as home visits by military personnel, were used to contain grassroots activism.

However, it did not stop the movement from staging a protest in Bangkok. The villagers claimed that their protest had nothing to do with the political conflict. Around thousand AOP members participated in the protest demanding the government to take action on the Pak Mun Dam. The EGAT violated the 2004 cabinet resolution to open the sluice gates during the rainy season by delaying the opening for almost one month late (*Bangkok Post*, 25 May 2007). The media ran news on the AOP once again. But most news reports emphasised on the how the protest was seen as a security concern because the timing coincided with the with upcoming Constitutional Tribunal's verdict on the dissolution of TRT and the DP. The papers also mentioned about hundreds of protesters were stopped by the military officers on their way to Bangkok. Once again, the AOP's public visibility in the media was linked with the colour-coded conflict. Without such a link, their story would simply be ignored by the media.

After the 2007 electoral victory of a pro-Thaksin party (the People's Power Party, PPP), the political conflict rapidly worsened. The first prime minister for the PPP-led government was the ultra-conservative Samak Sundaravej, who made it clear that he wanted to bring exile former Thaksin Shinawatra home and amend the 2007 constitution. It only took a few months before the anti-Thaksin groups regrouped and began their protests in May 2008. Most of them dressed in yellow (the colour of the King's birth date, Monday according to the Thai colour code). The PAD then become a full-blown yellow-shirt movement, which mainly aimed to protect the monarchy.

The new focus on the monarchy effectively alienated the pro-democracy groups as well as radicalised movement. To add more pressure on the government, the PAD took a more extreme turn in August 2008, including seizing the NBT (the state TV station), Government House, and two international airports (see McCargo 2009). In September, Samak was pressured to resign from the post following the Constitutional Court decision to disqualify him from the premiership. Thaksin's brother-in-law, Somchai Wongsawat was named as the next prime minster. He only stayed in power for three more months. The Constitutional Court once again intervened. With an unusually rapid procedure, the court ruled against the pro-Thaksin party, and its coalition parties. The parties were disbanded (Ockey 2009; 327).

The AOP decided not to mobilise during these pro-Thaksin governments. The AOP correctly predicted that the governments would not last. They did not want waste their limited resources on the failing governments. But more importantly, as the political situation intensified, the villagers were afraid to get caught in the middle of the violent confrontation [113] One of the villagers expressed his concern that any mobilisation, if not carefully carried out, might be interpreted as taking sides, and could damage their non-political stance (Fieldnotes, 12 October 2010). The most news reports on the AOP during these two governments were about the deaths of its two prominent NGO leaders, Wanida Tantiwittayapitak and Nantachote Chairat in December 2007 and May 2008 respectively. Newspapers particularly covered the story of Wanida's premature death from cancer, and the nature march (*thamma yatra*) in March to honouring her dedication to the poor. But the stories mostly recognised her life's work as an individual, not as part of the AOP. Many news reports on the event did not mention a single word on the AOP.

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[113] Somkiat Phonphai, Interview, 25 December 2010.

In December 2008, with help from the courts and the military, the tables were now turned. After the collapse of the Somchai government, the PPP coalition partners were pressured by the military to switch side from Thaksin to palace-endorsed Abhisit.[114] Despite having lost the 2007 election, Abhisit was chosen by parliament to become the next prime minister. The new government was widely dubbed as *rattaban jak kai thaharn* (literally, the government from the army barracks) which suggested its lack of democratic legitimacy.

The shift of the political power through 'special means' outraged the pro-Thaksin groups. Now dressed in red, the pro-Thaksin groups kicked off their protests against the new government almost immediately. In March 2009, the red shirts mobilised a massive protest and surrounded Government House. In April, the protests expanded to several locations in Bangkok and Pattaya (the site of the Fourth East Asia Summit). The government employed armed troops and dispersed the protesters. Dubbed as 'Bloody Songkran,'[115] violent clashes were reported in the mainstream media and the disturbing images clouded the supposedly joyful occasion. Two civilians from neighbourhood watch group were killed in a clash with the red shirts, and at least 123 people were injured during the ensuing chaos (Human Rights Watch Report 2011: 40-41).

Although the Abhisit government survived the challenge, the use of military force added nothing to improve its diminishing legitimacy and popularity, especially among the rural population. In some way, the red shirts also represented the rural population, and so the Abhisit versus red shirts conflict created an image of the premier

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[114] Chief royal adviser General Prem Tinsulanonda, who usually acted on behalf of the palace, publically supported Abhisit as he said "Thailand is lucky to have Abhisit as PM. I am confident that he will solve the country's problems with support from all Thais. I am glad that Abhisit is the prime minister and I think Thais also feel the same" (*Manager Online*, 4 January 2009).

[115] Songkran is a Thai water festival, and it is regarded as the traditional Thai new year day. The celebration generally takes place between 13 and 15 April.

versus the rural people. That was not something Abhisit wanted at the time of crisis. He was well aware that he needed some sort a quick fix for improving this bad image.

Meanwhile, some AOP leaders saw this as an opportunity to gain more bargaining power over the government, so they offered Abhisit a media frenzy event that would help to solve this problem.[116] They proposed a photo opportunity with an iconic social injustice fighter, Hai Khanjanta. The 85 year-old grandma, or better known as Yai Hai, had continuously fought for the land she unjustly lost to a state project over thirty years ago. She became a national sensation overnight after she and her family took the matter into their own hands and tried to break the reservoir that flooded her land in April 2004. In the days that followed, she also appeared on front page of all major newspapers and in many national television programmes. Within a matter of months, Thaksin, the prime minister at the time, solved her thirty-plus-year-old problem and returned the land to her (*Prachatai*, 10 October 2009).

But she never received any compensation over the years until five years later. After a brief negotiation with the AOP,[117] the Abhisit government passed a cabinet resolution to pay 4.9 million baht to Yai Hai's family and her neighbours for their losses over the years on 22 September (*Thai Post*, 23 September 2009). After some AOP leaders learned about the compensation, they immediately called a press release urging Abhisit to come to Ubon Ratchathani and hand the money to Yai Hai in person (*Naew Na*, 24 September 2009). Despite his busy schedule, Abhisit immediately

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[116] I personally talked to one of the villager leaders, who played a crucial role in brokered this deal, and he insisted that both parties were well aware of the situation. The AOP leaders knew how much the DP needed this event, and that gave the AOP a more bargaining power. An AOP adviser, Pornchai Tantiwittayapitak, also admitted that the pressure from the red-shirts on the government gave the AOP much-needed bargaining power. It helped to speed up the resolution process, which usually would be very slow (Pornchai Tantiwittayapitak, Interview, 21 December 2010).

[117] Baramee Chairat, Interview, 22 December 2010.

welcomed the invitation. To appear on the media with Yai Hai and the AOP members would certainly improve his image among rural voters.

On 10 October, Abhisit flew to the Thai Ban Local Wisdom Centre in Ubon Ratchathani to meet with Yai Hai. Around 1,000 AOP members were also present. The event received tremendous media attention. But it was not all about Yai Hai; many reporters expected to cover a violent confrontation between the local red shirts and the security forces. The government employed 5,000 police and military officers to provide the security for the event. Around 1,000 local red shirts showed up to protest against the premier (*Matichon*, 11 October 2009). According to the opposition, the government spent almost 100 million baht of the taxpayers' money on the event in order to hand Yai Hai and her neighbours compensation money of 4.9 million baht (*Lokwanni*, 12 October 2009).

The event may be seen as a success for the AOP, judging from the remarkable media attention and the increased cooperation from the government. But critics slammed the AOP leaders, especially the NGIs, for lending a hand to a government that lacked democratic legitimacy. Suree Mingwannalak, for examples, argued that the villagers deserved to be fairly compensated, but there was no need for such a public event. She added that the event only helped Abhisit, a leader who had failed to uphold democratic principles, to restore his damaged image (*Prachatai*, 11 October 2009). Sanan Chusakul, an AOP adviser, argued that the AOP did not *soem barami* (literally, improve the legitimacy) for the government. The government did the right thing because the problem had remained unsolved for a long time (*The Nation Weekly*, 26 October 2009). The government certainly made the correct decision by paying the compensation to Yai Hai, but the trip to Ubon Ratchathani was simply unnecessary. Yai Hai and her neighbours would have received the money regardless of Abhisit's visit (*Prachatai*, 28 October 2009).

As for the AOP, did the movement have to host the controversial event to give legitimacy to a government that was widely questioned by human rights and pro-democracy activists? The answer lies in which is the most important objective for the AOP: their immediate goals or the long-term development of democracy and human rights? For the AOP leaders who supported this event, their priorities appeared to be immediate goals, and so their answer would be a *yes*. But if one sees the AOP as a pro-democracy organisation with long-term political goals, the answer would clearly be a *no*.

Again, the Yai Hai case clearly shows that during this period the media coverage was linked with the colour-coded conflict. Without Abhisit's visit, Yai Hai story alone could still attract considerable media attention. But when this was combined with the public appearance of prime minster and a potential violent confrontation, it became a much bigger story. This media coverage was the beginning of a close relationship between the AOP, along with other people's organisations, and the Abhisit government. After the April-May 2010 massacre, the bond grew even tighter. Many NGIs joined the controversial government-appointed reconciliation committees and sub-committees, which were widely seen to have been appointed to revive the government's damaged image after the violent crackdown in 2010 (see Atchara 2010). Under the Abhisit government, some of the villagers' minor issues, such as community land title deeds in some areas, were resolved, but important issues, such as the Pak Mun Dam, remained unsolved (Assembly of the Poor, Official Statement, 2 May 2013). However, given its weaker political position in the recent years, the AOP has been seen less as a social force but more as a political quick fix, which governments could use in times of legitimacy crisis to gain more public approval.

A stark difference from the above events in terms of media attention can be seen in the AOP's 15th anniversary on 12 December 2010. Hundreds of villagers, advisers, NGIs, and academics were invited to the event. As the longest-lasting grassroots movement in the country's history, the event was expected to attract reasonable media attention. But in the reality, only four newspapers, *Bangkok Post*, *Post Today*, *Thai Post* and surprisingly *Daily News*, covered the event. All of the reports were hidden away in the back pages of the dailies, and the *Thai Post* report was only a paragraph long. To be fair, this limited media coverage was partially the secretariat's fault for not contacting the media effectively (Fieldnotes, 12 December 2010). But this to a certain extent reflected the political reality of the AOP in the recent years. It is safe to say the lack of media attention had to do with the fact that such an event had no connection with national-level polarised politics, so it was simply ignored by most media.

The above sections discussed the chronological events of the AOP and the media access. They have shown that the events that were linked with the polarised politics generally gained reasonable media attention while the events without such a connection failed to gain the publicity. As one can see from the Graph 5.1 that during the polarised period (late 2005 onwards), the graph line goes up at times where such events occur, which are February 2006, May 2008, October 2009. However, without such a connection, the AOP's 15th year anniversary was ignored by most media outlets.

D. Conclusion

This chapter discusses a more dynamic aspect of the POS, which has allowed grassroots movements, including the AOP, to occasionally develop and mobilise over the years. Due to the complexity of the POS theory, it is difficult to define fixed components of the volatile political opportunity structure. In this thesis, I singled out the elite divisions and the media access as the primary factors that have significantly

influenced the AOP's course of struggle in the last decade. Unlike the stable aspects of the POS, these elements can rapidly change because the components are not embedded within any structure, so the activists can constantly change their fortunes by influencing these factors.

In terms of elite divisions, this chapter shows that the AOP struggled to carry out a successful campaign during the TRT government. At the beginning of the government, when the elite remained divided and Thaksin was battling with his pending trial at the Constitutional Court, the AOP enjoyed cooperation with the government. But soon after he consolidated his powers both inside and outside the parliament, the AOP's political campaign began to face obstacles. Inside the movement, the mobilising structure was notably weakened by cooptation and mass desertion. Externally, the movement struggled to gain public sympathy or support. This inability to gain support occurred, despite the reasonable media attention.

With the elite groups under control, the government was able to effectively produce and implement its pro-poor policies, which proved to be very popular among the rural voters. The TRT won two landslide elections in 2001 and 2005. Polls also showed that Thaksin personal popularity remained constantly high. The main issue for the AOP's campaign during the Thaksin government was to have the Pak Mun Dam 's sluice gates open all year round. Throughout their campaign between late 2001 and early 2003, the media paid sufficient attention to the movement, but it did not help the villagers win their case. The government withstood the pressure and finally won the political contest. The villagers were forced to go home empty-handed after their camp was demolished in January 2003.

In terms of media access, studies show there was a strong connection between the media access and the development of social movements (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Koopmans 2004a; 2004b; Vliegenthart et al. 2005; Osa and Corduneanu-Huci; Gamson and Meyer 1996). Media access enabled the movement to gain more bargaining power vis-à-vis the government during the 99-day protest. The lack of the media access during the Chuan government in late 1990s, on the other hand, made it difficult for the villagers to carry out their political campaign. The movement gained considerable media coverage as the protesters challenged Thaksin, but his government was proven to be too strong for the villagers.

However, Thaksin's political dominant position ended as was challenged by the PAD in early 2006. The political and elite divisions, which were supposed to open up more political space, did not help the AOP's mobilisation. The AOP was unable to secure media access. This lack of the media access was caused by many factors, both internal and external. Internally, the movement grew considerably weaker in the recent years. Also, given the complexity of the issues, as time passed it became very difficult for the activists to communicate with the public about their grievances. Externally, after the emergence of the colour-coded movements, the public grew weary of street politics. Street protests without mass participation or political significance would simply be ignored by the media. And most importantly, with all the drama and confrontation that colour-coded politics produced, the media space was filled with the stories of the conflicts. The media as a result tended to ignore AOP activities unless there was a connection between the events with the coloured conflicts. Without the media space, the movement found it very difficult to carry out a successful political campaign.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Almost two decades after the Assembly of the Poor was founded, today many observers have begun to question the movement's formerly well-established credentials as an 'agent of change.' Some even go as far as to ask whether the AOP is really a movement or it is more of an interest group with some unique features (see Uchane 2007: 164). One AOP adviser suggested to me that it was probably unfair for outsiders to have false expectations about the villager members. She insisted that they were just ordinary people trying to solve their problems in any way they could. We should not expect the AOP to bear the burden of transforming Thai society (Fieldnotes, 24 December 2010).

Though arguably correct, this modest assertion certainly contradicted what AOP leaders had long been trying to tell both their villager members and the wider public: that the AOP was a movement which aimed to deepen democracy in Thailand. Some may view this portrait of the AOP as a pro-democracy movement simply as a discursive strategy (see Missingham 2003: Chapter III), but according to many advisers I talked to, this was precisely what many people had hoped the AOP might become. Unfortunately, this never happened: the AOP failed to act consistently to help develop democracy, and ultimately descended into factionalism and irrelevance. So what went wrong? Perhaps the answer lies in the nature of people's movements themselves.

The Assembly of The Poor: Reflections on People's Movements in Thailand

Before the formation of the AOP, various groups of villagers struggled to put pressure on successive governments to solve their problems. In the late 1980s, a number of local groups were campaigning on livelihood and related issues, but none of them managed to have their demands addressed properly. In 1992, many of these groups formed an umbrella movement known as the Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan (SSFAI), to

increase their strength. The SSFAI ran a successful campaign for a short period, until personal conflicts and corruption scandals led to organisational conflict and mass desertion (see Somchai 2006). Then some of these deserting elements along with other local groups formed the AOP in 1995. The AOP reached the pinnacle of its achievement when it staged a successful 99-day protest and won unprecedented compensation packages in 1997 (see Suthy 1997; Prapas 1998; Baker 2000). But soon after that, the movement gradually became weakened, and its success has become more and more limited over time.

After years of struggling, the villagers yet formed another people's movement, the People's Movement for a Just Society (P-MOVE) in 2011. Similar to the SSFAI and the AOP, P-MOVE is an umbrella movement which consists of several networks and local groups. The movement demands that the government address a long list of specific issues, such as entitlement to community land title deeds (*Prachatai*, 1 October 2012). Some of the local groups in the AOP, notably the anti-Pak Mun Dam group, are also part of P-MOVE. In fact, the anti-Pak Mun Dam group has been part of all of the above movements. This dynamic of these local groups shows the nature of people's movements in Thailand, which has been rather goal-oriented, non-committed, and non-ideological. Those involved in such groups clearly set their sights on local issues of immediate relevance to the well-being and livelihoods of those they represent.

The modus operandi of both the AOP and P-MOVE is in line with the work of prominent Thai NGIs, which is typically wide-ranging, issue based, and short-term. It is also compatible with the majority of NGI's core idea of community culture, which emphasises a non-political approach and working on local issues. As suggested in Chapter II, NGIs have played an influential role in these movements. In certain circumstances, this strategy can help grassroots movements to quickly expand their mass base, but in the long run, it is hard for them to sustain their strength. One has to

keep in mind that the primary if not sole goals of most villager members are to solve their short-term problems. The political activism of most villagers will end as soon as their problems are solved. The level of commitment of these members tends to be lower than those who work closely with the movements or campaign for structural changes (Fieldnotes, 10 October 2010). But those with a long-term commitment to social and political change make up only a small minority of the movement participants.

Equally important, people's movements in Thailand have struggled to mobilise resources to fuel their political activities. Since most of these movement's members are from the lower classes with no or little financial stability, their financial contribution to the movement is quite restricted. Also, their adoption of an ostensibly non-political approach means that these movements are unlikely to gain any meaningful support from elite groups, who naturally seek allies at critical junctures in order to help topple their political rivals. Moreover, many groups, especially the smaller ones, usually have no long-term plan for resource mobilisation (Fieldnotes, 11 October 2010), which reflects their main desire to pursue short-term goals. This has therefore limited the mobilising structure of these movements to function effectively.

The solution of many groups to these problems has largely involved working with the NGIs and funding institutions, such as the Thai Health Promotion Foundation and the Community Organizations Development Institute (see Gawin 2004). But working with the NGIs and the institutions associated with them often comes with strings attached. Not only do funding recipients have to fulfil the project requirements, which may be time-consuming and distract from the main goals of the groups,[118] but the movements may also risk of being co-opted by these quasi-state funding agencies (see Boonlert 2008: 53-54).

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[118] Somparn Kuendee, Interview, 26 December 2010.

This study of the AOP also reflects this reality. It is an attempt to understand the dynamic of the AOP from a critical perspective. Unlike previous studies on the AOP, this thesis illuminates some of the internal weaknesses of the movement, including its loose structure, which have made the movement struggle to run successful political campaigns since the early 2000s. The factors that have caused this decline can be found inside and outside the movement. The AOP has employed a loose structure that can facilitate the cooperation of diverse groups within the movement. But this structure may be criticised for concerns over lack of unity and ineffective mobilisation. In terms of institutionalisation, the AOP has also been unable to expand its mass strength, failed to increase effective centralisation and professionalisation, and has been denied access to conventional channels.

As the AOP relies on a dual strategy approach, which mainly involves agitation and negotiation, mass strength was the key to its earlier success. But, without strong mass participation their protests have struggled to gain the public and media attention. And without this extra-parliamentary pressure, their negotiation strategy has seen very limited achievements. Similar to other people's movements, the NGIs also enjoy an influential role in the AOP, although officially they are only expected to play a supporting role. Such an inequality causes some criticisms concerning the idea of collective leadership.

This thesis has also explored the components in the political opportunity structure (POS), both the stable and volatile aspects. The stable elements of the POS, including cultural structure, institutional structure, and prevailing strategies, have paradoxically obstructed the mobilisation of the AOP since its inception. At the centre of the AOP's cultural structure, discourse of Thainess has helped deny political space for marginalised groups for decades. The strength of the Thai state under the control of the elite has also limited non-elite groups from gaining the access to the system. The

use of violence as a prevailing strategy by the state—seen in the violent suppression of red-shirt demonstrations in 2009 and 2010–has to some extent deterred grassroots groups from developing a clear political platform.

However, the volatile elements of the POS have occasionally allowed grassroots groups to emerge and develop. This thesis has explored the two components of the POS that had the most influential role in partially determining the fate of the AOP during and after the Thaksin government. During Thaksin's reign, the government was able to control leading elite groups both inside and outside the parliament. Thaksin's dominant position allowed the government freely to pursue populist policies such as the thirty baht healthcare scheme, and at the same time to contain grassroots groups which had proved able to harass and undermine previous elected administrations, especially the AOP. Although Thaksin began to lose his control over the military and civilian elites in late 2005, the AOP still failed to make gains from the opportunities available. Since the emergence of the colour-coded groups in late 2005, the AOP has failed to gain the media access, another volatile component to its earlier successes. This limited media space considerably restricted the success of the AOP's campaign during this polarised period. However, the AOP occasionally gained some media coverage when its activities were somehow linked to the colour-coded conflicts.

Future Prospects for the Assembly of the Poor

Since the late 1990s, the AOP's achievements have mainly been limited to resolving some local problems. In many land encroachment cases, villagers could only stall the officials from confiscating their lands. These cases are still far from being resolved (Uchane 2007: 174). Most of the AOP's policy proposals were either entirely rejected

or considerably changed by the authorities.[119] This was a vivid indication of the AOP's limited successes, especially at the structural level.

However, the AOP may have been more useful in empowering the villagers through grassroots political activism. Many villagers have become confident and more aware of their basic rights (Missingham 2003: 159). Grassroots activism fostered by working with the movement has significantly transformed many uneducated villagers to become politically conscious individuals and community leaders. This is extraordinary. But in general. most villager members still have a limited role in the movement. Without an effective resource mobilisation, this empowerment process remains fairly limited.

Given its decline in the recent years, there are serious doubts as to whether the AOP could re-emerge as a critical non-elite challenger in the near future. In an informal discussion in October 2010, a villager said that the AOP was now *kin bun kao* (literally, 'consuming its old merit,' in a Buddhist sense)—a Thai expression meaning that the AOP was presently simply living off its former glories. To some extent, the AOP could still gain bargaining power from making threats to organise massive protests against the government or state officials. But the AOP's store of merit, he added, would soon run out. He insisted that some meaningful changes have to be made before the movement would once again become a serious political contender as in the past.

On the other hand, some villagers still hoped that somehow local people's groups would regroup under the AOP and make an impact again as in 1997 (Fieldnotes, 12 December 2010), but the emergence of the P-MOVE, which was also an umbrella movement in 2011, indicated that this might never happen. Some AOP member groups

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[119] Baramee Chairat, Interview, 22 December 2010.

decided to join P-MOVE's campaigns, jumping ship or at least hedging their options to try and maximise their influence.

Equally importantly, it is highly unlikely that the permanent components of the Thai POS will be radically changed anytime soon. Both formal and informal structures have been shaped and maintained by the elites in ways that will benefit their interests for decades. The elites would make sure that the existing structures persist. Also, the surprisingly high popular support for the 2010 anti-red-shirt crackdown by the military indicates that the use of violence against non-elite challengers is likely to continue.

Moreover, it is also certain that the current political conflicts will continue to have considerable impacts on Thai politics for years to come. The elite divisions and the polarisation of the Thai society will therefore persist, limiting political space for the AOP and other similar movements because the media will continue to pay more attention to colour-coded conflicts tied directly to elite power struggles. News related to these groups will permanently dominate the media unless the AOP could somehow link their political campaigns into the colour-coded conflicts.

P-MOVE, for example, successfully organised a two-week protest at Government House, which attracted considerable media attention from the media in May 2013. The government led by Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, was under strong attack from anti-Thaksin groups. Anti-Thaksin news agencies, such as ASTV and TNews websites, gave extensive news coverage to the villagers throughout the protest. Anti-government groups showed overwhelming support for the protesters, which in turn pressured the Yingluck government (2011 – present) to negotiate with the movement (*Prachatai*, 24 May 2013). But this may be effective only in the short run. The support for the P-MOVE was simply a strategic move to emphasise the government's inability to solve the problems of the poor.

Last but not least, Chantana also argues that the future of the people's movements, including the AOP, will also depend on such factors as the counter-responses of the state, the state's handling of environmental issues, and the implementation of development projects. She adds that if the state continues forcefully and aggressively to pursue the implementation of development projects, this may radicalise the grassroots activism further (2004b: 250-251). If that happened, Thailand might see the emergence of the AOP or another people's movement that campaigns primarily on these development-related issues once again.

Contribution to the Literature

This thesis makes an important contribution to knowledge and understanding in the literature on Thai politics and political opportunity structure theory. The study on the Thai POS reveals the elite's dominant position vis-à-vis the non-elite groups in the Thai political structure in both formal and informal settings. This analysis of the Thai elites shows how the ruling groups have systematically created and maintained their superior position through the Thainess discourse, the formal structure, and the use of violence against non-elite groups. This analysis helps to explain why the AOP and other non-elite groups have rarely been able to emerge in the national politics over the years. This shows that the limited mobilisation of grassroots politics has not necessarily been a result of the culture of obedience, as many would argue (see Attachak 2006); it rather suggested that the pro-elite political structure is to blame for attempting to foster political passivism in the villages.

This study of the AOP's decline also reflects the current political reality that political conflicts in Thailand have decreasingly involved 'non-political' issues, such as development and environment. Issues which had not been discussed in the past, such as the human rights and monarchy, have now become widely debated and contentiously disputed subjects. If people's movements continue to place sole emphasis on 'non-

political' issues could diminish their political relevance even further, at a time when the red-shirt movement–with a strong base in the Northeast, like the AOP–has been able to address a wider and more overtly political range of concerns.

Moreover, this thesis has contributed to the study of social movements and political opportunity structure, which has been based so far largely on the emergence and development of social movements in either developed countries or non-democratic nations (see Osa and Corduneanu-Huci 2003). But this study is an attempt to understand a grassroots movement in a developing country, which has both quasi-democratic institutions and elements of an authoritarian structure. Unlike other studies on the POS, this study proposes that elite factors be divided into two groups, the bureaucratic and elected elites, which represent two aspects of the Thai political system, the authoritarian and parliamentary. Without an analysis of these two elite groups, the picture of the Thai POS cannot be completed. This to a certain extent helps to fill the gap in the POS theory, which has not often been used to explain the movements in developing democracies, where both authoritarian and parliamentary features exist.

More studies on the grassroots movements in developing countries may be needed to test the validity of this approach. Developing countries, such as India, which have both relatively stable democratic regimes and strong peasant groups (Omvedt 1994), may require different theoretical adjustments to draw a accurate picture of relationships between POS and the movements. This thesis offers a way forward for future studies along similar lines.

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Appendix A

List of Interviewees

1. Somkiat Phonphai, a villager leader (25 December 2010)

2. Sawat Uppahat, a villager leader, the AOP coordinator (15-16 August 2010, 11 October 2010)

3. Put Buntem, a villager leader, a member in the working group (11 October 2010)

4. Anont Sripen, a villager leader (25 September 2010)

5. Kessakorn Silarak, a *phi liang*, an NGI (19-20 August 2010)

6. Somparn Kuendee, a *phi liang*, an NGI (26 December 2010)

7. Prapon Singkaew, a *phi liang*, an NGI (27 December 2010)

8. Baramee Chairat, a former member of the secretariat team, an AOP adviser, a *phi liang*, an NGI (10 August 2010, 17 December 2010, 22 December 2010)

9. Ubol Yoowa, an AOP adviser, an NGI (16 August 2010)

10. Nitirat Sapsomboon, an AOP adviser, an NGI (14 January 2011)

11. Hannarong Yaowalers, a former member of the secretariat team, an AOP adviser, an NGI (4 August 2010)

12. Khematas Palprem, a member of the secretariat team (21 July 2010, 4 September 2010)

13. Watcharee Phaoluengthong, an AOP adviser, an NGI (23 August 2010)

14. Suriyasai Katasila, a former AOP adviser, an NGI (28 July 2010)

15. Pipop Thongchai, a former AOP adviser, an NGI (30 July 2010)

16. Pornchai Tantiwittayapitak, an AOP adviser, a businessman (21 December 2010)

17. Sirote Klampaiboon, an academic, a former student activist (12 January 2011)

18. Naruemon Thabchumpon, an AOP adviser, an academic (19 January 2011)

19. Aimpong Boonyanupongsa, an assistant chief reporter of *Khao Sod* (4 January 2011)

20. Phumtham Wechayachai, a former deputy secretary-general of the TRT, a former

NGI (19 January 2011)

Appendix B

List of Newspapers and Weekly Magazines

1. *Bangkok Post*

2. *Khao Sod*

3. *Kom Chad Luek*

4. *Krungthep Thurakij*

5. *Lokwanni*

6. *Phujadkarn Raiwan*

7. *Matichon*

8. *Naew Na*

9. *Thai Post*

10. *The Nation*

11. *The Nation Weekly*

Appendix C

Timeline of the Assembly of the Poor and Related Events

	Date (m/d)	Events
		1995
	10 December	The Assembly of the Poor was officially founded at Thammasat University.
	15 December	Around 500 representatives from the AOP marched to ASEAN Summit to submit a petition.
		1996
Banharn government	26 March – 23 April	The AOP staged its first massive protest. Around 1,1000 joined the protest. The protesters represented 56 cases and came from five groups: dam group, forest and land group, state project group, slum group, and industrial sickness group. The villagers stayed in front of Government House for 5 weeks and gained extensive media attention and public recognition. An agreement was reached between the government and the AOP. Several commissions were appointed to look into these 56 cases (Uchane 2007: 155).[120]
	13 – 19 August	Around 500 villagers staged a protest camp in front of Government House to remind the government its promise to implement the April 1996 agreement (Naruemon 2006: 274).
	14 October – 7 November	Around 5,000 villagers staged a protest camp in front of Government House to demand a concrete action following the April agreement (Naruemon 2006: 274).
		1997
Chavalit government	25 January – 2 May	**The AOP's second massive protest, the 99-Day Protest.** Around 25,000 protesters staged a camp in front of Government House to demand that the government solve their problems, The protest lasted 99 day. The protesters, which represented 125 issues, came from seven groups: dam group, forest and land group, state project group, slum group,

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[120] Of all these cases, only two cases were solved. One dam project was cancelled and Banharn used his own money to buy the land from the villagers as some form of compensation (Uchane 2007: 155).

		industrial sickness group, alternative agriculture group, and indigenous group. Overall, the protest was seen as a success. The protest received an extraordinary media and public attention throughout. In terms of concessions, the AOP also achieved an unprecedented victory. The list included: giving compensation packages to almost 7,000 families for their loss of land and livelihood caused by dam projects; cancelling one dam project and reviewing five others; and ending summary eviction from 'forest' lands and admitting the principle that long-settled villagers should be allowed to stay in 'forest' zones. In total, the government's immediate cost was 4,657 million baht (Baker 2000: 23).
	July	Financial crisis hit Thailand. Thai baht was devalued. The public and media turned their back on street politics and wanted a strong government. They were afraid that the street protests would damage the investment climate (Rungrawee 2004: 545).
Chuan Government	**1998**	
	April	The Chuan government cancelled all agreements, which were reached by the previous government, to compensate villagers affected by dam construction projects (Naruemon 2006: 275). The cabinet resolution specified no compensation would be paid to those who were affected by any completed project. The government also filed a fraud lawsuit for the villagers who already received the compensation in the case of Rasi Salai Dam (Baker 2000: 24-25).
	14 July	The Thai Rak Thai party was registered.
	1999	
	April	As the political climate changed and the villager protester were not as welcome in Bangkok, the AOP adopted a new strategy, known as *dao krajai* (literally, scattered stars). Instead of organising one massive protest in Bangkok, the protesters now staged several smaller protracted protests in its base provinces, such as Ubon Ratchathani (Pak Mun Dam),

		Sisaket (Rasi Salai Dam), and Khon Kaen (Uchane 2007: 156-157; Naruemon 2006: 182-183). The new strategy was a failure. More than a year of utilising this strategy, the villagers received scant publicity and the government simply ignored them (Rungrawee 2004: 546).
	2000	
	15 May	Around 1,000 villagers occupied the Pak Mun Dam's parking lot in front of the power plant and blockaded the entrance of the office building to demand the dam decommission. Also a commission, led by Bantorn Ondam, was appointed to resolve 16 problematic issues. (Naruemon 2006: 276).
	28 May	Around 300 AOP members stormed Government House demanding a negotiation with the government (Naruemon 2006: 276).
	6 July	Bantorn commission announced its findings, which overwhelmingly supported the AOP's demands (Missingham 2003: 207-208).
	12 July	The AOP members began their protracted protest in front of Government House to pressure the government to follow the recommendations of the Bantorn commission (Nareumon 2006: 226)
	18 July	225 AOP members stormed Government House demanding that the government follow the recommendation of the Bantorn commission (*Matichon*, 19 July 2000). They faced criminal charges (Nareumon 2006: 277).
	7 November	Around 500 AOP members blockaded the road to Government House in order to obstruct the cabinet meeting. The villagers were dispersed and the AOP leaders were charged for breaking the law (Nareumon 2006: 227).
	19 November	The protest camp at Pak Mun Dam was partly burned down by a pro-dam group. Thirty villagers were injured. No one was charged with a crime (Nareumon 2006: 227).

		2001
Thaksin government	6 January	The TRT won 248 out of 500 seats in the general elections.
	10 January	Thaksin showed a public support for the AOP as he had lunch with the villagers at their protest camp in front of Government House. He promised to help the villagers solve their problems and ordered the removal of the fence surrounding the camp site. The fence was built by the previous government. Thaksin also appointed Deputy Prime Minister Pongpol Adireksan to chair a committee to look into the AOP's grievances. The number of the protesters also increased to one thousand to pressure the government to decommission the dam and compensate the affected villagers for their financial losses (Naruemon 2006: 158, 277).
	18 January	Thaksin's asset concealment case was accepted by the Constitutional Court.
	April	Thaksin's populist policies were quickly implemented. The government pilot healthcare scheme was launched, and the government made the agrarian debt relief scheme available to 2.3 million debtors (Pasuk and Baker 2008: 66).
	5 April	Thaksin called NGIs 'poverty-selling agents' (*naina kha khwamjon*) (*Phujadkarn Raiwan*, 5 April 2001).
	12 April	The villagers ended its 9-month protest in front of Government House, but they vowed they would come back if the government failed to meet their demands. They hosted a ceremony for the prime minister to mark a new beginning of a cooperation between the government and the villagers (*Matichon*, 12 April 2001). Meanwhile, the government also ordered the EGAT to open sluice gates at Pak Mun Dam for 4 months. It also commissioned UBU to conduct a comprehensive study on the impact of the dam (Naruemon 2006: 277).
	25 May	Thaksin visited the AOP's protest camp and demanded that the EGAT complied with the resolution.
	16 June	The EGAT opened the sluice gates only after the government

		threatened to sack its governor (Naruemon 2006: 278).
	July	The anti-Pak Mun Dam started a community-based research, known as *Tai Ban* research. The EGAT also commissioned its own research team on the Pak Mun Dam (Naruemon 2006: 278). Meanwhile, the TRT absorbed the Seritham Party.
	3 August	The Constitutional Court narrowly acquitted Thaksin on the concealment of assets because there was insufficient evidence.
	September	More populist policies were implemented. The village fund scheme was extended to most villages in the country, and 5.3 million loans were approved (Pasuk and Baker 2008: 66).
	10 September	More than one hundred villagers, mostly from the anti-Pak Mun Dam group kicked off their 'long march' from Ubon Ratchathani to Bangkok to collect signatures to support the dam decommission campaign.
	19 September	Thaksin ordered the government agencies to comply with the government's demands in order to solve the AOP cases (*Matichon*, 20 September 2001).
	29 November	The attorney general dropped the charge against 225 villagers who stormed Government House during the Chuan government. He explained that the villagers had no ill intention, and the pursuing the case was not in the public interest (*Matichon*, 30 November 2001).
	4 December	Sulak Sivaraksa and Somkiat Phongpaiboon visited the marchers as they reached Nakorn Ratchasima (*Matichon*, 5 December 2012)
	11 December	The government ordered the opening of the sluice gates at Pak Mun Dam and Rasi Salai Dam for the entire year after being pressured by the AOP's long march as villagers reached Nakorn Ratchasima (around 250 kilometres away from Bangkok).
	16 December	The marchers changed their route. Instead of heading to Bangkok as originally planned, they decided to circle around the provinces in the Northeast. The new route would be 2,000 kilometres long and take around 8-12 months (*Matichon*, 16

		December 2001).
	2002	
	January	The TRT absorbed the New Aspiration Party.
	6 March	The AOP and its allies organised rallies in Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Ubon Ratchathani to remind the government of its promises (Naruemon 2006: 278).
	19 March	The AOP kicked off its first prolonged protest in during the Thaksin government, which would last 64 days (19 March – 21 May). More than 300 AOP members organised a protest camp in front of Government House to put more pressure on the government to respond to their demands (*Matichon*, 20 March 2002). The protesters, which represented 205 issues, came from seven groups: dam group, forest and land group, state project group, slum group, industrial sickness group, alternative agriculture group, and indigenous group.
	20 March	Thaksin made a speech about solving the problems of the poor at a UN conference on development in Mexico. Meanwhile, hundreds of poor villagers were protesting his government in Bangkok (*Matichon*, 21 March 2002).
	25 March	The government appointed 17 subcommittees to work with the Pongpol committee in solving the AOP's problems (*Matichon*, 27 March 2002).
	20 April	Thongchareoan Srihatham, an AOP villager leader, was robbed and injured in his own house. Many suspected that this had something to do with his role in the anti-Pak Mun Dam group (*Khao Sod*, 22 April 2002).
	18 April	Around 1,000 AOP members from the Rasi Salai Dam and Huana Dam joined the protesters in Bangkok (*Matichon*, 19 April 2002).
	22 April	Yongyuth Tiyapairat, the government spokesman, accused three AOP leaders for committing a fraud (*Matichon*, 23 April 2002).
	23 April	The government passed a cabinet resolution that would allow local authorities to use force against any illegal protest

		activities at the local level (Naruemon 2006: 278).
	1 May	The protesters were no longer allowed to use the toilets in a state building (*Khao Sod*, 2 May 2002).
	21 May	The AOP ended its 64-day protest after the government appoint the Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, to chair a committee to oversee the implementation of the government's orders by the government agencies regarding the AOP cases. Fourteen AOP representatives were given seats in the committee (*Thai Post*, 22 May 2002).
	June	The *Tai Ban* research announced its findings (Naruemon 2006: 278).
	15 September	The UBU research group announced its findings and proposed 4 policy options as follow: 1) the gate was to be permanent closed for the whole year (full electricity production), 2) the gate was to remain open for 5 months and closed for 7 months, 3) the gate was to remain open for 8 months and closed for 4 months, and 4) the gate was to be permanently open (no electricity production). The research itself recommended that the sluice gates be open all year round for five more years for further study. The study argues that the dam was useless in terms irrigation and shutting it down would have no significant impact on the electricity supplies in the lower north-eastern region. Moreover, without the dam, it would be better for the local people (over 8,000 families) financially (*Krungthep Thurakij*, 5 November 2002).
	28 September	The Pongpol committee proposed that the sluice gates be opened for 4 months and closed for 8 months, as suggested by EGAT (Naruemon 2006: 278). This selected choice was not one of the four options proposed by the UBU study, which was funded by the government.
	1 October	The government passed a cabinet resolution following the suggestion by the Pongpol committee. According to the resolution, the gate-opening period was between 1st July and 31st October and closing period was between 1st November

		and 30th June (*Daily News*, 13 November 2002).
	29 October	Around 300 AOP members, mostly from the anti-Pak Mun Dam group, kicked off their second prolonged protest in Bangkok to pressure the government to reconsider the cabinet resolution (*Khao Sod*, 29 October 2002).
	4 November	The Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD) and other allied organisations publically questioned the government's policy choice on the Pak Mun Dam. They supported the UBU study's most preferred option to keep the gate open all year round (*Khao Sod*, 4 November 2002).
	December	The number of protesters increased to around 1,000 people.
	5 December	A group of around 30 masked men raided and vandalised the AOP protest camp in Bangkok. The damage cost was around 6,000 baht. The raid was directed by a man, who was on the phone with someone he addressed as *nai* (literally, master). It was widely speculated that a general close to the government and some state officials were involved (*Khao Sod*, 7, 10 December 2002). The raid backfired on the government. Some said the government was behind the action. The other blamed the government for failing to provide security for the villagers (*Khao Sod*, 7 December 2002). The culprits were never identified.
	8 December	Thaksin visited the protest site unannounced. He spent 7,000 baht treating the villagers small meals and ice cream. He promised he would review the government decision. He said he wished to bypass NGIs and talked directly to people who were really affected by the dam. He would also like to visit the site of the dam to hear the people's grievances. He urged the villagers to be reasonable and base their decision on reliable information. Meanwhile, the villagers handed Thaksin a copy of the UBU study, which was commissioned by his own government. However, the AOP refused to leave the protest. They said that they learned their lesson from last year and would not leave until their problems were solved (*Bangkok*

		Post, 9 December 2002).
	15 December	Around 40-50 hooded men raided and burned down the AOP protest camp in at the Pak Mun Dam. It took them about 30 minutes to the 255 shacks (*Khao Sod*, 16 December 2002). Later that day, around 200 AOP protesters marched to Thaksin's residence and demanded to speak with the prime minister about fire. Only 5 AOP representatives were allowed to talk to the prime minister on phone for 30 minutes (*Khao Sod*, 16 December 2002).
	17 December	Sawek Banthao, also known as Kamnan Sawek, and his men turned themselves in. They admitted to the crimes. Sawek was reportedly known for having previously worked with the EGAT and had conflict with the anti-Pak Mun group. He reasoned that he was unhappy with the villagers and their protest against the cabinet resolution (*Krungthep Thurakij*, 17 December 2002).
	18 December	Thaksin accused the NGIs of receiving funds from foreigners with ill intent. He suggested that he would have an public talk with the villagers. No third party, the NGIs, would be allowed to be part of the dialogue (*Daily News*, 19 December 2002).
	20 December	Thaksin hosted a televised meeting with AOP representatives. The meeting lasted five hours. Other than Thaksin himself, only the villagers and the researchers were allowed to take part of the meeting. The NGIs were not allowed to attend the meeting. The villagers appeared to be nervous but they adequately presented their cases (*Bangkok Post*, 21 December 2002). In several occasions, Thaksin stressed that was not to be pressured and he had to make decision based on the interest of the majority. He delayed making the decision and claimed that he would have to see the dam site himself. Additionally, Thaksin had a meeting with the head of National Statistical Office (NSO). He wanted the NSO to conduct a survey about the opening of the gates at Pak Mun Dam (*Matichon*, 20 January 2003).

	20 – 22 December	The NSO had only three days to come up with the survey questions.
	24 December	Thaksin flew to the Pak Mun Dam site along with two villager representatives. He insisted again that he had to take the interests of the majority into account (*Khao Sod*, 25 December 2002). Around 500 villagers, both supporters and opponents of the Pak Mun Dam, greeted Thaksin at the Sa Pau rapids (*The Nation*, 25 December 2002).
	24 – 26 December	The NSO sent 173 poll takers to 150 villages in the Pak Mun basin area to conduct a survey about the opening of the gates at Pak Mun Dam. There were 3,750 respondents in the survey from three districts in Ubon Ratchathani (*Khao Sod*, 21 January 2003).
	2003	
	13 January	Phumtham Wechayachai, the deputy prime minister and the chair of the committee on the Pak Mun Dam case, confirmed that the government would not change its position on the dam decision. The sluice gates would be opened for 4 months and closed for 8 months as ordered in the previous cabinet resolution (*Matichon*, 14 January 2003)
	29 January	The conflict entered the final stage. Samak Sundaravej, the Bangkok governor, cited traffic and public health laws and personally directed the demolition of the protest camp. The government gave the green light to the Bangkok governor. Over 1,000 municipal officers from all fifty Bangkok districts were deployed to knock down the camp. The protesters, mostly elders and children, showed no resistance to the officers. Later that day, the protesters left Bangkok for their home provinces (*Khao Sod*, 30 January 2003).
	August	General Chaiyasit Shinawatra, Thaksin's cousin, was promoted to commander-in-chief replacing General Surayud Chulanont as commander-in-chief (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 142).
	2004	

	5 January	The first day for the poor to register with the government as part of the TRT populist policies. This policy was hugely popular, and a large number of people showed up to register in the scheme (*Khao Sod*, 6 January 2004).
	19 April	Yai Hai and her family attempted to break the reservoir. The action attracted considerable media attention.
	15 August	Withitat Institute hosted a panel discussion on the negative impacts of Thaksinomics. Many academics, NGIs, including the AOP advisers took part of the event (*Matichon*, 16 August 2004).
	15 September	Some AOP leaders publically announced their opposition to the TRT government (*Khao Sod*, 16 September 2004).
	September	The TRT absorbed the Chart Pattana Party.
	2005	
	23 January	The AOP and the Campaign for Popular Democracy hosted a panel discussion focusing on the upcoming election. The AOP advisers and the NGIs strongly criticised the TRT's populist policies and how the politicians destroyed the country (*Thai Post*, 24 January 2005).
	6 February	The TRT won a landslide election victory of 375 out of 500 seats. In Bangkok, the DP's stronghold, the TRT won 32 seats while the DP received only 4 seats. The TRT was the first party to win election with this margin.
	15 – 17 March	Around AOP 1,000 members, led by Yai Hai, rallied in front of parliament to raise awareness about plight of the villagers (*Bangkok Post*, 16 March 2005). Abhisit, the opposition leader, also visited the protesters (*The Nation*, 17 March 2005).
	13 - 20 May	Around 300 AOP members, mostly from the anti-Pak Mun Dam, rallied in Bangkok. They demanded that the government order the EGAT to open the sluice gates as it was specified by the resolution (*Khao Sod*, 21 May 2005).
	2006	
	8 February	The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) was formally

		established. The PAD organised its first protest in 11 February, and a series of protests were staged thereafter. The PAD also announced that it would organise another massive protest in 26 February.
	20 – 23 February	Around 500 AOP members organised a protest in front of parliament to criticise the government's policies. The AOP leaders announced that they had to organise the rally because: 1) they wanted to reveal what the TRT government lied to the public, 2) they demanded that the government solve their grievances, and 3) they called for a political reform for the poor. The protest had been planned since 10 December 2005 (the AOP's 10th year anniversary). Some AOP leaders even threatened the government that if it did not address their problems seriously, the AOP members could join the anti-Thaksin groups (*Bangkok Post*, 21 February 2006).
	24 February	Around 500 protesters seized the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperative building and demanded that their problems be solved. The occupation appeared in all major newspapers including *Thai Rath* and *Daily News*. Key ministers, including Sudarat Keyuraphan, rushed to negotiate with the protesters because they were afraid that the protesters were part of the anti-Thaksin groups. The government ordered 800 police officers to be prepared for their dispersal. Sudarat suggested to the press that there might be someone behind the decision to seize the ministry. She also urged the protesters not to join upcoming anti-government rally (*Bangkok Post*, 24 February 2006). Later that day, Thaksin dissolved parliament and called a snap general election.
	2 April	The TRT easily won 460 out of 500 seats in the election. Other major parties, including the DP, boycotted the race. But in many constituencies, a new round of voting was required because the election law specified that a candidate needed to win more than 20 percent of the total votes in an unopposed race. Many TRT candidates failed to meet the requirement in

		many Southern provinces, which were the DP strongholds. Also, more than 9 million people (37.9 percent) went to the poll and voted 'no vote' to show their opposition to the TRT.
	25 April	The King, who appeared on television, called the election undemocratic and asked the court to solve the 'mess.'
	8 May	The Constitutional Court declared the election result was invalid. New elections were set for 15 October.
Surayud government	19 September	The military led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin overthrew the Thaksin government. The general later appointed Surayud Chulanont, a member of the privy council, to become the next prime minister.
	2007	
	24 – 30 May	Around 1,000 AOP villagers organised a protest in Bangkok to pressure the government to reconsider its position the opening of the sluice gates at Pak Mun Dam. Also, the protest came after the EGAT violated the 2004 cabinet resolution to open the sluice gates during the rainy season by delaying the opening for almost one month (*Bangkok Post*, 25 May 2007). A number of protesters were stopped by the military on their way to Bangkok because the timing of the protest coincided with the with upcoming Constitutional Tribunal's verdict on the dissolution of TRT and the DP. The protest was seen as a security concern (*Thai Post*, 24 May 2008). Nidhi Eoseewong, a highly respected historian, also visited the protesters and urged them to vote against the draft of the 2007 constitution (*Krungthep Thurakij*, 28 May 2008).
	30 May	The Constitutional Tribunal dissolved the TRT Party, along with other minor parties, for what the judges viewed as the violation of electoral laws.
	19 August	In the constitution referendum, 57.8 percent of the voters voted in favour of the new constitution, while 42.19 percent of the voters said no to the charter. The referendum was severely criticised for its unfairness since many provinces were still under martial law, and the opponents to the draft were also

		deterred to speak their mind because the martial law allowed the authorities to arrest those who campaigned against the draft.
Samak government	23 December	People's Power Party (PPP) led by Samak Sundaravej won the general election with 233 out of 480 seats. The PPP was a pro-Thaksin party, which was originally founded in 1998. But after the TRT was disbanded, many TRT former MPs joined the party and made it a reincarnation of the TRT party.
	6 December	Wanida Tantiwittayapitak, an AOP iconic leader and an NGI, passed away prematurely from cancer.
	2008	
	15 January	The AOP successfully pressured the government to discontinue its pursuit of two dam projects (*Matichon*, 16 January 2008).
	15 – 17 March	The AOP hosted a three-day event honouring the late Wanida Tantiwittayapitak in Thai Ban Local Wisdom Centre in Ubon Ratchathani. The activities included a nature march (*thamma yatra*) and panel discussions. The event was joined by many high profile figures, such as Sulak Sivaraksa, Anand Panyarachun, and Kasian Tejapira.
	28 March	The PAD regrouped and vowed to topple the Samak government.
	2 May	Nantachote Chairat, a respected AOP leader and an NGI, passed away.
	25 May	The PAD kicked off their anti-government campaign and organised its protest on Ratchadamnoen Road.
	5 June	Samak announced his intention to pursue the construction of Kang Seuaten Dam. The announcement incensed a fierce debate on the issue. The project has been put on hold for over a decade because it faced strong opposition from the NGIs and local people (*Kom Chad Luek*, 7 June 2008).
	20 June	The PAD's protest camp moved to a site near Government House.
	26 August	The PAD seized Government House and the NBT television

		station.
	9 September	Constitutional Court ruled that Samak was guilty of violating a law which prohibited government ministers from receiving payment from another job. Samak received money from a cooking show (Human Rights Watch Report 2011: 38), and so was ousted from office.
Somchai government	7 October	Thousands of anti-government protesters attempted to hold the MPs and senators hostage inside the parliament building. Thousands of police officers were deployed to secure the building. The clashes between the protesters and the police continued into the night. These resulted in several serious injuries, including the loss of arms and legs. But it was never clear what caused the dismembering, the tear gas rounds or ping pong bombs. Two protesters also died during the clashes.
	13 October	The queen made a surprise move by attending in a funeral of one of yellow-shirt protesters. Many high-ranking generals also attended the event.
	16 October	General Anupong Paochinda, the army chief, appeared on television called the prime minister to resign (McCargo 2009: 19).
	26 November	The PAD seized the Suvarnabhumi International Airport and Don Muang Airport.
Abhisit government	**2009**	
	2 December	The Constitutional Court dissolved the PPP and two other parties. Many MPs were under the pressure from the army to switch side and support the DP's leader, Abhisit, to become the next prime minister. Meanwhile, the PAD declared their victory and ended the airports seizures.
	7 – 14 April	The red-shits began its campaigns against the new Abhisit government. As the anti-government protests escalated, the clashes expanded to several locations in Bangkok and Pattaya (the site of the Fourth East Asia Summit). The red-shirts used radical tactics as the protesters attacked Abhisit's convoy and stormed the hotel where the ASEAN summit took place. The

		government also employed armed troops and used live ammunition to disperse the protesters. The clashes resulted in two civilian deaths from a neighbourhood watch group and 123 reported injuries (Human Rights Watch Report 2011: 40-41).
	22 September	The Abhisit government passed a cabinet resolution to pay 4.9 million baht to Yai Hai and her neighbours for their loss over the years (*Thai Post*, 23 September 2009).
	10 October	Abhisit flew to the Thai Ban Local Wisdom Centre in Ubon Ratchathani to meet with Yai Hai. Around 1,000 AOP members were also present. Because of the security concern from the local red-shirt groups, the government employed 5,000 police and military officers to provide the security for the event. Around 1,000 local red-shirts showed up to protest Abhisit (*Matichon*, 11 October 2009). According to the opposition, the government spent almost 100 million baht of the taxpayers' money on the event in order to hand Yai Hai and her neighbours compensation of 4.9 million baht (*Lokwanni*, 12 October 2009).
	2010	
	March 12 – 19 May	The red-shirts regrouped and mobilised more than 100,000 protesters from the provinces, especially the Northeast, to Bangkok. The protesters took Phan Fa Bridge as their first protest site for a month. After failing to achieve their goal of getting an election, the protesters took a more radical approach by moving the protest camp to the central commercial centre on Ratchaprasong road. The first violent clash took place at the evening of 10 April, which resulted in more than 20 deaths and thousands of injuries. The government blamed the 'men in black' for the violence. The May crackdown was even more deadly. As the government attempted to end the prolonged protest, some areas were declared a 'live ammunition zone.' The use of heavy arms resulted in more than 50 deaths and hundred more injuries (Human Rights Watch Report 2011: 47-

		101).
	12 December	Around 300 villagers, advisers, NGIs, and academics attended the 15th year anniversary of AOP at Thammasat University. Reporters, NGIs and villager leaders took part in the panel discussions on many issues, including the political struggle of people's groups and the AOP in the recent years.