

Post Cold-War Political Ideologies in Thailand

Assistant Professor Thanet Aphornsuvan
Faculty of Liberal Arts,
Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand

I: The End of the Cold-War

In Thailand, Cold-War politics and ideology ended in 1992 as popular resistance to the military coup in 1991 triumphed. Even though the May 1992 mass demonstrations, expressions of popular power, were violently and lethally put down, the coup crumbled when confronted by such concerted opposition. The new government, under the Democrat Party that won the majority vote, began to establish a new era of democracy free from military rule and domination. The transition from military domination to civilian rule was formidable and tenuous. Given the history of military intervention in Thai politics—17 military coups between 1932 and 1992--the government had little courage to proceed with democratization and curb the previously influential and powerful groups, both legal and illegal. Ultimately, though, the government gave in to the popular call to draft a new constitution as demanded by various radical groups and NGOs. The People's Constitution of 1997 was the first constitution drafted and debated by the people before becoming the supreme law of the kingdom. (The first Thai constitution was promulgated in 1932 after a military coup overthrew the monarchy and established a constitutional monarchy. Altogether there were 15 constitutions from 1932-1992).

The army faction that led the coup, calling itself the National Peace-Keeping Council (NPKC), based the legitimacy of its February 1991 coup on defending the monarchy, cleaning up corruption and dealing with bad ministers. In practice, however, the junta tried to restore the power and influence of the military, which had been eroding since the 1973 Revolution. The real cause underlying the NPKC coup thus was the conflict between the government of civilian General

Chatichai and the Army, which increasingly had lost its perks and its traditional control as a result of its declining control over politics. Ironically, the NPKC's main inspiration and practice came from the army coup in 1957 under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat that gave rise to the theory of Thai-style democracy based on the old fictional 14th century Sukhothai paternal kingship.

The theory of Thai-style democracy didn't work this time, and ended in the bloody May of 1992, when the popular demonstration, led by Plang Dhama leader Lt.Gen.Chamlong Srimuang, staged a hunger strike in front of the parliament, which led to violent suppression by the military. The May uprising, like the previous October 1973 uprising, thus thwarted the attempt of the military to retain their own power and glory in Thai politics as they had during the Cold War era.

II: The Beginning of the Cold War in Thailand

Paradoxically, the end and the beginning of the Cold War in Thailand were ushered in by military coups. The Cold War period in Thailand began with the Coup of 1947, which ended the rising influence of the radical wing of the People's Party that promoted a democratic form of government and parliament. The major political forces in power after the 1947 Coup were the army and royalists or pro-monarchy elite. Their main political ideology was constitutional monarchy in which the sovereign power of the state was restored to the monarchy. The formation and growth of the "new monarchy" in Thailand was finally completed under Field-Marshal Sarit Thanarat's regime that overthrew the Phibun regime in 1957. Modern Thai politics has been dominated by tension between two sources of political legitimacy, constitutionalism and people's sovereignty, more or less, as represented by Phibun, vs. despotic paternalism, as represented by Sarit.

"Pattiwat," or Revolution in a new sense, began with the coup on October 20, 1958 that ushered in a New System of Thai-style democracy. That meaning of 'democracy' was not western

liberalism from which the 1932 Revolution had drawn its ideology, but rather it was a return to “Thai” political ideology. Political scientists have dubbed the Sarit regime a despotic paternalism. Similar to the previous premier, Sarit made use of the state and personal leadership; indeed Statism and Popularism have been regularly deployed by nationalist leaders in South East Asia during and after the nationalist independence movements. At the same time, while preaching to the Thai people that they should follow traditional ways, Sarit actively exploited US anti-Communism in the region to legitimate his suppression of opposition inside and outside the government and parliament. With material and monetary assistance from the US and the World Bank, the Thai government started the first Five Year Plan to build infrastructure and create an atmosphere favorable for an export-led oriented economy.

Sarit’s political philosophy:

Political power is absolute and undivided, therefore there should be no conflicts or opposition from other people. King Rama VI had asserted that the king is the sole responsible person for the government and country. Other ministers could be helpers and advisors, but they were not responsible persons. So they could have no real power. Later King Rama VII decentralized absolutism by devolving power to ‘aphirattamontri’ [superior ministers] drawn from senior royalty. Political representation also changed under Sarit. There was no need for popular representation since the MPs were helpless and hopeless. Based on the confidence and benevolence of the older and the duty and obedience of the younger, the people would get protection, guidance, support and care from the government and bureaucracy. This paternal relationship operated on the principle of reciprocal duties, not rights. In this version of “the people,” the populace was

subordinated to and led by a “righteous leader.” Hence power was returned to the “virtuous ruler,” after thirty or so years of unsuccessful attempts to give power to the people.

At that time there was only one political party left underground. Formerly, the opposition forces consisted of varied emerging groups and parties operating more on their own than in coordination with one another. The most important political party which emerged during the resistance against the Japanese occupation of Thailand in 1945 was the Communist Party of Thailand(CPT). From 1953-1963, the height of the Cold War politics in Thailand, the government violently suppressed opposition politicians and students, intellectual, journalists and writers, summarily executed them without court trial, locked them up in jail, threatened and closed newspapers and printing shops. By the mid-1960s there was no open opposition or critical intellectuals left. Some went underground to join the CPT, which until then had been struggling to find an appropriate strategy to fight against the government; others went abroad in exile or left politics to live quietly in the countryside. In 1965, when the CPT decided to seize state power by launching a guerilla war from the countryside, the crucial arena of politics moved from the city and parliament to the rural, from voting to shooting. Thus did the Cold War finally bring war to Thailand.

III: Post Cold-War political ideologies

I: The ideology of nationalism

who owns the nation or whose imagined community?

The debate in Thailand has been between official nationalism and popular nationalism. The recent reflections by Kasian Tejapira, is illuminating on this point.

Kasian asks in his article “On Knowledge, the Nation, and Universals” (*Kyoto University Review* 2003, http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue2/article_227_p.html), what is left of Thai political ideology after the storm of the coup in 1976 that massacred hundreds of students and other people followed by the collapse of the CPT in the 1980s?

“What was so troubling about that massacre was not only the degree of violence used, but also the fact that a lot of ordinary Thai folks took part actively and bloodthirstily in lynching the students. Our fellow Thai countrymen must have really hated our guts to have killed us in that bestial manner.

“That incident formed the background of the knowledge, method, and aspirations of the so-called ‘Octobrist’ generation of Thai intellectuals and scholars, to which I belong. Hence the two basic facts about us are: *the Thai (official) nation tried to kill us but we survived*; and *then we tried to make a revolution but it failed*. In a way, our subsequent common intellectual trajectory has been a traumatic, persistent attempt, in our own separate ways, to find an appropriate and adequate intellectual answer and political response to those two problematics – why the Thai nation hated us so and why the revolution failed.”

The first question, why the Thai nation-state hated us, has to do with the idea and belief that the nation-state, a modern invention and imagination of the popular community, has become and capable of making change of its citizens and society, a Leviathan. Similar idea both liberal and left. This relates to the second question, why the revolution failed, which also hinges on the idea of changing and transforming the state. This idea is different from the traditional Buddhist cosmology, which emphasizes the active role and leading of the dhama inherent in the body of the merit leader.

The state is simply a tool, an vehicle for the right leader to ride and take all subjects across the suffering world into another higher level of world, which is the non-material world.

The revolution in the traditional sense is the act of overthrowing the corrupt/unrighteous king from the throne and replacing him with a new moral leader.

So does it mean the modern political ideology did not work or relevant in Thai society? It's not easy to give one or two factors in explaining this whole problem. My understanding is that it's a history of change and transformation that will take a longer time and space to achieve any definite result, given the pervasive and rapidity of modern technology and economic production, nothing will remain the same in the earth but how much and what will be the change and what will stay and reproduce itself into a growing social body is really a making of a history.

II: The ideology of communitarianism

1. contest meaning of citizenship and development; role of marginal group of peoples, hill-tribes, ethnic minorities,

2. the politics of environmentalism, community forest, community rights and dignity, local power and local knowledge;

III: the ideology of social justice and equality

Gender based rights and equality; women, gays and lesbians

Children's rights

Workers' rights

IV: Revival of Buddhism, Plang Dhama(Righteous Force), Buddhadas,

1. The rise of fundamental Buddhist movement

-Santi Asoke; Plang Dhama party; Dhamakaya and Prawes's NGO local knowledge movement.

2 *Buddhadhas and Buddhist socialism*

IV: Post Cold-War Political Discourse

1.1 The narrative of modernity, with progress, social order and happiness (fun) as the desired goals of both the government and people. Such a narrative is compatible with the Buddhist social and political teachings that focus on the positive development of beings amidst the negative cycle of life and death.

1.2 The Left, progressives and radicals recuperated and continued working with the masses, in the provinces and cities around the country. NGO's movements from environmentalism to monitoring voting to women's and children's rights. Some of the enterprising Left student activists who joined Thai Rak Thai party (TRT) party are now in the cabinet and many in the senate.

1.3 The state of the government, or ruling classes, are now expanding to include new and diverse groups of participants and prospective politicians, especially from the academic community, NGOs, and the private sector.

2. What is current Thai political discourse?

2.1 There is no real or imagined threat to post-Cold War narratives from the left and progressives. The major NGO narratives are based on communitarian ideals--forest-communities, alternative agriculture, and participatory democracy--but they have not been viewed as a serious threat to the structures of power, even though they also call for decentralization of government power and rule. There is even an emphasis on power to the people, as one even sees in advertisements at gas stations that read, 'give power back to the car.'

2.2 Thailand is still heavily a hierarchical society, as seen in the rise of conservative Buddhist discourse. Try to hold on to both sides, the people and the state. Metaphor: the ideology

of the stupa. Interdependence between the gem on top of the stupa and the huge base. The higher the gem, the wider and bigger is the base. A proper social order is more important than change and chaos.

3. Does any of this matter in a globalized world?

3.1 It remains to be seen how long these (traditional Thai) vertical social relations can hold together a growing, expansive society driven by the rapid transformation of information and other technologies. But unlike other countries, such as Indonesia, conservative politics in Thailand has not fostered a post-Cold War anti-communism to oppose threats to existing hierarchies.

Bangkok

July 2003