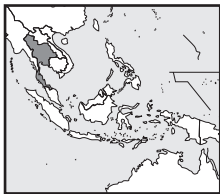


Two different worlds



The effects of globalisation on government policies, particularly in the field of natural resources management, has been even more devastating than the effects on human security of economic shortcomings and natural disasters. The construction of a gas pipeline in partnership with Malaysia and the monopoly of telecommunications in the hands of corporations owned by members of the political elite are the most alarming issues in a society where economic growth has widened the gap between the rich and the poor.

Social Agenda Working Group

Ranee Hassarungsee

Participation and authoritarianism

In the past, problems related to natural resources and the environment were limited to indiscriminate tree felling in the forests by local inhabitants. Things have now changed. The rights of communities, recognised by the Constitution, are under threat. Thais have always defended their rights within the institutional legal framework, and in this case too they have exhausted all local and regional opportunities to make their claims heard before resorting to street demonstrations. The Government has responded with authoritarian attitudes that discourage popular participation.

The gas pipeline of insecurity

The Government is committed to the globalisation process, which exerts a powerful influence on state policies for natural resource management. Other countries and transnational corporations are increasingly interfering in the formulation of Thailand's development policies. The Thai Government has become a stakeholder in the Thailand-Malaysia Gas Pipeline, a partnership between the Petroleum Authority of Thailand and Malaysia approved in 1999. Opposition to the project was immediate and continues to this day. Led by more than 1,000 academics and the people of Chana

district,¹ opponents of the pipeline have publicly argued that the benefits of the project are insignificant compared to the dangers it represents to the ecosystem and to the lifestyle and livelihood of local communities. A local villager speaks: "Mab Ta Phud (a much publicised and promoted industrial zone on the east coast of Thailand) suffers from a lot of pollution. People there, the children and the adults, are not happy. Their complaints have not been heard. I ask myself, is this really development? If other people want this kind of development, good luck to them. I know that I don't."² There is also, of course, the risk of an explosion.

The Government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has the final power of decision in the execution of the pipeline project, but the Government has never given public explanations of its intentions and has consistently refused to enter into open dialogue with the opposition movement. The Government's attitude has encouraged the companies responsible for constructing the pipeline to simply ignore demands for a public debate over the issue. Their only response has been to take out advertising space in the media to publicise and praise the pipeline project.

The gas pipeline and other mega-projects aimed at developing infrastructure have not been managed properly. In addition to preparatory and operational difficulties, there has been a serious lack of transparency. Some projects have had to be cancelled because of their negative impact or because they turned out to be ineffective. This has disrupted the country's development, and some sectors of the economy have suffered large losses.

Political power plus economic power plus media power

After the 1997 economic crisis transnational corporations bought up so many bankrupt businesses that today it is hardly possible to talk of "national" assets. The benefits derived from the growth of the

GDP must therefore be examined carefully in this context.³

Between January and October 2003, fourteen companies registered with the Stock Exchange and issued shares which were traded at 50% to 100% over their average prices. Recent press reports have revealed that the shares were snapped up by well-known business groups (CP Seven Eleven PLC, Matching Studio, RS Promotion, Advance Information Technology PLC, International Research Corporation PLC, and SC Assets).⁴ These groups are closely linked to high-ranking politicians in the government party, Thai Rak Thai (Thais Who Love Thais).⁵ The Shin Corp Group, a conglomerate owned by the present Prime Minister, is the most powerful one. This group operates cellular phone services (AIS), satellite communications (IPSTAR Co.) and television (ITV PLC). Not only do its activities essentially depend on public monies, they also directly affect the public sphere. The concessions granted to the political powers-that-be (through the workings of political manipulation), give the concessionaires perpetual rights and privileges which are not necessarily commensurate with their business management expertise. Supinya Klangnarong, secretary of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform, has said: "So far, the Prime Minister has done nothing to tackle the conflict of interests. Nor has the Royal Decree on Taxation on the Operation of Telecommunication nor the contract for ITV. (...) We are concerned that Thai society, shaped by media information, will be dominated by the Shin Corp group which is the only company with a strong political base."⁶

1 Since the Thai Government signed a contract for the construction of a gas pipeline to exploit gas reserves in the Joint Development Area between Thailand and Malaysia a few years ago, local people who inhabit the area around the construction site in Chana District, Songkhla Province, have had no peace. Most of these people, who earn their living from small-scale fishery, are very conscious of the adverse impacts of this project on their lifestyle and environment. They have vigorously opposed the project, and security forces have responded with brutal repression. A major clash took place in December 2002, resulting in many people being injured and extensive property damage. Leaders of the movement were arrested on trumped up charges. UN Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders Hina Jilani, who visited the area, has deplored the arrests. Jilani has unsuccessfully lobbied the Thai Government to drop all charges. She described the situation faced by civil society movements in Thailand as one of "intimidation and fear". June 2003.

2 Testimony of Areyya Hmadeh in: "Reasons of the Anti-Thai-Malaysian Gas Pipeline Project Movement". NGO-Coordinating Committee on Rural Development/Southern Branch. Thailand, 2000.

3 According to UNICEF, the average annual growth rate of per capita GDP was 2.8% for the period 1990-2000. Regarding the purchase of assets by transnational companies, see: Prasertkul, Seksan, "Thailand on the Road to Democracy: Problems and Solutions Explored". Conference speech for the 30th Anniversary of the 14 October 1973 uprising, co-organised by the 14 October Federation and the Co-ordinating Group for the 30th Anniversary, Public Sector. 14 October 2003.

4 *Matchon Daily*, 1 December 2003, p. 12.

5 Pattamanan, Ukrit. *Matchon Weekly*, 5 December 2003.

6 *Post Today*, 30 June 2003. On 1 December 2003, Supinya was sued by Shin Corp for defamation due to her interview with *Thai Post* about the links between the corporation's profits and the Thai Rak Thai Government. 16 July 2003.

TABLE 1

Household debt - in Thai bahts (THB) per household per month					
	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002
TOTAL HOUSEHOLDS					
Average debt (THB/household)	31,079	55,300	72,345	70,586	84,603
Relation debt-monthly salary	3.7	5	5.7	5.7	6.1
Percentage of debt spent on consumption	59.7	50.8	61.2	61	64.1
POOR HOUSEHOLDS					
Average debt (THB/household)	9,727	13,698	22,787	21,818	24,876
Relation debt-monthly salary	4.4	5.4	7.5	7.5	8.5
Percentage of debt spent on consumption	37.9	34.3	39.1	41.5	44.5
VERY POOR HOUSEHOLDS					
Average debt (THB/household)	11,830	18,593	22,968	20,083	24,188
Relation debt-monthly salary	9.1	12.2	13.1	11.5	15.2
Percentage of debt spent on consumption	53.4	26.9	40.4	37.7	50.2

Source: This table is adapted from information supplied by Somchai Jitsuchon at the annual conference of the Thailand Development Research Institute on Human Security 2003.

Note: A) "Very poor" households are those earning less than 50% of the amount defined as the poverty line (around THB 2,000 per household per month). B) THB 1 = USD 0.03.

The State maintains its monopoly on power, not by force of arms, but through control of capital and the media. Its power is therefore exercised more subtly, and people are unwittingly more vulnerable to it.

The growth gap

Social changes in Thailand have been consistent with capitalist logic and this has polarised Thai society. The gap between rural and urban areas has widened. Two worlds co-exist: the globalised, modern world of the haves, and the miserable world of the have-nots.

According to neoliberal doctrine, economic growth depends on increases in per capita consumption. As a result, more and more mega-projects are being approved, and more state businesses are being privatised. Thus, the Government and their political entourage accumulate wealth and profits via financial speculation, through their monopoly on the telecommunications industry, and by making political decisions subject to market principles for their own benefit. Far from solving the economic difficulties of the ordinary people, and the structural problems that cause them, this course of action simply makes matters worse. Table 1 shows figures for household debt which are eloquent in themselves.

The excluded majority

People’s participation in decision-making is the essential foundation for building human security. One way of evaluating popular participation is to take a critical look at the composition of the legislature. According to Thailand’s Electoral Commission, out of a total of 500 members of parliament (MPs), 453 are businessmen, former government officials, lawyers and politicians. In other words, fully 90.2% of

MPs belong to the well-off urban classes; the agricultural sector and the working class are represented by only 3.2% and 2.8%, respectively. Although senators are now elected directly, the composition of the Senate is not very different, as the conditions for running for election were biased in favour of the elite. We can therefore conclude that Thai “representative” democracy excludes the poor majority of the population from decision-making at the national level.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that not even the local communities most affected by big government projects, nor those whose natural resources have been allocated to private companies, approve of the bargains that have been made in the name of the “national interest”. Neither is it surprising that anti-government protests are spreading among small local communities and throughout the poorer social sectors. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening under the impact of globalised capitalism, and may usher in a period of social and political violence in the country. If the present economic policies continue, drinking water, electricity, health and education will become commodities to be freely traded at market rates. Life for Thais will then be restricted merely to consuming or investing in goods and services.

Human security means protecting the vital core of every human being so as to enhance the enjoyment of freedom and human self-realisation. In contrast, the so-called development programmes in Thailand during 2003 in fact constitute a grievous assault on human security.

Communities and globalisation

The changes brought about by modernisation have made citizens more aware of their civil and political liberties. However, economic, social and cultural

rights are increasingly being restricted. Local communities care greatly about their values, their cultural uniqueness, and their natural and intellectual resources; they have therefore been motivated to join forces in a common struggle against the threat of invasion posed by transnational corporations, and the commercialisation imposed upon them by Western industrial super-powers. Such a heightening of consciousness demonstrates that individual rights have come to be embraced as community rights. In order to guarantee these rights and empower the people, development initiatives must be democratically managed at grassroots level.

Concluding remarks

The issues discussed in this report can be summarised and concluded in the words of Seksan Prasertkul,⁷ on the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of 14 October 1973 Uprising:

“It is true that we have not been capable of creating a society in which everybody has equal access to property. But at least we should not abandon the hope of creating a society in which all human beings are equal. In any case, material riches are not always important. Once the basic needs for adequate food and decent housing are satisfied, peaceful coexistence, cultural advancement, spiritual depth and the realisation of what it really means for us to live in this world for only a limited period of time, are more important than making profit. This concept is in direct opposition to the quantification of everything by market mechanisms; in fact it impedes the flow of capital and the accumulation of wealth. It means that investors will be barred from extracting resources from certain areas, and that the lifestyle of Thais will not lead to free-competition, but to collective co-operation. These choices and the diverse approaches to development will never be available to the people unless public participation in devising economic policies that affect their communities is recognised. We must appreciate local wisdom, decentralise development and political power, and put an end to the abuses of state authority and the power of capital.”⁸

7 Seksan Prasertkul is a well-known Thai writer and intellectual, and Dean of the Faculty of Political Science at Thammasat University. He led students in a mass uprising that toppled the military dictatorship in October 1973.

8 Prasertkul, Seksan, “Thailand on the Road to Democracy: Problems and Solutions Explored”. Conference speech for the 30th Anniversary of the 14 October 1973 uprising, co-organised by the 14 October Federation and the Co-ordinating Group for the 30th Anniversary, Public Sector, 14 October 2003.