

## **Beyond the rural betrayal: lessons from the Thaksin era for the Mekong region**

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### **Introduction**

When I prepared the title and the abstract for this paper in mid-September last year I had no idea that, within days, the three-time elected Thaksin government would be overthrown by a military coup. This coup was very unfortunate for democracy in Thailand but it was rather more fortunate for my paper as the coup, and the reaction to it, underlined many of the points I was planning to make about what I call “the rural betrayal.” This paper is an extension of my previous work in which I have been critical of the strategies pursued by NGOs and activist academics who seek to defend the rights of rural people in Thailand (Walker 2001, 2004). My view has been that these strategies too readily resort to simplified and romantic images of communal solidarity, subsistence orientations and other-worldly pursuits. Here I will suggest that these activist perspectives—given a recent boost by the military regime’s enthusiastic promotion of the royalist “sufficiency economy” approach—provide a poor basis for defending the economic and political rights of rural people in Thailand and elsewhere in the Mekong region. I propose that the key lesson from the Thaksin and post-Thaksin era is that many common approaches to rural politics, society and economy in the region need to be rethought.

### **The rural betrayal**

First, what do I mean by the “rural betrayal”? Most generally by this I mean a sentiment among many “leftish leaning” commentators that rural people have betrayed the cause of rural empowerment. Let me briefly illustrate the cause, and then

I will move on to some of the dimensions of the betrayal.

Over the past two decades, activist academics and NGOs in Thailand have waged a vigorous campaign in defense of the rights of rural people against the incursions of both the state and the capitalist market. Of course, there are many elements to this diverse campaign, but there are several key motifs that regularly stand out.

- First, an emphasis on the moral value and social desirability of subsistence-oriented agricultural production. It is regularly argued that agricultural production oriented primarily to household use provides a basis for sustainable resource management, cooperative village sociality, the persistence of diverse forms of local knowledge, and the maintenance of various forms of local ethnic identity.
- Second, there is a regular emphasis on communal management of resources. The vigorous campaign for community forest legislation is probably the highest profile example of the claim that local community-based institutions provide a strong basis for the sustainable management of natural resources. These institutions are regularly portrayed as being under threat from both state regulation and market expansion, both of which promote individual private property at the expense of more communal arrangements.
- Third, there is a common emphasis on the other-worldly orientations of rural people. In the campaigns for rural empowerment we have heard a great deal about umbilical cord forests, watershed spirits, tree ordination, hunting taboos and rituals to extend the life of river systems. Many would acknowledge the adaptive and politically performative nature of much of this other-worldly activity but, nevertheless, it is seen as a key component in creating a counter-discourse of rural empowerment.

In Thailand the years of the Thaksin government have witnessed the emergence of increasing bewilderment at the rural betrayal of these various principles. It is well known that Thaksin's electoral heartland lay in the rural areas of north and northeast Thailand, precisely the areas where the rural empowerment campaign has been most active and the areas that have furnished many of the images of subsistence production, communal management and other-worldly pursuit. But this is not the imagery of

Thaksin and his *Thai Rak Thai* party. In fact, Thaksin's rural electoral support has been based largely on the popularity of his local economic development initiatives. Though there is a real risk of stereotyping the nature of rural support for Thaksin, I think it is fair to say that it focuses on policies and initiatives such as:

- The one million *baht* per village credit fund;
- Various other grant and rural development schemes;
- The provision of debt relief;
- The provision of 30 *baht* health care;
- Lamentably, the war on drugs.

Put simply, many rural people seem to have electorally endorsed a vision very different to that proposed by the campaigners for rural empowerment. They have expressed a strong preference for external cash input into local economic development with support for investment and consumption that often has little to do with local provision for subsistence or with traditionally communal forms of resource management. Far from resisting the incursion of the state they appear to have embraced the direct relationship that Thaksin encouraged between state agencies and local villages, cutting out many of the provincial and district level middlemen. This endorsement of state engagement at the local level even extends to widespread support for the outrageously heavy handed "war on drugs" in which extrajudicial killings proliferated throughout the country.

The rural betrayal took on additional dimensions as it became clear that local business interests dominated in local government elections. The vision of participatory and decentralized administration envisaged in the 1997 constitution turned into an activist nightmare of capitalist domination of local decision-making bodies.

### **The implications**

The military coup of 19 September has been justified in various ways: Thaksin's corruption; his thinly veiled attacks on the King; and his creation of national disunity. But the coup makers, and their numerous advocates, have had to contend with the fact that Thaksin was handsomely elected three times. Even the coup makers recognize

that the opposition parties boycotted the controversial April 2006 election because they knew they would lose. And they also knew they would lose the election scheduled for late 2006. Thaksin had a clear electoral mandate.

So it was ideologically important that the legitimacy of this electoral mandate be undermined. This was achieved by the repeated assertion that Thaksin's electoral victories were illegitimate because they were "bought" from a poorly educated and unsophisticated electorate. It has been argued repeatedly that the *Thai Rak Thai* party engaged in widespread vote buying, paying voters through networks of local canvassers and securing their votes through both moral obligation and, where necessary, coercion. Thaksin's local economic development policies have also been widely portrayed as "populist" handouts. "Populist" is a word used in Thailand to refer to policies that allocate resources outside Bangkok and bypass the usual elites. Both before and after the coup, there has been repeated condemnation of Thaksin's nation-wide village credit fund which is said to have contributed to the political corruption of villagers. While Bangkok is awash with credit card debt, pro-coup social commentators (who used to be pro-democracy advocates) vilify the provision of small scale loans to farmers. They see initiatives in local economic development as tantamount to vote buying.

This delegitimisation of rural electoral input has started to crystallise in the notion of "Thai-style democracy", or what I like to call "sufficiency democracy". A range of proposals have been circulated which seek to reduce electoral influence in Thailand's political system. Just as the "sufficiency economy" principles seek to dampen rural aspirations for engagement in national economic life, "sufficiency democracy" principles seek, in various ways, to play down the importance of an electoral mandate especially when it is derived from a rural populace. The link between "sufficiency economy" and "sufficiency democracy" was recently underlined by General Sonthi, head of the Council for National Security, when he identified the lack of rural understanding for sufficiency economy principles as a threat to national security, seemingly making rural folk vulnerable to the inducements of the cashed up pro-Thaksin "undercurrent" forces.

One would expect that this concerted attack on the electoral rights of rural people would meet with stiff resistance from those who have worked so hard for rural empowerment. But, by and large, the resistance has been muted. Of course, there are

good reasons for this. Under current circumstances there are real restrictions on what can be said and written openly. But there is, I think, a more fundamental issue relating to what I call the “rural betrayal.” In the latter period of the Thaksin era it has become clear that many of these leftish-leaning commentators have been bewildered by the “rural betrayal.” Contrary to the images promoted in the various campaigns for political empowerment (such as the long-standing campaign for community forestry) many rural voters seem to have embraced Thaksin’s vision of market-oriented economic diversification. The result has been an increasing disconnect between academic and activist commentary and the rapidly changing livelihoods and aspirations of people in rural areas. This disconnect is powerfully expressed in the NGO/academic rejection of Thaksin in contrast to his broad electoral popularity in many rural areas. In many respects Thaksin badly wrongfooted the campaigners for rural empowerment, displaying a more acute understanding of rural aspirations than many of the “grass roots” commentators. And the wrong foot is not a good place to be when confronting a coup.

What do I mean?

Many of the empowerment campaigns grant rural communities what I have called a “limited legitimacy” (Walker 2001). This limited legitimacy recognises the rights of local communities (and there is a strong emphasis on the community rather than the individual) provided they accord with some of the key motifs of the empowerment campaign – subsistence orientation, communal institutions and otherworldly pursuits, typically wrapped up in an ecologically friendly package. There is much less emphasis on the legitimacy of those who pursue alternative livelihood paths – we hear little about the local wisdom of factory workers or about the role of cash crops in supporting the education of sons and daughters. Nor is there much advocacy interest in the efforts of rural people to improve livelihoods through acquisition of consumer durables. In this context, the various economic promotion policies of the Thaksin government are seen as leading rural people away from what are seen as legitimate rural pursuits. In other words, rural people’s endorsement of Thaksin’s policies tends to remove them from the protective umbrella of limited legitimacy accorded by the empowerment movement.

Let me briefly illustrate in relation to community forestry. For some time community forestry was one of the darlings of NGO and academic activists in Thailand. Lately it

seems to have receded from the agenda somewhat as their attentions have been diverted by Thaksin and his “populist” policies. There is some irony in this shift. Activists have long argued that farmers are capable resource managers and that their longstanding skills in relation to land, forest and water management should be respected in national legislation. But when Thaksin gave villagers cash (in the form of the village fund and various enterprise promotion schemes) the advocates of farmer capability were appalled. Farmers, it seems, are fine managers of forest but money is another thing altogether. In this rather odd world-view *phum panyaa* (local wisdom) and cash just don’t mix. Who knows, farmers may even be silly enough to spend some of their money in these foreign-owned shopping malls that are popping up everywhere!

In this sense some of the ideological groundwork for the coup, and its rejection of the rights of rural voters, has been laid by the longstanding campaign for rural empowerment.

## **Alternatives**

So, is there an alternative approach? Here I want to make three points.

First, I propose a primary engagement with the aspirations of rural people. For too long rural studies in Thailand have been framed by a middle class nostalgic preoccupation with lost community. (Of course, Thailand is not alone in this!) I am not suggesting that this sense of nostalgia is completely absent among rural people but it needs to be placed in the context of aspirations that are increasingly oriented towards external economic, political and cultural systems. A particularly important issue is rural people’s aspirations for education and the commonly voiced desire for their children to find employment outside the agricultural sector. I would propose placing these desires for economic and spatial diversity in livelihood strategies at the centre of analysis. A desire for education, urban employment and lifestyle improvement needs to be placed at the core of contemporary rural culture and not marginalised as some sort of false consciousness that is inconsistent with “sufficiency” thinking.

Second, there is a need to reassess the common imagery associated with rural commercialization. Commercialisation is regularly identified as a driving force behind

environmental degradation, cultural decline and social disruption. Of course, it would be naïve to deny the negative impacts of commercial agriculture and wage labour. But it is equally important to recognise the diverse ways in which rural households forge livelihoods through active engagement with different parts of the capitalist economy. Rural studies in the region would benefit from greater attention to the ways in which the economic activities of rural households are active drivers of processes of commercialisation and capitalist expansion, rather than simply relying on the common image of capitalism “penetrating” the countryside.

Third, I propose an alternative approach to the state. The image of the “state” standing opposed to the “community” simply does not reflect the aspirations of many rural people to actively engage with state power and state resources. There is a need for much more attention to the processes of “stateship” through which diverse forms of social interaction contribute to projects of state-making. The state is present in the village not just through processes of centrally-driven “incorporation” or “territorialisation” but through local people actively participating in processes of development, simplification and regulation.

Of course these are three very brief and schematic points. But I do think they may point the way to an approach to rural empowerment that provides a much broader umbrella of legitimacy that incorporates a more diverse set of rural livelihoods and lifestyles. A broader recognition of the legitimate role of rural people in economic and political life will, hopefully, encourage greater acceptance of the legitimacy of their political voice.

### **Bibliography**

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