

# Thailand's Assembly of the Poor: background, drama, reaction

*Chris Baker*<sup>1</sup>

In Thailand in the early 1990s, several new organizations appeared to represent rural demands. Their emergence reflected a relaxation of Cold War era repression, but also a transformation in the rural political economy which brought village and city closer together, and which created new groups and leaders with a rural base but with exposure to the urban economy and culture. In 1995, this movement split. Groups of more secure farmers joined lobby-style organizations which exploited opportunities opening up in parliamentary politics. Groups of less secure farmers networked together as the Assembly of the Poor under a strategy of mass agitation. The Assembly's campaigns took place not only in the village and on the street but in the public space created by the media and public debate. In 1997, the Assembly's 99-day protest in Bangkok won unprecedented concessions. Subsequently, the urban-biased Democrat Party government reversed these concessions, provoking a new debate on rural strategy. This article sets the Assembly in the debate on rural popular movements.

The emergence of the Assembly of the Poor (*Samatcha khon chon*) has been one of the most striking political events in Thailand in the 1990s. The agitations which led up to the foundation of the Assembly in December 1995 were the first major assertion of a rural political voice since the suppression of the Peasants' Federation (*Sahaphan chao na chao rai*) twenty years earlier. The Assembly's chosen name, its decentralized network style of organization, its diffuse leadership, and its espousal of both local battles and global issues, represent a break from previous forms of rural politics. In February–May 1997, the Assembly led a 99-day demonstration in Bangkok which won concessions from government unprecedented in scale and content. The (qualified) success of this event can be measured by the subsequent reaction. The Chuan

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Pasuk Phongpaichit, Kanoksak Kaewthep, Praphat Pintoptaeng, the journal's anonymous reader, and several participants in the Assembly's campaigns.

Leekpai government (1997– ) was provoked into a fierce campaign of suppression. The official mind reacted in some places by reviving the anti-communist discourse to intimidate rural protest (for example Pasuk, 1999:1–2). The Ministry of Interior suddenly discovered a new interest in rural uplift.

The emergence of such a new and powerful force has provoked debate on its origins and political significance. Yet at present this debate is conducted in an elusive, indirect way. Fundamentally, there are two main positions.<sup>2</sup> The most detailed study of the Assembly, by Praphat Pintoptaeng (1998),<sup>3</sup> drew its theoretical approach from studies of new social movements (NSM) in the West, and in particular from the ‘political process’ model popular in the United States. Praphat explained the Assembly’s emergence and success in terms of three main elements: the ‘political opportunity’ which opened up with the decline of Cold War repression; the adoption of an organizational model based on loose networking; and the building of alliances, particularly with middle-class pressure groups, on the common ground of environmentalism.

Praphat’s approach emphasizes the Assembly as a *new* political phenomenon. The second approach to understanding the Assembly, by contrast, strives to emphasize the continuities between the Assembly and Thailand’s earlier history of peasant protest. In this version, the Assembly is the latest iteration of a long-standing struggle between peasant and state. This struggle changes in form through different historical eras – runaway *phrai*, millennial revolts, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) insurgency, the Peasants’ Federation of Thailand. But the essence of the struggle remains constant (Kanoksak, 1997).

The difference between these two approaches reflects a much larger debate over the origins, nature, strategy, and prospects of popular political

<sup>2</sup> A third approach focuses on the term ‘civil society’. In 1997, Suthy Prasatset (1997:97) enthusiastically concluded: ‘The Assembly of the Poor is one of the leading movements in the struggle to strengthen civil society’. But civil society is a slippery term, and in the late 1990s was often appropriated for a particular urban and middle-class view of political change. In a review of the Assembly in one of the many volumes on civil society in this period, Sorot Sirisai (1999:282) concluded: ‘Finally this essay tries to answer the question always in my mind whether the association of villagers in the shape of the Assembly of Smallscale Farmers of the Northeast and the Assembly of the Poor achieves the objectives of association in the form of “civil society” or not. Let me answer briefly: no.’ Sorot did not go on to justify this conclusion. Suthy (1997:98) had predicted: ‘The Thai middle classes almost in total will need a long time before they understand or support the movement of the Assembly of the Poor.’

<sup>3</sup> Praphat’s book carries an enthusiastic, legitimating foreword by one of Thailand’s leading political scientists, Prudhisan Jumbala (see also Prudhisan, 1998).

movements in the contemporary world, and in particular within societies which still have a large, poor agrarian population. One side in this debate argues that 'new' forms of political organization and struggle reflect the 'new' conditions of the post Cold War era. Radical organizations no longer have the backing of an international ideology or international political bloc. They have little prospect of seizing power or overthrowing the state. At the same time, the agenda of political and social organizations has expanded beyond matters of class and power to include environment, gender, and other issues. These changes in the background and objective of these movements are reflected in new forms of organizing (networks rather than parties), new tactics (everyday forms of resistance, wars of position), and new ideologies revolving around culture, identity, and community.

In reply, many of the old left have argued that this emphasis on 'newness' and on non-political aspects amounts to a form of political defeatism. They contend that the NSM approach unduly down-plays the role of class. More pointedly, they argue that the NSM approach, particularly when conflated with postmodernist forms of analysis, leads to poor political strategy – concentrating on local struggles, community autonomy, and inward-looking cultural revival, while ignoring the expanding domination of the state and global forces. Henry Veltmeyer argued that the NSM theories result in 'intellectual immobilization and political demobilization' (Veltmeyer, 1997:141). Tom Brass contended that the movements' emphasis on local autonomy 'represents a retreat, amounting to abandoning the field of battle to the enemy' (Brass, 1995[a]:19). He argued that the combination of postmodern forms of analysis, ideologies of community and culture, and the abandonment of socialism resulted in 'populist movements proclaiming resistance/empowerment on the basis of a romantic anti-capitalism, anti-modernity, nationalism, even fascism' (Brass, 1995[b]: 263).

Since this debate was joined in such clashing terms in the early 1990s, both sides have modified their positions. From the NSM side, Latin American theorists admitted that they too readily adopted theoretical approaches from Europe, and that they needed to give more attention to the class basis and the importance of politics. But they reasserted the belief that both political economy and political strategy had been radically altered by changes in the international context (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998). From the left, writers such as Veltmeyer (1997) argued that class categories should be retained, but 'in a radically different form from that analysed and theoretically constructed in traditional

marxist analysis', taking into account new local social realities and international links. In a survey of recent agrarian movements in India, Terry Byres admitted that much had to be seen as 'new' since in recent years 'agency had passed from "peasants" to "farmers"; the central focus of rural agitation had shifted from land to prices; the essential agitational form was a non-party one; and distinctive forms of agitation were employed . . . with a broadening of agenda and ideology, to include the environment and women's issues' (Byres, 1995:2).

This essay is an attempt to broaden the understanding of the Assembly of the Poor. It does not deal with the Assembly's organization and internal history, or with the details of the 99-day demonstration. These matters have already been covered elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Instead this essay looks at four less well-appreciated aspects of the Assembly's emergence: changes in rural society; the division between the Assembly and other new rural organizations; the evolving 'public drama' of rural protest in the 1990s; and the government reaction in the aftermath of the 99-day protest.

### **Peasant politics without peasants**

The Assembly of the Poor is at heart a classic peasant struggle over rights to resources of land, water, and forests. However, it differs radically from peasant movements of earlier eras. Peasants are not what they were. The emergence of the Assembly reflects not only a widening of the space available for peasant politics but also the appearance of a new political economy of the Thai peasantry or post-peasantry.

Robert Elson (1997) has argued that the peasant disappeared from the South East Asian landscape around the middle of the twentieth century. Elson defined peasants as rural dwellers whose economy was very largely oriented to subsistence and localized systems of exchange (xix–xx), and whose social and political horizons were correspondingly local. Over the last century, they have been transformed:

[They] still live in the countryside, but not with the permanence, rural focus, and sense of local identity their forebears had. . . . They sell the great bulk of what they produce, they produce it to sell, and they purchase the great bulk of what they use. . . . They work outside the village. . . . Their culture is not just that of the village but of the nation and the world (xxii).

Within this overall picture, however, it is worth making a couple of qualifications about timing and differential impact in the Thai case. For

<sup>4</sup> Especially by Praphat (1998) in Thai and the summary in English in Prudhisan (1998).

Elson, the peasantry disappeared as a result of commercialization, particularly of rice farming, which gathered pace from the late nineteenth century and was largely complete by the Second World War. Thailand certainly experienced such commercialization, but the impact was circumscribed. It was limited to the larger, land-secure, and entrepreneurial farmers in long-settled zones (central plains, northern valleys). Many smaller peasants escaped from this process by joining the massive post-1950 movement of land colonization in Thailand's dry uplands areas. They experienced a phase of re-peasantization which ended only when the urban economy accelerated and the land frontier closed a generation later in the 1980s (Pasuk and Baker, 1995:chapter 2).

Moreover, the processes which finally integrated Thailand's smaller peasants, upland colonists, and rural labourers into a commercial economy were very different from Elson's commercialization of rice farming. The two main processes were the growth of rural-urban labour migration, and the expansion of communications. While neither happened overnight, both processes expanded significantly in the 1980s.

In the 1970s, the Bangkok migration first pulled in the landless villagers from the adjacent rice zone in the central plain. But by 1980, the major source of migrants had become the upland zones in the north and (especially) the north-east. The process was complex. Many rotated regularly between city and village on the rhythm of the agrarian calendar. By the 1990s, villages in this zone would typically cite that 50-70 per cent of household heads were absent in the dry season. Many teenagers went to the city as much as a rite of passage as an income-generating activity. When the urban economy boomed after 1985, more stayed for a longer time or shifted permanently. Precise numbers are difficult. One demographic estimate reckoned that 1.1 million people in the 15-30 age range had disappeared from the north-east between 1980 and 1990 (Lewis, 1995). In 1995, the transport ministry reckoned that two million people travelled back from Bangkok to the north-east for the Songkran holiday alone.

The expansion of cheap communications also narrowed the gap between village and city over the 1980s. The improvement of the road network made almost anywhere accessible to Bangkok by overnight bus. Local assembly made 2-stroke motorcycles so affordable that half of all rural families owned one by 1992, and 71 per cent by 1996. The rural TV broadcast network was expanded rapidly from the mid-1980s

while TV set costs dropped in the same period. Rural TV ownership increased from 30 to 70 per cent over the 1980s and exceeded 90 per cent by the mid-1990s (data from Deemar media surveys).

Elson's post-peasant emerges around mid-century and is a commercial rice farmer. Certainly, such figures populate Thailand's central plain and other zones of relatively secure rice production. But through the one-crop, rain-fed zone – the majority of the area and population – the Thai post-peasant emerges rather later, in the 1980s, and is a different figure. His calendar is divided into a subsistence season and a cash season. During the rainy season, his objective is to grow rice to meet the family's subsistence needs, with only a subsidiary hope of some surplus for sale. During the dry season, his objective is to raise cash. This might be through cash-cropping, wage labour on the sugar harvest, or even hunting and gathering. But more and more this cash search has been directed towards rural–urban migration. Meanwhile he is constantly in communication with urban Thailand through his motorbike, his TV, the bus service, and the connections with migrant kin and neighbours. The Thai post-peasant straddles city and village, subsistence and commercial economies.

Elson implies that the end of peasant economics also meant the end of peasant society and peasant politics. Certainly in the Thai case, the classic form of isolated peasant community has disappeared. Certainly too, the peasant protests which reflected and often defended this isolation – the so-called millenarian revolts – have faded away. But Elson's argument stops at the interesting point: what came next?

The Assembly of the Poor is a direct reflection of the new hybrid political economy of Thailand's peasant mass. The majority of those involved come from poor, insecure areas (see below). They depend on the urban economy for a significant (probably a majority) share of their income. Yet they are reluctant to abandon a rural base, for reasons which probably include rational self-interest (long-term welfare) as well as cultural and social ties. The leaders of the new rural politics of the 1990s reflect this blend of rural and urban experience. Bamrung Kayotha, the movement's most prominent early leader, was an early migrant from the north-east to Bangkok in the 1970s. He had an urban political education through trade union activities in the Siam Cement Group and through participation in the 1973–76 agitations. He later returned to the north-east and took up agriculture and political activism. Prawian Boonnak, a Loei leader assassinated in 1995, had trained as a teacher in Udon Thani town, spent some time with the CPT, worked as a teacher,

and stood as a parliamentary candidate. Nakhon Sriwiphat also trained and worked as a teacher and spent time with the CPT. He then went on to take an open university degree and work for an NGO in the city slums before returning home and involving himself in rural organizations.

Sorot (1999:273–76) notes that the north-eastern peasant movement was transformed in the mid-1990s when sons of peasants who had trained as teachers or lawyers returned and supplanted city-based NGO workers. In 1995, some forty teachers were reported as ‘core members’ of the north-eastern peasant movement (*Bangkok Post*, 1 February 1995). Praphat (1998:102–04) conducted an interview survey with 268 leaders of the Assembly. Eighty per cent of them had worked outside the village, especially in Bangkok and as overseas migrant labour in the Middle East.

In sum, the emergence of the Assembly is a direct result of the development of a new rural political economy, and this is reflected in the background and life-experience of its leaders. The central goals of the Assembly are to gain better rights over the land, water, and forest resources required to sustain a semi-subsistence local economy. Yet the strategy of the movement reflects a sophisticated appreciation of the wider (national) political economy. Often this sophistication is attributed to the role of urban NGOs. Yet in reality, the Assembly acquired its distinctive organizational form and strategic direction at the point when leaders with a rural origin and urban experience took over the key roles.<sup>5</sup>

### **Class division beyond class**

The Assembly does not represent the Thai (post-)peasantry as a whole but a specific segment. This segment cannot be defined using classic categories such as landlord and tenant (as landlordism has historically

<sup>5</sup> James Petras (1997:19–20) identified a similar process in Latin America: ‘. . . the new peasants are former workers, particularly miners, displaced because of plant or mine closures, or they were peasants one generation earlier. In other cases, they are the “excess” sons and daughters of peasants who entered religious institutions, became involved in the rural struggles, and abandoned the Church to lead the struggle for land reform. In many cases, they are daughters of small peasants with primary or secondary education, who join and sometimes lead land occupations rather than migrate to the cities to work as domestic servants. The “new peasantry”, especially those who are leading the struggle, travel to the cities, participate in seminars and leadership training schools, and engage in political debates. In a word, even as they are rooted in the rural struggle, live in land settlements and engage in agricultural cultivation, they have a cosmopolitan vision.’ Thanks to the journal’s reader for this comparison.

been a minor factor in Thai political economy)<sup>6</sup> or a division into rich, middle, and small peasants. The Thai post-peasantry has been divided by the very uneven impact of commercialization and its attendant bundle of civic and legal rights.

It is difficult to generalize about Thai rural structure because of the huge variation. One way to manage this variation is to portray it as a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum is the advanced commercial farmer. He is found throughout the Chaophraya river system, and in smaller pockets elsewhere. His forebears have been engaged in commercial farming for a century and a half. He is highly entrepreneurial and market-sensitive. He has secure land rights, and faces only moderate year-to-year seasonal variations. The ownership and management structure of his farm may be highly complex. His production is relatively capital-intensive because of the use of machinery and expensive inputs. He is a long-time client of the government's agricultural bank. His main concern is pricing – of capital goods, inputs, outputs, and credit.

At the other end of the spectrum is the late frontiersman who colonized new land in the few years before the closure of the frontier in the late 1980s. His land is classified as 'forest' or (worse) 'protected area', and hence he has no secure land title and faces the threat of dislodgement by official or speculator. His land is in an ecologically precarious zone of unreliable rainfall, poor soil, and susceptibility to erosion. He has had neither the time nor opportunity to generate a capital fund, and has no access to government loans because he has no land title for collateral. His cultivation strategy is to minimize input costs and hence minimize his risk exposure to moneylender capital. In addition, there is also a strong chance he comes from a minority group – either a hill people or one of the lowland groups that have never been fully absorbed into modern Thai state culture and have been gradually pushed towards the periphery on the outer edge of the advancing frontier. Equally there is a chance that he has a history of involvement in the protest politics of the periphery, including participation in the CPT-led resistance of the 1970s. Finally his remote area attracts the designers of dams, pipelines, waste disposal sites, and other projects which enclose land and water resources. In sum, his position is highly *insecure* because of uncertain rights in land, poor access to capital, susceptibility to seasonal variation,

<sup>6</sup> In 1983, only 11 per cent of land was held by landholders, mostly concentrated around old political centres in the central plain and north. Since then, land speculation has probably inflated this figure, but there is no recent estimate.

cultural marginalization, political history, and the likelihood of being displaced by infrastructure projects.

Between these two ends of the spectrum, there are various intermediate forms. Plotting the profile of groups along the spectrum is difficult. In the early 1990s, it was reckoned that around a quarter of all farming families lacked land rights because they were settled on 'forest' land. Since then, some of these have been legitimated under the government's *SPK* land schemes, and some have negotiated stand-off arrangements with local authorities. Others abandoned poor land and went to the city while urban labour demand was good (but often retained a residual village base). Large numbers remain in 'protected areas' where land rights are consistently denied. Probably ten to fifteen per cent of all farming families are still huddled at the wrong end of this spectrum.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are moderate numbers of very secure farmers who have sizeable landholdings in zones with good water supply and easy market access, particularly in the central region. Then there are much larger numbers who are in an intermediate site on the spectrum. These are found in the northern valleys, where most of the landholdings are small, and in the north-east, where even the more developed areas are confined to one crop a year, and liable to large variations in rainfall and flooding.

Two groups have figured strongly in the new rural politics of the 1990s. First there are those at the far 'insecure' end of the spectrum. Second there are those in an intermediate position – with a secure asset base and high involvement in the commercial economy, and yet with high vulnerability to climate and market. Both of these groups are concentrated mainly in the north and especially the north-east. The different backgrounds of these two groups have shaped different politics.

Rural protests emerged from the mid-1980s as parliament replaced military dictatorship and the military-run vigilante network gradually faded into the background. Initially protests were highly localized and involved conflicts and negotiations with local officials. The build-up of NGOs in the late 1980s, and the increased attention to rural protests in the press, gradually built linkages between local movements and local groups. In the early 1990s, several new supra-local organizations appeared. The most important were the Assembly of Smallscale Farmers of the North-East (*So Ko Yo Oo*) formed in March 1992 and the Northern Farmers Network (*Kho Ko No*) formed in early 1994 (Pratuang, 1996; Jarin, 1995; Sorot, 1999).

The protests of the early 1990s were of two types, roughly reflecting

the different interests of the two groups outlined above. The first set of protests were basically about income issues. They involved attempts to alter the pricing of agricultural inputs (credit, fertilizers) and outputs (crops) by bargaining with the market and the state. Most involved specific groups of cultivators (rubber, garlic, cassava), but the dispute which found a wider constituency and attracted public attention focused on the fall-out from failed agricultural development schemes. Government agencies had promoted the schemes and induced villagers to take out loans from the government agricultural bank (BAAC) to participate. When the schemes failed, villagers demanded that the government take responsibility for the remaining debt. The most famous scheme involved the import of Australian breeding cattle which turned out to be infertile and were dubbed 'plastic cows'. Others involved crops promoted in ecologically inappropriate areas (cashew) and crops which could not be profitably marketed (red millet).

The second set of protests focused on insecurity issues, particularly over access to land, water, and forests. Many involved dams. Several groups who had been displaced by dams had never received compensation (in land or money), largely because of official intransigence. Other groups faced imminent displacement by new dam projects. Another subset of protests involved access to forests. After the end of the communist insurgency, government launched policies to 'reforest' large areas through commercial tree plantations. These plantation concessions often closed off areas which villagers had formerly used for collecting food, herbal medicines, firewood, natural manure, and saleable forest produce. Another sub-set involved land rights. During the massive upland frontier expansion from 1950 onwards, large numbers (estimates ran up to twelve million people) had settled in areas which government officially defined as 'forest'. Government refused to grant land rights, and from the mid-1980s various government agencies launched schemes to resettle people out of these forest areas. The largest protest of this type erupted in 1991–92, when the army laid a plan (*Kho Cho Ko*) to move six million settlers out of 1,250 'forest' areas, and began implementing the plan with brute force – dismantling villages, burning crops, manhandling people (Local Development Institute, 1992; Chai-Anan and Kusuma, 1992; Pasuk, Sungsidh, and Nualnoi, 1996).

In the early 1990s, these two types of protest worked in alliance. The coincidence of the army resettlement scheme and the failed agriculture schemes provided the background for the surge in organization building. Groups of both types found a common cause in opposition to a

proposed 'national agricultural council' (*sapha kaset haeng chat*) on the grounds that it would favour state and agribusiness at the expense of the individual peasant. *So Ko Yo Oo*, founded on 6 March 1992, emerged as the champion of both income and insecurity issues. In 1994 and 1995 it spearheaded protests which highlighted both types of complaint.

But in 1995–96 the alliance split. At one level this split appeared as a typical leadership dispute. Bamrung Kayotha, who had become the most high-profile rural leader since the mid-1970s, resigned from the general secretary post of *So Ko Yo Oo* in November 1995 amid talk of mismanagement and corruption. A month later he helped to form the Assembly of the Poor. But at a deeper level, this was a much more fundamental split between two different causes and two different groups of people. From this point on, the more settled farmers and the income disputes were represented by organizations descended from *So Ko Yo Oo*, while the more insecure peasants grouped under the Assembly of the Poor. The division was far from exact. Politics (and especially rural politics) are rarely so neat. But there were two distinct approaches to organization and strategy which reflected the background difference in political economy.

The income agenda moved away from protest and agitation towards a strategy of negotiation with local officialdom and with government. The new leader of *So Ko Yo Oo*, Nakhon Sriwiphat, publicly announced he would work through negotiation with politicians rather than through demonstrations (Sorot, 1999:275). The organization built alliances into national politics, especially with Chavalit Yongchaiyudh's New Aspiration Party which was increasingly projecting itself as a north-eastern party with a popular, rural base. *So Ko Yo Oo* fragmented, partly because of leadership disputes, partly because of the new and divisive factor of political patronage, and partly because of the variety of local issues. Several new organizations appeared with a similar style and strategy (Praphat, 1998:58–60).<sup>7</sup> These different units bickered among themselves, but also co-operated on key issues, and usually distanced themselves from the Assembly of the Poor and its agitational approach. Besides negotiating with government, they also launched various self-help schemes of income enhancement, including local credit schemes, livestock development, and subsidiary income projects. Within the income agenda of negotiation, the key issue became debt, specifically the

<sup>7</sup> *So Ko Yo Oo* broke into three parts, while three other major groups appeared, including the *Munniti Kasetakon Thai* (Thai Farmers Foundation), led by Asoke Prasanson. See *The Nation*, 5 February and 24 June 1998.

high level of debt to the government agricultural bank, not only as a result of failed schemes but more generally because of the rising costs and market uncertainties of cultivation. In June 1998 and again in February 1999, these organizations mounted campaigns for a moratorium on agricultural debt.

While the Assembly of the Poor drew in some fishermen, industrial workers, and slum groups as allies, the core of the network consisted of the insecure peasant groups, and their core agenda concerned land, dams, and forests.<sup>8</sup> Most originated in the north-east and to a lesser extent the north, either in hill areas or upland zones of relatively recent colonization.<sup>9</sup> While the income groups adopted a classic party or association form of organization (president, general secretary, membership dues), the Assembly built a decentralized network with no central office-holders, and only a skeletal secretariat (of NGO workers) to process basic administration (calling meetings, distributing documents). Each participating local group contributed a *pho khrua yai* (group father/head) who met in assembly to debate overall strategy. The chosen name, Assembly of the Poor, deliberately emphasized this form of organization. *Samatcha* means an assembly, coming-together, or conference.<sup>10</sup> This decentralized form reflected a commitment to localism, but was also influenced by the known vulnerability of rural leaders to violence, intimidation, and political co-optation. The Assembly sought no political links, and party politicians kept a firm distance. However, the agenda of land, dams, and forests provided a platform for co-operation with environmental groups and a basis for more sympathetic press coverage than was generally available to the *So Ko Yo Oo* farmer associations. The term 'Poor' in the organization's title reflected this strategy. It not only marked a break from old ideological camps of the past but also provided a constant, accusing reminder of the widening income gap between rich and poor. The Assembly's strategy focused on large non-violent agitational campaigns to overcome the deep-seated structural biases which created the asset insecurity underlying the poverty of large parts of the population.

<sup>8</sup> The 125 'problems' presented to government at the start of the 1997 protest broke down as follows: land and forests, 93; government schemes, 5; dams, 16; slums, 8; and one each on alternative agriculture, health and safety in the workplace, and small-scale fishing. See Praphat (1998:73).

<sup>9</sup> The 125 'problems' broke down by region as follows: north-east, 74; north, 37; south, 2; central, 2; Bangkok, 6; other, 2. See Praphat (1998:73 and map on 72).

<sup>10</sup> *Samatcha* is also the term used to translate the UN General Assembly into Thai. Sometimes the organization has been translated as 'Forum of the Poor', but 'Assembly' is its own preference.

In sum, the rising rural politics of the early 1990s split along a dividing line in the rural political economy. The Assembly of the Poor emerged as the organization of peasant groups that had been at the outer edges of the frontier colonization movement, and that faced multiple forms of insecurity. They adopted a name and organizational style which marked a deliberate break from both the 'party' format of the CPT days, and the 'lobby' format of the more secure farmers' new organizations.<sup>11</sup>

## The theatre of non-violent war

The power of the soldier is the gun. The power of the businessman is money. . . . From the experience of the poor, the power of the poor is their feet.<sup>12</sup>

The Assembly was formed to provide a basis for co-operation between dispersed local movements but also to provide a mechanism for bargaining with the central state. Hence the Assembly's activities encompassed both local campaigns and national campaigns. Local campaigns were staged within the space and the culture of local society.<sup>13</sup> But the national campaigns had to be staged within the modern and postmodern political space of national politics and electronic media. While these campaigns were in essence negotiations between village and state, the negotiations were carried out in the view of a national audience – and particularly an audience of the politically-aware, media-viewing segment of the urban population. This audience became an essential part of the campaign drama.

This aspect of the theatre of contemporary politics is often ignored, and is not easy to analyse. What follows is an experimental account, which focuses on one particular aspect of this public negotiation – the equivocal role of violence in the public drama of protest.

Any rural movement of political assertion in Thailand is set against a history of state violence. Most recently, the Peasants' Federation of 1974–

<sup>11</sup> To add to the groupuscule complexity, one of the major *So Ko Yo Oo* fragments, usually called *So Ko Yo Oo I*, led by Nakhon Sriwiphat, also belongs on the 'insecure' side of the split, and often worked in alliance with the Assembly. In early 1999, *So Ko Yo Oo I* was involved in the 'land invasion' of Dong Larn forest to draw attention to issues of land rights and land access.

<sup>12</sup> Wiraphon Sopha interviewed on 10 March 1997, quoted in Praphat (1998:150).

<sup>13</sup> See for instance the account of Bamrung Kayotha's mediation of a dispute between villagers and police in Kalasin in 1998 (Madsen, unpublished). This account is enhanced and coloured by the fact that the writer is accustomed to studying India and hence tends to highlight the very local character of the negotiation which would be missed by a more experienced Thai specialist.

76 was dispersed by a campaign of selective assassinations. In the early 1990s, four leaders of the emergent rural movement were shot dead – one by an assistant village headman and one by a policeman.<sup>14</sup>

After the insurgency collapsed in the early 1980s, there was a strong reaction against the CPT strategy of armed insurrection, and more generally against the role of violence as an instrument of political struggle. Intellectuals criticized the CPT for pitching a weakly organized rural base against a powerful central state. Others regretted the social division and violence which had characterized the late 1970s. The first NGOs were formed by ex-radicals who hoped to find an alternative to the politics of confrontation. The NGO movement developed around a philosophy of non-violent action.

But rural protest involves confrontation. The challenges to government authority, and the official response, contained an implicit aggression. In the public drama of these politics, this aggression was expressed in military metaphors of invasion, siege, and battle. However, this was warfare in which the role of violence was inverted.

### *Invasion*

In June 1992, the groups protesting against the army's mass land resettlement scheme convened at Khon Kaen, the unofficial capital of the north-east. They had appealed to the army and to the provincial authorities without success, and resolved to direct their final protest at the government in Bangkok. To get there, they decided to march.

The route from Khon Kaen to Bangkok was a passage from periphery to centre, from the Lao territories gradually annexed by Bangkok during the nineteenth century to the heart of the Ayudhya-Bangkok-Siam-Thai state. The critical boundary was the Dongphyayen, the steep escarpment falling down from the north-east plateau to the Chaophraya deltaic

<sup>14</sup> Sangiam Tomjai-od was killed at a rally in Kamphaeng Phet in 1993. Prawian Boonnak was shot in Loei on 11 July 1995; the assassin was an assistant village headman, and the gun belonged to a police officer. Prawian had recently led successful protests to close three stone-grinding quarries, and had unsuccessfully opposed the quarry-owner in parliamentary elections. See *Thai Rath*, 12 July 1995, and *Bangkok Post*, 13, 22, and 23 July 1995. Jun Bunkhunthot was shot in Chaiyaphum by a policeman who claimed it was an accident during a raid on a marijuana patch. Jun was active in opposing the Phong Khun Petch dam and had just demanded removal of the village headman for his involvement in rackets by land speculators. The local police chief stated: 'These locals and the Forum of the Poor use their group to pressure government and force it to surrender to their requests. They are obstacles to government', *Bangkok Post*, 4 August 1996. Thongin Kaewwattha was killed in early 1996 during protests against the Genco waste treatment project in Rayong.

plain. For centuries, the central plain based government had placed a key garrison at Saraburi, just below the pass. Troops had marched on Bangkok along this route during the Boworadej rebellion in 1933, and again during the suppression of the April Fools Day coup in 1981. More importantly, the last time the periphery had marched on the centre along this route was Chao Anou of Vientiane in 1827 (Mayoury and Pheuiphanh, 1998). Whatever the truth of this event, it is written into the school history books as an invasion, a *khabot* (revolt), an attempt to seize and overthrow Bangkok.

Into this historical background of armed invasions, the Assembly marchers in 1992 inserted a foreground display of peace and loyalty. The march was headed by a group of old ladies. Some carried national flags and large pictures of the king and queen as direct affirmation of loyalty and as denial of any attempt at *khabot*. Some danced, a further affirmation of peace, recalling the tradition of old women dancing at the head of festival processions in the north-east. This delicate mix of political messages was highly effective. The government dispatched a junior minister by helicopter. In negotiations beside the highway, he agreed to kill the *Kho Cho Ko* resettlement scheme on condition that the march dispersed.

The 1992 march had been a largely spontaneous response to the threat of mass forced evictions. But the success of the strategy was proven. In 1994, the north-eastern groups repeated the strategy but with two major differences. First, this time the march was planned as a deliberate attempt to force government's attention to a long list of north-eastern rural grievances, including both income complaints (debt, failed agricultural schemes, prices) and insecurity complaints (dams, land, forests). Second, the groups assembled at Lamtakong, a flat plain half-way down the Dongphyayen escarpment, less than half the distance from Khon Kaen to Bangkok, and right at the entrance to the final pass down to the Chaophraya plain. The press recognized the site's strategic importance in language which recalled the region's old pattern of marauding warfare. *The Nation* (12 February 1995) called it a 'haven and stronghold', 'a launching pad for political trouble', with good supplies of food and water and convenient routes for dispersal in the face of attack. Government again responded urgently and with a military sense of strategy. It ordered police to seize the villagers' cavalry of *i-taen* trucks.<sup>15</sup> When the marchers continued on foot, the police blockaded bridges and seized

<sup>15</sup> *I-taen* is a modern version of a bullock cart with the bullock replaced by an all-purpose diesel engine.

the vehicle carrying food supplies. Finally government dispatched the agriculture minister to talk with the marchers and convey their demands to the cabinet. The government agreed to form a committee to evaluate the demands. The march dispersed.

A year later, in January 1995, after this mechanism had produced no result, the protest groups again assembled at centres around the north-east and then converged on the encampment at Lamtakong. They demanded negotiation at ministerial level. They waited twelve days until their numbers had risen to 8,000 and then began to march. Again government responded to maintain the central/north-east border unbreached. A minister was dispatched to the protest site. The pattern was repeated again in early 1996. Groups from the outer north-east assembled at Sakon Nakhon before moving to Korat en route for Bangkok. Two ministers and a bunch of senior officials rushed up by helicopter to head them off before the pass (*Bangkok Post*, 2 and 25 February 1996).<sup>16</sup>

### *Siege*

The stretch of road alongside Khlong Prem Prachakon in Bangkok behind Government House had long been used by the police to site protest groups, but usually in small numbers for short periods. In April 1996, the Assembly of the Poor brought several thousand to occupy this site for three weeks. Government negotiated a quick agreement to dispel the protest, but again the resulting agreement proved worthless. In January 1997, the Assembly brought in 20,000 people by truck, train, and *i-taen* to camp on this site. The siege remained for 99 days. If a historical parallel were now required, it would be the repeated Burmese sieges of the old capital of Ayudhya.

But the siege strategy was double-edged. Moving the location of this periphery-centre warfare to the heart of the capital also meant an upward shift in media attention and public anxiety. The protest itself came under siege by the media. The press reported daily. Television ran regular news stories and shot interviews and talk shows from inside the siege encampment. The attitude of the electronic audience now had a bearing on the moral right of the Assembly to engage in such negotiations with government. The behaviour of the siege camp was subject to public scrutiny. Any 'incident' would quickly change the media tone and disperse

<sup>16</sup> The leaders took pains to emphasize the non-violent aspect of this strategy. Bamrung Kayotha said: 'In all of our protests, we caused no turmoil in the country. We held peaceful rallies. We didn't block roads or cause traffic [jams].' *The Nation*, 7 February 1995.

public sympathy. Any violence would count as a strategic defeat. The same rules counted for the government defenders. The police were kept at a distance and instructed to minimize violence.

These conditions imposed a need for organization and discipline in the siege encampment. The basic framework of the demonstration was mapped over the Assembly's decentralized pattern. Each participating group was a self-governing unit with a *pho khrua yai* in charge of political activities and a *mae khrua yai* in charge of logistics. Each unit organized its own commissary by importing rice from its home base, supplemented by donations and various hunting-and-gathering activities in the city.<sup>17</sup> Over this 'local' organization was laid a superstructure to take care of watch-and-ward, entertainment, dispute settlement, fund raising, and education.

But excessive good behaviour ran the risk that the demonstration would be forgotten. And, as with earlier sieges, both sides knew that the rains would bring the campaign season to an end. After six weeks, media interest dwindled and negotiations stalled. On 17 March, 20,000 protesters walked round the perimeter of Government House, emphasizing the metaphor of siege. Again, in early May, with the talks deadlocked and rains approaching, the Assembly repeated the encirclement manoeuvre, ending with a blockade of the gates of Government House which penned ministers inside for two-and-a-half hours. An appearance by Samak Sundaravej, a right-wing minister and vocal opponent of the Assembly, provoked a small scuffle. This limited and largely symbolic use of violence proved effective. The prime minister agreed to restore the momentum of negotiations, and the press took heart that the siege would soon be lifted.

Throughout this state of siege, the principle of inverse violence reigned. The Assembly protesters announced their own body counts of dead and injured as victory claims. At the outset of the protest, they claimed six had been hospitalized as a result of stress and Bangkok pollution. Many others complained of fevers and headaches. When three villagers died from heart failure shortly after returning home, it was attributed to 'protest-induced stress' (*The Nation*, 19 February 1997). One participant committed suicide after being intimidated by local officials. Another returned to his home village and jumped to his death from a moving

<sup>17</sup> The organization of the demonstration, and especially the finance and provisioning, is covered in detail by Praphat (1998:chapter 6). Journalists who interviewed Assembly members arriving in Bangkok for this demonstration were first disbelieving and then awe-struck to discover that they were not being paid by anybody.

train, apparently in frustration at the protest's lack of success.<sup>18</sup> A negotiator collapsed on emerging from a meeting. One protester threatened to set himself on fire. Another was photographed with his head in a noose. During the set-piece marches, Assembly members re-enacted these deaths and violent incidents in mini-dramas. On the government side, the same rules of engagement applied. After the scuffle at the blockade, Samak complained that he had been prevented from attending a hospital appointment, while a pregnant protester claimed Samak had trodden on her stomach. At the end of the protest, the Assembly announced the final body count as ten deaths and six miscarriages (*Bangkok Post*, 4 May 1997).

### *Peace treaty*

The Assembly negotiated with government in the style of a peace treaty. In 1996, the Assembly had negotiated with a group of junior ministers from the Banharn government on a list of 47 grievances, resulting in an 18-page treaty document which was ratified as a cabinet resolution. When this format proved as ineffective as earlier agreements with officials and ministers, the 1997 protest insisted on a more complex procedure and negotiation through to final decisions. They began with a list of 125 issues.<sup>19</sup> Twice a week the *pho khrua yai* met with ministers and officials – facing off across long negotiating tables piled with documentation. Each side compiled minutes. The Assembly's NGO and academic helpers served as interpreters, sometimes translating between local dialect and central Thai, more often translating between the style of officialdom and the style of the village. Agreements were solemnly signed in duplicate copies. The event was occasionally recorded for posterity with a ceremonial photograph. The documents were then referred up to the cabinet for ratification, and announced by press release and conference.

In sum, the negotiations between rural protest and the state took place in the public space of the media. The watching and reading observers became an essential part of the negotiation. The confrontation was expressed as a drama of conflict which evolved over the course of five years from invasion, to siege, to peace negotiations. In this public drama, the role of violence was inverted. Injuries received counted as victories,

<sup>18</sup> Punsak Dokkamji, a Karen from Samoeng, threw himself off a moving train after the agriculture minister, Chucheep Harnsawat, had told him there was no chance his group would get land rights; *The Nation*, 7 March 1997. A village headman in Mukdahan shot himself after the amphoe officials had threatened him for not keeping his villagers out of the demonstration; *The Nation*, 19 February 1997.

<sup>19</sup> See notes 8 and 9 on the breakdown.

injuries inflicted as defeats. The achievements of the 99-day demonstration depended in no small measure on the protesters' success in intimidating government without raising the anxiety of the electronic audience beyond a critical threshold. The final act of the protesters before leaving Bangkok was to conduct a *bai si su khwan* ceremony, to settle the spirits and restore harmony.

### **The right to have politics**

Possibly one of the most extraordinary relics of the 1997 protest is found in the funeral commemoration book of ex-premier, Chatichai Choonhavan. The picture, taken at the *wat* in May 1998, shows the Assembly leader, Bamrung Kayotha, and the head of Bangkok Bank, Chatri Sophonpanich, standing side by side for the benefit of the photographer.<sup>20</sup> Bamrung had become a representative figure in public politics in a way that no previous rural leader had achieved.

The concessions won by the Assembly's 99-day siege and peace negotiation covered only a handful of the 125 issues raised in the Assembly's going-in agenda. The most important were: compensation to almost 7,000 families for loss of land and livelihood arising from dam schemes; cancellation of one dam project and review of five others; and three resolutions which ended summary eviction from 'forest' lands and admitted the principle that long-settled groups should be allowed to remain in 'forest' zones. The immediate cost to government, largely from the compensation payments, was 4,657 million baht. Although far short of the Assembly's original agenda, concessions on this scale were totally unprecedented.

More importantly, the event established a precedent for a new form of politics – the peace treaty negotiation – involving groups which had been systematically denied political access in the past. Furthermore, the concessions had broken some constraints of law and procedure which were biased against the poor. Earlier rounds of protest had foundered when bureaucrats argued that demands made by the Assembly were counter to the law – most prominently, the right to reside in areas which the government called 'forest'. At the start of the 99-day negotiations, the Assembly leaders demanded this constraint be lifted, and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh agreed.

Finally, the Assembly had created an organization which did not seem

<sup>20</sup> This appeared in the commercially-sold version of the volume entitled *Amla alai 'Na Chat'* [Farewell to Uncle Chat]. Bamrung is wearing a denim jacket and a tie.

susceptible to the usual tactics of political co-optation. Its leaders were not tied to any 'big' figures. Its finances were meagre and transparent. It was obviously different from the 'organized mobs' which had been an integral part of the politics of coups and military dictators.

However, in the aftermath it became clear that the political space opened up by the Assembly was extremely narrow and vulnerable. While Chavalit was prepared to allow this space, other members of his party and coalition had been openly hostile. Samak's opposition was public knowledge. The interior minister, Snoh Thienthong, had publicly mocked the negotiations at every opportunity. The science minister aired the usual line that the demonstration was an 'organized mob' (*Maitichon*, 1 February 1997). Some ministers had to be pulled away from the negotiating table because their hostility was too obvious.<sup>21</sup> The Bangkok media had been generally sympathetic. But some city residents had complained to phone-in radio that the protesters had disrupted traffic, hindered access to Wat Benchamabophit, and degraded Bangkok's international image.

The Chuan Leekpai government, which succeeded Chavalit in November 1997, deliberately set out to erase the political space secured by the Assembly. In little more than six months, the government reversed out of all the major concessions from the 99-day event.

Chuan retreated behind the barricades of law and bureaucracy. He insisted that laws must be upheld and officials must be in charge. When rural protesters arrived outside Government House in early 1998, Chuan's personal secretary called the leaders 'parasites' and 'opportunists', and said: 'politics and interest groups are major hindrances to easing their [the poor's] plight' (*Bangkok Post*, 4 March 1998). Chuan snubbed the Assembly's attempts to continue negotiations. In early February 1998, groups rallied in the north-east to discuss another march on Bangkok. The government dispatched a minister to negotiate, but the protesters pronounced it 'useless' to talk with someone who lacked the power to solve problems. Government then agreed to set up a series of taskforces to continue negotiation. But this turned out to be a smokescreen. From April, the government began systematically undoing the concessions which the previous government had made to the Assembly. It revoked the promised dam compensation through a cabinet resolution denying any compensation for projects already completed. It launched court

<sup>21</sup> A case in point was Chucheep Harnsawat, the 'meatball king' who was serving as minister of agriculture. 'The villagers feel, after yesterday's meeting with Chucheep, that he has too little knowledge about their problems', Wiraphon Sopha in *The Nation*, 4 February 1997.

proceedings claiming fraud in the case of the Rasi Salai dam where some compensation had already been paid. It cancelled a project for digging reservoirs. It revoked three resolutions allowing settlers to remain in areas of 'official' forest. It laid down that settlers would have to prove they had occupied such areas before 1941. Local officials were emboldened to restart dam projects which had been frozen. The forestry department seized the opportunity to sabotage the passage of a community forestry bill.

As the city became absorbed in the economic crisis from mid-1997 onwards, parts of the press returned to reporting the Assembly as a 'mob' which specialized in conducting disruptive demonstrations for no good reason. Supara Janchitfah noted that her fellow journalists had become bored at the lack of novelty ('They protest against the same old issues'), had resurrected old themes of the paid mob ('I suspect they get paid. I know some politicians are behind these people'), and feared escalation ('if the Government gives them what they want, there will be endless protests') (*Bangkok Post*, 21 June 1998).

The aggression of the Chuan government stemmed from the Democrats' paternalist attitude towards rural society and politics. Over the 1980s and early 1990s, the Democrats evolved from a royalist, conservative party into a party of small and medium businessmen and urban middle class. It adopted a modernist vision of Thailand developing as a prosperous, urbanized society. The continued existence of a large rural society is an embarrassment to this vision. Chuan once stated that the agrarian population should ideally be reduced to 15 per cent of the total (currently around 50 per cent). The Democrats are aware that their urban supporters are reluctant to see rural people gaining more control over resources and more political power which might threaten the urban vision of modernization.<sup>22</sup> Hence the Democrats stand for democratization, but with a heavy urban bias. In parallel they accept with no question the colonial-style administration of the countryside by the Ministry of Interior. The Assembly created an organization whose independence challenged this model, whose demands questioned the morality of existing laws and bureaucratic practices, and whose strategy established a precedent for direct negotiation with the executive. The Democrats' reversal of the Assembly's gains was a reassertion of paternalist control, and a denial of political space for the Assembly's new form of politics.

In meetings of the Assembly and related groups in 1998, when the

<sup>22</sup> On the ideological background, see Pasuk (1999:12–15).

impact of Chuan's offensive against the Assembly had become clear, one major issue was whether the Assembly would have to abandon its strategy of decentralized, peripheral, organization-free organization, and take some role in formal politics. At a meeting of NGOs, activists, and local groups in July,<sup>23</sup> several speakers expressed a wish for some kind of central organization to provide better co-ordination of local movements, and to create a stronger bargaining position with official agencies. Local movements were all very well, the argument went, but they were too easily picked off one by one. At the third anniversary of the Assembly of the Poor in December 1998, Piphob Thongchai questioned whether the Assembly would always remain vulnerable and ultimately powerless, unless it developed some way to enter the formal political process. The answer at both meetings was negative. At the first, Banthorn Ondam (a respected senior NGO leader, formerly an academic) argued that forming a central body would result in splits and discord. At the Assembly meeting, the proposal was not formally addressed. In 1999, the Assembly reverted to the *dao krachai* (scattered stars) strategy of multiple local protests rather than a major event in the city (*Matichon sutsapda*, 4 May 1999:13–14). This move tacitly reasserted the Assembly's commitment to a locality-based organization and strategy.

## Conclusion

The appearance of the Assembly of the Poor, *So Ko Yo Oo*, and other rural groups in Thailand in the 1990s reflected not only the lifting of repression and the enlargement of civil society from an urban base, but also changes in the nature of the Thai peasantry. The disappearance of the peasantry, in the Elsonian sense, has not left a blank space but rather a new kind of hybridized post-peasantry. It retains vestiges of the self-sufficient style of peasant production, side by side with close involvement in the urban economy, largely through the sale of labour. It combines rural residence with constant rural–urban migration, and consumption of national and global culture. It still accounts for over half the population. The end of the peasantry has not meant the end of peasant politics. Rather it has seen the emergence of movements involving people who may derive a majority of their income from the urban economy, but who want to protect the rural base which still serves as their social secu-

<sup>23</sup> The *thammarat* meeting of NGOs and local groups convened by Thirayuth Boonmi, at Chulalongkorn University on 25–26 July 1998.

rity and cultural anchor. The emergence of new rural politics in Thailand in the 1990s was a direct reflection of this new urbanization of the peasantry, the development of leaders who represented this combination of rural roots and urban experience, and the formation of organizations which articulated rural demands with urban-aware strategies.<sup>24</sup>

While this emerging movement, especially in the key area of the northeast and north, maintained a loosely networked unity in the early 1990s, the middle of the decade saw a significant split. This split was not simply a product of leadership squabbles and outside interference (although both were present) but reflected a division within the peasantry between groups with different historical experience, different resource bases, and different agendas for negotiation with the state. The peasantry from more settled zones, whose demands focused on opportunities to increase their income, were being gradually drawn into the expanding world of formal democratic politics (local government, MPs, political parties). The peasantry from marginal areas, whose demands focused on asset insecurity, were drawn into agitational networking to protect, regain, or be compensated for their access to resources of land, water, and forests. These two groupings adopted different strategies and organizational styles. The income groups tested the opportunities opening up in formal parliamentary politics. They organized as pyramid-shaped lobby organizations, bargained with MPs and party leaders, and often attracted accusations of co-optation and corruption. The insecurity groups worked through agitation at both local and national levels. They adopted a loose, flat, networked style of organization with virtually no central structure. They avoided charges of political co-optation, but depended on a fragile ability to intimidate government without alienating urban public opinion.

The Assembly of the Poor is a classic peasant struggle over rights to land, water, and forests. Yet it differs from traditional peasant movements in many important ways. It does not operate only in the political space of a locality, with tenant pitched against landlord or peasant against official in direct localized confrontation. Rather it operates within the political space of the nation (and in some senses, beyond). Its campaigns are played out not only on the street (as Praphat's book title, *Politics on the street*, graphically emphasized), but also in the particular form of political space provided by the media and other platforms of

<sup>24</sup> Also internationally-aware strategies. In 1999, the Assembly forged links with similar organizations in other Asian countries.

political debate. The confrontation between rural protest and government developed over the 1990s as a public drama marked by warlike images of invasion, siege, and treaty negotiation. This confrontation had its own rules of engagement in which the role of violence was inverted.

The challenge which the Assembly represents goes beyond the agenda of specific peasant demands to question some of the conventional limitations of Thailand's democracy. The use of the word 'poor' in the organization's title serves as a constant reminder of the widening rich-poor gap, and of the monopoly of the rich on direct political representation. It challenges the paternalism built into a bureaucracy evolved from absolute monarchy and military dictatorship – a paternalism which has been easily adopted by both establishment 'liberals' and by the dominant political parties such as the Democrats. By using both the street and the mediascape to open up space in national politics for rural demands, the Assembly questions the assumption that the countryside can still be managed through official paternalism. In 1998–99, the Democrat Party government reacted fiercely against this challenge. It overturned the Assembly's gains, closed down the space for negotiation, and led urban opinion to resurrect the discourse of rural protesters as an unruly, threatening 'mob'. This reaction in turn provoked a wide-reaching debate among the Assembly's leaders, participating groups, and sympathizers over strategy and organization.

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