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Prachakhom: Civil Society in Thailand

The Case of Khon Kaen Civic Assembly (KKCA)

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Introduction

In December 1997 upon my return to Thailand after several years of absence, I was struck by a widespread public debate on civil society and good governance (Prawese Wasi 1993, Thirayuth Boonmi 1993, Chai-anand Smudavanija 1996, 1997, Anuchat Poungsomlee and Virabun Visatsakul 1997, Anek Laothamtat 1997, and Thanet Aphornsuvan 1997). The economic crisis beginning in mid-1997 led the public to question the efficiency, impartiality, transparency and accountability of the government administration. Many academics and social activists have called for good governance, which I define as processes through which citizens from various sectors in Thai society indicate their interests, exercise their rights and obligations, and mediate their conflicts and differences. Thus, governance processes refer to building partnerships within government departments and to engaging citizens across sectors in development policy planning and implementation. To achieve this goal, government mechanisms must be reformed.

Political changes on the part of the government sector following the Black May event of 1992 have led to a gradual process of political reform in Thailand. Unlike previous national development plans, in the Eighth National Development Plan (1997-2001), the Thai government has promoted a people’s centered development approach. The government has mandated the establishment of civil society or Prachakhom, a new governance mechanism, which emphasizes state-society partnerships in planning and implementation at the local level.

By 1996 the government through the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) mandated the establishment of Provincial Civic Assemblies (PCAs) or Prachakhom Changwat in four regions² of Thailand. The PCAs were experiments in democratic participatory planning. The Khon Kaen Civic Assembly (KKCA) was created as a test case for the Northeast.

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² These four pilot projects endorsed by the NESDB are in four provinces: Nan for the North, Petchaburi for the Central Plains, Songkhla for the South, and Khon Kaen for the Northeast.
By 1997, the government through the Ministry of Interior mandated the establishment of Tambon Authority Organizations (TAOs). Over 6,000 of the total 7,255 TAOs established throughout the country have been transformed into local authorities that encourage local participation in managing their own development affairs (Opart Panya 1999). Certainly, the establishment of Prachakhom indicates a more open, democratic process of political development in Thailand.

This paper is a result of my research on the KKCA project between April 1998 to April 1999. I examine how the concept of civil society or Prachakhom has been utilized in Thai society, using the KKCA case to illustrate my points. I argue that the creation of Prachakhom was made possible by the middle class, who desired to assert their rights and defend their interests in a democratic way. While the idea of civil society has been coopted and supported by the Thai state, it also provides a new political cultural space for civil society to develop and to contest to meanings and practices of development. That raises the question, however, of whether the middle class would want to share the power they gained with marginalized people at the grassroots level. Since Prachakhom is currently dominated by the middle class and governments, it is unlikely that the forum would represent voices and interests of marginalized people.

The Overall Context of Contemporary Civil Society in Thailand

Thailand has a long experience with centralized bureaucratic administration. In the 1960s and 1970s (with the exception of the period between 1973 and 1976), the Thai state monopolized both institutions and discourses associated with development and modernity. The rise of contemporary civil society is an outcome of the growth of the middle class to contest political cultural space, which was formerly monopolized by the military and civilian bureaucracy. The 14th October 1973 incident marked the origin of

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3 In this paper, I specifically refer to Prachakhom at the provincial level.
4 Although the hegemonic reach of the Thai state is always extensive, it never completes, especially with respect to the media and business.
the civil society movement in Thailand. This event, led by University students, brought together many Thai people from all major sectors of urban society in Bangkok. They clamored for the removal of the military dictatorship that ruled Thailand prior to 1973. After the tragic event of 6th October, 1976, many students, social activists, farmers, workers, and intellectuals fled to the countryside to join the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). A few years later, most of these activists, one after another, left the CPT and returned home to lead their normal lives. Today, many of these people together with other segments of the middle class have held several important positions within the government, academics, business, NGOs, and the media.

In the 1980s, civil society outside the government structure began to grow through the emergence of non-government organizations (NGOs) and grassroots community organizations. By the end of the decade, one could observe the proliferation of many community organizations and people’s forums in both rural and urban areas. Simultaneously, the Thai government in the 1980s became more receptive to different views. In the 1990s, various people’s forums and community networks at the grassroots level in both rural and urban areas began to assert their rights and make their voices heard.

As a result of the Black May event of 1992, the government promulgated the new constitution in October 1997. This new constitution has captured the notion of people’s participation in policy planning and expanded the rights of Thai citizens in many areas. Today, many community organizations and NGOs have played an active role in defending their interests. Development ideology nowadays has become increasingly contested by different groups of citizens. Certainly, within this evolving political process, there is political space for civil society to grow and develop.

Civil Society Today: Concepts and Practices

Although contemporary civil society asserted itself in Thai society since 1973, the term “civil society” emerged only recently in Thai society and has been translated in various ways over the past five years. These terms include Prachakhom (civil society),
Prachasangkhom (civil society), Sangkhom Khemkhaeng (strong society), Sangkhom Prachatham (Dhammic civil society), Sangkhom Pholamuang (citizen society), and Sangkhom Raatsadon (citizen society). All these terms reflect the importance of civil society or community building, and highlight civic engagement in public affairs.

In fact, civil society is not a new phenomenon in Thai society although the terms in Thai were newly created. Many stories in the past have indicated the rise of civil society in opposition to state authorities, such as the case of the Holy Men Rebellions in the Northeast of Siam (or Thailand today) at the turn of the 19th century.

Dr. Kasian Teechapira, a professor of political science at Thammasat University, and a leading social thinker in Thailand, employed the Gramscian perspective when he explained the meaning of civil society. He referred to civil society as institutions and associations operating at an intermediate level between the economic structure, on the one hand, and the state mechanisms, on the other. Civil society exists outside the state structure. Kasian further elaborated that Chinese immigrants who were capitalists and coolies in the early Rattanakosin period created the origin of civil society in Thailand. These people played a major role in commerce and effectively organized their own schools and associations to preserve their cultural heritage and identity, and collaborated with each other to protect their interests. Also, print capitalism beginning in the early Rattanakosin period played a significant role in creating a vision of civil society. According to Kasian, civil society appears in the following three areas: the market, which referred only to distribution and consumption, not to production; institutions of reproduction and socialization, including family, school, and the temple; and civic groups, forums, and movements (Kasian Teechapira 1997:123).

Unlike Kasian, Dr. Prawese Wasi (1993) and Dr. Chai-anand Samudavanija (1997), two other prominent social thinkers in Thailand contend that unlike in the West, civil society in Thailand emphasizes state-society partnerships in planning and implementation. Nevertheless, both share a similar view with Kasian that civil society operates outside the government structure independently.

The utilization of the term civil society (Prachakhom) in Thailand today tends to emphasize state-society partnerships, since the role of the Thai state is so influential and
has permeated throughout the society. It is difficult to ignore the role of the Thai state in relation to the expansion of the contemporary civil society movement.

Often times the meaning of civil society is intermingled with good governance. Civil society is generally understood as a people’s forum that includes stakeholders from different sectors (government, business, academics, NGOs, community organizations, and the media) whose role is to link people with policy planners. Good governance, by contrast, emphasizes governance processes that enhance greater public participation in planning and implementation. These two are closely interconnected.

In my view, civil society in Thailand today can be roughly categorized into two distinctive models: a conflict model, which allows for contestation of the development path endorsed by the Thai state; and a consensus model, which reflects state-civil society partnerships in policy planning and implementation. The conflict model largely represents the movements of people’s organizations at the grassroots level. The Assembly of the Poor is a good example of this model. This is a grassroots civic group that largely represents voices of marginalized people. They are not a multi-stakeholder group by nature. Usually, they oppose to many aspects of the mainstream development ideology and practices. They have demanded that the government solve the plight of the poor. Today, demonstrations in front of the Parliament House in Bangkok and at various Provincial Halls led by the Assembly of the Poor and other citizen groups have become common phenomena in Thai society. Since I have written elsewhere about the conflict model, such as the case of the Kok Hin Khao land rights conflict in the district of Nam Phong in Khon Kaen, I will not discuss about it here.

The consensus model has largely been coopted by the Thai state and is currently dominated by the middle class, government, and socially engaged academics. Some NGOs, community organizations, business and the press are also present in this type of civic group. The middle class has used the notion of good governance and democracy in

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their struggle to gain a bigger share of political-economic power from the former ruling elite predominated by the military and high-ranking civilian bureaucrats. Strengthening civil society is an important attribute of the contemporary social reform, for the middle class will gain more from a democratic political system. Thus, enhancing democratic planning through state-civil society partnerships is a promising strategy for all players involved. In this respect, the Thai state has coopted the idea of civil society as envisioned by the middle class by endorsing the establishment of Prachakhom and watched over its movement through state-civil society collaboration. The existence of the KKCA highlights the middle class's ideal of civil society and good governance, reflecting social reform rather than revolution.

The Khon Kaen Civic Assembly (KKCA): A Case Study

The KKCA Project Profile

As mentioned earlier, the economic crisis beginning in mid-1997 brought people from all major urban sectors together to examine the role of the government. Many people inside and outside the bureaucracy were appalled by the government administration. Reforming government mechanisms is, therefore, unavoidable. The government currently is promoting governance to reform public administration.

The Thai government's current emphasis on a 'people-centered' approach to development is a marked contrast to the more state-centered, economically-focused development plans of the past. The new Thai constitution, revised in 1997, and the Eighth National Development (1997-2001) have endorsed the people-centered approach in policy planning and practice. Nonetheless, making the vision of the new Thai constitution and the Eighth National Development Plan a reality has proven challenging. One approach the government has taken is to create a provincial assembly - a new body linking people with government offices to discuss provincial development issues and to
practice participatory planning. The Khon Kaen Civic Assembly (KKCA) is a good example of this approach.

The origin of the KKCA can be traced back to December 1995 when a small informal citizen group, called the Khon Kaen Forum, interested in participatory planning began to emerge. It was in turn inspired by the Bangkok Forum. By May 1996, the Khon Kaen Civic Assembly, initiated by the National Economic and Social Development Board, evolved from the Khon Kaen Forum. Fearing that the government would dominate the KKCA, the founding members looked for suitable academics from Khon Kaen University, the most prestigious academic institution in the Northeast, and finally invited Dr. Vanchai Vatanasapt, a former Rector of Khon Kaen University (KKU) to take up the leadership role. He is currently a Professor of Surgery at KKU, Director of the Institute for Dispute Resolution (IDR) and of the Mekong Institute at KKU.

In May 1997, the KKCA began its action research project with financial support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) under the program Canada-Asean Governance Innovations Network (CAGIN), managed by the Institute on Governance (IOG). Participatory action research was used throughout the research period extending from May 1997 to April 1999.

Since its creation in 1997, the KKCA has been led by the regionally-recognized Institute for Dispute Resolution (IDR) at Khon Kaen University. The project manager is Dr. Suwit Laohasiriwong, Deputy Director of IDR. In April 1998, I was contacted by IDR to replace the former local action researcher, Dr. Mongkhol Dandhanin, who resigned to take another position. My roles are to be a researcher-cum-member of the KKCA, document the dynamic processes of state-civil society partnerships, provide feedback to other KKCA participants, and obtain their ideas on how to improve

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6 For the detailed case study, please see Ratana Tosakul Boonmathya 1999. Democratic Planning: Civic Assemblies in Thailand: The Case of the Khon Kaen Civic Assembly (KKCA), financially supported by CIDA-CAGIN and managed by Institute on Governance, Canada.
7 These people include Mr. Thawat, Vice-Governor of Khon Kaen, Mr. Somphop from Khon Kaen Forum, Mr. Thiraphong from National Bank of Thailand, the Northeast Chapter, Mr. Suphakit from the NESDB, the Northeast Chapter, Mr. Deja, Chair of Coordinating Committee for NGOs in the Northeast, and Dr. Mongkol from Research and Development Institute at KKU.
governance processes. Mr. Somphop Bunnack, an NGO person, is a project coordinator for KKCA activities.

**Building State-Society Partnerships: Not An Easy Task**

The KKCA is an example of contemporary civil society in Thailand. It is a new governance mechanism created by the government. It is a multi-stakeholder group whose role is to facilitate public participation in policy planning with the goal of democratizing the decision-making process of community development in the Northeast. The main objective of the KKCA is to strengthen its capacity in participatory planning with specific objectives as follows:

1. To develop an agreed-upon vision, mandate, structure, and mode of operation for the KKCA.
2. To expose KKCA to multi-stakeholder consensus building processes in other jurisdictions.
3. To experiment with a process of multi-stakeholder consensus building on specific issues in Khon Kaen and to assess its effectiveness for the future.
4. To channel the results of the consensus process to the relevant authorities for the purposes of influencing the planning process.

The KKCA shows a model of how the synergy among government, business, and civil society can be used to create a vision for a stronger community, to identify issues and to implement practical solutions. Since its creation, the KKCA has organized regular forums, which have provided a new space to discuss various issues of concern among representatives from government, business, and groups of citizens. The group has used facilitation tools such as 'appreciation-influence-control' (A-I-C) technique to create a vision for Khon Kaen, identify issues and develop action plans to address issues. The group also concentrates on building a civic network with other civic groups that have sprung up around in Khon Kaen and other provinces.

The mission of the KKCA was initially to generate ideas and provide public information and consultation related to development issues to relevant authorities and private agencies. Ideas about how this will work, however, have been evolving throughout the project. So far, this model has not yet become a reality. Although several
meetings have been held, issues have been discussed, information has been shared, and representatives of multi-stakeholder groups have come together, formal recommendations have not been passed to the government.

The KKCA has achieved a certain level of success in terms of providing forums for multi-stakeholder groups to meet together, identify issues that are of most concern, and discuss possible solutions. Nevertheless, defining the role and mandate of the KKCA has been an uphill process. Building understanding, trust, and respect among members from very diverse backgrounds and interests has also proved difficult. Since the KKCA is experimenting with a participatory planning process rather than a focused-base issue approach, it is extremely hard to find common ground among people from different stakeholder groups who come with their own framework, backgrounds, mentalities, and interests.

The middle class, bureaucrats, and socially-engaged academics are the predominant participants in the KKCA whereas a small number of NGOs, grassroots-community organizations, and the press are also present. Some government representatives, such as the Khon Kaen municipality continue to attend the KKCA meeting tentatively for fear that they might be the subjects of criticism. Also, there are frequent changes in the representatives of many government departments when they do attend KKCA meetings which has weakened the stability of organizing the core team, and has made it more difficult to follow-up on agreed plans.

The model of patron-client relationships between government and citizens continues to have force. There is a prevailing top-down tendency in government practice. This is reflected in the recent memo of the Ministry of Interior to all district officers, instructing them to create Prachakhom, and in the directive from the Khon Kaen Governor that Tambon Authority Organizations (TAOs) must support civic groups with a budget of 10,000 baht.

Sharing power between government and civil society is still problematic. The Khon Kaen Vice-Governor mentioned to a seminar on District Civic Assemblies in Khon Kaen that Prachakhom could only provide a policy recommendation to government, but
has no right to compel the government to do or follow this advice. In this view, *Prachakhom* is a people's forum linking people to government, but should not act like a pressure group to demand government to act according to its interests.

The fact that a number of civic groups in Khon Kaen have sprung up means that there is a demand for a more participatory approach to decision-making and resource management. The downside is that there is a possibility of competition among the different groups of people in Khon Kaen, particularly between the KKCA and People's Assembly led by the municipality. The reformulation of the KKCA's role to be a unified umbrella network for other civic groups is promising. More organizing work needs to be done. Even though the KKCA has legitimacy at a certain level to act as an umbrella network for others because its creation was mandated by the government, there is no certainty that most civic groups, NGOs, and people's organizations in Khon Kaen will accept its new role. Competition for limited resources from foreign funding and political leadership rivalry between different civic groups, NGOs, and some government departments mean that the KKCA's role is very much an evolving political process.

Obviously, creating civil governance is a slow process and unique to each socio-cultural context. Despite its initial growing pains, the KKCA has produced some results. It has spearheaded the creation of a weekend market in Khon Kaen and the creation of a herbal medicine center by a slum dweller. It has also engaged leaders of the slum community network to work on its team.

**Integrating Old and New Cultural National Symbols: Creating Legitimacy**

A National Workshop on Civic Assemblies was organized by the KKCA on May 21-22, 1999 in Khon Kaen. Dr. Prawese Wasi was invited to give a talk on "*Prachakhom: The Promising National Development Strategy.*" He mentioned that socio-political-economic crises today are highly complex and interconnected globally. The traditional norms of governing where governments have played the sole authoritative role in directing societies are no longer appropriate. Their institutional, philosophical, and practical underpinnings have come under severe question in an age of rapid environment, political, social, and technological changes that are affecting societies at local, national,
and global levels. Government, academics, business or NGOs alone cannot deal with these crises. Transforming governing to civil governance is thus an unavoidable social reform. Strengthening civil society to participate in policy planning and implementation is a promising national development strategy currently.

Unlike in the West, civil society in the present Thai context does not exclude government. On the contrary, it emphasizes building stronger partnerships between the state and groups of citizens. Dr. Prawese proposed civil society or Prachakhom be the fourth national ideology in addition to the already established ones including the nation (Chai), religion (Satsana), and the monarchy (Kasat). He compared these three existing old symbols to the soul and integrity of the country, whereas Prachakhom stands as the body or structure. The first three national symbols are like the main national pillars providing the national ideology uniting all Thai citizens across sectors together. Thailand could survive all major social political crises because of the merit of the three national pillars. Prachakhom is portrayed as an extension of the three national pillars to bring merit to the country and Thai citizens as a whole. Dr. Prawese’s proposal on the use of civil society as a new ideology and strategy to solve the social economic crisis of the country has currently been widely accepted by NGOs, government, academics, and the press.

The middle class in Thai society spearheads the idea of civic engagement in governance. Their intellectuals are making use of the old established national symbols to gain legitimacy in their demand to have more say in development policy planning and practices. This time they choose not to challenge or confront with the established order as they did in the 1970s, but to incorporate newly produced cultural meanings with old cultural symbols to create a new cultural alternative. By doing so, the middle class is creating a new political cultural space through the civil governance mechanism, Prachakhom, to support their request to share power along with the established authority.

This phenomenon reflects a lived hegemony that is not a fixed, passive form of domination. Rather, a lived hegemony is always a dynamic process that is susceptible to subversion, alteration, negotiation, and incorporation. While the hegemonic reach of dominant meanings is always extensive, it is never complete. At any time, the persistence
of residual forms of traditional culture and the emergence of newly produced cultural meanings provide forms of alternative or directly oppositional culture or values (Williams 1977:110-113).

The Consensus Model of State and Civil Society Partnerships: Thai Values

Many times I have heard that the difference between civil society in Thailand and the West derive from the fact that Thai values are different from the West. Some aspects of Thai values include respect for seniority, deference to authority, politeness, consideration, cool heart, and gratitude. The emergence of civil society (particularly with respect to the conflict model) obviously carries some cultural values opposed to the traditional Thai ones. And as a result, their movement is usually considered by state authorities to be foreign and to undermine the traditional Thai values. This argument is indeed interesting and begins to affect people's movements. Those who are in power in Thailand and elsewhere in many Asian countries now have a tendency to use this cultural logic to suppress people's movements defending basic human rights, which include equal gender and minority rights.

In fact, culture and politics are closely interwoven. The use of cultural relativism to assert that each society has its own cultural mechanisms to solve its own problem is valid but not sufficient. Although the violation of basic human rights is closely related to the cultural attributes of power structure in each society, it is a universal phenomenon. To determine whether women should have equal rights with men is actually an issue of gender power relations and politics and not just culture.

In the case of Thailand, the state is coopting the idea of civil society and is now part of contemporary civil society (with respect to the consensus model). Certainly, this is to mediate difference and avoid confrontation between state and civil society. Lessons learned from various political upheavals in the 1970s and the 1990s and the civil society movement today informed us that contemporary civil society in Thailand needs permission and patronage from the state in order to sustain its movement in the long-run.

On the part of the state, being a partner in the new governance mechanism of Prachakhom, has provided an opportunity for the government to watch over
Prachakhom's movement. Since the model of patron-client relationships continues to have force and governments are predominant in Prachakhom, they are able to influence the decision-making of Prachakhom. As mentioned earlier, some senior bureaucrats mentioned that Prachakhom should not be a pressure group, but should have social consciousness and responsibility, order, and discipline. In other words, Prachakhom should act in accordance with the traditional Thai cultural values. Prachakhom should not create any ideological, ethnic, class, gender, and national disparities, but should preserve unity and prosperity of the nation. This also raises the question of whose unity and prosperity is to be preserved and who benefits most from such an ideology.

Voices from the Marginalized Group: Are We Included?

A Story from the Network of Slum Communities

When Tharapong Chatchawanprasert moved to live with his wife in a slum community nearby the railway in Khon Kaen municipal area, he learned that being a slum dweller was equivalent to non-existence. Slum people have neither identification cards nor house registration-and have virtually no access to public services like electricity, water, or free compulsory education for their children. Realizing that unity is strength, slum people formed a network in 1995 to make their voices heard. Tharaphong was elected to be Chairman of the network covering 21 communities in the city of Khon Kaen. The network has five main programs: income generation, urban environment protection, human rights, education and primary health care, and organizational development. So far, the network has undertaken numerous projects to support slum dwellers' rights, develop their infrastructure (such as the building of a sewage system and cement walkways, and the installment of electricity and running water), and increase their productivity. They have applied a non-threatening strategy to make their voices heard and have their expectation met. They have communicated their problems to the government via representation in government departments and at the parliament. However, it seems that the government hardly recognizes their presence. In addition to communicating their problems and concerns to the authorities, they have attempted to make their story known to the public to gain support and solidarity.
The creation of the KKCA; however, gives slum people a ray of hope. The KKCA as mandated through the Eighth National Development Plan encouraged significant popular participation in development planning by creating a venue for citizens to meet with policymakers. Active participation of slum dwellers in the KKCA has not only provided recognition for their cause but also helped institutionalize their voices into the formal system. In other words, getting involved with the KKCA is a way to empower marginalized people in the evolving political system.

Recently, the Railway Authority of Thailand has proposed to accept bids for leasing out its land along the railway in Khon Kaen without considering slum people who have already lived there for years. Tharaphong contacted the KKCA to gain its support for the slum network’s petition and peaceful demonstration. It is expected that meetings will be held with multi-stakeholders to mediate difference and conflicts. Tharaphong states that this is a chance for the KKCA to prove whether it can be an umbrella network for other groups linking people to government. In this role, the KKCA needs to provide a space where different opinions can emerge, and provide support to its various members. Nevertheless, Tharaphong feels that the slum people are like those working in the kitchen and in the back yard whereas the KKCA is like those sitting in the living room receiving guests. He wonders how it is possible to channel the needs and concerns of the people in the back yard and kitchen to those sitting in the living room. The KKCA needs to work hard to strengthen its link with local community people and to empower them through the evolving political system.

This story is an example to show that Prachakhom has not yet functioned effectively to empower marginalized people in the evolving political system. In an interview with the chair of the KKCA, he argued that the KKCA should avoid activities that may lead to conflict or confrontation with state authorities in order to gain credibility, respect, and cooperation from governments. Thus, the KKCA should deal with issues that are neutral and acceptable to all players involved. The coordinator of the Bangkok Forum, Mr. Chaiwat Thiraphan, shares a similar reformist view. In a workshop on “Strengthening Prachakhom” held in Khon Kaen, he mentioned that activities of the forum should be of

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8 This story appeared first in my publication entitled *Democratic Planning: Civic Assemblies in Thailand- The Case of the Khon Kaen Civic Assembly (KKCA).*
concern to all, such as the revitalization of cultural heritage sites, green and clean city, children's playground and the like. These issues obviously reflect concerns more pertinent to the middle class rather than the day to day livelihood problems of poor and marginalized people, although they as well would benefit somewhat from the proposed activities.

With respect to gender issues, a women member of the KKCA and also a member of the Gender Watch Group in the Northeast, has commented that the KKCA should be a gender sensitive people's forum. Compared to men, women are still underrepresented in the KKCA. Many poor women would like to have a chance to participate in the KKCA, but they have not yet had the opportunity to do so. Some are overwhelmed with household responsibilities and must also work outside the home, others are too poor to afford travel expenses to attend meetings. Also, many women find it difficult to attend the KKCA meetings, which are usually held in the evening.

Concluding Remarks

Thai society has reached a turning point where the old governing system is under severe question. The society has become increasingly pluralistic. The government has no sole responsibility in directing society. Different groups of citizens want to have more say in development policy and practices. Many leading social thinkers in Thailand today see civil society as a new governance mechanism for social reform. Community organizations and NGOs nowadays have played an active role in contesting discourses on development ideology and practice promoted by the Thai state. Political changes beginning in the 1970s have led to a gradual political reform process on the government part. The new Thai constitution and the Eighth National Development Plan have captured the people-centered development approach as the main national development strategy. The growth of the middle class in Thai society resulted in the development of the civil society movement today.

The emergence of civil society in the form of Prachakhom today signifies a vision of the middle class based on civil society and good governance, which emphasizes state-society partnerships in civil governance. In this consensus model, social reform rather
than revolution is promoted. The middle class attempts to legitimate their civil society movement by integrating newly produced cultural values with traditional national symbols and claiming to represent people's voices across sectors, particularly marginalized groups of citizens. The result of this action, however, has yet to be seen.

Although Prachakhom is currently dominated by the middle class and coopted by the Thai state, it does provide a new political cultural space for the development of the civil society movement in Thailand. Nevertheless, moving from governing to civil governance is a long-term process and unique to each socio-cultural context.

Within this evolving political process, Prachakhom is a part of the entire dynamic process of decentralized participation for reforming government mechanisms. The key to success is its ability to link people, especially marginalized people with policy planners, and to create and sustain the interactive process of state-society partnerships in planning via its own structure or the support of other civic groups.

One very important point to strengthen civil governance processes is how to share power among different stakeholder groups fairly, especially among marginalized people. Lessons learned from the KKCA project show that support from the community at the grassroots level is crucial to strengthen this new governance mechanism, for grassroots people are the majority of the society. Without listening to them, civil society cannot succeed. Solidarity with the poor is essential. Active participation of NGOs and community organizations is crucial to make civil governance a reality. Since governments currently dominate several provincial civic assemblies, the participation of NGOs and community organizations helps to balance the influence of governments. Also, as many NGOs are committed and motivated to work with disadvantaged groups of people, and have skill and experience in organizing this work, their presence in Prachakhom will better empower marginalized people in the evolving political system.
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Thai Language


English Language

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