

Social movements and the crisis of neoliberalism in Malaysia and Thailand

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Social movements and the crisis of neoliberalism in Malaysia and Thailand

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Abstract

Of the Southeast Asian countries most badly affected by the 1997 financial crisis, Malaysia and Thailand remain the most unsettled by its political fallout. Their present political situations are not akin to 'politics as usual'. Instead, they capture the unpredicted outcomes of post-crisis struggles to reorganize structures of economic and political power. Comparing the situations in Malaysia and Thailand, this paper focuses on their differing state and civil society engagements with neoliberalism. It is suggested that the post-crisis contestations, sometimes tied to pre-crisis conflicts in political economy, left something of a stalemate: neither neoliberalism nor the social movements satisfactorily fulfilled their agendas in either country.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, social movements, East Asian financial crisis, Malaysia, Thailand

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And yet they came — not in large enough numbers to inaugurate a new system of government, to be sure, but in numbers certainly large enough to trample the old one to death. Some have argued, with merit, that their goals remain unclear, their motives diverse, their demands inarticulate, their strategy underdeveloped, and their leadership coarse, homophobic, and hopelessly divided against itself. Still, the death of the old system requires no clear vision, no unanimity of motive, no strategic acumen, and no enlightened leader; indeed, it does not even require the physical removal of the current puppet regime (Ferrara 2010b).

Of the Southeast Asian countries most badly damaged economically by the 1997 financial crisis in East Asia, Malaysia and Thailand remain the most unsettled by its political fallout. Their respective trajectories of crisis-induced turmoil may be tersely captured by the ironic swings in the fortunes of their iconic figures.

In Malaysia, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Anwar Ibrahim, was sacked in 1998 and imprisoned for six years before being released after the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front) gained its biggest electoral victory ever. In the general election of March 2008, despite having to wait five more months before being legally able to contest, Anwar led the Opposition to a historic surge, inflicting the worse defeats ever on BN (Khoo 2008) Starting from June 2008, two months before he won a bye-election and returned to Parliament, he has had to face prosecution again (Khoo 2009).

In Thailand, billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra took the Thai Rak Thai party (TRT) to electoral victories in 2001 and 2005 only to be overthrown by a military coup in 2006. With Thaksin in exile, and TRT dissolved by the Constitutional Court, his allies formed the People's Power Party (PPP) that went on to win the election of 2007. Yet two PPP Prime Ministers were again deposed, and the PPP itself eventually dissolved, by judicial decisions

(Kenkij and Hewison 2009). Unrelenting, Thaksin's 'Red Shirt' supporters and allies continue to challenge the current regime in demonstration after mass demonstration (Ferrara 2010).

These two situations are not akin to 'politics as usual'. Instead, they capture the unpredicted outcomes of post-crisis struggles to reorganize structures of economic and political power within settings framed by several important factors. First, the 1997 crisis undermined the legitimacy, authority and capabilities of those in power, albeit to different degrees. Second, the agendas of crisis management and proposed solutions were socially and politically divisive, mostly because of cold and desperate calculations of potential losses and benefits. Third, some socio-economic repercussions stemmed directly from the crisis while others were fused with pre-crisis conflicts in political economy. And, fourth, there were diverse ideological representations of the situations, ranging from the blandly academic to the vociferously patriotic.

The causes, effects and unfolding of the 1997 crisis in both countries are too well rehearsed to bear repeating here. Suffice it to note that the very swift progression from initial currency depreciation to financial meltdown and then economic collapse was politically intimidating.¹ Those who tried to preserve the pre-crisis order, or to overturn it, had to form contingent and unorthodox alliances that brought together desperate coalitions of interests, apparently incompatible political parties and loosely structured social movements. That partially explains the 'untidy' post-crisis politics that has not completed its respective courses in Malaysia and Thailand. Although the politics may be variously interpreted, this paper tracks it to the interplay between state, neoliberalism, and social movements – against the 1997 crisis, naturally, but also against deep socio-political contradictions in the respective societies. To that end, the paper addresses the following questions:

¹ In contrast, the politics of the 2007–08 financial crisis in the West seems sedate, even with the recent demonstrations in Europe.

1. How was the state positioned vis-à-vis neoliberalism before the 1997 crisis?
2. Within capitalist transformation, what were the antecedents of *actually existing neoliberalism*?
3. What were the predispositions of social movements towards neoliberalism before the 1997 crisis?
4. During the crisis, how did ‘political ambiguities’ influence the role of the social movements?

1. Before the crisis: comparing states

Beginning in its homelands of Reaganite USA and Thatcherite UK, neoliberalism, pushed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, has expanded into a global regime of capitalist accumulation and governance. The neoliberal extension into countries outside the sphere of developed economies has often been accelerated in times of financial and economic crises that compelled ailing economies – in Latin America, Africa and post-Soviet East Europe – to accept pro-market, anti-statist and anti-social sector structural adjustment programmes in exchange for assistance. Claiming to rest on superior macroeconomic policies that would establish an efficient self-regulating market as the cornerstone of capitalism, neoliberalism has never been merely a set of rational prescriptions, technocratic recommendations and institutional rules. Were the neoliberal agenda so impassively neutral and technocratic, its imposition would not have met as much resistance as it had in many parts of the world. On the contrary, neoliberalism has been ‘a class project, masked by a lot of neo-liberal rhetoric about individual freedom, liberty, personal responsibility, privatization and the free market’, towards ‘the restoration and consolidation of class power’ (Harvey 2009). Or, as has been more graphically expressed, the ‘genius of neoliberalism has lain in the destruction and expropriation of existing

structures and goods: privatization of utilities, de-unionization of labor, means-testing of universal benefits, removal of tariffs and capital controls' (Watkins 2010: 8).

For emerging markets, neoliberalism in the guise of a received ideology and policy would restructure 'the social, state and transnational balance of power' (Rodan, Hewison and Robison 2001: 26) around which development processes and the social conflicts they generate took place. But the state played crucial roles in initiating this restructuring by controlling its scope, depth and pace. In principle, this was an issue as much of intent as compulsion: some states favoured neoliberal agendas, while others were forced to accept them. In reality, the state's position shaped by such factors as the state's developmental goals and capacities, ideological stances, and the interfaces it facilitated between the domestic economy and the global economy.

How was the state in Malaysia and in Thailand positioned vis-à-vis neoliberalism before July 1997? One way of answering this question is to compare their situations – as part of Southeast Asian states – with those in other parts of the world.

In Western capitalist economies, neoliberalism bearing the ideological forms of 'monetarism, Thatcherism, free market Third Way and triumphal globalization' (Watkins 2010: 20) rolled back the frontiers of the state. By comparison, Southeast Asian states displayed varying degrees of *dirigiste* and technocratic-managerial tendencies. Directing their developmental processes and economic transformation, they intervened in the economy to protect and promote capitalism on the whole. But without a strong domestic capitalist class, the Southeast Asian states sometimes built developmental capacity to 'govern the market' and maintain a significant state presence in selected sectors. In other instances, they allowed markets and sectors to be fragmented according to political power. In short, state imperatives and capabilities, or even the lack thereof, tempered their trysts with neoliberalism.

Before the 1997 crisis, unlike most Latin American economies, the main Southeast Asian ones – Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia – belonged with the East Asian cluster of high-growth, export-oriented newly industrializing economies. When several Latin American economies were beset by financial crises followed by severe structural adjustment programmes, the Southeast Asian economies sustained trends of growth and prosperity. Their share of the so-called ‘East Asian miracle’, for all its shortcomings, contrasted even more sharply with the devastated African economies in roughly the same period. Economic success, with its socio-political payouts of stability and legitimacy, gave the Southeast Asian states wider policy-making scope. But success also conditioned public attitudes towards some of its ingredients, notably the role of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the real economy and foreign portfolio investment (FPI) in the speculative sectors. In that way, the public, particularly its ‘new rich’ layers and components, were predisposed to participate actively in different markets.

Yet, even at the pinnacle of their success in export-oriented industrialization (EOI), the Southeast Asian economies did not replicate the post-war records of their Northeastern counterparts – Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. The Southeast Asian economies had long been more open to international trade than had structured their economies. That high degree of openness included a chronic dependence on FDI, coming initially from the western capitalist economies but, after the 1985 Plaza Accord, from East Asia itself. The Southeast Asian offshore manufacturing platforms were dominated by multinational corporations (MNCs) and crucially relied on them for employment generation and transfers of technology. By the 1980s, several Southeast Asian economies had become showpieces of EOI, but of ‘ersatz’ quality (Yoshihara 1988). Unable to translate their various strands of economic nationalism into homegrown, world-beating ‘autonomous development’ and competitiveness (Anderson 1998), the Southeast Asian states were more captive to neoliberal enticements or pressures the more integrated their economies were with globalizing markets.

The drive to ‘globalization’, so called, was paved with neoliberal preferences expressed through the ‘Washington Consensus’ – economic deregulation and liberalization, fiscal discipline and austerity, and privatization. To foreign capital targeting emerging markets, such policy and governance measures were critical for ‘opening the doors to investment and providing secure guarantees and exits in case of trouble’ (Hewison and Robison 2006: xiii). Politically, the neoliberal ideal could be a ‘sort of regulatory state, or system of authoritarian liberalism’ that would guarantee and uphold market freedoms by law and force ‘to brush aside potential opposition from organized labor, environmental groups, or others that may challenge the social inequalities produced by the free market’ (Hadiz and Robison 2006: 41). Yet many gaps existed between received neoliberal ideals and what were enacted as deregulation, liberalization, privatization, and fiscal discipline. Indeed, *actually existing neoliberalism* in Southeast Asian countries was not imported in comprehensive packages; it arose from selective and pragmatic adaptations of policies and measures conducive to neoliberal agendas and favourable to domestic capital. The crisis, therefore, did not clearly divide a pre-neoliberal past from a neoliberal present.

Finally, the crisis damaged state capacity in general but the different character of the state in Malaysia and in Thailand influenced their ability to manage the crisis and its political repercussions. Managing with difficulty but without recourse to an IMF rescue program, the state in Malaysia could more freely face up to demands for pro-market reforms. Requiring IMF’s intervention, the state in Thailand was more constrained by IMF’s conditionalities. With prolonged hegemonic rule, the Malaysian state had become very much centralized, not least in its control of economic policy. Weakened, the state was still able to manage the crisis with its administrative machinery and mostly domestic resources. Able to confront the global financial market, and weather the massive political crisis provoked by Anwar Ibrahim’s fall, the state could resist demands for political reform and restructuring. The Thai political system was not as centralized and the state’s hegemony over civil society was more keenly contested, as evidenced by the civilian uprisings and military coups. Hence, there was more scope for new commercial and

political elites to seize the crisis as a moment to compete for state power. The differences between the situations in Malaysia and Thailand would eventually be shown in the kinds of socio-political alliances that faced off in the wake of the crisis.

2. Antecedents of neoliberalism

The trigger of the 1997 crisis – the speculative attack against the Thai baht – and the chief purveyor of the neoliberal solutions offered to it – the IMF – were international, that is, foreign. That is no reason to assume *a priori* that the state's priorities were tidily opposed to neoliberal agendas.

Malaysia was systematically interventionist *and* neoliberal, controlling markets but enacting neoliberal measures according to sectors, projects and constituencies. Many such 'antecedents' of neoliberal policies were not identified as being neoliberal because they were enacted earlier or defended as simply 'pragmatic' policies. For example, the state in Malaysia was well known for being highly interventionist on behalf of the Malay community and especially the capitalist and middle classes that the state sponsored and promoted via its New Economic Policy (NEP). But the state also differentially protected and regulated segments of capital, while strictly controlling labor. At one tier of the economy, the state privileged the MNC-dominated EOI sector by granting it fiscal and other incentives but leaving its operations free of most forms of bureaucratic interference. At a much lower tier, the small and medium enterprise (SME) sector long remained in benign neglect since the state had no interest in this predominantly Chinese non-corporate sector. Only later, when the state planned to have SMEs become important sub-contractors to its heavy industries would the state actively support new SMEs, via the Proton car's vendor development program, for example.

For a decade starting from the mid-1980s, the state implemented policies that bore all the hallmarks of neoliberalism. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his Minister of Finance introduced privatization, reduced funding for state-owned enterprises, imposed budgetary restraint, and repaid foreign debts early. During the 1985–86 recession, they suspended the NEP’s restructuring requirements to make the investment regime more attractive to FDI and domestic capital. As high growth resumed in the late 1980s, the state liberalized, deregulated and privatized social services that had previously remained under state control – power generation, telecommunications, waste disposal, water supply, healthcare services, and tertiary education (Chan 2007, Tan 2008).

Those were standard neoliberal practices. Other policies and measures were not less so for being differently termed. The state passed property rights legislation and policies that advanced market-based capitalism. Into this category belonged policies to extend private timber-logging concessions or oil palm plantation-based cultivation into Native Customary Land; moves to undercut communitarian rights by re-developing Muslim *wakaf* land and ‘Malay reserve’ land; the repeal of urban rent control law to benefit a new class of urban property developers; and strict judicial applications of property rights to areas and users once covered by customary usufructs and ‘unwritten contracts’.

Until July 1997, there seemed not to be a contradiction between the Mahathir regime’s economic nationalism and neoliberalism. Indeed, the neoliberal turn could be justified in nationalist terms. Neoliberal practices reconciled certain state and class interests: privatization transferred public assets ‘held in trust’ to Malay capitalists; deregulation rebuilt the state’s alliance with domestic Chinese capital previously hamstrung by legal and administrative restrictions; and liberalization of the investment regime would stimulate growth towards ‘developed nation status’. Discursively, all this was packaged in neoliberalism’s ‘common sense’ terms: reduce public sector inefficiency and spending, and rely on the private sector as the source of growth. It was important in Malaysia’s multiethnic society that Mahathir’s interventionist-neoliberal regime spoke to Malay and

non-Malay capital: create asset transfer for the former, remove shackles off the latter, and, for both, diminish competition from the state sector.

Thailand, '*not* a model of dirigiste developmentalism' (Hewison 2006: 117) was less interventionist in the economy. Yet, the use of industrial policy – to expand and rationalize the automobile assembly sector, for example (Abdulsomad 1999) – was hardly unknown. As with Malaysia, the Thai state's promotion of capitalism created many antecedents of neoliberalism in different phases and sectors of development. As early as 1960, Sarit's military junta had accepted World Bank recommendations that the state should 'withdraw from new and risky industries, provide incentives and services to support private sector entry', and to 'overhaul, streamline, rationalize and tighten controls over the budgetary process' (Kasian 2004: 30). These tenets, derived from an earlier paradigm of 'development planning', laid the basis for capitalist expansion, in this case, via import-substitution industrialization (ISI). The state promoted ISI with fiscal incentives, tariff protection and institutional support (Hewison 2001: 81–82). State policies also favoured the rise of domestic banks and conglomerates that dominated in turn major areas of business as they opened up – 'first agriprocessing, then import-substituting consumer industries, then basic process industries, and then urban services' (Pasuk and Baker 2000: 18). In certain areas of resource exploitation, provincial interests wrested concessions not via the neoliberal ideal of competitive privatization but by decentralized political power (Pasuk and Baker 1997).

By the 1980s, Thailand's 'state-promoted capitalist development [had] led to the large-scale commodification of rural land', increasing rural landlessness, and eventually a 'wholesale privatization of community lands' for non-agricultural purposes (Kasian 2006: 12). Regional disparities grew as a result of persistent urban bias in resource allocation and unbalanced patterns of development that left 'starving the tropical forests of the mountainous North, the rolling savannah of the Northeast and the densely forested Malay peninsula' (Kasian 2006: 11). On the whole, 'the countryside was managed as a source of

labor and other inputs for urban growth (land, water, electricity generation)', with the village consigned to being 'a welfare system providing unemployment relief, retirement support, and many other social functions' (Pasuk and Baker 2000; 19).

State intervention was more evident and systematic in the control of labor and wages, whether by deploying repressive measures under the military regimes before the 1973 uprising, or by permitting an 'oversupply' of migrant labor when necessary. With the advent of EOI and the fresh lure of FDI in the 1980s, new legislative and administrative restrictions were used to achieve 'the disorganization of organized labor' to ensure that 'labor remained subordinated to the changing demands of capital accumulation' (Brown 1997: 175–76). Consequently, working class opposition from the 1980s to early 1990s was focused on securing 'a degree of autonomy, independence and space' to 'develop its organizations and legitimately contest the dictates of capital and the state over issues such as wages and condition, occupational health and safety, short-term employment contracts, social welfare and the introduction of new technology' (Brown 1997: 176). These conditions did not prefigure the regime of 'flexible labor' prized by neoliberalism but state intervention in the labor market was needed to 'free' it from the power of unions.

Moves towards more clearly neoliberal policies emerged in the 1980s following a structural adjustment programme that devalued the baht, launched EOI with labor-intensive industries, attracted more FDI flows, and spurred even more domestic investment. The subsequent high manufacturing-led growth of the Thai economy led to more decidedly neoliberal developments. For 'big-business executives, urban politicians, mainstream economists, state technocrats and human-rights campaigners' the neoliberal consensus of the international institutions (Kasian 2006: 21) was the ideological basis of economic progress towards a more deregulated free-market economy. Among the most important steps taken in that direction were the expansion of the Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET), the liberalization of the financial sector and their deeper integration with the global investment market. In the transformation of the financial and corporate sectors, 'for many

rising capitalists the expansion of the SET and the financial liberalization were liberating, as they were finally free of the control of the banking families' (Hewison 2001: 88).

3. Social movements vis-à-vis neoliberalism

Inasmuch as social movements are formed by or represent the dispossessed, marginalized, powerless, and victimized, they tend to be adversarial towards the state that was complicit in expropriation, exploitation, discrimination and so on. Such movements also tend to oppose neoliberal agendas and their expressions in specific projects, even if some general statement of movement goals – for example, 'a society marked by openness, transparency, fairness, rights and participation' (Pasuk and Baker 1997: 35) – cannot easily be distinguished from neoliberal 'good governance' rhetoric.

Such was true of Thai social movements active in diverse areas (Encarnacion-Tadem 2001, Bantorn 2004, Shigetomi 2004, Somchai 2006, and Kenji and Hewison 2009). It has been argued that 'the Thai development NGO movement [rose] to meet' the immense challenge of a 'socio-economic malaise' caused by 'unbalanced, unequal, unfair and unsustainable state-planned and promoted [sic] national economic development' (Kasian 2004: 34) begun after Sarit's 1958 military coup. During the 1980s, Thai NGOs cohered as a socio-political movement. Opposing the 'the excessive centralization of the state and the uncontrolled thrust of urban-based economic growth', they advocated 'a fairer society, better access to government, a clearer definition of human rights and more controls on the abuse of power' (Pasuk and Baker 1997: 34). The organized peasantry protested urban encroachment on rural resources of land, forests and water. Within the environmentalist movement, NGOs helped to 'articulate an ideology of peasant defence' that challenged the 'development theory' that justified the intrusion of hydro-electric dams, eucalyptus plantations and polluting factories. As subsequent protests protested the underlying strategy of economic liberalization, rural groups demonstrated against a regional meeting on trade

liberalization on grounds that ‘economic globalization increased the imbalance of wealth and power between the city and the countryside’ (Pasuk and Baker 1997: 37).

Hence, environmentalism, within ‘a rapidly changing polity’, could be connected with broader concerns, including ‘control over resources, centralized versus decentralized power, bureaucratic power versus participation, and ultimately of state versus civil society’ (Hirsch 1997: 193). In such a milieu, the Assembly of the Poor unified many local struggles into a national self-sustaining social movement by providing ‘an over-arching ideological critique of development’ connecting local grievances to national policies, a ‘political identity’ to the poor as ‘victims of development’, and a ‘strategic recognition’ that political identity was forged through conflict and struggle (Missingham 2003: 318). Three factors made the 1990s ‘a decade of rural organizing, political activism and protest such as had never before been seen in Thailand’ – processes of development within which ‘state and capital increasingly moved to acquire and exploit rural environmental resources’, a ‘long history of rural resistance and collective struggle against subordination and exploitation’, and the growth of a ‘diverse middle class, which sustained a movement of political activism that opposed elite power and struggled for social and political reform’ (Missingham 2003: 318).

An important component of the social bases of these movements was the urban ‘white collar working class’ that furnished ‘public intellectuals’ from the radical intelligentsia who had left the collapsed militancy and failed parliamentary attempts of the 1970s for social activism through the press, public platform, and NGO (Pasuk and Baker 1997: 34). In its own way, the Assembly of the Poor, the single largest social movement, embodied an alliance of urban public intellectuals and rural communities. An ‘umbrella organization’ for seven ‘people’s networks’,² allied to NGOs and assisted by academics, the

² The networks were the Dam Group, Land and Forest Group, State Development Project Group, Slum Community Group, Occupational Health Group, Alternative Agriculture Group, and Local Fisheries Group (Rungrawee 2004).

Assembly practiced ‘new ways of collective decision-making and democratic self-management’, local representation at leadership levels, although NGO activists came to ‘exercise power and influence ... that far outweighs their small numbers’ (Missingham 2003: 327).

In contrast to the Thai social movement experience, Malaysian social movements were more limited in many ways. For example, in defending community rights or protesting against disruptive large-scale infrastructural projects, Malaysian NGOs never built a movement comparable in scale of participation, durability of engagement, or organizational reach to the Assembly of the Poor. For comparison, NGOs, such as Alaigal and the Urban Pioneers Support Committee, had small numbers of dedicated activists who campaigned ‘in solidarity’ with workers, vegetable gardeners and ‘illegal squatters’ facing eviction from estates and urban fringe land on which they had worked and lived for long periods. Faced with big projects liable to dislocate native communities or lead to ecological degradation, many different NGOs might join in an ‘ad hoc’ coalition of limited aims and duration. More established NGOs, such as Aliran, SUARAM and Sisters-in-Islam, located in the bigger cities, concentrate their efforts on the protection of human rights and civil liberties. Likewise, their membership is limited, but since they interpret human rights and civil liberties in broad democratic and constitutional ways, they frequently network via an ‘ad hoc coalition’, formed with other NGOs and political parties to mount a politically important or urgent campaign.

Over the years, the activities of Malaysian NGOs have chiefly been conducted for public awareness, education and protest. Some of these have inspired new groups of younger activists, including young professionals and new graduates (the latter freed from prohibition of political participation in schools and tertiary institutions) who have linked different kinds of socio-political issues in their work. For instance, campaigning for the repeal of repressive statutes infringing on constitutional rights to freedoms of expression, association and assembly, can be linked to demands for fixed and minimum wages for

estate workers, or support for harassed and abused migrant workers. A few religious NGOs – such as the (Muslim) Jamaah Islah Malaysia and the (Catholic) Penang Office of Human Development – have joined civil protests and demonstrations against the state’s intensifying authoritarianism. The NGOs, too, are rarely involved in development-related activities for several reasons. No NGO can remotely approach the state’s extensive programmes in development and social services. Some niches in education, community investment and relief work are available but many of these have been occupied by different parties of the ruling coalition to extents rarely encountered elsewhere. It is no exaggeration to say the pervasiveness of state and ruling party coverage of developmental activities have crowded out the NGOs.

A point made about civil society in relation to NGOs in Malaysia is relevant here: ‘civil society itself is conflict-ridden, harbours ethnic hierarchies, and conflicting class visions and identities and is subject to repression’ (Cooke 2003: 179). Of these ‘flaws’ of civil society, ethnic identities and divisiveness are particularly weakening. The point is not that NGOs are habitually pitted against one another in ethnic competition, but they are typically based in specific ethnic communities. Two notable examples illustrate this problem. An NGO with a rare mass membership, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM, or Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement), operated exclusively among Muslims until it joined other NGOs to fight against proposed amendments to the Societies Act that would restrict politics to self-declared ‘political’ societies. Another NGO which had mass support was Dongjiao Zong, the standard bearer of the Chinese education movement and intimately associated with the Chinese community (even if Dongjiao Zong joined civil society campaigns with other NGOs and opposition parties).

In short, if the Malaysian NGOs have putative ideological clarity, particularly towards neoliberalism, it is unexpressed. Broadly defined solidarity work against repression and for opening up political space do not require an ideological commonality beyond a commitment to ‘justice, democracy, solidarity’ – Aliran’s slogan. Where NGOs dissent

they mostly target the state, but a state with very definite characteristics. The state has been developmentalist since 1970 and the economic outcomes have been largely acceptable to the middle-class activists who form the core of NGO personnel. But the state discriminates by ethnicity, and has since the 1997 crisis been much criticized for inefficiency, incompetence and corruption. Insofar as the market could be more level and transparent, many NGO activists – particularly if they are non-Malay – could blend a political anti-statist stance with a neoliberal preference for the superiority of the private sector. This had a significant impact on the politics of the crisis.

4. Thwarting neoliberalism

Again, the details and controversies of the post-crisis measures taken by the state in Malaysia and Thailand are too well known to repeat them in detail here. But it is necessary to note that their differences precipitated political struggles that led to contrasting responses of their respective social movements towards neoliberalism.

Faced with depleted foreign reserves (after a futile defence of the baht up to July 2, 1997), collapsing currency and stock values, capital flight, widespread banking and corporate insolvency, Thailand was forced to turn to the IMF for rescue. Via several Letters of Intent, IMF imposed its standard, that is, neoliberal and pro-market, structural adjustment programme: tighten monetary and fiscal policy, pay off foreign creditors, slash public spending, liberalize rules on foreign investment, keep wages low, improve corporate governance, and privatize state enterprises. Not an unregulated speculative money market was considered to be at fault but only ‘crony capitalism’, and so, a free market was the antidote. The IMF reform package damaged or threatened so many sections of society as to provoke a powerful ‘nationalist’ backlash. Business interests balked because whereas ‘foreign capital has usually retreated and domestic business had been able to expand’

(Hewison 2006: 121) in previous economic crises, now the reverse happened under IMF oversight.³

By shifting support from domestic capital to ‘more generalized support for business that advantaged foreign investors, the IMF, World Bank and Chuan government announced that the old consensus could not be re-established’ (Hewison 2006: 128). However, the IMF, the Democrat Party government, and some technocrats who supported systemic neoliberal reform had miscalculated. One crucial political product of the attempted Thai embrace of neoliberal reform was: ‘All elements of the developmental social contract disintegrated: workers were unemployed, the rural poor were deeply distressed by the crisis, local business was being crushed, and widespread, Indonesian-like social conflict was feared’ (Hewison 2006: 128). In those uncertain times, Thaksin Shinawatra and Thai Rak Thai engineered a new ‘social contract’ – that bound domestic capital, big and small and medium-scale, intellectuals, labor unions, civil society figures, NGO activists, and the poor (particularly the rural poor) to join battle against neoliberalism and the IMF – and won the first post-crisis election in 2001.

Three years earlier, Mahathir remained in power doing essentially what Thaksin did to gain power: defend domestic capital and preserve the ‘developmental social contract’ at all costs and mount a counterattack on neoliberalism in the process. For over a year after July 1997, Malaysia experimented with crisis management methods that at one time seemed like ‘an IMF package without the IMF’ – higher interest rates, shorter definition periods for non-performing loans and fiscal cutbacks. But Mahathir himself refused to abide by the neoliberal demands and prescriptions of the global finance market, IMF and the regional media. Finally, on 1 September, 1998, with greater domestic resources and in a less vulnerable position than Thailand, the state in Malaysia fought back with a currency

³ Between the second half of 1998 and the end of 1999, Thailand received increased capital inflows, most of which ‘came from international companies taking advantage of very good pricing. Almost none went into new ventures’ (Pasuk and Baker 2000: 218).

peg and limited capital controls. Behind these, the state carried out exercises in recapitalization, rescue and reflation to overcome the recession that had set in.⁴

The state had several key motives: protect the strategic financial sector from collapse; save domestic conglomerates from any ‘fire sale’ to foreign investors; preserve the Malay advance under NEP from any ‘market leveling’; and stabilize the economy for everyone else. An advocate and practitioner of privatization and liberalization, Mahathir defiantly refused to contemplate further foreign entry into the state-protected sectors. If he had to re-nationalize failing privatized entities, he would do so with public funds. If he had to sell Malay assets, he declared, he would sell them to ‘friendly’ domestic Chinese investors and buy them back in more favorable times. In contrast to Thailand, then, although there were neoliberal-minded reformers among state technocrats – and sometimes Anwar Ibrahim could sound sympathetic to the neoliberal paradigm⁵ – the state led the campaign against neoliberal reform. But Mahathir, too, had miscalculated. One day after imposing capital controls, he sacked Anwar and persecuted him, only to provoke a Malaysian *Reformasi*, mostly a Malay revolt that Mahathir never thought would arise (Khoo 2003: 100–08).

Thus social movements in the two countries were drawn into broader struggles involving neoliberalism, but they took different sides, as it were. With the IMF behind it, the regime in Thailand pressed for neoliberal reform but it came to grief largely between the ‘nationalism’ of domestic capital and the ‘populism’ of the poor. The social movements and the rural poor in particular supported the campaign of Thaksin and the TRT whose ‘handsome victory [in 2001] marked a rejection of the IMF-brokered policies of the Democrat-led government’ (Hewison 2006: 124). In Malaysia, however, the pre-eminent anti-neoliberal actor was the state which defended its own nationalist-capitalist project that

⁴ For a fuller treatment of the Mahathir regime’s crisis management, see Khoo (2003: 47–60).

⁵ Anwar was quoted thus: ‘in politics I am a liberal but in economics I am a conservative’. See ‘Crony capitalism in Asia will be reduced, says Anwar’, *Business Times*, 29 January 1988.

had begun since NEP and was extended into Mahathir's long administration. Except for scattered criticisms of the global market for precipitating the currency crisis and criticisms of the state for its poor economic management, the social movements did not develop any coherent views of neoliberal economics then. When Anwar fell and was persecuted for defying Mahathir's regime, the social movements and opposition parties formed a civil society-based coalition to defend him. At that juncture social movements attacked the state for its 'KKN', borrowed from the Indonesian *Reformasi*'s anti-Suharto code for *kolusi*, *korupsi* and *nepotisme* (collusion, corruption and nepotism). That line of attack coincided with one of neoliberalism's favourite *political* criticisms of 'the Asian model of capitalism'. For the moment, though, there was to be no further expansion of neoliberalism according to the dictates of the global financial market and the Washington Consensus. In the general election of November 1999, Mahathir and BN gained a victory, though a flawed one due to UMNO's considerable losses in Malay-majority constituencies, and continued to rule, aided by economic recovery and the repression of *Reformasi*.

In hindsight, if '[n]eoliberals within the World Bank and the IMF expected liberal economic reforms to transpire as a matter of course after the shock of a devastating economic crisis' (Hadiz and Robison 2006: 41), their envisioned systemic neoliberal restructuring was thwarted in Thailand and Malaysia,⁶ despite the time lag between their decisive moments, and the different routes taken by different actors. So to speak, neoliberalism in Thailand and Malaysia lacked a 'genuinely liberal party' that could push a market reform agenda, and not simply 'isolated pockets of liberals in a few government

⁶ Elsewhere, too: '... some political observers of Indonesia expected a gradual, but more or less linear, change in the direction of liberal democratic modes of governance, once Soeharto's regime had crumbled and the institutional skeleton of markets and democracy had been put in place. However, rather than being a simple technical problem of institutional design, the Indonesian case has underlined the fact that economic and political reforms of any type needed to be enforced politically and through political struggle' (Hadiz and Robison 2006: 41)

ministries and agencies, and some academics and intellectuals' (Hadiz and Robison: 2006: 41–42).

5. Ambiguities in policy and practice

But even if the crisis had not produced neoliberal regimes, the neoliberal character of major policies was exposed by their implementation. By the 2000s, Malaysian privatization and deregulation were no longer the aids to economic efficiency first touted by the Mahathir administration two decades earlier. Now their neoliberal character was bared in unexpected but recognizable ways and assailed from an unexpected perspective by a renewed coalition of social movements and opposition parties. In the mid-2000s, economic conditions again turned less favourable for the middle and lower classes. At the same time, political conditions became more favourable for the Opposition when the post-Mahathir UMNO brazenly and repeatedly displayed its arrogance of power. Released from prison in 2004, Anwar rejuvenated the Opposition, again supported by NGOs, and led a broad movement to attack BN and its regime.

The substantive and discursive dimensions of the new assault were not elaborated such as to constitute a categorical attack on neoliberal policies – or statist ones, come to that. But, intriguingly, the criticisms seemed to be partially anti-statist *and* partially anti-neoliberal. Popular disaffection grew in response to rising costs of oligopolistic services and utilities supplied by 'an oligarchy of privatisation' – politically favoured highway concessionaires, electrical power producers, urban waste disposal providers, and urban light rapid operators. The neoliberal dimensions of these entities were their privatized status and the substitution of public delivery systems with user-pay market operations. Their statist dimensions, however, lay in the non-transparent contract awards, and financing and profit terms drawn up between the state and its concessionaires. Attacking both dimensions of the issue, the Opposition and their NGO allies essentially reverted to their decade-old 'KKN'

formula, targeting ‘Mahathir’s cronies’, Umnoputera,⁷ and corruption. The attacks went furthest in renouncing the NEP as a policy instrument that had been subverted by elite capture. Discursively, the Opposition, with tremendous voter support and social movement backing, could have criticized that established system of politically managed privatization as a form of ‘crony neoliberalism’.⁸ In Malaysia’s ethnicized political economy, a seemingly oxymoronic ‘crony neoliberalism’ could refer to a state-sanctioned hybrid of crony capitalism and market capitalism that offered something for everyone: state-created privilege for a multiethnic oligarchy, state-crafted social protection for Malays, market competition for the Chinese, and market-induced marginalization for the Indians.⁹

The new Opposition coalition (Pakatan Rakyat, PR, or People’s Alliance) for the 2008 general election had an ambiguous stance towards the market and neoliberalism in its New Economic Agenda (NEA). On the one hand, the NEA contained ‘pro-people’, welfarist elements reflecting the populist commonalities of the Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKR, or National Justice Party), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Islam (PAS, or Islamic Party). On the other hand, the NEA offered pro-market, neoliberal-sounding reassurances that good governance and transparency, ending corruption and cronyism, would stimulate higher levels of foreign and domestic investment, and retrieve declining ‘national competitiveness’. Hence, a hybrid of sorts, on PR’s part, too! In the way that these sentiments are ethnically correlated in Malaysia, the NEA partially reflected lingering non-Malay anti-statist stances and partially harboured rising Malay pro-market aspirations. Could it be that the NEA – claiming to be multiethnic – wanted to weld the ‘efficiency of the market’ to the ‘welfarism of the state’?

⁷ ‘Umnoputera’ – a popular derivative of the official term, *Bumiputera*, designating Malays and other indigenous communities, unlike the Chinese and Indian (or other) descendants of immigrants – used by critics of the regime to denote and deride UMNO leaders and members who profited from cronyistic dealings.

⁸ The much more extensive and expensive bailouts of banks in USA and Europe in the 2007–08 crisis, if not earlier, conclusively show that neoliberalism is far from being immune to cronyism.

⁹ To take only the three largest ethnic groups for the illustration of a point.

Something of a similar policy bifurcation underscored the five years of Thaksin's administration. At one end, there were populist measures to alleviate the hardships of the poor, especially in the rural Northeast region. The TRT's 30-baht universal health care charge, 1-million baht soft loan each for villages and poor urban communities, and farmer debt moratorium may have been indefensibly populist in neoliberal eyes. Later proposals targeted urban housing needs, small-scale entrepreneurial activity and social safety nets. To the poor, rural especially but urban as well, these were measures of specific and immediate relief – and evidence that a new party had arisen that implemented what it promised.¹⁰ At the other end of the TRT regime's policy spectrum was an effort to rescue domestic capital from being crushed by the crisis and external competition. The effort was part statist and part neoliberal in the ways that these directions became less and less easy to separate. Compared to the pre-crisis period, a more developmentalist direction of economic growth was set, with the state mobilizing and allocating credit and other resources. To allow time and space for domestic capital to fortify itself for competition, the Thaksin regime delayed privatization and liberalization for a couple of years until the economy recovered and a renewed prosperity raised income and consumption levels. When privatization was resumed, it ambitiously covered energy, water, transportation and telecommunications. If this was neoliberal, it was also cronyistic, benefitting a politically connected coterie (Kasian 2006: 27). Most controversially, when selected sectors were deregulated and liberalized, the outcomes were particularly beneficial to the Thaksin family's corporate assets.

In contrast to the rural support for his populism, the urban middle-classes, labor unions, business rivals, royalists, the military, and the judiciary would turn against Thaksin on many charges, but none so widely unifying as the matter of his 'corruption'. Economics

¹⁰ Kenkij and Hewison (2009: 461) suggests that TRT's policies allowed the party direct influence over the poor instead of gaining it via social movements as was the case when Thaksin was negotiating for social movement support before the 2001 election.

alone was not the undoing of Thaksin's regime. The callous disregard for human rights, minority grievances, media freedom, and even civil society dissent was a huge problem. A third was the suspicion and resentment that Thaksin and TRT's growing power aroused among non-representative political circles, namely, the military and the monarchy. When the constellation of mostly Bangkok-based 'Yellow Shirts' gathered to oust Thaksin, TRT's solid rural support in the general election of 2005 kept him and the party in power. The denouement arrived in the shape of a military coup in 2006. But by then, the political fight in Thailand was not principally about 'toppling neoliberalism'.¹¹

6. Social movements and the 'old orders'

It has been said, critically if not disapprovingly, of social movements in general that they tend to focus on single concerns, lack systematic analyses of structural issues, operate along identity lines, pursue tactical and limited gains, enter short-term alliances with strange partners, ignore the deeper power dimensions of politics, et cetera. Much of this can be conceded in general so long as one does not rule out that in certain historically specific circumstances, social movements can exert political influence beyond their limited resources, visions and organizations. This is illustrated by the trajectories of the post-crisis politics in Malaysia or in Thailand which have yet to complete their courses. Some of the twists and turns in those political struggles are directly traceable to the 1997 crisis of neoliberalism and the ensuing demands for pro-market reforms and restructuring. In response, different quarters mounted counter-attacks deploying and mixing various nationalist and populist, radical and conservative measures and idioms. Over those political struggles, interventions by popular forces and social movements exerted differing degrees of influence, often to unsuspected outcomes – to the rise of Thaksin and TRT, and the

¹¹ Two articles which are influential in my reading of this phase of Thai politics are Kasian (2006), 'Toppling Thaksin', and Thongchai (2008), 'Toppling Democracy', the second being something of a critical rejoinder to the first.

resurgence of Anwar and PR. Yet, the full force of intervention by social movements in both situations could only be appreciated when they were related to longer socio-political struggles, some affected by longer-term neoliberal trends, others of decidedly different character. In a way, the former is better illustrated by the unpredicted rise of the Hindu Rights Action Front (HINDRAF) in November 2007, the latter by the emergence of the Red Shirts in Thailand. Each captures a different motif within the political history of their country.

On 25 November 2007, the largest ever demonstration by the Indian community took place in Kuala Lumpur. The estimated number of Indian demonstrators – about 30,000 – was unprecedented for Malaysia, especially since the Indian community's overall electoral support for BN had been taken for granted. This amorphous movement, called by obscure leaders, declared itself to be against the continued 'marginalisation'¹² that had left Indians increasingly bereft of social and economic opportunity. HINDRAF charged that the position of the Indians in Malaysia had deteriorated as a consequence of unfulfilled promises and state neglect. State neglect here meant at least two things – NEP-justified official discrimination against non-Malays, and the exposure of an unprotected minority to market forces and competition. Leaving aside its specific demands, some of which were dismissed by unsympathetic observers as being outlandish, HINDRAF demanded the restitution of 'Hindu rights' in different forms – to ethnic equality, economic equity, and in the areas of culture and religion. Of course, it was analytically and politically possible even in November 2007 to caution that HINDRAF was ethnically over-conscious, if not outright chauvinistic: after all, not all Indians are Hindus anyway, including many of the protesters. Yet, the recent causes of the unsatisfactory Indian condition were attributable to: lack of improvement in working conditions, the repression of organized labor, the importation of migrant labor, the privatization of services, the supersession of property rights over customary ones, the increasing reliance on the private sector for growth, et cetera. In short, the problem lay in an increasingly neoliberal pathway of capitalist development at popular

¹² Movement participants most frequently use this term to describe their condition.

levels that left too many descendants of migrant Indian labor imported into British Malaya straggling.

The true impact of HINDRAF lay in its coincidence with two other movements (Khoo 2007). One was the Bar Council's protest, in September 2007, supported by almost all NGOs, against the corruption and abuse of the judiciary after repeated instances of political interference and commercial bribery were exposed. The other was a movement called BERSIH ('clean'), an ad hoc coalition of opposition parties and NGOs that demanded an end to many kinds of electoral improprieties committed by the ruling coalition with the aid of existing institutions. In both cases, the motif of restitution was likewise present: restore confidence in the institution of the judiciary and restore voters' rights to free and fair elections – each indispensable to democracy. These three eruptions about four to six months before the general election of March 2008 framed the electoral revolt that would bring unprecedented victories to the PR even though BN remained in control of the federal government. A decade earlier, *Reformasi*, a political by-product of the crisis of neoliberalism was too tentative and ineffective an onslaught by social movements and opposition parties. In March 2008, the electoral 'tsunami', as it has been hyped, resumed that combined assault on the politico-economic foundations of the electoral system. Whatever the outcome of current political struggles over the immediate future, the small, ad hoc, and unsystematic social movements have rendered significant contribution to the opening of political space and the questioning of political economy.

The situation in Thailand is potentially even more far-reaching. Clearly, the social movements there were always more powerful than those in Malaysia. In spite of military rule, Thailand has had a long record of peasant protests, rural demonstrations and mass actions, and urban uprisings against dictatorships and military juntas. Between the mid-point and the end of the neoliberal boom period, there were 'reportedly 739 mass demonstrations in 1994, 754 in 1995 and 1,200 in 1997' (Kasian 2006: 21). In the 1990s, social movements, including the Assembly of the Poor, had organized mass marches and

mounted campaigns to heighten ‘media visibility’, ‘discursive contestation’ and ‘theatrics of resistance’ (Rungrawee 2004: 549–60), thereby displaying sufficient political force to conduct in situ negotiations with state officials and extracting concessions from them.

That a large number of Thai social movements turned against Thaksin personally and TRT as a party from late 2005 onwards – for renegeing on reform promises, for corruption, and for increasingly intolerant rule (Kenkij and Hewison 2009: 459–64)¹³ – might have initiated the polarization of the populace that used to stand behind the social movements for reform. The support of largely Bangkok-based middle-classes and domestic capital for Thaksin and TRT, on ‘nationalist’ grounds, has vanished; in its place rose the predominantly urban anti-Thaksin People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and its Yellow Shirt supporters. The PAD, with its alliance with commercial interests, support for the military coup of September 2006, appeal for monarchical intervention, and its subsequent campaigns against the post-coup ‘clones’ of TRT occupied one polar position. Ranged against the PAD is the ‘populist’ rump of the original coalition that Thaksin and TRT forged to combat neoliberalism, now reinvented as the United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). The UDD’s Red Shirts have continued with a vengeance the tradition of local groups and rural protestors who had been ‘bringing their grievances to the focus of power in Bangkok’ (Pasuk and Baker 1997: 36–37).

In a sense, the flaws of social movements, briefly noted above, may have come together dramatically and ironically in the division of popular forces – no doubt manipulated to different degrees by other actors – according to an ‘urban uncivil society’ long responsible for encroaching on the countryside and a ‘tyranny of the rural majority’ with its electorally superior numbers (Kasian 2006: 15). As Kasian has wryly observed, the division is almost tragicomic: the urban middle-classes whose several uprisings against

¹³ Or the leaders of the movements and NGOs, to be precise, rather than the grassroots support they were supposed to lead or represent. I wish to thank Chris Baker for clarifying this point for me during his seminar at IDE, April 27, 2010.

military dictatorship advanced Thai democracy now ‘pin their hopes for rights and freedoms on the elite of army and feudal aristocracy’, while ‘the grassroots masses pin their hopes for social and economic justice on the big monopoly capitalist class’ (Kasian 2007). These color-coded struggles with their complex alliances of social classes and political forces must yet be placed within other motifs, politically complex ones. One such motif is the struggle of royalists to restore monarchy to superiority vis-à-vis Thai democracy since a military coup in 1932 compelled the monarchy to shed its absolutist powers (Thongchai 2008). Another motif is summed up in the following observation of the latest demonstration (March to May 2010) in Bangkok by the Red Shirts who first came in their thousands from the countryside but were later supported by many from Bangkok’s ‘lower classes’:

the red shirts do not embody the lofty democratic ideals of a relatively small, largely urban minority. The red shirts are rather the vehicle for the anger and frustration of perhaps tens of millions of people living in some of the country’s most populous regions. These people are tired of being second-class citizens. They are tired of being disenfranchised. They are tired of being told by those who have gotten rich through bribery and exploitation that they are too goddamn stupid, ignorant, or dark-skinned to have the right to elect their own leaders, speak their own minds, and enjoy a minimum of economic opportunity (Ferrara 2010a).¹⁴

On a smaller scale, modified according to time and place and conditions, this latter theme was glimpsed in Malaysia where a decade-long progression from *Reformasi* to the ‘tsunami’ has come close to ‘trampling the old [order] to death’.¹⁵ Neoliberalism contributed to that trampling without remaking either social order in its image. That was

¹⁴ It is beyond this paper to consider in any depth the March-May 2010 ‘Bangkok uprising’ but the scale, forms of protest, strategies and demands showed the transformation of social movements into a galvanized political movement with objectives that went far beyond what is typically associated with social movements. In Bangkok, on the night of the day this paper was presented, the regime carried out its first military assault on the Red Shirts but it was rebuffed, albeit with heavy casualties. As it turned out, this was merely a rehearsal for a second, more violent and decisive attack by the military.

¹⁵ See epigram at the start of the paper.

partly because of the resistance of social movements. But the social movements are not nearer to realizing their goals of fairer societies, not least because neoliberalism remains an obstacle. To that degree, perhaps social movements and neoliberalism have confounded each other.

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