NGOs as Political Actors in Thailand:

Their Development and Strategies in the Democratization and Human Rights Movements

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INTRODUCTION

In Thailand, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are now regarded as political actors, even though they have also made an undeniable contribution to economic and social development. Some NGOs specialize in the pursuit of democratization and frequently appear in the political news coverage of the mass media. Historically, we can trace this kind of organization to the early 1980s. If we count organizations that tackled violations of human rights by the authorities, Thailand has had NGOs in its political arena since the early 1970s. This means that political NGOs appeared in the country as early as the other NGOs, which specialized in tackling economic and social problems. In this chapter, I shall call these NGOs "political advocacy NGOs."

Most literature about Thai NGOs in this field, however, covers the period after the 1990s, when NGOs' political roles became conspicuous (Naruemon & Charan, 2002; Paveena, 2001; Chutima, 1998; Conners, 2002; Doneys, 2002; Napinthorn, 2003). Suthy (1995) analyzes the situation before 1990 but this study is limited to the late 1980s. Misra (1976) and Chamaiphan (1989) cover a much earlier period, but limit their studies to an analysis of one human rights NGO.

The main task of this chapter, therefore, is to review the history of political advocacy NGOs in Thailand since the 1970s. However, this is not just a chronological description of events. The chapter's focus is on why and how NGOs have influenced the formal political arena. Certain forms

of organization and certain strategies are involved, which can be shown to be features that distinguish NGOs from other political organizations. In this chapter, I shall describe the organizational structure and activities of political advocacy NGOs, dividing the periods into: (1) the era of human rights activities up to the 1980s; (2) May 1992; (3) the period of political reform; and (4) the period since democratization as a result of political reform. Then, in the last section, I shall try to characterize political advocacy NGOs in this country. I shall argue that they have both elitist and populist aspects in two dimensions, their source of political influence and the media through which they exercise it. This frame of reference may be a tool to categorize various political advocacy NGOs in this country and to assess the impact of current political and economic change on the NGO sector.

This chapter, however, limits its coverage of NGOs. All the problems that arose during the process of economic development can be understood as human rights problems. The lack of welfare for children, women, peasants, and slum dwellers is a threat to the right of well-being. Living in a healthy environment is a basic human right. Many NGOs that pursue economic and social development engage in political activities to some extent. However, these issues are left to other chapters. This chapter limits its investigation to the study of NGOs whose main concerns were political reform and human rights. This study also neglects some ad hoc organizations, even though political activities outside the state system have been flourishing since 1992. The political organizations of local people for their own sake are also excluded from this analysis, since this volume focuses on organizations that work for other people's well-being.

DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS NGOs IN THE 1970s AND 1980s

Post October 1973 and the Emergence of Human Rights NGOs

After the October 14 student uprising, which ousted the military dictators and introduced a more liberal political environment, the first human right NGO, Union for Civil Liberty (UCL), was established. The liberal political environment, however, did not last long. In 1976, the military and right

wing social movements exerted pressure against the students and the liberal sphere of society in general. In this tense social atmosphere, some religious people from Buddhist and Christian circles formed Coordinating Group for Religion in Society (CGRS), the second human rights NGO in Thailand. Not long after that, a brutal crackdown happened on October 6, 1976. Many NGOs, including UCL had to stop their activities. Under the right wing government of Thanin Kraivichien, many activists fled into the forests and joined the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). In 1977, a Catholic organization formed a new human rights group named Justice and Peace Commission of Thailand[1] (JPCT, c. 1997).

In 1978, the military led by Kriangsak Chamanan ousted the Thanin government and abolished the oppressive policy towards dissidents. With the more tolerant political atmosphere under the Kriangsak and Prem Tinsulanonda government, the activists left the forests and the CPT and started to engage in social activities. From 1979, the number of NGOs increased and the older NGOs such as UCL revived their activities. JPCT became active over female labor issues and over the rights of minority groups in mountainous areas. This organization put much emphasis on research into these human rights issues (JPCT, c. 1997). In the early 1980s, there was a Thai branch of Hong-Kong-based Hotline, in addition to the other three NGOs in the human rights sector. This branch was maintained by one person and worked mainly to report the human rights situation in Thailand to Hotline's headquarters. These four organizations formed a coalition for exchanging information, Coordinating Committee of Human Rights of Thailand or CCHROT, in 1983[2] (Chamnong, 1998, p.40). Excluding NGOs that specialized in the rights of children and women,[3] these five organizations made up all the organizations that focused on human rights in general in the 1970s and 1980s.

Organization and Activities of Human Rights NGOs

Of the human rights NGOs mentioned above, the most active and influential were UCL and CGRS. Their organization and activities can be summarized as follows.

Union for Civil Liberty (UCL)

Soon after October 14, a group of university academics gathered and talked about how they could contribute to democratization. In November 1973, they established UCL, *Sahaphap phua sitthi seriphap khong prachachon* (later, *Samakhom phua sitthi seriphap khong prachachon* or *So So So*). There were 107 founding members of UCL; 57 percent were university academics, while 89 percent were residents of Bangkok (Misra, 1976, pp. 107-108). These figures clearly show that this organization was formed by urban-based intellectuals.

Recruiting individual members widely from the society has been a unique feature of UCL. The number of members grew to around 500 in the mid 1980s (Chamaiphan, 1989, p. 124), to 800 in 1995 (UCL, 1995, p. 6), and to 900 according to an interview I carried out in 2003. Many laborers and rural residents who benefited from UCL's activities became members. As a result, the general membership of UCL in later years was made up mostly of laborers and farmers rather than intellectuals and urban middle-class people (UCL, 1995, p. 50).

Formally, the members have the right to participate in decision-making, including the election of executives, and the other activities of UCL (Misra, 1976, p.122). However, actual participation has been very limited. The number of people attending the annual general assembly has been less than 100, usually 50 to 60. In practice, invitations to the assembly have been delivered to those who are likely to attend (UCL, 1995, p.51). The decision of the executives is usually accepted as the consensus of the assembly. The number of active members is difficult to confirm. According to the annual report for 2001, the total amount of fees collected was 5700 baht, which represents the fees of fewer than 20 percent of annual members (UCL, 2002, p.46). The regional distribution of members is uneven. In the central region, there are few members outside Bangkok. Even in the other regions, members are concentrated in the provinces where UCL had branches (see below). Even though UCL has a diverse membership compared with the other NGOs, its decision-making still relies heavily on a small circle of active executives and administrative staff (UCL, 1995, p.53).

Another unique feature of UCL is that it has some branches outside Bangkok. It set up the first branch in Chiang Mai in 1983, and by the late

1980s, it had set up another three branches in the northeastern and southern regions. All these branches had staff managing local-level activities. Until very recently, these branches organized seminars and training for people in provincial areas[4]. Between 1986 and 2003, 60 percent of UCL's gatherings were held in these provinces where it had branches (UCL, various years)[5].

UCL worked for political human rights. For example, it sought to abolish undemocratic laws and secure the release of political prisoners. At the same time, it was very active on economic issues. Problems such as low paddy prices, the landlessness of farmers, the loss of residential land, the damage done to local people by infrastructure construction, and concerns about laborers' welfare were the major concerns of UCL in the 1970s (Chamaiphan, 1989, pp. 100-106). In the 1980s, it supported local people in a conflict over land rights and it researched how the rural economy had suffered from the hike in oil prices (UCL, various years).

UCL's main strategies at the time were to offer seminars and training programs and to provide legal assistance to individuals. Having academics as active members and networks with layers, UCL had strong intellectual resources. It organized many seminars and training programs. However, most of them attracted a small number of participants, mostly local leaders and human rights activists (UCL, 1988, p.21)[6]. As for legal assistance in labor disputes, UCL could deal with only 0.8 percent of total cases coming to the courts in 1986 (UCL, 1987, p.13).

Coordinating Group for Religion in Society (CGRS)

This group (*Klum prasan ngan sasana phua sangkhom* or *Ko So So* in Thai) was established in March 1976 by leaders from religious societies such as Sulak Sivalaksa (a social critique and Bhuddhist philosopher), Koson Srisan (a Protestant preacher), Bunluen Mansap (a Catholic bishop), and Gothom Arya (a university academic and an active leader of UCL). Some young activists in Sulak's circle also joined this group. Unlike UCL, CGRS did not recruit members from the general public. A small number of activists managed the campaign.

The activities of this group started with an inter-religious seminar in March 1973 (CGRS, c. 1991). Just after the October 6 incident, CGRS

visited both the state agencies (the army and the police) and those who had fought with them to reduce the social crevice. It also formed a rural development section in 1979, which implemented a lunch program in rural schools and an agricultural technology development program. In 1982, it assisted farmers who had been evicted from their land in Nakhon Sawan Province by the Army (CGRS, various years). CGRS, as well as UCL, paid considerable attention to economic problems, since it regarded them as resulting in the deprivation of the human right of access to resources.

Ad Hoc Political Activities by NGOs

The first non-partisan organization that aimed to influence the state's politics was established at the time of the constitutional amendment in 1981. The name of the group was *Khana tham ngan ronnarong phua kae khai ratha thammanun hai pen prachathipatai (Kho Ro Po)*[7], or the Working Group for Amending the Constitution (to make it) Democratic. The establishment of this group was agreed at a UCL meeting of 50 participants in September 1980 that had been called to discuss constitutional amendments the parliament had declared it would make (*Siam Rath Sapda Wichan*, October 19, 1980, December 21, 1980; Gothom, 1982). Gothom Arya, then the representative of UCL and a founder of CGRS, became the vice-chairman of Kho Ro Po. Kho Ro Po had 15 executive members; among them there were three members of parliament, three NGO staff (including staff from UCL and CGRS), and two mass media people (Kho Ro Po, 1982). The office was located in the The Press Association of Thailand (*Siam Rat Sapda Wichan*, December 14, 1980).

Two types of strategies were used by Kho Ro Po. One was to draw the attention of the mass media, with offices located in a media association and executive members from media circles. Kho Ro Po also organized public gatherings to air its ideas. Kho Ro Po gathered about 50 participants at a meeting in November 1980 and declared 12 proposals for amending the constitution (Kho Ro Po, 1980). It demonstrated at a religious performance on the Constitution Day and held another two meetings for strategy planning. Then it organized an assembly of the general public to campaign for its proposals from May 1 to May 3, 1981. Some newspapers reported that 200 people attended the assembly while Kho Ro Po's records give the

names of 111 participants and 35 observers (*Matichon*, May 4, 1981; Naeo Na, May 4, 1981; Kho Ro Po, 1982, pp.228-232). Somkit Srisangkom, the representative of Kho Ro Po, talked to the media about the organization's ideas, knowing that they would not be widely disseminated without the attention of the mass media (*Siam Rat Sapda Wichan*, December 14, 1980). The strategy was successful to some extent, since some newspapers reported the news, including the date of the next Kho Ro Po meeting. The May assembly was covered on the front page of some newspapers.

Another strategy was lobbying. The leaders of Kho Ro Po, some of whom had good connections with politicians, visited prime minister Prem Tinslanonda and deputy prime minister Praman Adireksan and a minister who supervised the government's public relations department. Kho Ro Po called for the government's support for its movement. The Prime Minister gave the organization 40,000 baht of his own money. The government allowed government officials leave to attend Kho Ro Po's May assembly. Kho Ro Po publicized that the ministers had welcomed its visit. However, Kho Ro Po was a group established to deal with a current political issue. It was natural that the group stopped its activity when the issue was over in 1983.

So, Kho Ro Po was formed by elites within society, such as academics, social activists and politicians. It organized themselves in an ad hoc organization that targeted a specified issue. It attempted to attract the attention of the mass media by developing close relationships with media people and having meetings to air its views. At the same time, Kho Ro Po used its personal networks with the elites for lobbying and showing its political legitimacy.

EMERGENCE OF POLITICAL NGOs WITH THE MAY 1992 EVENT

The May 1992 Event and Social Movements for Democracy

In February 1991, the military leaders staged a coup and put the state under the control of the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC). In April 1991, Kho Ro Po was revived with a new name, *Khrong kan ronnarong phua prachathipatai* (soon to become *Khana kammakan ronnarong phua prachathipatai*) or Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD). When the

NPKC-installed civilian government led by Anand Panyarachun started to consider a draft constitution, CPD submitted a democratic draft (Suphatra, 1991). In June, it organized a gathering calling for democracy to be enforced through the constitution. In November, it called a public gathering, together with Student Federation of Thailand (SFT) and various political parties. A large crowd appeared at this meeting and the NPKC leaders had to declare that they would not take the premiership. After the general election of March 1992, however, the pro-military political parties took a majority of parliamentary seats and nominated Suchinda Kraprayoon, the most powerful NPKC leader, as the prime minister. Soon after Suchinda accepted this nomination in April, CPD intensified its anti-government campaign. On April 8, 11 and 20 and May 4, CPD, SFT and opposition parties called public gatherings and drew huge crowds. For example a hundred thousand people gathered on April 20 (Suthachai, 1993, p.50).

At first, CPD and SFT held the lead among the democratic movements (Kritya & Sophon, 1997, p.29). On May 4, however, Chamlong Srimuang, former Bangkok governor and Palang Dhamma Party leader, started on a hunger strike and became the key figure to draw public attention. The conflict among the leaders in the democratic movements intensified and Gothom, the actual leader of CPD, once claimed that CPD and SFT would not lead mass demonstrations anymore. After a short break from demonstrations after May 11, the movement's leaders held a meeting on May 14 and established Democracy Confederation or DCF (*Samaphan prachathipatai*) to take the lead in mass demonstrations. CPD did not participate in DCF and quietly disappeared from the scene. When the mass demonstration resumed on May 17, the huge crowd was led by Chamlong and some other leaders of DCF. On that night, there was a clash between demonstrators and government forces. The brutal events ended with many injuries, deaths and disappearances and the resignation of Suchinda as prime minister.

Organizational Structure of CPD and DCF

Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD)

Although CPD was said to be a revival of the old Kho Ro Po[8], its founding members were quite different from those in that 1980s movement. Gothom was a key player again but there were also NGO activists among the leadership. Of the first 28 executives and members of staff, at least 10 were from NGOs and six were university academics, while there was no politician among them (Suphatra, 1991, pp.86-87).

CPD used to be a union of about 20 organizations (it now has more than 50 organizations). It has a central committee in which the representatives of member organizations discuss its policies (Napinthorn, 2003). However, this committee meets once a year and many organizations, especially in provincial areas, do not attend it. The executive committee meets once a month. However, not all executives attend every meeting, since they are volunteers and are busy with their own activities. Thus the occasional decision-making was made by a few leaders who were ready to devote to the movement. Now, CPD has a secretary general as a salaried full-time staff and leaves many parts of decision-making to him (Chutima, 1998, p.104). Even though the participation of member organizations in the administration is limited, they form a network around CPD and give legitimacy to its claim to represent people from many parts of society.

Democracy Confederation (DCF)

According to San Hatirat, who chaired the meeting that established DCF, this organization was formed only for the purpose of controlling the upcoming May 17 gathering (*Thai Post,* August 22, 1999). It was certain that a huge crowd would appear; the leaders did not need to mobilize popular participation. The only thing necessary was to have a few people take the lead in decision-making about the upcoming event, at which a huge crowd would gather against state power (Kritya & Suphon, 1997, p.37). Therefore, it set an excutive with only seven people. Even though DFC declared itself to be a federation of many organizations, the executives were not elected by the one-vote for one-organization rule (ibid, p.38). Even after the events of May 1992, no systematic means of governing the

organization was agreed on (Chutima, 1998, p.114). The executives made decisions alone (ibid, p.110).

NGOs as Major Political Actors

With the events of May 1992, NGOs appeared as important actors in the political arena. CPD facilitated the union of other political actors, such as political parties and students organizations, and organized public meetings that drew huge crowds against the government. DCF took over the position of CPD after May 17.

The political power of the May 1992 movement undoubtedly came from the huge crowd. Some observers understood that NGOs played a crucial role in the event by using their networks for mobilizing people (Callahan, 1998, p.120). However, an analysis of the organizational structure of CPD and DCF shows that they did not have such extensive popular roots. Although they claimed many NGOs as members or supporters, their administrative power was concentrated with a few staff and executives.

It is not clear to what extent the other NGOs joined this political event. NGO Coordinating Committee on Development (NGO-COD), the largest network of NGOs in Thailand, did not officially record its role in this event (Anuson, 1998). The activity report of NGO-COD's Bangkok circle just before the event mentions no activity against the military government (NGO-CORD, Bangkok, 1992). The participation of a slum group was identified in some records (Chamlong, 1992, p.77; Kritya & Suphon, 1997, p.31), but this could mobilize a few hundred people at most[9].

The most powerful actor in mobilizing the crowd was probably the mass media. A CPD leader remembers that the organization could draw the attention of the mass media by organizing seminars. The mass media played the role of publicizing the next gathering. This made more and more people interested and many came to the meeting. After his hunger strike, Chamlong became a charismatic leader who drew huge crowds. DCF needed him as an executive member even though this decision conflicted with DFC's agreement to exclude politicians from its leadership (*Thai Post*, August 22, 1999).

After the event, the mass media also saw NGOs as actors in the political arena. Newspapers used to cover news of NGOs in sections

relating to each NGO activity, such as rural development, women issues, and the environment. Most of these issues appeared on the inside pages, sometimes even in a separated volume. The newspapers usually assigned their reporters to attend formal and major political institutions. When NGOs were interacting with these institutions, the reporters covered the movements of NGOs. The reports were edited as political news and sometimes appeared on the front page. Some newspapers assigned their political reporters to follow NGO-related issues[10]. Some reporters and editors had been students activists in the past and had personal connections with NGO activists.

At the time of the political events of May 1992, the leading NGOs were organizations of the elites. They did not have the organizational structure to mobilize mass to political events. However, they had the intellect to show the frame for understanding the current political problem. At the same time, they had personal contacts with politicians and the other leaders of society. Since they took a non-partisan position, they could coordinate various organizations, including political parties. For example, Chamlong could appear as a non-partisan crusader for democracy when he was working with NGOs. The involvement of political parties made the event part of mainstream politics. Consequently, it drew the attention of the mass media, whose news coverage resulted in broad participation by the people. Now, the organizational capability to mobilize participation was less important for the leaders of political movements, including those of NGOs. What was necessary was a strong and unified leadership. DCF, an organization of just seven people could lead the event.

POLITICIZATION OF NGO SECTOR IN THE POLITICAL REFORM PROCESS

Political Reform Process

For the March election of 1992, the Anand government decided to set up a volunteer organization for monitoring the election process. Soon after the events of May 1992, the second Anand government established a similar organization, called Pollwatch (*Khana kammakan ongkon klang kan luak tang*). Pollwatch relied on various non-state organizations to conduct its activities.

After 1993, during the Chuan Leekpai government, there emerged a mood for political reform in Thai society. People were fed up with corrupt politics of political parties such as that during the Chartchai government. At the same time, they needed to act to prevent military dictatorship. When Chalard Vorachat started his hunger strike for democratic political reform, the government asked Prawes Wasi, a respected medical doctor and an NGO leader, to chair a committee for considering political reform. The committee proposed constitutional amendments that would bring political reform. The proposal was given legitimacy by society; thus, the next government, led by Banharn Silapa-archa, had no choice but to claim that it was pursuing political reform. Its Political Reform Committee proposed to set up a special assembly of non-partisan representatives with exclusive authority to draft the constitution. The assembly, *Sapha rang ratha thammanun* or *So So Ro*, was required to hold public hearings on its drafting of the constitution. This constitution, together with some laws and institutions relating to it, seemed to be the fruit of the political reforms after the events of May 1992. In this process of political reform, NGOs had an opportunity to participate broadly in the monitoring of elections and the amendment of the constitution.

NGOs' Involvement in the Process of Drafting the Constitution

During the drafting of the constitution, many non-state actors tried to influence the contents of the new constitution (Naruemon & Charan, 2002). Here I focus on two NGOs that actively involved in the political process. One was Women and Constitution Network and the other was UCL.

Women and Constitution Network (WCN)

WCN was formed at a seminar to discuss women and the constitution in 1996 (Thicha et al., 2000). Although the network claimed that 26 organizations joined it, those who continuously and actively participated in the administration were about ten women who had been working for the rights of women in NGOs and universities[11]. At first, they tried to have women as assembly members. They sent their active members to be candidates and promoted other female candidates. Only 0.9 percent of

all female candidates remained on the shortlists for the selection of parliamentary candidates[12] since their networks in the provincial areas were not broad or popular enough. However, the network was successful in sending some of its core members to the assembly.

The strength of WCN became apparent after the drafting process started. Having some core members inside the assembly, the group worked as a secretariat for those assemblypersons. It drafted some clauses that it considered important for human rights, especially the rights of women, on behalf of the assemblypersons, who were not necessarily legal specialists and who were in any case busy with political negotiations inside the assembly. The WCN members, including the assemblypersons, met every week. When the assemblypersons were detained in meetings at the assembly, the group sent information to the assemblypersons by telephone and fax. Some group members were assigned as staff for the working group of a sub-committee to assist assemblypersons from provincial areas[13]. As a result, they had the chance to assert their opinions to these assembly-persons. Sometimes they lobbied the assemblypersons on behalf of their members in the assembly. The salient feature distinguishing this women's group from other pressure groups was these secretarial and lobbying activities. Even though the number of women assemblypersons was small, the intellectual capability of the women's group allowed it to influence the drafting process.

Provincial activities of UCL

Another organization that was active in the process of drafting the constitution was the Union for Civil Liberty (UCL). Like WCN, it lobbied the assemblypersons energetically. However, I shall focus on another activity, which seems unique to UCL.

When we analyzed its organizational structure, we found that UCL had provincial branches and members from the general public. After 1992, UCL started a project to strengthen local administrative bodies, especially Tambon Council, and, in a later period, Tambon Administrative Organiza-tion (TAO)[14]. At first, UCL organized seminars to discuss questions of government policy. Then it started training programs, first for UCL

301

members in rural area and then for TAO assemblypersons (UCL, various years). From 1995 to the first half of 1998, it made "the popular participation in local administration" its top priority.

Activities relating to land rights became another important project for UCL from the early 1990s. Although UCL had been intervening in land rights disputes from early in its existence, such interventions were part of its casework designed to protect people's rights. In 1990, it made the land distribution problem one of the year's target issues in its human rights protection project. From 1995, it made land issues one of its top priorities (UCL, various years).

These activities involved UCL in stronger contact with local people, especially local leaders. When UCL started its campaign to raise public concerns with the constitutional assembly, it had already formed a local foundation. Before the official public hearing by the assembly, it talked with local leaders through its networks about the points to be argued in the public hearing[15] (UCL, 1997, p.7). It was natural that these local people expressed their opinion on the drafting of the constitution. However, as we discussed before, the provincial distribution of UCL members was largely limited to the provinces where it had branches.

Election Monitoring and NGOs

Another way for NGOs to participate in national politics was by monitoring activity in the general election. Gothom Arya, then CPD vice chairman, took responsibility for the administration of the monitoring organization. Many executives were university academics or came from business associations and NGOs. The Pollwatch for the September 1992 election gathered more than 60,000 volunteers. Since bureaucrats and politicians had to be excluded, non-governmental organizations were expected to play an important role in Pollwatch.

Some researchers note the importance of this Pollwatch activity for the development of the NGOs. Naruemon (2000) argues that the Pollwatch networks worked for later political movements in the pursuit of democracy, such as anti-NPKC movements. According to Prudhisan and Maneerat (1998), provincial NGOs were involved in Pollwatch. Some NGOs recorded

their contribution to activities relating to the election. For example, UCL organized a discussion of political parties on a TV program (UCL, 1995) while NGO-COD held meetings and debates about the election (Anuson, 1998).

However, we need further investigation to know to what extent and in what manner NGOs contributed to Pollwatch activities. Naruemon, Chaturon and Latdawan (1998) give a detailed analysis of the reactions of NGOs to the election process, although their study covers a much later period. They interviewed 15 national NGOs in 1998 and found that political advocacy NGOs, despite their high level of interest in disseminating democracy, contributed little to practical volunteer activities, since their resources (manpower and money) were limited (ibid., p.71). The development NGOs had stronger connections with local people but they found it difficult to adjust to election monitoring activities and also faced limitations on their resources (ibid., p.72). Rather, the organizations that had more resources and manpower to contribute were business and professional associations, educational institutions, and philanthropic organizations that were collaborative with the government[16]. Moreover, more than 40 percent of Pollwatch volunteer coordinators were civil servants, while NGO staff made up less than 1 percent (Pollwatch, 1992). It is possible that some civil servants were voluntary member of NGOs. However, the data show that the state sector provided the largest portion of volunteer coordinators.

To sum up, an important development in the NGO sector during the political reform period was the extensive involvement of NGOs in the general political process. With the events of May 1992, political advocacy NGOs appeared as major political actors; however, they were only a small part of the NGO sector. Election monitoring and constitutional drafting gave opportunities for political participation to the wider circle of NGOs. Many NGOs joined or were expected to join this process, since they were working closely with local people. They were assumed to be bodies that could represent the voices of grassroots people.

NGOs AFTER THE POLITICAL REFORM

New Governance System and Political Situation

As a result of political reform, new sets of institutions have been established for monitoring the performance of politicians and bureaucrats. The new constitution is designed to weaken the intervention of politicians and bureaucrats in the election of members of these agencies. This selection system allows people outside the formal political and bureaucratic arena to get involved in these new monitoring institutions. Some NGO activists have become members of these institutions.

From the late 1990s, "civil society" became a popular term in Thai academic discourse. The number of publication on the "civil society" increased after 1997 and peaked between 1999 and 2001[17]. This discourse had many aspects; one was the formation of a political system and a system of governance that facilitated the participation of civic organizations. The constitution also prescribes the participation of non-state actors in some sections of the administration. Some government agencies have responded to the trend of "popular participation" and have invited NGOs to join their policy-making and implementation process.

At the same time, the role of the state as a provider of resources has become more and more obvious. The democracy of party politics induces politicians to choose popular policies. Thaksin Shinawatra's populist policy represented an extreme form of such "democratization." As the resources of the government increase, the problem becomes the distribution of resources rather than the amount of resources. NGOs seek to intervene in the government's distribution of resources.

Participation in Governance as Specialists

Strengthening civil society is a means of changing the pattern of distribution. Many NGOs regard themselves as important actors of civil society. Local Development Institute (LDI), a powerful NGO that has been funding many small scale NGOs, has started to focus on civil society movements since the end of 1990s. It has received large amount of money form the government sector and distributed it to local organizations seeking collaborative governance by the government and non-government

sectors. In these circumstances, an NGO named Civicnet, which directly dealt with the formation of civil society, emerged in 1997. The major activity of Civicnet has been to provide training for civil servants and local leaders. It presents the idea of civil society and teaches how to build a participatory governance system. Its first work was to organize a training course for the Community Development Department (CDD) of the Ministry of Interior. A foreign agent, which provided funding for the reform of CDD, hired Civicnet to design and implement the program. Civicnet also worked for other governmental agencies, such as the Public Health Ministry and the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives. Later it put more emphasis on training civil servants who had direct contact with the general public and local leaders. Civicnet has also tried to strengthen civic groups and their networks at a local level.

Chaiwat Thiraphantu, the chairman of Civicnet is its only full-time member of staff and administers all its activities. He himself and some other executives are the instructors for its training programs. The intellectual capability (knowledge and training skill) of these people allows Civicnet to get involved in government projects. Civicnet's revenue mostly comes from the fees for its training programs.

By taking a standpoint more critical of the government, Weera Somkwamkid and his group are also trying to change the way of governance. The focal concern of this group is the problem of corruption. It investigates and publicizes cases of corruption. Weera grew up with a strong deter-mination to fight corruption and individually fought against corruption by politicians and bureaucrats. In 1996, he established People Rights and Freedom Protection Group with about ten supporters. Weera works for the anti-corruption movement in a full-time capacity while the others are involved as volunteers.

Since the group is very small and all its members except Weera wish to remain anonymous, Weera relies on the mass media to publicize the problem. He has sued big politicians and bureaucrats with hard evidence that drew the attention of the mass media. In 2001, Weera joined the formation of a governmentally endorsed NGO (People Network Against Corruption), and he has the close cooperation of National Counter Corrup-tion Commission.

Approaching People's Movements

Another response of NGOs to the new political and economic situation is to unite with local people's movements. When the formal institutions of politics and governance have been democratized through the political reform process, the scope for NGO activity in this field becomes narrow. However, at the same time, increasing government programs for development often bring conflict with local people. Greater political tolerance since 1992 has allowed for more active movements of local people. Some NGOs have found their raison d'être in assisting people's organizations such as Assembly of the Poor (AOP).

After the mid-1990s, the NGOs that played leading role in the events of May 1992 faced organizational crisis. In an interview in 1999, Sant Hathirat, the leader of Democracy Confederation (DCF), admitted that the role of DCF was limited in the present (democratic) political environment (*Thai Post*, August 22, 1999). As mentioned, DCF was an organization for coordinating leadership and it had no organizational basis for mobilizing popular participation. It could not take the leading position if no mass demonstration occurred. Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD) also admitted its organizational decline in its report of 1995 (Conners, 2002, p.50). According to Suwit Watnu (2001), who was the secretary general of CPD from 1997 to 2001, CPD started to commit to the movements of people's organizations from around 1997. It joined in the sit-in of AOP in 1996 and the movement against the gas pipeline project in 1997. Suwit attributes the change in strategy to the change of leadership in CPD. Regardless of the reason, this shift has revitalized CPD.

In 1995, when CPD was still concentrating on macro-political issues, three NGO activists established a new organization, Friends of the People (FOP). They formed FOP for assisting the newly established AOP. All the founding members were CPD executives and they kept the small organizational size so that they could react swiftly to the changing situation. Later, the founding members became advisors and younger generation activists, mostly former SFT activists, took responsibility for the organization's administration. The organization still keeps its small size, with eight full-time staff. However, it has an advisory committee, a few of whose 30 members work closely with the staff. FOP works as a

secretariat for people's organizations such as AOP and Federation of Northern Farmers (FNF). When people's organizations confront and negotiate with the state authority, FOP arranges the meetings and gives them information to help them understand the situation.

People's organizations have thousands of members, who may occupy roads, plantations, and even government buildings. When the reason for the occupation is understandable among the general public to some extent, the action gains some legitimacy. Even though it has only a few staff, FOP achieves political power by working with people's organizations.

THAI NGOs AS POLITICAL ACTORS

Summary of Development

Soon after the October 14 student uprising in 1973, a human rights NGO emerged in Thailand. Except for a short period after October 6, 1976, several NGOs worked in the human rights field until the 1980s. These NGOs put much emphasis on people's rights to access resources. In the early 1980s, they established a group to campaign politically for democratization. However, it campaigned on only one current political topic and relied considerably on professional politicians.

The coup of 1991 and the events of May 1992 gave birth to NGOs that specialized in political activity. These NGOs played a key role in the mass demonstration. NGOs become a major player in politics. In the political reform process after the unusual events of May 1992, a wider circle of NGOs had opportunities to participate in national politics, especially in the monitoring of the election and the drafting of the constitution. NGOs, even those whose major tasks were community development and philanthropic work, were widely conceived as political actors too.

After the democratic development of the political system and with the expanding role of the state in the distribution of resources, political advocacy NGOs saw their role as to provide their intellectual capability as professionals or to support people's organizations that were confronting governmental projects.

Structure of NGOs' Political Power

Failure of representation system

The NGOs that we examined in this chapter have been trying to voice political opinions. Their political power, therefore, should be assessed by comparing the system of NGOs with other systems for representing people's voices. Firstly, the pluralistic representation system has not worked well in Thailand. Even though plural political parties contested with each other in elections after 1973 (except for during some short periods), their political goals did not differ much. There has been no long-lived socialist or social democratic party. The legitimacy of the election process has always been doubted because of widespread vote-buying. Further, the ethics of politicians have also been called into question because of frequent corruption. Secondly, corporatism might work only partially in the business sector. Labor unions have never been unified and the number of organized workers has been limited. Thirdly, the governmental administrative system, which aims to be a nation-wide institution to hear local people, has been regarded as ineffective since contact with governmental agents is formal and sometimes authoritarian. Thus, there prevails a common understanding that ordinary people, especially those at the grassroots, do not have a system that represents their voices.

Most NGOs are not working for political purposes. However, they have close contact with people at the grassroots, since their target group is the poor and underprivileged. Even though their contact may be limited to those at project sites and local leaders, NGOs have claimed to be better at representing ordinary people than the other existing systems. This perception has been accepted by the public to some extent. This is one important source of legitimacy for NGOs' political activities.

Structure of political influence

By observing the political activities of Thai NGOs since the 1970s, we can identify two types of resources that give NGOs some political influence. One is the intellectual capability of NGO activists. NGO leaders are people with strong educational backgrounds and extensive experience in related fields. They are capable of drafting legal clauses and even training

308

government officials. They know who needs public services and what public services they need. They are ready to work hard and flexibly. Their capability as professionals is the reason why many government agencies invite NGO activists to take part in the decision-making and implementation process.

Another source of NGO's power is their legitimacy: they represent grassroots people. In a situation where other political and governance systems are conceived as not representing people's voices, NGOs have a comparative advantage. Even though all the political advocacy NGOs have only a few members who administer their activities, many of them claim to have networks involving local-level NGOs and people's organizations. Some NGOs rely directly on the political power of people's organizations by acting as their secretariat.

We could identify two types of strategies used by NGO's to achieve political influence. One is to use connections at the center of political power. The strong educational background of NGO leaders allows them to have close contacts with a wide range of politicians and high-ranking bureaucrats. Members of the early generation of NGO activists have some friends from their school days who now hold important positions in the bureaucracy. Many politicians, as well as NGO activists, used to be student activists. Kho Ro Po's leaders could meet and get some assistance from the then Prime Minister. In the process of drafting the constitution, many NGOs lobbied assemblypersons and politicians using personal connections.

Another method of achieving influence is to use the mass media. In 1980, Kho Ro Po had its office at the premises of a newspaper association, while in 1991, CPD relied on newspapers to encourage mass attendance at public gatherings. After the mass media perceived NGOs as important political actors, they would report even a small seminar organized by an NGO if the topic and the speakers were sufficiently attractive.

To sum up, both the sources and the media of influence have elitist and populist aspects. We can draw a four-box matrix (Figure 11-1) to explain the characteristics of the strategies adopted by political NGOs. Some NGOs may adopt more than two methods simultaneously; however, there is some division between NGOs in terms of which method they emphasize. When the government increases the distribution of resources and, at the

same time, tries to exclude dissidents, strategies A and D may be intensified. Strategy A offers more opportunities, since the capability of NGO activists as elites is necessary for the distribution of resources. Strategy D occurs more often, since government projects increase conflict between the government and local people and the likelihood of sensational events that will attract the mass media, even against pressure from the government.

Figure 11-1:   The Strategies of political advocacy NGOs (Categorized by source and media of NGOs' political influence)

				Media of influence	
				Elitist (Personal connection)	Populist (Mass media)
Source of influence	Elitist	(Professional capability)		[A] Participation in the public governance	[B] Seminar
	Populist	(Legitimacy of representing people)		[C] Attending to governmental committee and hearing	[D] Public gathering and demonstration of force

Source: Prepared by the author

Notes

[1] In Thai, *Khana kammakan yutitham lae santi haeng prathet thai* or *Yo So.*

[2] In Thai, *Khana kammakan prasan ngan ongkon sitthi manusayachon.*

[3] Center for the Protection of Children's Rights and Foundation for Women were established in 1981 and 1984 respectively.

[4] UCL recently abolished these branches because of a shortage of funds.

5 I counted the number of seminars, training events, and other kinds of gathering (in Thai, *wethi, prachum, sewana, aphiprai, banyai*) that specify the name of a province as the venue.

6 An examination of the number of participants at UCL's meetings (except public and open-air demonstration) as recorded in its annual report during 1986 to 1989 shows that three-quarters had less than 100 participants and half had less than 50. After the 1990s, the number became smaller (UCL, various years).

7 The name of the organization was *Khrong kan ronnarong phua kae khai ratha thammanun hai pen prachathipatai* in another document of Kho Ro Po (Kho Ro Po, c. 1980).

8 The founders raised constitutional amendment as a means of seeking democracy rather than clashing with the military government. They adopted the method that Kho Ro Po applied in 1980 (Interview with a founder of CPD in December 2003).

9 Interview with a slum group leader in Bangkok (November, 2003).

10 Interviews with newspaper reporters (Matichon, Thai Post, Thai Rath, Prachachat Business, Bangkok Post) during October to December 2003.

11 I could identify nine founding leaders; they were five NGO staff, two university academics, one MP, and one bureaucrat and NGO executive (Interviews to come members of WCN (November, 2003) in Bangkok).

12 This figure was quite low compared with the share of women MP elected as a proportion women candidates in the November 1996 general election (more than 6 percent).

13 There was a personal network of a member of the group and an assemblyperson who took responsibility for this sub-committee.

14 Tambon is a unit of local administration in rural area. On average, it consists of about eight to nine Mubans (villages) which have about 140 households. After 1994, Tambon Council, an assembly of Muban leaders, was changed to Tambon Administrative Organization which has its own staff, budgets and assembly.

15 According to the records of UCL, it held meetings three times in Bangkok, six times in the northern region, 10 times in the northeastern region, and seven times in the southern region. The number of participants at each meeting was about 20 to 60. The size of each meeting suggests that

most participants were those who were very conscious of political issues, i.e. local intellectuals and community leaders (UCL, 1997).

16 They were the Chamber of Commerce, Law Society of Thailand, Rachaphat Institute and National Council of Social Welfare of Thailand.

17 In the digital catalog of Thammasat Library, the number of publications with the word "prachakhom" or "pracha sangkhom," the Thai word for civil society, in the title was two in 1995, eight in 1998, 16 in 1999, and four in 2002. Before that, the word "prachakhom" was a translation of unity among nations such as European Community (EC).

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