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*'CONSOLIDATING DEMOCRACY:  
POLITICAL SOCIETY AND NGOS IN THAILAND'*

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**‘The only way real change will come is through more protests. Only then will the government understand that this has become a political war – a war for people’s democracy it cannot win’**

Uaychai Watha, chairman of the Assembly of Small-Scale Northeastern Farmers, talking about the growing demands for decentralisation. Quoted in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* 31/08/2000.

**‘For your wants,/ your suffering in this dearth, you may as well/  
strike the heaven with your staves, as lift them/ against the Roman  
state, whose course will on/ the way it takes, cracking ten thousand  
curbs/ of more strong link asunder than can ever appear in your  
impediment.../’**

The patrician Menenius to the Roman plebians. Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* 1.1. 65-71.

## **CONSOLIDATING DEMOCRACY: POLITICAL SOCIETY AND NGOS IN THAILAND**

### **Hypothesis:**

There is a need to include ‘political society’ in the analysis of democratic consolidation. NGOs’ claims to strengthen democracy in Thailand rest upon their claim to assist interest mobilisation on behalf of other groups within civil society - via projects for community empowerment and alliance building- and their role in advocating policies, including decentralisation, which, it is claimed, would enhance the accountability and transparency of the Thai state. This approach is premised on a state-civil society dichotomy and, in Thailand specifically, a disenchantment with the possibility of a socialist political alternatives and a distaste for the nature of party politics as it has developed. In such an environment, the ‘new politics’ has flourished. Nevertheless, despite some significant progress on localised issues, it is argued that to enable structural change leading to the *long-term* and *extensive* political empowerment of the majority of Thailand’s rural and poor citizenry, NGOs must support the invigoration of political society in Thailand, perhaps in the form of a new political party from the grass roots.

The basis of this argument is twofold. I look firstly at the potential of alliance building by NGOs for interest representation. Secondly, I look at decentralisation and argue that, although an attack on bureaucratic domination, the result has been to decentralise political corruption and money politics without promoting democracy on the basis of equal citizenship. By default, NGOs have become complicit in the political exclusion they seek to challenge.

This dissertation is divided into three main parts. The first discusses a theory of civil society and its uses in the Thai context. The second section discusses NGO strategies and political involvement in Thailand. The third combines evidence from both the previous sections to discuss the role of NGOs in the decentralisation agenda, arguing that given the structure of social exclusion in Thailand, thorough-going democratisation requires more than institutional decentralisation and citizen education.

## **1. State, civil society and political society in democratic consolidation**

### **1.1. Civil Society and the State**

Luckman and White (1996) suggest that, normatively, the procedural and participatory aspects of democracy are complementary. They describe procedural democracy as including open political multi-party competition, civil and political rights in law, accountability to citizens via elections. The participatory aspects of democracy, on the other hand, are founded upon a basic level of public political awareness and involvement. I would draw a parallel here with Held (1993) who argues that we should perceive democracy as a ‘double-sided phenomenon’ consisting of interdependent transformation of the state and of civil society.<sup>1</sup> Much of what Luckman & White describe as ‘procedural’ elements of democracy are characteristics which I would attribute to the nature of the state or regime.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, their notion of ‘participation’ is clearly linked to the development of civil society, which is also underpinned by education and access to information.

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<sup>1</sup> Held (1993) p. 24. I define civil society as ‘a public associational space that exists between the state, market and family’ (following Putzel (1999) p. 202). This dissertation does not examine the democratic conditions and credentials of civil society as a whole, except in so far as the NGO activities here examined constitute one segment of civil society activity.

<sup>2</sup> Following Stepan (1988), by ‘state’ I mean something more enduring than government and even constitutional arrangements of, for example, the legislature, judiciary and executive (‘regime’ arrangements). ‘It is the continuous administrative, legal, bureaucratic, and coercive system that attempts

From this perspective, democratisation becomes an continuous process. Democratic transition - marked by the enactment of democratic constitutional provisions - may have been effected due to pressures exerted by a growing civil society (among other forces)<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, the process of democratic consolidation requires ongoing fine tuning of constitutional rights and the continued activity of democratic forces within civil society:

‘It can quickly be seen that according to ... a rule and rights based definition, democracies can vary widely in quality. A weak or shallow democracy need only comply with the basic definitional characteristics ... A strong, or deep democracy would se extensive *exercise* of all of these ... From this perspective, democracy is not an ‘end state’ but can always be deepened or strengthened (or made more shallow and weak).’<sup>4</sup> (Emphasis added).

Thailand is a prime example of the tendency towards a civil society – state dichotomy. NGOs locate themselves in civil society and thereby project themselves as forces for democratisation. They consciously seek a redistribution of power away from the central state and towards the people – via devolution or decentralisation of

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not only to manage the state apparatus but to structure relations *between* civil and public power and to structure many crucial relations *within* civil and political society.’ (Stepan (1988) p. 4.)

<sup>3</sup> Following the analytic framework developed by Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) which is adapted as a unifying logic in the Luckman & White (1996) volume, civil society is only one of the forces which is common to democratic transitions, the others being the international environment and state elite’s hold on power.

<sup>4</sup> Putzel (1999) p. 200.

decision making. This civil society-state opposition can be seen nowhere more clearly than in the process of the drafting of the 1997 constitution, described by Uthai Pimchaichon, Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA) as the 'People's Constitution'.<sup>5</sup> The process was unprecedented in its inclusion of a diverse spectrum of non-parliamentary groups and experts and the widespread participation of the public in commenting on primary drafts.

Furthermore, Thailand provides fertile evidence for the non-linearity of the democratisation process, especially in the absence of a strong, democratising civil society. Even Huntington, who is an advocate of democracy as a 'dichotomous variable' is forced to concede that Thailand, from 1980 onwards, forms one of a very small and exclusive group of 'semidemocracies' which are 'betwixt-and-between cases'.<sup>6</sup> Thailand's first transition to democracy, in 1932, was short lived, but also shallow in so far as it was effected by elites seeking a redress of monarchic power, rather than a distribution of power to the citizen body. Since then, a long string of constitutions has been enacted, promulgated either by the military or elected power holders, although civil society has gradually played a greater role in democratic transitions, as, for example, in 1973 and 1992. The growing potency of democratic

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<sup>5</sup> Prudhisan (1998) p. 270.

<sup>6</sup> Huntington (1991) pp. 11-12.

norms is illustrated by the fact that even the 1991 coup leaders justified their action by the rhetoric of ‘saving democracy’ from the corruption of elected politicians.<sup>7</sup>

## 1.2 Political Society

Despite the process of democratisation typically being analysed in terms of the state and civil society, I have hypothesised the need for the inclusion of a ‘political society’ perspective. What constitutes ‘political society’ and how does this relate to the dichotomised state-civil society discourse?

### 1.2.1 What is political society?

Stepan lists the core institutions of a democratic political society as ‘political parties, elections, electoral rules, political leadership, intraparty alliances, and legislatures’<sup>8</sup>. White<sup>9</sup> prefers to narrow the concept down to political parties and political leaders. Meanwhile, he includes legislatures and electoral systems ‘as part of the institutional patterning of the state’<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> See Pasuk & Sungsidh (1996) p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Stepan (1988) p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> White in Luckman & White (1996), pp. 178–219.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 219 n. 9.

I follow White in restricting the definition of political society to political parties and leaders, while seeing the other institutions included by Stepan assigned to the state, or, more likely, to the regime-type. This is based on a wish to distinguish forces in society from the institutions with which they interact and, perhaps, aspire to change. For instance, several political personages and parties in Thailand, often influenced heavily by lobbies in civil society, have supported calls for decentralisation and electoral reform. If enforced, these would lead to changes much more enduring than the period the parties are in office and which are potentially detrimental to their long-term survival.

The definitive example here is the new constitution, passed by parliament in September 1997 and with significant implications for the nature of the Thai state. In the aftermath of the May 1992 crisis, the demand for large-scale ‘political reform’ (*karn patiroop karnmuang*) emanated from democracy-oriented groups in civil society. Several officially endorsed committees investigated potential reforms of the parliamentary system followed. These included the Committee on Developing Democracy (CDD) set up in 1994 under the first Chuan Leekpai administration and the Political Reform Committee (PRC) which was set up by Barharn Silpa-archa during his tenure as prime minister. These were superseded by the CDA, itself provided for under the Constitution Amendment Bill of May 1996. The constitution

was finally drafted and passed under the administration of General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh.

Just as the new constitution of the Thai state was formulated over a period of several administrations, the implementation of measures in the 1997 constitution has been ongoing under the second Chuan administration. Certainly the progress made by the Election Commission (ECT) in monitoring electoral corruption will change the nature of Thai political parties if it achieves its objectives successfully in the parliamentary elections due in late 2000. Nevertheless, ‘Torn between its liberal ideology and its practical understanding of how to manipulate the old system’<sup>11</sup>, the ruling Democrat party provided only half-hearted financial support to the ECT in the run-up to the Senate elections in March 2000. Within the analytical framework outlined above, I would interpret this as ambivalence of actors in political society towards using the power of their office to enforce change upon the institutional structure of the state. For the purposes of this discussion, the distinction is between relatively transitory political actors and enduring institutions they have the potential to shape.

### 1.2.2 Political society and civil society

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<sup>11</sup> Financial Times (FT) 02/03/2000, ‘Senate vote is first big test of Thailand’s new constitution’.

Thus far, political society has been distinguished from the state, although the latter may affect the conditions of its development and operation. Organisations within political society remain ‘primarily oriented towards state power and administration’,<sup>12</sup>. However, what is more contested, is how the concept of ‘political society’ should be distinguished from -yet ultimately reconciled with- that of civil society. Quintessentially, political society is an outgrowth of civil society (except in strong authoritarian one-party systems) which fulfils the role of interest aggregation and representation - *potentially right up to state level* by seeking the power of political office. Stepan writes:

‘By “political society” in a democratizing setting I mean that arena in which the polity specifically arranges itself for political contestation to gain control over public power and the state apparatus...those core institutions of a democratic political society... through which civil society can constitute itself politically to select and monitor democratic government.’<sup>13</sup>

Thus, he views political society as ‘the organisational manifestation of the political articulation of civil society’<sup>14</sup>. Rueschemeyer et al. refine this further for the purposes of their comparative-historical, class-based analysis of democratisation, preferring to

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<sup>12</sup> Putzel (1998) p. 78.

<sup>13</sup> Stepan (1988) p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) p. 287.

‘treat the political articulation of civil society as a distinct analytical dimension of civil society which cannot be reduced to the economic and class structure and the remainder of the organizational structure of civil society.’<sup>15</sup>

I will make two brief points on these debates. Firstly, while agreeing that political society is part of the political articulation of civil society, I would add that it is but one part of this articulation. The discussions by Stepan and Rueschemeyer et al. do not include a consideration of the ‘new politics’ or ‘new social movements’, both strongly represented in Thailand, by NGOs and POs respectively. These organisations, as I will discuss below, also constitute part of the political articulation of civil society, albeit by rejection of political society as defined above. The crucial point of difference turns upon whether or not groups are oriented to state power and administrative control. Secondly, while a class analysis is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I would share Rueschemeyer et al.’s optimism that it is possible – although not in any way inevitable- for political society to form an ‘analytical dimension’ somewhat distinct from the inequalities inhering in civil society and the state as a whole. These two nuances are pivotal to my overall analysis of the shortcomings of NGO strategies in Thailand.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 287.

### 1.3 How does political society relate to democratisation?

It is critical to point out, however, that the existence of political society per se does not promote thorough-going democratisation. White has written that political society 'can act to strengthen or weaken the democratic potential of a given configuration of civil society'<sup>16</sup>. Putzel (1995) sees political society as symptomatic of a developing civil society, one important characteristic of which

'is the extent of the development of programmatic politics *usually* accompanied by the organisation of political parties that articulate real and distinct policy options debated within the political process.'<sup>17</sup> (Emphasis added.)

The quality of political societies may differ. Just as civil society, it is argued, must be internally democratic if it is to successfully promote democracy to the level of the state<sup>18</sup>, so too, political society should be based on horizontal relations between represented and representative. These, I shall argue are a prerequisite of programmatic politics, but fundamentally opposed to clientelistic politics.

Rueschemeyer et al. identify two types of political parties in their analysis of the democratising potential of political society in Latin America:

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<sup>16</sup> White (1996) p. 184.

<sup>17</sup> Putzel (1995) p. 4.

‘Political parties emerged in our analysis in a crucial role for the mobilization of pressures for political inclusion from subordinate classes, and for the achievement of the delicate balance between such pressures... and threat perception on the part of economic elites necessary for the consolidation of democracy. The type of party which emerged... [was] originally shaped by the nature of the export economy, namely, its agricultural versus mineral base. In agricultural export economies clientelistic parties emerged and in mineral export economies radical mass parties.’<sup>19</sup>

They contend that clientelistic parties have proved more successful than radical mass parties in consolidating democracy because, posing less of a threat to established interests, they have been more readily endorsed by elites. This analysis can be usefully transferred to the case of Thailand. With its export base almost entirely agricultural, it too has demonstrated strong tendencies towards clientelistic politics. Meanwhile, fear of radical, mass mobilisation by the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) behind the complete ban on political parties by the military regimes between 1958-1968 and on the repressive civilian administration of Thanin Kraivichien (1976-77).

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<sup>18</sup> For this argument in the context of Thailand, see Quigley (1996).

<sup>19</sup> Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) p. 223.

However, the conclusion that clientelistic party systems are conducive to democracy is, critically, a result of the inclusion of ‘restricted democracies’ in Rueschemeyer et al.’s survey of Latin American democracies where

‘the stipulated conditions are met to a large extent, but significant sectors of the population are excluded..., responsiveness of government is significantly reduced..., and/or limitations on the freedoms of expression and association significantly narrow the range of articulated political positions.’<sup>20</sup>

In fact, Thailand itself maybe described as just such a restricted democracy, according to any one of the three criteria given. However, I will focus upon the first: exclusion from the political process.

What restricted democracy amounts to is limitation on the equality of participation for all citizens. As Held (1993) and Putzel (1995) have claimed, democracy in any meaningful sense is incompatible with extreme economic inequality and, therefore, a condition of deepening democracy is ‘alleviation of dependency and poverty among the population’<sup>21</sup>. Clientalism –the logical opposite of programmatic politics- is a manifestation of dependency and a symptom of restricted democracy. As Fox writes:

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<sup>20</sup> Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) p. 44.

‘The process of rural democratisation involves a transition from clientalism to shared ideas of citizenship... Citizenship entails a set of non-contingent, generalised political rights, while clientalism refers to the inherently selective and contingent distribution of resources and power based on ties of personal and political loyalty... Effective citizenship requires the capacity to participate autonomously in politics, and to take propositional action which actually shapes state decisions and enforces state accountability. The issue of clientalism versus citizenship often hinges on the balance of power within alliances between grassroots social movements, urban-based intellectuals and workers, and national political parties.’<sup>22</sup>

It is my contention that despite the shortcomings of the extant political society in Thailand, NGO strategies of democratic consolidation cannot mount a sustained and geographically extensive challenge upon the political exclusion of the mass of the Thai citizenry.

#### 1.4 Political Society and Democratisation in Thailand

Political parties have not played a major role in democratisation in Thailand, neither emerging strongly against the NPKC during 1991-92, nor in the subsequent process of democratic consolidation. In both contexts, their potential for progressive input has been compromised by their reliance on clientalism rather than programmatic policy platforms. For instance, as McCargo (1997a, 1997b) has argued, popular mistrust of

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<sup>21</sup> Putzel (1995) p. 4.

politicians and their motives for political action outside the parliamentary arena have limited their participation in schemes for broader democratisation. Similar forces meant that they took a limited role in the 1992 protests over the premiership of General Suchinda. Ironically, the association of political parties with corruption has limited their ability to form mass organisations which is one way corrupt activity could be limited.

In the period since 1992, progress towards democratic consolidation and deepening has been instigated primarily by civil society forces, predominately NGOs. These initiated momentum for political reform, culminating in the 1997 constitution; they have maintained pressure on the government to implement the mandate for electoral reform; a broad coalition of NGOs is at the forefront of the decentralisation lobby, in the name of democratisation. Meanwhile they continue running citizenship education programmes and information services at the grass roots and support issue-based coalition groups in lobbying the government. Importantly, they also support a myriad of local development projects to supplement the welfare provisions, services and income of local communities. As discussed above, these are fundamental prerequisites for thorough-going democratisation.

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<sup>22</sup> Fox (ed.) (1990) p. 8.

On both fronts, while political parties have been involved, they have generally assumed a largely passive role. Following May 1992, the Thai media labelled parties ‘angel’ or ‘devil’ according to their stance towards the NPKC appointed government. In reality, this is a shallow distinction which reflects the lack of substantial policy differentiation between the parties: in fact none of them were prominent (qua political party status)<sup>23</sup> in opposing the junta. Similarly, the progress on democratising the constitution and implementing changes in the state (electoral reform, decentralisation) have been effected with the support of political parties but they have not consistently been the principal actors in this process. The Chavalit administration supported the draft constitution through parliament as a matter of political expediency at a time of economic crisis rather than firm commitment to its principles. Indeed, given that parliament was not entitled to amend the draft, rejection was expected.<sup>24</sup> I would argue that it is their dependence on clientalism which has proved to be a structural constraint on the ability of political parties to promote democracy both at the level of the state and civil society.

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<sup>23</sup> I make this qualification in deference to the role of Chamlong Srimuang in the 1992 crisis. The founder of the Palang Dharma party was a focal point of the May 1992 opposition movement. However, his actions as analysed by McCargo (1997a) reflect those of a political personality engaging in ‘rally politics’ – that is extra-parliamentary activity dominated by a charismatic leader who makes direct appeals to the people. I do not believe his actions –despite their undoubted importance- can be cited as typical of political parties/ leadership in Thailand. Indeed, McCargo argues that his prominence in such extra-parliamentary activity was one contributory factor in the decline of the Palang Dharma’s popularity with the Bangkok electorate who had previously been impressed by Chamlong’s ‘pure’ political motivation.

### 1.5 The structure of political exclusion in Thailand

Thus far I have argued that political society in Thailand has not fulfilled its democratising potential. Its reliance on clientalism has meant that vertical relations form the basis of political representation, rather than horizontal relations between equal citizens. The former are symptomatic of restricted democracy and political exclusion, the latter of programmatic policy platforms and the potential for a dynamic, deep democracy. I will now turn to an examination of the particularities of the Thai case of restricted democracy.

Clientalism in Thai politics is a function of two processes. The first is the persistence of traditional norms of 'patron-clientalism' according to which the pre-modern bureaucratic polity functioned. The second process is the cautious liberalisation of politics under the conditions imposed by a highly centralised state. The combined result is that political parties were initiated from the centre; indeed, they were revived in 1968 in an attempt to curtail growing popular pressures for more representative, mass-based politics.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, despite the ideal of political society as a transmission belt between people and the state on the basis of equal citizenship and

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<sup>24</sup> See Prudhisan (1998) pp. 280-284.

<sup>25</sup> See McCargo (1997b) p. 115.

interest aggregation, political parties were constrained to adapt to traditional norms to penetrate the new constituency.

Despite failing to establish mass organisations or meaningful local party branches, the predominance of patron-clientalism as a base for political parties was not inextricably related to the growth in money politics.<sup>26</sup> This phenomenon arose with the provincial boom of the 1970s and the rise of provincial businessmen who were quick to see the potential of politics as a means of securing lucrative business contracts and political protection. In return, they offered valuable access to local patronage networks for aspiring politicians. Furthermore, as long as bureaucrats retained control of distributing contracts for local infrastructure development as well as the appointment of provincial governors, they were able to dictate their choice for political incumbency in return for continued influence. This system of interlocking alliances between politicians, bureaucrats (particularly in conservative ministries such as the Ministry of the Interior), and provincial business has been dubbed an ‘iron triangle’<sup>27</sup> which perpetuates political exclusion in Thailand despite the development of procedural democratic norms.

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<sup>26</sup> Anek (1996) p. 203-209.

## **2. NGOs and democratic consolidation**

Thus far I have argued that extant political society in Thailand has not been as successful in promoting democratic consolidation – both at the procedural level and at the participatory level - as civil society groups, including NGOs. In this section I turn to examine the limitations on the NGO activity despite their manifold achievements. I then make the further claim that a project for thorough-going democratisation entails an attack on the structural causes of political exclusion which, if it is to have long-lasting, geographically extensive results, will necessitate a return to the concept of political society.

### **2.1 Defining NGOs**

In the absence of a definitive set of criteria to identify NGOs, a range of methods have been employed in defining them. These may be classified as positive descriptions, negative descriptions and organisational, functional and strategic differentiation. In reality, each of these approaches offers some insight into the nature of NGOs and need not be incompatible with any other one. Here I will briefly discuss elements of the debate which are pertinent to my analysis of Thai NGO strategies.

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<sup>27</sup> Surin & McCargo (1997) p. 145.

Clarke employs a positive descriptive method: NGOs are ‘private, non-profit, professional organisations with a distinctive legal character, concerned with public welfare goods’.<sup>28</sup> Putzel combines several approaches initially describing NGOs negatively - by reference to what they are not. NGOs are distinct from state organisations, from other societal organisations, such as privately owned firms and corporations which operate for profit. They are distinct from political organisations in that they do not aspire to be political office holders and should also be distinguished from people’s organisations (POs) whose accountability is to their membership base where NGOs’ organisation entails more complex accountability flows.<sup>29</sup>

Putzel goes on to transcend the descriptive tendency of most NGO definitions and develops an interpretative schema according to which organisations can be distinguished as NGOs or otherwise. He proposes that there are two crucial dimensions to NGO status: one organisational, the other functional. Organisational variables (i.e. membership base or otherwise) distinguish them from POs and political

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<sup>28</sup> Clarke (1998) pp. 2-3.

<sup>29</sup> Putzel (1998) p. 78.

parties structured according to the mass-bureaucratic model.<sup>30</sup> The functional framework delineates four types of activity with which NGOs may be involved:

‘The first is *policy advocacy*, or campaigning, organizing and lobbying to achieve particular policy goals at the central and local levels of the state ... The second role NGOs have played is one of *service delivery* to rural communities and rural-based POs ... The third function of NGOs has been their role in *alliance building* among themselves and the wider community of POs ... this role has usually been undertaken in relation to policy advocacy ... Finally, NGOs have developed a role in what, for want of better terminology might be called *consciousness-raising activities* or “popular education”.’<sup>31</sup>

In many ways these distinctions complement Korten who posits four ‘generations’ of NGO activity, according to their strategic differentiation. The four generations are as follows: (1) relief and welfare activities; (2) small scale local development projects; (3) community organisation, mobilisation and coalition building; (4) institutional and structural reform nationally and internationally.<sup>32</sup> Although this schema is intended to represent NGO development over time, its value lies in highlighting the progression from ‘alleviating symptoms to attacking ever more fundamental causes’<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Indeed, ‘mass-bureaucratic’ organisation is the very criterion which Kramol (1982) sets for a ‘real’ political party. See the discussion in McCargo (1997a & 1997b).

<sup>31</sup> Putzel (1998) pp. 79-80.

<sup>32</sup> Korten (1990) pp. 114-124.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 115.

Nevertheless, at any given time, different NGOs may be operating in a variety of roles and through diverse strategies.

### 2.1.1 Applying these frameworks to Thai NGOs

Korten's evolutionary approach to NGO roles accurately mirrors developments within the Thai NGO community, as seen through the eyes of some of its most prominent members. According to Seri Phongphit, the director of the Thai Institute for Rural Development (THIRD), in the 1960s Thai NGOs concentrated on economic assistance for villagers through developing income-generating activities and vocational training. In the 1970s, the burgeoning indigenous NGO sector diversified its development approaches: some focussing on socio-cultural methods of community organisation and bargaining, others, more explicitly political, concerned with changing inherited power structures in society.<sup>34</sup> In general terms, Jon Ungphakorn, director of the Thai Volunteer Service (TVS), sees a progression from welfare and social service orientation towards community development approaches.<sup>35</sup>

These perspectives do not emphasise the role of NGOs in alliance building or policy advocacy. However, by the late 1980s NGOs had become a valuable resource in

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<sup>34</sup> Gohlert (1991) pp. 105-6, following Seri (1988).

connecting information networks surrounding academics with grassroots protests about the environmental impact of the government's economic development strategy.<sup>36</sup> Both THIRD and TVS have been primary actors in the promotion of NGO networks and are explicitly defined as 'third generation' NGOs by Gohlert (1991); that is, they focus on 'creating a policy and institutional setting that facilitates... inclusive local development action'<sup>37</sup>. As Preecha (1999) has demonstrated, networking has continued to be a critical element in the recent history of Thai NGOs.

## 2.2 The political character of NGOs

Clarke<sup>38</sup> maintains that what constitutes 'the political' is a function of two processes. Firstly, the definition of 'social meaning' through ideology, cultural relations and rituals. And secondly, the allocation of resources within the framework of a given 'social meaning'. From this, he argues, the political character of NGOs is constituted on two planes: (1) overtly political action which challenges the dominant 'social meaning' or (2) action to influence the distribution of resources. The political character of such action is often disguised because it takes place within, and therefore tacitly supports, the 'political meaning' of the status quo. If Korten's framework of the four 'generations' of NGO strategy is applied, the first is ostensibly non-political,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p.108.

<sup>36</sup> See Hewison (1993) p. 172; Prudhisan & Maneerart (1997).

<sup>37</sup> Korten (1990) p. 121.

the second, in so far as it involves challenging the power of local elites, is overtly political but on a micro-level. It is the third (including coalition building and policy advocacy) and fourth levels where there is potential for direct intervention into political conflicts on the national level.

Nevertheless, a degree of ‘depoliticisation’ remains part of the legitimising discourse of NGOs. Indeed, it is the precondition upon which they are tolerated by the conservative forces within the Thai state, especially the bureaucracy. NGOs and their leaders are keen to distinguish themselves from the legacy of communist militancy and CPT involvement on the one hand, and from establishment political parties’ reputation for corruption on the other. As a result of both, NGOs embrace the ‘new politics’, eschewing the ambition for political office in favour of direct action based on an invigorated civil society. However, NGOs’ ‘depoliticisation’ must be construed in terms of an aversion to involvement in political society, rather than as a rejection of politics itself, which, as Clarke argues below, is fundamentally impossible. Nowhere is this paradox of NGOs refusing to take on political society more potent than in examining their roles in policy advocacy and alliance building; roles which have typically been the preserve of political parties.

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<sup>38</sup> This paragraph follows the argument of Clarke (1998) pp. 6-7.

### 2.2.1 The conditions of NGOs participation in third generation strategies

The conditions which gave rise to the development of NGOs role in policy advocacy and alliance building could be termed ‘liberalisation without democracy’<sup>39</sup>. Since the late 1980s, political space has increased as personal, political and press freedoms have been expanded. However, there has been less progress in genuine democratisation which is attributed to dual failure: the failure of political parties to institutionalise themselves as representatives of popular opinion and the failure to attack the entrenched conservatism of the bureaucracy.<sup>40</sup> In this milieu, NGOs have developed new skills and resources, to promote the interests of communities to the level of the state. Thus, it is claimed, they are transcending the limits of localism inherent in second generation strategies.<sup>41</sup>

A similar analysis is favoured by Clarke, who sees the proliferation of NGOs as a response to the ‘institutional vacuum’ created by political change against a background of underdeveloped political parties:

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<sup>39</sup> This phrase is used by Sukhumbhand (1993) to describe the changes in the Thai state as a whole.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 884. Compare the ‘iron triangle’ analysis by Surin & McCargo (1997).

<sup>41</sup> See Korten (1990) p. 123.

‘Weak ideological cohesion, poor intra-party discipline, frequent party changing... and low membership undermined the ability of political parties to respond effectively to the changing themes of political discourse, to represent the increasingly disparate interests features in that discourse or to induct new social groups into the body politic. Small and flexible but well-coordinated, with a consistent record of opposition to the military and with direct links to a wide range of social groups, NGOs and POs were well placed to fill this institutional vacuum.’<sup>42</sup>

He maintains that these characteristics facilitated NGOs’ role during the 1992 crisis, when the Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD), and then the Confederation for Democracy (CFD), enabled a coalition of interests to combine forces first against the constitution drafted by the NPKC and latterly against Suchinda’s premiership. However, such potential is now typically employed on ‘low politics’, that is, supporting local or issue-based coalitions on single-policy platforms.<sup>43</sup>

Thus we see that NGOs, in their role as alliance builders, are performing many of the same functions as ideal-typical mass political parties: mass politicisation and organisation, and interest aggregation, modification and communication. They have even negotiated the establishment of limited forums between NGOs and the state, in 1996 being involved the drafting of the Eighth Economic and Social Development

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<sup>42</sup> Clarke (1998) p. 47.

Plan (1997-2001) by the NESDB. Two crucial differences remain. Firstly, that, to this point in time, the coalitions typically remain issue-based and temporary. This contrasts with, for instance, a political party promoting a programmatic policy platform over a sustained period of time. Secondly, but inextricably related, is the fact that such coalitions have no ambition to gain political power over the state apparatus. Nevertheless, fundamentally, the underlying motivation for building such alliances is to counter political exclusion of Thailand's poor citizenry. As such, NGOs, though bypassing the electoral process and political society, are using different means to the same end as, for instance, a hypothetical left-of-centre people's party. I now turn to examine how effective such strategies have been in one particular case.

### 2.3 The Assembly of the Poor<sup>44</sup>

The Assembly of the Poor was founded in December 1995 as an alliance of dispersed POs which came to represent the interests of insecure small farmers to the central Thai state. The Assembly was premised on a rejection of parliamentary politics and a strategy of mass agitation and protest. The approach of the Assembly can be

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<sup>43</sup> Given that I am concerned with democratic consolidation rather than transition, I will concentrate here on the strategies adopted after the 1992 restoration.

<sup>44</sup> The name 'Forum for the Poor' appears in some English-language sources but refers to the same organisation. For this part of my thesis, I have used the discussion of the Assembly in three sources: Prudhisani (1998); Preecha (1999) & Baker (2000).

perceived by looking at the run-up to their biggest and longest rally: 30,000 protestors were encamped outside Government House in Bangkok between 25 January and 5 May 1997. This had been preceded by two comparatively small protests, one in Spring 1996, one in Autumn 1996, and each time the Assembly mobilised its ranks to return to Bangkok because of the government's failure to meet its demands.

In the earlier cases, these demands related to: the government's development policy; a change in the law to promote sustainable development; participatory channels for POs in planning and implementing development projects; general measures for decentralisation and community resource management. In the massive third rally, a wider spectrum of POs had joined the original core and the demands expanded into a list of over 120 points and issues relating to different complaints around the country, although most still relating to the central group of issues.

Two significant points about the Assembly's experience need to be drawn out of this account. Firstly, the fact that they demanded procedural changes to be underwritten by law. This was tantamount to asking for institutional change at the level of the state. Secondly, the fact that, although representatives of the Assembly were able to meet with ministers, including Prime Minister Chavalit, their demands were ultimately

subject to the changes and vagaries in the parliamentary government. Chavalit was keen to meet the Assembly representatives and several concessions were extracted from the government before the protest dispersed. These included a compensation fund for those affected by 'governmental maladministration'<sup>45</sup> of development projects; the scrapping of three macro-development projects – a dam, an industrial estate and an industrial waste factory; and the initiation of bills potentially reassigning power in favour of the poor (including the community forest bill and the occupational health protection bill). However, an administration headed by Chuan Leekpai replaced Chavalit's in November 1997. The Democrat's attitude towards the Assembly, their methods and the concessions granted was radically different from that of his predecessor. He dismissed protestors who returned in early 1998 and has failed to further the implementation of concessions agreed by the Chavalit administration, in some cases reversing them.<sup>46</sup>

### 2.3.1 The role of NGOs in the activities Assembly of the Poor

All commentators stress that the considerable organisational achievement represented by the Assembly of the Poor must be attributed almost entirely to the POs. However, the NGOs played a role through an advisory committee to the national network of POs and helped them formulate the various techniques of political engagement that

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<sup>45</sup> Prudhian (1998) p. 268.

they used.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the gradual ascendance of POs, partially superseding NGOs, has been envisaged as an ultimate objective by Jon Ungphakorn<sup>48</sup> and so I do not think that their back-seat role acquits them of observing lessons from the Assembly's experience. Furthermore, the Assembly of the Poor represented an attempt on behalf of the politically excluded to find an alternative voice – an aspiration generally shared by Thai NGOs.

The critical point has been made by Baker:

'The Democrats' reversal of the Assembly's gains was a reassertion of the paternalistic control and a denial of political space for the Assembly's new form of politics.

'In meetings of the Assembly and related groups in 1998, when the impact of Chuan's offensive against the Assembly had become clear, one major issue was whether the Assembly would have to abandon its strategy of decentralised, peripheral, organization-free organization, and take some role in formal politics... At the third anniversary of the Assembly of the Poor in December 1998, Piphob Thongchai questioned whether the Assembly would always remain vulnerable and

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<sup>46</sup> See Baker (2000) p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> Preecha (1999).

<sup>48</sup> Gohlert (1991) p. 108.

ultimately powerless, unless it developed some way to enter the formal political process.’<sup>49</sup>

While the Assembly of the Poor gained publicity for its causes and short term empowerment through its confrontational tactics outside the realm of formal politics and political society, there have been no significant systemic changes to the condition of the poorest, as it set out to achieve. Meanwhile, the various POs have returned to pursue a localised strategy of resistance. The very fact that the Assembly’s demands were partially heeded by Chavalit only to be stalled by a new government administration, is surely an indication of the importance of a *permanent* political lobby *within* the confines of political society itself.

### **3. Breaking the ‘Iron Triangle’: decentralisation as a strategy for democratisation**

Having examined the ambiguous success of extra-parliamentary coalitions in effecting long-term political change, I will now turn to examine NGO strategies to a particular issue: decentralisation. This issue attracts the support of a wide range of NGOs of various ‘functions’ and ‘generations’. In some ways, it is the unifying

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<sup>49</sup> Baker (2000) p.26.

refrain of the Thai NGO movement, which has grown up with the structural constraints and power inequalities of a highly centralised state.<sup>50</sup>

### 3.1 Decentralisation and the structure of political exclusion

Within the decentralisation lobby, two approaches may be distinguished. Firstly, those who are concerned with the procedural democratisation of the Thai state. These are concerned with provisions to decentralise rural administration, for instance, by making *kamnan* and *phuyai baan* (tambon and village heads) elected positions, rather than under the direct control of the Ministry of the Interior. Such provisions were present in the 1997 Constitution but have yet to be implemented fully. Secondly, there are those who are concerned with the participatory elements of decentralisation, including local resource management and a voice on local councils. In reality, as at the national level, these approaches are complementary and many democracy groups advocate both constitutional change and citizenship education in preparation for increased autonomy at the local level. One example of such an organisation is the CFD, itself a coalition of non-governmental democracy groups, founded in May 1992.<sup>51</sup> For both elements in the 'ideological coalition', democratisation is seen as almost synonymous to decentralising power to the people in an attempt to involve them more closely in their day-to-day governance.

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<sup>50</sup> See, for instance, Gohlert (1991).

Decentralisation of the structures of the state is seen as one way of bypassing traditional power centres, such as the Ministry of the Interior, and as such countering the political exclusion of Thailand's poor rural citizenry. However, as noted above (1.5), the bureaucracy is only one element in the structure which perpetuates political exclusion. While the bureaucracy is routinely blamed for maldevelopment in the country, alliances between provincial business and politicians are a second root of political exclusion.<sup>52</sup> While decentralisation will indeed reduce the influence of the conservative ministries, and for this reason it is opposed by them, it is also likely to play into the hands of provincial businessmen. Given the widespread poverty and dependence of the population and the lack of institutionalised channels for democratic interest articulation, NGOs promoting decentralisation may be unaware of their complicity in the perpetuation money-politics.

Evidence for such trends is available upon examination of the progress of the Tambon Administrative Organisations (TAO), established in 1996, with the aim of strengthening local government . What were intended to enhance the quality of local

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<sup>51</sup> For an account of the CFD's activities see Quigley (1996) pp. 270-273.

democratic governance, offering greater financial autonomy and local representation that the Sub-district Councils they replaced, have quickly evolved into microcosms of the national political process. There is not only confusion between traditional offices of power (such as the kamnan, elected on a lifetime basis) - which remain de facto sources of authority - and the newly elected officials; there is continued domination by of the new TAOs by business people. Thus, even if NGO leaders are elected, their concerns for social development are often marginalised in the general rush of other members to secure infrastructure projects.<sup>53</sup>

The limited impact of the TAOs has also been assessed by research institutions within Thailand.<sup>54</sup> Dr. Gothom Arya of the Institute of Technology for Rural Development at Chulalongkorn University has maintained that the shortcomings, including the persistence of corruption are down to a lack of citizen awareness. Similarly, Dr. Uthai Dulykasaem, director of the Sodsri Sanitwong Foundation, claimed that decentralisation without prior education in citizenship was unlikely to produce the desired structural change in rural governance. A change in the law alone was not sufficient to ensure democratisation.

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<sup>52</sup> Pasuk & Sungsidh (1996) implicitly recognise this. They propose a dual attack on corruption, consisting of decentralisation of bureaucracy *and* of political parties so that they 'become more accountable to a popular base', p. 183.

<sup>53</sup> See Arghiros (1997) and Clarke (1998) p.48.

### 3.2 Decentralisation and political society

While education is certainly a prior requirement for effective participatory citizenship, I do not believe that education and decentralisation legislation are sufficient to enhanced democracy without further institutions being in place. I return here to my prior claim that dependence in the population and the absence of mass-based popular organisations, which participate in the formulating the discourse of political society are prerequisites for the deepening of democracy and the concomitant weakening of political exclusion.

I believe that the arguments of Hirst (1990), although conceived as relevant primarily for parties of the Left excluded from power in Western representative democracies, are also significant for an analysis of political exclusion in Thailand, where the 'left' is constituted in part by NGOs who deliberately avoid involvement in political society. Hirst identifies two strategies employed for the invigoration of democracy. The first he labels 'new republican theory', based on the ideas of citizenship and 'advocating the strengthening of active participation in common... and extending the

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<sup>54</sup> The evidence for this paragraph is gathered from Bangkok Post (BP) 08/06/1997, 'The birth pains of democratic reform'.

social and political rights of citizens'<sup>55</sup>. This approach has much in common with projects of citizenship education and 'consciousness raising' in Thailand, as well as with the attention to procedural details of democratisation. However, he finds such an approach falls short of its stated project of democratic invigoration:

'Democratisation must rely on something other than higher levels of mass participation... Mass democracy may be a minimal form of political participation for the individual, but it gives the major parties the capacity to monopolise the political agenda... Hence, any political alternative that does not compete for the vote as parties do and yet seeks to change the political agenda, is in danger of political exclusion.'<sup>56</sup>

The second strategy employed rests in 'civil society', and is again mirrored by Thai NGOs' commitment to their status as civil society organisations. This approach is 'more anti-statist... advocating the crucial role of citizen's initiatives in 'civil society' and relying upon an active organised civil society to act as a check upon and a substitute for the state.'<sup>57</sup> The shortcomings of this approach, according to Hirst, is that, as long as 'the state is not chronically lacking in legitimacy, such strategies of opposition within 'civil society' can have at best a local and single-issue effect'<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> Hirst (1990) p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

The importance of Hirst's proposal lies in his refusal to write off the potential of political society for further democratisation – something which Thai NGOs have been wont to do<sup>59</sup>. At the same time, he offers a political society alternative based on mass participation, refusing to see the alternatives reduced to the mass-bureaucratic party and the 'electoral professional' party – as McCargo (1997b), for instance. His vision, entailing what he calls a 'pluralisation of the state' and 'associational socialism', articulated further in Hirst (1994), remains normative. However, potentially, it is of resounding practical importance for Thailand, where a method of countering political exclusion remains to be found.

### **Conclusion:**

In this dissertation, I have argued for the inclusion of a discourse of 'political society' in the discussion of democratic consolidation in Thailand. This is not founded upon evidence from Thai political society as it stands: I make no claims as to the *inherent* potential of political society for democratic consolidation. Rather, the analysis is based upon an examination of NGO strategies of interest representation and communication. In their roles as alliance builders and policy advocates, NGOs approximate many of the characteristics of an (ideal) political party. The fundamental

distinction remains their avoidance of entering, or supporting, the arena of political society. However, I have argued from examination of their role in, and association with, the Assembly of the Poor, that it is precisely this avoidance that limits their potency to effect long-term, extensive change at the level of the state.

The main barrier to democratic consolidation has been presented as political exclusion of the mass of the rural poor citizenry. The assumption behind this claim is that democracy is not a 'end point', or a merely procedural form of government, but that it is a process, invigorated by participation, and able to be strengthened or made more shallow. Political exclusion itself is a function of economic dependence and the absence of mass organisations oriented towards state power. Although some authors are sympathetic to such a claim (Sukhumbhand, 1993), while others make oblique reference to it (Pasuk & Sungsidh, 1996), the majority of NGOs situate themselves firmly in civil society. By confounding the distinction between political society and the state, NGOs remain hostile to the potential of political society to reinvent itself as a force for democratic consolidation.

I do not reject the democratising potential of NGOs in general at a more limited level.

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<sup>59</sup> Admittedly, the history, status and performance of political parties in Thailand makes it easier to understand NGOs attitudes in this respect.

Their role in citizen education is particularly important in this respect. Nor do I propose that NGOs should form themselves into political parties, or lose their essential quality of autonomy from the existing Thai political parties. What I have endeavoured to highlight, particularly through the discussion of decentralisation in Thailand, is the structural inconsistencies of their attitude to political society. In effect, by promoting decentralisation without the communicative channels of a grassroots political party, they are perpetuating structures of political exclusion and weak democracy.

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