“The root causes of weak citizens and communities are: interference by politicians, meaning they use citizens as instruments; exploitation by the rich, meaning they see citizens as slaves; divide and rule by bureaucrats, meaning they see citizens as the enemy....”

— Prapas Ngoksungern. Member of Sungnern Local Wisdom Group (in The Asia Foundation 2001: i)

Introduction

The main question to be answered by the present research is: What are the roles played by civil society organizations (CSOs) in local governance? Opening with the above quote preempt the possibility of a positive answer to this question, but it also suggests where to focus this inquiry in order to understand the present situation. The Thai ‘villager’ is spared by none: politicians, bureaucrats and rich people. They all dominate local communities curbing genuine
grassroots participation in the decision-making process. We will look at the historical background of the relations between these elites and ordinary citizens at the local level, to highlight the changes that are occurring, rather than to suggest the existence of a static society and culture. Although Prapas feels alienated by the power structure of Thai society, the setting in which he was able to do this declaration reflects an evolving situation, where civil society organizations are a legitimate part of the governing process.

The research paper is structured in six sections. The first two are dedicated to the analysis of the making of the Thai modern state and its evolution up to the current decentralization process. It reflects on the changing relations between the central administration and the territory, the external influences and local resistances. The research will then set out to analyze the emergence of a ‘civil society’ sector in Thailand, its role vis-à-vis the State, its dominant ideology (localism, communitarianism), and its development in recent years, particularly after the crisis and the rise of Thai Rak Thai politics (section 3).

In section 4 a map of existing CSOs in Thailand is drawn, analyzing the different roles played over the years by NGOs, CBOs and new social movements. This is followed by an early assessment of the overall role of CSOs in local governance, discussing in particular the case of ongoing attempts to coopt civic politics by governing elites. A conclusive paragraph is dedicated to the challenges CSOs will face in the near future.

From ‘Governmentalization’ to ‘Decentralization’

An overview of the historical relations between the ‘center’ and the ‘periphery’ in Thailand is necessary in order to understand the nature of local power relations and the ‘birth’ of civil society. This is the political and social background for the engagement nowadays of CSOs in local governance. Governance at the local level has been dominated by bureaucrats since the reforms of the end of the 19th century. Changes are hard to develop, but on the wave of political reform since the early 1990s, decentralization is taking place, advocating for an active involvement of people’s groups in local governance.
Centralizing Administrative Reforms, Nationalism, and Development: Impact on the ‘Village’

The Thai administrative system took the shape it basically features today with the reforms of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) in the 1890s. Before, power relations outside the capital city were based on the so-called sakdina system. Sakdina literally means ‘power (rank, honor) in or over (irrigate rice) fields’ and ‘refers in the first place to the legal system of allocation of social rank in a numerical-hierarchical order, to the entire population in most traditional Thai states’ (Turton 1984: 25n.). It is also referred to as Thai feudalism. Sakdina has also been defined as a patron-client relationship (see, e.g., Tanabe 1984: 87), ‘characterized by the exploitative exchange of labor, goods, protection and generosity etc. between individuals of different status’ (ibid.). According to Kemp, under the sakdina there wasn’t a system of territorial control but a ‘hierarchy of centers of authority whose influence in turn extended outwards and downwards with declining effect the further away one progressed’ (1991: 317). It was based on individual relations rather than groups or coalitions, where freemen (phrai) were under the authority of officials (nai) according to their administrative departments or sub-departments. At the bottom of the system were the that, slaves.

Under the influence of neighboring colonial powers and the pressure to ‘modernize’ the country to avoid direct colonization, the King and his royal ministers attempted to set up ‘a uniform centralized system of administration over the whole kingdom, now redefined in what to us is a far more familiar form with precise geographical
boundaries’ (Kemp 1991: 317). The new system introduced a salaried professional bureaucracy, replacing local hereditary governors; reformed the tax system, replacing tax farmers with a centralized tax collection; and in 1892 created a new structure of central government departments. This significantly changed the role of the government in local affairs.

The administrative change attempted to impose spatially defined administrative relations over non-spatial ones. The system was imposed primarily on rural people, and a physical boundary around the village was created, often quite arbitrarily. The reforms were carried out with great difficulty and were often met by various forms of resistance that led at times to open confrontations mainly in the tributary states (which were more peripheral and often ethnically distinct). But the kind of mass political participation in colonized countries in their quest for independence was lacking, since the country never lost its sovereignty. In terms of less overt forms of resistance, people disliked elected commune (subdistrict) or village head, generally complaining about the insufficient compensation, but probably also because they felt it ‘alienated them from their neighbors for it turned them into quasi-officials of the government’ (Tej 1977: 189). In turn this created an awkward situation in which ‘some people...took the easy way out of the predicament and elected government officials as village and commune elders’ (ibid).

The role and the nature of the subdistrict head (kamnan) and the village head (or village elder—phu yai ban), as they came to be developed in that period, by and large survive today. They are elected leaders (the former among the phu yai ban of the subdistrict), but accountable to the Department of Local Administration (DOLA) of the Ministry of Interior (MOI), a hybrid figure between a politician and a civil servant.

It has indeed been argued that they are more ‘the ears and eyes’ of the state rather than the representatives of the rural people in the state (Kemp 1991, Hirsch 1991, Turton 1987). Hirsch argues that through these modernizing reforms the two-class system present in the so-called sakdina system was maintained. He sees evidence of this in the village discourse in which, for rural dwellers, there are the villagers (chaoban) and the civil servants (or ‘officials’)—as he identifies
them—*kharatchakan*). The latter are sometimes referred to as *nai*, following the previous existing distinction. In the new bureaucratic system, ‘former serfs and slaves constituted a peasantry that was at once increasingly mobile and commercialized, while bureaucratic positions went to the ruling class—that is, the former nobles* (1990: 19). The reforms have also been faulted for creating a dependency of the local communities on government administration, allegedly insulating the people from local affairs and restraining them from carrying out activities for the common good (Dej 1995: 88, Anek 2002: 46).

Once the administrative state was more or less set up, characterized by violent repression over rebellions, it could be suggested that a process of Foucauldian ‘governmentalization’ of the state has taken place in which control and surveillance become the actions of power (Foucault 1991). First of all it was a control over culture. The Thai ruling power, after the 1932 coup that brought to an end the absolute monarchy, needed to create a Thai national identity that could legitimize it. An official version of a Thai culture and of what it meant to be a ‘Thai citizen’ was forged based on historical *imaginaire*. It was basically the ‘culture of the bureaucrats’ and of the growing bourgeoisie, that ‘set state-identity apart from popular cultural identities especially at the local level. Many popular traditions and cultures became “folk” or “sub-cultures” during this period and thereafter (Chai-anan 1991: 71). This is a period of strong nationalism accompanied by state capitalism led by Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram.

In 1957 a new direction is undertaken by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who

combined capitalist development with a new emphasis on the role of the monarch, control of the *sangha*, and a selective revival of public rituals and ‘traditional values,’ which once again became the official state version of ‘Thai culture’ (Turton 1984: 28).

National development (meaning economic development) became his prime task (the term *kanpattana* was used to refer to it), using a paternalistic style of leadership that ‘was also by nature despotic’ (Thak 1979: 220). Development, or more precisely the urge to develop, became a fundamental key for the State to gain access to the village. The challenge underpinning the development process (‘by which the
village benefits by becoming part of the national modernization’) ‘stems from unequal power relations between what was state and what was village, a power gap that is being shifted and absorbed into the village itself’ (Hirsch 1989: 50). Rural development was promoted as a way to keep under control politically sensitive areas, by building roads and creating an apparatus of mutual surveillance between villagers. Turton highlights the role of such grouping as the Village Scouts or other paramilitary ones in creating a system of surveillance, violence and fear (1984, 1987, 1989).

The definition of the ‘village’ with the administrative reform and its control through nationalism and development had a strong impact on local governance and the shaping of the relationship between ordinary citizens and the state apparatus. Development meant, for some observers, the end of the ban (‘village’) culture, negatively affecting the cultural identity of village dwellers (see Chatthip 1991, Sulak 1991). These social critics emphasize the importance of the village community and peasant culture, which is described as ‘anti-state and non-capitalist,’ and considered to preserve ‘pre-sakdina characteristics’ (Chatthip 1991: 133). Actually the idea of ‘village’ in rural Thailand is often met with widespread criticism. Hirsch sharply points out that ‘[t]o talk of the Thai village is to acknowledge the success of a particular discourse of power’ (1991: 336), and he goes on to suggest that we are often imposing an identity rather than seeking one out when we try to define rural identity or village identity in Thailand (ibid.). Kemp, in highlighting the ‘amorphousness’ of the settlements he studied, declares that

[i]t is theoretically incorrect to interpret the peasant village as the primordial base from which the wider more complex society has emerged, it is instead the “creation” or “product” of that state of which it is part (1991:319).

Although nowadays the administrative division of the territory is most likely internalized, it is important to keep in mind how it has been constructed, not only physically, but, as Hirsh and Kemp point out, also discursively. The relationship between what can be called a local civil society and the government is inevitably influenced by these historically contrived power relations. In the villages there is usually a small proportion (about 5 percent) of the population that possesses
a degree of wealth, and ‘derives their advantages from their ‘external’ connections and alliances’ (Turton 1984: 30), covering leading political and economic roles. The poorer villager is thus once again marginalized from the rest of the society⁴, possibly perpetuating an everlasting dichotomous division between ‘us’ and ‘them’, that Hirsch observes characterizing also the villager’s perspective of the developer, in the contrasting official-villager, outsider-insider framework (1990: 20). ‘The main commonly recognized distinction between these developers is that between state and non-governmental (NGO) workers.’ (ibid.: 21)

**Economic Growth, Popular Uprisings, and Political Reform**

The bureaucracy and the military dominated the country for thirty years (from the ‘50s to the ‘80s), with US backup in a Cold War environment.⁵ The economy grew considerably, based on the alliance between businessmen and generals, an alliance that started to grow weaker in the early 1970s, when business leaders indirectly supported the student uprising in 1973 and participated in the democratic government that was formed in 1975. With the US failure in Indochina and the growing complexity of Thai society, the now wealthier business class started to question the role of the military. In 1976, however, the army regained political control. Using again the threat of communism and the capillary network of paramilitary informal right-wing groups set up in the previous years, it mounted a bloody campaign that culminated in the students’ massacre of October. Students at Thammasat University in Bangkok were protesting, as in 1973, against the still unresolved social injustices the country was suffering as the result of uneven economic growth, together with international issues such as American militarism and Japanese economic hegemony (Pasuk & Baker 1998: 243; Ji Giles 2001). Some 2,000-3,000 of the students fled ‘to the jungle’ to join the Thai Communist party and came back in the early 1980s after the insurgency collapsed and the army issued an amnesty (Pasuk & Baker 1998: 234).

The 1973 and 1976 events marked a threshold in Thai political history. Political change, as the 1973 events demonstrated, could emerge from popular uprising (McCargo 2002). Since then, it is be-
believed, ‘civil society has played a major role in Thailand’s evolving democracy’ (Amara 1999: 325). The military was also forced to recognize that the events represented a breakthrough in Thai politics, and in 1979 they restored the parliament. Power was nevertheless kept under significant military control with the premiership of General Prem Tinsulanonda (Pasuk & Baker 1998: 225), but the political system saw a gradual institutionalization of parliamentary politics.

The political scene of the 1980s was dominated by General Prem who ruled the country until 1988 when, after the general elections, he stepped down to let a ‘party’s man’ be appointed. Chatichai Choonhavan, Chat Thai party leader, became prime minister and formed a cabinet composed of three-quarters of businessmen, many coming from the provinces. The balance between the military and the political parties that Prem carefully maintained for the last eight years was compromised. On the charge of corruption the military in 1991 intervened and deposed the Chatichai government. Corruption was in fact rampant (but not new) with the economic boom making the sums of money involved larger and the ‘democratization’ process creating new beneficiaries. Local provincial ‘bosses’ had already started growing richer in the 1960s with the construction of public infrastructures in the countryside intertwined with illegal activities (like smuggling and gambling). They became known as chao pho (godfathers). By now vote-buying was widely spread, with these provincial magnates controlling elections ‘on a patronage system’ (Pasuk & Baker 1998: 227). Bangkok businessmen and the old guard bureaucracy found it hard to adjust; hence, when the military intervened and appointed the respected business manager, ex-diplomat Anand Panyarachun, it was not regretted.

However, popular protests broke out, first in 1991, against a constitutional draft proposed by the military, and then in 1992, after the elections and the appointment as PM of General Suchinda Kraprayoon, one of the coup leaders. The latter ended in bloodshed and is remembered as ‘Black May.’ Up to half a million had joined the street demonstrations in Bangkok, many of them middle-class people, defined by the local press as mob mu thu or the mobile phone mob (Pasuk & Baker 1998: 238, Bello et al. 1998: 15). But, although often disregarded, many others were workers, slum dwellers and peasants.
Protests against the military spread also to some provincial towns, especially after the violence erupted. Suchinda was forced to resign and a second interim government led by Anand was established. These events are believed to have marked the end of military role in Thai politics.

‘Political reform’ became, since these early years of the 1990s, an imperative, and the process set in place culminated in the passage of the 1997 Constitution, readily addressed as the ‘people’s constitution.’ This has been described as the outcome of a ‘critical alliance between liberal, progressive, and conservative forces to check the power of elected politicians’ (McCargo 2002:3). Political reform meant different things to different people and the Constitution partly reflects compromises between contrasting factions. However, it represents a significant potential change for Thai politics, switching the focus on people’s participation and setting the basis for a society governed by the rule of law. Important, in this context, is the emphasis placed on decentralization and local government.

**The Structure of Thai Local Government and the Decentralization Process**

On the wave of political reforms initiated in the 1990s and the demand for an opening of the governance structure of the country to allow people’s direct participation, decentralization became a high point on the agenda. It has been also influenced by the emergence at the international level of the New Public Management theory. After the political crisis erupted, donors renewed their support for decentralization, in line with the overall emphasis on the reform of the governance structure of the country. Decentralization is usually seen as a way to deliver better services, to be more effective in the developmental process, promoting a better use of local resources, deepening democracy, and sustaining the formation of a vibrant civil society.
Local Government and Public Administration

The first form of local government in Thailand is considered the sanitary district (sukhaphiban) set up by the reforms of King Chulalongkorn. It survived, alongside the municipalities (as a sort of smaller version of the latter) until 1999, when reforms following the new constitutional dictates transformed them into municipalities. Municipal councils were established in 1935, with the first local elections held in 1937, hence representing an elected local government with the longest history (Fishel 2001: 4). The system of tambon (sub-district) administration was first created in 1914, but elected members were introduced in their councils only in 1972. These were transformed in juristic entities in 1995, with the creation of the TAO (Tambon Administrative Organizations). Tambon were to serve areas outside of municipalities and the sanitary districts. Provincial Councils were set up for the first time after the constitutional revolution in 1933 and endowed with legal status in 1955 as PAOs (Provincial Administrative Organizations).

Thus, local governments have been in existence for some time, but alongside the central government’s public administration agencies (see Figure 1). The latter basically had the control of the executive power. This has been exercised through each line ministry’s territorial administration at the provincial and district level, creating a situation of ‘vertical spatial expansion’ with no ‘horizontal integration’ (Nelson 2002). Given the scarce horizontal assimilation, provincial governors (phuwaratchakan changwat) and district officers (nai amphoe), appointed by the MOI, tend to cover a role of coordination and representation, rather than that of presiding over an integrated administrative organization (ibid.). The latter should be created under a reformed decentralized local government, gradually curbing the power of the central administration.

The strong control exercised by civil servants and the military over all the state’s affairs led to the controversial definition of Thailand as a ‘bureaucratic polity,’ i.e. a state dominated by the bureaucracy. The firm grasp on the provinces that has been kept throughout the 1970s and 1980s to maintain ‘national security’ (under the alleged threat of internal communist insurgency and of neighboring socialist and communist states) started loosening, first in the 1970s.
with the rise of parliamentary politics, and more significantly in the 1990s with the beginning of a decentralization process. However, most observers underline the persistent dominance of the bureaucracy over local affairs (see Arghiros 2001, Nelson 2002, Fishel 2001) which indeed seems far from subsiding. Although local governments are nominally by and large independent from the central government, rules and regulations are generally established by the MOI and its Department of Local Affairs (DOLA). Provincial governors are in its line of authority, and so are the kanman (sub-district administration head) and the village heads through the district office.

Currently, at the provincial, municipal (thetsaban) and sub-district level (tambon), we find local government organizations. At the provincial level, we thus find a PAO (Provincial Administrative Organization), being the people’s representative body, and the ‘provincial administration’ under the provincial governor. The governor, until the 1997 reforms, was also in charge and in control of the PAO. The district (amphoe) level, on the other hand, is administered only by civil servants headed by the nai amphoe who supervises, similarly to the provincial governor, the work of the various ministries’ and departments’ representatives. At the moment there doesn’t seem to be any provision for local government at this level. This represents a great weakness in the decentralization process of the country. As noted by Arghiros, it is in the districts that representatives of the line ministries deliver most of their services, hence becoming the bureaucratic level with which rural people mostly come in contact (2001: 26-27).

The two most important loci of local political power are the sub-districts and provinces. The hybrid position of local governments, vis-à-vis the state administration structure and the ‘decentralization of the money politics’ since the 1980s, did not allow the formation of genuine representative bodies at the local level.

Provincial governments have a negative reputation. They have been defined as ‘insignificant playgrounds for local politicians who are often construction contractors’ (Nelson 2002). This harsh depiction is due to the de facto weak role of this local government body vis-à-vis its administrative counterpart, in terms of power, sources and duties. The principal role of provincial councilors seems to be
that of approving and allocating the budget for infrastructure development. It comes as no surprise that most of them are in the construction business and are often seen as ‘chao pho’ (see Arghiros 2002: 237-238). It has been argued that their accountability to the electorate is extremely low and that they remain by and large isolated from the pressure of CSOs. Their role has been rather that of ‘intermediaries’ between local and national politics, especially during elections (ibid.).

The younger TAOs run the risk of mirroring the negative image ascribed to PAOs. Infrastructure development represents already the first item in their agenda (i.e., corruption), and growing tension between TAOs and the state-appointed authorities is reported (see Onnucha 1999). These negative experiences generate two different kinds of reaction. On the conservative institutional side, we find the well-known rhetoric of the ‘lack of readiness’ of local communities to run local governments (see Fischel 2001: 8). On the progressive side, there is on the contrary a push for further decentralization and independence from the central government administration.

The Decentralization Process

The centralizing reforms carried out by King Chulalongkorn had a strong impact on the concept of Siam (as Thailand was then called) a nation based on territorial unity, an absolute monarchy, politically, and administratively controlled, from the center with a strong, capillary bureaucracy. From then on, the idea of a unitary state would always represent a drawback for any attempt to decentralize power to the provincial and district level, supporting the (wrong) assumption that decentralization would weaken the state (as noted by Nelson 2002, who points out that most likely the difference between ‘state’ and ‘government’ is, in this case, not clear).

The drive to decentralize has been always held back by the rhetoric of the ‘lack of readiness.’ Already at the time of the reforms of King Prachatipok (Rama VII), the attempts to set up municipalities countrywide were met with skepticism among his ministries, who argued that they ran the risk of not being understood by the people, and hence being detrimental rather than beneficial to the country (Choowong 1997: 71-72). Nowadays conservative forces, especially
within the MOI, similarly claim that local governments might not be ready to perform the new roles ascribed to them by the decentralization process. The Constitution itself employs the same jargon when stating, ‘The state shall decentralize power to (...) develop into a large-sized local government organisation a province ready for such purpose’ (Section 78, my emphasis). This is often translated either as lack of education (sometimes in a paternalistic fashion) or due to a ‘culture of obedience’ (as was mentioned to me by the chairperson of the NGO-Coordinating Committee, from a ‘people’s perspective’).

**Figure 1: State Administration and Local Government Structure (as of March 2000)**

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<tr>
<th>M I N I S T R Y</th>
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<th><strong>STATE ADMINISTRATION</strong></th>
<th><strong>GOVERNMENT BOD</strong></th>
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<td>Field Units of Central Departments</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>9,367</strong></td>
<td>Field Units of Central Departments</td>
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<td><strong>TAOs Staff</strong></td>
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**Special Administrative Organizations**

- BMA (Bangkok Metropolitan Administration)
- Pattaya City

*Figure 1: State Administration and Local Government Structure (as of March 2000)*
The push towards decentralization came hand in hand with the political reform movement that has characterized Thailand since 1992. Strengthening local government was mentioned as a policy priority as early as in the 7th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1991-1996) and further developed in the 8th Plan, where management and budgetary capability of local institutions are specifically addressed (Weist 2001).

The new Constitution clearly mandates for further decentralization of power in the country (Section 78), and a whole Chapter (IX) is dedicated to local government. It represents a significant development from Thailand’s fifteen previous constitutions. The constitutional provisions implied the enactment of new laws and the revision of old ones, of which the ratification of the Decentralization Act in 1999 and the decentralization plan in 2000 are the most relevant. Further decentralization and alleged deeper democratization of the country are hence underway, and it is still early to say what the effects will be. Many of the new Constitution’s provisions will have to be interpreted, such as what can be defined a ‘locality’ under Section 283,11 or if, under Section 285, people can directly elect the presidents of PAOs.12

Since the early 1990s there has been a popular call for direct elections of provincial governor and eventually of the TAOs’ heads but, at least up to now, it drowned in the rhetoric of monarchic respect13. Attempts to introduce direct accountability of locally elected representatives to their electorate are represented by the possibility of evicting a councilor or administrator on the appeal of at least half of all eligible voters (or three-quarter of a turnout). Furthermore at least 50 percent of those eligible to vote can forward a petition to the local council to consider a draft of a local law (just consider, they have no obligation to deliberate on it, according to the Constitution). It seems that while some constitutional drafters meant to establish mechanisms for participatory democracy, the conservative part of the drafting committee managed to disable them by placing significant hurdles.

In 1994 the law creating the TAOs was passed (also endowing with juridical status the subdistrict councils), expanding the number of elected village-based members. In 1997 PAOs were finally sepa-
rated from the provincial administration, until then supervised by the appointed provincial governor. In 1999 sanitary districts were upgraded to municipalities (Nelson forthcoming).

The decentralization plan, apart from the vast range of issues regarding timeframe, transfer of financial and human resource, duties, etc., introduces one issue that, as Nelson points out, is rarely mentioned. He refers to the establishment of ‘provincial’ and ‘area boards,’ new administrative units that should work at the provincial or sub-provincial level. They will provide policies and standards for the provision of services that require both a specific expertise and a unity in their delivery (e.g., education, public health, natural resources, etc.). These will consist of representatives of state agencies, local governments and civil society, with the PAOs serving as secretariat. The latter feature leads Nelson to argue that it should imply an enlargement of the PAOs, size and power at the expense of the public administration, (maybe) gradually replacing the various ministries’ and departments’ provincial offices, and endowing the PAOs with a coordinating and supervising role vis-à-vis the other local governments. However, it is not at all clear how this will be developed and what the actual implications for the structure of the state administration are.

An implementation plan has been approved by the Cabinet in November 2001. It covers six areas of intervention with a number of responsibilities having to be transferred from several departments of the line ministries. The six areas are: infrastructure; quality of life (including education and public health); communal and social order (including supporting democracy and people’s participation); planning, investment promotion, commerce and tourism; natural resources management and environmental protection; and art, culture, custom and tradition, local wisdom.

Three types of duties should also be transferred:

1. those performed by a local administrative organization or jointly with other local administrative organizations, or for which they purchase the services of the private sector, the state or other local administrative organizations
2. those performed jointly among local administrative organizations and the state
3. duties performed by the state, that could be performed by local administrative organizations (Weist 2001).

Also funds should be gradually transferred, with 35 percent of the government’s income to be devolved to local authorities by the year 2006 (Nelson 2002). In 2001-2002, however, the share of local budget significantly increased from 6.8 percent to 9 percent of the national public sector budget. Local revenue mobilization should also be enhanced. Up to now local governments have to rely on shared taxes and subsidies (with only 13 percent in FY 2000 of locally collected revenues), hence reducing its local accountability and predictability of income flows (Weist 2001).

Now it is all in the hands of Thaksin’s government, which so far has sent mixed signals in terms of commitment to decentralization. While the reforms at the provincial level suggest a weakening of the provincial administration in favor of local government bodies, the new PM is calling for the transformation of provincial governors into chief executive officers (CEOs), following a strategic reform of the bureaucracy. Protests have erupted against the new government over the rejection of an amendment of the Tambon Council and Tambon Administration Organization Act, that provided for the direct elections of the chairmen of the TAOs (September 2002). This rejection has been read as the intention to keep power under central control (see Wut 2002). It is nevertheless too early to draw a clear assessment of the government’s performance in terms of decentralization. I tend to agree with Nelson that the business-like style of governance of the current PM does not allow us to keep our hopes too high. Skepticism is reinforced by the populism that characterized its political campaign and his (early) attitude towards people’s organizations, as we will see in the next section.

Changing Local Powers?

When talking about local governments and administration in Thailand, we cannot disregard the role of local power structures that could heavily influence the formation of local formal political bodies and hinder people’s active participation. I am here referring not only to the popular figures of chao pho (provincial godfathers that dominated the PAOs) or the so-called ithipon muet (‘dark influences',
i.e., those mafia-like powerful individuals or groups that control some localities), but also to the general Thai social structure believed to be based on patron-client relations.

The patronage system, deemed to characterize Thai society in a static functional way, has been challenged by recent anthropological works. Arghiros, for example, defining patron-client relations as ‘dyadic, multifaceted and asymmetrical relations,’ argues that relations of this kind have become scarcer as capital rather than followers has become the primary source of power, and, conversely, as the majority of rural people rely on the market to sustain a livelihood rather than on other people who have more resources (2001: 7).

Therefore he sees political relations as characterized by a different type of reciprocity, that nevertheless uses as a resource of power the ideology and idiom of patronage. Fishel similarly attempts to reinterpret the patron-client model ‘to take gender and new class formations into account’ (2001: 15), and ‘rather than seeing patron-client ties in static terms’ she tries ‘to look at how both patrons and clients actively manipulate the dynamics of exchange, including their desires to get outside of the process of exchange altogether’ (ibid.: 17).

Hence, while the importance of ‘reciprocity’ in Thai society is stressed by both authors, the changing nature of patronage relations is also underlined. This is at least partly influenced by the decentralization process of political power.

Changes in the power structure is occurring at least at two levels. Firstly the new electoral process attempted to restrain the influence of provincial godfathers over national politics, thanks to the introduction of nationwide party lists, single-member constituencies, and the alleged increased importance of party affiliation. In fact many candidates from influential families which did not enter the TRT party basically disappeared in the 2001 elections (Pasuk & Baker 2002). Secondly, reinforced local government bodies, such as TAOs, show a gradual emancipation from the state administration system and local influential people.

Arghiros, for examples, witnessed a TAO council meeting in 1998 where village representatives managed to divert funds, provided by a World Bank loan to enhance local employment, from a village
headman’s proposal to deliver the money to his own construction company to dredge the canal, towards the payment of wages of manual labor for poor households (2001: 254). As he observes, this could not have happened ten years before, both because village representatives would not have been present and, even so, they would not have dared to speak up.

However, there is the risk that, while local government bodies are endowed with new powers and duties, local elected positions might become more appealing. As we have seen, provincial businesspeople already dominate the PAO’s councils and are seen as chao pho (Arghiros 2002: 238). Arghiros argues that they up to now featured a ‘state of symbiosis’ with national politicians (lending their support in times of elections), but they might in fact find it easier to launch themselves into national politics thanks to the single-member constituencies—exactly what the Bangkok political elite wanted to curb with the electoral reform. Furthermore, an eventual direct election of provincial governors might end up being controlled by these same dark figures (ibid.: 237).

I tend to agree with Nelson when he states that what we find at the local level is ‘a myriad of separately localized reactions to the various elements of the central model’ which a ‘process of politicization’ aims to replace with a ‘behavior that follows the centrally prescribed patterns’ (forthcoming). While he sees local politics dominated by political cliques (phuak), he seems to foresee a gradual reduction of their influence thanks to a ‘democratic decentralization.’ However, this decentralization of democracy, rather than restoring an alleged previous local autonomy, will reflect the dominance of centralized political structures.

As the arguments reported above suggest, local power structures are in a state of flux. It is probably still early to assess how and if they will significantly change. In any case it will take some more time. We will probably witness the decadence of certain cliques/families/chao pho and the resistance, or even the strengthening, of others, depending on how smartly they will play their political alliances at the national level. The growing power of elected officials vis-à-vis their government counterparts might indeed create new spaces for ‘dark influences’ to exert their power. It is actually here that CSOs could
play a significant role, ensuring the accountability of elected bodies. However, as we will see later, they also run the risk of being controlled by those same forces they should help marginalize.

**Elite Civil Society, Localism, and Thaksin’s Populism**

The historical roots of Thai ‘civil society,’ as we have seen, are believed to be embedded in the popular uprising of the 1970s, growing stronger after 1992. In the last decade a national debate on what this ‘civil society’ represents and its role boomed. The idea of civil society has been linked to localism and reshaped in populist discourse of the current government. Within this ideological framework CSOs have to operate in their engagement in local governance.

**The ‘Building’ of Prachasangkhom**

The term ‘civil society,’ translated as *prachasangkhom* or *prachakhom*, has known incredible popularity in Thai political discourse in the last ten years. The presence of a strong (*khemkheng*) civil society is considered a *sine qua non* for the success of any political reform, the solution of social crisis, and the achievement of ‘good governance.’ Confusion on what constitutes civil society is nevertheless rampant in Thailand and, as many other political concepts, it has been imported and mainstreamed in local political discourses, creating new meanings and legitimizing given interpretations. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the re-contextualization process that the concept underwent in Thai society. Suffice it to say that it was employed in many different ways, according to the political stance of each social actor who decided to seize it.

One of the positions that acquired significant influence is that of Prawese Wasi, a prominent physician, royalist and close to the NGO movement, who endowed it with a sense of morality, the ideological space where to express public virtue, solidarity, and cooperative participation. In his own words, ‘*prachasangkhom* means a society where people come together to work in different ways. This is the key to have good economy, morality, and politics’ (cited in Ponladej 2000:...
4, my translation; see also Prawese 1999). After the 1997 crisis this idea of prachasangkhom has been raised to support localism and alternative views of rural development.

In the discourse of social thinkers and organizations that claim to work at the grassroots level, ‘civil society’ has become something to be achieved. We often hear about ‘building civil society’ (sang prachasangkhom), as if this should be the outcome of a process of production (which also implies defining what a ‘strong civil society’ should be). This emerges clearly from a report on the CIDA-CAGIN Tambol project by LDI, where it is stated: ‘The community felt that to become a civil society is very difficult task,’ ‘one of the principles of civil society is community participation,’ ‘structure of civil society management was formed,’ ‘…knowledge that is useful and applicable for achieving civil society’ (LDI 1999a: 2-3, 11).

Many (especially foreign) scholars tend to underline the non-existence in the Thai setting of what can be called ‘civil society’ in ‘Western’ terms, at least up to the end of the 1980s. This has been ascribed to the pervasiveness of the Thai state ideological and bureaucratic system fill up the power gaps that could have been taken up by ‘civil society’:

The highly centralized public administration limits the capacity of the peasants to organize and determine their own destiny (Damrong 1988: 123);

Because of the particular features of the Thai social formation (…) state apparatuses effectively monopolize much of the ground which in other social formations is occupied by ‘civil society’ (Turton 1984: 38);

(…) state ideology succeeded in removing politics from civil society and relocating it in the bureaucracy which became the main theatre of politics (McVey in Chai-anan 1991: 73).

Going back to the ideological and coercive domination that characterized the presence of the state in the village in rural Thailand, it is significant in this context to mention the fact that, within that regime of surveillance, empirical practices included the ‘co-option by the state of local “intellectuals” as paramilitary trainers, leaders and informers of various sorts,’ and the use of the ‘communist’ labeling to restrain any kind of rural initiative outside ‘official definitions’
During and after WWII the alleged communist threat from China led the government to establish the National Cultural Commission at the Ministry of Education, which oversaw all the activities of nonprofit organizations and reinforced by new regulations in the 1970s to face the ‘internal’ threat of communist forces (see Amara & Nitaya 1997). It is not until the early 1980s, with the demise of the Thai Communist Party, that the country experienced a relaxation towards civil society movements (Amara 1999).

The economic boom of the 1980s created a new class of salary-men and women who passed through the university system but not through the bureaucracy. Their political attitudes were shaped by the events of the 1970s but, also after the amnesty and the ‘return from the jungle’ of many political activists, this stratum of the population found it hard to get representation in the political institutions. Provincial elections, as we have seen, were dominated by local ‘bosses.’ Parliamentary representation was hard to obtain. Political pressure could be exercised only from the outside (Pasuk & Baker 1998: 233-236). Bangkok-based intellectuals and social activists who started campaigning in the early ‘90s against corruption of politicians are seen as the embodiment of Thai incipient ‘civil society’ (Fishel 2001: 202). Along with the effort to influence the political system, this middle class, especially through its jungle returnees, worked in rural Thailand to promote an alternative developmental approach. The view that became dominant is that the middle class constitutes the ‘true’ civil society who, through its intellectuals, activists and ‘developers,’ can help the ‘villagers’ convey their grievances and formulate their resistance to the central government.

The idea of ‘civil society’ also became quite fashionable within the development industry in the 1980s, with the promotion of partnerships with CSOs and the design of programs to develop the civil society of recipient countries. For example, the Local Development Assistance Project (LADP) was created by CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) to fund nonprofit organizations. This later developed into a Thai NGO, LDI (Local Development Institute), and LDF (Local Development Foundation). LDI nowadays embodies moderate social activism that seeks state-civil society cooperation, and it is one of the main partners of the current government.
However, the conceptualization of Thai civil society as a ‘middle class affair’ and legacy of the popular uprisings of the 1970s can be misleading. As Ockey (2002) recently analyzed, Thailand, or better Bangkok, in 1955-57 already experienced significant instances of street politics, but these events have been erased from the historiography of Thai ‘civil society.’ Similarly, as earlier mentioned, the 1991-2 protests have been attributed essentially to the growing urban middle class, although a significant role was played also by lower classes. This has led to a focus on ‘elite civil society,’ legitimizing the idea that civil society is a social formation that can be constructed from above and whose leading figures are necessarily representatives of the middle class. In this way power structures are not questioned and the status quo is preserved (Somchai 2002: 135-137).

**The Rhetoric of Localism and Thaksin’s Populism**

When the Asian financial crisis triggered a reflection on the development path followed until then and on the need to reform the governance system of the country, a ‘strong civil society’ was raised once again as the answer (now coupled with the new buzzword of the moment, ‘good governance’). A resurgent localism gained momentum alongside with nationalism. The former, linked to the *wathanatham chumchon* (community culture school of thought) kind of discourse, found an ‘authoritative’ support in King Bhumipol’s speech delivered during his birthday after the crisis erupted (5th December 1997):

> Being a tiger is not important. What is important is to have enough to eat and to live; and to have an economy which provides enough to eat and live (...) We need to move backwards in order to move forwards. If we don’t act like this, the solution to this crisis will be difficult (quoted in Pasuk & Baker 2000: 193).

As has been observed, the King’s speech ‘gave the anti-globalization message a degree of legitimacy it might not have had beforehand’ (Bello et al. 1998: 9).

Localism, in the moderate sense of self-reliance, has been translated into state projects, NGOs and community organizations activities and hence built and promoted through structured practices. An
enticing review of the localism discourse in today’s Thailand (Connors 2001) suggests that it is an attempt ‘to determine the nature of citizen participation in the political process,’ part of what Connors calls ‘democrasubjection, or the subjection of people to imaginary forms of self-rule.’ McCargo (2002) similarly underlines that the importance placed on a moderate lifestyle and a reduced engagement with the global economy implies placing the responsibility on individuals, who are asked to make ‘moral choices.’ The emphasis on the development of a strong civil society by Prawese Wasi (and Thirayut Boonmi, both influential social thinkers in Thai society) is here linked to the idea of a rational middle class. The picture that is thus delivered is that of a top-down approach depicted as a bottom-up process. Furthermore, localism draws from international development discourse and its funding agencies. The emphasis on participation, empowerment, community, culture and ‘indigenous knowledge’ that arose in recent years in development projects can be easily connected with the alleged grassroots approach of localism in Thailand.

The nationalism intrinsic in the idea of localism was mainly directed at the consumerist aspects of western lifestyle imported to Thailand since its ‘modernization’ process began, but it was also applied to the contemporary subjection to the IMF and the World Bank dictum. The latter triggered a wave of resentment especially regarding the overall feeling of ‘selling off the country’ to foreigners (in terms of privatization and lifting the ban on foreign ownership). This issue again found on the same side, as in the political reform movement, conservatives who protected their vested interests and leftist intellectuals and activists who embraced the wider anti-globalization discourse. The latter were concerned with the impact of the reforms on the poorer sectors of society and workers, and the increased dependence of the country on the global market, rendering it more vulnerable to outside moods.

Populism is generally regarded to be part and parcel of the localism and nationalistic discourses in Thailand, being conservative, traditional, nostalgic, glorifying agriculture vs. industrialization, and denouncing outside exploitation (see Hewison 2000: 288-289, McCargo 2001a: 99). The political party that definitely came closer to the localist/populist positions is Thai Rak Thai (Thai love Thai) party, formed in
1998 and led by Thaksin Shinawatra, who obtained a landslide victory in the January 2001 general elections. A self-made businessman (so his official depiction goes), Thaksin rode the wave of political discontent by creating an institutionalized space for NGOs and grassroots movements to forward their policy proposal.22 This recent mainstreaming of localism discourse emphasized its paternalistic and populist features, in which local culture is reinterpreted and elaborated by elitist ‘social/cultural brokers.’ One of the main actors in this process is undoubtedly Prawese Wasi who became involved in many government-led social reforms and a committed Thaksin’s supporter.23

Localism thus found a new legitimacy. Yet if this meant the opening up of discursive spaces to rehabilitate, for example, local knowledges and community-based environmental resources management, the discourse was also redirected toward populist and nationalist positions. The 1997 crisis brought into question the bureaucrats’ and politicians’ capacities to steer the political economy of the country—hence new forms of governing were demanded. In line with broader popular participation enhanced by post-1992 politics, the emphasis was placed on the involvement of different sectors of the society in the management of the country’s affairs and, moreover, on the need to have a ‘strong civil society’ to counteract the power of local bosses and rent-seeking politicians and bureaucrats.

Apparently there is an attempt to overcome the patronage system in which local politics in Thailand has been trapped, building new figures ‘to fill the gap’ between the ‘villagers’ and the larger system, now that older modes of association are breaking up. This is done in close connection with the state and, rather than leading to a real ‘empowerment’ of the ‘people’, it seems to reinforce the control of the state apparatus (Connors 2001, 2002). There is the risk that the paternalistic style of leadership that characterized the years of ‘national development’ will survive, shifting the emphasis from the ‘we take care of you’ to the ‘we listen to you’ attitude, without calling into question power relation structures.

This approach, that characterized the rising of the Thaksin government, started showing its first significant cracks in the last few months. In December 2002 the people, who came to protest against
the decision to open the gates of the Pak Moon Dam (Isan-Northeastern region) for only four months a year during the rainy season, saw their camp in front of the government house destroyed by ‘unidentified men.’ A couple of weeks later the houses of the people who had just set off for the capital city to join the demonstrations in front (this time) of the PM’s residence, were torn down. Regarding both incidents the government of course denied any responsibility. The escalation of violence culminated a few days later in the crackdown by the police of a protest against the construction of the Thai-Malaysian gas pipeline, with the arrest of 12 activists.

Is the Thaksin’s honeymoon with the ‘people’s movements’ over? Probably. The worrisome part is the employment of well-known strategies of demonization of selected fringes of these social movements, while legitimizing others. This has led some to talk of the government as adopting ‘divide and rule tactics’ (see Supawadee 2002). By depicting some NGO members as ‘rotten eggs’ (see Post Reporters 2002), i.e., the ones that were arrested in Hat Yai and who allegedly ‘misbehaved,’ implies that there are ‘good’ elements that are worth preserving. There is a calibrated use of control over the society. Rather than featuring an anachronistic blank-out of people’s resistances, a grid is applied over the society, which allows only the surfacing of carefully selected discourses. Talking of civil society in terms of a ‘prachasangkhom kem keng,’ where cooperation between different sectors of the society and non-conflictual attitudes are praised, appears highly compatible with these recent events. This is part and parcel of a process of co-optation of local resistances in which moderate sections are tamed and mainstreamed.

**Thai Civil Society Organizations:**

**NGOs, CBOs and People’s Movements**

The formation of civil society organizations in Thailand, as we have seen in the previous section, has been by and large suffocated for many years. During the nationalistic period and the military dictatorship (from the ‘40s to 1973), any kind of association promoted by the citizens was seen with suspicion and only philanthropic activities were allowed. Laws and regulations were promulgated whenever it was felt that national security was under threat by the formation of CSOs. After the October 1973 student uprising, people became
politically more active and tried to set up non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to advocate for radical reforms (Amara & Nitaya 1997). It is not until the 1980s, however, that these organizations were allowed to flourish. With the demise of the Communist Party of Thailand many students and intellectuals, who had ‘fled into jungle’ after 1976, returned home. Several of them joined NGOs engaged in rural development or the protection of human rights.

Traditionally equated with the NGO movement, CSOs dramatically developed since the early 1990s, with new kinds of associations springing up both in urban and rural areas. Today, the definition of what constitutes CSOs in Thailand is a debated issue. NGOs, community organizations, grassroots movements, people’s organizations, forums, and local assemblies are often mentioned, but the distinction between each of them is quite blurred. Differences are sometimes drawn between ‘classical’ and ‘grassroots’ NGOs, including in the latter also some forms of community-based organizations.

NGOs probably represent the first institutionalized form of independent civil society organizations, while other types of social grouping working at grassroots level on policy advocacy are a more recent phenomenon. There is, however, a growing emphasis on community-based organizations, not only vis-à-vis NGOs, but also in contrast with what is referred to as ‘civil society.’ This is usually read in terms of ‘middle class’ vs. grassroots. The dichotomy is also fuelled by negative stereotypes ascribed to the NGO-sector. On one side, as a legacy of the ‘jungle returnees,’ these organizations are conceived as the most confrontational part of civil society groups (vis-à-vis state authorities). On the other, probably as a legacy of international support, NGO workers are labeled as ‘ha kin’ (finding something to eat). The Director of the Civil Society Development Section of LDI commented:
NGOs and civic groups are different. In the original NGOs most of the people are social workers who receive a salary from the organization. CSOs' workers receive no salary, they are volunteers (interview with the author, 4-11-2002).

NGOs are regarded as comprising mainly representative of the middle class and it is argued that they find it difficult to establish a broad membership.24 By contrast community organizations (ongkon chumchon) are perceived to be potentially less confrontational, not influenced by outside ideologies, and closer to people’s needs.25

The mapping of the existing CSOs in Thai society is not an easy task. Comprehensive studies have not been carried out and any statistical information is simply not reliable given the dispersion of what are usually identified as CSOs, and due to the fact that the majority of those organizations are not registered (to avoid state control).26 Most of the studies on the emergence of ‘civil society’ at the local level identify its birth with the Eighth National Socio-Economic Development Plan (1997-2001). The plan envisaged the participation of the ‘people’ in its drafting, through the creation of provincial prachakhom or civic assemblies. This strategy was coupled with the ongoing ‘participatory’ process that characterized the drafting of the new Constitution (Ratana 1999a and b, Gonzalez III et al. 2000, The Asia Foundation 2001, Opart 1999, Somphan et al. 1996, LDI 1999b). Reference is also made to the advent of the crisis as an additional factor that led to the revival of ‘localism,’ as we have seen, and the consequent need to build ‘strong’ communities in the countryside.

In this section the role of NGOs, CBOs (ongkon chumchon) and people’s movement (khabuankan prachachon) is discussed separately, reflecting only partly a real distinction in the nature of their organization. Rather, it reveals different ways of conceiving civic engagement and its history. Each is briefly presented regarding the kind of activities performed, its evolution through time (if applicable), and its potential for enhancing local governance. Wider space is dedicated to CBOs, considering that these should be the organizations directly involved in local governance.
The Role of NGOs

Under the label of NGO (non-governmental organization) are often categorized a wide range of CSOs. NGOs in Thailand are met with contrasting opinions. If on one side they are considered a ‘vibrant movement,’ source of alternatives to the current economic model (Bello et al. 1998: 243, Dej 1995), on the other side their approach toward rural dwellers is debated (e.g., Rigg 1991) or their attitude considered too confrontational. They have been inspired by different ideologies: communism, non-partisan humanitarian service, and social Buddhism (Bello et al. 1998: 243-244). Their areas of intervention are typically rural development (‘in search for alternative livelihood,’ Suthy 1995: 104), human rights, democracy promotion, and policy advocacy. In the last ten years environmental issues became also increasingly important, reflecting both the impact of the boom years on the natural resources of the country and the worldwide attention towards environmental preservation. Besides carrying out specific activities, NGOs have developed in recent years an important catalyzing role. They are said to ‘have filled a vacuum created by the inability of political parties, trade unions and peasant associations to expand popular participation’ (Naruemon 2002: 183), supporting the formation of people’s movements and coordinating their activities. Although this alleged inability and its causes should be explored further, it is true that at least some NGOs managed, over the years, to promote some form of ‘people’s empowerment,’ channeling grievances, information, and skills.

An important development of the NGO sector has been the setting up in 1985 of a coordinating body at the national level, at first comprising the organizations working on rural development (NGO-CORD Coordinating Committee on Rural Development). Later the ‘rural’ specificity was dropped to include a wider range of NGOs, reflecting the changing nature of this sector. NGO-COD, as it is now known, has gained a stronger voice in the political realm in the last few years.

The membership base remains one of the weakest points of these organizations, a weakness shared with other kinds of CSOs as we will see below. The impression that CSOs in Thailand work more as social service agencies rather than associations is confirmed both by...
the limited number of effective members and the social class of the latter. According to a survey, development-oriented NGOs recruit their members mainly from university and college campuses, where students are more sensitive to social and political issues and willing to volunteer (Amara & Nitaya 1997: 48). Dej estimated that 75 percent of NGO workers are very young and from the middle class (1995: 94), hence representing an intellectual elite.

In terms of enhancing the quality of local governance, NGOs play an important role through:

- Promoting the formation of grassroots groups
- Political activities (at the national and local levels)

Naruemon identifies three broad types of NGO political activities: cooperational (influencing government policy), grassroots (critical of government development policy), and promoting empowerment from below (2002: 188). The last two categories are the ones working closer with local politics (or ‘grassroots democracy’). In the ones promoting a politics of grassroots movements, Naruemon includes the Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD), the Union for Civil Liberty, and the Forum of the Poor. As belonging to the last group we find the Village Foundation, the Traditional Medicine in Self-Curing Project, and the Community Forest Project.

Some of these organizations were involved in different stages of the decentralization process and some (like CPD) had a significant influence in the process of the 1997 Constitution drafting. Naruemon argues that NGOs managed to strengthen their network of people’s organization linking with other groups including urban-elite civil society organizations. They attempted to lobby the government on issues such as ‘community rights over natural recourses’ and the decentralization of power to communities (ibid.: 195, see also Choi 2002: 14). NGOs played an influential role especially after the crisis, both at the central level (putting pressure on the government to focus on specific issues) and at the rural level with various forms of ‘resistances’ (like the adoption by a group of villages of an interest-free community currency).

Although there has been a rise of ‘civic politics’ in Thailand since the 1980s (Connors 2002), this still has to reach the local level. It is hard to find communes’ organizations that work on policy-advocacy
and the monitoring of local politicians and bureaucrats. NGOs and networks of people’s organizations involved in anti-corruption campaigns and democratic reforms promotion are based in the main cities with (usually) weak provincial branches. It is the case of the newly born (2001) ‘Network of People against Corruption’, whose office is based at the headquarters of Local Development Institute (LDI) in Bangkok. While it boasts of membership of more than 100 organizations nationwide, its main promoters, dominating the public image of the network (and most likely its activities), are well-known figures of moderate Bangkok political activism. Furthermore this organization is often the embodiment of its leaders and, although very active, they just can’t be strong also at the local level.

We have a history of rural development engagement and one of urban politics, both characterized by the dominant role of the urban middle class. Although the performance of grassroots NGOs is met with contrasting opinions, it seems that their long-term engagement at the local level, together with a growing influence on national politics, can represent a good vehicle for enhancing local governance. Two main obstacles are: lack of funds (and the risk of being mainstreamed into government-sponsored activities) and a narrow membership base (that risks to alienate a significant part of the population). To the latter is linked a possible weak grassroots-embeddedness.

**Community-Based Organizations**

LDI conducted a survey in 1999 (see LDI 1999b) to portray the present situation of CBOs in Thailand. They counted at the national level 40,186 organizations ranging from saving groups, workers’ groups, women’s groups, youth clubs, health volunteers, farmers, water-users and cremation associations. Information was collected through different sources, mainly networks working with/for local organizations (Bank Poor Net, SIFpp, LDI etc.). They also tried to assess what they called the ‘strength’ (khwam khemkheng) of the community organizations on the territory. The indicators they employed:

1. the number of organizations for every 10,000 households
2. the age (number or years of operation)
3. size (in terms of number of members)
4. financial resources.
These indicators have been used to classify each group into five levels of ‘strength.’ Unfortunately the report does not inform us on the methodology adopted in constructing these categories and in collecting the data, hence the statistical relevance of the whole study cannot be assessed. However, the analysis of the distribution on the territory reveals some interesting points. The number of organizations are spread quite unevenly in the different regions of the country, with the Northeastern part (Isaan) and the South featuring the highest density (40 and 29 groups per 10,000 households respectively against and average of 26 nationwide). A closer analysis reveals that just a handful of provinces retain a concentration of organizations as high as five times the mean value. In terms of ‘strength’ the regional perspective changes significantly. Bangkok and its surroundings register the highest proportion of organizations classified as ‘strong’ or ‘very strong’ (25 percent), followed by the South with 22 percent, while the other regions follow at a significant distance. Not knowing how each indicator contributes to the definition of the categories makes it difficult to draw some assessment from the latter information (see Box 1).

The geographical distribution of CBOs, as evidenced by the LDI study, supports the general assumption that cultural and historical factors contribute to the different developments of civil society groups in the country. The preponderance of the South is generally ascribed to its ‘different culture.’ Here people are believed to share a tradition of group-cooperation and involvement in local governance. In the North and North East the presence of a high number of community organizations is determined by a historical large presence of NGOs. These being the poorest areas of the country, many international NGOs started to work here in the late 1970s, supporting the creation of local development organizations. What the study does not analyze are the activities carried out by this large number of local organizations and the nature of their membership and foundation. These two aspects actually appear to be the weak part of CBOs in Thailand, with many organizations that are state-initiated focused on very specific circumstantial issues and with a narrow real membership base.
Civil Society Engagements in Local Governance: The Case of Thailand

Box 1. Density and Strength of Community Organizations in Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>No. of Org./10,000 households</th>
<th>% Org. ‘Strong’ or ‘Very Strong’/total org.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North East</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central &amp; Western region</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East and Bangkok area</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: LDI 1999b

CBOs at the local level are by and large focused on circumstantial activities. While this is not a negative aspect *per se*, it often leads to a very limited interaction with local authorities restraining the possibilities of acting as pressure groups. Based on the review of previous studies, activities carried out by CBOs can be grouped in the following categories, in order of relevance:

- Local Economy
- Environment
- Traditional Culture
- Women
- Civil and political rights

Activities related with the enhancement of the local economy and the reduction of poverty are probably the oldest and still involving the largest number of organizations. These are represented by the establishment of revolving funds, farmers’ banks, support to the production of basic crops, setting up off-farm activities, etc. Groups performing these activities are mainly those set up by rural NGO projects in the 1980s, based on a village-centered development (see Suthy 1995). This came back in vogue with the crisis and the resurgent localism. The renewed emphasis on localism allowed also the flourishing of existing groups and networks working on the revitalization of local cultures, in particular the use of traditional medicine, the production of handicrafts and other local products.

In the analysis carried out by Somphan et al. (1996) of nine ‘villagers’ organizations’ (or people’s organizations—*ongkon chaoban*), we find their activities focused on specific local economy-related is-
sues, i.e., support for the production of basic crops, setting up revolving funds, cremation groups, traditional medicine groups, support of small off-farm income-generating activities. Other activities regard the capacity-building of their leaders and the protection of the cultural and natural resources.

In the four ‘Tambon Civil Society’ projects analyzed by LDI in the CIDA-CAGIN sponsored program, the ‘activities in the field’ are connected to particular events such as the impact of chemical products in agricultural production (and consequent drop in prices of crops), administration of garbage collection and disposal, illegal and unsustainable collection of clams. Only in the case of the Tambon chosen in the Southern region, the formation of a ‘civil society’ is not linked to the solution of one problem, but rather to the overall discussion of public issues (again this might be connected with the general impression that in the South there is a stronger tradition and culture of cooperation and self-government). Similarly Arghiros, during an interview with the author, noticed that in the subdistrict where he worked the only existing groups were water-users, brick-manufacturers associations, and the like.

In terms of membership, problems are similar to the ones experienced by established NGOs. Nelson for example recalls:

I attended a function held at the Ratchaphat Institute to commemorate October 1976. There was a banner listing more than 10 organizations as organizers. However, only approximately 30 people attended, amongst them children and some students as well as guests from other provinces. In fact the main organizers were the same three or four people I had come across in other contexts (forthcoming).

During my fieldwork I also lived similar experiences. In spite of the high number of organizations spread around the country, the actual membership is probably quite low and, moreover, largely restricted to certain people. These are defined by a combination of class and ‘clique’ extraction. We have already discussed how ‘civil society’ emerged essentially as a dominion of the middle class. In the political realm we find what Nelson termed ‘cliques’ (phuak), described as ‘informal,’ ‘political relevant,’ ‘based on a variety of relationships, for example family-ties, friendship, business interests, or patron-client ties,’ and as ‘socially and politically exclusive’ (Nelson forthcoming).
While he analyzes them in the context of local politics (where political parties seem to be fairly absent), local *phuak* might also dominate the ‘civil society’ scene. The participation of ordinary citizens in established civil society formations could also be influenced by local informal power structures. As the locus of power shifts, from the mandarins to centralized administration and from the bureaucracy to representative bodies, we have seen local elites adapting and changing. There is a risk that, as CSOs at the local level gain space and importance within the political realm, they will be seized by yet another elitist clique. This is already suggested by the formation of the so-called ‘civic assembly’ (*prachakhom*).

Another weakness of Thai CBOs is represented by the way most of them have been founded. All of the nine village-organizations analyzed by Somphan et al. were established either by the state or NGOs. Often district officers and village leaders play a significant role in the administration of the group. Hence the bottom-up process that we would aspect to see in the formation of local CSOs is, at least for the moment, a chimera.

*People’s movements*

Although people’s movements lack, by definition, the organizational structure that characterizes CSOs, they find a legitimate space in this research because they reflect a change in local politics and represent a form of resistance that could be channeled in the enhancement of local governance. Some of them started as a spontaneous movement to become a more established and organized network of people (e.g., Assembly of the Poor).
New social movements rose in recent years mainly focused on specific issues, often related to the environment and natural resource management (see Pasuk 2002a and 2002b). These have been able to comprise, according to Pasuk, the ‘little people,’ ethnic minorities, small fishermen, marginal peasants, slum dwellers and working women, who were previously marginalized in the political arena. Phenomena like the Assembly of the Poor (or Forum of the Poor, samacha khon chon) could indeed suggest an emergence of the lower classes in streets politics (or return, if we consider the pre-1976 movements non-elitist, Ockey 2002: 121). Many of them are protest movements focused on opposing dam construction (e.g., Pak Mun Dam) or industrial infrastructures (e.g., waste-water management system of Samut Prakan, the Thai-Malaysia gas-pipeline. See Pasuk 2002a).

It is still early to assess the role that these social movements play in local politics. Their strength seems to rely on the linkages that they are able to set up with ‘urban-elite’ groups, ‘combining rural demands with urban-aware strategies’ (Baker 1999: 20). Furthermore these movements appear to be embedded in local communities, probably more than any other form of organization. Their emergence is not only the expression of resistance to specific state-led (i.e., outsiders) projects, but as a whole they ‘mark a significant change in [Thai] society and politics’ representing, it has been argued, the ‘first, sustained examples of mass social action’ (Pasuk 2002b). Pasuk in her analysis of people’s movements underlines that, although they have been supported by NGOs in various ways, NGOs cannot create them. The ‘mass’ characterization of these movements is what differentiates them from NGOs and CBOs, but they probably could not exist entirely outside the political space created by the former.

Social movements up to now had to move to the capital city to make their voice heard. Decision-making, as we saw, has been highly centralized. As decentralization effectively takes place, we might see some of these movements channeling their grievances towards local government bodies. They might hence engage themselves in local governance. This will, however, require a revision of their organizational structure, focusing on local alliances and building internal strength to overcome the influence of local ‘dark powers.’
CSOs in Thai Local Governance: ‘Empowerment’ or ‘Co-optation’?

‘Civil Society in Thailand takes shape in the centrally-devised civic assemblies.’
— Michael Nelson
(interview with the author)

So far we have seen on one side how local public administration has evolved through time and, on the other, what kind of civil society organizations have been operating at the local level and how. In this section the research will attempt an assessment of people’s participation in local decision-making processes as outcome of decentralization and CSOs’ engagement.

Especially since the 1990s, with the alleged end of military intervention in the political realm, emerging social forces have been allowed to flourish. Protest movements significantly increased, bringing rural grievances to the capital. At the same time local administration is being reshaped (although at a slower pace), decentralizing decision-making power to the provincial and sub-district levels. The next foreseeable step should be a deeper engagement of CSOs in local governance, enhancing the performance of the newly established local government bodies. To this end ‘civic assemblies’ have been created, first at the provincial and then at the tambon levels. These, it will be argued, epitomize a new form of control over civic politics, rather than a genuine improvement in people’s participation. Has co-optation substituted violent repression and surveillance?

An early assessment of CSO engagement in local governance

As we have seen in the previous sections, different organizations engaged themselves at the local level over the years. Their activities span from the promotion of the local economy to policy advocacy and resistance movements. CSO types of engagement are usually divided into two large modalities: consensual and confrontational, with the former gaining space in the institutional realm and the latter being stigmatized as extremist. A weakness affecting both categories is the narrow membership base together with the tendency to represent mainly the middle class. Groups and organizations working at
the local level are often externally driven, but, in the Thai context, this means being influenced by ‘elite urban’ social activism rather than by the international donors’ agendas (however present).

Engagement in local governance has been until now significantly curbed by existing power relations and public administration structures. Patron-client relations and the culture of ‘reciprocity’ are still indicated by some observers as an obstacle for lower classes’ participation in the local political sphere (Fishel 2001, Arghiros 2001). However, as formal power structures are reformed, we can also expect cultural impediments to slowly evolve and adapt themselves to the new historical context. The nature of the Thai ‘villager’ is of course also subjected to change. The increased relations with urban Thailand and the increasing diversification of household income towards off-farm activities have undoubtedly changed the rural dwellers’ perspective vis-à-vis the rest of society; many of the farmers, movements have been re-shaped in the mid-1990s by the sons of ‘returnees,’ who went to get an education in the ‘city’ and ‘supplanted city-based NGO workers’ (Baker 1999: 16).

So far we have witnessed attempts by NGOs to ‘empower’ local communities, supporting alternative developmental approaches and fostering community-based groups. Policy advocacy and participation in the decision-making process have been mainly conveyed at the central level, reflecting both the strong state-centralization and the difficulty in performing ‘resistance’ where personal ties criss-cross political issues. Although debatable, the role of NGOs in supporting local organizations’ engagement in some aspects of local governance has been remarkable. What is important is that we start seeing programs that are not confined to the support of specific activities, but rather aim at an empowerment of local organizations vis-à-vis state authorities.

An example in this direction is the project on ‘Civic Participation in Local Governance’ (CPLG) supported by The Asia Foundation and the World Bank Institute. The project team comprised six Thai NGOs (Women and the Constitution Network, Women in Politics Institute, Union for Civil Liberty, Local Information Center for Development, Northern Women Leaders Club, and Local Development Institute) and The Asia Foundation. It created a pilot training curriculum and
manual to ‘promote changes in the attitudes, knowledge, and skills of participants to transform them from passive subjects to active, informed citizens’ (The Asia Foundation 2001: 21). The training was directed at local leaders, villagers, politicians, civil servants and local administrators, limiting the participation of public officials to a quarter of the total. An interesting feature of this project is that training on local governance is provided to both ordinary citizens and officials by CSOs, hence providing a ‘civil society perspective’ on local government. The training manual covered eight lessons grouped in three sections: community and self-government concepts; skills in thinking and planning on participation in self-government; people’s participation in self-government, through the drafting of local ordinances, monitoring local administration and removing non-performing or corrupt officials from office.

So far, ‘classical’ grassroots groups have been working around local governments rather than through them, mainly because local administrations are dominated by elites and are run as the central bureaucracy (Arghiros 2002: 234). This has seriously limited CSOs’ capacity to act as pressure groups and watchdog organizations. Activities like those of the CPLG, or other programs designed by Thai NGOs working on policy advocacy, seem more directly linked to an improvement of the overall quality of governance at the local level. They will also possibly lead to the formation of autonomous CSOs at the tambon and provincial level in the near future.

A problem of sustainability is, however, present, both financial and organizational. Projects like CPLG are short-term and work under the organizational skills and financial support of an international fund. Other coordinated efforts are, as we will see below, under the auspices of the state. Especially with the apparent openness of the current government towards people’s organizations, we can observe a pervasive involvement of the central government in local civil society engagements. This reinforces the persistent hurdles to develop independent movements, which should be, by nature, confrontational.
The Co-optation of ‘Civil Society’

As people change their resistance strategies and organizational patterns, state authorities and conservative forces try to co-opt the new trends, mainstreaming and keeping them under control. Rüland and Ladavalya noticed the attempt by the state of incorporating CSOs into planning and decision-making as a way to neutralize those organizations that were becoming more and more confrontational (1993: 160). The push toward direct participation in the political realm (advocated by some CSOs since the 1992 events which managed to influence the drafting of the new Constitution) has been nowadays funneled into moderate-prone prachakhom. The effort to revive the local economy following an anti-globalization ideology has been molded into the ‘one tambon one product’ state-sponsored project and the popular ‘one million bath village fund.’

The case of ‘civic assemblies,’ or prachakhom as they are called in Thai, probably represents a significant, yet debatable, attempt of promoting civil society engagement in local governance. Their formation was mandated in the 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (1997-2001), following the rationale that ‘participation’ of all stakeholders in the decision-making process will lead to a ‘people-centered development.’ Prachakhom has been defined as a ‘new governance mechanism, which emphasizes state-society partnerships in planning and implementation at the local level’ (Ratana 1999b). These assemblies, to be first established in four pilot provinces, were meant to provide inputs from ‘ordinary’ citizens into development programs. An NGO has been later (1998) appointed to assist in the formation of prachakhom at the district level (LDI), with the financial support of CIDA-CAGIN (Canada-ASEAN Governance Innovations Network).

The idea of creating ‘civic assemblies’ at the local level was readily seized by the Ministry of Interior which mandated their formation at the district (amphoe) level through the DOLA, for the drafting of the five year development plans. In this context prachakhom is reduced to bureaucratic process of information and suggestions collection, following detailed forms and procedures provided by the Ministry.

Hence we now find ‘informal’ civic assemblies and ‘formal’ ones, i.e., incorporated into the bureaucratic structure. Unfortunately at a closer look, the farmer does not seem to represent a feasible way to
enhance local governance. Two interrelated characteristics of *prachakhom* suggest that they represent a co-optation of civic politics rather than truly innovative way of framing power relations at the local level. First, the ‘popular’ representation seems confined to the middle class (see Ratana 1999b). Second, the consensual approach that underpins their formation suggests a taming of civil society instances rather than providing a venue for their expression (Connors 2001).

Ratana, in her analysis of Khon Kaen provincial civic assembly, underlines how this has been dominated by the ‘middle class, civil servants, and socially engaged academics’ (1999a: 4). Although some NGOs and slum dwellers, representatives were present, their voices have been dissolved in the rhetoric of the consensual approach. The chairman of the assembly argued that this approach ‘should avoid activities that may lead to conflict or confrontation with state authorities in order to gain credibility, respect, and cooperation from governments’ (Ratana 1999b). State-civil society cooperation is constantly underlined, thus defining the nature of ‘legitimate’ people’s participation. On the construction and expansion of local ‘civic assemblies’ for example, the efforts coordinated by LDI pointed toward the identification of ‘key persons’ or ‘change agents’ that should have ‘good behavior, leadership quality, good ideology’ (LDI 1999a: 12, see also Opart 1999). It hence reveals a paternalistic approach, where an external agent, although sympathetic and neutral, will identify the ‘right’ figures to promote local self-government. The whole process aims at letting the people in the community understand that participating in these networks will work for their benefit.

The other two state-led projects I mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph (one tambon one product, one million bath village fund) focus on the local economy rather than politics. The former is the development (and polishing up) of an older Japanese-sponsored program. It has been revived by the Thaksin government that heavily invested in its promotion. The latter is one of the populist promises of Thai Rak Thai’s electoral campaign. Since both are fairly recent (launched in 2001/2002), it is too early to analyze them. As suggested above, the projects can be read as attempts to control community-based economic activities. The local drive that followed the economic
crisis is here 'nationalized.' The fund provides a government-designed framework within which the revival of local economies can be performed. The management of the fund is again assigned to yet another kind of ‘civic assemblies.’ LDI is the official government counterpart in the realization of the program, hence confirming itself as the ‘legitimate’ representative of CSOs in Thailand. The operational level of the village fund project is provincial, where an ad hoc prachakhom has been organized by LDI and its network. They tried to gather ‘the political active [people] from the movements of the past (for the Constitution, reform of the health sector, HIV campaigns, etc.)...they are middle-class volunteers’ (interview with an LDI officer by the author, 4/11/03). At the village level small committees also are being established (74,500 so far according to the LDI source).

These efforts confirm the impression that there is an ongoing attempt to try to define CSOs’ role in Thai society and to marginalize those sectors that are perceived as a threat to the status quo. In such a way, the emerging forces of civic politics are disciplined and channeled into moderate stances, and radical discourses are seized and sent back to them filtered through the ideological grid of state nationalism (see Connors forthcoming).

The Road Ahead

The historical background of state-citizens relations in provincial Thailand has been characterized by a significant alienation of the people from the governance structure of the country and a strong control exercised by the authorities over civil society activities. Under the patronage of international NGOs first, and the emerging urban middle class later, CSOs have grown in the last twenty years. Their engagement at the local level is by and large focused on economic activities, but policy advocacy and resistance movements are also gaining space. At the same time a process of decentralization has been put in place in the attempt to curb the power of the bureaucracy and promote local autonomy. New spaces of intervention are opened up for civil society, but also new risks of being co-opted and controlled are rising.

If we don’t want decentralization to create just one more layer of money politics and to decentralize corruption rather than political
participation, it is generally believed that there should be a vibrant, active civil society at the local level. CSOs should play the role of watchdogs and consultative bodies. In order to do this the current organizational infrastructure of Thai CSOs should be enhanced. Grassroots embeddedness is still weak and wider (class/clique-wise) participation is crucial. Independence from ruling elites is just as important. The creation of local ‘civic assemblies’ does not represent an improvement in this direction. However, as NGOs run by urban intellectuals in the past, they can favor the spatial reallocation of civic politics, moving it closer to local realities and creating at least a forum for the discussion of people’s needs outside the formal structure of governing bodies.

Although local power relations cannot be analyzed disregarding the cultural notions of ‘reciprocity’ and ‘respect’ that define social relations in traditional Thailand, these should not be considered static. Their function is increasingly challenged by the changing nature of the ‘villager’ and the legitimization of concepts like ‘participation’ and ‘localism.’ In the legitimization process these concepts are also often co-opted and disciplined, but they nevertheless disclose political spaces allowing forms of resistance inconceivable just a few years ago.

The challenge is now represented by the actual implementation of the decentralization process (and its effectiveness in carrying away power from the MOI and local ‘dark influences’), the capacity of local civil society to organize themselves into structured groups, and the ability of CSOs to re-appropriate themselves of the empowerment discourse. The quality of CSO engagement in local governance can improve only if all these three aspects are tackled.

**About the author**

Barbara Orlandini holds a PhD in Politics and Economics of Developing Countries from the University of Florence, Italy. Her dissertation is entitled “Consuming ‘Good Governance’ in Thailand: Re-conceptualizing Development Paradigms”. She is currently connected with the United Nations Development Program in Cambodia.
ENDNOTES

1 This statement was recorded during a meeting organized at the Nakhon Ratchasima Public Health Office on May 11, 2001 as part of a pilot-training course under the project ‘Civic Participation in Local Governance’ supported by The Asia Foundation.

2 Probably the situation is not so clear-cut, and indeed in the so-called Holy Men Rebellions, some of these leaders were the provincial ‘petty nobility’ that were left out by the reshaping of the local power structures (Tej 1977: 131).

3 Chatthip is part of the so-called Community Culture (wathanatham chumchon). School of thought that supports this view of an ideal pristine village way of life.

4 They speak of village ‘society’ (sangkom), and that the rich do not allow them to participate in it (‘mai hai ruam sangkom’) (Turton 1984: 30; 1987: 81)

5 The US could use Thailand as a base for defending Southeast Asia against communism. The price was US political and material support for the military regime. (Pasuk & Baker 1998: 219)

6 For a different view on the impact of the 6th October 1976 events and the formation of ‘Civil Society’ see Ji Giles Ungpakorn (2001). He argues that the legacy of the massacre on the Thai Left was such to destroy it ideologically, and the blame was put on the students and workers themselves that ‘just did not know when to stop’. This alienated them from Thai society. ‘Civil Society’ was later seen as a potential ‘political space’ and has been preferred to re-establishing political parties of the left, but, according to Ji Giles, in this way the issue of class power is superseded, framing the political conflict in the binary opposition between state and non-state groups in society at large (ibid.). See also Kasiian (2000) for a cultural politic view on the construction of Marxism as un-Thai to understand the brutality of the events.

7 This period is usually defined as ‘quasi-democracy.’ It resisted two coup attempts in the 1980s meant to reverse the democratization process.

8 It is argued that these representations of the demonstrators as a white-collar, reasonably well-off mob are written by middle-class reporters and academics, in which the role of the lower classes is completely erased (Ockey 2001: 315-316). See also Choi (2002).

9 This section draws extensively on Nelson (2002).

10 Actual implementation started in 1996.

11 The section reads ‘any locality which meets the conditions of self-government shall have the right to be formed as a local government organization as provided by law.’

12 ‘A local government organization shall have a local assembly and local administrative committee or local administrators. Members of a local assembly shall be elected. A local administrative committee or local administrators shall be directly elected by the people or shall be from the approval of a local assembly.’

13 The direct election of the TAO’s president, it is argued, could endanger the position of the monarchy, sustaining the idea that the leader of the country should be popularly elected.

14 Recently the government announced that it would be hard to achieve this target ‘given spending commitments, (Bangkok Post, 19 February 2003: ‘Local body funding target out of reach’. Retrieved on the web-site).

15 It is interesting in this sense how government officials are usually seen as having amnat (power in terms of strength and ability) derived by the state and ultimately the King, while elected officials are considered to have ithtiphon, i.e., power derived from personal ties, wealth and possibly coercion (Fishel, quoting Nithi, 2001: 11).
16 See e.g. Somchai 2002.

17 For an analysis of the introduction of the ‘good governance’ policy agenda and its use in the Thai political context, see Orlandini 2002.

18 It cannot be disregarded the functional use of the King’s speech that has been operated by the media and those politicians and social activists that seized the message excerpting those passages that emphasised the need of going ‘back’ to self-reliance. They made of it a *thritsadi mai*, a new theory, meant to change the concept of development in Thailand at the local level.

19 Connors (2001) identifies two branches of localism discourse in Thailand, one ‘anarchist’ of Chattrip Nartsupa, and the other ‘moderate’ of Saneh Chamari, Prawese Wasi and the Local Development Institute (LDI), the latter seems to be the one that found ‘legitimacy’ in Thai discourse on localism.

20 The economic crisis has been compared to the fall of the Ayutthaya in 1767. In 2001 a movie came out on the story of Bang Rachan village that, according to national mythology, bravely resisted the attacks of the Burmese several times in 1767. The movie enjoyed an incredible popularity and a TV series based on it was also broadcast. The poster of the film (a warrior riding a buffalo) became a sort of icon. It was used in a cartoon as the cover of a book on ‘Cooperating to save the nation’ featuring as the enemy a foreigner on an airplane firing missiles with the US Dollar sign on; but also ironically by the weekly *Mathichon* with Thaksin’s face (current PM) as the white knight that will save the country.

21 Kasian Tejapira, a political scientist and assistant professor at Thammasat University, in a newspaper article defined the nationalist stance of debtor entrepreneurs as a ‘crony-capitalist agenda,’ while under the same nationalist banner NGOs are pushing a different agenda, which he calls ‘radical populism,’ characterised by economic sovereignty, resource management and State reform (Kasian 2001).

22 As Michael Nelson pointed out to me, the image of Thaksin, sharing a meal with the Assembly of the Poor’s members protesting outside the government house and listening to them, has a strong symbolic effect, especially on the background of predecessor PM Chuan who always seemed indifferent if not hostile to their plight.

23 An editorial on *The Nation* on Thaksin’s case (found guilty by the NCCC of deliberately hiding his assets) and his pending Constitutional Court verdict, reflects on the variety of people that came out to support him. These range from a Benz dealer to a ‘Buddhist moralist’, the latter being Prawese Wasi. The royalist reformer, according to the editorial, ‘believes Thaksin understands the importance of community, the Asian way, and self-reliance’. Commenting on the difficulties that foreign press encounters in understanding this phenomenon, the editorial observes: ‘The foreign press is struggling to understand this with words like “nationalism” and “populism”(...) [but] something like “self-strengthening to succeed in globalization” would be more apt’ (Chang Noi 2001).

24 Fishel, in her analysis of Thai provincial middle class, reports that one NGO-like group operating in the province of her fieldwork claimed to have more than 100 members, although most of these were school children of middle-class families (2001: 209).

25 This categorization of course does not reflect the reality of these organizations. We will thus find grassroots movements that are particularly confrontational, but do not run on high budgets (e.g., Assembly of the Poor) and NGOs that seek cooperation with government agencies (e.g., Local Development Institute). Nevertheless, the labeling is reflected in the discourses of social activists and bureaucrats. During an interview with a ‘moderate’ activist carried out by the author, for example, the Assembly of the Poor has been defined as ‘NGO-like’ (i.e., confrontational).

26 Although the 1942 National Cultural Act’s mandate for any registered organization to state that it had no political objectives was lifted after 1992, applicants still have to submit annual financial and activity reports to the MOI (Narumon 2002: 187).
27 Rigg defined the ideology that underpins their approach 'an elitist reinterpretation of that (externally perceived) [folk/peasant] culture’ (1991: 204). He refers in particular to the wathanatham chumchon that, as we have seen, underpins also today’s localism.

28 NGO-CORD was set up to respond to the perceived need to establish closer cooperation between NGOs working in rural development and to forge links with government agencies, especially the National Economic and Social Development Board in charge of drafting the five-year development plans (Amara & Nitaya 1997: 34-36, Dej 1995: 102-103).

29 The project was finally dismissed due to the opposition of the Bank of Thailand (Naruemon 2002: 196).

30 Social Development Fund, established after the crisis with a World Bank loan.

31 In the LDI survey reference is made to ongkhon chumchon (community organization), while in Somphan et al. (1996) to villagers’ organizations (ongkhon chao ban). I believe that by and large the two definitions coincide.

32 Banthon observes that the importance of building villagers’ organizations in the North East was felt at the end of the 1980s with the drive for industrialization. The problem of seizure of natural resources brought together NGOs working on human rights and those working on development which started supporting the formation of local groups and networks between villages. According to Banthon this also raised the awareness that democracy could only be constructed from below (1993: 317-320).

33 Lacking the statistical support this assessment is only based on a general impression derived from the analysis of other works.

34 If we assume nonetheless with Foucault that ‘power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted “above” society as a supplementary structure whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of’ (1982: 222), it could not be otherwise.

35 Eighty percent of 268 leaders of the 1995-founded Assembly of the Poor (considered the ‘first major assertion of a rural political voice since the suppression of the Peasant Federation’ in 1975) interviewed had worked outside the village (Baker 1999: 15-16).

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