
Thailand: the struggle of forest peoples to remain in the forest

There has been, over the course of the last decades in Thailand, many developments concerning the rights of the tribal peoples found throughout the country, but predominantly in the north. The difficulties faced by the entire country, stemming from bad environmental management, came to rest upon the shoulders of the tribal people as they now inhabit the last remaining stretches of forested land. However, is the basic assumption made here valid? The assumption that the small remaining forested lands must be kept free from human habitation, indeed, that the human occupants must be removed and the wilderness kept in a pristine and isolated state to be used for day excursions by the rich. That this is the most effective conservation strategy that could be adopted? It is easy to demonstrate that this western philosophy of conservation does not apply to Thailand, that far from protecting the valuable and vulnerable natural resources it destroys priceless cultural heritage and removes from the delicate ecosystems the resource management strategies of the people that have protected the forests over centuries.

However what is the right approach to take? The struggle for land rights by the indigenous/tribal people of Thailand's north has been so long and difficult because of this question. It highlights the most controversial aspect of the struggle; on the one hand are people that claim to have preserved the land they occupy since time immemorial and demanding the right to continue to do so and on the other are people who claim to work for the good of the entire Thai community, to be protecting a vital and delicate resource that is essential for the prosperity and health of the nation. How to decide between these two seemingly compatible but polarised views? The secret lies in the obvious, to combine them, to allow those with the knowledge and experience to preserve that which they have been protecting for centuries.

Economic development has been a focus of the Thai government since 1961; it is a form of development which stressed the increase of agricultural production for export, removing the traditionally sustainable nature of Thai agriculture. This immediately meant that the land under cultivation in Thailand increased dramatically, adding to the already serious deforestation problems. It is worth noting at this point that the new emphasis on surplus production did not have as great an effect in the areas populated by hilltribes. In Mae Hong Son, where the population of hilltribes is estimated at 80%, the forested cover is significantly greater than in comparable provinces. This environmental damage could not go unchallenged and thus the government did begin to pay attention to the problem. In 1992 the Cabinet declared that all land was to be divided into zones in which the land uses would be controlled. Three classifications were put into place, dividing economic, agricultural and conservation areas. Area allocated to Conservation Area: 88 million rai; to Economic Area: 52 million and to Agricultural Area: 7 million rai.

Within this declaration were the procedures for increasing the area of conservation land, as the 88 million rai target was not complete. These procedures illustrate more clearly than anything else the western image of conservation which has been adopted by the Royal Thai Forestry Department. Once land has been classified as conservation land, all communities already in residence must be, if possible, relocated away from the delicate area. Trees planted immediately in all areas of the vacated land. If immediate relocation is not possible the government takes control of all the land used by the

community and strictly controls any activity upon that land. The community should be convinced to leave the land and when this is achieved trees are to be immediately planted. This system of regeneration of land shows the view held by the government on conservation land, ie. that it is pristine forest devoid of all human habitation, a state of existence which is ultimately and obviously unsustainable. Before moving on to the reaction of the communities to these threats to their lifestyles it is worth taking a look at the reality of land uses through these areas. The conservation area, stated at 88 million rai has actually at most 68 million, as 20 million rai currently have mining concessions granted by the government, the same government which has actually removed land titles from long standing communities within the conservation areas to facilitate the declaration and increase of conservation land.

Not only has the government granted mining concessions in the proclaimed delicate ecosystems of conservation class land but in addition the logging, the government sanctioned logging, which took place in Thailand over the last 30 years of increased material prosperity, can be blamed for the devastating environmental damage on Thailand today, damage which culminated with the deadly floods in the south of Thailand in the beginning of the 1990s. This was what had to happen before the government stopped legal logging, what will have to happen to stop the mining? Yet despite the obvious culpability of the government in environmental problems such as this, the campaign has been to place the blame on the shoulders of the tribal peoples in the north. I will examine this campaign in detail later but it is a good indication of the strength of corruption that the fight has become so dirty.

So what has been the response? How have the people reacted to having their ancestral lands and only known way of life threatened? The clearest result is the startling growth in peoples' organisations, the people have come together in highland organisations, lowland organisations and have combined their voices in networks such as the Northern Farmers Network in order to protest the decisions of the government that were threatening them. The well-known Assembly of the Poor saw huge turn-outs of people determined to present their stories and the truth about the situation in Northern Thailand to the government. This massing of support for the poor of the north saw two main responses; the first was the government meeting with delegates on the 17th and 29th of April, 1997, to draft a Community Forest Law which would give the right of resource management of surrounding forest land back to the villages. These meetings were held in Chavalit Yongchaiyudh's time as Prime Minister and with the subsequent changing of the Cabinet the process was slowed. The second apparent result was a strong reaction by the government and Green NGOs against the peoples' organisations; the government has used the hilltribe communities as scapegoats in a number of problems, allegations that when looked at in detail are hardly credible.

Firstly, however, we should look at the accomplishments of the two meetings, the 17th and 29th of April. The draft law as designed by the Cabinet was debated by both the green NGOs, the peoples organisations' delegates and the government and a solution, acceptable if not welcomed by all resulted. A committee was established to determine the legitimacy of claims to land ownership and it was accepted that if occupancy could be proved to pre-date the 1993 declaration of "conservation land" then land rights would be granted. Another meeting was also held during April, on the 22nd, to which the delegates of the peoples organisations were not invited. It was here in this meeting that the procedures for the land delineation and titling were drawn up. The mapping was to be done by the military using the satellite mapping techniques and the Royal Thai Forestry Department was responsible for the process of delineation. Difficulties emerged in the process of demarcation, the mapping by the military was slipshod at best and in some cases villages did not even appear on the maps drawn up.

Many times the agreements reached in these two meetings have been in danger, most recently, as mentioned, because of a smear campaign run by the government and the green NGOs, many established by retired members of the Thai military and the Thai Forestry Department. The alliances between the government and the NGOs of this kind have quadrupled since the rising popularity of the peoples organisations from 4 to 25. This has meant that, because the green NGOs support the view of forests devoid of human habitation, factionalism has appeared in the NGO community.

This factionalism has made the dirty work of blaming the hilltribes for the environmental damage much easier; in the Doi Inthanond area the fires which have recently broken out were immediately considered the work of the Hmong and Karen hilltribes in the area. The ensuing battle to extinguish the fires was attended by thousands of Hmong and Karen people every day and the careful watch to ensure no more fires could get out of control was taken up by these tribes. However, the actions of these people went largely unnoticed in contrast to the similar actions of a smaller group of lowlanders who also aided in fighting the fires. This type of one sided reporting is incredibly damaging to the standing of the hilltribes in the public eye and this standing, in this respect, is essential if changes are to be wrought at the policy level.

The incident at Doi Inthanond is not unusual. The well-publicised Salween logging disaster and more recently the reaction to increasing deforestation in Chiang Dao, Chiang Mai Province are also clear examples of the one sided and intentionally misleading reporting of environmental problems in the north. There has emerged recently, however, a recognition in the public sector of the real nature of these problems. Increasingly people are seeing the "scapegoat" allegations for what they are and support is again on the rise for the peoples' organisations.

However, the process of land demarcation and the granting of land titles upon the results of the demarcation, as agreed to in the April meetings last year, is under greater threat now than ever before. On April 21st the government will debate whether to allow the process to continue. It has already been stated and there is a very real possibility that the government will decide against the peoples organisations. It is now that support is needed from the international community. Organisations, NGOs, peoples' organisations and international alliances must now make their voices apparent to the Thai government. The rights of the indigenous/tribal peoples in Thailand's north cannot be ignored any longer and the strength of international opinion is well known.

Source: The Corner House