

Environmental Civil Societies of Thailand: Expectations and Realistic Observations

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Abstract: Civil society at first was a concept of Europe instrumental in modernization by opening a public space for various sectors of the society to participate in policy-making, voicing opinions and raise matters to influence or pressure the state to address their social needs under prevalent contexts such as cultural conditions, capitalist economic development and democratic governance. Since, such concept migrated to Thailand, it has been arbitrarily favored by authorities from different sectors as a rightful and sustainable solution to almost every issue in Thai society including those of environmental aspect. This study is thus intended to construct some observations on the realities of civil society adoption in contexts of Thai society with an emphasis on environmental civil society, through critical analysis and reflection on the “source-status-prospect” of contemporary environmental civil society in Thailand on open platforms accessible for the researcher through various forms of media along with reviewing relevant literature, concepts and theories of both domestic and foreign origins. The initial findings revealed some dissimilarities in terms of the people’s fundamentals as well as accumulated experience and social norms which essentially facilitate the maturation and practicality of civil society concept between Thailand’s and that of modern Western society the original model. Therefore, an acknowledgement and establishment of a perception that does not deviate far from reality on these different features and principles are considered a vital groundwork to an efficacious implementation of such concept.

Key words: Civil society, environment, efficacious implementation, groundwork, Thailand, dissimilarities

INTRODUCTION

“Crazing imported things” is an attitude among many Thais. Foreign merchandise is generally believed to be of higher quality, made by premium-grade materials, aesthetically pleasing, physically robust. Being able to consume imported products such as sport cars from Germany, handbags and apparels from France, Swiss wristwatches, Japanese foods or even a spouse from the United States would bring about aura of classiness at least in the eyes of beholders. This is somehow undeniably true but thoughtlessly taking in foreign entities or cultures insensitively might lead to glitches or kinks from inaptness or incompatibility. Many of which are not difficult to find.

The concept of “civil society” is another foreign abstraction (Chansilp, 2007) widely adopted in Thai society, though crudely or ineptly (Poungsomlee, 2000) but for the sake of sophistication, every able person or privileged enough would definitely not turn down an opportunity to refer to or merely mention such concept. Having the quality of being foreign, it is able to sway the majority of Thai people to believe that it is supposedly good, even more so when such social discourse has been officially acknowledged and promoted extensively by

spheres of social superiors, academics and many regional leaders (Poungsomlee, 2000) as a favorable concept that must be implemented as a proper and viable solution that meet the needs of the majority of the people (Poungsomlee, 2000) further stressed the quality such foreign concept to be incontestable.

Nonetheless, implementation of civil society in Thai society is similarly to using any other foreign studies not to be impetuously adopted without thinking of the contextual differences between the originator and those of their own. In such cases where at least some considerations are taken into account, adaptation of fundamentals to incorporate such foreign concept never occurred still. “Democracy” is one of the most classic instances having been recently questioned whether it was “exportable” and concluded as “unexportable” (Barany and Moser, 2009) and many groups in Thai society deemed it as “not our own” (Klampai boon, 2007) led people to believe that this form of governance is unsuitable for Thailand due to lack of accumulated experience and cultures as the West acquired (Laothamatas, 2016). While adopted for nearly a century, never once any “change in political culture and ethics” was carried out to incorporate such. This study is thus intended to construct some observations on the

realities of civil society adoption in contexts of Thai society with an emphasis on environmental civil society, through critical analysis and reflection on the “source status-prospect” of contemporary environmental civil society in Thailand on open platforms accessible for the author through various forms of media, along with reviewing relevant literature, concepts and theories of both domestic and foreign origins which led to finding of some dissimilarities in terms of the people’s fundamentals as well as accumulated experience and social norms which essentially facilitate the maturation and practicality of civil society concept between Thailand’s and that of modern Western society, the original model, explained in more detail.

CIVIL SOCIETY: COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

It could be said that this fundamental change leading to the concept of modern civil society began in the 15th century and become pronounced during late 18th century in the era of Scottish and Continental Enlightenment (Carothers and Barndt, 1999). Many political theorists then from Thomas Paine to Georg Hegel developed the notion of civil society as “developed the notion of civil society as a domain parallel to but separate from the state a realm where citizens associate according to their own interests and wishes” (Carothers and Barndt, 1999) over those of others (Heywood, 2000) or the general public (Heywood, 2013). The conception of such new thought reflected changes in Western Europe’s economics in the high middle ages (Wallbank *et al.*, 1996) such as concept of ownership, market competition, especially the emergence of a new middle class bourgeoisie (Carothers and Barndt, 1999) and the circumstance where merchants from different cities gathered together and formed their guilds (Kapilakanchana, 1999). On one hand, civil society may be considered a social order of bourgeoisie (Habermas, 1998) in that perspective.

The rise of the bourgeoisie marked a turning point that led Europe into new era that is it was the arrival of a group of peasants so massive it could challenge the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church that oppressed Europe into long period of dark ages until the time when series of revolts arose with the earliest evidence being the dutch revolt in 1566 against the house of habsburg Spain, later the Glorious Revolution in 1688 to overthrow King James II of England (James VII of Scotland) and the French Revolution in 1789 to overthrow King Louis XVI of France (Davidson, 2005). The bourgeoisie’s way of thought was well-received by the people, feudal lords and the monarch as the Church taught Christians to adhere to doctrines and accept the original sin created by the first couple, Adam and Eve or

sin of disobedience in consuming from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and being banished from the garden of Eden to suffer the consequences as a punishment to succumb to state of lives believing that adversity is imposed by God. What humanity should do is prove their faith to God then they can be redeemed by the grace of God, hoping to return to Him in the afterlife. People were taught that mere mortals were incapable of communicating with God directly and the Church was a medium of communication and guide the people to God’s wills. Conversely, the bourgeoisie denied such notion and proposed a concept to convince the people to put emphasis on their state of affairs and believe in competency of humanity or humanism, through power derived from their economic wealth to bring about a renaissance movement of the late 14th century which later became a religion reformation in the 16th century, leading to the age of enlightenment in the 18th century.

“Protestant Ethic” (Max, 1958) was another Christian literature in the concept of bourgeoisie presented through a new denomination like Protestantism by retelling the concept of predestination in Christianity that it was impossible to know who was predestined but observable through their way of successful life, particularly economic success without having to prove or talk to Him through the priests anymore. These words were deemed more sensible than the old teaching as at the least, those chosen by God should also be happy on Earth, not poor and scarce (How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. In this sense, wealth throughout one’s life is unfavorable as it prevent him from going to the Purgatory in the afterlife). On another perspective it was better for the state or the monarch and aristocrats in this case as they did not have to lose a huge amount of income in form of taxes or leakages that gives no economic gain such as donation to the Church any longer.

Whether conducting willfully that is having believed and act in good faith longing for an afterlife as taught by religion or opportunistically, it cannot be denied that these notions brought major changes to European’s way of life, turning from indiscriminately forgo life and focus on life after death, carrying out religion practices of the Roman Catholicism to seeking wealth and prosperity by all means and in all classes as evident in the act of sailing to find route to Asia and Africa for trading purposes (Kapilakanchana, 1999). Many sailors were commoners funded by the monarch and aristocrats. It was indeed the Protestantism which emphasizes hard work, discipline and frugality that has evolved and become a system of belief in ownership of capital or “capitalism” (Singhadecha, 2005).

Mandeville (1988) wrote a book that illustrate the essence of capitalism “Fable of the Bees: or private vices, publick benefits” (1714) proposing that civilization derived from selfishness of humanity as in “Physicians valu’d fame and wealth above the drooping patient’s health” (Mandeville, 1988) that is all deeds originate from the desire to live a simple life of every human but it is selfishness that does good to the society (Nartsupha, 1998).

Over half a century later, Adam Smith authored an inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nation a literature considered the most influential economic text conveying, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner but from their regard to their own interest.” It is understandable that Smith was largely influenced by Mandeville, substituting his word “Vice” with “Interest”. Smith’s conception emphasizes freedom of individuals, promoting free market competition, letting human’s selfishness function as an “invisible hand” that promotes general welfare. Hence, government should hold limited power and roles, especially in economics (Wantana, 2008).

In 1839, Charles Darwin this notion by suggesting a theory of evolution and natural selection, leading to a social interpretation by Herbert Spencer who later coined the phrase “survival of the fittest” (Chiangkun, 2005).

In view of the fundamentals to contemporary cognitive evolution which became a context that founded civil society in Europe, it is observable that European societies share a significant belief that “human nature is evil” (Wongsurawat, 2007) noticeably the belief in original sin and even more explicit acknowledgement in aforementioned researches of Mandeville and Smith, along with the promotion of humanism, encouraging the people to have faith in own knowledge and abilities, motivated by wealth and prosperity, heightened by instituting free-competition spaces which hold the only rule that “the fittest prevail”.

Circumstances of civil society might be seen as an association of “selfish” people in the ideal eyes of Thais, as the driving force thereof was the potential of “self-benefit” which has been nothing but a social norm in Europe as Europeans so believe in the benefit of one’s own.

CIVIL SOCIETIES IN THAILAND: UNIVERSAL DOGMA, BAN SAITHONG AND CHARITABLE ORGANISATION

Whilst the development of European civil society was founded on protection of self-interest, the adoption of such conception in Thailand was not only genially embraced as a key to Democratic governance but also

loaded with optimistic escalation of which into a “universal” solution to all problems, like “miraculous snake oil”. Whenever any problem appears to be unworkable, civil society tends to be exploited against illogically, relying on it to address every matter from environmental issues (Klaitabtim, 2007) communal or societal reinforcements, defusing crises, attaining sustainable developments (Chuchai and Kardkarnklai, 1998) to upholding civil society as an underpinning to national development.

Apart from believing that civil society is some kind of magical potion to cure all sicknesses, it has also been redesigned to hold similar qualities as those of Podjamarn Sawangwong, the ideal lead actress in Thai soap opera “Ban Saithong” who was lovable, kind and virtuous; persistently indoctrinate Thai people to sacrifice and advocate common interests of their communities, hometowns and the nation (Netsawang, 2005).

Prawet Wasi is another academic who often brought up civil society one of the most frequent in the country, to remark on civil society, community status or societal strengths in Thai that they connoted the same meaning interpreted from civic tradition, civility, community or a form of working together productively towards a shared goal, a common principle or common beliefs and often with beneficent purposes and interactions, either collectively or autonomously but helpful to each other, encompassing compassion, affection and friendship, along with collective learning in activities and management. As community develops, certain qualities can be observed (Netsawang, 2005):

- Contentment: through association, mentality, spirituality, dharma and ethics; being mindful of the general public, selfless and generous
- Mutual progression: improving efficacy with friendship and affection
- Organisation: a potentiality to achieve the impossible

Similarly, Suwit Wibulpolprasert stated that civil society signifies a circumstance when inhabitants in a society who possess civic consciousness gather in a partnership-like manner to do something with affection and compassion under a system which facilitates mutual-learning. Moreover, Netsawang (2005) has quoted certain qualities any civic society should have from the journal of primary health care, Volume 14, Issue 3 as follows: having public-consciousness being sincere and honest being idealistic, valuing citizenship not the patronage system. Comprising collective purposes, activities, management and learning processes. Having compassion, affection and friendship. Having group-level management schemes. Formation of networks of

alliances. Having social power sourced from all sections, all professions and all ranks. Having activities that ultimately benefit the people. Having intellectual arsenals, not progressing with “money first, brain follows” and having participatory management practice.

With those mentioned, it can be fairly confusing to those who study the subject since it is primarily understood that charity foundations are considered a part of civil society but these constantly and repeatedly reproduced in Thai society might have just given a new impression that civil society is the charity.

Expectations and realistic observations on environmental civil societies of Thailand: Thailand is a country where civil societies appear in many forms of organizations. With environmental issues being widely and increasingly recognized, ADB (2011) reports on Thailand’s civil societies that the economic development of the country has caused non-governmental organizations for fundamental public services and infrastructures for the people to shift towards environmental stewardship in 1990’s.

All these resulted from the belief that civil society can solve any problem, including environmental which is nothing more than a universal dogma, Ban Saithong and charity organizations mentioned earlier, still trying to create an illusion and entrust civil society to solve environmental issues to some degree as in.

“Success in environmental management through promotion of public participation is achievable through unity, cooperation and collective benefits with emphasis on public interest over self-interest and it should be made aware of the fact that environmental issues affect us all. Therefore, we should address these environmental issues together” (Klaitabtum, 2007).

WIN OR DIE TRYING: THE TRAGIC CASE OF PITAK TONWUT: QUARRY OF NOEN MAPRANG DISTRICT, PHITSANULOK PROVINCE

“Win or die trying: The tragic case of pitak tonwut: quarry of noen maprang district, phitsanulok province” was an article from “Strategic Community Resource Management Process” by Chalermnarong and Chaiyaroong (2005) printed by the national human rights commission of Thailand. The author has chosen to compile secondary data from this over 20-page study to be analyzed and make some observations on environmental civil societies in Thailand. Initially, the research tried to look for the background of this case and found that it began between a group of people in Chompu District, Noen Maprang District, Phitsanulok Province including Pitak Tonwut, under environmental preservation and natural resource

conservation committee of Chompu River basin and rock and stone LP and Anumat Kan Sila, licensed to operate quarries in the area.

In view of the many concepts of civil society, in environmental aspects especially that various sectors of Thai society romanticized that civil societies are built through “unity, cooperation and collective benefits with emphasis on public interest over self-interest” the information contained in this article alone is able to reveal the underlying reasons behind this gathering which were well-documented as follows.

“Rock blasting has rendered khlung hin pun, one of the village’s streams, unusable. Explosions banged nights and days, lorries rolled day in and day out, dust clouds flying everywhere and falling onto the village, polluting air and ruined the local’s health. Most importantly, natural resources they had relied on for generations were devastated” (Chalermnarong and Chaiyaroong, 2005).

The critical part for the villager, documented by Pitak Tonwut, a key leader, before his death was: “...the association was asked by the villagers of chompu to be their counsellor in the demand to terminate two quarries that caused the villager’s suffering” (Chalermnarong and Chaiyaroong, 2005).

Another, piece of evidence on the incident is that the villagers filed a petition to the government, appeared on an order of department of mineral resources, ministry of natural resources and environment which demanded the quarries to cease their operation.

“The quarries were in fact, causing disturbance and failed to comply with the official’s order according to the Factory Act B.E. 2535” (Chalermnarong and Chaiyaroong, 2005).

In addition, the dispute between the villagers and the operators caused disharmony among the villagers. It was believed that some including the sub-district headman and the village headman along with some public servants turned to accept bribery from the operators.

“The dividing tactic and money were brought upon the community through its leaders the village and subdistrict headmen. Pring Kwanthong the sub-district headman were hired as a manager, supervising the employees, causing Hirun Kwanthong, headman of the first village, brother of Pring, who had joined forces with the villager to break off. Hirun and a number of leaders in the villager’s group later turned to support the quarry until today... (Chalermnarong and Chaiyaroong, 2005). During that time the villagers were constantly threatened to stop the protest...” (Chalermnarong and Chaiyaroong, 2005). The provincial officials appeared to be biased toward the quarry, even there were proofs the quarry were at fault (Chalermnarong and Chaiyaroong, 2005).

Ultimately, the incident came to an end with the triumph of the villagers and peace has returned to the neighborhood (Chalermklarp and Chaiyarose, 2005) though at the cost of Pitak Tonwut's life.

Nevertheless, in view of the statements cited, it was evident that the main purpose of the gathering was only to "get rid of disturbance" originated from the quarries as in trucks rolling day in and day out and the sound of rock blasting, yet never came across any intention of protecting natural resources as gloriously praised so in a book published by national human rights commission as a "fight for the Lands and Mounts" (Chalermklarp and Chaiyarose, 2005).

EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES OF THAILAND'S ENVIRONMENTAL CIVIL SOCIETY

Apart from the instances above, the researcher also found many other environmental civil societies of similar fashions, namely those originated in such a manner of "locking the barn door after the horse was stolen" and often a "collapsing barn" not at a capacity to institute significant change in practice and the conscience of the people is limited, putting their own welfare above all else (Charoensinolarn, 2006).

Correspondingly, Wongsurawat (2007)'s heart of civil society comprises of sense of self-interest comprehension of the concept of giving up some of own liberty for peace in the society and personal responsibility and discipline for the society in a hierarchical manner in line with the theory of human motivation by Maslow (1970) which asserted human needs.

Maslow (1970) proposed that all humans have needs from the most basic level or deficiency needs physiological needs safety needs love and belonging and esteem, respectively before subsequently extended the idea to include growth needs or need of self-actualization. Maslow further expanded that two preconditions consist in-between the two groups desires to know and to understand where a person will desire knowledge and an understanding, though not for fulfilling the necessity to make a living such as "liberal arts" education of the free persons in the classical period which successively progressed into the educational foundation for the schooling of European elites in the renaissance period and aesthetic needs where appreciation of artistic creations or arts patronage count as practical instances of such in Maslow's partial description on the needs of those who can be satisfied only by beauty (Fig. 1). In any case, civil societies in Thailand, environmental in particular, during the past three decades whether in the aforementioned cases or several others were gatherings of

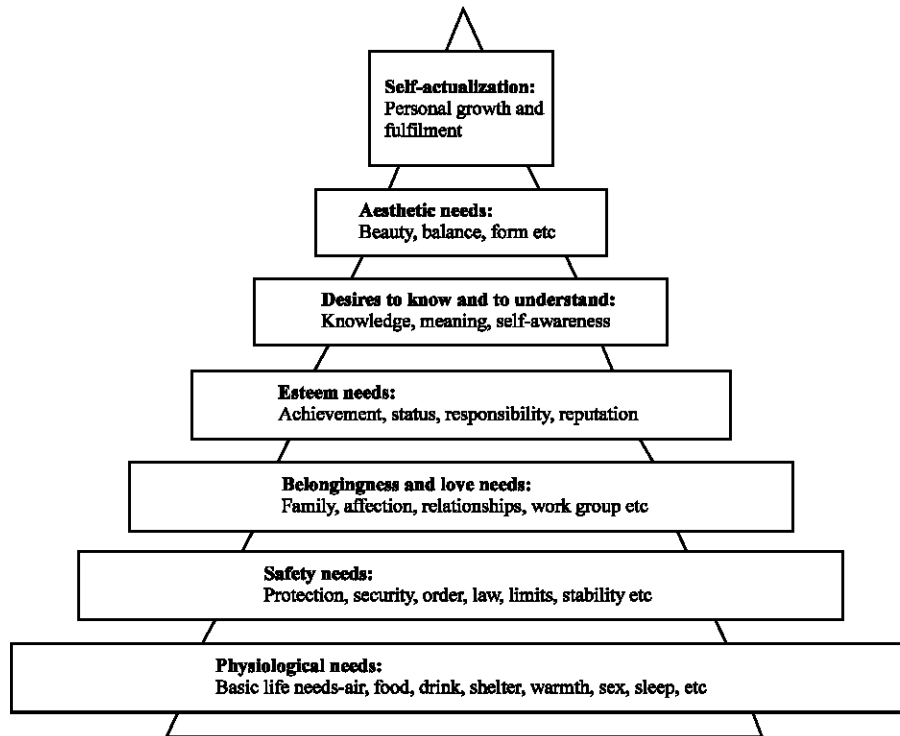


Fig. 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970)

the underprivileged/disadvantaged (Pintoxtang, 2009) afflicted by a development or an intrusion of investors in order to set a different political platform for the renegotiation of power relations (Pintoxtang, 2009) or so named by Prapas Pintoxtang (2009) “politics of recognition and respect” to be established in this “depreciative and disrespectful representative democracy”.

However, the existence of economic constraints still defines that civil society in Thailand is more a matter of the grassroots, laborers and agriculturalists, primarily for the essentials and impartial distribution of social welfares and resources and so forth to their groups, communities, or themselves (Pintoxtang, 2009) as per the concept of deficiency needs of Maslow, often manifested in forms of gatherings to make a complaint to ask for help or sympathy from the government or officials, though rarely succeeded (Nimpanich, 2009) than an affair of the middle-class who are mindful of public interests or able to give priority to the public over self-interest or desires on account of different levels of need and potentiality.

CONCLUSION

It is agreeable that owing to inequalities in economic and social bases of the people and practical experience being so incoherent to that of Western society or any other region, results of implementations of civil society would certainly differ from country to country and culture to culture. Moreover, practice of toleration is another condition that raised some perspectives for instance whereas democracy may or may not be exportable, it is pretty clear that the civil society of any particular country or society most probably is not (Barany and Moser, 2009).

The conclusion of this study is a mere reflection to raise collective awareness that even an acknowledgement and establishment of a perception that does not deviate far from reality where civil society was derived by a unique and prevalent circumstance having been developed and requiring several elements to realize and achieve results in the same fashion as the model society, might not directly contribute to the strength of any civil society in Thailand, especially of environmental segment but the acknowledgement and establishment of the perception that does not deviate far from reality on these different features and principles in the researchers perspective are considered a vital groundwork to render the implementation of such concept efficacious.

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