

CHAPTER 5

SOME NOTIONS ABOUT "DEMOCRACY" WHICH MAY BE RELATED TO THAI "HUMAN RIGHTS" PERCEPTIONS

There may be considerable confusion and perception gaps over what "democracy" actually involves and how it should be defined, given the wide variety of existing interpretations. In Western democracies, democracy may represent individual freedom, mutli-partyism, majority rule, rights for minorities, cultures of accountability, or any other number and/or combination of established rules, institutions and/or practices observed in various nations through which something referred to as "democracy" may be realized in many forms, or may be at various stages of development.

In the West, democracy is intrinsically seen as involving *twin principles of popular control over collective decision-making and equality of rights in the exercise of that control* (Beetham & Boyle, 1995: 1). But what about the Thai case? Why? And what are the implications for human rights concerns?

The practices of parliamentary politics, regular elections, freedom of the press and expression, civil rights to organize political opposition, and other practices, which have been referred to as defining the extent to which

democratic processes in Thailand today have become relatively institutionalized. But these do not necessarily reveal Thai ideas, expectations and/or perceptions about democracy.

Some have argued that Thai perceptions of democracy are more readily comprehensible from an historically-particular approach involving more traditional value systems evolved from conceptions of state and kingship, including concepts of merit and subsequent power in Thai society, as well as other systems such as hierarchy qualified by reciprocity.

It has been argued that religious and philosophical conceptions form the most fundamental foundations of social hierarchy in Thailand, as well as many other Southeast Asian hierarchical societies. Robert Heine-Geldern, in his paper, "*Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia*" (Heine-Geldern, 1956: 1) notes that there are some fundamental conceptions and notions of state and kingship in these parts of Southeast Asia where Hindu-Buddhist civilization prevailed.

His analysis of the social structures of these societies, including Thailand, is based on the notion of *parallelism between macrocosms and microcosms...between the universe and the world of men* (Heine-Geldern, 1956: 1). Accordingly, social organization can be seen as a microcosm of the Hindu-Buddhist view of the universe whereby, *harmony between the empire and the universe is achieved by organizing the former as an image of the latter, as a universe on a smaller scale* (Heine-Geldern, 1956: 1).

In this way, power was centralized around the king, court and government. The cosmological principle of *Mt. Meru* (Heine-Geldern, 1956: 8) was also carried down the ranks of officialdom in accordance with the numbers allotted official office bearers. In this way, *the empire was conceived as an image of the heavenly world of stars and gods* (Heine-Geldern, 1956: 7).

Heine-Geldern writes that it must be remembered that the macrocosm-microcosm principle, as applied to the state, forms part of *a much wider complex and resulted from a conception of the universe and of human existence which regulated, and to a large extent, still regulates, all the private lives of individuals* (Heine-Geldern, 1956: 14).

Some may argue that such bases of state formation have nothing to do with the modern state under the impact of modernity and modern civilization with its imported technological innovations, global integration, not to mention concepts of democracy and representative government. But one may also question whether it is enough to imagine that modern economies, industry, business and politics have completely overridden traditional concepts of state, kingship and social formation.

Some contemporary studies, including the "*Hofstede Survey*" (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1996: 17), which came up with what it refers to as a "power-distance index" to measure the extent to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power will be distributed unequally, tend to suggest otherwise. The results of the Hofstede Survey

indicate that the Thais, both senior and junior in rank, in comparison with 32 other cultures, expect, even prefer there to be greater hierarchical gaps.

Although it is difficult to definitively say whether people really "prefer" there to be greater gaps, the human rights survey respondents' answers that they want the government to support and foster human rights may be indicative of a tendency to look to some higher authority for advice and guidance. It may also be interesting to note that some respondents replied that "the upper and middle classes are afforded every right" while they feel that the government tends to overlook the rights of the less empowered, minorities, the poor, elderly and disabled.

In trying to see how this may be related to concepts and perceptions of democracy in Thailand, it may be interesting to note that King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) wrote in his 1927 essay on democracy that he felt a democratic form of government would be quite unsuited to the temperament of the Thai people. He wrote that he believed that democracy would be unlikely to succeed in Siam and that he believed that efforts should be made to try to educate the people to be politically conscious in order to realize their own interests and not be misled by agitators or dreamers (Basham, 1993: 11).

Still, the king was apparently conscious of the possible installation of a democratic regime and most of the discussion in his essay seems to have focused on "when" rather than "if ever" the Thai people would be truly ready for democratic government. Contrasting with the discussions of pro-democracy intellectuals about "when", the king's essay focused on the validity of democratic government in Thailand, and "whether" the Thai

people would ever really be ready for democracy, or whether the Thai people would be just satisfied to accept *an unsatisfactory charade* (Basham, 1993: 11).

As a realist, the king probably realized there was an inevitable trend toward democratic reform, and that limitation of the powers of the monarchy were also inevitable, but he suggested that the people must be "taught", *how to vote and how to elect representatives who will really have their interests at heart* (Basham, 1993: 11). A similar view was present in the results of the human rights survey whereby the respondents indicated a similar need found in comments such as "the government should provide guidance so that the concept of human rights spreads among the people".

The king's skepticism about the appropriateness of democracy to a hierarchical society, like Thailand, where the unequal distribution of power is accepted, sometimes even preferred, is indicative of the underlying notion of an intrinsic link between democracy and notions pertaining to human rights such as civil and political rights.

Regarding the macrocosm-microcosm notion, and its three cornerstones of indigenous beliefs, Hinduism and Buddhism, Aye Kyaw writes that these three elements embodied at least four ideological concepts: absolute power; the law of karma; the king's quasi-divine identity; and, the king's inseparability as an agent for the promotion and protection of religion (Kyaw, 1979). With state rule by the king as the pinnacle of social relations, Hanks writes that, *..merit has traditionally been the most important explanation of position in the hierarchy and degree of mobility*, such that

moments of perfect justice in an orderly system are rare (Hanks, 1962: 1253).

Concepts of merit and subsequent power in society were and still seem very much related to the system of *cosmic justice* (Hanks, 1962: 1253), of the macrocosm reflected in the microcosm of Thai society. Podhisita writes that even in non-religious contexts, religious concepts, be they Buddhist or Hindu in origin, represent, *...a codification of certain assumptions about human nature and responsibilities* (Podhisita, 1985: 25). Among the survey results, it may be interesting to note here that the less empowered respondents such as the unemployed indicated that they found more limitations acceptable in response to the question of circumstances under which the respondent feels it would be acceptable to limit the rights of others.

Furthermore, when King Trailok (King Borommatrailokanat) put the ranking of all citizens within the country into legislation in the 15th century, *"The Law of Civil Hierarchy"* (Reynolds, 1987: 157), to classify and position every person numerically, referred to as the *"Sakdi na"* system (Reynolds, 1987), it could be argued that this was the codification in society of the cosmological order, the transfer from the supra mundane to the mundane or secular realm of notions associated with the inherent conditions of one's existence.

Although it is argued in *Thai Radical Discourse* that *..by a process of substitution and displacement, old Thai Sakdina becomes modern Thai Saktina, an improper transfer of meaning* (Reynolds, 1987: 156), and that

The Real Face transfers this rhetoric.....divesting sakdina of old meanings and investing saktina with new ones (Reynolds, 1987: 156), and even though the Sakdi na system was eventually abolished along with slavery by King Chulalongkorn in the process of modernizing the country to deal with Western encroachment and the threat of colonization, it may still be asserted that karmic principles, the idea that one has a pre-determined place in the hierarchy, and that one should know one's place, may remain strongly imprinted in the Thai psyche.

Even if *..the real relationship between sakdina and saktina is metaphoric rather than one of identity* (Reynolds, 1987: 159), if the new socio-political order is just being laid on top of the old, including some key notions of hierarchy which were manifested in many of the historical systems, then it may be fair to conclude that despite the broadening of some opportunities for upward mobility such as through higher education, military service, and so forth, earlier concepts still play a very strong role in the national mentality and would necessarily impact the ways in which the Thai may perceive "democracy", its form and the extent to which it would be widely accepted, not to mention notions pertaining to "human rights".

Given the aforementioned historical factors and the perspective of Thai life under the absolute monarchy in the 1920's, the remarks in the king's essay may seem more reasonable. Interesting, moreover, is his opinion of democracy and the need *to educate people to be politically conscious...how to vote and how to elect representatives who will really have their interests at heart* (Basham, 1992: 11). Today, too, several initiatives aimed at the enhancement and protection of human rights, including the

recognition of various rights, are seen as concomitant to the evolution of democracy in Thailand.

Still, in his essay, "*Democracy Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry*", Richard Basham writes that, *...for large sections of the Thai community, democracy remains suspect as the fount of an unstable, nearly anarchic form of government dominated by selfish interests and the power of the purse*" (Basham, 1992: 11). Just five years after the king drafted *Democracy in Siam*, he was confronted by the "People's Party" coup, apparently composed of primarily military and bureaucratic figures with experience studying overseas and whose actions purported to bring "democracy" to the nation. In agreeing to relinquish his powers and serve as a constitutional monarch, the king signed Thailand's first Constitution on June 27, 1932, which begins with the words, *..the highest power of the country belongs to the entire people* (Basham, 1992: 11).

As mentioned earlier, democracy has been described as entailing *twin principles of popular control over collective decision-making and equality of rights in the exercise of that control* (Beetham & Boyle, 1995: 1). But it was not long after the coup that the misgivings expressed by the king in his 1927 essay concerning the fate of democracy in Siam were justified. *It soon became apparent that the shift of power had not been from an absolute monarchy to the people, but from the monarchy to an authoritarian (and faction-ridden) military-bureaucratic clique* (Basham, 1993: 12).

Basham writes that the king's subsequent abdication in 1935, far from provoking a democratic backlash against the country's new rulers, simply

removed an obstacle to their assumption of absolute control, hastening the ascendancy of the military to elements of the People's Party and presaging four decades of military rule (that was only temporarily interrupted by the 1944-48 alliance with Japan), right up to the student-led uprising in October, 1973 (Basham, 1993: 12).

The Military-dominated System

In the context of modern Thailand, the domination of the military dates back to the aftermath of 1932, when the military and other sections of the bureaucracy took over control of the autocratic state system from the retreating court and aristocracy. Their position became exceptionally strong in the 1960s and 1970s when they assumed the role of protectors of the state in the face of internal insurgency and aggressive communism in neighboring countries (Phongpaichit, 1993).

Through the astute management of ideological and social bases of support, the Thai military was able to sustain its exceptionally strong position even after the decline of the communist threat. The military continued to propagandise the communist threat and won both active and tacit support from important segments of Thai elites, including the bureaucracy, business and other segments of the Thai middle class. They also built strategic alliances with key sections of the emerging business community based on mutual profit. The military brought to these alliances the opportunities for corrupt revenues and from the 1950s to the 1980s, and, according to Dr. Pasuk Phongpaichit, many of the most important businesses depended on this combination of resources.

They also won control of many key government-owned enterprises and passed security legislation which gave wide power to the Prime Minister, the Army Chief and the Supreme Commander, especially at times of emergency. In addition, the military cultivated a base among the rural

population with a propaganda program operated by hundreds of military-owned radio stations and two military-controlled TV stations, as well as rural assistance programs through the mid-1980s.

The military also built strategic alliances with the emerging elite of "local godfathers" or "*jao poh*" which emerged with the increased integration of upcountry areas into the national economy and with the increasing importance of electoral politics (Phongpaichit, 1993). According to Dr. Pasuk, they gravitated towards military leaders in expectation that they would convey them the connections and protection required to continued and expand their businesses.

The 1973 student-led demonstrations challenged military dominance and won a temporary victory. But in 1976, the military ruthlessly re-established their domination. As parliamentary politics re-emerged following this crisis, the military continued to receive support from the majority of political parties. The two men who served as Prime Minister from 1978 to 1988 (Kriangsak and Prem) both succeeded to the post from the leadership of the army.

The majority of elected parliamentarians continued to support the army right up to the May, 1992, crisis. The crisis precipitated the accession to the prime ministership of General Suchinda, who had arisen to the post in exactly the same way as Kriangsak and Prem, from the headship of the army. The wide support of the military right up to the May, 1992, crisis underlines the failure of the semi-democratic system. The political parties had not developed as representatives of the people. Neither did they try to

free the people from bureaucratic domination and patron-client relations. Instead, they mainly represented the interests of business groups and the aforementioned local godfathers who supported at election times (Pongpaichit, 1993).

From this, it seems clear that, in the past, the democratic form of government was held merely for the benefits of limited segments of society, not for the benefit of the majority of the Thai population.

HOW DO THE THAI VIEW "DEMOCRACY"?

Could there be something about Thai perceptions of democracy (and political legitimacy) which allowed the aforementioned situation to perpetuate itself for so long? In Western democracies there are concepts of "accountable government" and the "rule of law" which primarily comprise three aspects: "legal accountability"; "political accountability"; and, "financial accountability" (Beetham & Boyle, 1995: 66).

Without going into unnecessary details, "legal accountability" is described as *the accountability of all public officials, elected and non-elected, to the courts for the legality of their actions* while "political accountability" refers to *the accountability of the government or executive to parliament and public for the justifiability of its policies, their prioritization and their manner of execution* and "financial accountability" is a narrower concept *for spending the proceeds of taxation only on those purposes approved by the legislature, and in the most cost-effective manner* (Beetham & Boyle, 1995: 67-68).

But how do the Thai view political legitimacy and democracy? Firstly, looking at notions of political legitimacy, it has been argued that the Thai believe that individuals who hold political authority owe their positions to the previously--mentioned notions of karma, *to the merit they have accumulated in past and present lives* (Basham, 1993: 14). Spiro, in his

book *Buddhism and Society* asserts that *since, from a karmic point of view, the usurper or power has as much moral authority as the person deposed from power, there can be no illegitimate regime* (Spiro, 1970: 443).

Basham writes, however, that there is a great deal of skepticism among the Thai concerning claims of religious sanctioning of political power. He feels that the assumed association between Buddhist merit and political authority lacks explanatory power and that it should be regarded as part of the Thai *official culture* (Basham, 1993: 14). His reasoning is that merit and power analysis misses an essential aspect of Thai religious culture: that, for the Thai, the manifestation of righteous behavior along dharmic lines provides a far more powerful justification for rule than does incumbency.

He maintains that the question of how persons with authority acquire and legitimate their authority is more "apparent" than "real" as the authority invested in positions of power has an "inertial quality" in a society such as Thailand where there is no long set of historical precedence of questioning underlying religious and moral sanctioning of power, *people have authority because someone must have it, and the incumbent's connections, skills and luck have worked in his favor....in this context, tolerance for poor performance is high and expectations are low* (Basham, 1993: 14).

If connections, wealth, skill and luck are the most common explanations advanced to account for a person's acquisition of authority, one may presume that the previously-mentioned notions of "accountable government", for example, with reference to democratic processes, may be far removed from perceptions about the chief components of a functioning

democracy held by the Thai general public, in anything other than very rudimentary senses such as notions of "fairness". That is to say, in Western democracies, we may look to the *building blocks of a functioning democracy* (Beetham & Boyle, 1995: 30), notions including accountable government, free and fair elections, civil and political rights, and so forth, but the chief components for the Thai may be quite different.

In Thailand, where the value of personal connections may be given greater importance, or even where wealth may be increasingly taking precedence over even personal connections in terms of status, growing disparities may be seen as "undemocratic" in the sense that the advantages of those with connections or wealth may be seen as "unfair", *although the country's middle classes, especially, have become habituated to this.....there is an enormous amount of resentment....such a situation is perceived as violating what is to many Thai the essence of a democratic society, fairness* (Basham, 1993: 16). This connection between people's perceptions of "human rights" and concepts of personal power in Thai society was also apparent in the results of the human rights survey in comments such as "human rights depend on budgets and resources" and "the rights of ALL people should be protected" (suggesting that this is generally not the case).

Why would this be so if *tolerance for poor performance is high and expectations are low* ? (Basham, 1993: 14). One explanation is that within the hierarchical structure of Thai society emerges an important concept discussed by Dr. Suntaree Komin in *Psychology of the Thai*: "*bunkhun*" ("indebted goodness"), which includes two important concepts of "*katanyoo rookhun*" ("gratitude and indebtedness") and "*metta karunaa*" ("the quality

of being merciful and kind") (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1996: 31), and that these two "*bunghun*" elements are interplayed, ensuring a respectful relationship.

Although these elements are certainly not the be all and end all of how the Thai view their positions without questioning the legitimacy of the authority of others (some scholars have described the Thai world view as individual and self-centered), perhaps the interplay of "*bunghun*" elements also serves to explain tolerance for political incompetence and political corruption in Thailand where *bureaucratic polities are often protected by a "moral division of labor"* (Basham, 1993: 14).

Basham points out that there is a substantial notion that the highest official, as opposed to those at lower and middle levels, are routinely deceived by the underlings, who keep them from ever becoming fully aware of the suffering of the people. At the same time, great social distance permits a controlled and well-orchestrated presentation of the persona of the highest officials (Basham, 1993). He writes that, *..as long as such individuals are seen as generous, honest and devoted to the populace at large, people accept their legitimacy and will tolerate without revolt great deviation from the ideal by lower-ranking officials* (Basham, 1993: 13).

Given the institutionalization of hierarchy in Thailand in terms of socio-economic and political status, and the concomitant, unquestioned, religious notions which also *influence activities in non-religious contexts* (Podhisita, 1985: 25), the question remains as to how a "fairness" perception of democracy fits into a society where people expect, sometimes prefer,

hierarchy and the prevailing social inequality. The answer still seems to be in the qualified sense of the previously-mentioned "*bunghun*" expectations of reciprocity.

Another more recent example related to perceptions of the Thai notion of democracy meaning "fairness" was how the Chaitichai Government (Aug., 1988 - Feb., 1991) was quickly deemed *unfairly corrupt* for violating what might be termed *the doctrine of reasonable greed* (Basham, 1993: 13). Even the actions of General Suchinda who "reluctantly" agreed to accept the mantle of office *for the benefit of the country* (Basham, 1993: 13) was too much, particularly after elections in March, 1992, had clearly suggested a consensus backing non-military rule.

If hierarchy is expected and inequality is tolerated, then what do people mean by "fairness" with reference to "democracy" in accordance with Basham's findings? From the previous examples, it would appear to refer to the notion that hierarchy and inequality must maintain "*bunghun*" reciprocity relations because, even in the case of "democracy", *changes introduced from the outside world are not accompanied by corresponding changes in mentality* (Cadet, 1982: 25).

If "democracy" means *fair and equal treatment of citizens*, something which Basham's survey findings revealed *they generally felt far more lacking in Thai society than personal freedom* (Basham, 1993: 19), it would appear that a close relationship can be found between how the Thai perceive "democracy" and Western notions of "human rights". If the Thai are really calling for "fair and equal treatment" to be derived from "democracy" it

would seem that they are actually calling for "human rights" in the sense of their being *individual entitlements derived from human needs and capacities* (Beetham & Boyle, 1995: 89). This is also supported by Basham's findings about Thai perceptions of democracy that *as significant as the widespread notion that democracy guarantees "rights and freedoms"....is the idea that democracy entails "justice and fairness"* (Basham, 1993: 19).

Although secular perceptions do not seem to go as far as describing democracy in terms of *popular control over collective decision-making and equality of rights in the exercise of that control* (Beetham & Boyle, 1995: 95), and despite the fact that some respondents qualified their definition of "democracy" *by arguing that it implied legal constraints to "rights and freedoms"* (Beetham & Boyle, 1995: 1), it is particularly notable that some of Basham's respondents regarded democracy *as a system of popular governance which involved obligations as well as rights* (Basham, 1993: 18). Basham's findings indicate that the Thai see democracy as guaranteeing *rights and freedoms*, ensuring *justice and fairness*, while offering protection from *authoritarian and unfair tendencies which seem endemic in Thai society* (Basham, 1993: 19).

In these respects, although concepts and perceptions of democracy do not necessarily fully correspond with Western notions, with its *very shallow roots in Thailand*, Thai perceptions of democracy as providing *justice and fairness* and guaranteeing *fair and equal treatment* (Basham, 1993: 19), even in the contexts of traditional value and social systems of hierarchy and expected reciprocity, do not preclude the notion that democracy and human rights are interdependent and reinforcing.