

## **Forest Policy and Strategic Groups in Thailand**

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### **1. Ethnicising Forest Conflict**

Thailand has been known for its strong environmental movements, based on the social demands of grass-roots farmers' networks. However, over the last few years there has been a trend towards a more repressive policy, with the ethnicisation of forest conflicts and the scapegoating of ethnic minorities as responsible for deforestation. This trend can be illustrated by three developments: firstly, the Chom Thong conflict of the late 1990s, secondly, the defeat of the Community Forest Bill in 2002 and, thirdly, the recent inclusion of forest politics in Thaksin's campaign against "dark influences".

The Chom Thong events were a decisive turning point in the ethnicisation of forest conflict in that the targeting of "shifting cultivation" as responsible for deforestation, which had always been one element of state forestry, was taken up by a conservationist NGO that proceeded to mobilise lowland farmers against ethnic Hmong on an environmental ticket.

The conflict had its roots in problems connected with the state-promoted expansion of cash crops in the 1960s. Since 1985, all cultivation had been prohibited in an area which incorporated 39 villages situated in Doi Inthanon National Park. A prestigious conservationist group, The Dhammanat Foundation, set up the Chom Thong Watershed Conservation Association (CTWCA) which targeted the Hmong "hilltribes" as the cause of water shortages that had arisen in lowland longan orchards. Members of the group denounced the Hmong during a public debate, asking "how possibly can we trust Hmong people when the act of destroying forests is nothing but their instinct". By 1985, the CTWCA had fenced off fallow land of Hmong communities, and in 1998 the conflict escalated when thousands of lowland farmers were mobilised

to block the road leading into the area, demanding the relocation of 20,000 people from the park.<sup>1</sup>

These events punctured the hegemony that farmers' networks had enjoyed within civil society, in which a close relationship between local community control over natural resources was seen as the best method to protect the environment. A second defeat followed in 2002, with the rejection of the Community Forest Bill.

For over a decade, the central demand of people's organisations like the Assembly of the Poor or the Northern Farmers' Network has been for a Community Forest Bill (CFB), which would legalise forest management by local communities. Known as the First People's Bill, because it was finally proposed in a petition of 50,000 citizens according to a right granted by the 1997 Constitution, the CFB was drafted, debated, rejected and redrafted until, in 2002, it was finally buried. The Lower House passed the bill, but the Senate called for changes to Article 18, in order to prohibit community forests in protected areas. Since then, the bill has been languishing in yet another joint committee. The result is that millions of farmers living in forest areas still face the threat of eviction and the central role of local communities in forest management has been practically rejected.

After the defeat of the CFB in 2002, the ethnicisation of forest politics continued. In an atmosphere currently characterised by Thailand's involvement in the "War against Terror" and Prime Minister Thaksin's "Campaign against Dark Influences" this has become blended into a strange mixture of security and environmental concerns.

Thus, for example, refugees from Burma, perceived as a security threat, are subject to relocation, justified on the grounds of deforestation. 17,000 refugees located in a camp near Salween National Park were to be moved to a location near the Thai-Burmese border "because of deforestation in Salween forest" at the end of 2003.<sup>2</sup> Under the heading "Hilltribes face mass relocation", the *Bangkok Post* wrote in May 2003 of government plans to relocate ethnic minorities to lowlands, because of their susceptibility to "dark influences", using them as tools to claim land in watershed areas. According to the report, "Mr Thaksin wanted to restrict hilltribes' use of land to bring an end to

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<sup>1</sup> See Pinkaew Luangaramsri, *The Ambiguity of Watershed – the Politics of People and Conservation in Northern Thailand: A Case Study of Chom Thong Conflict*, Amsterdam, 7th International Conference on Thai Studies, 1999. *Bangkok Post*, 25.4.98, 28.4.98, 29.5.98.

<sup>2</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 18.10.03.



shifting cultivation in which productive fields are relocated every year and which has been a major cause of deforestation".<sup>3</sup>

## 2. What of the Elite?

In reaction to these developments, forest people's movements, community forestry networks and academics have successfully deconstructed the arguments concerning "hilltribes" and "shifting cultivation". In particular, scientists from Chiang Mai University have done important work in uncovering the complex tapestry of forest and agricultural management systems and their relationship to indigenous cultures in Northern Thailand, in analysing the racist underpinnings of the "hilltribe contra nature" discourse, and in confronting it with the attempts of Karen and other communities to defend their forest-based way of life.<sup>4</sup>

However, the championing of sustainable management systems practised by ethnic minorities is not enough to challenge the authoritarian environmentalism of the Thai state and sections of civil society. The ethnic reasoning itself is embedded within a more general definition of "poor farmers" as the cause of forest destruction, a view dominant within forestry discourse all over the world.

The Tropical Forestry Action Plan, the paragon of international efforts to deal with the crisis of deforestation, is a good example of a line of reasoning which sees poverty as the central problem:

It is now generally recognized that the main cause of the destruction and degradation of the tropical forests is the poverty of the people who live in and around them and their dependence on the forest lands for their basic needs.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, institutions such as the World Bank, forestry departments or the army (at least in Southeast Asia) are automatically assigned a conservationist, environmentally sustainable role. They are the protagonists who, perhaps after a phase of good governance reform, will be in charge of protecting

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<sup>3</sup> Bangkok Post, 21.05.03

<sup>4</sup> See Anan Ganjanapan, *Local Control of Land and Forest: Cultural Dimension of Natural Resource Management in Northern Thailand*, Chiang Mai, Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, 2000. Pinkaew Luangaramsri, *Redefining Nature: Karen Ecological Knowledge and Challenge in Modern Conservation Paradigm*, Chiang Mai, Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, 2002. Yos Santasombat, *Biodiversity, Local Knowledge and Sustainable Development*, Chiang Mai, Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> FAO, *Tropical Forestry Action Plan*, Rome, FAO, 1985.

the environment, who will draw up and implement the master plans devised to help the rural poor develop themselves in a sustainable way.

Apart from increasing the insecurity of rural communities and preventing the development of long-term forest management systems, thereby probably increasing deforestation trends, the environmental discourse directed against the rural poor serves another purpose, it exonerates elite groups: "The danger is to neglect the obvious power of capital as a material force in degradation and, as a consequence, come close to blaming the victim albeit in terms of the situational rationality of the land manager who is compelled to mine the soil or fell the forest."<sup>6</sup>

This article summarises research that analyses "the obvious power of capital" and the role of other elite groups in forest politics in Thailand. In order to so understand environmental change, the Strategic Groups approach developed by the sociologist Hans-Dieter Evers and others at Bielefeld University was applied to the specific development of forest-related conflict in Thailand. Evers sees the ruling elite as a fluid coalition of different groups, each of which pursues different strategies to increase its influence and to adapt the political system to suit its needs.

Strategic groups are defined as follows:

Strategic groups consist of persons who are united by a common interest in upholding or expanding their mutual chances of appropriation. These appropriation chances are not only material but can include power, prestige, knowledge or religious purposes. The common interest makes strategic action possible, i.e. in the long term a 'programme' to enable them to uphold or expand their chances of appropriation.<sup>7</sup>

Depending on the "mode of surplus appropriation", Evers defines three main groups of strategic groups:

- collective strategic groups (where chances of appropriation rest on the coercive power of the state, i.e. civil servants and the military);
- corporate strategic groups (where "resource networks" are decisive, i.e. business); and

<sup>6</sup> Watts, M. and Peet, R., *Liberation Ecologies*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> „Strategische Gruppen bestehen aus Personen, die durch ein gemeinsames Interesse an der Erhaltung oder Erweiterung ihrer gemeinsamen Aneignungschancen verbunden sind. Diese Appropriationschancen beziehen sich nicht ausschließlich auf materielle Güter, sondern können auch Macht, Prestige, Wissen oder religiöse Ziele beinhalten. Das gemeinsame Interesse ermöglicht strategisches Handeln, d. h. langfristig ein ‚Programm‘ zur Erhaltung oder Verbesserung der Appropriationschancen zu verfolgen.“ Evers, H.-D. and Schiel, T., *Strategische Gruppen. Vergleichende Studien zu Staat, Bürokratie und Klassenbildung in der Dritten Welt*, Berlin, Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1998, p. 10.



- personal strategic groups (where individual education and ability forms the basis of appropriation, i.e. students or professionals)

Each strategic group attempts to create the political and economic conditions favourable to its own specific strategy. Political development is seen as the outcome of the changing balance of forces between these competing strategic groups.

Looking at forest politics in this way has several advantages. Firstly, the framework of analysis is not defined by dominant discourse, i.e. is not centred around the question of whether shifting cultivation contributes to deforestation or not and does not accept a priori the definition of state institutions as agents of conservation and sustainable forest management. Instead, the self-portrayal and ideology of, for example, the Royal Forest Department, can be related to its appropriation strategy as a collective strategic group. Secondly, forest politics, and particularly deforestation, ceases to be a blind, structural process related to ahistorical factors such as poverty or population increase. Rather, forest politics becomes an active process shaped by consciously acting social groups, and becomes a concrete historical development, in which inherent dynamics are open-ended. Thirdly, viewing the development of the social appropriation of forest resources as a real historical process can make sense of the twists and turns in forest politics which otherwise appear to be a coincidental addition of various factors and events.

### **3. Corporate Forestry**

The specific framework of modern forestry in Thailand developed within the context of profound changes in Thai society towards the end of the 19th century. The economic integration of Siam into an expanding British Empire was accompanied by the subjugation of regional lords by the central monarchy in Bangkok, the creation of a nation state (and of "Thailand"), and the transformation of social and economic relations from "feudalist" exploitation of bonded peasants and slaves to the market-based exploitation of smallholders and wage labourers. Forestry was not only shaped by these changes but also contributed to them.

In the first instance, a newly emerging corporate strategic group shaped forest politics. Timber companies that had been operating in Burma expanded their operations to Northern Thailand. They were interested in one commodity: teak. They proceeded to change the economic basis of forest use to fit in with their interests and formed the political framework necessary to do so.

Before the Bowring Treaty of 1855, trade with teak was restricted. In 1841 a Royal decree prohibited the export of teak in order to damage a particular British company, Hunter and Hayes, which was involved in opium trafficking.<sup>8</sup> Even after Bowring, until 1883, European companies were forbidden to cut timber themselves, and Chinese and Burmese firms were the only ones involved in Thai teak.

However, by the end of the 1880s, European corporations had taken over the teak industry. According to the *Consular Report on Trade of Chiengmai* for 1898, six companies dominated the teak trade, three of which were British, one French, one Danish and one Chinese. These were The Borneo Company Limited (BCL), The Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation Ltd. (BBTC), Louis T. Leonowens Co. Ltd. (all British), the East Asiatic Co. Ltd. (Danish), La Compagnie Est-Asiatique Francaise (French) and the Kim Seng Lee Company (Chinese). The latter company was taken over by the BBTC in 1899 and a new company, the Siam Forest Co. Ltd. moved into the teak business in 1900.

British companies worked "the greater portion of the forests in Chiengmai and Lakhon"<sup>9</sup>, receiving 20 concessions in 1885 alone. In 1896, new terms increasing the size of the concession area were introduced which favoured larger companies. BCL obtained 15 of the 30 teak concessions of 1900 and 16 of the 83 given in 1902, whereas BBTC secured 8 leases in 1900 and 21 leases in 1902. Of 112 concessions in 1902, 83 were leased by British companies, and only 20 by local nobles. In 1909 teak leasing was again reorganised, the number of leases was reduced from 105 to 40 and the felling cycle raised from 12 to 30 years. In 1925, another round of leases was issued, 88% of which were acquired by European firms.<sup>10</sup>

Timber extraction itself was a lengthy process. Teak trees would first be girdled and left standing for one or two years. After felling, the logs had to be hauled out of the forests to streams by elephants, and then pulled by elephants down the streams until larger rivers were reached. This could take between three and four years. Then the logs would be rafted together and floated down to Bangkok or Moulmein, which took another one or two years. In all, this

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<sup>8</sup> See SarDesai, D. R., *British Trade and Expansion in Southeast Asia 1830-1914*, New Delhi, Allied Publishers, 1977.

<sup>9</sup> Anon., The Teak Trade of Chiengmai in Siam for 1894, *Indian Forester* XXII (1896), No. 1, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> See Akira, S., *Capital Accumulation in Thailand. 1855-1985*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 1996. Banasopit Mekvichai, *The Teak Industry in North Thailand: The Role of a Natural Resource-Based Export Economy in Regional Development*, PhD. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1988. Bourke-Borrowes, D., General Thoughts and Observations on Forestry in Siam, *Indian Forester* LIV (1928), No. 3, pp. 141-160.



process could take up to 7 years. Major fluctuations in timber exported from Bangkok took place, depending on the amount of rainfall. In dry years transport was much more difficult.

This meant that large amounts of capital were required for high-risk, long-term investment. This also encouraged concentration in the teak industry. Capital mainly took the form of elephants. According to Sompop (1989), 2,500 elephants were deployed in the Northern forests in 1896, rising to 2,976 in 1914.<sup>11</sup> In 1899 an elephant cost around 2,000 rupees<sup>12</sup> but in a few years increased in price to 5000 rupees per head. According to Akira, the BCL deployed 600 elephants in the 1890s, whereas the BBTC owned 762 elephants in 1899, valued at 1.7 million Baht, which was equivalent to the registered capital of the then largest royal chartered company in Thailand.<sup>13</sup>

European capital was also dominant in the processing and trading of teak. The Indian Forester of 1897 speaks of five large steam-driven saw mills, of which three were British, one Danish and one Chinese. Sixty "saw sheds" without steam-power were largely operated by Chinese. This was the pattern until after the 1932 revolution. In the 1930s, European saw mills had a much larger capacity than their Chinese rivals. The BBTC could produce 2,200–3,000 tons of timber per month, the BCL 800–1000, the East Asiatic Company 1,500–2,000, whereas the biggest Chinese firms produced only 350–500 tons per month.<sup>14</sup>

Teak exports increased dramatically, peaking in the early twentieth century, when Thailand was responsible for around 1/4 of world teak production.<sup>15</sup> This was a radical transformation compared to pre-Bowring times, where virtually no teak was exported at all. To achieve this, the new corporate group had to change social relations in the region, the political and judicial system and the way in which forests were used and managed.

As Evers puts it:

With the emergence of a new economic system and a new system of domination (*Herrschaftssystem*), whichever group emerges first to become large or powerful, has the greatest chance to structure the political system, to establish

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<sup>11</sup> Sompop Manarungsan, *Economic Development of Thailand 1850–1950. Response to the Challenge of the World Economy*, Bangkok, Chulalongkorn University, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> 15 rupees = 1 Pound Sterling.

<sup>13</sup> Akira, S., op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> Akira, S., op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Anon., Teak Industry of Siam, *Indian Forester* XXVII (1901), No. 10, pp. 529–533.

patterns of legitimacy, of political style, in short, to actively promote a specific framework suited to its interests.<sup>16</sup>

Because, initially, labour was not "free" in Thailand, the emerging corporate industry had to "import" labourers instead of using Thai peasants. In Bangkok, Chinese "coolies" were employed for the work in the saw mills, and for loading and storing the timber on the docks. In the north, the Khamus were imported from Laos. They were prepared to work in isolated forests and for low wages. The colonial attitude towards these forest workers is summed up well by J. Stewart Black of the RFD, who describes the Khamus as "a dirty, ignorant, but for Indo-Chinese people, hardworking race, and have always monopolised the working of the forests in Siam".<sup>17</sup> The teak companies would rent them for 2–3 years from their village heads, who collected an agent's commission. About 4,000 Khamu labourers were employed in the teak industry. However, the supply of labour became more difficult after teak companies were six years in arrears with wage payments (a tactic employed to induce the workers to remain longer) and the French colonial government in Laos started employing the Khamu for infrastructural work, charging a fee for those labourers working in Thailand. Teak companies complained that this led to an increase in wages from 40–60 Rps to 60–70 Rps per year.<sup>18</sup> Anan Ganjanapan (1984) argues that this labour problem was one of the reasons the British pressed for the "freeing" of Thai labour from *corvée* bondage.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to wage labour, the timber companies needed a safe and stable climate for their long-term investments and the protection of teak resources from other interests. To this aim, the Royal Forest Department was established.

#### 4. The Royal Forest Department

The Royal Forest Department of Thailand (RFD) was founded in 1896 by the former Deputy Conservator of Forests in Burma, Herbert Slade. Staff and approach were taken from the colonial forestry departments of British India and Burma. Slade was head of the department until 1901, being replaced by an-

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<sup>16</sup> Evers, H.-D., *Sequential Patterns of Strategic Group Formation and Political Change in South East Asia*, Bielefeld, Faculty of Sociology, 1982, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Black, J. S., Report on the Teak Trade of Chiengmai, Siam, *Indian Forester* XXVII (1901), No. 3, pp. 136–140.

<sup>18</sup> Anon., The Teak Trade of Chiengmai in Siam for 1894, *Indian Forester* XXII (1896), No. 1, pp. 12–15.

<sup>19</sup> Anan Ganjanapan, *The Partial Commercialisation of Rice Production in Northern Thailand (1900–1981)*, Thesis, Cornell University, 1984.



other British forester, W. F. L. Tottenham, Director General until 1904, who in turn was replaced by W. F. Lloyd, who was head of the department until 1923. The department had eleven officers in 1899, all of them Europeans. This increased to 24 officers in 1904, 15 of whom were Europeans and 9 Siamese. Five of the Siamese officers had been trained in India. By 1928, the department had a staff of 618, only a small minority of whom were British. It is safe to say that up until 1923, the department was dominated by British forestry officers trained in colonial forestry.

The first and primary task of the RFD was to wrest control of the teak forests from the northern princes. Until the late 19th century, the north was divided up into various townships and princely states, the most important of which were Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lakhon and Luang Prabang. These local powers ruled autonomously from Bangkok, paying tribute in recognition of its military superiority. They were, therefore, in control of the northern forests, and the Burmese and Shan loggers and, later, European timber companies had to deal with these various authorities to gain permission to fell teak. From 1864 onwards, the British Consul, George Thomas Knox began pressuring the Bangkok government to exert more control over the north. The British complained of unstable legal relations in connection with the teak trade, with forest workers being plundered and murdered, widespread elephant and timber theft, and the issuing of forest leases for the same forest to two parties or more.<sup>20</sup>

Step by step, the central government took power and revenue sources away from the northern principalities and assumed control over the teak trade. At first, the local rulers were still the owners of their forests, and were merely under the legal jurisdiction of Bangkok, having to render 25% of forestry proceeds to the central authority for the privilege.<sup>21</sup> However, by 1898, they had to submit all private revenue to the Bangkok state. By 1900, ownership of the northern forests passed completely to the central state in Bangkok. The formation of the Royal Forest Department was part of this transfer of control. A contemporary writes of Herbert Slade, the first General Conservator and then Director General of the RFD: "In face of great opposition [...] he succeeded in putting a stop to the old, strongly ingrained, illicit methods, in establishing

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<sup>20</sup> Manich Jumsai, *History of Anglo-Thai Relations*, Bangkok, Chalermnit, 1970. Chaiyan Rajchagool, *The Rise and Fall of the Thai Absolute Monarchy*, Bangkok, White Lotus, 1994. Witt, D. O., The Use and Abuse of Forest Work in Siam, *Indian Forester* XXX (1904), No. 7, pp. 299–303.

<sup>21</sup> Banasopit Mekvichai, op. cit.

the proprietary rights of the Crown to its forests and in setting up a properly constructed Forest Department."<sup>22</sup>

In fact, "the proprietary rights of the Crown to its forests" were something that until then had not existed. Tottenham, the Director-General of the RFD from 1901–1904, speaks of the "great trouble" Herbert Slade had "in getting Laos Chiefs to relinquish all claims to hereditary ownership of the forests in their States".<sup>23</sup>

Although the RFD was founded on behalf of the corporate group, it also dovetailed nicely with the strategy pursued by the Royal Family in establishing a nation state. The increasingly centralised power in Bangkok also relied on the RFD to generate tax revenue. Indeed, revenue collection constituted *the main activity* of the RFD. In retrospect, it is tempting to think of the Forestry Department as an institution engaged in forest protection or management. This was not the case. According to the Deputy Conservator of Forests, D.O. Witt, "the Forest officer in Siam is at present [...] much more of a revenue collector than a forester".<sup>24</sup> Bourke-Borrowes complained that the "small trained staff is usually so completely immersed in revenue collection that forest survey work of any kind is of the rarest occurrence" and that "no regular programme of silvicultural work has ever been drawn up and carried out in Siamese forests".<sup>25</sup>

Another aspect of the RFD points to another significant function of the department, namely the suppression of the traditional use of teak saplings and poles for house building. According to Witt, this had been a booming trade, 80,000 poles being used annually at the turn of the century. The department actively suppressed this use of teak, which conflicted with the export of timber, in two ways. Firstly, within teak concession areas, the felling or girdling trees below a certain girth was prohibited. This girth was increased systematically and was set at 6 feet 41/2 inches in 1909, and 6 feet 81/2 inches in 1923. Secondly, the use of teak by anyone except concessionaires was prohibited by law and, in part, enforced by the RFD. The Indian Forester states in 1900 that the trade in teak saplings was now being curtailed: "Each villager regarded any patch of young teak trees near his house as his own private property, but the efforts of the Forest Department are now beginning to convince him that

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<sup>22</sup> Anon., Herbert Slade, *Indian Forester* XXXI (1905), No. 6, pp. 320–321.

<sup>23</sup> Tottenham, W. F. L., The Formation of the Forest Department in Siam, *Indian Forester* XXXI (1905), No. 8, pp. 446–449.

<sup>24</sup> Witt, D. O., *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Bourke-Borrowes, D., *op. cit.*



such is Government property."<sup>26</sup> Witt states that forestry officers had to "explain to the astonished villagers that a teak tree was no longer the property of the first person who liked to cut it down" and that "reporting and, if necessary, prosecuting for infringements of the new rules was a natural addition to his work".<sup>27</sup>

The formerly subsistence-based use of a wide range of forest products (ranging from firewood to fodder, medicine and forest vegetables for the peasantry, and luxury goods such as eagle-wood, cardamom, birds' nests and sapan-wood for the elite) was replaced by the systematic logging of large areas for teak.

The new system of management was by no means sustainable. Forestry Department Director-General Tottenham complains about unsustainable logging ("exceeding possibilities") at the turn of the century. He estimated the possible yield of the "Menam" (i.e. Chao Phraya River) valley forests at 30,000 per annum and compared this to the actual number of logs passing the revenue station at Pak Nam Pho (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Overharvesting in the Teak Forests of Northern Thailand, 1897–1928.

	1897–1899	1899–1901	1903	1913–1928
Permissible rate (logs <sup>28</sup> )	30,000	30,000	30,000	30,000
Actual harvest per annum	56,000	83,000	108,530	93,000

Source: Tottenham, W. F. L., *The Teak Trade and Forest Conservation in Siam*, *Indian Forester* XXXI (1905), No. 8, pp. 464–471; Bourke-Borrowes, D., *General Thoughts and Observations on Forestry in Siam*, *Indian Forester* LIV (1928), No. 3, pp. 141–160.

Bourke-Borrowes, writing over twenty years later, reported similar overharvesting. On the other hand, the timber industry made frequent complaints about the restrictions imposed by the Forest Department. For some 30 years, a harvest of double or triple the sustainable rate was extracted from the northern teak forests. This, combined with the silvicultural method implied in the minimum girth, could only have meant severe degradation of these forests. This compares negatively with the forest use systems in place before profit-orientated forestry, characterised as they had been by using younger trees and saplings, letting the large and old trees remain, and with them the forest cover. Mature large trees, in contrast, were seen as a problem by the RFD, as they

<sup>26</sup> Anon., *Teak Trade in Bangkok Siam in 1898*, *Indian Forester* XXVI (1900), No. 3, pp. 96–97.

<sup>27</sup> Witt, D. O., *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> One log has a statistical average of 4.3 cubic feet, or 1.16 cubic meters. Anon., *The Teak Trade of Chiangmai in Siam for 1894*, *Indian Forester* XXII (1896), No. 1, pp. 12–15.

reduced the productivity of stands. After surveying relatively undisturbed teak forests in the 1920s, Bourke-Borrowes declared that "Siamese teak forests are abnormal, in that they contain too large a proportion of over-mature trees and too small a proportion of class II and class III trees".<sup>29</sup> The rapid harvesting of these old trees led to the structural destruction of the teak forests.

In sum, the RFD was founded to wrest control over the leasing of the teak forests from the northern princes, which it then rented out to British teak companies. The department was staffed with mainly British foresters educated in the British colonial forestry system. Its main task was to collect royalties, and it was hardly engaged in silvicultural or conservationist forest management activities. Conflicts emerged between the two strategic groups concerning the short- and long-term strategies of timber exploitation. However, these differences were based on a common "political economy of profit"<sup>30</sup> grounded firstly on a new form of surplus value exploitation, through the introduction by the teak companies of wage labour, which was supplied by Khamu migratory workers. Secondly, it implied the exclusion and suppression of the previous, subsistence-orientated forest resource management by villagers in teak forests. Although major changes were to take place within these strategic groups in the future, this phase was formative for influential strategic groups and patterns of use and of conflict up to the present day.

## 5. Enter the Military

The 1932 revolution represented a turning point in the economic and political development of Thailand that was to have far-reaching implications for the development of forestry. While the basic framework of forestry, the "political economy of profit" and state control, remained intact, the specific character and constellation of collective and corporate strategic groups underwent important changes.

In the state arena, the military emerged as an independent and increasingly influential strategic group, which intervened directly in politics and the economy. In forestry, the military had to compete with entrenched groups to assert its influence. To quote Evers: "Any succeeding group has to contend with the already established framework. It either has to operate within it or change it

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Banasopit, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>30</sup> As Ramachandra Guha characterised the system of colonial forestry in India.



against the resistance of its creators, in many places in the first instance the colonial government and entrenched interests of metropolitan capital."<sup>31</sup>

In ways strikingly similar to the post-colonial governments of neighbouring countries, this new group sought to pursue a conscious strategy of national development. To this end, the direct involvement of the state in the economy was increased and a symbiosis with corporate strategic groups evolved. In forestry, the domination of foreign capital was broken, being replaced with indigenous and predominantly state-run companies.

In 1952, the government announced that the forestry leases to foreign companies, due to run out in 1954, would not be renewed and that the forest concessions would be rented to local firms or government enterprises.<sup>32</sup> A state company, the Forest Industry Organisation (FIO, established in 1947) was granted a virtual monopoly on teak exploitation, other forests were worked by provincial state enterprises (*Borisat Changwat Thammai Chamgat*) and various "local" private companies. Most of these concessions were extended in 1968 for a period of 30 years and the RFD's figures for the end of the 70s give a good overview of the extent and distribution of concessions for the whole period since 1954 (see Table 2).

State capital was clearly dominant in timber harvesting, with the FIO directly involved in most teak concessions and state companies accounting for nearly 80% of other forestry concessions. The provincial forestry companies were also state controlled, with the FIO holding 46% of shares.<sup>33</sup>

The state bureaucracy therefore controlled timber logging via its state forestry companies, but the military also became directly involved through private companies set up by the various factions. The War Veterans Organisation founded by the Phin faction became directly involved in forestry concessions. The Korea War Veterans Association and the The First World War Veterans Association were also military companies. The Thahan Co-operation Co. Ltd. established a subsidiary, the Thahan Co-operation Wood Dealers Co. Ltd. in 1951, which played a major role in the distribution and sale of timber products. This enabled the new rulers to break the hold of Chinese capital, which had previously dominated the domestic marketing of timber.

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<sup>31</sup> Evers, H.-D., *Sequential Patterns of Strategic Group Formation and Political Change in South East Asia*, Bielefeld, Faculty of Sociology, 1982.

<sup>32</sup> Ingram, J. C., *Economic Change in Thailand 1850-1970*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1971.

<sup>33</sup> Amnuay Corvanich, *Thai Teak*, Bangkok, Forest Industry Organisation, 1967.

**Table 2:** Forestry Concessions in Thailand, 1954-1979

Concessionaire	Teak forests		Other forests*	
	Number of concessions	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Number of concessions	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )
Forest Industry Organisation	37	24,860	30	16,212
War Veterans Organisation	3	1,615	8	7,748
Korea War Veterans Association	2	1,959	2	1,959
The First World War Veterans Association	1	2,498	-	-
Provincial Forestry Co. Ltd.	-	-	232	126,202
Thai Plywood Co. Ltd.	-	-	7	5,149
State Railway of Thailand	-	-	9	2,675
Sri Maha Raja Co. Ltd.	-	-	2	1,776
Watana Chotana and Arphorn Suwanasing	-	-	1	727
Ua Withya Phanit Co. Ltd.	-	-	1	810
Total	43	30,932	335	194,191

\* Without mangrove concessions

Source: RFD, *Forestry Statistics of Thailand*, Bangkok, RFD, 1986.



The FIO also took the initiative in building up a Thai wood processing industry. Up to 1956, sawmilling had still been in foreign hands, with the Bombay-Burmah Co. Ltd. and the East Asiatic Co. Ltd. owning the two biggest modern plants and Chinese capital most of the smaller mills.<sup>34</sup> By 1962, the FIO had established three major saw mills (the Mai-Thai Sawmill in Bangkok, the Kaset-1 Sawmill in Chon Buri and the Kaset-2 Sawmill in Ayuthaya) and by 1978 was operating 12 further (smaller) mills. The state also consciously developed other wood processing industries. The FIO set up a subsidiary, the Thai Plywood Co. Ltd. in 1951. Later this became an independent company which started production in 1957. A fibreboard company was established by the FIO in 1969.<sup>35</sup>

A pattern emerges of a "tripod structure"<sup>36</sup> of corporate forestry dominant up to the 1980s, after which it became increasingly crisis-ridden. This "tripod structure" was a coalition between 1) state capital, dominating timber harvesting and involved in wood processing industries (the FIO, provincial forestry companies, Thai Plywood company), 2) "military capital", i.e. private companies set up by influential cliques within the ruling state bureaucracy, involved in timber distribution and to a smaller extent in timber harvesting (Thahan Cooperation Wood Dealers, War Veterans Organisation), and 3) private companies involved in distribution and wood processing. This coalition pursued a strategy of surplus accumulation through the expansion of harvesting and processing to include more tree species, an expansion of the total volume of timber production and the further processing of wood products.

The rise of the military within the collective strategic group and the increased importance of state corporate involvement did not result in a decline of the conventional civilian bureaucracy. On the contrary, within forestry, a rapid expansion of the RFD took place, with total staff rising from 1,339 employees in 1946 to nearly 7,000 in 1976. This expansion was related to the assertion of territorial control over the non-teak forests, culminating in the National Reserved Forests Act of 1964. This created a uniform system of reserved forests, in which all use of forest resources by farmers and all agricultural activity was forbidden.

Although the RFD was not in a position to impose this act particularly effectively, the basic system of forest areas policed by the department and rented out to (often military-controlled) state companies led to a prevalent

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<sup>34</sup> Ingram, J. C., op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Forest Industry Organisation, *The Forest Industry Organisation*, Bangkok, 1962. Forest Industry Organisation, *Forest Industry Organisation*, Bangkok, 1978.

<sup>36</sup> A term coined by Suehiro Akira to characterise capital formation in Thailand in general.

view that subsistence use of forests was the main threat to forestry. According to the Deputy Director General of the RFD, Krit Samaphuddhi, in 1966:

Shifting cultivation extensively practised by the hill-tribes of the North, and illicit clearing of the forests for cash crops by local villagers constitute one of the major problems in forestry and the measure employed to curb such malpractise is by vigilant patrol of the vulnerable areas and by the establishment of a number of large settlement areas for the landless cultivators and gradually colonizing them by letting them settle down to permanent cultivation.<sup>37</sup>

A symbiosis between the military and the RFD developed increasingly along these lines, as forest politics became entwined with counter-insurgency efforts against the communist guerrilla.

The communist forces operated in the heavily forested mountainous regions in Loei, Nakhon Phanom and east of Chiang Rai along the Lao border, in the Phuphan Mountains, along the Cambodian border south of Surin and along the Burmese border in the South. Counter-insurgency concentrated on these remote forest areas by building an extensive road network and setting up "volunteer" counter-insurgency villages.<sup>38</sup>

In this context, the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), in conjunction with the RFD, launched the Forest Village Programme. Between 1975 and 1981, a total of 144 forest villages were set up.

The Forest Villages in Thailand are often portrayed as a kind of social or community forestry, whose purpose was to allow the participation of farmers in NRF in an environmentally sound forest management.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the main purpose of the programme was to concentrate scattered hamlets in forest areas, in order to isolate them from communist influence. The new villages, arranged according to a grid-like structure, were often established on logged over forest areas. The forestry component was restricted to reforestation activities on land left over after each family had received the amount of agricultural land allotted to it by the programme.

This "state capitalist" phase of forestry was no more sustainable than the corporate teak regime of the British. The expansion of forestry concessions to cover more than the entire forest area of the country was accompanied by rapid structural destruction. Although concessions were tied to "working plans", it is generally agreed that these were not really implemented. Combined with a

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<sup>37</sup> Krit Samaphuddhi, *Forestry Development in Thailand*, Bangkok, RFD, 1966.

<sup>38</sup> See Chai-Anan Samudavanijaja and Kusuma Sanitwongse, Security, Development, Participation and Natural Resource Management, *Thai Development Newsletter* 27/28, 1995.

<sup>39</sup> Titles of studies on the Forest Village Programme include *Helping Rural People Help Themselves*, *Community Forestry Activities at Dong-Lan Forest* and *Towards Participatory Forest Management*.



development strategy based on the export of cash crops, large areas of forest were converted into agricultural land. After the capitulation of the CPT in 1982, the remaining forests in remoter areas were logged over. By the end of the 1980s, the forestry industry faced a severe resource crisis.

## 6. Plantation Plans

As forest resources became depleted, the old state-dominated timber industry declined. Between 1980–1984, export revenue from logs and sawn wood dropped to an annual average of 22 million Baht whereas imports rose to over 2 billion Baht a year.<sup>40</sup> Despite more investment, the added value produced in the sawmilling industry actually decreased from 2.6 to 1.9 billion Baht between 1979 and 1984.<sup>41</sup> This trend came to an end with the general ban on logging in 1989.

However, a new corporate strategic group within forestry emerged in the form of conglomerates interested in pulp and paper production. Rather than state-owned businesses, these were national and multinational companies such as Siam Cement, Soon Hua Seng, Ballapur Industries or New Oji Paper. The expansion of manufacturing and the export boom led to a huge increase in the demand for paper for communications, administration and packaging. In the pulp and paper industry added value rose spectacularly from 2.5 billion to 4.2 billion Baht (1979–1984), while each worker produced nearly twice as much surplus.<sup>42</sup>

Paper production was largely dependent on the import of one necessary raw material: wood pulp. From the beginning of the 1980s, Thai companies therefore increasingly propagated the use of depleted National Forest Reserves for large-scale plantations of fast-growing tree species. The Board of Investment promoted pulp manufacturing plants, chip wood production and plantations.

On this basis, projections made by the pulp and paper industry itself in 1989 show confidence in an increasing demand for and capacity of pulp. Domestic demand was expected to reach 268,000 tons by 1990 and 480,000 tons by 1994. Production capacity was expected to reach 152,000 tons by 1990 and over 800,000 tons by 1994, leaving 320,000 tons for export after domestic

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<sup>40</sup> RFD, *Forestry Statistics of Thailand*, Bangkok, RFD, 1986.

<sup>41</sup> Charit Tingsabath, *Employment Effects of Reforestation Programs*, Bangkok, Thailand Development Research Institute, 1989.

<sup>42</sup> Charit Tingsabath, *op. cit.*

demand had been satisfied.<sup>43</sup> The overall objective was to transform Thailand from a pulp and paper importing country to a major exporter.

However, there was a major obstacle to these ambitious plans, as a study entitled *Potential of Commercial Fast-growing Tree Plantations in Thailand* explained in 1989:

There is no lack of new interest from the private sector to invest in forest plantations. Major companies such as Siam Pulp and Paper, Shell, and the Oji Paper Company of Japan, all have publicly expressed their interest to invest. Some have gone through the process of seeking promotional privileges from the Board of Investment, while others have already applied for governmental land. At least one company is facing a lamentable problem when it found that the allocated land has already been encroached upon by squatters. Statistics confirm that there is an abundant supply of land with poor soil in forest reserves which is suitable for fast-growing trees. However most of the land is occupied by illegal settlers. This has become the single major obstacle to large-scale plantation, not the shortage of investment fund, nor the lack of governmental policy. In dealing with tens of thousands of poor farmers, the private sector can not be expected to come up with solutions by itself.<sup>44</sup>

It was in order to solve this problem that both the RFD and the military adapted their strategies to fit the new situation, entering into an alliance with the new corporate group within forestry.

With the revenue accruing from logging concessions petering out, the RFD started to emphasise reforestation activities. It set up a special "Office for Promotion of Private Forestry Plantations" which formulated the long-term goal of 30,000 km<sup>2</sup> of private tree plantations. The 1985 "National Forestry Policy", which called for 25% of the total land area of Thailand to be set aside for production forests, also emphasised the role of private plantations.

The army also became involved in the plantation drive through its Green Isan project, initiated in 1987 and planned to run until 1992 with a budget of 55 billion Baht. The official name of the Green Isan project is the "Project of the King to Develop the Northeast Following the Thoughts of his Majesty"<sup>45</sup>. This title reflects the official story of the project's emergence and its purpose, i.e. that the King of Thailand asked the army to initiate the project in order to

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<sup>43</sup> The Thai Pulp and Paper Industries Association, *Supply and Demand of Pulp and Paper Industry in ASEAN Countries*, Bangkok, TPPIA, 1987. The Thai Pulp and Paper Industries Association, *Situation in Pulp and Paper Industries in Thailand in 1989*, Bangkok, TPPIA, 1989. The Thai Pulp and Paper Industries Association, *Demand and Supply of Pulp and Paper Industry in Thailand*, Bangkok, TPPIA, 1990.

<sup>44</sup> Thailand Development Research Institute, Bangkok, 1989.

<sup>45</sup> *Khrongkan Namphrathai Chak Nai Luang Phua Pattana Pak Tawang Ok Chiang Nua Tam Phraratchadamri*



help the poor of the northeast affected by drought, the idea being that the army would solve the drought problem by building dams and reservoirs and would "re-green the northeast" by planting lots of trees.

With Green Isan the army attempted to expand its "development for security" role, presenting itself as a developer and conservationist. According to the project head, General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, "the army has transferred its emphasis from eliminating enemies that endanger the country to helping the government prosper the country's economy".<sup>46</sup>

The plantation interests of the project can be seen by the forestry component of Green Isan, for which 6 billion Baht were earmarked. Forest patrol units were to be created in order to stop illegal logging, forest plantations developed, and a continuation and acceleration of the forest village programme continued and accelerated. Overall target was the reforestation of 1.3 million rai<sup>47</sup> of protected forest and 3.4 million rai of economic forest. 53 forest villages were planned in which nearly 30,000 households were to be moved out of 44 National Forest Reserves encompassing an area of 2.1 million rai into an area of 1 million rai.<sup>48</sup>

However, neither the RFD nor the army were capable of providing a suitable framework for large scale plantations. Waves of protests, which had started in 1985, continued in 1987 and culminated in 1989/1990. In increasingly militant struggles, villagers uprooted seedlings, cut down plantation saplings and even set fire to RFD and FIO offices. In Dongyai forest, the now famous forest monk Phra Phrachak Khuttachitto, led villagers in an open demolition of a eucalyptus plantation.

Farmers reacted particularly violently to eucalyptus. In their eyes, it was a "selfish tree"<sup>49</sup> in that it drained nutrients and moisture from the soil, affected neighbouring crops, was no good for fodder and provided little firewood. Natural forests, even when logged over and degraded, provided a wide range of produce, from fodder for animals, firewood, game and forest vegetables to insects, herbal medicines, mushrooms, honey, resins and fruit. Eucalyptus monocultures by contrast were like barren deserts, hence the farmers' saying: "Even red ants will not enter a eucalyptus grove."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Biwater, *Project of the King to Develop the Northeast Following the Thoughts of His Majesty: Master Plan*, Bangkok, 1987.

<sup>47</sup> One rai = 0.16 ha.

<sup>48</sup> Biwater, *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> Lohmann, L., Peasants, Plantations, and Pulp: The Politics of Eucalyptus in Thailand, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 23 (1991), No. 4, pp. 3-18.

<sup>50</sup> Hirsch, P., *Political Economy of Environment in Thailand*, Manila, Journal of Contemporary Asia Publishers, 1993.

For a short while, the movement was able to halt the plantation plans. After the Suan Kitti scandal erupted in 1990<sup>51</sup>, large-scale commercial plantations were banned by the government. However, an even bigger plantation project was being planned which would lead to a huge and decisive conflict: *Khor Jor Kor*.

The *Khor Jor Kor* project, officially named the "Land Distribution Programme for the Poor Living in Degraded National Forest Reserves in the Northeast of Thailand"<sup>52</sup>, planned to reorganise land use in all of Thailand's 1,253 National Forest Reserves. It was set up by the Internal Security Operations Command in 1990. President of the project board was General Suchinda Kraprayun, its director General Issarapong Nunpakdi – both were key players in the coup d'état against the Chatchai government one year later.<sup>53</sup>

*Khor Jor Kor* combined previous trends in Thai forestry into one huge project. It represented a continuation of the Forest Village Programme in that a key element was the concentration of different villages into new, grid-like settlements. The Green Isan project lived on in the concept of total development, in which the recipients of government aid were to be given infrastructure, new employment and education. Also, land reform, i.e. the confiscation and reallocation of agricultural land, was a central component. In total, 1.4 million ha of land were to be freed for eucalyptus plantations.

For both the army and the RFD, *Khor Jor Kor* was an attempt to regain influence lost during the 1980s. The project was part of an offensive for a greater role for the military in internal affairs through the creation of the development-environmental crisis paradigm, which could only be solved by military involvement. Also, the army could prove its usefulness in the alliance with the corporate group of conglomerates interested in large-scale pulp plantations. If, with a successful implementation of *Khor Jor Kor*, the army could show that it only was capable of pushing through a commercialisation of degraded forest areas against the (formerly successful) resistance of farming com-

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<sup>51</sup> The Suan Kitti Co. Ltd. was a subsidiary of the giant Soon Hua Seng Corporation and had been established in 1984 for the purpose of setting up eucalyptus plantations. In 1990, 156 of its employees were arrested for encroaching on National Reserved Forest. The company had been cutting down trees in natural forest in order to be able to apply for a concession to "re-forest" a degraded forest area. The issue became a national scandal because of the connections between high-ranking politicians, the RFD and the company.

<sup>52</sup> *Khongkan Chat Thi Tham Gin Hai Gap Rassadon Phu Yak Rai Nai Phuen Thi Pa Sanguan Suam Som Phak Tawang Ok Chiang Nua*. This project was known under its initials *Kho Cho Ko*, transcribed in the English language press as *Khor Jor Kor*.

<sup>53</sup> ISOC, *Khor Jor Kor: The Project for Land Allocation for the Poor Living in Degraded National Forest Reserves in the Northeast. Master Plan*, Bangkok, ISOC, 1990.



munities, this would fortify the political role of the military, which had been eroded after the defeat of the communist insurgency.

*Khor Jor Kor* allowed the RFD to resume the offensive on the conservationist front. Ideologically, the project placed the blame for forest destruction squarely on the "poor farmers". The solution to forest destruction put forward by *Khor Jor Kor* was to let the RFD regain control over the forest areas. In this way, the RFD could be portrayed as a champion of conservation, in contrast to its public image as the "stump department". Secondly, the project promised to win the battle over economic tree plantations, which the department had lost in the eighties. With the help of the military, the RFD could now achieve what it had failed to do before, namely, move unruly rural populations out of National Forest Reserves and regain control over them. Tree plantations could provide an alternative source of revenue for that lost by the logging ban, either by leasing land to private companies or by setting up plantations.

## 7. Democratic Resource Management

The *Khor Jor Kor* conflict was a watershed in the development of forest politics. If the military and the RFD had been successful with their project, this would have entrenched authoritarian forestry in Thailand. The continuation and deepening of the traditions within state forestry, and the combination of the various elements into one huge, total plan would have set the scene for subsequent developments. The extensive control over forest areas and the communities living in them by the army and the RFD, a massive expansion of commercial monocultures and the policy of forced relocation of communities would have severely restricted efforts to encourage local participation and democracy with regard to forest resources.

Instead, the project gave rise to an effective resistance movement, which was able to stop the project and became an important link in the development of a wider movement in the direction of democratic resource management.

The success of the resistance movement was based on a number of different but interconnected factors. First of all, it was a grass-roots movement, involving thousands of farmers. Building on experience gained in the eucalyptus protests in the eighties, the movement succeeded in uniting farmers from 36 forests affected by the scheme.

On this basis, there was active and broad participation in civil disobedience and direct action. This ranged from challenging the authority of government officials in *Khor Jor Kor* propaganda meetings, refusing to move when ordered to do so by the army and preventing officials from conducting the

survey necessary for the land allocation plan to staging illegal demonstrations, blocking roads and organising mass re-occupations of land taken away by the project.

Secondly, the founding of the Committee of 36 Forests<sup>54</sup> in February 1992 meant that protests could have an Isan-wide focus and enabled activists to learn from experiences in areas affected by the project.

The networking also helped the movement to sustain an effective campaign around the villagers of Nongyai. The villagers were forcibly evicted by the army, and when they received no land in the resettlement village Santisuk ("Peace"), they camped out at the local temple. This "Thai Refugee Camp" became a constant reminder of the violence inherent in the project and served as a warning to villages still to be affected.

Using the symbolism of the Nongyai case, the Committee of 36 Forests could challenge both the environmental and the "poverty alleviation" credentials of the project. In the Dongyai area, the military actually cut down intact forest in Tablan to make way for the resettlement village – a fact widely documented and published by supporters in the universities and press. Video footage of Nongyai showed the lack of land and proper housing which characterised the reality of the project.

Thirdly, the 1992 May uprising in Bangkok was crucial in defeating *Khor Jor Kor*. The army in general and the ISOC in particular were significantly weakened by the urban protests, and key persons behind the project like Suchinda and Issarapong had to flee the country. This weakness of the opponent was seized upon by the rural activists, who staged another symbolic drama in June, when they marched to Pak Chong, the "door to the northeast" (*Pratu Isan*), blocking Friendship Highway to prevent *Khor Jor Kor* from entering "their country". After marathon negotiations, the Anand interim government finally agreed to cancel the project on the 3rd of July.

The repercussions of this victory were considerable. For rural activists, winning such a conflict in which they were faced with adversaries with the full power of the state at their disposal, was a massive confidence boost. With the founding of the Assembly of the Poor in 1995, farmer organisation and protest continued and expanded during the following years, culminating in the large and protracted demonstrations held by this network in Bangkok in 1996 and 1997.

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<sup>54</sup> i.e. Kanagamagan 36 Pa, actually short for *Kanagamagan Chauban Gekai Banha Thidin Thamgin Pat Isan 36 Pa* (Farmer Committee to Solve the Land Problem in the Northeast in 36 Forests)



For many activists from the Northeast, the memory of *Khor Jor Kor* featured prominently in these later protests. For example, during the 1996 and 1997 demonstrations in Bangkok, banners and photo exhibitions referred to the conflict, or it is remembered in other ways:

When my bananas have a fruit, I take it to give merit. I call it *Khor Jor Kor* banana (*Gluai Khor Jor Kor*). So the people know about the history, why we have a harvest today because of our struggle before. Many things were born during *Khor Jor Kor*. We would not have a committee like this, or we would not have integrated farming like this if we hadn't fought during that time.<sup>55</sup>

Of course, the subsequent rise of the Assembly of the Poor was not only related to *Khor Jor Kor*. In addition to the northeastern farmers, the movement against dams (in particular the Pak Mun Dam) and the Northern Farmers Network (founded in 1994) were major grassroots participants in the network.<sup>56</sup> Clearly though, the movement was not organised along ethnic lines; rather, farmers from different parts of the country and with different ethnic backgrounds united to push for common (but diverse) goals.

This "unity in diversity" approach was central to the Assembly's ideology, reflecting both its social base and experience with and rejection of the centralist CPT. So, at the height of its mobilising capacity in 1997, when the network was able to sustain a permanent demonstration for 99 days outside Government House, 121 individual cases were presented to the government. Each case had representatives from the relevant community at the demonstration, and each was negotiated according to its unique history and situation. At the same time, groups of communities were affected by the same general policy, which resulted in the grouping of problems and the formulation of general demands. For example, different ethnic groups in the north and in the northeast were threatened by eviction because the land they lived on had been classified as protected area. One general demand (which was granted) was therefore that no one should be evicted from NFR until a joint committee of farmer representatives, NGOs and government officials revised the boundaries of the protected areas to exclude communities existing before the protected status was declared.<sup>57</sup>

Already, during *Khor Jor Kor*, the Committee of 36 Forests proposed a democratic run land reform and a system of community forests. It rejected the classification of National Forest Reserves, which it saw as arbitrary, and the

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<sup>55</sup> Pho Waen, community leader from Choeng Doi, in Phuphan Forest. Interview with author in 1997.

<sup>56</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Assembly of the Poor, see Bruce Missingham, *Assembly of the Poor in Thailand: from local struggles to national protest movement*, Chiang Mai, Silk-worm Books, 2003.

<sup>57</sup> Observations based on research undertaken by author at the 1997 demonstration.

characterisation of the farmers living there as illegal squatters. Instead, it demanded that a system of land management and forest protection be developed from the existing reality, with farmers in forest areas being given land rights awarded by committees made up of both farmer and state representatives.

In the following years, alternative management systems were developed and implemented independent of state approval. Although officially illegal, community forests spread across Thailand, for a number of reasons. Often, the community forest was based on traditional management practices, such as cemetery forests put aside for religious purposes or forests connected to traditional irrigation systems in the north. Or they were founded as a reaction to ecological problems resulting from state logging (as in initiatives in Nan Province) or as part of watershed protection schemes (as in the Mai Wang Watershed Project). The famous ordaining of trees by environmentalist monks also developed as a reaction to ecological crisis.

Increasingly, however, community forests were deliberately propagated as an alternative to the state's conservationist strategy based on the eviction of people from national parks etc. The *Samatcha Chauna Chaurai* (successor to the Committee of 36 Forests) has a network which encourages member communities to set aside areas as community forests. Communities affected by eucalyptus plantations often adopt the strategy of replacing the plantation seedlings with a variety of indigenous tree species and declaring the area to belong to the community.

The concept of community forests rejects the dichotomy between commercial and conservation forests propagated by state and corporate forestry, and perceives the forest as an ecosystem intimately related to the agricultural needs of the farmers. Forests are used for timber, firewood, fodder and grazing, medicinal plants, vegetables etc. and are protected in order to sustain the agricultural areas around them.

The move towards community forests was connected to the propagation of integrated or "ecological" farming. The Assembly of the Poor sees the predicament of small farmers in Thailand as being related to the particular model of capitalist development pursued by the state with the specific relationship between widespread logging, infrastructural development, displacement and cash crop farming. Instead, a system of subsistence-based farming is proposed, which combines agroforestry components and crop rotation with the rejection of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and monocultures. This integrated farming is also being practised by an increasing number of farmers, and together with community forestry, is seen as supporting conservation in that it breaks the cycle of cash crop cultivation, soil erosion, and further forest clearing.



So, during the 1990s and following the victory over the *Khor Jor Kor* project, the initiative in forest politics passed from the coalition of strategic groups to a counter-strategic group made up of a network of farmer organisations and NGOs. This counter-strategic group was not only able to halt the implementation of state and corporate forest politics (most significantly the ambitious displacement plans), but also developed a democratic, community-based forest management alternative.

## **8. Conclusion**

Using the strategic groups approach, three distinct phases of forest politics in Thailand can be discerned, which I call the colonial, the national and the global phases. These phases correspond to fundamental changes within the corporate strategic group influential in forestry, or rather to the replacement of one group by another.

So, in the colonial phase, forestry was defined by a corporate group made up of European companies that were primarily interested in logging the teak forests of the north. Forest management was subordinated to the production of this one commodity, with subsistence-based diverse forest use replaced by systematic and unsustainable logging.

In the national phase, a new corporate group took over which was made up primarily of state capital. State logging companies (FIO and provincial forestry companies) extended the forestry system set up by the British to cover the whole country and all indigenous tree species, servicing a timber processing industry embedded within an overall strategy of national development. The systematic destruction of Thai forests in this extended period was so intense that it led to the collapse of the logging-based corporate group by the end of the 1980s.

In the global phase, the previous state corporate group was replaced by globally oriented companies, which shifted their focus of interest away from forests all together. They drew up ambitious plans to replace large parts of the remaining forest cover with plantations of fast-growing tree species for the production of pulp.

In all three phases, the protection of the environment or the conservation of forests was not part of the corporate group's strategy. Indeed, for the "appropriation of surplus", systematic destruction and conversion of the natural forest was necessary.

Whilst the corporate groups changed over time, the collective strategic groups important in forest politics remained, adapting their strategies according to the changes taking place in the corporate sector.

The RFD was initially set up to wrest control of the teak forests from the northern princes and to impose the corporate logging system on the local

population. Silviculture or forest management was not part of its duties. After nationalisation, the department worked in a similar way, extending state control and suppression of subsistence use across the country. Again, its primary role was to supervise the concession system, at which it was so successful that it became nicknamed the "stump department". With the collapse of the logging system, the RFD turned to "reforestation" and the revenue associated with eucalyptus plantations.

The army initially started out as a corporate group in the forestry sector, dominating both the state forestry companies and private distribution networks. In response to the CPT, however, it also became active as a collective strategic group by combining its forestry interests with counter-insurgency. It developed this role further in the project-based paradigm of environment and development in Green Isan and *Khor Jor Kor*.

The strategic groups approach, however, cannot account for the fourth phase in Thai forestry, which was dominated by resistance and alternatives to state and corporate forestry. This phase evolved not from differing strategies within the ruling elite, but from conflict between a coalition of elite groups (around the eucalyptus plans) and groups of the non-elite. Successful resistance led to the formation of a counter-strategic group, which not only stopped the plans of the corporate sector, the military and the RFD, but also proceeded to dominate the discourse on forest resources until 1997. In addition, real alternatives to corporate and state forestry were developed and implemented.

It is these alternatives which are now being questioned. Since 1997, a re-grouping of strategic groups has taken place. The RFD, which was demoralised and discredited during the 1990s, has been using the conservationist paradigm to reassert its control over protected areas. The army, which had played no role in internal forest politics after the *Khor Jor Kor* defeat (preferring, instead, to engage in illegal logging in Cambodia and elsewhere), has been gradually "assisting" in forest conservation. Digging up the old prejudices against "hilltribes" and "shifting cultivation" serves both interests so well, because it combines racist stereotypes with authoritarian conservationism, creating a new need for a blend of forestry and internal security.

This return of authoritarian forest politics is possible because of the weakness of democratic civil society movements in the context of Thaksin's particular version of populism. The victory of the resistance movement against *Khor Jor Kor* and the flowering of grass-roots activism in its wake were, after all, only possible thanks to the massive urban uprising against the military regime in 1992. This kind of counter-strategic social alliance between urban and rural grass-roots movements will be necessary for a revival of democratic resource management in Thailand.