

POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

A Case Study of Thailand's Assembly of the Poor

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ABSTRACT: This article describes the political struggle of a nationwide rural-based movement in Thailand, the Assembly of the Poor (AOP), and interrogates the way its struggle has unfolded in the media. The AOP movement brings the politics of Thailand's rural poor to the public arena, within which it manifests its grievances and, at the same time, it proposes an ideological critique of state-imposed development and articulates oppositional visions of an alternative bottom-up development. The article shows how the discursive struggle over media visibility and representation has been central to the making and unmaking of the movement. The AOP's presence in media space has allowed it to bring counter-perspectives to public attention, thereby creating a nationwide conversation about the grievances of poor villagers, rallying support for AOP causes and actions, and heightening the possibility for entering into dialogue with the government concerning state development projects. The article also points out, however, that the media plays a pivotal role in managing the space of public communication, deciding if and how the AOP should be represented (though not without constraints) — and this may have detrimental effects. Media space is thus a central site of ideological and political contestation that no social movement can afford to dismiss, if it desires political change.

Discursive struggle over media visibility and representation is central to the making and unmaking of social movements in contemporary Thai politics. The mass media has become a pivotal arena for political struggle, one that social movements cannot afford to dismiss if they are to have any significant impact. Yet, few scholarly works have scrutinized the cultural politics of media representation and the effects the media have had upon oppositional social movements in present-day Thailand. Those that have examined this topic have done so only peripherally.¹

This article examines the politics of media representation and assesses the significance it has had for social movements through an analysis of a movement called the Assembly of the Poor (hereafter AOP). The article argues that the players involved in the AOP's struggle, be they villagers, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or student activists, have deliberately and actively made their concerns newsworthy so as to attract publicity. As a potent venue of public communication the media has enabled the AOP to push forward its agenda, allowing it to create a nationwide public conversation about the plight of Thailand's rural villagers, to rally support from other civic groups and media-consuming citizens, and to enhance the possibility for dialogue and negotiation with the government. During a prolonged campaign in 2000, the AOP succeeded in getting a considerable amount of media visibility. However, as we will see, this news coverage came with a price.

The first of this article's four sections situates the AOP movement in a wider context of contemporary social movements in Thailand. The second section provides background information on the AOP's demands that are the centerpiece of the public debate generated in the wake of mass demonstrations in 2000. The third section discusses the relationship between the AOP and Thai media throughout the course of protracted demonstrations. The concluding section describes and assesses the significance of the price that the AOP has paid for publicity.

Assembly of the Poor and Rural Politics in Thailand

Thailand has a long history of rural resistance and organized rebellion. Rural resistance in premodern times appeared in the form of a Buddhist-oriented millenarian movement, known as "holy men revolts," or *kabot phu mi bun*.² The beginning of rural resistance in modern Thai history is closely linked with communist movements in the country. The first nationally organized rural opposition formed in the 1960s within the broader movement of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). The activities and base of support of the CPT were largely in remote areas as the outlawed organization was not allowed to carry out political campaigns in public. For the first time in modern Thai history peasants organized themselves as a political movement. Some of the legacy of these efforts is still present — particularly in the oppositional discourse it created — in social movements today. The downfall of the Thanom-Praphat dictatorial regime in 1973 first made it possible for democratic and revolutionary forces to proliferate and the country witnessed a surge in the growth of rural movements. The student-led uprising on 14 October 1973, which brought down the military dictatorship, paved the way for the formation of extra-parliamentary politics, comprising three major political forces: students, peasantry, and workers.³ From 1973 to 1976, student activists forged political alliances with farmers and workers in their mission of "revolutionizing the society." The country's first national organization of farmers, the Peasants Federation of Thailand (PFT), was founded in 1975 and came to play a leading role in representing the voices and concerns of peasants. The post-1973 proliferation of popular movements was brought to an abrupt end, however, when the empire struck back in the military

coups and massacres on 6 October 1976. The PFT, perceived by the authorities as having links with the CPT, was suppressed; all other oppositional movements were forced to go underground. More than three thousand students fled to jungles across the country to join the CPT's guerrilla warfare.

Rural movements reemerged in the late 1980s in tandem with the growth of civil societal groups and NGOs, particularly those working on development and environmental issues. Some activists, disheartened with the CPT, fled the jungle but carried on their social activities by working with NGOs.⁴ The 1990s saw the dramatic growth of rural movements after the May 1992 popular uprising that brought down the military-run government.⁵ The increasingly democratic climate permitted rural villagers who had suffered the adverse consequences of state-imposed development projects to voice their grievances through mass protests.

Top-down bureaucracy that ignored the voices of the rural poor had led the peasants to doubt that filing appeals with government agencies would solve their problems. So they took to the streets to arouse public attention and insisted that the government pay attention to their demands. The AOP, also known as the Forum of the Poor, was born in this sociopolitical climate.

The AOP is the largest of the rural-based movements that emerged in Thailand after the PFT fell apart in the aftermath of the October 1976 massacre. Known in the Thai language as Samatcha Khon Chon, the AOP was founded in Bangkok on 10 December 1995 with the support of NGOs, academics, and student activists. The AOP's major base is in the countryside, mostly in Thailand's North and Northeast, and its campaigns focus on the grievances of the rural poor, although some of its demands have also concerned the urban poor. The AOP, which describes itself as a network of people who are victims of the state's



Assembly of the Poor demonstration (1996). Frustrated by attempts to change government policies through bureaucratic channels the rural poor took to the streets to arouse public attention. AOP was born in this sociopolitical climate. (Courtesy: Friends of the People)

uneven development, argues that the rural poor have paid the price for Thailand's state-sponsored program of export-oriented industrialization for more than four decades.⁶ According to the AOP, subordination of the rural agricultural sector to the urban industrial sector has ravaged the countryside and caused the deterioration of the livelihoods of rural people. AOP's aims, therefore, are to empower rural villagers to have more say in development policies that affect their lives and to propose alternative views concerning the country's development path as a whole.

After the popular uprising in May 1992, the growth in civil society and people's movements accelerated, opening up more democratic space for extra-parliamentary activities. Later, in 1996, these civil societal groups joined hands and pushed for the drafting of a constitution as a means to propel the reform of political institutions. The AOP staged its first marathon demonstration in 1996 and the second one in 1997. The AOP's 1997 campaign lasted for ninety-nine days and attracted extensive media attention. Unprecedented in scale, the "historic" campaign succeeded in pressing the government of Chavalit Yongchaiyudh to come up with solutions for the AOP's 121 demands.

The enormous publicity the AOP received in 1997 was, in part, an inverted result of the unpopularity of the governments of Banharn Silapa-acha (1995-1996)⁷ and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (1996-1997); both governments were widely perceived as being corrupt, inefficient, and unaccountable. The highlighting of AOP protests in the media reinforced perceptions among the urban middle class that the Chavalit government was incapable of leading the country. At the same time, Chavalit himself felt he had to address the grievances of the poor and galvanize rural support in order to counterbalance the growing antagonism against his government in the press.⁸ Positive media coverage of the AOP's political campaigns significantly accelerated the movement's momentum and compelled the government to seriously address its petitions. In April 1997, the Chavalit government finally came up with a cabinet resolution that addressed all the problems put forth by the AOP. The government agreed to pay 4.65 billion Baht in compensation for villagers who had been negatively affected by construction and operation of the Sirinthorn, Rasi Salai, and Pak Mun dams, as well as by other development projects. It also formulated resolutions on land and forest policies, and agreed to invite people's participation in any future dam projects.⁹ This favorable political climate changed, however, after Chavalit stepped down in November 1997 in the wake of protests against his administration for its inability to handle the economic crisis, which also hit many other Asian countries during that time.¹⁰ The Democrat Party under the leadership of Chuan Leekpai formed a new government.

The transition from Chavalit to Chuan negatively affected rural political movements. The Chuan government adopted an overtly antagonistic approach toward the AOP, charging that protesting villagers were being provoked, if not brainwashed, by ill-intentioned, "third-hand" or foreign-infiltrated NGOs. Not only was the Chuan government unresponsive to the demands of protesting villagers, it also revoked the agreement the former government had reached in response to the AOP's demands. The Chuan cabinet's decision to revoke this

agreement received little media coverage and gave rise to scant public concern as attention was focused overwhelmingly on how to tackle problems of macro-economic management in order to rescue the country from its worst-ever economic crisis.

Moreover, the AOP itself had become tainted by a corruption scandal concerning compensation the Chavalit government had approved for the Rasi Salai villagers. The Chuan government accused a minister of the former cabinet and NGO workers of accepting bribes for getting villagers registered to receive compensation and it alleged that some registered villagers had made fraudulent claims about their land rights.

The post-1997 economic slump also seriously affected the media industry, resulting in the closure of many newspapers. The remaining newspapers restructured their operations to cut production costs by reducing the number of pages, cutting employees' salaries, and laying off reporters. As a result, the ample and sympathetic media coverage the AOP once enjoyed was drastically reduced.¹¹ Budget constraints forced media organizations to confine news coverage to cities, leaving the countryside out of the picture;¹² news agencies preferred to assign reporters to cover large demonstrations in Bangkok rather than small-scale protests in rural areas.

Moreover, coverage in some newspapers in the post-1997 period became unfavorable to the AOP protestors as editors feared that protests would create a negative image of Thailand and scare away foreign investment deemed to be important for the Thai economy, particularly in a time of crisis.¹³

Mounting a prolonged demonstration in Bangkok requires enormous financial resources and labor power. Given the unfavorable economic and political circumstances in the post-1997 period, the AOP decided to change its strategy.



A symbolic "protest village" near the Pak Mun dam. (Credit: Ed Tadem)

Instead of mobilizing people to carry out large-scale demonstrations in Bangkok, they opted for what they called the *dao krachai* (scattered-star) approach — i.e., setting up “protest villages” in outlying areas that had AOP bases. The village set up near the Pak Mun dam, pictured above, is an example. These villages symbolized local opposition to state development projects that were having adverse effects on the livelihood of local villagers.

Thirteen months of scattered-star actions yielded nothing of political worth, however. The AOP protests received scant publicity and the Chuan government ignored them completely. In the absence of media attention the AOP found it difficult to make its presence felt. As one media scholar put it, “a demonstration with no media coverage is a nonevent.”¹⁴

In 2000, the AOP changed course and decided to mount a large-scale demonstration to press the government to pay attention to its appeals. The next section describes AOP petitions that were at the center of public debates surrounding the AOP’s protracted protest.

The 2000 Campaign and AOP Demands

The AOP is an umbrella organization consisting of seven people’s networks, namely, the Dam Group, Land and Forest Group, State Development-Project Group, Slum Community Group, Occupational Health Group, Alternative Agriculture Group, and Local Fisheries Group. Villagers belonging to the Dam Group and the Forest and Land Group made up the majority of the protesters in the campaign that AOP launched in 2000 to get the government to address sixteen adverse effects of state-sponsored large-dam construction on villagers, forest and land rights, and the lack of citizenship of ethnic minorities. These petitions are listed below in Tables 1 and 2 (p. 547).¹⁵

While the AOP petitions covered many issues, the media focused largely on the Pak Mun and Rasi Salai dams as both of these were the sites where sit-in protests were held. Villagers have long struggled against the negative effects of these two dam projects.

Pak Mun Dam

The Pak Mun dam, which is located in the province of Ubon Ratchathani in northeastern Thailand, is a “run-of-the-river dam” that does not require a large water storage area and, therefore, does not necessitate the displacement of local villagers from adjacent areas. The Pak Mun project is the responsibility of the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), one of the most affluent state enterprises, and was partly funded by the World Bank.¹⁶ The EGAT claimed that the Pak Mun dam would generate 136 megawatts of electricity to serve demands in the lower part of northeastern Thailand.¹⁷

Since the late 1980s when a feasibility study was begun, local villagers have objected to plans to build the Pak Mun dam. Despite their objections, the government of Chatichai Choonhavan approved the project in May 1989. Protests continued as construction of the dam got underway, but these proved equally fruitless and the dam was completed in April 1994.

Table 1. The AOP's Petitions on Dam-related Grievances

Category	Reference Cases	Petitions
Completed dam projects	1. Pak Mun dam 2. Rasi Salai dam 3. Sirinthon dam 4. Lam Khan Chu dam 5. Huai La Ha dam	Compensating affected villagers for the loss of lands and local resources. Opening the dams' gates so as to restore ecological system. Stopping dam operation so as to carry out the post-construction social and environmental impact assessment.
Proposed dam projects	6. Pong Khun Phet dam 7. Lam Dom Yai dam 8. Hua Na dam	Stopping the projects and carrying out a social and environmental impact assessment. Demanding the government to disclose unbiased information instead of propagandizing the projects.

Table 2. The AOP's Petitions on Forest and Land Grievances

Category	Reference Cases	Petitions
Reserve Forest & National Park*	9. Dong Phu Long Reserve Forest 10. Phu Pha Taem National Park 11. Dong Hin Hong Reserve Forest 12. Kaeng Ta Na National Park 13. Pa Lang Phu Reserve Forest	Resuming policies of the Chavalit government, which brings together the state authority, academics, NGOs, and villagers to verify land rights.
Public Land*	14. Ban Lung Tung 15. Ban Wang Mai	Allowing villagers to continue living in the areas.
State Development Project	16. Chong Mek checkpoint	Allowing villagers to continue living in the areas.

* Villagers living in the above-mentioned areas faced eviction as the government claimed their procession of the land.

In 1995, villagers whose major sources of incomes were from fisheries petitioned for compensation for the loss of fishing opportunities during the three-year period of dam construction. After several rounds of protests, the Chavalit government acknowledged the dam's adverse impacts on fishing communities and agreed to compensate each family 90,000 baht for their loss of income during the construction period.¹⁸ However, the dam continued to cause a sharp decline in the fishing haul and a deterioration in the Mun River's ecological system. The loss of fishing incomes, originally perceived to be temporary, became a permanent condition of life in the area. Thus, affected villagers demanded additional compensation for the permanent loss of their livelihood.

In demonstrations that followed, however, the Pak Mun villagers no longer appealed for compensation. Instead, they demanded the opening of the Pak Mun dam's gates, the restoration of the Mun River's ecological system, and the rehabilitation of villagers' livelihoods.

Rasi Salai Dam

The other case that was widely covered in the media during the AOP's 2000 campaign concerned the Rasi Salai dam. Located in the northeastern province of Sisaket, the Rasi Salai dam was built between 1992 and 1993 in an effort to find a long-term solution for water shortages in the region. In phase one of the so-called Kong-Chi-Mun project, thirteen dams were to be built to divert water from the Mekong River to the Chi and Mun Rivers.¹⁹

The construction of the Rasi Salai dam was carried out by the Department of Energy Development and Promotion (DEDP) of the Ministry of Sciences, Technology, and Environment. Initially, local villagers did not oppose the project as they were told that the dam would be only 4.5 meters high and the water level would not rise above the riverbank. However, the concrete dam turned out to be twice as high and its waters submerged more than one hundred square kilometers.²⁰ Villagers began to stage protests, insisting that the DEDP not store water above the riverbank in order to keep farmland and the fresh water swamp forest near the dam from being submerged. Their demands were ignored and more than three thousand families lost their farmland due to the flooding that ensued. The dam also caused soil salinity in vast areas nearby and villagers were unable to use the land for farming.²¹

Villagers adversely affected by the Rasi Salai dam sought redress in various ways. Some filed appeals with government agencies; others joined the AOP and launched mass protests. As part of the above-mentioned AOP protest in 1997, the Chavalit government paid compensation to 1,154 villagers negatively affected by the Rasi Salai dam. The lack of an environmental impact assessment prior to start of the Kong-Chi-Mun project complicated matters as the DEDP did not have any baseline data to determine how many households would be affected by the Rasi Salai dam.²² After the first round of compensation payments, other villagers who had yet to receive their payments appealed to the government for equal treatment and financial assistance. Their de-



Villagers stage a rally against the Rasi Salai dam in 2000. (Credit: Chainarong Settachua)

mand was politicized by the Democrat Party-run government, which alleged that some villagers made fraudulent claims about their land rights.

In its 2000 campaign, the AOP dismissed demands for compensation and, instead, called for the government to open the Rasi Salai dam's gates in order to mitigate the social and environmental impacts from the dam. The AOP also wanted to have land rights verified.

Public Drama: The AOP Protest and the Media

This section explores the political campaign the AOP conducted from April to August 2000.²³ The discussion of events is presented in chronological order so as to show how the media came into play in each event throughout the protracted demonstrations.

Garnering Media Attention: Confrontation at the Dam Sites

Media's sentiment is a cardinal factor that AOP leaders take into consideration when they prepare for political campaigns, as Wanida Tantivitayaphithak, an NGO worker who played a leading role in the protest in 2000, explains:

When we are to mount a demonstration, we need to gauge if the media will be interested to cover our activities. If there is not much interest from the media or they are likely to perceive it in a negative light, we would rather not do it. Instead, we will use other "positive" strategies, such as organizing seminars and disseminating information by other means, and refrain from strategies which are most likely to be seen as troublemaking. Nevertheless, we could not do so [wait and gauge public sentiment] at all times. In some instances, villagers' grievances needed immediate attention and we could not wait. If we have to stage a demonstration, we try our best to explain our aims [to the public]. Sometimes we are successful, but sometimes we aren't.²⁴

The AOP decided to change its protest strategy from *dao krajai* to mass rallies as they forecast the declining popularity of the Chuan government, particularly among the urban middle classes. Discontent with the government's policy of economic rehabilitation was growing and many newspapers were severely criticizing the government for accepting without question the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Sensing that these broader political realities strengthened their hand, an estimated one thousand villagers marched toward the crest of the Pak Mun dam in the early morning hours of 15 May and began a sit-in protest. They called on the EGAT to open eight sluice gates, arguing that only the restoration of the Mun River's ecology could safeguard the livelihood of the local communities. Five days later, about eight hundred villagers living near the Rasi Salai dam followed their Pak Mun counterparts and occupied the Rasi Salai dam, obstructing access to the dam's power-generating plant.

Structurally, journalists divide their beats in accordance with the structure of state bureaucracy and they are usually assigned to ministries and state agencies that are deemed most important. The way news organizations are structured shows that their coverage revolves primarily around the state apparatus. Thus,

to attract media attention, villagers need to carry out acts that bring them into direct confrontation with the state. The sit-in protest at the Pak Mun dam was, therefore, a deliberate attempt to challenge the authorities in an effort to increase newsworthiness and draw media attention to their plight. (NGO organizer Wanida acknowledged that villagers staged their demonstration in the EGAT compound because they wanted media attention.²⁵) The more dramatic and intense a protest action becomes the more newsworthy it is. The situation at the Pak Mun dam site was deemed more critical when protestors were given an ultimatum to end their protest or else face dispersal. The prospect of looming violence attracted a great deal of media attention and many news organizations sent reporters from Bangkok to cover the unfolding events.

It should be noted that having protests covered by reporters from the head office (rather than by local stringers) is critically important. Provincial reporters work within the prevailing culture of rural society and key elements in this culture are the cultivation of patron-client relationships²⁶ and the maintenance of close connections with local authorities. Thus, stringers tend to have problems covering conflicts between local authorities and protesting villagers. Due partly to their close proximity to local authorities, many stringers are biased against protesting villagers who challenge the power of local authorities and their coverage of the AOP protests largely reflected their preconceptions.

Reporters coming from outside are somewhat freer to interpret village-level protests because they are not constrained by the local patron-client relationships. By no means does this imply that they necessarily portray protests in a positive light, but at least their outsider status allows the AOP more room to get its message across.

The challenge to the state, the prospects of a heated confrontation with local authorities, and the anticipated violent crackdown all brought extensive media attention to the grievances of the poor villagers. Conflict and violence, after all, are key elements that journalists use to measure the newsworthiness of an event. Nopphadon Phunsoem, general news editor of *Thairath*, a tabloid newspaper with the largest circulation in Thailand, explained: "We sent a reporter to monitor the situation there [at the Pak Mun dam] when the prospect of violence was looming. We waited until the situation returned to normalcy and when there was no more sign of violence, we [then] asked the reporter to come back."²⁷

Media participation, particularly by the national press,²⁸ indirectly protected protesting villagers against any crackdown at the Pak Mun dam site. Wanida pointed out that the state authority would have been more likely to use force to disperse the protesters if no media had been present at the protest site.²⁹ With the media present, the government ran a high risk of triggering public outrage and undermining the legitimacy of its rule if it initiated violence. A crackdown on the protestors would certainly have rated a headline.

The Pak Mun dam siege generated considerable publicity for the AOP. On 16 July 2000, nine of the nation's twelve daily newspapers reported on the protest, albeit from differing angles and with different emphases.³⁰ *Khaosod*, a tabloid newspaper with the third largest circulation in the country, headlined its story:

“Pak Mun Villagers Seize Dam, Fish Decline Unbearable.”³¹ The English-language *Bangkok Post*, splashed across its front page a striking picture of a giant catfish to illustrate a story about Pak Mun villagers praying to remember the catfish once abundant in the Mun River. Appearing on page four of the same newspaper was a separate news report under the heading “Villagers Lay Symbolic Siege to Dam.”³²

Phuchatkan, a business newspaper, ran a commentary piece on its front page arguing against the AOP action. A news story on the incident appeared on its local business page along with two special reports on the development of resistance against the Pak Mun dam and an interview with a Pak Mun protesting villager.³³ Another business newspaper, *Krungthep Thurakit*, covered the event on its back page, where important political news items were featured.³⁴ Five other daily papers, namely, *The Nation*, *Daily News*, *Maticchon*, *Thai Post*, and *Thai Rath*, reported the incident as a small news item and relegated coverage to an inside page.

Media visibility allowed the AOP to thrust its petitions onto the public agenda and catch the attention of the government. When a cycle of newsworthiness begins, journalists watch for newsworthy information from relevant players as well as from other accredited sources. With this in mind organizers did whatever they could to make their actions and causes newsworthy.

Discursive Contestation

Once the AOP’s protest hit the headlines of national daily newspapers, the event opened up public discussion about issues that had previously been silenced. The media arena became a pivotal public space in which the AOP and the authorities both fought to convince the public of the righteousness of their claims. In this light, how protests are covered and contextualized in the media is a matter of ideological contestation. Some officials tried to dismiss the AOP’s protests,³⁵ but the attention given the protests in the media forced the authorities to address the claims that the AOP was making against them. The EGAT argued that Pak Mun dam could generate 136 megawatts and not 38 megawatts as the AOP stated. It insisted that the dam was crucial in addressing the country’s increasing power demand. On the other side, the AOP said that the fish ladder,³⁶ which was built to facilitate fish migration up the river, was a total failure, while the EGAT said it functioned properly and fish population in the Mun River was still abundant. The EGAT alleged that protestors caused a public disturbance by obstructing access to the power-generating plants and preventing officials from carrying out maintenance checks of the machine room. If this continued, the EGAT claimed, the dam system would malfunction and cause an electricity blackout in the lower Northeast region as well as flooding in areas near the reservoir.

It should be noted that discursive struggle in the media extended beyond the sphere of news reports. The EGAT purchased advertising space in newspapers to express its viewpoint in the form of “pseudo-articles.” Media critics called on newspapers to reject such misleading and politically motivated submissions.

The line of media coverage has crucial impacts on the AOP protest. If the authorities’ characterization of the event gained widespread acceptance, then it

would be easy for the authority to justify the dispersal of protestors. Therefore, on its side, the AOP tried its utmost to use the media as a platform to explain its cause to the public such as through the issuing of daily political statements and through interviews with the media.

Opinion pieces are another crucial space that the AOP and AOP sympathizers use to explain their cause to the public. A number of academics in Thailand playing the role of public intellectuals wrote press articles to express their views in favor of the AOP protest. Contributions of this sort are subjected to little editorialization.

The role of sympathizers is no less significant in adding weight to the AOP's efforts. Academics, environmental experts, and civic groups all played a pivotal role in helping to define and argue the AOP position in public space. Some journalists had a preconceived idea that the AOP was biased against the state because it had its own political agenda to push forward. In their interpretation of the situation, the AOP was likely to be seen as less credible. Therefore, supportive comments from social critics and civic groups are imperative to the AOP campaign.

Following the Pak Mun dam siege, various civic groups joined forces to issue political statements and publish open letters to then prime minister Chuan Leekpai expressing their support for the AOP's appeal. When the situation at the Pak Mun dam became tense following an ultimatum issued by the local authority — end the protest voluntarily or face arrest — civic groups came out publicly to lend support to the AOP.³⁷ They espoused the villagers' rights to peaceful assembly and expressed their opposition against the government's use of violence and the use of state-owned media to disseminate what they deemed to be "distorted" information. They urged the authorities to dialogue with protesting villagers to find solutions for their grievances. Environmental NGOs weighed in with charges that the Pak Mun dam was a total failure. They cited the results of a study by the World Commission on Dams (WCD), an independent dam-assessment committee that had examined the social and environmental impacts of the Pak Mun dam.³⁸

Also playing a vital role in support of the AOP, were a group of senators who were the first to come to power via the election that was mandated by the 1997 Constitution. The drafting of the new constitution was part of a political reform project that had been pushed forward by civil society groups led by medical-doctor-cum-social-critic Prawese Wasi. Previously, senators had been appointed by the prime minister, with the result that the senate consisted mainly of bureaucrats, military generals, business people, and others with close connections to the government. The first senate election, which took place in late 1999, allowed diverse groups of people to be represented in the senate, including NGOs and civic groups.³⁹ These new senators played a vital role at many stages of this controversy as mediators between the state authority and the AOP.

The deadline for ending the Pak Mun protest passed and the anticipated crackdown did not occur. A *Kbaosod* stringer reportedly saw riot control equipment inside the EGAT compound and news reports indicated that local authorities had been told by the central government not to intervene to stop the vio-

lence if it erupted. One reporter stated his belief that if civic groups had not alerted the public about the possibility of state suppression and if the protest had not been widely covered, the government would undoubtedly have cracked down on the protesting villagers.⁴⁰

The Theatrics of Resistance

Public expressions of concern compelled the Chuan government to address AOP's sixteen demands⁴¹ and the interior minister appointed a committee to examine its petition. Knowing that the government had often used this tactic in the past as a pretext to end protest while not seriously addressing the problems, the AOP made every effort to ensure that this committee would do justice to its demands. The ten-member committee (five members having been nominated by the AOP) was given one month to submit a recommendation to the government. In the meantime, negotiations with the government were suspended for the month of June.

The AOP needed media visibility to ensure that its actions and concerns remained in the public attention. Without a media presence, AOP organizers believed, the authorities would ignore its petitions. Even worse, they feared, protestors would face harsh suppression, if representatives from the media were not on hand as witnesses. The longer the protest continued, however, the more difficult it became to secure media coverage.

Media attention often vaporizes rapidly. Senior Thai journalist Sanitsuda Ekachai points out that the media constantly need to find a fresh angle when a news issue continues for a long period of time. If there are no new developments, there is nothing to be reported and the media gradually lose interest.⁴² Media inattention can effectively black out a movement, causing it to lose momentum.⁴³ The AOP realized this and they therefore made a deliberate effort to sustain news coverage.

The fact that both protest sites were located far from Bangkok made it difficult for the AOP to sustain media visibility. The longer reporters from headquarters remained at the protest sites, the higher the costs their organizations had to bear. Once the importance of the protest was deemed to be declining, local stringers took over the reporting. This change meant the relocation of the battlefield to the domain of provincial politics — with the consequences noted above.

At the demonstration sites, the NGO advisors, student activists, and villagers staged actions daily to keep the protests captivating. Nitirat Sabsombun, an AOP spokesperson, reflected that in the later period the newsworthy content of AOP actions was given less attention while photographs of their activities received relatively more coverage. "Photographs became a more effective way to convey their message to media consumers [who tend] to spend less time reading news contents," he said.⁴⁴ Activities at the protest sites ranged from Buddhist prayers to political speeches, role plays, song-for-life concerts,⁴⁵ and collective meditation. While some of these activities were not particularly intended to attract publicity, the need to gain media attention was always given serious consideration and figured prominently in the preparation of protest activities.

In an effort to garner media attention, AOP activists and villagers made an effort to create dramatic actions that could generate striking photographic images. The staging of “spectacular” protest actions such as the three activities described below proved to be a way for noncelebrities and marginal groups to become newsmakers.⁴⁶ In this way they helped powerless and dissident groups to construct access to the media.

The photograph to the right, which appeared on the front page of *The Nation* on 1 June 2000, shows the “statement-reading activity,” during which an

activist from the Student Federation of Thailand was suspended from the crest of the Pak Mun dam. Dangling above the water, he was prepared to read a political statement urging the government to decommission the Pak Mun dam and stop the dam construction to allow the river to flow freely and to rehabilitate the livelihood of the villagers and safeguard the area’s ecological system. *The Nation* reported that the bold volunteer soon became dizzy and had to be hauled up to safety before he had time to read the statement.

The photograph on the front cover of this issue of *Critical Asian Studies* (vol. 36, no. 4) shows student activists from the Student Federation of Thailand making a mockery of the fish ladder by showing how hard it is for fish to swim through the ladder that was designed to facilitate fish migration across the dam. Student activists staged this event in response to the remark of then-prime minister Chuan Leekpai that the ladder worked efficiently. (The fish ladder photograph appeared on the front page of the *Bangkok Post* on 23 May 2000.)

In the photograph on p. 555, which appeared on the front page of the *Khaosod* newspaper on 24 May 2000, Rasi Salai villagers are conducting a morning ritual to worship and ask for help from the goddess of the river, or *phra mae khongkha*. This newly invented ritual drew upon the villagers’ belief that the construction of the dam violates local tradition because it obstructs the stream



A student activist reads a political statement at the Pak Mun dam in June 2002. (Credit: *The Nation*, Bangkok)

of water believed to be a walking path used by the river's goddess. Villagers conducted the praying every morning during their prolonged protest.⁴⁷ The coconut-leaf roof that appears behind the villagers in this photograph is a part of the protest village that was located in the middle of the Rasi Salai reservoir. The village was



In a "newly invented ritual," Rasi Salai villagers conduct a morning service to worship and ask for help from the goddess of the river. (Credit: Khaosod, Bangkok)

built following the scatter-star strategy before this area had been flooded. After the dam's gates were closed and the water level rose, the protest village was gradually submerged. This photograph conveys the strong determination of the villagers to continue their struggle despite the deepening water.

NGO advisors to the AOP played a pivotal role in assisting villagers to revive selected local rituals and convert them into a *cultural weapon* for the purpose of their political struggle. Chainarong Setthachuea, an advisor to the AOP and head of the Southeast Asian River Network, an environmental NGO, recalled how the goddess of the river ritual came about:

A villager leader gave me a call to consult about what they should do, as his fellow villagers were intensely demoralized. Despite that, the protest village began to submerge day by day, there were no news stories at all [about their grievances]. Then, I asked him if there was any activity they could create based on their own traditional beliefs. He said villagers believed that every river had a *phra mae khongkha* who guards the river. At that time, I happened to see a photograph of a ritual called *sattayakbroa* in a website.⁴⁸ So, we borrowed the form of this ritual from the *sattayakbroa*, however, its content was essentially based on the villagers' own tradition.⁴⁹

Chainarong explained that the objectives of this ritual were twofold. First, it aimed to boost the morale of villagers and strengthen their solidarity, during a particularly hard time in their struggle.⁵⁰ The ritual became a political and cultural resource that villagers deployed in order to construct their collective identity and give meaning to their struggle. Second, the ritual generated publicity about the grievances of the Rasi Salai villagers. Dramatic rituals such as this one provided good material for news photographs and news reports.

The three events described above demonstrate that NGOs, student activists, and villagers were all active agents in trying to attract media attention to the AOP's political campaign. Their activities catered to the journalists' appetite for dramatic and extraordinary spectacles. One might argue that protestors have no choice but to perform actions that are deemed newsworthy so as to gain media publicity. But I will argue below that activists need to be vigilant in their media campaigns because the operational logic of the media plays a significant role in



← An old villager from the Pak Mun dam area bleeds from the blow he received from a police baton when police cracked down on protestors at the Government House. (Courtesy: *Khaosod*)



→ A mother and daughter were among the protestors arrested for trespassing on Government House grounds. (Credit: *Khaosod*)

shaping the political actions of organizations like the AOP and this can have consequences that may not coincide with the movement's intentions.

Making Headlines: The Government House Demonstration

The recommendation that the Neutral Committee submitted to the Interior Minister on 6 July 2000 to resolve the AOP's sixteen problems suggested that the government instruct EGAT and the Department of Energy and Development Promotion to open the sluice gates of the Pak Mun and Rasi Salai dams. The government, however, was unresponsive to the recommendation of the committee it appointed. Therefore, thousands of villagers decided to leave their protest sites on the dam's crests, travel by train to Bangkok, and set up an encampment beside the Government House. This action dramatically enhanced their chances of media exposure. The AOP protestors announced that if the government continued to dismiss their appeals, they would storm the Government House to confront the prime minister. Some three hundred police, including anti-riot squads, were stationed at the entrances of the Government House and double crowd-control barricades were installed to deter the protestors.

On the night of 16 July, demonstrators took advantage of a moment when police guards had relaxed their vigilance and climbed over the fence into the Government House compound. Police armed with tear gas and batons tried to stop them but to no avail. Some two hundred protestors managed to enter the Government House and they pledged to remain there until their demands were met. The next day approximately two thousand police officers from different forces were on the scene. At 2:30 in the afternoon, the police, equipped with batons and tear gas forcefully rounded up protestors in the compound. Protestors outside attempted to lend a hand to their counterparts but they were pushed back to a lane beside the House, where the protestors had originally gathered. At least twenty-one protestors were seriously injured during the clash between

police and protestors.⁵¹ A total of 224 villagers — 139 men, 84 women, and one child — were arrested, detained, and charged with trespassing.

A few days after the incident, I asked Wanida Tantiwithayaphithak, one of the protest leaders, what scenario she and her counterparts had had in mind when they decided to enter the government compound. She explained:

We did not know exactly what would happen [after we entered] but we expected that at least some people [would] understand us. We were pressed to trespass into the Government House. If we sat idly, the government definitely wouldn't solve our problems. Storming the Government House was the only way to exert pressure on the government. So, we needed to take the risk.⁵²

A protesting villager explained on a television talk show that the villagers made this decision out of a simple wish to hold a talk with the prime minister.⁵³ Her reasoning may sound naïve because it was improbable that the prime minister would come out and meet with “trespassers,” but, in fact, their action did compel the government to give the villagers a hearing. This happened, however, only after the event had gained enormous media coverage.

Ironically, being beaten and getting arrested became a means to help villagers gain wider media visibility. Before the protest, Wanida reflected on the advantages of this strategy: “If the police arrest villagers, we will have to obey the order. Yet, in so doing, [the police] could face severe public denunciation and the villagers’ voice may gain more hearing. Politically speaking, we will have more bargaining power.”⁵⁴ In other words, media attention made it possible for the AOP to bring its agenda back into the center of public discussion and further its political agenda after the government’s dismissive response had stalemated the negotiations.

News reports and photographs of heavy-handed suppression covered the front pages of all national newspapers surveyed on 17 and 18 July (see Table 3, p. 558).⁵⁵

This incident resulted in extensive media coverage for the AOP. While the government and police voiced their side of the story and defended their actions, public criticism of the state’s use of violence was widespread. Civic groups expressed sympathy for the protesting villagers, reprimanding the government for the violent crackdown, and some two hundred Thai scholars signed an open letter condemning the government for its “serious violation of human rights.” The scholars stated: “Such an action is no [different] from the authoritarian regime in Thailand’s past.” Seventy-four international NGOs opined that the government overreacted in this situation by using force against unarmed villagers who had the right to stage peaceful protests to voice their grievances. Despite public debates about whether or not the protestors were justified in trespassing into the government compound, the media actually devoted more attention to the state’s heavy-handed response to the action. This widespread condemnation turned the tables on the government as the press began to take a more sympathetic stance toward the AOP.

The increasing newsworthiness of the AOP’s actions gave momentum to the protesting villagers in at least two ways. First, the public outcry that the media

Table 3. Press Coverage of the Government House Protest ⁵⁶

Newspapers	July 17 Headline	July 18 Headline
<i>The Nation</i> *	Pak Mun dam Activists Battle Police	Violent Clashes Spark Rallying Cry
<i>Bangkok Post</i> *	Protesting Villagers Caught Going Over the Wall Again	Villagers Charged with Trespassing
<i>Khaosod</i>	Pak Mun villagers couldn't tolerate, storming the House. Police crack them down with tear gas	No light is brighter than wisdom. Tyrannical Chaun, cracking down poors on Buddhist day
<i>Thairath</i>	Taking auspicious time of lunar eclipse, Pak Mun scales govt house	Demonstrators dispersed: 223 arrested and detained in two places
<i>Matichon</i>	Baton and tear gas used. Violent suppression preventing the poor from storming House	Govt insisted protestors bring it upon themselves. Chuan made second crackdown
<i>Daily News</i>	---	Protestors face harsh approach — crackdown
<i>Krungthep Thurakit</i>	Protestors invading House beaten unconscious by police	State takes harsh approach: arrest 202 protestors
<i>Phuchatkan Raiwan</i>	Pak Mun violently clash with police	Black July. Chuan joins rank of tyrannical PM. Call for senators to lend support to the poor
<i>Thai Post</i>	Perfect tyranny beating poor. 20 injured.	barbaric dictators condemned of arresting 202 dissidents
<i>Naeo Na</i>	Protesters invading House arrested. Pak Mun brave, scaling the wall again.	Special security police claims New Aspiration Party funded protestors storming the House. Police crack down protestors.
<i>Ban Muang</i>	---	The poor's blood pours on the government house of the rich. Even more brutal than (the act of) tyrants.
<i>Siam Rath Raiwan</i>	Protestors invading house caused violent clash. Dozens injured.	2,000 police made a raid. Protestors beaten, imprisoned and arrested on two charges.

* English-language newspapers

reported on forced the government to pay attention to the AOP's petitions. Soon after the Government House clash, for instance, the interior minister held an urgent meeting to review the Neutral Committee's recommendations.

Second, whenever the limelight shifts to the actions of the protesting villagers the AOP gains leverage to negotiate with mass media in order to win wider and more positive coverage. Take, for example, the case of the popular newspaper *Thairath*. *Thairath* reporter Praphat Khunsongkhram revealed in an interview that he had a hard time covering the Government House demonstration because protesting villagers were openly hostile and refused to provide him

with any information or comments. The villagers thought that *Thairath's* coverage of the Pak Mun dam demonstration had been negative and hostile and they were therefore unwilling to cooperate with the newspaper's reporters.

Since the clash between the government and the AOP protestors at the Government House was then at the very center of public attention, reporters could not afford to miss out on this event. Praphat used every means at his disposal to gain the confidence of the protestors. He tried to convince villager leaders that it was his colleague who had covered the protest at the Pak Mun dam and not him, and he pledged to do his best to give the AOP fair coverage. He told me that he gradually won the protestors' trust and gained greater access to the AOP's key leaders.⁵⁷

In an attempt to keep up the momentum of the sit-in after the clash and to exert more pressure on the government, dozens of AOP members decided to organize a hunger strike on 27 July. In response to government charges that they were hiring people to go on the hunger strike, as many as 545 protestors volunteered to join the fasting on 5 August in order to refute the government's allega-

Table 4. 25 July 2000 Cabinet Resolution

	Reference Cases	Cabinet Resolution
Completed Dam Projects	1. Pak Mun dam 2. Rasi Salai dam 3. Sirinthorn dam 4. Lam Khan Chu dam 5. Huai La Ha dam	Opening the dams' gates for four months from May to August. Opening the dams' gates for the time being and verify land rights. Future decision will base on the study of a research team. Rejecting the demand for compensation. Agreeing to look into the cracks on the dam's crest but refusing to carry out the post-project social and environmental impact assessment. Refusing the demand for compensation.
Proposed Dam Projects	6. Pong Khun Phet dam 7. Lam Dom Yai dam 8. Hua Na dam	Agree to halt the project. Agree to halt the construction. Agree to halt the project.
Reserve Forest and National Park*	9. Dong Phu Long Reserve Forest 10. Phu Pha Taem National Park 11. Dong Hin Hong Reserve Forest 12. Kaeng Ta Na National Park 13. Pa Lang Phu Reserve Forest	Refusing to revoke the cabinet resolution dated June 1998. Essentially, it refuses to recognize the idea of "community forest," which proposes that men and forest could coexist peacefully.
Public Land	14. Ban Lung Tung 15. Ban Wang Mai	Agree to allow villagers to remain in the areas but refuse to drop the charge of land encroachment against villagers. Order the land rights be verified.
State Development Project	16. Chong Mek checkpoint	Allowing villagers to remain in the areas while land rights are being verified.

* Notes to come

tion. The 12-day-long hunger strike ended on 8 August following the cabinet's issuing of a resolution on the AOP demands.

As seen in Table 4 (p. 559), the cabinet resolution accepted some of the AOP's immediate demands, for example, opening the sluice gates of the Pak Mun and Rasi Salai dams.⁵⁸ However, it refused to give in on many of the key appeals. The government opened the dam gates, but only for a brief period; it did not offer any long-term solution for the problems. The AOP was not satisfied with the government's response, perceiving it to be a tactic intended to mollify public outrage.

The AOP pushed forward its petitions by proposing that a public forum be organized in order to discuss its demands. Public pressure prompted the government to agree to this proposition. The forum, which was organized by academics of the Thammasat University on 17 August 2000, was broadcast live on the state-owned Channel 11 and the radio station of the Department of Public Relations. While the state used this televised forum to sway public opinion and argue the political legitimacy of its actions with regard to the AOP appeals, the forum also benefited the AOP by providing the poor with a rare opportunity to air their long-ignored grievances to a large audience, particularly to the powers-that-be. Nevertheless, the forum failed to convince the government to give in to demands that were still outstanding.

When an issue becomes newsworthy, it takes on a life of its own. After five months, the Government House demonstration was approaching the end of its newsworthiness cycle. The AOP had reached a dead end with its appeals and prospects for further negotiation appeared to be slim. Media attention gradually declined and so did the movement's momentum. Hundreds of villagers went home; most of those who remained at the Government House protest site were elderly.

The Chuan government's term expired in early November. In February 2001, a newly elected government took office under the leadership of the Thai Rak Thai Party's leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, a communications-tycoon-turned-politician. Thaksin's very first activity as prime minister was to lunch with the AOP villagers at the protest site. This lunch with the poor aimed to *display* his government's enthusiasm for addressing the grievances of the poor.



Photographer Chainarong Settachua distributed photographs of submerged villages to journalists who were unable to gain access to areas adversely affected by the dams.

The newly elected Thaksin government appeared to be more forthcoming with the AOP as it wanted to create an image of the “new politics” encapsulated in his party’s slogan: “Think New, Act New.” Its positive posture toward the AOP was part of a public relations campaign designed to augment the government’s emphasis on boosting rural economy. Media and social critics dubbed the campaign a “populist” policy. In what appeared to be a gesture of goodwill for the poor, the Thaksin government agreed to procedures to address the AOP’s demands and the AOP ended its nine-month-long protest in early February 2001.

The AOP continued its campaign for the permanent opening of the Pak Mun dam’s gates under the Thaksin government. After several rounds of protests, the Thaksin government finally decided on 14 January 2003 that the Pak Mun dam would be opened four months every year, from July to October.

The Price of Media Visibility

Even though the AOP succeeded to a large extent in attracting publicity and capturing media space to promote its cause, the organization needs to consider the price it paid for this increased news coverage. The event-driven logic of media operations puts the AOP in a double bind: It must create spectacular and unusual events to garner news attention, but in so doing, it inadvertently entices reporters into focusing on the unusual or even bizarre aspects of the events and the protestors. In many instances, this approach could overshadow the essence of the AOP’s petitions and underlying issues.⁵⁹

The Government House incident discussed above is an example of how the desire for media attention influences the way AOP’s leaders carry out their political struggle. Knowing that the journalists’ sense of newsworthiness ranks violence and conflict at or near the summit of media attention, AOP organizers deliberately made the situation more confrontational and ferocious in order to get attention. Yet, insistently disrupting the social order and sparking confrontations may reinforce hegemonic media portrayals of protestors as deviants and troublemakers. By catering to the logic of media operations, the AOP sows the seeds of its own marginalization by contributing to the perpetuation of stereotypes about their protests.⁶⁰

AOP workers are aware of the influence of the media in shaping their movement, as AOP spokesperson Nitirat Sabsomboon said in an interview:

The media has with them the power to judge the right and wrong as well as the rise and fall [of the movement]. When they decide to publish and broadcast certain kinds of activities and reject others, such action implies there is a line for the AOP to follow [in order to get coverage]... However, the AOP does not allow ourselves to be completely under the influence of the media. But we admit that the media has great influence [on shaping AOP activities].⁶¹

Playing the game largely dominated by the operational logic of journalism, the AOP has to gamble that its dramatic actions will not cause the public to lose sight of its real concerns. However much the AOP tries to make the most of media attention to articulate the rationale behind its actions, in the end the pub-

lic's ability to go beneath the surface of bizarre events lies, to a large extent, in the hands of journalists who manage the space of public expression.

By reporting on the dam controversy, the newspapers provided their readers with a selected "reality" of the events as perceived by journalists and through chosen quotations from people whose viewpoints the journalists considered to be credible and legitimate. As most readers did not experience the AOP demonstration at first hand, this mass-mediated reality figured prominently in forming the very basis on which they made sense of the movement's actions and the dam controversy overall.

However, I argue elsewhere that journalists do not have complete freedom to write a script for the AOP.⁶² Their operation is also conditioned by factors such as the news-gathering system, the conventional norms of journalism, the profit-oriented structure of the press industry, and the political and economic climate of a given period. The interface of these factors at a particular juncture generated certain patterns of media discourses on the AOP's political actions.

Concluding Remarks

I have aimed to demonstrate in the foregoing discussion that the discursive struggle over media visibility and representation is central to the making and unmaking of the Assembly of the Poor. Media publicity gives the movement an opportunity to call public attention to counter-perspectives that are usually marginalized and it allows the AOP to create a nationwide public conversation about grievances of poor villagers that are related to state development projects, to rally public support for its causes and actions, and to heighten chances for a dialogue with the government and possibilities for change.

Even though the extent of media publicity accorded to the AOP political campaigns and the framing of the issue by mass media have a considerable bearing on the state's response, this does not immediately translate into a change in policy-making. When the AOP succeeds in thrusting its issues onto the national political agenda through the media and thereby marshaling public support for its campaigns, the possibility of effecting policy changes is heightened markedly.

Increased media exposure does not mean, however, that political elites will necessarily accede to the rural poor's demands. As seen in the AOP campaign, the Chuan government was compelled to address the AOP petitions in the wake of a widespread public outcry against the police crackdown on rallying villagers, but it remained recalcitrant nevertheless and the resolution it made was merely a short-term palliative response with no implications at all at the policy level.

Nevertheless, the AOP's lack of success in effecting immediate policy changes is by no means a total failure as its struggle could influence policy-making in the future. In addition to the immediate results, the AOP movement also redefined public discourse in the media terrain and transformed the cultural and political contexts in which policies on development projects are made. Once new territory has been staked out or old terrain altered, politicians, journalists, and the public are likely to incorporate those landmarks into their thinking about policy issues.⁶³

It should also be noted, however, that there is a price to pay for media visibility. Repeated recourse to confrontational tactics as examined earlier, willy-nilly, reinforces the hegemonic stereotyping of the AOP protestors as troublemakers. Headline-hitting events, in some instances, overshadow the underlying message that the movement wants to convey to the public. Despite this danger, no movement can avoid engaging the mass media if it wants to effect political change. The cultural struggle on the media front is thus part and parcel of the political struggle of contemporary social movements in Thailand.

Notes

1. See Prapat Pintoptaeng, *Kan mueang bon thong tanon: 99 wan samatcha kbong chon lae prawattisat kan doen khabuan chumnum nai sangkhom thai* [Politics on the street: 99 days of the Assembly of the Poor and the history of demonstrations in Thai society] (Bangkok: Research Center and Book Publishing, Krerk University, 1998); Bruce D. Missingham, *The Assembly of the Poor in Thailand: From Local Struggles to National Social Movement*. (PhD diss., Australian National University, 1999); Chris Baker, "Thailand's Assembly of the Poor: Background, Drama, Reaction," *South East Asia Research* 8, no. 1 (2000): 5-29.
2. Charles F. Keyes, "Millennialism, Theravada Buddhism, and Thai Society," *Journal of Asian Studies* 36, no. 2 (1977): 283-302; Kanoksak Kaewthep, *Rai ngan kan wichai rueang prawat kan khuen wai khong chaona thai chak adit thueang patchuban* [Research on the history of Thai peasant movement from past to present: A political economy analysis], unpublished paper (1983); Chatthip Nartsupha, "The Ideology of Holy Men Revolts in North East Thailand," *Senri Ethnological Studies*, no. 13 (1984): 111-34.
3. It remains a controversial debate especially among Thai scholars who were themselves involved with political movements while they were student activists during the years 1973 to 1976 whether and to what extent student movements were, in fact, influenced by the CPT. Some students activists were secret members of the CPT.
4. The CPT lost intensity and gradually petered out in the late 1980s. Many students who had joined the movement in the aftermath of the 6 October 1976 massacre left the struggle after spending a few years in remote jungles as they became disheartened by the CPT, which they perceived to be dogmatic, hierarchical, and authoritarian.
5. A group of generals staged a coup d'état in February 1991 and seized power from the civilian government of General Chatichai Choonhavan, a government they claimed was corrupt. However, what the military promised to be a transition toward civilian control turned out to be an attempt to prolong their stay in power. A mass protest in May 1992 forced the then-prime minister General Suchinda Kraprayoon to step down. The May uprising put the military back in its barracks and seemingly put an end to military governance.
6. Assembly of the Poor, *Samut Phokdam: Samatcha Kbong Chon* [Black paper: The Assembly of the Poor] (Bangkok: Kangan Publishing, 1998), 21.
7. Banharn, leader of the Chaithai Party, was a contractor-turned-politician who was dubbed a "walking ATM." This satirical name captures the political phenomenon of the day when money politics was widespread in Thailand.
8. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand's Crisis* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), 149.
9. Cabinet resolutions dated 17 and 29 April 1997.

10. The Bank of Thailand's decision to unpeg the Thai baht from the U.S. dollar on 2 July 1997 caused the value of Thai currency to plunge sharply. The resulting economic turmoil had a deep and widespread impact on Thailand as well as on other Asian economies.
11. The press industry was severely affected by the economic decline, suffering major losses in advertising income. Paper, the raw material for printing, was mostly imported into Thailand; paper produced domestically is priced in line with the world market. The plunging value of the Thai baht, from 25 to over 50 per US\$1.00, boosted production costs enormously. See Phonthawi Yodmongkhon, *Kan bariban thurakit nangsuepbim nai saphawa setthakit toktam* [The management of newspaper business in the time of economic downturn], (M.A. thesis, Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communications, Thammasat University, 1998), 88-127.
12. I gained this insight from my personal communication in December 1999 with Prasitiphon Kan-onsri, a staff member of the Friends of the People, an NGO functioning as the AOP's secretariat.
13. Ibid.
14. William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 94.
15. Details on the petitions in Tables 1 and 2 are based upon a report produced by the Neutral Committee, which the government appointed to find a solution to the AOP's petition dated 6 July 2000.
16. The World Bank's \$23 million grant for this project accounted for 13 percent of the total costs.
17. Cited in the EGAT's website: <http://pr.egat.or.th/english/pm.html>.
18. Approximately U.S.\$2,142, at an exchange rate of 45 baht to the dollar.
19. For more information on the Khong-Chi-Mun Project in the Thai language, see <http://www.dedp.go.th/project/Projpop.asp?lngProjectID=1>.
20. See <http://www.irn.org/programs/mekong/rasi.basic.shtml>.
21. Sanan Chusakun, cited in Chainarong Setthachua and Shyama Shepard, "Village of the Dammed," *Bangkok Post*, 11 January 2000. See also, Chainarong Setthachua, *Kbuean Rasi Salai: Kwam ching kwam khatyaeng lae thang aok* [Rasi Salai dam: Truth, conflict and solution], <http://www.searin.org/Mek/RSD/RSDa/RSDa3.htm>.
22. According to the Environmental Act of 1992, an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) study is required for any dam project that will have a reservoir area of more than fifteen square kilometers.
23. The AOP ended its protest on 12 February 2001, but its political momentum had actually begun to decline in August 2000. I focus on the period when the AOP campaign was at its height.
24. Interview with Wanida Tantiwithayaphithak, 21 July 2000.
25. Interview with Wanida Tantiwithayaphithak, in Thiraphon Anmai, *Botbat nangsuepbim kap kan phuengpha khaosan khong chaoban thi dairap phonkrathop chak kbrongkan sang kbuean pakmun* [The roles of newspapers and the dependence on media's reporting of villagers affected by the Pak Mun dam], (M.A. thesis, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 2000), 76.
26. See Akin Rabidhadana, *The Organisation of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period, 1782-1873* (Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 1996).
27. Interview with Nopphadon Phunseom, 13 July 2000.
28. Due to their dissimilar historical development, Thailand's national newspapers are vastly different from local newspapers and electronic media in their perspectives on the AOP.
29. Anmai, *The Roles of Newspapers*, 84.

30. The surveyed newspapers include ten Thai-language newspapers, namely, *Thai Rath*, *Khao Sod*, *Daily News*, *Maticchon*, *Krungthep Thurakit*, *Phuchatkan*, *Thai Post*, *Naeo Na*, *Ban Muang*, *Siam Rath Raiwan*; and two English-language newspapers, namely, *The Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*.
31. *Khaosod*, 16 July 2000.
32. *Bangkok Post*, 16 July 2000.
33. *Phuchatkan*, 16 July 2000.
34. *Krungthep Thurakit*, 16 July 2000.
35. The Ubon Ratchathani provincial governor, Siwa Saengmani, for example, tried to delegitimize the AOP protest at the Pak Mun dam by saying that the AOP demonstration violated the law. He said: "We will carry out our lawful duty but I will not say how... What has been happening here is unlawful... State officials cannot be expected to sit idly by. Violence will not come from officials but from the protesters' behavior." *Bangkok Post*, 17 May 2000.
36. In response to the villagers' outcry over the Pak Mun dam's adverse impacts on local fisheries, the EGAT built a fish ladder and attached it to the dam in order to enable fish to go upstream across the dam to spawn. The efficacy of the fish ladder has been widely debated.
37. Active sympathizers of the AOP include a network of thirty-two organizations of academics, Northern villagers, and NGO workers; a network of sixteen people's organizations from Southern Thailand; a group of forty-five Thai academics; a group of eleven overseas-based Thai-studies scholars; the Student Federation of Thailand; and a network of international environmental NGOs.
38. The World Commission on Dams (WCD) is an independent commission created by the World Bank and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) to review the performance of large dams, assess alternatives for water resources and energy development, and develop internationally accepted standards, guidelines, and criteria for decision-making in the planning, design, construction, monitoring, and decommissioning of dams. WCD produced a series of case studies — one of them on Pak Mun — to look at lessons to be learned from completed large-dam projects. The case studies were done by local consultants in cooperation with the WCD. For the WCD's full report on the Pak Mun dam, see S. Amornsakchai et al., *Pak Mun Dam, Mekong River Basin, Thailand* at www.dams.org (Cape Town, 2000). Although the WCD states that the views in the country study report prepared for the Commission are not intended to represent the views of the Commission, the report on Pak Mun dam was widely cited by Thai NGOs to add weight to their arguments during the AOP's campaign.
39. The senators who played a crucial role in this controversy were Niran Phithakwatchara, Kraisaak Chunnawan, Wanlop Tangkhananurak, Damrong Phuttan, Tueanchai Dithet, and Jermsak Pinthong.
40. Interview with Sinit Si-a-phon, 27 July 2001.
41. See details of the sixteen petitions in the first section of this article.
42. Interview with Sanitsuda Ekachai, 14 July 2000.
43. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1980), 234.
44. Interview with Nitirat Sapsombun 17 July 2000.
45. The term "Song for life" used to refer to a particular type of music in Thailand, whose development is related to the student movements in the 1970s. Music was used as a means to describe the hardships of the underclass and their struggle for a better future.
46. Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, 43.
47. Interview with Chainarong Setthachuea, 2 July 2001.

48. The *sattbayakbroa* ritual has been performed by villagers in India in their opposition against dam projects on the Narmada River. In the photograph seen by Chainarong, a group of villagers were conducting the *sattbayakbroa* ritual: with palms against each other between their breasts, they were pictured with half their bodies submerged
49. Interview with Chainarong Setthachuea, 2 July 2001.
50. Ibid.
51. *Bangkok Post*, 18 July 2000.
52. Interview with Wanida Tantiwithayaphithak, 21 July 2000.
53. The Nation Channel's *Khom-Chat-Luek* program, hosted by Sorayut Suthatsanachinda.
54. Interview with Wanida Tantiwithayaphithak, 21 July 2000.
55. See endnote 30 for titles of newspapers surveyed.
56. With the exception of those from *The Nation* and *The Bangkok Post*, the translation of all other headlines is mine.
57. Interview with Praphat Khunsongkram, 26 July 2001.
58. However, the AOP argued that the opening of the gates of the Pak Mun dam was because the authority needed to lower water levels in the upstream river because of the influx of water from Mekong River. It was not a direct result of the cabinet resolution.
59. Regina G. Lawrence, *The Politics of Force: Media and the Construction of Police Brutality* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2000), 79.
60. Ibid.
61. Interview with Nitirat Sapsombun, 17 July 2000.
62. Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, *Politics of Representation: Assembly of the Poor and the Roles of Media in the Making of a Social Movement in Thailand* (M.A. thesis, the National University of Singapore, 2002).
63. Lawrence, *The Politics of Force*, 185.

□