

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

**Singapore** | 18 March 2019

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## **Neither Here nor There: Understanding the Stakes in Thailand's 2019 Elections for Marginalised Communities around Chiang Mai**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The Thai state poses environmental and land-based threats to marginalised communities composed of members of ethnic minorities located around the Northern Thai urban centre of Chiang Mai.
- Collaboration between these communities and civil society to confront these threats reveals the complex and dynamic nature of the ways in which developmentalism and political transitions play out on the ground in Thailand.
- The environment, and especially communities' presence on and stewardship of land, has become the primary arena of contestation between marginalised communities and the Thai state. It is an arena marked by unequal power relations.
- Uncertainty following the military coup in May 2014 has made it more difficult for these communities to retain and exercise their rights and to escape their precarious positions.
- The experiences of these marginalised communities sharpen our understanding of what is at stake in Thailand's 24 March 2019 general elections.

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## **INTERSTITIAL COMMUNITIES**

Coverage of recent events in Thailand has focused on its urban centres and rural frontiers, from Bangkok to the Golden Triangle. Communities in the interstitial spaces between the country's metropolises and its edges have fallen off the radar screen. Yet trying to make sense of the messy situations that these communities face reveals how the stories that occupy the headlines, such as Southeast Asia's developmentalist march onwards and the kingdom's troubling political transitions, play out on the ground. It sheds light on how these processes affect people, places, and practices in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Drawing on two vignettes from the area around Chiang Mai in the time following the coup of 22 May 2014, this *Perspective* directs attention to communities on the margins, in the peri-urban zone between core and periphery.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the experiences of these communities in the post-coup era sharpens our sense of the stakes that the coming Thai general elections hold, and helps us appreciate the restoration of democracy – with its checks and balance – in a way that a mere focusing on urban centres and rural frontiers does not.

In that zone, the urban – not only tangible and visible manifestations of urbanisation<sup>2</sup> but also socio-cultural aspects of urbanism<sup>3</sup> – has altered the cultural landscape of putatively rural areas. The two clusters of villages – the first near Mae Chaem and largely populated by Karen people, and the second near Chiang Dao and comprising mostly of Dara-ang people<sup>4</sup> – share important characteristics. The communities are largely made up of members of ethnic minorities that have been marginalised by the Thai state and the majority of the population. They face environmental or land-based threats due to actions and interventions by the Thai government, and they have been working with members of civil society, including people from universities, to address these threats. Their cases suggest that the realities affecting them are refractions, rather than reflections, of the changing circumstances that surround these communities, distorted to the extent that those realities might easily elude one's ability to grasp them.

## **CONTESTED LANDSCAPES**

The environment, especially what these marginalised peri-urban communities have come through their presence and stewardship to regard and value as *their* land, has become a primary arena of contestation, where unequal power relations come to the fore. The inhabitants of the first cluster of villages found out in October 2013 through word of mouth

that they had been caught up in the government's plans to build the Mae Chaem Dam, whose construction would sweep away their villages and farms (and therefore their homes and livelihoods). The dam was part of the broader water management scheme laid out in response to the floods that devastated the country in the early part of the present decade.

Although the dam had been proposed years before, the state had developed no plans for compensating or even relocating the villagers. Moreover, the latter learned about plans for the dam from their youths studying in urban centres and from concerned NGOs, rather than from official sources, investors, or contractors. This lack of consultation and sleight of hand underscored how the government had actively ignored villagers' needs and aspirations. It galvanised and led them to work with academics and activists from institutions such as Chiang Mai University and the National University of Singapore and from NGOs such as the Orphy Institute.

In the second cluster of villages, over a series of "visits" conducted in May 2016, officers – often armed – from local and national government departments and the military, accused villagers of encroaching onto state-owned land and threatened to seize the villagers' land even though they had been settled on the edge of Si Lanna National Park for decades. In previous years, some of the villagers had been arrested and temporarily imprisoned, and some parcels of land seized. However, it remains unclear what real use or value such moves have to the state, besides serving as tactics of intimidation to secure or strengthen the position of power and the authority of its officers.

The officers have adopted a manipulative, carrot-and-stick approach to compel the villagers to accede to their demands. This has included having villagers sign legally binding documents that most cannot understand and vote in the 7 August 2016 constitutional referendum that tightened military rule. That approach has oscillated between warning villagers of the consequences of disobedience and appealing to their needs and aspirations, offering to return parcels of land or to turn a blind eye to their supposed encroachment. The precarity that marks their situation has led the villagers to work with academics and activists from Chiang Mai University, the National University of Singapore, and NGOs such as the Makhampom Theatre Group since a decade ago.

## **SUBTLE SHIFTS**

The greater uncertainty of the post-coup era has added layers of complexity to working with these communities. Signs that the soldiers had seized power were immediately apparent in Chiang Mai city, with a tangible military presence on the streets. Deeper in the countryside, the difference was less palpable, the shifts more subtle, speaking to the marginalised position of these remote communities in both spatial and social terms. Following the coup, they still lacked power, but relative to a different set of players. However, the military regime made it even more difficult for them to retain and exercise their rights and to escape their position of precarity. The junta made promises, such as a more consultative approach than that of the previous government, but it did not face the checks and balances necessary to ensure that its actions matched its words.

In the first cluster of villages, the junta initially cancelled the water management scheme that included the Mae Chaem Dam, but then reinstated it as part of a new economic roadmap just weeks later. It resumed discussions with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean corporations and consortia on this and other projects in an attempt to reclaim the investor confidence that had been lost with the coup. In the second cluster, the military regime paved the way for the officers to employ more heavy-handed methods with the villagers without fear of repercussions. Academics and activists sought to guide these villagers in making their case through formal channels, but the coup broke the system in which these channels could work and rendered such an approach increasingly frustrating.

## **LESSONS LEARNT**

The past half-decade highlights one of the pitfalls of working with marginalised communities in the ways that more privileged groups know best, from expert arguments to legal battles. As long as disempowered communities try to fight on the terms of those who are in power, they will remain subordinated to the powerful, as power relations are left unequal. In the first cluster of villages, the large-scale dam was already seen as unwise and not a solution to flooding by some experts, even according to the technical standards of the government itself. It was not just the project's unreliable environmental impact assessments and potentially less-than-responsible design-and-build plan (which eliminated the review and bidding processes) that caused concern, but also the location of the site for construction in an active fault zone with an elevated possibility of catastrophic dam failure.

The villagers affected had raised these issues in a people's statement issued in October 2013, which also noted their concerns about the increased likelihood of potentially devastating landslides and sediment load accumulation. Both highland and lowland communities along the Mae Chaem River stood to lose if the dam was built. Settlements upstream of the dam would be flooded by the reservoir formed behind it, and those downstream would be subject to greater water shortages during the dry season. Furthermore, the communities in the watershed already have developed and implemented their own alternative solutions for effective water resource management at lower environmental cost, such as *fai* — simple weirs that regulate the flow of streams using an enclosure of stakes, and allowing aquatic animals and sediments to pass through with the natural cycle of ebb and flow.

It would be mutually beneficial if the state involved such communities in the management of the watersheds in which they lived and which they knew best. After all, the state's attempts at similar small-scale solutions in the same district have been grossly mismanaged and fallen into disrepair. The valuable voices of these communities were drowned out even further during military rule, when no one was required to listen to them. Pre-coup democracy gave at least some apparent weight to the opinions of these communities.

In the second cluster of villages, academics and activists sought to help villagers legitimise their rights to remain in place on legal terms, such as by granting to an ad-hoc committee power of attorney to represent them in negotiations with the government. However, it is doubtful whether this is of use if their terrain shifts, and if expert opinion and the law are disregarded.

### **EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES**

Five years of military rule have left Thailand more divided than before, now judged by some to be the most unequal country in the world,<sup>5</sup> in spite of the junta's promises to reconcile the country,<sup>6</sup> and its denial of that ranking.<sup>7</sup> As the military continues to make moves to ensure that it stays in power even with the approaching general elections,<sup>8</sup> it is becoming increasingly clear that already marginalised communities have to be truly empowered by themselves and others if they are to stand a chance in preserving their lives and livelihoods. One key leitmotif from my conversations with villagers, academics, and activists was the

importance of working together as a community and networking with other communities, even across regions. They have to actively unite to make their voices heard and find their own ways of turning the tables.

To this end, in the first cluster of villages, representatives from affected villages formed an inter-village anti-dam committee in early 2014 and connected with similar networks across Thailand. This allowed them to share their stories with a larger audience and in gathering support for their cause. Given the junta's broader programme of attempted depoliticisation,<sup>9</sup> it is particularly crucial for marginalised communities to repoliticise issues such as land or the environment and to craft narratives from their own perspectives. However, they should also be aware of the possibility that internal politics arising from identity conflict could erode their unity and therefore their collective power.

In the second cluster, officers of the state have played certain individuals and groups against others, widening divisions among villagers along the lines of ethnicity, status, and wealth. They have also tried to discredit the academics and activists trying to help the residents of this cluster of villages by labelling the former as outsiders. Understanding how these communities face refracted realities in navigating their complex situations and how they are linked to a diverse range of actors in different ways point to the value of studying peri-urban settings in our efforts to understand social dynamics and political currents in Thailand.

Although more privileged outsiders can only ever be mediators for marginalised communities, community-building, networking, and narrative-crafting are areas in which these outsiders can contribute useful resources. The academics and activists working with the two clusters of villages near Chiang Mai have helped to galvanise members of the communities, provide spaces and platforms for different groups to network, and create and circulate materials based on their own accounts. These communities may always find a way to survive,<sup>10</sup> but greater attention should be paid to them, for they are comprised not just of people deserving of the proper lives and livelihoods that they seek, but also of people who are worthy members of Thai society, with strong cultures and an ability to contribute to the economy and to care for the environment. The restoration of democracy with the coming elections in Thailand may give them the opportunity to make such contributions.

<sup>1</sup> This piece draws on and builds upon fieldwork done from 2014 to 2016, and follow-up research from 2017 to 2019. For more information on the case studies, see Mark Heng, “The Urban as Methodology: Critical Urban Pedagogy around Chiang Mai” (paper presented at the 13<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies, Chiang Mai, 15–18 July 2017), and “Who Gives A (Mae Chaem) Dam? Critical Reflections on Participatory Development in Southeast Asia” (*WordPress.com*, 21 June 2014 <<https://whogivesadam.wordpress.com/>> [accessed March 2019]).

<sup>2</sup> On the impact of urbanisation on communities on the fringe of another Southeast Asian city, see Erik Harms, *Saigon’s Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> On the effects of urbanism on rural dwellers in another Southeast Asian context, see Eric C. Thompson, *Unsettling Absences: Urbanism in Rural Malaysia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the first cluster, see Huiying Ng, “For democracy in Thailand, pay attention to Mae Chaem” (*New Mandala*, 17 July 2014 <<https://www.newmandala.org/to-establish-democracy-in-thailand-pay-attention-to-mae-chaem/>> [accessed March 2019]). For more information on the second cluster of villages, see Arratee Ayuttacorn, “Social networks and the resilient livelihood strategies of Dara-ang women in Chiang Mai, Thailand” (*Geoforum* 101 [May 2019]:28–37).

<sup>5</sup> Macan-Markar, Marwaan, “The 99% election: Thais are worse off after five years of military rule”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 6 March 2019 (<<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Cover-Story/The-99-election-Thais-are-worse-off-after-five-years-of-military-rule>>, accessed March 2019).

<sup>6</sup> “The Guardian view on Thailand’s election: staving off the real reckoning”. *The Guardian*, 17 February 2019 (<<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/17/the-guardian-view-on-thailands-election-staving-off-the-real-reckoning>>, accessed March 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Chatrudee Theparat, “NESDB denies nation worst for inequality”, *Bangkok Post*, 8 December 2018 (<<https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/1589886/nesdb-denies-nation-worst-for-inequality>>, accessed March 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Laura Villadiego, “In Thai election, any government you like – as long as it’s the junta”. *South China Morning Post*, 9 February 2019 (<<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2158472/thai-election-any-government-you-long-its-junta>>, accessed March 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Michael J. Montesano, “Introduction: Thai Realities and Possibilities after the 22 May Coup”, in *After the Coup: The National Council for Peace and Order Era and the Future of Thailand*, edited by Michael J Montesano, Terence Chong, and Mark Heng. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019: 1–24.

<sup>10</sup> Chong, Terence, “Conclusion: Thailand in Transition”, in *After the Coup: The National Council for Peace and Order Era and the Future of Thailand*, edited by Michael J Montesano, Terence Chong, and Mark Heng. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019: 381–388.

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