

Anti-ADB Protests in Chiang Mai

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The anti-ADB campaigns which occurred during the Bank's 33rd annual conference in May 2000 was a milestone in the democratization process in Thailand. It marked for the first time that such a protest action was waged against a multilateral agency in the country. It also witnessed the biggest demonstrations ever held in North Thailand, where together with Northeast Thailand, the majority of the country's poor reside. It was also the first time that the Thai social movements held an anti-ADB international parallel conference, attended by as many as 1,000 participants. The relevance of such an occasion, however, is not only in terms of the number of conference participants and demonstrators but more importantly, the events revealed the persistent problems of poverty, inequality and underdevelopment in the rural areas, concerns which have existed in the past and which continue to confront Thai Society.

In Thailand, the ADB is the third biggest provider of loans after Japan and the World Bank. Prior to the ADB Annual Meeting, there were already severe criticisms concerning ADB policies and projects in the country.

- *Samut Prakarn Wastewater Treatment Project* -- Situated in Klong Dan, a fishing village in the province of Samut Prakarn facing the Bangkok Bay, the project seems to epitomize almost all the criticisms which has been heaped on the Bank during the past years. Major issues raised were lack of public participation, large-scale corruption, and threatened sources of marine food and livelihoods.
- *Corruption* -- The issue of corruption and external loans is not a new one and Thai social movements are very conscious of this as corruption is considered one of the major factors which has contributed to the country's economic crisis. When the Thai government borrowed \$500 million from the ADB under the 'Social Sector Program Loan' sans transparency, NGOs have demanded to be part of the committee tasked to manage and monitor the project; their demand, however, was rejected.
- *Imposition of water tax in the agricultural sector* This is a condition of the Bank and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) \$500 million agricultural sector program ban and stemmed from a belief that imposing water charges would encourage farmers to use water more efficiently.
- *ADB's overall framework* -- The ADB's ideology to boost competitiveness of exports in a free market system seems to benefit mainly the advanced, large-scale agricultural enterprises rather than small-scale farmers.
- *Weakening of the workers' bargaining power* -- This is particularly true of the provincial labor force after the ADB supported a minimum wage mechanism 'to be expanded nationwide to limit the minimum wage rise.' The ADB has actually called for the government to freeze the minimum wage at 162 baht until at least 2002.
- Other concerns include: ADB's failure to help Asian economies prevent future collapse; cut back on social welfare, in particular ADB's push for autonomous hospitals and universities leading to massive lay-offs in these institutions and exclusion of the poor from such services; ADB's support for privatization of state enterprises will result in massive lay-offs of state workers; ADB's Yadana gas pipeline project on the Thai-Burmese border has brought about widespread destruction of pristine forests and threatened endangered wildlife species.

The Thai social movements relationship with the ADB is not characterized by engagement (i.e., dialogue); one probable reason is because the ADB's presence in the country is relatively new. Thus, the monitoring of ADB policies ensued mainly after the 1997 economic crisis when the ADB entered to give loans including conditionalities designed to reform the structure of the country's social and economic systems.

At a parallel conference on 3-5 May 2000 -- dubbed as the People's Forum on the ADB 2000 -- Thai NGOs announced that ADB President Tadao Chino has "snubbed" the invitation to dialogue with the participants of the People's Forum, saying that the invitation came too late and because he was "too busy" to accommodate their request. (In the past, the ADB President would always address the NGOs but it would be in the venue of where the ADB conference was taking place.) Because of this, the Thai NGOs called on the People's Forum to boycott any form of dialogue with the ADB; instead, the Forum announced that there will only be one big session to lobby the ADB in relation to the conference's resolutions.

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This strategy is quite different from the past whereby the NGO Working Group on the ADB (now the NGO Forum) arranged dialogues with ADB officials on behalf of all NGOs present during the ADB annual conference. The leading Thai NGO organizers of the People's Forum were the NGO Coordinating Committee (NGO-COD), Towards Ecological Recovery for Regional Alliance (TERRA) and Project for Economic Recovery (PER).

The first of the anti-ADB demonstrations began on May 4 spearheaded by the 100-strong Students Federation of Thailand (SFT) who marched in front of the Westin Riverside Hotel, the venue of the ADB annual meeting. The protesters called on the ADB to stop interfering in Thailand by using the economic crisis to push for controversial privatization policies.

The opening session of the ADB conference on May 6 saw more than 1,000 uniformed police formed in a line as the demonstrators marched to the Assembly Hall on Chiang Mai University. After talks with the police, the demonstrators were allowed to plant their anti-ADB white flag as they read a statement opposing the Agricultural Sector Loan and conditions to the Social Program Loan, as well as the Samut Prakarn Wastewater Treatment project. There was a conscious effort on both sides to refrain from violence. Despite the burning of ADB's flag, the demonstrators ended their protest peacefully by giving flowers to the police and to the media.

The anti-ADB demonstrations on 5-8 May were carried out by the People's Network of 38 Organizations believing that the only way by which the ADB would listen to the demands of the Thai people was through confrontation. The seriousness of its anti-ADB campaign can be seen in the months-long preparation of the grassroots social movements, i.e., human rights activists, environmentalists, farmers' organizations and labor unions, for these events. Three weeks before the start of the ADB Annual Meeting, more than 1,000 farmers and activists led by the Forum of the Poor gathered in the town of Khon Kaen to denounce conditions attached to the ADB loans which they claim would "marginalize the poor".

Thai organizers of the anti-ADB protests believe that their goals and objectives were met in as far as increasing public -- especially Thai middle class and other villagers -- awareness of the issues raised against the ADB. According to a Thai leading historian and academic activist, the bigger picture is being able to link the anti-ADB campaign to the adverse effects of globalization; this public awareness would not have been possible in the 1980s when the NGOs themselves still did not have enough data concerning the projects of multilateral agencies. It is only now that there is accumulation of information.

One factor which contributed to the successful consciousness-raising was the merging of the parallel conference and the anti-ADB demonstrations. Thus, for one week, there was the continuing education of the public concerning issues against the ADB which began with the parallel conference and ended with the demonstrations.

Such an alliance was formed quite serendipitously; the actions of the demonstrators were complemented by the organizers and participants of the anti-ADB parallel conference.

Within this group, there were different blocs -- one bloc was invited to present their problems with ADB projects in Thailand and other countries; another bloc came to observe, including villagers who were very much part of the demonstrations; still another helped lobby the demonstrators' issues during the small meetings of the NGOs and ADB officials during the Bank's conference.

The nature of such alliances with like-minded NGOs/POs without any form of centralized leadership seems to have worked well in carrying out the anti-ADB campaign. There was enough flexibility to take into consideration the varying needs of not only the members of the People's Network of 38 Organizations but also of the NGOs, both local and international, which took part in the parallel conference.

The anti-ADB campaign made the Bank realize that it should do its homework in strengthening its ties with not only NGOs in Thailand but in the whole region as well. The restructuring of the NGO Unit in the Bank to give it more staff and resources is proof of this.

For the long-term strategy, the Thai peoples' movement seem to be optimistic in being able to build on the foundation that was laid to strengthen as well as to expand the network of alliances of NGOs/POs, academics, social critics and others against the ADB. A strength of this alliance is its resolve that the ADB should be abolished. For them, there is great pessimism that the Bank would ever change, especially with the perception that even when the Bank listens, it does not act on these criticisms and worse, it does not listen at all.

The Chiang Mai showdown also reveals that there is still very much to be desired in the relationship of the people's movement and the Thai state. As some have pointed out, the anti-ADB demonstration was also very much as anti-Thai government demonstration. More importantly, one can view this as an increment in the struggle of Thai social movements for a more pro-people development and further democratization.