

## ***Thammarat/Good Governance in Glocalizing Thailand***

Kasian Tejapira

In the summer of 1997, in the aftermath of the most severe financial crisis in Thai history, the IMF-derived term “Good Governance” was hastily reincarnated in the Thai language as the word *thammarat*. Though obviously prompted by the impending diktat of the global financial regime, its Thai inventor, Professor Chaiwat Satha-anand of the Faculty of Political Science at Thammasat University, and its chief public advocate, Thirayuth Boonmi, a lecturer in the Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, explicitly stated that the intention behind the Thai coinage was to create a space for the interpretation of Good Governance in Thai cultural politics which was relatively autonomous from IMF meanings and policy imperatives.

Here I follow the reception of the word *thammarat* among different political groups in the Thai polity, including the authoritarian military establishment, the liberal corporate elite, and communitarian public intellectuals and activists. My intention is to highlight the ways in which debates about the meaning of “Good Governance” did indeed provide a space for different groups to negotiate with one another about the proper nature of the state, the market, and society more generally, at a time when these concepts were being called into question. In fact, different political actors on the Thai scene staged debates through IMF language that went far beyond the wildest dreams of any IMF  
|  
functionary.

Modern political history in Thailand has long been marked by explicit debates about the translation of foreign concepts. Successive generations of bilingual Thai

intellectuals argued about translation as both an apparatus of capture of and also a buffer against Western-style modernity. Given Thailand's distinctive state-nationalized language, scripts, and sounds, Western modernity has been consciously hindered from coming to the Thai public in its pristine, original, or direct linguistic forms. Thai intellectuals of all political persuasions have guarded these linguistic borders and the integrity of the Thai nation-state's "body cultural."<sup>1</sup> Each tried to screen new translated lexical immigrants, turn away suspicious ones, or retranslate them in such a way as to civilize, harness, or domesticate them. Meanwhile, their unofficial counterparts incessantly sought to smuggle in and procreate illegitimate lexicons of their own unauthorized translations. Hence the highly politicized nature of the process of translation-as-transformation through which key foreign political and ideological words were scrutinized, mediated, negotiated, contested, selected, modified, and kept under constant surveillance as they underwent their cross-cultural metamorphoses.

This process of translation-as-transformation was shaped by the Thai language itself: popular speech and literary genres emphasize end-sound rhyming. Thus, if new coinages were to gain wide circulation, they could not merely be transliterated from their native languages – they had to be *transformed* into Thai; that is, they had to be situated both within preexistent structures of lexical meaning and aural aesthetics at the same time that they pushed the boundaries of these socio-political language norms. In simpler terms, they had to sound good to the Thai ear, which listens for and desires certain patterns of language, especially those of rhyme. The process of translation-as-transformation points both to the specific ways in which the entrance of foreign terms has been seen as an

important site for political intervention by various official translators in Thailand and also to the flexibility and generativity of Thai rhyming genres.

### **A Nation of Rhymers**

Rhymes allow us to say the same thing over and over again lengthily, verbosely, gracefully, powerfully, rhythmically, and rhymingly, making it easy to remember and recite or sing. Through their newly-acquired musicality and sheer recitation, these words circulate and mobilize, sometimes conjuring hundreds of thousands of people to the streets and moving them to fight, to kill, and to die.

Rhyming is an everyday linguistic practice as well as the centerpiece of an ideology of culture, as attested to by two chief representatives from opposite political camps of modern Thai poetry: No.Mo.So., *alias* Prince Phitthayalongkorn (1877-1945), a staunch royalist, and Intharayut, *alias* Atsani Phonlajan (1918-1987), a diehard communist. No.Mo.So writes:

Thailand Is a Nation of Rhymers. Siamese Thais are rhymers by habit. There are plenty of poets from the highest to the lowest classes. Some of them are scholars but many more are illiterates. The scholars who become poets may do so because of their literacy as well as disposition. But the illiterates do so purely on account of their disposition. If we are to publish a collection of all the verses composed by these illiterate rhymers in a year, it will take up a great many volumes ... If one is to estimate what percentage of the population of this country are rhymers, the figure should not be less than that of any other country in the world. We love rhyming so much that we versify not only in our own traditional genres, but also in those of other languages. And once we get hold of them, we do not follow their

original version but modify them to suit our ears by adding rhymes, thus making them much more difficult.<sup>2</sup>

Intharayut puts it in more concise terms:

Thai people are rhymers by habit. The sweet-sounding saying of rhymes is almost a commonplace but its content is another matter.<sup>3</sup>

Translated words were perfectly admissible and convenient candidates for inclusion in Thai poetry for the simple reason that they were much easier to rhyme with other Thai words than were their original foreign equivalents. Not only could translated words be intentionally cast to fit poetic genres, they could also be cast to fit the politics of the translator.

One way of making sense of the Thai-style politics of translation is to compare it with the start of a snooker game, in which a player hits a white ball against a triangular formation of other balls so that, upon impact, these balls scatter and go their separate ways. It was as if, once imported or smuggled across linguistic boundaries, stripped of their original foreign script and sound, made to incarnate Thai meanings, thrown into a new semantic field, and then shoved into various Thai verse genres, those poor alien words run into a virtual minefield of rhyming, syllabic, accentual, rhythmic, and tonal rules that follow a totally disparate logic. They can't help but enter into a new pattern of multifaceted relationships with pre-existing Thai words, with etymological roots, denotations, connotations, and associations completely unrelated to the original foreign words and absent from their respective languages of origin. Crashing into these cultural obstacles head-on, they disintegrate on impact into free-floating political signifiers, multiple signifieds, substituted referents and incongruous practices, each going its own

separate, mind-boggling, centrifugal way. The cultural and political travails of recollecting, reintegrating, reinterpreting, and redeeming these fragments are left for later generations of Thai intellectuals to carry out.

### **Official Neologisms: Translation as Politics**

About six months after the overthrow of the absolute monarchy, in December 1932, Prince Narathipphongraphan (*alias* Mom Chao Wan Waithayakon Worawan or Prince Wan),<sup>4</sup> the soon-to-be-appointed chairperson of the *Rajbandittayasathan* under the new regime (the Royal Institute, which was the Thai equivalent of the British Royal Academy) and most prolific Oxford-educated authority on modern Thai coinages, laid down what was to become the reigning principle of Thai official neologisms:

It is the Thai language that will guarantee the security of the Thai nation. This is because if we favor the use of Thai transliterations of Western words about ideas, we may walk too fast. That is we may imitate other people's ideas directly instead of premodifying them in accord with our ideas. But if we use Thai words and hence must coin new ones, we will have to walk deliberately.<sup>5</sup>

During the four decades or so in which Prince Wan was involved with the work of the Royal Institute's Coinage and Dictionary Editorial Committees, he took on the coinage of Thai equivalents of Western words with enthusiasm. In his mission to stabilize the Thai nation amid the influx of Western modernity as well as to tame and turn Western modernism into Thai-fied conservatism, the Prince managed to invent, along with hundreds of others, the following key Thai political coinages: *sangkhom* (society), *setthakij* (economy), *nayobai* (policy), *rabob* (system), *raborb* (regime), *phatthana* (development), *patiwat* (revolution), *patiroop* (reform), *wiwat* (evolution), *kammachip*

(proletariat), *kradumphi* (bourgeoisie), *mualchon* (masses), *sangkhomniyom* (socialism), *ongkan* (organization), *sahaphap* (union), *watthanatham* (culture), *wiphak* (critique), *judyoun* (standpoint), *pratya* (philosophy), *atthaniyom* (realism), and *jintaniyom* (romanticism). With such a broad range of official terms, all modern political discourse in Thailand—of any political persuasion—draws on the lexicon of Prince Wan.

We can thus turn to translations as an important source for understanding Thai history. The following are examples of the politics behind—and beyond—some of these official coinages:

*Revolution.* Prince Wan's coinage for revolution in Thai was *patiwat*, which literally means “turning or rolling back.” It thus has a conservative connotation of restoration, rather than denoting a radical break with the past, or a progressive and qualitative change of affairs, as in the English original. Dissatisfied with the conservative connotation of Prince Wan's *patiwat*, Pridi Banomyong,<sup>6</sup> himself a democratic socialist revolutionary and leader of the 1932 constitutionalist revolution, coined the word *aphiwat* instead, which literally denotes “super-evolution”.

*Communism.* Although Prince Wan did tentatively coin a couple of Thai words for communism as early as 1934, including *Latthi niyom mualchon* and *Sapsatharananiyom* (literally meaning “Massism” and “Pan-publicism” respectively), the transliterated version *Khommunist* has been universally adopted in both official and popular usages to this day. Sulak Sivaraksa, a radical, conservative royalist intellectual and noted cultural critic, has suggested that the reason for this might be to maintain the alien sound and appearance of the word and the idea -- to deny it a legitimate place in the Thai language and keep it forever as the un-Thai Other at the lexical gate, so to speak.

The radical leftists' subsequent attempt to coin a new Thai word for communism (such as Atsani Phonlajan's *Latthi sahachip*, literally meaning “Unionism”) failed to catch on.

*Democracy.* The present Thai equivalent of democracy is *prachathipatai* which, curiously enough, was coined by King Rama VI as early as 1912 to mean “a republic” (i.e. a government with no king). The shift in its meaning from "republic" to "democracy" followed from a compromise between the People's Party and King Rama VII during the revolution of 1932 when a constitutional monarchy was chosen in place of a republic. Thus, Thailand's present political system is characterized as "*rabob prachathipatai an mi phramahakasat song pen pramuk*" or, if one sticks to the original meaning of *prachathipatai*, "*Republic with the King as Head of State*," an oxymoron made possible by the successful taming of a foreign-derived signifier.

*Bourgeoisie.* Prince Wan chose a neutral-sounding and low-key translation of bourgeoisie as *kradumphi*, literally meaning “the well-off” or “a householder.” Atsani Phonlajan, *alias* Naiphi or "Specter" in English, a multilingual genius in the Thai language and etymology and probably the most erudite and sophisticated among Thai communist intellectuals, <sup>7</sup> retranslated the bourgeoisie as *phaessaya*, a Sanskrit-derived Thai word which has the notable double meaning of a “merchant class” or “a prostitute or bitch.”

*Worker.* A pioneering group of ethnic Thai labor union activists and organizers in the 1920s deliberately chose to call their organization and affiliated newspaper *Kammakorn*, a Thai word with a residual meaning of “slavery and cruel punishment,” as the Thai equivalent of "worker" in English. The authorities did not like its negative

connotation and have waged a protracted war against the word *kammakorn* ever since. The official dictionary of the Ministry of Public Instruction published in 1927, as well as that of the Royal Institute issued in 1950, added an unusual note of caution to the entry specifically to explain that *kammakorn* was not a slave, but should be thought of in a manner similar to the English "*Labour (Labouring Class)*." <sup>8</sup> In 1956, then-Police Chief Police General Phao Sriyanond bargained with delegates of the radical labor union movement for a change in the Thai rendering of May Day from *Wan kammakorn* to *Wan raengngan* (or from Worker Day to Labor Day) as a pre-condition for allowing a public celebration on that date. More than thirty years later, the then Prime Minister of Thailand, General Prem Tinsulanond (1980-1988), again pleaded with labor leaders for the same nominal change at the Government House!

*Proletariat.* Prince Wan rendered "proletariat" in Thai as *kammachip*, which translates literally as those who earn their living from laboring. Although they generally accepted this rendering, Thai radical leftist intellectuals and university students, many of whom are low-ranking and low-paid government employees themselves, fiercely – if confusedly – debated whether or not Thai government employees and tricyclists (or pedicab drivers) should be counted as members of the proletariat. Granted that, theoretically speaking, the proletariat was supposed to consist of propertyless wage earners, the incongruity of the situation lies in the fact that the former group, though relatively speaking middle-class by station, were indeed salary earners employed by the state and did not own any means of production while the latter, though dirt poor and toiling, nonetheless did own a piece of private property as means of production in their battered tricycle or pedicab.



Subsequently, however, *kammachip* came to mean something other than “modern industrial workers” in actual political usage. If one looks at the top rank of the Communist Party of Thailand (1942 - mid-1980s), purportedly the vanguard of a Thai proletariat, one finds just a handful of Thai and Laotian industrial workers. The rest were mostly high-school-educated, Sino-Thai, petty bourgeois, small and medium entrepreneurs, shopkeepers and their apprentices, along with a few university-educated intellectuals. Hence it turned out that their Chinese apprenticeship ethics of self-discipline, diligence, endurance, self-abnegation, parsimony, simple lifestyle, etc., were identified as universal “proletarian characteristics and virtues” and became the prescribed model and hallmark of the Communist Party of Thailand's cadres and revolutionaries during the years of rural armed struggle.<sup>9</sup>

*Globalization.* In the aftermath of the May 1992 middle class dominated mass uprising that toppled the military government of Prime Minister General Suchinda Kraprayoon, “globalization” quickly became a buzzword in Thailand. Its first Thai avatar, *lokanuwat*, which literally means “to turn with the globe”, was coined by Professor Chai-anan Samudavanija, a maverick, colorful and versatile royalist political scientist-turned-public intellectual, and then widely and successfully propagated by *Phoojadhan Raiwan* (the Manager Daily), a leading and very popular business newspaper of that period, together with its various sister periodicals. For a long while *lokanuwat* became the talk of the town, making a ubiquitous appearance -- oftentimes uncalled-for or not obviously pertinent -- in press headlines, columns and news reports, radio phone-ins, TV talk shows, TV advertisements for all sorts of products including soy sauce, and even a birthday speech by King Bhumibol. With its seemingly progressive, outward and

forward-looking connotations, the *lokanuwat* discourse was adroitly used by Chai-anan, *Phoojadkan* and the globalizers among Thai public intellectuals to culturally and politically push the military back to their barracks and challenge the legitimacy of the rising, parochial, provincial mafia-type elected politicians by branding their respective rule “counterclockwise”, “against the trend of the globe” and “falling behind the trend of the globe”.

More ominously, the term was also used to signify an aggressive new national project of Thai capitalism with expansionist designs on its poorer neighbors. Symptomatic of this Thai expansionist trend was the decision of the Royal Institute to adopt -- against Chai-anan’s vocal opposition and much to his chagrin -- a new coinage as the official Thai equivalent of “globalization” in place of the pre-existing *lokanuwat*, namely *lokaphiwat*, which literally means “to turn the globe”.<sup>10</sup>

### **From Good Governance to *Thammarat***

The translation-as-transformation process also describes the coming of “Good Governance” to Thailand. The official website of the IMF explains that in 1996, the Board of Governors encouraged the Fund to

promote good governance in all its aspects, including by ensuring the rule of law, improving the efficiency and accountability of the public sector, and tackling corruption, as essential elements of a framework within which economies can prosper.<sup>11</sup>

While the focus of the IMF was supposed to be only on aspects of governance that relate to macroeconomic processes, its powers of surveillance to ensure “good governance” were nearly unlimited. “Good governance” could thus become a standard for measuring

anything and everything, from industrial productivity to everyday corruption. Its definition, then, was mobile, unfixed, and extremely important in Thailand.<sup>12</sup>

The context was the world-famous *Tomyam Kung* disease,<sup>13</sup> the severest financial and economic crisis Thailand had ever faced in its modern history. In July of 1997, the fixed exchange rate was abandoned and the *baht* was effectively devalued, leading to a stampede of foreign capital out of the country.<sup>14</sup> Financially liberalized Thailand found its foreign currency reserves depleted, and the then credibility-bankrupt government of Prime Minister General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh had no choice but to turn to the IMF for a loan rescue package.<sup>15</sup> This package came with the condition that the Thai government implement measures towards “good governance,” a string commonly attached to loans in the 1990s as a result of the IMF’s bleak view of the trustworthiness and efficiency of debtor countries. Almost immediately, Thai public intellectuals began discussing and strategizing about this “good governance.”<sup>16</sup>

At that critical juncture, Chaiwat Satha-anand, who was then chairperson of the Faculty of Political Science at Thammasat University, convened a special faculty meeting to discuss what they, as a community of Thai political scientists, could do to help elucidate the volatile situation to a confused public. Chaiwat was concerned about the economic crisis and the coming of the IMF loan program with its “good governance” conditionality. His concern should be understood in a context in which academics had an established tradition of public intervention. Many of them took part in the popular opposition to military dictatorship during the 1970s; some participated in the rural armed struggle against it. Given their presumed knowledgeability and relatively secure and respectable social status, the Thai public generally expects scholars to be active as public

intellectuals in addition to their normal teaching duties, more so even than it expects them to do research. Chaiwat is an exemplary figure: a Thai Muslim of Indian descent and the foremost scholar of peace studies and non-violent conflict resolution in the country. (He is also a colleague and personal friend of mine.)

After some discussion, the meeting authorized the chairperson to issue a statement on behalf of the faculty that reflected the views aired in the meeting. In drafting that statement the following day, Chaiwat coined the term *thammarat* as the Thai equivalent of “good governance.”<sup>17</sup> The statement was published as a full-page piece in a leading daily newspaper on August 10, 1997, under the title “*Khosanoewaduai thammarat fa wikrit setthakij-kanmeuang*” (A Proposal on Good Governance in the Face of Political Economic Crisis).<sup>18</sup>

In a phone conversation the prior afternoon, Chaiwat told me the thinking behind his choice of the term *thammarat*. *Thammarat* is composed of two words: *thamma* meaning righteousness, religious teachings, religious precepts, truth, justice, correctness, law and rules;<sup>19</sup> and *rat* meaning simply the state. In Thai Buddhism, *thamma* denotes 1) nature as it is, 2) the law governing that nature, and 3) the obligation of human beings to conform to the law of nature.<sup>20</sup> My uneasiness about the overt religious tone and moral absolutism of *thamma* led me to suggest such alternatives as *thammabal* (meaning the upholder of *thamma*) or *thammasasna* (meaning the teachings of *thamma*). But Chaiwat emphatically wanted the state to be grounded in moral terms. His idea was to make it possible to interpret *thammarat* or Thai-style “good governance” as the use of *thamma* (moral righteousness, truth, law, etc.) as the norm to control, regulate and discipline *the Thai state* and thus provide a legitimate ground for civil disobedience against it.<sup>21</sup> The

faculty's *thammarat* statement emphasized three main expectations that would define whether the state was enacting “good governance”: concern and care for the plight of the poor, the unemployed, and the disadvantaged on the part of the government, especially in time of crisis; the rejection of any government that might be installed by unconstitutional powers; and public administration based on the principles of justice, fairness and righteousness.<sup>22</sup> The faculty thus wielded familiar terms in order to make a compelling case for radical, democratic reforms.

The term would also travel well in popular rhymes. According to the first Thai rhyming dictionary, strictly speaking only a single Thai word, namely *kraen*, meaning “dwarf,” rhymes with a straightforward transliteration of “good governance,” whereas 685 words rhyme with the translation, *thammarat*.<sup>23</sup>

After a relatively quiet period of political gestation and organizational preparation, *thammarat* was picked up in January 1998 by Thirayuth Boonmi, a former student leader and guerrilla fighter, but by then a suave and astute member of the Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology at Thammasat University. Thirayuth redefined it in a broad manner as a tripartite self-reform of the state, business, and civil society for efficient and just public administration. He thereby inflected the democratic connotations of the term with more standard, IMF-derived tones and, because the term was now institutionally acceptable, he was able to build a consensus around this new definition. Thirayuth inaugurated a widely publicized national agenda and high-profile reform campaign, respectively called *Khronkan thammarat haeng chat forum* (The Forum on Good Governance of Thailand Project) and *Kanprachum haeng chat pheua thammarat haeng chat* (National Convention for Good Governance of Thailand), in the process

recruiting some bigwigs to the *thammarat* cause, including Former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun and the senior medical doctor and NGO activist Prawase Wasi.<sup>24</sup>

From that point on, *thammarat* inspired countless public meetings and panel discussions; a much vaunted agenda of government reform policy; numerous rules, regulations, guidelines, indicators, and committees of the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of the Interior, the Office of the Civil Service Commission, various universities, local administrative bodies, and the Thai Stock Exchange Commission; quite a few well-funded research projects, many publications, a noisy bureaucratic slogan and ceaseless publicity campaign, a corporate mantra, an environmental governance project, and an active network of people's organizations against corruption.<sup>25</sup> The meanings and practices of *thammarat* were widely disparate and conflicting, even oppositional and incompatible. What follows here is my effort to unpack the meanings of *thammarat* that circulated in contemporary political discourse. In addition to its state-civilizing, and national-consensus versions, I identify three other interpretations of *thammarat* as both word and model of governance.

### **Authoritarian *Thammarat***

The authoritarian version of *thammarat* made its first appearance in a public discussion that was part of the Forum on Good Governance of Thailand Project initiated by Thirayuth, and co-organized by the National Economic and Social Development Board (the country's main technocratic development planning agency) and the King Prajadhipok's Institute (a political think tank affiliated with Parliament). At the event held at the Army's Auditorium in April 1998, General Bunsak Kamhaengritthirong, then

the Secretary-General of the National Security Council, presented *thammarat* from the point of view of the state security apparatus:

Thammarat is precisely what I have in mind. *Thammarat means a state that runs on Thamma.* People in that state are intelligent. *This is exactly what the National Security Council is in charge of.* For when people are intelligent, society will be *united as one.* And the potential *enemy* wouldn't be able to do anything.

If the Thais love Thailand, *know Thai-ness better,* and use their intellect, they will have the force and power to tell right from wrong, as well as a *harmonious and creative* style of management. In the end, *thammarat* will arise.

As to the privatization of state enterprises, we need to consider it carefully. It is not that foreigners are taking over our country, but rather the practice of a theory that will improve it [emphasis added].<sup>26</sup>

Bunsak's speech is replete with conservative Thai watchwords such as "united as one," "Thai-ness," "harmonious and creative," and "enemy." The General's speech captured the gist of Thai authoritarian thinking by attaching *thamma* to the state as its natural keeper. In this view, the state, through such government agencies as the National Security Council, would take charge of imparting *thamma* to the people so as to make them intelligent and achieve the proper Thai attributes listed above. The violence inherent in the position could also be read in the statement's invocation of an imprecise "enemy." Was this enemy internal or external? Such ambivalence justified the use of force both within and outside the borders of the nation-state.

Obviously, General Bunsak's top-down, *dirigiste* interpretation of *thammarat* was the exact opposite of Chaiwat's original radical intent, inasmuch as it reversed the power

relations among *thamma*, the state, and the people that Chaiwat was hoping for. It also differed substantially from the liberal version of *thammarat*. What is striking, however, is that when it came to matters of economic policy during crisis, Thai authoritarian conservatism was at a loss for an “authentic” response and could only replicate and defend the neo-liberal policy of privatization. Under free-market hegemony, even ardent nationalists had to accept the inevitability of the IMF’s continued importance – its central role – in Thai political life.

### **Liberal *Thammarat***

If the enforced quiet of Thai law and order represented the authoritarian ideal of *thammarat*, its liberal counterpart was held to be open, diverse, clean (because uncorrupted and accountable), and clear (because transparent). At the same time, it was expected to be messy and deafening, as universal values – not merely Thai ones – were debated within the space of civil society. Such was the view of Cambridge-educated, middle class-favorite Former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun (1991-1992). Taking an active, high-profile role in Thirayuth’s *thammarat* campaign, Anand delivered the keynote address that formally launched the Forum on Good Governance of Thailand Project at the Faculty of Political Science of Chulalongkorn University in March of 1998, thereby earnestly and willingly lending his high social stature and considerable political weight to it. On that occasion and in other addresses and interviews he gave on the issue, Anand aggressively advanced his own definition of *thammarat*, which in essence amounted to sound administration, transparency, fairness, efficiency, and the delivery of public services.<sup>27</sup>



Anand's version of *thammarat* accorded with most pronouncements on the issue from the corporate sector, with its emphasis on "efficiency and effectiveness," that is, on management techniques rather than political fundamentals.<sup>28</sup> The general strategy of his discourse was to depoliticize *thammarat*, as was evident in his reply to a question raised following his March 25<sup>th</sup> keynote address.<sup>29</sup> Pointedly queried as to how *thammarat* could avoid politics when it necessarily had to deal with the allocation of public resources, Anand insisted on conceptualizing *thammarat* as a matter of administrative process, not of power relations. As he had said in a talk to a group of intellectuals one month earlier:

*Thammarat* is translated from Good Governance. What is *thammarat*? It is an efficient and fair government and administration in the public interest....We can see that today political ideologies hardly mean anything.....At this point, political ideals hardly matter.....The answer doesn't lie in any doctrine but in the ability to govern and administer public affairs, and in the ability to manage private business to the satisfaction of the people....<sup>30</sup>

It thus logically followed from Anand's premise that no matter how a country was governed, be it by a dictatorship or democracy, and no matter what kind of power relations obtained between its rulers and people, be it centralized and monopolized or decentralized and evenly distributed, so long as that country was transparently, fairly, and efficiently administered and could deliver public services, it would represent *thammarat*. Anand went on to cite Singapore as an example of dictatorship with good governance.

### **Communitarian *Thammarat***

Anand's self-proclaimed apolitical *thammarat* was the exact opposite of Prawase's reading. In his preface to Thirayuth's book, *Thammarat haeng chat* (1998), in which the author laid out his consensus-building liberal view of "good governance," Prawase argued that "At present, every form of dictatorship, be it monarchical, military, or communist, is not considered good governance."<sup>31</sup> Hence, *pace* Anand, Singapore was automatically ruled out as an instance of "good governance." Only a democracy was eligible to qualify as a site of good governance. However, to win the title, it further needed to follow the prescription given by Prawase for an ideal communitarian society: namely, to link local communities together in a social network that would allow them to share their experience and knowledge and make use of their social capital and folk wisdom to strengthen themselves. It is through such networks, according to Prawase, that there would be bottom-up reform of the state, the economy, and society. This would make it possible to build the ideal *santi prachatham* society – a peaceful democracy within the bounds of *thamma*.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Five Meanings of *Thammarat***

The five different versions of *thammarat* may be concisely summarized as follows:

**Diagram 1: The Five Different Meanings of *Thammarat***

<b>STATE-CIVILIZING <i>THAMMARAT</i></b>	<b>NATIONAL-CONSENSUS <i>THAMMARAT</i></b>	<b>AUTHORITARIAN <i>THAMMARAT</i></b>	<b>LIBERAL <i>THAMMARAT</i></b>	<b>COMMUNITARIAN <i>THAMMARAT</i></b>
the use of <i>thamma</i> to control, regulate, and discipline the state, thus providing a legitimate ground for civil disobedience	A tripartite self-reform of state-business-society -- not just the state -- for efficient and just public administration	The state imposes <i>thamma</i> on the people in a top-down manner	Orientation to management, efficiency & results + depoliticization	Weaving social fabric together → generating social energy → pushing for National <i>thammarat</i> → building an ideal <i>santi prachatham</i> society
by Chaiwat Satha-anand & Co. (academic community)	by Thirayuth Boonmi (pluralist political activist & strategist)	by General Bunsak Kamhaengritthirong (military, National Security Council)	by Anand Panyarachun (business leader, former Prime Minister)	by Dr Prawase Wasi (royalist medical doctor, civic leader & NGO sage)

Focusing on the latter three contending versions of *thammarat*, the following observations may be made about the crucial differences among them (Diagram 2).

*On the issue of power:* Authoritarian *thammarat* wanted to concentrate power in the hands of the state so as to unite the nation as one harmonious whole. Liberal *thammarat* wanted to limit, check, and balance state power, allowing for conflict as part of normal public life. Communitarian *thammarat* called for decentralization of power from the state and the corporate sector to local communities.

*On the issue of market:* Authoritarian *thammarat* helplessly surrendered to and complied with free-market economic policy without any new economic platform of its own. Liberal *thammarat* began from the premise of the worldwide triumph of free-market capitalism over socialism and communism. Free-market capitalism was “the reality” that could not be denied or avoided and to which one had to adapt. As to communitarian *thammarat*, it began from the opposite premise of both the failure and

injustice of free-market capitalism, as evidenced by the ongoing Thai and East Asian economic crises. Consequently, it strove for a space for what the King had called a "sufficiency economy" as an alternative.<sup>33</sup>

*On the issue of democracy:* Authoritarian *Thammarat* sought a return to the good old days of "Thai-style democracy" (i.e. the military absolutist dictatorship from 1958 to 1973).<sup>34</sup> Liberal *thammarat* distinguished *thammarat* and democracy as separate issues, whereas communitarian *thammarat* considers the two inseparable.

**Diagram 2: The Three Different Meanings of Thammarat**

Issues	Authoritarian Version	Liberal Version	Communitarian Version
Power	State-centralized power over a monolithic, harmonious nation	Limitation, checks & balances of power; allowing for conflict	Decentralization of power
Market	Compliance to market forces	Taking as its premise the triumph of free-market capitalism	Taking as its premise the failure and injustice of capitalism; seeking space for a "sufficiency economy"
Democracy	Thai-style	Considering <i>thammarat</i> and democracy as two separate issues; the former being about administrative process, the latter having to do with power relations; a country can have <i>thammarat</i> without democracy, e.g., Singapore	<i>Thammarat</i> & democracy can't be separated; hence all forms of dictatorship, whether monarchical, military or communist, are emphatically not <i>thammarat</i>

## Conclusion

In the end, should one feel sorry for the towering Monsieur Michel Camdessus, the Managing Director of the IMF from 1987 to 2000, because his forceful prescription for "good governance" had become completely and helplessly contaminated, bastardized, and transformed into this messy word *thammarat*?

The Enlightenment belief in the universality of reason and transparency of the word-reality relationship has been shown to have been overly optimistic by the actual cross-cultural, cross-language motion of words and discourse. And yet, this is no reason to hastily give up the noble dream of universal reason. One needs rather to understand that it is impossible to transport and transplant intact a fixed signifier with definite signifieds and unchanging referents from one culture and language to another, not least because there are no such fixed things in the first place. Having already disintegrated into semantic instability, "good governance" can come to other peoples only through a self-educating process in which they have to fight, experience, learn, improvise, invent, and reinvent *thammarat* themselves. Only through this concrete historical process can the free-floating signifier, the multiple signifieds, and the substituted referents that together constitute "good governance" be reintegrated in a new whole, and its institutions be built and take roots. Even a generous attempt in good faith to come up with a universal definition of good governance can never replace that process. The only sustainable Good Governance is the one that people define and build for themselves, not the one decreed and then imposed on or offered to them by global power-holders or well-wishers.

The world may therefore end up with many different good governances. Some we may envy, others we may disapprove of, to the point that we may not even want to call them “good governance.” Certainly, *thammarat* falls far short of perfection, and we hope to change and improve many of its features in years to come. That is why the differences between our *thammarat* and the good governance of others are just as important as their common ground. For differences invite us to compare, contrast, and learn from one another’s achievements and shortcomings. We need only open the vista of “good governance” beyond the purview of the IMF or any single site of power in order to seize the opportunity for open-ended dialogue. In the process, we may change their definition of good governance and they, in turn, may change ours. With no single universal definition of good governance, the words can remain in motion as people talk and argue and learn to fashion their own versions of global concepts.

---

<sup>1</sup> I derive this concept of Prasenjit Duara from Craig J. Reynolds, “Identity, Authenticity and Reputation in the Postcolonial History of Mainland Southeast Asia” (keynote speech given at the “International Conference on Post Colonial Society and Culture in Southeast Asia”, Yangon, Myanmar, 16-18 December 1998). See also Thongchai Winichakul, Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), especially “The Border of Thainess,” pp. 169-70.

<sup>2</sup> No.Mo.So. (Prince Phitthayalongkorn), Klon lae nakklon [Rhymes and rhymers] (Bangkok: Sophonphiphatthanakorn Printing House, 1930), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Intharayut (Atsani Phonlajan), “Wannakhadi kao kao” [Old literature], Aksornsarn, I:11 (February 1950), 85.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Mom Chao* is the title of the lowest royal rank, usually held by a grandson or granddaughter of a king.

<sup>5</sup> Prince Narathipphongpraphan (Mom Chao Wan Waithayakon Worawan), "*Pathakatha reuang siamphak* [A Lecture on Siamese Language]," *Chumnum phraniphon khong sassatrajan pholtri phrajaoworawongthoe krommeun narathipphongpraphan* [Selected Writings of Professor, Major General, Prince Narathipphongpraphan], Songwit Kaeosri, ed. (Bangkok: Bangkok Bank, 1979), p.416.

<sup>6</sup> Pridi Banomyong, 1900-1983, was the top civilian leader and political strategist of the 1932 anti-absolute monarchy, constitutionalist revolution, key architect and minister of the subsequent constitutional regime, head of the underground Free Thai resistance movement against the Japanese occupiers during World War II, one-time prime minister, and the first royally-conferred Senior Statesman of modern Siam. He went into exile in the aftermath of a right-wing, conservative-royalist military coup in November 1947, lived in Communist China for the next two decades and then moved to Paris, where he stayed until his widely-mourned death. See Vichitvong Na Pombhejara, Pridi Banomyong and the Making of Thailand's Modern History (Bangkok: Committees on the Project for the National Celebration on the Occasion of the Centennial Anniversary of Pridi Banomyong, Senior Statesman (private sector), 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Atsani Phonlajan, 1918-1987, was a self-taught, rebellious, iconoclastic member of the Thai literati and one of the two foremost, versatile, and finest communist Thai poets and literary critics, the other being Jit Poumisak. A lawyer by training and state prosecutor by profession, he was won over to communism by a leading *jek* (i.e. a Thai of Chinese descent) Maoist intellectual and went underground to China for theoretical education in

---

the 1950s. Subsequently, he rose to the upper echelons of the Communist Party of Thailand and worked in its theory department. Upon the collapse of the communist-led rural armed struggle in the early 1980s, he refused to give himself up to the Thai government and went over instead to socialist Laos, where he died of old age a convinced communist revolutionary. See Kasian Tejapira, Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture, 1927-1958 (Kyoto and Melbourne: Kyoto University Press and Trans Pacific Press, 2001), *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Pathanukrom krom tamra krasuang thammakan [Dictionary of the Department of Textbooks, Ministry of Public Instruction] (Bangkok: Department of Textbooks, Ministry of Public Instruction, 1927), p. 13; Photjananukrom chabab rajbandittayasathan [The Royal Institute's Dictionary] (Bangkok: Rajbandittayasathan, 1950), p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Pho. Meuangchomphoo (Udom Sisuwan), Soo samoraphoom phoophan [To the Phoophan Battlefield] (Bangkok: Matichon Press, 1989), pp. 74-75; and Kasian, Commodifying Marxism, p. 22, 213n78.

<sup>10</sup> The data and arguments in this section come from my dissertation and subsequent research. See Kasian, Commodifying Marxism, pp. 196-99; Wiwatha lokanuwat [Debate on Globalization] (Bangkok: Phoojatkan Press, 1995), pp. 17-39; and "Signification of Democracy," Thammasat Review, I:1 (October 1996), 5-13.

<sup>11</sup> [www.imf.org/external/np/exr/facts.gov/htm](http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/facts.gov/htm)

<sup>12</sup> At its inception in international development agencies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the definitions of good governance as a policy agenda ranged from the technical Washington version (especially the IMF's) to the more political New York version (e.g. the UNDP's). For the neo-liberal Washington consensus, good governance was read



---

either as “a move beyond the Washington consensus” or “an extension of economic neo-liberalism to the political sphere”. Although these divergent meanings of good governance at its origins should be borne in mind, they should not restrict us here. For a survey of relevant studies, see Barbara Orlandini, “Consuming ‘Good Governance’ in Thailand: Re-contextualising development paradigms” (Ph.D. diss., University of Florence, 2001, Ch. 1).

<sup>13</sup> *Tomyam Kung* is a hot and spicy shrimp soup, flavored with chillies, lemongrass, and kaffir lime. Popular among Thais and well-known to foreigners, it has become representative of Thai cuisine abroad. In the aftermath of the 1997 Thai economic crisis and its subsequent contagion effects around East Asia, its name was widely used in the Western media as a metonym of the economic ills and plague begotten by Thailand.

<sup>14</sup> Taking advantage of cheap foreign loans made available through the opening of the country's capital account and the liberalization of the financial market under the Bangkok International Banking Facility (BIBF) program since September 1993, many big Thai companies borrowed extensively abroad (the total foreign debt of Thailand's non-financial private sector amounting to US\$85 billion at year end 1997) and channelled the easy money into mismatched investment on a grand scale. The devaluation of the Baht (its exchange rate plummeting from 25 to over 50 Baht per U.S. dollar in late 1997) turned these foreign currency-denominated loans into gigantic NPLs overnight at half the size of the Thai annual GDP. Thousands of companies folded, two thirds of pre-crisis private commercial banks went under and changed hands, 65% of Thai capitalist entrepreneurial class went bankrupt, one million workers lost their jobs, and three million more Thais fell below the poverty line. The subsequent costs of restructuring the

---

financial sector reached 42.3% of GDP. See Kasian Tejapira, “Post-Crisis Economic Impasse and Political Recovery in Thailand: The Resurgence of Economic Nationalism,” Critical Asian Studies, 34:3 (September 2002), 323-56; Richard Duncan, The Dollar Crisis: Causes, Consequences, Cures (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons (Asia), 2003), 34-42, 132-33.

<sup>15</sup> For an informative comprehensive account of the 1997 Thai economic crisis, see Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, Thailand’s Crisis (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000). For its domestic political impacts, see Kasian Tejapira, “The Political Lesson of the Thai Economic Crisis: A Critical Dissection of Electocracy” (unpublished paper presented at the workshop on “What Lessons We Learn from the Crisis?” organized by Professor Takashi Shiraishi at the International House of Japan, Tokyo, 14 June 1999); and “Post-Crisis Economic Impasse and Political Recovery in Thailand”.

<sup>16</sup> Some early instances are Kasian Tejapira, “*IMF kab anakhot khong ratthabal jew* [IMF and the Future of the Chavalit Government],” Maticchon Daily, 7 August 1997, p. 21; and Chai-anan Samudavanija, “*Good Governance (GG = Go! Go!)*,” Maticchon Daily, 9 August 1997.

<sup>17</sup> As a matter of fact and completely unknown to him, the word *thammarat* had already been coined for a different purpose before Chaiwat’s utilization of it to translate “good governance.” Some time after the bloody massacre of left-wing student protesters at Thammasat University and the subsequent military coup on October 6, 1976, a group of journalists published a weekly news magazine under the title *Thammarat*, with a Mr. Yongyudh Mahakanok as its publisher and Sriphanom Singhthong as chief editor. Short-lived and mostly forgotten, it carried a slogan “*pheua khwampentham khong sangkhom*”

---

(for social justice) from which its title might derive. This piece of little known information was dug up and made public by Suchat Sawatsi, the omniscient “bookman” or literary critic of Thailand, so as to insert a jarring note into the brouhaha about *thammarat*. See his column under the penname Singh Sanamluang in “*Roi pi haeng khwam hohiao* [One Hundred Years of Distress],” Nation Weekender, 7: 319 (16-22 July 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Matichon Daily, 10 August 1997, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Photjananukrom chabab rajbandittayasathan pho. so. 2525 [The Royal Institute's Dictionary, B.E. 2525] (Bangkok: Rajbandittayasathan, 1995), p. 420.

<sup>20</sup> Uthai Dullayakasem, “*Sinlatham* [Morality],” in Suwanna Satha-anand and Neungnoi Bunyanet, eds., Kham: rongroi khwamkhid khwamcheua thai [Words: Traces of Thai Thoughts and Beliefs] (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1994), p. 133.

<sup>21</sup> Chaiwat’s version of *thammarat* was invoked in a marathon protest by civic groups and NGO activists against the construction of the Myanmar-Thai Yadana gas pipeline that exploited Burmese ethnic minority forced labor and cut through a pristine forest in the border area. See Kasian Tejapira, “*Huajai khong thammarat* [The Heart of *Thammarat*],” Matichon Daily, 19 February 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Thailand has one of the worst income distribution ratios in the world, a history of twelve successful military coups between 1933 and 2007 and a centralized, corruption-prone and repressive auto-colonial state bureaucracy schooled in anti-communist counter-insurgency mentality and practice.

<sup>23</sup> Laong Missethi, Photjananukrom lamdub sara [Rhyming dictionary] (Bangkok: Rungreuangsan Publisher, 1961), pp. 669-701, 1022.

---

<sup>24</sup> Thirayuth Boonmi, *Thammarat haeng chat: yutthasat koo haiyana prathet thai* [National Good Governance: Strategy for Salvaging Thailand] (Bangkok: Sai Than Publishing House, 1998); and Siriwich, “*Tour thammarat trip phises: Khwamreunrom phasom khwamkhid mai* [A Special *Thammarat* Tour: A Mixture of Enjoyment and New Ideas],” *Nation Weekender*, 6: 301 (12-18 March 1998), 28-29.

<sup>25</sup> For example, see Orlandini, “Consuming ‘Good Governance’,” Chapter 6; Bussabong Chaijaroenwatthana and Boonmi Li, *Tua Chiwad thammaphibal* [Indicators of Good Governance] (Bangkok: King Prajadhipok’s Institute, 2001), pp. 8-20, 38-47, 88-89; Thai Stock Exchange Commission, *Raingan kankamkab doolae kijjakan* [Corporate Governance Report] (Bangkok: Thai Stock Exchange Commission, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> *Matichon Daily*, 22 April 1998, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Anand Panyarachun, “The Tao of good governance,” *The Nation*, 18 February 1998, pp. A4-A5, A2; Anand Panyarachun, “*Thammarat kab sangkhom thai* [Good Governance and Thai Society],” in Sommai Parijchat, ed., *Mummong khong nai anand* [Mr. Anand’s Viewpoints] (Bangkok: Matichon Press, 1998), pp. 25-32, *passim*; Anand Panyarachun, Interview on “*Thammarat: ik khrang khong songkhram khwamkhid* [Good Governance: Another Round of War of Ideas],” *Hi-Class*, 15: 169 (June 1998), 40-42. See also Anand Panyarachun, *Mummong khong nai anand lem 2* [Mr. Anand’s Viewpoints, Volume 2] (Bangkok: Matichon Press, 2001), *passim*.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Kiattisak Jelattianranat (then president of the Institute of Internal Auditors of Thailand), “Crisis lends urgency for good governance,” *The Nation*, 2 May 1998, p. B1.

---

<sup>29</sup> The question was posed by Mom Ratchawong Prudhisan Jumbala, a political scientist from Chulalongkorn University. Mom Ratchawong is a title showing royal descent.

<sup>30</sup> Anand Panyarachun, “*Thammarat kheu aria?* [What Is *Thammarat?*],” in Sommai Parijchat, ed., *Mummong khong nai anand* [Mr. Anand’s Viewpoints] (Bangkok: Matichon Press, 1998), p. 15, 16, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Prawase Wasi, “Preface,” in Thirayuth Boonmi, *Thammarat haeng chat*, p.3.

<sup>32</sup> Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, a top economic technocrat-turned-political dissident, and former rector of Thammasat University, has qualified the ideal of democracy by requiring *thamma*, lest democracy degenerate into the tyranny of the majority. See Prawase Wasi, *Kansadaeng pathakatha phises puey ungphakorn khrang thi 6* [The Sixth Puey Ungphakorn Memorial Lecture] (Bangkok: Faculty of Economics, Thammasat University, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> “Sufficiency economy” refers to an alleged universally applicable, peasant community-derived philosophy of moral economy under the Buddhist precepts of cautious moderation, which would avoid the worst excesses and risks associated with free-market capitalism, consumerism, and materialism.

<sup>34</sup> For the elaboration of Thai-style democracy, see Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism* (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand and the Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 1979).