

# People's struggles in Thailand - I - the CPT era

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**The French original had to be much shortened because of editorial constrains. An even longer version is now under preparation and will be posted online in French... as soon as possible.**

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The communist movement was first established in Siam (renamed Thailand in 1939) mostly in the Chinese ethnic migrant communities, then proliferated in the seemingly disparate surrounding regions in the North, Northeast, and South of the country. Following a long, difficult period of transition, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), once an urban party, retreated to the jungle and engaged in armed struggle. Its national expansion, during the 1970s, occurred while the kingdom was transformed into a US base for military intervention in the Vietnam War. The party eventually saw its decline during the Sino-Indochinese conflict of 1978-9 and disappeared from sight in the mid-1980s.

In Siam the formation of the CPT was dependent upon its strategic geopolitical position, a social formation characterized by a three-way segmentation of the population (town-province, center-outskirts, migrant-Thai), and also by the gap between a Chinese political orientation and the realities of life in Thailand. Thailand also benefited from its geographical position and avoided the

colonization suffered by its neighbors. By creating ties with Germany, who helped form its army, and navigating a balance between the French and British imperial influences in the region, Thailand became a buffer zone between the possessions of the French in the East and Great Britain in the South and West.

The communist movement in Thailand, therefore, could not arise from a powerful popular tradition of anti-colonial resistance. Instead, the movement had to confront the dominant class and authorities whose power had never been checked by colonialism or loss of independence. These realities had significant consequences on the trajectory of sociopolitical struggles in Thailand, and made the CPT unique within the greater political sphere in Southeast Asia.

The Thai peasantry was particularly difficult to organize for a number of reasons. For one thing, ethnic divisions made the expansion and unification of sharp class conflicts in rural Siam difficult. At the same time, in urban areas, workers' strikes were initially acts of Chinese immigrant workers who sometimes fought to defend their jobs against the hiring by employers of Thais. The Chinese labor movement was often linked to the Guomindang or to family clans. Thus, the communist movement was confronted with the difficult task of organizing such a divided population.

## **Revolution of 1932**

In 1932 the political struggle took a new turn with the overthrow of the absolute monarchy and transition to a constitutional monarchy. The People's Party was a direct player in the coup. Though its membership was small, the party was supported by regiments in Bangkok as well as a large faction of urban dwellers, if not provincial populations or rural peoples. The civilian left wing was led by Pridi Banomyong (1900-83), an intellectual influenced by European non-Marxist liberal and socialist ideas. A field officer and a commoner, Phraya Phahon Phonphayahasena (1887-1947), led the military group.

Through his support for individual freedom, social progress, and a state-implemented economic plan, Pridi gained support from businessmen, the Chinese trade unions, and the politicians of the provinces. Soon, however, the politically progressive civilian wing of the People's Party was usurped by the military wing. In 1935 the new army chief and defense minister, Plaek Phibun Songkram (1897-1964), known as Field Marshal Phibun, became Prime Minister and established a dictatorship. From 1933 to 1937 the number of military men doubled and the military budget increased dramatically. The army became a vector of industrialization. In the name of nationalism it invested in agriculture and transport and took control of Chinese enterprises. A new law on nationality in 1939 forced minorities to "become" Thais by learning the language, changing their family names, and sending their children to Thai schools. The regime of Phibun imposed a martial law more severe than Siam had ever known in order to assimilate non-ethnic Thais into this nationalistic vision. A new alliance was established between sectors of the traditional bourgeoisie (including Sino-Thais), the administration, and the military. But, under Phibun, some campaigned for the "superiority" of the "Thai race" and racist campaigns were directed against minorities.

## **First Communist Parties**

The Chinese community established in Thailand had been precociously politicized by the impact of the 1911 and 1927 revolutions in China. Thus, the communist movement first established itself among Chinese traders and workers, with the primary exception to this trend in the poor and densely populated region of the Northeast, where Vietnamese communists played a significant role

from the late 1920s.

The onset of communism in Thailand was not widespread. A first small staff of half a dozen people was sent to the kingdom by the Chinese Communist Party in 1923. In 1926 the Committee of the Southern Seas, or Nanyang Party, was established in Southeast Asia. In 1927 hundreds of young Chinese founded the Communist Youth of Siam (CYS), linked to the Communist Party of Siam (CPS), a precursor of the CPT. A second organization, the Thai branch of the Chinese Communist Party or the Chinese Communist Party of Thailand (CCPT), may have existed, though the relationship between the CPS, CPT, and the CCPT is not clear. At the same time, there was a constant movement of militants from China and Vietnam who, alongside Chinese communities throughout Southeast Asia, promoted the establishment of the Thai communist movement. Ho Chi Minh (alias Nguyen Ai Quoc) went several times to the field as an envoy of the Komintern to help with the establishment of the CPS.

Organizing the movement in Thailand was risky. Chinese militants were arrested from 1921 to 1931 in Bangkok and in the North, and anti-communist laws became more stringent. In 1933 the propagation of communist doctrine became a crime against the state. Repression was widespread and the CPS declined until it fragmented altogether around 1936. In the Northeast, Vietnamese militants were either detained or deported, and remaining Vietnamese militants returned to their country to reinforce their own anti-colonial battles. The influence of the Indochinese Communist Party on Thai communists declined significantly.

### **Communist Party of Thailand and the Beginnings of Social Battle, 1940-1972**

At the onset of World War II Thailand, under the authority of General Phibun, allied itself with Japan, embracing much of Japan's fascistic ideology. In 1941 Japanese troops invaded the country under the pretense of fighting British and French armies on the Thai borders. The Thai government declared war on the Allied powers while joining the Axis, but Japanese forces quickly took on the role of conquerors, alienating the Thai population. Two resistance movements organized against the Japanese occupation: the Volunteer Organization for Armed Opposition to Japan created by the newly reestablished CPT, and the underground Seri Thai (Free Thai) network, represented in exile by Pridi Banomyong and Seni Pramoj (1905-97), a former ambassador to the US. Both movements were limited in their capacity to act against the occupation, and there was effectively no cooperation between them. Still, Thailand's occupation by Japan was an impetus for communists in Thailand legitimately to declare its first battle for national liberation.

The CPT's movement-building during the war was more influential than its military activities, which were limited essentially to gathering intelligence and some operations of armed propaganda. Though initially the political situation was not amenable to popular resistance, the atmosphere eventually changed and the communist struggle flourished with the creation of welfare associations, an underground labor union, and the Anti-Japanese Federation.

The party was not able to contend with the Seri Thai movement in the aftermath of the war, but the immediate postwar period nonetheless constituted a very important political opportunity for the communists' struggle. Members of the Seri Thai network returned from exile to negotiate peace with the Allied movement. Seni Pramoj, Oxford-educated and a member of the royal family, became prime minister in 1945. The following year a constitution proposed by Pridi was adopted and the parliamentary regime was restored. In order to avoid a Russian veto on the entry of Thailand into the United Nations, the Thai government abrogated the anti-communist law and authorized the CPT to act legally.

As armed struggle was no longer on the agenda, the CPT dissolved its military forces. Then, instead of organizing peasants in the countryside, the CPT called back its members to Bangkok, which shows how much it remained an urban party. Leaders and militants of the party returned from China, including Udom Srisuwan, who became a well-known editorialist of the CPT and its primary theorist. During the years following the war the influence of revolutionary ideas began to find its place among students such as Jit Phumisak (1930–66), whose essays and poems impressed many generations of militants, and who was eventually killed by police. The underground, episodic CPT newspaper, *Mahachon* (the Masses), became a weekly publication. The party reestablished itself in the capital and started the Bangkok Labor Federation as well as unions, associations for women and youth, and associations of school and university students. The CPT became politically involved at the parliamentary level when parliament member Prasert Sapsunthon publicly declared his affiliation.

In order to offer a common framework to the union organizations in which it was active, the CPT created the Association of United Workers of Thailand. Moreover, the prestige of the party increased with the defeat of the Kuomintang in China and the party's influence developed within the Central Labor Union (CLU), which joined the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in 1949. Even so, during these years, the Thai left was diverse. Pridi Banomyong created the Southeast Asia League to affirm solidarity with the national liberation movements in the region. The writings of European socialists were translated into Thai. A progressive Buddhist current was developed and represented by the thinker Buddhadasa; the possible relationship between Marxism and Buddhism was discussed.

The development of a legal, pluralist left was ultimately hindered by the chronic instability of the postwar parliamentary regime. In 1947 Phibun instigated a coup d'état and took power. He took a series of measures against the communist movement, unions, and Sino Thai schools, ending the CPT's period of legality after less than two years. Phibun established the Thai Labor Union (renamed the Thai National Trade Union Confederation (TNTUC) in 1951), reserved only for Thai nationals and serving as a mass base for the regime. In 1952, in the name of the Anti-Communist Act, the Central Labor Union was dissolved and its leaders were arrested.

From 1950 Bangkok aligned itself with the United States and became the first country in Asia to offer troops and material to the United Nations in Korea. In return, Washington offered massive military assistance to the Thai regime. Thus, the geopolitical situation of Thailand changed dramatically. In the past, Siam, as a buffer between French and British colonies, remained at the margins of regional conflicts and avoided colonial conquest. This time, the kingdom was on the front lines, in the direct service of imperialist military strategy. The anti-communist and anti-Chinese repression worsened and arrests increased. The democratic movements and the left were muzzled. Pridi Banomyong returned to exile, this time permanently.

The influence of the Chinese Communist Party and the role of the Sino-Thai cadres in the CPT did not insure the "spontaneous" adoption of a Maoist orientation for the CPT. During the 1920s when Chinese influence on Thai communists was taking hold, the Chinese party itself was not yet Maoist. The relationship between the two parties was tenuous after the counterrevolution of 1927 and "pro-Chinese" during this period did not necessarily mean "pro-Mao." The CPT's Maoist orientation shaped only after the victory of the revolution of 1949, and was not formalized until the Sino-Soviet conflict in the 1960s.

The movement toward rural armed struggle was difficult for the Thai party to make, as it necessitated a radical reorganization of party forces that were culturally and sociologically removed from the peasantry. The prestige and influence of Chinese Maoism helped move the CPT toward rural struggle, but the evolution of Thailand's political scenery itself played a significant role. From the mid-1940s to the end of the 1970s, the country had only three democratic interludes of three

years each punctuating three decades of military rule. There were 18 coups d'état under one reign of King Bhumibol, Rama IX, who ascended the throne in 1946.

The CPT held its second congress in early 1952 and was officially named the Communist Party of Thailand. It was only during this period, the early 1950s, that the Chinese Communist Party of Thailand (CCPT) was formally dissolved. According to some estimates, this organization had about 4,000 members and the CPT only 200. Some militants went back to China and others joined the Thai party. This integration reinforced the "Chinese" influence on the direction of the organization. The congress also endorsed the "rural turn" of the CPT, without giving up the development of its urban activities. In particular, it mobilized forces to participate in the worldwide peace movement, an issue important to Thailand.

Meanwhile, Thailand experienced a new relatively democratic interlude. Numerous jailed Chinese leaders were freed. Thailand's trade relationship with China improved. Prominent figures on the left went to Peking, such as Thep Jotinuchit, leader of the socialist opposition, and Klaew Norapati, general secretary of the Economist Party. The Chinese government linked itself with Thai opposition parties. Peking targeted the role of the United States in Thailand, and the party focused on anti-imperialism and nationalism more than revolution.

In 1954 Thailand and the Philippines joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), whose purpose was to fend off communism in the region through alliances with the West and pro-western nations. In 1957 a new coup d'état brought General Sarit Thanarat to power, and the following year his regime consolidated authoritarian rule. A wave of arrests hit militants and prominent figures on the left. In 1959 imports from China were prohibited and in 1960 Thai troops were sent to fight secretly in Laos on the side of US forces.

The third congress of the CPT in 1961 effectively marked the inception of armed struggle, though much preparation was necessary to ready the forces before battle began. Cadres had to be sent in the countryside to establish bases. Militants had to be trained (outside Thailand) in military as well as political fields. The CPT had to get the support of the Chinese, Indochinese, and other small neighboring parties. Political repression contributed much to the turn toward armed struggle. Soon after the third congress, one of the leaders of the CPT, Ruam Wongphan, was captured by security forces and later executed. Other members of the central committee, based underground in Bangkok, found refuge along the border or in China. For the first time, the national leadership of the party, by and large, left the capital and never returned.

Throughout the 1960s Thailand was a western stronghold of the counterrevolutionary security belt in Eastern Asia. The United States turned Thailand into an important operational base for Indochina. For four years, the CPT avoided confrontations with the government, knowing that the conditions were not yet ideal for engaging in military operations. However, counterrevolutionary actions on the part of the Thai state accelerated the CPT's decision to engage in an armed struggle even if conditions were not yet ideal. The mass base was fragile, comprised of no more than a few thousand sympathizers and only a small number of villages, primarily in the Northeast, where battles broke out in 1965. Under pressure from the government army, the party was forced to begin fighting while it was still badly prepared in most regions of the country.

The CPT targeted remote provinces of strategic importance. In the mountainous North it recruited members of Hmong tribes who had been bombarded with napalm by the Thai army in 1968, and who were still alienated from the rest of Thailand. Alliances with the hill tribes were made by offering services such as health, education, and assistance to the poor, and by attacking outside enemies such as the Thai army, the forestry companies, and various gangs. In the Northeast Isan region the battle for socialism was led by the Samakee-kun (Solidarity) movement, which was influenced by

Khrong Chandawong, a member of the Socialist Front and the Peace Committee of Thailand. Khrong was arrested during the waves of state-led repression in 1958 and sentenced to death in 1961. The repression contributed to the radicalization of northeastern resistance, though it also caused a great deal of problems for the party.

The mountains of the South were dense with forests and served as an important refuge for the CPT and its active guerilla forces. Armed struggle took place in 1966, alongside the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), which depended on bases in the Thailand side at the border after defeat by the British. In this region the communist movement did not benefit from proximity with China or Indochina, and developed more autonomously than in the other provinces. Muslim resistance in the South was reorganized underground along the border and by the 1960s the regional resistance was at once Islamic and socialist in character.

### **From Success to Crisis: 1973-1982**

The CPT developed itself along the fault lines of Thai society. The militants were devoted to serving the people; the CPT participated in social protection more than fomenting revolution. It protected the tribal communities or villages from outside threats such as armed forces, a corrupt administration, and usurers. It also offered services that the state did not, such as healthcare and education, and consequently benefited from a moral debt of recognition. The party acted in favor of social justice but without necessarily radicalizing the social sphere itself.

The CPT's strategy is summarized in the maxim: "The countryside encircles the town, the jungles lead the village." The first part of this saying is common to all Maoist parties, although its application differs in different regions (in China and Vietnam, armed forces were established following revolutionary struggle and mass uprising, which was not the case for Thailand). The second term of the maxim reflected a characteristic particular to the CPT: in order to escape repression, the political and military cadres did not stay in the village, but the surrounding forest. Cadres and party members left their homes, entered the jungle, and secretly returned to work in the villages. They worked in the jungle during the day and in the village at night. This system of organization would have significant consequences for the future of the CPT.

The whole CPT organization, then, was reoriented in order to support the rural armed struggle up to the point that in the beginning of the 1970s there was no leadership structure in Bangkok responsible for activities in the capital as a whole. There were networks, each of which linked to a different region, charged with helping the development of the guerilla forces by assuring communication, information, or collection of funds, clothing, and medicines. Comparatively, renouncing centralized leadership of the urban network was an uncommon move for a Maoist party.

Operating along the Indochinese borders and near China, the CPT benefited from important logistical, financial, military, and food support from its neighbors. It had diplomatic representation in Peking and the backcountry of Yunnan. It opened bases in Laos where there were hospitals, schools, and training camps. With the exception of Thailand's southern region, militants based in the jungle were armed, fed, and cared for thanks to this foreign assistance. The cadres of the party were often sent to train in China; thus, ideological dependence on Peking was coupled with a dangerous physical dependence.

## **A Crucial Decade**

The political climate in the 1970s shifted in such a way that the CPT was able to coordinate its struggle at the national level. A national crisis – simultaneously political, social, and moral – broke out in Thailand with the overthrow of the military dictatorship in 1973 and the proliferation of radicalized student and peasant movements. For the first time, revolutionary victory seemed possible. Communist guerillas were active in Thailand, Burma, and Malaysia, hoping for support from Peking and Hanoi. American officials expected to see the loss of continental Southeast Asia.

During this period large numbers of people and a plurality of organizations were engaged in a struggle against dictatorship and for democracy. Students participated actively in the organization of labor unions. They also launched a campaign promoting and publicizing the rights of peasants and contributed to the development of peasant associations, especially in the North where the new Federation of Peasants of Thailand became prominent. Workers' strikes and peasant delegations increased in the capital.

The arrest of democratic militants who demanded the promulgation of the constitution stoked the fire in October 1973. The student movements and then the common urban people of the capital took to the streets. Faced with repression, the huge demonstrations turned violent. The king had no choice but to demand the exile of the dictators. For the first time in the history of Thailand, a military dictatorship was defeated under pressure from the street. Individually, militants of both the CPT and the Socialist Party participated in the October 1973 struggle. They built underground networks and had an increasing influence on above-ground organizations. The CPT enjoyed a substantial amount of prestige among the students, who admired its tenacity and its devotion to the people, but who knew very little about the party itself. In fact, as such, the CPT was not at the initiative of the 1973 upsurge and had little to offer in terms of orientation to the continuing mass struggles. Some student groups, such as the Federation of Independent Students (FIST), which were animating the movements, looked to the CPT but usually were not members.

The false unanimity present after the October 1973 uprising died down as a result of the dual impact of social struggle within the kingdom and the victory of communist forces in Indochina. The royal family worried about the radicalization of struggles and was concerned with the abolition of the monarchy in Laos, a neighboring country. Political repression increased in severity and popular struggle became more risky. After several assassinations and attempted assassinations, many student and labor leaders from Bangkok fled to the jungle to join the underground partisans of the CPT. Notable among these was Seksan Prasertkul, a prominent union and student leader.

On October 6, 1976 police, military, and anti-left wing paramilitary forces assembled at the gates of Thammasat University and opened fire on protesters in what would come to be known as a massacre. There were hundreds of deaths and thousands of arrests; the televised images of the massacre shook the entire country. Just three years after the removal of the dictator in 1973, the military took power again in October 1976, shortly after the massacre. For many, it destroyed hope for Thailand's democratic evolution.

Still, this was not the end of the left. By the thousands, in order to avoid arrest or death, to pursue their struggle, and obsessed by the desire to avenge friends massacred at Thammasat, students joined the guerilla forces, along with workers and peasants. The People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT) increased its forces dramatically. In the beginning of 1979, at its peak, it had 12,000 to 14,000 soldiers according to government estimates; according to other estimations, there were 20,000. Guerilla zones existed in more than forty provinces and the CPT had influence in thousands of villages with a total population of more than 3 million.

It was not only numbers that gave the CPT and PLAT strength. The credibility of party leadership was reinforced by the coup. Though the party had not necessarily drawn large numbers of members from protest movements in the past, guerilla zones became the only refuge for the urban and student activists who were now hunted by government forces. Members of the mainstream left were also forced to go underground and join the movement, including the United Socialist Front (USF) and particularly the Socialist Party of Thailand (SPT).

The mass arrival of young urban folks in the guerilla camps caused many logistical problems. The integration of students educated into the urban democratic fight within more traditional village communities was difficult. A few months after the coup d'état of October 6, 1976, the first conflict broke out within the camps in the southern province of Surat Thani; however, such conflicts remained localized. Still, the rallying to the CPT, to the PLAT, and to the new United Front of prominent worker, peasant, and student activists, and the growing propensity of the student movement for revolution, allowed for a considerable enlargement of the social base of the Thai communist movement.

### **Sino-Indochinese War**

Between 1979 and 1980 the CPT lost a great deal of support from the outside. Militants left the guerillas and returned to towns in large numbers, discreetly at first, then publicly, in response to a government offer of general amnesty. In 1981 through 1982 the crisis of the Thai left became increasingly profound. The contradictions that undermined the heart of the CPT became apparent with its Fourth Congress. At that time, approximately half the guerillas had already left the jungle. Extensive political debates within the Thai left called its legitimacy into question.

One cause of this decline, and perhaps the most obvious, was the Sino-Indochinese crisis. Political and then military disputes between the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Chinese regimes had serious repercussions for Thailand. A flow of refugees from the three Indochinese countries caused confrontations within the movement and raised several ideological and political issues. Tensions were particularly obvious between the CPT and the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). The VCP had proposed, since 1975, a considerable increase of military assistance to the CPT, in order to take advantage of the American collapse in Indochina and to give a push to the revolutionary struggle in Thailand. Such offers were reiterated until 1978, but the CPT refused, believing that the Vietnamese party wanted to exert its own influence on the revolutionary movement in Thailand. For Hanoi, the CPT's refusal reflected the will of Peking to avoid an extension of revolutionary struggle in the region and demonstrated the political dependence of the CPT on China.

In this period, the CPT was obliged to choose between its past allies. It maintained its alliance with Peking and the Khmer Rouge and denounced Vietnam as an agent of social imperialism in Southeast Asia. Pham Van Dong, Vietnamese prime minister, declared in 1978 that all assistance to the CPT was suspended. In 1979 the CPT and CCPDF camps in Laos were closed and the Thai militants expelled.

### **Crises of Allegiance**

The Third Indochinese War, in which China briefly invaded Vietnam in response to Vietnam's occupation of [1] Cambodia, accelerated the crisis of the party, which politically and logistic-ally depended on the support of its neighbors. The war also instigated a series of debates within the CPT, as the militants began to question the capacity of the party's leadership. The brutal decline of the



CPT and its guerilla forces after a period of such rapid growth was a result of the way in which the leadership of the party reacted to the regional conflicts between the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cambodian regimes.

The party came into crisis even before the government and the army inflicted heavy blows on the resistance. It was not defeated by superior forces, but was weakened both by the loss of its Indochinese allies and by the evolution of Chinese diplomacy as it opened up to the West. The CPT was also undermined by the advent of deep internal divergences.

Because the party was unable to avoid a rupture with Vietnamese and Lao forces, some questioned whether the CPT's leadership was more responsive to the Thai people or to Chinese policymakers. These questions arose when Chinese leadership supported ASEAN and efforts were made for the constitution of an anti-Vietnamese front. Suspicions were also raised by increasing diplomacy between China and the US and the improvement of relations between the Thai and Chinese governments. The Voice of the Thai People, the radio station of the CPT that had been established in China, permanently ceased broadcasting a few days after the declaration announcing China's rupture with Hanoi and denouncing Vietnam as a threat to Thailand. The disappearance of the radio station was a blow to the Thai movement, as it had been the principal means of political communication between militants in Thailand. The discontinuation of the station was perceived by the government as a pledge of good will from Peking toward Bangkok. Moreover, leadership began to solicit the militants to prepare for resistance against what seemed an inevitable Vietnamese invasion of Thailand.

The Vietnamese invasion never occurred. Slowly, the militant Thai left started to get the measure of the tragedy faced by the Cambodian people under the Khmer Rouge. In the Northeast, many PLAT units experienced the bloody "radicalism" of their Cambodian comrades. Moreover, some CPT members implemented a "Polpotian" policy by forcefully shifting many Thai villages to the Cambodian side of the border. After the Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia, the Thai government army allied with the Khmer Rouge and turned Chinese arms against PLAT.

Many newer members of the party and of PLAT finally decided to leave the jungle, often citing reasons concerning lack of democratic decision-making practices. The politburo of the CPT was often non-communicative and few political documents circulated within the party. Rare "directives," often obscurely signed "center," were written in terms so general that they were nearly impossible to discuss. The recruitment of new members to the party was rigidly controlled. The vertical orientation, partially a result of being underground, prohibited horizontal contacts and exchanges. Critical documents and communications only reached the leaders, who often did not reply.

Isolated in the jungle, with little contact with the population, the students, who by thousands joined the armed struggle in 1976, were powerless. They left, discouraged, one by one, group by group. Some left very early, others left much later, such as Seksan Prasertkul, who reached Bangkok only in 1981. The absence of democracy within the CPT, PLAT, and the Thai revolutionary movement in general was an essential factor in the crisis of the left. The militants were faced with the alternative of keeping quiet or voting with their feet by returning to the towns or villages.

A first disagreement, concerning strategy within Thailand, broke out regarding the attention paid to urban work versus rural work. The coup d'état of October 1976 and resultant move to the jungle temporarily staved off this debate. Later, the evolution of government policy opened a new space for democratic intervention in the towns. The union movement began new activities. Bangkok became again a political center of concern.

A second disagreement emerged over the party's Maoist orientation. Many felt that the Thai

revolutionary movement did not have a clear line of action. These debates confirmed the end of the Chinese model. China had become the single point of reference for the Thai militants. The ideological formation of the militants was based on chosen Maoist works. Faith in the Chinese “big brother” was shaken by the violent struggles between factions which tore apart the PCC in the following years. The Chinese leadership eventually attacked the heritage of Mao himself. The experience was traumatizing for the Thai militants.

### **Fourth Congress of CPT**

The crisis of the Communist Party of Thailand was already obvious when the Fourth Congress convened more than twenty years after the third. Due to the precariousness of the military situation, the leadership of the party decided to convene three regional assemblies. At this particular moment, the CPT was losing the majority of its active forces and its prestige was declining. A small majority opted for a reform of the orientation and the functioning of the party: the Northeast, the new zones of the North, and the organization in Bangkok voted together against the North, the South, and the Central leadership.

On ideological issues the term “semi-feudal” gave way to “semi-capitalist.” The traditional orientation was replaced by formulas balancing the strategic importance of the town and the countryside, of the armed struggle and the political struggle. Such formulas were closer to those of the Vietnamese than the Chinese. The word “revisionist” was withdrawn from the party vocabulary. Analysis of the USSR became vague, and the congress declared that it was ready to seek alliances with all “neutral” groups who were not too allied to Moscow or Peking. The party’s Maoist orientation was further questioned.

The reformers gained ground at the last congress. However, the votes did not express homogeneous lines but blocs of factions. The aftermath of the congress was bitter for the reformers. The new leadership remained de facto under the control of former dominant factions, and key zones of the reformers did not have representation in the central committee. The official communiqués of the CPT played down the debates and changes. The documents of the Fourth Congress were only officially published in 1986.

The 1982 congress did not resolve the crisis. A new series of eye-catching defections occurred, including among the party leadership. Groups of guerilla forces negotiated en masse their surrender, especially in the Northeast. In certain regions of the South the military forces of the CPT resisted the crisis, but on the national level the guerillas disintegrated. In 1986 the CPT leadership announced that it had reorganized and reinforced its relationship with international solidarity; however, the party did not reappear on the political scene.

### **Difficult Departure from the Jungle**

The 1980s marked the end of an era of party oriented revolutionary struggle. Another era commenced which, on the contrary, was characterized by the disappearance of political parties with leftist roots. Unlike in places such as the Philippines, the crisis of the CPT did not give way to a pluralist left, but to the disappearance of the political left. This contrast could be understood in part by the new policy of counterinsurrection implemented in Thailand under the government of General Prem Tinsulanonda. The government offered individual amnesty to CPT members and negotiated the grouped return of guerilla units into newly established villages. This policy was a success because it came at the time when the CPT leadership could not offer any credible solution to its crisis. Still, it

does not completely explain the reasons for the collapse or the disintegration of the political left as a whole.

The militant struggle in the jungle collapsed for a number of reasons. First, ideological confusion, disciplinary constraints, and isolation of camps from one another made collective departure difficult. More importantly, members of the party and the revolutionary army living in the jungle had depended on the central leadership for everything (money, rice, ammunition, and arms), and splitting meant being without material means for survival. Each member had to search for work or for his or her family for financial resources. Priority was placed on professional and social reintegration. Many resumed the education interrupted by the 1976 coup. Under such conditions, it proved very difficult for the “returnees from the jungle” to maintain their newly formed organizations.

There were also generational and linguistic issues. The generation gap was particularly profound. The leadership was largely composed of cadres advanced in age, of Chinese origin, and for whom Thai was a second language. The assimilation of Sino-Thai children accelerated with the suspension of immigration in 1949. They went to Thai schools and fewer spoke the dialects of their parents or grandparents. Living in China or in surrounding camps, the historical cadres of the CPT remained unaware of these developments. Language created a political barrier for other reasons as well. English was not used frequently, even by the students, as Thailand had not been colonized, and there were very few Marxist works translated into Thai. Very few people could read Marx or understand how Marxism was plural, encompassing various trends.

### **Continuing the Struggle**

Some students who returned from the underground movement took up activities in the parties of the traditional “political establishment” linked to industrial and banking sectors, and defended sociopolitical reform. Others turned to the Socialist Democratic Party, established legally after the SPT went underground. The National Labor Party recruited some student and labor cadres returning from the jungle and hoped to be a permanent voice for the workers for the first time in the Thai political arena, which was historically reserved for the elite classes. However, the majority of leftist militants felt that this new party would primarily serve to intervene in the union movement on behalf of various military factions.

Others returning from the jungle concentrated their energy on the publication of above-ground political magazines, with both information on current events and in-depth discussions related to the militant experience. Study groups were formed with students who were often anxious to reflect on these experiences. The crisis of the CPT paved the way to a vast ideological debate within the Thai left and provoked an effort at political reflection never witnessed before in Thailand.

Social work and the defense of democracy took on greater importance for militants desirous to engage in work for social change. New associations of volunteer work were established and oriented towards slums, children’s welfare, and the rural population. Various cooperatives appeared in the villages. These associations began to coordinate their actions more systematically. Still, in spite of a very precarious political situation in the kingdom, the era of revolutionary struggle ended, at least temporarily.

### **Pierre Rousset**

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## **Two generations of activists: Wirat Angkhathawon and Seksan Prasertkul**

***Two short biographies of Thai revolutionaries has been included in the Encyclopedia to illustrate the depth of the "generation gap" between the founding members of the CPT and the 1970s' radicals.***

### **Wirat Angkhathawon (1921-1997)**

[*The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*, vol. VII, pp. 3538-3539.]

The Kingdom of Thailand entered into a period of turmoil in 1973 when the military dictatorship was overthrown. Wirat Angkhathawon, at the age of 42, became a principal leader of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and a distinctive representative of the militant post-World War II generation.

Wirat was born in 1921 in Bangkok to a family of Chinese origin from the town of Swatow, a port in the South of China. Although relatively affluent, his family encountered financial difficulties due to his father's health problems. After studying in a Chinese school, Wirat joined the communists and began working in a match factory in 1940. Subsequently, Wirat was sent to the South of Thailand,

meeting his future wife, Somphon, from a Sino-Thai trading family from the southern province of Patthalung. Somphon spent a short period in China for studies and became a member of the Communist Party in 1943. Wirat returned to Bangkok in 1944 and was elected to the Central Committee of the CPT and the political department at the second congress in 1952. He was re-elected to the Central Committee and elected to the five-member secretariat of the CPT at the third congress in 1961.

From 1950 to 1951 Wirat resided mostly outside of Thailand, in China and Laos or in mountain bases on the border of Thailand. He first studied at the Marxist-Leninist Institute in Peking and returned to Thailand in 1957-8 and regularly went to China for Communist Party meetings. From 1965 to 1976 Wirat lived alternatively in China and a remote base of Nan in northern Thailand. Wirat settled in Laos where he led the "re education" of the dissident cadres of "the region of three provinces" (Phetchabun-Phitsanulok-Loei) before traveling to China in the late 1970s. In 1982 he joined a base of CPT to participate in the fourth congress.

Wirat used the pseudonyms of Comrade Than, Jang Yuan, and Tho Phianwitthaya. It was under this last name that he signed, in 1978, the principal document analyzing the history of the CPT from the point of view of his leadership. He was the writer of important official declarations of the party.

Wirat Angkhathawon advanced the prestige of the CPT among the generation of Thai radicals in the 1970s. The CPT was the only Thai party successfully to organize resistance against the military dictatorship, and was widely recognized for its political and economic integrity. But after 1978 the CPT entered a period of crisis when the People's Republic of China moved decisively toward a market, pro-capitalist economy. The CPT's staunch "pro-Chinese" stance impaired the party's reputation among leftists and youths in Thailand.

In late 1982 Wirat suffered a stroke. After hospitalization in Bangkok, he returned to China in 1983 for treatment before his death on June 16, 1997.

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## **Prasertkul, Seksan (b. 1949)**

[*The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*, vol. VI, pp. 2746-2748.]

Seksan Prasertkun (or Prasertkul) was among the most visible student leaders in the demonstrations of October 1973 that toppled the Thai military regime. He was also among the first groups who joined the fighters of the Communist Party of Thailand when it became clear that a new coup d'état was underway. He was one of the militants who actively opposed CPT leadership support for the People's Republic of China and the Khmer Rouge during the Sino Indochinese conflict of 1978-9. After losing this ideological campaign in the Thai communist movement, Seksan permanently returned to civilian life. Marcel Barang, who translated many of Seksan's writings, summarized his exceptional journey in one sentence: "Child of the poor, great student speaker, outcast underground fighter, highly quoted professor, renowned writer, witness and actor of his century." In this way he became an emblematic figure of the radical generation of the 1970s.

Seksan Prasertkun had a poor childhood. Son of a technician of small trawlers and a fruit and vegetable vendor, he became an excellent student in a monk school of his village of fishermen, at the mouth of Bang Pakong, on the Gulf of Thailand. In 1967, at the age of 18 years, Seksan had the fifteenth highest score at the national university entrance examination, opening the doors of the prestigious Thammasat University in Bangkok. Seksan received a scholarship to travel to the US to learn English in 1968 at the time when mobilizations against the war in Vietnam were at their height, and returned to Thailand politicized.

In the late 1960s the military regimes of Field Marshals Thanom and Praphas were highly unpopular and nationalist and democratic demands expanded dramatically. In 1972 the National Center for Student Action (NSCT) launched a campaign to boycott Japanese products. Seksan became known by his university and polemical writings. On October 6, 1973, when student "leaders" were arrested by the police, Seksan avoided arrest. A talented speaker with charisma, Seksan led mass demonstrations to demand the release of students and a national constitution. From October 13-14, Thai armed forces fired on demonstrators, killing more than 1,500 democracy protesters. The civilian demonstration and military crackdown forced King Bhumibol to order the dismissal of the field marshals.

Seksan founded the Federation of Independent Students of Thailand (FIST), one of the principal components of the radical wing of the movement. Faced with the deadly rise of violence of the extreme right, he decided, earlier than most others, to join the fighters of the Communist Party. He left the country in 1975 with three student activists for France, China, Vietnam, and Laos (where he obtained political and military training).

In October 1976, when the army seized power in a bloody coup, Seksan joined the People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT) to fight in the Rongkla mountain range in Northern Thailand until the beginning of 1978. Seksan returned to Thai Communist Party outposts in Northern Laos at a time when the triangular conflict between communist China, Vietnam, and Khmer Rouge-led Cambodia worsened. The CPT leadership sided with the Chinese and the Khmer Rouge over Vietnam, a position Seksan vehemently opposed. In 1979 Seksan left for Laos to a base in the province of Phayao where his first son, Chang, was born in July.

Despite Seksan's criticism of the CPT position, the party refused his request to leave the movement, and he and his family were sent to the Burmese border, in the district of Umphang, where they were in political quarantine. But Seksan clashed with the provincial leadership of the party, in the framework of the preparation of the fourth congress of the CPT. He was opposed to the mode of authoritarian designation of delegates, declaring later in Bangkok: "We had to fight for democracy all over again in the jungle." Now in opposition to the CPT, many former students were demoralized and averse to pursue the internal battle under exceptionally difficult conditions. At the end of 1980 Seksan and other dissidents in the party were finally permitted to leave the jungle. In his writings he wrote about his difficult journey.

Like many students who “came back from the jungle” Seksan resumed his studies. He received a doctorate degree in political science from Cornell University in the US; his thesis was on the evolution of the state and Thai economy. He embarked on a new lifestyle as a professor, rising from 1993 to 1995 to dean of the political science faculty at Thammasat University. From 1984 to 1993 Seksan authored numerous articles highly critical of upper-class privilege and repressive Thai society, including an autobiographic screenplay for the film *Moonhunter* (2001).

Seksan Prasertkul is a generous man, whose self-assurance and frankness always stand out in a culture where self-effacement and ignorance of conflicts is seen as a virtue. Nevertheless his own history reflects the radicalization of a university milieu socially transformed by the arrival of a number of working-class students, shocked by the corruption of the regime and the Indochinese war, and in contact with campuses beyond the Pacific [2]. Engaged fully in the struggle for a fair society, such students were profoundly disillusioned by the Thai Communist Party. The difficulty lay in pursuing this initial engagement after the end of the armed struggle in a country without a militant tradition or alternative to the CPT.

## **Pierre Rousset**

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## **P.S.**

\* On the International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest, see on ESSF:

[The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest - 1500 to the Present](#)

[A presentation of the “International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present”](#)

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## **Footnotes**

[1] Correction from the printed version “Vietnam’s aggressions against Cambodia”. For an analysis of the Sino-Indochinese Wars, see: Pierre Rousset, [Les guerres entre « Etats socialistes » : le conflit sino-indochinois de 1978-1979](#)

[2] This sentence has been corrected and differs from the printed version.