

# **The Thai Radicals and the Communist Party**

Yuangrat Wedel

**MARUZEN ASIA**

# The Thai Radicals and the Communist Party

Interaction of Ideology and Nationalism  
in the Forest, 1975–1980

Yuangrat Wedel

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the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*

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# Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements .....                               | vii |
| Introduction .....                                   | 1   |
| The First Contacts .....                             | 3   |
| Influence of the Non-Communists Marxists .....       | 7   |
| Into the Jungle .....                                | 11  |
| Reception and Reaction .....                         | 15  |
| International Changes .....                          | 19  |
| Chinese Domination Sharpens Conflicts .....          | 23  |
| Maoism and the CPT .....                             | 27  |
| The CPT View of Thai Society .....                   | 31  |
| Party Strategy .....                                 | 37  |
| Party Structure and Discipline .....                 | 43  |
| Out of the Jungle .....                              | 47  |
| Analysis of the Split .....                          | 51  |
| What is to be Done? .....                            | 55  |
| Appendix A Methods .....                             | 59  |
| Appendix B Basic Questions Asked in Interviews ..... | 63  |
| Appendix C Background of Thai Radicals .....         | 65  |
| Appendix D Chronology of Thai Radicalism .....       | 73  |
| Notes .....  | 79  |
| Bibliography .....                                   | 83  |

## INTRODUCTION

FROM 1975 to 1977, a large number of Thai students and political activists fled rightist and government violence to join the armed Communist insurgency in the forest. Academic observers<sup>1</sup> wrote that the exodus, which included many of the nation's brightest and most articulate youth, was a major victory for the Communists. But within six years, most of the radicals had given themselves up to the Thai government, expressing serious disagreement with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), which they labeled a puppet of China.

This radical-Communist split has provided an opportunity to study the brief alliance through first-hand information from the radical participants and to shed more light on the thinking of both the radicals and the Communists.

This study will examine the questions of the radicals' motivations for joining the Communists, the intellectual influences on them and their differences with the Communists. In describing the process of the developing antagonism between the two groups, particular attention will be paid to the role of Chinese dominance of the CPT, ideological differences over Maoism, the effect of party structure and discipline, the importance of tactical differences and personal ambition and the effect of the government amnesty program. The information will be used as the basis for a brief analysis of the possible effect of the split upon the future actions of both the radicals and the Communists.

The study is based on extensive interviews<sup>2</sup> with 22 of the radicals who fled the jungle, including most of the best-known radical leaders.<sup>3</sup> Those interviewed are not intended to be a representative sample of the estimated 3,000 radicals who joined the Communists in the jungle. They are rather the intellectual and organizational leaders of the broad category of activists demanding rapid and major social, political and economic change in Thailand that I have labeled "radicals." For the purposes of this paper I have drawn a distinction between "radicals" who, although influenced by the writings of Communism, were not under Communist Party ideological discipline and "Communists" who were fully under this party discipline, usually as members of the party itself or its youth wing.

It must be kept in mind that most of the informants for this study came from the radical group and that there was no first-hand

contact with the Communists, although some effort has been made to give an understanding of what their position must have been in the difficulties of dealing with the radicals. More detailed and less biased information on the views of the Communists must be awaited before definitive conclusions can be drawn on their reaction to the radicals. My interest, however, has focused on the radicals themselves and the continuing development of an indigenous radical ideology under stress and in competition with powerful foreign ideological forces.

## THE FIRST CONTACTS

BEFORE 14 October, 1973 the Communist Party of Thailand had few links with the student movement. In line with their avowed Maoism the party leaders concentrated their efforts on organizing peasants in the countryside. It must have come as a stunning surprise when the lightly regarded students with the support of the urban masses were able to overthrow the ruling military government in less than a week of overt struggle.<sup>4</sup> The CPT with its rural strategy, in comparison, had achieved almost nothing in 30 years of revolutionary warfare. The party was unable to react to the events in the capital and did not take much advantage of the confusion in the Thai government and armed forces.

For their part the students had just as little knowledge and understanding of the Thai Communist Party as the party had of them. Thai government suppression had kept the party from publicizing itself in the cities and the party's Maoism kept it from expending much effort on students they saw as bourgeois, urban intellectuals. But after the student success the party began making its approaches and, as the right wing started to strike back, the students became more receptive. Communist agents contacted, directly or indirectly, most of the top student leaders. "We all knew who they were,"<sup>5</sup> Seksan Prasert Kul, leader of the 14 October uprising, said later. "We did not have any prejudice against them, but we knew that they were not like us . . . We both knew there were some differences between us, but they knew me very little and I knew them very little too."<sup>6</sup>

Before going into the forest most of the radicals had read CPT documents and propaganda, some of which was actually published by radical student groups.<sup>7</sup>

While such publications were clearly part of a Communist plan to infiltrate and influence the radical movement, they do not mean that the student radicals were convinced supporters of the Communist Party. It was a time of intense radical intellectual activity. All the writings forbidden for so long were being published and discussed with the eagerness of those long denied the opportunity.<sup>8</sup> The explosion of radical literature was too sudden to penetrate very deeply. There was too much ferment and too little time. Although the radicals read CPT literature and talked with members and agents of the party who came

into the city, they did not really have a very good idea of what the ideology of the CPT actually was. It was first obscured by government suppression and then by the Communists' own distortions in their efforts to win support. The government, of course, used its own propaganda and psychological operations to try to convince the people that Communists were simply those who wished to destroy the nation, its religion and its monarchy as well as replace the everyday life of the people with an all encompassing collectivism. Pridi Panomyong the leader of the 1932 coup and one of the first Thai Marxists, complained of this propaganda, that the government made it seem that the Communists "would even confiscate the clothes you are wearing. They would make women common property, destroy religion and so on. This kind of propaganda makes people afraid of Communism so much that it becomes a state of mind."<sup>9</sup>

This simplistic government image, if it had ever been believed by the student radicals, quickly dissolved when they met actual Communists and found them to be articulate and sympathetic. With government propaganda shown so clearly to be false it was that much easier to believe Communist propaganda instead. To best attract the radicals the Communist agents in the city subtly altered the party line espoused among peasants in rural areas or among the party faithful in their jungle bases. The radicals said later that the Communists projected a strongly nationalist image, placing much emphasis on the presence of American troops and foreign control of the Thai economy.<sup>10</sup> Although the Communist propaganda never departed from the tenets of Maoism, the radicals said their first introduction to Communist ideology made it seem more open and flexible with less overt mention of Mao as an object of veneration.<sup>11</sup> In the city the Communists were, in a sense, working on the student radicals' home ground and therefore were more circumspect. Immediately after the stunning success of 14 October many of the radicals were too flushed with victory to pay much attention to the agents from the party. With the increasing organization and confidence of the right, however, the student radicals and labour leaders began to listen. Kamnoon Sittisamarn, Secretary of the Student Centre in 1974 said "As the students encountered obstacles they began looking for new ideas and those of the CPT began sounding more realistic."<sup>12</sup>

While there was no real ideological antagonism between the radicals and the CPT, the radicals were not ideologically committed to the party at all. Very few, if any, were party members or under party discipline. The radicals believed that the major difference was that the Communists were committed to a violent, armed revolution beginning in the countryside while the radicals thought they could bring about change (and in fact, had already done so) by political organization and agitation in the cities.<sup>13</sup> The overthrow of the government on

14 October, 1973 seemed to prove the students and other radicals were correct, but the bloody attack on Thammasat and military coup three years later on 6 October, 1976<sup>14</sup> seemed to leave only the Communist option of armed revolution.



## INFLUENCE OF THE NON-COMMUNIST MARXISTS

In the interim between the two October events there was a period of open intellectual debate among the radicals. Along with the Maoist ideas of the CPT the radicals were reading the original works of Marx and Lenin that were freely available in Thai translation and in English for the first time in Thailand. The radicals did not always understand what they read, nor were they always convinced by it. The Marxist literature did, however, give them the conceptual and rhetorical ammunition with which to attack the existing social-economic-political system they abhorred. Like almost all the radicals interviewed student organizer Pridi Boonsue readily admitted the influence of Marx. "I read Marx's works before I went into the jungle, but I picked among Marx's ideas by reading independently."<sup>15</sup>

But there was another set of ideas which had great, though not necessarily conflicting, influence on the young radicals. In addition to the works of the foreign communists, the open period also made available the suppressed works of an earlier generation of Thai radicals, especially those of the 1950s, who had faced many of the same theoretical difficulties and contradictions the radicals of the 1970s were facing. These earlier radicals had consciously (and unconsciously) tried to integrate the thoughts of Marxism and the traditional values, especially religious, of Thai culture. The results of their efforts I have called "Thai Marxism."<sup>16</sup> The principal developers of Thai Marxism were Pridi Panomyong, Jit Pumisak, Anut Arpapirom, Gularp Saipradit, Nai Pii, Seni Saowapong and Amnat Yutawiwat.

Several of these thinkers eventually joined the CPT, but their writings that were most influential were those done before they came under CPT influence or after they escaped it.

The student radicals were particularly influenced by the ideas of brilliant historian and linguist Jit Pumisak, who was killed by government police in 1966, and had adopted some of the language of Marxism and some of its analytical methods. When he applied them to Thai history, however, he created a structure more Thai than Marxist. It was a history of Thailand that differed radically from the accepted notions put forward by the government in school textbooks and approved publications. In "The Face of Thai Feudalism"<sup>17</sup> Jit gave the radicals the historical platform from which to attack the unsatisfactory present.



Jit and the other Thai Marxists had realized that the ideas of Marx needed to be adapted to fit the Thai situation and to be acceptable to the ordinary Thai. In the process of this adaptation<sup>18</sup> these thinkers tried to reinterpret what they thought were the best of Thai values into a Marxist framework. They emphasized cultural and ethical change rather than economic change. Art, literature and religion, the radicals believed, were tools used by the oppressing class to keep the corrupt system working. So one of their first priorities was to take these tools from the hands of the exploiters and put them at the service of the oppressed. They tried to create a revolutionary literature, a revolutionary art and even a kind of revolutionary Buddhism.

They tried to make their work comprehensible to ordinary people and applicable to their lives, reversing centuries of elitist art that focused on the lives of the aristocracy. They tried to bring Buddhism back to what they saw as its original spirit while at the same time reshaping it to fit the form of revolution. Thai Marxists believed that in order to change Thai society a cultural and psychological revolution had to precede and make possible the political revolution. In this cultural revolution, which was very different from the Chinese cultural revolution, artists and writers were to be the leading edge of a change in consciousness. The weapons of this revolution were to be poems, songs, novels and films. The Thai Marxists did not place much importance on the party. They saw the revolution much more in the inspirational terms of Marx rather than the calculating terms of Lenin. The Thai Marxists saw their function as one mainly of consciousness raising. Once the consciousness of the people was raised, the masses, including the middle class and the intellectuals would sweep forward together to bury the old, oppressive society. The success of the protests of 14 October, 1973 seemed to give credence to the Thai Marxists' rather romantic conceptions. The Thai Marxists tended to downplay the abstruse economic theory that is at the heart of much of Marx's writing. They make reference to it and use its terms, trying to insist Marx's economic analysis must also apply to Thailand. But they never actually apply that analysis themselves to the situation in Thailand.

The Thai Marxists felt more comfortable applying Marx's class analysis to Thai society. But since Marxist analysis was developed from European and industrial models, the Thai Marxists necessarily had alterations and additions to make. The Thai Marxists saw the *sakdina* (Thai-style feudal) class as the principal oppressor class. This class, with its connections to privilege and wealth through the central government was the target of their analysis. Much of their work was aimed at arousing the other classes — peasants, workers and intellectuals — to the unjust exploitation of the *sakdina* class.