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Enters the Agitator

A Strange Story of Land Reform (December 2009)



Prayong Doklumyai went up to a high podium. He adjusted his microphone, and asked a crowd of squatters: "Why are you landless?"

There were murmurs in the crowd.

"If you ask a monk," Prayong continued, "he will say: 'It's your old Karma; you have done little good deeds in your past life; that's why you're suffering in this life.'"

"But that's not true!" shouted a thin man, bare-chested. Prayong nodded and continued with his questioning.

"If you ask a teacher, he will say: 'You

have little education.'

If you ask a doctor, he will say: You guys have too many diseases that hindered your ability to perform and function."

"Now," Prayong paused. "If you ask me, I will say that it's the structure of society that made you poor and landless."

"It's not that we don't have land! We have plenty of land, but it all belongs to the rich," he gestured with his hand towards the Parliament

Prayong pulled out a sheet of paper and started to read the statistics into the microphone. He informed the crowd that in Thailand, 10% of the population owns 90% of private land.

"There are 150 million Rai of private land in Thailand," said Prayong. "And much of it belongs to the politicians," he smiled, "and that's why land reform policies in Thailand never did materialized."

"There are 30 million Rai that are left vacant without any uses - just speculative land," said Prayong.

"If we divided the total land in the nation - 320 million Rai - by 60 million; each person will have more than 5 Rai worth of land - a large amount!" said Prayong. (5 Rai = 0.8 Hectare)

"So yes we have land available, but it's simply not yours," Prayong smiled.

The crowd roared savagely. The entire forum descended into an orchestra of cursing and foul language.

Prayong works at the controversial Land Reform Network for more than 10 years now. He wears a black beard that cover more than half of his face; the remainder of his face is then covered with a thick pair of glasses. Despite all his attempts to appear vulgar and folksy, there is still - lurking behind his black beard - an armchair intellectual in its pure form. He is, in essence, a political theorist.

One of his radical ideas managed to find its way to the primetime TV news (right before the soap operas); it was the idea of Community Land-use Deed. Sometimes it is known as Collective Land Deed. Shortly after its TV appearance, the idea also managed to find its way to the Prime Minister's desk.

Thailand's National Park and preservation areas are home to more than 10 million people. Most of them have been working and living in the area long before they were designated as National Parks. Soon after, they were all regarded as "squatters" in places where their ancestor had lived for more than 300 years.

Prayong and his team came up with an idea: why not let the people draw up their own land-use map? Why not draw up their own land deed, for that matter?

They could do their own surveying and draw up a hand map showing the boundaries of their land. This is very much like the process of writing articles in Wikipedia. The people do their own writing and checking. Then, technical teams could go in and help with digitizing all the hand maps - for a more rapid transmission of data in the network. The community land-use map is usually done very quickly - within a few weeks at most.

During the entire process of drawing up their own land-use maps, city officials are usually asked to participate and to walk along with the folks. Once the maps are done, and Community Land Deed is issued collectively by the community. Still, the collective land deed stays "unofficial." It is simply one instrument for the community to fight back

land speculation. But with Prayong's insistence, the "unofficial" could be seen as the "official" (if you want it to be). Don Quixote would have agreed.

Then an announcement came this summer; the Prime Minister - Abhisit Vejjajiva - made it clear that he and his cabinet intended to recognize the concept of Community Land Deed as a way to solve the problem of land-use in Thailand. The Community Land Deed is similar to the concept of the land co-op, but it involves less bureaucracy and has more flexibility.

The essential concept of Community Land Deed is that it is "collective"; the community owns the land together; and any selling and buying of individual plot would have to be pre-approved by other members of the community.

Prayong, in addition to advocating the concept of collective land ownership, has also slipped in the idea of implementing a land tax - 2% - on all vacant piece of land. The cabinet is now considering his suggestion. This tax money will be used for a "Land Bank" where people can apply for land loan and other grants from it.

Still, there is some debate of whether the "Land Bank" will stay local or will be operating on a national scale. A centralized national "Land Bank" will have huge bureaucracies but will be less influenced by local politics. The local "Land Bank" idea - where each municipality has its own "Land Bank" - could be influence by the local Mafiosi and powerful men in the provincial level. Both have their pros and cons.

Land reform is, ironically, a keystone in the growth of successful capitalism. Amartya Sen once observed that the unprecedented economic growth of China is an indirect result of it's egalitarian communistic measures - education, healthcare, and land reforms. It unleashed the productive power of the entire population.

"Basic education , good health and other human capabilities and quality of life (these are direct pay-offs of schooling, health care and other social arrangements), but these capabilities can also help in generating economic success of a more standard kind, which in turn can contribute to enhancing the quality of human life even more." (Amartya Sen, The Argumentative Indian, 2005, p. 198)
