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Santi Asoke Buddhism and the Occupation of Bangkok International Airport

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Thailand experienced dramatic political turmoil from February 2006 to November 2008 culminating in the occupation of the Bangkok International Airport. The demonstrations against then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his political allies were organised by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). One of the PAD leaders, Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, is an active member of the Buddhist Santi Asoke group. The group is controversial as it is not under the state Buddhist authorities and has implicitly criticised the Thai state Buddhist monks for moral corruption. Known as the 'Dharma Army', hundreds of Santi Asoke monks, nuns and lay people participated in PAD demonstrations. This paper analyses what the Santi Asoke Buddhist group represents, what the 'Dharma Army' is, how its reality differs from media images, what the ideological reasons for Asoke to initially support Thaksin were, and why the group finally turned against him. The paper argues that the group cannot be viewed as a monolithic community. Instead, it should be considered as an amalgamation of monks and nuns, urban and rural temple residents, lay followers of Asoke monks, practitioners of organic agriculture in Asoke village communities, students and former students of Asoke schools, and supporters of Major-General Chamlong Srimuang. Representatives of all these networks participated in the demonstrations albeit with different intensity.

Keywords: Thailand, Santi Asoke, Dharma Army, People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), Chamlong Srimuang

Zwischen Februar 2006 und November 2008 stand Thailand unter dem Zeichen tiefgehender politischer Unruhen, die in der Besetzung des internationalen Flughafens ihren Höhepunkt fanden. Organisiert wurden diese Demonstrationen, die sich gegen den damaligen Premierminister Thaksin Shinawatra und seine politischen Verbündeten richteten, von der Volksallianz für Demokratie (PAD). Einer ihrer Anführer, Generalmajor Chamlong Srimuang, ist aktives Mitglied der buddhistischen Santi Asoke Gruppe. Da sich Santi Asoke nicht der staatlich kontrollierten buddhistischen Ordnung beugt und solche Mönche implizit der moralischen Verdorbenheit

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beschuldigt, hängt ihr ein kontroverser Ruf an. Unter der Bezeichnung „Dharma Armee“ nahmen hunderte Anhänger von Santi Asoke, darunter Mönche, Nonnen und Laien an den PAD-Demonstrationen teil. Inhalt dieses Artikels ist daher die Analyse der Hintergründe und Ziele der Santi Asoke Gruppe und der „Dharma Armee“, Unterschiede zwischen medialer Darstellung und vorgefundener Realität sowie die Motive der anfänglichen Unterstützung Thaksins durch Santi Asoke und ihre spätere Abkehr von ihm. Dabei wird argumentiert, dass die Gruppe nicht als monolithischer Block verstanden werden kann, sondern in ihrer Vielfalt, zusammengesetzt aus Mönchen, Nonnen, EinwohnerInnen städtischer und ländlicher Tempel, Laien, AnhängerInnen biologischer Landwirtschaft in Asoke-Dörfern sowie UnterstützerInnen von Generalmajor Chamlong Srimuang begriffen werden muss. RepräsentantInnen all dieser Netzwerke nahmen, wenn auch in unterschiedlicher Intensität, an den Demonstrationen teil.

Schlagnworte: Thailand, Santi Asoke, Dharma Armee, Volksallianz für Demokratie (PAD), Chamlong Srimuang

The Buddhist Asoke Group of Thailand²

Santi Asoke as a name is a misnomer. Santi Asoke is just one of the many Asoke temples and communities in Thailand. Santi Asoke is a temple on the northeastern outskirts of Bangkok. It accommodates a vegetarian restaurant, two multi-storey apartment buildings housing laypeople, a school building and a huge unfinished temple in concrete, a publishing company with a printing press, a public library, one dormitory for laymen, another for laywomen and school girls, several meeting halls, a kitchen, a dental clinic, a small hospital, a supermarket and some 50 *kutis* for the housing of monks and nuns known as Sikkhamats. There are several Asoke temples located in various parts of Thailand; the oldest ones are Pathom Asoke in Nakhon Pathom, Sisa Asoke in Sisaket, Sima Asoke in Nakhon Ratchasima, Sali Asoke in Nakhon Sawan and Ratchathani Asoke in Ubon Ratchathani. There are also Asoke communities in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Trang, Chumphon, Khon Kaen, Chaiyaphum, Petchabun and other places.³ Although some of the centres are very modest, such

² An earlier version of this paper was presented at the fourth Viennese Conference on South-East Asian Studies “Crises and Conflicts in South-East Asia”, 19-20 June 2009, Vienna, Austria. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments, which I have tried to accommodate. I would also like to thank Ms Pat Norman for the language revision.

³ There were 27 Asoke centres in Thailand in 2007; five in Central Thailand, 13 in Northeastern Thailand, five in Northern Thailand and four in Southern Thailand (personal communication in Santi Asoke, 16 November 2007). There are two important centres in the north; Lanna Asoke in downtown Chiang Mai and *Phu Pa Fa Naam* (Mountain, Forest, Sky, Water) on the mountains in the same province. Descriptive Thai-language names became popular in Thailand after the financial crisis in July 1997. The centre in Chaiyaphum is called *Hin Pa Fa Nam* (Rock, Forest, Sky, Water).

as family-run vegetarian restaurants with a few regular customers, the number of Asoke centres has been increasing over the last twenty years.

The group consists of followers of Bodhiraksa, who was ordained as a monk more than 30 years ago. He was a famous TV entertainer in the 1970s, became vegetarian and started to preach first as a layman, but was later ordained into the royalist Thammayut Nikai⁴ sect in the state-controlled Buddhist *sangha* (monastic order). The Thai Buddhist sangha is divided into two different sects. Thammayut Nikai was established by King Mongkut (1804-1868), who was a monk for 26 years before assuming the throne as King Rama IV of the presently ruling Chakri dynasty in 1853. Thammayut Nikai is perceived as more “orthodox” in its behaviour, adopting the teachings of ethnic Mon monks, who in Thailand are still regarded by others as well as by themselves as more “orthodox.” The concept of “orthodoxy” is complex in Buddhism. The interpretation of Vinaya rules, for instance, varies from one country to another and “orthodoxy” guides behaviour rather than belief.⁵

Bodhiraksa was not impressed with the Thammayut Nikai and the monastic authorities could not tolerate his criticism concerning their non-vegetarianism, involvement in magic rituals and lax following of the monastic Vinaya rules. Bodhiraksa was re-ordained in the Mahanikai sect, which literally refers to the majority of the monks. The Thammayut Nikai has since Mongkut’s time controlled the state Buddhist organisation known as the Supreme Sangha Council or the Council of Elders (*Mahatherasamakhom*). The Mahanikai consists of both urban and rural monks and some forest monks, who are involved in rural community development projects or in teaching meditation. The official Thai Buddhist interpretation is that these two groups do not differ from each other. However, there is no space for a third “nikai,”⁶ so when Bodhiraksa left his last temple with a group of followers they became a *de facto* free non-state-controlled group.⁷

There was some propaganda against the group throughout the 1980s, but when Major-General Chamlong Srimuang was elected as the Governor of Bangkok (1985)

4 Thammayut Nikai refers to the Sanskrit word *Dharma* and Pali word *Dhamma* meaning Buddhist doctrine. Nikai comes from the Pali *nikaya* – meaning a sect. I have chosen to transliterate the Thai names according to the most common form in maps, media and literature.

5 See Hansen’s (2007) discussion on reforming and purifying the Khmer *sangha*.

6 Neighbouring Burma has nine different *nikayas*, whereas both Cambodia and Laos have traditionally had two *nikayas* as both have been influenced by Thai Buddhism.

7 Based on this exclusion, some regard Asoke as a “semi outlawed sect” (“Chang Noi”, *The Nation*, 15 September 2008).

and later showed interest in joining national politics (1988), the stage was set for a systematic campaign against and demonisation of “Santi Asoke” as the media insists upon calling the group. Chamlong was extremely popular as a Governor, regarded as a “Mr Clean,” who lived modestly according to the Asoke teachings, ate one vegetarian meal a day, rejected tobacco and alcohol, and did not gamble or visit night-clubs. In other words, Chamlong was an eye-catching exception among his contemporaries in Thai politics (McVey, 2000)⁸.

There were obvious reasons to assume that as a Prime Minister, Chamlong would not have been positive towards the various lucrative but shady business deals that the military politicians and the Sino-Thai business elite were involved in. In order to prevent Chamlong from taking to the national stage in politics, his Buddhist affiliations needed to be declared illegal. Bodhiraksa was detained in June 1989 and all the Asoke monks and nuns were detained for one night in August 1989. A court case was commenced against them that year lasting until 1996. They were accused of not being Buddhist monks, based on the fact that they had been excluded from the state Buddhist organisation.

After nearly seven years of on-going court hearings (Heikkilä-Horn, 1996, pp. 64-67), approximately a hundred monks and nuns were given a suspended sentence of two years. There was plenty of confusion of who was and who was not accused. The nuns or *Sikkhamats* were cleared of all charges, as they did not claim to be fully ordained Theravada Buddhist nuns or *bhikkhuni*. The Asoke nuns are Ten-Precept Nuns, which means that they depend on the lay people for their food, shelter, clothing and medicine.

After the court case the Asoke group was tolerated by the authorities⁹ and expanded rapidly. New Buddhist centres were established. New restaurants and shops selling organic products were opened. The economic crisis in 1997 boosted the interest in the Asoke group, which had always been critical of capitalism (*thunniyom*) and had been promoting its own Buddhist economics known as “meritism” (*bunniyom*).

The King of Thailand, in his birthday speech in 1997,¹⁰ indicated that Thailand

8 Analysis of the political tradition in Thailand can be found particularly in Sombat (2000) and Ockey (2000).

9 The monks and the Sikkhamats had to report regularly to the Correction Office. The Asoke monks are by law not regarded as *Bhikkhu*, and hence cannot be addressed as *Phra* but as *Samana*. The monks had been forced to wear a white robe as a sign of lay status since their arrest. They switched back to brown in 1998 after the two-year period of suspended sentence was over.

10 The speech was further clarified in December 1998 in another birthday speech.

should not concentrate all her efforts in an export-oriented economy but should secure self-sufficiency in food and the basic needs of the population. He suggested that whatever the people produce, they should keep one-third for themselves, while allotting one third for the domestic market and one-third for the export market. The King's philosophy is known as "Sufficiency Economics" and has been faithfully propagated ever since by every Thai government – whatever the government's real policies may have been.¹¹ Ironically, the Asoke group had been promoting similar economic ideas since the 1970s, but it had gone somewhat unnoticed due to the harsh criticism against other issues concerning the Asoke, such as the Asoke group's strict vegetarianism, which has remained one of the major controversies with the state Buddhist sangha. According to the state sangha, the Buddha himself never suggested that his monks should be vegetarians – common though it must have been among the Hindus in India that time. Asoke members argue that they want to follow the First Precept, which recommends that one should refrain from "destroying life."

The Asoke group had an opportunity to preach their economic ideas to the rural population when Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra delegated to the Asoke groups the government-financed training of tens of thousands of indebted farmers in Asoke centres in 2001.¹²

Farmers came in groups of about one hundred and stayed for five days. They learnt about organic farming, recycling and reusing, and were obliged to listen to sermons on the virtues of vegetarianism and *bunniyom*. Almost all centres were running these training courses, nearly a course per week. There were breaks in the training courses only when the Asoke people themselves gathered for their five annual weeklong retreats. This means that in five years hundreds of thousands of peasants have been trained at the Asoke centres.¹³

Many of the farmers attended the training courses rather reluctantly because, obviously, they had been forced to attend them. In exchange, their debt was

11 UNDP report (2007) outlines the philosophy of sufficiency economy in "Sufficiency Economy and Human Development." See UNDP Thailand Human Development Report 2007.

12 The Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) financed the training courses from May 2001 to March 2004. From April 2004 to 2007, the training courses were financed by the government's Health Department (Thamrong Sangsuriyajan from the Organic Farming Network of Thailand, personal communication at Santi Asoke, 16 November 2007).

13 Mr Thamrong Sangsuriyajan estimates that some 60,000 peasants were trained between 2001 and 2004, and another 100,000 between 2004 and 2007. A new programme of training courses started in 2007. Twenty-four Asoke centres were given funds to continue the training courses (Thamrong Sangsuriyajan, personal communication, 16 November 2007).

postponed for three years.¹⁴ Some participating farmers were visibly uncomfortable, not because of the rather simple conditions under which people live in the Asoke centres – those are the same conditions the farmers came from – but because of the lack of alcohol, cigarettes, gambling and other entertainment.¹⁵ Some participants in the training courses, however, became quite enthusiastic about organic agriculture and returned to learn more. During those five years, Asoke started to build up a considerable base among the ordinary Thai peasants, particularly in Northeastern Thailand (*Isan*), which has remained the poorest area in Thailand and where Asoke has three major temples and several small experimental farms, communities and shops selling Asoke products.¹⁶

Some of this goodwill among the Northeastern farmers was lost when the Asoke monks, nuns and lay people joined the anti-Thaksin demonstrations in February 2006. Thaksin had been particularly popular in the Northeast and the Asoke group had initially supported him.

Buddhism and Politics Always Mix

The Asoke group had always been political to a certain extent, but it would be naïve to claim that the other monks and temples in Thailand remained apolitical. The state sangha organisation parallels the state bureaucracy and the three Sangha Acts of 1902, 1941 and 1962 all place the sangha hierarchy under the secular hierarchy. Also, there have always been rebellious monks, sometimes as leaders of *phumibun* uprisings or so-called holy-men uprisings against the centralisation policies carried out by the state authority on the periphery. Several individual monks are known to have been in conflict with the state: Phra Phimontham in the 1960s, who protected the rights of the “suspected Communists” to join the monkhood; Buddhist monks were active in the early 1970s, when the left-wing student movement was also active (Somboon, 1976; 1982); several monks who have been trying to protect the forests against illegal logging have been threatened, forcibly disrobed or killed (Taylor, 1993); even one of

14 The debt of peasant families varies between 30,000 to 60,000 Thai baht. The average income of a farmer is between 1,500 to 3,000 baht per month. Based on my survey in April 2002 at Sisa Asoke.

15 Observations at Sisa Asoke from 2001 to 2006.

16 Many Asoke monks originate from Northeastern Thailand and are fluent in the local Lao and other dialects spoken there. There is great diversity among the Asoke people and it is not easy to give exact estimates of their ethnic and class background. A survey was conducted in the 1990s. See Heikkilä-Horn (1996).

the most respected Thai Buddhist monks, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, was several times accused of being a Communist during the long years of military dictatorship in Thailand during the Cold War period.¹⁷

There have also been several ultra-reactionary right-wing monks willing to support the corrupted military elite. The best known is Phra Kittiwuttho, who in the heat of the civil war in Thailand in the 1970s announced that it is not “demeritorious to kill a Communist.”¹⁸ Several monks have been closely linked to notorious military commanders and ministers, publicly giving their blessing to these people. One monk wanted the Thai people to donate their savings in gold to pay the International Monetary Fund (IMF) debt that the government had taken in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis. Another controversial Buddhist group, Dhammakaya¹⁹ temple, offered its premises to Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his supporters during the final stages of the anti-Thaksin demonstrations. The Buddhist sangha simply has never been apolitical: it either supports state policies or it opposes them. It has been a persistent myth that Buddhism and politics do not mix, but the myth has repeatedly been proven illusory.²⁰

The Asoke group had a complex relationship to Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin had been a protégée of Major-General Chamlong Srimuang since Thaksin joined *Palang Dharma* (Moral Force) Party and became Foreign Minister. He was accused of promoting his own private business interests in that post. Later on in Barnharn Silpa-archa’s government, Thaksin was Deputy Prime Minister and promised to solve the notorious traffic problems of Bangkok within six months. Fortunately for him, the government was dissolved a few months later. Thaksin also was a Deputy Prime Minister in General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh’s government in 1997 until the Asian financial crisis forced that government to resign.

Thaksin established his own political party in 1998.²¹ Before contesting the elections,

17 Buddhism and politics have been thoroughly discussed by Ishii Yoneo (1986), Stanley Tambiah (1976), Trevor Ling (1979), Somboon Suksamran (1976, 1982) and Peter A. Jackson (1989), but the issue remains sensitive and some Thai experts might have preferred to overlook these studies for the sake of their research permits.

18 “Demeritorious” referring to the word “*baap*” in Thai or “*papa*” in Pali as opposite to “*bun*” and “*puñña*.”

19 Also known as Wat Thammakaai in the northern outskirts of Bangkok, with ambitions to become the world Buddhist centre. See their website www.dhammakaya.net.

20 Younger generation Thai experts are slowly breaking down the myth of an apolitical *sangha* (see Jerryson, 2009; McCargo, 2009). Both authors argue strongly that such authorities as Charles Keyes and Donald Swearer have depoliticised the Buddhist *sangha* by presenting Buddhism as a “civic” or “civil” religion.

21 For critical assessments of Thaksin’s policies, see McCargo & Ukrist (2005), who label Thaksin as “opportunistic; motivated by pursuit of wealth” (p. 20) and the party as applying “marketing policies; no ideology” (p. 79).

he gathered together a team of former Communists, NGO activists and supporters of Chamlong and Santi Asoke. He travelled with them to Northern Finland to draft a programme for his *Thai Rak Thai* (Thai Loves Thai) Party.²² The TRT party became an anti-IMF nationalistic party, promoting both the royalist and Asoke “sufficiency economy.” Thaksin’s first speech as a Prime Minister in a meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Shanghai came as a shock to the international business community as Thaksin explained that Thailand would start “looking inward to our original strengths.”²³ The speech was allegedly written by a former close assistant to Chamlong Srimuang, Sunai Setboonsarng, who had published a study on Asoke economics in the 1970s.²⁴ The Foreign Minister of Thailand was forced to rephrase Thaksin and try to convince the international investors that Thailand would remain as open as it had always been to foreign investment.

Thaksin rapidly did a turnaround and started to negotiate and push forward several free-trade agreements (FTA), particularly in the field of agriculture, that the NGOs and farmers’ organisations bitterly opposed.

There had been several important radical social movements before Thaksin came to power. One of the largest was The Assembly of the Poor, established in 1995. It included networks of small-scale farmers, fishermen and urban slum dwellers from all over Thailand. In 1997, the Assembly staged its most spectacular protest by camping for ninety-nine days outside the Government House in Bangkok. The protesters were demonstrating against a dam in the Northeast that threatened the livelihood of the people in the area, yet the movement clearly had a broader agenda for grassroots democracy and social justice. For the first time since the 1970s, the Thai poor challenged the Thai state hegemony by demanding that the ruling elites address their grievances. The Democrat-led government systematically discredited the Assembly, and the Assembly was encouraged by sympathisers to form a political party to contest the next elections. Thaksin – supported by the ideas of his activist advisers – addressed in his election campaign some of the grievances by granting a debt moratorium, village funds and cheap health care. With his “pro-poor rhetoric”²⁵

22 His trip to Finland and meeting with “Santa Claus” became front-page news in Thailand in 2006. See *Matichon* 2-8 June 2549 B.E. (2006).

23 *Economic Review Bangkok Post* (30 December 2002, p. 121)

24 Sunai’s book has recently been reprinted and translated into English. Schumacher’s (1973) chapter on “Buddhist Economics” is also regarded as an inspiration to the Asoke group.

25 Kevin Hewison (2003) labels Thaksin’s approach as “pro-poor rhetoric” and regards Thaksin’s government as a

Thaksin managed to domesticate this radical social movement. When in power, Thaksin marginalised and eliminated the social activists, environmentalists and defenders of human rights.²⁶

Asoke is a politically and socially engaged Buddhist group which seeks to find a remedy to the moral and social ills of global capitalism within the capitalist framework by establishing economically autonomous village communities. The Asoke group addresses economic and social justice from a radical Buddhist perspective by promoting an alternative economic system to global capitalism. Its aim is to teach the people to follow the moral Buddhist path, which would ultimately transform the capitalist society into a *bunniyom* society. With these “utopian” ideas the Asoke Buddhist economic development plan is inherently populist. This is the same populist approach found in Thaksin’s rhetoric.²⁷

What endeared Thaksin to the Asoke group was the community development approach in his rural policies. Somchai (2006) regards the “community culture” as a “variant of populism”. Populism may criticise “big business” and capitalism generally, but promotes neither radical structural change in land ownership nor a progressive taxation system. The Thai community culture school blames the “imported” Western capitalism for destroying the economy of the idealised Thai village community.²⁸

Asoke continued supporting Thaksin until February 2006. There had been some critical voices against him inside Asoke – both Bodhiraksa and Chamlong condemned Thaksin on moral grounds when he played with the idea of buying Liverpool Football Club in mid-2004.²⁹

Asoke adherents also demonstrated in August 2005, when the Beer Chang Company was to be listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand. This was seen as promoting both drinking and gambling.

“government by and for the rich” (Hewison, 2003, p. 140). For a similar assessment, see Divjak & Symonds (2001).

26 For critical assessments on Thaksin’s approach to the rural poor, see Bell (2003), Missingham (2003), Somchai (2006) and Ungpakorn (2003). “Chang Noi” presents a list of the assassinated social and environmental activists in his column “Shooting the messenger” (Chang Noi, 2004).

27 For earlier discussion on the “community culture school”, see Chattip (1991). Authors like Apinya (1993), Olson (1983), Sombat (1988) and Suwanna (1990) see the Asoke group as “utopian.” Some recent studies on Asoke communities discuss their economic policies in more detail; see Essen (2005) and Kanoksak (2008).

28 For Somchai’s critique on the “community culture approach”, see Somchai, 2006, pp. 62-64.

29 “PM’s mentor raps Reds bid. Thaksin ready to give up, sees success in having ‘humbled’ ex-colonial power” (*The Nation*, 1 June 2004).

The Different Networks of Asoke

Asoke is not a monolithic community,³⁰ but rather an amalgamation of monks and nuns, urban and rural temple residents, lay followers of Asoke monks, practitioners of organic agriculture in Asoke village communities, current and former students of Asoke schools, and admirers of Major-General Chamlong Srimuang. It could be argued that the Asoke group consists predominantly of a network of four major wings engaged in spiritual, agricultural, social and political activities. What unites the wings is their self-identification as disciples of Bodhiraksa.

The nucleus of the spiritual group consists of monks and the nuns including the novices and aspirants. The monks and the nuns act primarily as advisers. They preside over all possible meetings from the primary school students' meetings to the political meetings. Their advice is spiritual and is derived from their interpretation of Buddhist teachings. They do not give practical advice on solving problems, but try to encourage the person to find a solution by applying Buddhism. Many lay people prioritise spiritual study, which means that they are not actively engaged in the other groups. The decision to join in the anti-Thaksin demonstrations was fairly unanimous in the spiritual group as the Asoke opposition to Thaksin was based predominantly on moral grounds. On the first day of the demonstration, 26 February 2006, practically all Asoke monks, nuns and novices were present, with only those who were sick not attending. After the first day, the numbers started to dwindle. There were health reasons quoted and there were references to the workload in the temple – writing articles for the magazines, working at the printing house or at the radio station were the most common reasons for leaving the demonstration site.

The monks, nuns and lay people returned to the streets of Bangkok for the second round of demonstrations in late May 2008. The issues had changed: the demonstrators opposed the new pro-Thaksin government led by Samak Sundaravej, who had proudly declared that he was Thaksin's "nominee." The demonstrators specifically opposed any amendments to the Constitution to pardon Prime Minister Thaksin and the one hundred and eleven *Thai Rak Thai* Members of Parliament banned from politics

30 Inside the Asoke, Asoke group (*klum Asoke*) refers to all the followers of Bodhiraksa. Asoke communities (*chumchon*) are the villages and centres (*sathan*) in various parts of Thailand. The group is organised into several associations and foundations. For more details, see Heikkilä-Horn (1996, pp. 147-150).

by the Constitutional Court in May 2007. Also this time the numbers of the Asoke demonstrators – particularly the number of the monks and the nuns – dwindled very rapidly and at the end, when PAD was occupying the Government House, there were only a handful of Asoke monks and nuns left out of the over one hundred monks and twenty-five nuns. When Bangkok's Suwarnabhumi International Airport was seized in November 2008 for about a week, only a few Asoke monks – and no nuns – took part.

The second wing of the Asoke network is the agricultural group, which consists of the temple residents in the rural Asoke temples, particularly in the North and Northeast. According to the Asoke teachings, it is important for a Buddhist to choose carefully her or his profession. This is a part of the Noble Eightfold Path, where point five emphasises “Right Livelihood” or “Right Occupation” (*Samma Ajiva*). According to Buddhism, it is not recommended that a Buddhist engages in selling weapons, intoxicants, human beings, animals or meat. The opposite of these destructive activities is nurturing life, and as a consequence of this thinking, being a farmer is the best choice for every Asoke member. If one cannot be a farmer, one can at least try to be a gardener. Hence, there is a passionate interest within Asoke in everything concerning plants, soil, seeds, herbs, insects, and fruit trees.

This group is interested in agricultural politics, and in 2004, Santi Asoke organised together with Greenpeace a roundtable discussion on genetically modified crops and subsequently issued a statement against the GM crops.³¹ The agricultural group found it difficult to leave their farms and gardens, and hence were not at the forefront of the demonstrations. Many of them left after a couple of days to return to the rural Asoke centres.

The third wing of the Asoke network could be called the socially engaged group working in education and health care. All major Asoke centres have primary and secondary schools, sometimes also vocational schools.³² Hundreds of students have studied at these schools, which have changed their status throughout the years from non-formal education to formal education and *vice versa*. All teachers are volunteers, some with teacher's qualifications from state schools and some without. Most of the

³¹ “Santi Asoke to oppose GMO foods. Buddhist group says modified crops not natural” (*The Nation*, 10 June 2004).

³² Each school has approximately 50 to 100 students, but the numbers vary from year to year. More about the education in Asoke schools in Essen (2005) and Heikkilä-Horn (1996).

students have a parent or a relative staying at the Asoke centres.

Another social activity in the Asoke communities is the healthcare provided by volunteer nurses and dentists in most of the Asoke villages.³³ The teachers and healthcare volunteers are educated to secondary or tertiary level and many of them participated in the demonstrations in the beginning. Teachers and students returned after some weeks back to their villages, whereas many of the nurses remained to provide services at the demonstration site.

The fourth wing of the Asoke movement could be called the political wing. The group consists of urban and rural Asoke members, people particularly from the urban Santi Asoke community, and people closely affiliated with the activities and groups in Santi Asoke. There are also politically active people particularly in Sisa Asoke and in Ratchathani Asoke, where Bodhiraksa resides. These people were pictured in the media as the core of the “Dharma Army”.

Dharma Army actually refers to *Gongthub Dharm* foundation,³⁴ which owns and maintains all the vehicles – vans and pick-up trucks – of the Asoke group. The chairman of the foundation is Chamlong Srimuang.

The political network consists of the supporters of Chamlong Srimuang. Some of them may be former members of Palang Dharma party, and many of them have taken training courses in Chamlong’s Leadership School. It does not, however, necessarily mean that all the demonstrators can be associated with the Chamlong Srimuang Foundation. The politically engaged network tends to be urban, better educated, often of ethnic Sino-Thai origin, whereas the agricultural network tends to be less educated and more often of ethnic Lao origin. The boundaries are fluid: there are some well-educated Sino-Thais who prefer to live in the rural centres and experiment with agriculture.³⁵

There was some criticism in the Thai media of Asoke monks, nuns and lay people taking part in the demonstrations, particularly after 7 October 2008, when the tense situation between the anti-Thaksin “yellow-shirts,” pro-Thaksin “red-shirts” and the riot police escalated into violence leaving one person dead and many injured.³⁶ The

33 Many centres also are engaged in producing herbal medicine, which is sold in the Asoke shops.

34 This is the romanised version written on all Asoke vehicles. There are considerable irregularities in the romanisation of Thai words. “Thamma” or “Tham” is the Thai pronunciation of Sanskrit “Dharma” and Pali “Dhamma”.

35 See Heikkilä-Horn (1996) for an ethnographic survey. Recent observations based mainly on my visits to Sisa Asoke in Sisaket from 2001-2009.

36 See Sanitsuda Ekachai in her column “A solution is possible” (*Bangkok Post*, 16 October 2008). Sanitsuda had earlier

Asoke comment on this criticism was that if the monks and the nuns had not been there, then the more violent elements of the PAD might have taken over. The presence of monks and nuns in the PAD groups perhaps deterred the “red-shirts” from violent attacks.³⁷

In 2000, the Asoke people established a new party called *Pue Fah Din* (For Heaven and Earth). Its leaders are based in Sisa Asoke. However, in the March 2006 elections the party fielded Samdin Lertbusya, who for many years has been in charge of the *Fah Aphai* Publishing Company in Santi Asoke. A rather unique characteristic of this party is that the candidate does not want to campaign, as he feels that campaigning involves making false materialistic promises, thus breaking the Buddhist Precepts.³⁸

The political network is closely linked to Chamlong’s Leadership School in Kanchanaburi, which trained various groups of employees from both the private and public sector throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. The training lasted over the weekend or sometimes longer and consisted of physical exercise in the early morning hours, aggressive propaganda in favour of vegetarian food and critical lectures about corruption and other social ills in Thai society. These courses served as a blueprint for the Asoke training courses for farmers.³⁹

The political network was also flirting with the idea of establishing a Green Party in Thailand already in the late 1990s.⁴⁰ The plans were buried with the financial crisis in 1997 and the emergence of Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai party in 1998.

It was the political network of Asoke people which had worked most closely with the organisers of the demonstrations from 2006 to 2008, and with the PAD. To what extent their interests and values coincided with the other leaders of PAD is debatable. Only as long as Chamlong is part of PAD will the adherents of the Asoke movement remain a part of PAD.

Sondhi Limthongkul, one of the most prominent PAD leaders, has tried to reach

opined in a column “Politics and religion do mix”: “Interestingly, the presence of the quiet, stoic Santi Asoke monks and nuns also helps provide a sense of restraint to counter the dangerously strong emotions in the rallies.” (*Bangkok Post*, 9 March 2006).

37 There were some attacks against rural Asoke centres interpreted as a reaction by Thaksin supporters. Sisa Asoke lost about 1/4 of their temple land when local officials claimed that Asoke had illegally encroached upon the land (Sikkhamat Chinda Tangpao, personal communication in Sisa Asoke, 27 February 2009).

38 “Moving heaven and earth. Little-known party eschews campaigning” (*Bangkok Post*, 20 March 2006). PAD has established a new party called *Heng Thien Tham* (Candles of Righteousness). This party faded away and a new party New Politics Party (NPP or in Thai: *Phak Kan Muang Mai*) was established in 2009.

39 Based on my observations over some weekend training seminars in 1997-98.

40 The author was interviewed by some Asoke members about the policies of the European Green Parties in 1997.

out to the Asoke group for support.⁴¹ He has, however, been involved in various well-publicised animistic and Hindu rituals, which the Asoke group totally rejects. Asoke Buddhist teachings shun all magic practices – the monks and the nuns are not involved in the sprinkling of “holy water” or predicting the winning lottery numbers, something with which many Thai monks are preoccupied. The popular Thai belief in ghosts and spirits is strongly refuted in Asoke; Bodhiraksa has repeatedly emphasised that if people persistently claim to see or hear ghosts and spirits, it is because those creatures live inside these people’s own heads.

As Bodhiraksa is the founder of the group, this makes him the most senior monk in Asoke and he is highly venerated by all Asoke members. He is, however, not the abbot of any of the Asoke temples; his function remains mainly advisory. Bodhiraksa still delivers his Buddhist sermon every evening through a video-link to all the Asoke temples.⁴²

All four major networks – spiritual, agricultural, social and political – are united in their Asoke Buddhist beliefs and values. They all respect Bodhiraksa as their spiritual guide and leader; they all have to be vegetarians; and they all have to practise *bunniyom* and live modestly.

Conclusion

This paper argues that it has always been a misconception to perceive Theravada Buddhism – or any other religion for that matter – as apolitical. Buddhism has been an important part of the legitimacy of the kings and Prime Ministers. It has been an important part of the nation-building processes of Thailand and other Theravada Buddhist countries. Furthermore, the Buddhist monks have also been an important element in protesting against military dictators, corruption of the ruling elite, and the centralisation of power in the capital city.

Concerning the controversial Santi Asoke Buddhist group, the paper argues that the group cannot be treated as a monolithic entity, as it consists of at least four

41 The other leaders beside Chamlong and Sondhi were Suriyasai Katasila, a former student leader and democracy activist; Somsak Kosaisuk, a labour leader and Somkiat Pongpaibul a Democrat Party MP. Sondhi has become leader of the New Politics Party, which consists of PAD supporters. The PAD and the NPP are, however, beyond the scope of this article.

42 Observation in Sisa Asoke, 27-28 February 2009.

major networks: spiritual, agricultural, social and political. It is particularly the political network which was most actively involved in the demonstrations. The political network is closely connected with Chamlong Srimuang, who is the president of a foundation called the Dharma Army. The Dharma Army that was seen in the demonstrations consisted of people engaged in the four Asoke networks.

The spiritual wing, dominated by monks and nuns, took part in the demonstrations with lesser intensity than the social and political wings. The agricultural network also participated in the demonstrations during the initial days of the protests but quickly left the scene to tend their rice fields and fruit orchards.

The social and particularly political wings participated in the street demonstrations and camped at the various demonstration sites throughout the turmoil. The media image of the Dharma Army was somewhat reductionist as the local print media often showed pictures of school children and students of Asoke schools.

It is, however, obvious that the ties binding Bodhiraksa to Major-General Chamlong Srimuang since the 1980s have seriously undermined the spiritual and social message of the Asoke group among the rural poor. One of the main reasons why the Asoke group joined the anti-Thaksin demonstrations was their loyalty to Chamlong Srimuang. When Chamlong turned against Thaksin, most of the Asoke people turned against Thaksin. These political links between Bodhiraksa and Chamlong have been used by the competing elites against the Asoke group leading, for instance, to the court case described above. Ironically, the recent political affiliation through Chamlong to the “yellow-shirts” and PAD has endangered the relationship of the entire Asoke group with the very people whom their anti-capitalistic *bunniyom* economy and training courses in organic agriculture were supposed to benefit. The fact that a large number of indebted farmers have chosen Thaksin Shinawatra as their “saviour” has forced the Asoke group in the current situation to re-establish itself among the wider rural population – without simultaneously severing its ties to the political activists who joined the “yellow-shirts.”

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