

CHAPTER 3

GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE SOUTH

This section will elaborate the effects of the activities conducted by global civil society. In this section, I regard global civil society as international nongovernmental organizations, taking the form of transnational public sphere.

In the post-Cold War world, the role of international nongovernmental organizations has been highly recognized, and sometime their operation is in opposition with the host government.¹⁴ International nongovernmental organizations, as a part of global civil society in the sense that their transnational movement have nothing to do with violence, are instrumental in many issues such as human rights and environmental issues. Even more than a century before the fall of Berlin Wall, the movement of some international voluntary associations intertwined themselves with local and transnational networks, introducing changes in European societies. International Abolitionist Federation, and International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women—the two international voluntary associations which possessed similarities of international nongovernmental organizations—proved that they could launch campaigns to abolish state regulation of prostitution in late 1800, at a time when human rights had not yet been a global issue.¹⁵ Human rights entered the global agenda after the end of World War II.¹⁶ After the collapse of Soviet Union, human rights have especially been more discussed. Norms on human rights have experienced a dramatic rise in recent decades, rivaled only by environmentalism. Diffusion of global human rights norms has produced common global understandings and identities among activists and citizens, enabling them to see various human suffering

¹⁴ Peter Willetts, “Transnational Actors And International Organizations in Global Politics,” in *The Globalization of World Politics*, 3rd ed., ed. John Baylis and Steve Smith (USA: Oxford University Press, 2005), chap 19., p. 439.

¹⁵ Stephanie Limoncelli, “International Voluntary Associations, Local Social Movements and State Paths to the Abolition of Regulated Prostitution in Europe, 1875-1950,” *International Sociology* 21, no. 1 (2006).

¹⁶ Kiyoteru Tsutsui and Christine Min Wotipka, “Global Civil Society and the International Human Rights Movement: Citizen Participation in Human Rights International Nongovernmental Organization,” *Social Forces* 83, no. 2, (2004): p. 590.

as human rights violations.¹⁷ In particular, if any human rights violation case reaches an international level of discussion, it is more likely that the voice of those affected by such violation can be heard. Korean and Japanese activists could, for instance, file the cases of comfort women who were raped by Japanese military personnel during World War II, at the then UN Human Right Commission in 1992.¹⁸

Nonetheless, this is not the case for the southerners in Thailand. The southern issue is an internationally known problem which is powerful enough to degrade Thailand's human rights standard. Unfortunately, it has not reached the discussion of intergovernmental forum. At the 32nd Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Yemen, 2005, a report highlighting violations against Muslim minorities in the far south of Thailand was about to be presented into the fifty-seven-Muslim-member-state forum where Bangkok government maintained its permanent observer status. Still, the Thai diplomatic corps lobbied until the report was withdrawn from the meeting.¹⁹ Had the lobbying of the Thai diplomats failed, the issue about the south could have been discussed by many governments. However, the issue of the south is not ignored. It has been circulated in the perception of people as some international human right groups, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Asian Human Right Resource Center, have monitored the development of southern situation of the kingdom. Once the Thaksin government attempted to launch any controversial policy on human rights, these organizations would issue statements to condemn such moves.

However, the move of these nongovernmental bodies remains far from efficiency to introduce any change. In the view of Ms. Supara Janchitfah, a *Bangkok Post* senior journalist, these organizations sometimes dispatch their staffs to the court hearings in a bid to play the role of surveillance or, in other words, to pressure the work of the Thai judicial system. But of course, their power is relatively limited because it seems that they could not contravene the rule of Thai court. Also, the

¹⁷ Kiyoteru Tsutsui, "Redressing Past Human Rights Violations: Global Dimensions of Contemporary Social Movements," *Social Forces* 85, no. 1, (2006): p. 335.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

¹⁹ *The Nation*, June 30, 2005.

nature of these bodies' work is too specific. They excessively adhere to their own mandate, which focuses only on violations of human rights predicated on tangible evidence. Unfortunately, sometimes evidence is difficult to collect and this leads to their inability to actually help the sufferers in the south. Meanwhile, these organizations do not address other people's plights which do not correspond to their mandate of human rights, even though those plights are more of urgency. From an optimistic view, the effect of these bodies is that they can solely pose restraints on government handling of the incidents. For example, after the perilous Tak Bai case in which 84 lives were slain and drew international outcry, the government tended to be more cautious and considerably more careful in coping with demonstrations in the three southern provinces.²⁰

In the form of the transnational public sphere, the movement of global civil society has not made any change in the southern issue. The public sphere implied the power founded on a communicative rationality and the desirability of consensus.²¹ The concept of Habermas's public sphere can be the ground of the nongovernmental movement. Developed out of the fact that a salon is the breeding ground of social force constructed by middle-class, Habermas believes that the discussion of people can create a sphere serving as the buffer between state and collective individuals.²² The salon provided a space apart from the economy, a space where people could exchange ideas and voice criticism on matters of shared interest or concern.²³ In the digitized age, the salon is transformed into cyberspace or cybersalon which can draw broad-based participation of people from all walks of life into the discussion via online forums. Subsequently such discussions can transform themselves into social forces. This may not be the case, however. Dean suggested that online discussion is far from effective due to some reasons.²⁴ The first reason is about interactivity. The

²⁰ Supalak Ganjanakhundee, Phone Interview, (May 8, 2007).

²¹ Thomas Olesen, "Transnational Publics: New Spaces of Social Movement Activism and the Problem of Global Long-Sightedness," *Current Sociology* 53, no. 3, (2005): p. 423.

²² Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts, eds. 2004. *Introduction to After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004)

²³ Jodi Dean, "Cybersalon and Civil Society: Rethinking the Public Sphere in Transnational Technoculture," *Public Culture* 13, no. 2, (2001): p. 244.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

feature of communication in the idea of salon is face-to-face approach. Communicative exchanges occur between people who meet in person and see each other.²⁵ However, cyberspace cannot produce such intimacy. People who exchange their ideas on electronic message boards or in online discussions may have never met with one another. It should also be noted that cyberspace can perfectly hide ones' identity. In internet message boards, one may use any pseudonym or any nicknames to air out his or her opinion. One message poser may have many pseudonyms to hide his or her own identity.

The nature of participation in cybersalon or internet discussion is different from the actual and tangible salon. In actual salons, interaction of participants always carries the norms of participants. Public utterance are supposed to be authentic; for Habermas this means that what one says in public is connected with a larger conception of reason, with an appeal to a common reason that transcends particular goals, desires or machinations.²⁶ In contrast, the participation in cybersalon is comparatively different as Dean explains:

“They [members of online salon] can read [the messages] without responding and [even] respond without reading. They can participate in multiple sites simultaneously, jump to different sites, and ignore what bores or frustrates them. Some interactions are interactive in name only: many users want feedback and response, not recognition”²⁷

For Dean, the interaction in cyberspace discussion seems to witness the absence of relation between bodies and words:

“This disconnection between bodies and words, although seemingly evoked by references to the rational exchanges of rational agents in public

²⁵ Dean, p. 255.

²⁶ Dean, p. 255.

²⁷ Dean, p. 259.

sphere, has in fact been thought of as one of the most threatening and disruptive dimensions of computer-mediated interaction.²⁸

My personal interpretation out of Dean's argument is that the missing link between nonverbal language (bodies) and verbal language (words) is the case in point here. What online communication—even in the form of chat rooms or web boards—cannot deliver is the so-called nonverbal language such as gesture, facial expression and tone of voice, which can be easily detected in face-to-face communication. The nonverbal language can be a ground for the examination of how authentic or reliable the message is. Such authenticity and reliability can be easily detected in the face-to-face communication while it is more difficult to do so in the realm of online communication. The absence of access to identity and nonverbal communication may thus lead to the level of distrust one has for his or her counterpart in the interaction. As a result, the absence of trust and reliability, and probably the disconnection between bodies and words in the online discussion produces the inability to transform the power in transnational public sphere into tangible power.

There are many online discussions about the southern problem delivered by nongovernmental groups and academia in both Thai and English.²⁹ But as mentioned, people in the online discussion fail to develop face-to-face communication so trust is unable to be established in such an interaction. What's more, the flow of opinion itself is not powerful unless there is mechanism to channel those views to the public at large. In order to let this voice heard, those voices need to be carried by some entities possessing authority. For example, for the southern matter to carry weight, the entity which addresses the problem should be politicians in Malaysia, such as Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad or even Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar.

Another problematic issue which deters the power of cyberspace is the access to such a sphere. Actors with a lower or marginal status in terms of political standpoints, material income, cultural and sexual identity and so on, have less access

²⁸ Dean, p. 259.

²⁹ Supalak Ganjanakhundee, Phone Interview.

to make their voices heard.³⁰ People in the three southernmost provinces are amongst the poorest in the country. Thirty-six percent of people in the three southernmost provinces live below the poverty line of Thailand. Worse, most Muslims in the areas also lack education and employment opportunity.³¹ Therefore, it is rather unlikely that they can gain access to internet to engage in the so-called transnational public sphere and to subsequently let their voices be heard. Besides, given their poor education, the chance for them to acquire technological and internet skills is somewhat bleak. Language can be another obstacle. People in the south primarily have low levels of literacy so they are unlikely to have the ability to surf the internet of which Thai and English are the language of instruction.

This section reflects that the performance of international nongovernmental organizations is not so promising to help solve violence given their too specific mandate. They can achieve moderate success in the sense that they can only deter the authority from the use of violence against the people in public places. Global civil society in the form of the opinion flows on cyberspace is also farfetched to exercise its power given the flaw of internet communication which does not grow trust amongst participants. Global civil society is perhaps exterior failure on the southern problem so the next section will focus on interior factor which degenerates the southern problem.

³⁰ Olesen, p. 423.

³¹ Srisompob Jitpiromsri and Panyasak Sobhonvasu, "Unpacking Thailand's Southern Conflict The Poverty of Structural Explanations," *Critical Asian Studies* 38, no. 1, (2006): p. 104.