Project Southeast Asia

"Contemporary Issues in Southeast Asia"
10-11 March 2012,
St. Antony's College, University of Oxford

Panel:
Marginalised Communities

1. **Deciphering Southern Thailand's violence: organisation and insurgent practices of BRN-Coordinate**

Dr Sascha Helbardt
(Post-doc researcher/ lecturer, University of Passau)

Since the outbreak of violence in Thailand's Malay Muslim dominated three provinces (Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani) in 2004, although much has been written about the region and the causes of the conflict, when it comes to the perpetrators of violent acts few substantial data has been gained. Description as well as interpretation of data is impeded by a cloud of "nameless" violence that renders the definition of actors and the interests involved difficult. Whereas the acts of state violence against the Malay minority can be identified more or less easily, the motives and organisation of those on the "other side" are even more heavily cloaked in secrecy, deception and speculation.

My presentation analyses the communicative dimension of Southern Thailand's insurgency, taking Barisan Revolusi Nasional Coordinate (BRN-Coordinate), the most important of the separatist groups, as a focal point. This look into the "black box" of BRN-Coordinate argues that although the group is deeply entrenched in local villages and schools, the fear of government infiltration forces the group to conceal its activities behind a "veil of secrecy". Collective violence is staged as sudden violence, while its architects hide behind the image of violence as a popular, justified reaction to state neglect and suppression. Apparently, the rationale of this strategy is to stir up mass support for separatism, inter-communal tension and to induce ruthless suppression by the Thais. This would make international recognition of the group's leadership virtually unavoidable.

This strategy, albeit based on clandestinity, depends on communication: it must create fear and cooperation, it must mobilise support and drive the Thai state into an escalation of violence. A crucial part in all of this is to recruit and socialize members, to convey a sense of legitimacy of violence that informs, guides and motivates people in the name of independence. This communication takes the form of discourses, rumours and violent acts – all of which can become symbols in themselves. It is my aim to bring clarity to this melange of insurgent violence, by pushing aside the façade of disorderly, confusing bloodshed and identifying the networks and organisational structures through which the group communicates - both internally and with local Malay audiences.

2. Bringing home exotic women: the "mail-order brides" industry and Southeast Asian women

Dr Gwenola Ricordeau
(Assistant professor, Université Lille-I (France))

The paper is based on a research about "mail-order brides" industry and marriage migration, with a closer look at the Philippines situation. After a research on gender and race stereotypes in the "mail-order brides" industry's advertising materials, I investigated on so-called "mail-order brides" life-course through in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation made, for example, in long queues in front of embassies in Manila and bureaus of immigration. I confronted my findings with the public debates and policies since 1990. My paper will develop the three following points:

1. **Race and gender stereotypes associated with "Asian girls" in the "mail-order brides" industry**

Whereas "Russian", "African" and "Western" women are respectively said to be "romantic", "happy" and "spoiled by feminism", "Asian" women are described as "gentle" and "exotic" and their "submission" and "family values" are underlined. Although the "mail-order brides" industry stresses its "Asian brides'" "sensuality" and "exotic sexuality" (particularly of Thai women) in its advertisements, it attempts also to set itself apart from prostitution. The paper shows also how men/customers are portrayed as "adventurers" and "saviours". I underline as well that women entering in the "mail-order brides'" industry have internationalized gender and race stereotypes so as to maximize their chance to be selected by men/customers.

2. **Investigating on "mail-order brides"**

Fieldwork shows that Filipino women who experience international matchmaking through introduction agency do not fit with the widespread prejudices about them. Like other migrant women, the so-called "brides" are rarely devoid of economic and cultural capitals. Marriage migration denotes in many case women' empowerment, since it allows them to match with social expectation (to start a family), especially for those who are too old for the local marriage market (because of high education or professional involvement) or single mother. Simultaneously, it cannot be denied that these women, when they arrive in their husband's countries, face higher risk of domestic violence and migration policies in their spouses' countries let them little agency.

3. **Intermarried women and policy-making**

South-East Asian women who marry foreign men are often described as victims (of the international matchmaking industry and/or of foreign men) or as traitors (to their country or their countrymen). In the Philippines, politicians often call for a more effective protection of Filipino women who are going abroad (to marry or to work), but their situation in their own country and their exploitation by their countrymen are much less discussed. Feminist and women' organisations positions are much contrasted and to some extent similar to those about prostitution/sex work. Our paper demonstrates an untold alliance between nationalist and/or patriarchal positions and the feminists' ones that view marriage migration without any consideration for – certainly ambiguous – forms of women empowerment. I conclude with an overview

on policies on marriage migrations in South East Asian countries.

3. Urban informality and neoliberalism: Formalisation versus Demolition of Informal Settlements in the Philippines

Narae Choi
(DPhil Candidate in Development Studies, University of Oxford)

Within the neoliberal emphasis on the efficiency of cities and their function as globally connected markets, other functions of cities – notably, as shelters and places of living – are marginalised. This imbalance is evident in the fact that forced eviction is growing in its intensity and diversifying in its form. As a consequence, urban informality in the form of informal settlements is a source of increasing vulnerability for urban poor dwellers. This paper examines the extent to which neoliberal urban development can embrace the de facto reality of informality in developing countries. Within the context of the Philippines, this paper finds that the acute threat of eviction conditions informal settlers to actively seek out preventive actions, mainly through various initiatives of tenure formalisation. However, as illustrated in a specific case-study of displacement entailed by the railway upgrading project in Metro Manila, formalisation may not win the increasing competition over urban spaces driven by the neoliberal urban development model. This requires a more critical and creative thinking about the ways to live with informality and about the ways to more fundamentally address the challenge that most city governments are grappling with in between the ambition towards growth and the need to address poverty.

4. Legal Mobilization in Post-Colonial Malaysia: The Law as a Political Tool for Marginalized Groups

Thaatchaayini Kananatu
(PhD Candidate, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Sunway, Malaysia)

This paper will explore to what extent the law (national legislation, case-law, the national constitution and international human rights law) provide resources and strategies to marginalized minority groups in Malaysia, a Southeast Asian state that has inherited the English common law system. This paper provides extracts from a doctoral study being conducted on the legal mobilization of the 'Malaysian Indian' ethnic minority group, which has since 2007 pursued rights-based international litigation, rights-based activism (in terms of civil disobedience and political lobbying) and human rights education, to mobilize the minority group. With the preliminary findings of the case study, this paper will examine the utilization of national and constitutional law as well as international human rights law by the marginalized minority group to mobilize their cause and grievance and seek minority rights as well as constitutional rights and protection, in post-independent Malaysia.

The first research question seeks to examine to what extent the law plays a role in the constitution of a legal identity as an 'ethnic minority group' and in the construction of grievances and causes such as 'minority rights'. Secondly, the paper seeks to explore the extent to which the law (human rights and constitutional rights and freedoms) has been utilized in the formation of a minority group strategy, either by pursuing 'active' public interest litigation (initiated by the minority group or movement or others) or in 'passive' litigation (where civil disobedience and direct action methods lead to criminal litigation), or by pursuing rights activism (civil disobedience methods and political lobbying). The basis of the paper is to put forth that the legal constitution of identity, the legal framing of grievances and legal strategy can be useful to marginalized ethnic minority groups that have little or no political leverage, especially in an ethnic-based political system. Coming from a socio-legal-political perspective, this study utilizes Michael McCann's legal mobilization theory in the analysis of litigation and rights activism as a legal and political strategy. Legal mobilization studies has centred on the North American and European social movements, and this paper will explore the gap in studies done on contemporary Southeast Asian ethnic minority movements from a socio-legal and political perspective.