Village Scouts: The King’s Finest

One of the more virulent neo-fascist-style organizations spawned by the United States counterinsurgency effort in Thailand came to the attention of the American public suddenly with Western press photographs of the police-military massacre of innocent and unarmed students at Thammasat University on October 6, 1976. One photo showed a Thai Village Scout, wearing the characteristic neckscarf given by the King to each Village Scout, with his arm in a stranglehold around the neck of a wounded, sobbing and terrified young student. A metropolitan policeman held the student by the other arm as a third young hoodlum punched him in the face.

News reports that nightmarish massacre was among those who participated in the burning alive, eye-gouging and strangling of a number of young dissidents gathered at Thammasat University that day to protest the military- and right-wing-sponsored return of the former military dictator Thanom.

Who and what are the Village Scouts? They were started in 1971 by an officer in the Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP) in Northeast Thailand, where government repression is worst and opposition peasant movements against police and government officials have a long history. As counterinsurgency expert General Edward Lansdale’s famous report in the Pentagon Papers and other sources make clear, the Thai BPP are essentially a CIA creation. Its members were trained in counter-guerrilla tactics by U.S. Army Special Forces teams. The deputy director of the BPP is currently deputy director of the Village Scouts.

The BPP officer who started the Village Scouts originally mobilized a number of adult villagers in the Northeast and brought them together for five days of anti-communist training. The program did not expand noticeably until after the October 1973 student uprising which opened up politics, permitting increasingly strident opposition to U.S. imperialism. In 1974 the Village Scout movement spread very rapidly, as the Thai monarchy took the program under its direct patronage. Through the efforts of the BPP, it spread to all the provinces of Thailand, and today Village Scout training proceeds in every province.

Each group of trainees includes 300-500 adults. Each group is trained for five days under 30-50 leaders, directed by the BPP. The groups are divided into blocks of ten, during training sessions. They work and play together, dancing traditional Thai dances and singing traditional songs as they are inculcated with a blind devotion to the three ideological principles of the Thai state. These principles—Nation (chakri), Buddhist Religion (sasana) and Monarchy (mahakaset)—have been used by the state since the 1920s to mobilize Thai peasants and workers behind its goals.

The program makes subtle use of traditional ethnic Thai themes, as did similar racist programs under King Rama VI (r. 1910-25) and under the military dictator Phibun Songkhram during Thailand’s alliance with Japan in World War II. While not entirely new, the present effort is nonetheless much more sophisticated than its predecessors. As one peasant participant noticed, the teachers have been trained in psychology. Obviously this psychology is of the “Psy-Ops” (Psychological Warfare Operations) type dispensed by American Psy-Ops units which have operated in a counterinsurgency role in Thailand for many years. At the end of the training program, the Village Scouts take an oath to be collectively responsible for the country and to defend it against “communism” and “communists.”

One participant in the movement reported that the present king, who directly sponsors the organization and hands out the neckscarves worn by the Village Scouts, desires to see their numbers mount to about five million. Currently there are reported to be some two million Village Scouts. Membership is open to anyone, but the BPP has concentrated on the rural areas, particularly in the North and Northeast. As the Thai name “Pean Tiger Cubs (luk sua chaoban)” suggests, it is primarily aimed at peasants and the villagers of rural Thailand. It appears to have been most successful among elderly peasants and unemployed village youths. Its counterparts in Thailand are Navaphon and Krahting Daeng; its older counterpart in Vietnam was the Personalist Movement of the Ngo Dinh Diem family in the fifties; and its even older counterparts were the Hitler Youth Groups in Nazi Germany and the Imperial Rule Assistance Association in wartime Japan. The Thai Village Scouts is the classic attempt of a socially bankrupt ruling elite to manipulate artificially created ethnic symbols to persuade the dispossessed to accept an inherently oppressive society. The Thai Village Scouts are obviously not the wave of the future, and even some Thai politicians and military-police officials are reportedly not enthusiastic about them. But they can prove to be bloody, if ephemeral, obstacles to social progress in that country.

Source: “Jonmai jak muang thai,” in Sayam Thaim 1:3 (Nov. 1976), 74-75
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