



Towards A Culture of Peace in Thai Society

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Abstract

Worldwide experience shows that arriving at or maintaining a culture of peace and non-violence is a major problem that affects a great many societies. A few non-violence and civil disobedience movements have been successful in this in spite of the odds stacked against their success. However, strife, violence and many conflicts or wars persist across or within countries. These adversely affect and even endanger, the lives of people at many levels, ranging from the individual and family to the community or country. Hence its causes need to be recognized and its emergence observed closely so as to address any shortcomings (preferably, by non-violent means) and thereby pre-empting, reducing or resolving conflict.

At the most basic level and the best place for observing, simply measuring and reviewing the absence of *abuse* and *violence* between individuals would naturally be within the family. This primary social institution and indispensable pillar of society provides socialization to its younger generations and thus passes on the most crucial social values. On this positive social mores must be encouraged in schools so that a sense of communal solidarity and social cohesion is nurtured within society. In its absence a state of *non-violence* and *peace* at the level of society at large cannot be reached or maintained.

Responding to conflict in the South or the political confrontation or indeed restoring *Peace* and *Non-violence* in Thai society, will be elusive unless the family, the workplace, and the communities, have all maintained or have a will to reclaim such a state of peace. To achieve this objective the present social divide with political division and social strife pervading society must be addressed. In this context, attention needs also to be paid to associated symptoms such as deficits in lack of civility, respect, cohesion and social solidarity amongst its diverse components. Unless these are addressed wisely yet decisively, and hence this challenge turned into an opportunity, Thai society at large will be hard pressed to (re)gain its stride.



Preconditions of and requirements for achieving and maintaining a violence-free society and thus lasting peace in Thailand are many. Solid foundations with the individual and the most crucial social groups must be laid first. This requires some adjustment and fine-tuning to socialization and curricula offered in school. Special efforts to enhance dialogue across social groups and communal bonding need to be undertaken, then, in tune with a communal spirit, social cohesion and solidarity will grow as will a *culture of peace*.

Key words: Non-violence, peace, violence, conflict, conflict resolution, Gandhi, King, civil disobedience, Thailand social problems, community action, national dialogue

Introduction

Non-violence Movements

When we speak of non-violence and peace we tend to think of the visionary concepts, the model movements led by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, that pursued a non-violent approach in their civil disobedience campaigns. So far, the official Thai response to the challenge posed by the unrest in the South has primarily been a military one or some other form of containment, coercion or enforcement. Would other approaches - without following the immediate reflex of resorting to force - have been feasible, at all, given the circumstances and the actors involved?

Interestingly, major civil disobedience, autonomy or independence campaigns have been waged successfully without resorting to, or even purposely banning, violence and also with essentially the other side, those in power, by and large have refrained from using (undue) force, on their part, too. Both, Gandhi and King – leaders of the most well known such movements in recent history - had studied the respective situation and power structure in much detail and for many years, assessed their own strengths and weaknesses and of their followers. They also discussed their grievances and conclusions as well as actions planned.

Their non-violent movements set historical precedents for waging emancipation campaigns against the powers-that-be without resorting to violence. In that they needed to depend heavily on the other side's understanding of their motives and (to some degree) the appreciation of their tactics, so that these would play according to certain rules and avoid state violence wherever possible. Otherwise their various marches and other actions challenging the authorities could have ended in much



bloodshed. Essential also in their eventual success was that their own side did not overreach and that they relied on the fact that the state did not over-react either.

Conditions for a Culture of Peace

The road to non-violence and peace is arduous, even uphill, and one must strike all that engages in this topic. *Conflict* and *war* are rife in our modern world; in all too many countries and continents *violence* and *terrorism* persist. The fact that promotion of peace and non-violence is not a simple task is probably best illustrated by the fact that the much invoked *Culture of Peace* at the focus of the UNESCO's *International Decade for the Culture of Peace* propagated at the global scale was in fact witness to many a major conflict. Of those several persisted until well into the Decade's final year (2010) and though the *World March for Peace and Non-violence* reached its destination early in 2010, it did not accomplish its goals, not by a far cry. Neither did it achieve its lofty targets hoped for during the *International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World* (2001 to 2010).

We must then contemplate limitations of such a global approach and accept: non-violence and peace actually must start at much less grandiose dimensions and take off from a more modest level, at home, with the individual and their respective families. These must be provided with clear values and virtues as well as with suitable 'tools' capable of fostering communication, cooperation and compromise to develop on their own a spirit of consensus and solidarity with their fellow man and citizen. Only on such a firm foundation can non-violence and peace eventually thrive in the entire country. On such a firm basis could we then dare thinking about building a non-violent and peaceful world?

Whilst reviewing the Thai world view and family values and gauging its relative strengths and weaknesses, its resilience in the face of the new challenges that lie ahead, we ought to observe how Thai individuals socialize and how they mature, in addition to examining the formation of their specific personalities. Additionally, in the midst of a rapid transformation, pertinent recent socio-economic and cultural changes, and their impact on Thai individuals (and society) need to be assessed as well. A great many such challenges, overwhelming influences and vital catalysts generate and/or affect such change.

To arrive at a culture of peace and non-violence, however, loyalty to their community and solidarity with others on the part of individuals must not be limited to family members or include just a few close friends and associates. For communal spirit to thrive, the vast majority needs to be included in order that society enjoy



equilibrium and harmony. A fair, equitable and a modern participatory society, develops only where the needs and expectations of the individual and that of society at large are balanced. To this end, the roles of all parts of the social chain (individual-family-group-community-nation) need to be strengthened. In particular, the link between family and social units above all must be augmented and thus the latter strengthened.

Thailand's Unexpected Conflicts

This may not come easily to a society characterized by uneven relations, where someone is always higher, the other lower, someone senior, the other junior. Under such conditions a society of equals hardly can emerge, rather one of patrons and clients, of leaders and followers, of those who control and those that are controlled. Distrust and discontent is likely, pent-up frustration and anger on part of those less or not at all entitled can be bottled up too long and in the absence of a security valve can erupt amidst much fury.

Despite – or because of – these inequalities Thais were not ‘familiar’ with strife or open conflict, neither in their private nor in public lives. Only recently has this begun to change, though: now dissent and unrest seem to be ubiquitous as illustrated by constant public bickering, pervasive distrust and suspicion. Continuous attack and counter-attack have become commonplace fueled by mutual reproach and recrimination at the level of politics, even unrest and open conflict has broken out in the South.

While its neighbours suffered major internal unrest, even civil wars, Thailand did not face domestic problems of such scale nor open strife for many decades. However, quite ironically, just as the turmoil in those countries seems to be abating, within the past five years civil strife has erupted in the country's South. Moreover, at the same time, broad economic disparity and sharp political divisions between Bangkok (and other urban centres) and the rural provinces with a host of multi-faceted adverse consequences have now surfaced and become all too visible.

Thailand then needs to search for and arrive at a distinctively Buddhist solution that can help to resolve the current quagmire. However the towering role and mitigating influence of Buddhism *per se* is under an onslaught of ‘modernity’ and ‘urbanization’ and its ‘out of the world’ doctrine collides with the ‘within this world’ message of other religions and, specifically, of Western culture. This culture's perennial propagation of and relentless drive towards economic progress at any cost (with its core message warmly embraced by a significant part of the young generation) has brought about



rampant consumerism, drug and a host of other social problems and these vices must be overcome. Thus a host of such contradictory viewpoints, tendencies and messages now symbolize the real-life division in Thai politics and society.

Past

Thai Family

Thais traditionally lived in small sedentary agrarian communities, where peaceful coexistence without major disagreements have long been the norm. In this largely static society organized around extended families with its younger members (or those lower in the village hierarchy) performing their assigned chores and without question or without questioning their elders. They were socialized early in infancy towards deference to their elders and learning to *wai* properly. When in school their teachers and textbooks transmitted similar values and perspectives and pointed them towards comparable attitudes. They were constantly admonished for not showing respect or expressing gratitude, for losing patience or sight of the fact that in society there were powers greater than them and their own humble and limited position. Trained to excess in forever withholding their own opinion and forgetting their pride, probably has caused frustration and anxiety to individuals, on the other hand prevented violence, friction or open conflict within communities.

Socialization and school curricula follow(ed) conservative norms and values as well as employing traditional forms in its transmission. What is taught is to give in to those older/senior and not to question their teachings, ideas, orders or to adopt a critical attitude or express skepticism of any kind. The schools reiterate and confirm such views and, by so doing, reinforce the traditional hierarchy of things and people. Hence, neither family nor school are preparing children and students for work in a modern workplace nor, for that matter, for life in a modern society where people are expected to freely express their views and discuss their diverging opinions with others in an open and pragmatic manner, without being either overly deferential or aggressive.

Individual and Society

Thai socialization, it can be concluded, does not successfully prepare people for an open exchange of opinions, nor in the field of human interaction nor does it teach how to deal with expressing or responding to grievances, objections or dissent. Discussion and argumentation are suppressed in favor of agreement and conformity.



Discussions over debatable issues are not won or decided by ‘better’ arguments but by the relative position of those involved. Quite likely though this is leaving those on the ‘losing’ side at times with a deep unresolved frustration.

This also explains, why – when it comes to public or political issues – Thais commonly prefer to remain ‘invisible’ and are not inclined to speak their mind in public in case they risk exposure or invite criticism or ridicule. Elevating this argument to the level of the wider society; such characteristics and traits are conducive to maintaining the status quo and support the ‘powers-that-be’ in exerting and maintaining control over their subjects. Are these then a positive force or influence or a drawback to modern urban life?

The dramatic and fast-paced transformation of society – as witnessed over the last five decades – that have released many millions of people into a chaotic urban environment, with its smaller families and relatively uncontrolled, individualized, living and life style have changed the status quo and upped the ante. The family cannot control its individual members at ease any longer as in times past. As it turned out, even the schools’ authority over adolescents cannot compete with peer pressure; today’s youngsters at times seem more open to influence of modern pop culture and the media than to traditional values.

Limited Public Concern

While Thais as individuals are not really prepared for open communication or for trusting or relying on the world outside of their family, social institutions that would be inviting or supportive for such attempts are not readily available either. This is another shortcoming of Thai social structure; social institutions at the intermediate levels are either absent or fragile, hence not dependable. The transmission of trust and good will, the ‘glue’ of social cohesion, from family to some higher social entity needs improving. The links between family and community (and again between community and the nation) must be viewed as fragmented. This is so because of an underlying apprehension towards ‘outsiders’ and open distrust towards ‘strangers’ and thus not much inclination towards including all and sundry within the ‘in’-group.

A simple test for the lack of communal orientation or space would consist in walking through the streets of our towns or cities. Whether a building or its location or positioning (or that of a street or an entire neighbourhood) is pleasing to the eye is of less concern; its main purpose is to make money (or simply showing off). The obvious lack of city planning and urban design that resulted in a stark deficit in public spaces or parks for esthetic reasons or the recreation of their residents



constitutes a major draw back of Thai cities. Both these deficiencies are interconnected, because when few look out for the common good there is little space left or reserved for the meeting of peoples – other than for sleeping, moving about or working. People sleep, commute or work; they do not meet out in the open.

Present

Uneven Relations

Given these values and traditions the country appears not particularly well prepared for modern dialogue or equipped for open discourse between society's major stakeholders, such a dialogue commonly requires two sides standing on an even keel. Where one clearly holds the dominating position and so is provided with far greater resources and power and thus may (attempt to) order or dictate at will, there is no need or reason for entering into conversation that could eventually lead to compromise and thus, probably, loss of face.

This is very much the case in Thailand where authorities traditionally hold the upper hand – by default. These can thus choose to act at will, even in paternalistic and authoritative ways, rule over, and apply pressure, use force or coercion in their dealings with the public at large. More such lopsided relations exist within the institutions of law enforcement and the armed forces too, even with the academic sector. The private sector mirrors such uneven power relations – probably taking even a lead – with employers having the upper hand and at times demonstrating this air of superiority, while employees, workers and unions in general are unable to withstand this pressure and, overall, have proven powerless.

Invariably, some one is higher or lower, in control or controlled and from the very outset all find their place within a strong hierarchy. Opinions – especially if diverging from the accepted 'norm' or prescribed values - must be kept within and not expressed. Hence, society lacks an apt security valve for letting off pressure as well as offering opportunities for informal and non-offensive discourse between proponents of diverging views. Its presence could have led to reducing confrontation and thus preventing open conflict. Instruments for reducing or resolving public strife by peaceful means, such as a 'Peace and Reconciliation Commission' are not in place.

A characteristic of traditional Thai culture – as in quite a few other Asian countries - is the subordination of an individual under the head of the family as well as under a comprehensive system of seniority which is enforced by the ever-present fear of losing face and thus dignity. It is an effective but not overt form of social control which does present itself in this way and hence does not need any 'sanctions' to maintain its existence.



Evading Reality

Thai individuals are constantly discouraged from probing into relevant yet potentially divisive issues; rather they are admonished to remain at the surface of things - out of politeness, fear of losing face, apathy or denial. This amounts to some form of evasion of reality. Denial of reality or of unwelcome news is quasi institutionalized via the over-riding fear of losing face and dignity or of being a harbinger of unwelcome tides. One is not supposed to concern oneself much with others and their affairs. This reluctance results in another weakness, though namely the inability of slipping on the shoes of others – seeing things from their perspective. This again leads to misjudging reality and to erroneous ideas as to how the other side will feel and react to one's own actions – potentially disastrous when fault lines have already surfaced and fatal when violent conflict has already erupted.

Moreover, in line with the above, a distinct built-in hypocrisy immanent in Thai society is undeniable, such as when Thai youngsters from 'good families' behave at home in a traditional subdued tone and with submissive manners, however once away from prying eyes and out of parental control and amidst their friends don revealing outfits; some even display morally questionable behavior in public.

Into this pattern of closing one's eyes of denying the facts directly supports the preference for 'face over fact'. Keeping in line with the attempt to present a violence- and conflict- free face of society social problems and vices are commonly not discussed openly. This does not mean, though, these are not present. Swept under the surface these nevertheless exist and persist throughout society: drugs and gambling of many a kind, prostitution in its various guises, even sex selling housewives and students, and various associated contagious diseases. There is further considerable hidden abuse and domestic violence within family and in society as well as business (such as towards migrants, workers and domestic servants) and a host of vulnerable single-mother households.

Avoiding Confrontation

Consistent with the predominance of style and form over content and substance, political discussions (at a level beyond blaming the other side or slinging verbal abuse aimed at their adversaries) are not the usual or preferred modes of expressing political opinion. (Verbal) Arguments are often substituted with rather simple codes and signs employed by the opposing sides to express aggression via 'color'. Other examples of style being preferred to function, or form taking precedence over substance, are demeaning posters or caricatures, burning in effigy of some



despised adversary and the like, instead of entering a debate using mature arguments.

Such reluctance to offend can prevent even the mere mentioning of felt needs or demands or of the airing of substantive grievances and thus precludes nipping conflict in the bud. Refusal of dialogue on grounds that the other side does not ‘know’ things does not help, either. All this is likely to contribute, though, to a growing sense on part of those less educated and powerless that the authorities have not only taken them for granted but have also marginalized and excluded them from mainstream concerns and pleasures. Though helpless as individuals, a multitude of such people motivated with common grievances and assembled in favor of some cause or interest group can be pushed towards a common goal and prompted to joint action; and consequently can accomplish something. Denial of existence of such problems, and thus avoiding open confrontation at this point, and failure of the established institutions and channels to addressing those - while still relatively confined and manageable – contributes greatly to the escalation of dissent and conflict.

Divisions in Society

Thai society is diverse; according to socio-economic criteria highly stratified and divided and not entirely inclusive, with people in rural areas and at the periphery not fully integrated into the economy or society at large. Great differences as to wealth and education prevail. Major economic and social divisions exist, as well as a wide disparity reflecting the rural-urban residence divide and other relevant socio-economic parameters (education, health, life expectancy, income and property). This means, Thais hailing from such diverse backgrounds must be talking at cross purposes because they do not share many traits or assets, preferences, likes and dislikes – with people outside their own group of reference. On the one extreme the semi-literate rural low-income earners and the highly educated urban high-income earners positioned at the other end have nothing in common.

With social distance, economic gaps and other divisions in society still growing, those lagging behind on certain social indicators, including their incomes which may be precarious, may entertain a growing sense of being disenfranchised and excluded from the mainstream of having a quality of life. Similar convictions will grow even more when they feel that they are not receiving respect from those more powerful or affluent. With their emotions bottled up and their aspirations disappointed, their frustrations not relieved, a potentially worrying combustion is thus set on course.

The stark division in and stratification of Thai society poses a major



constraint to maintaining or restoring non-violence and peace. It does provide the ground for and contributes a great deal to creating situations which are already full of conflict or have the potential for conflict. Additionally, where confrontation and strife are rife and constant the situation will become entrenched and long lasting. Their diverse life experiences and life styles compound a situation of dissatisfaction and major discontent that could be precursors of protests, strikes or unrest of many kinds. These root causes of division in Thai society are unlikely to vanish in the foreseeable future.

Conflict and Its Lessons

It should by now be self-evident that such historical precedents of civil disobedience and other politically motivated non-violence movements as well as of open conflicts need to be studied, to enable a better understanding of motives, triggers, rules or consequences of non-violent versus violent action, and conditions for avoiding open conflict. Important, too, once started what could probably help extinguish a fire and what tends to fan or reignite the flames? Studying points of friction with the potential for escalation into open conflict, as demonstrated with many foreign conflicts, could help formulate realistic responses to the Thai domestic challenge. Amongst the first lessons to heed is that violence comes in various guises and its parameters and depth are wide ranging.

Violence, peaking in violent crime and murder, may be committed by an individual or else by a group of people, even in their millions for example rebellion or revolution. For a state to enjoy and remain in peace, the latter is more relevant, however we ought to study the similarities and links between such actions by one person and that of groups of people as well. Is there a link between the individual's act of violence and that of a multitude in society? This question needs be addressed. Finding answers to such queries could be relevant for predicting and/or preventing an outbreak of mass violence.

Violence, even that on mass scale, is harder to prevent if less of its common ingredients and factors are known or understood; also, the typical course of such action needs to be studied systematically. Failing to analyse its causes and tendencies and thus the steps towards emergence and escalation of violence will not be fully understood. What does appear to prepare the ground for (mass) violence and what could have prevented it? Steps in the escalation include conditions on the ground and relations between the opposing sides, with fault lines emerging on the surface,



specific events, triggers that lead to reactions on the part of the weaker side and, eventually, to open conflict.

Specific root causes and triggers of violence and conflict may be many, such as rifts between or unfairness felt by members of ethnic, religious, political, economic or social groups or a combination of some or all of these factors. Pressure on ethnic or religious minorities, disparity and discontent between rural and urban dwellers, distrust between the capital and the provinces have been found amongst the most reliable predictors of the outbreak of confrontation or unrest. Into this plays also a wide discrepancy of life styles, whereas a majority still upholds the traditional values, occupations and the 'past' way of life, a growing minority have moved on to more 'modern' choices and outlook. Friction prevails.

An important yardstick for gauging the likelihood of an eruption of violence provides the concept of direct and structural violence, the latter defined as the systematic way in which a state can deter, prevent or exclude individuals from achieving their full potential. Institutionalized racism or gender inequality come to mind as well as the relegation of groups of people to second-class citizenship. Social relations in such societies tend to be uneven (and often static), with some on the top and others at the bottom of the hierarchy. With such conditions, violence does not need to be direct, as it is built into the structure of society and set against those not part of the establishment.

Warning Signals

Indicators and warning signals of potential or impending conflict are many and varied such as in states with a centralised system of administration; a growing dissonance between state ideology (and actors) and self-concept, as well as the aspirations of people in the provinces and/or those on the periphery. When ethnic origin, culture and/or religion of a minority group differs from that of the majority and they feel that they are being pushed constantly towards giving up their culture and mother tongue, a further step towards confrontation takes place. A general air of intolerance or discrimination may persuade those outside of the establishment that their concerns are only marginal. When their communities are not provided a similar level of public services (roads, electricity, water, sanitation) or a say in local matters, or there is a sense of receiving less than a 'fair' share in educational and medical services and little or no economic incentives and development commensurate with that at the national level coming their way, either, disappointment may turn to frustration.



Parameters of Conflict

Parameters and patterns of causes for and conduct of conflict: The greater the physical, objective or emotional distance; the more uneven the power relationship, the more divisive the factors, such as race/ethnic origin and religion and, specifically, a combination of both, or the greater the linguistic, educational or income disparities between the potential opponents, the greater the divide will be and the greater the likelihood of an outbreak of conflict will be. The end result will also result in the greater difficulty in resolving a conflict. All this seems yet more pronounced when these additional conditions are present; the more distant from the country's centre, the closer to an international border, the longer the history of antagonism prevailing or violence and/or the more intense the extraction of natural resources from the territory of the weaker side. Moreover, the less responsive to local complaints and protestations, the harsher the response on the part of the authorities and the more unprovoked coercion and use of (undue) force, as well as the more superior and better armed its forces are directly leads to the escalation of the cycle of violence, revenge and vengeance. Classic cases of this scenario are Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland; the more the conflict tended to escalate the longer it would keep running.

Thailand then with its freshly escalating domestic confrontation and strife by no means stands alone; a great many conflicts erupted all over the world in the midst of a general upsurge in ethnic and religious-based strife and conflict since the end of the Cold War, such as in Southern Europe. In Asia these tended to involve Muslim minorities opposing their respective central governments, Russia is another example (Chechnya and Caucasus) as is China. These conflicts tended to drag on unresolved in spite of major crack-downs.

Limited Reaction

Once conflict in the South was out in the open, the Thai system of governance and administration which is not designed for reacting in a timely fashion when this means compromise, has proven rather inept in extinguishing the fire while still at low flame. Hence, the recent flashpoint in the South and potential other friction points, i.e. the hill tribes and the urban slum dwellers, or rural peoples with their various grievances and complaints, seem beyond the scope of routine governance or traditional responses. Also, those in authority appear not to have regained the initiative in the South but are merely responding and reacting to moves from the other side.



As it has turned out, Thai official responses to the conflict, other than the use of force, appear hesitant and not readily forthcoming, as if the challenge was entirely unexpected and the authorities taken by surprise. In reality the authorities over the years could not even identify and localize its leadership. However historic precedence as well as a host of distinctions including a wide discrepancy between local and mainstream norms and values differing from that of their mainstream neighbours could imply that these contrasting ways of life remain on a collision course.

The developments in the last years have shown that Thailand basically had no operative conflict prevention or avoidance strategy and has a history of missing minority views and not giving in to dissent from outside the establishment. Presently, nearly a decade into the conflict, Thailand still has no coherent strategy and has not developed a dependable facility for recognizing and issuing an early warning in response to these or other groups or points of major friction or to sound alarm bells about impending grave social problems or of an imminent for recognising conflict brewing.

Prospects

Positive Approach

The demonstrated disquieting lack of preparedness to take on such a major issue as the Southern conflict, which at the time of its outbreak had simmered for a few decades and that could not have escaped the notice of the authorities, and which is now still raging in its sixth year. In addition, the public debate about the responses hitherto chosen for dealing with such a major challenge have been proven as “too little, too late” are obviously incapable of containing the conflict.

Lacking the ability or of the means for detecting or interpreting the codes or signals for impending confrontation or of upcoming strife that could warn authorities and the public, or else, reveal the fuses that could go off and thus forestall a major ‘explosion’, we need therefore to examine other conflicts and analyse their typical structure and flow. Often violence is visible at the surface but is found to be just the tip of an iceberg. Therefore, recognizing and addressing friction early could be a major bonus and part of an effective proactive response.

A pre-condition for or reconstitution of internal ‘peace’ is not only the absence of open conflict, a negative/passive goal, but even more so, a confluence of positive interests and feelings towards others, a sense of mutual responsibility and a readiness to collaborate. Reaching a positive synergy requires an input and effort from all sides and need to be based on enhancing common interests and faith in the



institutions. Its' fruition should be achieved by encouraging a basic trust in the system on hand which is a positive/active goal. This would go a long way towards providing a feeling of security, at the communal level, and giving a sense of having a stake in society, thus helping infuse a sense of social cohesion, in lieu of the compartmentalized sense of loyalty and compassion limited to a confined circle, which currently prevails with many in Thai society.

Those who feel that they have a fair stake in the current environment and who appreciate life under the status quo, are more likely to resist the temptation to reject it and opt instead to defending the current way of life. People generally satisfied with their present circumstances, as well as that of the wider society commonly do not make rebels. Instead, these people can afford to enter a debate on issues in quite a relaxed frame of mind rather than being embittered or full of hatred. However currently in Thailand, such civilized debate without bias and political discourse and without prejudice seems in short supply, while short-tempered agitation and confrontation rule the day.

Towards Non-Violence

Violence erupts and conflict breaks out, not peace. This latter tends to be the culmination of a long process strewn with many difficulties and full of diversions. Without non-violence prevailing, though, there is no peace in society. Non-violence needs to be practised, a must for solidarity and cohesion.

Thai society, as indeed any other, needs non-violence and peace to thrive. But what does this mantra really suggest? Is *non-violence* merely the absence of violence and is *peace* just the opposite of conflict or war? Rather abstract concepts, depicting a passive state of affairs without grades or levels of intensity, or should certain positive qualities be associated with these concepts that need to be present for generating or maintaining the wished-for positive state of affairs? These could as well include, enhancing the quality of life and promoting participation in the field of the wider public in the affairs of their communities and nation, as well as instilling positive values, an awareness of the need for social cohesion and solidarity amongst all citizens irrespective of their gender, age, ethnicity, religion, residence, occupation and income.

What does society-wide non-violence – *peace* - really imply? Suppose, 98% would never resort to physical abuse, does this amount to a satisfactory state of non-violence and peace within society? However this would leave one million on the outside of this equation, perhaps too many. Must then not *all* abstain from violence



for that goal to be accomplished? This points towards the need for motivating all its citizens to engage in realizing the vision of non-violence and thus work for peace. Or, at the very least, these need to give their tacit consent and assurance to desisting from acting as ‘spoilers’. Inclusion and integration, non-violence and peace are dependent upon a positive sentiment towards fusing a society with its values and goals as its guiding factors.

Building Trust

In order to reach the active participation of a majority amongst the (local) people, a consensus, in a conflict-prone area and where trust needs to be built (or rebuilt) and suspicion, distrust or hatred diminished, the circle of vengeance and revenge be ended. Trust, like faith, is a matter of (personal) perception and so is distrust and suspicion. Trust is then a consequence of a policy of respect, tolerance, solidarity and consensus. Commonly, those on the other side of power and authority experience the more negative setbacks or sentiments. To restore their belief and trust into the system requires special efforts.

To building trust amongst all or the majority of stakeholders is usually a tedious endeavour and a long term prospect. It needs constant and coordinated efforts of a great many, but can be destroyed in an instant by misdeeds or violence on the part of the deliberate actions of just a few or even by pure accident. Once trust as an institution is broken or faith is shattered, its restoration requires major efforts and much patience. Lessons from multicultural societies with a history of past conflicts, usually involves the restoration of a state of non-violence and this tends to be a lengthy process that requires patience and perseverance on the part of all the sides involved. It does not come easily nor can it be maintained on the ‘cheap’; instead, constant vigilance and active engagement on the side of the major stakeholders are required.

Universally accepted instruments against which progress or otherwise, can be measured are as follows: Many of the most vital ingredients for avoiding friction and conflict as well as for building trust and reaching non-violence are contained in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which Thailand endorsed as one of the first UN member states. The Act encourages the inclusion as well as improving the quality of life for the majority by asserting that the “recognition of human dignity of all people is the foundation of justice and peace in the world.” It proclaims four freedoms; freedom of speech, belief, freedom from want, and freedom from fear – which are “proclaimed as the highest aspiration” of the people. It underlines also



“faith in fundamental human rights and dignity and worth of the human person”. Safety and security of the individual, gender equality and other such ideas and legal incitements contribute to inclusion and integration of all people. Where these are present and respected, building of or maintaining trust between the members of society should not prove too difficult.

Sharing Authority

One way of achieving trust and harmony for its citizens as a sense of having a stake in society, is by setting up formal political institutions, at levels below that of central Government, with a share in authority, power and, with fiscal autonomy to some degree. These would enhance political inclusion and promote local participatory democracy. The Constitution of B.E. 2540 envisaged people’s participation and consultation along the process of administration by assigning responsibility to a lower level of Government by undertaking decentralization and devolution of power. Establishing a lower level of political representation and thus enhancing local ownership such as Tambon Councils was a step in this direction. Decentralizing education and the police force administration were also considered.

Another such attempt, at the national level, was the establishment of Independent Agencies provided for and set up under the Constitution. Still, these were primarily ‘top-top’ instruments for advising and checking on those in power. Their implementation was devised on the back of past negative experiences, such as corruption and lack of up-to-date expertise on the part of those with authority. These thus were products viewed with suspicion by ‘the’ people fearing those who govern may not reflect their concerns and therefore may need to be controlled. (An additional draw back is that these agencies, too, comprise of a few selected members who, again, represent the masses.)

Raising Awareness

Whereas violence and conflict tend to proceed with an accelerating pace, reconciliation and resolution of conflict must be viewed as a protracted and gradual process that starts off rather slowly, but not due to a single event. In the absence of security valves, political opponents need first to be equipped with useful formulae for non-confrontational expression of opinion and low-key dialogue. All this could contribute to pre-empting or keeping conflict at low-level. At the same time, it would also afford law enforcing authorities the time for conducting appropriate training for policing demonstrators or for crowd control, by employing a non-violent



approach.

Those in charge, as well as their potential opponents, need to be provided a functional yet manageable conflict avoidance or reduction strategy, not just taught ‘proper behavior’. The rationale and ‘etiquette’ for demonstrating and protesting needs to be taught and inculcated into society too. At the same time, this would also serve to keeping antagonists apart. However, for improving the actual situation on the ground, it would be quite useful to offer the opportunity (on specified occasions) and space for meetings in the public arena and communal spaces as a base to encourage people to join together, rather than living apart.

Overcoming Constraints

Strong evidence gained from the reduction or resolution of former conflicts suggests that even major barriers can be broken down and constraints or weaknesses can be overcome as long as norms and values or social sanctions become flexible enough to accommodate reasonable aspirations and demands. They also need to amend severe shortcomings or soft spots as well as close ‘short circuits’ in order to lodge appeals or demands. There is a need to augment the lack of an interface between authorities and the rest of the people. Even an entirely adverse situation can be turned around, but constraints are abundant:

Adopting suitable and timely responses is key to success. Efforts that have developed useful typologies, dynamics, formulas and models and strategies, have demonstrated, once violence has broken out, conflicts should be taken on in a comprehensive manner, in a systematic and structured approach, not in some isolated or sporadic, spontaneous or improvising way.

Thai society is used to a top-down flow of decisions (vertical bias) and (selective) information trickling down from the authorities to their ‘subjects’ which could benefit from appreciating and even promoting horizontal flows of information, communication and interaction amongst a multitude of actors meeting on a more even keel. For this to take effect, extensive concerns with those in positions of authority need to be overcome, namely, opening up to the public, whether it is a consultation with the public or an enhanced transparency which would water down their control or endanger their authority.

The authorities need to adopt the art of compromise. In the past the authorities aim to restore the status quo was the ultimate goal, for those on the other side the aim was total change, so as to reverse their fortunes, fulfill all their aspirations and thus present them with a positive future. Compromises ought to be found



through negotiations and mediations, as arranged by a neutral partner rather than to look for solutions solely with the opposing sides.

So far, Thais have found it difficult to ‘insulate’ grievances so as not to go overboard, neither with demands nor reactions. From never complaining, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme, it has become fashionable to be complaining all the time about all and sundry and demand a total turn-around of society and the reversal of the status quo. Those concerned must learn to identify what is important and what is less so, to separate the essential the ‘core’, from the peripheral, the ‘negligible’.

Enhancing Communal Spirit

Typically, once centralized administrations encounter local problems or are faced with protests, high-ranking officials deciding on measures to be taken (or not) or some other high-level panel which will discuss matters. This kind of reaction leaves out two crucial levels, that of the individual (affected) and that of the community (concerned). They need, however, to be included in any such efforts, to address and remove conditions for disaffection, violence and conflict. Crucially, such efforts thus need to be taken up on two fronts, at the level of the individual and a second intermediate level of the social institution and of groups. Hence, issues of concern [and soft spots] within Thai society that have surfaced in issues related to these important aspects need to be addressed and the social institutions at both these essential levels targeted.

Besides, at a more general level, to generate a sense of solidarity, individuals need to extend basic skills on how to exchange views and opinions. Moreover, a sense of belonging to something greater than the family needs to be generated or encouraged, which will help foster a sense of communal rights and responsibilities. In a way, components and mechanisms of a social as well as inter-generational, and rural-urban dialogue need to be developed. However passing on any non-traditional ideas and values tends to be an uphill task once a person has turned into an adult, complete with a fixed set of values, world views and ideas that impose a standard set of attitudes and fixed patterns of behavior. Hence, children and youth need to be a prime focus of attempts at creating awareness and or affecting change.

One set of long-term responses then ought to target adapting principles, substance matters and messages of socialization and formal education, i.e. parenting/ socialization and school curricula and syllabi, to the requirements of a more open, inclusive, tolerant society, while another, more short-term reaction could be targeted,



directly at reverting and reducing friction or conflict via media, government officials and core multipliers.

Traditionally, the local population has not been granted a say in matters of local administration ('withholding'). This position could be sustained over a great stretch of time via supportive policies, as well as ideology and or a controlling force. This also meant to keep the lid on emancipation attempts and probably has resulted in 'withdrawing' on the part of those thus sidelined. However, it could be an altogether different proposition when taking back some form of 'freedom' rights or 'independence' once granted. Such set-backs would more likely antagonize, even incense, those who had believed they had been 'set free', accorded some degree of personal 'freedom'. They could be even more offended when observing double standards at play and would probably come to realize their disadvantage.

Embracing Diversity

In our modern world with its streams of migrants and large-scale immigration few states are homogeneous. Practically all Asian countries are home to ethnic and or religious minorities, so is Thailand. Thai society has now arrived at a crucial juncture and needs to come to terms with the fact that up to ten per cent of its citizens are neither ethnic Thai nor Buddhist. Not all of those may share all the world views, values and positions of the majority population which could lead to an inherent danger of polarization.

Present-day Thai society is culturally diverse. Over the centuries, Thailand has accepted many immigrants with different backgrounds. Such diversity has benefited the country in the past; although this fact still needs official acknowledgment. According to the United Nations, minorities should not be forced to give up their traditions. Specifically the problems in the South highlight the fact that the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity is of utmost relevance:

“culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs”. It is relevant to “identity, social cohesion, and the development of a knowledge-based economy”. Hence, “respect for the diversity of cultures, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation, in a climate of mutual trust and understanding, are among the best guarantees of international peace and security.” Greater solidarity can be achieved “on the basis of recognition of cultural diversity”. (all taken from the Preamble). *Article 4 – Human rights as guarantees of cultural*



diversity

“The defence of cultural diversity is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity. It implies a commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the rights of persons belonging to minorities and those of indigenous peoples. No one may invoke cultural diversity to infringe upon human rights guaranteed by international law, nor to limit their scope.”

The Declaration strongly endorses positions that enhance appreciating cultural diversity as a positive contribution towards non-violence and peace. UNESCO calls for the Declaration’s “effective application” as a way to assist vulnerable groups, as well as preserving the cultural wealth of the world.

“In our increasingly diverse societies, it is essential to ensure harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well as their willingness to live together. Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace. Thus defined, cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Indissociable from a democratic framework, cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life.”

Article 2 – From cultural diversity to cultural pluralism

Raising awareness of the need to embrace diverse ethnic Thais into the fold of Thai society and to endorse its relevance and the benefits of accepting such individuals into the fold is paramount to eliminating any opportunities for distrust and anger to grow. This may not come easily to people, as long as their own children are ‘held down’ and kept ‘silent’; granting a ‘voice’, ‘free choice’, and ‘equality’ to others, particularly to strangers, will no doubt seem a far-fetched idea to traditional Thais.

Tasks Ahead

Dispensing appropriate parenting and life-skills, demonstrating rational decision making, as well as mediation techniques, need to be instilled, especially, into the younger generation so as to

- Counter the constant fear of offending others or of losing one’s face, pervades any contact or communication. Demonstrate how to express one’s opinion freely while respecting and appreciating that of others.
- Urgently equip schools (qua curricula and teachers’ training) to teach skills



for decision-making and critical thinking, - and for

- Raising team spirit as well as laying down the skills for teamwork in schools and in the workplace;

- Impart to government agencies and NGOs, but also a wider public, a need to show concern for others and to have them pursue matters of mutual interest. The goal of this initiative would be to encourage people to see themselves as part of a wider community and of something larger than their family or their workplace, but as important.

- Undertake concerted efforts at consensus and community building; inclusion, gender equality and integration of minorities should be fostered;

- Strengthen ability of forming and maintaining coherent social groups and associations above the level of family and intimate peer groups (patrons and clients or groups of classmates) that represent groupings of diverse people like parties, unions or other such associations of people unrelated by kin but linked by common interests;

- In the context of a modern fast changing society with a vast array of open media and communication channels, disseminate timely information on relevant current and upcoming events and issues so as to achieve broad participation at the community level for planning and conduct of communal tasks needs be sought and institutionalized.

First Steps

Probably no better place to start than with the family, that assembles both sexes and several generations under one roof and thus is ideally suited to launch a renaissance and revival of traditional values and harmony, as well as a re-orientation towards communal values and concerns. A second such wave targeting strategic multipliers and change agents ought to be aimed at temples and schools, a third at the media, would target social cohesion and solidarity, so as to enhance a communal spirit.

For this, parents need to be offered appropriate parenting skills via the media. Teachers should offer fresh approaches to parenting or teaching skills, via courses in a new role media practitioners. By joining forces, parents and teachers can target the youth, as well as the community and address potential crucial causal factors and high risk groups. Appropriate life and decision making skills need to be imparted too.

In general, conflict resolution and negotiating skills and appropriate mediation techniques need to be extended to a multitude of stake holders. To this end appropriate



personnel need to be selected and trained. Also, nodal points (junction points in a transmission system) need to be identified and recruited, such as, universities, also specialized institutes, teacher colleges, PTAs or rural health centres. As crucial catalysts and ‘multipliers’ the media (radio and TV) via journalists’ associations and private/public stations need to be involved, as well.

Two special nation-wide programmes for furthering trust, cooperation and enhancing communal spirit are worth considering:

- **Taking Up Dialogue**

At present (March 2010), with the opposing sides seemingly unable or unwilling to enter civilized dialogue, a major step towards advancing non-violence and peace within Thai society would be to arrange a nationwide public dialogue, to present a public forum for issues that are causes or effects and thus the basis of the current challenges, confrontations and conflicts. These issues, discussed in an organized way, and a civilized manner in the public arena and on neutral ground, could constitute a major accomplishment in this current era of permanent confrontation.

For this, though, a culture of public dialogue is required; components and mechanisms of a social, as well as an inter-generational and rural-urban exchange of opinion need to be developed. Such dialogue would set the scene for articulating concern and for arriving at consensus, compromise and contribute - through its very presence - towards solidarity and cooperation amongst diverse segments of society including the rural-urban, young-old, educated-less educated, employers-employees.

Its first positive impact would be to reach out and motivate a wider participation in public and political affairs. A responsive dialogue bringing together the various stakeholders at one forum; thus furthering positive relations. These can be direct relations between members of civil society or relations between governmental authorities and civil society, to address concerns on a variety of matters. Participants would come from the public and private sectors as well as ‘civil society’.

The aim is to debate certain issues and come up with answers and suggestions for action. The goal is to have an ongoing dialogue on issues of current concern and present a platform for an exchange of opinions at every level of society. This would introduce a structured and qualitative dialogue and device for the authorities and institutions to take into account the concerns and aspirations, opinions and ideas from a wider public. It would also help improve accountability and transparency on the part of those who govern and hence contribute to making policy and administration more inclusive, by providing a platform for diverse inputs from



all stakeholders.

Examples of such dialogue activity may include mutual information, open discussion, coordination of their actions, and exchanges of opinions, consultation and negotiation. Initially, so as to avoid confrontation, issues discussed ought to be less divisive, political or 'explosive' and where consensus is inherent, e.g. the issues surrounding public parks, pollution.

- **Promoting Community Action**

Non-violence or peace, in some ways, cannot be taught but the conditions and the framework that make it possible and/or sustainable can be transmitted to the people concerned. Non-violence and peace are becoming attractive and worth investing in or defending, when everyone feels they have a stake in the current situation and something to lose should it be disturbed. In order to enhance community spirit and pride as well as to transmit a sense of belonging to something greater, these ideas ought to be shared with a great many others when planning, performing or watching joint activities of mutual interest.

Within a great many communities scores of Government agencies, NGOs, companies, and the like are already conducting many such activities. However commonly these are disjointed, uncoordinated efforts, not performed at the same time, and without the participants being aware of being part of a communal, provincial or national effort. This is very much the case with the Father's, Mother's or Children's Day celebrations, which are not repeated throughout the year to highlight more mundane yet positive purposes or local concerns, such as joint projects to clean up a canal, river, or community, planting trees or competitions in sport or entertainment, at a communal or provincial basis – but, preferably, not organized as usual from the top by authorities or commercial sponsors but by 'the people' themselves.

For example a few schools could come together, and have a brainstorming session to come up with a topic and a plan, as well as a prospective date and location and to then take these up with authorities, NGOs and the private sector. Media should be invited to announce and to cover such events. By jointly taking community action, solidarity and a group spirit and pride is enhanced. The prime purpose – apart from just having fun – is a hope to garner a commitment, at a personal, as well as a group level, to engage and practice a basic yet effective level of solidarity and cohesion in a community. The benefits of raising the communal spirit can be major.

In a similar spirit, sports and entertainment games between competing communities or provinces could be arranged and pairings could reflect the diversity of the country bringing together disparate communities and regions. All this could



lead to much improved teamwork, collaboration and cohesion.

Community Action - its social dimensions yet unknown participation in such joint activities can have an enormous positive effect on the community or the country. Essential is: Focus clearly, One Theme at One Time Carried Out Everywhere: "Together Let's Make our Community Green, Clean, Happy!"

Towards Non-Violence and Peace

Neither non-violence nor peace is a static condition, but a confluence of positive traits, actions and events. Peace in society is not a constant state of affairs, but requires perpetual work, joint voluntary efforts of a great many – only feasible where all are part of the wider society. Participation and contributions of all members of society require joint efforts of all, but for this to occur, all need to feel included, as well.

NON-VIOLENCE needs to begin at 'Home', to be replicated a few million times over the Country; then PEACE can come and stay in Society.

What can or must the Thai family do? What can Thai society contribute towards a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence? Socialization needs to convey a sense of mutual dependence and responsibility outside of the confines of the family and prepare the individual for open communication, cooperation and compromise in the public and political sphere. At school education needs to impart an intense aversion towards abuse or violence, as well as, a general sense of fairness and inclusion. Education needs to foster a spirit of cooperation and solidarity that also embraces weaker segments of society and includes minorities which will lead to long-term solutions.

But even if family or school succeed in this endeavor against all the odds, major challenges and prerequisites for a conflict-free Thai society still persist, as there are other deterring forces or major hindrances and constraints well out of its control or reach, such as the wide economic disparity and a divisive political climate. These need to be addressed in the medium-term.

Lest we forget, though, for amending the way society operates or augmenting school curricula to result in tangible effects or to take hold throughout society and country, it might require the combined efforts of an entire generation or more. Hence, implementing these suggestions right now would not alleviate the present urgent concerns, (albeit preparing society better for modern life) of individuals or communities and their need to be governed by peace and non-violence.



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