

Pmove must fight much harder to win the good fight



Villagers from the People's Movement for a Just Society, a grassroots movement, are barred from entering Government House during their protest to pressure the government to fulfil policy pledges to ease their plight.

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Their plight represents what the poor suffer after decades of unfair development. Their protests used to grab headlines and shake the stability of governments. No longer.

The current sit-in protest by members of the People's Movement for a Just Society, or Pmove for short, is its eighth effort during the past two years to draw the Yingluck government's attention to their plight.

This one is the biggest so far with close to 3,000 people joining at the height of the protest which started last week. It moved to the Education Ministry at the weekend, but resumed outside Government House yesterday.

But it is a far cry from the powerful rallies under its old name of the Assembly of the Poor, a nationwide network of grassroots movements.

And with little media attention centred on their rally, the government does not feel the pressure to help the group or implement its policy promises which might ease their plight.

Colour-coded political conflicts take up more of the government's energy,

and media attention. The poor's plight is relatively low on their priority list.

"There is hardly any space for grassroots movements to make our voices heard amid the current political divisions," Paijit Silarak, a grassroots activist and Pmove co-ordinator said.

"The poor's problems are brushed aside when national attention is focused on colour-coded politics."

The Assembly of the Poor, the once powerful grassroots network, suffered a blow when Thaksin Shinawatra first won a landslide election in 2001. Thanks to his popularity, the public and media were in no mood to listen to criticisms of his government's support for environmentally destructive megaprojects.

After the 2006 coup, the red-yellow division further eroded camaraderie in the grassroots movement.

Pmove subsequently emerged in 2009 after the death of the movement's iconic leader Wanida Tantiwittayapitak to fill the gap and carry on the Assembly of the Poor's mission, with a clear policy of staying clear of colour-coded politics. The movement comprises more than 10 grassroots groups across the country. They fight for the rights of the landless, stateless, and homeless whose plight is caused by draconian development policies.

Pmove put off its rally several times amid the distracting public debate over

the charter amendment and amnesty proposals, but when the government arrested some of the movement's members in the land rights network, Pmove decided it was time to act. Their main demands this time: decommission the Pak Moon dam; provide housing security for the urban poor; provide protection for communities under community land rights programmes; and do more to help the landless poor.

"The problem is a lack of political will and commitment," Mr Paijit said. "Instead of chairing the problem solving committee herself to ensure coordination and swift policy implementation, Prime Minister Yingluck assigns her deputies to the job." "First Yongyuth Wichaidit, then Chalerm Yubamrung. Neither understand the poor's problems. We have to start the talks all over again. And every time there are promises but no implementation."

Academic Atthajak Sattayanurak of Chiang Mai University's Humanities Faculty says Pmove's demands reflect fundamental needs in society, namely social security, equity, and a fair and just society.

Chainarong Sretthachau, a lecturer at Mahasarakham University's humanities and social sciences faculty, and a former activist on sustainable water uses, said academics and the media once strongly supported civil society groups such as Pmove. Deep political divisions

during the past decade, however, have distracted them.

While some become over-protective of the government, others believe that broader change in the overall power structure is more urgent and other problems have to wait, including the plight of the poor.

“But we cannot turn a blind eye to people who are affected by flawed state policies. Their plight demands attention no less than the colour-coded political conflicts,” Mr Chainarong insisted.

Pmove must work harder to win public attention through better networking with other civic groups and better use of information technology, he suggested.

The latest rally may fail to win rapid solutions for the poor who are uprooted by unjust state policies.

“But the protest is sending the message to the public and the authorities that they still exist, their decades-long problems remain unsolved, and that they’re still ready to fight for justice over the long haul.”

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