



Governance beyond the government: Responding to a reactionary flood governance regime in Ayutthaya, Thailand



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ABSTRACT

The 2011 flood has left a deep impression on many in Thailand. Many in Ayutthaya, the capital city of Ayutthaya province, remember it as the worst flood in living memory. While the central government was generally faulted for the apparent neglect of Ayutthaya at the expense of Bangkok, anger was largely directed towards the local government for releasing misleading and conflicting information prior to the flood, and lacking organization during the event. With the 2011 flood as the empirical anchor, this paper reveals the reactive nature of the decentralized disaster governance in Ayutthaya, and argues that this is an extension of the flood management strategy endorsed by the central government. I will further show that without the involvement of non-state actors, it would have been even more difficult, if not impossible, for the local government to cope with the 2011 flood. While the local government has since established a disaster management office, beyond the (small) monetary compensation many received after the 2011 flood, there have been few actions involving the people that have taken place. This reinforces the sense of a largely reactionary flood governance regime.

Next, I argue that this perceived lack of initiatives on the part of the local government has engendered further decentralization of flood governance in the small city of Ayutthaya. In their preparation for future floods, the people of Ayutthaya are enacting a form of flood governance with little involvement from the local government. Reclaiming their roles in the flood management process, people are developing personalized and neighbourhood-based adaptive strategies for dealing with future floods. This involves the establishment of informal networks for shelter and the distribution of supplies in case of future floods. In light of this, somewhat ironically, the inadequacies of the local government have productively encouraged the active participation of the people in flood management.

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1. Introduction

Rivers are mobile entities – they flow, they deposit and erode, they rise and fall. Floods are part of this process of mobility, and for countries like Thailand, they are seasonal phenomenon. Seasonally high river flows are expected during the monsoonal months from May to October. However, the coincidence of the monsoon period with tropical depression storms often results in large flood events (Lim, Boochabun, & Ziegler, 2012). While the latter is disruptive to lives and livelihoods (Lebel, Manuta, & Garden, 2011), large portions of the population have

been dependent on the seasonal floods for the renewal of fertile alluvial sediments and sufficient irrigation for their crops (Manuta & Lebel, 2005; Sophonpanich, 2013; Sornprapai, 1994). Thus, many have adapted their lifestyles to the flux of the river discharge. Festivals were planned around the monsoonal calendar and centred on rivers,¹ canals once criss-crossed the water-based cities of Bangkok and Ayutthaya as the fluxes of the rivers were incorporated into the urban blueprint of these cities, and stilt houses and floating houses have come to define Thai vernacular architecture. Rapid industrialization

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¹ One of Thailand's most famous festivals is Songkran in April, in celebration of the end of the dry season and welcomes the 'renewal' of the wet season.

and subsequent processes of urbanization, however, have resulted in massive changes in land-use, livelihoods and ways of living in Thailand over the past decades (King, 2008; Manuta, Khrutmuang, Huasai, & Lebel, 2006). As such, the importance of riverine rhythms has diminished substantially in cities – floods are automatically assumed to be disruptive events. In turn, modest changes in river discharge may result in floods, and unusually high flood events may be disastrous (Lebel et al., 2009; Manuta et al., 2006).

Lasting for almost two months, and incurring a loss of almost US\$ 4.5 Billion (World Bank, 2011), the recent 2011 flood was indeed a disaster. The ineffective management of the floodwaters at the state and various municipal levels contributed partly to the assertion that the flood was the worst in living memory (see *The Straits Times*, 10 November 2014). This essay investigates the flood management strategy of Ayutthaya city in 2011. Based on the empirical material collected from interviews with people living in Ayutthaya, local leaders and civil servants, the first part of this essay reveals the crisis-driven and reactionary nature of the municipal flood governance regime during and immediately after the 2011 flood. This is symptomatic of a broader issue – Thailand has a largely unitary government, and despite efforts to decentralize over the past decade, most Thai municipal governments have ‘weak capacity in financial management, planning and service delivery, and generally lack adequate resources to deliver services effectively’ (Suwanmala & Weist, 2009: 194; Webster, 2002). I argue that, ironically, the municipal government of Ayutthaya was forced to further decentralize its flood management strategy during 2011 due to its inability to provide resources, services and information in a timely fashion to the people of Ayutthaya. Instead, the flood response was led largely by local actors and philanthropic organizations. These individuals and organizations provide important links between local communities and the municipal government (see Lebel et al., 2011).

Next, this essay suggests that following the 2011 deluge, there have been attempts to further decentralize flood governance, and encourage local participation in the management and mitigation of floods. However, these attempts were half-hearted at best, and they lack political will. This is further evident of the reactionary nature of flood governance in Ayutthaya: floods are quickly forgotten² at the municipal governmental level as the floodwaters subside (see Pfister, 2006). The people, however, do not forget. Reclaiming their roles in the flood management process, the people in Ayutthaya enact a form of governance with little involvement from the local government. While Douglass (2013) argues that residents in cities are dependent on access to governmental aid and assistance, after the 2011 flood, the people of Ayutthaya are increasingly turning to reciprocal relationships in their development of adaptive strategies and sharing networks for the future. Focusing on the ‘neglected scale... of neighbourhoods and smaller urban spaces’ (Douglass, 2013:17), this essay will reveal how prosaic changes in everyday ways of living, acts of altruism and mutual aid can potentially make the ability to live with floods a more egalitarian possibility. With this, the essay concludes with some reflections about how the decentralization of flood governance can take place in urban Thailand, at the nexus of the state, people and environment.

² This ‘forgetfulness’ is not to be understood literally; rather, it connotes an almost willful neglect of the impacts of the 2011 flood on the people in public discourses and policies.

2. Reactionary flood management: during and after the 2011 disaster

I'm impressed by the speed of sandbagging and the distribution of food and water [in Thailand], but you can't always solve problems with sandbags ... It's shocking how people are unprepared for the flood. It's as if the phenomenon of flooding has been completely forgotten in Thailand

Verwey, 2011; cited in an interview with the Integrated Regional Information Networks

Verwey (2011) is not wrong to say that floods have been seemingly forgotten in Thailand. Like most cities, Thai cities have been increasingly reliant on large-scale technocentric structures like levees and flood-control dams to control riverine fluxes – a phenomenon Tobin (1995) dubbed ‘the levee love affair’. This narrow and simplistic emphasis on structural means to regulate river discharge continues despite the fact that they have been proven, time and again, to be inadequate (Lebel et al., 2009; Ziegler, Lim, Chatchai, & Jachowski, 2012). The biggest issue with such protection structures is not only the false hopes and sense of security they generate; they also transform regular events – seasonal floods – into rare ‘interruptions’ that few are prepared for (Colten & Sumpter, 2009). Instead of enacting various long-term responses to riverine fluxes, flood governance regimes in Thailand are *reacting* to flood events with makeshift measures.

Ayutthaya city, colloquially known as ‘the island’, is surrounded by three waterways (Fig. 1). Hence, the settlements along the riverbanks are inundated up to about 0.3 m yearly. The extent of the flood in 2011 was, however, unprecedented. A combination of mismanagement of upstream dams and unusually high amount of rainfall resulted in a two-month-long flood, 1.5–2 m high, in most parts of the city. Initial attempts made by the municipal government to control the flood water illustrated the reactionary nature of the flood management strategies. A structural engineer working with the municipal government confirmed that the management approach was to ‘react to the event’ (interview, April 2014). Impromptu walls of mud, concrete and sandbags were built around riverbanks of the island as the central government announced the impending likelihood of floods in central Thailand. Floodwalls were also erected around institutions like the Ayutthaya Hospital and several governmental buildings.

The building of these walls was accompanied by continuous public reassurance that Ayutthaya would not be inundated despite the rising waters. In the process of assuaging fears, the municipal government had misinformed the city's residents. This seems to be a recurring mode of operation for many municipal governments in Thailand; for example, Manuta et al. (2006) writes that warnings were only issued a few hours before the waters reached Chiang Mai in 2005. Hence, there was simply not enough time for the people to prepare for the impending floods. Likewise, in Ayutthaya, many respondents shared similar experiences:

The [local] government kept telling us we would not be flooded ... They said the dams and floodwalls protecting the city were working well and the situation was ‘manageable’.³ We also

³ The phrase ‘manageable’ – ao yu – was heard constantly as we talked with the participants. Since the disastrous response of the municipality and the central government towards the flood, the phrase has since entered the day-to-day speech of many in Ayutthaya as a sarcastic jab.

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