

Boonsanong Punyodyana

1936–1976

On Saturday, 28 February 1976, Dr. Boonsanong Punyodyana, one of Thailand's most prominent sociologists and the Secretary-General of the Socialist Party of Thailand, was shot to death while driving toward his home on the outskirts of Bangkok. Dr. Boonsanong's death has meant a severe loss to the fledgling social sciences in Thailand, to Thai studies more generally, and to the community of Asian scholars with whom he was associated during his many years in the United States, as well as a personal tragedy for his wife Tasaniya and his two small children.

Born in 1936 in Chiang Rai in northern Thailand, he received his early education at Prince Royal's College in Chiang Mai. Continuing his studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, he received his B.A. degree in Political Science there in 1959. In 1963 he came to the United States for further study at the University of Kansas, and in 1964 earned an M.A. in Sociology from that university. In 1967, after two years on the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Thammasat University, he again returned to the United States for further studies, taking his Ph.D. at Cornell University. During his years in the United States, he was an active member of the American Sociological Association and, even more, of the Association for Asian Studies. He attended almost every annual meeting of the AAS from 1968 to 1972, presenting papers on panels at the 1968 and 1971 meetings.

Boonsanong's scholarly interests focused on the questions of the structure of social inequality in Thai society and of the processes of change affecting this structure. He carried out primary research on the changing position of the Chinese in Thai society, the results of which were published in a monograph and in several papers. In both his master's thesis and his doctoral dissertation, he attempted to interpret the changes that had taken place in Thai society and economy by comparing the modern history of Thailand with that of Japan. In both these studies, and in several articles he queried the conventional Western assumption that a high rate of economic development in Thailand has been associated with marked improvements in the standard of living of the majority of the population. For example, in his paper "Social Structure, Social System, and Two Levels of Analysis: A Thai View," he argued that Thai peasants form a class segment of Thai society relative to bureaucrats, who belong to another segment. Given the power and authority of bureaucrats in Thailand, and the rigid boundaries separating them from other members of the society, and given the absence of class consciousness among the Thai peasantry, benefits of economic development reach the peasants only insofar as they are granted by officials.

It was this type of assessment that led Boonsanong to devote himself to political action he felt could result in a radical restructuring of Thai society. When he returned to Thailand in 1972 to take up a position in the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Thammasat University once again, he found that there was growing popular resentment toward the ruling military dictatorship. Pressures to make the government more responsive to the populace were especially strong among students and faculty at Thammasat University. Initially, Boonsanong felt his most important role in helping to create a more democratic society was in the university context, where he could translate his Western-derived knowledge into terms meaningful for Thai. In October 1973, however, he was swept into a much more activist role by the revolution—led by students and faculty at Thammasat University—that succeeded in effecting the overthrow of the military dictatorship and in opening up possibilities for creating a more democratic society in Thailand.

From then on, Boonsanong became increasingly involved in politics, culminating in his becoming the Secretary-General of the Socialist Party of Thailand. In the elections of January 1975, the Socialist Alliance, which included the Socialist Party of Thailand and the United Socialist Front, won a total of 25 out of the 269 seats in the new Parliament. Although Boonsanong did not himself win a seat, the strong showing of the Socialist Alliance gave him a prominent role in the political life of Thailand throughout the following year. He was often portrayed in the press (both local and international) as the spokesman for the Thai Left, a designation that made him uncomfortable and which was also somewhat misleading. By late 1975, leftist and left-liberal parties in Thailand became the focus of strong public attacks, often for alleged positions these parties did not, in fact, advocate. By January 1976, when the Kukrit Pramoj government fell, several extreme right-wing movements had become violent in their opposition to leftist political leaders. Dr. Boonsanong felt increasingly uneasy about his role in a worsening situation; he is reported to have told friends that he planned to leave politics and return to his scholarly activities. He never had the opportunity to do so; instead, he became the best-known victim of the violence of the period.

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* The majority of Dr. Boonsanong's scholarly writings appeared in English. The compilation above is not all-inclusive, but lists his major works. I am indebted to Professor Lauriston Sharp of Cornell

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