

# National Human Rights Commission In Thailand: NGOs Make A Difference

Ruth Selwyn

In October 1997, Thailand adopted a new Constitution which promised to strengthen the country's democratic institutions. Provisions to create a National Human Rights Commission were especially welcomed by the country's vibrant human rights community. To ensure that the Commission would become an effective institution, the Coordinating Committee of Human Rights Organizations of Thailand (CCHROT) launched a public education campaign in collaboration with the Asian Forum on Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and the Canadian Human Rights Foundation (CHRF).



From left to right : Mr. Karthy Govender (Commissioner, South African HRC), Mr. Justice V.S. Malimuth (former Commissioner, Indian NHRC), Mr. Suthas Ngermmuen (Justice Minister, Royal Thai Government), Ruth Selwyn (CHRF), Mr. Peter Hosking (former Commissioner, New Zealand HRC)  
Source : CHRF

The campaign was designed to mobilize public opinion in support of the creation of an effective Commission and to convince government decision-makers to set-up an institution responding to the needs of Thai society. To promote public awareness and participation, CCHROT organized public consultations throughout the country, targeting women's groups, consumer organizations, children's rights advocates, indigenous peoples from Hill Tribe communities, labour, slum-dwellers and other marginalized groups.

As the Thai Parliament met to consider the draft legislation in July 1999, CCHROT co-sponsored a Seminar at Parliament to encourage parliamentarians to reflect upon the desires of Thai civil society and to consider existing international experiences and standards in their deliberations. As part of its contribution to the project, CHRF facilitated the participation of three international experts in the seminar.

The Seminar prompted a lively debate involving parliamentarians, Government officials and civil society which resulted in a Government decision to delay parliamentary debate on the Bill while changes to enhance the Commission's independence were considered.

In early October, the Act creating the National Human Rights Commission was approved by the Thai Parliament. While NGOs were not able to rid the legislation of all its imperfections, several of the important civil society recommendations related to the nomination process and powers of the Commission were adopted. The final result will not be known, however, until the Commission opens its doors. One thing remains certain, however, CCHROT and its partners will continue their efforts to ensure that the new National Human Rights Commission lives up to the promise of the 1997 Constitution.

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Ruth Selwyn is the Executive Director of the CHRF.

The Canadian Human Rights Foundation is an NGO in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. The CHRF has been contributing since 1967 to the creation of a vibrant community of human rights workers, dedicated to advancing democracy, human development and social justice in Canada and around the world.

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