

Political Culture in 21st Century Thai Villages

Dr.Premasak Piayura :Dept. of Development Sciences,
Khon Kaen University
Khon Kaen, Thailand
e-mail: orapan@kku.ac.th

Assist.Prof.Dr.Dusadee Ayuwat:Dept. of Sociology,
Khon Kaen University
Khon Kaen, Thailand
e-mail:dusayu @kku.ac.th

Abstract— The Northeast of Thailand is viewed as a remote region inhabited by poor and uneducated farmers. These poverty and educational backwardness are often put forward as the reasons why people in this area constantly vote for corrupt vote-buying politicians. The argument made by Thai academics was people in this region were too poor and too uneducated to understand real democracy. However, the citizens of the Northeastern villagers shocked the entire nation with the electorate turnout on December 10th, 2007 when they voted for ‘no name’ politicians of their own choices, not by ‘order’ as in the past. In addition, villagers of the Northeast of Thailand were also the majority of the ‘red shirt’ protesters against the current government. The daring to challenge the ‘established’ politicians and other institutions keeps happening through the latter local elections and other political activities in recent Northeastern Thailand. This interesting phenomenon is perceived as a part of new political culture. This study illustrates how this new political culture is formed. The data is collected by in-depth interview with villagers and political leaders in Banphai and Phon District, Khon Kaen Province, Thailand. The study found that the villagers ‘political decisions were influenced by mass media and neighbors. Vote buying is accepted but not influential matter.

Keywords- Political Culture, Democracy, Thai Village

I. THAI POLITICAL CULTURE

Seksan Prasertgun (2005), a Thai academic and former leader of student activists of the Great Student Rally in October 1973, argued that Thai political culture was originally very different from western political culture. Before the adoption of democracy, Thai people, formerly recognized globally as Siamese, were governed by the absolute monarchy system. The relationship of people and rulers was in vertical division or hierarchy system. People were used to being ruled by the rulers and accepted that people were not equal. This concept of governing is totally different from the concept of democracy which emphasized on people’s right and equality (Seksan Prasertgun, 2005:10). The argument was also mentioned by Mulder in his book, *Inside Thai Society* that:

Legality exists on paper, but equality before the law has been very weakly developed and the concept of human rights is only vaguely understood (Mulder, 2000:6).

Mulder claims that Thai people don’t have the concept of equality because of Thai culture to respect seniority and to be grateful to those who had done something for their benefit as the following quote.

Thai cardinal value (e.g. respect for seniority, gratefulness for benefits and recognition of obligation)

contrast starkly with doctrines holding that men are born equal, have rights vested in their being human, and should be judged according to the same standards. Moral equality and citizens’ responsibility for the public interest are extremely difficult concepts to imagine on the basis of Thai experience (Mulder, 2000:7)

Not only the influence of Thai traditional value, but also the attitude about politics as an affair of the ruling class and politicians are corrupt stop Thai people from getting involved in politics. This could be illustrated in the following quote from Wilson in his book *“Political Tradition and Political Change in Thailand”*

It is generally agreed that most people in Thailand are not involved in politics, which is regarded as an affair of politicians, or, of the ruling class. This is still very much true today. The ideas that politics is dirty and that getting involved in politics will contaminate oneself prevail. (Wilson, 1979: 281)

This results in a political culture of Thai style which is being called *Thai style democracy* or patronage democracy in Thailand.

The phenomenon is, however, changing slowly. According to Roongrengsuke (1990), the old political culture has been changed slowly since the increase of political participation of middle class people and the involvement of local people in various development projects. Thongthai (1990) explained that after people benefited from participation, they started to participate more in the government’s projects and activities. However, the significant phenomena of change in Thai political culture seem to activate more actively over the past few years, particularly in Isan rural area. Beginning with the electorate turnout on December 10th, 2007 in many election areas of the Northeast of Thailand, the Northeastern villagers shocked the entire nation with the daring to challenge the ‘established’ politicians and voted for numbers of ‘no name’ politicians of their own choices.

II. THAI VILLAGERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Apart from daring to challenge the established politicians, villagers of the Northeast of Thailand were also the majority of the ‘red shirt’ protesters against the current government. The most active groups of Northeastern villagers were from Banphai (*Banpai*) and Phol (*Pon*) districts of Khon Kaen province where the majority of them are farmers and have minimal education.

The idea to challenge the ‘established institutions’ is brought to them intentionally and unintentionally. The unintentional path is from their consumptions of television

programs. The ideas about equality or human rights are always seen through television programs. These evoke the villagers of the rural area in Isan to aware of their existence in society. Such popular culture as music and fashion have flooded Thai society and could easily be experienced every where; diluted the belief in high culture or low culture of local people. Therefore, the respect of seniority or high institutions was also weakened. This weakness allows the opportunity for the political activist group who intends to propagandize the local villagers about the new political culture, the culture without patronage system. This is another path of influence on the villagers in the Northeast of Thailand, especially the citizens of Banphai and Phol district. This path of information is from the so called the 'unintentional path'.

The intentional path is from the campaign of the Red and the Yellow political movement groups. The Red group has a formal name as National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship or the UDD. The Yellow group is the People's Alliance for Democracy or PAD. These two groups of political activists are being called the Red and the Yellow because of their color symbols.

These two colors have connotation meaning. To use Semiology terms, Yellow and Red are the 'signifiers' consists of many meanings underneath the 'signified' and lots of incidents and explanations in the 'signification' process. Roughly, one of the major themes of the PAD or the Yellow group rally is to support the monarchy and yellow is the color of the king's flag. In contrast, the UDD or the Red is accused to be the anti-monarchy group and red is the color of the communists which used to be seen as the great danger to Thai nation in the 70's.

The National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship or the Red group has a lot of influences on the villagers of Isan. These villagers are introduced to meet the set of knowledge from Michel Foucault's about the space for the weaks, the marginals and the excluded others. In the case of Isan rural citizens, they were propagandized to accept themselves as *Prai* (peasant) by the UDD; and have to protest to appeal for their rights of equal opportunity. One thing to make them equal is to upgrade their economic status. According to the propaganda, the only person to upgrade the status of these people economically is Taksin Shinnawat, the former Prime Minister. This propaganda is being criticized for the conflict of interests of Thai politicians who used to be benefited from Taksin Shinnawat when he was in power or those who were being known as 'Taksin's followers'. Mr. Taksin Shinnawat is also accused for being 'the man behind the curtain' who supports the protesters, financially. However, the observation from this study at this point is before the propaganda of the United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship or the Red group, this group of villagers in the Northeast of Thailand was enjoying their peaceful lives of being farmers and lived an ordinary life. However, they were also inactive about politics.

After the political movements of the National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship and the People's Alliance for Democracy, the preliminary study found that the villagers of Banphai and Phol districts in these days

participate in political activities more than in the past. These villagers, formerly, participated in National Election only. At present, these people not only turn up at the National Election, but also participate in local political elections, appeal about the result of the election, attend the political parties' meetings and express their opinions towards the parties' and the government's policy; for their own benefit as well as joining the group of protesters.

This wakefulness of the Isan villagers could be analyzed as the effects of the followings;

1. The government's authority to allow the right to appeal for the result of the election
 2. The media which allow the opportunity for villagers to consume information locally and globally
- and
3. The political movement group of the PAD or the Yellow group and the UDD or the Red group.

The PAD or the Yellow group and the UDD or the Red groups have a lot of influences on people in Banphai and Phol districts. It is difficult to tell the definite number of local citizens who support these two groups because they are mixing with each other in the same community. In some family, the father is the PAD supporter, the mother is the UDD supporter and the child is the government supporter. Some people show their political preference explicitly but some people hide it in order to avoid conflicts or confrontation. However, as the group of the UDD or the Red is more active, it seems as if there are more Red supporters in the area. These people joined the activities during the political crisis in Thailand in April and May, 2010. These are some of the incidents or activities they had joined during that period.

1. Highway Blocking to stop the soldiers going to Bangkok to join the troop.
2. Railway Blocking to stop the trains taking army weapons to go down south.
3. Townhall Burning as the aftermath of the surrender of the Red Group Rally in Bangkok.

These political activists could be divided into three groups.

The first group is local people who used to be benefit from the popular propaganda of the former Prime Minister, Taksin Shinnawat. The second group is the group of those who do not like the Democrat as it is seen as the party of the Southerners. These people share the same attitude towards the Democrat government and want Taksin back. Their negative attitude for the current government is increased after they have been watching the television programs on the Red Television channel. The third group is the group of those who has no political preference and are hired to join the rally.

A movement away of villagers from fixed ideas and their rejection of formal institutions or high and low culture as well as the influence of globalization and capitalism together with the dominance of mass media that formed the new form of political culture in the rural area of Noreastern Thailand.

This political culture is claimed to be the 'new political culture' in Thailand by many Thai academics. For instance, Professor Likhit Theerawekhin explained that in the globalization era, people are more wakeful about politics. Governing the country is not down to the three institutions of government, legal, and justice anymore but people's participation is also significant (Likhit Theerawekhin, 2010).¹

III. THAI VILLAGERS AND NEW POLITICAL CULTURE

According to the interview with 40 villagers and political leaders from 4 villages in Banphai and Phol districts, Khon Kaen Province, Thailand; the study found that all of the informants participated in political activities especially the elections. The majority of them participated in local politics. They received political information from television, newspapers and radio. For the last national election in December, 2007, the majority of them received the vote buying money from the politicians but the money had no impact on their decisions. Their political decisions were based on their families and neighbors. All of them were found to be bored of the conflicts between UDD and PAD supporters. They liked the idea of protesting for equality in society but they did not like the violent protesters. Most of the political leaders in the communities tried to show their neutral. There was only one Chief Executive of Tambon Administrative Organization in Banphai expressed his strong opinion to support the UDD.

IV. CONCLUSION

The influence of globalization helps to form the new political culture; as well as putting Thailand in a difficult time. A rejection of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture is the main issue, leading to many problematic situation in Thai politics and governance. The set of knowledge about the space for the weaks, the marginals and the excluded others are propagandized by the UDD but the knowledge about international democracy that one has the right to express or exercise one's belief but one also has to respect other people's rights; is not introduced. In addition, the villagers are confused with the 'truth' being distributed to them by the National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship and the People's Alliance for Democracy as each side are trying to set up the 'ultimate truth' for these citizens to accept. It leads to chaotic in Thai political arena at present. The problem of the villagers in the Northeast has shifted from the passive political participation to be the over active ones that disturb other people's right. These are from their lack of understanding about the genuine theme of democracy.

REFERENCES

- [1] April Carter & Geoffrey Stokes (ed.). 2002. *Democratic Theory Today: Challenges for the 21st Century*. Malden: Blackwell.
- [2] Almond & Powell. *Comparative Politics : A Developmental Approach*. Boston : Little Brown and company, 1966.
- [3] Almond & Verba. 1965. *The Civic Culture : Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Boston: Little, Brown and company.
- [4] Bunnag, Jane. 1979 "Loose Structure : Fact or Fancy ? " *Thai Politics from Village to Nation*, ed. Clark D. Neher. Cambridge: Schenkman.
- [5] Carton C. Rodee .1935. "Representation", *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, XIII. New York: Macmillan.
- [6] Dixon, Chris. 1999. *The Thai Economy: Uneven Development and Internationalisation*. London and New York : Routledge.
- [7] Ebenstien, W. 1960. *Modern political thought: the great issues*. Massachusetts: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- [8] Francois Furet & Mona Ozouf, eds., 1989. *The Transformation of Political Culture, 1789-1848*. Oxford: Pergamon
- [9] Gellerman, S. W. 1994. *Motivating Superior Performance*. Portland, Oregon: Productivity Press.
- [10] Henderson, John W. 1971. *Area Handbook for Thailand*. Washington. D.C:GPO.
- [11] Keith Michael Baker, ed., 1987 *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* Oxford: Pergamon.
- [12] Keyes, Charles F. 1987. *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State*. Boulder and London: Westview Press.
- [13] Lipset, Martin. L. (ed.) 1967. *Student Politics*. New York : Basic Books, INC.
- [14] March & Olsen. 1995. *Democratic Governance*. New York. The Free Press.
- [15] Mole, Robert L. 1973. *Thai Values and Behavior Patterns*. Rutland, Vermont, and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle.
- [16] Mulder, Niels. 2000. *Inside Thai Society*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- [17] Mulder N. 1992. *Inside Southeast Asia: Thai, Javanese and Filipino Interpretation of Everyday Life*.
- [18] Bangkok : Duang Kamol. -----, 1997. *Thai Images: The Culture of the Public World*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- [19] Mutebi, A. M. 2003. *Thailand 's Decentralization Experiment : Evolution, Dimensions, and Challenges*. National University of Singapore.
- [20] Nakata, Thinapan. 1975. *The Problem of Democracy in Thailand: A Study of Political Culture and Socialization of College Students*. Bangkok : Praepittaya
- [21] Neher, Clark D. ed. 1979. *Modern Thai Politics From Village to Nation*. Cambridge: Schenkman
- [22] Norman, B. 2000. *An Introduction to Modern Political Theory*. Hampshire: Macmillan Press.
- [23] Phongpaichit, Pasuk & Chris Baker. 1995 *Thailand: Economy and Politics*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- [24] Phongpaichit, Pasuk & Sungsidh Piriyanrangsan. 1996. *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- [25] Pye, Lucien W. 1966. *Aspects of Political Development*. Boston : Little, Brown and company.
- [26] Roongrengsuke, Siryupa. 1990. *An Analysis of the Efficacy of Thai Buddhist Temple and the Sangha as an Informal Institution for Community Development in Northern Thailand*. Diss. U of Southern California.
- [27] Sargent, Lyman T. 1990. *Contemporary Political Ideologies: A Reader*. California: Brooks/Cole Pub Co.
- [28] Shils, Edward. 1982. *On the Constitution of Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [29] Shutt, H. 2001. *A New Democracy: Alternatives to A Bankrupt World Order*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- [30] Spencer, C. & Benedict G. 1990. *Conditions of Participation in the Group for Production Credit: A Thai Community Development Program*. Diss. U of Southern California.

¹ Sayamrat Newspapers, March 11, 2010.

- [31] Thongthai, Lek. 1990 . From Quality Circles to Khums: A Study of Participatory Communities in Thailand. Diss . U of Southern California.
- [32] United Nations. Local Governance. 1996. Report of the United Nations Global Forum on Innovative Policies and Practices
- [33] in Local Governance. Gothenburg, Sweden, 23-27 September.
- [34] Vinijniyapak, Nutta. 2004. Institutions and Civic Engagement : A case study of that Community in Los Angeles. Doctoral Diss. U of Southern California.
- [35] Wilson, David A. 1979. " Political Tradition and Political Change in Thailand" Pp. 281-293 in Modern Thai Politics from Village to Nation, ed. Clark