

Family business, Thai style



Some of you might have read the article about [‘Family Business’](#) in the Bangkok Post. Citing a study on relatives sitting in the newly elected parliament the author dismisses ‘family politics’ as undemocratic and the MPs involved as unqualified. This is not the first time that nepotism has been heavily criticized by observers as an outdated way of choosing political leaders.

However, these commentators tend to forget the rules of the game. Members of Parliament cannot be appointed by those in power. They all have to pass elections. What is it that makes political protégés pass elections? Are these protégés really unqualified? And what are the consequences for Thai politics?

To begin with, not everybody is allowed to enter the political game in the first place. Just like in high-class casinos one needs to adhere to a dress code. Of course an invitation can be helpful. Often the protégés recount that they were invited to enter the political game. That means they were nominated to be candidates in their father’s, mother’s, uncle’s or brother’s constituency, often by people not related to them. Such an invitation is near impossible for most people with similar credentials because they are not known to the game-makers.

Thus, the first advantage of protégés is that they are already known as potential players.

Once they have become candidates they have to undergo the same procedure as any other candidate but they do so with considerable advantages. Like every game, politics has its own rules. There are certain skills, like the poker-face, that have to be acquired. Here the protégés are clearly at an advantage, as they most often have grown up in a political environment. Sirin Phatanothai recounts sitting on Phibul's lap while he and [her father](#) were discussing government policies. Banharn Silapa-archa took his whole family to election campaigns as if it were an ordinary outing.

This political environment enables the protégés to observe, to learn and to practice from an early age. Additionally, some protégés become official assistants to their mentor before joining politics themselves. This is bound to make them more adapt in the game than other political newbies.

This advantage in skills is enforced by a recognition factor. Voters are often already familiar with the protégés and expect the apple to fall not far from the tree. They believe that by electing somebody from the same family they will get something similar. Thus, carrying the same last name or being otherwise associated with a successful politician is a real campaign asset.

Not to forget that the parental generation has already made considerable material investment in their families' political faith. But as opposed to other games, in politics, you cannot withdraw your stakes when retiring. Thus nepotism is interesting for the old players in order to redeem their investment in the next generation. This investment is also an advantage for the protégés. This also includes non-monetary investment.

Thus by now it should be clear that the advantage of political protégés does not lie in patronage and money alone. It is also based on the possession of skills that have to be gained throughout a long period of time. So maybe the political protégés are not as unqualified as the *Bangkok Post* author has claimed. Indeed it appears that the qualifications mentioned in the article do refer only to the age of the MPs.

But let's try to look behind that. Let's take an example the author has cited himself: Ekanat Prompan.

As was stated in the article he is the stepson of Suthep Thaugsuban but he is also the son of Ponthep Techapaibun (former deputy-minister of industry and current deputy-governor of Bangkok) and the nephew of Niphon Prompan (former Minister of Agriculture and current Deputy Leader of the Democrat Party). He has observed politics since his early childhood and has helped his relatives campaigning. Further, he has gained formal political experience as personal secretary to Suthep Thueagsuban, a position he took shortly after earning three degrees from Oxford University. It seems that he is not at all unqualified, despite his age.

Ekanat's relatives' patronage networks were not likely of much help as he was running outside of his stepfather's and uncle's domains. Only his biological father might have been of some help as Ekanat was running in Bangkok but Ponthep himself has not been running for some time. Ekanat

Prompan might be young but not unqualified.

It was qualification, his good looks and maybe the help of his Miss-Thailand stepmother during campaigning that won him a seat.

Ekanat Prompan is only one example out of many. Political protégés should not be underestimated in terms of qualification. Political families invest in their next generation wisely as they represent an asset. The same goes for the nominees and politicians' wives in particular.

How they are engaged in politics will be discussed in a follow-up post.