Central-Local Relations in Thailand since 2014: Decentralisation Interrupted, Central Bureaucratic Control Reinforced

Policy Briefing – SEARBO

Australian National University

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DISCLAIMER

Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank Paul Hutchcroft for his invaluable suggestions, feedback, and revisions of this report, Elly Kent for feedback and edits through the completion, Sittipol Pacharoen, Kritdikorn Wongsawangpanich and Hatchakorn Vongsayan for helping in various ways while drafting this report.

Published by

new mandala
NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTHEAST ASIA

Co-sponsored by

Australian National University
Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs

Front cover image: Pheu Thai candidate's campaign truck on the left and community gas station with "Pracharath" sign and logo that resemble PPRP's on the right (image supplied by the author) .

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Background

One of the major institutional reforms of the 1997 constitution was the establishment of important new mechanisms of local democracy. This started to alter some of the dynamics of Thai central-local relations, enabling the gradual decentralisation of what has historically been a highly centralised state. Before that time, the whole country outside the Bangkok Metropolitan jurisdiction was governed in a very top-down manner by the Ministry of Interior (MoI)'s Department of Provincial Government. In what is known as its Provincial Administration, there was a clear chain of command from the department at the top, to governors, to district chiefs, to sub-district headmen (*kamnan*) and down to village headmen at the base of the system. Significantly, provincial governors were appointed by the central government rather than elected by the citizens. While there were some elective posts at provincial and municipal levels, they had limited authority and budget.[1]

Thai provincial politics was progressively transformed with the promulgation of the Decentralization Plan and Procedure Act of 1999, as the Provincial Administration had to accommodate the new mechanisms of subnational democracy — known as Local Administrative Organizations (LAOs). Despite the odd nomenclature, these co-called "administrative" organizations were composed of executives and council members democratically and locally elected for four-year terms. These organizations of local governance were placed under the MoI's newly created Department of Local Administration (DOLA), responsible for promoting decentralisation and supporting LAOs. The DOLA and LAOs, together with their extensive informal networks, comprise the system of Local Administration. Local Administration, in turn, is generally treated as a sphere of activity that needs to be distinguished from the much older system of Provincial Administration.

By 2001, LAOs had been established throughout the entire country. They were mainly categorized into three major types: (1) the Provincial Administrative Organizations (PAOs), the largest in size covering 76 provinces outside Bangkok Metropolitan; (2) municipalities (*tetsaban*), covering urban areas[2]; and (3) at the lowest level, covering countryside areas, *tambon* (sub-district) Administrative Organizations (TAOs). Meanwhile, Bangkok and Pattaya have special local organizations. Some responsibilities, particularly healthcare and education, were supposed to be gradually devolved from Provincial Administration to LAOs and supported with new budget outlays. The initial goal was to allow the local administration to claim at least 35%

1 There were elected provincial councils, but they had no power to balance the appointed governors. Business people from the construction sector liked to become council members, as it helped them to build their connections with the provincial officers. In addition, there were elective posts in city municipalities, but these jurisdictions covered less than 1% of the country's geographic area.

2 The municipalities are divided into three types based on their urbanised levels: city municipalities, town municipalities and sub-district municipalities. Between 1997 and 2021, the total number of municipalities gradually increased from 144 to 2472.

of the country's total revenue, but the central bureaucracy resisted the excessive diminution of its structures of Provincial Administration and managed to curb the scope of the decentralisation process. As a result, several responsibilities remained under the central bureaucracy, and the local administration was only allowed to claim roughly 25 per cent of national revenue — which is the level of support that it has continued to have until the present. Even as this falls short of the initial goal, these new resources have allowed the local administration to play very important roles in the livelihood of citizens at subnational levels (Nethipo, 2019, pp. 226-229).

These shifts in formal structures had important implications for political power, as the LAOs transformed the provincial networks. Whereas they were previously under central bureaucratic domination, they now incorporated new kinds of linkages between local politicians and citizens, as well as between local and national politicians. In this change, the local bosses known as "*phu mi itthiphon*" (men of influence) or "*chaopo*" (godfather), whose monopolising power informally relied on connection with bureaucracy, had to adapt or share their power with many minor strongmen. These local bosses formally relied on public money and performance in the local administration (Nethipo, 2019, pp. 233-234). Without a doubt, this process would have weakened the centralised state power in the long term, if it had not been interrupted. But interruption did come, very dramatically, with the military's coup d'états in 2006 and 2014. This allowed bureaucratic forces to delay and interfere in the process in many ways. The latest coup, staged by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) in 2014, established a long-lasting authoritarian regime and embedded it in the present government after the 2019 election.

Building on this historical background, the rest of this report surveys the transformation of central-local relations under the NCPO's authoritarian regime from 2014 through to initial responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first section examines the consolidation of the NCPO regime, and the various mechanisms it used to hinder local democracy. The next section demonstrates how the regime manipulated local politics to its own advantage in the 2019 election. Third, the focus shifts from the NCPO to the royal projects — through which the central bureaucracy further expanded its power and authority. The fourth section examines the LAOs' response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, demonstrating how the system of local administration not only survived but also continued to function quite effectively in this non-democratic context. The report concludes by surveying recent trends, which suggest — on a more hopeful note — the capacity of local administration to endure despite the consolidation of bureaucratic power in recent years.

The NCPO regime 2014-2018: Consolidating power and suspending local democracy

Direct commands

After the 2006 coup, the central bureaucracy sought to obstruct the process of decentralisation by amending laws and exerting greater control over the LAOs through the Department of Local Administration (DOLA). Even so, the system of local democracy endured. It was only with the 2014 coup that the conservative elite was able to crack down on democracy at all levels and return political power to the centre.

Upon seizing power in 2014, the NCPO immediately issued various NCPO Orders which were equal to laws. The Provincial Administration's line of command was utilised to make sure the NCPO's orders would be conveyed from the provincial governors to the district shifts all the way down to the village headmen at the base of the system. To further reinforce the commands, the NCPO quickly removed 14 governors who were viewed as allies of the government of former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra — and in whose provinces the Red-shirt mobilization remained active (Komchadluek, 2019). In addition to this, the NCPO shut down local democracy by issuing an order to ban all local elections; as part of the command, incumbents were initially allowed to remain in the positions that they occupied as of July 2014.

By 2018, Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha used NCPO Orders and so-called NCPO Head Orders (the latter authorised by article 44 in the interim constitution) to remove several hundred officials and replace them with people from the NCPO's own networks. Nearly 300 LAO officials, including both bureaucrats and political incumbents, were booted out of office as they were being investigated for corruption.

Damrong Dharma Centres

Another mechanism that the NCPO used to increase the Provincial Administration's control over the system of Local Administration was the reactivation of an alternative agency in each province, known as *Damrong Dharma* Centres (literally Centres for the Protection of Righteousness). The centres were operated under the MoI with a mandate to receive civilian complaints. The NCPO Order 96/2014 increased the *Damrong Dharma* Centres' budgets so that they could operate as government mouthpieces at a subnational level. In many cases, the Centres were utilised as tools to harass old political networks and establish new political relationships, through which the military and the MoI inserted themselves into local conflicts. For instance, a complaint was filed against a former Member of Parliament (MP) who was popular in a Northern province, alleging that he used illegitimate power to intimidate citizens. He had been a part of the Pheu Thai Party of former Prime Minister Yingluck, by which he was also associated with her exiled older brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinwatra — the central target of the NCPO. Although no evidence was supplied, the MP was summoned to a

military base to defend his innocence. The MP perceived this as a way to make him realise that power had shifted and he had to follow a new set of rules [3]

Financial control

The politics of finance were a crucial tool for returning power to the central bureaucracy. The junta launched many projects to win support in the countryside and coursed resources through the Provincial Administration rather than through the LAOs. Major projects were rushed through, and thus not subject to inspection by the State Audit Office (SAO); this included infrastructure construction, under the Thailand 4.0 Plan, and economic stimulus, under the *Pracharath Rak Samakkee* scheme promoted as a partnership of the state, the business sector, and the people (as described further below). Because local elites in most provinces are highly reliant on public funds, changes in financial arrangements eventually forced local politicians and businesspersons to acknowledge the renewed dominance of the Provincial Administration.

Through financial control, the State Audit Office (SAO) became an effective and powerful agent of the regime. The SAO was established by the 1997 constitution as an independent agency responsible for overseeing good governance, but as with other independent agencies, it became a powerful tool to consolidate central government. In the 2016 fiscal year that followed the coup, the SAO inspected 3,236 of the 9,850 LAOs and found misconduct in 2,780 of them. It recalled 1.8 billion baht from these LAOs (The State Audit Office, 2017, p. 29). The projects charged with misconduct included training, supporting local sport teams, giving bonuses to officers and various kinds of projects that might promote politicians but were at the same time often beneficial to local citizens. In some cases, incumbents were directly accused of corruption and referred to another (supposedly) independent agency, the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) for investigation. This led the LAOs to cut back their projects and avoid spending budget outside of mundane expenses. On a side note, projects that related to promoting the monarchy were not under the SAO's scrutiny, demonstrating how the state's money was accompanied with a state-imposed ideology.

Pracharath Scheme

In September 2015, after a full year of deploying its coercive power, NCPO began to propose a policy to try to further secure its position. The *Pracharath* scheme, with a budget of 136-billion-baht, was launched as an overarching plan to reform the economic structure. *Pracha* literally means people and *rath* means state, therefore implying a partnership between the state and the people. It was advertised as a policy of economic stimulus, bringing together state, civil society, and business enterprises with the goal of eliminating the nation's poverty. Apparently, this project was encouraged by the tycoons to tighten their connection with the state at the national level, and to reach out to more people at the subnational level. At first, the NGOs, as part of the civil society,

3 Interview with anonymous informant, 5 June 2017

were included to help build networks, particularly in the countryside. It was necessary to accommodate the NGOs who actively participated in the overthrow of the previous elected government. But when the projects were implemented, NGOs did not play significant roles. On the business side, 24 major conglomerates signed a partnership to support the program initiative in December 2015. As Kongkirati and Kanchoochat explain, in their critical assessment of the scheme, little came out of the scheme in the two years after it was launched: projects were still "haphazard and ad hoc" without much tangible implementation (2018, 294-95)

The first tangible populist project under this umbrella, launched in October 2017, was *Thongfa Pracharath* (thongfa means blue flag). This project distributed welfare cards (known as "bat khonchon," or indigent cards) to people who registered as having low incomes. The cards came with credits of 200, 300 and 500 baht monthly, according to levels of income. The card holders could use the credit to buy goods, but only at the designated shops displaying the symbol of the blue flag. The products in these blue-flag shops were from the Pracharath's partner-companies. Critics in the media and the opposition objected, saying that the ultimate beneficiaries would be the conglomerates, and that the ordinary people receiving the cash payments would not see an appreciable improvement in their lives. The richest conglomerate, the CP Group, was a particular target of criticism as it earned very substantial privileges and benefits from the project. As if things were not bad enough, the partner-companies also received tax exemptions from the government.

In September 2018, the NCPO established its own ruling party, *Palang Pracharath* (PPRP), meaning "power of Pracharath". Not coincidentally, people in rural areas had by that point seen "Pracharath" signs in every community at the Thongfa Pracharath shops. This is another form of populist appeal intended to project the benevolence of the state. On the surface, the NCPO was emulating pro-poor policies earlier found during the government of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006). Viewed more critically, however, these policies reverted to a pre-Thaksin mindset. If Thaksin framed his innovative programs as part of a package of basic political rights, purporting to manage public resources on behalf of the needs of the people, the NCPO hearkened back to an era in which support from the government should be viewed as benevolence granted from on high.

Another project of the Pracharath scheme was *Pracharath Rak Samakkee* (Pracharath Loves Unity), aimed at establishing local enterprises in every province. The established enterprises were to be operated collectively by the national bureaucracy, business, and local people. The proportion of ownership in each enterprise varied depending on the nature of the business. The determination of which national government department would oversee the enterprise depended on the type of business. For instance, a project relating to tourism would be overseen by the Ministry of Tourism and Sports. Then, the ministry would assign the Provincial Administration office under its command to operate the enterprise. The government claimed that this approach would make

the large conglomerates contribute their expertise and know-how to setting up and boosting the capacity of the local enterprises. An example of this project was having shops sell products from the country's *tambon*, or subdistricts. This mirrored an earlier initiative of the Thaksin government, seeking to promote local handicrafts through the "one tambon, one product" (OTOP) project. Tourism and community rice mills are some of the enterprises established under the project.

Since the early assessment of Kongkirati and Kanchoochat, there has yet to be a comprehensive study of the impact of the Pracharath scheme. But we can presume that, since early 2020, the pandemic has probably significantly slowed down its operations. Even so, the Pracharat scheme has been an effective means of supplying bureaucrats with enough patronage to maintain their networks. The national-level conglomerates, meanwhile, were given ample opportunities to deepen their linkages at the subnational level.

Figure 1. At a village hall, voters waiting for an election rally. Image supplied by the author.

Manipulating local politicians and networks for the 2019 Election

In August 2016, the junta's constitution passed a referendum in a process which included "misinformation, direct repression and both implicit and explicit threats of violence" (McCargo, Alexander, & Desatova, 2017, p. 66). Subsequently, a general election was scheduled to be held in March 2019. The systems and processes of this election were widely criticised as deeply flawed and rife with manipulation (McCargo, 2019, p. 119; Sawasdee 2019, pp.54-56). Nonetheless, the way the junta played the electoral game was even worse, as its newly formed military-backed party, the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) needed to resort to creative tactics in order to win the election.

Cutting off the old networks

The NCPO successfully created a climate of fear by summoning citizens — activists, academics, politicians, businessmen, and community leaders — every day for several months. When they reported to the military, they were intimidated with interrogation, so-called "attitude adjustment," detention, persecution, torture, or prosecution in the military court. The purpose of this was to eliminate the mobilisation of people and networks by actors outside of the state. Martial law and military courts were utilised to suppress citizens, along with existing laws that violated human rights, such as Article 112 (*lese majeste*), Article 116 (inciting a rebellion), and the Computer Crimes Act. The effect was to rapidly weaken political movements, which was apparent in the deterioration of their capacity to communicate among themselves and their supporters. This benefitted the NCPO when they wanted to ensure victories in both the 2016 constitutional referendum and the 2019 election.

Offers that could not be refused

Ironically, the NCPO justified its interventions in local networks by citing a crackdown on *phu mi itthiphon* (men of influence). From Phibun's military government in the 1950s to the Thaksin government of the early 2000s, campaigns to suppress "phu mi itthiphon" (men of influence) were launched as a means of building legitimacy for the centre while also curbing local powerholders. As "itthiphon" (influence) means the informal and often illegitimate power exercised by provincial strongmen and bureaucrats, these campaigns sought to disrupt very extensive and wide-reaching local networks. The NCPO is now continuing this legacy, drawing on its predecessors' playbook of as it seeks to justify its broader centralising agenda. According to Kongkirati's historical analysis, the centre's suppression of *phu mi itthiphon*, therefore, impacts patterns of political violence that have taken place for decades (Kongkirati, 2013). The NCPO government drew upon this old agenda once again in NCPO Order No. 13/2016, which conferred power upon the military to suppress "mafias" and *phu mi itthiphon*. The NCPO also appointed a Commission on the Coordination of the Suppression of Local *Phu Mi Itthiphon,* chaired by then-deputy prime minister and defence minister, General Prawit Wongsuwan. As was obvious to political observers in the academe and media, strongmen able to align

themselves with the government could easily avoid being labeled as *phu mi itthiphon*. However, unlike in previous years, changing sides now exacted a greater political cost, since the party identity and political linkages have been deepened by two decades of strong parties and decentralisation.

Under this policy, some former MPs, local politicians, and vote canvassers were constantly intimidated. One former Pheu Thai MP in a Northeastern province, whose house was forcibly searched several times, recounted,

They came in a group of 10 and armed with weapons and were led by a soldier ranked as a colonel. They spoke politely and paid me a respect, but they entered without removing their boots. They dug through my filing cabinets, my wardrobe. They made a scattered mess and even opened my ceiling to see if anything was hidden there. I think they themselves knew they wouldn't find anything, but it was like psychological warfare. [4]

The threat of criminal prosecution was sometimes used to force former MPs and local politicians to move to PPRP. Two prime examples can be found in Kanchanaburi and Chonburi provinces. In Kanchanaburi, a constituency dominated by the Democrat party, a key former provincial MP was Pracha Phothiphiphit or "*Kamnan Sia*", known in the media as "the Godfather of the West." In 2004, Pracha was accused of bid rigging and trespassing, after which he disappeared. There was some news that he had fled to a neighbouring country. Yet Pracha's family remained highly influential in the province and played a decisive role in the 2019 general election and 2020 PAO election. Pracha's political heirs were his two sons: Atthapon Phothiphiphit, a former constituency MP, and Thammawit Phothiphiphit, a former party-list candidate for Democrat Party. In this election, both sons competed for constituency seats in Kanchanaburi under the banner of the PPRP, and were both elected. Media have viewed their cooperation with PPRP as the critical factor allowing *Kamnan Sia* to return home and receive a pardon (Springnews Online, 2018).

In Chonburi, one of the most famous local political bosses was *Kamnan Po*, or Somchai Khunpluem, whom the media nicknamed "the Godfather of the East" (Chonburi and nearby provinces). He was sentenced to 30 years and 4 months in prison for corruption in a land deal, and for arranging the murder of Prayoon Sitthichoke, a former ally whom he accused of betraying him. Somchai fled to a neighbouring country in 2006 but was arrested in 2013 upon his secret return to Thailand. Under the NCPO regime, in December 2017 he received parole and was allowed to move to a hospital due to illness (Thairath Online, 2017). In April 2018 Sontaya Khunpluem, the eldest son and political heir of Somchai, was appointed as an advisor to Prime Minister Prayuth. Then in September, via exercise of Article 44, Sontaya was appointed as the Mayor of City of Pattaya (Thairath Online, 2018). When PPRP was established, Sontaya led a team of Chonburi politicians, including his younger brother Ittiphol, to run under the PPRP's

4 Interview with anonymous informant, 19 March 2019

banner in Chonburi.[5]

In a similar way, the NCPO used allegations against local politicians to enforce their will.

Many, including 15 chief executives of PAOs, were stood down from their duties by the NCPO Head's orders as they faced corruption charges. Just a few months before the election, Prayuth restored eight PAO chief executives who had declared their support for PPRP; the other seven, however, were not reinstated. The eight chief executives were in the PAOs of Yasothon, Chiang Mai, Mukdahan, Sakon Nakhon, Chai Nat, Phetchabun, Kamphaeng Phet and Nakhon Phanom, where the Pheu Thai party was strong (iLaw, 2018).

From this perspective, the co-optation of politicians into PPRP was achieved more by the stick than by the carrot. PPRP used this tactic to force former popular MPs from Pheu Thai Party to run for PPRP, and 20 out of 21 were elected. Moreover, we can see that the co-optation of provincial MPs took place mostly in locales where the former MPs had worked hard to secure their electoral bases. In Loei, formally a Pheu Thai stronghold, PPRP won in three out of four constituencies. In Phetchabun, PPRP swept half of the province. The NCPO's party was also successful across Kamphaeng Phet. In provinces such as Ubon Ratchathani, Phetchabun and Sa Kaeo, where there was conflict within the ranks of the Pheu Thai, PPRP used the tactic of co-opting Pheu Thai's rivals to run against Pheu Thai candidates.

Obstruction

Other politicians outside PPRP, especially members of the Pheu Thai Party who worked hard to secure their networks, faced brutal obstacles. Their vote canvassers were threatened, their houses were searched and they were surveiled by village headmen (Matichon Online, 2018). During rallies, MP candidates were constantly shadowed by security officers. Similarly, at small-scale community political speeches, it was common for plainclothes officers to be on the scene. Candidates greatly feared violating election laws, and by erring on the side of caution they found themselves at a significant disadvantage relative to government-supported rivals. For example, they did not distribute water to voters who came to listen to the talks to avoid being accused of bribery. When voters asked whether candidates would be able to solve various community problems, candidates avoided a direct answer out of fear that they might be accused of violating the Election Commission's prohibitions against offering money or benefits to voters. The content of the campaign, therefore, revolved around broad and general assertions like "our party stands alongside the people" and "we will fight

5 These two cases resemble that of Dejnattawit Teriyapirom, the son of a prominent politician from Chiang Mai and former Commerce Minister Boonsong Teriyaphirom. Boonsong was sentenced to prison by the Supreme Court Criminal Division for Persons Holding Political Positions (another politicised agency), for corruption in relation to a rice scheme under former Prime Minister Yingluck. In hoping to get parole for his father, Dejnattawit left the Pheu Thai Party to join PPRP — admitting that he did so to help his father. Even so, Dejnattawit did not win in Chiang Mai where Pheu Thai party's identity was still strong (Prachachat Thurakit, 2019).

against the authoritarian regime."[6]

Moreover, when candidates requested permission to use public spaces such as schools, city halls, colleges, public squares, or sport facilities for campaigns, they were regularly refused. Meanwhile, the PPRP freely used all these facilities. Obstructions to the campaigns of various parties have been recorded in media and documented by human rights NGO iLaw (iLaw, 2019).

The power of money

While opposition candidates were carefully scrutinised, there was a different set of rules for the PPRP and its affiliated parties. Vote-buying was extensive in the 2019 election, both in terms of frequency and openness. On social media, reports and photographic evidence of vote buying from civilians were rampant, such as those marked under the Twitter hashtag #votebuying. A spokesperson from the Democrat Party released a statement calling for the Election Commission to investigate extensive cases of vote buying that took place before Election Day. One Pheu Thai vote canvasser operating in Lamphun province estimated that parties with the funds to support vote buying would have expended some 30-50 million baht (USD1-1.5 million) per candidate. Money was distributed in various forms including paying for travel costs to major rally events, and distribution of payments to homes two or three times before the election (Kruewan, 2019).

Figure 2. These two candidates make sure voters remember to cast vote at the right number (#2) because this time the same party had different numbers in different constituencies. In the past elections, each party had one number for all candidates throughout the country.

6 From the author's observation of seven constituency candidates in Ubon Ratchathani, a province in the northeast, from 8-10 March 2019.

Royal Projects: The New Normal in Central-Local Relations

Royal projects under King Vajiralongkorn are another good example of how royal commands interfered with — and disrupted — the hierarchical command structure both within the bureaucracy and between the central bureaucracy and the Local Administration. During the Cold War, royal projects under King Bhumibol were utilised as powerful state propaganda. Mostly related to rural development, these projects successfully built royal hegemony, and presented a compelling image of state benevolence. In practice, the projects were promoted and operated under the auspices and budgets of various bureaucratic departments. It has been customary for Thai bureaucracy to promote and protect the monarchy in all forms. However, the royal initiative of the new regent King Vajiralongkorn titled "*Royal Volunteer Spirit Project*" (904 VorPorRo[7]) or in Thai '*chit a-sa gaosun*si' has gone further to bend the whole bureaucracy to his will.

The project was initiated by the King on his birthday, to encourage people to enact good deeds voluntarily. It then became a top priority for all the state agencies of all levels to mobilise people to participate. Participation was monitored as an indicator of one's fealty to the monarch, so the executives of all offices quickly demonstrated their loyalty by promoting the project. All agencies at the provincial level had to mobilise people according to the numbers requested by the MoI. At a time of extreme confrontation between the royalists and youth protesters in late 2020, the program was used to bring people into Bangkok to back up royalist rallies.

An operation in one of the districts in Patum Thani province near Bangkok is a good example. In early November 2020 when the confrontation in Bangkok was at its peak, a district chief[8] (*nai amphoe*) was requested to send 2,000 people wearing yellow shirts to participate in the rally. All the deputy district chiefs (*palad amphoe*) were asked to mobilise a few hundred people from the sub-district under his/her command. In practice, the deputy district chiefs sought help from local politicians who had their networks ready to supply people and resources to the program (Warin, 2020).

In the intense mobilisation of the state's networks to support the monarchy, existing rules and chain of commands were bypassed. The Department of the Provincial Government often sent requests to the LAOs, via provincial governors, commanding them to mobilise people on behalf of the department. This was evidenced by many memos circulated among the MoI, the Provincial Administration (signed by governors) and the different levels of LAOs.

On top of that, the MoI has sent out several commands that demonstrate the

7 904 is a codename for the present king. In the last reign, King Rama IX's codename was 901 (Rama IX and number 1), the queen was 902 and his elder sister was 903, then he was 904 as a crown prince.

8 An appointed position under the governors' command in the Provincial Administration.

straightforward hegemonic power of the monarch. For instance, a memo signed by the MoI's Permanent Secretary in February 2020 stated that because training programs for the Royal Volunteer Spirit Project were related to emergency and disaster relief, LAOs should be allowed to use resources categorised as "disaster relief funds" in their budgets to operate royal projects. This was contrary to the strict financial discipline that the central government had earlier imposed on LAOs. Another memo issued by the Department of Local Administration (DOLA) in 2018 was sent out to all LAOs commanding them to use the Bureau of Royal Household designated poster design for volunteer activities. Apparently, this one royal project had established a "new normal" for commands between the central bureaucracy and the LAOs. The local autonomy legally granted to the LAOs was readily violated for the sake of royal commands.

Figure 3 The Royal Design in the Royal Volunteer Spirit Project

COVID-19 response: The indispensable role of municipalities

In 2020, as Thailand managed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic relatively well, the Prayuth government tried to grab much of the credit within an environment where information was strictly controlled. To get a fuller picture of what sectors are responsible for this success, however, it is necessary to investigate operations from the provincial level down to the community level. At the same time, examining the roles of the central bureaucracy and LAOs in the pandemic response provides valuable insights into recent developments in Thailand's central-local relations. The important role assumed by LAOs in the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak demonstrated their capacity to survive and function — even in an undemocratic setting in which local elections were long delayed.[9]

A recent study on the roles of city municipalities in the COVID-19 crisis showed how they were able to maintain their linkage with citizens, and effectively mobilise their networks to respond to the crisis (Vongsayan & Nethipo, 2021). In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the municipalities' roles were indispensable at the community level. As explained further below, their capacity derived from expertise and investment in local public healthcare, the possession of databases, and management structures which relied on creating close linkages with communities and their people.

Thai government in the COVID-19 response

There are two laws that guided administration during this pandemic. The Communicable Disease Act B.E. 2558 (2015) was employed from 26 February 2020 to authorise government sectors to act in response to the pandemic. This act brought about the establishment of the National Communicable Disease Committee (NCDC) chaired by the Minister of Public Health, the Bangkok Communicable Disease Committee (BCDC) led by Bangkok's governor (normally an elected position), and the Provincial Communicable Disease Committee (PCDC) in each of Thailand's 76 provinces, chaired by the provincial governor. The act grants authority to the BCDC and PCDC to independently command anything related to controlling the disease in their domains. In a way, the act complies with the traditional structure by prioritising the Provincial Administration. However, within the PCDC, a mayor from each province also sat as a member, which allowed the mayors to act within the authority of PCDC. Once the power was dispersed from the central government to the Provincial Administration, it was easy to distinguish the relative capacity of the two levels — provincial versus local — in implementing preventative measures. Drawing again from the conclusions of the recent study, the capacity of the Provincial Administration proved inadequate and it was the system of Local Administration that proved critical to the success of healthcare delivery at the community level (Vongsayan & Nethipo, 2021).

9 Elections came at a later stage: for PAOs in December 2020, and for the municipalities in April 2021. The lowest levels, which govern rural areas, have not yet been allowed to hold elections.

The other law used to control the situation was the Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situations B.E. 2548 (2005), and this became a powerful tool for cabinet to contain the situation, mainly by controlling information. The central agency for this task was the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA), established as the predominant agent for communication with public. The use of these laws illustrates important dynamics of central-local relations in Thailand. The Communicable Disease Act originally allowed decision making to be dispersed down to the LAOs, but the government instead entrusted the Provincial Administration with implementation of the law — while at the same time relying on contributions from the LAOs, albeit without giving them proper credit. In the end, the emergency law became a powerful tool for the authoritarian government to control communication and information without utilising it to prevent the disease.

Healthcare as a Capacity and Network building

In the decade after the passage of the Decentralisation Act of 1999, healthcare devolution was far from successful. Responsibility for the one or two Primary Healthcare Units (PHUs) in each sub-district was supposed to be transferred to municipalities and TAOs but only a few dozen were given devolved authority. The PHUs were later named Tambon Health Promoting Hospitals, and currently encompass 9,800 units. At present, more than two decades after the passage of the 1999 law, almost all community-based PHUs and all hospitals remain under the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH). In practice, hospitals and medical officers at the provincial level are required to operate within the structure of Provincial Administration under the command of governors.

In spite of the failures of decentralisation, the universal healthcare program established in 2002 by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra as part of his "30-baht scheme" (enabling visits to the doctor for a mere 30 baht, or roughly 1USD) created an independent agency outside MoPH called the National Health Security Office (NHSO). The NHSO provided universal funds for all public hospitals, but when it came to the issues of community-based disease prevention, the LAOs were given a prominent role. One of the most important programs promoted by NHSO was the Local Health Security Fund (LHSF), established in 2006.[10] It was one of the keys to institutionalising local capacity on public healthcare. The LHSF provides funding to municipalities and TAOs at the rate of 45 baht per person, while the LAOs contribute a proportion that depends upon the size of the organisation. The funds are used for various health-related activities initiated and operated by communities with support from the LAOs. These activities not only help strengthen LAOs' healthcare service capacity, but also allow the LAOs to connect with communities and individuals through various projects. The fund is also relatively flexible when compared to the strict disbursement of the government's budget. During the pandemic, LHSF funds helped LAOs to facilitate preventative measures in communities.

10 Local Health Security Fund's budget is subsidized from various sources i.e. (1) National Health Security Fund, dispensed on the basis of population; (2) Local Governments' support, dispensed on the basis of income; and (3) Public Health Care and other expenses.

(Vongsayan & Nethipo, 2021, p. 18) In terms of politics, healthcare programs have always been major proactive practices that allow incumbents to connect with their voters, even when they did not yet know when the next elections will be allowed.[11]

Figure 4. An election rally organized at a community forest

11 When the government finally permitted municipal elections in April 2021, voters acknowledged that the efforts of the local administration had influenced their voting decisions. In other words, there were signs that the municipal politicians continued to have strong linkages with their voters (Vongsayan & Nethipo, 2021).

Conclusion: Backward trends and local hopes

The NCPO regime's attempt to turn back time in the lead-up to the 2019 election involved tactics aimed at replacing political networks that had developed over the past two decades with alternative — and retrograde — networks of power. This is evidenced by two important backward trends, which are fortunately balanced with enduring hope about the viability of local democracy.

The first backward trend is the way in which the NCPO used the central bureaucracy to achieve its own ends, in the process allowing the bureaucracy to reassert itself. From day one, the NCPO exerted its power through the Provincial Administration because its structure allowed any command to directly reach the authority down to the village levels. Through the deep reach of the Provincial Administration into subnational levels, the NCPO was able to keep track of resistance, track down opponents, and enforce its commands at the local level. Subsequently, the NCPO government shifted many responsibilities from LAOs to the Provincial Administration, especially in the infrastructural projects, and, hence, the provincial bureaucracy enjoyed enhanced access to budgetary resources. Lastly, the central bureaucracy increased its control over the LAOs through financial inspection, thus disrupting the chain of command and weakening the LAOs' autonomy.

The second backward trend is a transformation of the political networks that link various levels from top to bottom, i.e., from Bangkok to the bureaucrats and local leaders in Provincial Administration to the bureaucrats, politicians, and people at the level of LAOs. As the central bureaucracy has been able to pull power back to itself, and give more prominence to Provincial Administration, it has had to develop new means of mobilising citizens — a task that it is not readily able to perform on its own. This has led to reliance on political brokers who are highly proficient in the art of mobilisation: politicians, strongmen, and local leaders. This inevitably heightens the power of brokers as they act as intermediaries between bureaucrats and the people.

But this only tells part of the story. To better understand this transformation of political networks, it is important to step back and view the linkages in broader historical perspective. Before 1997, during the heyday of the *phu mi itthiphon,* patronage was disbursed downward from Bangkok through informal networks based on a combination of clientelism and coercion. In the system of electoral politics that was in place from 1997 to 2014, patronage continued to be of critical importance but there was more reliance on formal networks (through the LAOs) and less reliance on coercion. Both national and local politicians enjoyed their own distinct domains of power and authority, with the latter group of officials strengthened by the introduction of Local Administration. Lower-level clients were attracted by benefits yet still had some degree of latitude including opportunities to exit the relationship.

Since the NCPO took power in the 2014 coup, the *phu mi itthiphon* have come to achieve

a level of prominence that they have not enjoyed since the pre-1997 era. In other words, the type of political network that has been withering away since 1997 is returning. But it is not entirely the same, as the *phu mi itthiphon* are now working alongside the new players that have been introduced through the *Pracharath* scheme — most notably some of the country's leading business conglomerates. In effect, there is a new form of government patronage that puts people at the mercy of the state and wealthy capitalists. The politicians, strongmen, and local leaders at the base of the system may be regaining some of their former prominence in the new system put in place by the NCPO regime, but they have been downgraded from agents to brokers. Their ability to survive, and to maintain their power, is premised on the strength of the connections that they make with bureaucrats. Ultimately, there are a relatively small number of brokers who have been cut into the new arrangements; the most successful are those who are able to forge the tightest connections with top bureaucrats — or, even better, cabinet members and other leaders of the NCPO. This new system is based fundamentally on fear, thus making it harder for underlings to exit the relationship. This does not auger well for moving Thai local politics in a more positive direction.

The third trend is much more uplifting, and involves on-going hope in local democracy and programmatic linkages between politicians and voters. Despite the backward trends noted above, these linkages have not been reversed. With the emergence of new healthcare schemes, for example, higher levels of institutional capacity have been built at the local level. Although the NCPO regime has weakened the decision-making power of local politicians, along with their leverage with the central government, the politicians can nonetheless use projects within their respective jurisdictions to maintain a strong connection with their constituents. Especially in contrast to the central government, which has failed to respond effectively to the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the LAOs have been able to demonstrate their strong capabilities. For those wanting to see the restoration of democracy in Thailand, the recent local elections (for the PAOs at the end of 2020 and the municipalities in April 2021) represent a potential source of light at the end of the tunnel.

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