Chapter 4
Decentralization and changing local politics in Thailand: Different Outcomes among the Regions

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Introduction

Thailand as a modern nation-state, located in mainland Southeast Asia, has been historically composed of two contrasting characteristics, namely homogeneity and diversity of society and statehood. The former one has been strongly emphasized by the centralist and conservative camp. This group propagated the lineage of Thai people from the past to the present. By contrast, the latter one tends to belong to parochialism and simply the liberalist camp. This second camp always insists that Thai means "free" and "independent" and consists of multi-ethnic groups. According to this perception, Thais have always differences among themselves from one region to another.

There are also some widely known dichotomies, with which Southeast Asian and Thai specialists frequently equipped for their research works, such as the ideas of unity and diversity, center and peripheries and the conventional framework of so-called high or court and low or common civilizations. These ideas aimed to explain political and social structures of Thailand, insisting that there would be one center, on both idealistic and concrete terms, for ever during each certain period and beyond. It also claims that the center always enjoyed invisible powers, the concentration of cultures, higher of belief system, and some kinds of authority to connect its powers with their own peripheries. In this perception, all peripheries have been comprised together like clusters which are put together with names of communities, villages, local authorities, and regions and so on.

Examples of conventional wisdoms mentioned above seem to be not only attractive but also coincidental with another theoretical working notion of centrifugal and centripetal ideas of political forces. Such a working notion has been analyzed by some leading political scientists and local government theorists both in the West, such as in Italy, and in the East, for example in Japan. The balancing and unbalancing of centrifugal and centripetal forces could be very crucial to verify meanings, functions, substances, and values of local governments and decentralization in each society.

Following this working hypothesis, the meanings of decentralization and actual transformation of politics in Thailand will be described and discussed in this Chapter, by bringing it back into the milieu of two such main political and social forces. These two forces, namely the centrifugal and centripetal ones, were, unavoidably, not static but fluctuated during a several decades in the past and is still seeking its perceivable equilibrium at present time.

1.   Background and history of locality in Thailand

The examination of a long period of local histories and cultures of people living in present Thailand could reveal the fact that there were around 20-30 power-centers at least, before the emergence of the modern nation state about 100 years ago. The habitants in the Northeast and Northeast regions in the past were mainly the Laotians, while in the Central region were composed of Siamese, Mon and Chinese. Apart from these main groups, there were various types of Mon-Khmer ethnic groups, Chams, Chongs. Karens, Malays, Shans, Indians, Arabs, Vietnamese, and plenty types of Tai-speaking ethnic peoples. Tracing history back in this way, it is, therefore, so astonishing to see how 5-6 millions of habitants one century ago could be merged and blended from various ethnic groups to be the "oneness," namely Thai.

It is certain that the process of modern state and nation building was hardly smooth and peaceful. The centralization of powers was led by strong Siamese central forces without any consultation with local elites one century ago. Resistance and rebellions took place mainly in the North, Northeast and South. In the North, small local princes of Nan, Prae and Payao mobilized their serfs and followers to fight against the Bangkok centralism. In the Northeast, not only small Laotian noble class, but also local monks attached to the forest Buddhist school, played their vital roles in their battles against the Bangkok power. The situation was highly complicated in the South, since local princes, noble class, farmers and Islamic elements formed their movements. Depending on these circumstances, the centralist camp always emphasized successful stories of Thailand's centralization, disseminating official discourse of being Thai from the past to the present. Such a simplistic perception not only neglected but also underestimated anti-centralism; they politically and discursively deceived themselves, in the sense that anti-centralist movement was happening only in the past, about one hundred years ago.

Transformation of provincial and local politics in modern Thailand could be traced back to one century ago. The Bangkok central government has seized nearly total

powers from the Northern, Northeastern and Southern local elites. Around the turn of the early 20th century, the modern system of regional, provincial, district, Tambon and village administrations were set up with the system of appointed government officials, who were sent from the center to govern the whole country. The new system of military recruitment, taxation, education, police, administrative jurisdiction, irrigation, road and highways etc, has gradually penetrated into all localities. This new picture of the Thai government and administration has remained somehow on the top of the so-called bureaucratic power structure since one century ago till today. The number of the central government's personnel has increased during the past century, from 30,000 to 2,000,000 officers.

The establishment of the highly centralized state and government briefly described above is only one side of the story. We have seen the decline and subsequent collapse of outstanding leaders, such as Chiang Mai, Roi-Et and Pattani princes in the North, Northeast and South respectively step by step. However, we detected the adaptation of the middle-level locally-born aristocrats taking place during the same period. From 1932 onwards, because of the establishment of new parliament under the democratic regime, some locally-born middle-level aristocrats took opportunities to run for elections voluntarily in 1933, 1937, 1938, 1945, 1946, 1949, 1952, 1957 and 1958 respectively. Needless to say, successful candidates could become members of the house. Members of Na Chiangmai, Na Lampang, Na Nan, Na Kalasin, Na Ubon, Na Mahasarakham, and Na Ratchasima families provides us good examples of how Thai provincial and local politics from the 1930s onwards altered their ways of lives to accommodate the Thai centralism. Locally-born, elite-turn-politicians played important roles in the Thai national unicameral house. Some worked well with the People Party's members who dominated Thai national politics in that period. Others, especially strong local leaders with patriotic sentiments, became powerful opposition not only in the unicameral house but also outside the national assembly, as they formed the so-called anti-centralist and anti-Field Marshall Pibul Songkram regime's movements which were activated mainly in the Northeast, North and South to different degrees.

Thai centralist and authoritarian leaders cruelly responded to anti-government's demands and voices. In the 1950s, local leader-turn-national politicians, such as Tieng Sirikhan and Thong-in Puripat, were killed by secret policemen. The state killing and suppression had apparently continued through the late 1950s and the 1960s, after Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat successfully took power from Field Marshall Pibul Songkram. The new junta aimed to transform not only national politics but also local level politics as well into the so-called Thai style democratic one.

Hence, they governed the country by military decrees without an elected parliament. In the meantime, they suspended all local municipal council elections. In fact, they selectively cooperated with 120 mayors around the country.[1] In consequence, this suppression and the centralist policies had pushed many people from cities to rural areas, to be allied with the communist party, directly and indirectly. All remote areas in the North and Northeast were altered from peaceful and undeveloped communities to be strong bases of guerilla warfare in Thailand from the 1960s till the late 1980s.

2. The Development Decade : Changing local economy and politics

Thai economy has changed dramatically from the 1960s onwards at least because of three reasons. First, a huge military spending during the 1960s and the 1970s by US army bases together with the Thai government was made with regard to infra-structures, such as roads, canals, electric stations, hospitals, and so forth. At the same time, so-called "containment policy" was pursued in aiming to lift up general living standard of Thai people in the countryside for fighting against communism. Second, the foreign direct investment (FDI), aiming to promote import-substitution industrialization, took place in the Central region from the beginning of the 1960s, especially in such industrial sectors as textile, garment and primary consumer products. And third, the commercialization of Thai agriculture and the rise of cash crops was seen in some provinces, especially in the newly opened lands and upland areas which were well-suited for transportation and factory construction. Cash crops, such as sugar canes, tobaccos, cassavas, pineapples, and so on, required not only huge immigrant labor forces but also tough local leaders with money and political networks.

Economic dynamism easily and logically paved ways to the new social and political settings. From the middle of 1970s, we started to notice local politicians being wealthier than bureaucrats and even provincial governors. These local politicians worked in all provinces, because some of them were former traders with the US military bases to provide transportation, such as in Sattahip, Takli, Ubol Ratchathani and Udorn Thani. From this period, members of the Provincial Administrative Organizations (PAOs) became widely recognized as local construction bidders, because small and

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[1] Other types of state-led local administrative bodies such as 71 PAO, 585 sanitary districts and 59 units of TAO during this period (the number is as of early 1970s). All were totally under the control of provincial governors, districts officers and Kamnan/village headmen respectively. So, it did not require any condition to prolong local elections of the chiefs of such state-led local administrative units.

medium sized construction works were promoted and expanded by huge government's development projects. In this setting, some outstanding PAO council members, who successfully bid construction works beyond his or her provinces, could own modernized transportation companies and get construction works even in Laos and Cambodia.

In this period, infrastructure of Thailand changed immensely due to the development policy by the Thai government and by the US military assistance. From the late 1960s, we thus witnessed increasing popularity and quantity of the road-transportaion and bus-transportation, replacing river-transportation and railways. Some local businessmen, who were brave and aggressive, could successfully run mass transportation companies in the North, Northeast and South. This was an actual changing scenario of Thai local politics, as it crucially grounded new portfolio of mayors and local councilors. In some provinces where bus transportation was promoted, we saw that owners of local bus transportation companies turned to be outstanding mayors and local councilors.

Some provinces such as in the Eastern region experienced the rapidest structural change of local economy from cash crop production to tourist site, which was mixed with new industrial zones within 3 decades. In this region, the wealth and the power of local politicians were highly interconnected. The separation between the wealth, as sources of power, and the power, as source of wealth, then was blurred because they were mixed up from various and unclear activities. Needless to say, under the growing informal and underground economic sectors, these activities could easily be done in the cities, border towns, tourist sites and remote areas of Thailand. Amongst others, gambling, prostitution, smuggling, sex trading, lottery, money borrowing, money laundering, and drug trading were notable in modern Thai public sphere. Responding to this changing setting, Thai academia in the late 1980s adopted the notion of Thai local "godfather", as it obviously appeared in some leading articles, thesis, books, and, became one discussion topic even in international conferences on Thai studies as well. Such a notion revealed that local politicians, including mayors and PAO councilors, have already changed themselves from weak and passive men to be active and, perhaps, "tough" guys to a certain extent since the 1980s.

3.   **Different contexts of local politics in the regions of Thailand**

The rise of tough guys in localities has tremendously been influenced by some heritages of each region's local and political cultures.

In the case of the Central region, it was largely molded by the Thai (or Tai) notion of "Nakleng" or local strong men culture. According to this notion, being perfect men comprised cycle and passage of life from the present one to the higher stage. Stealing and robbing from rich men in outside communities for themselves and for their relatives was one prerequisite for the passage of men's life. In addition, brotherhood and generosity were crucial component of being gentlemen in the Central region's traditional ways. Other notion rooted in Chinese communities was "Tue-hia" or big Chinese men's brother culture. The two sources of local culture were mixed together in some areas, especially in the big communities where the populace had half-Thai and half-Chinese origins. In this circumstance, local tough guy culture became cultural equipments and, perhaps, skills with which wealthy local mayors exercised for their powers. Some leading scholars argued that tough guys' manner was local cultures in transition from traditional to modern one. Such phenomena were condensed by socio-economic factors and special cultures of some localities. But later on, they should be declined when urbanization and a modern educational system fully emerged.

In the North, the notion of "Pho Lieng" (literary means adopted father), or big men, has been developed from two kinds of local cultures. First, it was a person who had magical powers. Second, it means the brave guy who could travel across the border such as to China or to Myanmar for trading, logging and so on. The two ideas were mixed together later on and meant specifically to the tough guys, who could equip cultural "weapons" for the benefits of both public and private works.

The situation in the Northeast is quite similar to the North. The notion of tough guy in the Northeast was remarkably influenced by these two ideas of "Mo Tham" (literary means Dharma doctor) and "Nai hoi" (literary means master of hundreds). The first meant men who could read Buddha texts or some magical texts that were technically useful in healing diseases. The second notion meant brave men who were capable to cross the mountains or big rivers safely with hundreds of cows and buffalos.

In the South, we could find the notion of "Nai hua" (literary means the master of head) which was historically derived from locally-born Chinese and Malay cultures. It meant especially big men who could lead labor forces to do hard jobs, such as mining and even some big local festivals. These men must possess wisdom, skills and, perhaps, arts of leadership. Some experts in the Southern culture explained that the Southern people loved public debating and questioning as they could find who could be a real master of "head". So, they voted for local politicians and representatives who could talk and lead (local) wisdom; otherwise let the dog bite any animals that should be the best, as one Southern local proverb says.

What is briefly described above might reveal distinct personalities, characteristics and attitudes of local leaders as well as local politics in respective regions. Northern and Northeastern cultures clearly emphasized the importance of men who had Dharma and magical powers in their minds and, more importantly, the brave persons who could connect localities with the outside world. Their good and, perhaps, the best leaders should play the role of a "broker" or middleman. They must go out to get wealth, money and even something beneficial to localities. Local people will follow them whenever such local leaders could do the courageous and prosperous things for local people from the outside of their communities. According to this understanding, Northern and Northeastern people kindly and frequently welcomed "strangers," to be with their communities, particularly those who possessed wealth and had connection with outside. Such kinds of hospitalities were more notable in the North and Northeast rather than in the Southern or even the Central communities.

By contrast, local leaders in the South have to perform in different ways through their own cultural rules. Connecting with the center is less emphasized than their vital and spiritual roles in communities. More importantly, local leaders must show their local wisdom through talking and debating with local people. In this context, Southern local politics has comprised of closeness, trust and associated characters. The close relationship between leaders and followers is crucial in Southern cultural rules. Perhaps, it is less materialistic culture than the North and especially Northeast regions.

4. Decentralization and Development of local politics

The 1990s marked a decade of structural political change especially in terms of decentralization and local politics of Thailand. It started by PAO supporters who strategically urged to have directly elected governors (there were 72 provinces in early 1990s and now increased to 75 provinces) , replacing appointed system that had been practiced for nearly one century. Political and public debates by some groups of stake holders took place for more than 2 years and it ended up with the establishment of some 6,000 units of the TAO (Tambon Administrative Organization) for the whole country. It should be noted that about 1,000 urban areas had already practiced three types of Municipalities and one type of sanitary districts for over several decades. The rest, approximately 6,000 Tambon units, were said to be rural and poor, so that the government could not have any policies to lift them up to the local governments in the past. Yet in 1994 it reached the perfect time for the Democrat party-led coalition

government to actively launch new policy, changing all 6,000 rural Tambons into a new type of local authority, namely TAO[2].

However, in this period of establishing the TAO, it should be noted that TAO chairman was Kamnan or headmen of compound-village (Tambon). This arrangement was similar to the case of the PAOs and the sanitary districts, because governors and districts officers were chiefs of PAOs and sanitary committee chairmen respectively. Following such guided structure, compound-village headmen or Kamnan were then chiefs of Tambon as state organs, and at the same time were chiefs of TAOs as local authorities.

The 1997 Constitution, which was promulgated three years after the establishing the TAO, aimed at changing the local government system. First, it determined that all state officers, namely governors, districts officers, Kamnan, village headmen etc., could be neither chiefs nor even ex-officio members of local authorities at the same time. This law notably separated state-led organizations from citizen-led organizations. Second, the 1997 Constitution stated clearly that Thai local government could not adopt a committee form of structure. The separation of power between two branches, namely executive and legislative branches, was preferred.

However, these two types of separated system seems to have created, intentionally and unintentionally, a weak system of local government. Confrontation took place not only inside the local authorities but also outside. Chiefs of local authorities or executive sides must contest with councilors in some aspects; in the meantime, they also have frequent activities against their village headmen and their assistants in the same localities to a certain extent.

Third, the 1997 Constitution aimed to increase the local government revenues as well as to guarantee somehow the local autonomy. This measurement, coupled with the enactment of the Decentralization Act and the establishment of decentralization committee in 1999, paved the new way for the full scale of decentralization. We then expected that all local governments, about 7,850 units in the whole country, were equipped with budgets and their own staffs to make locally delivered service functions benefit to the people.

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[2] Regarding this scenario, bureaucratic side explained that they were forced by deputy Interior minister who was a senior politician of Democrat Party. They emphasized that such deputy minister ordered them to do it right now. On the other side, Democrat party sources said that permanent secretary of ministry of interior and its senior officers proposed them that the TAO should be the best forms of local government, not the elected governor as the anti rally against provincial administration demanded.

There are five types of local governments in Thailand, namely PAO, Municipalities, TAO, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and Phataya City. The majority of local governments are approximately 6,000 units of TAOs. In the reality, however, there is a big gap between TAOs in the Central region and those in the Northeastern region. In the Central region, some TAOs are richer, by almost ten times, than PAOs. Thai municipalities also suffer from a similar gap between the old generation established many decades ago and the new generation establishing in 1999 and afterwards[3].

PAOs and TAOs in the Northeast region were actively engaged in changing internal structure from indirectly-elected executive to directly-elected one. The North region also joined the bands. The South and Central regions seems to be inactive, as they said that indirectly-elected executives were good enough to manage and run their offices.

In 2002, when the PAO association had an annual meeting and also discussed positive and negative sides of directly elected executives, the present author argued that this system should be experimental and should implement only in big cities not in small towns or in small TAOs. However, in the following year (2003), the TRT government led by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra decided to adopt the directly-elected executive system in the whole country.

This survey will show how Thai local governments responded with the newly introduced directly-elected executives. If we understand all background, we may foresee that the North and Northeast regions will be content with this changing scenario more than the Southern and Central regions are. This outcome reminded the present author with one opinion of a PAO chairman from the Eastern region who was also the chairman of PAO association during that period. He said that directly-elected executives could by no means guarantee that local governments of Thailand would be stronger than the past. The important things are their finances, management, local autonomy, and the person who dares to challenge and is able to negotiate with central and provincial governments. Unless they can embark on such change at the first step, the directly-elected local executive system and indirectly-elected one will bring about the same result.

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[3] In present author's observation, local governments run by new rich mayors would not actively demand the transformation of the local government system from indirectly-elected mayors to directly-elected ones in the late 1990s till early 2000s.

5. Briefing of the Survey Results: Different reactions among the regions towards the directly-elected executives system

In this section, the present author will briefly summarize some of the results concerned with regional differences from the survey of the Local Administrative Organizations (LAOs). In Table 1 to Table 4, opinions of LAO Presidents on the necessary conditions to be elected as Presidents in the direct election is compared among the regions.

Table 1 shows that response rate of 'much effect' is a bit higher in the North and the South than that of other regions.

Table 1   Evaluation of the effectiveness of the candidates' personality to win the LAO presidential election

	Effect of people's perceptions of the personality of the candidate to win the LAO Presidential Election(%)				
Region	no effect	little effect	much effect	not sure	N
North	0.2	1.1	98.3	0.4	543
Central	0.0	1.5	97.8	0.7	729
Northeast	0.4	2.7	96.7	0.3	1075
South	0.0	0.3	98.3	1.4	291
Total	0.2	1.8	97.5	0.5	2638

$\chi 2 = 19.90$, p<0.05

Source: Calculated from the survey data.

Table 2 indicates that the LAO Presidents in the Northeast recognize election canvassers system as an effective tool to win the LAO presidential election. On the other hand, the effect of election canvassers is less evaluated in the North than in other regions.

Table 2   Evaluation of the effectiveness of election canvassers to win the LAO presidential election.

Region	Effect of election canvassers to win the LAO Presidential Election(%)				N
	No effect	little effect	much effect	not sure	
North	15.9	39.0	35.6	9.4	533
Central	12.9	36.4	41.9	8.8	712
Northeast	10.6	36.5	47.4	5.5	1040
South	11.3	39.4	44.0	5.3	284
Total	12.4	37.3	43.1	7.2	2569

$\chi 2 = 33.32$, $p < 0.001$

Source: Calculated from the survey data.

Table 3 again shows that the reaction of the North towards the effect of support from national level politicians is different from that of the Northeast and the Central. The Presidents in the Southern region also evaluated the effect much less than in the Northeast and the Central regions.

Table 3   Evaluation of the effectiveness of support from national-level politicians to win the LAO presidential election

Region	Effect of support from national-level politicians to win the LAO Presidential Election(%)				N
	No effect	little effect	much effect	not sure	
North	27.8	39.6	22.0	10.6	536
Central	25.5	35.9	28.9	9.7	713
Northeast	28.2	37.2	27.6	7.1	1044
South	27.5	38.3	23.3	10.8	287
Total	27.3	37.4	26.3	9.0	2580

$\chi 2 = 16.76$, $p < 0.05$

Source: Calculated from the survey data.

Table 4 shows that the support from the political parties is more evaluated in the Northeast. On the contrary, its effect is less evaluated in the North and the South.

Table 4   Evaluation of the effectiveness of support from the political parties to win the LAO presidential election

Region	Effect of policy support from the political parties to win the LAO Presidential Election(%)				
	No effect	little effect	much effect	not sure	N
North	32.5	36.4	20.3	10.9	533
Central	31.0	36.9	21.9	10.2	713
Northeast	27.3	39.4	25.9	7.4	961
South	34.8	37.3	18.1	9.8	287
Total	30.3	37.8	22.7	9.2	2494

$\chi 2 = 21.57$, p<0.01

Source: Calculated from the survey data.

These results partly support the author's understanding in the sense that introducing the same new system of the direct election has brought about the different reactions among the regions. However, for the further analysis on the regional differences, more investigations should be made on the survey results and its backgrounds.