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Community Groups And Election In Thailand : A Problem
Of Insufficient Level Of Political Information

By

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A problem of insufficient level of political information

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Profile of· the Thai political system and the election

The present 1978 Thai Constitution marked the new era of the Thai election system. Following the student-led uprising in 1973, the once dominated military regime had been compelled to accept a more opened political system. During the past twelve years, six general elections were held periodically without interruption despite two coup attempts. However, it would be misleading to suggest that the Thai democratic polity has been, if not satisfactorily, developed to a full extent. Accordingly, under a provision of the present Constitution, the prime minister and the cabinet member might or might not be elected by the people, although, in practise, most of them are. The electoral procedure is not based upon the "one man one vote" principle. The Senate, whose composition is largely high ranking military personnel nd prominent businessmen, is appointed by the King through the suggestion of the prime minister. Behaviorally speaking, malpractises on the part of the candidates and the electorate, particularly the vote buying/selling, are also widespread. The latter problem will be the focus of this paper.

Community groups and the election

Western social scientists such as A.F. Bentley, D.B. Truman, R.G. Schwartzenberg, and M. Duverger, to name just a few, believe that a group, be it social, economic, or political is a body of individuals bonded by each individual desire or expectation that his/her basic needs be fulfilled by this body. In effect, the concept rests upon the Western democratic assumption in the sense that each individual, based upon one's idiosyncretic desire, will automatically attempt to take part in the decision making process. In short, the public policy is fundamentally generated by the masses. However, the author found it difficult to apply this concept to the present socio-political context of Thailand.

As the matter of fact, the Thai society is vertically, and not horizontally, structured upon the unequal relationship of individuals, or more precisely, the elite and the masses. The elite is believed to be those who possess special resources whether it is power, authority, generosity, benevolence, or wealth. The masses, on the contrary, are those who, in order for survival, have to rely on the resources of the elite. Such terms as yum kreng (deference), barami (charisma), chao nai (superior), and phrai (inferior) are not uncommon among the Thai people. (For a detailed discussion of the Thai political culture, see Clark D. Neher, Editor, Modern Thai Politics from Village to Nation, 1976) Thus, the elite can be identified as a local leader like a village headman, an abbot, a district officer, a landowner, a merchant, and a policeman, or a national figure like an industrialist, a banker, a businessman, and a high ranking government official. As a result, various kinds of social activities, including the community

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groupings, become an initiative of the elite rather than the masses.

This cultural cum religious aspect of the Thai society is furthermore strengthened by the fact that the old regimes, both the absolute monarchy and the military were not in favor of community groupings for fear of the peril to their elite status. King Rama V's Association Act of B.E. 2457 (1914) clearly stipulated that the government might at all times dissolve any associations deemed dangerous to the public order and safety. (Mayuree Anuman Rajadhon et.al., Thai Election Dynamics, A research report submitted to the Asia Foundation, 1987: 158) After the Second World War, the successive military regimes of Pibul, Sarit, and Thanom, the mass groupings, especially the labor, were put under a tight control of, if not abolished by, the government. The current situation, in which various types of community groupings come into existence, appears more relaxed at least in terms of the government's numeral control. Nevertheless, they are still barred from engaging in any political activities.

In principle, a general election is one of the important political activities in which each individual who owns the sovereignty can express his/her will in selecting the representative to administer the country. Accordingly, the concept rests upon several assumptions. First, an individual is well aware of his/her own political rights. Second, the electorate possesses sufficient level of political knowledge to make a correct judgement for the benefit of itself and the whole society. Third, in casting the ballots, the electors are free from any external interferences.

But this is not the case in Thailand, particularly in the rural area where 70 per cent of the population live. The cultural cum

religious aspect, deeply instilled into the attitude of the Thai people, expresses itself in a form of voting behavior. According to a number of field studies by Thai researchers such as Sujit Bunbongkarn, Pornsak Pongpaew, and Chartchai na Chiang Mai, a sense of civic duty, rather than an awareness of political rights, is the most important determinant for the Thai people to go to vote. However, one may cast doubt whether this "sense of civic duty" is authentically generated by the voters themselves. Furthermore, the same studies also pointed out that a large number of the Thai electorate are mobilized and/or directed to vote by others such as canvassers, friends, and community leaders.

As stated earlier, the major problem of the election in Thailand is the vote buying/selling practise, in which, as a result, the elected politicians attempt to recuperate their money invested in the electoral campaign. How and why has the practise come about? To begin with, Thai politics can be conceived as bi-spheral which signifies two existing parallel polities, the national and the local, simultaneously. These two separate polities are illustrated by several indicators such as the absence of party branches in the province, the lack of party participation in the local elections, and the fact that most MPs have never been a local politician before. The phenomenon necessitates the candidates in a general election to rely upon the support of the leaders of local community groupings e.g., Tambon (a cluster of villages) and village councils, temple commitee, irrigated water user group, and housewife group, to name just a few. These local politicians in nature, in order to please their clients, have transformed themselves into "power brokers" between the candidates and the electors. The bargaining results in laterite road, temple roof,

bridge, cash, for example.

Perhaps, one way of curing the vote buying/selling disease is to provide the community leaders and the masses with more political information. The basic argument here rests upon the assumption that a well-informed individual, whether he or she is considered a member of the elite or the masses, is not apathetic to the (national) politics, despite its farreaching nature. Democracy in Thailand might be here to stay. But it also needs to be nurtured and well maintained. It is thus a duty of the concerned parties namely the mass media, the educational institutions, the non-governmental organizations, and the government (sic) to carry out this enormous task.