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Democracy and Village Politics in Thailand and Singapore: Making Analytical Comparisons in Late Modernity

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Abstract

What is the best way to maximize democratic participation without violent consequences? Democratic theory emphasizes grassroots participation in politics as part of the democratic evolution and transition. Democratic participation is not always peaceful, and indeed has proven itself to be volatile and violent in the history of modern Thailand. Thai scholars like Chaloemtiarana, Bunbongkarn, Boonpraset, Winichakul, Ponsidurak and others have underscored various interstitial issues of violence in Thailand from Phibun and Sarit's regimes, the role of the military, university student uprisings, mass protests and civil disobedience. Thailand and Singapore share a similar political history despite the differences in size. Both states have experiences periods of authoritarian rule with different policy outcomes and political consequences. Since the end of the Cold War, the governments of both states have emphasized the importance of a democratic ethos and how such a belief leads to a better life for citizens. Yet democracy in Singapore is peaceful by comparison to its larger neighbour. This paper examines how Southern Thai Village people can maximize their participation in village affairs by applying Singapore's ethnic management strategy of political cohesion. This paper is organized into the following sections: the problem of villages in the Southern provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani; Political Assimilation; the Singapore Model; and Village Affairs.

Introduction

There are three main local problems in the restive problematique of the Southern Thai provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani. The first local problem is the rejection of Thai assimilationism. This involves the virtual and material rejection of Standard Thai language, Thai Buddhist customs and the celebration of national Thai holidays and special days such as Buddhist Lent and the birth of the Buddha. While Thailand is mainly Buddhist, the state does not forbid the practice of other religions including Christianity and Islam. Indeed, in Bangkok, it is common to see and hear the Muslim call to prayer. In fact, the Red Shirt protests saw the unity of purpose between Muslim and Buddhist citizens of the Kingdom [1,2]. This means that the problem in the South is especially unique and divides Muslim from non-Muslim in terms of a general observation. A second local problem is that there is a very strong connection among the descendants of Thai-Muslims most of whom attribute their connection with Islam to a fabled Pattani Sultanate that was said to have existed in the 14th century. This coincided with the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia and the southward expansion of the Thai state into what is known today as the Federation of Malaysia. Another local problem is the failure of various assimilationist policies since the 19th century to educate the 80-87% of the population in Buddhism. More so, scholars like Dorairajoo refer to the situation in 2004 as "the use of Islam as a rallying cry" in an attempt to link the issue to Palestine and Afghanistan" [3] in what was part of what anti-Semites believed to be a global conspiracy against Islam by the West, or so it was thought to be in the first decade of the 21st century. Perhaps the more glaring aspect of the problem is the death of thousands of local Thai people in the South that include school-children in their schools during classes, teachers, religious teachers, Buddhist monks, Buddhist religious students, farmers, security personnel, Islamic teachers, Muslim security volunteers (state) from the villages, police officers and their families, and the destruction of parts of local villages.

All these interconnections have generated a nexus that is fraught with emotion, anger, civil disobedience, and apparently military and police ground personnel who are both disheartened, as they are unwilling to resolve the problems.

The local villages are said to protect the perpetrators of political violence and civil disobedience but are for the most part unaware of who actually commits these crimes. While the locals are often willing to peacefully partake of local affairs in economics and politics, they are at the same time always on edge and very cautious as bombs may explode in a market place or bus station at any time. The local belief in Islam and traditional Malay cultural practices has become a millstone around the neck of the state. Political scientists would describe the problems in the South as either (1) Ethno-religious separatism; (2) Insurgency or (3) Irredentism. The irredentists believe in the reclamation of the mythical 14th century Islamic Sultanate of Pattani. These fits in with the vast and growing literature on other local issues that have gained national prominence the least of which not being the case of the Ramkhamhaeng stele and other works referred to by Rigg and other critics of the constructivist "rural idyll" [4].

The following section reveals the position of the Thai state and how important it remains for any sovereign nation not to cede territory or risk the political balkanization of its geopolitical boundaries to local Thai-Muslim villagers.

Political Assimilation

Since the time of Rama I, Thailand has maintained a steadfastly assimilationist ethnic strategy that has seen the rapid increase in the number of Buddhists to the current 95% of the population. Additionally,

the Chakri Dynasty has never backed down from emphasizing the importance for Siamese, and after 1939, Thai people of all social and economic classes and from all religious beliefs to speak Standard Thai and to practice Thai village customs. Some scholars like Streckfuss have based their arguments on the "Thai race nationalist model" [5] which stop short of underscoring the important political roots of Thai, Siamese and Tai ethno-nationalism that date back centuries. Thailand's assimilationism came to a head in the late 1900s when the King ruled that the provinces south of the Isthmus of Kra had to better embrace the importance of Thai-ness a word that is today known as khwampentai and introduced various policies that would engender both Bangkok-centrism and Thai nationalism. It is not known if the many foreign advisors in the royal court had secretly whispered in the monarch's ears to affect such nationalist policies but it would fit in with the sweeping desire for nationalism across Southeast Asia and against the colonial farang occupants. This was reinvigorated after the 1941 Thai-French War and then later after the Americans bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Thai assimilationism is built on three main pillars: Respect for the King, Standard Thai language and Buddhist education. These three prongs or pillars have remained important since the time of Rama I.

Respect for the King

The idea of "respect for the king" was important in the sense that it was forced. Up till the time of Chulalongkorn the Great, Thai people who were sufficiently wealthy could keep slaves. Many of the slaves came from the lands that Thailand occupied or annexed. Also, ordinary people and royals had to prostrate themselves before the king. The idea of respect for the monarch became more crucial after the 1932 coup when the monarch devolved power to Parliament and made vulnerable before the law, without protection. The loss of absolute power meant that the sovereign would remain unprotected and it was only the introduction of lese majeste that afforded some degree of protection for the king and the royal family against those who wished to diminish the former's status. The anti-monarchical movement reached fever pitch when Rama VII began ageing as a wave of anti-royal protests swept across Asia and parts of the Middle East. By the time that Rama IX ascended the throne there was nothing left of the monarchy except for the trappings and superficial ceremonies that were being kept alive by the military brass. Hence in the case of Thailand, we can see that the work of Rama IX had a profound and lasting effect on restoring the prestige and power of the monarchy that was on the brink of disaster. Rama IX transformed "Respect for the King" into "Love for the King" almost single-handedly by the 1980s.

Assimilation Through Language

Standard Thai language was adopted as a reinforcing, nationalistic linguistic agent that would unify the Siamese/Thai people under a single linguistic umbrella. Some historians attribute this to the Chakri Dynasty [6]. However the language policies of Thailand in its nationalist course reveal a steady course that has been backed by military expansionism within what David Brown refers to as Internal Colonialism [7]. The absence of a unifying language such as Standard Thai would have significantly hampered the development of Thailand, as we know it today. It is widely believed that Standard Thai is spoken in the same manner for centuries. The sound system of the Thai alphabet has not changed at least since Rama IV. Like spoken Tagalog in the Philippines, most Thai citizens do not speak Thai language habitually. In fact, most Thai speak their own local dialect with Standard Thai mixed in. there is also a separate body, an entire vocabulary of words that are designed for use in the royal court.

While most Thai people do not habitually use Standard Thai, most Thai people or an overwhelming majority or 95% are Buddhists. Thai people became Buddhists because it was handed down from the earlier Lana period, the Sukhothai era as well as subsequent periods in the evolution of the Thai state. Hence Buddhist religious practices are a distillation of centuries of traditional activities that have long embedded the Siamese and Thai psyche. Indeed, Thai political culture and Thai military culture are both deeply affected by Buddhist beliefs. It is both impractical and illogical for the Bangkok-centric state in late modernity to give up Buddhist beliefs since it is part and parcel of being Thai, of khwampentai. The natural progression from the love for the Thai Buddhist King, Thai Buddhism, and Thai unity is Buddhist education. This system has been in place for decades and remains critical to the Thai state's unity.

Assimilation through education

One clear example of Buddhist historical education is the widespread but sometimes challenged belief in the inscription on what is known as the Ramkhamhaeng stele at the Bangkok National Museum that dates back to 1833 when it was discovered in a Buddhist temple by King Mongkut (Rama IV). A foreign scholar who challenged the validity of the Ramkhamhaeng stele was deported under the lèse majesté law. No scholar has since raised the issue. Duncan McCargo believes that Thai Buddhism and Thai Buddhist teachings offer, "support for the development of progressive and democratic ideals" [7]. However, I think that it is in fact the other way round as we shall see later. The fact remains that Buddhist education has evolved into a powerful monument for political, social and economic change through the education system, one that is infused with metaphorical reproductions of Buddhist artifacts, bass reliefs, and archeological tropes that celebrate the lives and times of the Chakri kings and generals.

Defining village affairs

Village affairs are defined as any political impact on village life in terms of the village's economic, cultural, social, or political dimensions. More often than not, local affairs are a mixture of these variegated dimensions. In political science, "local affairs" refers to the administrative functions of local bureaus and agencies that deal with policy delivery within democratic-authoritarian states in Southeast Asia [8].

Village affairs in southern Thailand

Thailand has 77 provinces including the Bangkok Metropolitan Area to administer over sixty million people. Each province has a capital city and several districts (khet) that coincide with electoral constituencies which are then divided into tambon and muban or village level. Some scholars refer to provinces as Changwat, districts as Amphoe and sub-districts as Tambon. If you read the Thai names of these administrative divisions, you would note that some use the word district and, or subdivision, in the actual name itself while others do not. The districts in Southern Thailand vary in terms of size and population density. This depends on several factors. The factors include cultural history and land settlement patterns as well as levels of economic development. It should be noted here that the Thai elections show consistently high voter turn out in the Southern Changwat. But more importantly, most valid votes are cast for the Democrat Party rather than the other parties.

The Singapore model

Singapore is made up of over 84 electoral constituencies that are

broken down into neighborhoods to administer over 5 million people. Some Constituencies have multiple Members of Parliament while others have one. This situation remains dynamic because the ruling PAP government often returns with at least a two-thirds majority in the General Election. This makes it legitimate for the incumbent PAP government to gerrymander the Constituencies regardless of whether they are in Opposition Party hands. This is why one issue that appears to be a local affair in Singapore is the issue of "why are residents living away from the East Coast part of an East Coast Constituency?" Gerrymandering is legitimate but considered "unfair" at the street level. This is because gerrymandering allows for the incumbent government to redraw electoral boundaries so that constituencies with stronger support can be partially merged with those that have weaker support.

The Singapore Model is far more complex than meets the eye. It involves organizing local ethnic communities into five separate groups. These include the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian [9] communities. Cosmopolitan Singapore has indeed many other ethnic communities but only these ethnic communities have made significant contributions to the state and the national community. These include economic and social contributions made by Chinese, Indians, Malay and Eurasians since the time of colonial era. This includes various aspects of modern life from the cradle to the grave [10].

Ethnic Management

The management of ethnicity in highly plural societies continues to be a major social problem worldwide. One country that has achieved an excellent record of interethnic relations is Singapore. This paper deals with the ethnic situation in Singapore, modes of official and unofficial racial classification, questions of the situational selection of ethnic identity, and the relevance of the Singapore model for other multi-ethnic societies. In particular the paper develops a model for the exploration of ethnic identity using the six dimensions of family structure, majority/minority statuses, political economy, modernization, alternative modes of social stratification and national ideology. This moves towards an explanation of the Singapore case as well as also to the generation of a more generally applicable set of analytical categories for exploring contemporary ethnicity [11]. The Singapore model involves dollar for dollar support from the state for officially sanctioned self-help ethnic communities. These communities then invest the money or use it for other social purposes including education, festivals and outreach programs. The state also sanctions these official self-help community groups as Institutions of Public Character (IPC). This means that the groups are exempt from corporate and business taxes. The Singapore model also has non-ethnic based administrative divisions known as Community Development Divisions (CDD) and their sub-divisions to general greater resource sharing. There are also Town Councils that care for a given Constituency. Therefore resources are shared and divided across different levels and derived from different government ministries and channels. Some of these channels involve the use of private and semi-private funding as seen in such local affairs as care giving for the aged.

Adopting the Singapore Model in Thailand

Is it possible to even consider adapting the Singapore model as a solution to the problematique in the restive Thai South? It is important to distinguish between complete adoptions of a foreign model that is totally inappropriate for the wholesale adoption throughout the country. Rather, I refer to the importance of localized adoption of parts of the Singapore model. One such aspect that has been severally neglected with severe consequences is the value of what Kontogeorgopoulos, Watthanakhomprathip and others refer to as soft ecotourism [12]. The Singapore model carries with it microsites of successful ecotourism at the Sungei Buloh Wetlands and Chek Jawa marine microcosm on Pulau Ubin. While Kontogeorgopoulos refers to a case in Phuket, we must recall that the Thai south is replete with an almost infinite number of possibilities for peaceful local action through promotion of eco-friendly tourism as opposed to the negative attractions associated with hard tourism such "women, wine and song" and the internal trafficking of young children and women including those from the Thai northeast as well as from Rhakine province in Myanmar through Thailand [13].

It is important to note that local affairs in the southern provinces cannot ignore the important role of the military and police units. This is because the military is especially a significantly powerful force in Thai politics unlike what has happened in other Southeast Asian states. Apart from Myanmar where the military continues to reign supreme, other former military regimes in Southeast Asia have changed significantly. Unlike the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam where the military has taken a backseat since 1997, about a decade after the end of the Cold War, the Thai military remains ever ready to defend its vested interests and in protecting the name of the King.

Conclusion

The Singapore model can only be adapted to the Southern Thai changwat under the following conditions: (1) the end of systemic (system-wide) corruption; (2) non-corrupt local administrators; (3) higher pay for local administrators; and, (4) non-involvement of the military or the police in civil services and policy delivery systems with the exception of criminal matters in local areas. Unless these conditions exist, it is unlikely that the Singapore model would work in all the various changwat, amphoe and tambon of the South. Thailand is also administratively complex as a result of different approaches to local affairs. Some parts of the machinery work while other parts do not. For example, Thai Buddhist education has become the tool for the economic and political elite to circumvent purely Buddhist teachings by way of an envelopment vehicle that allows for the creation of a national education system that has become the top-down conveyor of nationalist ideals couched as sacred, mysterious, unfathomable and hence unchallengeable by all. The April 2010 Red Shirt protests was an attempt at civil disobedience that had threatened the very core of Thai-Buddhist statehood and by logical extension the vested interests of those whose claim to power dependent on the presence and maintenance of the existing power structure [14]. Then there are other problems that involve a cat and mouse game with the local authorities. The locals are said to protect the perpetrators of political violence and civil disobedience but are for the most part unaware of who actually commits these crimes. While the locals are often willing to peacefully partake of local affairs in economics and politics, they are at the same time always on edge and very cautious as bombs may explode in a market place or bus station at any time. The local belief in Islam and traditional Malay cultural practices has become a millstone around the neck of the state. Political scientists would describe the problems in the South as either (1) ethno-religious separatism; (2) insurgency or (3) irredentism. The irredentists believe in the reclamation of the mythical 14th century Islamic Sultanate of Pattani [15]. Thailand has also to consider other factors when dealing with local affairs such as the importance not to cede territory or risk the political balkanization of its geopolitical boundaries to ancient and modern adversaries.

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