

อิทธิพลของวัฒนธรรมการเมืองไทย
ต่อธรรมาภิบาลบนวิถีประชาธิปไตย

The influence of Thai Political Culture on Democratic
Governance

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ประกอบด้วยสามส่วนย่อย คือ ประวัติศาสตร์ของการเมืองไทย วัฒนธรรมการเมืองไทย และอิทธิพลของวัฒนธรรมการเมืองไทยที่มีต่อธรรมาภิบาล บนวิถีประชาธิปไตย ผู้เขียนได้ยกรณีกฎหมายของชุมชนชาวไทยในนครลอสแอนเจลิส และการมีส่วนร่วมของประชาชนในสถานการณ์การเมืองในปัจจุบัน ทั้งนี้ ได้พรรณนา ประวัติศาสตร์ของการเมืองไทยในแง่มุมของระบอบการปกครองแบบประชาธิปไตย อันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงเป็นพระประมุข (constitutional monarchy) อมาตยาธิปไตย (bureaucratic polity) จากนั้นได้แยกแยะตัวละครที่มีบทบาททางการเมืองออกเป็นกลุ่ม ๆ และอธิบายบทบาทของแต่ละกลุ่ม คือ รัฐบาล พลเมือง กองทัพ และภาคเอกชน จากนั้นผู้เขียนได้อธิบายวัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองไทยในแง่มุมของลัทธิปัจเจกชนนิยม ระบบอุปถัมภ์ และการขาดหายไปของกลุ่มถาวรในสังคมไทย

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Abstract

This article consists of three parts: Thai political history, Thai political culture, and how the Thai political culture might influence the development of democratic governance. For the discussion of the influence of Thai political history and culture on democratic governance, the article provides the example of the Thai community in Los Angeles and the people's participation there in the current political situation in Thailand. Thai political history is described in terms of the constitutional monarchy, bureaucratic polity, and political actors; i.e., the government, the citizens, the military, and the private sector. Then, the Thai political culture is described in terms of individualism, superior-subordinate relationships, and the absence of permanent groups.

Thai Political History

A Constitutional Monarchy

A unified Thai kingdom was established in the mid-14th century and was known as Siam until 1939 (The World Factbook, 2002). Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country never to have been colonized by a European power. A bloodless revolution in June 24, 1932 turned the absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy. However, Mulder (2000) has found that in Thai textbooks where important national days are classified into three clusters, religious, monarchical, and popular-traditional, Constitution Day is considered as a royal occasion.

“In the discussion of the Seventh Reign, the King is said to have anticipated the demands for popular participation in government. In principle, he was in favour of instituting democracy, but he was held back by the grandees of the realm who held that the population at large was not ripe for it. So, basically, he was a modern monarch and a democrat, willing to allow the people to participate in government. His good intentions were pre-empted by the coup d’etat of the People’s Council of 24 June 1932.”
(Mulder, 2000: 114)

The idea of a benevolent king was created under ancient law. Under Thammasat, the ancient Hindu-Buddhist code of law, the king was bound to uphold the following: 1) the four principles of justice: to assess the right and wrong of all services or disservice rendered to him, to uphold the righteous and the truthful, to acquire riches only through just means, and to maintain the prosperity of the state only through just means; 2) to abide by the ten kingly virtues: alms-giving, morality, liberality, straightforwardness, gentleness, self-restriction, non-anger, nonviolence, forbearance, and rectitude; 3) to abide by the five moral precepts: not to kill, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to tell an untruth, and not to take intoxicating drinks. Tradition sanctioned his overthrow if the king did not rule justly (Henderson, 1971).

Although the absolute monarchy has ended, the King continues to be one of the three most important institutions of Thailand. The other two institutions, the nation and religion, are also closely linked to the King. As Mulder (2000) observes, in Thailand, the nation is considered as a dependent creation of kingship and religion has always been under royal patronage.

“The history that the school-books project is royal history: without ‘King’, there is no Thailand, and there would be no ‘Nation.’ In this view there is no place for ordinary people, and chronological history stops short in 2475/1932, or in 1934 at the latest, when the seventh king stepped down from the throne.” (Mulder, 2000: 110) (Note: 2475 is 2475 B.E. or Buddhist Era, dating from the death of the Buddha, 543 years before Christ.)

Thai political system has been unstable since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. Between 1958 and 1973, the country was plunged into a military dictatorial system, with the bureaucrats playing a decisive role (Dhiravegin, 1990). Until 2005 there had been nine successful seizures of power (excluding that of 1932), nine abortive coup d’etats, sixteen constitutions, thirty revisions to the constitution, and eighty-seven general elections. The failure of the military to hold on to power from 1991 to 1992 suggested that such military intervention was increasingly outmoded (Dixon, 1999). Thai people thought that after “Black May”, the 17-20 May, 1992, a popular protest in Bangkok against the government of General Suchinda Kraprayoon, there would be no more coup d’etats. However, there was another military coup on 19 September, 2006.

Bureaucratic Polity

From the beginning of the establishment of the constitutional monarchy, bureaucratic agents, not citizens, played the most important role in Thai politics. In 1971, Henderson argued that the democratically political concepts were not firmly institutionalized and that Thais understood just a little about the concept of equality or popular sovereignty. According to Hewison (1997), there was a

significant consensus in the study of Thailand's political system until the early 1980s that the system could be considered a "bureaucratic polity" following the bureaucratic polity model used by Riggs and his followers. He added that this model fundamentally derives from Western theories of society and politics, specifically modernization theory and the major work on post-war Thai politics by David Wilson (1962).

The importance of bureaucratic power has many explanations. For example, Wilson (1979), who saw the pattern of political change in Thailand as change from above or administered change, offered an explanation that the idea of egalitarian representative government lying behind the constitution and justifying the rule of bureaucrats was at odds with the political psychology of Thailand. Henderson (1971) explained the Thai indifference to politics as the result of the absence of critical socioeconomic tensions that can be exploited and that Thai society is relatively free of social or political barriers that might lead to change through resistance of alienated groups.

Somvichian (1979) provided another explanation why bureaucratic power has had an important influence on the Thai socialization process that it is partly because bureaucratic power has existed from the beginning of the national Kingdom, especially during the absolute monarchy. He insisted that the development of the political and bureaucratic system was an attempt to extend the bureaucratic power as efficiently as possible to cover everybody; therefore, decentralization or delegation of power remains mostly lip-service. Moreover, he pointed out that Thailand is a status society, meaning that people are classified by position, wealth, education, and age or combinations of these factors. This classification by status, based on power more than anything else, impedes the development of a political system characterized by equality and participation.

Finally, Mulder (2000) found that official Thai political culture is preoccupied with teaching morality, and this is reflected in the fifty to seventy-five percent of primary school time devoted to the teaching of how to be a good and tractable subject.

Political Actors

The Role of Government

Government is an important actor that can support or hinder political development. Lisk (1985) saw the task of government as that of building institutions that must meet the expressed needs of their constituents and, if successful, are capable of playing an important role in promoting participation; thus, these institutions act as a bridge between the people and the state (Spencer-Cooke, 1990). Unfortunately, Henderson (1971) found that Thailand has selectively adopted Western political and legal institutions and practices and that the Thai political system is oriented primarily toward stability and preservation of traditional values. The result is that the Thai government continues to regard its mission as a paternal one of leading the people, and government is expected to function without the people's assistance, participation, or involvement.

Spencer-Cooke (1990) concluded, based on Akin's research (1978), that there was little to indicate the Thai government's efforts to initiate any form of participation, much less self-initiated or authentic participation in which participants have greater responsibility in assessing their own needs and in finding their own solutions through the mobilization of local resources. The people are not traditionally considered to be responsible for the maintenance of those local problem-solving institutions, for initiating programs or attesting their rights to form and maintain such organizations autonomously, or taking control

over resources and institutions over which they previously had no control. He pointed out that many governmental programs are initiated from above and as such may only be seen as being able to encourage pseudo participation.

Insor (1963) observed that Thai people have had an intense desire to avoid anything to do with government and have believed that government was an evil, that oppression and misrule were natural, that it was futile to stand up against the government even on legitimate grounds, that the government was not the concern of the people, that the government will take care of matters, that security in office depended upon the pleasure of the superior and therefore one's duty was to please one's superior. More recently, Dixon (1999) explained popular participation from the Thai government's point of view as follows.

“Political activity outside the Parliamentary arena has generally been regarded as something that should take place within carefully prescribed and centrally controlled organizations such as village and tambon councils. Indeed, for the most of the post-1932 period popular participation in the political process has been regarded with grave suspicious by successive administrations. Trade unions, wider political activity and the media have been heavily controlled; indeed the activities of organized labour have been illegal for most of the modern period, and only in the brief, relatively more ‘liberal’ interludes (1932-4, 1944-7, 1955-7 and 1972-6), has there been substantial activity (Brown and Frenkel, 1993).” (Dixon, 1999: 259) (Note: Tambon is larger than village but smaller than district.)

The Thai government also experiences problems with corruption, as do many developing countries. The old rationale of a public administration that allows bureaucrats to see commission fees as part of normal business practice is stronger in the consciousness of the Thai people on the corruption issue than the new concept of public office, which means that bureaucrats are public persons working in public organizations for the purpose of providing public services (Phongpaichai and Piriyaangsan, 1996). The Thai vernacular expresses the idea of corruption by the European word because nobody had apparently conceived of the practice before (Mulder, 2000). Many Thais still see corruption simply in terms of *kan chor rat bang lung*, the nearest English equivalent meaning “cheating from the people and cheating from the royal coffer.” They see bribes given to officials as being *sin nam jai* or gifts of good will, which are acceptable or tolerable if done in the context of *khvam mi nam jai* or generosity, which is upheld as a good thing under the social value system (Phongpaichai and Piriyaangsan, 1996).

“Bureaucrats see commission fees as ‘part of normal business practices.’ In effect, they interpret their own role as salesmen rather than as public servants... Politicians and bureaucrats can still rely on the fact that the majority have a poorly developed conception of ‘public office,’ a resigned acceptance of many forms of abuse of power, and an ingrained deference towards political and administrative position.”
(Phongpaichai and Piriyaangsan, 1996: 164)

The Role of Citizens

The main argument here is that the concept of moral equality, which is fundamental to democracy and human rights (Mulder, 2000), and political representation and accountability (Henderson, 1971) do not connect well with the Thai social imagination or traditional Thai culture. Consequently, popular participation is limited and political development has been slow, at least until the 2005 political movement occurred.

In 2000, Mulder still observed that legality exists on paper, but equality before the law has been very weakly developed and the concept of human rights is only vaguely understood. For the time being, activists that push for democracy, administrative decentralization, social justice, and civic rights are marginal to the system and not represented in the centers of political power. Public opinion still carries little political weight. He explained that Thai cardinal values (e.g., respect for seniority, gratefulness for benefits, and recognition of obligation) contrast starkly with doctrines holding that all men are born equal, have rights vested in their being human, and should be judged according to the same standards. Moral equality and citizens' responsibility for the public interest are extremely difficult concepts to imagine on the basis of Thai experience.

In his 1950 work, Embree introduced the concept of the loose-structure of Thai society, where the importance of observing reciprocal rights and duties was minimized, and the Thai social system was relatively lacking in social rules. His concept is supported by other studies, such as those of Sharp et al. (1953), Kaufman (1960), and Phillips (1965) (Spencer-Cooke, 1990). Thai society provides few insuperable institutional barriers to social mobility through either government employment or entrepreneurial activity, and no implicit negative sanctions affix to individual initiative or economic self-betterment (Piker, 1979).

Henderson (1971) found that Thai people have not been forced by external circumstances to question the rationale of their traditional institutions and values or to seek more effective alternatives. Therefore, the indigenous authority and deference structures have been undisturbed by any crisis of cultural conflict or incompatibility. The centuries-old pattern of allegiance to monarchy and of adherence to Buddhism has continued to provide the people with a stable base of social cohesion. His conclusion derived from the fact that Thais have not been subjected to the bitterness, humiliation, or sociopolitical dislocations of colonial rule because the country has continued its independence since the thirteenth century. However, it is interesting to see that this is still true after Thailand's political crisis of 2005 to 2006 and also the 2008 political crisis.

Somvichian (1979) illustrated the ideal type of Thai leadership as a person who possesses authority, power, and status (for example, a high-ranking bureaucrat either in the military or civil bureaucracy), who is able to project the Buddhist quality of kindness and generosity, and who gives value to independence and freedom. In short, Thais tend to admire most a leader that is tough in dealing with certain public problems, yet soft in giving them enough freedom to pursue their daily way of life. Somvichian characterized Thais value as a pendulum swinging from the one extremity (freedom at the family level) to the other extremity (authoritarianism at the social and political level). The result is that if the Thais are left alone they are individualistic, but if they are confronted by or are under superior power, they will be rather submissive.

The prevailing notion among Thais is that people should have as little to do with government as possible (Insor, 1963; Young, 1979). Young (1979) found that even though Thai villagers know precisely what they would like the government to do, only a tiny minority will make a political effort to translate their dreams into reality. Wilson (1962) observed that it is generally agreed that

most people in Thailand are not involved in politics, which is regarded as properly the affair of politicians, or, of the ruling class. This is still very much true today. The ideas that politics is dirty and that getting involved in politics will contaminate oneself prevail. Recently, Thongthai (1990) found that the Thai villagers' attitude towards government officials is that they did not associate closely with the officials; instead villagers kept the problems to themselves and tried to solve their problems by themselves.

Ordinary people are not aware of their rights to receive public service under the concept of modern administration and thus, do not assert themselves to protect their rights (Phongpaichit and Piriyarangsan, 1996). A public discourse undeniably exists but public opinion carries little political weight (Mulder, 1997). In seeking benefits from the government, rather than approaching the government through institutional channels, the ordinary Thai is more likely to approach an influential individual with whom he can establish a personal relationship of obligation (Henderson, 1971).

This political culture may be slowly changing as a new politically conscious middle class oriented toward more participation gradually emerges. The villagers that have taken part in their community improvement projects and have tasted the fruits of their participation have developed pride and confidence in themselves and have tended to increase their participation in development activities (Roongrengsuke, 1990). Moreover, if villagers would like to settle down permanently in the community, they will be more enthusiastic about expressing their ideas and will want to take some responsibility for development programs (Thongthai, 1990). There are certain basic ingredients of democracy and human rights being promoted through the expansion of modern mass society (Mulder, 2000) and there have been popular uprisings against legally elected governments in numerous states from the late 1990s (Shutt,

2001). The 1997 Constitution was remarkably more ideology-oriented and may hint at a gradual maturing of Thai civil society; as a result, many, mainly urban, educated people now pin their hopes on the serious practice of democracy (Mulder, 2000).

The Role of the Military

The Thai military has played an important role in Thai politics both directly and indirectly. Thailand was under a military dictatorial system for a long period of time, between 1958 and 1973 (Dixon, 1999). The latest coup d'état by the military occurred in 2006.

The military leaders' point of view is useful for understanding Thai politics. According to Samudavanija (1990), the Thai military views politics as a limited activity which centers on the parliament and not outside. They do not accept pressure group politics as legitimate action; hence, political participations in the form of mass instigation or peaceful demonstrations are not tolerated and are considered as "irresponsible forces which cannot be accepted by us" (Chai-Anan; 1990: 186). Chai-Anan explained that this attitude is understandable because during the period of open politics (1973-1976) the military was the main target of attack by those forces. He pointed out that the military leaders' different view on democracy is a source of conflict because when democracy is considered as a means to promote national stability and security by the military, it is natural that military will have to maintain its dominant role in the political area and thus, voluntary associations and pressure groups will find it very difficult to move independently in the political process but will be under surveillance (Chai-Anan, 1990). Phongpaichit and Baker (1995) provided the military view on Thai politics.

“As the [Thai] military gradually recovered from the defeats of mid-1992, military ideologists opposed the growth of NGOs and attempted to brand certain NGOs, if not the movement as a whole, as a resurgence of ‘communism.’ They pointed out that many ex-activists and ‘jungle graduates’ had joined the NGOs. They drew attention to the NGO’s overseas funding. They suggested that NGOs served as a conduit for foreign elements to influence Thai politics with cash and ideas.” (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1995: 391)

The coup has been less popular since “Black May” in 1992. Although the 2006 coup seemed to have a warm public response, or at least we can say that the coup did not receive a strong resistance from Thai people in general, there has surely been a political movement against the military government and the military coup. Public opinion has been diverse even among academics and activists. The role of the military in current and future Thai politics is not likely to be an easy one to predict.

The Role of the Private Sector

a. The Role of Business

The private sector is quite a new actor in the political system. Historically, Thai business is small and has played a role only in the economic system. Until the early 1980s business interests had acquired remarkably little direct political power; however, between 1980 and 1991 there was considerable development of civic society in Thailand (Dixon, 1999). Practical politics is now mostly in the hands of those in the business suit, although the military still plays its part (Mulder, 1997).

The reasons why businesspeople entered the Thai political world quite late are not only because of the Thai bureaucratic polity but also because of Thai political socialization. Although many Thai businesspeople have graduate educations, they remain mostly apolitical. Somvichian (1979) found that even the higher educational institutions, which should be the center of the political socialization process, are not functioning as such in Thailand. He provided an example of two leading Thai universities.

“It has been shown that most Chulalongkorn degree earners are in favor of the university’s motto “seniority, tradition, order, spirit, and unity,” which favors the privilege of senior classes compatible with traditional polity. These values exist not only in this university but in most higher educational institutions, both old and new. Even in Thammasat University where there are slogans extolling democracy (Equality, Freedom, and Fraternity), the instructors exercise power over the students in various non-academic activities... It can be said that in spite of campus activism by some groups of students, most Thai academia and undergraduates remain apolitical and conservative.” (Somvichian, 1979: 159)

However, the Thai businesspeople’s apolitical role seemed to change after the diminishing role of the military in 1992. At first, there were just a few highly successful businesspeople actively and directly playing roles in the Thai political system. Deposed former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is one of them. Since the Thai economic crisis in 1997, the Thai Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Thai Industries, the Thai Bankers’ Association, including

many businesspeople comment more openly and more frequently on Thai government economic policies. This is probably because they are worried about their businesses. Their concerns continue because the numerous political crises have had strong negative effects on the Thai economy. Moreover, in 2008-2009 the world entered into a recession.

b. The Role of Nongovernmental Organizations

In Thailand nonprofit organizations are known as nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, and they are the newest actors in the Thai political system. Some scholars recommend that NGOs should build elements of popular participation into the projects they sponsor to make sure that these projects do not unduly favor elite groups within the local society and that NGOs should also promote the local management of programs (Spencer-Cooke, 1990).

The notion of popular participation has been adopted by NGOs in Thailand and increasingly in Thai government development policy and planning documents. Policies of decentralization and popular participation were introduced in the Fifth

National Development Plan (1981-1986). However, there is little evidence that such policies have been successfully implemented in rural Thailand, due in part to the resistance of political elites and state bureaucracies (Missingham, 1997). This is not surprising since Phongpaichit and Piriya-rangsan (1996) found that overall the public servant concept has been weak in Thai society, where those who appreciate the concept of the public servant are significantly more common among NGO workers, academics, media people, and other professionals; those that do not appreciate this concept tend to be concentrated among the military, police, civil servants, and the lower echelons of society.

Almost twenty years after Henderson's observation, Roongrengsuke (1990) found that the temple helped to solve the problems of the rural poor and improve their income and lifestyles by functioning as an informal community development center. The temple has proven to its members and to the public that it has reached a certain level of institutional efficacy in this way. He found that the efficacy of the temples and the levels of the villagers' participation were correlated with the output of the communities in his study. However, the Buddhist temple in Thai society is normally apolitical.

2. Thai Political Culture

Individualism, superior-subordinate or patron-client relationships, and absence of permanent groups are the main characteristics of Thai political culture. This political culture is likely to translate into participation attitude and behavior in Thailand in that Thais participate more in private activities than in governmental activities, and in activities that require short-term rather than long-term commitment.

Individualism

In his international study of values, Hofstede (1980) discovered two dimensions of cultural variation: individualism and collectivism. He found the United States, Canada, and Western European countries to be high on the individualistic dimension, while Asian, Latin American, and African nations to be high on the collectivistic dimension. Hofstede (1991) has defined individualism and collectivism as follows:

“Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.” (Hofstede, 1991: 51)

Kim’s work in 1994 (quoted from Kim, 1997) characterized individualism according to three critical features: 1) emphasis on distinct and autonomous individuals, 2) separation from ascribed relationships such as family, community, and religion, and 3) emphasis on abstract principles, rules, and norms that guide the individual’s thoughts, feelings, and actions. On the other hand, collectivism emphasizes the group, the maintenance of ascribed, and personal relationships (Kim, 1997).

The prevailing view is that societies of Asia, South America, and Southern Europe are collectivistic in orientation (Leung & Fan, 1997). However, all literature, both Thai and Western, agree that Thai is individualistic in orientation, with some diversion from Western individualism.

John Embree has declared that Thai society is divergent from all other Asian countries and designed it as a “loosely-structured social system.” This theory was widely adopted by economists in their analysis of development options (Spencer-Cooke, 1990). A Thai folk-saying, “One who can do as one likes is a genuine Thai” (Mole, 1973; Somvichian, 1979), expressing the same thought and reflecting little consideration of social rules (even the law), is an obvious and outstanding Thai trait. The following of one’s own will or the love of freedom among the Thais, according to some Thai sociologists, is individualism

(Somvichian, 1979). Western scholars also generally characterized Thai society in terms of a lack of rigid role conformity and the high value placed on individualism (Neher, 1979). Mole (1973) has provided explanation of Thais' characteristic as follows.

“Herbert Phillip in his excellent study, Thai Peasant Psychology, stressing the Thai quality of individuality notes that the Thai society system is based upon the theme “that relations between people should be friendly, genial and correct, but need little personal commitment or involvement.” It is this readiness to phrase all face-to-face encounters in social rituals with little or no commitment that lies at the base of Embree’s terminology “loosely-structured social system.” Phillips declares emphatically, “Siamese are first and foremost, free and independent souls. Much of the time they fulfill each other’s expectations, but this is only because they want to, not because others expect it of them or because the situation demands it.” (Mole, 1973: 66)

In seeking to define Thai political culture, Somvichian (1979) investigated the learning process of Thai people. At the family level, the key elements of the Thai child’s environment are his parents, relatives, Buddhism, and the agrarian society.

Relationships within the Thai family have a rather loose characteristic. What the Thai considers gratitude or sense of obligation or responsibility for each other is not considered unavoidable nor to be followed strictly as a pattern for living, as in Confucianism, which has influenced the learning process of the Chinese and Japanese. Neher (1979) found that the profit motive is an important

determinant of behavior in Thailand: if Thais see no immediate return on their investment of time, labor, or money, they will not invest. Mole (1973) agreed that the Thai individual's role in society seemed different from that of other Asian countries, even when factors of Buddhism were considered.

Mole (1973) asserted that in spite of its prominent individualistic orientation, Thai society functions quite well since relationships with other people are characterized by a large measure of reciprocity. Patterns of cooperation are pragmatic, reliable, and workable because they meet the needs of all that are involved. Moreover, Somvichian (1979) has suggested that the Thais' strong sense of independent individualism will keep the dependence/authoritarian tendency in check and that Thais will remain a moderate people by and large. Extreme dictatorship of the right or of the left is not compatible with Thai political culture.

Others dispute that individualism is not a particularly important ingredient in the Thai character, nor is it highly valued by them, and very little value is attached to innovation or originality; thus Embree, Phillips, and others describing the Thais as "individualistic" was a mistake (Bunnag, 1979). More recently Hewison (1997) has asserted that describing Thais as individualistic and status-conscious, albeit within a loose social structure, is no longer an adequate description of politics in the 1990s. However, no one has suggested that Thai political culture is collectivistic.

Superior-Subordinate or Patron-Client Relationships

Another key element in the structure of Thai political society is superior-subordinate or patron-client relationships (Mulder, 2000; Neher, 1979). Since slavery was abolished by King Chulalongkorn in 1872-1873, the basic hierarchical cleavage in society has been between the royalty/nobility and the peasantry

(Keyes, 1987). The superior is expected to have the qualities of compassion, loving kindness, empathetic joy, and equanimity, and is expected to manifest these four qualities by protecting, aiding, complementing, and giving generously to subordinates or clients, while the subordinate is expected to act deferentially to the superior, who is his patron (Neher, 1979).

This pattern of relationships is strongly socialized. According to Mulder (2000), respect for hierarchy, obligation, and deferential manners is among the first things a child learns so that they know how to behave in the presence of superiors and to become sensitive to all forms of criticism. He explained further that the social world appears to a Thai child at first as an aggregate of benevolent superiors, such as the mother, who teaches a child to reciprocate through the show of obedience and conformity that will lead to reward and acceptance. The child also soon learns that many people are highly sensitive to the respect owed to them. Consequently, Thais practice non-involvement in the affairs of others, tolerance, and restraint of oneself emotionally, especially when one has no power or influence to avoid hurting others people's sensitive feeling. Noninvolvement and indifference practice leads to the satisfaction of solving problems independently.

The reciprocal demands of a patron-client relationship and the autonomy and individualism that Thais strive toward are in conflict; however, the conflict is not so severe partly because outside of hierarchical relationships, Thai can do very much what they wish to do (Neher, 1979). There never has been a rural landlord class and the majority of peasant cultivators own the land they cultivate, while the political elite have traditionally preferred urban to rural society, and have in consequence always resided in the capital (Bunnag, 1979). Moreover, while Thais expect their leaders to be benevolent, leaders generally conform to this expectation. Thus, Thais seem to accept authority with much less obvious

tension than do Americans (Mole, 1973). Mole (1973) has provided explanation as follows.

“Normally the wisdom or competence and efficiency of the authority figure is not too openly questioned. However if the authority figure does not honor the accepted reciprocal relationships, the oppressed individual may simply quietly cease to follow higher directions. This latter course will be done without rudeness, discourteousness or any public display of indignation.” (Mole, 1973: 70)

Mole (1973) also explained why there is no history in which the Thai peasant has revolted in class warfare in terms of the Thais' concept of power, that power is a by-product of virtue or Buddhist merit. Thais, with faith in cosmic retribution, are supposed to remain undisturbed even when misuse of power occurs. He found that the Thai peasant is largely concerned with his immediate world and tends to ignore or not question matters beyond his ability to influence or control.

It is clear that the Thai superior-subordinate pattern of relationship is not consistent with political development. Mulder (2000) provided an example by stating that democracy does not quite agree with the Thai image of the external world, where people are mutually unequal and have different roles and duties that they should faithfully execute because they are under obligation to the three institutions (nation-religion-king). The assumption is that if everybody behaves accordingly, society, nation, and the state cannot but be in the most desirable order. Protestors are viewed as people that do not know or accept their place and role. Their belief that they are equals in a moral sense with the

leaders and so can assert their causes is more than a threat to the order that has hierarchy as its backbone; therefore, protestors are considered immoral (Mulder, 2000).

Absence of Permanent Groups

A third distinctive feature of the Thai social system is that permanent groups that demand personal commitment appear to be virtually absent (Bunnag, 1979; Piker, 1979; Neher, 1979; Mulder, 2000). Very few corporate groups or permanent co-operative groupings of any kind means that at the level of individual behavior, actors move quite easily between roles, both within and between spheres of activity (Bunnag, 1979).

"In an article entitled 'Some Aspects of Rural Life in Thailand' Wijeyewardene states that 'Thai society is perhaps most satisfactorily characterized as pragmatic, with organization directed towards specific and limited ends' and concludes by saying that 'organizations arise to fulfill specific tasks, but there is no tradition of on-going associations which may be called upon to fulfill any task which might arise' (Wijeyewardene, 1967:83)." (Bunnag, 1979: 145)

There are many suggested reasons for this absence.

1. Mole (1973) stated that it is more likely that the rural Thai are emotionally tough, with sufficient self-reliance and emotional security, that the need of others is not imperative.

2. Bunnag (1979) suggested that since Thailand has escaped colonization, the development of strong political awareness, which might have

resulted in the formation of groups with political functions, may have been inhibited. Moreover, there is little pressure upon individuals to form permanent groups because there is no permanent need, arising from economic or political considerations, to do so.

3. Somvichian (1979) suggested that rich soil, abundant natural resources, and fair weather enable an individual to live alone without much dependence on others. These living conditions and a lack of rigid family system contribute to the Thai's love of independence, aversion to living under rules and regulations of the family and society, or establishment of associations, organizations, or federations. Since Thais do not permanently or voluntarily join groups, while the necessity to establish groups or organizations always exists, the strong leader sometimes uses authoritarianism, such as issuing laws or orders to do so. However, this type of forced grouping will only be temporary because groups dependent on personality are unstable. When the strong leader leaves the scene, the group is naturally dissolved because there is no binding relationship among its members to replace the authoritarian power of the leader.

4. Piker (1979) found that the villagers are wary of the intentions of others; thus, they approach interpersonal involvement with considerable caution and suspicion, and interpersonal relations are characterized by a relative absence of binding, mutual commitment. This pattern of expectation implies a low likelihood of stable relationships. Piker also referred to the widely noted Thai individualism.

5. More recently, Mulder (2000) has suggested that the hierarchical perception of others isolated people from each other, that led to a remarkable tolerance of deviation. Furthermore, the respect for the independence and individuality of others leads to a weak measure of social control. The prime

source of interpersonal integration appears to be the recognition of mutual obligations which creates personalized, dyadic relationships, while communal integration remains weakly developed. If strong leadership is not forthcoming, members of communities will generally only cooperate on the occasion of religious festivals or ceremonies.

Individualism, superior-subordinate or patron-client relationships, and absence of permanent groups are still the main characteristics of Thai political culture. However, political ideology has played a more important role in Thai politics recently and people are setting up their own groups according to their political ideologies. Thus, these groups have the potential to become permanent. There is more and more severe criticism of the patron-client relationship as well.

The 2005 Thai political movement, stated by The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), also called the Yellow Shirts, is likely to have an effect on Thai political culture. The PAD is a coalition of protesters against deposed Thaksin Shinawatra, the former Prime Minister of Thailand. It had played an important role in Thailand's political crisis of 2005 to 2006 and also in the 2008 political crisis. The National United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), also call the Red Shirts, is an important factor affecting Thai political culture as well. It is a political pressure group supporting Thaksin Shinawatra, as opposed to the PAD. Its movement started after the 2006 coup. There are many other people's movements that identify themselves apart from the PAD and UDD, but they are rather smaller groups. Now all there is to do about the final conclusion on the future of Thai political culture and the role of all actors is to wait and see.

3. The Influence of Thai Political Culture on Democratic Governance

Governance refers to complementary arrangements for formulating, using, monitoring, judging, and enforcing individual or societal interactions (V. Ostrom, 1991). It refers not only to the use of government authority in making and enforcing collective decisions but also to rules and processes that specify how collective choices are formulated, enforced, and changed. Thus, it includes both formal and informal mechanisms for social activities to be organized.

Governance involves: multi-agency partnerships, a blurring of responsibilities between public and non-public sectors, power dependence between organizations involved in collective action, the emergence of self-governing networks, and the development of new governmental tasks and tools (Stoker, 1998). As Gaudin (1998) has stated, the purpose of the term “governance” is to describe the new intersectoral and multi-level forms of coordination to be observed on a local, national and international scale. By promoting democratization and human rights, attention and power in society shift from the public to the private sector, and from state to civil society. Governance is strengthening civic cultures and thus improving the societal bases for democracy.

Thai Community in Los Angeles

The above review of Thai political history and culture suggests that traditional Thai values are not consistent with democratic values. Due to Thai political culture, Thais tend to participate more in non-political activities than in political activities, and in activities that require short-term rather than long-term commitment. My research on the Thai community in Los Angeles (Vinijaiyapak, 2004) provides some support for this notion. Although that community is in the United States and is exposed to Western values, traditional

Thai political culture persists there. The result is that neither the formal nor informal institutions that structure Thai behavior and their interaction in their community in Los Angeles provides strong support for governance.

The prevailing notion among Thais in Thailand is that people should have as little to do with government as possible (Insor, 1963; Young, 1979) and that getting involved in politics will contaminate one because politics is dirty (Wilson, 1962). This view also seems to prevail among the Thai immigrants in my study. Instead of associating closely with government officials, Thai immigrants in Los Angeles try to solve their problems by themselves, just as Thongthai (1990) found that Thai villagers in Thailand did. It is possibly worse for the Thai community in Los Angeles because many of its members are illegal immigrants who are too afraid of deportation to contact any authorities. There is also evidence that ordinary Thai immigrants are not aware of their rights to receive public services and therefore fail to protect their rights. This is not so different from what Phongpaichit and Piriyaangsan (1996) found in their study of corruption and democracy in Thailand. However, the second generation of Thai ethnic immigrants has already begun to play a role in the Thai community there. The emergence of the new politically conscious generation has the potential to develop a participant culture that will transform the Thai community in Los Angeles in the future.

According to Fay (1987), culture and traditions as informal rules affect individual behavior and thus affect the performance of formal institutions. The informal constraints that are culturally derived will not change easily and there will be an ongoing tension between altered formal rules and the persisting informal constraints, as many are inconsistent with each other. The cultural conflict in some nonprofit organizations confirms this notion. The attempt of a Thai nonprofit organization in Los Angeles that run by a Thai American, the

second generation, to change the Thai superior-subordinate pattern of relationship is not easily understandable for other Thais there and not likely to be followed by other Thai nonprofit organizations soon. The campaigns concerning human rights are also difficult for Thais generally to understand. There is little support from the Thai community at large or even from violated victims. This is not surprising, as Mole (1973) found that Thais, especially those with no power or influence, practice non-involvement in the affairs of others, tolerance, and emotional restraint.

Although Hewison (1997) asserted that describing Thais as individualistic and status-conscious within a loose social structure is no longer an adequate description of Thailand's politics in the 1990s, such characteristics nonetheless appear useful in understanding the Thai community in Los Angeles. Many respondents in my study use such concepts to explain Thais and the Thai community development experiences. The Thai political culture appears to lack one of the three characteristics of individualism identified by Kim (1994): the emphasis on abstract principles, rules, and norms that guide the individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions. There are obviously few principles and little value attached to innovation or originality. However, the other two factors in Kim's concept of individualism exist, which are the emphasis on distinct and autonomous individuals and the separation from ascribed relationships such as family, community, and religion. Therefore, Thai culture should be considered as individualistic in orientation but it should also be emphasized that the Thai form of individualism differs from the Western ideal.

Embree's concept of the loose-structure of Thai society showed that the Thai social system is relatively lacking in social rules. Somvichian (1979) explained that Thai values are a pendulum swinging from the one extremity of freedom at the family level to the other extremity of authoritarianism at the

social and political level. In other words, Thais are fully independent and individualistic without control, but rather submissive if confronted by or under superior power. The loose structure explains why most Thai immigrants are looking for a leader with authority, such as a consul, as the solution to their community unity problems. This notion is not consistent with the governance idea where ordinary people themselves should participate in their problem-solving process.

Another distinctive feature of the Thai social system is the absence of permanent groups that demand personal commitment (Bunnag, 1979; Piker, 1979; Neher, 1979; Mulder, 2000). The Thai community in Los Angeles also faces such an absence that it, in turn, severely impedes the self-governance establishment. Thais come together for specific community tasks but they do not stay long after or create organizations to fulfill any task which might arise. Nevertheless, as Moe (1973) has asserted, Thai society functions quite well because relationships characterized by a large measure of reciprocity and patterns of cooperation are pragmatic, reliable, and workable because they meet the needs of all that are involved. My study found that the Thai community in Los Angeles also functions and survives through pragmatic cooperation. Strong self-governance, meaning intersectoral and multi-level forms of coordination in which individuals, private organizations, nonprofit organizations, society, and the government are not separated (Gaudin, 1998), would require institutions and community members to coordinate closely and regularly. Intersectional and multi-level forms of coordination increase the four dimensions of community capacity identified by Chaskin (2001): sense of community, commitment, ability to solve problems, and access to resources. Thus, self-governance is an important way to solve collective action problems and to develop the community.

Unfortunately, the self-governance is not happening in the case of the Thai community in Los Angeles.

Political Engagement in Thailand's Current Situation

The Thai political situation has been in turmoil since at least 2005 with the *Tak bai* incident in the South. However, this article focuses on the “Sondhi phenomenon” starting in Bangkok in 2005. The television show, “Muangthai Rai Sapda” (Thailand Weekly) was withdrawn in September, 2005 by the MCOT, broadcaster of Channel 9 (Wikipedia, 2006). Thai media magnate, Mr. Sondhi Limthongkul, the owner of that television program and also of a local newspaper called “Phujatkarn,” had attacked former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Throughout late 2005 and early 2006, he arranged political seminars and demonstrations in various places, such as Thammasat University, Lumpini Park, and Sanam Luang. Later on, Mr. Limthongkul became one of the leaders of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). The PAD demonstration on February 4, 2006 at the Royal Plaza had between 40,000 to 50,000 (foreign media estimates) and 100,000 (local media estimates) protestors (Wikipedia, 2006). There were demonstrations on Rachadamnern Road and Silom Road in front of Siam Paragon Department Store and other places as well. Besides demonstrations, PAD followers donated money to support various activities, distributed information in various ways, and set up provincial alliance groups. The PAD formed a political party called the “New Politics Party” (NPP) in June, 2009 after gunmen ambushed Mr. Limthongkul's car at a petrol station in Bangkok; he survived.

There was the dissolution of Parliament in February, the nullification of the April 2, 2006 election in Thailand, then the coup in September 19, 2006. The National United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) started in 2006 by opposing the military government and the military coup and continued

its activities during the 2008-2009 political crisis. The UDD attacked PAD demonstrations from time to time in many places, such as the clash in Udon Thani in July, 2008. In 2009, the UDD caused the ASEAN summit in Pattaya, Chonburi province to be cancelled after the security forces failed to stop the protesters. Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva declared a state of emergency in the areas of Pattaya and Chonburi on April 11, 2009. After that, the protesters used cars, buses, and LPG tankers to seize many places in Bangkok. The Thai soldiers successfully took control of the situation in April 13, 2009. At present, the UDD still continues its legal activities.

Thai political history and culture have played an important role in the Thai people's behavior. Around August 2005, His Majesty the King's indefeasible right according to Article 7 of the 1997 Constitution were proposed by a considerable number of scholars, politicians, and ordinary people as a peaceful political solution. This meant asking His Majesty for a new Prime Minister. Anti-Thaksin Shinawatra groups insisted that His Majesty had exercised his royal power in this way in October, 1973 by appointing Sanya Dharmasakti as Prime Minister after Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn resigned following demonstrations demanding an end to the military dictatorship (The Nation, Apr 28, 2006). This article did not judge this proposal in any way. The point is that the monarch continues to be an important political factor in Thai politics, although the Thai absolute monarchy system has been a democracy with a constitutional monarchy since 1932.

The bureaucratic polity has encountered many changes recently. Bureaucratic agents were changed through the 1992 Administration Reform and the rising role of the private sector. These agents are no longer the most important actor in Thai politics; their power is now shared by many actors.

Let us turn to consider the Thai political actors. Dixon's (1999) notion of Thai politics still holds true in that Thais in general consider political activities outside the parliament area suspicious in their intention and should be controlled by authorities. Political engagement, allowed according to the Thai Constitution, could be obstructed. The Thai government may not want to support political engagement outside the parliament except such engagement meant to support the government. However, the degree of obstruction may differ depending on the situation, the governmental attitude toward citizen participation, the strength of the government, the strength of people movements, and so forth.

The notion that Thais in general do not want to engage in politics (Insor 1963; Young 1979) since politics is regarded as the affair of politicians or ruling class (Wilson 1962) may deserve reconsideration after a large number of Thais have participated in many protests since 2005. Phongpaichit and Piriyarangsan's study in 1996 indicating that Thai people are not aware of their rights, thus leading to the failure to protect them, may also need to be reaffirmed. However, political demonstration is still considered a public problem in the eyes of many Thai citizens. The normal accusation is that it causes traffic congestion and slows down business.

Although the military role in Thai politics has been limited, the military is not fully out of the picture just yet. Business people are divided. Some support the PAD, some support the UDD, and the rest just do not want to get involved. The certain thing is that Thai business always appreciates political stability.

NGOs actively engage in the current political situation and play an important role. The best example probably is that Ms. Rosana Tositrakul, head of the anti-graft network, succeeded in revoking the royal decree to privatize the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT). The NGOs' active role

is not surprising since NGOs have firmly adopted the notion of popular participation before. However, the absence of permanent groups in Thai society impedes the progress of NGOs' work.

It would be interesting to see whether the political experiences that Thais have gone through throughout these years can bring a gradual maturing of Thai civil society, especially when traditional Thai political culture does not provide strong support. Neher (1979) has noted that Thais are practical and tend to place emphasis on immediate benefits. This is the result of Thais' lack emphasis on abstract principles. Although Somvichian (1979) insisted that extreme dictatorship will not be accepted since it is against independent individualism, this is not a good enough foundation for civil society.

The superior-subordinate pattern of relationships that constitutes the climate of Thai political culture is tolerant of dictatorship. Thais seem to prefer strong leadership and sometimes confuse it with dictatorship. Democracy and dictatorship are abstract concepts far beyond the concerns of ordinary Thais who, according to Mulder (2000), see protestors as an immoral threat to the order and hierarchy of society. For example, Thaksin Shinawatra, the Prime Minister deposed in the 2006 coup, himself called protestors "the stupid mobsters" (The Nation, Feb 13, 2006).

After all, the current political situation yields another opportunity for Thai political history and culture to clearly manifest themselves through people's behavior and opinions. Unfortunately, the Thai political culture has impeded the good governance for which they yearn.

Conclusion

Political history and culture influence political engagement. A culture not promoting political engagement is an important impediment to good governance and a country's development. The main argument of this paper is that the firm establishment of good governance in Thailand depends on the change of its political culture. Repeatedly receiving positive engagement experiences and benefits from participation can eradicate the negative perception of politics. Participation itself promotes representation, strengthens democratic processes, and builds the civic values required for good governance. In order to overcome the weakness of Thais' democratic values, Thais need to consider seriously the redesign of their political culture.

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