

Decentralization and Its Effect on Provincial Political Power in Thailand

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Abstract

Thailand started decentralization in earnest in 1994. It has been over a decade that decentralization in Thailand has been implemented. This article examines the effects of decentralization on provincial power structures,¹⁾ presenting empirical evidence from field research in two case study provinces. The author argues that although decentralization over the last decade has brought about a reinvention of local self-government organizations, powerful MPs of the pre-decentralization era have regained and amassed even more power and have further entrenched themselves, mainly owing to their preeminent ability to win a large portion of vote.

Introduction

This article examines the effects of the decentralization process on the structure of provincial political power in Thailand through a series of field research-based case studies of direct elections for the Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) chairman in two provinces—Buri Ram and Pathum Thani—in 2003-2004. The Thai decentralization program began with the enactment of the Tambon Council and Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO) Act, 1994 [Achakorn 2004; 2005a]. Before decentralization, power and authority of local government organizations (LGOs) were very small, compared with MPs and central government officials stationed in a province. Decentralization has enriched LGOs in power, budget, and personnel. It is very interesting to study what kind of changes a series of decentralizing measures have engendered on power structure in provincial Thailand. The author will place more emphasis on effects on MPs than on government officials, as the author will analyze effects on the latter elsewhere.

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1) I define “political power structure” here as the relationships among actors of influence and power in a province. I refer specifically to national politicians (MPs and senators) and local politicians at the levels of PAO, TAO and municipality (the terms “influence” and “power” are used in the context of Tamada [1991: 445-466]).

1. PAO Chairman Elections

The third amendment of the PAO legislation, passed on November 4, 2003, produced two major changes in how PAO elections would be conducted in the 75 provinces.²⁾ First, PAO chairman³⁾ was now chosen by direct (popular) election. Second, the electoral districts for the PAO councilors were sub-divided into smaller constituencies with one representative per constituency. In addition, PAO elections in all provinces were scheduled to be held simultaneously. The first such round of simultaneous elections was held on March 14, 2004, but Buri Ram's poll was held earlier on December 14, 2003 due to the expiration of the previous council's term.

In the 2003-2004 elections, a number of features became quite conspicuous. Decentralization had expanded the mandate, duties, personnel and budget of the provinces, and provided local administrators with opportunities to be elected directly, and although 39.94 percent of the candidates were newcomers, not a single one of them was elected as a PAO chairman (see Table 1).

Powerful MPs and their relatives still accounted for 18.67 percent of the elected PAO chairmen, and entrenched local politicians controlled the remaining 81.33 percent of elective positions. Many

Table 1. Electoral Performance of PAO Chairman Candidates, by Candidate Type

Region	New candidates		Former MPs and relatives		Established local politicians*	
	run	elected	run	elected	run	elected
Central	51	0	13	2	52	24
Northeastern	55	0	13	5	35	14
North	18	0	8	4	40	12
South	9	0	6	3	33	11
Total	133	0	40	14	160	61
Percent of the candidates (from 333 persons)	39.94%	—	12.01%	—	48.05%	—
Percent elected (from 75 persons)	—	0%	—	18.67%	—	81.33%

* Fortyeight former PAO chairmen, eleven former PAO councilors and two former municipal mayors are included in the established local politicians' category.

Source: [King Prajadhipok's Institute 2004]

2) *Krungthep*, also known as Bangkok, does not have a PAO.

3) Before PAO act of 1997, a PAO chairman was an ex-officio position for a provincial governor. PAO councilors were directly elected by people. Then, before November 4, 2003, PAO chairman was selected among those PAO councilors. PAO councilors were directly elected by people. This can be called indirect election of PAO chairman. After November 4, 2003, both a PAO chairman and PAO councilors are directly elected by people. This direct election of PAO chairman leads to a strong executive system.

of the latter were former PAO chairmen who had been previously elected under the old system (i.e., indirect elections by PAO councilors). These candidates often received strong support from local MPs. If, as the saying goes, “the more things change, the more they remain the same,” then the following questions may be raised:

1. Why did the candidates connected with the old powerful groups of MPs win, and why did the newcomers fail?
2. How were the powerful groups of MPs and provincial politicians able to adapt themselves to the changes brought about by administrative and fiscal decentralization?

This paper explores the possible answers to these questions by examining the politics in two provinces, Pathum Thani and Buri Ram. These two provinces followed divergent paths after decentralization. In Pathum Thani, the once-powerful Hansawat group lost some of their power and influence in the province. Pathum Thani, therefore, is a case to show the possibility that a powerful MP can be defeated. In Buri Ram, however, the powerful Chidchob group managed to retain its near-monopoly on provincial power, and even became stronger.

2. Two Contrasting Cases⁴⁾

2.1 *Pathum Thani Province: Power Disrupted*

Since 1975, Pathum Thani has been under the control of the Hansawat group, whose pioneer, Chuchip Hansawat, ably guided the family's fortunes first in business and then into politics. Chuchip, who first ran as an MP in 1975 under a small party called the Santichon Party, began to expand his power by undertaking a sustained campaign to raise his political and social profile. He tirelessly developed personal contacts, attending local parties and public ceremonies to garner support. He also became heavily involved in the elections of village headmen, tambon chiefs, local councilors and executives. Because of these efforts, he was elected MP with the highest vote in Pathum Thani in 1976. He would repeat this feat in 1979 and again in 1983. By the latter date, Chuchip was confident enough about his power and influence that he took the next step necessary to build the political family: he made his younger sister and brother run in 1986 and they too were elected MPs [*Manager Magazine*, November 15, 1995]. Chuchip also placed his relatives in key provincial positions: an elder brother, Phaibun, became mayor of Pathum Thani Municipality, while a younger sister, Wani, was appointed chairperson of the Pathum Thani municipal council. A sister-in-law, Nittaya, became chairperson of the PAO council and the first elected PAO chairman.

4) For further details about the two contrasting case studies, please refer to Achakorn [2005b: 267-276].

Chuchip attached himself to a large parliamentary faction called the Wang Nam Yen Group,⁵⁾ led by Sanoh Thienthong, a close friend of Chuchip. As a key member of the faction, Chuchip became Deputy Minister of Commerce (August 5, 1986-February 23, 1991), Deputy Minister of Education (April 7, 1992-June 10, 1992), Minister of Commerce (July 17, 1995-November 25, 1996) and Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives (November 25, 1996-November 9, 1997 and February 17, 2001-October 3, 2002). With his multiple appointments, he was able to expand his fame and prestige not only in Pathum Thani but also beyond the province. Using his ministerial power, he brought back largesse to the province and secured funds from the central government to build dams and water reservoirs, helping the local agricultural economy, particularly orange plantations. All this largesse, in turn, kept the voters loyal.

In the 2004 PAO chairman election, however, Chuchip lost unexpectedly. Several factors may have contributed to his loss. First, frequent news of his family's involvement in corruption began to erode its prestige. It was common knowledge in Pathum Thani that Chuchip was involved in various sorts of corruption, such as unfair bidding for certain contracts, dubious sale of fertilizer and questionable acquisition of public land in Kanchanaburi Province when he was Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives [*Prachachart Turakit*, February 22-25, 2001: 1, 5, August 9-12, 2001: 1, 4; *Matichon Sutsapda*, November 25-December 1, 2002: 8, 12]. Second, he monopolized the local mass transportation industry in Pathum Thani and had many unruly employees who were ready to bully people. Third, in 2003 he declared a personal debt of up to 950 million baht incurred from the mortgage on the assets of his business.

Chuchip's fortunes began to affect his relations with his allies and subordinates. Although Phaibun has been mayor of the Pathum Thani Municipality for more than 25 years, for example, in the recent election his share of the vote decreased significantly, reflecting his patron's poor financial status. At the national level, Chuchip's political fortunes likewise began to wane. When the leader of his faction came into conflict with the party head, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2000, over the sparse cabinet positions it got in 2002; Chuchip himself was not appointed to any post. Without this national position, he was unable to bring largesse and patronage to his Pathum Thani network. In turn, state officials and local politicians in the province, who once showed their solid loyalty to Chuchip, began to keep their distance from him.

Internal conflict within the Hansawat group, especially between family members and non-

5) The group originally belonged to Chat Thai Party. However, it switched to New Aspiration Party in 1996 and to Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) in 2000. It started to have problems with TRT leader, Thaksin, in 2004 and formally split off from the TRT in 2006.

family members, further complicated the picture. Chuchip broke a promise to a long-lasting ally, Charn Puangpetch, by choosing his own nephew, Punsawat, to be PAO chairman instead of Charn. This move convinced many non-family members in the group that their chances for advancement were limited as their leader clearly preferred family over allies. Soon after, a splinter group⁶ began to challenge Chuchip. This in turn weakened the control of the Hansawat group over provincial politics.

The Pathum Thani case suggests that the solidarity of a provincial political group headed by a powerful MP can easily falter when its leader provokes dissension and loses financial power, while his subordinates remain wealthy and influential. Pathum Thani thus served as a lesson to other provincial political machines. For if a leader favors his family interests at the expense of those of their allies, his local political machines will suffer.

2.2 Buri Ram Province: Power Consolidated

The Chidchob family's political capital is based on a wide patronage network created by Chai Chidchob. Chai was elected Buri Ram MP many times (1969, 1979, 1983, 1986, 1988, September 1992,⁷ 1995, 1996) and in 2006, he won as senator. After he established his provincial base, he passed his legacy on to his children. Newin, a son of Chai, was elected Buri Ram MP in 1988 after serving as Buri Ram PAO councilor. Newin has held many cabinet positions—Deputy Minister of Finance in 1995, Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives in 1997, Deputy Minister of Commerce and Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives in 2002, and Minister of the Prime Minister's Office in 2005. He also supported the political ambitions of friends, allies and supporters. Thus by 2001, many of the province's MPs belonged to the Chidchob family network. MPs elected in the 2001 general election were Prasit Tangsrikiatkul of Constituency 1 (a close friend of Newin), Karuna Chidchob of Constituency 2 (Newin's wife), Saksayam Chidchob of Constituency 3 (Newin's younger brother), and Sophon Saram of Constituency 6 (one of Newin's vote canvassers with a vote base in Lum Plai Mas and Nhong Hong Districts). In addition, Newin's elder sister, Usani Chidchob, was elected a Buri Ram senator for a six-year term in 2000. In 2003, the network expanded when Police Colonel Chawalit Chidchob (husband of Usani Chidchob) was elected PAO

6) The group composed of Thawatchai Uengampornwilai (elected mayor of Bang Kra Di TAO), Suraphong Uengampornwilai (former PAO councilor and former PAO chairman who was elected MP for Pathum Thani Constituency 1 under the Chart Pattana Party), Niphattha Amornrattanametha, (senator and former governor of Pathum Thani Province), and Charn Puangpetch (a former headman of tambon Sam Khok and former PAO councilor). Even after Bang Kra Di was upgraded from tambon administrative organization (TAO) to a municipality, Thawatchai continued to be elected to the municipality.

7) In 1992 there were two general elections, in March and September.

chairman and when 36 of the 42 councilor seats came under the control of the Chidchob network. Parinya Samanpratha, ex-mayor of Buri Ram municipality for two consecutive terms (eight years) and Wikrom Somchitaree, the present mayor, both are close friends of Newin, Prasit, and Sophon for many years.⁸⁾

Other prominent MPs have also built and consolidated their respective networks in the province. The Petchsawang group of Sophon Petchsawang, MP for Buri Ram Constituency 8, has a vote base in Nang Rong District and Chalerm Phra Kiat District. Members of this group were elected to the PAO council in the Nang Rong District. Though Sophon is a member of the Thai Rak Thai Party, he does not belong to Newin's group but is instead affiliated with the Wang Nam Yom faction, led by Somsak Thepsuthin. Newin and Somsak have been at odds over the post of Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives. To bolster their position, the Petchsawang group had relatives and close friends run for election to the PAO, TAOs and municipal councils. Sophon's wife herself, Phatchari Petchsawang, ran successfully as Buri Ram senator in 2006.

The Thongsri group of Songsak Thongsri, MP for Buri Ram Constituency 10, has a vote base in Pra Khon Chai District. The group's prominent members include relatives and friends of Songsak who were elected PAO councilors in the district. Recently, the Thongsri group has successfully placed relatives and friends in positions in the PAO, the TAO and the municipality such as Phunsak Thongsri, and some councilors of Pra Khon Chai municipality and some of TAOs in Pra khon Chai district. The group's national connections are preserved through Rungrot Thongsri, a Buri Ram senator. Songsak is a member of the Thai Rak Thai Party, and belongs to Wang Nam Yen faction of Sanoh Thienthong. Another group, the Liangpongphan is led by Sawang Liangpongphan, tambon headman of Tambon Khu Muang. He successfully got elected as PAO councilor in Khu Muang District. Panawat Liangpongphan, a younger brother of Sawang, has been elected MP for Buri Ram Province many times. Presently, the Liangpongphan group continues to send relatives and close friends to elected positions in the PAO, such as Loerit, Chutikan and some councilors of Khu Muang municipality and some of TAOs in Khu Muang district, although it has no MP.

It is clear how relatives and cronies are vital in preserving and expanding one's political network. One Buri Ram MP admitted in an interview, "Every time there is a local election in the province, there is always a unanimous agreement that Newin Chidchob should select the most appropriate candidates to run and his network should support whoever he recommends."⁹⁾ Newin

8) Niran Kundanan [2006: 77-78].

9) Interview with Prasit Tangsrikiatkul, Thai Rak Thai Party MP for Buri Ram Constituency 1, on August 15, 2004.

nominated his brother-in-law Police Colonel Chawalit Chidchob as a candidate for PAO chairman. When Police Colonel Chawalit was an active police officer, he used his own surname, Artarsa. But when he ran for election in Buri Ram, he adopted his wife's surname as the people of Buri Ram were more familiar with the name Chidchob. He was elected Buri Ram PAO chairman even though he had no political experience and had not previously worked or established a personal reputation in the province.

Unlike the Hansawat family in Pathum Thani, the powerful MPs in Buri Ram have been able to maintain a network of allies and supporters at the provincial level. For example, Sawang Chanyatham Foundation, which actively works for social works and rescue in Buri Ram, always take injurers to a famous private hospital owned by a powerful politician. Both the foundation and the politician can receive reciprocal benefits from the insurance companies and can also raise fund directly from the donators. In addition, the powerful MPs have been able to maintain the network financially through businesses such as construction, gravel, and stone quarrying which are political business underpinned by government concessions and contracts. While each local executive and councilor has a vote base under his or her control in the tambons, MPs can consolidate those bases to a wider area on the provincial or national level. As long as MPs still maintain sufficient wealth and influence to deliver patronage and keep these vote bases happy, local executives and councilors must give a respect or a royalty to the powerful MPs. These local networks have become important due to decentralization, as indicated by the Buri Ram PAO election where powerful MPs and their cliques were able to retain power despite the decentralization has paved the ways for a change in provincial political structure.

3. Powerful MPs and Decentralization

3.1 Local Power and Money Politics

The fate of the Hansawat group does not negate the fact that decentralization still brings enormous benefit to pre-existing local power groups. The devolution of the budget, human resources and certain powers once held by the central government has enabled powerful MPs to strengthen their networks, send trusted people to take over local political positions and cement their holds over local vote bases. They have also used decentralization as a way to create new systems of spoils that allow benefits to trickle down to the local level. The powerful MPs have adapted well to the era of decentralization by combining their personal wealth and the “extra” budget allotted to the MPs¹⁰⁾ (roughly 20 million baht per year) to enrich their war chests further. In addition, MPs with ministerial positions have been able to tap supplementary budgets that are often embedded in their

offices and use their position to elicit the expected positive responses from those seeking their assistance [Somsak 1995: 18-20].

Access to money and connections may sometimes not be enough to guarantee electoral success. Since local politicians control the votes of their constituents, MPs need to maintain good relationships with them, providing them with resources to ensure that they deliver the votes at election time. Local politicians are themselves wealthy, and can use their local wealth to determine electoral outcomes. Thus they cannot be ignored by powerful MPs. These two centers of political power—national and local—generally see alliances and mutual accommodations as being preferable to being in conflict or ignoring each other.

Powerful MPs also place importance on social obligations to keep voters' loyalty. Chai Chidchob, for example, uses social occasions like his birthday to demonstrate his kindness, virtue and concern for the poor by donating goods or money to the temple, the community, government offices and people's organizations. He organizes an annual birthday party every April, and treats the people of the province to a feast. He makes sure that communities that celebrate his birthday are rewarded with official assistance. In return he receives nothing but votes from Buri Ram voters who continue to regard him as an open-minded politician.

In Pathum Thani, Suraphong provided trucks to carry water to the people in Muang Pathum Thani District when water was scarce, in order to demonstrate his kindness.¹¹⁾ He also made it possible for the children of his constituency to get into reputable provincial schools.¹²⁾

MPs support relatives and clique members in their bids to be elected to LGOs in order that their network will have access to the budgets wielded by LGOs under fiscal autonomy. Many PAO projects are potential objects of plunder as a means to channel money to MPs pockets. In Buri Ram, for example, the MPs reportedly got approximately two percent as their "share" of a PAO project under which computers were procured at the cost of 40 million baht.¹³⁾ Many PAO politicians are themselves contractors who are eager to secure projects from the PAO. Some Buri Ram people have started to feel concern for local councils dominated by these contractors. In October 2005,

10) From 1980, each MP received a fund for "Rural and Local Development Project according to MPs' Proposals" or "MP budget." Originally each MP received 1.5 million baht per year. The amount increased gradually, reaching 20 million baht by 1995 [Somchart Thamsiri 1995: 7]. This budget was abolished by Section 180 of the 1997 Constitution.

11) Interview with Rangsit Yaiyung, a PAO councilor of Muang Pathum Thani District, on September 6, 2004.

12) Interview with Surapong Uengampornwilai, constituency MP of Pathum Thani, on September 6, 2004 at the MP Coordinating Center.

13) Interview with Police Colonel Phairot Lertwilai, a former candidate for Buri Ram PAO chairman, on March 20, 2006 at his residence in Buri Ram.

there were over 60 complaints from the public about conflict of interest in construction projects undertaken by local government organizations in Buri Ram [*Siamrath*, October 24, 2005].

As mentioned above, politicians may channel state funds to their constituencies. In 2006, Newin was able to secure funding for water reservoir systems in about 10 places in Buri Ram. The projects and their budgets were placed under the provincial governor, who just happened to be a member of Newin's political network.¹⁴⁾ Newin and Police Colonel Chawalit used the occasion of the mobile cabinet meeting held in Buri Ram Province on May 16-17, 2004 to secure state funding for local projects. They asked Prime Minister Thaksin to allocate large budgets for many large-scale projects in Buri Ram to show their competence [*Manager Online*, May 15, 2006a, May 15, 2006b].

Politicians take advantage of the tendency of local people to vote for candidates that are familiar and famous for visible achievements. This is conspicuous at all levels—from the PAO level down to the TAO level.¹⁵⁾ MPs try to capitalize on these opportunities to increase their power by sending members of their cliques to run for elected positions at the local level. Thanks to the political capital of the powerful MPs, their cliques are often elected as local executives and councilors with ease. Once the MPs' clique members become local executives and councilors, they can strengthen the position of the already-influential MPs with their local legislative and administrative authority. Apart from these, members of the MPs' cliques, who are elected as local executives and councilors, seek to eliminate promising political rivals from politics. Aspiring politicians who do not have their own cliques within local government organizations at the grassroots level face many difficulties in strengthening their influence in the area.

There is a certain measure of mutual dependence in the relationship between national level politicians and their provincial counterparts. Even though MPs do not have as much budget at their disposal as previously, they still can use their prestige and connections with national politicians to exert influence on central government officials to coordinate the implementation of projects with provincial officials. Provincial politicians, in turn, can provide MPs with benefits such as access to money from construction projects, assistance in election campaigns and political intelligence in the form of frequent reports on the state of provincial politics. This relationship is crucial for such administrative procedures as the granting of subsidies from the central government to local government organizations. In the case of Buri Ram, a deputy governor revealed that "Local government

14) Interview with Pramot Satcharak, deputy governor of Buri Ram Province, on September 18, 2005.

15) Interview with the director of Phra Nakorn Sri Ayudhdhaya Election Committee [*Matichon*, June 22, 2005: 8].

organizations request supporting budget from the central administration. But the consideration process for budget allocation depends on the ties between the executives of those local government organizations and MPs. National politicians can communicate directly to the cabinet ministers or top level bureaucrats in ministries/departments to seek their support for special budget.”¹⁶⁾

In Pathum Thani Constituency 1, its MP, Suraphong Uengampornwilai, put up campaign posters and banners stating that the expansion of the road and bridges in Muang Pathum Thani District was a result of his assiduous work in obtaining funds for the project. Suraphong stated proudly that “I called Suwat Liptapanlop (the former leader of the Chart Pattana Party and deputy prime minister) to request the budget for this big project. I could ask for anything from him. He has never refused. I have always been successful. ...The people of Pathum Thani must clearly see and perceive the difference in the speed of development of the province between the former days (when the Hansawat group dominated) and these days. ...Among the MPs in Pathum Thani, I am the only one who has the ability to coordinate budget for various projects for Pathum Thani.”¹⁷⁾ Due to his influence, a temporary alliance consisting of some constituency MPs and local elites shifted to Suraphong’s group and gave their support to Charn in the election for PAO chairman, which Charn won.

Local politicians who do not belong to the MP networks are often unable to access state budgetary resources in this way. Such was the case of Surakiat Petchpradup, mayor of Mae Chai Municipality in Phayao Province, and deputy chairman of the municipal league of Phayao. He complained that the budget allocation for each local government organization may not be sufficient for local administration, [forcing] many local government organizations to plead for additional support from the central government. Only local government organizations well-connected with national politicians are able to receive grants of support from the central government budget. Those with no national allies often receive either less or none at all. Such local government organizations have suffered from constant budget short-falls.

Kachornsak Hormnan, mayor of Nam Wan TAO in Chiang Kham District, Phayao Province, and deputy chairman of the Phayao TAO association had a similar complaint. He said, “Usually national politicians are divided into a lot of political groups. But it is necessary for local politicians to be in harmony with all MPs even from different groups. The MPs in each province must be able to coordinate local government organizations, and give due importance to each local government

16) Interview with Pramot Satcharak, deputy governor of Buri Ram Province, on September 18, 2005.

17) Interview with Suraphong Uengampornwilai, MP for Pathum Thani Constituency 1, on September 6, 2004 at the MP Coordinating Center.

organization equally and fairly. They should never think about whose side this person is taking. But in reality, the opposite happens. In fact, if local politicians are on the same side as the government MPs, the latter will do their best to get budgetary support for the former.”¹⁸⁾

In principle, every MP in every political party wishes to expand his or her influence to ensconce himself or herself in the province. Local government organizations also need good relationships with all MPs, regardless of party affiliation. However, it is notable that local government organizations do not seek to be subjugated by the MPs, but demand equal partnerships with them. It will take several elections, national and local, for the character of the relationship that will gradually develop to become evident.¹⁹⁾

3.2 Maintaining Political Capital at the Local Level

Under the pre-1994 centralized political power structure, MPs could boast of having support from a wide array of groups—from vote canvassers (including monks and teachers) to the people. MPs had political capital, i.e., influence, prestige, cliques, friends, subordinates, staff, local leaders and patronage networks within the area. This political capital created the chance to become widely accepted in a province. Once they had accumulated this political capital, it became easier for them to prepare for the next election. In interviews with national and local politicians who played significant roles in Pathum Thani, Buri Ram, Suphan Buri, and Phitsanulok provinces, they mentioned “The vote base is most important for electoral politics. Victory in elections requires money and prestige. We can’t dispense with the funds for continuous political activities in the area. To fulfill the demand of the people, local politicians, like executives and councilors [of local government organizations], must take good care of them. In addition to the ordinary people, there are local leaders at the grassroots level and politicians who must be given due importance. These include local public health volunteers (Ministry of Public Health), the Housewives Group and the Craftsmen Group (Department of Community Development). The tambon headman, village headman and medical trainers attached to tambons (Ministry of Interior) are particularly important because they spend most of their time with people in the tambon and village.”²⁰⁾ A better way of appreciating the significance of political capital is by taking a brief look at the backgrounds of some of the

18) “Phayao Local Administrative Organization reveals MPs pull budget to constituencies of their relatives” [*Manager Online*, June 15, 2006].

19) Due to increased authorities and administration resources, and enhanced local autonomy caused by the development of decentralization in the future, local politicians may realize that it is wiser to try to become more independent of national politicians, like local politicians in Japan are now.

20) Interview with Premrudee Champhunot, a mayor of Phitsanulok municipality and a wife of a famous Phitsanulok MP, on September 6, 2005 at Government House.

prominent provincial groups and their rises to power.

Chamsai Silapaarcha, wife of former Prime Minister, Banhan Silapaarcha, revealed that prestige enhancement was essential before her family ran for election as it enabled them to win the hearts of people in the province, Suphan Buri. She said, “From 1957 onwards, Banhan and I began to take part in the development of the province, starting with the establishment of the Banhan-Chamsai School. At that time, Kanchana [Chamsai’s daughter, who is currently a deputy leader of the Chart Thai Party], my relatives and I had to go out to get votes from the people. We went out of the house at 3 or 4 am to meet a lot of people. We incessantly did merit making. In 1975, Banhan ran in the general election and was elected MP with the highest vote in Thailand. Later he became the 21st prime minister of Thailand in 1995.” [*Matchon*, June 4, 2006: 11]

Considering the Chidchob family’s political capital in Buri Ram, it is difficult for newcomers to challenge this group. “New faces” in the political scene of Buri Ram were not people coming from outside of these established groups. For example, the Chidchob group decided that it could not trust some of its PAO councilors and selected new five candidates²¹⁾ to run for office. Although they were actually not “new faces,” having moved from other districts to Muang Buri Ram District, their campaigns portrayed them as fresh candidates. All were elected PAO councilors in the district owing to the strength of the Chidchob’s political capital [*Siamrath*, December 12, 2003].

The elections for MPs and senators in 2006, especially in Buri Ram, further validate the significance of political capital. All ten constituency MPs elected in 2005 were re-elected again in a general election on April 2, 2006, although the poll was voided by a constitutional court on May 8, 2006.²²⁾ Regarding senators, all successful candidates²³⁾ either had close relationships with the powerful political families. For example, Thawisak,²⁴⁾ a former Buri Ram provincial governor and close friend of the Chidchob family, was elected senator with the second highest number of votes in almost all districts where Chai received the most votes.²⁵⁾

21) Pornruedi Michai, a former Buri Ram PAO councilor, Surasak Sombunram, a former mayor of Ban Yang TAO, Phayungrat Charreungdet, the tambon head of Chumhet, Pol. Sen. Sgt. Maj. Prakhan Krasiri, Newin’s personal security guard and Sanoh Thepaksornnarong, former PAO chairman.

22) The Constitutional Court of Thailand. *A decision no.9/B.E.2549* (2006) <<http://www.concourt.or.th/concourt/judgement.jsp?year=9&action=1>> (May 15, 2006).

23) Chai Chidchob, Thawisak Kitbanchong, Wallop Issarangkul na Ayuddhaya, Rungrot Thongsri and Phatchari Petsawang.

24) Thawisak worked as a state official in Buri Ram for a long time. He was also chief district officer of three districts—Khu Muang, Pra Khon Chai and Sa Teuk [*Matchon*, May 17, 2005: 3].

25) For the results of the election for Buri Ram senators, see the website of the Office of the Buri Ram Provincial Election Commission at <<http://buriram.ect.go.th/buriram2/>> (May 20, 2006).

3.3 Electoral Adaptability

Powerful MPs generally have considerable experience in elections and are well-versed in election campaigning. They know how to cope with the electorate and vote-canvassers. Although the rules and the institutions regulating elections were changed by the 1997 constitution, powerful MPs still have an edge over newcomers because they have been able to adapt to the new system, based on their ample experience and knowledge. According to the 1998 Election Commission Ordinance Dealing with Provincial Election Commissions and Directors of Provincial Election Offices, each Provincial Election Commission consists of five members.²⁶⁾ These five people are selected as follows. A sub-committee is set up to select 15 candidates for the provincial election commission.

The sub-committee consists of eight members²⁷⁾ and each member has the right to propose a maximum of three candidates; the general public can also nominate candidates. The sub-committee then selects 15 candidates from among the nominees. Each member may vote for ten people at a time. To be selected, a candidate must receive the support of over half of the 15 sub-committee members. If voting does not result in 15 winning candidates, further rounds of voting are conducted until 15 winners are found. The names of the 15 candidates are then sent to the central Election Commission, which selects five of them to constitute the Provincial Election Commission.

The process, however, is not immune to the interference of powerful MPs. This is generally not difficult because the MPs often have close relationships with members of the sub-committee. To start with, the powerful MPs urge their people to run for the provincial election commission, finding about 15 people to be candidates. The sub-committee votes for the candidates in a pre-arranged manner; in the first round, each member of the sub-committee casts all ten votes for a slate of nominees—the same ten persons in the same order—who thus are chosen as candidates. A second round of voting is conducted to fill the remaining five candidate's slots, and sub-committee members use the same method again. The central Election Commission will select five provincial election commissioners from among the 15 candidates, but since all the candidates have close relationships with the powerful MPs, this selection step matters little.

26) Commissioners serve for a five-year, non-renewable term.

27) The sub-committee consists of representatives from professional groups in a province, specifically (1) public enterprises and governmental offices, (2) business associations (the provincial chamber of commerce, the provincial federation of industry, the provincial bankers' association, and the provincial mining association), (3) academic institutions, (4) legal professions (senior judges, senior prosecutors or lawyers), (5) labor unions, (6) agricultural organizations, (7) local self-government organizations, and (8) other private organizations [The Office of the Election Commission of Thailand. *The 1998 Election Commission Ordinance Dealing with the Provincial Election Commissions and the Directors of Provincial Election Offices*. <<http://www.ect.go.th>> (March 4, 2006), Section 17].

A good example of intervention would be the chairman of the Buri Ram PAO election commission.²⁸⁾ The chairman used to be the manager of a stone refining factory owned by an old political family and a former TAO chief administrator in the province.²⁹⁾ In elections of a PAO chairman and councilors, the candidates who were supported by the chairman and this old political family won easily. After the elections, a chairman of the PAO election commission became a deputy chairman of the Buri Ram PAO with Newin's support. In marked contrast with this case, when a government official in Buri Ram who was accidentally selected to be a chairman of the Lum Plai Mas Municipal Election Commission by the opposite side of a powerful political family was transferred to Nong Khai, another province far away from Buri Ram, before the election finished.³⁰⁾

Needless to say, almost all of the Buri Ram provincial election commissioners³¹⁾ were close friends of an old political family in Buri Ram and have always given their support to the family's political interests. For example, the commissioners applied an election law, especially anti-vote buying and selling, with double standards. The commissioners asked for a provincial police to watchdog the opposition of the powerful MPs more strictly by preventing them from buying the votes. In contrast, the commissioners allowed the powerful MPs to buy votes more easily. In return, the commissioners, who are provincial officials, have been quickly promoted to higher positions within the province, whereas the commissioners who belong to business sectors will be repaid with other suitable rewards.³²⁾

According to an official of the central Election Commission, a provincial election commission plays a significant role in all elections in the province. When there are complaints and objections

28) There are many local election commissions attached to each election. Before the each local election is held in a province, the provincial election commission must appoint four local election commissioners from among short-list candidates nominated by a selection panel. Among the 11 members on this selection panel, eight are active state officials in the province—provincial governor, provincial chief secretary, provincial prosecutor, provincial police commander, chief of military officers, a rector of universities located in the province, director of the educational district and director of provincial election commission office. All these officials are usually on good terms with the powerful MPs. The term of a local election commission is terminated when the local election has been completely finished [The Office of the Election Commission Thailand. *The 2003 Election Commission Ordinance Dealing with the Election of Local Councilors and the Local Executives, (including second amendment in 2004)*. <<http://www.ect.go.th>> (March 5, 2006), Sections 28-43].

29) I refer here to Winai Kiatkamchorn.

30) Interview with Police Colonel Phairot Lertwilai, former candidate for Buri Ram PAO chairman on March 20, 2006 at his residence in Buri Ram.

31) Since 2003 the chairman of Buri Ram provincial election commission has been Serm Chainarong (former district officer in many districts of Buri Ram province, currently provincial chief secretary of Buri Ram province). The other four commissioners are Thienchai Ounchitwanthana, Thongchai Niyamosot (principal of Buri Ram Pittayakom School), Surin Chatchawanwong and Police Colonel Sanong Reungphaisan.

32) Interview with Police Colonel Phairot Lertwilai on March 20, 2006 at his residence in Buri Ram.

regarding the election, it is not the central Election Commission but rather the provincial one that investigates the cases. The provincial election commission will submit an investigation report to the central Election Commission, which will base its final judgment on the provincial report. Thus, the investigation by the provincial election commission is critically important in any dispute concerning elections.³³⁾ Therefore provincial election commissions are another strong weapon that powerful MPs can use against their enemies at the expense of the provincial election commission's political neutrality.

Conclusion

Why have the powerful MPs and their cliques remained in power despite the recent decentralization? There are three major reasons. Decentralization has brought various changes to politics in the provinces. Local government organizations—PAOs, municipalities and TAOs—gained new powers and more freedom to control their budgets and personnel. In addition, rather than spreading power to various groups of people, thereby creating opportunities for new political forces to challenge the old elites giving voters a wider field of candidates to choose from, decentralization has instead achieved the opposite. It allowed the already powerful MPs a chance to adapt to the new setting and take advantage of decentralization.

Nevertheless, there do appear to be some exceptional cases. In Pathum Thani a change in the power configuration affected immensely the local power bloc's electoral loss. The loss was not so much due to decentralization, but resulted rather because of the problems this group encountered in accumulating and maintaining its resources, especially conflicts of interest whether within local politics or at the level of national politics, to keep its provincial network loyal and its ties with national leaders strong.

This article shows that most of the members of parliament (MPs) who wielded political power in their respective provinces before decentralization were still able to maintain control over their domain by exploiting the opportunities created by the new administrative framework. The ability of these MPs to retain power was the result of having ample "war chests" of money and other resources at their disposal, as well as the political capital they preserved via networks of supporters, cliques, subordinates, community leaders and vote canvassers. Moreover, these MPs possessed the necessary electoral experience to allow them to adapt to the rules and procedures of the new system.

33) Interview with Prakit Phromayon, director of election information section, on September 7, 2005 at the Office of the Election Commission.

In short, decentralization in the last decade appears to have had very little effect on political power structures in the provinces. The MPs of the pre-decentralization era have regained and amassed more power and have further entrenched themselves, mainly owing to their preeminent ability to win a large portion of the vote. If change in political structures must happen in the future, it is most likely that new political forces—either coming from reformist groups or from up-and-coming families—would have to find their way to preeminence outside the arenas of decentralized politics, because they cannot rely much on what the decentralization process has laid out for them.

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