

# **The Formation and Development of Political Networks after the Recent Decentralization in Northeastern Thailand**

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Place of fieldwork: Thailand

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- **Research background**

In recent decades, the concept of decentralization has been promoted in many countries. Thailand has also developed a decentralization policy with the aim of transferring functions, power, and budgets from the central government to local governmental organizations. This mechanism made change in the relations between the central and local governments not only in term of administration but also politically. Since the local governments were strengthened, the power of national-level politicians (Member of Parliament; MPs) has dramatically decreased because some budget and decision-making power for development in their constituencies has been transferred to the local governmental organizations such as Provincial Administrative Organizations (PAOs).

- **Research purpose and aim**

This research will examine changes in the relations between national-level and local-level politicians that have affected the formation of political networks in Northeastern Thailand, the most populous region in Thailand, where local politics are crucial. The central research questions address how political networks among national-level and local-level politicians in Northeastern Thailand form and change, especially after the Thaksin administration, and how these political networks explain the current state of Thai politics. In the conclusion, a diagram of political networks in Northeastern Thailand is presented that can explain and predict the political situation in Thailand.

- **Fieldwork results and achievements**

The tasks of my fieldwork at this time are twofold: to visit local-level politicians, including those in-charge at field sites, and to meet Thai scholars working on Thai local politics, in particular in the northeastern region. To execute the first task, I visited Udon Thani and Ubon Ratchathani provinces, the areas of dominant political influence among the other provinces of Northeastern Thailand. In Udon Thani, I spoke with journalists and the local people. I found that although this area was dominated by the Phue Thai Party, as represented by the fact that all of the MPs and chief executives of the PAO were supporters of this political party, the mayor of the city came from the opposition. This was a conflict for policy implementation at the local administrative level when the municipality constructed a new sport stadium and the old one was transferred under the responsibility of the PAO. Moreover, in this area there is also an active pro-Thaksin group that plays a more significant role than those who hold formal positions.

In Ubon Ratchathani, I interviewed the chief executive of the Ubon Ratchathani PAO. The main questions were on the decentralization process and how the PAO coordinates with MPs and local government organizations; I hoped to learn about the political networks in the area. In addition, I met with the director of the policy and planning division and asked to intern with the PAO for a month to observe how the PAO creates networks with other organizations.

My second task was completed at Mahasarakham and Thammasat universities. As my research is mainly focused on the local politics of Northeastern Thailand, speaking with scholars at regional universities was necessary. From them, I could access much necessary information concerning local politics, such as the development of political participation in the region, the emergence and role of the red-shirt (Pro-Thaksin) groups in Northeastern Thailand, and so on. Moreover, I asked them for help in gaining access to politicians, who are expected to be the key actors in my research.

- Implications and impact for future research

As I have to work with politicians on both the national and local levels, a strong connection with them is necessary. This fieldwork is very important for conducting my research because this time I can make a connection with them by chance. Having recognized that an interview with a politician is not enough to gain sufficient data to support the research question, I asked to work at the Ubon Ratchathani PAO for a month at my next visit in order to observe how the chief executive of the PAO works with MPs and local government organizations politically. For that, in-depth data regarding the political networks in the area is strongly expected.



**Fig. 1:** The office of the Ubon Ratchathani Provincial Administrative Organization, Ubon Ratchathani province



**Fig. 2:** An interview with the chief executive of the Ubon Ratchathani Provincial Administrative Organization



**Fig. 3:** A campaign poster for the February 2nd general election in front of the office of the Udonthani Provincial Administrative Organization, Udon Thani province



**Fig. 4:** A vinyl banner declaring “Red-shirt (pro-Thaksin supporters) territory” in Udon Thani province



**Fig. 5:** College of Politics and Governance, Maharakham University, Maharakham province