

The Formation, Change, and Continuity of Political Networks after the Recent Decentralization in Northeastern Thailand

Year: 2014

Place of fieldwork: Thailand

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Key Words: political network, local politics, local government, decentralization, party politics

- **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 changed the relations between the central and local governments not only administratively but also politically. Since the chief executive of the local government was elected directly from the people in the area, the power of national-level politicians (members of parliament, or MPs) has decreased dramatically because some budget and decision-making power for development in their constituencies has been transferred to the local-level politicians.

- **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, which is a strategic area for the major political parties to gain electoral votes. 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 governments as key places for interviewing in-charge informants, and to collect some necessary data from the government offices. To carry out the first task, I visited Ubon Ratchathani and Udon Thani provinces, the provinces of dominant political influence in Northeastern Thailand. In Ubon Ratchathani, I asked for an internship in the Ubon Ratchathani Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) office for a month in order to interview a sufficient number of informants and observe their organization. An in-charge officer for my visit was the head of Planning and Policy Division, and took me to other divisions to conduct interviews and collect the data. Although not much data was provided concerning local politics, based on the administrative data, the relations between the chief executive of Ubon Ratchathani PAO and national-level politicians could be indirectly analyzed.



Fig. 1: Sign of the office of the Ubon Ratchathani Provincial Administration



Fig. 2: Ambulance used to answer “1669” emergency calls. This service is one of the popular policies formulated by the current chief executive of Ubon Ratchathani PAO, who was elected for three consecutive terms.



Fig. 3: The seminar on decentralization education for the people in Ubon Ratchathani province held by Office of the Decentralization to the Local Government Organization Committee, where, by chance, I was invited to participate

In Udon Thani, I also requested an internship for three weeks. An in-charge PAO officer was very informative, providing me with a great deal of data on local politics in Udon Thani. I found that although this area was dominated by Thaksin and his network, as indicated by the fact that all the MPs and chief executives of the PAO were supporters of the Phue Thai political party, some political groups came from the opposition, known as the Mak Khaeng group, who occupy political positions in the city. I was able to observe the competition of the two main political groups in the area.

I was able to work on the second task for about a week. This task was completed at the Department of Local Administration and King Prajadhipok's Institute. As my research is mainly focused on local politics, it was necessary to collect the documents from the organization concerned. From them, I was able to access a great deal of necessary information concerning local politics, such as the data on previous local elections (2004, 2008, and 2012) in Northeastern Thailand, the grants allocated by the Ministry of Interior to local governments, and so on.



Fig. 4: The office of the Udon Thani Provincial Administrative Organization



Fig. 5: The Division of Planning and Budgeting, Udon Thani PAO, where I had an internship to collect data

- Implications and impact for future research

As a result of the military's coup d'état during my fieldwork, discussing politics was difficult. Some politicians, even government officials, were hesitant to talk about politics when I asked to interview them. Therefore, I could collect only administrative data, with little information about local politics.

However, this fieldwork is very important in conducting my research, because this time I can access sources of information in Ubon Ratchathani and Udon Thani PAO. I could use the data I have collected to write a case study to prove the existence of local political networks in my dissertation. Concerning publication, I plan to write a journal paper on the relations between the chief executive of PAO in Northeastern Thailand and the main political parties by using case studies in Ubon Ratchathani and Udon Thani.