

Formation, Change, and Continuity of Political Networks in Northeastern Thailand After the Thaksin Administration

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- Research background

Politics in Thailand have undergone dramatic changes for more than a decade. The critical point is the landslide 2001 victory, especially in the north and northeast, by the Thai Rak Thai Party, led by Thaksin Shinawatra. Ever since, electoral preferences in these regions have changed from candidate-based to party-based. Parties have had a major impact on voters' political behavior, and have become dominant.

In the same period, decentralization has been promoted in many countries. Thailand has developed decentralization policies with the aim of transferring functions, power, and budget from the central government to local governmental organizations. Part of this process is the adoption of direct elections for the heads of local governmental organizations. This mechanism has changed the power relations among the main actors in local politics; it has also created new political networks at the local level.

- 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 area investigated is the most populous region in Thailand, and it is a strategic area for the major political parties to gain electoral votes. The central research question addresses 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 help explain and predict the political situation in Thailand.

- Fieldwork results and achievements

The fieldwork tasks are threefold: hold in-depth interviews with key local-level politicians, collect some data in the Ubon Ratchathani and Udon Thani provinces, and explore the new field site in the Khon Kaen Province to collect diverse data and make a more effective analysis.

To execute the first task, I visited the Udon Thani, Khon Kaen, and Ubon Ratchathani provinces, as these are the areas of dominant political influence among the provinces of northeastern Thailand. In Udon Thani, I spoke with the former chief executive of the Udon Thani Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO). He is the founder of a local political group called the *Nakhon Mak Khaeng* group, which plays a key role in Udon Thani local politics. In Khon Kaen, I interviewed a councilor of the Khon Kaen PAO and a personal assistant of one of the long-standing MPs in Khon Kaen. In Ubon Ratchathani, I spoke with a civil servant of the Ubon Ratchathani PAO who directly takes charge of the PAO elections for both the chief executive and the councilors. By chance, I was introduced by the Dean of the Faculty of Political Science at Thammasat University to interview the chief executive of Loei PAO, which is another province in northeastern Thailand.



Figure 1: An interview with the former chief executive of the Udon Thani PAO.

From these interviews, I found that political connections are important for politicians to obtain or continue in their political positions. Rather than voter bases and candidate performance, another important factor that entails success in local elections is coordination with politicians in the provinces. The provincial politicians such as the MPs have influence on their own strong voter bases in their specific area. Each candidate who desires to win in the elections, therefore, makes a good connection with the voter base to gain electoral support. Politically, it is customary for new local politicians to introduce themselves and ask MPs for permission to work in the area for electoral campaign purposes. Showing disrespect for the influential people in the area might be problematic for the candidates, and can directly affect their votes. MPs prioritize their networked candidates of the same faction or the same political ideology because their work might be easier in terms of area development or budget allocation. In addition, the PAO councilors are also necessary to coordinate during the campaign period. Each councilor has responsibilities in the specific area that are different from the scope of the

PAO chief's work in the provincial area. Thus, the councilors are always close to the electorate in their area and have strong voter bases and the potential to help the candidates for PAO chief in the electoral campaigns. This can create or further the political networks among the PAO chiefs, MPs, and the PAO councilors. The local political networks have strengthened the PAO chief in dealing with issues regarding government and administration in the provincial area.



Figure 2: An interview with the chief executive of Loei PAO.

My second task was completed at the Ubon Ratchathani and Udon Thani PAO offices; I set out to collect data. An in-charge officer for my visit was the head of the Planning and Policy Division, and that official took me to other divisions to collect data. The PAO officers were very informative, providing me with a great deal of data on local politics in the Ubon Ratchathani and Udon Thani provinces. Based on the data collected, relations between the chief executive of the Ubon Ratchathani PAO and national-level politicians could be efficiently analyzed.

I was able to work on the third task for about a week. This task was completed at Khon Kaen PAO, as a new site for my research. As my research is mainly focused on local politics in northeastern Thailand, it was necessary to collect more data from another province to support my argument. I was able to access information concerning local politics such as data on previous local elections (2004, 2008, and 2012) in Khon Kaen PAO, the relations among politicians in the province, the grants allocated by the Ministry of Interior to the local governments, and so forth.



Figure 3: Free shuttle tour bus, one of the incumbent chief executives of the Ubon Ratchathani PAO's policies.



Figure 4: The Khon Kaen PAO's office.

- Implications for and impacts on future research

As a result of the military's control during my fieldwork, discussing politics was difficult. Some local politicians were hesitant to talk about politics when I asked to interview them. However, by explaining the purposes of my research and getting assistance from some Thai scholars, I was able to interview many politicians and thus collect information on local politics.

Fieldwork is very important in my research because it allowed me to access sources of information in three field sites. I could use the data I collected to write case studies to prove the existence of local political networks in my dissertation. Concerning publications, I plan to write a journal article on the relations between the chief executive of the PAO in northeastern Thailand and the main political parties by using case studies on the Ubon Ratchathani, Udon Thani, and Khon Kaen provinces.