

Thought and Practice of “Good Men’s Politics” of the Southerners in Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract

The southerners of Klong-Chan state housing (Klong-Chan flat) selflessly and dedicatedly attended the rally held by People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), although the political ideology of PDRC doesn't promote equal political rights of the lower class, the economic status they are in. For them joining the PDRC is a great opportunity to do good deeds to make Thailand without corruption, to get good people in government, and to protect the monarchy to be a strong pillar of the country forever. The shared feeling of the same partisan among southerners as being suffered from “Thaksin Regime”, highly influences the southerners at Klong-Chan flat to participate PDRC. The identity of southern-ness as not succumbing to injustice and fraudulent power by political parties and politicians is also emphasized in joining PDRC. Their identity is also about comparing themselves with people of other regions especially the north-eastern (Isan) people, who are usually looked down by them as being educationally and economically inferior. Their participation in PDRC rally is successful in overthrow democracy and promoting aristocracy ruling Thailand by few good people. Although during the first two years under the regime of military dictatorship, Thai public has started to criticize the regime's administration, the southerners in Klong-Chan flat have still affirmed that the coup staged by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) in 2014 was necessary and suitable. For them, even though the election is important but it should be postponed until Thai society “ready” for it.

Keywords: PDRC, NCPO, Thai Politics, Political Ideology

Introduction

One major group of people attending the rally of the People's Democratic Reform Committee or PDRC, held from the end of October 2013 to May 22, 2014, was the southerners. Some of them travelled from the south of Thailand to attend the PDRC rally in Bangkok and some of them were the southerners already living in Bangkok. They attended the rally actively aiming to protect the nation from subversion by fraudulent politicians under “Taksin Regime”.

The southerners joined PDRC because they believed in “Good Men’s Politics”, which is political approach with less attention on the improvement of mechanisms and rules to check and balance the political system. In contrary, it relies on individual moral of the persons who have power and rule the country. Also, the aim of Good Men’s Politics isn't to develop the efficacy of political parties, but to develop the ethics of individual politicians instead. Good Men’s Politics believes that without corruption Thailand would be a successful country. Therefore, the movement of the southerners with PDRC aimed to eradicate fraudulent politicians and to replace them with the ones with high moral.

Good Men’s Politics is not new for the southerners but it has been their political identity for more than three decades. Their long-term attachment with Democrat Party as a political party of southerners was based on the image of honest of Chuan Lekpai, a previous party's leader

and based on the status of the party which had long been an opposition party working to investigate fraudulent governments. However, Good Men's Politics of the southerners had not been confined only with election politics attached with Democratic Party and had expanded to direct politics through attending the rally with people in Bangkok and other regions.

The political movement for Good Men's Politics by PDRC, which was able to mobilize supports from various groups of people, has had significant impacts to contemporary Thai politics. Since the southerners played crucial role in this movement, this study aims to examine Good Men's Politics of the southerners especially the ones settling and making a living in Bangkok. That is to understand the formation and changes, the conditions related, and practices of their Good Men's Politics as well as its impacts toward Thai politics in general.

“Field” and Methodology

This study is an ethnographic research utilizing the idea of “location” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) “site” (Marcus 1995) and especially “scape” (Appadurai, 1996) to select Klong-Chan state housing or Klong-Chan flat, Bangkrapi District in Bangkok as a field of study. Klong-Chan flat is a space for living and moving back and forth as an “ethnoscape” of the southerner migrants in Bangkok. The “ethnoscape” means flow, unstable and not tied to a fixed geographic space, but based on the locomotion and economic, social and cultural practices of the southerners in Bangkok.

As “field” is tied to the locomotion of southern migrants, this study utilized the method “follow the people” of Marcus (1995) to follow the southerners in Bangkok to observe their social and cultural activities outside Klong-Chan flat, such as the festival of the tenth lunar month at a temple. The activities are part of the construction of the southern-ness identity. This study also used informal interview and participant observation which are the basic tools of ethnographic research to collect data.

This study selected Klong-Chan flat as a field since it has been known as the biggest southerner's community in Bangkok. This is not only about many of the southerners living here, but it is about the complex relationship of the southerners in Klong-Chan flat. As a researcher, I went to Klong-Chan flat with help from my husband's distant relative who has lived in and run a cooked to order food stall here for more than 10 years. My husband's relative attended PDRC actively and introduce me to other southerners here attending PDRC rally.

The Southerners and Politics

The Identity of Southern people

It has been known that Thai southerners have their own unique habit and personality different from people of other regions. This perception has been emphasized continually since the late 1970s through the writings of “local intellectuals” who are historians, folklorists, Thai studies academics and writers. The habit and personality of the southerners have been represented as primordial heritage from distant past influenced by specific natural environment of the region and Buddhism. The southerners don't like to be the henchmen of other people. They always live as gangsters but they are the gangsters with ethics and moral protecting the weak and their own community from unfair state power and influential people (Phetkaew, 2011)

However, for the local intellectuals, the southern-ness has been threatened by development from outside and this causes the society and culture of the southerners weak. Because the development usually provides benefits only for the rich and influential people, this leads to

various impacts such as crime, deterioration of natural resources, poverty, and migration. Then the southerners lost their dignity of southern-ness.

However, in general the southerners are proud of their personality that is different from and superior to people of other regions. In the context of current political conflict between the Yellow Shirts and the Red Shirts, many southerners are so proud to see the leaders of two sides are the southerners. They are also arrogant that the two former Prime Ministers of Thailand-Gen Prem Tinsulanonda, who is also a former Privy Council president and statesman, and Chuan Leekpai-are the southerners.

Political Culture of Southerners: From Antagonistic of State to Protect the Nation from Thaksin Regime

The opposition against state power: With unique characteristic of the southerners, they have usually not been trusted by the central state. Since the Ayutthaya Kingdom the southern region was seen by the center as being intractable (Phetkaew, 2011). The ideology to oppose against state power had been accumulated for several generations and led to several “bandit communities” around Songkhla Lake basin in the southern region. The bandit communities happened in response to the misery of people suppressed by the state and especially state officials through labor enlisting and levying.

The enmity toward the state and the “masters” including officials by the southerners has been continued from past to present with widespread sentence of today saying that “not fighting with the masters, not being out of poverty”. However, the masters for them had been only state officials in local regions while the noblemen and the monarch at the center were seen as the saviors.

Up until now the southerners still feel that masters or officials are superior to ordinary people who are always insulted and maltreated by the masters and official (Phetra, 2003) The counteraction against the state was clear in the case of the southerners attending the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) during 1970s because people at that time couldn’t endure persecution and repression from the state.

It is interesting that the southerners who refused to be the victims of exploitation and suppression by the state have become the conservative who actively protect the main three components of Thai state: the nationhood, the religion (Theravada Buddhism), and the monarchy.

Democrat Party: a political party of southerners: From the election in 1992 on, the Democrat Party won more than 80% of MP seats in the southern region. The party won heart and soul of the southerners who had shared feeling among them that the Democrat Party is “our party” or “the party of the southerners”. This caused prominent political localism (Sattayapipat, 2007; Boonsuaykhwan, 2006)

The characteristic of the southerner is very in consistency and in harmony with the identity of Democrat Party. The southerners identify themselves as the ones who are curious and active in politics much more than those of people from other regions. It is believed that the abundance of natural resources of the southern region has helped people not face with hardship and have time to learn politics. Also, the southerners prioritize education. This is in coherent with the image of Democratic Party which most of its members and leaders are well educated with good knowledge on politics. Moreover, since the southerners oppose corruption by people in power, this is agreeable with the image of the party prioritizing the honest through the attachment with Gen Prem Tinsulanonda and Chuan Leekpai.

Moreover, the Democrat Party has laid the foundation to win heart and soul of people based on patron-client relations helping people on various issues when being asked such as managing students to get in famous schools or helping to promote or reshuffle positions among officials (Boonsuaykhwan, 2006)

However, the commitment to the Democrat Party, which is a political party in a parliamentary system, doesn't automatically mean the supporting democracy. Amid the contemporarily political conflict and since the 2006 coup the status of a democratic political party has attenuated and has been replaced by negative image as a party supporting the coup. This is especially when the party boycotted the election for two times in 2006 and 2014 (Ramangkoon, 2014).

Politics by People Sector in the South: Although the southern people are bonded to the Democracy Party, many of them have disgusted politicians. They have felt that all politicians, no matter which side, just only think of themselves. For them, a parliamentary system and political parties don't support the participation from local communities. Also, local governments, which should be a hope for better local development and decentralization, always spend budget ineffectively. Moreover, local governments usually come to the power by vote buying.

Therefore, some groups of southerners set "the politics by people sector" connecting various groups to work on demands at policy level. The people sector has worked to oppose against development projects based on liberal economy weakening self-sufficiency of local communities. The southern people sector have joined "the civil society sector" at national level to solve political crisis caused by the representative democracy or parliamentary system with the problems on efficiency, transparency and legitimacy including the negligence of voices from the minorities. It is important to note that Thai civil sector fully supported the idea "reform before election" of PDRC.

Attending PAD and PDRC: In 2005 some southern people attended the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) actively to expel Thaksin government, which was seen as a corrupt government for benefits of its own partisan.

However, when comparing between the PAD rally and the PDRC rally, many more southern people joined the PDRC rally with highly energetic. This is because several PDRC leaders are southerners and important former MPs of the Democratic Party. Importantly, PDRC rally paid attention to the issues the southern people facing at that time, which was the low price of para-rubber. Rubber planters gathered to demand Yingluck Shinawatra's government to make higher price of rubber. Then rubber planters from the south became the main force of PDRC both in Bangkok and in the south.

Monarchy and southern people: The political culture of the southern people today is based on loyalty to the monarchy which is the most important attribute of the southern-ness. Their deep attachment to the Democrat Party is not only about regionalism but also the long term prominent presentation of the party to protect the monarchy.

For southern people, the King (the King Rama 9) worked very hard and sacrificed himself for people. The king is very much more superior than the politicians who tried to overthrow the monarchy. Therefore, the coup by the military is necessary because it brings good people to govern the country.

The royalty to the monarchy makes hatred toward the Red Shirts which is accused not being loyal and demanding to overthrow the monarchy.

The Southern People in Klong-Chan Flat

Who is the southerners in Klong-Chan Flat?

Klong-Chan flat is a large residential project run by the National Housing Authority (NHA), as a state enterprise. The flat was built in 1976 for low income people to lease. In the beginning, most people living in the flat were students of Ramkhamhaeng University, an open university with low tuition fee. It has been known that many of students of Ramkhamhaeng University are the southerners. However, the most current residences of

Klong-Chan flat are not students of Ramkhamhaeng University but people in working age (Koomkhanab, 1992).

From 30 years ago, the southern people in Klong-Chan flat have worked either in formal or informal economic sectors. The latter ones mainly are self-employed, trading and personal business. Most of southern people in Klong-Chan flat are in middle-lower and lower class, not being destitute and having a lifestyle (Koomkhanab, 1992). However, their lives and the ways making a living are insecure without any progress though career paths. For the ones working full-time with a company or a government agency, are in the young generation and most of them are working in various low-level positions. Many of them decided to stay in Bangkok after completing their degree. For the ones who are a food seller, beautician, locksmith, and etc. they are in middle-age with mainly high school educational background. Most of them migrated to Bangkok for more than 25-30 years. Also some of them make a living in a gray area such as being a caretaker of parking lot or working closely with local politicians to "look after the various things" and "helping the people" in the area.

Interestingly, the southern people in Klong-Chan flat plan to work and live permanently here since they don't have relatives left in their hometown and no job to make a living there.

Southerner Community at Klong-Chan Flat

During the past 30-40 years, it has been known that Klong-Chan flat plan is a community of the people from the south. Klong-Chan flat has been full of southern-style food stalls and tea/coffee shops. Most southerners still communicate to one another with southern dialect. There is even the ground for bird song contest, the popular recreation in the south. At the same time, outsiders have recognized Klong-Chan flat as a community of stubborn and impatient people who prefer violence to deal with any conflict.

The southerners at Klong-Chan flat themselves also realize the state of being southern communities. Some of them lived at other places before and then decided to move in to Klong-Chan flat as they feel that living here is like living at home and living in the south. Moreover, many of them have friends and relatives from the south living in the flat before, and got invited to move in.

The relationship and attachment among the southerners at the flat covered even the ones who don't have any relative or friend living here before. To befriend with southern neighbors is easy and the friendship brings long-term helps and supports.

Social relationship among the southerners has been constructed and reproduced through various informal activities such as the gathering around tea/coffee shops located nearby several buildings of the flat including recreation activities like bird song contest. The festival of the tenth lunar month held at the flat by the southerners very much helps strengthen the attachment among them. The festival provides a good chance for the ones who are not able to travel back home to make a merit for their ancestors and the festival also reminisces their southern roots.

The feeling of attachment in Klong-Chan flat makes the southerners protected the area of the flat from being occupied by capitalists or property developers and corrupt officials. Also, the strong bond among the southerners bring them decision to join PDRC.

The Southerners at Klong-Chan Flat and Politics

Formal Politics

Most southerners at Klong-Chan flat are loyal and devote to the Democrat Party same as most southerners in the south. However, the degree of loyalty and devotion differ among people of different ages. For the ones in middle-age, the Democrat Party is the party they have been familiar and felt attached with since they were young. The image of honesty of the

party based on the story of Chuan Leekpai impressed them since the generation of their parents. As mentioned before Chuan Leekpai has been recognized of being very honest and humble. Moreover, he worked so great in the parliament as a MP and oppositional party to debate and question against the corrupt governments.

Some southerners at Klong-Chan flat have connection and work closely with local members of the Councilor of Bangkok and members of the District Councilor of the party. Through the network the southerner they can propose their needs and demands to Bangkok government offices. The bond, attachment, and network with the Democrat Party are the important factors of the southerners here to join the PDRC rally actively.

However, for the young generation of the southerners at the flat, they identify themselves as a free man having strong intention to make the nation better, and then they don't appreciate much to the Democrat Party. They evaluate the party with both negative and positive views. They trust the party of having deep loyalty with the monarchy, but the party has worked or run the country ineffectively. They also think that all politicians and political parties are not honest and sincere to people. This younger generation joined PDRC even though they know that the leaders of PDRC are closely related to the Democrat Party. They explained this that it is priority to oppose against Thaksin Regime and it needs someone to be a leader of doing so.

Informal Politics

Attending PDRC rally: The southerners at Klong-Chan flat were actively and vividly participate in the PDRC rally much more than when they join the rally of PAD. Several of them attended the PDRC rally since the first day at Sam Sen train station to oppose against the Amnesty Act proposed by Yingluck's government. After that the southerners from Klong Chan Flat alternate naturally to attend all rallies and activities by PDRC. Some attended the rally every day after work. The ones with motorcycle always join the "Bangkok shutdown" closing various governmental organization to paralyze the government of Thaksin regime. For some special gatherings of PDRC, many southerners at Klong Chan Flat get together making food and drinks for the rally and military working as "peace keeper" in Bangkok few days before the coup in 22 February 2014. Importantly, they played important role to obstruct the general election both on the day of the pre-election and the election by shutting down the polling stations nearby the Klong Chan Flat.

The participation in PDRC rally of the southerners at Klong-Chan flat was very dedicated. They attended most occasions of the rally and worked so hard facing with high risk from high possible clashes with unknown groups and suppression towards the rally by the authorities. Some acted as the front lines of the rally in times of stress. This is different from the participation of the middle class and upper class who joined the rally sometimes and were very careful to not attend the rally when it was dangerous and intense.

The Reasons to Attend PDRC Rally

I categorized the southerners at Klong-Chan Flat attending PDRC rally into three groups. The first one is the group of people who are very much admire the Democratic Party. The second one is the group of the ones working for politicians and security officials related to the military government. The third one is the people who are active in politics. These three groups share three things to one another-opposing against corruption of the government by Thaksin Regime, opposing against the insult toward the monarchy, and opposing against the abusive of power, human rights abuse and wrong policies of the government by Thaksin regime such as the rice mortgage scheme and the tablet distribution to students.

Political Thought and Hope for Thailand

Justification for the coup d'etat and the junta

PDRC rally was important ladder to coup d'etat in May 22, 2014. For the southerners at Klong-Chan flat, the coup is necessary. They disappointed with the 2006 coup that was not able to solve the nation's problems successfully. For the 2014 coup, it helped prevent the violence as the police and the government at that time didn't do their job in providing the security of the protesters letting them to be attacked by the opponents. Without the intervention by the coup makers. There would be much more PDRC protestors hurt and threatened. They believed that after the coup the network of Thaksin Regime still continually utilized money to lure people to incite the government appointed by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO).

The southerners at Klong-Chan flat viewed that some of the Red-Shirts have real democratic ideology but they are innocent and are tricked by Thaksin. However, some of them get benefit from or hired by the network of Thaksin. For the leaders of the Red-Shirts, they don't have democratic ideology and get personal benefits from Thaksin and lure the Red-Shirts mass for their own benefit. Moreover, some groups of the Red-Shirts are armed to create turmoil in the country after the coup.

For the administration by the government under NCPO, most southerners felt satisfied with it. This is so different from what they evaluated the administration of Thaksin and Yingluck's governments. The decisiveness and quickness of the government by NCPO to make the new social order such as the forced organizing of hawkers, food stalls, van and motorcycle terminals as well as forest reclaiming are perceived in positive way. Comparing to Thaksin government the decisiveness and quickness on the same issues were condemned as being abusive and dictating. Same as the low price of rubber, it was seen as the failure of government during Yingluck's government. In Contrary, in the period of the government by NCPO the low price of rubber was not viewed as the failure of the government, but as the impact from the world economic condition. The corruption by the military and the government by NCPO was also seen as just a slight flaw that can be resolved in the future, while during Thaksin and Yingluck government the corruption was so important and it became the main reason for the southerners to support the coup.

Hope for Thailand

By attending the PDRC rally, the southerners at Klong-Chan flat expected a better society for future generation. One said he would like his kids growing up without depending on patron-client system. They also dreamed for better governing system. They accepted the election in democratic system but before having election there must be a reform first. This is because Thailand still has not had enough qualified politicians.

For the attribute of the PM, they would like the one who is honest, transparent, and being a good person. When being asked to name the name of persons as their idols for PM, they named General Prem Tinsulanonda (former PM and Privy Council President), Dr. Supachai Panichpakdi (former Director-General, World Trade Organization) and General Prayut Chan-o-cha. Another hope for them was to bring back peaceful Thailand with solidarity, not to be separated by people of different political ideology or "the color of shirts". It is important to note that while the southerners at Klong-Chan flat demanded for peace and solidarity of the society, they still viewed the opposition people negatively and viewed Isan people as being brought easily by populist policies of Thaksin Regime.

Building Good Men's Politics with Southerner Identity

The enthusiasm to participate in PDRC was closely related to the identity of southern-ness with relying very much on the feeling of partisan. No matter still living in the southern region or already migrating to Bangkok for years, the troubles of southerners believed to be the impacts of Thaksin Regime can create energetic in resistance against the government of the regime among the southerners including the southerners at Klong-Chan flat. On various stages of PDRC, the orators discussed the problems that southerners are facing with, especially the low price of rubber, the violence in the deep south of Thailand that caused severe casualties to the Buddhist southern people in the area. They felt that Yingluck government neglects the difficulties of the southern people. This included the incidents that southern students of Ramkumheng University were hurt by the red-members gathering at a stadium near the university.

For the southerners at Klong-Chan flat, joining the PDRC rally is a good opportunity to stay together with other southerners from various places with warm and harmonious atmosphere. They felt that the PDRC rally is their own activities. Also, on the stage there were several southern performance arts shown such as puppet shadow, Manora Dance, and music and songs with the content to criticize Thaksin Regime and Yingluck's government.

The feeling of being partisan of the southerners in attending PDRC was also related to Democrat Party which is "our political party" for the southerners. As the leaders of PDRC are former executives and main figures of the party, attending PDRC is to support the Democrat Party automatically.

The main identity of being southern-ness which is the refuse of fraudulent and corrupt power brought them to attend PDRC for benefit of the public. Also, the identity of connoisseur and being intractable is in coherent with violent actions of the PDRC rally such as shutting down government building and polling stations. For the southerners at Klong-Chan flat, these violent methods were necessary to stop injustice by the government under Thaksin regime.

The identity of southerners as being politically active made the southerners at Klong-Chan flat felt confident in their decision to join PDRC based on their accurate information with the purpose to make the country better. For them, the southern people's political action was different from that of the Red Shirts especially the ones from the northeastern region who have very few and inaccurate knowledge in politics and then become a political tool for bad government.

Conclusion: Southerners at Klong-Chan Flat and Significance to Future Thai Politics

Political thought and practice of the southerners at Klong-Chan flat have been based on the ideology to oppose against fraudulent and injustice state power. Although the battle would make them lose the benefit from the "populist policies" which the beneficiary are mainly middle lower and lower class.

The thought and practice of the Good Men's Politics of the southerners at Klong-Chan flat is a part of the movement making political parties weak and reduce the role and significance of politicians. That is to prevent vicious and corrupt politicians and political parties to get power to administer the country. Their political actions have increased power of the bureaucratic system and the power beyond regular politics. This is the political practice to change Thailand to be more conservative, neat, and moral society based on their view.

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