

A Study of the Relationship between Political Parties and People during Election Season: A Case Study of Pheu Thai Party^{**}

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Abstract

The research question of this research is how people and Pheu Thai political party interact in the policy development process. Answering this question to clarify the relationship above can be divided into four sub-points, which are 1) who are the people in the perception of the Pheu Thai Party? 2) Does Pheu Thai Party's regulatory structure and mechanism allow people to be involved? 3) What are the practices and activities of the Party and the member involving the people? And 4) What is the level of people's participation in the Pheu Thai's policy development process? To be able to answer all questions, the researcher has looked at the activities that The Party claim "people" as centrepiece in the policy-making process based on the election process on March 24, 2019. To demonstrate the empirical data, the researcher attempted to collect all

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sources, as follows 1) Pheu Thai Party's documents, arty regulations, ideology, policy, meeting minutes, etc. 2) The academic's analysis and ideas from all media. 3) Monitoring of Pheu Thai Party member's field visits and 4) Interview with eight Pheu Thai political executive members.

The results of the study revealed that the people from the viewpoint of Pheu Thai Party's consisted of all civilians and residents of Thailand. The relationship between Pheu Thai Party and the people in policy development process depends on radical change of the political conditions after the coup on May 22, 2014 that limit the interactions between the party, the political member and the people. The relationship between Pheu Thai party and the people currently rests on an important condition: the old successful image of policy's administrative of group of executive member who are the same groups since the Thai Rak Thai Party.

The Pheu Thai Party's policy-building mechanism in the 2019 elections, under the legal conditions and relations with the people mentioned above, is characterized by an attempt to open various channels for public hearing. A draft and the improving of a draft of policy were created by specific working group. In the improving process, the working group has been negotiating the direction of the policy between the stakeholder, the people and the executive of the arty. However, the final policy decision-making for electoral campaigns still depends on the executive group within the party.

Keywords: People's participation , Pheu Thai Party, Election

Introduction

“A Study of the Relationship between Political Parties and People during Election Season: A Case Study of Pheu Thai Party” aims to answer the question of how people and Pheu Thai political party interact in the policy development process. Answering this question to clarify the relationship above can be divided into four sub-points in accordance with the objectives: 1) who are the people in the perception of the Pheu Thai Party? 2) Does Pheu Thai Party’s regulatory structure and mechanism allow people to be involved? 3) What are the practices and activities of the party and the member involving the people? And 4) What is the level of people’s participation in Pheu Thai’s policy development process? To be able to research and answer all these questions, the researcher has looked at the activities that the party claim “people” as a centrepiece such as the policy-making process, based mainly on the process of the election on March 24, 2019, and candidate selection.

Collecting the data for this study, the researcher aims to demonstrate the empirical data from three main sources as follows: 1) Pheu Thai Party’s documents, including the party’s regulations, ideology, policy, meeting minutes, etc. 2) The academic’s analysis and ideas from all media. 3) An interview with eight Pheu Thai political executive members.

“People” in Pheu Thai Party’s perception

In the perception of the Pheu Thai Party management team, “people” can be divided into three groups:

(1) Party’s members and common people; in this definition, “common people” doesn’t include the party’s executives and political personnel.

(2) Individuals eligible for voting and the person related to said group

(3) All Thai people and residents. Pheu Thai Party needs to take care of all the residents in Thailand. However, Thai residents can be divided into many sectors and groups by different criteria, such as age, occupation, area, education, income, related sectors, organization, business ownership, residency status in Thailand, rights, role, cultural or religious group, etc.

Considering their election slogan: “reduce expense, increase income, expand opportunities,” the party’s definition of “people” would most likely be “poor, have low income and lack of opportunities”; the “people,” in the party’s perspective, need to “rely on” someone. Thus, if Pheu Thai Party becomes a government, it needs to become “someone who can be relied on” and be “the giver.” This kind of definition makes

the statement saying “Pheu Thai Party never makes give-away policy” be washed away among the criticism in Thai society.

Pheu Thai Party’s ideology concerning the people

Under the declaration of ideology in chapter 2, article 9 of the party’s regulation, there are nine articles addressing the demonstration of people’s ownership of power and people’s participation, as follows:

(1) Adhere to the Democratic form of Government with the King as Head of State.

(2) Insist that sovereignty belongs to the people, strive to create real democracy, and fight against all forms of dictatorships.

(5) Develop the party to truly become the political institution of the people.

Relationship between Pheu Thai Party and the people

At structure level

According to Pheu Thai Party’s regulation, the policies and activities concerning people’s participation are as follows:

The party’s policy: the policy is divided into main policy and specialized policy. There are 17 articles in the main policy addressing the establishment of real democracy, but don’t state in detail about people’s

participation. On the other hand, 16 aspects covered in specialized policy discuss people's power and participation as follows:

Political policy

(1) Adhere to the Democratic form of Government with the King as Head of State, allowing Thai people, as the owner of the sovereignty, to truly participate in politics; the shaping of guidelines and administration of public sectors; the monitoring of the exercise of state power; and the development of the country under the Constitution and laws.

(7) Promote and support decentralization, allowing people to participate more in self-governance and local development.

Administration policy

(1) Promote people's participation in the monitoring of government officials' performance of duty...

(5) Enable people to readily access to public sector's data and information without cost or with the least cost possible.

Natural resource and environment policy

(3) Reduce deforestation and manufacturing that relies on deforestation, increase forest area, and enable people to participate in forest conservation and restoration...

Agricultural policy

(5) Promote farmer grouping for the manufacturing, distributing, and support of farm product processing to increase the value of the product.

Education and sport policy

(2) Reduce inequality, establish equality, and create the opportunity to access quality education [...], encourage local government organizations, private sector, and communities to participate in the management of education...

Public health policy

(3) Enable people to take care of their own health, possess helpful knowledge, and participate in the promotion of health care...

Social development and human security policy

(2) Enable people to resolve their own problems and possess the creativity to build and develop a strong and happy community and society.

Party members are individuals at least 18 years of age on the day of membership subscription, who have subscribed to be a party member, already paid the membership fee, and have been approved to be a member by the party's registrar. The party member's rights are as follows (article 18 of the party's regulation):

(1) Participate in the consideration for the issuance or revision of the regulations concerning:

(1.1) Criteria and selection or approval method for the position appointment and dismissal, including roles and authority of the party's leader, secretary-general, treasurer, registrar, member, other executives, board of directors, branch leader and committee, and provincial representatives

(1.2) The party and party branches' general meetings

(1.5) Criteria and method for members of the House of Representatives and prime minister candidate selection within the party

(1.6) Criteria and method of candidate selection for political positions

(2) Make suggestions regarding the policy or voice opinions towards the party.

(3) Attend meetings and vote according to the regulation or board resolution.

(4) Get selected and appointed as the party's board of directors, branch board, provincial representative, committee, or other subcommittees according to the regulation, or as an adviser or officer of the party.

(5) Get selected as the party's member of the House of Representatives.

(6) Participate in the party's political activities.

(7) Select candidates for the election of members of the House of Representatives, prime minister, and other political positions

Pheu Thai Party holds roles and responsibilities towards its member and the people regarding the promotion of participation as follows (article 20):

(2) Work with the people to reasonably establish guidelines for the development of the country and solve the problems occurring in the society...

(3) Reasonably promote people's participation in political activities and the monitoring of the exercise of state power and independent organizations' operations.

Other activities

(1) Promote and support party members and people's participation in the policy making process and political decision-making.

In practice

People are allowed to participate in Pheu Thai Party's policy making process at the informing and informal discussion level. Pheu Thai Party's policy making process can be summarized as follows:

(1) Agencies or organizations involved in the policy making process

Pheu Thai Party's agency, organization, committee, and body of persons involved in the policy making process are divided into three levels, as follows:

(1.1) The party's decision-making level, consists of

- Board of directors, required to form according to the Political Party Law
- Pheu Thai Party's strategy committee: an internal committee working as an academic team and responsible for the coordination between party members and the board of directors. This committee is divided into many subcommittees, with senior party members or specialists appointed as a chair of each subcommittee, responsible for the provision of information and policy initiation.

(1.2) operation coordination level between the party and the field, consists of

- The member of the House of Representatives' working groups. These groups are divided by area and are responsible for gathering problems occurred in each area, then forwarding them to the party's specialized working group.
- The specialized working group consists of appointed advisers, former ministers, board of directors, and academics. Their responsibility is to draft initial needs for the development or solution to the problems received from the field and members of the House of Representatives, then present them to the strategy committee and/or board of directors for co-revision.

(1.3) Field level, includes

- The party's branch/coordinating team, responsible for receiving information and coordinating with party members and people in the area

(2) Channels to gather information, problems, situations, and related issues. The party's information gathering process is conducted via four following channels:

(2.1) Information gathering through Pheu Thai Party's meetings at various levels, both formal and informal, such as the party's general and extraordinary general meetings, board meetings, meetings for the member of the House of Representatives, strategy committee meetings, meetings with interest groups in different sectors, subgroup/ad hoc working group meeting, party branch/ coordinating team meeting, the situation analysis conducted by the strategy team, former ministers, and party advisers, etc.

(2.2) Field visit, for meeting and discussing with stakeholders

(2.3) Surveys and academic forums, both at national and local level, aiming to gather information on the party's topics of interest. Mostly, they would be surveys of candidates' popularity and feedback gatherings on the policy to be promoted during the election campaign. However, the survey result is usually shared only among party executives.

(2.4) Other online channels such as websites, Instagram, Facebook, etc. Party members, especially candidates,

would be advised to share information and communicate with the people through these channels.

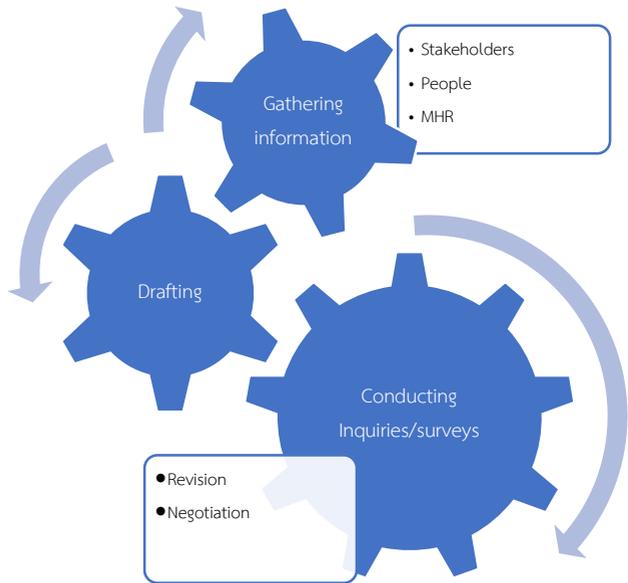
(3) Policy draft revision process

The mechanism Pheu Thai Party employs in the policy draft revision process can be summarized as follows:

(3.1) Receiving information regarding problems, situations, and other issues from the information-gathering channels and directing them to the working group and the party's internal meeting mechanism.

(3.2) Specialized working groups drafting the policy by incorporating stakeholders' needs and opinions of the academic, both in and outside the party; considering the possibility of the policy according to the Election Law; and comparing them with other parties' policy. In this step, the working group would constantly go back and forth with the executives to improve the draft.

(3.3) Presenting the draft to the board of directors to finalize the policy



Gathering information

- Stakeholders/people/MHR

Drafting

Conducting Inquiries/surveys

- Revision
- Negotiation

(4) Policy finalization

Pheu Thai Party's board of directors and working groups consisting of former ministers, former members of the House of Representatives, and

advisers remain the policy decision-makers and would finalize the policy in accordance with the party's situation analysis and laws.

Status of the people in Pheu Thai Party's political process

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the statement saying “Pheu Thai Party never makes give-away policy” be washed away among the criticism in Thai society.

Conclusion and discussion of the relationship between Pheu Thai Party and the people

Changed political conditions

After the coup on May 22, 2014, political conditions concerning the conduct of political activities by political parties changed radically. These newly- designed systems and regulations limit the interactions among politicians and political parties. In the forum titled “Past, Present, and Future of the Constitution of Thailand” (2019), Vannapar Tirasangka stated that “the Constitution was drafted on the basis of mistrust from a certain group of people who believes that all politicians are corrupted” Meanwhile, Siripan Nogsuan commented that “the Constitution became a tool utilized in the transition to non-democracy [...], a military regime disguised by election, leaving enough room to easily attract and control political actors. [...] There are four failures of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (B.E. 2560 (2017)): it is unable to establish a stable government, provokes problems pertaining to checks and balances, is unable to establish equality and alleviate inequality, and is unable to create political unity. The Constitution will become the cause of conflict;

if it is in use for a long time, political parties will begin to fight against one another...”

The political conditions under Thailand’s principal laws largely affect Pheu Thai Party’s political activities. For example, the selection of the candidate to be on the party list, in which the party has to include its former ministers and executives despite knowing that they stand very little chance of getting the candidate elected as party-list representatives under the conditions of the Constitution and related laws. As a result, the party needs to subsequently adjust its internal management process.

The party’s former ministers and executive members who are currently not the member of the House of Representatives but had become a well-known symbol of the party need to work outside the parliament as the party’s subcommittee members to support the party’s members of the House of Representatives working in the parliament. Therefore, the gap between the well-known members and the party’s members of the House of Representatives is widened even more.

The people need to “rely on” someone

As discussed in the previous section of this study, Pheu Thai’s policy seems to define the “people” as a group of individuals who need to “rely on” someone. However, the party shows that they have reached out to various occupational groups and organized international

cooperation. This prompts a question for Pheu Thai Party whether they can elevate themselves from “ someone to be relied on” to the “supporter” of the people.

Past achievements

It is undeniable that, compared with other parties’ policies, Pheu Thai’s policy promoted during the election campaign in 2019 neither created a new phenomenon nor was unique. The strategy of utilizing the policy and characteristics of the party leader in an election campaign, which is the change the Thai Rak Thai Party had initiated since the time of Thaksin Shinawatra, is now adopted by all political parties. In other words, even though Pheu Thai Party has opened various information-gathering channels, there is still a limitation to creating a unique policy that will gain support from the people.

Despite being able to gather information through various means, forming a policy that both meets people’s needs and conforms to the Constitution and the 20- year National Strategy still becomes a new challenge. Pheu Thai Party needs to quickly develop a guideline that will help separate the party’s relationship with the people from their impression and trust in the party’s past success in making the policy practical and effective.

The relationship between Pheu Thai Party and the people today is based on these important conditions:

(1) The relationship in which Pheu Thai Party is the continuity of Thai Rak Thai and People Power Party, verified by the fact that the party leader, type of policy, and some personnel are the same in these three parties.

(2) Being a continuity of the mentioned parties results in the people remembering the past success of the old, practical policy.

(3) The personnel transferred to Pheu Thai Party possess past work experience. Although some had been criticized for their administrative problems, had been prosecuted, etc., some people still have faith in these personnel.

An important question is, will the relationship between Pheu Thai Party and the people, relying on the party's past achievements, waver and wither under the context and condition that other political parties are forming their policy on the same basis and that party members are beginning to transfer to other parties, which is normal in the world of politics? The answer proposed by NDI (2011) is that the party needs to establish itself as an institution deriving its policy from discussions, making the people feel as if they are the owner of that policy. In this aspect, the relationship between the party and the people will become closer and more sustainable.

Being the “political institution of the people”

Thai Rak Thai Party had succeeded in recruiting millions of members before transitioning to Pheu Thai Party with only hundreds of thousands of members. This is the history of the party that has repeatedly faced dissolution and thus prompted a condition that it needs to manage new members all the time. As a consequence of this condition, Pheu Thai Party became “worried” that it would be “dissolved.” Furthermore, some conditions requiring party executives to be responsible for party members’ behavior make Pheu Thai Party even more cautious. Therefore, it is undeniable that the Pheu Thai Party’s position as the “political institution of the people” is affected by external political conditions. Accordingly, Phumtham Wechayachai (2020) stated in his interview that *“the problem of discontinuity or being unable to become a strong political institution is mostly the result of the weak democracy system in Thailand and the fact that it is constantly sabotaged and destroyed by the military and people in the position of power. When addressing this issue, we will discuss in terms of ideas that, when looking in detail, we can’t achieve such improvement as we are not in such good shape as we used to be in. Plus, all those experiences haven’t been continually passed down to us. For example, I’m now with Pheu Thai Party, but I’m the continuity of the Thai Rak Thai Party. However, there are very few people whom I worked with then left in Pheu Thai Party today. If we don’t do anything about this and*

there has been a continuous improvement during these past 20 years, the party would have been way stronger than it is today.”

Communication innovation

The form of relationship between Pheu Thai Party and the people began to shift from direct interaction to interaction conducted via communication innovation. The party's executives, advisers, former ministers, and members of the House of Representatives were all asked to create a channel to communicate with the people on every platform possible, such as Facebook, Line, Facebook Pages, Twitter, Instagram, or other channels based on each member's preferences. The purpose of communicating through these channels is to distribute the party's news and information to the group of people who currently follows each party member and to receive information from the field, as Pheu Thai Party is aware of the limitation of public communication conducted during their time as the opposition party.

The information gathered through these channels will be forwarded to the party by regional coordinators. The party's members of the House of Representatives or political personnel will connect the coordinators to these channels to enable two-way communication. The information sharing conducted via this channel is considered personal communication, separated from the party's. The information shared by

the official Pheu Thai Party channel will be screened by the legal team before distribution to prevent illegal actions, which can negatively affect the party.

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