

## CHAPTER XII

### CONCEPTS FOR POLITICAL CHANGE

#### 12.1 Voices for Political Change

Much like Prem and Harn in the 1980s, contemporary military leaders in the Thai army recognize the political nature of the insurgency, and realize that the solution will require more than just a military response. The problem is political, and increasing numbers of people in Thai society are also beginning to realize that the end state must be the restructuring of local politics by way of certain measures of decentralization in order to win the popular support of the people. As the incidents of violence increased throughout the summer of 2007, more and more public figures began to emphasize the merits of political decentralization as a means to mitigate violence. The majority of these voices came from among academics and the NGO community, calling for the autonomy of southern bureaucracy and empowering the local community to assume a greater role in the decision making process.

A study by the Prince of Songkhla University, Pattani Campus, indicated that 41.8 per cent of southern Muslims wanted a special administrative body established from the three southernmost provinces. An almost equal number called for the restructuring of local administration. The study's subtext is that local Muslims see the central government as insensitive and unresponsive to their needs. Local residents want to be empowered to manage their own affairs, though they remain divided over the proper administrative structure.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unknown Author. Lessons on south from Okinawa. Available from: <<http://www.nationmultimedia.com>> [4 September 2007]

In September 2007, Dr. Waemahadee Waedoh led a number of academics, university students, and former senators designate for the south in the formation of a group dedicated to proposing measures to quell the insurgency.<sup>2</sup> He advocates autonomy as the best way to solve the regions problems.

Dr Gotom Arya of the Peace Center at Mahidol University, has been spearheading a World Bank Funded Community Development Project in conjunction with Thammasat and Chulalongkorn Universities. The project explores capacity building, documentary research, and field research in the areas of local governance. Dr. Arya, a former member of the NRC advocates that local people should be allowed greater participation in decision making, especially on matters that affect their patriotism in order to help mitigate violence. He calls for reform within the Ministry of the Interior to allow for substantive local political participation through decentralization and devolution.<sup>3</sup>

Mahidol, Chulalongkorn, and the Prince of Songkhla Universities sponsored a regional workshop this year with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance which initiated dialogue on policy options for devolution of power as a means to increase stability and engender peace. Attendees included policy makers, researchers, and civil society members.<sup>4</sup>

Dr Chaiwat Satha Anand, also a former member of the NRC believes that it makes sense to have periodic dissension in response to centralization, in that Siam went to the south in the form of colonization and completely emasculated the traditional power structures of the region. He calls for a “sandwich strategy” with the micro being peace,

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<sup>2</sup> Post Reporters. Senators-designate form group. Bangkok Post (24 September 2007): p.3 Main.

<sup>3</sup> Gotom Arya, personal interview, Bangkok, Thailand, 29 Jan 2008.

<sup>4</sup> “Towards Liberating Democracy: Devolution of Power Matters” International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Report of the Regional Workshop Bangkok, 16-17 January 2007.

non violence and reconciliation, meso being military, and macro being a political strategy.<sup>5</sup>

## **12.2 Decentralization, Devolution, Deconcentration, and Special Autonomy**

In recent years throughout Southeast Asia and the world, the decentralization of governments has brought about a considerable increase in local political, administrative, and financial autonomy. Factors which have brought about this trend include the disillusionment with centralized planning, better ways to manage growth and development programs, and the difficulties in managing the complex growth of societies. Additionally globalization has increased the political awareness of people, prompting them to recognize their place in governmental participation. Social and political changes seen in liberalization, privatization, and market reforms have increased the demands on central governments, pressuring them to decentralize, as have political pressures and pressures from donors such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.<sup>6</sup> Decentralization of political authority and responsibility has become advocated and implemented in developing countries as a means of improving governance, reducing poverty, and inducing development. Proponents view it as important for administrative efficiency and political participation.<sup>7</sup>

### **12.2.1 Definitions**

Decentralization refers to the transfer of power to local government units to initiate, fund and implement programs meant for local development. It is based on the

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<sup>5</sup> Chaiwat Satha Anand, "Myth of Thai Society", Southeast Asian Studies class lecture, Bangkok, Thailand, 9 Jan 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Colin MacAndrews, "Features of Decentralization", Southeast Asian Studies class lecture, Bangkok, Thailand, 13 Jun 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Chandra-naj Mahakanjana, "Decentralization, Local Government, and Socio-political Conflict in Southern Thailand" *Working Papers No 5*. Washington D.C: East-West Center Washington, 2006: p.16.

principle that public decisions should be made when possible, at the level of authority closest to the people.<sup>8</sup>

Devolution of power implies that local governments are given some discretionary authority in decision making and in the management of local affairs and delivery of services to their communities. It reforms to a form of administrative decentralization.<sup>9</sup>

Deconcentration of power implies the transfer of more limited responsibilities, powers, and resources from the central government to field offices at the local and regional level: government becomes closer to the citizens while remaining directly under the authority of the central powers and acting on its behalf and under their direction and control.<sup>10</sup>

Special autonomy is assignment or transfer of autonomous government functions usually by a national legislation to elected or otherwise represented local government bodies.<sup>11</sup>

### **12.2.2 Rationale for Decentralization**

Much of the rationale for the justification of decentralization is in either economic or political concerns. Economists justify decentralization on the grounds of allocative efficiency, in that the rationale for decisions about public spending that are made by a level of government closer and more responsive to a local constituency are more likely to reflect the demands for local services than similar decisions taken by a remote government. An additional benefit is that people are more likely to be willing to pay for

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<sup>8</sup> "Towards Liberating Democracy: Devolution of Power Matters" International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Report of the Regional Workshop Bangkok, 16-17 January 2007: p.9

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

services they find to be responsive to their priorities, especially if they have been involved in the decision making process with regard to service delivery.<sup>12</sup> For example, in 2003 the Thai government approved a large budget for development projects in southern Thailand, but instead of the money being allocated to local governments; it was channeled through the SBBPC. According to locals, the resulting projects did not reflect local needs in that seeds ordered were inappropriate to local soil conditions. Local leaders would have preferred funds to promote vegetable production, yet locally initiated projects lacked funding and in fact were not implemented.<sup>13</sup>

Political rationale for decentralization lies in the fact that people have become disillusioned with existing systems of government, believing them to be inequitable, unrepresentative, poorly performing, and failing to provide them with a voice to influence decisions that affect them.<sup>14</sup> Decentralization, and specifically devolution, is a means to expand the space for public participation, especially when the stakeholders are part of the design and implementation of the governing structures.

### **12.3 Devolution and Democracy**

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental body dedicated to building sustainable democracy. In February 2007, it sponsored a regional workshop “Towards Liberating Democracy: Devolution of Power Matters” in Bangkok, Thailand. Drawing on experiences in Aceh, Mindanao, West Papua, and southern Thailand, the workshop addressed the nexus between democracy, conflict and human security in these contexts, and emphasized the

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<sup>12</sup> “Rationale for Decentralization”, Southeast Asian Studies class handout, Bangkok, Thailand, 06 Jun 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Chandra-naj Mahakanjana, “Decentralization, Local Government, and Socio-political Conflict in Southern Thailand” *Working Papers No 5*, Washington D.C: East-West Center Washington, 2006: p.21.

<sup>14</sup> “Decentralization and Good Governance”, Southeast Asian Studies class handout, Bangkok, Thailand, 27 Jun 2007: p.5.

need from democracies to help create a positive peace in conflict prone societies through power sharing as a measure to stabilize areas facing violence and reduce tensions between different groups in society.

International IDEAs definition of democracy is that of a system of political governance whose decision making power is subject to the controlling influence of citizens who are considered political equals. A democratic political system is inclusive, participatory, representative, accountable, transparent and responsive to citizens' aspirations and expectations.<sup>15</sup> This definition resembles closely the World Bank definition of good governance; the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development. Essential components include efficient public sector management, accountability of public officials, a legal framework for development, and the availability of information and transparency.<sup>16</sup> The Asian Development Bank sees good governance in terms of sound development management and cites the core elements as accountability, participation, predictability, and transparency.<sup>17</sup>

With decentralization seen as a strategy by which good governance can be obtained, and with true democracy possessing the hallmarks of good governance, the concept is that devolution of power is a means to increase stability and engender peace. Decentralization facilitates democracy, in that it expands space for public participation. True democracy, as defined by the International IDEA, necessarily then allows for conflict resolution, human development, and human security. At the same time, it also facilitates economic development geared towards the stakeholders in society.

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<sup>15</sup> "Towards Liberating Democracy: Devolution of Power Matters" International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Report of the Regional Workshop Bangkok, 16-17 January 2007: p.6.

<sup>16</sup> "Decentralization and Good Governance", Southeast Asian Studies class handout, Bangkok, Thailand, 27 Jun 2007: p.6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## 12.4 Thai Political Tradition

The problem with this concept is that it is diametrically opposed to the Siamese/Thai political tradition since the Ayutthaya period, and is also dissimilar to the Thai concept of democracy. Thai centralization has historically served as the means to defend against internal and external threat and preserve the integrity and stability of the state. As Bangkok Post Editor Sanitsuda Ekachai wrote, “Emerging in the reign of Rama IV and V under the pressures from colonialism, the process to define Siam’s identity began. A new ideology to unite people under political centralization... Buddhism as the source of morality of the Thai race, absolute monarchy as the source of enlightened rule and national unity, Thai language as an index of the cultured class were selected as the main ingredients of being Thai. These ingredients...legitimizes unequal power and teaches us to accept inequality based on social hierarchy linked to past karma...National ideology says inequality among Buddhist Thais is ok because the problems will be taken care of by a good and moral leader who needs total control to do his job...It is ok to use force to solve nagging problems and more than ok to use violence against those we do not count as our own...this national ideology supports state violation of human rights and hinders democratic development.”<sup>18</sup>

The fear of many with the Thai government and society at large is that decentralization or autonomy will lead to secession and similar demands from other ethnic minorities, thereby threatening the overall stability and integrity of the Thai state. In 2006, Prawase Wasi, deputy head of the NRC said using the word autonomy will create more disputes.<sup>19</sup> In July 2007, Interim Prime Minister Surayud ruled out the idea of a special administrative zone, saying that it sounded too much like autonomy and that

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<sup>18</sup> Sanitsuda Ekachai, Commentary, *Bangkok Post*, 31 Jan 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Ten Kate. No solution apparent as round of attacks signal insurgent pressure. Available from: <<http://www.asiasentinal.com>> [17 January 2008].

further study was needed.<sup>20</sup> This being the case, autonomy has repeatedly been ruled out as a solution strategy.

According to Dr Michael Nelson, professor and visiting lecturer of comparative local government at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand's administrative unity is put together with country as a nation. Most conservative Thais fear semi independent status. "The Thais are caught in a contorted conceptual framework, equating decentralization with independence".<sup>21</sup> Sunai Pasuk of Human Rights Watch echoes this sentiment, "You can grant autonomy to Bangkok or to Pattaya, etc. as long as it is granted to fellow Thais, but Malays are historically rebellious, and this is what makes the idea so sensitive."<sup>22</sup> Dr Panitan Wattanayagorn, a professor of political science at Chulalongkorn (and Thammasat) University, agrees that the central authority has not done a good job thus far. "We need to rethink multipolar and multicultural Thailand...we need to create long term good governance in the south and look to self determination...we need to change the mindset of the Thais in terms of autonomy."<sup>23</sup>

## 12.5 Thai Experience with Decentralization

Thailand had in fact been working on measures of administrative and fiscal decentralization beginning with the Seventh Economic and Social Development Plan (1991-1996). This plan emphasized developing local infrastructure, providing credit to expand and improve local services, and helping local authorities mobilize capital and pursue development projects.<sup>24</sup> The 1997 Constitution mandated a more decentralized and participatory structure of government at all levels, calling for the restructuring of

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<sup>20</sup> Unknown Author. Special administrative zone unlikely for the south. Available from: <<http://www.bangkokpost.com>> [8 July 2007].

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Michael Nelson, personal interview, Bangkok, Thailand, 30 Jan 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Sunai Pasuk, personal interview, Bangkok, Thailand, 4 Feb 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Dr. Panitan Wattanayagorn, personal interview, Bangkok, Thailand, 5 Jan 2008.

<sup>24</sup> "East Asia Decentralizes", Southeast Asian Studies class handout, Bangkok, Thailand, 27 Jun 2007: p.26.

administrative functions across central and local administrative units, provided that it did not endanger the unity of the state by dividing it into smaller autonomous entities.<sup>25</sup>

Following the 1997 Constitution, there were nine different laws and policies which formed the basis of Thailand's decentralization efforts, including the National Decentralization Act of 1999, the Provincial Administrative Decentralization Act and the Tambon Administrative Decentralization Act. These legislative policies were intended to increase local administrative autonomy by giving local governments more freedom in generating their own administrative, personnel, and financial policies. In terms of the scale to which local government should be devolved, the decision was made in favor of smaller units, rather than provincial because of the lingering fear that empowering provinces would have the effect of strengthening separatist sentiments.<sup>26</sup>

### 12.5.1 Provincial Level

At the provincial level in Thailand, bureaucratic power is exercised through the MOI and remains concentrated in the hands of provincial representatives of the bureaucracy. Provincial governors who are responsible to the MOI administer provinces and oversee the field offices of central ministries that have provincial level branches.<sup>27</sup> These governors and their administration are appointed, not elected.

Locally elected government at the Provincial level is formed by a separate entity called the Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO). It is a body designed to facilitate democratic decentralization at the provincial level. The executive branch of the PAO is the provincial council, which is comprised of members elected from each district

<sup>25</sup> Michael H. Nelson, *Thailand's New Politics: King Prajadhipok's Institute Yearbook 2001*. (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2001), p.226.

<sup>26</sup> Chandra-naj Mahakanjana, "Decentralization, Local Government, and Socio-political Conflict in Southern Thailand" *Working Papers No 5*. Washington D.C: East-West Center Washington, 2006: p.23.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Arghiros. *Democracy, Development and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand*. (Surrey:Curzon Press, 2001), p. 22.

within the province. While the Thai government presents these councilors as the people's representatives who are expected to promote the development of their districts, in truth power continues to remain concentrated in the hands of the appointed members of the provincial bureaucracy. The roles and duties of the PAO are so limited that the organization has little influence over development or the work of the governors' administration. Central government has maintained a high degree of control over the procedural and law making functions of local government.<sup>28</sup>

### 12.5.2 District Level and Sub district level

There is no form of local government at the district level, instead being completely administered by MOI appointed officials. The district chief supervises the work of field representatives of the central ministries and departments.<sup>29</sup>

Local government at the sub district level, or Tambon, is represented by the Tambon Administrative Council (TAO). The Tambon Council is composed of the following: the sub district head (Kamnan) and the village headmen (Phu Yai Ban) of all villages in the Tambon, the Tambon doctor, and of elected members, elected by the people in each of the villages in the Tambon. Each village elects one member. The TAO has the powers and duties of developing the Tambon under its plans, projects and budget, making recommendations for administrating the services as well as developing the Tambon.<sup>30</sup> Subject to the law, the Tambon Council can do the following within the Tambon:

1. provide water for consumption and agriculture; provide and maintain waterways and land routes;

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Arghiros. *Democracy, Development and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand*. (Surrey:Curzon Press, 2001), p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.p.25.

<sup>30</sup> Tambon Council and Tambon Administrative Authority Act B.E. 2537 (1994).

2. provide and protect drains, and keep the roads, waterways, paths and public places clean, and also provide garbage and night soil services;
3. protect, look after and maintain natural resources and the environment;
4. promote people's occupations;
5. And promote and develop women and children, the youth, the elderly and the handicapped.

The District Officer, as representative of the MOI, has the power of supervising the performance of duties of the Tambon Council to be in accordance with the law and the rules and regulation of the service.<sup>31</sup>

## 12.6 Weaknesses of Thai Decentralization

Although both the 1997 and the 2007 Constitutions formally enshrined decentralization, and subsequent legislation detailed it, Thailand has implemented few of the reforms which were formally adopted.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of fiscal decentralization, local governments still do not have authority to set priorities and make decisions on expenditure allocations. Local government budgets need to be approved by the provincial governor or the district council, which are extensions of the central government.<sup>33</sup> Structures such as the PAO and TAO have no real power, in terms of devolution from the center to the locals, and therefore locals as of yet have no greater role in decision making.<sup>34</sup> The main weakness with decentralization in Thailand has been its implementation, and the fact that it has been hampered by institutional arrangements and weak support from the central government.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Tambon Council and Tambon Administrative Authority Act B.E. 2537 (1994)

<sup>32</sup> "East Asia Decentralizes", Southeast Asian Studies class handout, Bangkok, Thailand, 27 Jun 2007: p.27.

<sup>33</sup> Chandra-naj Mahakanjana, "Decentralization, Local Government, and Socio-political Conflict in Southern Thailand" *Working Papers No 5*. Washington D.C: East-West Center Washington, 2006: p.23.

<sup>34</sup> Sunai Pasuk, personal interview, Bangkok, Thailand, 4 Feb 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Chandra-naj Mahakanjana, "Decentralization, Local Government, and Socio-political Conflict in Southern Thailand" *Working Papers No 5*. Washington D.C: East-West Center Washington, 2006: p.23.

With respect to the southern provinces specifically, decentralization has not achieved desired results in that not only are the PAOs and TAOs operating under the authority of the center and the state ideology of Buddhism, but local people are underrepresented in the public administration and civilian affairs remain in the hands of the MOI and militarized. In terms of whether the current scheme of decentralization, as expressed through legislation can address the grievances of the Malay Muslims, it is not likely. The practice of decentralization is closely supervised by the provincial and central government and therefore seen as not genuine. It does not allow space for the cultural, religious, linguistic, and other elements of local patriotism to express themselves politically.

### **12.7 Autonomy Considered, Ruled Out**

Special autonomy is assignment or transfer of autonomous government functions usually by a national legislation to elected or otherwise represented local government bodies

As previously mentioned, the fear of many with the Thai government and society at large is that decentralization or autonomy will lead to secession and similar demands from other ethnic minorities, thereby threatening the overall stability and integrity of the Thai state. While the Thai state has experimented with decentralization to a certain degree, by and large it has been in the form of deconcentration, rather than devolution. The difference being that the central government had delegated power to its own branch offices, rather than transferring autonomous government functions to elected local bodies acting on their own behalf.

Special autonomy, in terms of devolution of central power, while seen as a political strategy to empower local people, is an aversion to the Thai concept of nation.

This aversion was made abundantly clear early on, in response to Haji Sulong's Seven Point Demands in 1948, and is still the case with the most recently elected government.

Prior to the MP elections of December 2007, each of the contending political parties put forward a policy for addressing the insurgent violence. The Democrats proposed a special regulation giving more support for Islamic schools, improving professional skills for locals, and promoting harmonious coexistence. Charthai planned to establish a new organization called "One Stop Government for Southern Border Provinces" comprising representatives of independent organizations as well as local officials, organizations, and academics. Puea Pandin, along with initiating projects for economic improvement, espoused establishing community councils. Ruam Jai Chart Thai focused on delivery of justice and modifying education to suit local culture. Matchimathipataya also suggested improving the economy and education.<sup>36</sup> Yet it was the People's Power Party (PPP) which seemed to be suggesting a move toward autonomy.

### **12.8 PPP: Lack of a Coherent Strategy**

The Peoples Power Party (PPP) planned to implement their "Peaceful South" policy, centered on three main projects:

1. The authorities must initiate reconciliation, protection and justice, and eradicate fear and distrust among the people. This needs full participation from every sector.
2. Promotion of a Halal food production center, operated by local Muslim people, to prompt export of food products.

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<sup>36</sup> Post Reporters. Party lines. Bangkok Post (2 December 2007): p.5 Main

3. An “Education for All” project to increase the number of teachers and teaching equipment and make courses more relevant to local customs and tradition.

On top of this policy, PPP also advocated “a self governing zone should be set up so that local authorities can manage their own natural resources and education. The central government would remain responsible for foreign affairs and certain development projects. This will not lead to separation. Thailand cannot be divided.”<sup>37</sup>

The PPP won the majority of parliamentary seats, and soon thereafter formed a government with Samak Sundaravej as the new Prime Minister. Following the elections, however, there was no more discussion on establishing a self governing zone, and instead it appeared as though the PPP was without a unified political strategy and direction for ending the violence.

The Minister of Interior, Chalerm Yubamrung, said in February 2008 that finding a solution to the southern unrest was a priority of his government. Chalerm held a discussion with the SBPAC director and the provincial governors, in which he said, “Consideration will be given to setting up an autonomous area in the far south...as a means of redressing the violence in the region.”<sup>38</sup> Within 24 hours of this announcement, PM Samak criticized Chalerm as being careless in the matter and that it was too soon to talk about autonomy.<sup>39</sup> Samak soon thereafter met with representatives from the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand who proposed complete disarmament of all civilians, rebels and eventually security personnel. Samak supported the proposal, saying that,

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<sup>37</sup> Post Reporters. Party lines. Bangkok Post (2 December 2007): p.5 Main

<sup>38</sup> Unknown Author. Chalerm: Some form of autonomy possible. Bangkok Post. (12 February 2008): p.2 Main.

<sup>39</sup> Anucha Charoenpo. Samak cool to autonomy idea. Bangkok Post (13 February 2008): p.1 Main.

“Keeping accusing one another of injustice will never bring an end to the story. We have to say the injustice issue is over, period.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite advancing the idea of some sort of autonomy prior to the elections, once in power the PPP backed down from the idea, resorting to an excuse of additional study requirements similar to the Surayud government. Instead the focus is on reconciliation, as a means to end the violence, with no attempt to address the issues of justice, and certainly no plan to devolve power away from the center. Yet using special autonomy as a strategy for conflict resolution and a means of keeping a nation unified is not without precedent. As will be seen in the next chapter, Indonesia was a nation with a very strong centralist tradition. Yet after decades of fighting an ethnic and Islamist insurgency, the government negotiated a political solution whereby autonomy was granted, allowing for the local grievances to finally be addressed and allowing the insurgents a political voice as opposed to continued resorting to violence.

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<sup>40</sup> Surasak Glahan and Wassana Nanuam. Critics rap arms free south plan. Bangkok Post (6 Feb 2008): p.1 Main.