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THAILAND:  
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**ANALYZING PROVINCIAL POLITICAL STRUCTURES IN THAILAND:  
PHUAK, TRAKUN, AND HUA KHANAEN<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper is about local politics and decentralization in Thailand. However, even in dealing with sub-national political processes, we cannot escape the formative influence global models of social organization exert on people's lives. For example, why should a villager living somewhere in Thailand's Mae Hong Son province add a piece of social action called "elections" (and all that is connected with it) to his life? To be sure, this villager did not come up with the idea himself. By going to a polling station and casting their ballots, people enact a global model of political structuring normally called "democracy." Yet, voters, politicians, and electoral officials do not merely enact what is stipulated in a world-level blueprint, making their actions indistinguishable from those of their European, American, Japanese, or Cambodian counterparts. Rather, we observe an active adaptation in relation to existing local socio-political structures. Expressions such as glocalization, hybridization, or global-local nexus are often used to put a label on this situation. Those western academics who are very much attached to a normatively pure model of democracy often see the outcome as "deficient"—leading to calls for capacity-building—or even as "defective"—as if we were dealing with a malfunctioning car that has to be sent to the garage for repair.

Similar observations might occur when we look at the administrative images produced by local politicians elected to executive positions. For example, the management policies announced by the *nayok* (executive chairman) of the Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO, or *ongkan borihan suan changwat* in Thai) of Chachoengsao were fully in accordance with the current normative clichés used in the public administration discourse in Southeast Asia, and probably worldwide. The *nayok* PAO stated: "I will emphasize *transparency* and *accountability*." In addition, he promised to facilitate *popular participation*, and follow the goals laid down in the PAO's *strategic plan*. One might say that capacity-building measures had at least

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1. This paper is partly based on two months of field research in Chachoengsao province, between 7 February and 5 April 2004. During this time I observed both the electoral organization and the political situation. I would like to thank Marc Askew, Duncan McCargo, and Michael Montesano for comments on earlier drafts, and Wendell Katerenchuk for editorial assistance.

enabled the PAO's staff to produce a document featuring the global language of "good governance" (equivalent staff in Cambodia, Indonesia, or the Philippines can produce this kind of talk, too). In clear contrast, the executive team appointed by the *nayok*, and the PAO councilors in his group, were described as *nakleng*, *kong*, and *yii*, expressions that highlight negative characteristics, such as bullying behavior, and corruption. During the election campaign, the *nayok* was accused as being involved in the drug trade and gambling business, accusations that were denied. Thus, it is easy to see the difference between global models and local realities in Thailand's decentralization efforts (for a more theoretical treatment, see Nelson 2004).

A second point I would like to make in this introduction concerns research methodology. One needs to keep in mind that Thai (local) politics is a highly exclusive and secretive affair. Most of it is not played out on a public stage, nor is the public normally allowed to observe what really happens. Research in this area cannot avoid dealing "with political practices that some people would prefer remain undocumented" (Arghiros 2001: viii). Obviously, political researchers cannot usually gain access to important discussions of electoral strategy and tactics. It is improbable that an academic observer would be invited when members of local governments were brought to an MP's house to discuss what could be done to strengthen their networks of *hua khanaen* (vote canvassers) for the next general election in order to beat the *phuak* (informal and exclusive political grouping) running under the banner of a rival political party.

One might happen to see piles of copied voter rolls, divided by village, in the house of a candidate for the position of *nayok* PAO. But the researcher should probably not ask for details, such as where these rolls came from, who prepared them, and whether they had anything to do with the village-level system of *hua khanaen* and the resultant vote buying. During field observations, one might detect that a district-level committee directing the vote counting for the position of *nayok* PAO probably had been stacked with members of the candidate's *phuak*, which is led by the patriarch of the pre-eminent political family of that area. However, trying to learn how this had happened by asking the officials who were directly responsible for selection and appointment—the chief district officer (*nai amphoe*), the *palat* (head of the administration) of the PAO, and the Provincial Election Commission—might not yield satisfactory results.

Data collection becomes difficult when conducting research in settings where informal processes are dominantly important compared to formal ones. As Fukui (2000: 3), introducing a book on informal politics in East Asia, said: "...the workings of such [informal] politics tends to be sporadic, erratic, and invisible, making them much harder than formal politics for outsiders to observe in detail, describe accurately, and explain coherently." In addition, such research is also more dangerous. Recently, I suggested to a Thai lecturer of social science who had once run for election as an MP that he should do it again as a real "participant observer," and then provide a detailed academic account from "within." He responded that this would be an impossible thing for him to do. It was understood that writing and publishing such a piece would endanger his personal safety because the difference between formal and informal structures was so huge, and the large number of illegal acts involved in running for office. From the perspective of a researcher reliant on participant observation for data, Daniel Arghiros (2001: 11) put it this way, "As I can certainly confirm, research on elections amongst Thai local elites is, as Turton notes, a 'highly uncomfortable research milieu' (1989: 88)—a fact that may partially account for the relative paucity of research on politics at this level."

#### **THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE PAO ELECTION OF 14 MARCH 2004**

One of the most interesting phenomena in this election was that—as the journal *Prachakhom Thongthin* (Vol. 3, No. 35: 55, January 2004) pointed out—it was not only the first time that *nayok* PAO were directly elected, but also the first time that "national-level" political parties, especially the ruling Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT), got involved at the *local* level. TRT had even "secretly" set the goal of gaining not less than 50 of the 75 *nayok* PAO positions (it got about 54 positions). In Thailand, political parties are usually seen as having their role exclusively at the national level. Their involvement at the local level is seen as interference in the localities' own affairs. Although political parties are often criticized for lacking "roots in society," if they do try to build such roots at the local level, they are accused of some sort of internal colonization, or of bringing conflict to harmonious towns and villages. In addition, parties are seen by many as something bad, dirty, and corrupt. From this perspective, their expansion to the local sphere is seen as an undesirable pollution of supposedly pristine local socio-political life.

The question of dominance also comes into play (asked by Senator Thongbai Thongbao in his column in *Bangkok Post*, 25 Jan. 2004; perspective): "Is it right for

big political parties, which already control the national parliament, to seek representation in local administrative bodies?” Seeing in a positive light that political parties turn their sights on local government positions and budgets, “This thinking is quite new in Thai society, where a large number of people still believe that big political parties should not get involved in local elections. ‘Let them take care of national affairs, and leave us to take care of our own house’ is the standard line I hear from members of communities. But times are changing.”

In fact, it is not at all clear whether one can establish this kind of national-local dichotomy with respect to political parties. After all, their cores consist of the parties’ members of parliament (MPs), who were elected in local constituencies all over the country. Moreover, a common complaint is that MPs lose the connection with their local roots after they are elected. Why should one support a local role—or at least the existence of local roots—for party-based MPs while rejecting the notion of party involvement in formal political structures at the local level, i.e. local governments? Furthermore, the lack of operational branches of political parties at the local level has been bemoaned for a long time because it renders them rootless and deprives the citizens of a central means of political participation.<sup>2</sup>

As for the Thai Rak Thai Party, the party as a collectivity apparently had no policy to get involved in local elections; it even issued a direction against the use of its logo. With the campaign progressing, however, it was pressured to endorse certain candidates in a number of provinces, until TRT was finally forced to allow any candidate who was a member of the party the use of its logo and policies in the election campaign. It did not seem that the dominant government party had prepared any well-devised strategy for the capture of local government positions, in this case the PAO, in order to complement its stranglehold on national Thai politics by the domination of the local level. Rather, it was forced to make *ad hoc* adjustments responding to the changing situation as the campaign heated up. According to a report in *Phuchatkan* newspaper (25 Feb. 2004: 14), during a TRT party meeting, “many” MPs had complained to Somchai Suntharawat, the chairperson of the party’s MPs, about the problem that party MPs would send “their own people” (*khon khong tua eng*)—not the TRT’s!—to compete for the position of *nayok* PAO. Many MPs, especially from the Northeast, said that if the party’s *phu yai* (bosses) did not clear

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2. This has also been discussed in the context of the question of whether it would make sense to expect Thai parties to develop into “real” political parties, along the lines of their European counterparts (see McCargo 1997; Ockey 2003).

things up before election day on 14 March 2004, then the party would experience divisions or disunity (*khwamtaekyaek*). Many other MPs further complained that the “opposite group” (*klum trongkham*)—referring not to candidates of the Democrat Party, but to fellow TRT MPs competing with them and their group in the same province!—supported some people whose names were on the lists of influential people and suspected law-breakers.

Given this situation, it seems incorrect to say that “the ruling party” battled “at all costs to dominate the recent nationwide elections of presidents of the Provincial Administrative Organizations” (*The Nation*, 6 May 2004), or that political parties had given local politics more importance and would thus increasingly “*len kanmueang*” (play politics) at the local level. To a large extent, it was pressure from below, caused by the needs of province-based political groups, which got Thai Rak Thai Party passively involved. These informal groups had generated constituency MPs and many party list votes for TRT, and they now hoped to improve their electoral prospects in the PAO elections by running under TRT’s name and logo. Of course, the intended stabilization and possibly the expansion of the groups’ voter base (*than siang*) should serve TRT well in the general elections held on 6 February 2005.

A source of active TRT involvement was its factions and prominent MPs trying to protect and expand their territories, and stand-alone candidates looking for protection and support. (But if so, what sense would using “TRT” as point of reference make?) Instead of observing a unified and centrally steered TRT selecting at the national level its representatives in the PAO election, the audience was treated to its major factions (*mung*) competing with each other in a number of provinces.<sup>3</sup> In addition, prominent individual MPs or groups of TRT MPs in a province competed with faction candidates or with candidates fielded by important fellow party members.

Consequently, in almost all provinces voters had a choice between at least two candidates to the position of *nayok* PAO and their teams (except in Sakaew province, where the Thienthong clan, or *trakun*, managed to stand unopposed and have Sanoh’s nephew, Songyot Thienthong, elected). However, voters often did not have a choice between political parties, because the provincial-level competitors belonged to the same national-level political party, namely Thai Rak Thai. That TRT—at the provincial level—was not strong and unified enough to select only one candidate to

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3. *Nation Weekend* (22 March 2004) reported the provincial election results under the headline “mung lek nai ‘phak yai’” (“small factions in ‘big parties’”).

represent it points to the importance of looking at how Thai provincial-level politics is structured. It can also help us understand why there could even be competing coalitions in some provinces. For example, in Chachoengsao, one TRT team included members of Chart Pattana Party, while the competing TRT team included supporters of the Democrat Party. At an election rally in Bang Nam Prieow district, Itthi Sirilatthayakorn, the Chart Pattana Party MP of this area, explained why he and his followers joined the TRT's group under Anand Chaisaeng. His most memorable statement was, "*Phakphuak* is more important (than political parties)!"<sup>4</sup>

In short, instead of looking at the PAO election from the national political party perspective—perhaps even going as far as assuming an insipient party politicization of local socio-political structures—it seems to be more promising to center an analysis on local political conditions. The PAO election may not point to an increased involvement or interest of political parties (read: TRT) in local government positions, but rather to a strengthening of informal (exclusive, invisible, intransparent) local political groups (*phakphuak* or *phuak*<sup>5</sup>), including their connection to individual MPs and factions (*mung* or *klum*). This approach deals with the involvement of political parties at the local level (or the linkages between national-provincial-local structures) in a more specific way. It also accounts for the great variety of political constellations to be found in the PAO election, while the centralized party perspective would tend to assume a uniform situation throughout the country's provinces.

## PROVINCIAL-LEVEL POLITICAL STRUCTURES

### *Political parties lack provincial depth*

In an organizational sense, the assumption that political parties are mainly national-level entities largely restricted in their every-day operations to the House of Representatives and to the government in Bangkok is correct. While political parties may have centrally initiated public relations activities outside Bangkok, there does not seem to be an abstract party-based political discourse unifying the national (or central) and the local levels into a homogenous political party culture covering the entire Thai territory. Even the Democrat Party's organizational structure—its aim is to expand their 200 local branches to cover all 400 constituencies—does not necessarily mean that there is any sustained Democrat political discourse at the local level. Rather, branches may be set up with the national level in mind, because the

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4. Before the general election of February 2005, Chart Pattana, including Itthi, joined TRT.

5. These terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

chairmen of the branch committees represent an important voting bloc in the elections of national party executives.<sup>6</sup> Although there may thus be a Democrat Party branch in a locality, it may not play any significant role in recruiting people into active political participation and in producing candidates to run in elections to municipalities (*thesaban*), PAOs, TAOs (*Tambon* Administrative Organization), or to the national parliament. There may even be an unbridgeable gap between groups of active supporters of the Democrat Party—who may have produced MPs for this party already—and this same party’s official branch committee. Local members of the Democrat Party thus might not share a political identity that could enable them to cooperate over personal and *phuak* differences for the common good of the party.<sup>7</sup>

As for TRT, this party has so far only established ten regional branches acting as coordination centers. Its more than (claimed) 15 million members are not politically included or unified. No signs of efforts to build any meaningful internal political party structure enabling member participation in political decision-making are visible (contrary to activities for specific target groups, including a journal for school students). Members are instead part of the party’s central customer data base, creating a stock of regular customers willing to vote for the party in elections, especially on the party list (it is the local *hua khanaen* who recruit new members on the urging of their MPs and would-be candidates). Being a strictly leader-based party with a populist outlook and an electoral *ad hoc* purpose, TRT may see a need neither for “centre-led territorial penetration” nor for a locally based “territorial diffusion (which is an inherently spontaneous process)” (McCargo 1997: 124, following Panebianco). Thai Rak Thai is about selling its leader and policies to the voters for national-level electoral success, not about opening opportunities for political participation to citizens in localities.

*Phakphuak (cliques) fill the void left by political parties, public, and citizens*

That public, inclusive, and territory-wide political parties play very limited roles in Thailand’s 75 provinces (Bangkok constitutes the 76th province) does not, of course, mean that there are no political processes outside the branches of the state

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6. They decided the race between the new party leader, Banyat Bantadnan, and his main challenger, Abhisit Vejjajiva. They were neck-and-neck with the votes of MPs and members of the party’s executive board (72 to 71). However, the branch chairpersons voted 91 for Banyat, 79 for Abhisit, and 12 for Arthit Urairat (*Matichon Weekend* No. 1184, 25 April-1 May 2003: 9).

7. One might keep in mind here that Thais generally seem to have problems cooperating with each other by using an abstract and generalized point of reference. Rather, it is personal relationships that count. This situation has a strong impact on the possibility of developing civil society, political parties, NGOs, and other collective organizations.

administrative apparatus in these areas. However, they are not centered on parties. Maybe, the backbone of provincial and local politics is the politically enlightened individual citizen, a critical public, a vigorous civil society, or a flourishing sphere of political activities created by non-governmental organizations (NGOs)? Nothing much can be found in these respects either. The people's lack of regular attention to and participation in formalized political structures and processes has been a long-standing observation (this does not imply an absence of temporary, issue-specific protests, social-movement kinds of activities, or NGOs limited to the fulfillment of specified tasks). Titaya (1973) used Etzioni's concept of authenticity to capture the people's relationship to political structures. According to her, Thailand "has been working at implanting democratic institutions for only 39 years, [thus] it has proved impossible to abolish the traditional primordial sentiments of the people, especially of the rural citizens."

Twenty years later, Arghiros (1992: 27) stated that villagers in his field research site of Ayutthaya province "blatantly disregard" the "values concerning a citizen's 'democratic' duty." In a later paper, the author followed this up by imploring villagers to "assert their autonomy" and to "take a keen interest" in the local authorities designed to serve them (Arghiros 1999: 11; also see Arghiros 2001). At present, "popular participation in TAOs and PAOs is very low indeed" (ibid: 17). Ten years after Arghiros made his strong remarks, Chantana (2003: 271) concluded an analysis of the NGO Child Watch Phuket and its relations to local state and local government authorities by saying, "It seems a valid observation that there is no such thing as people's politics at the local level. Fierce political competition is a recent scenario confined within local election politics." Both local governments and citizen groups would benefit from "the realization of people's politics at the provincial communities" (ibid: 272).<sup>8</sup>

Instead of formal political party structures or citizen-directed political activities, we find *informal*—meaning essentially private and exclusive, mostly invisible—local political groups or cliques,<sup>9</sup> called *phakphuak* or *phuak* in Thai (see Nelson 2002a,

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8. In contrast to this dominant view, Thomson and Thawilwadee (2003: 70), based on a survey, insist that the Thai population is indeed highly politicized and politically active, both in urban and in rural areas.

9. Robertson (1996) identified the absence of political party institutionalization in Thai provinces as one important factor that made the rise of what he called the "rural network politician" possible. This is an apt depiction. However, the author emphasizes patron-client ties, although expressions like "webs of relationships" and "local networks of influence" seem to pose the question of what the nature of these relationships and networks is.

2003).<sup>10</sup> They are collective entities in the sense that their members—local politicians and office holders, supporters, followers—share an identity.<sup>11</sup> As much as they see themselves as belonging to this group, they can identify people who do not. Moreover, they distinguish themselves from the members of other, competing, or hostile *phuak*. This identity also allows members to evaluate actions as being beneficial or detrimental to the group's interests, and to shape their own actions if members of the group are involved. Regarding elections, for example, a market lottery vendor in Bang Nam Prieow district (Chachoengsao), who I have known for many years, pointed out to me that people would not vote according to which candidates were good or bad. Rather, they would consider to which *phuak* they belonged. Voters would then favor their own *phuak* and “punish” the rival *phuak*. Knowing that one belongs to the same *phuak* encourages communication and cooperation. Conversely, it also makes one wary of people from other *phuak*, as well as with contacts whose affiliation one does not know. Neutrality, then, may be expressed in the phrase the provincial police commander used in his capacity as a member of the Provincial Election Commission (PEC), “*mai pen phakphuak kap khrai loe*” (I am in nobody's clique whatsoever).

While one such *phuak* may cover the entire territory of a province, the more usual case certainly is that they have their centers in different parts of the province. First of all, this results from the fact that *phuak* consist of personal relationships, and are integrated by a leader who had been instrumental in building the *phuak*. He (seldom a she) will start doing this around the area in the province where he lives and works. Second, a politically directed *phuak* responds to the institutional structure of politics.

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10. This kind of informal grouping is a general feature of Thai social organization. In this paper, I am not concerned with the question whether it is similar to what we find in other countries in terms of factions, cliques, or informal structures. *Phuak* can also play very important roles in formal settings, such as the state administration, a university department, or an academic institute. This can reach proportions where the formal purpose of an organization is largely overruled by the *phuak* pursuing its own benefits. From a perspective critical of corruption, the problem is referred to in Thai as “*len phak len phuak*” (favoring one's friends, followers, and clients with little concern for the organization's needs).

11. Earlier approaches rejected the idea of any group character. Hanks (1975: 200) wrote, “An entourage is a group focused on a single person. The points to be noted about it are its individualistic rather than group character...group spirit is lacking in the Western sense. Each of the clients has made his own particular contract with the patron, and between clients indifference or even hostility may prevail.” Yos Santasombat (1985: 251) allows for some leader-driven group elements, “It is...the ultimate role of the patron to resolve and mediate the conflicting interests among his clients and center-men, bringing them together and transforming them into an interacting, cooperating group. A follower's personal tie with the leader thus plays a crucial role in his attachment to the group. It is also collectively the fountain source of the influence a leader has over his followers and their interaction.” Both Hanks and Yos aimed at breaking through the wall of misleading western perceptions that impede our understanding of the Thai social (Hanks) and political (Yos) organization.

That is, for elections to the House of Representatives, provinces are divided into constituencies (previously multi-member, since 2001 single member; see Nelson 2001; Orathai 2002). Consequently, in order to win a seat as an MP, the leader of a *phuak*, or his representative, does not need to cover the entire province. It is sufficient to have a solid voter base in the constituency where the leader's residence is located. Electoral competition thus occurs when there is another leader with his *phuak* in the same constituency. At this stage, what happens in the other constituencies of the same province is irrelevant for a localized *phuak* and its leader.

#### *The role of trakun (clans) in political recruitment*

At the core of a *phuak* may be the individual, strong leader. However, we also need to consider the importance of family, here used in the sense of "clan" (*trakun*), for political recruitment. Similar to Thai-Chinese businessmen who try to fill the positions of their family businesses with family members, many politicians in the Thai countryside will try to secure as many political positions for their family as possible. Well-known clans dominating politics in particular provinces, based on a patriarch's decades of political work, include the Silapa-archas in central Thailand's Suphanburi, the Chidchobs in northeastern Buriram, or the Khunpluems in eastern Chonburi. However, limiting references to these well-known cases obscures the fact that the role of families—in conjunction with *phakphuak* (families plus their friends, followers, clients, and allied individuals and families, plus their associates)—is a more general socio-political phenomenon in provincial Thailand. We would deal with the Tiyaphairats and the Chongsuthanamanis in Chiang Rai, the Champhunots in Phitsanulok,<sup>12</sup> the Wongwans in Lamphun, the Thongsawats in Lampang, the Uttamots in Chanthaburi, the Phetchawangas in Buriram, the Na Chiang Mais and Buranupakorns in Chiang Mai, the Bunyamanis, Pattanos, and Suwannawongs in Songkhla, the Kittithornkuns in Krabi, the Songprachas in Chainat, or the Phothiphipits in Kanchanaburi, amongst many others.<sup>13</sup> Pre-eminent families therefore should have a systematic place in any conceptualization of provincial

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12. For a detailed portrait of Suchon Champhunot, currently an MP for Thai Rak Thai party, see Montesano (2000).

13. In the run-up to TAO elections scheduled for 31 July, the Jinapak family in Kanchanaburi's Ban Mai sub-district made headlines. The 66-year old Pramual Jinapak, the former *kamnan* (sub-district or *tambon* chief) and presently the TAO (*Tambon* Administrative Organization) chairman, was arrested and charged with having hired the gunmen who killed an important canvasser of his younger brother, Sombat. Sombat is a former chairman of the *kamnan* and village head association, and was competing with Pramual for the TAO chairmanship. Pramual's son, Nanthawut, is the *kamnan* of *tambon* Ban Mai. And a younger brother of Pramual and Sombat, Santhad, is the TRT MP in constituency two, where Ban Mai sub-district is located (*The Nation*, 3 June 2005; *Bangkok Post*, 3 June 2005; *Matichon*, 4 June 2005: 1 and 15).

political structures and processes (see the figure on “The Local-national Political Structure in Thailand,” below).<sup>14</sup>

As for Chachoengsao province, the *trakun* Chaisaeng has in its possession the positions of mayor of Mueang municipality, one TRT party-list MP and deputy prime minister, and two constituency-MPs. The family also managed to have a member (Wuthipong, now an MP) selected as the provincial representative of the Constitution Drafting Assembly on 15 December 1996. For the general election on 6 February 2005, the family patriarch, Anand Chaisaeng, had successfully positioned his only daughter (Thitima) to take over his MP seat in constituency one. At a PAO election rally in Bang Nam Prieow district on 27 February 2004, he admitted, “Some people may wonder why all members of the *trakun* Chaisaeng had to be MPs. Oh, no! This is all about serving the people, doing our duties for the people and the country!” *Siam Rat* (8 December 2004: 22) put it this way, “The Thai Rak Thai Party has nominated a new-face candidate [in constituency 1], the heiress (*thayat*) of a famous clan (*trakun dang*), namely Mrs. Thitima Chaisaeng, the younger sister of Chaturon Chaisaeng. Her father and all of her three brothers are national- and local-level politicians.”<sup>15</sup>

The *phuak*'s (or should we say Anand's?) successful candidate to the position of *nayok* PAO got his son elected as a provincial councilor, while his wife sits on the council of Mueang municipality. The leader of the main competing *phuak* in the PAO elections, MP and Deputy House Speaker Suchart Tanchaen, got his brother-in-law elected as a senator, while a sister was elected provincial councilor. In fact, the decisive factor for Suchart's role has been the *baramee* (prestige, social esteem) that his father, Vichien, has built in the province's Phanom Sarakham, Sanam Chai Khet, and Thai Takiap districts over the past decades.<sup>16</sup> His house is reportedly always open for people seeking help, indicating that he has taken his role as a local (Chinese) patron seriously. Khun Vichien's degree of *baramee* can be gauged from the fact that up to 3,000 people turn up at his house in Phanom Sarakham district on

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14. This approach differs significantly from the more familiar harping on the imagined widespread role of *chao pho* (godfathers; see some articles in McVey 2000).

15. The word “*thayat*” (heir, heiress) appeared often in newspaper articles analyzing the situation in particular provinces and constituencies in the run-up to the general election on 6 February 2005. This indicates the frequency with which families, or old male parliamentarians, try to position their sons and daughters as their successors.

16. *Baramee* is a standard theme in Thai political culture when one needs to explain why a great number of people would follow suggestions made by an individual. This kind of influence is different from the exercise of power, the use of intimidation, and the use of negatively connoted *itthipon* (influence).

his birthdays (23 October). Similarly, about 2,000 well-wishers reportedly attended the wedding party of Konlayuth Chaisaeng, held in a military camp near Wat Sothorn shortly after the PAO election.

Locals, it seems, do not share the Bangkok bureaucratic and academic elite's perspective that sees this situation as an impediment to democracy. Neither can they easily be brought to share the central elite's way of looking down on their respected provincial political big shots. What people at the local level see positively as *baramee* that guides their action, people reproducing a normative model of democracy at the national level may perceive negatively as *itthiphon* (influence), and corruption.<sup>17</sup>

Normally, the founders of important *trakun* have built their area of influence, or their degree of social esteem (*baramee*), over decades. Having become old, they try to transfer what they have achieved economically and politically to their heirs. These heirs mostly do not have the often problematic background of their fathers. Rural Thailand has become more civilized during the past four decades, one might say. Rather, they are well educated, often with degrees from abroad, and they act in a much more regularized environment. Those who cannot adjust their behavior—like the Yoobamrung brothers in Bangkok or the Aswawahems in Samut Prakan—may not succeed any longer. However, even the fate of the Silapa-archa, Khunpleum, Chidchob, Chaisaengs, or Tancharoen offspring may be in doubt. All of them still very much depend on their fathers' *baramee*. The crunch time will come when they have to stand on their own feet. It will be interesting to see whether the transition period that saw them moving into political positions, gaining experience, and participating in their fathers' job of taking care of their *phakphuak*, and their network of vote canvassers (*hua khanaen*), will have been effective in securing their careers after their family patriarchs are no longer around. The children of Buntheng

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17. Recently, a prominent member of the Bangkok-based technocratic elite, Virabongsa Ramangkura, criticized the majority of voters for being politically ignorant, and incapable of choosing "honest politicians over bad ones" (*The Nation*, 28 November 2004:1A). This view of (mainly) rural voters has been a long-standing element of elite political culture in Thailand. In addition to the issue of differing criteria of evaluation, one wonders whether Virabongsa would dare naming names in order to help these voters. More importantly, one might doubt that this individualizing approach is adequate. After all, it is the political structures that select or produce the candidates voters can choose from. Consequently, educating voters alone would not help much as long as the political structures did not produce the quality candidates Virabongsa wants to see. He even increases the requirements beyond the dichotomy of honest/bad by including technical economic knowledge in the job description.

Thongsawat in Lampang,<sup>18</sup> and of Prawat Uttamot in Chanthaburi, for example, have found political life tough after their fathers died.

This situation necessarily follows from the personal and relational nature of local political groups and networks. There does not seem to be a generalized mechanism of integration, such as abstract political convictions that may bridge personal differences to an extent and allow stable cooperation, and that may span broad geographical areas (such as the entire territory of the country). Political loyalties are not directed towards ideas, but towards leading figures. Countryside political structures thus do not depend on the power of ideological persuasion, but on the leadership qualities of individual politicians (whatever factors that is based on). The sons and daughters of such leaders may find it difficult to fill their fathers' shoes. If they cannot acquire their fathers' *baramee*, or leadership legitimacy, their *phakphuak* will split, and new leaders will try to take their place.

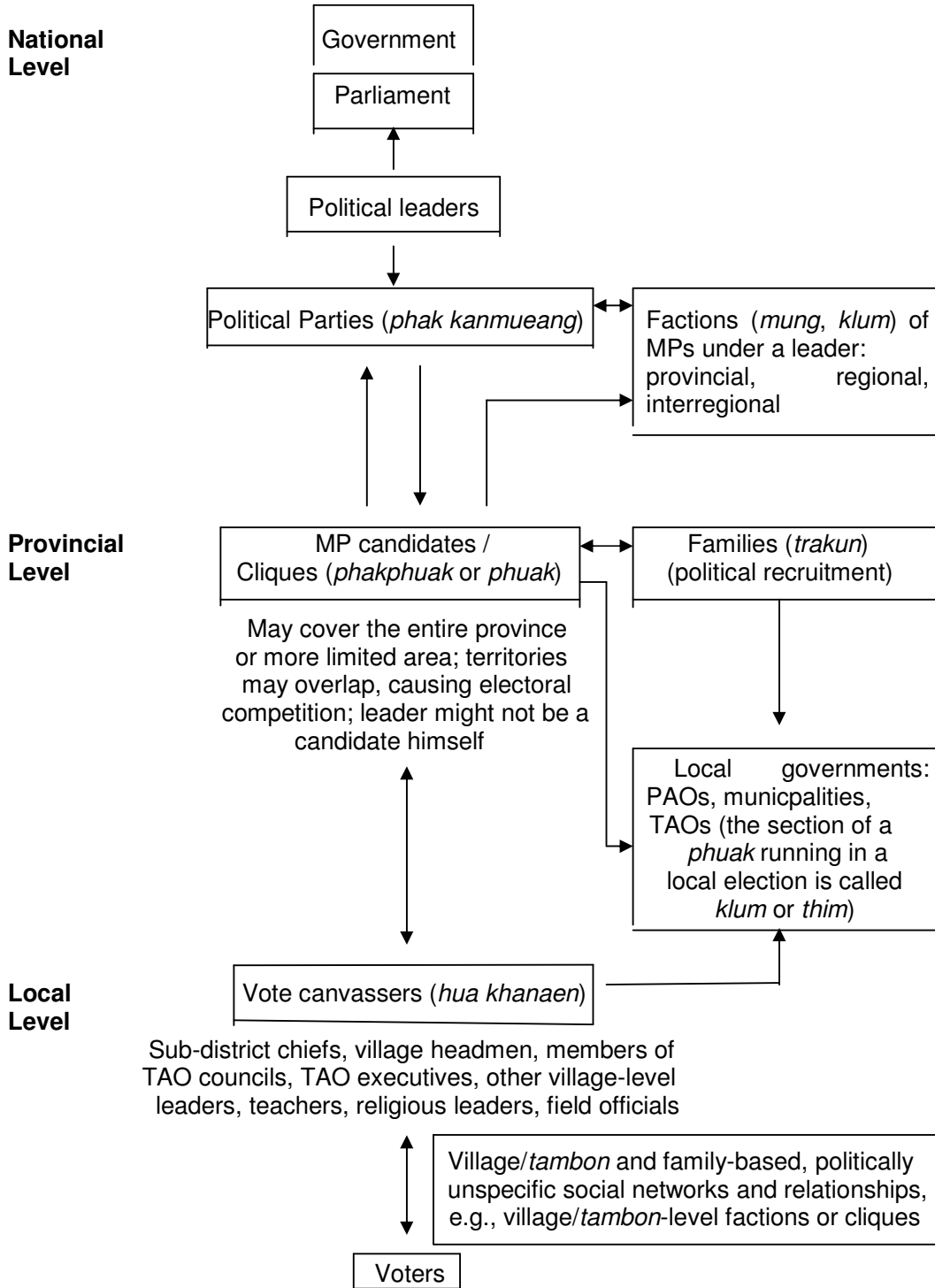
Maintaining a family's and *phuak's* political position in practice means competing for local political offices (including *kamnan* and village heads). The election of *nayok* PAO and council members, as well as the municipal and TAO elections held both before and afterwards, were thus mandatory occasions to prove the *phakphuak's* and the *trakun's* relative strength *vis-à-vis* other such groupings in the province. This included trying to expand one's area of influence to local government jurisdictions that were not previously in one's fold, and strengthening influence in places it seemed weak. Groups of local candidates, perhaps especially when they run as a new group, may look for a *thi phueng* (supporter, patron) for their bid, and they may well find it in an established *phakphuak*—not in a political party.

Obviously, the PAO election was especially important because general elections were anticipated for February 2005. Given that *phuak* and families would field candidates to the House of Representatives, the PAO election was seen as an indicator of how big and secure their voter bases (*than siang*) were. Such considerations went right down to comparing the number of votes individual candidates to the PAO council got in their constituencies. On 8 May 2004, I happened to sit behind MP Anand Chaisaeng, next to the PEC's chairman, and a local stringer of iTV.

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18. In Lampang province, four long-established MPs have tried to position heirs: the late Buntheng Thongsawat, Phinit Chantharasurin, Phairot Lohsunthorn, and Bunchu Trithong (see *Krungthep Thurakit*, 8 November 2004: 18).

Figure 1: The Local-national Political Structure in Thailand<sup>19</sup>



19. Earlier versions of this figure appeared in Nelson (2002a; 2003).

They discussed the PAO election result in some areas, paying special attention to the question of whether Anand's daughter could succeed her father as a new-face candidate. At one point, they raised the example of one PAO constituency (part of a much bigger House constituency) in Mueang municipality, where Anand's candidate beat the competitor by 3,485 to 2,821 votes (both candidates were established local political figures). The question then was how this would change if his daughter ran against a yet-to-be-announced competitor fielded by the Democrat Party. National-level observers, of course, asked what the PAO elections meant for the prospects of TRT and Democrats in the coming elections. This example shows that these national-level concerns are complemented in very concrete ways by local *phuak* and families with respect to the electoral prospects of their local MP candidates.

The occasion from which I have taken the example was interesting in itself. The Chaisaengs, via the director of their "TRT" coordination center near Wat Sothorn (before the family's move to TRT, it was the "New Aspiration Party" coordination center), had invited 500 local politicians from constituency one. Most of them came from TAOs, meaning from the villages. Some *kamnan* and village headmen also attended. They listened to lectures concerning the TAO elections (of which there were 27 scheduled for June). This seminar was billed as a TRT affair, and participants received TRT certificates confirming that they had taken part. The event was supported by the Election Commission of Thailand's (ECT) political party development fund. The panel leader was the former chairman of the election observation association of Chachoengsao, while the speakers comprised one expert from the ECT, the PEC chairman, and one staff member from the PEC office.

Anand Chaisaeng opened the seminar with a speech, followed by his daughter, Thitima Chaisaeng, introducing herself as the MP candidate in this constituency, succeeding her father. One week later, an equivalent event was held in constituency four, represented by MP Wuthipong Chaisaeng. One may thus say that formal and public political structures like TRT, ECT, and PEC, including their resources, were used for strengthening the informal, and essentially private, political *phuak* dominated by *trakun* Chaisaeng. Given that formal political party structures are non-existent in most provinces, allocating the ECT's political party development fund to provincial-level activities related to a party label cannot strengthen political parties. After all, it is the national level where they have an operational bureaucracy. Unavoidably, the major beneficiaries instead will be local *phuak*, and the money will largely be

misspent (however, without doubt, the group targeted here had a perfect right to be educated about the election law).

*Phakphuak's and trakun's electoral infrastructure: hua khanaen (vote canvassers)*

The aforementioned seminar was aimed at people working at another level of the provincial informal political hierarchy, namely the *phuak's* vote canvassers (*hua khanaen*),<sup>20</sup> who, during election campaigns, are also instrumental in organizing the distribution of vote-buying money.<sup>21</sup> Officially, an important local representative of the Thai Rak Thai Party organized this seminar to educate fellow party members from the sub-district (*tambon*) and the village (*muban*) levels. Therefore, this event should have strengthened TRT's local organizational capacity. More realistically, however, a local influential *trakun* and *phakphuak* used the TRT's party label and the ECT's political party development funds in order to strengthen their informal vote-canvassing and vote-buying network.

The TAO members' task during times of MP elections—and the connection between local and national elections via leaders, family, *phuak*, *hua khanaen*, and party

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20. For earlier Thai-language research reports on campaign organization, including the importance of local groups and vote canvassers, see Phichai, Somchet, and Worawit (1987), Phoemphong and Sisomphop (1988), and Sombat (1987, 1993).

21. Vote-buying belongs to a number of phenomena that might be called “electoral corruption”—at least from the perspective of the ideal of a functionally differentiated political system in which *individuals* make their choices of action based on generalized structures. As I have been trying to demonstrate in this paper, politics in Thailand is very much socially embedded, certainly at the levels of province, district, *tambon*, and village. This situation leads to other phenomena that might be seen as “corrupt,” such as vote canvassers and *phuak* trying to determine who would man village-level polling stations, or serve on district-level vote-counting committees for the *mayor* PAO election and on the constituency committees in MP elections. For example, a well-informed observer in Chachoengsao remarked that the Chaisaeng *phuak* seemed to have been “well-prepared” for the vote counting in *amphoe mueang*. The rival candidate's lead of 11,500 votes was turned into a loss by a mere 740 votes. Certainly, *amphoe mueang* is the family's political stronghold. However, observers also noted that one of their important vote canvassers, a *kamnan*, was appointed to the committee, as was a politician from a municipality that belonged to this *phuak's* sphere of influence. Observers also alleged that three section chiefs from the district office serving on the counting committee were in this *phuak's* fold. Similarly, in the MP election of 6 February 2005, the Chaisaeng *phuak*, by whatever means, managed to dominate the election committee of constituency one and its vote-counting committee. In general, provincial political groups and influential families try not only to conquer local political positions, but also try to build bases of support in the civil bureaucracy and in the police force. This is one of the reasons why being a government MP is so important: they are able to lobby ministers and ministerial officials to put their people in important administrative positions located on their political territory. Moreover, it is quite normal that bureaucrats lobby their local MPs to use their influence to obtain transfers and promotions. Of course, such a service must be reciprocated at a later point, perhaps during election campaigns. From the perspective of the global model of “election quality” (e.g., Elklit and Reynolds 2005), these phenomena might be seen as indicating a poor quality of Thai elections, pointing to Thai democracy as “deficient” or “defective.”

labels—was well illustrated when representatives from seven TAOs in the northern province of Phichit called a meeting to prepare for the upcoming TAO elections. According to *nayok* TAO Mana Wuthiyakorn, he had organized this meeting

in order to establish teams of candidates for *nayok*, deputy *nayok*, and TAO members to compete with other people, especially from other political parties. If our *phuak* wins the elections, I believe that we will for sure be able to control the voter base (*than siang*) for the Democrat Party in the election constituency (*khet lueak tang*) of Bangmunnak district. We thus can have good hopes for the next general election. If somebody stood to compete with Siriwat Kachornprasat, the son of Maj. Gen. Sanan Kachornprasat, he seriously would have to reconsider. (*Matichon*, 21 May 2004: 8)

Bangmunnak district, together with *amphoe* Phothale and semi-district (*king amphoe*) Buengnarang, made up Phichit's constituency three in the MP election of 2001. Siriwat Kachornprasat was the clear winner with 30,953 votes, while the candidate under the TRT banner received only 14,304 votes, slightly more than the 12,127 votes received by the third candidate in this constituency, standing for Seri Prachathipattai Party. The *nayok* TAO quoted here did not refer to Siriwat Kachornprasat's inherent attractiveness to the individual voters of the constituency for securing another win in 2005, but rather referred to a "voter base" controlled by their *phuak* of candidates to the TAO councils, and to the positions of *nayok* TAO. Indeed, this is the core task of *hua khanaen*, or vote canvassers: They are able to induce people in their immediate social environment to cast their votes for a suggested candidate. TAO councils are made up of two representatives elected by the people in every village of the *tambon* (thus, for TAO elections, the village is the constituency). Getting elected as a TAO council member thus demonstrates that the candidate was able to mobilize the votes of fellow villagers for him or herself. People would often refer to the *rabop khruayat* being at work in this context—the "family system." Members of a family and their circle of friends and neighbors, or people otherwise socially connected to the candidate, be it closely or loosely, vote for "their" representative.

Obviously, the *nayok* TAO did not think that village-based TAO elections and national elections were distinctly separate activities. He anticipated that his *phuak* would not disappear after the TAO election was over. His *phuak* certainly followed the organizing principles of all *phuak* briefly described above. However, this does not necessarily mean that it is also an integral part of the provincial or constituency-level *phakphuak* he surely belongs to. Apparently, this *nayok* TAO feels that he belongs to

the Kachornprasat's *phakphuak*. Whether or not the same applies to all members of what he sees as his *phuak* is an empirical question. From the perspective of the higher-level *phakphuak*, his circle of friends may merely appear as a number of individual *hua khanaen* organized and held together by one of its members, without them being seen as belonging to the *phakphuak* as such.<sup>22</sup>

At the Chaisaeng's TRT seminar for TAO-related politicians, a few people, such as a *kamnan* (sub-district headman) who is a well-known major vote canvasser in Muang district, belonged to the *trakun's phakphuak*. Yet, most participants did not seem to be particularly close in the sense the word *phakphuak* indicates. They may more accurately be seen as followers connected to and politically (and perhaps financially) supported by the Chaisaengs and the members of its *phakphuak*. Thus, the *kamnan* mentioned certainly had a much closer relationship to Anand Chaisaeng than did the TAO people. At the same time, he also had a much closer relationship to the TAO politicians from his sub-district (*tambon*) than did Anand Chaisaeng. Therefore, a *phakphuak* neither evenly covers its entire area of influence, nor does it have an immediate relationship to all of its village-based canvassers and their "entourage" (Hanks' expression for a patron's clients) or *phuak*.<sup>23</sup> Rather, we observe a number of overlapping circles of relationships at the levels of province, MP constituency, district, PAO constituency, sub-district, and village.

Furthermore, the *nayok* TAO in Phichit assumed that the village-based social ties that he hoped would bring members of his *phuak* into their local political positions would continue to exist and could reliably be used for generating votes in favor of a preferred candidate in the national election. In other words, the members of his *phuak* were supposed to act as local *hua khanaen* for an MP candidate. Seen from the candidate's perspective, they provide him with the electoral infrastructure necessary to gain election. Higher-level candidates do not so much directly aim at the voters as they try to tap the great reservoir of "local leaders," who will be able to ask people in their social circles for their votes. These local leaders may be members and executives of TAOs, as in the example. However, there is a range of other people capable of filling these positions, most notably the sub-district headmen

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22. Three decades ago, Hanks (1975) used the word "circle" to denote this kind of situation. However, his concept of "entourage" only covers patron-client relationships, while the phenomenon of *phuak* does not figure.

23. On village-level *phuak* or factions see Potter (1978, chapter 8), and Soparth (1988); on electoral rivalry of factions in a sub district (*tambon*) in Ayutthaya province, see Arghiros (2001).

(*kamman*) and the village headmen (*phu yai ban*), who are well known as being “key players in Thailand’s new electoral politics” (Arghiros (2001: 27).<sup>24</sup> In addition, teachers, religious leaders, or field officials of government agencies also often act as vote canvassers. Village-level volunteers, such as the village health volunteers, or members of state-initiated groups, such as housewife groups, might be approached by a candidate to use their influence in order to gain votes.<sup>25</sup> Finally, PAO members (whose constituencies encompass villages and sub-districts but are much smaller than MP constituencies) might directly act as vote canvassers and constitute links between MP candidates and local leaders.<sup>26</sup>

This entire local network of *trakun*, *phuak/phakphuak*, and *hua khanaen* (including the voters led by them) is not only supposed to be relatively stable (which comes at a cost, though). It is also not easily influenced by national-level political-legal opinions, and it is *transferable*. The Constitutional Court, after all, found Sanan Kachornprasat guilty of having made a false income declaration leading to his disqualification from political posts for five years. Yet, he did not suffer social and political stigmatization at the local level (not too much at the national level either). On the contrary, in the 2001-election, he was able to transfer the support of his *phakphuak* and its lower-level followers and vote canvassers in an impressive way to his politically inexperienced son, Siriwat Kachornprasat. In mid-2004, Sanan Kachornprasat left the Democrat Party, and founded the Mahachon Party. Accordingly, his son, Siriwat, ran under this party banner in the election of February 2005. Reading the quote above, it was not about the *than siang* of the Democrat Party, but the *than siang* that was controlled by the local politicians for the Democrats, based on the local politicians’ close

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24. District-level civil servants, especially those from the ministry of the interior, had used them in much the same way for decades. Local politicians could therefore build their efforts on this “preparation.”

25. If professionally done, campaign organization thus needs a systematic approach, based on the village-level voter rolls. Candidates need to connect each household—in their multi-level campaign structure—to one of their vote canvassers (if this household is not committed to a canvasser from the competitor’s camp). A member of the PEC in Chachoengsao remarked that some groups had prepared their MP campaigns quite well, using a proportion of one canvasser to ten voters. A candidate in Chainat had reportedly recruited one leader in each village. His task was to control sub-leaders who, in turn, would control a voter pool of ten people (*Matichon*, 8 December 2004: 10).

26. Based on his observations in Ayutthaya province, Arghiros (2001: 25) writes that provincial councilors are “primary vote brokers, or canvassers of national politicians.” The latter “recruit provincial councilors to canvass on their behalf in the district that they represent,” and to “mobilize the lower-level networks on their behalf.” Probably, political and electoral structures, though they have many elements in common, are not uniform in all provinces of Thailand. Moreover, the recent rise in importance of TAOs and municipalities seem to have had an effect on their politicians’ relationships with upper-level politicians, such as PAO members (previously called provincial councilors) and MPs.

relationships with or membership in the *phuak* of Sanan.<sup>27</sup> Thus, on 27 July 2004, *Matichon* (p. 8) reported another statement of the *nayok* TAO Mana Wuthiyakorn:

After Maj. Gen. Sanan had founded the Mahachon Party, Siriwat left the Democrats. Therefore, all the *hua khanaen* in constituency three, and the members of the Democrat Party have been preparing to apply for membership in the Mahachon Party. "People in Phichit are not attached to political parties but to individuals. Therefore, to whichever party Maj. Gen. Sanan or Siriwat might move, most of the previous *than siang* will move accordingly."<sup>28</sup>

Some months later, *Matichon* (11 November 2004: 8) again reported statements made by Mana, who was then referred to as the chairperson of the TAO association of Bangmunnak. The association was said to have joined forces with the *kamnan* and village headmen in constituency three in order to help Siriwat Kachornprasat, called the prospective candidate for the Mahachon Party, to retain his MP seat. According to this report, Mana said:

We "recognize the goodness (*khunngamkhwamdi*) of *Set* Sanan that he has plentifully built with the people of constituency three. Since *Set* does not play politics any longer, we must help *Set's* son with his candidacy. The trend for the Mahachon Party in constituency three is now very strong. Anybody who wants to compete with Siriwat will find it very hard to squeeze in. I can confirm right away that Siriwat will certainly win an MP seat for the Mahachon Party in the coming election."

As has been described above, Anand Chaisaeng has been trying to achieve a similar transfer of his *than siang* to his daughter, Thitima (as he had done previously with his sons, Chaturon and Wuthipong). Vote canvassers who previously used their influence for getting Sanan and Anand elected now do the same job for their son and daughter, respectively. In addition, the transfer also worked in the election to the

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27. Voter bases are thus personal possessions of vote canvassers and candidates, and not institutionally connected to a political party. Parties must therefore try to recruit candidates with a good *than siang* in order to tap the voter reservoir and gain members of parliament. According to a representative of the new Mahachon Party, it had not fielded any candidate in Phuket, because "The people who the party had contacted, and who are persons with social capital (*tonthun thansangkhor*), were not interested in playing politics (*len kanmueang*)" (*Phuchatkan*, 8 December 2004: 15). On the other hand, local politicians whose vote basis is big enough for thinking that they might give running for parliament a try, must contact political parties for them to field them as their candidates, forcing the parties to run a great deal of background checks on prospective candidates who are unknown to them. Both ways underline the *ad-hoc* nature of the relationship between political parties and many, if not most, of their candidates.

28. This sort of contrasting reference to individuals versus political parties reflects a standard theme in Thai political culture.

position of *nayok* PAO. Both the Kachornprasart's candidate in Phichit<sup>29</sup> and the Chaisaeng's candidate in Chachoengsao were elected using their respective electoral infrastructure of vote canvassers, complemented by the candidates to the provincial council with their own followers.<sup>30</sup>

While Thitima Chaisaeng succeeded, Siriwat Kachornprasat did not.<sup>31</sup> Although he was able to maintain his previous level of support with 30,679 votes, he lost to the son of an established MP from neighboring constituency four, who received 34,265 votes. Before the election, the winner, Nawin Bunset, said that he was not afraid of having to stand against Siriwat, "because there is a lot more of my father's *than siang* [in constituency 3]. I don't think that I am disadvantaged." He also confirmed that he would not pull away Siriwat's *hua khanaen*, "because I believe in the potential of the Thai Rak Thai Party" (*Matichon*, 22 November 2004: 8). Thus, he hoped for the

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29. *Matichon* (16 March 2004: 2) listed the winner as "DEM," while the runner-up is said to belong to "TRT." *Nation Weekend* (No. 616, 22 March 2004: 88) also listed the winner as "DEM." The paper added that he is a former *nayok* PAO, and a person close to Sanan Kachornprasat. *Siam Rat Weekend* (Vol. 50, No. 43, 18-25 March 2004: 22) attached the label "independent" to the winner. According to this paper, both Sanan and a TRT MP from constituency four had supported him. For this reason, it could not be decided which party would have the bigger voter base (*than siang*) overall in this province. It depended on to what degree these groups were able to take care of their respective areas of the province (until the general election in February 2005).

30. Given this multi-level conceptualization, the voter obviously does not appear as an autonomous individual rationally making a political decision when casting his or her vote. Nor did we construct the conceptualization from the voter upwards. Certainly, the voter perspective needs more elaboration (as does popular political culture). However, first, the idea of individual actors in social contexts is itself a specific element of Western philosophy. This is contradicted by structural approaches in which actions (such as voting in an election) "are not ultimate ontological givens that emerge as unavoidable empirical elements that force themselves upon one in every sociological analysis...Actions are artifacts of processes of attribution..." (Luhmann 1995: xlv). In addition, institutionalist views would be more interested "in why and where markets are created, rather than market behavior, and why (and where) elections exist, rather than why people vote the way they do" (Jepperson 2000: 39). Second, there might be various motivational mixes that lead voters to their "choices," composed of the knowledge of compulsory voting (importance of "no vote" votes); campaigning by the candidates; various kinds of social ties (being a family member, a relative, a friend, a client, a follower, an employee, a *phuak* member); trust in the superior knowledge of respected position holders; the *baramee* of an important local figure; intimidation; social pressure in the polling station; patronage; the work of *hua khanaen*; vote buying; the availability of local political party structures and activities; preferences concerning political parties (be they centered on party ideology, a charismatic leader, or government policies that benefited the voters); or political marketing and control of the mass media. Third, the information available to voters varies from election to election. While they probably know very little about the PAO, its tasks, performance, and candidates, knowledge about the prime minister and government policies is much better. Accordingly, one might say that the degree of voter-focused "rationality" and "democracy" in national elections is much higher than that in local elections.

31. Both families figured prominently in an article headlined "When politics is all in the family" that appeared in *The Nation* (9 June 1999: A2). The author is of the opinion that the purpose of the 1997 Constitution is threatened by family-related "nepotism."

effectiveness of his father's personal canvassing network, combined with the voters' assumed preference for TRT.

## CONCLUSION

The above can be read as a description of the way socio-political structures in provincial Thailand have reacted on the expansion of a world model of politics—as mediated by the Thai national political elite.<sup>32</sup> This “model of democracy” includes ideas on the filling of political positions by elections, the role of voters, the way voting should be conducted, political organizations that should mediate between the public and political candidates, the role of the public administration vis-à-vis the elected political leadership, and on issues such as legitimacy, accountability, and responsiveness.

Based on the analysis presented in this paper, readers might think that democracy as a generalized, public, and inclusive political system still has a long way to go in provincial Thailand. Even the present state of affairs has comparatively recent origins. In my dissertation on Chachoengsao (Nelson 1998: 3), which was based on field research from October 1990 to March 1992, I introduced a center-periphery distinction of the Thai polity, and stated, “my central thesis is that the ‘bureaucratic polity’ still seems to be very much alive in the countryside.” While the central state bureaucracy over many decades had been greatly expanded from the center to the periphery (provinces, districts, *tambons*, and villages), non-bureaucratic political communications in the provinces—be it in the context of local governments, political parties, local political groups, or the public—had remained very limited.

Daniel Arghiros (2001)—who had conducted fieldwork in Ayutthaya province in 1989-1990, and 1995-1997—had a similar impression of the nature of provincial Thai politics. He wrote, “One is forced to agree with Nelson’s conclusion that the ‘bureaucratic polity’ is still very much a reality in the countryside” (Arghiros 2001: 227). At the same time, he cautioned that acknowledging the “continued primacy of the state at the local level” must not make us overlook that local business associations had empowered themselves by the “accumulation of elected positions,” and that this “represents the arrival of business-based civil society in the provinces” (ibid.).

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32. For a critical view on the role of the national elite, see Connors (2003).

This might, to a greater or lesser degree in different provinces, very well be the case. Moreover, the situation in some provinces might have deviated from the rule in that strong individuals had been able—over many decades—to create extra-bureaucratic power bases with substantial effects on the provincial bureaucracy as well as on the people. (This is one more area where political researchers have not yet produced proper empirical data.) An outstanding example on the positive end is Sino-Thai Banharn Silapa-archa, the archetypical benevolent and paternalist provincial patriarch in Suphanburi (Banharn is the owner of the Chart Thai Party; he was prime minister between July 1995 and November 1996). On the negative end, we find Somchai Khunpluem, or *Kamnan Po*, the infamous model-*chao pho* (godfather) in the eastern province of Chonburi (currently fighting corruption and murder charges in court, but still commanding widespread respect and being able to have his candidates win all but one of the seven MP seats in the province).

However, much more significant for the sustainable countrywide politicization of the provinces is the implementation of the Constitution of 1997. It included a fundamental attack on the bureaucracy's provincial-level primacy by mandating wide-ranging decentralization in terms of powers, personnel, and budget (Nelson 2002b). Consequently, a substantial local-government reform concerning *Tambon* Administrative Organizations, municipalities (all previous *sukhaphiban*, or sanitary districts, were up-graded to *tambon* municipalities), and Provincial Administrative Organizations was launched. This notably included the introduction of directly elected local executives for all forms of local government. In 2004 alone, provincial election commissions had to organize 2,861 local elections (concerning 74 PAOs, 289 municipalities, and 2,496 TAOs, plus the elections for Pattaya and the governor of Bangkok; see Samnakborihan [2003]).

Moreover, the national-level decentralization committee has been working (slowly) on transferring powers, personnel, and budget from the central bureaucracy and its provincial branches to local government authorities. These authorities have strengthened their respective associations covering municipalities, TAOs, and PAOs; a process is also underway to establish an umbrella organization. Finally, daily newspapers, such as *Matichon* and *Siam Rath*, have introduced special pages dedicated to local-government affairs. There is even a monthly journal, *Prachakhom Thongthin*, which exclusively deals with local government issues.

In sum, the state's bureaucracy will certainly continue to be an exceptionally strong player at the provincial level — by virtue of the highly centralized and personalized policy-making and implementation process under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the introduction of CEO governors, the sheer number of civil servants working in the provinces, and the great amount of budget available to them. However, all the phenomena mentioned above indicate a significantly increased quantity of extra-bureaucratic political communications in the provinces. For this reason, characterizing provincial-level political structures as “bureaucratic” does not seem to be adequate any longer. Whether this immediately implies a higher degree of democracy in the provinces remains doubtful, given that exclusive, and largely invisible, informal political groups and prominent families dominate provincial politics (sometimes called “elite capture,” or “elite grabbing”). Yet, there certainly is political competition and voting in elections in order to fill political positions. Ironically, national-level politics might be more democratic, because local citizens can gain more information about what the central government does than about what happens politically in their provinces. Moreover, citizens can translate their information into political preferences, and express them in their votes on the party-list ballot.

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