

Vote Buying and Village Outrage in an Election in Northern Thailand: Recent Legal Reforms in Historical Context

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Vote buying has long been considered a major obstacle to democracy in Thailand. As reiterated in explanations of Thailand's 2006 military coup, vote buying in Thai electoral politics has often been attributed to traditional village culture and rural ignorance. Placing a 1995 northern Thai election for kamnan (subdistrict head) in historical context, this essay suggests that vote buying did not typify village electoral politics but was an aberration that reached its zenith during the mid-1990s. Legal ambiguities, not rural apathy or ignorance, impeded villagers' ability to protest corrupt practices and safeguard their internal democracy. These ambiguities emerged as new democratic laws implemented in 1992 and 1995 to decentralize power conflicted with older laws dating from the days of absolute monarchy. Subsequent legal reforms appear to have mitigated the importance of vote buying in village electoral politics. How these reforms will affect national electoral politics remains to be seen.

DECADES AGO, BARRINGTON MOORE, Jr. (1966), observed that the manner of peasant integration into nation-states provides the foundation for understanding the social origins of dictatorship and democracy. Too often, grand narratives of national struggles to attain electoral democracy focus on the urban bourgeoisie, portraying them as the progressive protagonists and the peasantry as the conservative laggards. In Thailand, vote buying has increased dramatically in national electoral politics since the late 1980s. Because rural voters have controlled as many as 90 percent of the seats in Parliament, vote buying has been portrayed as a rural problem rooted in rural ignorance, apathy, poverty, or their “traditional” culture based on patronage.¹ Resurfacing in explanations of Thailand's most recent coup, many in the Thai urban middle class have concluded that rural voters are “not capable of effective participation in democratic politics” (Ockey 2004, 167). This discourse on vote buying masks the more complex role of Thailand's urban population in providing periodic support for authoritarian military rule and conceals a class politics in which “metropolitan businesspeople can

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¹See discussions in Arghiros (2001), Anek (1993, 1996), Callahan and McCargo (1996), Nelson (1998, 86–99), Ockey (2004, 20, 166–70), Pasuk and Sungsidh (1994), and Suchit (1996).

present their interests as the national interest” (Callahan 2005, 108; see also Anderson 1977; Anek 1993, 1996; Ockey 2004, 151–71). In perpetuating a narrative that portrays villagers as obstacles to democracy, this discourse fails to locate vote buying in its historical context and silences the voices of villagers who are no less outraged by vote buying than their fellow urban citizens.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of rural voters in establishing a democratic nation, recent studies of electoral politics have focused on national, provincial, and municipal elections. Contemporary ethnographic studies of village politics are almost nonexistent. The first generation of anthropologists and political scientists conducted their fieldwork during the period from the 1950s to 1970s, an era characterized by military dictatorships and a rising rural-based communist insurgency. Although there were few national elections, village elections were generally portrayed as uncontested and consensual.² As provincial towns expanded from the 1980s to the present, scholarly attention shifted to the rise of new urban “provincial godfathers” in municipal, provincial, and national electoral politics (see, e.g., Arghiros 2001; Callahan and McCargo 1996; Fishel 2001; Hewison 1993; McVey 2000; Murashima 1987; Nelson 1998; Pasuk and Sungsidh 1994; Robertson 1996; Turton 1989). Although various authors repeatedly noted that these provincial godfathers depended on village and subdistrict heads to act as their vote canvassers, Daniel Arghiros (2001) was the first to refocus attention on the impact of these external politicians on internal village electoral politics. Building on his anthropological study of a 1990 election for *kamnan*, or subdistrict chief, in Ayuthaya Province in central Thailand, Arghiros concluded that by the 1990s, vote buying in local village elections had become “ubiquitous” (2001, 71; see also Takagi 1999). If the vote buying that began to characterize national elections in the 1980s once seemed a boon to villagers, its penetration into village electoral politics in the 1990s was increasingly seen as their bane.

In April 1995, I had occasion to observe an election for the position of *kamnan* in a *tambon* (subdistrict) in Chiang Mai Province in northern Thailand, which, for the purposes of this essay, I shall call Tambon Thungnaa.³ Three of the *tambon*'s twelve village heads competed in a bitter campaign. When one of the candidates began to engage in dirty tricks and vote buying,⁴ the other two candidates and their supporters were outraged. Blocked from campaigning freely in other villages,

²Herbert P. Phillips (1958) provides an early anthropological account of a national election. The earliest mentions of vote buying in village elections occur in the central region. A losing candidate in a 1953 election for village head suggested the winner had bribed the district officer (Kaufman 1960, 75–78). Steven Piker (1983, 143) mentions vote buying in Ayuthaya in the 1960s. Michael H. Nelson (1998, 94, 241) notes vote buying in Chachoengsao in 1985 and in a *kamnan* election in 1991. Daniel Arghiros (2001, 74) dates the vote buying in a village head election in Ayuthaya to 1988. Ryo Takagi (1999) notes vote buying in an election for *kamnan* in Nakhon Sawan in 1997.

³To protect confidentiality, the names of the candidates, village, and *tambon* are fictitious.

⁴In the *kamnan* elections described by Arghiros (2001) and Takagi (1999), both candidates bought votes. Nelson (1998, 214) notes a 1991 election voided by district officials because of heavy vote buying.

the aggrieved villagers sought redress through the district office and through an independent organization, Pollwatch. Their efforts were to no avail. Faced with legal ambiguities and legal lacunae, frustration and anger mounted. Sleepless nights, agonized hours of discussion, tears, and even a stabbing characterized the grueling monthlong campaign.⁵

Many villagers, whose kinship bonds through birth and marriage crisscrossed the *tambon*, tried to appear neutral. Some tried to show their support for different candidates by helping with meal preparations and other aspects of the respective campaigns; they found themselves under suspicion as “two-headed birds” (*nok song hua*), spies for the “enemy” camp (see Bowie 2008). Offers to buy votes only heightened villagers’ dilemmas; both accepting and rejecting such offers jeopardized strategies of plausible deniability.⁶ The aftermath was no less fraught with tension. One villager was murdered. Villagers branded as traitors for vote selling found themselves targets of retribution.

In June 1995, I followed another election for *kamnan* that took place in a neighboring *tambon*, which, albeit less violent, followed a similar pattern. I was stunned. As a graduate student in anthropology, I had seen two uneventful elections for village head in the late 1970s; in each case, the winners had been foregone conclusions. From the decades of consensual village elections, a dramatic transformation had occurred.

The efforts of outraged villagers to seek redress against vote buying and other dirty tricks both during and after the election drew my attention to the complex interaction between recent legal reforms intended to decentralize power and older laws written during the reign of absolute monarchs that were intended to centralize state power. To this day, rural administration is governed by the Local Administration Act of 1914, itself based on the Local Administration Act of 1897. Just prior to the 1995 election that I observed, two important legal changes had gone into effect. The first change was an amendment to the 1914 Local Administration Act, approved by the government of interim prime minister Anan Panyarachun in March 1992. This amendment limited village leaders elected after July 1992 to five-year terms; existing village leaders were allowed to remain in office until they reached age sixty, the previously mandated age of retirement.⁷

⁵Two brothers in Baan Dong got into a fight over the election. Their father had had poor relations with Headman Kaew ever since he refused to give up land for a village road. After Headman Kaew’s brother took the stabbing victim to the hospital, friendly relations were restored.

⁶Because villagers are invariably related to each other and to the candidate, most villagers prefer to appear neutral. One villager explained her plight to me after she was offered money as follows: “If I don’t take it and say, ‘Save your money, I was planning to vote for you anyway,’ they won’t believe you and think you’re just saying that because you plan to vote for the other person. So you just take the money so they’ll think you’ll vote for them. But really no one can see who you’re voting for. It’s hard since we are all related to each other.” See also Arghiros 2001, 1.

⁷Amendment no. 9 to the 1914 Local Administration Act. The Interior Ministry had proposed that village leaders be appointed (see Murray 1996, 18–19). Five-year term limits were first proposed in 1975 by the Social Action Party (Prathan 1986, 18).

Ironically, although this amendment was apparently intended to reduce the entrenched power of corrupt village heads, it strengthened the hand of the older generation of village leaders at the expense of the incoming generation. The second change was the approval of the Act on Tambon Councils and Tambon Administrative Organizations (TAOs) by the Chuan Leekpai government at the end of 1994. This law, which I will abbreviate hereafter as the 1994 Tambon Act, went into effect in March 1995. Intended to decentralize the power of the national bureaucracy, this law expanded the role of these subdistrict organizations.⁸ Because *kamnan* were ex officio heads of these bodies and village heads were ex officio members, the initial 1994 Tambon Act served to increase the powers of these village leaders. At the time of the 1995 elections that I observed, village heads and *kamnan* were poised at a new pinnacle of power.

Subsequent legal reforms have again shifted the dynamics of village politics. Spurred by the ratification of Thailand's so-called People's Constitution in 1997, which mandated the decentralization of state power, additional changes were made to the 1994 Tambon Act. In 1999, *kamnan* were no longer allowed to serve as TAO heads; instead the chair was to be elected internally from among its member village representatives.⁹ In 2001, all ex officio positions in TAOs were eliminated (see Arghiros 2002; Nelson 2000, 19, 45; Noranit et al. 2002). In October 2002, the Thai government underwent a major restructuring, marking "the first major reorganisation of ministries since King Chulalongkorn set up Thailand's modern system of departmental government in 1897" (Painter 2006, 39; Thitinan 2003, 284, 288). As a result, *kamnan* and village heads now are administered by a different department in the Ministry of Interior than the department that oversees TAOs and other such bodies.¹⁰ Given their lower salaries and lessened responsibilities, a growing number of *kamnan* and village heads today are resigning in order to run for TAO

⁸Various proposals for *tambon* council reform had received earlier support from the Social Action Party, Thai Nation Party, Democrat Party, and the Ministry of Interior (see Prathan 1986, 17–20; Chaichana 1990, 121–22). During the September 1992 election campaign, several political parties included decentralization in their platforms. The Phalang Dharma party was most vocal in calling for the election of provincial governors and district officers (Thanet 1992, 58; McCargo 1997, 286). The 1994 Tambon Act was widely interpreted as a compromise to thwart this pressure. In December 1994, the Chuan government sought to require the direct election of all members of the *tambon* councils. However, "aware that they stood to lose a key source of influence and graft, the country's *kamnan* and village heads aggressively lobbied the then minister of interior, the leader of the New Aspiration Party Chavalit Yongchaiyudh" (Arghiros 2001, 244). Chavalit ensured that *kamnan* and village heads maintained their ex officio positions in the *tambon* bodies. When Chavalit became prime minister in November 1996, *kamnan* and village heads were "enthusiastic *hua khanaen* for him and his party" (Arghiros 2001, 244; see also Robertson 1996, 931). For more on this period, see also Hewison (1993), Khien (1997), Murray (1996), Nelson (1998), and Noranit et al. (2002, chap. 4, p. 38).

⁹*Kamnan* and village heads led protests in 1997 (see Nelson 2000, 19) and again in mid-1998 (Arghiros 2001, 244).

¹⁰Oversight of the TAOs and other such bodies came under the Department of Local Administration (*Krom songserm kaanpokkhrong thongthin*). *Kamnan* and village heads have been integrated into the Department of Provincial Administration (*Krom kaanpokkhrong*). In February

positions; alternatively, they are encouraging family members to run for TAO seats.¹¹ Throughout the twentieth century, *kamnan* and village heads were known as the “fathers” of their communities (*poh kamnan*, *poh luang*). In the space of less than a decade, the positions of *kamnan* and village head are being transformed from fathers to figureheads, seeming anachronisms from an era of absolute monarchs.¹²

Theda Skocpol has argued that “agrarian structures and conflicts offer important keys to the patterns of modern politics” (1979, xv). Using the 1995 election as a case study, this essay suggests that tensions in village electoral politics escalated during the mid-1990s because of legal ambiguities resulting from the conflict between new democratic laws intended to decentralize power and older feudal laws intended to centralize power.

This essay is divided into three sections. In the first section, I will discuss the development of village administration, beginning with its nineteenth-century origins in a top-down “feudal” administrative legal system based on an ideology in which villagers were to serve the state.¹³ The second section of this essay focuses on the period after the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1932, outlining the development of bottom-up “democratic” legal institutions based on an ideology in which the state was expected to serve the people. Following this overview of the conflicting trends in the national legal framework in which villagers were embedded, the final section provides an ethnographic account of the 1995 election campaign and its aftermath. Seen from the perspective of the *longue durée*, vote buying in village electoral politics was not a continuation of traditional village culture but an aberration resulting from a specific historical moment in which the conflict between two legal trends reached its zenith in village politics.

CENTRALIZATION: FEUDAL SUBJECTS SERVING THE STATE

Although villagers have long been ignored as “people without history” (Wolf 1982), changes in administrative law over the course of the twentieth century

2004, the Thai Rak Thai party announced plans to abolish direct elections of village heads and *kamnan* entirely (McCargo and Ukrist 2005, 105).

¹¹In Tambon Thungnaa, the basic monthly salary for a new *kamnan* is 4,500 baht and a new village head 4,000 baht. By comparison, the TAO chair earns 18,000 baht, the deputy chair earns 8,000 baht, and village representatives earn 4,500 baht per month.

¹²In the wake of Thailand’s most recent coup in September 1996, various initiatives towards decentralization were reversed. In May 2007, the Cabinet approved a bill to allow *kamnan* and village heads to serve until age 60, and changed their status from elected politicians to civil servants selected by governors. Further changes remain under discussion.

¹³I am using “feudal” to refer to a hierarchical political system in which lords extracted resources from the peasantry. Although some have sought to differentiate Southeast Asian and European feudalism based on control over people versus control over land, I would note that historian Georges Duby, writing of medieval Europe, has also argued that “[w]hat constituted the real basis of wealth at that time was not ownership of land but power over men” (1974, 13).

affected the dynamics of Thai village politics. Concerned about colonial advances in Burma and Indochina during the late nineteenth century, King Rama V (r. 1868–1910) entrusted the task of reforming the country’s rural administration to his half-brother, Prince Damrong Rajanuphab.¹⁴ As founder of the powerful Ministry of Interior, Prince Damrong (r. 1894–1915) established the national hierarchy of provinces (*cangwat*), districts (*amphur*), subdistricts (*tambon*), and villages (*muubaan*).¹⁵ The provincial and district levels of government were incorporated into a highly centralized national bureaucracy. Due to budget constraints, Prince Damrong left *tambon* and village administration in the hands of local villagers. The Local Administration Acts of 1897 and 1914 established the rules governing the election of village leaders and defined their responsibilities. Villagers elected their village heads; village heads, in turn, elected one among themselves to become *kamnan*. Thus, through village elections, Prince Damrong deftly allowed village communities a modicum of internal democracy while incorporating them under a hierarchical feudal bureaucracy. As this section will show, vote buying did not characterize village electoral politics, both because villagers found holding village office increasingly less attractive over the course of the twentieth century and because precedents were in place to facilitate internal consensus among villagers in advance of their formal elections.

Serving Rama: The Period of Absolute Monarchy (1897–1932)

Rural administration developed within a feudal conception of peasant–court relations in which the primary concern of the state was stability and the extraction of goods and services (see figure 1). Under the earlier periods of absolute monarchy, local officials had been expected to “keep the list of men available for military service, report signs of people assembling, list the elephants in the province, get to know the strangers that come to live in the province, and the like” (Wales 1934, 126–30). As Tej Bunnag explains, the late nineteenth-century court was primarily interested in the peasantry because they “provided an abundant supply of free labour; secondly, they could rapidly be called to arms in case of war; thirdly, those who paid their commutation tax in kind provided valuable goods; and finally, those who paid in cash provided the government with revenue” (1977, 9–10). With a more centralized administration, Prince Damrong explained, “we will naturally be able . . . to direct the people more easily than in the past” (Tej 1977, 109).

The primary responsibility of village heads and *kamnan* was to facilitate the security and revenue interests of the state. Village heads were considered the

¹⁴Rural administration emerged from the earlier Department of the North, whereas urban administration developed from the Department of the Capital (see Tej 1977; Riggs 1966).

¹⁵In the *sakdinaa* system of the central region, individual villagers may have been subordinated to different lords (Tej 1977, 109; Akin 1969). A *tambon* comprises some five to twenty villages.



Figure 1. Text reads, “In emergencies, [the *kamnan*] must inspect or conscript supplies from villagers as requested by the military.” Illustration in a government booklet on the duties of *kamnan* (author’s translation; Anonymous 1961, 30).

heads (*huanaa*) of their villages. The 1914 act lists eight duties of village heads: to maintain peace (*raksa khwaamsangop*) and public well-being (*khwaam suksamraan*); to inform the *kamnan* of dangers requiring his assistance; to inform villagers of all government announcements or orders; to keep village household registration lists up to date; to inform the *kamnan* of unusual events in the village that may endanger the village or the government; to investigate any strangers who are not listed on the village household register who enter the village; to summon villagers (*luukbaan*) to catch criminals, confiscate stolen property, extinguish fires, or render other assistance; and to summon troublemakers and vagrants for questioning. In addition, village heads were empowered to make arrests of known or suspected criminals and to confiscate property.¹⁶

In addition to their duties as village heads, *kamnan* had *tambon*-wide responsibilities. These duties included maintaining order, informing people of laws,

¹⁶See “Duties and Powers,” in Fred R. von der Mehden and David A. (1970, 200–206; sec. 27, 1:8; sec. 28, 1:6; sec. 27, 9:19 was added in 1943).

protecting against danger, maintaining public well-being, and collecting taxes. They were to arrest known or suspected criminals and send them to the district office; follow orders to arrest individuals and to search or confiscate property; inform the district of problems; and call meetings of fellow village headmen and their underlings to put out fires or assist with other activities. In addition, *kamnan* were to find places for traveling strangers to stay and assist with the requests of government officials in need of transportation or food. *Kamnan* were also expected to take care of public locations such as rest houses, ponds of water, and places for animal pasturage. They were to keep household registration lists up to date, keep records of taxable goods for their subdistricts, and escort people to pay taxes.

Kin Muang: The Practice of Feudal Self-Remuneration

As with their duties, the manner of remuneration for village leaders developed within this feudal context. Rulers and officials claimed the right to *kin muang*, the practice of self-remuneration by obtaining their income from the goods and services provided by the people under their jurisdiction. As Prince Damrong noted on his tour of eighteen provinces in 1892, governors “made a living out of the provincial administration by using their position to promote their own commercial interests, to protract legal proceedings for the sake of judicial fees, and to keep for themselves as much of the central government’s revenue as possible” (Tej 1977, 99). Under the administrative reforms of Prince Damrong, village leaders were not considered to be salaried government officials. Initially, village leaders were merely exempted from paying certain taxes; subsequently, they were allowed to keep a portion of the taxes and fees they collected for the state (Tej 1977, 123–24). Around 1938, *kamnan* and village heads began to receive a small monthly stipend (De Young 1966, 16; see Snit 1967 for further details).

Such minimal compensation encouraged the continuation of the feudal *kin muang* practices of extracting public tribute, taxes, and labor among village leaders. Villagers often planted and harvested the fields of their village heads (Bowie 1988; see also Arghiros 2001, 76; Delcore 2000). Although the power of village leaders within their communities was checked to varying degrees by their personal conscience, their kin groups, their shared economic interests, and their superiors in the district office, some leaders were able to take advantage of their positions to become wealthy. Lauriston Sharp and Lucien M. Hanks describe a *kamnan*’s rise to power at the turn of the century in central Thailand whose income grew as he “took the responsibility of showing newcomers where to find vacant land, helping stake out their borders, and settling their disputes” (1978, 114, 233). Over time, the *kamnan*’s lifestyle came to resemble that of the feudal aristocracy:

In turn people paid him their land tax, from which he extracted his fee. Soon the canal between his house and the temple was filled with the boats of those who wished his protection. His household grew with

wives and children. His orchard yielded abundant fruit at the hands of his servants. Baskets of grain came to his storehouse from the toil of his tenants. When the crops were in, musicians gathered in the courtyard of his house to begin the songs from the jeweled dancers. Across the fields trooped householders bearing trays of food for the *kamnan*; they would savor for a moment something of courtly life. (Sharp and Hanks 1978, 233–34)

Authorized to arrest villagers and confiscate property, the less scrupulous village leaders found opportunities for extralegal gain as they collected taxes and organized *corvée* labor. In Tambon Thungnaa, a former *kamnan* used his links with outside government officials to conduct raids on villagers who had amassed teak for future house building and to threaten their arrest (see also Arghiros 2001, 74–77). As teak logging was illegal, he collected bribes and confiscated the teak for his own usage. As head of the dam that irrigated lands in his subdistrict and several other subdistricts, he demanded compensation from all villagers downriver, as well as from villagers dependent on water from the canals he oversaw. He gradually acquired more and more land, becoming one of the most powerful men in the district. Ruthless, he was rumored to have used magical powers to kill those who had dared oppose him.

However, not all village leaders were ruthless or unscrupulous. For those who tried to serve their communities, their monthly stipend could hardly compensate for their social obligations (see figure 2). Village heads were embedded in kinship networks that ensured some redistribution of wealth through charitable giving (see Bowie 1998). As John De Young explains,

Headmanship confers prestige and honor on the incumbent, but it carries heavy responsibilities, and demands considerable time. The allotment paid by the central government is too small to be of financial gain to the headman; in fact, the office usually costs him money because he will be expected to make frequent contributions to the temple and for funerals, and to provide food, betel nut, liquor, cigarettes, and cigars for prominent visitors. (1966, 18)

In Tambon Thungnaa, the successor to the ruthless *kamnan* was a man of more modest means; he found the expenses of hosting visitors and attending the never-ending cycle of funerals, housewarmings, and other ritual events throughout the *tambon* to be a considerable financial burden.

Synaptic Leaders: Between State and Citizenry

In these earlier decades, willingness to hold local office varied. As reflected in their titles as “fathers” of their communities, holding village office was considered prestigious. Nonetheless, *kamnan* and village heads were “synaptic leaders” squeezed between the pressures exerted by their villages and officialdom



Figure 2. Text reads, “[The *kamnan* should] help support religious affairs, for example, by repairing temples and supporting the Buddhist monkhood.” Illustration in a government booklet on the duties of *kamnan* (author’s translation; Anonymous 1961, 21).

(Moerman 1969, 548–49). Some scholars have suggested “the authority inherent in a role sanctioned by both national and peasant systems has an obvious attraction for those who seek power at the village level” (Keyes 1970, 105). David M. Engel provides insight into the potential power inherent in the mediating role of village leaders:

If they are skillful they can play their two identities against one another, offering protection against the harsh workings of the laws and regulations which they enforce, and also threatening to use those laws and regulations against persons unwilling to negotiate disputes or persons disrespectful of their authority. In the area of criminal violations, the arrest and reporting powers of the village chief and *kamnan* give them a powerful club to wield over recalcitrant individuals. (1978, 89–90)

The position of *kamnan* offered even more opportunities than that of village head alone because *kamnan* could “increase their power by playing off local and national demands to a greater extent” (Keyes 1970, 105–6).

Yet other scholars have argued that this mediatory position deterred most villagers from seeking office. As Clark D. Neher writes, “As a middleman the headman is constantly subjected to conflicting pressures and is therefore in a most unenviable position” (1976, 217; see also Moerman 1969, 549; Kemp 1976, 258). Moerman suggests that some villagers, when given advance warning of their potential nomination, even began to “campaign in reverse,” asking their friends and kinsmen not to vote for them (1969, 538). Herbert J. Rubin found that most villagers he interviewed did not want to be a village leader, noting that “the benefits were not worth the cost” (1973, 434). Upon his election, one headman commented, “I must accept my duty and my burden even though I will lose my popularity” (Neher 1974, 46). Another headman explained,

It’s hard to be headman. One must listen to the officials and listen to the villagers. If one says ‘no,’ the villagers scold; if one says ‘yes,’ the officials scold. One is neither a villager nor an official. One is in the middle. It’s hard and the money is small. No one wants the job. (Moerman 1969, 547)

Conflict Avoidance: Elections without Campaigns

The extent to which Prince Damrong’s institution of village elections was an innovation is unclear.¹⁷ For villagers for whom harmonious intermatrilineal relations are best served by consensus, the partisan format of a formal election may well have seemed strange.¹⁸ As Herbert P. Phillips notes, villagers believe “that to present the name of an opposition candidate in public would be socially awkward” (1958, 37). Under the 1914 act, both male and female villagers were eligible to vote for their village head.¹⁹ The only qualifications for voting were that one must be under Siamese jurisdiction and must be a lay person age twenty or older. Candidates for the position of village head were to be lay male householders, age twenty or older, and under Siamese jurisdiction; servants, employees, and soldiers were explicitly excluded. The district officer, together

¹⁷Prince Damrong noted that some villagers “actually disliked the idea of electing commune and village elders” (Tej 1977, 188). Because villagers were embarrassed to choose a fellow villager by a show of hands, Prince Damrong instituted the option of a secret ballot in 1897 (Tej 1977, 122–3). The 1914 act defines a village as anywhere from five to two hundred villagers. C. W. Kynnersley suggests that in Trang Province, “The people of 10 houses or any collection of houses up to 20 elect the Phoo-yai-ban and the Phoo-yai-bans elect the Kam-nan” (1905, 14). Northern Thai headmen were usually the wealthiest landowners in the village and also oversaw the irrigation system and any royal lands in their area. Often succeeding their fathers or fathers-in-law, their role as local elites may have facilitated both their selection or election (see Bowie 1988).

¹⁸For a more detailed analysis of the importance of matrilocality and matrilineality in village electoral politics, see Bowie (2008).

¹⁹The 1897 act also included women’s suffrage, long before most countries. Thomas M. Fraser, Jr. (1966, 45), suggests that only “male heads of family” voted in the south.

with the *kamnan* and other village heads of that *tambon*, oversaw the election of village heads. If villagers were uncomfortable with an open election, they could request a secret election in which they whispered their choice in the ear of the district officer. The *kamnan* was elected by the village headmen of a given *tambon* at a meeting presided over by the district officer. In turn, the *kamnan* appointed two assistants. These elections and appointments were subject to the approval of the provincial governors.

Reflecting the likely pattern of earlier decades, village elections of the 1950s to the 1970s are overwhelmingly portrayed as uncontested (see, e.g., De Young 1966, 18; Kingshill 1976, 105; Neher 1974, 46; Potter 1976, 216; Rubin 1974, 52; Phillips 1958, 37; Keyes 1970, 105).²⁰ Villagers seem to have developed various mechanisms to ensure minimal conflict in the election of their leaders. The general pattern appears to have been to nominate a candidate who had served as assistant to the outgoing head, had been nominated by the outgoing head, or who had been chosen by a private consensus reached by village elders (representatives of internal village matriline). De Young describes a northern village election during his fieldwork in 1948–49, noting that “[t]here is no campaigning: the retiring headman and his informal council of elders recommend one or two candidates from mature, respected men of the village, and the villagers vote for these candidates” (1966, 18). He remarks that, commonly, the most popular candidate will be the assistant to the retiring headman because “he is familiar with the office, and will have gained the respect of the villagers in his dealings with them as assistant” (1966, 18; see also Kingshill 1976, 106; Potter 1976, 216). Phillips writes of a central Thai election that “[t]he prospective headman is privately designated by his predecessor or a higher ranking headman” (1958, 37). Writing of the village that he studied in northeastern Thailand, Charles F. Keyes notes that “the role of *puyaiban* [village head] is semi-hereditary and elections merely serve to confirm in office the man that everyone knows should be headman” (1970, 105). In the northeast, *kamnan* often held their positions by virtue of being village head of the central village of the *tambon* (*baan tambon*; see Keyes 1970, 105). Of six village elections he studied, Rubin provides the following example of a typical pro forma election:

To please the District Officer two candidates were nominated. The informally chosen headman won 91–2. Afterwards the villagers adjourned to the new headman’s house where a party had already been arranged. (1974, 52)

²⁰Kaufman (1960, 76) describes a contested election in Bangkok District on the outskirts of Bangkok in 1953; see also Piker (1983, 143). Because community bonds do not always coincide with administrative divisions, the dynamics of the central plains are different from other regions. Of six northern elections that Herbert J. Rubin studied in 1969–70, “only one involved any competition” (1974, 52).

Villagers generally appear to have chosen their own candidates without official interference. In the election that Neher observed, although the district officer convened the election meeting, “the district officer, who was not acquainted with the new headman, did not attempt to influence the vote” (1974, 46). However, there are cases in which district officers were actively involved in the selection of village leaders. In the village that Michael Moerman studied, “Villagers claim, and officials suggest, that the official arrives having already determined which villager he favors for the office. It is most unlikely that the elders would name anyone of whom the officials would disapprove strongly” (1969, 537). District involvement has also been noted in village elections in southern Thailand (Fraser 1966, 45; Thomas 1970, 166–67). Such bureaucratic involvement would also have rendered election campaigning moot.

Changes after the Constitutional Monarchy: Hanuman Battles On

Over the course of the twentieth century, the basic legal framework for village-level elections was amended only four times before 1992. After the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1932, new qualifications for village leaders were added in 1943, specifying that candidates must have Thai nationality, must not be over age sixty, and must be literate in Thai. Ironically, while adding a clause requiring village heads to have administrative abilities in line with the constitution, the 1943 amendments eliminated the election of village heads and the exclusion of soldiers; instead village heads were to be soldiers or policemen appointed by district officials. These latter clauses were short-lived, and democratic elections were reestablished in 1946.²¹ In 1972, Decree no. 364 was issued, which made minor modifications in the qualifications for village headmen, reintroducing a minimum age of not less than twenty (which had been suspended in 1943 to enable the appointment of soldiers and police) and requiring the completion of the compulsory level of education or its equivalence (then grade four).²² More importantly, this decree terminated the former practice of internally electing *kamnan* by fellow village headmen and instituted the direct election of *kamnan* by the people in that *tambon*. However, even after 1972, village headmen generally continued to confer among themselves to decide the next *kamnan*; usually the successor came from the same village as the retiring *kamnan* and was often his deputy *kamnan*. In 1982, women were allowed to run for *kamnan* and village heads for the first time; however,

²¹See Von der Mehden and Wilson (1970, 192–237) for a translation of the 1914 act with the 1946 clauses. The 1943 amendments give deeper meaning to David A. Wilson’s remarks about “greater influence for army officers in the government” (1962, 176). Virginia Thompson (1955, 145–46) is the only scholar to even note this dramatic change. Intriguingly, she notes that in 1950, “The government itself opposed in Parliament a proposal to revive election of headmen, claiming that ‘since village chiefs have the status of assistants to civil officials, it is technically right that they be nominated by those officials rather than elected by the people’” (1955, 147).

²²Another edict on August 7, 1973, allowed exceptions to these educational requirements.

because village heads generally served until retirement, this amendment had little immediate impact.²³

Although the format for village elections underwent little change, the responsibilities of village leaders expanded over the century. Following the coup of 1932, which overthrew the absolute monarchy and established Thailand's first Parliament, democratic expectations that the state should serve the people increased. As a result, the 1914 act was amended in 1943, adding eleven more duties for village heads to perform. Among them were provisions that village heads were to train fellow villagers for warfare; protect them against infectious diseases; improve villagers' livelihood in agriculture, commerce, and industry; and keep villages clean and orderly (see figure 3).²⁴ As competition for land increased, village heads were forced to adjudicate a growing number of conflicts over land rights. Furthermore, as Engel notes, the number of laws and policies that village leaders were expected to enforce also increased, as the previously unrestricted customary village practices of gambling, opium, alcohol, and forest usage became "objects of governmental prescription and intervention" (1978, 188; see figure 4). With the rise of communist insurgency based in the countryside in the late 1950s and 1960s, there were added dangers to being a village leader; some village heads were assassinated as communist sympathizers and others as government lackeys.

Based on his fieldwork in 1960, Moerman provides ethnographic detail of the time-consuming duties carried out by village leaders on a daily basis: traveling long distances to the district office for meetings; convening village meetings to announce the names of those whose birth dates required them to appear for school registration or military conscription; organizing public works and religious affairs including matters relating to the repair and maintenance of the temple and to large-scale Buddhist festivals; supervising road maintenance and school construction; maintaining careful records of contributions to community projects; and mediating disputes "as diverse as the theft of a pomelo, desertion, divorce, armed assault, and rape" (1969, 539–40). In addition, village leaders were "the first to be invited to funerals, ordinations, and similar festivities given in other villages" (1969, 542; see also Fraser 1966, 45–49; Kingshill 1976, 105–21).

That frustration with increasing state expectations was mounting among village leaders is revealed in the remarks made by two villagers who were headmen before the start of World War II; as they commented to Moerman, "In the old days, one was elder of the village. Now the headman is merely the hired messenger of the officials" (1969, 549). Although earlier village heads

²³The impetus to allow women to run is also unclear. I examined the open public records of the parliamentary debate, but the issue provoked no virtually no discussion.

²⁴For a translation, see Von der Mehden and Wilson (1970, 192–237). The 1943 amendment also created assistant village heads, who could be male or female. In 1967, villagers were to have a minimum of two assistants, responsible for administrative and security duties.



Figure 3. Caption reads, “Caw Mii, don’t defecate in the bushes like this! Learn to make a privy like other villagers” (Anonymous 1962, 26).

had generally served for decades at a stretch (see, e.g., Kaufman 1960, 76; Phillips 1958, 37; Sharp and Hanks 1978, 118–19), anthropological accounts of the middle of the twentieth century provide various cases in which village head resigned early because they felt “the burden is too great and the rewards too small” (Moerman 1969). As Konrad Kingshill, who conducted his fieldwork in northern Thailand in the 1950s, commented, a district officer “who demands



Figure 4. Caption reads, “Thit Mii, please take the confiscated property and follow me to the kamnan’s house” (author’s translation; Anonymous 1962, 33).

too much work of his Kamnans and headmen will find frequent resignations” (1976, 106).

Drawing on the epic story of the Ramayana, a 1961 Ministry of Interior brochure illustrates the *kamnan* as Hanuman, the monkey chief who served King Rama. Depicted with multiple arms, Hanuman juggles the diverse duties of handling administrative affairs, maintaining the peace, developing occupations, promoting culture, ensuring public health, and miscellaneous other matters (Anonymous 1961; see figure 5).²⁵ Because village leaders had virtually no state budget at their disposal, fulfilling these growing responsibilities to both state and populace would indeed have required supernatural abilities. Thus, over the course of the century, there was a growing reluctance among villagers to hold village offices.

DECENTRALIZATION: THE STATE SERVING ITS CITIZENS

After the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1932, democratic efforts to decentralize state power resulted in the creation of new institutions at the *tambon*, provincial, and national level. Initially these bodies were only allowed to serve advisory functions, but over the course of the twentieth century, they became more independent. In contrast to the feudal view that people were to provide tribute and labor to serve the government, these councils reflected the expanding democratic ethos that government should serve the people. Catalyzed by a growing communist insurgency and rural unrest, these bodies grew in importance after 1975 with the institution of the Tambon Development Fund and other related governmental development budgets. As this section will show, access to the new development funds flowing through these ever-strengthening bodies served to reawaken Hanuman’s interest in holding village office in the last decades of the twentieth century and set the stage for ensuing conflicts in village-level electoral politics.

Tambon Councils: Developing Influence

Tambon councils can be traced to the *tambon* committees (*khanakamma-kaan tambon*) set out in the Local Administration Act of 1914. Intended to facilitate the *kamnan*’s role in ensuring law and order within his subdistrict, this law provided for at least monthly meetings of the *kamnan*, village headmen, and *tambon* medic to discuss *tambon* affairs. In 1943, district officers were authorized to expand these *tambon* committees by appointing one teacher and an unspecified number of respected villagers. However, these bodies had no budget and

²⁵A parallel brochure for village heads depicts a man embracing two children while carrying a shoulder pole loaded with two heavy baskets laden with packages labeled with the various duties (1962, back page). Lauriston Sharp and Lucien M. Hanks (1978, 186) remark on the villagers’ view of Hanuman as protector.

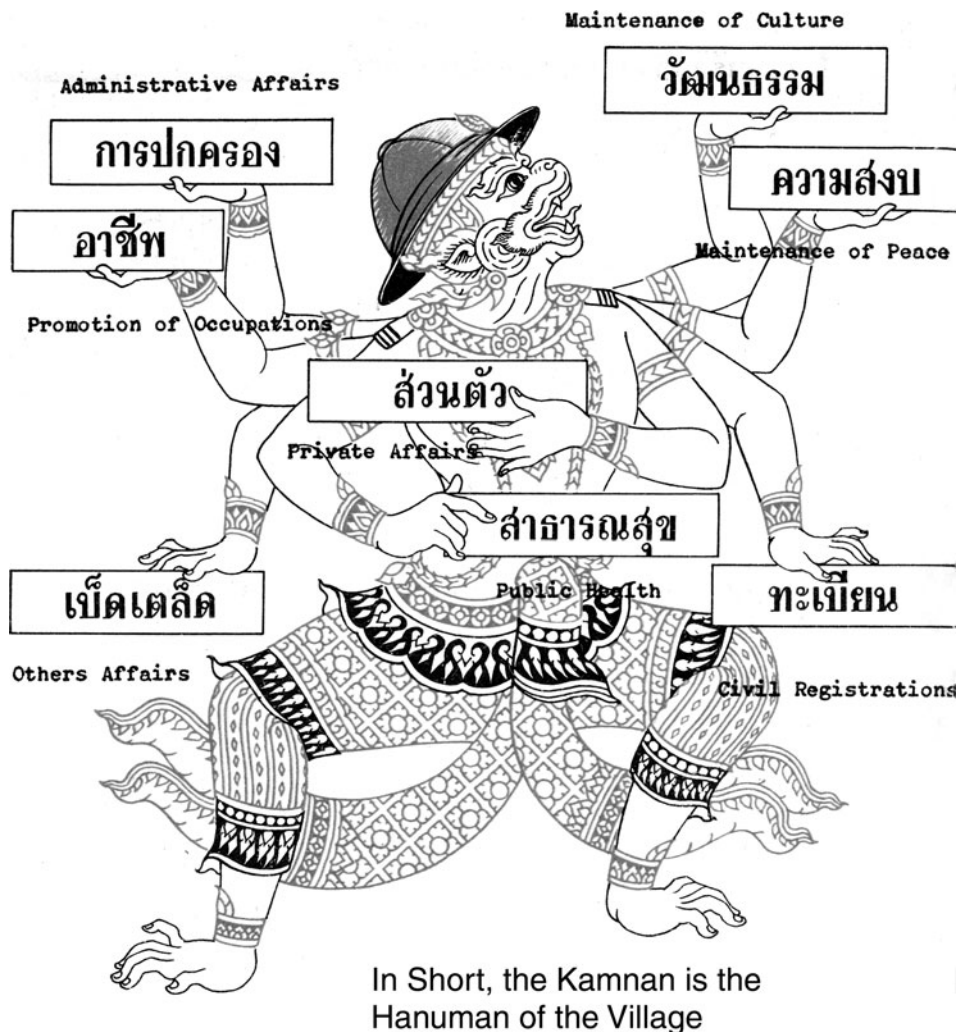


Figure 5. The back page of a Thai government publication, drawing a parallel between the role of the *kamnan* and Hanuman, the monkey-chief who assisted King Rama in the famous epic the *Ramayana* (Anonymous 1961).

played merely an advisory role to the *kamnan*. In 1956, the government of Field Marshal P. Phibulsongkhram issued Ministry of Interior Order no. 222, which established the first *tambon* councils (*saphaa tambon*) authorized both to receive money from national or provincial budgets and to raise local funds.²⁶

²⁶Order no. 222 should not be confused with the 1956 law establishing *tambon* administrative organizations (TAOs). The TAOs never became widespread and were formally terminated with Revolutionary Decree no. 326 of December 23, 1972 (see Adth 1970 for a discussion). For translations of both laws, see Von der Mehden and Wilson (1970). Clark D. Neher (1970b, 8) suggests the motivation for Order no. 222 was democratic, resulting from Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram's trip to the United States and Europe. Fred W. Riggs suggests the government's motivation

Large and unwieldy, these *tambon* councils were chaired by the district officer and comprised ex officio and appointed members. These councils proved ineffective because their activities remained “budgetarily and administratively under the authority of the district officer” (Neher 1970b, 9).²⁷

Spurred by growing concerns about the spread of communism and increasing recognition of the problems inherent in the existing structure, the Ministry of Interior issued Tambon Council Law no. 275 in 1966. Limited in its initial implementation to a pilot program in northeastern Thailand supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development, this law was intended to make the *tambon* council more democratic. The *tambon* council was streamlined into a single entity, with the *kamnan* now serving as chair rather than the district officer. Whereas previously meetings had been held at the discretion of the district officer, the new law required a minimum of four meetings each year. In addition to the *kamnan*, village headmen, the *tambon* medic, and one appointed teacher were also members; for the first time, villagers were allowed to elect a representative from their respective village. All other officials were now eliminated, although community development officials and an assistant district officer were to act as nonvoting advisors to the council. *Tambon* councils were authorized to approve or disapprove village development projects and file grievances of official misconduct (Adth 1970, 63–72; Rubin and Rubin 1973; see Von der Mehden and Wilson 1970, 283–90, for a translation). However, by 1970, only some 10 percent of *tambons* had been authorized to adopt this format (Neher 1970b, 9).

The overwhelming majority of *tambons* in the country remained under the unwieldy 1956 form of *tambon* council until December 1972, when Revolutionary Council Decree no. 326 was issued. Modeled on the format of no. 275, this decree established *kamnan* as the heads of the *tambon* councils nationwide for the first time, with village heads and the *tambon* medic as members ex officio. In addition, one representative was to be elected from each village for a five-year term. The district officer appointed the *tambon* council advisor, who was either a deputy district officer or an official from the community development

may have been to centralize power under such key figures as General Phao Sriyanond. Because Phao was chief of police, deputy minister of the interior, and secretary-general of the Seri Manangkhasila political party at the time, he may have seen it as a way to create a mass party that “would improve his own position in relation to his bureaucratic rivals” (Riggs 1966, 191).

²⁷Neher (1970a, 29–30; see also 1970b) concludes that only 10 percent remained in the subdistrict after the district officer co-opted funds for other projects under his jurisdiction. These *tambon* councils were composed of two bodies, the council and an executive committee. The council, chaired by the district officer, was made up of two representatives per village—the village headmen ex officio and a villager selected by the district officer. The executive committee was comprised of the *kamnan* as chair, the *tambon* medic, all village heads, one local school teacher, the headmasters of all schools, all government officials stationed in that *tambon*, and at least two other respected persons to be selected by the district office.

department, and the secretary, a teacher in the *tambon*. The district officer oversaw *tambon* council budgets and was authorized to stop “harmful” policies.

Although this organizational structure remained unchanged until 1995, the importance of *tambon* councils grew as the amount of government funds being channeled through these local councils began to increase. In 1975, newly elected Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj implemented a controversial Tambon Development Fund, marking “the first time central funds were allocated to be spent on locally decided development projects (Turton 1989, 91; see also Prathan 1986, 15; Suvit and Koonthong 1976). Under the 1982–86 National Economic and Social Development Plan, *tambon* councils were expected to develop long-term economic and social plans for their localities (Turton 1989, 91; see also Nelson 1998, 39–44, 225). Although *tambon* council decisions were still constrained by a “top-down” structure in which district officials were directly involved (see Chaichana 1990; Nelson 1998), money was flowing. With growing budgets for road construction and other local projects, the positions of village head and *kamnan* became increasingly attractive.

In 1995, the new 1994 Tambon Council and Tambon Administrative Organization Act went into effect. This law provided for a gradual transition from single-body *tambon* councils to dual-body *tambon* administrative organizations, the latter form in effect for larger subdistricts with greater tax revenues. This law also established both forms as legal entities able to sign their own contracts and file legal cases in the event of contracted work not meeting standards. In both the older *tambon* councils and the newer TAOs, *kamnan* were the heads and village heads were members *ex officio*. With increased budgets now passing through these *tambon* bodies and greater power to allocate their budgets independent of the district offices, the new law created a widespread expectation that the power of the *kamnan* and village heads was destined to increase significantly.

Provincial Councils: Constructing Power

Like the *tambon* councils, the power of provincial organizations grew over the course of the twentieth century. Provincial councils were created in 1933, in the aftermath of the 1932 coup that established a constitutional monarchy. “Suspicious of the political inexperience of the council,” the first members were appointed by the provincial governors and subject to the approval of the Minister of the Interior (Choop 1962, 24). A new law in 1938 provided that all members be elected. However, lacking legislative authority and an independent tax base, the elected council remained merely “an advisory board to the governor and his staff rather than a council for local self-government” (Choop 1962, 27). With the Japanese occupation of Thailand during World War II, the provincial councils declined. No provincial elections were held after 1943, and they were abolished in 1953 (Thompson 1955, 147). Provincial councils were resurrected under the Provincial Administrative Act of 1955. Under this act, half of their

members were elected and half appointed; in 1956, the law was amended, providing that all members be elected for five-year terms (Riggs 1966, 192). Nonetheless, the council remained under the control of the provincial governors. Consequently, the council remained at best “a body of limited effectiveness” (Neher 1970b, 10).

Despite these constraints, provincial councils gradually expanded their provincial powers. Because of their role in approving and allocating infrastructure development budgets for roads, bridges, dams, schools, public offices, and the like, the positions of provincial councilors became attractive to businesspeople involved in construction. Their power increased during the 1980s when the government of General Prem Tinsulanond (1980–88) replaced a *tambon* development fund with a provincial development fund and allowed provincial members of Parliament (MPs) to control its use (Pasuk and Baker 1995, 347). By the 1990s, the provincial councils had become widely dubbed “contractor councils” (*saphaa phuu rap mao*). Working in tandem with the provincial government and disbursing funds to *tambon* councils, these provincial representatives formed bridges with *kamnan* and village heads. Provincial councilors came to play increasingly important roles in national political elections, with present and prospective MPs bankrolling the campaigns of provincial council candidates “on the understanding that provincial councillors will mobilize the lower-level networks on their behalf” (Arghiros 2001, 25).²⁸ Extrabureaucratic networks were growing.

Parliament: Building Support

Parliament was also founded after the 1932 coup. Although the original promoters of the coup called themselves the People’s Party, the first Parliament was entirely appointed (Thawatt 1972, 119–26). Several times during the 1930s, the question of political parties was raised in the national assembly, and each time the government opposed them (Wilson 1962, 234; Murashima, Nakin, and Somkiat 1991). According to various interviews that I have conducted, early candidates based their support on their personal roles in developing irrigation systems, providing free legal advice, and the like. Although the first law allowing the registration of political parties was only passed in 1955, fledgling political parties formed for the first time in the aftermath of World War II (Riggs 1966, 162–76). However, with the exception of the Communist Party of Thailand, the parties had no established bases in the countryside. Repeated military coups hindered party development, as following coups, “parties were ultimately dissolved, their assets confiscated, and their organizations dismantled” (Ockey 2004, 24; see also Suchit 1987). Without a stable national organization and with only short periods of time to organize before the elections, the parties depended heavily on the bureaucracy to mobilize

²⁸See Fishel (2001), McVey (2000), Nelson (1998, 67), Pasuk and Sungsidh (1994), and Turton 1989.

voters. Prior to 1975, each election had been won by a government party that, “by using the bureaucracy, had a ready-made organization and adequate financial support” (Ockey 2004, 24).²⁹

However, this pattern of bureaucratic domination began to change in the 1970s. The military ruled Thailand from 1958 to 1973. On October 14, 1973, a popular uprising overthrew the military dictatorship, marking “the first time in modern Thai political history that a military regime had been toppled by extra-bureaucratic forces with mass support” (Suchit 1987, 50–51). This period saw a rapid explosion of new forces in civil society, such as student organizations, labor unions, and farmer groups (Bowie 1997; Girling 1981; Morell and Chai-anan 1981; Prudhisan 1987). Under the new constitution, all candidates for election had to belong to a political party. With the military expelled from office, for the first time, there was no government party mobilizing the Ministry of Interior to deliver rural votes (Anderson 1996, 18). As a result, the elections of 1975 were highly competitive; forty-two political parties fielded candidates (Morell and Chai-anan 1981, 112). However, the challenges of managing shifting party coalitions and a society undergoing rapid polarization proved complex. The military staged another coup on October 6, 1976.

Military rule notwithstanding, capitalist expansion continued apace. Beginning in the 1960s, Thailand had embarked on a course of industrialization. Although formerly only “able to expand their economic activities successfully by cooperating with the Thai patrimonial ruling class” (Prudhisan 1987, 115), business became increasingly independent. The growing role of capital was reflected in the 1975 election results: Just over one-third (37 percent) of the newly elected MPs were businessmen; only 12 percent were bureaucrats (Morell and Chai-anan 1981, 115).³⁰ Businessmen won a majority of seats in subsequent elections held in 1983 and 1986; by 1988, two-thirds of MPs were businessmen (Pasuk and Baker 1995, 338–39, 349). Significantly, in each successive election, a growing number represented provincial business interests (Pasuk and Baker 1995, 344–49).

In August 1988, power passed on to Chartchai Choonhavan (1988–91). With his plan to turn the battlefields of Indochina into marketplaces, business thrived. Between 1980 and 1991, the annual export growth of Thailand averaged 13.2 percent, exceeding even that of South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Foreign investment soared. By 1991, Thailand had become the twenty-

²⁹In 1949 and in 1950, high officials of the Phibun administration were accused of threatening officials with dismissal or transfer if they did not support the government party’s candidates (Thompson 1955, 147). Wilson notes that in 1957, “A district officer in the south was asked if there was a close relationship between the civil service and the Seri Manangkhasila organization. Frankly, but without pride, he said, ‘We were the Seri Manangkhasila organization’” (1962, 245).

³⁰Businessmen outnumbered bureaucrats and lawyers in the assembly for the first time in 1969, however Parliament was dominated by the Senate, “packed with 128 military men among 164 members” (Pasuk and Baker 1995, 300).

fifth-largest exporter in the world (Anek 1993, 113). With a cabinet overwhelmingly composed of businessmen, the Chartchai government was involved in major projects “to expand telephone systems, improve upcountry highways, extend Bangkok’s expressway, build mass transit systems, launch telecommunication satellites, expand electricity generation through dams and power stations, and complete the massive Eastern Seaboard development zone” (Pasuk and Baker 1995, 353). Justifying their coup on growing rumors of corruption, the military, led by General Suchinda Kraprayoon, ousted the Chartchai government on February 23, 1991. In the ensuing period of instability, new elections for Parliament were held on March 22, 1992, and again on September 13, 1992.

Thus, at the time of the 1995 elections that I observed, parliamentary elections were occurring with growing frequency. Over the course of the 1980s, vote buying in parliamentary elections had become increasingly widespread.³¹ First-time candidates bought votes in their effort to displace existing MPs, while already elected MPs used new parliamentary development funds, large state development budgets, and provincial development funds to safeguard votes in future elections. Between the national elections of 1988 and 1996, vote buying was estimated to have increased tenfold, from some 10 billion baht to 100 billion baht (about US\$400 million to US\$4 billion; see Ockey 2000, 87). From the perspective of villagers, there was often little apparent difference among candidates or party platforms. With money flowing, *kamnan* were widely considered “the most important link in the chain” (Ockey 2004, 29; see also Callahan and McCargo 1996; Murray 1996, 89, 223). For village leaders, the times seemed particularly promising.

THE CASE OF THE 1995 LOCAL ELECTION

The growing allure of holding village office combined with the legal reforms of 1992 and 1994 to create a new political dynamic. As elsewhere, although vote buying had come to characterize national elections, elections for village head and *kamnan* in Tambon Thungnaa had never been particularly fraught and had never involved buying votes from villagers. In elections for village head, villagers had generally reached a consensus before the formal vote was taken. Of the four *kamnan* who had served over the earlier five decades, three had been chosen under the original law of 1914 in which headmen chose among themselves. No one whom I interviewed recalled any particular controversy; it was a foregone conclusion that the *kamnan* would come from Baan Dong Village, as it was the largest village in the *tambon*, had the only regular morning market, and was

³¹Vote buying in national elections is often dated to a fiercely contested by-election between General Kriangsak Chamanan and Bunlert Lertpreecha in Roi-et in 1981. It has also been dated to 1979 electoral legislation that banned candidates from showing films and other such low-cost forms of entertainment at election rallies (Callahan and McCargo 1996, 378).

relatively centrally located. The fourth *kamnan* was the first to be elected by popular vote in 1986, as stipulated under the 1972 law. Campaigning was minimal. The three candidates at that time had a few posters made, and their supporters drove a few trucks blaring their poll numbers from loudspeakers through the *tambon* on the day before the election. Like the earlier three *kamnan*, the winning candidate lived in Baan Dong Village, came from a wealthy landowning family with a wide kinship network, headed a branch of the irrigation system, and had served as deputy *kamnan*. His two opponents both came from smaller villages and were considered young and inexperienced; their combined votes were far less than the votes of the winner.

The election that I observed in 1995, triggered by the mandatory retirement of the last *kamnan* when he reached age sixty, marked a dramatic departure. Resignations of *kamnan* involve two successive elections; the first is an election for a new village head, as *kamnan* serve as heads in their village of residence, and the second is a *tambon*-wide election for *kamnan*, in which only village heads are eligible candidates. Discussions had been under way in Baan Dong Village and in other villages in Tambon Thungnaa as to the retiring *kamnan*'s possible successors. With an eye to the *kamnanship*, Baan Dong villagers quickly reached an internal consensus to formally elect Kaew as their new village head; he ran without opposition. Although he was only of somewhat above-average wealth, he was known throughout the *tambon* because he had served as deputy *kamnan* for some ten years, his father had headed the very successful district agricultural cooperative, and his brother was a respected police officer. In addition to newly elected Headman Kaew, there were two other candidates: Headman Kham and Headman Ngen. All three candidates were in their early forties; of the three, Headman Kaew had the most formal education. Headman Kham's campaign was the least serious of the three, as he had just been elected village head a few months earlier (replacing his father), had little prior public service experience, and represented only the third-largest village in the *tambon*; he explained to me that he was primarily running to position himself for future political developments.

Representing only the fourth-largest village, Headman Ngen was the major contender, and he ultimately won the election. He had been village head since 1985, but he was not well liked. He had run unsuccessfully for *kamnan* in 1986, and since then, his own villagers had twice mounted recall efforts. The first was prompted when he got into a fistfight and the second by a conflict over the management of a village rice bank. Unlike the first attempt, the second recall effort garnered the necessary number of signatures in his village, but it died when the then *kamnan* refused to forward the matter to the district office as required; hence Ngen remained as village head. Over time, Headman Ngen had become increasingly wealthy from his road construction business and had made it widely known that he planned to win this election. When the three village heads went to the district office to formally register their candidacy,

Headman Ngen had already arranged for the housewives' associations from eight villages in the *tambon* to present him with garlands of flowers. However, the campaign that began with beautiful, sweet-scented flowers quickly became ugly.

Term Limits: Creating the Grandfathered Coalition

Accustomed to the old days when village heads chose their own *kamnan*, the heads of the twelve villages had held private discussions about the *kamnanship*. Eight, including Headman Ngen, had been elected under the pre-1992 laws; grandfathered, they could remain in office until they reached age sixty. The other four heads, including the two other candidates, were elected after the 1992 law went into effect and would only serve the limited five-year term. The seven senior headmen had developed a close relationship with Headmen Ngen while working in the *tambon* council and had benefited from their participation in his road construction business. Headman Ngen had laid the groundwork for his campaign in advance, ensuring the gratitude of these village headmen by providing them with truckloads of free dirt for their village's roads, walkie-talkie radios, and interest-free loans, the last two to be returned or repaid only if he lost. Consequently, the eight village headmen quickly formed a coalition against the four junior upstarts. The eight village housewives' associations that brought flower garlands for Headman Ngen on registration day marked the first formal appearance of this faction.

The coalition, which included the interim *kamnan*, was unabashed in announcing its choice for *kamnan* and made no pretense of being neutral. The group organized two campaign rallies for Headman Ngen; one rally was conveniently timed to coincide with a Boi Luang temple festival being held in the village of the acting *kamnan*, and the second rally was held in a village headed up by a cousin of Headman Ngen. Although the *tambon* council had never met as a body to vote on this issue, the acting *kamnan* presented these two rallies as neutral forums organized in the name of the *tambon* council. There was a sizeable audience at the temple festival; the second rally drew only a small crowd of some fifty people. At each rally, Headman Ngen, garlanded in flower leis provided by the housewives' association of the hosting village, was surrounded by the other seven headmen holding their new walkie-talkies. With the acting *kamnan* serving as master of ceremonies, each of the village heads in the coalition gave brief speeches announcing their support for Headman Ngen. Headmen Kaew and Kham were not present. Although they had been sent initial letters of invitation, they never received any subsequent information regarding date, time, or format.

Headmen Kaew and Kham, together with their supporters, debated how to handle these de facto rallies. Before the first rally was held, Headman Kaew had gone to the district office to ask whether it was legal for village headmen to campaign or whether they should remain neutral. The district official involved replied that as long as the headmen were not attacking the other candidates, there was

nothing wrong with them campaigning for the candidate of their choice. The prevailing view among Headman Kaew's supporters was that the district officials were deliberately cooperating with Headman Ngen. Given the district's supervisory role in the budget allocation process of the local *tambon* council development funds (with its historical practice of all involved reaping private benefit), this interpretation was not inconceivable. Although they were upset by these two partisan rallies, both Headmen Kaew and Kham decided they would not crash the "*tambon* council" rallies. They both still believed they would have a neutral venue for their campaigns in the public forums that the Pollwatch committee intended to organize.

Comprising a loose coalition of nongovernmental organizations, trade unionists, and academics, Pollwatch was a national effort to monitor vote buying and other election irregularities that was founded in January 1992 under the Anan government (for more on Pollwatch, see Murray 1996, 91–98, 215–21; Callahan 1998, 117–30; 2000; Callahan and McCargo 1996). The head of the local district Pollwatch affiliate announced its plans to hold several neutral forums for all three candidates to speak. The acting *kamnan* had initially told the head of the Pollwatch committee that he would support such forums. However, as the first date neared, the Pollwatch organizer still had no venue. The acting *kamnan* refused to allow his village to be used, and the other headmen assumed a similar position. Headmen Kham and Kaew were asked about their villages, but each felt that it was unfair unless forums were held in each village fielding a candidate. The problem was suddenly solved when another village head, the cousin of Headman Ngen who had also hosted the "*tambon* council" rally, agreed to allow his village to be used as the venue. Because this village was centrally located, the Pollwatch committee decided that rather than hold multiple events, it would only hold one large forum. The Pollwatch organizers went ahead with the other details of arranging the program. Each candidate was to speak for no more than twenty minutes; an outside moderator would be invited from Chiang Mai. The details were confirmed with the participants the night before.

However, the coalition also managed to successfully thwart the Pollwatch event. On the day of the forum, the host village head informed the head of the Pollwatch committee that he had changed his mind and did not want the forum to take place in his village. He said that he feared there could be violence, and as village headman, he was responsible for maintaining law and order (he had no such fears when the "*tambon* council" rally had been held in his village). Stunned, the head of the Pollwatch committee went to the district office to consult with district officials. The district official involved said that he was personally opposed to holding public forums because it was turning the office of *kamnan* from one of administration into one of politics. He sympathized with the host village head's concern, explaining that village heads are "owners of the village" (*chawkhong sathanthii*) and reiterating their responsibility for maintaining

law and order (*mii naathii raksaa khwaamsangop*) (see figure 6). He had no objection to the Pollwatch committee's request for police assistance with peace-keeping efforts. However, he said that if a village headman fears he cannot maintain law and order, he has the right to prohibit an event.³² The Pollwatch committee arranged for a delegation of some ten police to be sent to the village in question. However, the village headman still refused to give permission for the forum to proceed. Consequently, at the last minute, the event fell through.

Not only did the coalition effectively block access to public campaign forums to Headmen Kham and Kaew, they also closed their individual villages off (*pid muubaan*) to private campaign initiatives.³³ Seeking alternative avenues of access, supporters of Headmen Kham and Kaew had tried to turn to their respective networks of friends and relatives living in other villages, asking them to let their houses be used for campaign meetings. Such requests put their friends and relatives in a very awkward position. In one such case, supporters of Headman Kaew asked to use the home of a villager who had been born in Headman Kaew's village but had married into a "gang of eight" village. He still returned every day to Baan Dong to sell pork at the morning market. Initially the pork seller agreed, but then the headman informed him through the seller's wife's family that if he allowed this meeting, the village headman would no longer guarantee his continued safety and happiness in the village. But once he called the meeting off, people in his natal village began to boycott his pork (see Bowie 2008). In another case, a village head agreed to arrange a meeting of villagers to hear Headman Kaew's ideas. But when Headman Kaew and his supporters arrived at the headman's house, there was no one there. In another village, the headman refused to allow Headmen Kaew's campaign workers to announce a meeting over the village public address system. He apologized to the workers, explaining that Headman Ngen had loaned him money, so he did not dare go against Ngen. When pressed, he radioed Headman Ngen, who told him not to allow them to hold the campaign meeting.

Fund-Raising: New Links with Outside Politicians

Campaign expenses had not been an issue in previous elections in Tambon Thungnaa; the only significant expense had been the victory celebration, which cost a few thousand baht, depending on the amount (and quality) of liquor served. The costs for the 1995 election were of an entirely different magnitude, running in the tens and hundreds of thousands of baht. Food and liquor were

³²During the 1970s, I was once involved in an effort to organize a public debate in a village among candidates for Parliament. When the district officer informed us that we would be held responsible for any outbreaks of violence, we could not proceed.

³³Nelson (1998, 192) notes that competitors were also banned in a 1991 election for *kamnan* in Chachoengsao Province. In Tambon Thungnaa, some village heads were formally part of the ban but secretly planned to split their village votes across the candidates—or so they claimed in conversations with Headman Kaew's representatives.

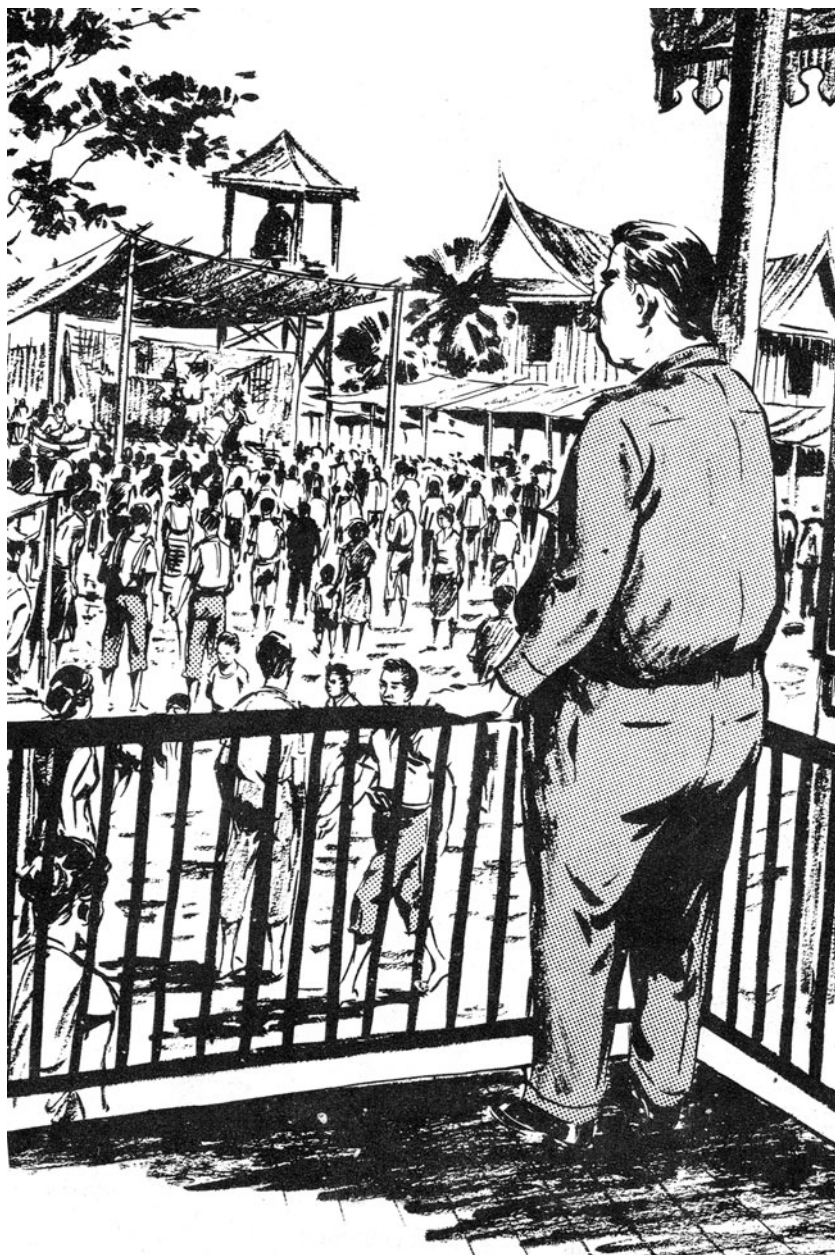


Figure 6. Text reads, “[The kamnan] must maintain order when there are festivals, shows, or other events in the village.” Illustration in a government booklet on the duties of *kamnan* (author’s translation; Anonymous 1961, 19).

major expenses. In the past, the winner had hosted a victory celebration; now campaign workers needed to be fed throughout the monthlong period leading up to the election. In addition, candidates had posters and leaflets made; they hired professionals to make tapes to broadcast from loudspeakers affixed to the back of trucks. Headman Ngen could afford to hire advertising trucks; the

other two candidates relied on supporters donating trucks, drivers, and gas. With as many as forty vehicles driving through the *tambon* on a single day in support of each candidate, the amount spent on gas alone was considerable. Headman Kaew estimated that he spent about 100,000 baht on the campaign; Headman Kham spent about 60,000 baht; Headman Ngen spent at least 400,000 baht, much of which went to unabashed vote buying.³⁴ Because Headmen Kham and Kaew were both newly elected headmen, they would only be able to serve five years. Neither bought votes, both because they believed it was unethical and because neither could afford to make the same kind of investment as a candidate with some two decades remaining in office.³⁵

With campaign costs running so high, fund-raising became a major issue for the first time. However, there were no laws governing fund-raising. Candidates had always been expected to cover their own minimal campaign expenses in the past; this election marked the first time candidates looked outside the *tambon* for assistance. Headman Ngen had become wealthy in his position as village headman, using his access to government infrastructure budgets to develop a road construction business. In addition to his own substantial personal means, he received considerable financial support from two MPs, several provincial assembly representatives, and others involved in construction. One single donor allegedly gave 90,000 baht. Headman Ngen's access to national and provincial politicians was enhanced by the fact that, if elected, he could legally remain in office for nearly two more decades. These politicians appeared to be more inclined to "invest" in a candidate who was likely to remain in power longer; the fewer the number of future elections, the more money they would save.

Headman Kham was the least aggressive fund-raiser. He relied almost entirely on personal funds, although he did receive small contributions from one MP and one provincial assembly member (he said that he did not solicit further funds from other politicians because he did not want to become indebted to more people than he would be able to repay at election time with votes from his village). Headman Kham never thought to ask his fellow villagers to help defray his campaign expenses. He told me that he just felt grateful that so many of them had helped with their time and labor.

³⁴My figures for Headmen Kaew and Kham are based on estimates provided by the candidates themselves and members of their campaign committees. The figure for Headman Ngen comes from estimates provided by Headman Ngen's wife and other family members.

³⁵Vote buying is difficult to prove, and allegations are often the result of efforts by some villagers to slander others. My confidence that Headman Ngen bought votes is based on several factors. First is the sheer number of detailed rumors that worked their way through village kinship networks back to various members of Headmen Kaew and Kham's campaign committees. Furthermore, both Kaew and Kham were approached by members of Headman Ngen's committee with offers to buy their withdrawals. In addition, one village headman met with Kaew, noting how much Headman Ngen was prepared to pay for votes from his village and offering to sell these votes to Headman Kaew for a higher price (Kaew refused).

Inventing Tradition: Old Rituals in a New Context

Headman Kaew initially assumed that he would be footing the bill for his campaign in large measure from his share of his family inheritance. However, Headman Kaew also had an extremely committed campaign committee comprising the leading members of the temple, school, and other such internal village committees. Using their various external connections, they contacted national and provincial representatives with long-standing relations with Baan Dong, as well as several merchants and a local banker. Through these external contacts, they raised more than 50,000 baht. The largest single donation—10,000 baht—came from an MP. However, it soon became clear that this amount was not enough.

As the campaign escalated and as rumors of Headman Ngen's vote-buying tactics were substantiated, Headman Kaew's committee made an unprecedented proposal: to raise money from fellow villagers. Because the election period coincided with the traditional New Year's celebration, villagers enthusiastically agreed to transform the traditional *dam hua*, or paying respects to the village headmen ceremony, into an election fund-raiser. Rather than the customary symbolic offerings of sweets and flowers, villagers decided to contribute food to help provide daily meals for Headman Kaew's campaign workers. It was a festive but poignant occasion. Villagers arrived by the hundreds, carrying ritual trays bearing rice, onions, and other food staples. The older generation wore white shawls over their shoulders, and many women had flowers in their hair. The ceremony began with the head of the temple committee commenting that although Headman Kaew was younger than many other villagers, "he is the father of us all and we wish him well in his work on our behalf." Led by the temple head, three former *kamnan* who resided in Baan Dong and the heads of the seven village temple subgroups, villagers came up to pour water on the hands of Kaew and his wife. As the throng of villagers reached its peak, Headman Kaew was asked to make a speech. With his wife at his side, he stood to speak. But tears welled in his eyes, and despite several attempts, words failed him. Emotions were palpable when Kaew's father expressed his son's gratitude on his behalf.

After the election, spurred by sympathy for Headman Kaew and a desire to rally his morale after his loss, Baan Dong villagers decided to organize another village-wide fund-raiser to defray the remaining costs. Headman Kaew had begun building a new house, but he had been too busy with the campaign to finish it. Upon the completion of a new home, home owners generally sponsor a housewarming party (*khyyn baan mai*). Villagers decided not only to help him finish his house but also to hold a village-wide combination of a special life lengthening ritual (*syub chataa*) and a traditional housewarming ceremony for him. Virtually every household contributed both labor and money. In addition to raising more than 20,000 baht to cover the cost of the ceremony, villagers

donated an additional 25,000 baht to defray Headman Kaew's election debt. These were substantial sums, especially considering that the temple committee had been having trouble raising more than a few thousand baht for its fund and village wages at the time were 40–100 baht per day. As a result, although his campaign cost about 100,000 baht, Headman Kaew was only out of pocket some 10,000–20,000 baht.

Vote Buying

With large government budgets at stake and so much invested, vote buying became a major factor in the election campaign. Although both communal and individual vote buying had been occurring with growing frequency in national elections, this election marked its first appearance in a village-level election in this region. The variety of forms of vote buying attests to a certain distorted form of inventiveness. Ngen made donations to the seven village headmen and their respective village housewives' groups. His campaign workers gave special contributions to the village elderly, seeking to gain the support of their children and grandchildren. In less subtle forms, villagers sold their right to vote (*noon thap sit*, "sleep on their right") by surrendering their identification cards; the cards were returned to their owners after the polls closed.³⁶ Another variation took advantage of villagers' penchant for playing local lotteries. In this form, representatives of Headman Ngen bet against their own candidate, offering 3:1 odds in favor of Headman Kaew. Hence, if Headman Ngen should win, they would be paid 300 baht for every 100 baht they gambled. Thus, individual villagers who took the bet had a personal reason to vote in favor of Headman Ngen. The average vote sold for about 100 baht. Village agents received an extra fee, which was to be returned if their village failed to meet its allotted quota. Thus, the system of vote buying allowed the vote buyer to minimize his expenses in the event of his election defeat.

In Tambon Thungnaa, more than 75 percent of some 5,000 registered voters cast ballots.³⁷ Polling hours were from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Consequently, many who worked construction jobs, a primary source of income for many villagers, sacrificed the day's wages to stay home and vote. Villagers who lived elsewhere returned home to vote. Headman Ngen won the election by 257 votes: 1,710 to Headman Kaew's 1,453 votes (see table 1). Headman Kham's campaign only succeeded in garnering 480 votes, 402 in his own village. About 90 percent of Baan Dong's eligible voters turned out to vote, and they voted overwhelmingly for Kaew (916:36:2). The final vote tally revealed that Kaew's campaign had not been to penetrate the eight villages aligned with Headman Ngen; the coalition had proved an effective bloc. Although vote buying was also a

³⁶Although it does not increase one's own vote tally, it reduces the number of votes one's opponents receive.

³⁷Arghiros (2001, 3) also notes high voter turnout in local elections.

Table 1. Vote totals in Tambon Thungaa's election for *kamnan*, April 1995

Village	Headman Ngen	Headman Kaew	Headman Kham	Invalid ballots	Total votes cast
1	149	290	4	57	500
2	122	14	16		152
3	64	59	4	3	130
4	87	35	0		122
5 (Ngen)	384	18	1		403
6	268	18	18		304
7 (Kham)	110	23	402		535
8	64	4	25		93
9	164	0	2		166
10 (porkseller)	121	9	5		125
11 (Kaew)	36	916	2	63	1,017
12	141	64	1		206
Total	1,710	1,450	480	123	3,763

Source: Author's field notes.

contributing factor, assessing the impact of vote buying is not easy. Many villagers took the money but voted as they wished. In one village where Ngen was said to have targeted 300 votes and spent a considerable amount of money (nine buyers with 5,000 baht each), he only got half that many votes. Nonetheless, given how close the vote was, money only needed to provide Headman Ngen with some 250 votes in order to have an impact.

The Aftermath

Headman Ngen's victory was met by intense outrage among Headman Kaew's supporters. When word of their defeat came, many burst into tears. Sorrow mixed with anger. There were no established patterns for coping with election defeat, as former elections had never generated such intense involvement. An impromptu gathering formed over at Headman Ngen's home, and village leaders decided to call a meeting for the following day. Villagers denounced vote sellers as lower than dogs: a dog sold for 2–300 baht, but these people had sold their votes for as little as 100 baht. As villagers repeatedly said,

Money,
 If it lands on a vagina, the vagina opens
 If it lands on grass, the grass dies
 If it lands on a buffalo, it becomes chopped meat (*laap*).³⁸

³⁸*Laap* is a village delicacy, usually made of finely chopped meat mixed with spices. The transliteration of the village saying is,

At the formal village meeting, proposals were made to punish the pork seller and other individual villagers who were accused of having betrayed the village by taking bribes or refusing to assist with Headman Kaew's campaign; these proposals received impassioned support (see Bowie 2008). Bitterly condemning the power of money, villagers repeatedly commented that they could have accepted defeat had the campaign been conducted fairly. The meeting concluded with a unanimous decision to send a delegation led by Headman Kaew to pay a visit to the MP who had helped them during the campaign. As it was the time of the New Year celebrations, they planned to use their visit to both offer their traditional new year respects (*dam hua*) and to ask him whether they could press for a new election.

The next day, the village delegation met with the MP and laid out their grievances. The MP told them they could try to file a complaint, but it was extremely unlikely that their complaint would come to anything. He told them of two cases of corruption and vote fraud in which he had been involved; in neither case did the governor call for new elections. He explained that the present laws were vague and basically left such matters to the discretion of the governor. He also cautioned the delegation to think through the consequences of a failed complaint for their headman's relations with others in the *tambon* council.

Although the villagers came home discouraged, they continued to discuss alternatives. Some argued they should mount a recall campaign and have Ngen expelled from office; others countered that he had survived two such campaigns already. Others wanted the Pollwatch organization to pursue charges. Subsequent meetings with members of Pollwatch revealed their difficulties in trying to appeal election results. First of all, vote buying was hard to document. Furthermore, Pollwatch had no particular legal standing and, at best, could only inform the Ministry of Interior of a problem (see Callahan 1998; Murray 1996).³⁹ In addition, the Local Administrative Act of 1914, even as amended in 1943, did not address the issue of election appeals.⁴⁰ In 1992, the Ministry of Interior issued a regulation governing elections of village heads in which it is mentioned

*Ngen,
Thaa thuk hii, hii aa
Thaa thuk yaa, yaa daaj
Thaa thuk khwaaj, pen chin laap.*

³⁹In the March 1992 national election, Pollwatch helped lodge more than 3,600 complaints. Of the 559 complaints sent on to provincial governors for investigation, legal action was only taken in three cases (see Murray 1996, 98).

⁴⁰The 1914 act merely states that if a village head does something wrong, a new election can be held; if the governor finds that the current *kamnan* is unable to handle his duties, a new election may be held. Under the 1943 amendment, a village head could be terminated on the basis of insufficient qualifications, death, a petition by a majority of voters, or governor's order.

that candidates or voters with complaints can file them with the provincial governor within fifteen days of the election; however, the regulation specifies neither the criteria for complaints nor a time frame by which the governor must respond. No law addressed how to appeal an election for *kamnan*.⁴¹

Because vote buying is hard to document, villagers believed they could more easily document the partisan role of the headmen in the coalition who had actively campaigned for Headman Ngen in the name of the *tambon* council, closed their villages to public campaign meetings, and sabotaged the Pollwatch forum. However, subsequent investigation revealed that the laws were ambiguous regarding the right of village headmen to prohibit public assembly. Although the 1914 law does not state that village heads are the “owners” of the village (*chawkhong sathanthii*), it does describe them as the “heads” (*huanaa*). The law does state that they are responsible for maintaining the peace, but it also suggests they should serve the public good. National laws are clear that government officials are not supposed to engage in politics; however, the 1914 act states that *kamnan* and village heads are not classified as government officials. An order issued on January 9, 1984, from the Department of Local Administration states that election officials “must remain neutral and should do nothing that would allow the population to see that they supported or sympathized with any given candidate for *kamnan* or headman” (M.T. 0409/W.12).⁴² However, it is unclear whether village headmen and the acting *kamnan* are defined as “election officials.” Given the lack of clarity, there is room for the personal opinions of the district officials to come into play.⁴³ Furthermore, there is no stated punishment or recourse if the order is considered to have been violated.

As legal options closed, more villagers thought matters should be allowed to settle. Nervously, villagers began to return to the never-ending succession of village funerals, housewarmings, weddings, and temple festivals that crosscut each other’s villages (see Bowie 2008). Many villagers argued that it was important to heal the rift so that Headman Kaew would be able to work with the new *kamnan* to bring development budgets to Baan Dong. Some Baan Dong villagers hoped that Kamnan Ngen would appoint Headman Kaew as his deputy. However, Kamnan Ngen made no effort to appease Baan Dong feelings; instead he appointed the man who had been acting *kamnan* and his main campaign organizer as deputy *kamnan*. Adding insult to injury, he encouraged a plan to divide Baan Dong village into two smaller villages as a way to break its strength (this plan failed when Headman Kaew appointed the leader of this

⁴¹In 1981, the Ministry of Interior issued a regulation on elections for *kamnan*, but it addresses such details as designating polling places and listing qualified voters rather than how to handle grievances.

⁴²Another order from the Ministry of Interior to all governors, dated March 14, 1991, also states that all “responsible officials” are to remain neutral (M.T. 0409/W. 419).

⁴³Even many Pollwatch members believe that although government officials should not use official time or government budget for campaigning, they should be free to endorse candidates.

internal faction as his assistant; see Bowie 2008).⁴⁴ A few weeks later, one of Kamnan Ngen's main opponents in his own village was murdered assassination style by two men on motorcycles. With tension remaining high, Kamnan Ngen had to postpone his victory celebration.

Having no immediate recourse, villagers came up with a new long-term strategy to assuage their anger. Because they now had little hope for fair budget allotments through the *tambon* council, they resolved to work closely with candidates for national election in order to gain access to the budgets available to MPs. Before, individual villagers had worked as canvassers (*hua khanaen*) for different candidates. As one villager explained to me,

In the past, we were *huanaa khanaen* for different MPs in the village, each pursuing our own private interests with the money we got. Now we will work together and put all that money into a common village fund.

Working together to sell their votes as a unified village block, they argued, would buttress Headman Kaew's bargaining position with prospective candidates. They planned to back different candidates than those Kamnan Ngen was supporting. In addition to financial resources, they hoped that by getting "their" candidate into Parliament, they would finally have sufficient political leverage to force the local police to press murder charges against Kamnan Ngen and thereby force him out of office.

Thus, anger at vote buying in a local election was ultimately transformed into a new strategy for vote selling in a national election. When national elections were announced for July 1995, a village delegation met with the candidates to negotiate. The candidates' offers were discussed at a village meeting.⁴⁵ Agreeing to use the pooled monies for a new temple building, Baan Dong villagers agreed to cast their votes as a unified block for the first time. When their candidates for Parliament lost, Baan Dong villagers were forced to bide their time. In 2001, the newly formed Thai Rak Thai fielded many new, untried candidates throughout the country. Frustrated by existing candidates and excited by the party's populist policies, Baan Dong villagers gave their wholehearted support to the new Thai Rak Thai candidate in their area, thereby contributing to the

⁴⁴With most recent administrative changes providing new incentives, Baan Dong villagers voted to divide into two separate villages in 2007.

⁴⁵Villagers factored in candidates' previous assistance and a balance of party affiliation. Three candidates from three different parties offered 30,000, 100,000, and 120,000 baht, respectively, as donations to the village temple fund. The first choice would have received villager's vote even without his token donation, as he was a long-term MP who had helped settle a major dispute over an irrigation system. At the village meeting, villagers proposed to expel any defectors from the funeral society. The abbot asked the sacred forces to curse whoever broke this village promise and vowed that village monks would not perform funeral services for traitors. On election day, Baan Dong produced more than 1,000 votes, well over the 700 block votes they had promised the candidates. Another nearby village also engaged in bloc voting.

party's unprecedented victories in the national elections in 2001 and 2004.⁴⁶ Baan Dong Villagers finally got their revenge.

Tambon Thungnaa has had several local elections since 1995, and all have been relatively smooth. Today, Kamnan Ngen and a few of the "old guard" village heads remain in office. Nonetheless, although remaining the honored guests at funerals and other ritual events, he and the other village heads have been sidelined by the flows of national politics. When Kamnan Ngen's ex officio term as TAO head expired, Headman Kaew resigned as village head and was elected to serve in the TAO. Kaew was then elected uneventfully by his fellow TAO members to serve as chair. According to the most recent amendment to the 1994 act, TAO chairs are now no longer elected by an internal vote of fellow members but by a direct *tambon*-wide vote. In addition, ballots are now collected and counted at a central location in an effort to reduce the efficacy of vote buying and to make it more difficult to monitor how individuals and villages vote.⁴⁷

In July 2005, I observed the first TAO elections in Tambon Thungnaa under these latest provisions. Elections were held for both TAO chair and for the two representatives from each village. Of the nine candidates running for the two Baan Dong Village seats, only one was rumored to have bought votes; he was seeking a second term in the council but only came in fourth. In the *tambon*-wide election for TAO chair, Kaew ran against two other candidates; he won by an overwhelming majority (more than 2,000 votes to the nearest candidate's some 700 votes). Only one candidate was rumored to have bought votes; he came in last. Kaew won primarily because of the widespread view that he has divided TAO budgets fairly among village projects and has not diverted TAO funds for personal gain. He also benefited from his ties with the MP, a member of the Thai Rak Thai party.⁴⁸ However, signs of new factional alignments are emerging within Baan Dong village. Upset with what they see as Kaew's arrogance, as he seems to spend more time with the MPs than with them, and upset

⁴⁶Many of the traditional provincial power brokers found their roles circumvented by the Thai Rak Thai party's electoral strategies (McCargo and Ukrist 2005; Pasuk and Baker 2004; Abhinya 2001; Ockey 2004, 45–55). Kamnan Ngen had been a vote canvasser for Chart Patthana Party, a candidate who had run and won previously. The Thai Rak Thai candidate, a former local district officer with a good reputation, was new to electoral politics. Running new candidates such as local school principals and hospital directors was an important component of the Thai Rak Thai strategy, an innovation widely attributed to Somkid Jatusripitak. Earlier Baan Dong villagers had supported candidates in the Democrat and Chart Thai parties but switched their support to Thai Rak Thai because of its populist platform.

⁴⁷The 1994 Tambon Act has had five versions. A sixth version, imminent prior to the 2006 coup, sought to consolidate smaller TAOs into larger ones to ensure their fiscal viability (interview with Tanachak Kamoln, August 8, 2006). Its fate remains unclear at this time.

⁴⁸Attending a village meeting, the MP commented that although he would not advise Baan Dong villagers how to vote, he took Baan Dong village very seriously because it controlled many votes. He also said that he had worked closely with Kaew, and, at Kaew's urging, he was forwarding Baan Dong's request for temple funds to the relevant budget committee.

by his refusal to take action against a monk widely rumored to be both sexually active and corrupt, one faction voted for one of Kaew's opponents. Had the coup not taken place in 2006, this faction's discontent likely would have benefited the candidate running against the Thai Rak Thai MP in the next national election.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

Thailand's most recent military coup took place on September 19, 2006. Polls taken at the time showed that as much as three-quarters of Thailand's urban population supported the coup. Nonetheless, the coup was blamed on rural vote buying, scholars denouncing Thailand's "electocracy" (Kasian 2006), and editorials suggesting that democracy had failed once again because "many rural voters seem to look upon their ballots as a source of immediate reward" (Kavi 2006). These justifications of the coup repeat the long-standing essentialized and ahistorical images of villagers as "lacking experience in political participation" (Nakata 1987, 182), as "politically immature" (Nelson 1998, 11), or as politically ignorant and in need of education (Suchit 1996, 200). Although villagers make up the majority of Thailand's population, their votes in favor of the populist policies of the Thai Rak Thai party were construed as "the tyranny of the rural majority" (see Kasian 2006, 15 for discussion). Rather than understood in the context of a shared national history, the dearth of scholarly studies of village politics has allowed the complexity of the challenges facing efforts to advance democracy in Thailand to be reduced to a simple divide between ignorant rural and informed urban voters.

This essay has shown that, far from being politically immature or uneducated, villagers are involved and informed participants in electoral politics. Very conscious of the new possibilities set in motion by the legal reforms of 1992 and 1994, villagers in Tambon Thungnaa lost no time in combining new democratic laws, old feudal laws, traditional rituals, invented rituals, outside politicians, district officials, and new nongovernmental organization networks in their internal electoral campaigns. In the process, democratic expectations that candidates should have a protected right to campaign clashed with feudal laws which established cultural definitions of village heads as "owners" of their villages. With no requirement to guarantee a public venue, village heads were allowed to close their village, forbid campaigning, and inhibit freedom of assembly. These feudal conceptions of village leaders have shaped the dynamics of broader electoral politics as well. The oft-noted role of *kamnan* and village heads as brokers in

⁴⁹Villagers in Baan Dong had already begun debating whether to support the Thai Rak Thai because of its strong platform or to vote for an opposition candidate to ensure an opposition party as a check.

provincial- and national-level elections has largely depended on their construction as gatekeepers controlling access to “their” villagers.⁵⁰ While legal reforms made in the context of rapid capitalist development contributed to an escalation of vote buying at all levels of electoral politics, existing laws lacked provisions for meaningful appeals of ensuing grievances, thereby impeding villagers’ ability to protest vote buying and safeguard their internal democracy. Legal ambiguities and legal lacunae, not rural apathy or ignorance, rendered village outrage mute.

Prevailing explanations of village vote buying range from a portrayal of villagers as embedded in a simple, rational capitalist calculation of selling their votes to the highest bidder to a portrayal of villagers as mired in a traditional moral economy of exchanging votes for gifts and hopes of protection. However, my anthropological case study of a village election suggests that these explanations suffer from five major flaws. First, these portrayals are ahistorical, failing to recognize that vote buying has not typified village electoral politics but rather has emerged in particular historical contexts. Second, these descriptions do not recognize the very different dynamics that characterize electoral politics at the village, *tambon*, provincial, and national levels; the more local the election, the more vote buying threatens village preferences for unanimity and anonymity. Third, such portrayals fail to recognize the dynamism of village politics, ignoring the complex and ever-shifting calculus by which village support for various candidates changes. Fourth, by failing to include a historical perspective, the explanations have minimized the importance in variations in patterns of vote buying; offering free pencils and free legal advice is different from bribing government officials, making private payments to individual villagers, or negotiating with a village community regarding proposed development projects. Finally, these characterizations fail to recognize how lacunae and ambiguities in the overall development of the national legal and administrative framework have complicated villagers’ efforts to protect democratic practices.

In *Ancient Law*, Sir Henry Maine wrote that in understanding the historical origins of laws, we must consider “the nature of their dependence on those which preceded them” (1861, 113). Viewing village electoral politics from a historical perspective, this essay has argued that the heightened conflict which characterized village electoral politics during the period from 1995 to 1999 resulted from the clash of newer, more democratic laws that were intended to decentralize power with older laws dating from the days of absolute monarchy that were intended to centralize power. In the days of the Ramayana epic, Hanuman served as a bridge for King Rama to cross as he sought to free his wife from the evil demon. The village Hanumans, from their conceptualization during the reign of King Rama V, have served as bridges between the state and the

⁵⁰The deft use of public media by the Thai Rak Thai party marked a major transformation in campaign strategies, enabling many of the party’s new candidates to bypass local leaders and gain access to villagers’ votes directly.

village, between a centralized bureaucracy and a kin-based democracy. Over the course of the twentieth century, these village leaders served a wide variety of politicians, ranging from aristocrats to commoners, from generals to civilians, and from dictators to democrats. By century's end, the village Hanumans were fading, and a new dynamic in the integration of villagers into electoral politics was arising.⁵¹ How Thailand's latest military coup will affect the ever-shifting patterns of national centralization and local decentralization remains to be seen. As Thailand's political processes transmogrify in ways unimaginable in epic myths, it is clear that the earthly realm is far more complex than the mythic.

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⁵¹Although the TAOs grew in power, provincial councils found their roles weakened (Arghiros 2002, 237; Nelson 2000, 12; Fishel 2001, 189–95). Concerns were also growing about the extent to which the decentralization at the *tambon* level was being used as “a substitute for democratisation at the national level” (Crook and Manor 1998, 1; Hutchcroft 2001; see also Painter 2006; Pasuk and Baker 2004; McCargo and Ukrist 2005).

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