

# Thailand: What's the problem about vote-buying and the "patronage system"?

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Over the last couple of years, concern about vote-buying has been on the increase. The story goes like this. Voters upcountry are too poor and too poorly educated. Some sell their vote for spot cash. Others are victim of "the patronage system" and obey the instructions of a patron on how to vote, in return for continuing patronage of various kinds.

The argument then continues: vote-buying and the patronage system mean that one-man/one-vote elections cannot work in Thailand. There needs to be some "Thai-style" alternative. This might be some corporatist method of representation such as the PAD proposed. It might mean diminishing the power of the elective parliament, and returning more power to the bureaucracy.

According to legend, vote-buying began in spectacular fashion in Roi-et in 1981, engineered by people in the military. It then swelled over the following two decades. At election times, banks calculate massive rises in money circulation, and journalists love describing complex systems involving lotteries. A brilliant study done in Ayutthaya in the mid 1990s showed that monks, gunmen, and local officials were all deeply involved. Vote-buying is part of the political culture; of that there is little doubt.

But vote-buying is not a simple matter. The practice has been in place for a quarter-century. The number of elections has multiplied—for parliament, senate, municipality, provincial council, subdistrict council, and so on. Thais have become some of the most experienced voters in the world. There has been a lot of learning about how to use the vote.

In the early history of Thai vote-buying, candidates thrust red notes into voters' hands in order to create an obligation. Once a voter had accepted the candidate's generosity, it would be bad manners not to repay that generosity when casting the vote. But this kind of naïve transaction did not last long. By the mid 1990s, some voters would take money from every candidate, and then vote how they pleased. Others would only take from a candidate they had already decided to vote for, in order not to create an obligation.

Candidates still had to offer money. Not doing so would risk being branded as "ungenerous" and thus not worth electing. This was particularly true of candidates known to be rich. Vote-buying has thus become a bit like a candidate's deposit, distributed among the voters rather than paid to the authorities.

By the mid 1990s, vote negotiation had become much more complex than these simple retail transactions. Voters understood that candidates had the potential to offer much greater benefits than a few red notes. They could bring infrastructure spending and development projects with much more impact in the locality. Communities negotiated with candidates to promise scheme, and held them to their promises by the threat of withdrawing their vote at the next poll. Parliament created the "MPs fund" to enable sitting members to fulfill these promises. Lots of local infrastructure got built.

Since then, the system has shifted again. The 1997 constitution began a deliberate attempt to de-link this kind of local pork-barrel from national politics. The funding for local schemes has been substantially transferred from the national budget to local government. MPs have less influence on central budget spending, and the MPs fund has disappeared. Elective provincial councils and municipalities now have big budgets. Many politicians have followed the money from national to local politics.

At the same time, the profile of the electorate has changed. The great 1986-96 boom boosted incomes, and the 1997 bust only temporarily knocked them back. The expansion of secondary education in the 1980s began to work through to the electorate.

Then Thaksin changed the game in national politics. He promised some attractive redistributive schemes, and delivered them. He centralized control over a fifth of the budget under his own executive authority, and toured the country dishing this out. The party and the prime minister became more important patrons than the local MP. Although the 2007 constitution has reversed some of this change, the memory still dominates.

In the last couple of years, there have been studies of election practice in the north, northeast, and south. The decision on casting a vote is now very complex and involves the party, the candidate, and the money. In the south, voters feel a strong emotional pull to vote Democrat. In the north and northeast, Thaksin's schemes have created a strong pull towards PPP/TRT. Yet the candidate also undergoes scrutiny. Is he a local person, someone close to us? Can he get things done, and does he have the track record to prove it? Is he reasonably honest? Does he have the right kind of friends? Finally, does he prove his generosity with a gift? Only candidates known to have modest wealth are excused this obligation, yet can still be elected on grounds of their social contribution.

At the recent poll, there did not seem to be much money around. After three elections in three years, pockets were empty. Candidates feared disqualification. The issue at stake in the poll was so stark, that a few hundred baht was not likely to matter.

So why the current panic about vote-buying? The upcountry electorate is richer, better educated, and more experienced at elections than ever before. In truth, the problem is not that upcountry voters don't know how to use their vote, and that the result is distorted by patronage and vote-buying. The problem is that they have learnt to use the vote only too well. Over four national polls, they have chosen very consistently and very rationally.

And, of course, that may be the real problem. Back when many upcountry electors sold their votes, and as a result their weight in national politics was zero, nobody cared so much about vote-buying. But now the electors have got smart, they have to be stopped. The bleating about vote-buying and patronage politics is simply an attempt to undermine electoral democracy because it seems to be working.

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**P.S.**

\* From Chang Noi's website:

<http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/selloff.htm>