

Thailand: Rural voters not politically naive, says Aussie anthropologist

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The stereotype view of Thai rural electorates as being ignorant and incapable of making informed political decision during elections is wrong and a better understanding of their complex set of values would be beneficial to the development of Thai democracy, Andrew Walker, an anthropologist at Australian National University (ANU) said.

Walker, who spent the past four years doing fieldwork at a small farming village called Baan Tiam in Chiang Mai province, said villagers make voting decisions according to their set of values, which he called a “rural constitution”.

The values were made up of numerous informal provisions that mainly include a common preference for local candidates, an expectation that candidates will support their electorate, and an emerging emphasis on strong and transparent administration.

“Certainly there’s an element of patronage, but I think like everything else, life is complex,” said Walker, at his fieldwork presentation at Chulalongkorn University’s Faculty of Political Science last week.

“To put it very simply, the fact that people have multiple patrons and are cross-cut by marriages, trading relationships and so on, make the idea that rural people can be divided into a series of pyramids is just ridiculous.”

Walker said both the mass media and academics often perpetuate the stereotype. The answer to democracy in Thailand, Walker warned, did not lie in turning rural villagers into middle class citizens.

He noted that rural people respond very pragmatically and understand where the power lies and recognise they have limited ability to alter the discourse.

“Don’t be afraid. Rural people do have political values. They may be different but they’re still legitimate values,” he said, adding that Thai democracy was now in “danger” with the “drafting of a rather disgusting alternative constitution”.

The anthropologist, who made the observations during his stay at the 100-household Baan Tiam, admitted that it was dangerous to romanticise rural culture.

“Often, people voted for reasons that are dishonourable, but we have to accept that it’s their right.”

He saw the refusal to accept that right by the anti-Thaksin Shinawatra protesters - who later supported the September 19 coup - as a threat to the future of democracy.

“Coups supporters and constitutional alchemists have sought to de-legitimise Thaksin’s electoral

support by alleging it was based on the financially fuelled mobilisation of an easily led and ill-informed rural mass. This erasure of everyday political values contained in the rural constitution represents a much more fundamental threat to Thailand's democracy than the tearing up of the 1997 charter."

Walker argued that rural electors are careful and rational, but did not deny the problem of vote-buying and the role of party canvassers. He pointed out that even the Thai Rak Thai Party received hugely varying votes from Chiang Mai people, with the party winning 44 per cent of the votes in the first election, 66 per cent in the second general election and 33 per cent in the last snap election.

Walker said rural voters evaluated Thaksin and his party through their rural constitution. "The level of his vote changed a great deal. So people just didn't go out and vote for Thai Rak Thai. They made an informed political decision."

The ANU anthropologist said a number of local people had expressed dismay at Thaksin, which went against the simple stereotyped view of a patronage culture and vote buying.

"Thaksin cheated too much - he's greedy and was surrounded far too much with bad people," one informant told Walker.

"He has lots of money but we never saw him make a donation," Walker quoted another villager.

On the plus side, Walker said local villagers valued the fact that Thaksin hailed from the North, could speak English, was rich, led a high-profile campaign against drugs, and helped end the IMF "bondage".

"Thailand is famous now, everyone has heard of Thaksin," a villager told him during the pre-coup time when Thaksin seemed invincible.

"You don't want to assume that farmers have a single-minded view of the TRT party," Walker concluded. "I'm not suggesting they are political computers but that there are local values informing their decision making process."

P.S.

* From The Nation:

http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2007/05/25/regional/regional_30035131.php