

Election politics from the bottom up

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Last week Chang Noi was in one of the more remote areas on the fringes of the northeast. Forty years ago, the rolling hills were covered in forests, and the sparse villages were full of communist sympathizers. Today the trees have been stripped, and the villagers are enthusiastic petty capitalists, making money from land speculation, resorts, even wineries. At breakfast, we go to pay our respects to the kamnan. After the first sips of the sweet coffee, he casually lets slip that he has decided to contest at the approaching general election. "Under what party?" "I haven't yet chosen." Note the verb very carefully.

In local terms, he's a success story. He migrated here from the other side of the northeast when this area was remote and dangerous. He still has something of the rough air of a frontiersman. He's wearing at least six amulets, four on a chain round his neck, and two clipped to his shirt pocket. He has risen with the frontier. He owns vast tracts of land. His construction materials store is the biggest building for miles around, and doing thriving business by breakfast time. He is building a resort in the most beautiful spot in the surrounding area. The walls of his office are hung with pictures of his four children receiving degrees from various members of the royal family. The table below our coffee cups must have come from one of the last great trees of the primary forest.

"Why have you decided to stand?" "The old MP has been there too long, several parliaments. He doesn't do anything for us. We only see him when he comes to ask for our votes. We and our people have decided we must do something."

Transforming this area from jungle to its present state took a lot of sweat. Taking it further needs the state. They want roads, piped water, electricity, schools. All over Thailand over the past decade, people like this kamnan and "his people" have plunged into the new elective local government bodies because these bodies are important. They have funds for building local facilities. They give out construction contracts which are a way of making money. Holding an executive post is a mark of prestige, and gives some weight in bargaining with government officials.

Over the last few years, local politics and national politics have come closer together. Local politicians with influence in the municipalities, provincial councils, and tambon councils can help an MP candidate get elected. An MP can return the favour by bringing projects funded by the central budget into the locality. The methods of electioneering at the local level and the national level are just the same.

"What party did the old MP belong to?" "Oh, many! He was elected under Thai Rak Thai last time, but he had belonged to many other parties." Later we look him up. He was first elected under a local party, then successively under Chart Thai, Chart Phattana, and Thai Rak Thai.

The kamnan should have a good chance. Through breakfast the visitors have included several local officials and business colleagues. His whiteboard is lined with appointments for meetings with various bodies in the locality, the district, and the provincial capital. His mobile phone rings approximately once every two minutes. We are getting in his way and so take our leave with one last question. "Have any of the party leaders come to see you?" He laughs. So does his wife. So do the other visitors in the room. "Of course! All of them."

All politics are local politics. People like this kamnan have been the bedrock of Thai politics for the last two decades. They were around before Thai Rak Thai was invented. They are still around after Thai Rak Thai has been destroyed.

Even though Thai Rak Thai has gone, the local politicians who made up the party are still there. Some 260 former MPs were not banned from politics. The 111 banned executives have brothers, wives, sons, daughters, or “our people” who can stand in their stead. If the generals block the 260 from joining another party, they have brothers, wives, sons, daughters and allies too.

If you look at Thai politics from top down, the disappearance of Thai Rak Thai might seem to open up space for its biggest rival, the Democrats. But if you look at those politics from the bottom up – from the point-of-view of this kamnan “choosing” his party – then it looks quite different.

The kamnan and “his people” want good access to the central government. If he gets elected to parliament, he will be in a much better position if he is part of the ruling party or ruling coalition. In the old days, this was a tricky business full of uncertainty. A good candidate had to choose between several different parties offering different blandishments. He had to take a bet on which party would do well enough in the election and in the negotiations over a coalition. That meant evaluating the appeal of the party leader and the size of his war-chest. Thai Rak Thai changed things by eliminating some of the uncertainty and risk. If you were a good candidate and got the Thai Rak Thai label, you were going to win. But now the old system has returned.

So what party will the kamnan “choose”? The Democrats seem unlikely. They have never had a presence in this area. Chart Thai is a long shot too. More likely, he will join up with one of the old northeastern faction-heads that Thaksin collected into TRT. But there is a new factor he has to consider: the generals. The kamnan and his peers have whole cupboards full of skeletons from their land acquisition and business deals. If they choose a faction which is viewed as uncooperative or defiant or a stalking horse for Thaksin, they could suddenly face unusual difficulties. The kamnan has a choice, but a tricky one.

P.S.

* From <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/kamnan.htm>