

The Demise of Localism: The Reflection of Class Struggle in 2011 Election

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Abstract

This article illustrates how the Mondialisation approach of French Marxist Henri Lefebvre can be read as a theory of neoliberal class struggle. Following consideration of Riggsian Bureaucracy and Marxist's structuralism, the article exhibits the insufficiency of latter approaches. It also demonstrates how the perception on local politics is challenged by the general class struggle. The landslide victory of Phua Thai Party does not only confront the national hierarchy status quo but also challenges the power relations in everyday life.

Keywords: Thailand general election 2011, Mondialisation, Riggsian Bureaucracy, Structural Marxism, local politics

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Introduction

A few weeks before the 3rd July 2011 election, a private conference between International NGOs and Thai academic scholars was held at Chulalongkorn University. According to the poll, it is obvious that Phua Thai Party would win the majority of parliament and Yingluck Shinawatra would have a chance to celebrate her victory as the first female prime minister of Thailand. NGOs officers' concerns are generally about the military coup and the external force, which is possibly the harming of the Thai democratic government after the victory of Phua Thai Party. Somehow, the Human Rights violation during Thaksin's regime still haunts their perception. It is a paradoxical condition for them. The political party presented as the benefit of the majority of the poor is representing the former prime minister, recognized as a Human Rights violator. "It is not a crude populism" a young lecturer replied to the question. "It is not just about the benefit bargain between politicians and the voters, the Thaksin phenomena reflects the structural class conflict in Thai society". The latter reply is very clear but also challenges the mainstream development theory and the common perception of the Thai middle class. The general election of Thailand is always demonstrated by the mainstream press and scholar as a duty affair. They express that the rural voters always sell their vote to corrupted politicians. The implication is that the public policy must be limited to their voter's benefit. It is just the politics of short-termism, which never reflect the long-term solution for the whole society. However, the result of the 2011 election tends to challenge this argument. Yingluck Shinawatra, who has only 40 days experience in political career, celebrates her landslide victory. Moreover, her party's MPs also won in the influential zone of the opposing political party. Bunharn Sillapaashar- the former prime minister and the most influential local politician of Suphanburi, declared that 'It is not a storm; we would rather call that typhoon. I never planned this situation before. We have never been defeated in Suphanburi for almost 20 years.' (Murdoch, 2011)

This article's objective is to demonstrate the demise of localism politics in Thailand. It can be contended that the 2011 election result reflects the class struggle condition in Thailand. The argument opposing the Riggsian model exhibits that the rural voters are always politically inactive and their benefits are isolated from national politics. Moreover, the concept of transformation of local everyday life and the connectedness with the global political economy can be employed to describe this phenomenon. To investigate the latter argument, Henri Lefebvre's theory of 'Mondialisation' (Lefebvre, 2002) would be grasped to clarify the condition of Thai local politics. This article considers three parts: firstly, to present the contesting idea of Thai society and to exhibit the insufficiency of the contemporary concept toward the condition of modern Thai society. Secondly, to illustrate the condition of everyday life politics since the 2006 coup d'état. Finally, to exhibit the process of 'Mondialisation', which is utilized to explain the 2011 election result.

1. The Contesting Idea on Thai Local Politics

Commonly, the perception on the condition of Thai society has always been dominated by a political development theorist. F.W.Riggs (1966) demonstrated an issue in his book 'Thailand: The modernization of Bureaucratic Politics' that the bureaucratic style of the

government is the main reason of political underdevelopment in Thai society. His idea inspired the Thai student movements in 1970 (October, 14th 2516 BE.) and his term 'Bureaucracy' is manifestly a campaign during the 2010 Red Shirt rallies against the power structure of Thailand. The second idea is proposed by the leftist scholar. The conceptual implication is that the condition of internal politics depends on the global economic structure. In this section, I shall demonstrate the insufficiency of the latter two concepts and exhibit Lefebvre's concept of Mondialisation illuminating the dynamic form of local politics in global economy.

1.1 The Riggsian Bureaucracy

The Riggsian approach popularly convinces Thai studies scholars. According to the modernist paradigm, it is obvious that Thailand could not be categorized as a democratic society. Since the Constitution Monarchy Revolution in 1932, Thailand has experienced thirteen military coup d'états. There have been three instances of urban uprising and massacre (1973, 1976, and 1992). Thousands of people in rural areas were killed during the civil war against the communist party of Thailand. Riggs (1966) suggested that the Bureaucratic government was the reason behind the latter scenarios. Professional politicians who rightfully represented the citizens had never flourished in Thailand, while politicians patronized by high ranking bureaucrats and military officers were in charge rather than their voters. Although the voters are the ones who guarantee their position in parliament, the successful politicians must ally themselves with the 'Bureaucratic regime', which refers to the whole power structure of Thai politics.

Despite the fact that Riggs's observation focuses on Thailand during the cold war period, many scholars suggested that this implication is still up to date. Scholars from various schools of thought utilize this approach to define Thai society in their ways. Thaks (1979), the liberal scholar, theorized the regime of Sarit Thanarat as 'The Politics of Despotic Paternalism'. He demonstrated that the military officers and the bureaucrats play a significant role in the legitimization process of the famous corrupted dictator. Similarly, Chaianan (Samudavanija, 2002), the right wing scholar, demonstrates that the universal western democratic value does not fit with the condition of Thai society, which has its own values, and a well-arranged hierarchy. A contemporary center-right scholar, Anek Laothamatas (1996), illustrated that the development of Thai politics does not depend on the majority represented by the rural poor but solely on the educated and deliberated urban middle class, who determine Thai politics as the final instance. Moreover, the radical liberalism campaign during 2010 also utilized the Riggsian term of Bureaucracy for their political campaign.

The general implication is that Thailand is a modernization without development society. The elections never reflect the voters' interests and objectives. The dilemma of liberal and right wing scholar share the same ontological approach. Somehow, some limitations of this approach include;

1. This approach assumes that the relations of the society are static rather than dynamic. The bureaucratic society approach reflects the hegemonic power of one successive group, which was never altered by other conditions. The fact is that the ruling class is not

simply a 'small group or elite' sharing the same characteristic. The Thai elite shares various characters and benefits representing the whole structure benefit rather than the individual or collective interest of their group.

2. Andrew Walker (2008), the anthropologist whose research focuses on the local everyday life in the Northern part of Thailand project, as well as the mechanism of local people on the check and balance process. It is the myth that represents the local people as politically inactive and dominated by the politicians' personal charisma or by patron-client relations. 'Baan Haw' politicians do not simply represent the people who were born in the local area. They have to represent the dynamics of local people's benefit. That means it is neither crude populism nor traditional moral politics.

3. Prapas Pintobtaeng (1998), the significant scholar of Thai social movement projects the dynamic 'Polybians' in Thai central region which refers to the transformation of everyday life perception. Prapas opposed to Anek's approach, which supposes that the demand of rural people to the state is static. He argued that the traditional concept of 'local' does not exist anymore. The present conditions of rural people connect to the global economy and to the world market. Although the vote buying does still exist in local or national elections, it is not the only the factor that determines the result.

1.2 World System and Regulationist School

This approach popularly influenced the social activist in the 1970's and was inspired by the leftist approach of Lenin's Imperialism and A.G.Frank's Dependency Theory (Frank, Chew, & Denemark, 1996). The approach presupposes that the rural areas of Thailand play a part as the peripheral zone of third world countries. The centralization process of the capitalism mode of production is the underlying condition of the underdevelopment in rural areas. The critical theory of international political economy also employs the same ground of ontology. Kullada Kesboonchoo (Kesboonchoo-Mead, 2001), an international studies scholar inspired by Robert W.Cox (1987), proposed that the condition of Thai politics is the reflection of capitalist hegemony. Her significant book reports an unfamiliar scenario in 1973. It portrays the situation of students' uprising by presenting the whole process as the external forces of hegemonic capitalism intervention. This perception on local everyday life is relatively dynamic to the first approach. Kengkij Kitiriangrap (Kitirianglarp & Hewison, 2009), the historian inspired by Nicos Poulantsaz, the neo-Marxist scholar, insists on the dynamic form of capitalism state on the legitimization process over the structural conflict (Jessop, 1985) .

The implication of this approach represents the whole process of global capitalism. However, the nation-state still plays a significant role on this approach. This means that the strategic dynamism of capitalism state only transforms into quantitative function (i.e. accumulation process on surplus value, the occupation of the space). The transformation of the nation-state and its social relations of production are not accounted in this approach. This means that although this approach projects the dynamic scenario of the relations of people in global relations, the struggle format still relies on the structural Marxism teleology. The class struggle in local everyday life does not necessarily represent the form of resistance or state power occupation, despite the fact that in its various forms it includes:

1. Thaksin's party defeats the opposing party four times in a row. The liberalist all praised the party's tangible policy. As well as the leftists claim that he just opportunistically took advantage on the structural class conflict in Thai society. Somehow, class is not something to take advantage of but the reflection of social relations. So, it is not neither a false consciousness that the majority of the poors vote for the billionaire nor merely the explosion of the accumulated class conflicts.

2. The reproduction of relations of production is not the result of protests, rallies or any kinds of observable resistance. The maintenance of social relations always results in the structure conflict found in the everyday life practice.

2. Everyday Life Politics Since 2006 Coup d'état

Following Truman's development plan, Import Substituted Industries (ISI) productions became the priority policy. Infrastructural buildings motivate migrants from the collapse of self-sufficient agriculture (Hanks, 1972). The Global market connectedness generates the primitive accumulation in Thailand. Hundred thousands of Northeasterners migrate to big cities both stimulated by the collapse of agriculture and the relatively high income. They work in construction sites as the seasonal immigrants. Darker-skin and Laos accent is indicated as an inferior ethnicity compared to urban Chinese. Lao Siew were selected to characterize Northeastern immigrants. The terms refer to stupidity, dullness, outdatedness and uncivilizedness. On production relations, the North-easterners take a part as manufactural and constructional workers. They are also generally accounted as lumpen proletariats² such as recycling business workers, unskilled freelancers, sex industry business and also drug trader. Their accommodations are located in Klongteoy and Phraram Sam. Both streets connect to Silom Road, the Bangkok downtown of Chinese entrepreneurs. During 1970-1990, Klongteoy Slum was commonly represented as the primary scenario of urban conflict from both academic research and non-fiction novels (Askew, 2002).

Isaan immigrants are not only excluded by the state authority, but also from the institutionalized labour movement. During the 1970-1980 uprisings, the most influential labor movement in Bangkok was the state-enterprise trade union. However, the trade union usually define themselves as Bureaucrats (Kharachkarn) rather than Laborers (Kamkorn). Due to Thai bureaucrat's tradition, there is no exception for the state enterprise. Bribery and patron-client based organizations are their well-known descriptions. Members' benefits is the first priority rather than social-structure reform. That is the reason why the most united and progressive trade unions in the country decide to ally their organizations with high ranked generals in the army rather than temporary workers or lumpen-proletariats from Northeastern (Askew, 2002).

In 1980's, Bangkok reached its limits. The economics and population were multiplied in size, comparing to the second largest city (Wongsuphasawat, 1997). Bangkok was commonly known as an over populated city, with poor ghetto community, terrible traffic jams, pollution and unsolvable internal immigrants problems. Two decades after the first

² Marx's definition on the semi-working class who is not qualified to assembly line production

wave of internal migration to the capital city, nothing had improved on their legal and living conditions. The second-generation migrants was born and lived in Bangkok, therefore they tended to lose their paradise homes in rural areas and any future in this mega-city.

It would be accounted as reductionism by demonstrating that the 2009-2010 uprising was originated from the traditional meaning of 'poor' (Glassman, 2004) . After Plaza Accord, Thailand differed from the image of the cold-war developing country. Post-Fordism productions increased their flexible job opportunity for the working class (Jessop & Lancaster Regionalism, 1991). For several decades of migrations, they were no longer concerned as sub-population according to their numbers. According to Olin Wright's post-industrial class formation (Wright, 1997), Thai internal immigrants also generate their space of hope in neoliberal terms. Their dream is neither to be successful white-collar workers nor to lead a peaceful and peasant life in the village. Establishing their small business like sweatshop or opening small local restaurants tends to be the present generation's mission. It is not the same as middle-class NGOs approach, who exhibit the image of peaceful collaboration among poor internal-immigrants. Bangkok is accounted as an Hobbesian state of nature for immigrants; they are supposed to be competitive and risk-taking workers among their peers. The rural village does not suit them while it is hardly for them to get permanent stable white-collar jobs. Moreover, during 1990-2010, unskilled low-paid jobs have been dominated by transnational workers from Myanmar.

After the deindustrialization, internal-immigrants have been involuted in different ways in Bangkok. The aggressive labor unions have been outsourced to the extended Bangkok metropolitan area (Askew, 2002). Isaan-Bangkokian (Chao Krung Isaan) is what they call themselves. Due to informal and service jobs, most of them hardly access to the social security fund insurance. While white-collar middle class are generally secured by relatively high turnover and private insurance company, the internal immigrants have to seek for their own survival under an unstable neoliberal economy (Webster, 2005). It is an ambiguous economic integration. During the 1990's, they were liberalized laborers and small entrepreneurs, who lacked legal and welfare protection. National politics are considered as an unusual affair in their everyday life.

Thaksin Shinawatra-the winner of 2001 election was considered as an ordinary prime minister who came from a rich background and therefore unable to understand the poor everyday life (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2008). The poor's patronage NGOs also indicated that the urban-rural poor's votes were usually corrupted by politicians. Somehow, Phorphan Ouiyanon (2006), the significant Thai economist, suggests that the relations between the poor voters and the politicians were better accounted as a rent-seeking behavior rather than as a simple patron-client relationship. Nevertheless, the introduction of universal health care policy and many populist based policies induced Thaksin to become the most visible elite for the poor compared to the abstraction of semi-God image of King Bhumibol for the middle class (Ungpakorn, 2010). The big business, royalist, right wing intellectual, middle class, and anarchist inspired NGOs failed to be picked up by Thaksin's corporatist form strange combination, appearing as the misnamed 'People's Alliance for Democracy-PADs' (Ungpakorn, 2010) . They oppose to the electoral democracy and indicate the poor as 'the people who still lack a proper understanding of democracy'. The military coup in 2006 was

considered as a peaceful military coup by NGOs and several right wing scholars. The incident was deemed understandable for Thai political culture. Although Thaksin's party was sentenced to be dissolved, the nominee party with the new name was still strongly supported by the voters in the 2007 election. Samak Sunthornravej, the prime minister declaring himself as Thaksin's nominee. Samak's administration has introduced the emergency healing economic policy. Free bus, electricity, and water for the minimum usage have been effective for six months. After the storm of PADs rallies, Thailand's Supreme Court ruled that Samak had violated the constitution by accepting payment to host a popular show and had to resign from his position. Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother in law became the next prime minister. He was confronted with the difficult situation of the occupation of the International Airport of Thailand by PADs and also faced the parliament house invasion of the royalist protesters. Finally, the party was sentenced to dissolution again. The Eaton and Oxford graduate Abhisit satisfied the middle class protesters. He was the fifth Thai prime minister positioning in 2007-2008. The court of justice regarding Thaksin's party dissolutions and Abhisit road to power are not understood by the majority anymore.

Moreover, the famous word 'Phrai' has been used during 2009. Phrai reflects a group of people who have been excluded from the state decision apparatus. They are the majority of the sub-populations in Thai society. In historical terms, Phrai refers to commoners who are not serfs and aristocrats. However in its socio-linguistic usage, it is popularly used as an adjective for urban middle class to describe 'bad people' or 'unpolite manner'. Most of recent Phraies are rural poor or Isaan immigrants. Their uprisings are described as 'The theft of enjoyment' by the middleclass. The reasons are not only their downtown shopping mall blocking and burning down in 2010. The middle class 'enjoyment' or 'way of life' also include the availability of cheap and docile workers, such as servants, wage labourers (Pijl, 2010) . So, in that sense these 'thefts' left out the sphere dominated by the upper and middle classes (by rallying around 'national' symbols). Almost a hundred people were killed and many of them were injured and arrested.

3. The Demise of Localism and Mondialisation

The landslide victory of Phua Thai Party is an uneasy condition. During 2009-2010, the party's activity has been limited by the state authority. One year before the national election, there were several local elections and Phua Thai party was defeated in many areas. Many scholars predicted that even if this party would win the majority, the opposing parties were still able to form the coalition government. Some right wing scholars also concluded that without the money power of Thaksin, Phua Thai party would not have been attractive for local politicians who expect that their investment would result in their position in the government rather than in the opposition.

Newin Chidchorb, the politicians from Buriram, is the role model for this explanation. The son of a significant politician, Chai Chid Chorb named his son after a Burmese dictator, was the ex-supporter of the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Somehow, the second time of party dissolution, his party decided to form a coalition government with the

Democrat party and was rewarded with many significant positions in the Democrat Government- i.e., the Minister of Interior Affairs. As well as the political cluster Bunharn Silapa-arshar influencing on some parts of the central region, also isolated from the Phua Thai Party during the political turmoil.

Only one month before the election, Samuthprakarn's local election also demonstrates the negative result for Phua Thai party. Chonsawat Asawahema, a local politician, won the election and the Phua Thai's candidate was in the third place after the candidate of Newin's cluster. Samuthprakarn representing the 'The Red Shirt City'³ became an uneasy case in the upcoming election for Phua Thai Party. It seems that the spirit of Republicanism was not strong enough to overthrow the spirit of localism.

Nevertheless, the election result finally demonstrated the demise of local politicians. The implication is that Thai local politics could not be explained with the Riggsian Bureaucracy approach anymore. It did fail to explain why ordinary people in Suphanburi and Buriram were classified by right wing scholars as 'unsophisticated voters' devoting their votes to an unfamiliar candidate of Phua Thai Party. The paper attempted to investigate this incident following the 'Mondialisation' approach.

Firstly, the perception space of the voters has been transformed. It is obvious that their everyday life material interest relies on the global economy. The peasants in Isaan and Central regions do not live in isolated villages anymore. Moreover, their perception also varied according to their material conditions. The implication is that their votes are dedicated neither to the concrete roads or electricity as the urban middle class have always claimed nor to the moralistic politicians devoting themselves to the local community. Due to the vulnerability of the Global Economy, the tangible policy is the minimum requirement, but in addition there are the representatives who signify their dynamic perception. They demand representatives who grasp the contradiction of homogeneity. As we see, homogeneity is a significant process of the domination both in the local and in the global scale. The spirit of 'Autogestion' or 'radical democratization' challenges the homogeneity of political truth (Brenner, 2009).

Secondly, the process of fragmentation results in the atomization of society into unconnected individuals. Fragmentation is an instrument of political power; it divides the society into parts in order to govern people easily. During the age of Neoliberalism, the individualized project fragmented the perception of the ordinary people. Organizing themselves outside the mode of bourgeoisie enjoyment is not the traditional meaning of 'class struggle', but its contribution to the action of discontent had challenged the localism politics (Brenner, 2009). Formation against the sign of conservation and domination is its implication.

Finally, the confrontation of 'Hierarchization' is the result of the domination of centers. The centers link up the peripherals and coordinate them. Administrative, Juridical, Fiscal and police are the examples of state and its ideological apparatus. It is not a crude

³ Since many scholars demonstrate that the 'Red Shirt' represent the Thai rural poor, Samuthprakarn exhibit the image of urban conflict as industrial city.

conclusion that Phua Thai Party is an egalitarian institution in which all voters play a significant role in the party's policy. Nevertheless, it reflects the strong spirit of humanism and the challenge of hierarchy in the moral perception (Pongsawat, 2006). This election result reflects the transformation of the reformative power. Their favorite politicians do not have to share a high spirit of morality, but a spirit of humanism.

4. Conclusion

The 2011 general election result challenged the mainstream of political science approach which always demonstrates that the majority of people in developing countries take part as unsophisticated voters. It is not the same with the famous phrase, which demonstrated that the 'the rural people elected the government but the urban people decided who was to govern'. It is not a simple segmentation of areas but it is replicated in the class struggle across the region. Challenging three domination spheres of Global capitalism consisting of homogeneity, fragmentation, and hierarchization replicates 'Class' formation as the multitude of reformism.

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