

The principal political culture of people in Ban Kham sub-district
administrative area, Nam Phong District, Khon Kaen Province¹

วัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองหลักของประชาชนในเขตองค์การบริหารส่วนตำบล
บ้านขาม อำเภอน้ำพอง จังหวัดขอนแก่น

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ต้องการชี้ให้เห็นว่า สังคมใดสังคมหนึ่งจะเป็นประชาธิปไตยที่คงทนถาวรหรือไม่นั้น ต้องดูว่าสังคมนั้นมีการพัฒนาวัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองแบบประชาธิปไตยได้มากน้อยเพียงใด มักมีการเข้าใจผิดอยู่เสมอว่าเมื่อมีสถาบันทางการเมืองแบบประชาธิปไตยและมีการเลือกตั้งอย่างอิสระ และมีความยุติธรรมก็หมายถึงว่ามีความเป็นประชาธิปไตยสมบูรณ์แล้ว ซึ่งในความเป็นจริงหาเป็นเช่นนั้นไม่ ขณะที่วัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองแบบประชาธิปไตยเป็นรากฐานสำคัญของระบบการเมืองการปกครอง และเป็นสิ่งจำเป็นอย่างมากสำหรับการปกครองระบอบประชาธิปไตยที่มีเสถียรภาพ วัตถุประสงค์ของบทความนี้เพื่อต้องการค้นหาวัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองหลักหรือที่มีลักษณะเด่นในชุมชนท้องถิ่นของภาคอีสาน ใช้การศึกษาวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพทำการเก็บรวบรวมและวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลในพื้นที่เป้าหมาย ผลการศึกษาพบว่า วัฒนธรรมการเมืองหลักที่มีลักษณะเด่นในชุมชนจำแนกได้ 3 ประเภท คือ 1) กลุ่มคนที่วัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองแบบเฉยเมย (apathy) ซึ่งเป็นวัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองของคนส่วนใหญ่ที่อยู่นิ่งเฉย ขาดความกระตือรือร้น ไม่สนใจและไม่ให้ความสำคัญกับปัญหาและเหตุการณ์บ้านเมือง 2) กลุ่มคนที่มีวัฒนธรรมการเมืองแบบแยกตัวออกห่าง ขอบเก็บตัว และไม่เกี่ยวข้องกับคนอื่น (detached and aloof) อันเป็นลักษณะของกลุ่มคนที่มีความโน้มเอียงไปในทางแยกตัวออกห่าง ขอบเก็บตัว ไม่มีความผูกพันหรือเข้ามาเกี่ยวข้องกับกิจกรรมส่วนรวมของชุมชนและเพื่อนบ้าน และ 3) กลุ่มคนที่มีวัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองแบบมีส่วนร่วม (participants) ซึ่งจำกัดอยู่เฉพาะคนบางกลุ่มในชุมชน ได้แก่ กลุ่มผู้นำชุมชน กลุ่มเกษตรกรและกลุ่มผู้ใช้แรงงานบางส่วน ที่รวมกลุ่มกันเรียกร้องผลประโยชน์ของตนเอง ขณะเดียวกันก็มีความสัมพันธ์เชื่อมโยงกับกลุ่มการเมืองทั้งในระดับท้องถิ่นและระดับชาติ คณะผู้วิจัยมีข้อเสนอแนะว่า ถ้าจะสร้างสังคมไทยให้เป็นประชาธิปไตยต้องสร้างวัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองให้เป็นประชาธิปไตยเสียก่อน

คำสำคัญ: วัฒนธรรมทางการเมือง วัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองแบบประชาธิปไตย
วัฒนธรรมแบบพลเมือง

Abstract

This article argued that one way of measuring whether democracy is of the lasting sort is to determine whether a democratic political culture has developed. It is often mistakenly assumed that to have democratic institutions in place or to conduct regular free and fair elections is tantamount to a mature democracy. Since democratic political culture is the founding of government and essential of democracy stability, the purpose of this research project is to study the principal political culture of local people in villages in the Northeast. A qualitative research method was used to collect and analyze data obtained from target areas; a total number of 38 subjects were interviewed. The research findings indicated that the principal distinctive political cultures in the communities could be divided into three categories: 1) apathy which is fostered by the majority who shows ignorance, apathy, a lack of interest and do not give importance to political or current issues, 2) detached and aloof refers to people who are quite introvert and prefer not to attach to or involve in any activity with the community, and 3) participants refer to a group of people with interest in political participation who are aware of political policies, are able to discuss political issues, and involve in various types of political participation. We recommend that if Thai society wishes to establish true democracy, it is essential to install in the society democratic political culture.

Keywords: Political culture, democratic political culture, civic culture,

Introduction

It has been argued that one way of measuring whether democracy is of the lasting sort is to determine to what extent a democratic political culture has developed. It cannot simply be assumed that a country has employed a mature democratic political culture, although the country has a well-developed constitution, elaborate democratic institutions, public watchdogs, regular elections, and political opposition by the competitors without violence. It is often mistakenly perceived that having democratic institutions managing to have a constitution, and free and fair elections means mature democracy. In fact, democracy involves plenty of other matters.

The importance of democratic political culture has not been overstated. In fact, the political culture determines the construction of each political and administrative institution and identifies how the government officers exercise their administrative power, who, in the society and the government, holds the power, who can have a voice in the policy decision-making, and how the people have the leaders hold responsible for their work. Actually, the political culture, whether or not being democratic, affects political experience of the people in such political systems. This involves the experience of an executive, a legislature, a judiciary, a governmental system, political parties, and civil society, not to mention the individual experience of political process. Hence, it can easily be seen that the political culture is truly an important basis of the country's political and governance system. In any case, the words "political culture" and "democratic political culture" have not been simply defined, for they both indicate ethical norms and are standard

of behavior for the government, organizations, and individuals. It is also clear that the country that takes the democratic political culture planting for granted are more likely to return to ghost democracies as seen in many countries' history.

Thai democracy has been adopted from western countries. This type of governance is popular in most countries and widely accepted by Thai people, but it has not been totally conformed to Thai lifestyles. It could be because most Thais haven't had democratic spirits or lifestyle. There are various obstacles that impede Thai democracy development. Firstly, "Thai political culture" has long been under a patronage system which induces the culture to be authoritarianism and traditionalism. Thai society is basically agricultural and unique, leading the political culture to be instinctive Thai style (Promgird, 2014i).

The end of the absolute monarchy has brought very few changes to Thai political culture. The political transition in 1932 (B.E. 2475) only stressed the change of power structure and of various political institutions, but ignored the change in mindset, basic belief, value, and former behavior that had rooted in Thailand for ages such as adhering to an individual rather than principles, rating interpersonal relationship, being libertarianism, adhering to original customs, being inactive or passive to political activities, lacking self-confidence, being pessimistic, and not believing in other people (Nakata, 2000). Those phenomena obstruct democratic governance, and most people, even at present, still understand democracy only superficially. This causes later Thai democracy to be distorted in order to gain justice or to benefit some political groups, and leads to severe

schism in Thai society. Under the condition where political institutions and process lack ideology, Thai democracy has been weakened and is difficult to stabilize (Promgird, 2013).

It can be said that the problem of political development in Thailand is caused by not only the political structure but also “political culture” which concerns attitudes, thoughts, basic belief, and value reflecting people’s political behavior in the society. So far, the political structure has been changed from time to time, but it has not been on social or cultural basis especially welding the democratic political culture into people’s lifestyle. It has put Thai democracy in a struggle (Promgird, 2014 ii.)

Rujanaseree (2008) stated that when talking about culture, Thai people only refer to uniqueness of religion, belief, arts, architecture, dancing, music, and customs, but not political culture relating to democracy. This has led to more emphasis on “pattern” than content when it comes to democracy development. Even though Thailand has implemented the democratic form of government with the King as Head of the state for more than 80 years now, the political culture has never seen development or even slight change. Since the political transition in 1932, Thailand has never carried out any policies or political projects called “Political socialization” in order to shape up people’s attitudes, thoughts, believes, and behavior at a family or a community level, or at educational or social institutions. Rujanaseree also commented that political development without a change of political culture has casted damages to Thai society for a long time. Mature democracy has never happened in Thailand, while original cultures that have never been

changed or revolved have caused a number of improper political behaviors. He, therefore, questioned whether it's time for political culture revolution for Thailand.

Sirikrai (2007), a political scientist, reviewed that Thai's democracy, since the transition of governance in 1932 or for more than 80 years, has been a failure due to the fact that the political leaders focus on developing democracy by merely improving such political institutions as drafting the constitution, empowering political parties, distributing administrative power among political institutions, and improving independent organizations to monitor the exercise of power of the political institutions, but never "political culture."

Macedo (2002) believes to strengthen democracy involves not only the establishment of an institutional or a constitutional state system and an effective government, but also the planting of democratic lifestyle into each individual through networks of organizations, clubs, and institutions. Countries with slight civic culture encouragement due to rapid transition from dictatorship to democracy usually have difficulties to retain democracy. Thailand, in the same way, cannot hope to have mature and effective democracy by sole means of having decent constitution in black and white, or focusing on political system, structure, and institutions in an official parliamentary system. The assimilation of civic culture, too, is required for ordinary people.

Anyhow, political culture may change, and vary in each society or community where changing rates are unequal (Chumpol, 1995). Presently, a Thai local community has drastically changed, but no study clearly

mentions their political culture that relates to political development. Therefore, this research poses a question how the instinctive principal political cultures existing in Northeastern local communities are. The research as to questions caused the researchers to conduct the study leading to the answer. It is hoped to be informative benefits to stable and sustainable democracy development in Thai society.

The Objective of the Study

The main objective of this research was to study the principal political culture of local people in local villages in the Northeast region.

Research Methodology

This study aimed to investigate political culture in the Northeast. Khon Kaen Province was the target areas for this study. Qualitative research was the main method adopted to collect the data for more understandings and to analyze an occurrence in context-specific settings. Two local communities: Don Sawan village and Sam Rong village, which are situated in Ban Kham sub-district administrative area, were the target areas of this study selected using purposive sampling. The data was collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observation. A total of 38 participants in this study were 24 villagers (12 villagers from each village), and 14 community leaders (7 leaders from each village) were interviewed during January - through April, 2017 and were selected using snowball and accidental sampling.

Results

In this study, political culture was classified by principles of political expressions in the following aspects: political interest, political awareness, and political participation. Based on the results of this study, the principal political cultures of local people in the two villages in the Northeast could be categorized into three groups as follows.

1. Apathy refers to a group of people with ignorance, interest apathy, a lack of interest in the surroundings especially political issues. These groups of people are not involved or have any interest in participating in any kind of political activities.

The results of the study showed that this group of villagers was the majority in both villages of the target areas. They have very little political interest and political information, and disinterest and a lack of awareness in political updates or changes. Election is the only political activity that they know and are interested in. Election is the only one activity perceived by this group of people as a form of politics. The perception of these people is that politicians are the only group of people involving in politics. Their interest in life is to make a living, their occupations, and livability of their families and themselves more than other issues. These apathetic attitudes could be resulted from the perception that politics is annoying and difficult to be understood, and necessity of political participation is not obvious to them. This can be seen from Miss Koi (a pseudonym) as she said “...I don’t understand. It gives me a headache when listening to political information. Watching a soap opera is much more fun and not as stressful as politics. Let the administrators

take care of it as they are more knowledgeable of the matters than us.”
(Koi, personal interview, May 7, 2017)

Denial of political information is another result of apathy. It could be resulted from having no time and lifestyles of the villagers who have to work from morning till dawn. The sources of political information vary from a word of mouth of neighbors, news on a radio or a television, and a community leader through a public address system. The majority of the people have low income, live in poverty, work from morning till dawn, and lack education, for example, crofters, day labors, small vendors, and a group of people without a permanent occupation, etc. These people with political apathy can be put into three groups; youth, seniors, and housewives. For youths as their interest is on entertaining and fun activities, they are not aware of their roles in political movement to improve local community. In addition, seniors have gained a lot of life experience and desire for a peaceful time in an older age. Going to a temple and making merit are what they would do, hence, in their views, responsibility for community political participation belongs to the youth. Lastly, housewives, are less likely to be interested in politics partly because they view it as responsibility of leaders and men only. As witnessed during the visit of the researchers for a group conversation at the village leader’s house in Sam Rong village, after hearing the topic of the interview, politics, the housewives got off the scene immediately thinking that they were not involved, and that it would be better to let the men deal with it. As can be seen in what Miss Noi (a pseudonym) has said “...Talking about politics, we, the housewives don’t know anything about it. We have no answers

for that, and no interest in it. Mostly, it's a job of the village leaders to inform us about political news. The husbands also know well about the political issues as they listen to the news every day, so they should be able to provide information on that.” (Noi, personal interview, May 3, 2017). Later when being asked to help with the foods, these housewives willingly cooperated. This reflects that this group of people has very little or no interest, and does not give any importance to politics.

For these groups of people, they don't believe in their ability to make a better change to society or a community, so they mostly play a role of followers. What they follow unhesitatingly is a voice of majority of the villagers. They believe in the village leader or respective seniors of the village (seniority), so an opinion or argument opposing the ones of these people will not be expressed. Believing in a leader becomes one of the principal cultures of the Northeastern local communities. This belief can be seen from a previous village leader, Mr. Boonlert (a pseudonym), as he mentioned that “...Things go according to what a leader says. People follow the community leader to whatever direction the person leads to.” (Boonlert, personal interview, May 3, 2017). Political participation was occasionally done – for only once in a while, and it was done only in an election. However, there was no clear understanding among these people that their votes indicate the future of the nation.

2. Detached and aloof refers to a group of people with permanent residence in a community, but has a tendency to detach themselves from the community. In other words, they are quite introverted and prefer not to be attached to or involved in any activity with the community. The

study found that this group of people has some interest in politics, and have some, but not much, political information. They know more about politics than the first group as they sometimes get updates and follow news on a television, a radio, a cellphone, online media, and the internet. Occasionally, the information is received from a public address system of a community leader. Most people in this group completed their education from a secondary or higher level, come from a middle to upper class families in the community, and can take care of themselves without any financial aids from others. It was also found that people in this group range from teenagers to middle-age men and women working in government sectors, or employees of a big company or a private business working in a city or commuting a long distance from their community to work. Members of this group are also students who go to school in a city. There is a tendency of an increasing number of this group of people in local communities as a result of changes in social and economic structure. That is, the rate of economic growth Thai society is expanding, and it leads to more career choices, and higher level of education among the new generation. Meanwhile, rural society has changed and turned into urban society with more convenient transportation systems resulting in a higher number of people from rural areas commuting to work and study in a city. Since the lifestyles of these people have changed, they spend less time mingle with villagers in their communities and this causes detachment and aloofness, isolation, no commitment or involvement with the community including people from their neighborhood.

This group of people offers a low level of cooperation and participation on community service activity such as cleaning public places in a community, cleaning a meeting hall, dredging, taking care of green areas of a community etc., but gives more importance on participating in religious activities and events held on religious holidays. Mostly they are good members of the community; adhere to rules and regulations of the community, prefer peace, listen to and respect a community leader, so they are rarely interested in or drawn to participate in political activities of any form including public assembly or a protest because, in their views, this could possibly result in troubles or grievance to themselves or their families. This attitude can be seen in what Mr. Tongdee (a pseudonym) have said “...We, as teachers and government officers, don’t want to be involved in politics too much. What we should do is to do our jobs. As you know, if we express opinions opposite to the ones held by neighbors, they won’t be accepted and can easily cause conflict.” (Tongdee, personal interview, May 3, 2017)

This group of people occasionally participates in a village meeting, but does not openly express their opinions on current issues, or discuss solutions to problems occurring in a community. Considerateness, one of the values held by these people, limits freedom of expression in political issues. This is obviously seen in a situation where facing with members who have different political opinions from theirs. Even though they are knowledgeable of the topic, they prefer not to express their opinions. Hence, the only form of political participation in which these people are involved is election. They would freely vote,

grounded on their preference of an individual or information they have in hands for making a decision of their own.

3. Participants refer to a group of people with interest in political participation who are aware of political policies, are able to discuss political issues, and get involved in various types of political participation. The study found that this group of people has a higher level of political interest than the other two groups, but the number of people in this group is low compared to the total number of people in the community. Participants are interested in getting updates and news on policies that are mainly relevant to personal or group interests. They get information and news from television, radio, other farmers, dealers, and discussions on current issues at a shop or a café in a community, or even becoming an election canvasser of political parties at the national or local level. Most people in this group are between middle-aged and elderly, and most of them are family leaders. They can be divided into two groups as follows.

3.1 Leader group includes, for example, sub-district headman, village leaders, village committee members, and board members of sub-district administrative organization. People in a leader group not only show interest in current and political issues, but also have a connection with politicians by being an election canvasser or a member of a group that shares similar political interests.

3.2 Villager group, mostly consists of people with poverty including farmers, and laborers. People in a villager group are interested in following news directly related to themselves, for example, farmers would be interested in news regarding the market price of rice, sugar cane,

cassava, rubber, etc., and also public policies from the government relating to farmers. In addition, seniors would be interested in living allowance for the elderly, and their rights on monthly living allowance. Another kind of people in this group is employees or laborers who would be interested in news and updates regarding daily wage rate, compensation, and rights to other benefits including compensation from a company and the government. Also, villagers who are affected by pollutions caused by a company in the sugar industry would be interested in news regarding solutions proposed by the government.

Among farmers and employees or labors, brotherhood relationship is found as they share what they have and mutually depend on each other. The relationship, especially among farmers, is healthy as agriculture and farming are the main occupations of local communities passed on from generation to generation. This resulted in more power in negotiation on interest of their occupational group.

Besides, it can be seen that farmers have informally formed other collective groups to support part-time jobs and to increase incomes, for instance, a collective group of fish farming, cricket farming, and cow farming, and a collective group of local dessert makers, etc. Individuals can be members of as many collective groups as they wish as these groups are small-size collective groups for local people. However, joining in many groups can lead to an unclear role and management difficulty, resulting in ineffective collective group management compared to the original collective group of farmers.

This type of villagers shows interest in political participation e.g. voting, public assembly for a group's interest, or political assembly with their preferable political group. It is noticeable that these people are connected to or related to a political group at the local and national levels. The belief that government policies can serve the needs of their groups and people is the main reason why a political group have their participation. Mr. Buapan (a pseudonym) said that "...I often help a candidate for a House Representative in a campaign. If he gets voted, we can ask for his help when being in troubles. For example, the rice price is too low, drought affects rice farming, or whatever the problems are, we should be able to ask him for help." (Buapan, personal interview, May 4, 2017). Therefore, policies are made to please this group of people as much as possible as their votes are bastions of a politician. Mutual benefits can be seen in a relationship between this group of people and a politician. The power of a politician is still higher than the one of the villagers, or what is called "Law of Reciprocity." In this situation, accountability of a politician in a local or national level is rarely a fact checked by the villagers as they see themselves powerless and avoids conflict with an influential person or a politician. This can be seen in what Miss Buasri (a pseudonym) has said "...we don't want to do a fact check on them. It's not our responsibility. Normally, they do well, and they make a visit to see what villagers need. I don't want to cause troubles or conflict with them. It many lead to a justice system, to the court. It's too much trouble! It's better for us to just keep quiet." (Buasri, personal interview, May 4, 2017).

Discussion and conclusion

This research was grounded on political sociology principles; any political system can sustain if political culture assists that particular system because political culture has influence on the political structure and political behavior of citizens of a country. Also, political culture is a significant foundation of a political system of a country (Nakata, 2003). Democratic political culture is essential for stability and effectiveness of democracy (Nakata, 2003; Tanasatit, 2016; Nash, 2010). Whether democracy is sustainable in society or not, the development of political culture is accountable. Importantly, democratic political culture is foundation of democracy, and essential to establish stable and sustainable democracy.

This exploratory study aimed to investigate the principal political culture of local people in local villages in the Northeast, hoping to gain some information and explanation that can be used as guidelines on how to develop democracy of Thailand. The results showed that the principal political cultures can be categorized into three types: 1) Apathy which is fostered by the majority who shows ignorance, interest apathy, a lack of interest to place importance on political or current issues, 2) Detached and aloof refers to people who are quite introverted and prefer not to be attached to or be involved in any activity with the community. For this people, there is a tendency of detachment and isolation from the community, public activity, or even neighbors. The number of people with this political culture is increasing as a result of changes in social and economic structure, an improved transportation systems, and more career choices. These changes lead to a higher number of

people from rural areas commuting to work and study in a city on a daily basis, and (3) Participants limited to a certain group of people in a community e.g., community leaders, some members of collective farmers or laborers who assemble to claim their rights and benefits and meanwhile are connected to political groups whether at the local or national level.

Observations from the results of the study

1. The results of the study suggested that political culture of most people is apathy—disinterest in politics and a lack of political knowledge. The main interest is emphasized on making a living and personal matters, not politics. Rumors are also what they fall for. Unfortunately, if this situation is found in most local communities of the country, development of true democracy can be difficult to be seen because democracy can only happen if citizens are alert and actively participate in political activities. Huntington (1969) stated that alertness and interest in political participation are most important in political culture. In addition, Pye (2000) viewed that in a democratic country, citizens must present civic culture. One characteristic of civic culture is a well understanding among citizens of politics in terms of regimen and how government works. Lasswell & Kaplan (1950) clearly stated that democracy development can occur if citizens are politicized by having; 1) interest in and care for the political process and issues, 2) an attitude that citizens must, at least, directly or indirectly be involved in political activities because politics is undeniably related to them, and 3) a belief that politics is significant and deserves reasonable amount of attention from all citizens. Effects of apathy and

disinterest in political issues include a lack of information for critical analysis, and this allows dishonest political groups that do not have political ideology to easily possess political power by using “money” to get access through all levels to the power. So, in Thai politics, financial fund circulates and involves in every election. After being voted and being in a political position, these politicians will attempt to gain profits from what they have invested in. This scenario leads to a belief and value of villagers that “merit is not as worth as wealth”, which means that money possesses greater value than merit and justice. If so, it will take a long time to develop democracy in Thailand.

2. The results of the study also suggested that in a community, there is a group of people participating in political activities, whose practices are desirable in democratic systems. Nothing is worth more than an opportunity of a citizen to participate in a political activity. Anyhow, there are three main concerns;

First, an assembly for personal or a group’s interest is considered rightful in democracy. However, for security and permanence of democracy, public spirits should come first, not personal interest.

Second, for this group of people, “election” is perceived as the only form of democracy, or an elected government is considered as a representative of democracy without any question and with all the rights by all means. This is a great misunderstanding. Besides an election, democracy composes many essential elements; rights and equality of the people, rules and regulations, checks and balances, virtue and ethics, etc. Election is only a gateway to political power. In many countries, a failure of

democracy is caused by too much emphasis that has been put on “election” without consideration for other key elements.

Last but not least, the participants are usually under control of politicians at the local and national levels, and this shows that even among this group of people, with participatory culture, subject political culture can be commonly seen. In this type of culture, people under control see themselves powerless, and without influence on a group of governors or an influential group. This perspective obstructs a role of people without authority in voicing their needs or do a fact check on an authority including government officers, and local politicians at all levels because authority is accepted unconditionally, and belief in destiny or karma is adopted. So, people in local communities seem to foster surrendered attitude; no argument no matter what is right or wrong even though it occurs in their community or society. This phenomenon throughout local areas of Thailand could be resulted from a lack of knowledge on the concepts of democracy. Since they don't have an opportunity to “plant” a seed of democracy, they cannot enjoy its “fruit”.

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