

# THAI POLITICAL CULTURE AND BUDDHISM APPROACH TO DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT

## วัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองของไทยกับการพัฒนาประชาธิปไตยเชิงพุทธ

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิชาการนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อเสนอแนวคิดวัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองของไทยกับแนวทางการพัฒนาประชาธิปไตยเชิงพุทธ วัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองเป็นแบบแผนของทัศนคติ พฤติกรรมของบุคคลต่อระบบการเมืองที่เกิดจากการเรียนรู้ ความเชื่อ ค่านิยม และการกล่อมเกลา ทางการเมืองจากสถาบันต่างๆ ทางสังคม เช่น สถาบันครอบครัว การศึกษา ศาสนา สื่อมวลชน และสถาบันการเมืองการปกครอง เป็นต้น การพัฒนาประชาธิปไตยจะพัฒนาที่วัฒนธรรมทางการเมืองของคนไทยให้เกิดความเชื่อมั่น ศรัทธา ในหลักความเสมอภาค และเสรีภาพ การเคารพในกติกาของ การปกครองระบอบประชาธิปไตย โดยการมีส่วนร่วมในกิจกรรมทางการเมือง รู้และเข้าใจอย่างมีเหตุผลและผลในทางสร้างสรรค์ ประชาธิปไตย คือ สิทธิ (ไม่ใช่หน้าที่) และเสรีภาพ (ไม่ใช่เบ็ดเบี้ยน) ที่มีขอบเขต ผู้นำต้องยึดหลักนิติธรรม และต้องสร้างธรรมาธิปไตยในสังคม เพื่อพัฒนาประชาธิปไตย ให้เป็นธรรมและมีธรรมาภิบาล ให้สอดคล้องกับวิถีชีวิต วัฒนธรรม สังคม และการเมืองไทย ที่เป็นเมืองพุทธ

### ABSTRACT

The objectives of this article are to propose the concept of Thai Political Culture and Buddhism approach to democracy development. Political culture is the attitudinal pattern and personal behavior responding to the political system arisen from learning, belief, value and political socialization from various social institutes,

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such as family, education, religion, mass media and political and administrative institutions etc. Democracy development is to develop Thai political culture to have confidence and faith in the principles of equality, freedom and respect of the democratic administrative rules and regulations, political activities participations, knowing and understanding with creative reasoning. Democracy is the right, not duty and freedom, not oppression, with limitation. Leaders must abide by the rules of laws, create social good governance to develop democracy to be virtuous with virtues coinciding with the way of life, cultural, social and Thailand political pattern, the land of Buddhism.

**KEYWORDS:** Thai Political Culture, Buddhism Approach, Democracy Development

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since Thailand had changed the administration from the absolute monarchical to democratic system with the King as the figure Head in 2475 B.E. Majority of Thai people understood the meaning and expression of attitude, belief, feeling of political ideology, standard of personal political norm. Politics sets Thai personal behavior and political culture with the dimension of democracy resulting the foundations and development of democracy in Thailand moving so slow and interrupted periodically. One important reason was that Thai people think that politics is far away, not personal business as well as being tire of some political crisis happening now and then especially the political conflicts in the last decade resulting severe desegregation between the supporting groups and the group with different political belief. (Social and Population Research Institute, Mahidol University, 2556)

## 2. POLITICAL CULTURE

Political Culture comes from two separated words; culture and Politics. Each word has different meanings. Culture indicates the growth, nourishment, orderliness and fine ethical morality of people. Culture is regarded as the norm that human created and accepted from long learning process and continuously practiced. It appeared to be prominent identity identifying growth and nourishment and social orderliness. Culture is the pattern of human behavior, thought, belief, values and attitudes, together becoming the life pattern of social civilization. It becomes the thinking pattern of living, working, expression, communication and interrelations exchange. The mentioned way of life is the life pattern or way of life of human beings that the majority society accepted and continuously practiced and it can be changed as the time passed by or the new way is found for solving problems and responding to the needs of society better and members of societies preferred (Sanya Sanyavivat, 2532: 182)

Politics is the power or authority to share or divide natural resources for the highest benefits of all people. That is to justly determine, to enforce social rules, regulations and laws responding to people's happy benefits equally with fare shares.

Political culture is the individual norms towards politics and political organizations arising from political socialization in families, peer groups, schools, career groups, religions and mass media transforming onto social norms, belief, behavior, feeling, attitudes, values. So the way of belief and values which derived from the past are regarded as an important political and administrative pillar of country.

### **Concepts of Political Culture**

The system of belief, value, attitude and norms has effects on the political pattern. Political culture is the individual thinking and this thinking is used by the individuals to just the political events or political acknowledgement. The acknowledgement is expressed in forms of political expression or election voting,

protests, opposition or conforms. Political culture is in forms of governments of every country. The differences are only by the belief, values arisen from political socialization according to the environment, society, economy and political system.

Political culture that can support the democratic political system must also be the democratic political culture (Polsak Jirakraisiri, 2524: 20) Political culture created by human is not created by instinct, but by agreement of members of one society or with societies in vicinity to come to an agreement on one system which is called “symbolic system”( Amara Pongsapit, 2551: 25) which is the pattern of attitude and this attitude creates political activities (Gbriel A. Almond and G. B. Powell, 1967 : 903-905) Political culture is the culture that dominates societies, the culture that determines the values and the norms for political debates and decision, the fruit of ideology of governors and inheritors. Governors always use political culture to create political justice (Ruengvit Kasemsuwan, 2549: 236-237)

### **3. IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL CULTURE**

Political Culture is one part of cultures that are the fruits of knowledge, thoughts and political belief that descended from generations to generations through social or political socialization in the important institutions such as families, educational institutes, religious institutes, political and administrative institutions, mass media, and entertainment institutes. Culture prevails only in human society. Culture creates orderliness and social unity. So culture plays the important roles as follows:

- 1) Political culture is the important factor that supports the political and administrative justice by obeying orders and abiding by the laws resulting the social orderliness.
- 2) Political culture is the important factor that encourages the political change

Jack Panchupet(Jack Panpet, 2550: 186-187) proposed that political participatory behavior of people in each country are different even though those countries have the same political systems due to the political culture derived from different way of political socialization which is regarded as an important tool to the change of the political culture in each country.

### **4. DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL CULTURE**

Tinnapan Nakata had concluded 8 types of democratic political cultures as:

- 1) Confidence and faith in democratic form of government
- 2) Hold to and believe in the importance, dignity, equality and freedom of individuals
- 3) Respect the rules and regulations of democratic form of government
- 4) Interested in political and administrative participation
- 5) Being participants in political and administrative activities
- 6) Being optimistic and trust in human fellows

- 7) Reasonable criticism in creative ways
- 8) No sense of the dictator's mind.

Vichai Tansiri (2551) proposed that society misunderstands all along that election is the democracy. In fact, election is only one form of political participation. Democracy depends on people's political culture in the areas of personal freedom, law obedience and law enforcement with equality. So Democracy development is to create political culture along with good constitution.

## 5. THAI POLITICAL CULTURE

Thai political culture from past to present can be concluded as follows:

- 1) Authoritarian, Thai people like absolute authority
- 2) Boss and subordinate system. Majority of Thai people in the society belong to one or more groups. Leaders of the group must be charismatic and able to protect and be beneficial to the subordinates. In return, the subordinates support the boss.
- 3) Hold to persons rather than principles. Inter personal relations and personal help are still important in almost every activity.
- 4) Echelon or rank of inter personal relations in organization that creates inequality in right and freedom. Thai people regard that one must know one's status, high or low, not equal. Thais still addict to the birth dignity.
- 5) Freedom minded. Thai people love freedom, do not like to be under others' control resulting the lack of orderliness, rules and regulations in the way of living.
- 6) Hold to the old tradition. Majority of Thai people still believes and practice according to the old traditions and cultures
- 7) Inactive, not enthusiastic in political activities. Thais are self-content with their statuses

- 8) Lost self-confidence and do not trust others from outside. Thais trust only members in the groups and also help cover up the mistakes of those people.
- 9) Peace loving and compromising. Thais love peace, do not like Violence. Political change is carried out peacefully, step by step, avoiding conflict, patience to unfair advantages.( Tinnapan Nakata, 2554: 36-41)

In the past Thai political culture was seldom expressed. But now more and more political activities are expressed, resulting the economic and political changes such as independence, tolerance and power of assimilation.

## 6. THAI DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL CULTURE

Thai society is the agricultural society that still strictly holds to and practices the traditions. Thai social structure reflects the free and democratically behavior in the aspects of right, equality, privilege in some cases in some cases freedom without responsibility to institutions (Sombat Wogsrirat, 2550:67), changing in attitude and tradition of the way of life. But still told to the social echelon, accepting the authority from the higher ranks, confidence in person rather than principles and compromising. Thai way of life and value socialization is clearly the indicators of Thai political culture which can be concluded as follows:

- 1) Seniority. Thai family traditions accept the authority of the Seniors
- 2) Career base. Career base of Thai people is agriculture. People Living separately. Political thoughts and culture were not accessible.
- 3) Genders. Differences between male and female have important parts in access to political objects. Research findings indicated that male youth in up-country understood political objects more than female youth(Sombat Wogsrirat, 2550:40), This indicated that male is more interested in political activities than female in political society.
- 4) Educational progress. The gap of education between people in the up-country and those in the city is still wide. Political information follow-up is not overall. City people understand and have access to more information than those at up-country.
- 5) Buddhism influence plays an important role to the political Thought. The Buddhist proverb that says “One is one own refuge” makes Thai good alone, not as a team. Also Buddhism teaches to be peaceful, harmonious, forgiveness and reasonable. Etc.
- 6) The term of democratic government is short. Coalition Government lack stability, resulting often elections. The coalition is for supporting the

majority power, not for the coalition ideology (Air Marshall Pongsatorn Chaisen, 2558: 10)

## 7. THAI POLITICAL CULTURE AND THE METHOD OF DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT

Thai Political Culture since Thailand changed from the absolute monarchical system to democratic system in the Buddhist Era 2475, there were often coup de ta all along since the last coup de ta by General Prayuth Chanocha, at present the head of National Council for Peace and Order(NCPO) who seized power in 2557 B.E. Thai democracy is still “up and down” or still crippled. Many people suspected that for what reasons Thai politics is full of revolutions or coup de ta, even though Thailand has good constitutions and independent organizations that can check and cross check the state power and not practical and still the military seized the state power or coup de ta?

However, if we consider the Thai political culture we can see that it is opposite of the democratic political culture. Thai people still lack democratic political culture and understanding the democracy and still practice the Thai way of political practice that is the authoritative and patronage pattern, the old system that still plays a big role and still have influences on thought, belief and values in the way of life beyond the rules and regulations in the constitutions. For that reasons the Thai democracy is still up and down for the following reasons:

- 1) Lack of democratic principle. Thai people do not respect the right of others but demand the right for themselves
- 2) Still admiring the absolute power to manage the crisis and not believing in the open society system, preventing others from expressing different opinions, eager to check other's faults, but being afraid of being checked and trying to protect self and associates from being checked.
- 3) People by overall do not have political participation, still think that politics is the job of politicians, people have only duty to vote.

From the mentioned cases, Thai political culture is authoritative related to patronage system enrooted deeply in the Thais' conscience. Historically, Siam

people did not request democracy by themselves. Thai government, either from election or from military coup de ta, has the same political culture. Corruption problem came from patronage system. Constitution stability problem from military seizing power came from authoritarian system. Constitutions were torn and rewritten time and time again, but the remaining phenomena in Thai society that is never changed, is that Thai people do not know the true principle of democracy. Bureaucratic system is for power seeking, desegregated, attached to the political and higher institutions. Government officers are honored and praised with dignity. Administrative role and power remain at the top level, not empowered.

Thai democratic political culture indicated the dark power in different forms causing the political power is limited to only specific groups that have money and influential power deterring those knowledge and academic people from getting involved with politics. For this one of the reasons, it is difficult to encourage people to participate in politics.

Some researches indicated that Thai political culture does not encourage people to participate in politics. Thai people believed that politics and administration are the duties of some minority groups. Politics is clearly for the benefits from some strong groups to take advantages of other groups but still declaring that they do it for the benefits of the people. This kind of thought makes people not to have faith and eagerness to participate in politics. The benefit exchange can be seen before and after election.

## **8. THE WAY TO DEVELOP THE DEMOCRACY**

Democratic minds come from various institutions in society that socialize their minds in uniform such as families, schools, communities, work places and mass media. Democratic political system is one form of government that the power to manage the state power comes from the majority votes of people who own the sovereign power. People may use their power directly or through the

representatives. Democracy is an ideal stating that people in a nation together determine the laws and the state operation and determines people to have equal opportunities and yield their will.

Democracy is the right, not duty, freedom, not oppression that have privacy and give equal right and freedom. One cannot abuse the right and freedom of others. Right and duty respect by laws will re-enforce the democracy. For this reason, democracy development by the rules of laws will yield the effective democracy. The principle of people's power, right and freedom and equality must be by laws, not by personal authority. If people lack readiness in education, knowledge of politics, economy and responsibility as the owner of the power and the rulers in the democratic system lack political moral ethics, not holding to the benefits for people and nation and the government with majority votes lacks the rules of laws, this will lose equilibrium of the state power and people power becoming the majority dictator government. It is not good for the objectives of democracy. The balance of power between state and people, the social strength by the rules of laws are the ideal phenomenon of democracy (Air Mashall Pongsatorn Chaisen, 2558: 11)

Democracy development is to develop the way of life and political culture to encourage people to have the democratic minds, responsibility to the whole and the sense of ownership of the country and the country belongs to every citizen and social consciences.

Democracy will be flourishing when people listen to each others' opinions to search the truth, accept the problem solving by peaceful means, with politeness, knowing how to forgive by the Buddhist society, give opportunity to show the responsibility to the society with reasons according to Suppurisadhamma, accepting other's opinions, accepting the change of own opinion when other's opinions are better. Many academicians expressed their opinions about the ways of life and culture according to Thai culture especially Buddhism as the guideline for

living. Thailand can become the democratic country not because of only democratic form of government, but also to create democratic culture in daily life. The components of Thai democracy in the present time consist of the right, freedom, equality, different opinion acceptance, responsibility to public, volunteering minds for the whole, participation, reconciliation, compromise and participation (Kanok Wongtrangan, 2537: 20)

#### How to create democracy in Buddhist Community

Buddhism is like the root of nationality and national identity socially, culturally and politically. Buddhism creates virtuous democracy and members of the society are good, moral, honest, intellectual and able to judge goodness and badness of people. Leaders must practice by the rules of laws and create the good governance in the society. Dhammadhipateyya or Righteous supremacy means practice by principles, reason, sincerity, righteousness and justice. Doing all administrative activities by the rules of laws, not by the worldly trends that might not be right, not be the righteous supremacy. Sometimes you may not like it. Dhammadhipateyya and Democracy in the Thai political context from the academicians' points of view indicated that Dhammadhipateyya supports democracy to be more justly practical. Dhammadhipateyya derives from Buddhism with the purposes of cultural, social and political alignment (Supote Boonviset and Praiwan kenprom, 2557:31).

It is the most appropriate to apply Dhammadhipateyya to develop democracy. Dhammadhipateyya is the firm foundation to support democracy to be secure, sustain, just, equal and should be applied in every organism from society, organizations, and unit of work, both state and private(Sangvorn Limtapanlop, 2559: 1).

Since Thailand has the democratic form of government with the King as the figure head. The democratic political concept should be in line with the 5 ways as sovereign power of the people, personal freedom, equality, the rules of laws and

the government from general election. If leaders lack virtuous ethics and morality, no religion to hold on to, the power gain by the political ways might be used for the personal gain. Leaders of the country apply religious doctrine to formulate policies. So Dhammadhipateyya or Virtuous Supremacy coincides with Thailand's cultural, social and political context.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Considering the pure Thai political culture, one can say that it is Opposite to the democratic political culture. Thai society still lacks good understanding of democratic principles and lacks democracy itself as the democratic ideology of the developed countries. Thai society still gets hold of the same old Thai culture. Every time the persons with power to write the constitutions always hide hidden agenda for power inheritance in the constitutions or finding the opportunity for selves or associates to interfere in the political arena.

The concept of authoritarian system related to patronage system is still alive and influential to political thought, belief, values of Thai people in daily life beyond the contents of all constitutions. For this reason, it is said that “If Dhammadhipateyya does not come, Democracy will not be sustainable”

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