

# Decentralization in Thailand

Research >  
Thailand

Since Fred Riggs's memorial book on 'Bureaucratic Policy' was published in 1966, research on modern Thai politics have broadened into new areas, exploring topics such as political parties, the military, the communist insurgency, the government-business relationship, the democracy movement, and so forth. Nonetheless, although it has often been pointed out that Thai bureaucracy is over centralized, Thai bureaucracy has never become a major topic for research. We still do not know how Thai bureaucracy recruits, trains, rotates, and evaluates its central bureaucrats. In view of the Thai economic recovery after the 1997 Asian economic crisis and the Taksin government's new policies, such as village funds, the 30-bahts health care programme, or the 'one Tambon, one product' movement, remarkably little attention has been paid to important and highly current issues concerning the Thai bureaucracy.<sup>1</sup>

## Young Japanese Researchers on Southeast Asia

Fumio Nagai is the first contributor to a series that aims to present current research of young Japanese scholars on Southeast Asia. Original Japanese research on Southeast Asia has a long tradition, is abundant and sometimes takes different routes from European or American research on the region. Moreover, many Japanese scholars publish in Japanese or in Southeast Asian languages and consequently the interaction between Japanese and non-Japanese scholars remains being somewhat limited. By means of this series we draw attention to the original research of young Japanese scholars with research interests in Southeast Asian affairs. In case you would like to introduce your own research on Southeast Asia, please contact the editors of the IAS Newsletter or the author of this introduction.<

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By Fumio Nagai

A key topic related to Thai bureaucracy is the current decentralization in Thailand, which has been accelerated by the 1997 Constitution. This is the topic that I have chosen to research. Decentralization is a big issue in public administration, but it is also a 'political' issue. It affects the role of both central and local governments, and may trigger politico-economic transformation of the Thai state itself. It is even more curious to compare reactions shown by Thai academics and Japanese academics. While many Japanese scholars are quite interested in decentralization and have published many books (written in Japanese), I have found but a small number of books (written in Thai) on decentralization in Thailand.

It is quite understandable why local Thai governments have received little interest from the general public and the academic world in particular. Let us reflect on figures from the local Thai government seven years ago. The ratio of local government expenditure to total government expenditure was 7 per cent or 8 per cent. The number of local government officials accounted for less than 10 per cent of central governmental bureaucrats. And the number of 'full-powered' local governments, whose heads were elected by local residents, were scattered from place to place, and amounted to only 250 bodies. But nowadays, 'full-powered' local governments in Thailand have spread over the national territory. They constitute a two-tier system and amount to nearly 8,000 entities. The number of local authorities in Thailand has increased thirty-fold within five years, and there are almost 200,000 politically elected members of local councils. The ratio of local government expenditure counts for 20 per cent of the total national budget for the 2001 fiscal year and is expected to increase to at least 35 per cent in the 2006 fiscal year, according to 'the act of decentralization plan and procedures in 1999'. Transfer of public servants from central bureaucracy to local governments has become a hot issue with the National Decentralisation Committee (NDC). During the past decade, the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and other foreign and international cooperation agencies have paid attention to Thailand's efforts toward decentralization and empowerment of local governments. Personally, I was dispatched by JICA, on short-term in 2000, as an expert attached to the Department of Local Administration (DOLA), Ministry of Interior, in order to help map out a comprehensive plan to empower local governments in Thailand.

The origin of full-powered local governments in Thailand could be traced back to the 1930s, after the Constitutional Revolution took place in 1932 (Thesaban, or municipality). Since then, issues of decentralization and empowerment of local governments have been frequently picked up by subsequent governments, military-led or democratically elected, but have never been implemented to full scale until recently. I am interested to discover why this is happening at this point in time, who supported and resisted the process, and how the local political structure and the relationship between the center and the locality will be transformed as a result of decentralization and empowerment of local governments.



Rogier Busser

### Characteristics of My Research

Past studies on local autonomy have been judicially oriented and tended to be static. They usually start their analysis with a description of articles and clauses in laws, then point out that local governments are lacking in real authorities or capabilities, and therefore conclude that the central government should delegate more power to local authorities. Recently another academic stream has emerged that focuses on local politics and local societal groups, such as local businessmen and 'Chao Phaw' or local gangsters. These issues are quite interesting and challenging to the stereotype of Thai local politics and society. But those approaches do not seem to fully explain my above-mentioned questions. They shed light on the role of local politicians and local reactions to decentralization, but they do not explain the root causes of decentralization in central government.

### My Research Approach

Only just having started my research on decentralization in Thailand there are still significant areas that I have not touched upon. My approach is not only to follow up what is going on in the Thai locality. Due attention should be paid to the process of policy formation in central government. As I have pointed out above, decentralization has in recent years been promoted through the National Decentralisation Committee (NDC). This is a standing committee that includes twelve intellectuals as committee members. It seems to me that their roles are significant in promoting decentralization. My question is how the NDC has come to play such an important role. Another point that I am interested in is the dynamic approach to the transformation of the local Thai political structure. As long as we stick to the judicial approach we can not understand how stakeholders in Thai locality have changed. This approach needs a longer perspective. Interestingly enough, current Prime Minister Taksin is trying to introduce the CEO (Chief of Executive Officers) type Provincial Governor that intends to give more administrative power. It would be quite interesting to know how locality recognizes the decentralization and the introduction of the CEO type of provincial governor. As part of my research I will take to investigate how politicians think about those two streams in my field research. <

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The Democracy Monument, located at Ratchadamnoen Avenue, was constructed in 1932 to commemorate Thailand's first constitution.

view of constitutions in Burma needs to be employed to understand the failure of two post-independence constitutions and remedy the vexed issue of ethnic representation.

A lamentable absence that day was the lack of ethnic perspectives. While the organizers attempted to fill this noticeable void, Australian experts in the field are, at the moment, thin on the ground. We hope to rectify this situation in our next Update and give this issue the attention it deserves.

The conference was aimed at advancing an already keen interest in Burma Studies at the Australian National University. The nine papers are currently being edited into a book, *Engaging Burma/Myanmar*, which will be published this year by Crawford House and associates. <



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21-25 September 2002, Gothenburg, Sweden

## Burma-Myanma(r) Research and its Future: Implications for Scholars and Policymakers

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### Note >

1 The 'Tambon' is the village as an administrative unit in Thailand.