

# The Thai Rak Thai Party and Elections in North-eastern Thailand

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**ABSTRACT** *Thaksin Shinawatra's electoral success, through the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, has led to a debate: was the party's electoral landslide based on the appeal of its policies or the power of money? On one side of the debate, the party's success was seen to result from its policies that reflected the interests of widely divergent sectors of the electorate. On the other side, TRT was held to be no different from "old-style" political parties that relied on money politics (vote buying, buying members of parliament and other kinds of patronage). This article explores the nature of TRT's successes and failures by examining the operation of TRT in north-eastern Thailand. It is argued that it is wrong to single out policies or money as a source of TRT's success because the party relied on both strategies to win elections.*

**KEY WORDS:** Thai Rak Thai party, elections, populism, vote buying, money politics

Thaksin Shinawatra, one of Thailand's richest businessmen, founded the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) on 14 July 1998. Within three years the party had already become the most successful political party in Thailand. In the 2001 general election TRT won 248 of the 500 parliamentary seats (McCargo, 2002: 248). And in the 2005 general election TRT fared even better when it won 377 out of 500 seats. This was an unprecedented parliamentary majority.

TRT's success has led to a debate: was the party's electoral landslide based on the appeal of its policies or the power of money? On one side of the debate, the party's electoral success was held to result from its policies that reflected the interests of widely divergent sectors of the electorate (McCargo, 2002: 253). On the other side of the debate, TRT was held to have adopted "old-style" political tactics. Its main electoral strategy was based on MP buying, vote buying and other kinds of patronage (see Kengkit, 2006: 95-6). However, the effort to single out policies or money as a driving force behind TRT's success is misleading since the party's success was based on the combination of the two factors. This article will explore the nature of TRT's successes and failures by examining the operation of TRT in north-eastern Thailand (the region commonly referred to as "Isan" in Thailand).

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Isan is crucial to Thai electoral politics, as the largest and most populous region it is home to one-third of Thailand's 60 million people and has the most members of parliament (MPs). As a result, the region became the place in which all major political parties in Thailand competed for seats. However, in the past, there was no single party that could politically monopolise the region or its MPs for long periods of time; the number of seats which each party won varied in every election (see below). Such a situation encouraged competition among parties. Historically, all major political parties, with the significant exception of the Democrat party, gained substantial support in the region, providing them with enough seats to bargain for entry into the coalition governments that were a feature of the Thai electoral landscape prior to 2001.

During the 1990s, Thailand held four general elections: March 1992, September 1992, July 1995 and November 1996. Political parties that had very strong political bases in Isan, such as the New Aspiration party (NAP), Chart Pattana party (CPP) and those with a reasonable political base in the region, such as the Chart Thai party (CTP) and the Social Action party (SAP), played a major role in setting up coalition governments. Because Isan occupies such an important place in Thai politics, it is worth examining the operations of the highly successful TRT party in the region. However, before looking at that, we first have to look at the new legal framework for elections after the passing of the 1997 Constitution.

### **New Elections Rules**

TRT competed in the 2001 and 2005 elections under the terms of the 1997 Constitution. As McCargo pointed out, "the constitution was in many respects the most important – albeit – delayed outcome of the May 1992 violence" (McCargo and Ukrist, 2005: 3). In May 1992, hundreds of thousands of protestors took to the streets of Bangkok and some provincial cities to oppose the military-dominated government of General Suchinda Kraprayoon, a leader of the 1991 military *coup*. Following the collapse of the Suchinda government, there were attempts to reform the political system in a more liberal direction, eventually resulting in the promulgation of a new constitution in 1997 (Connors, 2002: 39-44). Under this new constitution and related organic laws, new rules were introduced to make elections "clean and fair." For example, the power to supervise local and general elections was transferred from the Ministry of Interior to the National Election Commission (NEC), an independent organisation, in order to cut what Sombat (2002: 204) called "the crucial ties that exist between politicians and the civil servants responsible for administering elections." The NEC had the power to investigate all kinds of electoral irregularities, disqualify candidates for election fraud and order a re-run of contests in constituencies where fraud was found to have influenced the result (Callahan, 2002: 9). The electoral system was also changed. Multi-member constituencies were replaced by single-member constituencies in order to make constituencies smaller both in terms of area and voters. It was believed that smaller constituencies "would allow candidates to establish close contact with their supporters, without having to resort to bribing or intimidating potential voters" (Sombat, 2002: 203). Apart from these single-member constituencies, MPs were also elected nationwide on a party list. Under the 1997 Constitution, there were 400 constituency MPs and 100 party list MPs.

**TRT: Money, Policies and Power**

Although TRT was a new party, it became a favourite to win the 2001 election (*Matichon Sutsapda*, 6 November 2000). TRT was tipped to win the election because it was more successful than any other party in recruiting a large numbers of former MPs (Ockey, 2003: 672; *Matichon Sutsapda*, 11 December 2000). In the 2001 general election, 189 former MPs stood for TRT; 117 of them were former MPs who had won in the 1996 general election, while 72 of them had won in previous elections (see Table 1).

TRT was able to recruit a large number of former MPs first of all because of its money power. According to Case (2001: 536-7), TRT paid a huge amount in “transfer fees” for defecting MPs. This kind of practice is known in Thailand as *dut* (to suck), and TRT became known as *phak dut* (the sucking party) (McCargo and Ukrist, 2005: 80). The massive cost of the transfer fees contributed significantly to the total cost of the election campaign, which was estimated to be the most expensive election ever in Thailand (Case, 2001: 537). According to the Thai Farmers Research Center, about 25 billion baht (\$US625 million) was put into circulation during the 2001 election campaign, up 25% from the 1996 election (Ockey, 2003: 671). In addition to the transfer fees, former MPs joined TRT because it provided candidates with monthly allowances and substantial election funds (*Matichon Sutsapda* [*Matichon Weekly*], 21 March 2000; Ockey, 2003: 678). However, money was not the only factor that induced former MPs to join TRT; popularity also played a significant part. Some former MPs defected to TRT because of the prospect of the party doing well and entering government (*Matichon Sutsapda* [*Matichon Weekly*], 17 July 2000: 11). Another factor that contributed to the defection of former MPs to TRT was internal party conflicts within existing parties and the prospect of poor electoral outcomes. NAP and SAP were examples of parties that fell into this category before the 2001 general election (*Matichon Sutsapda* [*Matichon Weekly*], 6 November 2000).

Apart from MP-buying, TRT became a favourite to win the election because the Democrat party’s compliance with the IMF’s post-1997 recovery requirements and its inability to tackle the country’s economic problems meant that its electoral prospects were dim (see Pasuk and Baker, 2008). Disappointed with Chuan Leekpai’s Democrat-led government, as more and more people looked for a “new alternative,” Thaksin attracted potential voters and MPs through his nationalist rhetoric and economic policies (*Matichon Sutsapda* [*Matichon Weekly*], 20 November 2000; Baker, 2005: 107-37). Thaksin was especially attractive to business groups. In contrast to Chuan’s austerity programme, Thaksin promised to implement policies

**Table 1.** TRT candidates for the 2001 general election

	MPs returned in 1996	MPs returned in other previous elections	Total
Party list	31	16	47
Constituency	86	56	142
Total	117	72	189

Source: *Matichon Sutsapda* [*Matichon Weekly*], 11 December 2000.

to assist the struggling business. Politically, his policies helped TRT to gain support from sectors of business that had previously supported other political parties (see Case, 2001: 538; Ockey, 2003: 672-3; Pasuk and Baker, 2004: 74-8).

Thaksin not only used the economic crisis to win over the urban rich but also the rural poor. As Ockey (2003: 672) pointed out, during the time of the economic crisis rural poverty became central to the political agenda and it could be used to win votes. Thaksin did just that. During the first half of the 1990s, there had been a series of farmer protests, especially in Isan. The protests subsided in mid-1997. But economic hardship after the economic crisis led to a new round of farmer protests. In May 1998, thousands of indebted Isan farmers organised a protest in Khon Kaen, a major regional centre, when news spread that Chuan's government was going to borrow some 700 billion baht to cover the debts of collapsed financial companies. The demonstrating farmers demanded that the government declare a five-year moratorium on the debts that farmers owed to the state-owned Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operatives, and set up a Farmers' Rehabilitation Fund to assist farmers in solving their indebtedness and provide funds for community enterprises. The farmers justified their demands by arguing that if the government could help the rich, it should also be able to support the poor (Somchai, 2006: 182-4, 188). Thaksin capitalised on the situation by consulting with both farmers' leaders and NGO activists. In early 2000, he adopted the farmers' demand for a debt moratorium. This policy later came to be seen as one of the TRT's so-called populist policies (see Pasuk and Baker, 2008; Pye and Wolfram, 2008). Later, Thaksin added other popular policies into TRT's programme that became known as his populist policies: a revolving fund of one million baht for every village and community in the country and the 30 baht per visit health care programme (see Pasuk and Baker, 2004: 81-2).

Thaksin's policies became popular across a wide spectrum of the population and this was reflected in opinion polls. For example, a survey conducted in October 2000 showed that TRT led the Democrats in every region of the country (*Matichon Sutsapda* [*Matichon Weekly*], 13 November 2000).

## **TRT and the January 2001 General Election**

### *TRT's Rivals in Isan*

Even though Chuan Leekpai's popularity had decreased, the Democrats remained TRT's main rival (McCargo, 2002: 247). However, the Democrats were not strong in the north-east, with their traditional stronghold being in the south (Surin and McCargo, 1997: 144). In the 1996 general election, the Democrats managed to win only 12 of the region's 137 seats. The main rivals for TRT in Isan were NAP and CPP. In the 1996 general election, NAP won 78 seats while CPP held 21 seats in the region (see Table 2).

In 2001, competition from the NAP in Isan was weakened because TRT was able to recruit Sanoh Thienthong into the party. Sanoh was the leader of the so-called Wang Nam Yen group, a major faction within NAP. He was, and remains, an influential figure in Thai electoral politics, having played a key role in setting up the Chart Thai government in 1995 and the NAP government in 1996. After the downfall of the NAP government in 1997, many NAP members made plans to leave

**Table 2.** Results of the 1995 and 1996 general elections in the Isan region

Party	Number of MPs	
	July 1995	November 1996
Chart Pattana	27	21
Chart Thai	29	5
Democrats	14	12
New Aspiration	36	78
Seri Tham	8	4
Social Action	14	12

Source: "The Result of the 2 July 1995 Election," *Parliament Newsletter*, July 1995, pp. 31-89; Interior Ministry (n.d.).

NAP, including Sanoh's faction. In early 2000, Sanoh instructed Pitak Intarawitayanun, the chief advisor of the Wang Nam Yen group, to negotiate with Thaksin about the possibility of the group joining TRT. After a series of meetings and negotiations, Sanoh agreed to take his group into TRT. He became Thaksin's chief political advisor and was given responsibility for selecting TRT candidates to compete for constituency seats nationwide (*Matichon Sutsapda* [*Matichon Weekly*], 1 February 2000; 8 February 2000). Sanoh led some 70 former NAP MPs and other local politicians from different regions into TRT. Thirty-six members of this group were former Isan MPs and Isan local politicians (*Nation Sutsapda* [*Nation Weekly*], 15-21 January 2001). In addition, TRT bolstered its power in the north-east by recruiting Adisorn Piangket, a NAP leader from Khon Kaen province, into the party. It is worth noting that the competition between TRT and the weakened NAP did not last for long. The parties soon became allies and it was widely believed that Thaksin had partly funded NAP during the 2001 election campaign (see McCargo, 2002: 255; Somyot, 2003: 105).

Also bolstering TRT in the north-east was the defection of Suvit Khunkitti, a former minister and an SAP leader from Khon Kaen province. Suvit also brought ten former SAP MPs with him. Notably, TRT failed to lure influential figures from CPP into the party. This was partly due to conflicts Pitak, who was a founding member of CPP before joining TRT, had with the CPP leader (*Matichon Sutsapda* [*Matichon Weekly*], 8 February 2000).

### *Finding Candidates*

What kind of politicians did TRT attract? As indicated above, many came from existing electoral networks. TRT projected an image of being a "new" party with politicians drawn from non-traditional sources. How accurate is this?

For decades, Thailand's electoral politics was dominated by "money politics." Politicians regularly spent large amounts of money on vote buying and then used their political power to reap rich economic rewards after winning elections, which they then invested in a new cycle of vote buying (Somchai, 2006: 4-5). When Thaksin founded TRT, he sought to dissociate his party from this old style of electoral politics. TRT, according to McCargo and Ukrist (2005: 80), sought to project itself

as a new kind of party, emphasising the extent to which its MPs had derived from non-traditional sources. However, for the north-east, this claim was contradicted by what actually happened. If we look closely at TRT candidates in Isan, we find that most came from existing electoral networks. From the profile of TRT's candidates (Thai Rak Thai, n.d) we can classify its candidates in Isan into three groups. As noted above, the first group TRT recruited were former MPs. Thaksin used his vast personal wealth to recruit a large group of former MPs into TRT. This group of candidates was a part of that process. Thus, this recruitment represents an old way of doing politics. As Surin and McCargo (1997: 137) have pointed out, after the announcement of a general election:

...former MPs and other prospective parliamentary candidates with good electoral prospects are offered financial incentives to join or switch political parties. Major new parties have emerged in nearly every recent election, and typically seek well-known political figures for their candidate lists.

In the Isan region, TRT recruited 52 former MPs to compete in the 2001 general election, of which, 34 were former MPs who won in the 1996 general election. Those 34 came from NAP (22), CPP (4), CTP (3), SAP (3), the Democrats (1) and the Solidarity party (1). Another 18 had won seats in elections prior to 1996. It should be noted that the region had 138 constituencies in the 2001 election, and former MPs constituted just more than one-third of TRT candidates. In some provinces TRT found it difficult to find former MPs to stand for the party. For example, in Sakon Nakhon and Udon Thani provinces, which had seven and ten constituencies respectively, TRT had only one candidate in each province who were former MPs. Meanwhile, in Mukdahan province, TRT was unable to recruit any former MPs to represent the party in the province's two constituencies.

The former MPs provided TRT with a high profile group that could attract the public attention. But former MPs were not the only ones succumbing to TRT's attractions and wealth. As Ockey (2003: 672) pointed out, TRT also recruited as candidates members of former MPs personal election networks. Prominent among their personal election networks were local politicians (discussed below as the second group of TRT candidates) and their relatives and canvassers (the latter referred to as *hua khanaen*), discussed as a third group of TRT candidates in the north-east. Because these groups of people also had their own electoral networks in place, TRT was interested in attracting them to the party and supporting them to stand in the election.

The second group of TRT candidates that represented the party in the 2001 general election was made up of local politicians. For many decades local politicians played an important role in helping national politicians to win elections in the provinces. Because most local politicians, such as provincial council members or mayors, were well-known persons in their areas and some of them were "influential figures" (*phu mi itthipon*), their support was crucial (Sombat, 1993a: 143-5). Most of these "influential figures" were semi-businessmen/semi-gangsters. While running legal businesses, they also operated illegal businesses such as smuggling and gambling. They used violence to protect their businesses and expand their influence. Therefore, to shelter themselves from law, "influential figures" made friends and

connections with the military and the police (see Sombat, 1993b). However, their political role was not confined to that of canvassers for political parties; some of them, especially those who had business backgrounds managed to become MPs themselves. By 1990, 62% of local politicians were businessmen (Pasuk and Baker, 1997: 337-7). One reason behind their success in national politics was economic growth in the provinces. The expansion of the economy benefited local businessmen-politicians not only in terms of wealth but also political power. They translated their newly acquired wealth into politics, and were able to occupy about 20% of seats in parliament during the 1980s and 1990s (see Parichart, 1997: 251-64; Pasuk and Baker, 1997: 332-40; Sombat, 1993a: 147).

As mentioned above, the 1997 Constitution introduced single-member constituencies. These constituencies enhanced the role and importance of local politicians because smaller constituencies meant that local politicians with support in particular areas no longer had to compete in big electorates where they were virtually unknown; smaller constituencies placed a premium on strong and localised support. As a result, political parties, including TRT, sought to recruit local politicians with good prospects to stand in constituency seats. There were 37 former local politicians who represented TRT in Isan during the 2001 general election.

The third group of TRT candidates came from local business circles, canvassers, the wives and relatives of former MPs, and politicians who had never won an election before, policemen, teachers and so on. Although almost all members of this group were not as engaged directly in politics as those in the second group, some of them were relatively wealthy, well known to local people and had good connections with politicians. They were the second largest group amongst those standing as TRT candidates, with 48 standing in 2001.

From the evidence provided above, we can conclude that all of the three groups of TRT candidates in the north-east were drawn essentially from what might be considered traditional political networks. In other words, on the basis of recruitment, the claim that TRT represented a new kind of political organisation appears weak.

What were the criteria used by TRT in selecting candidates from the three groups mentioned above? In general terms, candidates were chosen on the basis of their popularity or their connections with influential figures in TRT. Although TRT gave priority to former MPs, it did not mean that they would always be chosen to represent the party. If the former MPs were not popular in their constituencies, TRT would look to people in other groups. The popularity of candidates was judged mainly on the results of polls conducted by TRT in the constituency (interview with TRT staff in Kalasin, 20 April 2007). However, good connections with powerful figures within the party could also be vital for a candidate to be sponsored by TRT.

To illustrate the way TRT chose its candidates, we will look closely at candidate selection in Mahasarakham province. In the 2001 general election, three of six TRT candidates in Mahasarakham were former MPs, but only two of them had won seats in the 1996 general election. Those two former 1996 MPs, Suchat Chokchaiwattanagorn and Krit Kongpet, represented the party in constituencies 3 and 6, respectively. The third, former CPP MP, Charnchai Chairungrueng, had failed in the 1996 election, coming fifth in a field of seven candidates, and competed in constituency 4 in 2001. The chance of Charnchai winning seemed minimal. However,

he won support from TRT because of his connection with Thaksin's sister Yaowapa Wongswat. Charnchai's wife was a relative of Yaowapa's husband. Because of such a close relationship to the Shinawatra family, Charnchai eventually became one of the leaders of TRT MPs in Isan after the election (interview, Pairat Chaisomkun, 16 January 2007).

Another TRT candidate in Mahasarakham who had experience in House of Representative elections was Kusumawadee Sirikumut. Before the 2001 general election Kusumawadee had run for a parliamentary seat on four occasions. She failed in all four attempts. While many locals were convinced that Kusumawadee would never win an election, TRT decided to sponsor her to run for a seat in Mahasarakham's constituency 5. This was because she was close to Krit Kongpet, an important member of the Wang Nam Yen faction (field notes, 25 October 2006).

Personal connections also played a role in candidate selection in constituencies 1 and 2. The TRT candidate in constituency 1 was Thonglor Polkote. He was chosen because of his connection with Srimuang Charoensiri, a TRT-sponsored senator in Mahasarakham and an influential figure in the party. Initially, TRT wanted to sponsor Yingyot Udonpim, a provincial council member, who had a strong political base in the area. But Yingyot was not qualified to run for an MP seat because he lacked the equivalent of a university degree, required under the 1997 Constitution. TRT therefore decided to support Thonglor, a civil servant, who had no experience in elections. Srimuang decided to help Thonglor because of a family connection. His elder sister was Thonglor's mother-in-law. With Srimuang's help, Thonglor was in a good position to win an election. Srimuang was a powerful TRT figure in Isan. He developed a close relationship with Thaksin when he was a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Communications. At that time Thaksin was not yet fabulously rich and Srimuang is said to have helped him a great deal. It was believed that because of this, Thaksin felt indebted to Srimuang, so he helped him to succeed in politics. Srimuang had long wanted to be a Mahasarakham MP but his ambition had not been realised. However, in the 2000 senate election, Srimuang's position changed dramatically when he received Thaksin's backing, and he went on to win a seat without difficulty. Later, Srimuang became the leader of senators who supported TRT in parliament. Moreover, he was appointed by Thaksin to oversee TRT financial matters in Isan. Money that Thaksin gave to TRT's candidates and MPs in Isan was paid through Srimuang (interview, Pairat Chaisomkun, 16 January 2007).

In constituency 2, TRT decided to support Chaiwat Tinrat, a provincial council member. He was chosen ahead of Suchat Srisung, a former MP who won in the 1995 and 1996 general elections. The decision was based on the result of polls which indicated that Chaiwat was more popular than Suchat (Centre for Information on Local Politics in Isan, 2001: 17). Moreover, in terms of personal connections, Chaiwat was in a better position than Suchat. He was close to Somsak Thepsuthin, a leader of the Wang Nam Yom faction. Chaiwat and Somsak became friends because of their mutual interest in cock fighting (interview, Pairat Chaisomkun, 16 January 2007).

From the evidence regarding candidate recruitment, we can again conclude that TRT did not adopt any particularly new or innovative means to identify and recruit candidates in the north-east.

*Funding Candidates*

In his 1993 study Sombat divided election funds in Thailand into two categories, which remain relevant. The first category are funds for the cost of rallies, cut-out boards, posters, leaflets and so on. Election expenditures in this category are legal if candidates do not spend beyond the limit set by the law. But more often than not most candidates break the law on this issue. The second category involves secret and illegal funds for canvassers, donations to communities and for vote buying. The illegal funds are far bigger and more important to candidates than the legal funds (Sombat, 1993b: 154-67). Before the 2001 election campaign, funding was generally conducted as follows: parties would grant initial funds to candidates; the amount being dependent upon candidates' election prospects. The parties would then monitor the popularity of candidates to decide whether funding should continue (Callahan and McCargo, 1996: 381).

TRT funding of its candidates followed this pattern. A person who was selected to represent TRT received 40,000 baht per month for the election campaign. Candidates reported details of their spending and the result of their campaigns to the party regularly. At the same time, TRT also assessed the ongoing popularity of each candidate by polling (interview, Pairat Chaisomkun, 16 January 2007). In addition to a monthly allowance was an undisclosed fund believed to be about 20 million baht. This fund was used for vote buying. TRT candidates carried out vote buying in various disguises. For example, one TRT candidate used seminars in sub-districts as places to carry out vote buying. He invited voters to attend seminars and paid them with cash (Centre for Information on Local Politics in Isan, 2001: 20). It should be noted that candidates did not have the same amount of funds for their campaigns. Some of them got additional funds from the patron of their groups. The size of this fund depended on the patron. For example, a candidate in Kalasin province got 20 million baht from his patron to fund his campaign (Field notes, 15 January 2007), while a candidate in Mahasarakham's constituency 2 got only 5 million (Centre for Information on Local Politics in Isan, 2001: 17). TRT's candidate funding in the 2001 election did not differ greatly from other parties; the major difference between them was TRT offered more money to its candidates than any other party (*Matichon Sudsapda* [*Matichon Weekly*], 21 March 2001).

*Election Results*

Utilising the selection and funding mechanisms indicated above, in the 2001 general election, TRT candidates registered a notable victory for the party. In Isan the party won 71 of the 138 seats contested. However, when compared with the result of the 1996 general election in the region, TRT won fewer seats than NAP, which swept 78 of 137 seats. Therefore, although the scale of success of TRT in Isan in the 2001 election was impressive, it was not unprecedented.

Who won the seats for TRT? If we look at the three groups of TRT candidates outlined above, it is clear that the first group, comprising 52 former MPs standing again in 2001, was the largest group that won seats for TRT. Thirty-seven candidates from this group managed to win their seats, while 15 failed. Twenty-seven among those who won were former MPs from the 1996 parliament and ten were former MPs

from earlier elections. For the second group of candidates, which comprised of 38 local politicians, their rate of success was about 50%; 16 candidates from this group won seats. The number of successful candidates from the second group is almost the same as those of the third group, but the percentage of success was higher. Only 18 of 48 candidates from the third group won. The result shows that in the first election for TRT in Isan the number of its MPs who were or were not former MPs was almost the same (37 and 34, respectively). This fact reflected the changed electoral system. It is clear that smaller single-member constituencies increased the chances of candidates in the second and third groups because they had strong political bases. Under the old electoral system, because a constituency was big, a winning candidate required a wide political base. If the candidate was strong only in a particular area, the chance of winning was rather small. However, under the new electoral system the size of a new constituency was reduced to about one-third of an old constituency. Therefore, having a strong political base in a particular area was an advantage for local politicians or canvassers. But it caused problems for some former MPs who had wide political bases – linked by canvassers – but who were not strong in any particular place. This kind of former MP tended to be the ones who lost their seats in 2001. It is for this reason that a large number of so-called new faces came from the 2001 general election.

The original result of the 2001 general election was inconclusive in a number of seats and election re-runs were held on 29 January and 1 February 2001. In Isan the NEC ordered electoral re-runs in 41 constituencies because of vote buying and other transgressions of the electoral laws. Initially, TRT won 71 seats but only 55 of these were confirmed by the NEC, while 15 results were “yellow carded” (invalidating first round results) and one was “red carded” (disqualifying from standing). After the two re-runs TRT won an additional 14 seats, bringing the party’s total number of seats in Isan to 69 (Table 3). However, after the 1 February re-run the NEC ordered re-runs in 13 constituencies of Isan, in which six TRT candidates were “yellow carded.” In those re-runs TRT managed to win eight seats, which lifted the party’s MPs in Isan to 71.

Even though TRT’s performance in Isan was impressive, the result of the general election also revealed some of TRT’s weaknesses in some Isan provinces. For example, the party failed to win a seat in Amnat Charoen and Nakhon Phanom

**Table 3.** The 2001 general election result

Party	Number of seats in Isan	National seats won
Thai Rak Thai	69	248
New Aspiration	19	36
Chart Pattana	16	29
Seritham	1	14
Chart Thai	11	41
Democrat	6	128
Ratsadorn	1	2
Social Action	1	1
Tin Thai	1	1

*Source:* National Election Commission (2001: 161, 381-464).

provinces, which had 2 and 5 seats, respectively. In Si Sa Ket and Roi-Et provinces, TRT won only 3 out of 9 seats. And, in the big province of Nakhon Ratchasima, the party won just 7 out of 17 seats. One reason for TRT's failures in these provinces was that other parties had established political strongholds. The implication of this is that competition for seats was still heavily reliant on the old ways of doing politics. Political parties that had strong traditional electoral networks could still hold onto their seats in those constituencies. TRT's attractive policy platform was unable to help the party in some of these constituencies. TRT would only be able to control such constituencies through the merging of other parties into TRT after the election.

#### *"New Face" MPs*

One important objective of the 1997 Constitution was to make it difficult for old-style politicians to win elections and, at the same time, allow new faces to enter politics. To some extent, this strategy seemed to work. In the 2001 general election, a number of famous old-style politicians failed in the election, while a large number of "new faces" emerged victorious (McCargo, 2002: 249, 251). If we compare the number of new faces in the 1996 general election with those of the 2001 general election, we will find that the number of new faces in parliament increased dramatically. In the 1996 general election, only 17 out of 137 Isan MPs were newcomers. This number increased to 60 out of 138 in the 2001 general election (*Nation Sutsapda* [*Nation Weekly*], 15-21 January 2003). These newcomers, according to Ockey (2003: 667), were seen as "the harbingers of a new style of politician." As we have seen, in the 2001 general election about half of TRT's 71 MPs in Isan were those who won a seat for the first time. For some, the TRT new faces were politicians who were different from old-style politicians. Thaksin portrayed the new faces in his party in this manner (see McCargo and Ukrist, 2005: 81).

Were the new faces a new type of politician? Were they "good" and "capable" people that the 1997 Constitution had been meant to nurture? If we look at the first group of newcomers, discussed above as former local politicians, then the answer is definitely no. This is because, just as national politicians, these politicians had tried to win local elections in the past through vote buying and other forms of money politics (see, for example, Supat, 1995). They were old-style local politicians, even though they were new to the national parliament. What about the second group of new comers who were not former local politicians? Did they represent a different type of politician from the first group of newcomers? The difference between the two groups was minimal because almost all of them had close connections with old-style politicians. Some 13 out of 18 of newcomers in the second group were relatives, family members, former canvassers of MPs and local politicians (*Nation Sutsapda* [*Nation Weekly*], 15-21 January 2001, pp. 28-9). They were predominantly drawn from existing political networks.

#### *TRT and the "Red Card"*

As mentioned above, one TRT candidate was red-carded by the NEC. The case was significant, not only because it was the evidence of electoral fraud by a TRT candidate, but also the way the TRT leader handled the issue. Seksit Wainiyompong,

TRT's candidate in Roi-et's constituency 2, finished first in the constituency with 35,085 votes, and was then red-carded because he violated the election law prohibiting any form of entertainment by featuring comedy during his campaign. As a result, Seksit was suspended from politics for one year (Somyot, 2003: 87-90). After learning of his fate, Seksit consulted Sanoh Thienthong. Sanoh did not try to help him and told him that if the NAP candidate won in the new round this would not be a problem as the NAP was likely to join a coalition government formed by TRT. Seksit and his secretary were not happy with Sanoh's advice. They believed that if the NAP candidate became an MP, it would be very difficult for Seksit to compete with him in the future. The best option for Seksit was to try and find someone to act as a stand-in for him for one year. He decided to make a deal with Boonterm Chantawat, the weakest candidate in the constituency. According to Seksit, he agreed to support Boonterm in the constituency seat election re-run, but after one year Boonterm had to resign to make way for his return to parliament (Somyot, 2003: 98-99, 102). Such a move was based on the idea that Boonterm was very weak and he would be unlikely to thwart Seksit's will. Boonterm was a candidate of the small Tin Thai party. He finished last in the original election with 240 votes. With the help of Seksit he won the re-run with 19,271 votes (Somyot, 2003: 63, 106).

After Boonterm won the election, he did not keep his promise. Seksit tried hard to pressure Boonterm to resign. Instead of helping Seksit, TRT recruited Boonterm into the party. Nirand Namuangrak, an MP of TRT in Roi-et's constituency 4, reported that Thaksin had instructed him to recruit Boonterm (Somyot, 2003: 123). However, TRT tried to console Seksit by appointing him an advisor to the Justice Minister (Somyot, 2003: 121).

The abandonment of Seksit by TRT sheds some light on TRT's policy toward its members. Did the Seksit saga show that TRT would not support a candidate who violated the election law? If we look at the recruitment policy of TRT which relied on old-style politicians, we would conclude that TRT had no objection to candidates who violate the election law. The Seksit saga pointed to the opportunist nature of TRT; it was ready to recruit any politician who won the election and at the same time it would abandon those who failed.

### **TRT After the 2001 Election**

Between its 2001 election victory and the 2005 election, TRT took two important steps to enhance its position. After winning in 2001, Thaksin rapidly implemented his policies that were aimed at rural voters, including the debt moratorium, the village and community fund and universal health care (see Pasuk and Baker, 2008). These measures undoubtedly helped to boost TRT's popularity.

Another measure that TRT implemented to strengthen its power was the incorporation of other parties. Shortly after the election, TRT absorbed the Seritham party (Ockey, 2003: 663). And, in early 2002, another party, NAP, merged with TRT (Pasuk and Baker, 2004: 95). After torturous negotiations and defections, the CPP decided to join TRT in September 2004 (Connors, 2005: 371). The merger increased the number of TRT MPs to more than 300. This measure not only strengthened the power of the TRT government but also helped to increase the chance of the party winning more seats in the upcoming election.

**TRT and the 2005 Election**

In the 2005 general election TRT registered the biggest ever victory in the history of Thailand's national elections. In Isan, the party's MPs increased from 71 to 126 (Table 4).

What were the sources of TRT's resounding electoral victory? As discussed at the beginning of this article there is a debate about whether the success of TRT was based on policies or the power of its money. As demonstrated in the previous section, TRT employed both policies and old-style money politics to strengthen its power. Its success, therefore, was not derived from a single factor; it was the result of the combination of factors.

One way to locate the sources of TRT's success in the 2005 election is to look at its new MPs. If we take a close look at the new TRT MPs for Isan we find that the majority of them were former MPs from other political parties. Forty-one of them came from those political parties that merged with TRT after the 2001 general election: NAP (16), CPP (14) and Seri Tham party (11). Five defected from CTP and one from the Democrats. Only eight were newcomers and all of these were local politicians or relatives of MPs. The number of the TRT MPs increased mainly because it "sucked" MPs from other parties. Since both these "new" MPs and the re-elected TRT MPs were all old-style politicians, their success surely would have been based, in part, on money power and the political patronage they had nurtured for years.

At the same time, no one can deny the contribution of the populist policies to TRT's success. One way to measure the popularity of TRT's policies in Isan is to look at the political position of farmers who worked with NGOs. Isan has long been a stronghold of grassroots social movements. From the 1990s onwards, NGOs and other social activists organised more than fifty significant protests in Isan provincial towns and Bangkok. Sometimes they were able to mobilise 10,000-30,000 Isan farmers to stage months-long protests at the front of the Government House. They rallied against dam projects, demanded land rights and a debt moratorium. Accompanying such political mobilisations, NGOs organised meetings, seminars and political schools to raise farmers' political consciousness. After more than a decade of mobilisation, NGOs had succeeded in creating networks of progressive farmers in various parts of Isan (see Prapat, 1998; Somchai, 2006). In the past these groups of farmers had generally adopted the same political view as that of the NGOs that worked with them. Therefore, when NGOs launched their campaigns against Thaksin, we should expect that these farmers' groups would have adopted a critical

**Table 4.** The 2005 general election result

Party	Number of seats in Isan	National seats won
Thai Rak Thai	126	337
Chart Thai	6	25
Democrat	2	96
Mahachon	2	2

*Source:* National Election Commission (2005: 273, 281).

attitude toward the Thaksin administration as well. However, almost all of the farmers who worked closely with NGOs supported Thaksin strongly. NGOs tried in vain to persuade villagers to oppose him. Even at the time when the rallies to oust Thaksin from power reached their height, the NGO organisers still found it difficult to persuade farmers to support the protest.

Why was this? From the NGO perspective, farmers refused to join the anti-Thaksin protest because they were unable to look beyond the short-term material benefits of the populist policies. This was attributed to the impact of the government's propaganda. What was needed was to help farmers to see the long-term damage of Thaksin's policies by supplying them with "correct" information (Field notes, 27 June 2006). Such a view implied that there could be only one political line taken towards Thaksin and, to be politically correct, farmers had to adopt that line. Such a thing was not going to happen because it ran counter to many farmers' way of thinking. Farmers do not adopt totalistic views towards things or persons; they deal with them in a pragmatic way. They judged Thaksin on an issue-by-issue basis. As a result, whether Thaksin was good or bad depended on the issue at hand.

The case of the anti-potash mining will be a good example to illustrate the point. Farmers in 21 villages of Udon Thani, a province in northern Isan, organised protests against a potash mining project in the province. They feared that the project would cause widespread subsidence, salt contamination of agricultural land and of groundwater. Co-ordinated by NGOs, farmers rallied at the provincial hall and at the front of the National Parliament in Bangkok. Although the Thaksin government supported the project actively, these farmers refused to join the anti-Thaksin movement. For them, protest against the potash mining project was one thing, rallying to oust Thaksin from power was another. They mobilised against the project because it threatened the survival of their communities. But they did not want to topple Thaksin from power. In their view, Thaksin, who helped farmers tackle their difficulties with money from the village funds and other projects, was better than any other prime minister. There was no reason that they should try to overthrow him, and many said they would vote for him in the next election (Field notes, 27 June 2006).

Farmers who worked with NGOs in other areas also welcomed and valued Thaksin's populist policies. While the policies were criticised severely as a new form of vote buying by many NGO leaders and academics in Bangkok, farmers viewed the policies as the distribution of resources to the countryside that helped farmers to address their needs. They insisted that the rural poor were as entitled to access the government budget as were the urban rich. In the past, politicians always promised to channel funds to help farmers but failed to deliver after they had won elections. Thaksin was the first to really deliver (interview, Don Dang villagers, 12 January 2007). However, it must be noted that this does not mean that all farmers who worked with NGOs always supported Thaksin. For various reasons, some turned against him (see below).

The popularity of TRT's policies undoubtedly contributed to the party's landslide victory. However, we have to be cautious about the extent to which these policies influenced voters' decision making. It was widely believed that in the 2005 general election anyone who stood for TRT would definitely win a seat because of the

popularity of its policies. However, one also needs to be able to explain the exception: why in 2005 did TRT lose in eight constituencies it had won in 2001? By looking at its losses it is possible to throw some light on why it was successful in other seats.

A few examples will help us to make the point clearer. In the 2005 election in Ubon Ratchathani's constituency 8, Poonsawat Hotrawaisaya, a 2001 TRT MP, lost to Isara Somchai of the Democrat party. In theory, Poonsawat was in a position to beat Isara without too much difficulty because he had already defeated Isara in the 2001 general election, and the popularity of TRT should have helped him enormously. But, in reality, other factors had more influence on the election outcome than these two factors. First, a power struggle within TRT affected Poonsawat's campaign. Soon after the 2001 election, a conflict between Thaksin and Sanoh emerged and resulted in the declining power of Sanoh within TRT (*Matichon Sutsapda [Matichon Weekly]*, 16 June 2001, McCargo and Ukrist, 2005: 103). Because Poonsawat was a member of Sanoh's Wang Nam Yen faction, he got less money from the party for his campaign. Secondly, after the 2001 election, local villagers were dissatisfied with Poonsawat because he did not have good "achievements" (*phon ngan*) (interview, Ubon Ratchathani Election Commission official, 24 January 2007). *Phon ngan* means a variety of things, especially providing service to villagers, ranging from road building and maintenance and other infrastructure improvements, to contributions to festival and funeral expenses (Callahan and McCargo, 1996: 338). *Phon ngan* was crucial to the success of politicians in Isan. As Callahan and McCargo (1996: 338) have pointed out, *phon ngan* was as important as money; candidates could not win their seats only by spending money. To win elections, they had to have good *phon ngan* as well. Hence, lack of *phon ngan* undermined Poonsawat's position significantly. Thirdly, the way Thaksin handled the ongoing Pak Moon Dam also had a negative impact on Poonsawat (for information on the Pak Moon conflict, see Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, 2003: 226-52). Before the 2001 general election Thaksin promised NGOs and the AOP, who organised villagers in the constituency against the construction of the dam, a sympathetic government response to their demands if TRT won. However, after the election Thaksin did not keep his promise. He approved the suppression of the AOP and sided with the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand that operated the dam (Pasuk and Baker, 2004: 82, 146). Bitterly disappointed with Thaksin, AOP members in the constituency voted for Isara. Fourthly, emotion also played an important part in Isara's victory. During the time of the election, one of Isara's sons died. In sympathy, local people decided to support him in the election. Fifthly, in the sub-district administrative organisation election, a canvasser of Isara, who competed in the election, was red-carded. Locally, it was generally believed that Isara's canvasser was probably innocent and TRT was behind the red-carding. Such belief led to sympathy with Isara among villagers. This combination of five factors assisted Isara in winning the election (interview, Ubon Ratchathani election commission official, 24 January 2007).

Another interesting example was the 2005 elections in Roi-et. In constituency 1, TRT candidate Sanit Wongsaktanapong was defeated by the CTP's Anurak Jureemat. Sanit and Anurak were long-time rivals. Sanit lost to Anurak in the four previous attempts before he eventually was able to defeat him in 2001. In the 1996 general election, Sanit led the election but after a temporary electrical power failure

he was beaten by a small margin by Anurak. It was widely believed that the power blackout was not an accident. Voters felt sorry for Sanit, who tried many times but failed in previous elections. They thought he deserved to win the election this time. Sanit took this public sentiment into his election campaign in 2001. He told local people that he was cheated last time by his opponent and asked for justice by begging them to give him a chance to become their MP. This tactic and the good *phon ngan* he provided for locals in the constituency helped Sanit to win the election.

Considering the popularity of TRT and the declining position of CTP, Anurak seemed to have had little chance to win his seat back in 2005. However, he managed to beat Sanit. The competition between Sanit and Anurak was not decided by access to money alone because both were level on this matter. Anurak tried to win his seat back by rectifying his past mistakes. After the 1996 general election, Anurak spent most of his time in Bangkok and rarely visited his constituency. Sanit devoted most of his time to building his support base among villagers. He replaced Anurak as the main “service provider” for voters in the constituency. But after the 2001 general election, the opposite was true. While Anurak worked hard in the area, Sanit failed to keep up (interview, Roi-et election poll station official, 11 January 2007). As a result, in 2005, although TRT’s policies were very popular, they were unable to help Sanit to win again, demonstrating that there was a desire amongst voters for their MPs to perform (Walker, 2008).

In the 2005 election some TRT MPs had to fight hard to retain their seats because of poor relations with local villagers. For example, in Mahasarakham’s constituency 6, a veteran MP and new TRT member, Krit Kongpet, almost lost his seat because voters in the constituency were dissatisfied with his unresponsiveness to local needs. They wanted to try a new MP. However, Krit was saved by Thaksin who toured the area at that time. Satisfied with Thaksin, who promised to help them if they voted for Krit, villagers decided to support Krit again (interviews, Kantarawichai villagers, 10 January 2007).

The above cases indicate that a number of factors affected election results; important among them was a perception about achievement (*phon ngan*). These cases add some weight to the view that Isan villagers ranked *phon ngan* above party policies. If a party had good policies but a candidate had poor *phon ngan*, it was possible for that candidate to lose in an election. TRT candidates, who had money and the popular policies on their sides, still lost their seats when local electors considered that they did not have good *phon ngan*. However, this does not mean that an election result is decided only by *phon ngan* alone. To be successful, candidates need the right combination of money power, *phon ngan*, popular policies and other lesser important elements. But one thing is certain, politicians had to regularly maintain their service to local people, if they failed to do so their chances of winning were greatly reduced. The point that needs to be emphasised is that Isan villagers are not docile voters who can be controlled easily by politicians through the power of money; they also had their own criteria for electing their representatives.

## **Conclusion**

At the time when TRT’s populist policies reached their height, Sanoh Thienthong told TRT members who belonged to his faction that the party could not win with

populist policies alone. He stated: “The notion that the party can ‘sell’ well with the current populist trend could be just wishful thinking. Individuals and canvassers still count when it comes to what can influence the decisions of the voters” (cited in McCargo and Ukrist, 2005: 103).

Applying Sanoh’s idea to TRT’s success in Isan, we find that it is a one-sided view that fails to grasp the complexity of the party’s success. In fact, it underestimates the impact of the populist policies on Isan voters. However, Sanoh was right when he pointed to the continuing importance of individuals and canvassers.

As we have seen, apart from the popularity of its policies, TRT’s success in Isan in the 2001 general election was based on the recruitment of three groups of candidates – (i) former MPs; (ii) local politicians; and (iii) canvassers and relatives of former MPs – into the party. Although the second and third groups were new to parliament, their basic characteristics did not differ from the first group; most of them were members of former MPs’ personal election networks. In the 2005 election TRT strengthened its power by the absorption of other parties. Therefore, TRT relied on candidates from traditional political networks to win elections. In addition, TRT recruited those candidates by paying them a huge “transfer fee.” This is an old way of doing politics. If we look back at the 1995 and 1996 general elections, we will find that the successes of CTP in 1995 and NAP in 1996 were based on similar money politics methods (*Matichon Sutsapda [Matichon Weekly]*, 17 July 2000).

The 2005 general election in Isan also shed some light on the influence of TRT’s policies on voters’ decision making. Although the popularity of TRT’s policies among Isan voters is undeniable, we have to be careful not to exaggerate the extent of their influence on voters. There were a number of cases in which former TRT MPs who won in 2001, lost in 2005. Those former TRT MPs lost their seats because they had not performed adequately in their constituencies; they had poor *phon ngan*. The cases suggest that the achievements of individuals were important to Isan voters. If a party had good policies but a candidate had poor *phon ngan*, it is possible that he or she would lose in an election.

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