

The Rural Constitution and the Everyday Politics of Elections in Northern Thailand

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ABSTRACT *The Thai coup of 19 September 2006 derived ideological legitimacy from the view that the Thaksin government's electoral mandate was illegitimate because it had been "bought" from an unsophisticated and easily manipulated electorate. There is nothing new about this argument, nor its use in justifying military interference. Political commentators have asserted regularly that the Thai populace lacks the basic characteristics essential for a modern democratic citizenry. Accounts of the deficiencies of rural voters often focus on their parochialism, their lack of political sophistication, the vulnerability to vote buying and the influence of electoral canvassers (hua khanaen). This article challenges this negative portrayal of rural electoral culture. Drawing on ethnographic field work in northern Thailand, it is argued that the everyday politics of elections is informed by a range of different electoral values that shape judgements about legitimate, and illegitimate, political power in electoral contexts. These local values can be usefully thought of as comprising a "rural constitution."*

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I suspect many Thais still lack a proper understanding of democracy. The people have to understand their rights and their duties. Some have yet to learn about discipline. I think it is important to educate the people about true democratic rule. It is a challenge to enable all 60 million Thais to gain an in-depth understanding of democracy and all its rights, duties and rules. Democracy will thrive once the people learn its true meaning (*Coup leader, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, cited in the *The Nation*, 26 October 2006*).

The Thai *coup* of 19 September 2006 derived ideological legitimacy from the view that the Thaksin Shinawatra government's electoral mandate was illegitimate because it had been "bought" from an unsophisticated and easily manipulated electorate. This was not the only rationale, but the denial of electoral legitimacy was fundamental in

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justifying the removal of a government that had been elected three times. And, with a further election scheduled for late 2006, those seeking to defend the *coup* relied heavily on the argument that the electorate was in no position to make a reasonable judgement about the Thaksin government's well-publicised faults. Faced with the likelihood that Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party would win yet another election, the *coup*-makers argued that the army's intervention was the only way to resolve the political standoff (see Hewison, 2008, this issue). The fact that the electorate continued to support Thaksin was, in the eyes of many of his opponents, clear evidence of voter irrationality and of the ongoing failure of the electoral process.

There is nothing new about this argument, nor its use in justifying military interference. Political commentators have regularly asserted that the Thai populace, and especially the rural populace, lacks the basic characteristics essential for a modern democratic citizenry (Connors, 2003). Accounts of the deficiencies of the voting population often focus on three key problems.¹ First, uneducated rural voters are parochial and have little interest in policy issues. Lacking a well-developed sense of national interest they vote for candidates who can deliver immediate benefits. Secondly, given their poverty and lack of sophistication they are readily swayed by the power of money. Vote buying is said to be endemic. Cash distributed by candidates, through networks of local canvassers, plays a key role in securing voter loyalty. And, thirdly, rural electoral mobilisation is achieved via hierarchical ties of patronage whereby local influential figures can deliver blocks of rural votes to their political masters. An array of studies documenting the political rise of provincial businessmen-cum-godfathers or *chao pho* (McVey, 2000) has added considerable strength to this patron-client model of rural political behaviour. Kasian's (2006: 14-15) account of Thailand's "electocracy" captures the key elements of this enduring view of the rural electorate:

At the base of the electocracy lay the 40 million voters, the majority of whom were poor, ill-educated and rural-based. With most of their constitutional rights routinely trampled by arrogant officials, local mafia bosses and politicians, they had to take advantage of the one that remained: to sell their votes to their local political patrons for money, jobs, protection or informal welfare benefits. Their interests long ignored by urban policy-makers, their local resources depleted by both state and private sectors, these voters perforce became willing accomplices of the electocrats in the systematic corruption of electoral "democracy."

There is little the rural electorate can do to shake off this persistent image. It is often alleged that electoral reforms and increased regulation of local electoral processes have had little impact on the pattern of financially lubricated electoral patronage. The only solution, we are consistently told, is ongoing political education, to provide rural voters "with a proper understanding of the object of elections and their mechanisms, as well as to arouse political awareness" (Suchit, 1996: 200). In the post-*coup* environment this call for education has been taken up with a passion by leading anti-Thaksin campaigner, Sondhi Limthongkul, who envisages a vanguard of politically aware urbanites gradually moving out into the countryside to spread their message of disinterested democratic rationality to the parochial and money-focused rural masses (see the discussion in Walker, 2006).

A review of the literature on rural political behaviour in Thailand, and elsewhere in the region, suggests two main alternatives to this negative perspective on rural political culture. One perspective emphasises rural people's non-electoral political mobilisation, in co-operation with an array of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to resist the incursions of both state regulation and market commercialisation. There is a rich body of research and activist commentary that documents local non-electoral struggles against infrastructure development, heavy-handed conservation policies and the commoditisation of local resources (see, for example, Hirsch, 1997; Missingham, 2003). Rural people's involvement in protest movements and advocacy coalitions, their commitment to alternative forms of resource management, and their vigorous promotion of local knowledge are regularly cited as evidence of a dynamic rural "civil society" standing in opposition to the dominant development directions set by the Thai state.

But does this material provide a sound basis for a reappraisal of local political culture? I do not think so. My perspective is influenced partly by the specifics of my research site where, by and large, "grassroots" advocacy organisations have a very low profile. But there are more fundamental issues involved. Participation in these types of organisations is, in overall demographic terms, very modest and their influence outside specific sites of high-profile resource conflict is limited. More importantly, many of the rural advocacy campaigns waged by civil society organisations are based on what I have called a "limited legitimacy" that relies on an imagery of local cultural identity, self-sufficient agriculture and ecologically friendly lifestyles (Walker, 2001; 2004). This is an empowerment framework that finds it difficult to incorporate widespread electoral support for Thaksin government policies which promoted external cash input into local economic development and the conversion of local resources into capital assets (see Pasuk and Baker, 2008, this issue). Faced with this "rural betrayal" of communitarian values, civil society and NGO advocates tend to resort to the convenient imagery of a rural populace seduced by money politics (Walker, 2007).

A second alternative approach to rural political behaviour focuses on "everyday politics." This approach has received considerably less attention in the Thai context.² It draws on the work of Scott (1985), who examined the informal, day-to-day and often surreptitious ways in which subordinate peoples express their dissatisfaction with prevailing structures of power and systems of resource distribution. Kerkvliet's (2002) important study from the Philippines focuses on the politics of daily life to counter the prevailing view that political behaviour is to be understood in terms of the operation of hierarchically organised "factions" that mobilise voters to serve the electoral purposes of the elite. In an attempt to broaden perspectives on what is regarded as "political" behaviour, Kerkvliet (2002; 2005) drew attention to the forms of "everyday politics" that tend to fall beneath the radar of much conventional political analysis. This broader view of politics embraces the "debates, conflicts, decisions, and cooperation among individuals, groups, and organisations regarding the control, allocation, and use of resources and the values and ideas underlying those activities" (Kerkvliet, 2002: 11). These debates and values are explored via the informal and everyday politics of complaint, theft, gossip, avoidance, sabotage, denunciation and, at times, outright protest. A key dimension of this analysis is a concern with the alternative sets of values that inform day-to-day political action.

Building on Scott's (1976) analysis of "moral economy," Kerkvliet (2002: Ch. 8) identified a range of values relating to assistance, basic needs, security and dignity that "interact" and "tussle" with the values that underpin capitalist property and market relations.

This is an approach that I find promising in seeking to understand rural political culture in Thailand. Its strength lies in its focus on the localised day-to-day debates about resource allocation rather than the more exceptional cases of mobilisation under the banner of civil society organisations. It also directly challenges the view that rural politics can be understood in terms of an uninformed and gormless peasantry mobilised to serve the political interests of elite patrons.³ However, in exploring "everyday politics" in northern Thailand, I propose an important modification to Kerkvliet's approach. I am rather less inclined than Kerkvliet (1995: 418; 2002: 242-5) to draw a distinction between "everyday politics" and the formal politics of electoral contests. The regularity of elections and the density of participation in electoral matters render the distinction untenable. In the northern Thai village where I have been working there were eight local and national elections between early 2004 and the end of 2006.⁴ Voting turnout is usually high (around 80%) and, more importantly, there are a considerable number of people in the village (by my count at least 20) who are active in this "formal" political arena. Given this temporal and social density of political participation, discussions about "elections", "candidates," "policies" and "campaigns" are a regular feature of day-to-day life. Electoral contests are embedded in local social relationships, and values that relate to the day-to-day politics of the village readily spill over into the electoral arena.

The local values that inform the everyday politics of elections can be usefully thought of as a "rural constitution." In most general terms, constitutions regulate the exercise of government: they define government structure, attribute roles and distribute power. As a result they authorise the legitimate use of government power and constrain its illegitimate manifestations, often providing a range of protections for the governed population. While most attention focuses on the formal constitution, political advocates and constitutional scholars recognise that written charters are situated within a broader field of tradition, morality and cultural orientation. This is what historian Nidhi Eosewong (2003) has referred to as the "cultural constitution" and what I, in the context of northern Thailand, am referring to as the "rural constitution." This un-codified set of political values regulates, constrains and legitimates the exercise of political power. It sets out the desired type of political representative, proposes ideal types of political behaviour and proscribes various forms of abuse of public office. This constitutional role is evident both in local government elections and in electoral assessments of the national government.

The ethnographic focus of this article is the village of Baan Tiam, which is located about one hour's easy drive from the northern city of Chiangmai. It is an ethnically northern Thai (*khon muang*) village located in a narrow intermontane valley a few kilometres to the west of the district centre of Pad Siew. The village is made up of about 100 households engaged in rice cultivation in the wet season, cash cropping in the dry season and an array of off-farm labouring activities. About half of the households derive their primary income from outside the agricultural sector and a large number of "farming" households have family members working elsewhere. This is a diversified rural economy.

Local Electoral Culture: Localism, Support and Administration

Localism

A number of commentaries of Thai political culture have highlighted the emergence of “localism,” a political orientation that places a strong (and often primary) emphasis on the local community as a bulwark against the intrusions of the modern state (Hewison, 2002; Pasuk, 1999). Local community institutions and capabilities are promoted as alternatives to the standardising bureaucratic structures of the modern state. In some respects this is similar to the version of localism that I am describing here. There is a similar emphasis on the moral desirability of local specificity and local attachments. But there is also an important difference. The localism of Baan Tiam is fundamentally outward orientated. It does not seek to resist the state but to draw it into a socially and culturally legible frame of meaning. What is important in Baan Tiam’s localism is that relations with the state are mediated by appropriately embedded local actors.

One of the most commonly expressed aspects of Baan Tiam’s rural constitution is the view that it is better to elect a local than a non-local. This is usually expressed as a preference for candidates from *baan haw*. Literally *baan haw* can be translated as “our village” but *baan* is a delightfully malleable word and its spatial referent of belonging can adjust readily to the different scales of electoral competition. In local government elections localism provides an explicit framework for political discussion and debate.⁵ Candidates are assessed readily in terms of the strength of their local linkages, which are highly legible and amenable to commentary within the electorate. The importance of localism is enhanced by the fact that the large increase in resource allocations to local government (as a result of decentralisation) has heightened budgetary competition between villages. As one villager told me, seeing the council fall under the control of another village would be like “waiting for an air drop of food and then watching the parachute float down on the other side of the hill.”

In fact, Baan Tiam has been a successful contender in these local resource contests. The previous sub-district head was a Baan Tiam resident and he went on to become the district’s provincial assemblyman. Most of his supporters in Baan Tiam expressed their support in terms of their desire to “help” someone from the same village. As Grandmother Mon said just before the provincial assembly election held in early 2004: “I’m helping one of us, whatever happens he’s one of us.” The incumbent candidate for municipal mayor in the election of 2006 was also a resident of Baan Tiam and derived considerable support from the view that it was only logical to vote for a fellow villager. He was also able to expand the range of his localist support as a result of close kinship connections with at least two other villages in the municipality. By contrast other mayoral candidates were weakened by perceptions that they were insufficiently locally embedded. This clearly applied to one candidate who was a former government official who had been posted to the area for only three years. But even long-term residents could be judged as non-local. One mayoral candidate, Dr Tanet, had distributed aprons advertising one of his businesses to vendors in the market. When I asked one of the small restaurant owners if her apron signalled support for Tanet she responded: “He came and gave them out so we decided to wear them. He is standing for election to be mayor. But I

don't know if he will get elected. He is not a local. He has lived here for 20 years. Most people know him. But he is from somewhere else."

Some of the subtleties and shifting coordinates of localism were demonstrated by the Senate election of 2006. Of all the elections discussed this was the least local and posed particular challenges for a localist approach to electoral decisions. There were 39 candidates for the five provincial seats and only a small number of them had tenuous ties to the local area. A typical comment in the lead up to the poll was that there "wasn't even one person standing from Pad Siew district, only people from other places." Without the orientation of local affiliation many voters indicated that they had difficulty in making a choice and a good number spent a long time reading the board outside the polling booth where the candidate's profiles were displayed. Some village officials predicted a large number of spoilt or frivolous votes, and, possibly, a low voter turnout. In fact, the vote went relatively smoothly – though the informal vote was somewhat higher than usual – but their comments did reflect some anxiety about the socially and spatially disconnected nature of the candidates.

Voters are flexible and pragmatic and sentiments of local belonging are highly malleable. Overall, the Senate results from Baan Tiam accorded with a broadly defined localist logic.⁶ Two candidates each received 38 of the votes cast in the village. One of these was predicted to do well because he was well known, as the younger brother of a former member of parliament for the province (he was also said to be "Thaksin's man"). The other was a former resident of the district and a provincial assemblyman. As the only candidate who had lived in Pad Siew district he could have been expected to poll better, but pre-election sentiment was that his connections with the district had been limited in recent years and his work as an assemblyman had produced no real local benefits. The next most strongly supported candidate (36 votes) was a key supporter of a nearby temple. Her recent history of merit making in the area was highly regarded, as was her close connection with a senior opposition party figure. Other candidates receiving local support were also locally situated in various ways: one had local business connections through his money-lending business ("good connections, lots of money, but perhaps not trustworthy"); another hosted a popular radio show ("lots of people here know him so they will want to help him"); and another with a "famous" surname had good connections among the district's cock fighting fraternity (and he had supported the construction of a cock fighting facility in a neighbouring district). Interestingly, Thaksin's sister-in-law, who carried the famous Shinawatra surname but who had no significant local connections, received only three of Baan Tiam's votes.

One of the underlying motivations for this kind of localism is a desire for political legibility. It is not just the state that seeks to create simplified and legible structures of governance (Scott, 1998). Electors themselves seek to locate candidates in a simplified framework of inside (*baan haw*) versus outside. This is a morally charged framework in which the spatially flexible concept of *baan haw* is associated with approachability, social familiarity, linguistic ease and commitment to local institutions. But localism does not provide a simple template for political decisions. Partly this is because it operates in ambiguous ways and there are competing claims to varying degrees of localness. Within Baan Tiam there is real concern that the large number of politically engaged people will split the local vote and reduce the political influence of the village in municipal affairs. Quite simply, there are too many

“locals” to choose from. Another key factor mitigating the purchase of localist values is that local legibility also often involves an intimate awareness of the human frailty of electoral contenders. The symbolic force of the simplified *baan haw* categorisation can be attenuated when it is set alongside the reality of interpersonal dispute, jealousy, resentment and gossip. The local reality of interpersonal conflict opens up fissures that can provide a basis for non-localist forms of political orientation. In brief, localism provides one flexible framework for political decision making, but local social life is simply too complex for it to be used as a one-dimensional template for political action.

Support

Many accounts of localism in Thailand emphasise local resources and locally orientated livelihoods as an antidote to the disruptions caused by the external economy. Such thinking gained significant momentum in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis and the king’s subsequent promotion of the “sufficiency economy.” This version of “localism” does not necessarily advocate disengagement from external economic systems but it does involve “looking inwards for a basis to resist the destructive forces of globalisation” (Pasuk, 1999: 6). Again, the form of localism that I am describing has a rather different emphasis. In Baan Tiam, locally embedded political representatives are not valued because they embody local resources or capabilities but because they are more likely to direct externally derived resources to locally valued initiatives. They are culturally and socially familiar figures with whom villagers feel relatively confident to negotiate for material benefits. Securing access to external resources is a key element of Baan Tiam’s outward-orientated localism.

In Baan Tiam’s rural constitution there is a strong expectation that political representatives will support their constituency financially. The issue of financial support is clouded in much discussion by the spectre of vote buying. I have no doubt that political candidates make direct cash payments to voters in Baan Tiam – even I was a beneficiary of Thaksin’s munificence (100 baht) when I attended a TRT party meeting. But it is important to place direct cash handouts to electors in the broader context of the array of material assistance that is expected of political representatives and other well-resourced people seeking to demonstrate their social standing and their embeddedness in local circuits of exchange. These culturally valued strategies of material assistance include: personal loans; donations to temples; support for household rituals; payment of (appropriately inflated) expenses for attendance at meetings; payment of children’s education expenses; provision of low cost transport services; and support for budgetary shortfalls in local development projects. Here are three brief examples.

- Fon obtained a personal loan from the TRT party candidate in the national election when she experienced financial difficulties as a result of crop failure. Local rumour was that this was instrumental in her becoming a canvasser for TRT. Later, she received a mobile phone. In the lead up to the 2005 national election Fon actively canvassed for TRT, and also sought funds from the opposition Mahachon party candidate to contribute funds to a village project she was attempting to initiate.

- Khruawan was a candidate in the 2006 Senate election. For some time she had been building up connections in Pad Siew district by patronising highly regarded temples and supporting religious construction projects. In November 2005 I attended a major temple festival in a village about ten kilometres from Baan Tiam. Khruawan was the major sponsor of the festival but her donation was actually presented to the temple by the district's provincial assemblyman. I was told that Khruawan was making donations in every district of the province.
- Prior to Baan Tiam's headman election in 2004 a group of women were invited to represent the village at a cultural festival in a neighbouring sub-district. Transport was provided by one of the candidates, Jakkrit, who owned one of the few pickup trucks in the village. He also provided modest support to cover the women's expenses for the day, but they considered this inadequate. He was accused of being stingy and the other main candidate was approached for a contribution. He refused, saying this could have been regarded as vote buying.

These various forms of assistance are assessed locally in terms of a range of interlinked political values that address issues of personal status, capability and morality. There is a widespread view that those with an established financial position are in the best position to hold political office. In part this is due to the obvious personal financial demands made on local and national politicians. Being a politician involves the building of charisma and regular demonstrations "that they have not forgotten the villagers." This is an expensive process, requiring regular investment in the form of donations, loans and attendance at many social events. This preference for politicians with established financial positions is also informed by the common view that they are less likely to corrupt public monies than those who are less affluent. One villager, clearly rating affluence above local connections, spoke enthusiastically about the credentials of one of the mayoral candidates:

He is a good and fair man. I don't think he would cheat with money because he already gets paid a lot, about 40,000 [baht per month]. He is not likely to want to cheat more. Some people say that he is an outsider, but this is not important because a person from outside doesn't have an opportunity to favour anyone. And he is well-educated.

Another political value relating to the issue of support is that the best political representatives are those who have made a sacrifice for the broader community. In local discourse a strong distinction is made regularly between the private and public domains. "Sacrifice" typically involves the diversion of some resources (labour, time and cash) from the private to the public sphere. There are many types of such sacrifice that are valued locally: participating in committees; assisting with the implementation of development projects; making representations on behalf of less capable villagers; and active involvement in village festivals. Provision of financial assistance is a highly visible way of demonstrating personal sacrifice, especially in the busy pre-election environment when time constraints limit other forms of participation. But there is a caveat. An appropriate demonstration of sacrifice requires that there is a perception that the funds being used are private rather than public funds. Of course, there are numerous ways in which candidates will attempt to blur this distinction

(especially incumbents who already have access to various budgetary allocations) but a widespread perception that public funds are being used to create an impression of personal sacrifice is likely to generate some electoral backlash.

A commitment to local development is also a key element in the rural constitution's positive evaluation of support. A standard mode of justifying or challenging a candidate's credentials is the extent to which he has, or will, bring development to the local area. The importance of this value is reflected in the ubiquity of terms such as *phattana* (development), *charoen* (prosperity), and *kaaw na* (moving forward) in local campaign material. The incumbent candidate for mayor emphasised his development achievements in his campaign songs that he broadcast before the March 2006 municipal election:

The municipality has moved forward. The roads are good, the work is finished. We have lights on both sides of the road. We have water to drink and water to use. The water supply system has provided water to houses near and far. We will continue to expand it. Rich and poor are equal. Mark my words, the work we have done is not insignificant. We will continue to move forward and work together so everyone can be happy and secure.

The discursive force of "development" in electoral culture is complex. On the one hand it fits readily with the image of the generous and good-hearted patron who makes personal sacrifice for the benefit of the broader community. Financial donation prior to the election is a demonstration of the candidate's willingness and capability to direct development resources to constituents. Personal sacrifice and community development are linked symbolically. But, at the same time, the common emphasis on progress and development can move local discussion of support into a somewhat different domain of social meaning. In broad terms a distinction is emerging between forms of benevolent assistance that are expressed in personalised patron-client terms and forms of development assistance that are linked to more socially inclusive modernist discourses of progress, administration and broad-based access. Whereas personal generosity is valued highly in relation to the former, the latter places primary emphasis on the ability to mobilise government resources effectively and to direct them to "projects" in the local area.

Some of the dimensions of the local emphasis on both benevolent support and community development can be explored in relation to the election for mayor. The incumbent, Somsak, was a resident of Baan Tiam, from a family with substantial kin connections within the village and a high economic and cultural profile. His younger sister was elected head of the village women's group a few months before the municipal election and his key running partner was the brother of the village headman.⁷ But this substantial social capital did not translate automatically into electoral support. Overall there was recognition that Somsak had contributed to local infrastructure development, even if this had been slower than some villagers had hoped. This was most visible in the conversion of numerous rutted dirt lanes into smooth concrete strips, but there were numerous other small construction projects that had received municipal allocations. But there were some complaints that one of the key beneficiaries of this development was his son-in-law, who had received many of the construction contracts. Somsak was also criticised for not mobilising

assistance quickly enough when the village experienced flash flooding. And, perhaps most damaging, was the view that he did not use enough of his reportedly substantial salary to support local projects. For one villager his failings were highlighted when he responded to a request for budgetary support for one of the village's irrigation groups by asking them to submit a formal written proposal to the local government planning committee. In brief, while Mayor Somsak may have been a reasonably good, if somewhat plodding, developer he lacked some of the key characteristics of the quick-acting benevolent patron.

Somsak's main electoral rival, Dr Tanet, provides an interesting contrast. He was from outside the district (though he had lived there on and off for 20 years), and his social distance from the population was signalled by the ubiquitous use of his professional occupational title. But he had gained a reputation as a locally influential "Mr Fixit," personally supporting a number of local projects, enterprises and welfare activities. For example, when he was told about the irrigation group's request he immediately "pulled money out of his own pocket" and handed it to Chusak, the irrigation group's deputy head. "Compare this to Mayor Somsak," Chusak said, "when he does help us he uses the government's money, not his own, and it comes too late." Dr Tanet's act of patronage and personal sacrifice was sufficiently impressive for Chusak to sign up as one of his local canvassers. Dr Tanet also distributed satellite dishes to key supporters (and was somewhat bemused to receive one of the dishes back after the election requesting repairs under warranty). And he expressed interest in providing support for Baan Tiam's community shop, cleverly exploiting the perception that Mayor Somsak was half-hearted in his support for this particular project given that two of his close relatives were village shopkeepers who were concerned about competition from the community shop. Overall, Dr Tanet's reputation was of a well-connected and wealthy man who could quickly mobilise funds to address local needs and desires.

But the demonstration of an ability and willingness to provide financial support is not without electoral risks. Dr Tanet's generous displays of financial assistance generated some feeling that his campaigning was too "strong" and insufficiently linked to broader development goals. A number of voters expressed the view that he would win the election with money and suggested that there were likely to be "dirty stories" in relation to his campaign. One resident of Baan Tiam suggested that someone who had invested so much in cultivating local support would want it back, plus profit, if he won. There were also allegations about vote buying directed particularly at Dr Tanet's vigorous campaigning in a large upland minority village located near Baan Tiam. But, possibly most damaging, was that his demonstrations of local support were undermined by his history of acquiring land and houses through foreclosure on unpaid debts. As one woman advised her mother, "don't vote for that shit, he has grabbed land all over the place." This was combined with a feeling that he was seeking election so that he would be in a position to upgrade the land titles on many of his holdings in the area. In other words, for some voters, Dr Tanet's demonstrations of personal sacrifice and benevolence were simply not credible, given what was regarded as an established personal history of self-interest and private benefit. As such, his financial support came to be interpreted by some as an attempt to exercise "influence" (*itthiphon*), which is widely regarded as a negative dimension of power (see Tamada, 1991).⁸

Administration

The concern about the inappropriate use of financial influence points to another key aspect of the rural constitution that, to some extent, challenges a political emphasis on the localist provision of support. This alternative perspective places a primary emphasis on good administration and takes on self-consciously modernist connotations. Local advocates of this position often present themselves as a “new generation” and not infrequently make explicit reference to the general principles of participatory democracy and the need to move beyond old-fashioned systems of patronage and local “dictatorship.”

This perspective places considerable emphasis on educational qualifications. This is a clear challenge to localist values. Most locally embedded politicians are of a generation when few rural people progressed beyond the middle years of primary school. For some voters this is seen as a limitation in terms of administrative and legal competence. This issue gained some currency in relation to the mayoral election, with some arguing that Mayor Somsak’s limited education (fourth grade) meant that he was incapable of effectively reining-in officials within his administration, most of whom held bachelor degrees. Other better-educated candidates, who also had more formal experience in public administration, were seen as more able to “reduce the role” of non-elected officials. There was particular concern about Mayor Somsak’s ability to manage one particular official – a gun-toting local strongman who was widely rumoured to have enriched himself from manipulation of construction contracts. Of course, this view did not go unchallenged, and Mayor Somsak responded by drawing on localist sentiments about the remoteness and impracticality of knowledge acquired through formal education:

Dr Tanet may have university degrees but that doesn’t mean that he can manage the work. Just sitting at a desk in an air-conditioned office giving out orders is one thing, but he can’t get out and walk in the paddy fields. How will he help the villagers? There are lots of people who think like this. That’s why they will vote for me.

Apart from the desirability of educational qualifications there are a number of other elements in the modernist emphasis on strong administration. These include an ability to speak well at meetings, to make quick and effective decisions, to manage budgets effectively, and to represent the locality effectively in meetings with higher-level bureaucrats and politicians. But, perhaps most important of all, is that administration and specifically the implementation of “projects” is transparent. Mayor Somsak’s campaign slogan – “aiming for development, honest, transparent, accountable” – tapped into one of the most common preoccupations of local political discourse. This discussion often revolves around the implementation of the numerous projects that are a key preoccupation of Baan Tiam’s everyday politics.⁹ Projects are stereotypically justified in terms of their collective management and generalised benefit. But they usually bring together quite specific coalitions of interests and thus become the focus for ongoing conflict about the allocation of resources and the distribution of benefits. Most projects are subject to withering criticism and gossip – including regular allegations of financial mismanagement and

misappropriation – by those who support other elements of collective activity. It is in this context that the language of transparency becomes crucial to defend one's own initiatives and to cast aspersions on the supporters of other projects.

For some, this emphasis on transparent administration starts to displace the electoral value of development. In this alternative framing, rapid development can be portrayed as rushed and unaccountable expenditure, often on projects of dubious economic value. Development can also be framed as a form of electoral manipulation. High levels of spending on local projects, especially in the months leading up to an election, can be regarded as a blatant attempt to secure votes. Supporters of Dr Tanet, were at pains to point out that Mayor Somsak had spent over eleven million baht in the final months of his tenure, building on their critique that he was a less than competent administrator for whom development amounted simply to approving projects and pouring concrete.

And, of course, the discourse of transparent administration links to explicit concerns about corruption. One of the most damaging aspects of corruption is that it can undermine the electorally important image of personal sacrifice for the common good. But this is a subtle moral economy. Sacrifice in the form of diversion of resources from the private to the collective domain is a highly valued electoral asset. But, at the same time, it is broadly accepted that many of those who are active in the collective sphere will also gain some private benefit for themselves or for their family, kin and close friends. As such, it is regarded as quite normal that political representatives will derive some private benefit from public office. The key is to maintain this benefit at a level that is appropriate. What is appropriate is difficult to judge, and it is in this grey area of exchange between collective and private benefit that conflict often erupts and allegations of corruption are made. These allegations are likely to be electorally potent if there is a perception that collective resources are used for private benefit in a way that directly disadvantages others. For example, in Baan Tiam an early contender in the village headman election was ruled out on the basis of allegations that he had used his position on various village committees to divert communal funds to support his private money lending business. The fact that communal funds were being used to extract punitive rates of interest from fellow villagers was, for many residents, a blatant breach of the moral economy of exchange between the collective and private spheres. It was corrupt.

Everyday Political Values and the Thaksin Government

In the 2001 national election, which bought Thaksin to power, the TRT candidate in Baan Tiam's electorate won with 48% of the votes cast. In the 2005 election his vote climbed to 66%. However, in the controversial 2006 election, without any opposing candidate, his vote was halved and over half the electorate either did not vote, voted informally or registered a "no vote."¹⁰ In other words, during the period of Thaksin's tenure there was considerable variation in the level of his electoral support. Local elections also cast doubt on the common image of TRT electoral hegemony. In the provincial assembly election of 2004, the incumbent candidate, who had strong TRT backing, was defeated soundly. And, in the vigorously contested mayoral election, the TRT candidate, Dr Tanet, fell short by the slimmest of margins, despite his well-resourced and high-profile campaign. So, rather than

assuming, as Kasian (2006: 15) does, “rock solid” rural electoral support for Thaksin and his party, readily mobilised via financially lubricated networks of patronage, it is more useful to examine how the Thaksin government was evaluated in terms of the rural constitution’s local political values.

Localism: “The Prime Minister is from Chiangmai”

In the national election of 2005 localism played an interesting but politically ambiguous role. Thaksin is, of course, from Chiangmai and is, in the eyes of many voters in the region, one of *baan haw*. One of the popular TRT slogans, regularly printed in distinctive northern Thai idiom, reflected this sentiment: “The people of Chiangmai are proud. The Prime Minister is from Chiangmai. Thai Rak Thai is the only party.” Part of the local political identity of Pad Siew district was that it had become part of the TRT heartland and there was a common extension of the *baan haw* category to include Thaksin’s TRT party. This commonly expressed sentiment was nicely summarised by a local party canvasser:

Thaksin’s policies develop Chiangmai. And we are Chiangmai people. So why wouldn’t we vote for him? Northerners have to help northerners and then Thai Rak Thai will win. We have to help Thaksin because the southerners will vote Democrat, they won’t vote for a northerner. If Thai Rak Thai win then the budgets will come here. Otherwise they will be cancelled.

The common contrast with the Democrat party-dominated south is morally charged, with the southern region increasingly seen as an undesirable place characterised by religious cleavage, ongoing violence and, in the lead up to the 2005 election, the inauspicious misfortune of the tsunami. At a speech in the district centre the TRT candidate made much of the contrast between the “good hearted” people of Chiangmai and the Democrat supporters of the south. In response to a question about agricultural extension he enthusiastically promoted the virtues of rubber, claiming that Thaksin had lifted the Democrat government-imposed southern monopoly on the cultivation of rubber, providing a new source of lucrative income for farmers in the north and the north-east. Initial tests, he suggested, had shown that northern farmers could produce even higher quality rubber than their southern counterparts.

So, localist sentiment certainly acted in TRT’s favour and it was actively cultivated during the campaign. But this was not without complexities when we come to consider the candidates themselves. The TRT candidate (the incumbent, first elected in 2001) may well have been a Chiangmai man, but this was not a key point of local discussion. What was more relevant was that his long career in public administration, combined with a somewhat bookish, formal and aloof style, clearly marked him in non-local terms. Regular comments were made that he had a low profile in the district and that he did not communicate easily with farmers. By contrast, his opponent (who had previously served as a member of parliament) was well known and locally popular. He came from a neighbouring district (where many in Baan Tiam had relatives) and was renowned for his informal, friendly and avuncular style. At the election rally he held in Pad Siew he impressed the large crowd with his

entertaining command of informal northern Thai. He was even able to address some comments to the Karen present in their own language, a smart move in a region where linguistic word play is an exceptionally popular pastime. He explicitly played up his localist credentials, emphasising that the election was about choosing a local representative rather than choosing a party (the TRT campaign message was exactly the opposite). The pre-election sentiment was that the localist credentials of the opposition candidate may well result in his victory and, while he lost heavily in the overall count, I have no doubt that he attracted substantial support in Baan Tiam where some of the most influential opinion leaders (including the headman) were keen supporters.

Support: "Good in Some Respects"

TRT had a rather mixed record in terms of the rural constitution's valuing of financial support. There was considerable grumbling about the limited local involvement of the TRT candidate, and there were also complaints about the limited payments received for attendance at TRT meetings. Within Baan Tiam, the local party canvassers were accused of being half-hearted in mobilising villagers to attend various party events, thus denying them potential income. Some even suggested that incompetent local canvassers had been deliberately recruited so that district-level party workers could pocket a greater share of the electoral benefits. Overall, despite some specific acts of personal support, the TRT candidate did not have the reputation for high profile generosity. In fact, it was the locally embedded opposition candidate who was more readily associated with the rural constitution's values of benevolent patronage. His active engagement in Pad Siew district had earned him the affectionate (and, for some, slightly mocking) title of "the honourable tent" (*sor sor tent*), referring to the large number of canvas awnings (printed with his name) that he had donated to local organisations during his previous tenure as local representative in the national parliament. At his election rally *sor sor tent* could also claim that he had contributed to various local projects, most notably the construction of a small-scale hydroelectric project and the new agricultural co-operative building. His benevolent profile was enhanced by the commonly expressed local view that, "Mahachon is much more generous than Thai Rak Thai" in its payment for attendance at rallies and party meetings.

But TRT's disadvantage in relation to the personal characteristics of its candidate was outweighed by the strong local endorsement of the official support provided under Thaksin's policy initiatives. Here, Thaksin's government was regarded as having performed very strongly: "they have helped us in many ways. Thaksin has many projects that bring benefits to farmers. The old government did not help us like this." Particularly strong support was expressed for the Thaksin government's local economic development initiatives, such as the village fund and the so-called "SML" program.¹¹ In Baan Tiam, despite some problems, the one million baht village fund operated relatively successfully with relatively high rates of repayment. It had also managed to increase its original capital stock as a result of members' regular deposits and the purchase of member shares. The village-level SML grant funded the construction of a village rice mill, which offers cheaper rates than the three privately owned village mills. A number of farmers in Baan Tiam have also taken subsidised

cattle provided under the Thaksin government's "one million cows" programme. As one villager remarked, "People still like Thaksin a lot. The project for raising cattle tries to fix poverty by creating income for villagers." And about 20 villagers have participated in income-generating activities provided as part of the government's poverty alleviation campaign. There was also very strong local support for the government's health policy, which provided hospital treatment for only 30 baht.

Electoral support for the various government initiatives was enhanced by the perception that they had been implemented very quickly and in a manner that largely bypassed local bureaucracy. The rapid pace of the Thaksin government's financial assistance was a key point of contrast with previous governments. The SML scheme was cited regularly as demonstrating the government's effectiveness. It was promised in the campaign for the February 2005 election and, by June 2005, the village had received the money and was in a position to decide which project would be implemented. Though there was considerable local debate about how the money would be spent, the policy of village-level decision making and implementation was seen as a significant departure from the usual administrative practice of submitting funding requests to higher-level authorities. The eventual decision was to construct a community rice mill and it was completed by early 2006, little more than a year after villagers had first heard about the new programme.

But it would be misleading to suggest that TRT was invulnerable on the issue of support. In fact, there was persistent local criticism that Thaksin's government had offered insufficient support to the agricultural sector. This point needs to be understood in terms of the considerable agricultural uncertainty faced by Baan Tiam's farmers. Coinciding with the Thaksin government's tenure many have experienced catastrophic declines in the yield of garlic, their primary cash crop. Of course, the primary causes of this reduction in yield – disease, bad weather and soil-fertility decline – were unrelated to government policy. However the government was not completely blameless in relation to the garlic collapse, and a good number of farmers correctly linked the steep drop in the price of garlic to the government's free trade agreement with China (see Pye and Wolfram, 2008). As one of the most active garlic farmers in the village told me, "Thaksin has been good internationally but not so good within the country." But even more damaging was a general perception that the government had done little to address the overall agricultural malaise, and there were specific concerns that some of the agricultural support programmes (especially the livestock initiatives) were tokenistic and unviable. Often an implicit contrast was drawn between specific development initiatives (on which TRT scored well) and broader-based support for the agricultural sector. Consider the views of Daeng, when he was responding to rumours that officials would be coming to the village to check that farmers claiming the government subsidy for reducing the area of garlic cultivation had actually done so:

Why should they come? Really, farmers who grow garlic don't get anything anyway. You have to invest a lot in fertiliser, and I don't want to be in debt. But we have to do it, because there is no alternative income. Why is the price of fertiliser and fuel going up? But the money to help us and the prices for our crops just go down. Just look at it! For the rice I lost [in the floods in the 2005

wet season] I only got 300 baht. If I had not lost that rice and been able to sell it I would have got several thousand. The government is not completely bad but their commitment and spending on agriculture is small and the farmers are still in trouble. No end in sight! I am still in debt. Everyone is in debt. The government has started to help us, such as the 30 baht health care, but it's not enough and not transparent.

Daeng's impassioned statement about the linkage between agricultural decline and indebtedness expresses the key socio-economic concern in Baan Tiam. Garlic requires significant investment in inputs and the failure of a series of garlic crops has meant that many farmers have substantial debts, in some cases amounting to over 200,000 baht: "garlic made us rich, and then it made us poor." The Thaksin government's debt repayment moratorium was appreciated but it provided temporary relief rather than addressing the debt problem itself. And, more importantly, there was a strong thread of local critique that TRT's one million baht village credit fund had merely increased indebtedness:

Thai politics is terrible. I don't like Thaksin. He has given money to the villagers but I have not seen any of them get rich, just further into debt. They just bring budgets and give loans to the poor people who then go and support them. But it's the money of the government, not Thaksin's own money. Farmers are in trouble, all the crop prices are going down. I stopped farming a few years ago. Running a restaurant is better.

*Administration: "I Call Him Sapsin"*¹²

There is no doubt that many of Thaksin's personal qualities were highly valued according to the rural constitution's measures of strong administration. He had a record of extraordinary business success, he was a capable public speaker and became a charismatic media performer, and he had excellent educational qualifications. Particularly important in local perceptions was that Thaksin could speak English well – a key cultural marker of social connection, sophistication and intellect. What all this meant was that Thaksin could represent Thailand effectively on the world stage. "Thailand is famous now," Baan Tiam's assistant headman told me, "everyone has heard of Prime Minister Thaksin."

There was one particular aspect of his administration that contributed to the Thaksin mystique and reinforced the image that he was a national leader who could operate effectively on the world stage. Local supporters regularly cited the fact that Thaksin had cleared the IMF debt that had been Thailand's national burden in the wake of the 1997-98 economic crisis. They thought that this had enhanced Thailand's international status, improved the country's credit rating and enabled the government to better support its own population. Some even suggested that Thaksin's success in settling the IMF debt was an indication that, given time, he would be able to deal with the problem of household debt. This electorally beneficial blurring of national and private debt was expressed nicely by the owner of one of Baan Tiam's noodle shops: "In the past any Thai child that was born was

60,000 baht in debt. But now the IMF debt is gone and Thailand's new born can rest easy. And money is coming into the village. Thaksin has done a good job. As for the other side – I've seen nothing."

Another factor that acted strongly in Thaksin's favour was his penchant for high profile campaigns (or what Thaksin called "wars"). The ambitious targets and tight deadlines of these campaigns clearly captured the local imagination. Most prominent of these was the so-called War on Drugs, during which there were widely reported to have been over 2000 extra-judicial killings of alleged drug dealers in a nationwide crackdown. As in other parts of Thailand, this heavy-handed campaign attracted significant local support. It was cited regularly by local supporters as evidence of the Thaksin government's effectiveness and Thaksin's strong and decisive leadership. It tapped into profound local anxieties about the spread of amphetamine use among young people and was also consistent with local sentiments that continue to value direct action against alleged criminals. Consider the comments of Uncle Man who checked himself out of hospital on election day in April 2006 so he could cast his vote in favour of TRT (despite the fact that there was no opposition candidate):

The thing I like most about Thaksin is the war on drugs. There has been a real benefit. In the past there were a lot of people on drugs, a lot of young people in this village. Just a couple of years ago, some young people came and tried to steal computers from the school. They were kids from our village. I didn't want to get involved. I am old and they might kill me. Our village set up a "night patrol" committee. It was a secret committee. They got people in several villages. Now it is quiet and I feel much safer.

Set against these positive perceptions of Thaksin's administrative record were concerns about his corruption. Thaksin's extraordinary wealth and his various business dealings and manipulations while in government made him vulnerable to the charge that he was "greedy," that he "cheated" too much, and that he surrounded himself with bad people. These were commonly expressed views, though for many they were not electorally potent, given the view that while he had "helped himself" Thaksin had also "shared" the benefits with rural people. In other words, his diversions from the public domain to his private domain were not seen as having directly disadvantaged rural voters. But this rationale was not universal, and some countered by pointing out that Thaksin's apparent generosity to the poor was not genuine, as it had come from government money rather than from his own private funds:

Talking of Thaksin, I call him "*sapsin*" (property). I don't like the way he has cheated so much money. My relatives in Bangkok don't like him at all and never agree with his actions because he just throws money away. The money that Thaksin uses is the country's money. It is not money from his own pocket. He has lots of money but we never see him make donations. When he dies will he be able to take it with him?

For some voters, Thaksin's corruption and maladministration were highlighted by the controversial April 2006 election. As a result of the boycott by opposition

parties, Baan Tiam's electorate had only one party standing – TRT. Some argued that the election itself was a waste of money ("the country's money, the money of every villager") and that the electorate was being taken for granted by offering them no electoral choice:

I think they should delay the election. Because doing it like this is not fair to all parties. I don't like Thaksin's government because it has cheated a lot and "eaten" too much. But here we only have Thai Rak Thai and this district is a vote base for them. Personally I would like another government to run the country.

Conclusion

Over the past few decades Thailand has been afflicted by what McCargo (2006) has called a "disease" of "permanent constitutionalism." Enormous energies have been devoted to developing constitutional provisions that will provide the appropriate balance between royalist, military, corporate and civil society interests. For many, the holy grail of constitutional drafting is a form of democracy where an appropriately constrained expression of electoral will is combined with a continued elite hold on key processes of government. Since the 2006 *coup*, Thailand has entered yet another round of constitutional drafting intent on avoiding a return to the "tyranny of the majority" that emerged from the 1997 charter.

In response to this constitutional obsession, historian and public intellectual Nidhi (2003) wrote in 1991 about Thailand's "cultural constitution." In contrast to the formal written charters, that are so easily set aside by *coup*-makers, the cultural constitution reflects the more enduring "ways of life, ways of thinking, and values" that underpin the key institutions in Thailand's political life. While, according to Nidhi's account, ultimate "power" resides with the sacred monarch, Thailand's cultural constitution holds that rulers are constrained by other forms of "influence." Local leaders have influence, as do the military and members of parliament (even if they are asleep when votes are taken). Power is also constrained by "morality," at least to the extent that "external manifestations of morality" provide a basis for the public's evaluation of legitimate power. Influence and morality are also "sacred institutions." For Nidhi, this "cultural constitution" is much more important than any written document in accounting for the underlying rationale of Thai political life.

There is, of course, considerable room for questioning how widely held the cultural constitution described by Nidhi really is. But his exploration of the role of informal cultural provisions in national political life is provocative and it invites more ethnographically engaged investigations. This article has taken up this challenge by exploring the operation of a rather different cultural constitution existing in a rural context. The rural constitution provides a basis for judgements about legitimate, and illegitimate, political power in electoral contexts. Like Nidhi's cultural constitution, it acts as an unwritten constraint on the exercise of power. It is embedded in the everyday politics of discussion, gossip and debate about the personal attributes of leaders, resource allocation, development projects and administrative competence. It is an important cultural domain where the everyday

politics of village life spills over into the more formal arena of electoral contest. The rural constitution is an unwritten constitution made of numerous informal provisions, but they can be grouped usefully under three main headings: a common preference for local candidates; an expectation that candidates will support their electorate; and an emerging emphasis on strong and transparent administration. But these various elements are refracted in complex and sometimes contradictory ways and do not provide a ready template for political decision making. Rather, they provide a broad framework in which local political evaluation can take place.

In proposing this rural constitution I want to avoid creating a mirror image of the negative portrayals of rural electoral behaviour with which I started this article. It would be ludicrous to argue that all rural electors are careful and rational decision makers who painstakingly assess candidates against a range of clearly defined criteria. Mrs Priaw told me that she votes for Thaksin because she does not know who else to support. Miss Noi goes to vote because her parents and relatives tell her to; but she votes informally because she does not know any of the candidates. And Mr Num, a young government employee, was a member of TRT but was not sure why because he did not get any personal benefits. As in any electoral system there are a good number of people who vote (or not) on the basis of disinterest, disengagement or disillusionment.

Nor do I intend to deny that “vote buying” and party canvassers have any influence on electoral behaviour in Baan Tiam or elsewhere in rural Thailand. But I do insist that these specific institutions need to be placed in the much broader context of everyday political values. As I have indicated, cash distributed by candidates and their canvassers means fundamentally different things in different contexts – it is subject to evaluation and critique within the broad framework provided by the rural constitution. And party canvassers are similarly evaluated. In Baan Tiam one of the key TRT party canvassers was regarded widely as a man who “talked too much, a lot of it rubbish.” His somewhat dubious leadership status was underlined when, in late 2004, he was dumped as head of the village’s largest irrigation group, given his inattention to the smooth running of the system (largely because his own fields lay at the head of the irrigation canal). The other key TRT canvasser suffered a major setback not long before the 2005 election as a result of her alleged mismanagement of a local development project. When village members ended up having to pay 500 baht each to salvage the project, her reputation nosedived. “She works hard for the community,” one woman commented, “but she is hopeless with money.”

It is also important to remember that candidates and political canvassers are socially embedded in complex and overlapping networks of relationships. There is no neat hierarchy of political patrons and vote-offering clients. Rather, there is a “diverse society of ill joined actors” (Kerkvliet and Mojares, 1991: 10) in which personal connections overlap, compete and draw people in different directions. Gluckman’s (1955) classic analysis of custom and conflict in Africa shows how a complex network of conflicting loyalties prevents feuds degenerating into outright conflict. In the same way, rural voters in Thailand find themselves linked in multiple ways with local figures on all sides of political contests. There is no ready-made social basis for political mobilisation into clearly defined electoral entourages. In this socially complex environment, the rural constitution is drawn upon to provide an informal framework for specific electoral allegiances.

Of course, Baan Tiam is only one village. But greater attention to the rural constitution, in its diverse forms, is likely to prompt some rethinking of the common stereotype of a failed democratic citizenry (see Somchai, 2008, this issue). From the perspective of Baan Tiam's rural constitution, the Thaksin government was elected because a majority of voters considered that TRT candidates and policies best matched their values for political leadership. Often the match was imperfect but, on balance, TRT was the most attractive alternative on offer. This electoral decision was swept away in a wave of urban protest that culminated in the sabotaged election of April 2006 and the *coup* of September 2006. *Coup* supporters and constitutional alchemists have sought to de-legitimise Thaksin's electoral support by alleging that it is based on the financially fuelled mobilisation of an easily led and ill-informed rural mass. This erasure of the everyday political values contained in the rural constitution represents a much more fundamental threat to Thailand's democracy than the tearing up of the 1997 charter.

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Notes

- ¹ See, for example, Anek (1996), Arghiros (2001), Callahan (2005), Kasian (2006), Nelson (1998), Ockey (2000; 2004: Ch. 2), Suchit (1996), Surin and McCargo (1997) and Tanun (1994: Ch. 4) and the numerous works cited by these authors. Of course, there is considerable nuance and variation in these accounts and I am not suggesting that all of these authors deal with the issues uncritically – in some cases quite the opposite, especially Callahan (2005).
- ² A key exception is to be found in the work of Turton (1984: 65), who called for greater attention to the "wide range of... everyday forms of resistance" in rural Thailand.
- ³ In exploring the everyday politics of elections in Thailand I am not starting completely from scratch. Of particular importance is the work of Nishizaki (2005) on the "moral origins" of one of Thailand's most famous provincial strongmen. Arghiros' (2001) work on local electoral politics in Ayuthaya is also an important contribution. Like other commentators, Arghiros placed considerable emphasis on vote buying, but he sought to interpret this in the context of the diverse social relations that underpin the local political system and he explored the localised bases of political legitimacy. And Anek's (1996) much-cited "tale of two democracies" does attempt to take rural voting behaviour seriously. However, his claim that the path to "virtuous democracy" lies in transforming "patronage-ridden villagers into small towns of middle-class farmers or well-paid workers" (Anek, 1996: 223) is a reversion to the stereotype that rural people are failed democratic citizens.
- ⁴ One for the village headman; three local government elections, one provincial assembly election, two House of Representatives elections and one Senate election.
- ⁵ Baan Tiam is part of a small municipality (*thesaban*) for which there is an elected mayor and an elected council.
- ⁶ Given that Senate votes are counted at the village polling booths (unlike lower house votes, which are counted at electorate level), village voting data are readily available.
- ⁷ Each mayoral candidate had a team of candidates running for council membership.
- ⁸ It would be surprising if Baan Tiam residents had not absorbed some of the messages of high profile national campaigns that seek to undermine the electoral power of "influential figures," though Turton (1984: 31) provided an indication of a longer-term subaltern critique of *itthiphon*.

- ⁹ During the period I have been working in Baan Tiam I have become aware of a large number of these projects. Here is a sample: the community shop, the wood carving project, the music group, a community rice mill, support for children with disabilities, lighting for public events, construction of visitor facilities in the nearby national park, a new concrete pavilion for the village territorial spirit, the handicraft centre, uniforms for the women's group to wear on public occasions, new stoves for the temple kitchen, a village history project, dolomite for the paddy fields, funds for the leaders of one of the irrigation groups to travel to the irrigation office to request further funds for renovation of the irrigation system, a toilet for the community shop, the banana group, the proposed village cultural centre and the community rice mill.
- ¹⁰ The boycotting opposition parties and anti-Thaksin protest groups urged their supporters to cast a "no vote" in the election. A "no vote" option is available on Thai ballot papers.
- ¹¹ Under the SML scheme, funds were provided to villages for local development projects, often construction projects. The "SML" referred to the different allocations for small, medium and large villages. It was usually referred to using this English acronym.
- ¹² *Sapsin* means "property," a playful allusion to Thaksin's extraordinary wealth.

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