

Capitalist and Fraction in Local Politics: Case Study of Samut Sakhon Municipality, Thailand

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Abstract— Established in Thailand for a long period of time, municipality is a local political unit that has fostered close relationships with people and been capable of setting a direction of local administration in its responsible area in each province. Therefore, it is not surprising to see groups of politicians or capitalists attempting to penetrate into and assume absolute power in the municipality. In fact, the groups that possess ultimate power in this local political unit will be empowered and gain control over the local economy. Obviously, municipality is regarded as a key administrative unit that plays a vital role in the local political and economic arena. Therefore, the author would like to initially illustrate the overall background of the municipal units in order to create complete understanding about the subject matter and a clear insight about the study which will be discussed in detail later on in this paper.

Keywords— Fraction, Capitalist Struggle, Relative Autonomy, Samut Sakhon Municipality

I. INTRODUCTION

The municipality system was established in accordance with the Municipality Organization Act, B.E. 2476. Known as Council-Mayor Form in the Western world, this system was adopted from Britain. In this system, local people in the municipality exercise their rights by voting for members of the municipal council who then cast their votes for a Mayor and councilor. Therefore, this form of local administration is regarded as an indirect election. (Thanet Cheroenmuang, 2005: 52-61)

In Thailand, the municipality system was initially formulated in the year after the parliamentary system had been instituted. It is the nation's first attempt under democratic administration that the government was actively determined to establish the municipality system in Thailand, compared to the sanitary district system that was first created in 1987 when Thailand was ruled by absolute monarchy. However, the members in the sanitary districts consisted of government officials only. For this reason, the sanitary district, which is regarded as the country's first form of local administration, is in fact a local political unit merely in theory. (Prayad Hongtongkham, 1980: 40)

Initiated by the People's Party, the structure of local administration system is therefore similar to that of the parliamentary system in which the members of the House of Representative vote for the Prime Minister. The People's Party wished to devolve the central government power to the local

political unit in order to strengthen democracy. The delegation of power from the central government to a lower level is a form of administrative decentralization generally executed in all democratic countries. Moreover, the Council-Mayor form was created to instruct and educate people about the parliamentary system at the local level so that they are experienced and accustomed to the scheme and able to adopt it to help strengthen the parliamentary system at the national level afterwards.

Nowadays, due to rapid globalization and reengineering, the issue of political revolution has been extensively debated. The phenomenon is beneficial for the Thai society as it causes people to rethink about how the world's system has an impact on the Thai society and why it is necessary to improve ourselves. Businesspersons need to level up their competency in order to compete in the global business arena. Moreover, it is important to streamline and transform the political system for improved efficiency. (Surasit Wachirakajorn, 1992: 79-80) Since Thailand advanced its industrial sector for exports in alignment with the development model of newly industrialized countries, we have seen many similar issues happening in various cities in Thailand, for instance traffic congestion, inefficient public transportation, poor city plan, garbage disposal problem, etc. These complications are becoming more serious in fast-growing cities, for example Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Korat, etc. (Surachet Niamtang, 1995)

The aforementioned problems not only reflect clearly that the municipal administration is unsuccessful and too old-fashioned to keep up with the free economy these days, but also indicate that people lack interest in the political situation as they do not consider that the municipal administration is an important institution. This sense of carelessness is a result of the following three problems: central government domination, Council-Mayor form of municipal structure and education system. (Thanet Cheroenmuang, 2005: 130)

Consequently, Thai political situation has changed dramatically since the economic crisis in 1997. This occurrence has resulted in people questioning about the increasing role of the capitalist class in both local and national politics. However, the author believes that there are two interesting and concrete issues. One is the relationship between government and capitalists. The other is the relationship among several groups of capitalists under the structure of municipal administration, specifically in Samut Sakhon Municipality where the author lives in

II. OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

1. To study and gain insights about the principles of Nicos Poulantzas on the exercise of political power of ruling class, relative autonomy in capitalist states and the capitalist class' struggle for survival in capitalist states.

2. To examine the movement of local capitalist groups, the disputes among capitalist groups as well as the concept of fractions in the capitalist class through the execution of various policies in Samut Sakhon Municipality.

III. METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, the author utilizes two research methods to seek answers to the assumption.

1. Documentary Research

Documentary research involves the use of texts and documents as source materials. The primary source includes acts, Royal Thai Government Gazette, Interior Ministry's regulations, and other relevant documents. The secondary source consists of academic journals and publications as well as other applicable research papers. For documentary research, the author focuses on studying about related theories and concepts.

2. Field Research

Field research is a method of collecting data by observing social movements, behaviors and characteristics using different approaches such as interviews and living in the studied community. People engaged in this type of research consist of the Mayor, members of the municipal council and other commercial groups, for example supplier group, Rotary Club, retailer group, etc.

IV. SCOPE OF STUDY

This research aims to frame an explanation by analyzing the political situation in Samut Sakhon Municipality from 2007 to 2014 when the national capitalist group was in power until when the local capitalist group seized power from it.

V. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Field research is a method of collecting data by observing social movements, behaviors and characteristics using different approaches such as interviews and living in the studied community. People engaged in this type of research consist of the Mayor, members of the municipal council and other commercial groups, for example supplier group, Rotary Club, retailer group, etc. Details of the field research are as "Conflicts between industrial fraction and service-commercial fraction" In this part, the author would like to illustrate the political struggle among two groups of capitalists: the old group and the new group of the municipality management. In this regard, the author will provide an explanation following the assumption that the service-commercial fraction (local capitalists) competes against the industrial fraction (national capitalists) which has expanded its capital power to the local level which, in this case, is Samut Sakhon Municipality.

The political struggle of the service-commercial fraction aims at safeguarding its interest in Samut Sakhon Municipality as well as preventing themselves from being eliminated or economically and politically suppressed by the industrial fraction in Samut Sakhon province.

In the past, powerful capitalists who were economically influential in the local area usually ran for election to be members of the House of Representative or acted as wirepuller supporting a particular candidate in an election by leveraging on their economic power along with local and provincial network as a tool to achieve this. Having political power or being a politician may both facilitate their way while contacting with government officials and open up further opportunities for their businesses. (Trakul Meechai, 1983: 102) Once any capitalist group makes its way to play a vital role in politics, conflict of interest may take place. This is because if the policymakers and businesspersons do not come from the same group, there will be a gap between both parties. To illustrate, if the policymakers have an autonomous power to formulate the policies and allow other groups than the businesspersons to participate in framing the policies, it will be good for the political and economic system. However, if the politicians and businesspersons belong to the same group, the situation will be problematic as policies will be designed to essentially create commercial benefits for themselves (specifically for their own businesses or their supporters' businesses). In this case, the gap to approaching the political power will disappear while other groups will also not be capable of partaking in the policymaking process. Ultimately, the policymakers will no longer have an autonomous power to make a decision. (see more in Pasuk Pongpaikit in Fah Diao Gun, 2006: 85)

The author will present the topic of political and economic struggles by examining the approach that the old group and the new group of Samut Sakhon Municipality management utilize to assume a political role from the years before 2007 to 2014. The study is divided into two parts: the period of municipality management before 2007 – 2014 (industrial fraction), and the period of municipality management from 2007 to 2014 (service-commercial fraction).

Before the industrial fraction took a principal role in the municipal administration, the service-commercial fraction had formerly maintained the power in Samut Sakhon Municipality. In fact, the Mayor of Samut Sakhon Municipality in the years before 2007 – 2014 had been from the service-commercial fraction, prior to losing the position to the new power bloc in the Municipal Council Election in late 2006.

According to the field research in Samut Sakhon Municipality, the author has found that the municipal council election this time is a competition between "Pattana Nakhon Society" led by Mr. Kulawat Hongku, the most recent Mayor of Samut Sakhon Municipality who announced to run for the election versus "Khon Rak Thin Group" led by Mr. Supap Saeheng (Brother Sei), former Deputy Mayor of Samut Sakhon Municipality and a

successor of Mr. Prawit Maneeroj (Brother Oui), the leader of Khon Rak Thin Group and former Mayor of Samut Sakhon Municipality for two terms. Brother Oui is believed to be retired now.

For the upcoming Municipal Council Election, “Pattana Nakhon Society” led by Mr. Kulawat Hongku, the latest Mayor of Samut Sakhon Municipality, is expected to set the same group of people to be in the Deputy Mayor team, i.e. Mr. Tongtan Lertlappatorn, Mr. Pakkapol Tassanipat (Brother Ex) and some people believe that, for Wattanapornmongkol family, Mr. Srisak Wattanapornmongkol, the owner of Esso Wattana Gas Station would join the team.

However, others believe that Mr. Chawapol Wattanapornmongkol (Seng), the favorite son of Mr. Somchai Wattanapornmongkol (Brother Yong) might return

to join Kulawat in running for the Deputy Mayor position. Previously, Chawapol had just resigned from the Deputy Mayor position on June 30 in order to take care of his credit business called Best Buy. However, Kulawat still appointed Chawapol as his honorary advisor.

In preparation for this election, Kulawat has utilized online social media through “Pattana Nakhon Society” Facebook fan page as another channel to publicize the work. Chawapol, who has been experienced in using social media, has been assigned to control the fan page. Previously, he was successful in managing Samut Sakhon Flood Watch Facebook fan page while Mr. Kulawat led the group members to the affected location before the end of his Mayor tenure.



Using the slogan “I have never left anyone behind”, Khon Rak Thin Group is led by Mr. Supap Saeheng (Brother Sei), Mr. Chumpon Janjarasattana (Brother Tu), Mr. Chawalit Limthanasarn (Brother Sung), former Deputy Mayor of Samut Sakhon Municipality, Mr. Sakchai Nimitpanya (Brother Ngoa), former member of municipal council district 1 (Kroakkarak, Wat Tukmahachayaram, Wat Jessadaram, Klong Krajone), and Mr. Sakorn Impanchai (Brother Toi), former member of municipal council district 4 (Tha Chalom, Power Plant, Klong Bangya).

In preparation for this election, Khon Rak Thin Group has invested money to buy advertisement space and time in local newspapers and cable television (Mahachai Cable TV) respectively. It was unclear whether the media buying was related to the fact that Chawalit and Mr. Weerapong Limthanasarn, Director of Mahachai Cable TV Co., Ltd., are in the same family or not. Previously, it was noticed that Khon Rak Thin’s advertisement spots with Supap’s voice were often broadcasted in the local news on channel 1 and 2 every day.

Supap and Chawalit used to be a councilor along with Mr. Prawit Maneeroj (Brother Oui) during the time that Mr. Suchart Baisamut was Mayor of Samut Sakhon Municipality in 2000, after the municipality had been levelled up from Town Municipality to City Municipality. Suchart had been elected as Mayor for six terms before passing on his political

power to Prawit, to be the Mayor of Samut Sakhon Municipality in 2002. At that time, Prawit was 80 years old.

Prawit was the Mayor of Samut Sakhon Municipality for two terms from 2002 to 2004. His councilor team consisted of Chawalit, Supap and Chumpon as well as Mr. Traipon Tangmunkong and Pakkapol, who later resigned from the Deputy Mayor position in 2006 and moved to the opposite party. In April 2008, Suchart died of senility and lung cancer, leaving behind the legacy of an over-30-year Mayor and the first President of the National Municipal Association of Thailand.

In the Mayor Election and Municipal Council Election of Samut Sakhon Municipality in 2008, Prawit competed with Kulawat (his previous name was Suntorn) Hongku, a member of Office of the National Economic and Social Advisory Council and a fishing business owner. Kulawat ran for election on behalf of Sakhon Ruamjai Pattana Group with Mr. Tongtan Lertlappatorn, former President of Samut Sakhon Fisheries Club, competing for Deputy Mayor position.

In fact, Tongtan used to run for Mayor of Samut Sakhon Municipality in 2004, carrying the slogan “It’s time for Tong to replace the position.” However, he failed to win the election at that time. The team also consisted of Pakkapol, who moved from Khon Rak Thin Group to Sakhon Ruamjai Pattana Group, as well as Chawapol, who had been a Deputy Governor of Samut Sakhon Provincial Administration

Organization before resigning from the position later on. Kulawat was seen as an incomparable competitor because he was the new face in the political arena, while Prawit had been a Mayor for two terms.

However, the result of Mayor of Samut Sakhon Municipality on 16 March 2008 was a great surprise as it was opposite to what people had predicted earlier. Kulawat won the election with 10,529 votes, while Prawit had only 8,911 votes. Even so, people still preferred to have members of Khon Rak Thin Group as the members of the municipal council as seen that nineteen members of Khon Rak Thin Group were elected as members of the municipal council,

while only five from Sakhon Ruamjai Pattana Group were elected.

According to the media interview at that time, many eligible voters in Samut Sakhon Municipality revealed that they decided to vote for Sakhon Ruamjai Pattana because they wanted a new management team. They had seen several problems under the administration of Khon Rak Thin Group. In fact, Kulawat produced considerable changes, specifically as he carried out landscape improvement of important roads and solved the flood problems during high tides and flood crisis in 2011. He was highly praised for his immediate action to solve the problems.



Kulawat's strength is well-known by Mahachai people. However, the weakness seen in his previous term was his members of the municipal council. Therefore, Pattana Nakhon Society tried to engage people from renowned families in the municipality to join as the team members in this election. The newly recruited candidates consisted of Mr. Pamorn Chaolam, former famous professor who runs for election in district 2 (Mahachai market, Samroihong, Dermbang, Narongmit), and Mr. Narong Silasuwan, mediator of Samut Sakhon Provincial Court who runs for election in district 3. The "Silasuwan" family is well-known among Tha Chalom people.

It is noteworthy to mention that the members of the municipal council of Pattana Nakhon Society have core strength in district 3 (Wat Pomwichienchotikaram, Sapanpla, Setthakit Road, Thesaban 8, Boy Scouts Camp). There are four candidates who were the members of municipal council in the previous term, i.e. Mr. Somkiat Pincharoen, Mr. Somsak Witheeklongkuen, Mr. Chaiwin Lueprasert and Mr. Juea Yupracham. However, there is only one candidate who was the member of the municipal council in the previous term, i.e. Mr. Manus Rojpairin.

Khon Rak Thin Group's main strength lies in the fact that it owns a majority of votes in the municipal council. Nonetheless, its key weakness is the Mayor candidate which is a key magnet for the election. Comparing Supap with Kulawat, it is obvious that Kulawat is more famous as he presented outstanding work and had media exposure in the national agenda, for example during the flood crisis, while Supap just partly supported the crisis relief by distributing

sand bags to the affected flood victims. Moreover, people in Mahachai market know Brother Sei well. Compared to Prawit or Brother Oui, the previous leader of Khon Rak Thin Group, the latter might have more political influence.

From the aforementioned information, we can summarize that, in local elections, the support from national political party cannot always bring victory to the members of the industrial fraction. In fact, the group had lost in the Senate election in Samut Sakhon. However, the political monopoly in Samut Sakhon province still exists with few capitalist groups competing against one another.

VI. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

According The research on "Capitalist and Fraction In Local Politics: Case Study of Samut Sakhon Municipality" aims at studying the struggles between the capitalist class and the status of capitalist State in the political arena of Samut Sakhon Municipality. The objectives of the study are to study about fractions in Samut Sakhon Municipality and the relative autonomy in order to determine the characteristics of network formation among different fractions for survival in the capitalist system. These fractions include service-commercial fraction (local capitalist) and industrial fraction (national capitalist).

In this regard, the author utilizes Marxist theory of capitalism in terms of fraction and relative autonomy as a framework of this study. Both principles are suggested by

Nicos Poulantzas. The study is based on the assumption that the industrial fraction (national capitalist) expands its role to dominate the administration in the municipal council in order to gain benefits for its own fraction, and that the service-commercial fraction (local capitalist) tries to struggle and compete against the national capitalist that expands its power into the local level. The local capitalist must do so to safeguard its benefits in Samut Sakhon Municipality and prevent itself from being economically and politically suppressed by the national capitalist. Moreover, the municipal council management in 2007-2014 operated under certain limits, but it was still capable of maintaining autonomy in certain affairs and worked under state jurisdiction according to the principle of relative autonomy.

According to the study, it has been found that the movement of the industrial fraction and the service-commercial fraction is a struggle aiming at seizing the state power, i.e. the power to manage the municipality in order to protect their interest and build the political and economic foundation for stepping up to a larger political arena, for instance at the national level, which offers greater interests for the fraction. This is the movement of the industrial fraction. As for the movement of the service-commercial fraction, there is an attempt to struggle to take a political power in the municipality in order to protect their share of economic and political interest. And it has been found that the local capitalist tends to be capable of maintaining the proportion of their interest as seen in the latest Mayor Election and Municipal Council Election that the service-commercial fraction achieved a landslide victory of 5,431 : 1,954 votes. However, the author is not certain that the victory at the municipal level is a sustainable win because the industrial fraction may not give in quite easily. The author will look into the situation closely in the future.

For the study on relative autonomy in capitalism, it has been found that Samut Sakhon Municipality which is the area of study maintains relative autonomy in some cases as seen in its decision not to fight against the international retailers by violent actions. This suggests that Samut Sakhon Municipality has relative autonomy to tackle with the problem. Other situations include the filing of complaint about the Mayor's lack of transparency to the provincial governor, the Chinese crematory case, the social welfare policy, etc.

In summary, by utilizing Poulantzas' principles of fraction and relative autonomy as a framework of study in Samut Sakhon Municipality, the author has found that both principles are suitable for explaining the political phenomenon in Samut Sakhon Municipality.

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