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## Thailand's urbanized villagers and political polarization

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### ABSTRACT

Thailand currently suffers from high levels of political polarization; parties associated with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra have won every election since 2001, based partly on strong support from voters registered in the populous North and Northeast regions. Many of these voters are migrant workers who spend much of their time working in Greater Bangkok, yet remain legal residents of their home provinces. This article argues that Thailand's political polarization could be reduced if many of these "urbanized villagers" either took up formal residence in the capital city, or were encouraged to share in the creation of new small-scale urban communities in their places of birth.

### KEYWORDS

Thailand; polarization; urban; rural; elections

Heading up to Departures at Suvarnabhumi Airport, I jump into the front seat of a taxi that has just dropped someone off, and immediately read aloud the address in Thai on the driver's ID card displayed on the dashboard. I do this partly so he realizes I know Thai and doesn't try to rip me off, but also out of curiosity, and the diehard fieldworker's determination to turn every chance encounter into a data-gathering opportunity. "You are from Roi-et?" There seem to be more taxi drivers from the northeastern province of Roi-et than from anywhere else in Thailand: fortunately, I can do Roi-et small talk – I've been going there for the last twenty-five years, know the districts, and even some of the local politicians a bit. "How long have you been driving a taxi in Bangkok?" I ask. "Oh, twenty-seven years," he replies. Quite probably he is about to tell me that the economic and political situation is terrible. He might even produce a redshirt organization ID card and tell me about his pro-Thaksin views. I have been in Thailand only a few minutes, and I've already met my first urbanized villager.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Millions of Thais are registered to vote in places where they do not actually live. As a result, official statistics often give a very distorted picture of the Thai population. Many of the supposed residents of the North and Northeast are in fact "urbanized villagers" who vote in their home provinces, but often live and work for much of the year in greater Bangkok or other cities.

Are these people "poor farmers," as they have been widely depicted? Yes and no. They may not be financially secure, and they often do own some farmland. But they work largely

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<sup>1</sup>This is a composite encounter; I have had similar conversations on numerous visits to Bangkok over the past twenty years.

in the service and industrial sectors. They are not poor in terms of income or assets; however, they are chronically insecure because their major earnings come from casual labor or informal businesses, such as small-scale vending activities which do not produce steady income. Most of these people are not very radical: they aspire to have a secure middle class lifestyle. They are eager to swap their motorbikes for pickup trucks and to support their children through higher education. And most do not want to return to live in villages and revert to subsistence agriculture, unless they are already financial secure.

Thailand's hybridized urbanized villagers lie at the core of the structural contradictions facing the country, and I suggest that changes to the current household registration system – though they would not be welcomed by either of the country's main political groupings – might lead to a gradual reduction in political and social polarization.

One of the most influential arguments about Thailand's politics in the 1990s was Anek Laothamatas's "tale of two democracies," which contrasted the allegedly more sophisticated political views of city dwellers – primarily those in Bangkok – with the politics of the countryside, where the electorate was susceptible to the sway of patronage and even to outright vote-buying.<sup>2</sup> Anek's arguments suggest a hierarchy of voters that works on two levels. First, urban voters are supposedly better educated than rural ones and thus make more informed political choices. Second – and this was more implicit than explicit in Anek's original argument – urban voters are morally superior to rural voters because their political choices are based on a greater degree of integrity and less corrupted by monetary considerations. Anek's views echoed a moral panic at the time about vote-buying that was based on substantial empirical evidence: votes were indeed extensively bought and sold in Thai general elections.<sup>3</sup> Concerns about such abuses led directly to the creation of the new Election Commission outlined in the 1997 Constitution.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the vote-buying discourse occluded the larger problems of Thailand's political system: since most governments of the 1980s and 1990s were multi-party coalitions that comprised aggregations of elite interests, voter choices had little or no influence on the political direction of the country. To take a typical example, in 1995, an apparently heated election campaign resulted in an improbable seven-party coalition, headed by Banharn Silpa-archa, a provincial power-broker whom virtually nobody wanted as prime minister. His government lasted just over a year, when it was replaced by another multi-party coalition headed by another forgettable politician, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, whose term in office was of similar duration. Vote-buying and electoral fraud were by-products of a system in which much of the population had little stake.

Following the post-1997 reforms, vote-buying – though it certainly continued – became less salient as a determinant of electoral outcomes. The terrain of public discourse shifted to a focus on the supposed moral and educational inferiority of rural-dwellers, which purportedly accounted for their susceptibility to the lure of parties and candidates loyal to the controversial former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a police officer turned telecommunications magnate who was a hugely polarizing figure in Thai politics, eventually becoming the *bête noire* of the royalist elite and political establishment. Yet anyone

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<sup>2</sup>For an English version, see Anek 1996, 201–223.

<sup>3</sup>A classic text is Sombat 1993; see also Callahan and McCargo 1996.

<sup>4</sup>See McCargo 2002.

who talks regularly to Northeasterners or Southerners soon learns that people from the provinces are much better informed about politics than the average Bangkokian, and far more politically engaged. The Bangkokian view that the center knows best is a travesty of the facts, while in the 2016 constitutional referendum vote, turnout in the capital was the second-lowest of Thailand's seventy-seven provinces.<sup>5</sup>

Thailand's polarized politics was on some level the result of an opposition between the country and the city. Thaksin Shinawatra successfully mobilized rural areas to challenge the dominance of urbanites, creating the conditions for schism. Indeed, during the run-up to the May 22, 2014, military coup, banners appeared in the North and Northeast threatening succession from the rest of Thailand, while during the preceding three years, up to 20,000 villages had held redshirt village proclamation ceremonies in which they pledged their loyalty to Thaksin.<sup>6</sup> The redshirt movement was a grassroots movement designed to bolster support for Thaksin and his party, created deliberately to counter the pro-royalist, conservative yellow shirt movement. A loose alliance of disparate local groups, notionally coordinated by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, the redshirts had previously been known for organizing mass rallies in Bangkok. But this new tact, a very public appropriation of territory was, for the Thai state, an alarming prospect: nearly a quarter of all villages in the country declared themselves to be redshirt villages. Despite the violent repression of the 2010 redshirt protests and the ejection of Thaksin supporters from the downtown Bangkok commercial district of Rachaprasong, by 2014 the countryside was surrounding and threatening the city.<sup>7</sup> Urban middle class voters, heavily outnumbered, had no chance of seeing an elected government that reflected their political preferences (Figure 1).

In this article I make one basic argument: the much-vaunted distinction between the city and countryside in Thailand does not exist.<sup>8</sup> Or to be more precise, it does not exist in the ways in which it is typically described and imagined. What actually exist are multiple blurrings of the distinction between urban and rural, and the emergence of a hybridized population that operates in a hinterland between the two realms. The instability that now characterizes Thai politics does not reflect a clash between urban and rural, but the precarious identity of a substantial – and decisive – portion of Thailand's electorate. The resolution to this problem therefore lies neither in the demonization nor the valorization of the rural, but in measures that would acknowledge and stabilize the actually-existing identities of those who live a hybridized urban–rural life.

Thailand's urbanized villagers have counterparts across the region. For example, the huge upsurge of support for the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) in the 2013 general election was fueled by migrant workers from the service and manufacturing sectors, who returned home from Phnom Penh in huge numbers to urge family and friends to vote against the ruling party.<sup>9</sup> But neither major party in that election really understood the changing nature of the electorate. Both the opposition CNRP and Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party had an outmoded view of the voters, seeing them as either urban or rural, rather than caught between two different realms. Once rurally-registered voters gained more knowledge of the urban world and recognized their own

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<sup>5</sup>See McCargo, Saowanee, and Desatova 2017.

<sup>6</sup>On the redshirt village movement, see Khajornsak 2017.

<sup>7</sup>For a detailed discussion, see Montesano, Pavin, and Aekapol 2012.

<sup>8</sup>For a variation on this argument, see Apichat et al. 2010.

<sup>9</sup>Author's fieldnotes, Kandal and Prey Veng Provinces, July 27–28, 2013.



**Figure 1.** Poster featuring former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra displayed at a redshirt village proclamation in Ubon Ratchathani on February 16, 2012. Credit: Duncan McCargo.

structural marginalization, they were ripe to be mobilized by politicians who spoke their language and addressed their needs.

It is impossible to understand the polarized nature of Thailand's recent politics, not to mention a whole host of other issues including the country's struggles to escape the middle income trap, without a long, hard look at the failing system of household registration (*thabian ban*). The current system, introduced in 1956, provides every household with an Interior Ministry document listing all those who reside there; identity cards and other official documents are issued based on the household registration document. The *thabian ban* underpins the electoral register, as well as the system of military conscription. At the heart of Thailand's troubles is a central challenge: huge swathes of the population, perhaps up to twenty million people (from an estimated total population of sixty-eight million), do not really live in the places where they officially reside. Their ID cards state that they live in the provinces – often, though not always, in villages in the populous Northeast or the somewhat less populous North – but in reality they spend most of the year in urban areas, primarily in the capital city and five adjoining provinces (Samut Prakan, Nakhon Pathom, Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, and Samut Sakhon) which together comprise Greater Bangkok.<sup>10</sup> Unlike in neighboring Burma or Vietnam, these workers are

<sup>10</sup>According to the National Statistical Office, in 2013, eighty-four percent of all internal migrants were five year migrants from the Northeast. Cited in Piyawat 2015, 3.

not required to register as migrants with the authorities. Because of this discrepancy between formal location and actual location, a whole host of official statistics based on population figures is basically bogus, and assumptions on which budget allocations are assigned are highly misleading. It also means that rural Thai electoral constituencies are significantly over-represented at the expense of urban ones. At the same time, since good services (such as schools and hospitals) and employment opportunities are excessively concentrated in and around Bangkok, this “over-representation” of the provinces offers a means of offsetting considerable inequities, and arguably forms part of an implicit social contract.

### The hybridity problem

My focus is on those Thais whom Naruemon Thabchumpon and I have termed “urbanized villagers.”<sup>11</sup> Our research began when we were trying to understand more about the supporters of former premier Thaksin Shinawatra who joined the redshirt movement and took part in the 2010 rallies against the Abhisit Vejjajiva government,<sup>12</sup> rallies that were violently suppressed by the military. Our surveys and interviews with 2010 protest members revealed that the characterization of redshirt protestors by both domestic and international commentators, including a useful commentary by Dr Prawase Wasi, as “poor farmers” was both interesting and misleading.<sup>13</sup> These were indeed poor farmers: but paradoxically they were poor farmers who were not poor and also were not farmers.

Our informants were poor in the sense that they typically had a lot of debt and were struggling to make ends meet, often juggling paid employment with small business activities such as running roadside stalls or mobile shops. They were not poor in the sense that they had incomes roughly comparable with the lower echelons of the salaried middle classes, and sometimes even a bit higher. But their livelihoods were insecure, and they could easily be derailed by a spell of ill-health or some other adversity. They were farmers in the sense that many of them, or their family members, owned small plots of agricultural land in their home communities. Some of them self-identified as farmers when asked about their occupation. But they were also not farmers, since they did not earn the bulk of their living through farming, and most of them did little or no farm work during the course of a typical year. For most urbanized villagers, an earlier pattern of returning “home” during the rice planting and harvesting seasons was no longer possible. Many have become what Ammar Siamwalla has termed “farm entrepreneurs,” who hire other villagers or migrant laborers from Burma, Cambodia, or Laos to plant and harvest crops on their lands.<sup>14</sup> The International Organization for Migration estimates that there are at least four million foreign migrant workers in Thailand. In the past, migrants would return to their villages for a few weeks a year to tend rice paddies: now, work and family commitments in the city mean they are less and less

<sup>11</sup>See Naruemon and McCargo 2011.

<sup>12</sup>The Abhisit Vejjajiva government was a Democrat-led coalition administration that assumed power in December 2008, without benefit of an election, as a result of a back-room political deal. It ended when the Democrats lost the July 2011 general election.

<sup>13</sup>See Prawase 2010.

<sup>14</sup>Informal discussion by Naruemon Thabchumpon with Ammar Siamwalla and Porpan Ouiyanont, Bangkok, June 28, 2010.

inclined to do so. Despite much talk of urban depopulation following the 1997–1998 Asian financial crises, few of the migrants who returned to the countryside during that economic recession did so to stay.

Most importantly, however, as in China and elsewhere, these urbanized villagers did not want to be farmers, and very much hoped that their children would not become farmers either. Farming was a lower-class form of life, involving back-breaking work exposed to the sun. Our informants were open about preferring indoor work in towns and cities, work that would allow them to have fairer complexions and provide them with prospects of upward social, financial, and educational mobility.<sup>15</sup> Long used to being order-takers, they aspired to become order-givers.

Former Premier Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–2006) and his political parties succeeded in attracting consistent electoral support from these urbanized villagers. Pro-Thaksin parties presented themselves as the voice of the underdog, challenging the overweening sense of entitlement, paternalism, and complacency emanating from the capital city and the political establishment. Thaksin policies such as the thirty baht healthcare scheme (which allowed people to be treated for any illness in a public hospital for around one US dollar), the relief of farmers' debt, and village development funds to promote small-scale enterprises at the local level all channeled benefits directly into the hands of ordinary voters. Through such policies, as well as through rhetorical attacks on the complacency of Bangkok, pro-Thaksin parties were able to lock down the votes of urbanized villagers in successive elections for an entire decade (Figure 2).

While the central focus of the urbanized villager argument is on mobility of villagers into Bangkok (the ruralization of the cities) a second dimension of my argument concerns the *urbanization* of rural areas. I have often had a similar experience when driving into a Thai town that I have not visited before. I leave the highway and follow a sign indicating that the center of the *amphoe muang* (urban district) is ten kilometers away. But within a couple of kilometers I find traffic thickening and buildings growing denser. I am in what looks like a town, but it takes another five kilometers to reach the huge porticos that herald our arrival in the municipality (*tesaban*) itself. Many of those ostensibly living in villages are actually living in towns, and vice versa. Frequently, they have not moved to town: the town has moved to them.

In the mid-1990s, Thailand created a new system of local government, supposedly a form of decentralization, featuring elected sub-district administrative organizations (SAOs).<sup>16</sup> Originally, the SAOs were meant to be low-key affairs, run by elected officials with a skeleton staff and working out of spare school classrooms (easy to find in a country with a rapidly falling birthrate) or other under-used local facilities. Twenty years on, SAOs compete with one another to erect fancy buildings and acquire small fleets of official vehicles. Between 2008 and 2012, 627 SAOs were upgraded to *thesaban tambon* – municipal sub-districts, heading by mini-mayors – of which there are now more than 2000. The Interior Ministry has proposed a bill to convert all remaining SAOs into mini-municipalities. Very soon, everyone in Thailand may be living in a town, at least on paper.

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<sup>15</sup>The definitive account of the politics of skin-whitening creams in Thailand and other Asian countries has yet to be written. See Iverson 2016.

<sup>16</sup>To confuse matters, much of the literature in English refers to SAOs as TAOs, or “Tambon Administrative Organizations.”



**Figure 2.** Redshirts (supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra) gathered near Bangkok’s Democracy Monument on June 24, 2012, to celebrate the eightieth anniversary of the end of the absolute monarchy. Credit: Duncan McCargo.

The official Thai view of the village is thus extremely ambivalent. On the one hand, farmers are celebrated and statistics generated that overstate the centrality of agricultural employment in the Thai economy. The royalist discourse of a “sufficiency economy” valorizes farmers, arguing that deep personal connection with the land is both a form of patriotic loyalty and a rejection of the consumerist values of the city. Prominent royalist reformer Prawase Wasi has suggested that subsistence agriculture offers a viable alternative lifestyle; the Abhisit-created National Reform Assembly Prawase chaired called for farming families to be given five or six hectares (around two acres) of land for this purpose.<sup>17</sup> This valorization is a mixed blessing, implying that farming is a morally superior way of life and somehow more authentically Thai. While small scale farming is perfectly laudable, such ideas are difficult to unpack from paternalistic exhortations to rural-dwellers to know their place.

Some of my own former students have turned into weekend farmers, growing organic produce on smallholdings an hour’s drive from Bangkok. Mostly, these small organic farms are not paying their own way: they are yet another form of urbanized villages. But viewing the countryside through the lens of these city-dwellers-turned-weekend-farmers may lead urbanites to harbor unrealistic expectations about the realities of rural life; hobby farming is very different from earning a decent living from a small piece of land.

<sup>17</sup>Prachatai 2011.

## Political significance

A lot of Thais experience identity confusion, stranded somewhere between the urban and rural, the past and their current reality, and nostalgia and dreams. To some extent, this confusion is self-generated. People deliberately chose to remain registered residents of places where they do not really live, and which they may visit less and less over time. But their identity confusion is also deliberately constructed by state policies that allow millions of people to live, work, and even send their children to school in places where they do not officially reside, while also creating obstacles that prevent them from legalizing their status. Children can attend government schools in any part of the country, irrespective of the address on their ID cards (though they cannot access elite schools which have specific catchment areas) and migrant workers can sign up to receive thirty baht health care benefits at any public hospital. Factory owners often do not allow their workers to establish legal residence in the dormitories they inhabit; people living in temporary or informal housing, on construction sites or in slums, face similar problems. Migrant workers, such as Northeasterners employed in the South, are referred to by the derogatory term *prachakorn faeng*, “hidden population.” While in theory the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority urges those living in the city to establish their household registration in the capital, in practice those living in factory dormitories and informal housing are usually unable to do so. Since it is much easier to prove you live somewhere where you do not live at all (the village headman has almost certainly known your family for decades), there is a strong incentive to maintain what is a fictive house registration status. Bangkok is already a primate city, sucking in the lion’s share of the country’s resources;<sup>18</sup> if the government fully acknowledged the extent to which the metropolis acts as a huge population magnet, the capital would be entitled to even more than it already receives. Pretending the provinces have more population than they really do is one way of mitigating the resource and budgetary imbalances that exist, part of an informal social contract.

Jeremy Wallace argues that authoritarian regimes such as China are guilty of “juking the stats”<sup>19</sup> – manipulating economic data to suggest more favorable interpretations. In the Thai case, the shaky nature of population statistics based on misleading household registrations is widely understood, but rarely seen as a problem. In a book focused primarily on China, Wallace argues that rapid urbanization poses dangers for non-democratic regime survival, especially when associated with “induced concentration,” the centrifugal pull of a single large city which draws in population from a wide area. He argues that regime survival hinges on:

... *urban concentration*, that is, the share of the urban population in a country that lives in its largest city. It is also possible to think of the political importance of urban concentration solely in terms of the capital city.<sup>20</sup>

Reviewing a large dataset that included many African countries, Wallace goes on to argue that excessive urbanization is a “Faustian pact”: it can boost a regime in the short term, but ultimately results in the destabilization of the political system. He also argues that instability may arise without any riots or disruptive events actually taking place. Instead, the mere

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<sup>18</sup>See London 1977.

<sup>19</sup>See Wallace 2016.

<sup>20</sup>Wallace 2014, 50.

expectation of such events may be enough to produce instability and threaten a regime's survival. Lots of farmers pouring into a primate city "represent more kindling for potential urban explosions in the future."<sup>21</sup>

Can these alarming claims be retrospectively applied to Thailand, which was until recently viewed as an emerging democracy, but also has a peerless track record of modern instability? Thailand holds the record for the largest number of both military coups and new constitutions since 1932, while few countries have experienced such protracted large scale street protests over the past two decades, including several episodes of mass violence. Do high levels of unregulated migration into the Thai capital partly account for this instability?

According to census statistics, Bangkok had a population of 8.3 million in 2010. When the five surrounding provinces are included, greater Bangkok had a 2010 census population of 14.6 million. But while census data is more accurate than household registration data, since it supposedly counts people where they actually live,<sup>22</sup> it still omits a lot of long-term migrants, not to mention non-Thai citizens.<sup>23</sup> It is safe to assume that the actual 2017 population of Greater Bangkok is close to eighteen million, and it could easily be more. If so, this is between a quarter and a third of the country's total population, an extraordinary example of urban concentration. If Wallace is right, this degree of urban concentration is not simply a symptom of other problems, but could partly explain political instability.

Some regimes have sought to use impose migration restrictions, regulatory mechanisms to prevent rural-dwellers from moving into cities. These range from China's well-known *hukou* system, to policies aimed at slum clearance and the prevention of informal settlements. Vietnam has a household registration system (*ho khau*) which also is not working properly: at least thirty-six percent of the population of greater Ho Chi Minh City and fourteen percent of the population of greater Hanoi has only temporary resident status in these major urban centers, amounting to at least 5.6 million people; the real figure is probably much higher.<sup>24</sup>

My own home city of Leeds in the United Kingdom experienced an amazing growth in population during the nineteenth century: from 53,000 in 1801 to 429,000 by 1901.<sup>25</sup> The adjoining city of Bradford, my father's birthplace, underwent an even more dramatic transformation: from 13,000 inhabitants in 1800 to over 100,000 in 1851.<sup>26</sup> The rapid expansion of English cities in the nineteenth century was hugely destabilizing politically. The Peterloo Massacre of 1817 in Manchester, when cavalry charged at demonstrators, killing fifteen, was just one flashpoint in an age of agitation and furious controversy over reform of the political system. In the decades that followed, Manchester was the focus of radicalism that at times threatened to boil over into outright revolution. But migrants moving into rapidly industrializing European cities quickly lost their ties to the countryside.<sup>27</sup> Few English migrants owned any land, as small landholdings had been lost during the enclosures of the eighteenth

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<sup>21</sup>Wallace 2014, 67.

<sup>22</sup>The city had a registered population of 5.6 million in 2011.

<sup>23</sup>In 2015 the International Organization for Migration estimated there were at least up to four million foreign migrants in Thailand, most of them migrant workers. This figure might well be too low. See <https://www.iom.int/news/thailand-migration-report-highlights-social-economic-challenges-migration>.

<sup>24</sup>See World Bank Group 2010.

<sup>25</sup>See <http://www.thoresby.org.uk/content/history.php>

<sup>26</sup>See <http://www.mylearning.org/bradfords-industrial-revolution/p-711/>

<sup>27</sup>For a discussion of these trends, see Briggs 1963, especially Chapter IV.

century. Changes in the landholding system created the industrial labor force that fueled Britain's economic transformation, and turned small towns into great cities in just a few decades. Over time, the peasants and villagers who moved into British industrial towns were thoroughly urbanized; by the time of the 1867 Reform Act, they had assumed new class identities as city-dwelling voters. The process of incorporating villagers into the Victorian city took several decades, despite the rapid severing of their ties to the countryside: going back was rarely a serious option.

In the Thai case, the centrifugal pull of Bangkok is offset by the continuing lure of the village. Villagers are reluctant to turn their backs on their birthplaces and their actual or imagined earlier lives as farmers. Even when they no longer perform any agricultural work, their families often still own some land, typically a few *rai* of rice paddy. This, coupled with a residual emotional attachment to their home communities, partly accounts for the implausibly high levels at which Thais self-identify as "farmers": thirty-two percent of the population in 2015, compared with just twelve percent in neighboring Malaysia.<sup>28</sup>

But there are also push factors: urbanized villagers find themselves spurned and derided by the very same capital city that needs them so badly. Northeasterners experience discrimination when they travel to work in central Thailand, where their "Lao" accents make them an object of ridicule.<sup>29</sup> Many Isan natives work hard to pass as Thai, covering up their origins and trying not to speak their local language in public. Their socio-economic identities are inextricably bound up with sub-ethnic identities, as marginalized peoples forced to subsume their culture and language to a dominant Thai-ness. The Northeast in particular has long been a site of political resistance to the power of the center, albeit a resistance that has grown more muted since the early decades of the twentieth century. Many of these people fail to thrive either in their birth communities – where there are too few economic opportunities – or in Thailand's urban areas, where they struggle to make ends meet. A study of migrants from rural communities in Buriram to Bangkok and other urban areas revealed that while eighty-four percent were able to increase their incomes, they worked longer hours and lived in inferior accommodation.<sup>30</sup> A 2012 Asian Development Bank (ADB) study suggested that while migrants are generally able to boost their incomes by working in greater Bangkok, they can only access unskilled employment because they tend to be poorly educated. As a result, migration "is less effective in reducing inequality and relative poverty."<sup>31</sup> In other words, for most urbanized villagers, migration does not offer a route to greater social mobility: only about two percent of the 2000 Northeastern migrants surveyed in 2010 earned in the region of twenty US dollars per day, which would place them in what the ADB optimistically terms "the new Asian middle class." Almost seventy percent earned less than 300 baht (USD eight) per day, and twenty percent earned below the then minimum wage of 206 baht per day. Nearly seventy percent had no written work contract, meaning their employment was inherently casual and precarious. As a result, mingling with full-time urban dwellers

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<sup>28</sup>See World Bank Employment in Agriculture Dataset 2017, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS>. Lower levels of Malaysian self-identification as farmers are also linked to different landholding patterns and the prevalence of large plantations.

<sup>29</sup>McCargo and Krisadawan 2004; Saowanee and McCargo 2014.

<sup>30</sup>Piyawat 2015, 70.

<sup>31</sup>Mulubrhan et al. 2012, 10–11. Migrants in this study came from the three Northeastern provinces of Buriram, Nakhon Phanom and Ubon Ratchathani.

did not make urbanized villagers share big-city political views. Instead, they remained attached to their provincial roots.

Critiquing Anek Laothamatas's work (1996), I argue that Thailand contains not two but at least three "democracies" or major political constituencies. Of these three, the hybridized domain of the urbanized villagers is arguably more important than the two more settled realms of city-dwellers and of year-round provincial residents, since this vast hybrid constituency has determined the outcome of Thailand's general elections going back at least to 2001. The ability of pro-Thaksin parties to capture the loyalties of urbanized villager voters ensured their success in the 2001, 2005, 2007, and 2011 elections – not to mention the boycotted and later annulled elections of 2006 and 2014. Most urbanized villagers travel back to their home villages to vote in general elections, while others take advantage of advanced voting rules that allow them to cast absentee ballots a week prior to the official polling day. Around two million of these villagers were registered in Bangkok as advanced voters for the 2014 general election. Whether they cast their ballots in Bangkok or their home villages, they are choosing provincial candidates, not those in the capital. Despite obstacles to electoral participation, Northeastern provinces that are home to large numbers of migrant workers often have very high voter turnout rates, and migrant workers typically vote along the same party lines as permanent resident in the provinces. Bangkok was affected by major street protests at various junctures in 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2013–2014, some of which lasted for weeks or even months. Levels of political polarization and partisanship are surely fueled by a sizeable semi-itinerant urban population.

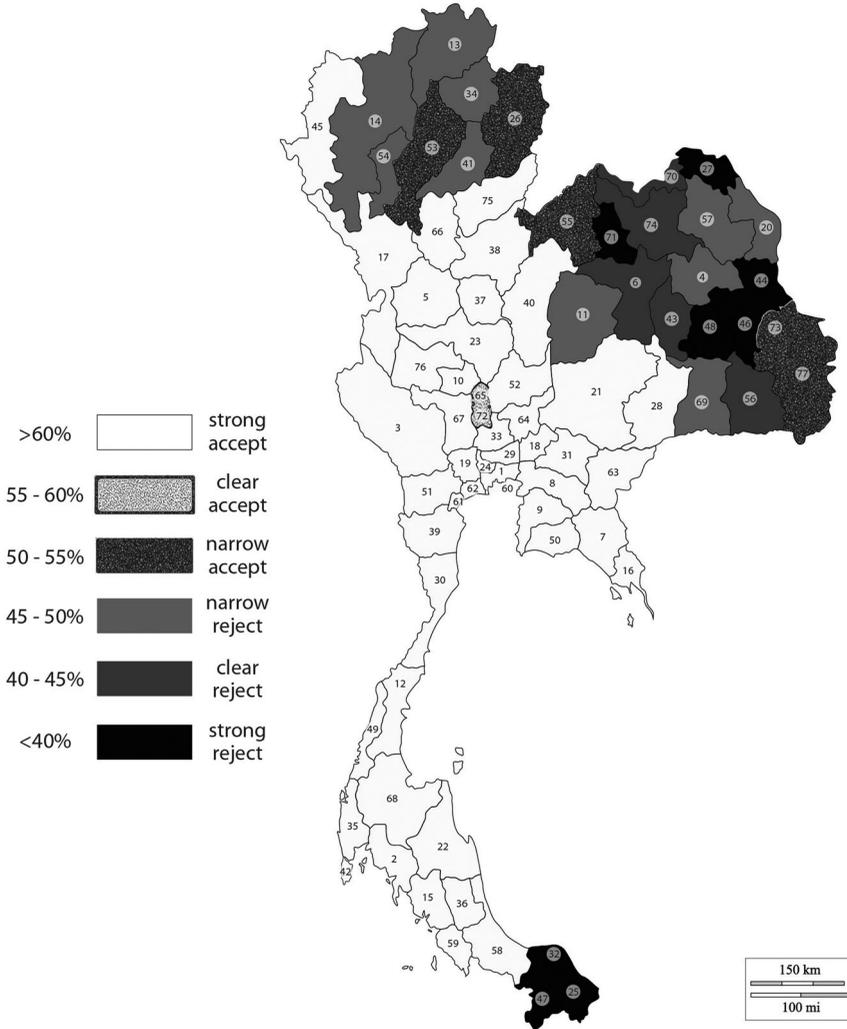
Through the 2006–2007, 2014–2015, and 2015–2016 constitution drafting processes, Thailand's conservative elites sought to curb the powers of elected politicians. While dressed up in the language of countering corruption, promoting reform, and latterly restoring unity and national happiness, their real goals were clearly to reduce the appeal of pro-Thaksin parties in particular, while also downgrading the legitimacy and authority of elected office-holders in general. Mechanisms such as changing electoral systems and replacing elected with appointed senators were a technical fix: they failed to address the root causes of the country's political polarization (Figure 3).

If political polarization arises partly because millions and millions of Thai citizens live in a legal and identity limbo, stranded culturally and socio-economically between the village and the city, then one solution would be to reduce the numbers of urbanized villagers. Given that urbanized villagers are not declining in numbers through upward social mobility, any reduction cannot simply be left to market forces. The state could act in one of two main ways: increased regulation, or formally recognizing the status quo. Increased regulation would mean curtailing the rights of migrants to move to the city and instituting rules – such as only allowing children to attend schools where they officially live – that would make migration much more difficult. Yet politically going down the road of authoritarian regimes such as China is not a realistic option for Thailand. In other words, the only serious way of resolving the issue is to register people's households (and hence establish their voting rights) in the places they actually live – following the lead of the census agency which already aims to track people by location and not by formal residency.

Unsurprisingly, it is also very difficult to find support for any change to the current system. For bureaucrats in the capital, often broadly sympathetic to the Democrat Party

## Thai 2016 Referendum Results by Province

### Question 1: 2016 Draft constitution



**Figure 3.** 2016 Constitutional Referendum results by location. Credit: Duncan McCargo.

and the establishment status quo, registering all urbanized villagers to vote where they live and work seems like a nightmare. Overnight, Bangkok would be swamped by new voters, likely to be more favorable to pro-Thaksin parties: they would no longer be concentrated in the Eastern zone of the megalopolis, with its more rural electoral character. But do not look to pro-Thaksin or indeed other regionally-based politicians to support the idea either: they are afraid that reducing the number of eligible voters in the provinces could reduce their political support. In this respect, Thailand is both similar to and different from Japan

and Malaysia, where incumbent parties have long benefited from rural malapportionment. At the same time, reassigning provincial residents to urban areas would mean that budget allocations for the provinces might be substantially cut, based on the more accurate population figures that would follow the first census following the introduction of a new system. In the short term at least, both of Thailand's competing power networks stand to lose by regularizing the position of urbanized villagers. In short, an implicit social contract in which the Thai state turns a blind eye to the absence from the provinces of millions of migrant workers could be replaced by a new social contract in which urbanized villagers are acknowledged, embraced, and encouraged to choose between their competing urban/rural identities.

Addressing this issue involves thinking long-term. The inexorable rise of the urbanized villager is a short-term solution to Thailand's socio-economic needs, providing an instant labor force for greater Bangkok and boosting the incomes of families with their roots in the provinces. But in the long-term, permanent temporary migration on such a huge scale fails to reduce inequality or enhance social mobility; worse still, it fuels rampant political instability and polarization. If Bangkok's urbanized villagers were encouraged to become fully-fledged Bangkokians, residing and voting in the capital, they would be invested in a more stable and secure future for themselves. For those from the Thai countryside who seek it, the path to a more middle class urban life should be opened, sign-posted, and well-lit.

Of course, some urban villagers will ultimately prefer to return to the countryside, especially given the ongoing urbanization of many provincial communities that could be further supported through government policies. Enlightened support for more *thesaban tambon* to create vibrant cultural and economic hubs with substantial control over their own affairs would be an interesting route to pursue; locally elected provincial governors could preside over networks of new mini-municipalities. In short, urbanized villagers should be given every incentive to choose more sustainable lives that combine the urban and the rural: either pursuing a more settled and secure life as legal residents of greater Bangkok, or a richer life in their home provincial communities, one that incorporates positive features of the urban. Thailand's political future could only be enhanced by the creation of these genuine alternatives.

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## Notes on contributor

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