
VOTE-BUYING IN THAILAND'S NORTHEAST

The July 1995 General Election

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The argument that Thailand was a bureaucratic polity characterized by limited popular participation has been challenged in recent years by the manifest rise of civil society. At the same time, business interests have assumed growing political importance, challenging the traditional pre-eminence of government officials and military officers. In particular, politics in provincial areas have come to be strongly influenced by a rising business elite. One effect of this changing landscape has been growing commercialization of the electoral process, as was clearly seen in the July 2, 1995, general election. Vote-buying and other abuses were widespread, especially in provincial areas. This article seeks to examine these developments in northeastern Thailand and relate them to wider patterns of political change in the country.

Background to the July 1995 General Election

Since the 1932 "revolution" that ended the absolute monarchy, Thailand has alternated between military and civilian rule. The most recent military intervention was on February 23, 1991, when a coup group known as the National Peace-Keeping Council (NPKC) seized power. The NPKC restored civilian rule in 1992, when two general elections took place: the first, in March, led to the formation of a coalition government headed by former coup leader General Suchinda Kraprayoon. Suchinda's government collapsed in May, fol-

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lowing mass protests on the streets of Bangkok and the fatal shooting of around 50 unarmed civilians by the military. The second election, on September 13, saw parties divided into two relatively distinct camps: the "devil parties" (including Chart Thai), which had been associated with the pro-military Suchinda government, and the "angel parties" (including the Democrats), which had opposed the Suchinda regime. The narrow victory of the "angels" was hailed by some commentators as a triumph for liberal democracy.

The July 1995 general election came about following the collapse in May of the five-party coalition government, led by Democrat Party leader Chuan Leekpai, who dissolved Parliament to avoid certain defeat in a no-confidence vote. The opposition parties, led by Chart Thai leader Banharn Silapa-archa, had accused the Democrats of corruption and mismanagement over a massive land reform program. Ironically, Chart Thai was a party with a checkered history of its own involvement in numerous scandals during its periods in office. Banharn was a leading member of Chatichai Choonavan's so-called "buffet cabinet" from 1988 to 1991, and was later among those investigated by the 1991 coup group for allegedly being "unusually rich"—a euphemism for corrupt.

Unlike in September 1992, there was no clear-cut, quasi-ideological distinction between the Democrats and the Chart Thai in the 1995 general election. The policy stances of the main rival parties were less important than the allegations and counter-allegations about corruption, MP-buying, excessive campaign spending, vote-buying, and abuse of power. Both parties used questionable strategies to lay claim to the moral high ground, the Chart Thai arguing that the Democrats had proved themselves unfit for office and the Democrats accusing Chart Thai of attempting to buy a way to electoral victory. Rural machine politics were nothing new—they had been a characteristic of Thai elections in provincial areas for the past 15 years—yet, money eclipsed all other issues in deciding the outcome of the 1995 polls, which saw the Chart Thai Party form the new coalition government after winning 92 seats compared with 86 won by the Democrats. This article will focus upon the use of money in the Thai Northeast during the election campaign. The Northeast is the largest, most populous, and poorest region of the country, and has the most members of Parliament (137).

The Vote-Buying Question

As Sombat Chantornvong has argued, vote-buying and other illegal, clandestine campaign practices cannot be viewed in isolation, but must be placed clearly in the context of the Thai political order.¹ The several overlapping

1. Sombat Chantornvong, *Leuktangwikrit: Panha lae thang ok* [Thai elections in crisis: Problems and solutions] (Bangkok: Kopfai Publishing, 1993), pp. 13–16.

explanations for the prevalence of these practices include the nature of the electoral system, the nature of the party system, the nature of political power and influence in provincial areas, and prevailing cultural norms.

The Thai electoral system promotes contestation, not simply between competing political parties but also between rival candidates from the same party. Most constituencies elect either two or three MPs. In a three-member district, for example, parties are obliged to nominate a full slate of three candidates and voters may select any three candidates on their ballots, regardless of party. Hence, candidates running from the same party are in direct competition with one another, and frequently run separate campaigns with their own posters and support teams. Many parties campaign only for a single "real" candidate in a constituency, with the running mates serving as "stunt men" placed on the ballot solely to satisfy legal requirements. In some northeastern constituencies as many as 11 parties submitted candidates, resulting in 33 names on the ballot. Parties are obliged by law to field candidates for at least 25% of all seats (98 of 391 in July 1995), a requirement that compounds the proliferation of token candidacies. Large multi-member districts make serious campaigning difficult, especially in rural areas with scattered populations and poor transport links; Si Sa Ket District 1, for example, contains 733 villages.

Yuttapol Srimungkun, a Democrat MP who was elected from Maharakham in 1975 but failed in subsequent elections, attributed the rise of vote-buying to changes in electoral legislation enacted in 1979² that banned candidates from showing films and using traditional entertainers at election rallies. This eliminated a very low-cost form of campaigning, and unable to offer free entertainment to attract villages to political rallies, candidates felt obliged to pay voters directly for their support. Vote-buying was further institutionalized in the Northeast when General Kriangsak Chamanan, a former premier, stood in a Roi-et by-election in 1981. Kriangsak and his opponent, Bunlert Lertpreecha, spent heavily in a fierce contest, giving rise to the so-called "Roi-et disease," a plague of vote-buying that later spread to other provinces across the region.³

The nature of the Thai party system is also relevant to an understanding of vote-buying and electoral malpractices. Most Thai parties are loosely structured groups of factions, based around a number of senior patrons who compete with one another to gain lucrative cabinet posts.⁴ Thai parties typically use their control of ministries to recoup election expenses, establish war chests for future elections, and distribute favors to supporters. Since the

2. Interview, 1 July 1995.

3. *Thai Rath*, 19 June 1995; *Siam Post*, 26 June 1995.

4. James Ockey, "Political Parties, Factions and Corruption in Thailand," *Modern Asian Studies*, 28:2, pp. 251-77.

1970s, national politicians and faction leaders have formed increasingly close ties with local influential figures in provincial areas.⁵ The Thai term *phu mi itthiphon* (influential figure)—like the closely related term *chaopho* (godfather)—is difficult to define but generally refers to individuals who have achieved significant wealth and influence in provincial areas, largely through semi-legal or illegal business practices. Typically, such practices include sub-standard construction contracting, running underground lotteries, smuggling, and illegal logging. In many cases, successful parliamentary candidates are either influential figures themselves or their relatives or close associates. For politicians of this ilk, business and politics are two complementary activities: political power allows them to consolidate and expand their business activities, while income generated from business gives them access to political power. The participation of influential figures in the campaign process, whether as candidates, canvassers, or financiers, leads to a commercialization of parliamentary elections, which they typically view as investment opportunities.

Cultural factors that contribute to the prevalence of vote-buying include the idea of *bunkhun*, indebtedness to the benevolence of others. In Thailand's hierarchical society, some rural voters will readily agree to support candidates who are known to have the backing of leaders such as the district or village headman, the schoolteacher, or the abbot of the local temple. Rural voters with limited education often feel obligated to candidates who have made payments to them, and are inclined to support them at the ballot box. Many devout Buddhists, especially older people, believe that failing to vote for a candidate who had paid them would be a *bap*—an act of demerit. During the 1995 campaign, a famous monk from Nakhorn Ratchasima, Luang Pho Khun, declared that such an act did not constitute a *bap*, but his statement—widely covered by the media—had little impact on the outcome of the election.

Vote-buying became a matter of concern to academics and urban elites at the time of the March 1992 election.⁶ To address problems of electoral fraud and promote a citizen-based democracy, Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun set up the PollWatch Commission in January, which attracted 20,000 volunteers to monitor the March election. PollWatch, which is funded by the government, was reconstituted in July after the government fell and Anand set new elections for September 1992. Though vote-buying was still active in that campaign, PollWatch 2 with 60,000 volunteers was seen as somewhat successful in curbing the practice. by the time Chuan Leekpai dissolved Par-

5. Sombat, *Leuktangwikrit*, pp. 111–20; also Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidh Piriyarangsan, *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, Political Economy Centre, Faculty of Economics, 1994), pp. 51–97.

6. Interview with Chaiyan Ratjagool, Chiang Mai, 8 January 1996.

liament in May 1995, PollWatch had become part of the public's perception of normal procedures in a clean election; it had to be revived even though the Democrat-led government was less than enthusiastic at the prospect. The purpose of PollWatch 3, once again, was to curb electoral fraud as well as educate and encourage Thais, especially in the villages, to become more involved in politics and self-government. But the organization was weakened when the Democrat Party switched its main campaign issue from land reform to money politics early in the campaign. PollWatch was often seen as a political tool of the ruling Democrat Party; the Democrats controlled the Interior Ministry, which was responsible for organizing the elections.

Campaign Management: Organization and Mobilization

The July 1995 election campaign lasted less than a month. Given the importance of money and timing—"twenty-one days of big spending," as one campaign worker put it—it is instructive to examine the campaigns in terms of a six-week schedule which followed a broadly similar pattern throughout the country: Week 1—candidate recruitment, week 2—central campaign organization, week 3—*huakhanaen* recruitment, week 4—*huakhanaen* organization and management, week 5—campaign rallies, and week 6—vote-buying. Close reference will be made to a key case study, the campaign of one candidate known by the pseudonym Kail. This article does not, however, seek to generalize from a single case study. Rather, it makes use of a particular case precisely because it so clearly illustrates patterns of vote-buying activity that were identified in a number of different provinces visited by the authors during several days of interviews and participant observation.⁷

Week 1: Candidate Recruitment

From the dissolution of the House on May 19 until candidate registration week June 5–9, all parties searched for electable candidates. This process entailed what the Thai press called "head-hunting"; parties were forced to bargain to maintain their former MPs as well as to attract former MPs from other parties. Thus, vote-buying was preceded by a furious round of "MP-buying." It was widely reported that the price of an MP had increased from a range of 3–5–7 million baht to 10–15–20 million (the exchange rate is ap-

7. These interviews were conducted by the authors with election candidates, campaign organizers, canvassers, voters, Pollwatch volunteers, and government officials during June 10–11 and June 15–23 in six northeastern provinces. A more detailed account, including comparative research conducted in every region of Thailand during June–July 1995, is forthcoming by William A. Callahan, *PollWatch, Elections and Civil Society: A Comparative Study of Thailand and the Philippines*.

proximately 25 baht to US\$1). The main targets of this criticism were the Chart Thai Party and the newly formed Nam Thai Party, both of which were quite successful in attracting former MPs.

Election campaigns can be classified according to four levels of candidates, each of which has its own schedule and strategy: new candidates, former MPs, former MPs who headed their team, and former MPs who were patrons of candidates beyond their own district and thus were prospective ministers. For entry-level candidates, campaign funders would decide the level of initial support to be granted based on their view of the candidate's election prospects. The backer would then give seed money to this campaign—perhaps 800,000 baht—and then assess the popularity of the candidate on a weekly basis to determine the extent of further support. If there is no response to the seed money, the party or sponsor could cut off further funding, leaving the candidate to support himself, but if there is a favorable popular response, the party would give the campaign more money, especially in the crucial final five days before the election when most vote-buying occurs. The second level of campaign involves former MPs who are already a known quantity electorally. For such candidates, the party or sponsor decides at the outset how much money to provide—usually at least 10 million baht—and then makes no assessments and no further payments.

The third campaign level involves former MPs who are expanding their power-bases beyond their own seats, and seek to have their teams of one or two running-mates (candidates at level one or two) elected with them. These candidates do not look to the party for support, but personally fund both their own and their running mates' campaigns. Such candidates are usually both wealthy and well-connected to local bureaucrats. Candidates in the fourth category resemble those in the third, but are even wealthier. At this level, the former MP's influence reaches beyond his own district and constitutes a distinct faction within the party. New candidates standing under the auspices of such an MP do not receive all their funding from the party, but from the faction boss. Once politicians control a number of seats (typically between four and seven), they can demand ministerial posts.

Kai was a well-established politician trying to make the transition from the third to fourth level of campaign. He had already been elected to Parliament four times prior to July 1995, and his strategy now was to spread spending to other districts, and ultimately into other provinces, so as to become a regional faction boss. To do this, Kai relied upon a sophisticated family structure that dominated both the economy and the politics of his province. Campaign funds could be drawn from the family's collection of businesses, including the largest construction company in the province, a hotel, restaurants, a law firm, a hospital, a theater, and motorcycle dealerships. Kai's family also made substantial profits through its control of the illegal lottery in the prov-

ince. Furthermore, Kai had close relatives in local government to complement his seat in the National Assembly: two younger brothers were provincial councillors, while the mayor and deputy mayor of the provincial capital were both relatives. Kai's running mates for the parliamentary elections were also recruited according to family ties: the other two candidates were his younger relative, Uan, a provincial councillor (category 1 candidate), and Daeng, a former MP who had recently switched parties (category 2 candidate) and who was now related to Kai by marriage. It is noteworthy that all three candidates are so-called "new generation" politicians, under 40 years of age. This was a conscious decision made by the retiring old guard, perhaps to take advantage of the new crop of 18- and 19-year-old voters who were newly enfranchised by the constitutional amendments of 1995.

Week 2: Central Campaign Organization

Each campaign had a central manager who was responsible for coordinating the entire enterprise. This individual could be the candidate himself but was more commonly a trusted friend or relative. The manager coordinated a small number of intermediaries—10 of them in the Kai case study—who first gathered together to work out a general campaign strategy and budget. Then, each of the intermediaries was assigned a number of villages, typically from 40 to 80, for which he or she was responsible. The candidate was not usually directly involved in the decision-making at the village level; the tasks of distributing cash and gifts to designated recipients were delegated to others. The campaign was thus decentralized, with the intermediaries working out local strategies and budgets for their areas as well as recruiting *huakhanaen*. This division of labor made it easier for candidates to deny all knowledge if their canvassers were apprehended buying votes or breaking electoral laws.⁸ Lek was one of the intermediaries working for Kai.

Week 3: Huakhanaen Recruitment

Although the Thai word for campaigning (*ha siang*) means "wooing votes," the central electioneering activity is *ha huakhanaen* (wooing canvassers). Finding canvassers, managing them, and channeling money through them are the three key steps to election. *Huakhanaen* is an ambiguous term (lit., head vote) but is variously translated as canvasser, vote gatherer, and vote bank. Canvassing encompasses a wide variety of election activities, ranging from the legal publicizing of party platforms to vote-buying to threats and vio-

8. One northeastern MP, Newin Chidchob (Chart Thai-Buriram), used this tactic to distance himself from the canvassers in his district who were caught with 11.4 million baht packaged with his election cards. (*Sunday Nation*, 17 September 1995, p. B6.)

lence. The activities of each *huakhanaen* are generally limited to one or two villages.

As a successful former MP, Kai had maintained relations with his campaign organization throughout his time in Parliament, and was therefore able to identify prospective *huakhanaen* without difficulty. To recruit new ones, Lek asked existing *huakhanaen* to suggest names, as well as getting recommendations from other sources. During the September 1992 election, Lek had computerized his *huakhanaen* lists, and updated the file for the 1995 campaign. Most of the changes were replacements for old *huakhanaen* who had retired or died; Lek also added some new canvassers to his list but did not fire anyone.

Three main levels of *huakhanaen* are found within the village, the chief, the deputy, and the supporting *huakhanaen*. For new candidates, recruiting experienced canvassers is crucial. There is evidence that a significant proportion of *huakhanaen* sell themselves to the highest bidder on an election-by-election basis, and some even work for candidates from rival parties during the same election. Thus, even long-serving ex-MPs could not always rely on their former *huakhanaen* to play the part of loyal retainers. For the position of chief *huakhanaen* in each village, Lek sought to recruit the person best placed to deliver support, generally someone with significant social status. In the past, the village headmen were the most sought-after *huakhanaen*, but in most parts of the Northeast, village headmen are no longer as influential as they were. The traditional model, whereby a headman would pledge to "deliver" the votes of the whole village in return for a specific political favor such as a new road, had largely fallen into disrepute, the result of numerous examples of broken promises by MPs. The old model did persist in certain areas, however, such as in Nakhorn Ratchasima Province.

One drawback of recruiting village headmen as canvassers is that they are technically local government officials and cannot legally participate in electioneering. In some cases, wives or other relatives of local officials (such as the village headman, schoolteacher, or district health officer) are recruited as chief *huakhanaen*, as they can work more openly than the officials themselves and their participation indicates the approval of village leaders. There is evidence that an increasing number of women are becoming *huakhanaen*.⁹ In general, chief *huakhanaen* are community leaders, people with *barami* (loosely translated as charisma), which gives them special standing in their local areas. It is not enough for candidates to spend money on vote-buying; it is essential for them to direct that money through the right channels. There

9. Ammar Siamwalla and Ananya Puchonkul, eds., *Rainganchababsombun kanleuktang samachik sapha phuthaenrasadorn*, 22 Minakhom 2535 [Full report on the parliamentary election, 1992], Bangkok: Bangkok Press, 1992, p. 101.

were numerous reports of candidates spending large sums of money, but failing to win election as a result of having chosen the wrong *huakhanaen*.

Week 4: Huakhanaen Organization and Management

The next stage of the campaign involves the intermediaries meeting with the *huakhanaen*, allocating work, and paying them. Typically, the chief *huakhanaen* divides up the village so that each lower-level *huakhanaen* has between five and ten houses to cover. Most of these deputy *huakhanaen* do not know the candidate personally, and it is the chief's job to ensure that the deputies are going to deliver the votes, visiting them regularly to check on the progress of the campaign. Many *huakhanaen* actually play very little part in the canvassing process. Lek estimated that four out of 25 canvassers in a typical village are dependable, and "the others play supporting roles." Lek was aware that since each village contained relatively few prominent people, some of his "supporting *huakhanaen*" were also working for other candidates. He explained that he recruited them anyway so that they would not become "enemies" of his candidates. This strategy of saturation recruitment meant that in some villages more than one in five households included a *huakhanaen*. The going rate for a *huakhanaen* varied considerably, although 300 baht was common for lower-level canvassers in the villages of the Northeast during the July 1995 campaign. After the election, Lek expressed doubts about the effectiveness of paying so many people 300 baht; one rival candidate was successful by paying a few well-placed people in each village 3,000 baht. *Huakhanaen* enjoy other benefits apart from monetary payment, including enhanced social status and privileged access to local patrons.

Week 5: Campaign Rallies

On a typical day of week five, Kai and his running mates held four rallies during the afternoon and evening—at 2, 4, 6, and 8 P.M.—each attracting crowds of several hundred people from surrounding villages. Before leaving his office, Lek would change from his business shirt and tie into a denim shirt and jeans for the countryside and switch from a briefcase to a casual bag, which contained lists of names and 80,000 baht in 20 baht notes still packaged from the bank. This cash was not for vote-buying—that would take place in the few days just prior to the election—but to "compensate people for the working time they spent coming to the rally." Each participant was to receive 20 baht. Although these transactions were not witnessed by the authors, the sums involved roughly corresponded with the rally program for the day: 4,000 20 baht notes would take care of four rallies of 1,000 voters each. At a Democrat rally in Mukdaharn attended by Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai on June 17, campaign managers were observed collecting lists of the 500

people who had been brought to the rally by *huakhanaen* from 76 villages. These lists were apparently used to assign attendance payments to the *huakhanaen*.

Kai's first two rallies took place at Buddhist temples, which characteristically serve as community centers for villages. The abbot of the first temple had only been informed of the rally that morning. Outside, the truck that served as a stage arrived and loud music started; a parade of 12 campaign vehicles (one carrying a five-piece Thai band) began ferrying people to the rally from surrounding villages. While the villagers sat waiting in the shade, the intermediary met with *huakhanaen* in the abbot's quarters, presumably to hand out the compensation money for distribution. Lek donated about 300 baht to the temple to cover electricity costs.

The rally got underway with a variety of warm-up activities. Interestingly, although the campaign team was working on behalf of a conservative political party with no strong principles, a "progressive" discourse was incorporated into the early stages of the proceedings, including a tape recording of pro-democracy activist and pop singer Ad Carabao criticizing alleged corruption by the Democrat Party. Each of the three candidates then delivered speeches for around 45 minutes, in the central Thai dialect. Daeng (seen as the weakest candidate) went first, then Uan, and finally team-leader Kai. They stressed their local origins and achievements at all four rallies, and made general attacks on the Democrats. Their style was much more serious than the speeches made by a senior northeastern Democrat, Suthat Ngernmoen, at rallies in Mukdaharn on June 17; speaking in the local Isan dialect (very similar to Lao), Suthat delivered a comic, populist oration that had his audience rolling about with laughter.

Week 6: Vote-Buying

Vote-buying was endemic in the Northeast during the election campaign, according to PollWatch, as all the main political parties were buying votes. Ten or 20 years ago, candidates would distribute small gifts such as cigarettes or betel nut, which showed their interest in the people and were more symbolic than material. Gradually, however, rural people began to expect cash payments, though payment in kind did persist in some areas. One *huakhanaen* in Khon Kaen divided people into three broad categories based on their educational level and social standing: the lowliest received cash payments, those at the intermediate level were given ducks, and the most senior were treated to drinks and meals during the run-up to the election. He also made a point of never mentioning which candidate or party he was working for; on the night before the election, he would go around the village asking people "not to forget" a particular number on the ballot. Some candidates in 1995 gave out gifts such as food, fish sauce, and sacks of rice. Sometimes free T-shirts,

sleeping mats, or bottled water bore a candidate's ballot number. Voting by number is an important feature of Thai elections in which illiterate or semi-literate voters memorize the numbers of their preferred candidates.

One informed estimate suggested that to ensure successful election in a competitive Northeast constituency, a candidate would need to spend in the region of 20–25 million baht (the official legal limit for campaign spending is one million baht per candidate). By no means would all of this money be passed on to the voters, perhaps only 5 or 6 million baht. Some of the remaining money would be used for legitimate expenses such as campaign vehicles, remunerating *huakhanaen*, making donations to temples and community groups, and bribing local officials. The minimum payment for an individual vote would vary by locality but in Khon Kaen was expected to be around 300 baht, up from 50 to 100 baht at the time of the September 1992 election. Heavy spending by parties with wealthy and ambitious leaders contributed to a doubling of actual election expenses in 1995 compared with September 1992, an inflationary trend that confounded some predictions that political parties would eventually exhaust their coffers. In any case, few parties were spending their own money; at the national level they were funded by banks and major corporations, which often made multi-million baht under-the-table donations to a range of different parties. A parallel process was at work at the local level, where hoteliers and other business people would donate on the order of 100,000 to 200,000 baht to promising candidates.

Lek, who was responsible for 40 villages in his district, disputed the payment figures of 300 baht per person, however, arguing that the large number of eligible voters (130,000 households in one typical three-member constituency) made it impossible to pay this much. He claimed that he expected to pay 100 baht per household in his district, less than would be paid in a municipal election where districts are smaller. However, Lek's low estimates were disputed by local PollWatch officials, who claimed that Lek's team gave out selective payments (confined to particular target villages) in excess of 1,000 baht per household on the night before the election. Decisions on final payments were not made until immediately before the polls. Each candidate's campaign managers collected information about payments made by their rivals, then adjusted their own payments accordingly so as to match or outbid other candidates. This waiting game required detailed and accurate intelligence about the progress of rival campaigns across the district. During the final days, many campaign managers opted to abandon weaker members of their team, who seemed to have little prospect of being elected, and direct their financial resources toward buying votes on behalf of the one or two candidates with the best prospects. In the past, it was common for all payments to voters to be made through *huakhanaen* in the villages, but as a result of problems with *huakhanaen* keeping money for themselves, many cam-

paign managers now preferred to send intermediaries to deliver payments personally. Sometimes *huakhanaen* would delegate other people—in one case, the man responsible for collecting water charges—to distribute payments prior to the election.

Apart from straight cash payments, numerous other variations on vote-buying have been used to good effect by different candidates. One widespread practice was paying people a small “rental fee,” typically 20 or 30 baht, to display election posters on the sides of their houses. This was not actually illegal, and it helped establish a connection between candidate and voter that was the prelude to a direct vote-buying payment in the final phase of the campaign. Many enterprising villagers displayed posters from a range of rival candidates. Another popular tactic was to sell election lottery tickets for, say, 5 or 10 baht; if all three candidates from a particular party won, the holder of the lottery ticket would win 1,000 baht or more, giving a lottery player a personal stake in the outcome of the election. It also appealed to the Thai love of gambling, and since many election candidates were themselves owners of illegal lottery operations, they could easily use their existing distribution network to market tickets. However, gambling could also work against candidates; in at least one Northeast constituency, many people bet that an unpopular MP would lose his seat, which he proceeded to do. In a three-member constituency, voters had three votes; some “sold” two of their votes, “saving” the third for the real candidate of their choice. For example, to avoid being tricked out of money by voters, some *huakhanaen* bought votes by “hiring” voters’ identity cards for use by agents of the *huakhanaen* who went to polls impersonating the voters.

Buying individual votes was not the only way of dispensing cash. Some candidates made multiple “donations” of several thousand baht to organizations such as housewives’ groups and youth clubs; others gave hundreds of thousands of baht to temples in order to win endorsement from well-respected monks, a practice that seemed especially common in Si Sa Ket Province. But it would be misleading to focus exclusively on electoral malpractices by candidates and voters. Vote-buying is intimately linked with the other main category of electoral fraud—biased government officials. Local officials such as police officers, district officers, and even provincial governors commonly receive generous “gifts” from parliamentary candidates during election campaigns. Thus, vote-buying is part of a wider pattern of electoral impropriety, and most of the fraud committed by candidates and their organizations could not proceed without the collusion or active participation of relevant government officials. At the local level, irregularities often occur at polling stations.

Other Factors in the Electoral Equation

Despite the importance of money in the July 1995 Thai election campaign, there was more to being elected than spending money, legally or illegally. Successful candidates, particularly incumbents or former MPs, had to campaign on the basis of their *phonngan* (achievements). However, the meaning of *phonngan* is contested. At the most basic level, it means paying attention to the people, visiting the constituency (many provincial MPs have their main homes in Bangkok), and maintaining contact with supporters. A good MP should maintain an office in the district and respond to problems raised by the people. Some voters see *phonngan* in terms of patronage, arguing that an MP should help people out with funeral expenses or treat voters to drinks at parties. Others regard projects supported by the MP's personal development fund of 20 million baht annually, funded by the state, as evidence of achievement. These projects typically include road improvements and the construction of *sala* (wooden roadside shelters). In principle, the existence of such development funds ought to favor incumbents at election time, but in practice, some MPs exploit their funds for personal gain. One *huakhanaen* explained that it is quite common for newcomers to be elected to Parliament, but then lose the next election because they fail to meet the needs of their constituents. If a *huakhanaen* took a voter with a problem to an MP's office and was unable to elicit a satisfactory response, the *huakhanaen* would lose face as an intermediary and would not want to support the MP in future elections.

More educated voters see *phonngan* in a broader context; for example, had the MP attracted business or tourism to the area? Relatively few voters viewed *phonngan* in terms of national-level government policies promoted by the MPs' party, such as land reform or increased support for education. Such policies had little impact on voter choices in the Northeast in July 1995. Kai explained that he was unable to make any use of his party's national policy manifesto in electioneering, as he knew that in the new coalition government, compromises would have to be made with other coalition members. In this campaign, local issues were much more salient than national ones.

Apart from *phonngan*, an MP seeking re-election should also possess appropriate *bukalik* (personal characteristics). An ideal MP should be attractive looking, well-spoken, and have a respectable appearance. He or she should also be well-educated, preferably a graduate of a well-known Thai university such as Chulalongkorn or Thammasat, or better still, a university in the West. Holders of doctoral degrees are especially well placed to stand for Parliament, as are medical doctors, university lecturers, former police or military officers, and former civil servants. Dr. Maņa Mahasurichai, a former Palang Dharma MP from Si Sa Ket District 1, was described by his campaign manager as a model candidate: he had a clean image, was not a trader, was good-

looking, tall, and popular with women, as well as having excellent *phonngan* and holding a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. Despite these impressive credentials, Dr. Mana failed to win re-election—apparently defeated by the power of money.

By contrast, former MP Banchong Kosotjiranan, who ran a well-funded campaign as part of a strong Chart Thai team in Roi-et District 1, openly admitted his lack of *phonngan* and repeatedly apologized to the people for not having paid proper attention to his constituents in the villages. After admitting these mistakes in one speech, he concluded by asking people to feel sorry for him and giving a very deep *wai* (bow to the audience). This strategy of courting sympathy was rather effective in the Thai context; for a well-known “influential person” to beg poor villagers for sympathy had a strong impact upon his audience. Yet, however much the voters appreciated Banchong’s show of humility, they did not re-elect him.

PollWatch

PollWatch addressed the problems of electoral fraud in various ways with an uneven pattern of success. PollWatch 3 recruited 50,000 volunteers throughout Thailand, which put a volunteer in each village.¹⁰ PollWatch activities to counter vote-buying and other election irregularities were organized around two main subcommittees: monitoring and campaigning. The campaign section was responsible for mass media programs—posters, banners, leaflets, and audio cassettes—and educational events at schools, factories, and villages. The monitoring subcommittee recruited and trained volunteers to join every poll station committee in the country to watch for irregularities up to and including election day. These volunteers, as well as other citizens, were encouraged to report any instances of fraud to the complaints section, and one reason why the 1995 election was seen as the “dirtiest” to date was because more people were reporting irregularities to both PollWatch and the media.¹¹

Moreover, a new feature was added to the monitoring section in 1995. Since PollWatch had been criticized as a “paper tiger” that could only observe and not arrest, the Interior Ministry beefed up PollWatch investigative units by assigning 4,000 Border Patrol Police (BPP) paramilitary troops, supplied with vehicles, sidearms, and communications equipment, to work alongside them. Thus, each district had PollWatch special units that included four BPP police officers, one or two PollWatch volunteers, and one local

10. Because of the limited number of “respected citizens” in each village, both PollWatch and the political parties tried to recruit the same local people with higher levels of education and social status, and in some cases Pollwatch volunteers were actually illicitly working as *huakhanaen*.

11. Interview with Abhinya Ratanamongkolmas, PollWatch section head, 4 July 1995.

police officer. These units not only investigated complaints made to PollWatch but also had the mission of tracking known *huakhanaen* and, if necessary, asking the local police officer to arrest election law violators.

In the Northeast, different provinces took advantage of the decentralization of PollWatch to emphasize either the campaign section or the monitoring section. For example, the committee for Khon Kaen Constituency 1 decided to stress monitoring and assigned 60% of its budget for this. Vote-buying was expected to be rampant in this district, given the political prominence of local "godfather" Sia Leng and the first-time candidacy of Nam Thai Party leader Amnuay Virawan. Early in the campaign, committee members explained that their strategy was focusing on "direct access"; they had compiled a list of *huakhanaen* and would keep close track of their activities.

Unfortunately, local politics prevailed; in the last week of the campaign, the coordinator at Khon Kaen PollWatch complained that the local police were not cooperating and thus PollWatch units could make few arrests. This was a common problem, since the police were under the control of the Interior Ministry and always had to consider that the *huakhanaen* they were arresting might be working for a future minister. The coordinators here had run into such a problem after the September 1992 election: three *huakhanaen* were arrested on vote-buying charges and after the election their candidate was appointed minister of justice. The three were found guilty in the lower courts, only to have the verdicts overturned on appeal. The most celebrated arrest of the 1995 campaign—when *huakhanaen* allegedly working for prominent Chart Thai candidate Newin Chidchob were apprehended with 11.4 million baht in small bills stapled to campaign cards in Buriram Province—was not made by the PollWatch units but by a prominent Bangkok-based police officer who was aided by PollWatch information.

During the campaign and election, Khon Kaen PollWatch received around 1,000 complaints; after the election, legal action was pending in ten cases. Many PollWatch volunteers were confident that they had fulfilled their mandate; even though they were not able to stamp out vote-buying, their tactics helped to curb election fraud because PollWatch succeeded in making it more difficult for *huakhanaen* to obtain money, distribute it, and reap votes in return. Because of the ineffective and sometimes corrupt legal system—Lek insisted that the election law was "unenforceable"—most PollWatch committees did not stress "political police" activities but rather emphasized the people's responsibility to elect "good" MPs and continue to watch them throughout their terms. Hence, other provincial committees in the Upper Northeast allocated 70% of their budget to education and 30% to monitoring. It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of educational campaigns, but they do seem to have made vote-buying a political as well as an economic issue for people at the village level.

PollWatch might have been more successful had its neutrality not been called into question by the media once the Democrat Party adopted "money politics" as the center of its campaign against Chart Thai. Critics of the Chuan government argued that the Democrats were abusing state power by targeting anti-vote buying efforts in strongholds of rival parties such as Chart Thai. Even though there were spectacular arrests of Democrat Party canvassers, the nagging suspicion that PollWatch was being used as a tool by the party's campaign sapped the organization's legitimacy.

Conclusion

Despite the efforts of PollWatch, money was the decisive factor in the July 1995 Thai general election. According to the Thai Farmers' Bank Research Centre, unprecedentedly large sums were spent in the Northeast; Yasothon, for example, was the top vote-buying province nationwide.¹² "New generation" politicians may have been brighter and younger but were no more scrupulous. They used much the same vote-buying methods as their predecessors, although they refined them by such techniques as computerized lists of canvassers.

As our cast study candidate discovered, there were extensive opportunities for wealthy candidates to block the ambitions of sitting Northeast MPs. Although Kai himself was re-elected, both his entry-level and incumbent team-mates lost. Kai was not able to establish himself as a faction boss, and failed to win a cabinet seat in the Banharn 1 government. This case illustrates the vulnerability of incumbent MPs to challenges from well-funded political rivals.

However, it would be simplistic to argue that vote-buying was the sole factor in the elections. Money politics in northeast Thailand varied considerably from district to district, and from province to province. Nevertheless, a successful parliamentary candidate in the Thai Northeast needed a judicious combination of money, *phonngan*, and *bukalik*; money alone could not guarantee success any more than good *phonngan* and *bukalik* could without the backing of cash.

While matters of money, achievements and personal qualities are critical in determining electoral outcomes, the pertinence of national issues varies. National issues can affect elections in rural areas during or immediately after periods of political crisis, as was evident in the September 1992 general election. However, that election appears to have been the exception rather than the rule. For example, Palang Dharma was the major party least tainted by

12. Pollwatch press release, 5 July 1995; *Bangkok Post*, 9 July 1995.

vote-buying,¹³ but although nine PDP MPs won seats in the Northeast in 1992, not a single one was elected there in 1995.

The widespread vote-buying evident in the Thai Northeast during the 1995 general election illustrates the changing scenery of provincial politics in which business interests have been gaining increasing control over the electoral process, with outcomes largely divorced from national political issues. New coalitions were emerging between local government officials, such as provincial governors and senior police officers, and powerful political figures who were often members of important families, ensuring the confluence of political and economic power.

13. Pollwatch reported no substantiated complaints against Palang Dharma in the Northeast. Press release, 5 July 1995.