

LUND UNIVERSITY • CENTRE FOR EAST AND SOUTH-EAST ASIAN STUDIES

# Migration and Political Engagement in Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand

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## **Abstract**

This thesis describes how the migration of people from Isan, the northeastern region of Thailand to Bangkok have allowed them to ‘learn the rules of the [political] game’ (Bourdieu, 1990), and make increasingly vociferous political claims. The thesis describes the political diversity, and the political impacts of migration found within Ubon Ratchathani province, in Village Ban, *Amphoe Mueang*, and among current migrants from there who are living in Bangkok. Mediated forms of voting, from vote-buying to policy-voting are found, and are contrasted with Bangkok-based tropes of political legitimacy such as education and urbanity, which are intended to deny Isan people the same political legitimacy. Education and urbanity become conflated with specifically urban citizen voters, which are contrasted against rural, vote-selling clients. Through migration and subsequent economic development, Isan migrants and villages have become more educated and urbanised, yet the tropes of political power continue to be denied to them. Despite the denial of political legitimacy, and the rewriting of the political rules through coups, the political crises from 2005-2015 provide a powerful message; Isan can no longer be politically ignored.

## **Key Words**

Isan, migration, politics, demonstrations, democracy, vote-buying, education, urbanism

## Acknowledgements

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## Abbreviations

CPT	Communist Party of Thailand
NCPO	National Council for Peace and Order
PAD	People’s Alliance for Democracy (known as ‘the yellowshirts’)
PDRC	People’s Democratic Reform Committee
PPP	People’s Power Party
PTP	Pheu Thai Party
TRT	Thai Rak Thai Party
UDD	United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (known as ‘the redshirts’)

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# Chapter One: Migration and Political Engagement; An Introduction

Political power struggles and inter-regional conflicts between Bangkok and the northeast region of Thailand have been visible as early as the failed Buddhist millenarian movements at the turn of the 20th Century.<sup>1</sup> The northeast of Thailand, better known as Isan, consists of predominantly Lao culture and language, and its pre-colonial history set it in contrast to the expanding political and cultural domination from Bangkok. Conflicts and contestations of power between Isan and the capital city continued throughout the Thailand's modern history: the 1932 revolution installed the first democratic constitution of Thailand centralised Thai control over the region further still, the rise of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the 1960s was particularly strong in Isan, and the dichotomous colour-coordinated political crises since 2005 set much of Isan and the North of Thailand against a predominantly Bangkok-based minority (McCargo and Hongladarom, 2004: 221).

Such contentions have shaped a unique power sharing relationship between Bangkok and Isan, as compared to the rest of Thailand. In particular, the rise of Prime Minister Thaksin and his *Thai Rak Thai* party (later affiliated to *People's Power Party* in 2008, and then reformed as *Pheu Thai Party* 2011) have challenged, changed, and diversified Thai electoral politics. The formation and expansion of oppositional dichotomous groups, such as the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (better known as the redshirts) and the People's Alliance for Democracy (or the yellowshirts) have coincided with, and been preceded by significant economic, social, and migration transformations.

To better understand the dynamics of contemporary Thai politics, this thesis investigates migration as a mechanism of political diversity and engagement, and the changing types and levels of political engagement in Isan. This thesis uses the case study of Ubon Ratchathani province and a sub-case study in Village Ban<sup>2</sup> in Khueang Nai district which sits around forty kilometres to the northwest of *Amphoe Mueang*. As illustrated in Figure 1, Ubon Ratchathani province is situated in the extreme east of Thailand in Isan, the northeastern region shaded in light grey. Ubon Ratchathani province borders Laos to the east and Cambodia to the south. The province has been

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<sup>1</sup> Led by *phumibun* (men with merit) these movements were opposed to unfair taxation and sought to counter the rise of the Siamese state's political control of Isan (Keyes, 2014: 33-52).

<sup>2</sup> This is an anonymous name to replace the actual name of the village to ensure the anonymity of interviewees.

known for contributing Members of Parliament to Thaksin-related parties, with a significant minority of other parties such as the Democrat Party. Village Ban is a typical village of the area, dominated by rice paddies and other crops, and resides close to a local market-town on the main road to *Amphoe Mueang*.

Using Bourdieu's habitus (1990) as the primary research framework, the thesis studies how, through migration people in Isan have learned the rules of the political game to reconstruct and transform Isan's political engagement with the Bangkok central administration. The thesis argues that people from Isan have managed to succeed in the game despite the dominant participants framing the rules to suit themselves.

This chapter will introduce the thesis and background into the Bangkok-Isan political history, provide the theoretical framework, give some background into the key terms used, detail the region and case study, introduce the research questions and propositions, and finally includes the methodology and their limitations.

**Figure 1. Regional and Provincial Map of Thailand**



Source: Gullette, 2013: 1256

### **Bangkok-Isan Relations**

Bangkok is located in the central region of Thailand, and has been the political, economic and cultural centre of Thailand since 1782 under the reign of King Phra Phutthayotfa Chulalok (Rama I). After the French success in expanding their occupation of Indochina to the left bank of the



Mekong river in 1893, the territory on the right bank of the Mekong became uncontested, allowing for formal Siamese expansion (Winichakul, 1997: 141). This enabled Siam to expand its authority and governance over the region of Isan. Isan is itself a word of Pali-Sanskrit origin that means ‘northeast’, and before formal Siamese control it was made up of a collection of largely independent Laotian and Siamese principalities and settlements pledging fealty to more dominant regional actors. Extractive taxation attempts by the Bangkok-based central administration in the early 1900s faced revolts by the Isan people through the *Phumibhun* movement (Keyes 2014; Murdoch 1974).

Thereafter, the Bangkok central administration turned to using soft power as an assimilative approach. Thaification was introduced after the 1932 bureaucratic-military revolution which ended absolute monarchy. Thaification aimed to encourage the central-Thai language and culture, particularly through the introduction of a standard Thai education system. As a result, the use of Lao-Isan, the primary language spoken by 90 percent of population in Isan, is considered inappropriate, and associated with *ban nok*.<sup>3</sup> As resistance, many in Isan prefer to call themselves Lao or Lao-Isan instead of *kon Isan* (people of Isan). This is because there is a discomfort to refer to themselves in a way that spatially locates them in relation to Bangkok, creating a centre (Bangkok) and periphery (Isan) dynamic.

### **Learning the Game in Bangkok**

Habitus is described by Bourdieu (1990: 56) as a societal collective embodiment of shared history, heritage and experience that is internalised within its members. It describes the continued influence of this collective past memory upon the present, particularly how members of the collective group interact with and comprehend events and interactions with members of, and within the same habitus, and those of a different habitus. With each habitus is a different set of rules and norms which govern intra-habitus behaviour and interactions, and how an individual can succeed in the habitus, through playing the game.

The game is the implementation of collective intra-habitus competition between actors within it using the various currencies of social, political, and economic capital. This provides privilege and power through the symbolic violence of “trust, obligation, personal loyalty,

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<sup>3</sup> *Ban nok* is a pejorative term to describe rural people, and loosely translates as “country bumpkin”, who are “socio-economically backward, unsophisticated, or downright stupid” (Alexander and McCargo, 2014: 61).

hospitality, gifts, debts, piety... of all the virtues honoured by the ethic of honour” within the habitus (Bourdieu 1990: 127). However in the case of Thailand under a military junta, a threat of overt violence is both persistent and real, and therefore describes a tool of the game that is much more visibly available to one group but not others. Callahan (2005b: 495) interprets Bourdieu’s concept of social capital as “the relations that knit together communities through a sharing of trust”. Social capital is therefore embedded within specific social-communities, the rules of which must be learned, particularly by migrants. Callahan (ibid.) looks at vote-buying and political reform through the lens of social capital, with both vote-buyers and anti-vote buying campaigners depicted as using their social capital to exert power over others.

This research does not seek to make an assessment of the characteristics of the habitus of the case study (Ubon Ratchathani) nor the sub-case study (Village Ban). Instead this research uses the term habitus as a means of understanding and interpreting the phrase ‘learning the rules of the game’ in relation to people from Ubon becoming political and working within the (changing) Thai political framework that led up to and beyond the election of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001.

Previous research into changing mobilities in Isan has focused primarily on the social and economic implications while giving little or no appreciation towards the political effects.<sup>4</sup> Rigg and Salamanca (2011) show how central migration is to the Isan economy, and how social formations have been transformed by the ubiquity of Isan migration. This research is geographically bounded to Isan, however the nature of migratory working patterns widely exhibited by Isan people involves movement from Isan to Bangkok, among other domestic and international destinations. These individuals returning to their home provinces to vote means that people of Isan are not geographically delimited to the region of Isan.

Economic (for example, migratory employment) and cultural (for example, the Buddhist Sangha and the mass media) interactions have contributed to forming and changing the aspirations and understandings among people from Isan (Keyes, 2014). Keyes (2014: 54-56) argues that increasing economic, social and cultural interactions between Isan people and the rest of Thailand, afforded by both infrastructural developments and the slow introduction of the centralised education system beginning in 1898 contributed to more nuanced understandings of Thai politics on the part of the electorate of Isan.

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<sup>4</sup> For more, see Rigg and Salamanca, 2011.

Thabchumpon and McCargo (2011) meanwhile argue that it is increasingly urbanised middle-class “villagers” who are asserting their increasing economic and political aspirations through their support for Thaksin and the redshirt movement. This research will therefore include both those present in Isan and Isan people who are living in Bangkok who vote in Isan, because it allows a comparison of political patterns and behaviours between those within and outside of the region, which may allow a greater understanding of how Isan people interact with living and working in Bangkok to produce different politics among Isan people.

This thesis combines Thabchumpon and McCargo (2011), Keyes (2014), Rigg and Salamanca (2011), Callahan (2005b) and Bourdieu (1990), with my own primary research to describe how migration has made people from Isan learn the rules of the political game, and are subsequently making increasingly powerful political claims.

### **Research Questions and Propositions**

Building on the above understanding, the primary research question of this thesis is: *What effects have changing migration and mobilities had on Isan people’s political attitudes and engagement?*

The sub-research questions are:

- 1) To what extent have people from Isan learned the rules of the political game?
- 2) How have Isan people’s political engagement changed over time?

To answer these questions, the propositions of the thesis are as follows:

Urban and rural areas provide different social and political environments through habitus which both enable or disable certain types of political engagement and attitudes. Changing migration has created a more politically aware Isan population with a keener understanding of their own rights and appreciation of the persistent social and economic regional inequalities in Thailand.

### **Research Methodology**

To accumulate the primary and secondary data for the research, this thesis uses the methods of field work observations, interviews, and secondary resource reference.

Research has been undertaken in *Amphoe Mueang* Ubon Ratchathani<sup>5</sup> and Village Ban in Khueang Nai district of the province. Village Ban was selected with the assistance of a local key informant with the priorities of being too remote from *Amphoe Mueang* for commuting to avoid village-city confusion, and willingness for participation. The research also includes interviews with people from Ubon Ratchathani province who live and work in Bangkok. The research was conducted in Ubon Ratchathani province from 2 to 20 March 2015, and in Bangkok from 30 March to 8 April 2015.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken to investigate and dissect Isan politics along ethno-regional identities, urban-rural cleavages, and political engagement and attitudes. Seventeen interviews were conducted in total, with eight in Village Ban, five in *Amphoe Mueang*, and four in Bangkok. The head of Village Ban, Prasit, assisted in coordinating and organising the interviews. All interviews were pre-arranged through my interpreters Ubon Ratchathani province and Bangkok.

Details of dates, venues and background of these interviews were listed at Appendix 1. Due to Thailand being under the control of a military junta - the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) - during the fieldwork, conversations on politically related issues are considered sensitive. Under these conditions, all interviewee names have been anonymised in order to protect them for participating in political research. The research was undertaken in accordance with the guidelines of The Swedish Research Council, and the purpose of the research, and the researcher's background were set out before the interviews. Permission was requested to record the interviews through audio and written notes. A total of nine interviews were recorded, with the remainder of interviewees feeling uncomfortable to be recorded due to the political sensitivities during the research. All interviews were also recorded via hand-written notes. Snowballing was used as the primary method in the selection of interviewees, which proved useful in the context of the close-knit village community, and contacting their friends and relatives in *Amphoe Mueang* and Bangkok. A variety of political persuasions were sought to avoid bias, however due to the political climate it proved more challenging to find yellowshirt or Democrat Party supporters for this thesis. This is reflected in the research participants, with only two out of seventeen interviewees

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<sup>5</sup> *Amphoe Mueang* means 'town district', and describes the main town or city in each province. The city of Ubon Ratchathani will herein be referred to as '*Amphoe Mueang*'.

identifying themselves as Democrat Party or yellowshirt supporters. This is a recognised limitation, and is reflected upon throughout the thesis.

Fourteen interviews were conducted in Thai and Lao-Isan with the assistance of an interpreter, while three were conducted in English.

### **Research Limitations and Strategies to Overcome Them**

Language has been a major difficulty that has been mitigated, but cannot be avoided entirely. The use of an interpreter enabled the research, but it has been critical to ensure that the interpreter not only understands the research, concepts and aims, but also taking an apolitical approach by interpreting as close to the original statement as possible. It was intended to make use of a single interpreter for the research, however the timing of the research coincided with a major exam period of the Thai academic calendar, and subsequently a variety of different interpreters were used.

The interpreters were made up of academics from Ubon Ratchathani University, and two English students from there, an English student from Thammasat University and a European Union-Thai relations policy analyst. The English students from Ubon Ratchathani University were paid 500 baht per day, whereas the rest refused payment before the interviews.

Another significant limitation of this thesis is the political sensitivities under martial law. The May 2014 coup has made politics ever-more sensitive, with the government banning political gatherings, and more generally gatherings of more than five people under martial law, and has criminalised various acts of political subversion. Such a sensitive political climate under a military junta requires a need to ensure that interviewees are aware of the apolitical nature of the research, and the anonymity that has been afforded to them for this research purpose.

This limitation has also resulted in having interviewees discuss other groups, as well as themselves and the groups that they belong to. Although this results in possibly biased information, interviewees from both groups have been interviewed, and the views have been taken as opinions rather than truth. This has also resulted in the need to find suitable interviewing locations that the participants - particularly those in Bangkok - felt safe and secure enough to be interviewed.

It is important to emphasise that this research does not seek to claim that it was migration alone that has created political changes, but that it has had political ramifications alongside other processes such as economic development and cultural integration through modern media such as

television, among a myriad of others. Instead, this research takes migration as an essentially unexplored, or more accurately, underexplored dynamic of this political development.

### **A Note on Terminology**

This thesis particularly distinguishes two rival dichotomous groups in Thai politics; the redshirts, and the yellowshirts. There is far more political nuance than such a dichotomy depicts, instead these two loose groups are used for an ease of analysis. Furthermore, the term ‘yellowshirts’ is used in this thesis to describe both the organisations, and members of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) (2005-), and the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) (2013-14). PAD members became known as ‘yellowshirts’ because ‘yellow’ is the colour of King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s (Rama IX) birthday, and wore yellow clothing. The PDRC did not have such a ‘uniform’, however there is significant crossover between their goals and membership. Both PAD and PDRC also have had links of varying intensity to the Democrat Party.

### **Roadmap of the Thesis**

After this introductory chapter, I will describe the political persuasions and voting patterns and pressures found in the research, and the role and efficacy of vote-buying in Village Ban elections in Chapter Two. Chapter Three looks at how the urban and rural have converged through the urbanisation of migrant workers, and subsequent urbanisation of their villages. This is investigated through Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, and the particularly yellowshirt trope of urbanity to signify political legitimacy. Chapter Four then looks deeper into the political consequences of changing migration, how villagers have learned the rules of the political game, and contrasts the different migrational experiences between those from *Amphoe Mueang*, and those from Village Ban. Chapter Five then looks at how learning the rules of the political game have created various forms of political mobilities and remittances. Chapter Six then discusses the main elements from each chapter together and concludes the thesis.

## **Chapter Two: Political Diversity and Voting Behaviour**

This chapter studies the electoral behavioural pressures that influence individual voting patterns, to uncover some of the political nuances that are often obscured behind a dichotomous depiction of politics, and describe the political affiliations in Ubon Ratchathani province. This chapter starts with exploring various pressures found in the research which affect how people vote, and the importance of looking beyond election results as a representation of voter's political attitudes. This will then lead on to a brief discussion of the political attitudes among the interviewees.

### **Voting Behavioural Pressures**

As with any non-absolute Proportional Representation (PR) electoral system, it is not possible to simply read the overall-winning results of an election in a single constituency to be truly representative of the electorate's politics. Increasing the PR element within the system makes this claim more legitimate, however there is far more nuance beyond this that is missed. Instead, reading overall electoral results provides a poor estimation of the mediated politics of the electorate.

Mediated is the way in which an individual decides on who to vote for on the combined basis of their own politics and how that translates to an individual Members of Parliament or political party, any financial return whether through vote-buying, finance or development being brought to the village after the election, through community pressures or tactical voting. Even the final constituency result then is a result of various processes, which highlights the importance of reading into a result and looking beyond it.

Various forms of mediated voting were found in the research. The first, and perhaps most contentious is vote-buying, in which voters sell their votes to parties, or those affiliated with parties, with the vote-buyer intending to ensure one or more votes for a specific party or candidate. The second mediated form of voting is policy-voting, which is voting on the basis of past policy achievements, and future policy commitments. Tied to this is 'edible voting', in which policies with tangible positive effects are sold to the electorate. The third form of mediation is voting for the democratic choice. This comes as a result of the Democrat Party, through its political history, being anti-democratic, which is contrasted against Pheu Thai Party, and other Thaksin-related parties.

## Vote-Buying

Allegations of vote buying and corruption in Isan have run rife particularly since the 1980s as Thailand became increasingly democratic (Callahan, 2005b) and remain two of the yellowshirts, the PDRC's (People's Democratic Reform Committee) and Prime Minister Prayuth's central arguments for detailing why Thailand is currently unsuited and unprepared for democracy. Vote-buying (among a range of other issues) has been used by these groups to justify a temporary period of undemocratic governance to 'prepare' Thailand for civilian rule through "reform[ing] the political structure, the economy and society" (*The Guardian*, 22 May 2014).

This follows civil society movements in the 1990s, which led to the 1997 constitution as a means of escaping from electoral corruption, and the cycle of coups (Callahan, 2005b). As argued by Callahan (2005a: 96), the focus on vote-buying was, and continues to be, effectively a means of distracting from the "bourgeois hegemony and the deeper issues of rural poverty and the institutional corruption of the Thai civil service". This means that a focus on eradicating vote-buying masks and fails to address the underlying and structural problems in Thai political society which have created the conditions for political and economic inequalities, and the continuous coup-civilian government-coup cycles. Callahan (2005b) then continues to identify the cause of Thailand's political problems are not corruption and vote-buying in rural areas, but the accumulation of social capital among urban elites which denies a constitutional voice for rural voters.

The focus of vote-buying and other forms of electoral fraud have largely been focused upon Thaksin-related parties, however through this research it was discovered that the local Democrat Senator elected in the area around Village Ban was involved in vote-buying through the mechanism outlined in Figure 2. A number of others interviewees also described the commonness and history of vote buying in the area. For example, Kesorn a retired teacher from Village Ban claimed that "the local senator gives money himself to villagers to help them",<sup>6</sup> while Prasit, the head of Village Ban commented "Before politicians would go to the village giving money and would *wai*<sup>7</sup> humbly, requesting that people vote for them, and then leave to never return".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Kesorn, 20 March 2015.

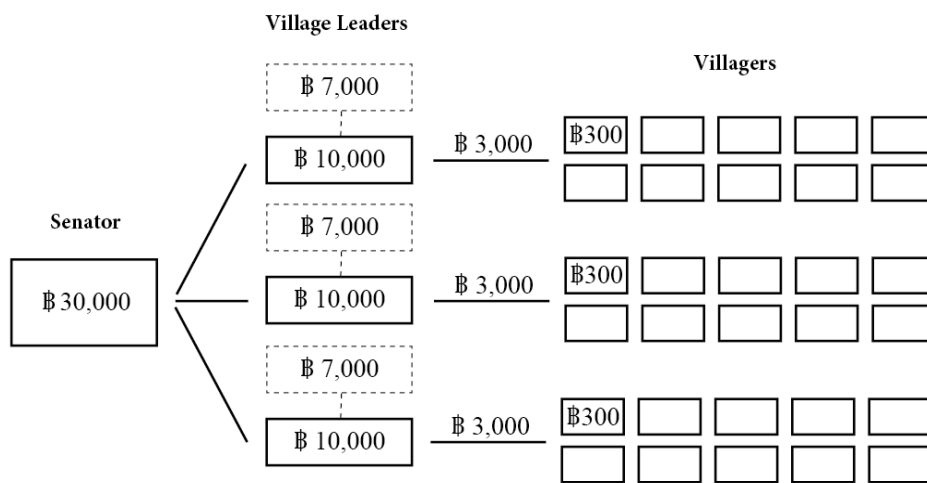
<sup>7</sup> The *wai* is a formal Thai greeting-gesture which involves bringing the hands together in front of the chest, and is used particularly with elders and those of a higher social status.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Prasit, 11 March 2015.



The mechanism in Figure 2 is reminiscent of Callahan (2005a: 102) who describes vote-buyers recruiting villagers to canvass on their behalf, thus employing people rather than directly buying votes. Figure 2 illustrates how the Democrat Senator gives 30,000 baht to three nearby village leaders who each take 7,000 baht and distribute the remaining 3000 baht among ten villagers who are then expected to encourage other villagers to vote for the Democrat Senator running for re-election. Pranee, a former maid in Bangkok from Village Ban claimed that the local Democrat was elected via this networked vote-buying pyramid and him being a local of the area.

**Figure 2. Democrat Senator Vote-buying Structure near Village Ban**



Source: The Author

Much of the narrative behind the yellowshirt, and other groups' accusations of vote-buying is directed towards Thaksin-related parties and voters being *the problem* with Thai democracy. However Figure 2 shows that the Democrat Party is involved in the very electoral fraud that they have campaigned against, and was used in part to justify the 2014 coup d'état.

Owen (2013) describes a more nuanced vote-buyer and vote-seller dynamic, in which rather than being a linear process of vote-sellers voting for the intended candidate of the vote-buyer, the vote-seller still makes a choice of who to vote for. This is echoed in the findings of this research, in which multiple interviewees described various aspects of vote-buying as far from such a zero-sum manner. Somkid, the Bangkok motorcycle taxi driver from Village Ban for instance has sold his vote to multiple parties at the same election:

“At the 2011 election I got around 1,000 baht to 5,000 baht from each party to elect an MP. I received money from every party but voted for the one I had favour for, and kept all the money”.<sup>9</sup>

Further, Somkid and Soontorn, a former Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) member from *Amphoe Mueang* and local party leader describe how the highest payer is not necessarily the winner of the constituency vote. According to Soontorn, “vote buying does not work if party A pays 100 baht and is liked, and party B pays 300 baht but is not liked, party B will lose despite paying more because party A is liked more”.<sup>10</sup> Somkid added to his opinion by commenting, the “winner not really the highest payer, people vote for the candidate that they have faith in, even if they pay less”.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the money becomes an incentive *to vote*, rather than strictly as an effective means of ensuring vote(s) for the benefactor’s intended candidate. The benefits of vote-buying for the vote-buyer are therefore difficult to ascertain.

The uncertain efficacy of vote-buying is made possible by the difficulties in ensuring who votes for whom in the Thai elections as a result of the secret ballot (Owen, 2013). Because there is no available ‘evidence’ that the voter has voted for the vote-buyer, payment is made in any case prior to the election, and relies on a level of trust between buyer and seller (ibid.).

While it is difficult to determine the efficacy of vote-buying, Owen (2013) describes mixed responses to vote-buying, and reasons for vote-selling. Owen shows how various vote-sellers comply and vote as the buyer intended as a result of feeling an obligation to do so out of cultural norms of reciprocity. Other vote-sellers however accept money but continue to make their own decision on the ballot paper. Finally Owen argues that it is the performance of individual politicians - whether vote-buyers or not - which determine voting behaviour, independent of whether money has been exchanged. Owen’s findings are seen similarly in this research, that the vote-seller is able to make their own choice at the ballot box, despite being a ‘bought’ voter by various contesting parties attempting to achieve electoral success through money politics.

### **Policy and Performance Voting**

About 53 percent of the seventeen interviewees, and all from Village Ban stated that their support for the TRT, PPP, or PTP, was in part on the basis of policies in manifesto, as well as performance

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Somkid, 8 April 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Soontorn, 13 March 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Somkid, 8 April 2015.

and achievements. For example Boonmee, the Bangkok taxi driver from Village Ban said, “Supported Thaksin because thought he had policies that support grassroots to develop. Can see obvious results from his actions and policies, and there is now a greater equality between Bangkok and Ubon”.<sup>12</sup> Similarly Sooksom, an office worker from Bangkok, reflected that Thaksin “had good policies for helping people to buy their first house or car”.<sup>13</sup>

Such policy-based support to the Thaksin regime can also be observed from Somkid, who praised Thaksin for quickly developing the country and to benefit grassroots people.<sup>14</sup> The generally good reviews were even reflected by non-Thaksin supporters, such as Somsak, a retired teacher from Village Ban and Somjai, the redshirt supporter living in California from Village Ban, both proclaimed that they are not followers of Thaksin, but they liked and appreciated Thaksin’s performance and policies.<sup>15</sup> In addition, Somjai also stated that it was Thaksin who brought the democratic practice of policy-voting to Isan. She said that Thaksin was the first to come “out of Bangkok to sell his policies to the people”, which allowed Isan voters to decide on who to vote for based on policies.<sup>16</sup> Such appreciation was also shared by Prasit, “Thaksin was the first politician to go to villages and tell people what he will do and what his policies are”.<sup>17</sup> This then enabled rural Isan voters to truly become part of the political process and decide on who to vote for on the basis of policies, and their performance in relation to their previous policy commitments.

The most commonly mentioned (and well received) policies by the interviewees included the Thirty Baht Health Care scheme, Million baht Village Fund, One Tambon One Product scheme, and the Scholarship scheme. These policies were “really admired as they helped to develop local economies”.<sup>18</sup> These policies had particularly significant effects in Isan, a region that for decades has suffered chronic underinvestment by the Thai state (Keyes, 2014).

It is within the realm of policy voting that Thai elections get closer to conventional models of democracy, rather than being based upon corruption, electoral fraud, or socially-networked nepotism. Voting by policy performance creates a politically active and connected electorate and forms part of the basis of a true democratic system. Through the voter being able to make an

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Boonmee, 2 April 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Sooksom, 8 April 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Somkid, 8 April 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Somjai, and Somsak 9 March 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Somjai, 9 March 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Prasit, 11 March 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Somsak, 9 March 2015.

informed analysis of who to vote for, in relation to benefiting themselves and others, the voter becomes political through policy-voting.

While many of Thaksin's pro-rural policies have been criticised as populist by the Democrat Party and yellowshirts, it is important to recognise that these policies resulted in tangible economic improvements for many rural groups. Furthermore, these policies were a reversal of the previous trend of state-development policies focusing on Bangkok, at the expense of peripheral areas. A competition between rural and urban populisms then appears. Reflecting on the urban-rural divisions, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the leader of the 2006 coup justified military action because Thaksin had "caused an unprecedented rift in society" (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008: 63).

The converse of Thaksin's 'populism' negativity, from the perspective of Prime Minister Thaksin and Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's supporters, is that he provided 'Edible Policies' which were easy to understand, and brought palpable benefits to rural voters. The next section will discuss Thaksin and Yingluck's policies alongside populism, and 'Edible Policies' in comparison to Japanese 'Pork-Barrel'.

### **Pork-Barrel and Edible Voting**

Pork-barrel politics is based upon politicians being re-elected in a local area on the basis of their past and expected performance to attract government investment to the constituency area (Fukui and Fukai, 1996). While 'Pork-Barrel' politics uses state rather than private funds, and is slower to bring economic improvements, it shares similar features with vote-buying. Both rely on trust between the voter and candidate in terms of voting for the 'right' candidate and receiving the appropriate compensation; both also are based on an economic stimulus or attraction; and both are visible in Isan and other parts of Thailand.

Decades of underinvestment in Isan by the Bangkok based central government has been a strong driver behind the rural Isan support for Thaksin-related parties. Thaksin's rural development policies changed the relationship between Bangkok, the political and economic 'centre', and Isan, the 'periphery'.

Thaksin's rural development policies were a form of edible voting, whereby voters in rural areas could vote on tangible policies that promised visible economic gain.<sup>19</sup> Callahan (2005a: 112)

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Somjai, 9 March 2015.

describes edible voting as crucial in the path towards a democratic Thai society because it transforms democracy from being merely “political or procedural” to being “economic and social”. In other words, it is creating a tangible and meaningful democratic political society in which everyone has a stake in the system.

However, edible voting continues to be classified by the yellowshirts and Democrat Party supporters as a form of state-funded electoral corruption. These groups see populist policies, such as the Thirty Baht Health Care scheme as primarily benefiting the rural poor, which meant that in return, these voters would re-elect the party that introduced it. This would imply that those involved with the yellowshirts or Democrat Party have not derived political or economic benefits from decades of government sponsored political and economic development directed towards in and around the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority. This reaction appears to be a Bangkok-based middle-class rejection of democracy because rural ‘periphery’ development threatens their own economic and political primacy. The current (2014-15) military junta is attempting to consolidate its power, and pacify redshirt areas by copying Thaksin’s populist policies (Wall Street Journal, 17 June 2014). This shows that rural areas can no longer be ignored by Bangkok.

### **Voting for Democracy**

The final form of voting that was seen in the research saw significant support for Thaksin-related parties as they were perceived as representing democracy.<sup>20</sup> In turn, the yellowshirts and Democrat party were understood to be opposed to democracy in Thailand because they cannot win at the ballot box. This undemocratic image is further compounded because they are viewed as having colluded with the military and Privy Council in the 2006 and 2014 coup d’états.

This collusion is in addition to the perceived unequal treatment of redshirt protesters compared to yellowshirt protesters during, and after the 2010 demonstrations under Prime Minister Abhisit.<sup>21</sup> For this group of alienated observers and demonstrators, voting for Thaksin-related parties is the only choice they can make which sustains democracy in Thailand. Somying, a waitress from *Amphoe Mueang* stated that she only nominally supported Yingluck in this way, stating that at the 2011 election, Yingluck was the only democratic choice.<sup>22</sup> This is in contrast to

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Somying, 10 March 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Interviews with Prasit, 11 March 2015 and Boonkerd, 17 March 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Somying, 10 March 2015.

a majority who mentioned democracy alongside other factors, such as voting for Thaksin's policies and on his performance.

Numerous interviewees referenced a speech by Seri Wongmontha, a yellowshirt protest leader who claimed that Bangkok votes were worth more than those from Isan.<sup>23</sup> This appears to have been misquoted, with Mana, a retired Bangkok taxi driver from Bangkok saying "Suthep PDRC leader said that 'people from Isan do not qualify to vote, and 100,000 votes from Bangkok or the South is worth more than 1,000,000 Isan votes'". There was an underlying feeling that the Democrat Party and the yellowshirts privileged Bangkok voters by giving them greater importance and worth than Isan voters, and the interviewees therefore perceived these groups to hold anti-democratic principles.

### **Political Affiliations and Apathy**

Most of the people interviewed for the research were at least nominal Thaksin-supporters, and sympathetic to both the redshirt movement, PTP and Yingluck. A minority were yellowshirt supporters such as Kwanjai, an accountant from Bangkok, and Manee, a retired teacher from *Amphoe Mueang*, while Srijan the *somtam* seller in *Amphoe Mueang* from Village Ban was a Democrat Party voter. This is perhaps unsurprising because both *Amphoe Mueang*'s main constituency and Khueang Nai constituency elected PTP candidates in 2011. However, it was known through the interview with Kesorn, that there were a number of yellowshirt supporters, and Democrat voters, at least for the Senator, in villages close to Village Ban. However due to the political sensitivities of Martial Law, many were unwilling to be interviewed who were not introduced via the redshirt village head, Prasit, and thus the research has a majority of redshirt voices.

The younger interviewees (under forty years old) of this research appeared to be only minimally engaged with politics, and lacked the more assured political affiliations as demonstrated by the older generation. Although Kwanjai (36) had attended some yellowshirt demonstrations in 2006, Sooksom (32) was only interested in business-conditions, and Somying was only a nominal PTP supporter, largely because of the lack of any other 'democratic' parties.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Interviews with Mana, 17 March 2015 and Kesorn and Pranee, 20 March 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Interviews with Somying, 10 March 2015, Kwanjai, 6 April 2015 and Sooksom, 8 March 2015.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has described various different forms of mediated voting which influence how people vote, particularly focusing on Village Ban voters which provided the majority of interviewees (nine out of seventeen). These have been described separately, but they are in fact overlapping; each one has some influence, but does not determine a vote in itself.

Furthermore, the types of voting listed are not exhaustible; a whole myriad of different processes, cognitive processing and personal histories and social relations come to influence the way people vote. Instead this chapter has explored some of the main mediated forms that appeared during this research. Vote-buying in particular is shown in this chapter to be far more complex and nuanced than is understood both by development organisations and particularly by yellowshirts, the 1992 'Black May' or 2013-14 PDRC protesters.

Finally, this chapter has shown how the people of Village Ban and Isan as a whole have become drawn into national politics. Thaksin created a new political class of rural policy voters, who were attracted by 'edible policies' to produce tangible and positive economic results. Chapter Three will discuss the different habitus environments of cities and villages affect politics, and how through migration the distinctions between urban and rural have become blurred.

## Chapter Three: Urban-Rural Convergence

This chapter explores how village and city habitus influence political and social practises, and to what extent this has been changed through rural urbanisation and developments in communications. This is done by discussing how both villagers and villages have become urbanised through economic migration and development, and by assessing whether patron-clientelism is visible in Village Ban. These in turn have created new forms of communication, in terms of the diffusion of technologies such as television and the internet, as well as through enhanced physical contact through migration.

Urban is not something limited to cities; economic, infrastructure, and communications developments have urbanised the rural landscape. This is both literally (roads, electricity, telephone wires), and cognitively through enhanced informational connectivity thanks to radio, television and more recently the internet (Wirth 1938, Tsatsou 2009). Tstatsou (ibid.) further argues that these technological innovations in communications, particularly electronic communications, result in the compression and distanciation of time and space. This does not eliminate, but rather reduces the remoteness of peripheral rural areas, bringing them politically, socially and economically closer to the centre.

Whilst rural areas and their populations have become more urban in some senses, it can be too easy to conflate the rural and urban after the aforementioned developments. This would be to ignore the continued significant differences in livelihoods and the economic and social challenges or opportunities that face people living in rural or urban settings. It has also been argued that some villagers themselves have become urbanised through development, enhanced mobilities and by migration.

This chapter will first discuss the extent to which the habitus of villages and cities provide different environments for political discussion and engagement. This will then be discussed in relation to the predominantly yellowshirt and Democrat party dichotomous discourse of rural patron-clientelism voting versus urban citizen voters. Finally urbanisation of villages and villagers will be discussed as products of economic migration and development, causing a convergence between urban and rural ways of life.



## Habitus and Politics

Villages in comparison to towns and cities have distinct political, social and economic dynamics and their own norms and acceptable behaviours which are produced by their specific habitus. This section will discuss how villages provide different socio-political environments than towns and cities. Soontorn a former student CPT member, and later a politician from *Amphoe Mueang* explained that rural people socialise and talk about politics, while Bangkokians (which he contrasted as ‘the other’), do not socialise as much.<sup>25</sup>

This assessment appears to hold true in the case of Kwanjai, the daughter of Pranee and accountant and yellowshirt supporter from Bangkok, who stated that there are some redshirts in the office, but most are yellow, and her colleagues would “fight if they were to talk about politics”. In the same interview too, Kwanjai also said that her main sources of political information came from her friends and family. With the exception of her redshirt mother Pranee, a former maid from Village Ban. Kwanjai also admitted that she “does not talk about politics with her mum”, and limits the political dialogue she has with people to those who conform with her own political attitudes.<sup>26</sup>

This in contrast to Village Ban where the villagers regularly discuss politics as a group. This was best proven when most of the villagers were reluctant to be interviewed until I (as the foreign researcher), and the research itself, were approved by Prasit, the head of Village Ban. This reluctance to participate in the research was despite a lack of obvious police or military presence beyond a police safety check-point on the nearest major trunk road.

The political open-dialogue is contrasted against *Amphoe Mueang*. While interviewing Manee, a nominal Democrat supporter at her home, her friends Soontorn and Samak, both former student CPT members and redshirts from *Amphoe Mueang* entered. After this Manee began to give shorter and more closed responses, and the interview ended shortly after their arrival. Soontorn and Samak’s interviews were taken separately at their own homes. When asked whether they discussed politics together they were quick to state that they did not talk about politics, with Manee stating “if she did there would be arguments and would lose friends”.<sup>27</sup> Srijan, the *somtam* (papaya salad) seller in *Amphoe Mueang* from Village Ban was interviewed while working at her street

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Soontorn, 13 March 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Kwanjai, 6 April 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Manee, 12 March 2015.

*somtam* stall, and was noticeably shy and reluctant in her responses, despite eventually opening up when no customers were near.

Finally despite martial law being in place Prasit was clear in his politics. His car was festooned with political slogans regarding his position on democracy, the redshirts and justice. Despite, or perhaps because he was an officer in the military he was not afraid of repercussions with the junta, and was convinced he had a right to publicly air his political feelings.<sup>28</sup> A similar feeling was also expressed by Weera, a retired military officer from Village Ban.<sup>29</sup>

Village Ban's political habitus was more open than either of those in *Amphoe Mueang* or in Bangkok. Villagers regularly discussed politics together, and this openness was even seen in the setting of the research process. Unlike Bangkok or *Amphoe Mueang*, Village Ban is an open political space, in which politics is shared and deliberated. By contrast, city spaces take on a greater degree of political animosity, particularly visible through dichotomous yellowshirt and redshirt displays of political legitimacy and demonstration. Not all villagers have the same political understandings, and even between those with similar political attitudes, there is significant nuance. The next section will look at some of these political nuances, and whether patron-clientelism was visible in Village Ban.

### **Patron-Clientelism Versus the Urban Citizen**

A long running argument made by Bangkok urban middle-classes for the unsuited nature of democracy in rural Thailand, is that rural areas are dogged by clientelism (Callahan, 2005b). Callahan describes clientelism being where votes are sold in exchange for money, in combination with villagers having naive conceptions of politics, resulting in voting by social obligation. One of the main focus points for the 1997 Constitution was to turn rural clients away from vote-buying and socially obligated voting into policy-voting citizens (ibid.).

The predominantly urban middle class, yellowshirts and the Democrat party have made the rural client a binary opposition to the urban citizen (Callahan, 2005a). The client in the specifically rural patron-client, and rural voters in general are described in various pejorative terms, such as *ban nok* (country bumpkin) and *khwai* (buffalo). These are used to imply stupidity, ignorance and following the herd. This is contrasted with the urban citizen as a politically intelligent and

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Prasit, 11 March 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Weera, 11 March 2015.

independent actor that holds political agency. Urbanity becomes conflated with the citizen, so that the citizen is urban by its very nature. This has become a common trope among yellowshirts who use it to justify a Bangkokian middle class urban political legitimacy over ‘rural clients’ which are dogged by vote-buying and patronage-based social obligations.

This urban citizen versus rural client trope was described almost exactly by Kwanjai, the yellowshirt supporter from Bangkok. She explained while yellowshirts are from Bangkok, redshirts are from outside Bangkok. Furthermore, she reasoned that yellowshirts are more highly educated, and therefore understand that vote-buying damages economic development.<sup>30</sup> She continued that yellowshirts are immune from vote-buying because yellowshirts are “better at thinking for themselves and not for the money”. By contrast “redshirts are poor rural people who rely on the money”, and “are not nice” because they sell their votes. To Kwanjai, yellowshirts are educated, from Bangkok, and have independent political agency. Conversely, redshirts are bad people who do “bad things” (vote-selling) because they are “poor rural people”, and therefore lack political legitimacy.

While poverty and ruralism continue to frame yellowshirt conceptions of the redshirts, Naruemon and McCargo (2011: 999) detail how the redshirt movement, is made up predominantly of lower middle-class “urbanized villagers... straddling both urban and rural society”. While many redshirts may be of rural origin, these are people who exist between the urban and rural societies. They are neither truly rural in the sense of a traditional agrarian lifestyle, nor are truly urban. Furthermore, in the logic of Kwanjai, they are not able to claim to be urban citizens; because if they were, they would be yellowshirts.

It is not just migrant workers from Isan in Bangkok who are denied acceptance as urban citizens; such rejection also applies to Bangkokians who are economically poor. This locally denied group are more vulnerable than their rural counterparts; Isan migrant workers who reside in the metropole have the option to return to their village and farm their lands. Ownership, or at least access to arable land is a central component in the resilience strategies of rural Isan families, who use it in conjunction with economic migration and local employment mobility (Rigg and Salamanca, 2009). While there is a general description of a wealthy urban centre with political agency, and a poorer rural ‘periphery’, voices of a poor and vulnerable urban Bangkokian subaltern community remain hidden from the political and economic agenda.

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Kwanjai, 6 April 2015.

It is important to note that rural landlessness also exists. Mana, the former Bangkok taxi driver from Village Ban explained that despite working multiple jobs in Bangkok and returning to Village Ban for farming three or four times per year, it was difficult to earn enough money.<sup>31</sup> He continued that at the whim of weather and bad fortune, yields and market prices were unreliable, and with it the secure rural ideal begins to unravel.

### **Clientelism in Village Ban?**

This section will now discuss the extent to which a patron-client voting relationship exists in Village Ban. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Democrat Party Senator in Khueang Nai district displayed elements of a patron-client relationship through his local social ties and networks combined with his vote-buying strategy. According to Pranee villagers were aware that the Senator had siphoned money from a road building project, yet the villagers still voted for him.<sup>32</sup>

Kesorn, a retired teacher from Village Ban has a different description of the Senator; he is “good because he helps a lot” despite being a redshirt supporter herself. In addition, beyond vote-buying, only Pranee and Kesorn described this patron-client dynamic, and this was only in relation to a Democrat Senator. Beyond this instance, patron-client relations between villagers and politicians could not be confirmed or seen elsewhere within Village Ban. However Manee from *Amphoe Mueang* believed patron-client relationships to be a continuing problem for Thai democracy, stating Thais in general “tend towards nepotism”, and “do not understand politics”. This is despite being a keen follower of the 1973 and 1976 student protests in search of redistributing power for *kwambintam* (justice) and fairness.<sup>33</sup> Manee perhaps epitomises the urban-optimism for democracy, which has since subsided since 2001 when it became clear that rural areas hold the democratic political power in Thailand.

Somkid, the Bangkok motorcycle taxi driver from Village Ban, and a redshirt supporter who sells his vote to numerous competing parties supported the idea of vote-buying and selling as a form of patron-client relationship, at least at the local level. He concluded that while vote-buying had little effect at national elections, it did have an effect at the local level; “In local elections money matters more”. The effect of vote buying on local elections may be enhanced because of

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Mana, 17 March 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Pranee, 20 March 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Manee, 12 March 2015.

low turnout rates at the local level. By incentivising voting at local elections, vote-buying results in vote-sellers making up a larger proportion of the active electorate than at national elections.

Manee described one such instance of patron-client voting for the local elections of members of the Tambon Administrative Organisation. The Tambon Administrative Organisation is a local government unit with a remit for planning and managing local development and public services, consisting of two elected representatives per village plus an elected president, as well as paid appointed staff (Sopchokchai, 2001). Manee argues that Tambon Administrative Organisations are essentially controlled by thugs ruling town, and it's members are elected through "favouritism [by candidates having their] 'own people'".<sup>34</sup>

Despite instances of vote-buying, the interviewees appeared to be political citizens with their own nuanced political understandings and engagement, rather than tied into voting certain ways out of social obligation or political naivety. Whilst a patron-client relationship may exist among Democrat Party voters in Village Ban, it is one that is understood in nuanced terms even by Kesorn, a supporter of Thaksin. Furthermore the only evidence found in this research identifies only the Democrat Party of engaging in this tactic. This is despite the predominantly Democrat party and yellowshirt discourse that denounces redshirt rural patron-clientelism, and contrasts rural vote-buying practices with urban citizens.

### **Urbanisation of Villagers**

Globally, rates of urban living are increasing involving a movement from rural areas towards urban centres, driven in part by changing economics; from primary towards secondary and tertiary industries, and the spread of increasingly commodified wage-based capitalism (Scott, 2007). Thailand has experienced significant urbanisation, increasing from 9.9 percent in 1947 (Srikam, 2006) to 48 percent in 2010 (World Bank *Urban Population* data). In Thailand the Bangkok Metropolitan has been the centre of the country's urbanisation. Rural-urban migrants attract industry, which attracts yet more rural-urban migrants in search of wage-based employment (Srikam, 2006: 2).

Urbanisation is not simply a phenomenon of population movements towards urban centres, it describes the social and economic changes in the way new inhabitants adjust how they live and interact. Louis Wirth (1938) describes urbanism as a way of life, and further argues that through

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Manee, 12 March 2015.

technological and communication developments, urbanism is not simply a phenomenon that only exists in settlements above a population threshold, and is not restricted to urban areas.

As villagers move towards urban areas - particularly to the metropolis of Bangkok - they are forced to live differently. They are away from their village social network and habitus, and must learn to adapt to different forms of social capital, and the different norms of behaviour and interaction. Many of the interviewees struggled with this transition, and felt that they suffered discrimination. Pranee said she “Did not feel comfortable working with people from Bangkok” because people from “Bangkok look down on *khon Isan*, and see them as poor with low education”. While Mana said that he experienced “discrimination, poor conditions and pay” in Bangkok, further feeling that people from Bangkok saw Isan people “as third class citizens”. By moving to urban areas, villagers also become wage earners and consumers (Rigg et. al., 2012: 10), which transformed their socioeconomic status and relations (Gullette, 2014).

As villagers return they bring urbanism with them; adaptations made to survive in the city are brought with them to the village (ibid.). Through migration, villages as well as villagers have become urbanised, and in the process the distinction between urban-and rural have become blurred. Migrants return with urbanism, which is also broadcast through economic, communications, infrastructure and transport developments. Communications developments bring rural areas “under the influence of cities”, making “rural life will bear the imprint of urbanism” (Wirth, 1938: 7). Through migration, developments and enhanced rural-urban interactions, villages and villagers have become increasingly urban.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has elaborated how urban and rural areas produce different habitus, which influence the extent to which people communicate politics with each other; the relatively open village is contrasted with both *Amphoe Mueang* and Bangkok. The political distinction between urban and rural has further been explored by looking into the predominantly yellowshirt trope of the urban citizen which affords an exclusive form of political legitimacy, particularly to Bangkokians. Against this is the rural patron-client relationship, and a depiction of rural Isan voters as *khwai* who follow through social-obligation and vote-selling. Despite these tropes, patron-client relations near Village Ban have more influence over Democrat Party voters than it does over Thaksin-party voters; the opposite of what is implied by yellowshirts. This reverse of yellowshirt argumentation

highlights that Village Ban and surrounding area is not politically homogenous, and that conflating the Democrat Party and yellowshirts, as well as seeing the Democrat Party as urban is unhelpful. Finally through migration villagers have adapted to a new habitus, which has in turn 'urbanised' them and their villages upon their return. Chapter Four will discuss the diversity in migration characteristics and experiences, and migration's political consequences.

## Chapter Four: The Political Consequences of Migration

Migration is important to a discussion of politics because it provides a key basis for social, cultural and political ideas to be dispersed, debated and negotiated. It is particularly significant for members of groups that have been hitherto spatially separated. Migration within the region of Isan in particular and Thailand in general, is something which dates back much longer than the scope of this thesis. In fact, the ‘mobile peasant’ is far from a modern phenomenon.

Peasant farmers were not as static as the image of subsistence farmers inferred by academics and development specialists (Rigg and Salamanca, 2011). Social, economic and environmental pressures from village overpopulation made it necessary for the movement of younger generations of villagers to move into unused frontier land (Keyes, 2014: 5).

Since the 1960s frontier land has diminished, and the natural expansion of arable land and villages has ceased (ibid.). Subsequent changes have occurred in the nature, distance, drivers and temporality for migration among Isan people. To understand such changes, this chapter will discuss the characteristics, political consequences and effects of changing Isan-Bangkok migration.

This chapter begins by discussing how political legitimacy has become claimed by people from Isan after migration enabled them to learn the rules of the political game, and allowed them to see the economic and political inequalities between Bangkok and Ubon Ratchathani province. The specific migration characteristics are then introduced, particularly comparing migration from Village Ban and *Amphoe Mueang*. These are found to have important consequences for how, and when migrants learned the rules of the political game.

### Learning the Rules of Game

Young (1968) describes four Isan villages in Udon Thani and Maha Sarakam provinces as non-participatory, and politically disengaged communities because of the relative unimportance of who is in government in comparison to village survival priorities. This is emphasised by the meaning of the Thai word for politics; *gan muang*. Young loosely translates the Thai *gan muang*, as “things in or about the city”, which “belongs to a wider world, the world of people who have power” (Young, 1968: 875). This translation would appear to confirm the idea that villages in the 1960s were ‘non-participatory’. However Thai politics has transformed since the 1960s, and was a



democracy until the 2014 coup. Furthermore *gan muang* has lost its association with an urban elite and has been claimed by villagers.

The understanding of politics as “things in or about the city”, and “belong[ing] to a wider world” gives salience to Bourdieu’s (1990) description of habitus. *Gan muang* is of the city, it is beyond the village, and is rooted in power dynamics alien to the village habitus. Through migration villagers come face-to-face with the city, and while they did not have power themselves, they came into contact with those who did. *Gan muang* also resonates with Bourdieu’s concepts of social, economic and political capital; it is the domain of those “with power”.

The understanding of *gan muang* as something of the city and belonging “to the world of those with power” is echoed by Mana’s experience. Mana, a former Bangkok taxi driver from Village Ban observed the 1973 and 1992 protests, but did not participate himself, because he felt that he was not privileged enough to participate in demonstrations; “groups who can protest are those with privilege”.<sup>35</sup>

The 1992 Black May protest, so named because it resulted in the deaths of 52 protesters, was essentially a middle-class movement formed in opposition to Suchinda Kraprayoon’s coup d’état in 1991 (Nelson, 2011). The protests sought to return Thailand to a democracy, and eventually led to the 1997 Constitution. At the core, Mana felt that there were institutionalised economic and political inequalities. According to him, “Isan people are easy to control - twenty years ago Isan was governed by the Siamese state, and people did not complain about anything even though different conditions - but in the centre life was not difficult and given good jobs”. Mana contrasts a past docile, accepting and hard-working Isan population against those of the centre, where life is easier.

While Mana saw protesting as something belonging to those of the centre, and people “with privilege”,<sup>36</sup> others participated such as Prasit, the head of Village Ban, who participated in demonstrations in *Amphoe Mueang* in 2010.<sup>37</sup> Kesorn, a retired teacher from Village Ban did not participate herself, but supported protesters by sending food to protesters, because she was “afraid someone would hurt her for supporting the Pheu Thai Party”.<sup>38</sup> While Mana felt that he was not privileged enough to protest, Kesorn and Prasit, among others, have actively participated in

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Mana, 17 March 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Mana, 17 March 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Prasit, 11 March 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Kesorn, 20 March 2015.

demonstrations in various ways. *Gan muang* as of the city has changed, and now includes those beyond the city.

During the fieldwork, I have identified that only the former university students from *Amphoe Mueang* (which included Manee, Samak and Soontorn) participated in the student protests in 1973. This was their first experience of political activism. These three were also the only interviewees who actively participated in demonstrations prior to 2006. Kesorn and Somsak are retired teachers from Village Ban, and both studied at university in *Amphoe Mueang*, but graduated in 1969 and 1967 respectively, and had therefore completed their studies before the student demonstrations in 1973.

Naruemon and McCargo (2011: 1003) describe the 2010 redshirt demonstrators being made up largely of middle-aged “urbanized villagers”. This is reflected in the findings of the research; the Village Ban interviewees did not participate in demonstrations or related activities until 2010, by which time they were all over forty years old.

Beyond learning the rules of the political game, living in Bangkok also meant that villagers could see the economic and political inequalities between Bangkok and Village Ban.<sup>39</sup> According to Mana, “now people from Isan do not want control and live in good condition... see middle class children living in comfort and want the same for their children”. Migration to Bangkok allowed Mana, and other Isan people to see economic inequalities, and they are now trying to claim political power to demand equality. Boonmee, the Bangkok taxi driver from Village Ban also did not participate in the 2010 demonstrations, but living in Bangkok has given him the opportunity to see inequalities; “Since I have been in Bangkok, I can see politics, demonstrations and economic inequality”. Mana’s forty years and Boonmee’s twenty-seven years living in Bangkok enabled them to learn the political process. Moreover, through their own experience they had also learned of the economic and political inequalities between the ‘Bangkok centre’ and the ‘Isan periphery’ which formed the basis of their own political understandings. This was also shared by the experiences Samak and Manee, the university students from Bangkok who took part in the 1973 student protests.<sup>40</sup> Migration was a central means through which they learned about the economic and political inequalities and injustices between Ubon province and Bangkok. This then formed their political attitudes and forms of engagement.

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Mana, 17 March 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Interviews with Manee and Samak, 12 March 2015.

The political game is more than protest and demonstration alone; elections are a key field of the game. The middle-class 1992 protests led to the enshrining of the democratic process and democratic rights in the 1997 constitution (Hewison, 2014). Every election since 2001 has been won by a Thaksin, or Thaksin-related party.<sup>41</sup> This has led to the yellowshirts rejecting conventional democracy involving elections for Thailand, because the Democrat Party is unable to win enough seats. The main proponents of democracy have changed from a majority traditional urbanised middle-class, to lower middle class “urbanized villagers”. And in turn, former urban middle-class democracy campaigners have become proponents of essentially undemocratic “Thai-style” democracy, in which the executive is made up of appointed ‘moral’ and benevolent people who are responsive to the people.

### **Migration Characteristics and Political Engagement**

This section presents and compares the migration characteristics of the interviewees from Village Ban and *Amphoe Mueang*. Clear differences in the drivers and consequences of migration are found, particularly in terms of how and when migrants have learned the rules of the political game. The differences in the characteristics and consequences of migration coalesce to produce different political capital.

There was no discernible difference in the likelihood of migration between residents in Village Ban and *Amphoe Mueang*, with the exception of the younger interviewees under forty years old. However there were differences in the types and duration of migration movements between interviewees in Village Ban and *Amphoe Mueang*.

Those from Village Ban - which included Weera (a former military officer from Village Ban), Boonkerd (a former electronics salesman from Village Ban), Prasit, and Mana - generally moved for employment and economic security, while those from *Amphoe Mueang* - which included Manee and Samak - generally travelled for college or university-level education, before returning to work in *Amphoe Mueang*.

All four interviewees (Manee, Somying, Soontorn and Samak) from *Amphoe Mueang* had university qualifications, whereas among interviewees from the village only Somsak and Kesorn, as well as the Bangkok born and raised Sooksom and Kwanjai had a university-level education. Of the older interviewees who went to university, only those from *Amphoe Mueang* had studied in

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<sup>41</sup> Thai national election winners 2001-2014: TRT in 2001, 2005 and 2006, PPP in 2007, and PTP in 2011 and 2014.

Bangkok (Samak and Manee), whereas those from Village Ban, and Soontorn from *Amphoe Mueang* had studied in *Amphoe Mueang* (Somsak and Kesorn).

All of the younger interviewees (Somying, Sooksom and Kwanjai) had studied at university, with Somying studying in her hometown of *Amphoe Mueang*, and the others in Bangkok. Both Kwanjai and Sooksom had grown up in Bangkok because their parents, Pranee (a redshirt and former Bangkok maid from Village Ban) and Prasit respectively, had spent their careers there. This then highlights a significant feature of the younger interviewees; they have remained where they grew up. This reflects Rigg and Salamanca's (2011) claim that despite migration being a defining feature of the Isan economy and households, migration is reducing among younger generations, in part because there are increasing local employment opportunities. But it should be noted that Sooksom and Kwanjai grew up in Bangkok, and therefore are present in Bangkok without being migrants.

Out of the three older interviewees from *Amphoe Mueang*, most of them went to Bangkok for university level education (Samak and Manee). While Samak and Soontorn went elsewhere while 'in the jungle'<sup>42</sup>, the main premise for Samak and Manee leaving *Amphoe Mueang* was for education in Bangkok. Upon completion of their studies both Samak and Manee returned to *Amphoe Mueang* to work in their professional careers as an x-ray technician and as a teacher respectively upon completion of studies, whereas Soontorn travelled to various parts of Thailand for his businesses after his studies in *Amphoe Mueang*.

By contrast all of the interviewees in and from Village Ban went to Bangkok for employment and, or marriage, often worked in low level and paying positions, and stayed for longer periods. However some such as Prasit and Weera had long careers in the military, while Boonmee later invested in a number of businesses alongside his taxi driving. Furthermore many of the Village Ban residents (for example, Prasit, Weera, Mana and Boonkerd) spent their entire careers in Bangkok and returned either to farm or for retirement. The exceptions being Srijan from Village Ban who worked in Bangkok for just three years while her children were young to earn some extra money and now works as a *somtam* seller in *Amphoe Mueang*, and Somjai who married a policeman in Bangkok before moving to the United States.

Those from *Amphoe Mueang* therefore went to Bangkok primarily for education, and returned to work in professional careers in *Amphoe Mueang* or in businesses across Thailand.

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<sup>42</sup> 'The Jungle' will be discussed in the section "1970s Student Activism: Beyond Demonstration".

Those from Village Ban travelled for employment or marriage before generally returning for retirement and, or to farm. The purpose and interactions with politics in Bangkok were significantly different between migrants from Village Ban and *Amphoe Mueang*.

It is telling of the urban-rural economic inequalities of the past that the only interviewees who were active in their support for the 1973 and 1976 protests were those from *Amphoe Mueang*, with two of them studying at that time in Bangkok and the other in *Amphoe Mueang*.<sup>43</sup> By comparison, almost none of the Village Ban migrants were politically active while living in Bangkok. Only Pranee and Somkid, the Bangkok motorcycle taxi driver from Village Ban were involved, both of whom did so only in 2010 when they joined the redshirt protests. Most Village Ban migrants did not become politically active until recently, and only after returning to the village. A combination of student activism and socio-economic status underlie the older *Amphoe Mueang* migrants' earlier political engagement.

While the interviewees from *Amphoe Mueang* universally had a university-level education, attaining university education for older residents in Village Ban was very difficult. Mana for example, expressed that he wanted to support his children's education, but he could not afford to.<sup>44</sup> Low wealth and the desire to educate their children forced many farmers to sell some of their land to pay to school their children,<sup>45</sup> and there was then a choice between livelihood and resilience (farming and land ownership), and providing children with a higher level of education.

Such observations explain the popularity of Thaksin's scholarship program, because it provided the poor with opportunity to study in Thai as well as overseas universities.<sup>46</sup> Yellowshirts and the Democrat Party declared that voters for Thaksin-related parties to be "duped or bought and admonished as uneducated and referred to as 'red buffalo'" (Hewison, 2014: 7). According to this trope, poor education reduces democratic legitimacy. Enhanced university access has provided increased legitimacy for Isan people, at least from their perspective.

This trope was echoed by interviewees from different political perspectives. Somsak said that Isan university graduates use modern communications in the same way as those in Bangkok, and "they are not fools like Bangkok people say they are".<sup>47</sup> This feeling is echoed by Pranee, a

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<sup>43</sup> Interviews with Manee and Samak, 12 March 2015, and Soontorn, 13 March 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Mana, 17 March 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Somjai, 9 March 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Interviews with Somjai, 9 March 2015 and Somsak, 9 March 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Somsak, 9 March 2015.

former redshirt protester who said Bangkokians look down on *Khon Isan*, seeing them as poor and uneducated. Pranee's daughter Kwanjai, a yellowshirt supporter, claimed that the yellowshirts were "highly educated", which means that they "can think by themselves". University education has become a trope used in support of political claims by opposing political sides. Despite the universality of this trope, and many Isan people now having attained university education, yellowshirts continue to describe Isan people as *khwai* and uneducated.

Soontorn from *Amphoe Mueang*, a former CPT member gave a moderated response regarding the political nature of current students. Soontorn said "students today are different to others", whereas in the past they used to be "more articulate". Soontorn explained professors used to be united, but now they are split between redshirt and yellowshirt camps, and that this division in turn makes students "confused or divided".

This fits with Kesorn's description of her son, a university student in Bangkok who "is neither red nor yellow", continuing that she "could not identify what side he belongs to... he just observes". Furthermore the younger interviewees under forty years old (Somying and Sooksom), with the exception of Kwanjai, while politically aware, felt largely disengaged from politics.<sup>48</sup>

Naruemon and McCargo (2011: 1003) show the redshirt movement is made up primarily of middle aged groups, so whilst current students may be apolitical they may not be in the future. The political consequences of migration are therefore not necessarily immediate, and may not be felt for some time to come.

Student action has had significant political impacts as can be seen from the protests in 1973 and 1976, between which saw a brief period of democratic government. Both protests in 1973 and 1976 were student led middle-class movements (Nelson, 2011 and Hewison, 2014). Soontorn stated that the 1973 protest consisted only of students, but "today if students rise, others will join them". University education has become more accessible and less associated with the traditional middle classes. If there were a student protest now, the supporting socio-economic base would be much wider than in 1973 and 1976, and therefore enable rural groups to participate. However a lack of significant political engagement a shared political agenda among current university students and academics would imply that a student and wider societal uprising is a remote possibility.

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<sup>48</sup> Interviews with Somying, 10 March 2015, Sooksom, 8 April 2015 and Kwanjai, 6 April 2015.

## 1970s Student Activism: Beyond Demonstration

Soontorn and Samak's early political engagement went beyond attending demonstrations. Both Soontorn and Samak went 'to the jungle' after joining the CPT in the mid-1970s. They first learned about student activism and communism whilst studying at university.<sup>49</sup> Starting in 1965, the CPT fought an armed insurgency in Isan, particularly in the provinces closest to Laos and Cambodia. The CPT began to decline from 1980 onwards when an "amnesty" was offered for defectors (Keyes, 2014). Going to 'the jungle' meant joining the CPT and leaving urban centres such as Bangkok, often going to rural Isan where support for, and acceptance of the CPT was strongest.

Samak joined the CPT in 1973 and fled to 'the jungle' after the 1976 coup and "taught villagers". In 1980 he was offered "amnesty" and returned, despite fears he and others might "be killed either by the state or by the CPT". The 'jungle' is not necessarily a literal jungle. Soontorn "fled to Loei" because he was "was worried about his relatives", saying that he joined the CPT after he "got carried away with friends", and returned in 1979 to work in a political party. He said that this was a common move; "many who returned from the jungle joined political parties or worked for them". After the student movement in 1973 and their subsequent membership and experiences in the CPT, Soontorn and Samak became actively involved in politics. Further, Samak said that he felt his experiences in the "communist party very much influences his present politics".

None of the villagers said that they had been involved with communism, despite Samak claiming the movement was made up mostly of villagers.<sup>50</sup> This may be due to a variety of factors including small sample size, martial law and political sensitivities at the time of conducting the research. However, this also may reflect that Samak and Soontorn were middle-class university students who had more opportunities to follow their political ideals. This is contrasted with the villagers who generally went to Bangkok to ensure they had a reliable and sufficient income to support themselves and family.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown that Village Ban migration is largely driven by economics, employment and marriage, and a minority migrating for education. By contrast *Amphoe Mueang* migration is the reverse; largely for education, and a minority for employment. These differences reflect the

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with Samak, 12 March 2015 and Soontorn, 13 March 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Samak, 12 March 2015.

different socio-economic status, with the more middle-class and urban migrants from *Amphoe Mueang* being able to attend university, while Village Ban migrants sought economic security. Migrating to Bangkok for education afforded those students earlier political engagement in the form of demonstrations while they were in Bangkok. For Soontorn and Samak university education also introduced them to the CPT, and became even more deeply involved in politics, with Soontorn later becoming involved in a local political party.

With the exception of Boonmee, Somkid and Pranee who participated in the 2010 Bangkok demonstrations, all of the residents of Village Ban did not participate in demonstrations until after returning. This would imply that university education makes early political engagement more likely compared with not studying. Nevertheless, current students are mostly divided and, or confused about politics due to divisions among academics, and this has made them less politically active than those who studied in the 1970s. The timing of university education is then critical, with a student's activism being dependent on events, and the academics around them while studying.

Redshirts and Thaksin-party supporters have adopted the yellowshirt and Democrat Party education-legitimacy trope, thanks to greater access to higher education under Thaksin. Despite this, yellowshirts and the Democrat Party continue to describe redshirts as *khwai*, thereby denying them political legitimacy through the trope of higher education.

Through migration to Bangkok, Village Ban villagers and the interviewees from *Amphoe Mueang* have learned the rules of the political game, by seeing the economic inequalities between Bangkok and Ubon Ratchathani, as well as between groups in Bangkok. It has also come through observing and copying successful 'urban' forms of political engagement, such as the 1973 and 1992 protests.

However, the rules of the political game in Thailand are not enforced equally. The military have repeatedly ignored the 'rules' through coups. Furthermore some protests and protesters are treated more favourably than others. For example, the 1992 Black May Protest resulted in the deaths 52 pro-democracy demonstrators which led to the end of the military junta, and ultimately to the 1997 'democratic' constitution. By contrast the 2010 protests against the unelected Abhisit government saw 91 deaths, made up mostly of unarmed redshirt protesters failed to directly lead to a change of government (Nelson, 2011).

There was also dissatisfaction with the perceived unequal treatment of yellowshirt and redshirt protesters in 2010, and that no criminal charges had been brought against Prime Minister



Abhisit Vejjajiva after his involvement in the bloody suppression of redshirt demonstrators in the same year.<sup>51</sup> Somjai felt there was an injustice and double-standards on the part of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's administration, because while redshirts were violently suppressed and imprisoned, little action was taken against the yellowshirts. Furthermore when attempting to charge Prime Minister Abhisit over the deaths, the Democrat Party said that the documents which show his guilt "were lost".<sup>52</sup> In addition, Boonkerd commented that "Injustice was really obvious under Abhisit and Suthep who commanded the military to kill redshirt protesters in 2010 - both have received no punishment despite clear evidence".

Political conflict from 2005 to 2015 in Thailand have shown that while the people of Isan have learned rules of the political game, the 'rules' are unevenly administered and routinely changed through military coup d'états which have "reset the country to silence people".<sup>53</sup> These injustices against redshirts however have only entrenched Village Ban villager's desire for democracy. Prasit concludes that there is no justice; "A country should have one set of laws, but many do not act within it and there is only one side that is prosecuted".<sup>54</sup> The next chapter will discuss political mobilities which have developed after Isan people having learned the rules of the political game.

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<sup>51</sup> Interviews with Somjai, 9 March 2015 and Boonkerd, 17 March 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Somjai, 9 March 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Soontorn, 13 March 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Prasit, 11 March 2015.

## **Chapter Five: Political Mobility and Remittance**

Migration, particularly modern migration does not occur within a bubble; migration is a social endeavour. Chapter Four detailed how migrants have learned the rules of the political game, while Chapter Three explained how villages have become urbanised by migrants returning with urbanism. This chapter discusses the mobility of politics, through migrants returning to vote and villagers travelling to protest, and how politics has been remitted through monetary and informational remittances.

The chapter begins by discussing recent political events, in relation to them not only being located in Bangkok. Electoral and political mobility is then discussed, which continues into political remittances.

### **From Isan to Bangkok**

Bangkok is the centre political power, and through coups and demonstrations it is also centre of political displays. It is in Bangkok that the largest demonstrations are held, close to the seat of power. Thailand's major popular political landmarks have all been in Bangkok; the brief end to military dictatorship between October 1973 and October 1976 which ended in a massacre of Thammasat University Students, and the 1992 Black May Protests which led to the end of dictatorship and construction of the 1997 Constitution - popularly known as the most democratic constitution in Thai contemporary history.

Political actions of recent years have had significant political effects and fallout. The yellowshirt protests against Thaksin from 2005 led to the 2006 coup, driven in opposition to Thaksin's populist policies and him rivalling the power of traditional royal elites. Yellowshirts occupied Suvarnabhumi airport in 2008 to pressure the resignation of People's Power Party Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat. After his removal, redshirts counter protested against the appointment of Democrat Prime Minister Abhisit. Redshirt demonstrations calling for democracy and elections were violently crushed by the state in 2010.

In October 2013 Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's governing party, the Pheu Thai Party, attempted to pass legislation that would provide amnesty for political figures and demonstrators across all parties. Having links to PAD (the yellowshirts), and the Democrat Party, the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) was formed in opposition to this proposal,

as they believed the main beneficiary of the amnesty bill would be Thaksin Shinawatra, who has been in self-imposed exile since 2006.

Beyond opposition to the amnesty bill, the *raison d'être* of the PDRC is to seek a change in the political system, by escaping representative democracy in its current form, which they argue is skewed in favour of vote-buying parties and politicians, supported by a corrupt, uneducated, and rural-majority electorate. The PDRC Bangkok protests began in November 2013, with Prime Minister Yingluck calling for a February 2014 election to pacify the protesters. Through election disruption and judicial intervention by the Constitution Court, Prime Minister Yingluck was removed from office on the 7 May 2014. The 20 May saw a coup d'état against the post-Yingluck caretaker government. These landmark events and conflicts all culminated in either immediate or eventual political change, or their movement's demise in Bangkok.

Nevertheless, Bangkok is not the only site of political effect or engagement, as this would imply that rural areas are unaffected by politics and do not see political demonstration. The coup is not only visible in Bangkok. There may be army patrols and token security checks on the Bangkok rail-transportation networks and shopping centres, but it was in Khon Kaen that students protested against the coup in front of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha, and in Isan where military raids have been conducted (Bangkok Post, 19 November 2014).

Redshirt demonstrations were held in *Amphoe Mueang* in 2010, and a related arson attack resulted the Provincial Hall being destroyed by a fire (Telegraph). December 2013 saw a yellowshirt protest and redshirt counter protest outside the new provincial hall. However, protests in Bangkok garner the most national and international media attention, while 'provincial' demonstrations are displayed as subsidiary protests. Nevertheless Bangkok is the locus of political change; it is where people from Isan and other regions of Thailand travel to take part in the biggest demonstrations and is the seat of political power in Thailand. The next section will discuss how interviewees' different migration histories have enabled political engagement at different stages of their life, contrasting particularly between those from *Amphoe Mueang* and Village Ban.

### **Electoral and Political Mobility**

Electoral mobility is a key feature of Isan's, as well as Village Ban's political landscape due to the high propensity of economic migration among villagers. This is necessitated by a structural constraint; it is difficult for villagers living and working in Bangkok to be registered there, and the

place of registration determines where a person can vote. This has produced electoral mobility in which voters travel back to Ubon Ratchathani province in order to vote. While migrant Isan voters may be enfranchised, they are generally denied the right to vote in Bangkok. This has implications for both the voter (having to travel to vote), and shows how migrant workers are denied urbanity, which was discussed in Chapter Three. The rural-urban divide, and associated tropes of political legitimacy are maintained by denying ‘urban’ enfranchisement for rural migrants.

Of the interviewees from Village Ban who had lived in Bangkok, and described where they were registered to vote, only two said they could vote in Bangkok. These were Pranee, who was married to a Bangkokian, and Boonkerd, the former electronics salesman from Village Ban whose grandmother was from Bangkok. The remainder, which included Mana, Srijan, Somkid and Boonmee, voted in the village.

Voting in Thailand is compulsory for registered adults, and is an expensive process for those migrants who were unable to register in Bangkok; travelling to Ubon Ratchathani province to vote is both costly and time-consuming. Furthermore, it is a cost that is not shared by Bangkok registered residents. Somkid, the Bangkok motorcycle taxi driver was paid up to 5,000 baht (150 USD) for his vote by competing parties in recent elections, meaning that transportation costs were mitigated and his vote incentivised. The acceptance of vote-buying and vote-selling however is not shared by all villagers; Somkid was the only interviewee who admitted to vote-selling.

Political mobility found too; villagers from Village Ban had to travel a long distance in order to participate in protest in Bangkok. This was negated for Somkid who had attended some demonstrations in 2010 while he was living in Bangkok, but for Village Ban residents, a relay system had to be developed. Kesorn, a retired teacher from Village Ban described how her friend, also a retired teacher, protested with the redshirts in Bangkok and stayed a week before returning to Village Ban and swapping with another villager. This is not something unique to the redshirts, with Kesorn claiming “a nearby village organised a bus last year for yellowshirt protesters”, with the “Democrat Party, who pay villagers 500 to 1,000 baht (15 to 30 USD) per person”.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, even with transport and food provided for, there is still a loss of earnings. Claims made to negate the legitimacy of villager protesters, for example ‘villagers are paid to protest’ seem unfair in the context of greater participation costs for villagers. This is especially true when compared to urban Bangkok protesters and voters alike. This group includes both

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with Kesorn, 20 March 2015.

redshirts such as Somkid and yellowshirts like Kwanjai who are already present in the main political arena.

Despite the urbanity of redshirts such as Somkid, yellowshirts have based part of their political claims that their members are ‘urban’.<sup>56</sup> This is in contrast to ‘rural’ redshirts; “in the popular discourse of middle class Bangkokians - the redshirts were presented as ‘poor farmers’” (Naruemon and McCargo, 2011: 999). Kwanjai, the Bangkokian yellowshirt echoes this discourse, stating that yellowshirts are better because they think for themselves rather than selling their vote, which “poorer rural people” do because they “rely on the money”.<sup>57</sup>

As described in Chapter Three, Bangkok urbanity has become a trope to signify political legitimacy, similar to university education described previously. But unlike university education which is increasingly attainable for villagers, migrant worker redshirt supporters are not considered to have achieved the urbanity of a Bangkok native. This can be seen in a speech mentioned by various interviewees in Chapter Two by a yellowshirt leader Seri Wongmontha, who claimed that Isan voters had less political authority than Bangkok voters. By disagreeing with the yellowshirts, Bangkok urbanity becomes an unattainable trope for urban redshirt supporters; the village habitus belongs outside of the city.

### **Political Remittance**

While migration, registration restrictions, and distance make political engagement more difficult for migrants, the political effects of migration are not limited to those who migrate; the research also found different forms of political remittance. Somjai, the redshirt supporter in California from Village Ban has lived in the USA since 1965 described an economic political remittance. “Many redshirts living in California collect money to send to Thailand in support... [with the] aim to help people and the families of people who have been arrested and put in jail”.<sup>58</sup>

There are also non-economic forms of political remittances: for Somkid, living in Bangkok “made him see things with his own eyes which gave a deeper understanding of political events”. Furthermore he “informs people in Ubon what is actually going on” because he is able to “witness political conflicts”. For Somkid’s friends and family, this is more useful than the mainstream

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<sup>56</sup> See for instance Seri Wongmontha’s speech discussed in Chapter Two about the value of Bangkok votes.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Kwanjai, 6 April 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Somjai, 9 March 2015.

media who are “not good at reporting what exactly happens”, saying that he “witnessed incidents but journalists just came and held a microphone to report it - and gave a different story”. Living in Bangkok allowed Somkid to witness political events himself and inform his friends and families, rather than information being mediated by the “media which takes sides”.

Soontorn, a former CPT member from *Amphoe Mueang* similarly depicts information-remittance, but from the perspective of the recipient. Soontorn described how in 1973 there were protests in *Amphoe Mueang* as well as in Bangkok. Students and professors used their social and professional networks to ‘remit’ information about the Bangkok protests, which was not reported by the media, inspiring protests in *Amphoe Mueang*. According to Soontorn, there “was a protest in *Amphoe Mueang*, I was friends with students in Bangkok and they alerted me about the Bangkok protests, and Ubon Ratchapat University students decided to do the same”. Soontorn found out about the Bangkok protests by talking among his friends because it was not reported in the news, continuing that professors and students alike learned about the protests in this way.<sup>59</sup> The 1973 Bangkok protests were reported and copied in *Amphoe Mueang* because the news was remitted by professor and student networks.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown the importance of understanding how political lessons learned in Bangkok are not limited to political participation in Bangkok. Migrants living in Bangkok and elsewhere have allowed money and information to be remitted back to Village Ban and *Amphoe Mueang*. Through these remittances the political consequences of migration go beyond the migrant’s own politics, to include their friends and family who have stayed in Ubon Ratchathani province.

Furthermore, this chapter has highlighted the relative disadvantage for people from Isan participating in demonstration in Bangkok, and Isan migrants’ participation in elections through political mobility. Subsequent criticisms over payments for migrant demonstrators are shown to be unfair, and help maintain yellowshirt tropes of urban political legitimacy.

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Soontorn, 13 March 2015.

## Chapter Six: Conclusions

This thesis has explored the changing political ramifications of migration from Ubon Ratchathani province to Bangkok. This has been analysed through assessing political attitudes and understandings, and the mechanisms by which individuals and groups come to make political decisions and actions. At the local level, villagers from Village Ban have faced increasing political, social and cultural conflicts with the Bangkok metropole. In turn Village Ban villagers have been transformed politically and economically. Concurrently, those who have migrated from *Amphoe Mueang* and Village Ban to Bangkok faced a habitus that is not native to them, and were forced to adjust to the new habitus. In the process they have both learned the rules of the political game, and have become urbanised. To advance on such observation, this chapter will explore the main findings from this thesis, and suggest the consequences for the development and state of political engagement at the provincial (Ubon Ratchathani province), local (Village Ban) and individual (migrants in Bangkok) levels.

Chapter Five describes how money and information are remitted to family and friends who remain in Village Ban. The political consequences of migration are not limited to those who migrate - migration is a social phenomenon, and is both personal and shared. Migration affects migrants, their family and friends, and as discussed in Chapter Three, migration has transformed themselves and Village Ban through urbanisation. Despite remaining distinctive, the habitus of Village Ban and Bangkok have become increasingly similar through migration. However while Village Ban has become more urban, the Bangkok-based yellowshirt movement continue to decry 'rural' Isan as backwards and unsophisticated in the negative of Bangkok civilised urbanity.

Village Ban villager's children have grown up in a cosmopolitan and urban environment; their habitus is uniquely different from the habitus their parents knew. As natives of the Bangkok-habitus they have a different understanding of themselves, and what is important. This has created different political understandings compared to their parents from Village Ban. Kwanjai, a yellowshirt supporter who demonstrated in 2006, and the daughter of redshirt Pranee, explained that her political opinions are influenced from her friends, and less so from the family. Similarly, Sooksom is largely politically apathetic beyond desiring a strong economy, whereas his father Prasit, the village-head is staunchly pro-redshirt largely on the basis of pursuing social justice and

democracy. Kwanjai and Sooksom's political understandings have been uniquely shaped by their own habitus experience and their socio-economic status.

The tropes of political legitimacy have become increasingly unattainable. As described in Chapter Four, university education has become more affordable and attainable for villagers through scholarship schemes introduced under Thaksin. Alongside education as a trope for political legitimacy is a particularly restrictive form of urbanity which was described in Chapter Three. Bangkok urbanity sits alongside education as a trope of political legitimacy, thus ensuring that 'rural' Isan people are denied the political legitimacy of those from Bangkok. These tropes of high education and urbanity are conflated with citizen-voting, and contrasted against rural clients, who are poorly educated and participate in vote-selling. Yet this research has shown even where vote-buying does exist, it is far more nuanced, with villagers still having agency. Significant differences in the characteristics of migration were also found, particularly between the older interviewees from Village Ban and *Amphoe Mueang*. The students from *Amphoe Mueang* in the 1970s became involved in politics at a much earlier age while studying at university. This is in contrast to the Village Ban interviewees who have only become politically active and involved in demonstrations since 2006, with only Boonmee, Somkid and Pranee attending demonstrations while still living in Bangkok. The migration experience and its characteristics such as purpose and duration are significant components, which determine the political effects of migration.

Migration is a major mechanism by which Village Ban and *Amphoe Mueang* residents have learned the rules of the political game. Through being present in Bangkok, Village Ban and *Amphoe Mueang* residents have witnessed and taken part in political events such as demonstrations and coups. They have copied and adapted demonstrations for their own purposes. But the rules of the game are not static; with each constitution is an attempt to reformulate political power, to morph it in the guise of minority - particularly urban - opinion. For example, the 1997 Constitution was the legacy of pro-democracy 1992 Black May protesters. The constitution attempted to create a democratic Thailand and avoid client-patron issues of vote-buying and vote-selling, which was seen by the 1992 protesters as a central problem to overcome for Thai democracy. The 1997 Constitution attempted to solve this by turning 'clients' into 'citizens', in part by introducing 100 MPs who were elected on a national, rather than local constituency basis as a way of reducing the influence of vote-buying. But this did not work well for those who took part in the 1992 protests; Isan voters - who make up one-third of the Thai population - outnumber them. Isan finally reaped



the rewards of their political power under Thaksin thanks to pro-rural development policies, as opposed to pro-Bangkok policies at the expense of the periphery.

The yellowshirts then campaigned against Thaksin, which led to the 2006 coup and 2007 constitution. But as can be seen through the 2011 election, the 2007 constitution changed little; Prime Minister Thaksin's legacy lived on through Prime Minister Yingluck. But this did not last as the PDRC demonstrated against Yingluck in late 2013, disrupted the February 2014 election, and eventually led to the May 2014 coup.

While the repetitive coups and introduction of revised constitutions tactics have changed the rules of the political game by resetting the country, it has failed to succeed in creating a system that can win over Thaksin-related parties, whose supporters have adopted similar political tactics, excluding the use of coups.

At the same time, the old pro-democracy protesters of 1992 have become essentially anti-democratic. Under the guise of the PDRC, they argue that 'periphery' voters (such as those from Isan) participate in anti-democratic activities such as vote buying, because they are uneducated, and are tied into patron-client vote-buying relations. This is contrasted against educated, urban citizens from Bangkok. In order to 'fix' Thai politics, the PDRC, similar to the military, seek to install "Thai-style Democracy"; a 'responsive' and benevolent executive made up of appointed 'moral' people to govern the country.

Concurrently Isan voters, or rather Thaksin-party voters and redshirts or their sympathisers are staunch supporters of representative democracy. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and to a lesser extent, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, provided Isan people with tangible (edible) policies that improved their lives and the rural Isan economy. The 2001 election was the first in which national political parties campaigned in Isan on the basis of policies, rather than candidates seeking support through humility and vote-buying.

The political crises from 2005 to 2015 shows how powerful Isan politics has become on the national stage. Isan voters and protesters are attempting to reclaim political power through democratic principles and practices which were learned through their experiences living in Bangkok. This then threatens the political power of the predominantly urban and established middle-classes, military and royal elites.

Finally to end, Phongpaichit and Baker (2008: 62) cite that a major justification for the 2005 coup "was that Thaksin had 'caused an unprecedented rift in society'", between urban and

rural areas. The fallout from this coup continues, and the “unprecedented rift in society” has only become more apparent and ingrained. The military junta, in power since May 2014, is attempting to change the rules of the political game. But it is unclear what exact changes will be made, and whether it will succeed in solving the political crisis, while appeasing Isan voters and demonstrators. It is further unclear how this will work; *gan muang* is no longer of the city and has been claimed by rural voters.

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## Appendix 1

No.	Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Description	Interview Date	Interview Venue	Language used
1	<b>Somjai</b>	87	Female	N/A	Lived in Bangkok from 1948 to 1965 until she moved to California, USA. Involved with a redshirt group in California.	09-Mar-15	Prasit's house in Village Ban	Lao-Isan-English translation
2	<b>Somsak</b>	70	Male	Retired teacher	Trained as a teacher in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i> at Ubon Ratchapat University. Taught in Village Ban. Father from the North of Thailand, and grew up there and in Village Ban.	09-Mar-15	Prasit's house in Village Ban	Thai-English translation
3	<b>Kesorn</b>	68	Female	Retired teacher	Trained as a teacher through distance learning in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i> and taught for a few years in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i> . Redshirt supporter.	20-Mar-15	Kesorn's house in Village Ban	Lao-Isan-English translation
4	<b>Weera</b>	62	Male	Retired military officer	Worked in the military, in Don Muang (Bangkok) between 1974 and 2003 (29 years).	11-Mar-15	Prasit's house in Village Ban	Thai-English translation
5	<b>Prasit</b>	67	Male	Village head, retired military officer	Worked in the military, in Don Muang (Bangkok) between 1966 and 2004 (38 years). Redshirt supporter, protested in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i> Ubon in 2010. Father of Sooksom.	11-Mar-15	Prasit's house in Village Ban	Thai-English translation
6	<b>Mana</b>	60	Male	Farmer	Worked in Bangkok from age of 1966 to 2006 (40 years). Worked as a labourer at the age of 11 and eventually became a taxi driver. Now farms in Village Ban and sells his own organic produce.	17-Mar-15	Boonkerd's house in Village Ban	Lao-Isan-English translation

No.	Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Description	Interview Date	Interview Venue	Language used
7	<b>Boonkerd</b>	58	Male	Farmer and carpenter	Worked in Bangkok 1971-1989 (18 years) selling electronics. Now farms and fishes commercially, and makes furniture to sell.	17-Mar-15	Boonkerd's house in Village Ban	Lao-Isan-English translation
8	<b>Pranee</b>	58	Female	Retired maid	Worked in Bangkok as a maid from 1980-2010 (30 years), stayed because her former husband lived in Bangkok. Mother of Kwanjai. Redshirt supporter.	20-Mar-15	Kesorn's house in Village Ban	Thai-English translation
9	<b>Somkid</b>	47	Male	Motorcycle taxi driver	Currently living in Bangkok. Has been working in Bangkok since 1985 (30 years), currently working as a motorcycle taxi driver. Redshirt supporter who participated in 2010 demonstrations in Bangkok.	08-Apr-15	Translator's office in Bangkok	Thai-English translation
10	<b>Srijan</b>	47	Female	Somtam seller	Living in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i> selling somtam, but originally from Village Ban. Worked in Bangkok from 1998-2001 (3 years) while her children were young. Democrat supporter.	13-Mar-15	Srijan's somtam stall in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i>	Lao-Isan-English translation
11	<b>Boonmee</b>	42	Male	Taxi driver	Currently living in Bangkok. Has been working in Bangkok since 1988, now working as a taxi-driver and has invested in some businesses there.	02-Apr-15	<i>Wat</i> garden	Thai-English translator
12	<b>Samak</b>	67	Male	X-Ray Technician	Studied in Bangkok at Mahidol University from 1963 to 1973 when he joined student protests and the Communist Party of Thailand. Went to 'the jungle' after protests until 1980 when offered amnesty, and completed studies in 1983. Worked in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i> hospital. Now a redshirt supporter.	12-Mar-15	Suphat's house in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i>	Thai-English translator

No.	Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Description	Interview Date	Interview Venue	Language used
13	<b>Manee</b>	65	Female	Retired teacher	Studied at high school in Bangkok 1968-1971. Involved in 1973 student protests seeking justice and fairness in society. Retired teacher in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i> . Tan Chaya is now a nominal Democrat and yellowshirt supporter.	12-Mar-15	Manee's house in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i>	Thai-English translation
14	<b>Soontorn</b>	63	Male	Former party secretary	Studied at Ubon Ratchapat University in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i> . Was active in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i> student protests in 1973. Joined the Communist Party of Thailand, and lived in Loei from 1973 to 1976. Worked for and became a key leader in the local Kipsamkhun political party. Now a redshirt supporter.	13-Mar-15	Soontorn's house in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i>	Thai-English translation
15	<b>Somying</b>	21	Female	Waitress	Studied English at Ubon Ratchapat University until 2014. Now works as a waitress in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i> . She is a nominal Pheu Thai Party supporter.	10-Mar-15	At the restaurant she works at in <i>Amphoe Mueang</i>	English
16	<b>Kwanjai</b>	36	Female	Charity accountant	Pranee's daughter, has lived her whole life in Bangkok. Studied for a Master's degree in the UK, and now works as an accountant for a Christian Bangkok-based charity. She is an active yellowshirt supporter, and was involved in the 2006 demonstrations.	06-Apr-15	At a restaurant in Bangkok	English
17	<b>Sooksom</b>	32	Male	Office manager	Prasit's son, has lived his whole life in Bangkok. Studied at Kasetsart University in Bangkok, now works for an international commercial sports equipment supplier. Is not interested in politics beyond the effects on the economy.	08-Apr-15	In a meeting room at Sooksom's Bangkok office	English