

## Thai Decentralization Policy Pathway Through The Len Of Elite Theory

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### Abstract

The decentralization policy plays the major role in most of the states. This study aims to apply the elite theory to critically analyze the characteristics of decentralization policy in Thailand from 1897 to present. There are seven pinpoints along Thai decentralization policy pathway. Even though, the policy status was at the growth stage in the earlier phase. It reversed to downturn and stagnated at the final phase. The finding is that the successful of decentralization policy in Thailand is heavily relied on the level of responsiveness toward the elite's interest. However, the incrementalism is not the prerequisite. Additionally, the consensus between the mass and elites does not always smooth. The negotiation and compromise process are required if it is needed.

**Keywords:** Decentralization , Elite Theory, Policy Analysis, Thailand

### 1. Introduction

Guha and Chakrabarti (2019) believe that local government is one of the most significant institutions to drive the sustainable development at the nation level. It is strongly suggested that the most of decision authority should be given to the local government. This is particularly in fiscal, political and administration dimensions. However, the limitation of local government has been widely discussed which mainly are the capability, specialization and knowledgeable to spread the services efficiently and effectively. Goal et al. (2017) argues that fiscal and administration decentralization improve perceptions of government performance.

Initially, the decentralization concept was introduced during 1980s when the stagnation economics and inefficient centralized bureaucracies. These phenomena were commonly seen developing countries . Furthermore, Schneider (2003) highlighted that another key pressure as the domestic civil society and local politicians. Their pinpoint statement is that decentralization policy would be beneficial for the better local public services

Some scholars may trace back the Decentralization administration in Thailand that has been publicized since 13th-14th Century during the Sukhothai kingdom. However, the modern Thai local government is seen in the period of King Rama V in last hundred years ago (Mala, 2017). The most concrete outcome is probably seen as the administration decentralized dimension. It is generally acknowledged as the transfer of resources, responsibilities and decision-making authority from the central government to the regional and local governments. Nonetheless, the decentralized administration in Thailand has been faced many challenges (Political Sciences, Chulalongkorn University. 2013). The Office of the Decentralization to the Local Government Organization Committee: ODLOC (ODLOC, 2020) addressed the most seven issues that are in needed to be prioritized. There are 1) the decentralized law and regulations 2) the relationship between central and local governments as well as the local governments and their citizen 3) the human resources of local government 4) the duplication of responsibilities between central and local governments 5) the autonomous of central government monitoring 6) the insufficient self-revenues and 7) the irrelevant criterial of budget distribution from the central government and 8) the right of local citizen.

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In order to truly understand the outcome of decentralization policy in Thailand, the model of policy analysis is considered as crucial to explain the specific phenomenon. Cairney (2021) states that policy analysis is a political act, not simply technical and 'evidence based' process. Moreover, Dye & Zeigler (2006) point out that most of public policy does not reflect the preferences of the masses, but rather the interests of the elite, and changes in public policy are incremental rather than radical or revolutionary. Consequently, the elite theory which comparing to the rational approach, is more likely to be an explanatory framework for analysis the evolution of decentralization policy in Thailand. More specifically, the merit of Elite theory is able to project the process of structural change as well as negotiation among the interest groups. This essay argues that the elite class dominated either directly or indirectly in the formation of decentralized policy in Thailand. The analysis will be principally applied the Elite theory because of its ability to see the dynamic of policy driving particularly in Thai setting.

### 2.Literature Review

#### 2.1.Elite Theory

Even though, the public policy analysis is perceived as a rational approach which. Putting the political alternative choices aside, most of decisions have an inclination to be made by using information and policy instruments. However, Stone (2011) contrasts that policy decisions often give way to political reality, to accommodation to conflicting interests, to compromise, to values other than economic efficiency. According to Mariotti (2020), "The Elite class, which is a ruling minority, –no matter when or where –in every society, the majority of the existent resources economical, intellectual, and cultural –are concentrated in the hands of a small group of individuals which use them to exercise power over the rest of the population".

Besides, the assumption of popular sovereignty, which the individuals are able to freely express their needs, is arguable. Inevitably, the reflection of society is often noticed the inequality. The elite groups ,who hold either power or charismas over the majority, take and impose decisions valid to the whole society. Regardless the era of transition modern democracy, the empirical study from Gilen and Page (2014) provide the substantial support for theories of Economic-Elite Domination follows in the tradition of the Winner Takes All Politics of Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson in 2010. Furthermore, the results implies that average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence towards the policy process.

The Elite theory in policy context, the explanation of Mill (1956) and Dye (2017) are that the policy formulation is an activity of the powerful minority group in the society. Consequently, the policy is only a product of the elite class. Either the mass who know almost nothing or the people, who know something regarding the political issues, have the high tendency to accept the policy-making by the Elite. Most of them expect only self-interest at the short-term period, comply with the elite policy for their career advancement. This is corresponding to Lindblom's standing point. He believes that the policy is an outcome from give and take and mutual consent among numerous actors. To reduce the risks and cost of uncertainty, the existing policy thus changes at the very slow pace which is the incrementalism.

More and More, changes in public policy will be incremental rather than revolutionary. Incremental changes permit responses to events that threaten a social system with a minimum of alteration or dislocation of the system. Active elites are subject to relatively little direct influence from apathetic masses. Elites influence masses more than the masses influence elites.

Dye and Zeigler (2006) summarized the elite theory as followed ;

- 1) Society is divided into the few who have power and the many who do not have. Only small number persons allocate values for society; the masses do not decide public policy
- 2) Elites share a consensus on the basic values of the social system and the preservations of the system.
- 3) Public policy does not reflect demands of the masses but rather the prevailing values of the elite.
- 4) The movement of non-elites to elite positions must be slow and continuous to maintain stability and avoid revolution. Only non-elites who have accepted the basic elite consensus can be admitted to governing circles.

It is worthwhile to be noted that Elite theory is not only widely used for the explanation of policy formulation. In the contrast, it is also brought about the concept of New-Marxism and Hegemony theory.

#### 2.2.Thailand Decentralization Policy Pathway

The decentralization policy in Thailand have been evolved over the hundred years. However, there are seven key distinctive characteristics during the period which will be discussed as followed;

### **2.3. Absolute Monarchy (1897-1932 A.D)**

It is widely accepted that the concept of Thai decentralized state had been applied and continually developed since King Rama V (King Chulalongkorn). To respond to western colonialism and embarked the far-reaching Thai public administration reform, the new modern state was the vital survival strategy. A sweeping reorganization of the entire government was launched in the 1890's. After the reorganization of the Ministry of Interior in 1882, the policy of centralization of provincial administration was greatly extended and systematized. A provincial structure of geographic divisions was established, in which the country was divided into circles (Monton), provinces(Changwat), districts (Ampur), communes (Tambol), and villages (Muban). For the most part, this system remains until today.

To be more specific, Sanitary district (Sukapiban) was also another initiative in Chulalongkorn era. Its primary roles and responsibilities are to maintain the area's cleanliness and roads, basic public healthcare and road maintenance (Sanitary Act of 1897). In 1905, the first sanitary district in Thailand was established in Tha Chalom district which is a semi-urban closing to Bangkok. However, most of scholar critic that sanitary districts were being considered as local state-government rather than a local-self government (Udyanin and Suwanagul 1965; Chayabutra. 1997; Chardchawarn 2010).

According to Udyanin and Suwanagul (1965), " the King Chulalongkorn's reign was the greatest development and modernization of the country". However, it is hard to deny that the Thai local government was still at the first step of development.

### **2.4 The Pinpoint of Political Regime Transformation (1932-1957 A.D )**

The second pinpoint of local governance in Thailand was appeared during King Prachathipok's reign which also was the last of Thai absolute monarch. The change from the absolute monarchy to the constitutional monarchy was brought about by a coup d'etat which took place on June 24, 1932. Unavoidably, the decentralization administration was also significant transformed, the Municipal Administration Act 1933 (Thesaban Act) was the first concrete local development reform. It is believed that Pridi Bhanomyong intended to establish Thesaban across the nations. There was approximately 2,000 tambons during that period. However, the expected number of Thesaban established in 1932 was delayed until 1999 was merely around 150 entities. The delay of this increase of Thesaban can attribute to various factor. The subsequent repetition of military coups and democratic rules, however, prevented the smooth development of local autonomy as Pridi envisioned. (Nagai, Ozaki, and Kimata, 2007). Furthermore, legal condition could be another contributed factor which including fiscal requirement, number of populations, and the village headman (Kamnan) qualification (Mektrairat 2004, Nagai and Kagoya 2015). More specifically, the village headman is less inclined to agree with the establishment of Thesaban, simply because they did not want to lose this prestigious post. Nevertheless, this legal condition was changed in 1999, which made it certain kinds of village headman to co-exist in rural areas.

In an effort to nurture and strengthen the concepts and practices of local self- government, (Lowatcharin and Crumpton, 2019) denote the new introducing several laws from the 1930s to the 1950s. These included the Municipality Act of 1933, Provincial Council Act of 1938, and the Sub-district Administrative Organisation (SAO) Act of 1956.

### **2.5.. The Military Regime ( 1958- 1991 A.D)**

Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat was the premier in a military government of Thailand from 1958 to 1963. Since the central government had a little confident on the expertise and capability on administration, the local government was tightly controlled and dominated by the bureaucrats both from the central and provincial governments. If administration of the provinces is examined, we can see that power was concentrated in the hands of the provincial administration of the bureaucracy. The roles and responsibilities of the PAO were so circumscribed that in practice the organization had little influence over either provincial development or the work of provincial administration. The central government maintained a high degree of control over the procedural and law-making functions of local government (Arghiros 2001: 22-23 cited in Chardchawarn 2010).

In general, PAO council members (at that time, called as Provincial Council members) were all elected directly by local residents; the PAO president was assumed by provincial governor, who was dispatched by the central government, and other senior officials of the PAO were also assumed by other high officials, such as deputy governors (the highest position in the province, dispatched from the department of local administration, Interior Ministry), district chief officers (senior officials dispatched from the department of local administration, Interior Ministry) etc. In short, though the legal status of the sanitary district and PAO was local government,

centrally dispatched officials and local notables were allowed to join in the management of local governments (Nagai and Kagoya 2015).

Bangkok Metropolitan and Thonburi Province were merged together under the administration of Field Marshall Thanom Kittakachorn in 1971. They were called, “Bangkok Thonburi Metropolitan” and “Bangkok Thonburi City Metropolitan” posited at the regional administration and local government level respectively. In 1985, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) is organized in accordance with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration Act 1985, to be responsible for the management of the city of Bangkok which comprises of two main bodies: the Governor and the Bangkok Metropolitan Council.

The decentralization policy had been created since 1973, the college students and people marched in demanding for absolute democracy. The fellow central government had not been prioritized the decentralized agenda which the Sub-district Administrative Organization (SAO) Act of 1956 were not seen any adjustment from then.

### **2.6.. The Political Revolution (1992-1997)**

During the cold war, the Thai Premier Chatichai Choonhavan declared his ambition to turn Indochina “from a battlefield into a marketplace.” To achieve this aim, the key national policy was focused on international trade and economic agenda. In the contrast, the decentralization policy remained unchanged until Chuan Leekpai’s cabinet in 1992. During his office time, there was an attempt sign to reform locality administration structure which particular the proposal to hold the election of provincial governor. Nonetheless, most of the top management bureaucratic in ministry of interior clearly opposed this idea while support the argument that local administration was not applicable to the provincial level. However, Tambon Council and Tambon Administrative Authority Act was promulgated in 1993. The Act was enlarged Tambon council’s authority to be the Juristic person and local government institution. This decentralization policy was surprisingly advanced in comparing with the decentralization development plan (Charoenmuang 2001).

### **2.7.. The Flourished Decentralization Policy (1997-2001)**

After the promulgation of 1997 constitution in Thailand, many scholars mutually agree to mark this period as the peak pinpoint for decentralization policy (Chardchawarn 2010, Mahakanjana 2014, Muangming 2018). Due to the first people’s constitution, the drafting process opened the opportunities for popular participation in politics, administration, and policy. The 1997 constitution, unlike others, included comprehensive and extensive provisions for local government and decentralization (Nelson 2001: 228-229). These stipulations mainly involved state policy and legislation concerning decentralization, and also the new structure of Thai local government.

Concentrating on decentralization policy, the form and structure of municipal government in Thailand changed significantly after the promulgation of the 1997 constitution. In Chapter V Directive Principles of Fundamental State Policies, the stipulation of Chapter 78 was that

“ The State shall decentralize powers to localities for the purpose of independence and self-determination of local affairs, develop local economics, public utilities and facilities systems and information infrastructure in the locality thoroughly and equally throughout the country as well as develop into a large-sized local government organization a province ready for such purpose, having regard to the will of the people in that province.”

Moreover, Chapter Nine (Articles 282-290) focuses on decentralization. Section 285 of the constitution allowed municipalities to retain the indirect system of election but also provided the option of adopting a new direct election system. After decentralization policy was implementing, the primary education, which were viewed as still not ready and had a lack of suitable structural framework, could turn out to be successful upon schools management and helped make users satisfied with their services (Jermstittiparsert and et. Al. 2016)

### **2.8. The Recentralized Policy ( 2002-2006)**

Another forth and back during the decentralized policy was appeared during the period of Thaksin Shinawatra. Being a tidal waves or tsunami, this is a metaphor of regime shift which was well presented by Bowornwathana (2014). His statement is that “The Thaksin administration is a good case of a major regime shift from democratic governance to democratic authoritarianism that is generating tidal waves that overflow the process of state autonomization in the 1990s. The direction of administrative reform in the democratic governance era of the 1990s was u-turned by Thaksin. Thaksin's tsunami has reversed the process of state autonomation by introducing administrative reform that further consolidates political power and government authority in the hands of a single person: Prime Minister Thaksin himself”.

In the decentralization policy dimension, the provincial governor administration style was adapted from ‘Chief Executive Officer : CEO’ in private sector which had the maximum authority to make decisions. This approach was claimed to move away the bottle-neck process in bureaucratic administration. To implied the effort to recentralized power, there were series of operations including delaying the transfer of personnel to local organizations and adjusting the ratio of local governments’ income to be not less than 25% of the net income of the central government (Muangming 2018).

**2.9. The Strengthening Bureaucracy System (2006-Present)**

Thai politics during this period has been yet stabilized, the crux of polarization in Thailand had been continually divided and left no middle room for the consensus. Decentralization policy has then been clearly stagnated. There was a slow pace of the fiscal, personal as well as a number of missions that was stipulated to transfer to local administrative organizations in accordance with the Determining Plans and Process of Decentralization Act 1999. It was revealed that many chapters in the 2017 Constitution were unclear concerning decentralization (Muangming, 2018)

Furthermore, the government is a bureaucratic polity which prefer to run by hierarchy of controls and unity of director. Even though, there was another initiative to reform the decentralized policy in 2013 which is specifically the autonomous province issue, it was another disappeared wave.

Throughout 120 years of the decentralization policy in Thailand, it finds out that the public service authority was much diverse. Moreover, the personnel and fiscal autonomous was raised higher for the local government. The master plan and action plan for decentralization policy is the Determining Plans and Process of Decentralization Act 1999 (number1-3) and the Determining Process of Decentralization Action Plan number 1-3. In sum, there are 262 of mission transfer, 10,361 personnel transfers, and 27.8 of annual revenue was subsidized to the local government (Office of the Decentralization to the Local Government Organization Committee 2020) The process to develop the new constitution specifically limited participation to the elite and carefully selected representatives of civil society from the middle class (Hewison, 2007)

**3.Research Methodology**

The study was conducted by chosen a number of important primary and secondary sources. Then, the information was analyzed with the Elite theory approach by Dye and Zeigler (2006). Furthermore, the policy status was added up to be an explanatory factor to indicate the level of policy implementation. There are six analysis subjects which are 1) policy status 2) formulation process 3) the mass’s values 4) the elite’s value 5) the incrementalism and 6) comply with the elite for career advancement.

**4.Results**

An analysis on the formulation policy process of decentralization policy in Thailand with the Elite theory, the results could be divided into 6 characteristics as in table 1 ;

**Table 1** An analysis on the formulation policy process of decentralization policy in Thailand with the Elite theory

Thailand Decentralization Policy Pathway	Characteristics in Elite Theory					
	Policy Status	Formulation Process	The Mass’s Values	The Elite’s Value	The Incrementalism	Complying with the Elite
1. In the era of Absolute Monarchy ( 1897-1932 A.D.)	Growth	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. The Pinpoint of Political Regime Transformation (1932-1957 A.D.)	Growth	✓	✓	✓	×	✓
3. The Pinpoint of Military Regime (1958- 1991 A.D.)	Growth	✓	✓	✓	×	✓
4. The Pinpoint of Political Revolution (1992-1997 A.D.)	Well-Growth	×	✓	✓	×	✓
5. The Flourished Pinpoint of Decentralization Policy (1997-2001A.D.)	Well-Growth	×	✓	✓	×	✓
6. The Pinpoint of Recentralized Policy (2002-2006 A.D.)	Recession	×	✓	×	✓	✓

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Thailand Decentralization Policy Pathway	Characteristics in Elite Theory					
	Policy Status	Formulation Process	The Mass's Values	The Elite's Value	The Incrementali sm	Complying with the Elite
7. The Pinpoint of Strengthening Bureaucracy System (2006 A.D. - Present)	Stagnation	×	✓	×	✓	✓

First, Thailand decentralization policy status during the first to the third pinpoint (1897-1991 A.D.) were at growth level. Even though, there was a number of limitations in term of areas and autonomous, the amendment of decentralization acts which was the structural reform could present the concrete advancement. Furthermore, there were well-growth of decentralization policy during the fourth and fifth pinpoint. This can be seen from the 1997 constitutions amended that "... the State shall decentralize powers to localities for the purpose of independence and self-determination of local affairs ...". More significantly, there were the Determining Plans and Process of Decentralization Act 1999 in order to indicate the fiscal, personnel and mission transfer to the local government. Thai decentralization policy, which is considered as part of institutional reform strategy, initiated by the 1997 constitution produced major and rapid changes in political and administrative systems in local governments in Thailand. Directly elected mayors and new personnel systems changed local administrations across Thailand (Mahakanjana, 2014). However, the recession period was occurred in the sixth pinpoint which the government aim to recentralize the authority. The bureaucracy reform led to reducing size of organizations yet enlarging the number of new organizations. These were directly affected to the development of decentralized policy. In the seventh pinpoint, the central government has solely been focused on political stability and unity. Even though, the decentralization plan still in the path, it has to face the delay of law adjustment. Nonetheless, it should be highlighted that the local public service are much more efficiency and effectiveness.

Second, the State was run under bureaucratic polity and authoritarian regime during the first ninety-year of decentralization policy. However, the Elite class initiated the value towards the decentralization policy. While the next thirty years later, the decentralization policy had been driven from democratic pressure which is the mass value instead of the elite. Most significantly, the value of decentralization policy in the last nineteen years has been abandoned by the bureaucratic polity which led to the policy stagnation. Chardchawan (2010) highlighted that the power was mostly seized in the hand of the provincial administration of the bureaucracy (Chardchawan, 2010). More importantly, the Decentralization to Local Government Organization Committee were bureaucratic domination which resulted in delay and difficulties in decentralization process as well as the unfair regulation for local government.

Third, the decentralization policy has consistently been the mass value through the 120 years. Regardless the symbolic statement, most of government mentioned to the decentralization policy which reflected of being a democratic government. Not been applicable to Thailand, there are much of concrete evidences proven the positive relationship between the decentralization policy and the sustainable development. Atisa, Zemrani and Weiss (2021) argue that the best avenue to advance sustainable development initiatives is through the framework of decentralization in order to produce durable economic outcomes, minimize civil disputes and improve the living standards of local communities. At this point, it is hard to oppose that the decentralization policy is still the mass's preferences, otherwise the governments have to counter with other policy that able to guarantee the state's sustainability development.

Fourth, the central government enjoyed the benefit of decentralization policy during the first to fifth pinpoint. This is including the number of voting, the people supporting and the mass depressor of being an autonomous. In the sixth and seventh pinpoint, there were no concrete evident that the government could enjoy the benefit for the decentralization policy. In viewpoint of Chardchawarn (2010), the state politician is one of the powerful actors in Thai local government because their ability to intervene the local government subsidy. However, the government in the sixth pinpoint presented by the success of economic development while it was not necessary to hold the decentralized value. In the seventh pinpoint, the government stability is the first priority. In so doing, the bureaucracy regime has to tightly hold while the decentralization policy is seen as the impediment. Peoples only the margin of development, there is a tendency that peoples will continuously less participate in the process of local development planning (Jermsittiparsert, Atsamongkhon and Sriyakul. 2015)

Fifth, Policy change occurs through interactions between wide external changes or shocks to the political system (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). When the circumstance has no effect to the power structural the elite, the change would be rather incremental than radical. The incrementalism has been presented as following patterns. The policy was implemented incrementally in the specific areas at the first pinpoint. However, the

implementation was at the specific issues during the fifth to seventh pinpoint when the political and economic contexts were less likely to affect the structure of the elite power. This situation aligned with the analysis of Greener (2002) toward the generally difficult to change policies because institutions are sticky, and actors protect the existing model. Nevertheless, there were the rapid structure reform nationwide during the second to fourth pinpoint. It was resulted from both the internal and external forces for being democratization and capitalization. To grasp this opportunity, the elites respond with the rapid reform which correlate to the discussion of Streeck and Thelen (2005).

Sixth, one of the distinctive characteristics of elite theory is to comply with the elite for self-career advancement. Most of the mass expect to be the elite. In doing so, they would prefer to comply rather than to revolt. Evidently, once the idea of the provincial governor election was initiated, most of public officers at central and regional level opposed this approach. In order to retain the existing approach of provincial governor, they compromised by promulgating Tambon Council and Tambon Administrative Authority Act in 1997.

## 5. Discussion And Conclusion

It is hard to argue that the Elite theory is able to analyze decentralization policy pathway in Thailand. Policy has been reflected the value of the elite class at the period of time. It is evident from the back and forth of policy process which resulted from the elite's preference. As Dye (2017) argues that the policy outcome is the reflection of elite's interest protection. Whether the elite had been initiated the policy or not, the process would be able to run through if it will benefit to the elite at some point. While the elite did not the key driven to push the decentralization policy during the fourth and fifth pinpoint, it had dramatically risen due to the elite's support. This was induced from gaining the populist support in return. In the contrast, the decentralization policy had the high tendency to obstruct the elite's interest in the sixth and seventh pinpoint. The policy status quo at that time was at recession. The decentralization policy had to faced many challenges which are including the delay of law adjustment, the clear structure of relationship forms as well as the insufficient resources. However, most of this limitation was the product of elite's decision rather than being the structural condition. More or less, the limitation had to remain unsolved as long as there was no support from the elite.

The study finds that elite's interest is the most vital factor. Contrast to Dye and Zeigler (2006), the policy pattern does not always be an incremental. In the contrast, the pattern is able to rapidly changed as shown during the second to fifth pinpoints. Moreover, the level of policy changing was followed by the level of the mass to comply with the elite. It should be note that the road did not smooth as always. To comply for career advance, most of time were gone to the compromising negotiation between the interest groups. Otherwise, the policy may silently out of the light if the consensus could not be reached. Altogether the Thai patronage political concept by Owen (2016), Thananithichot (2020) also indicates the number of political dynasties is risen from 3.1% in 1979 to hit the peak at six-fold or 18% in 2011. This is related to the iron triangle model which analyzed that the politician, the bureaucracy and the interest groups tend to hold the positive relationship in order to share the power unity (Shamas-ur-Rehman and Stephen, 2010).

The study was analyzed by using the information of the 120 years of decentralization policy in Thailand. This benefit to the concrete conclusion that derived from the governments' decision under the various contexts and circumstances. This is a cross-sectional confirmation study that the policy status in the long run is dominated by the elite's authority. However, the incrementalism pattern is unlikely to be fixed. However, the relationship among the stakeholders and the in-depth of the comply for career advancement are both limitation in this study.

At the bottom line, the successful of decentralization policy in Thailand is heavily relied on the level of responsiveness toward the elite's interest. In the contrast, there are no clear evident that using power of people solely will able to make the effective change.

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