

The ideology of vote-buying and the democratic deferral of political reform

Presented at

**Trading Political Rights: The Comparative Politics of Vote Buying
International Conference, 26-28 August 2002
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge MA**

William A. Callahan

**Politics Department, University of Durham
Durham DH1 3LZ, England, W.A.Callahan@Durham.ac.uk**

“We are democrats today,” John Dunn declared in 1979. The triumph of liberalism signals the end to history, Francis Fukuyama famously chimed in a decade later. Even though ideological questions are no longer vexing, according to news reports in the past few years there has been a general crisis of elections. The response to electoral problems has not been the call for revolution, but for political reform. In the Third World, reform is the new ideology in places as diverse as post-Mao China (*gaige*) and post-Suharto Indonesia (*reformasi*). Though vote-buying is characteristically seen as a pathology of developing nations, this narrowing of politics does not just occur in the Third World. Most of the hits for a search for “vote-buying” on google.com were for Japan’s manipulation of the International Whaling Commission, and the head-line grabbing scandal of Americans auctioning their votes on eBay. Indeed, Europe and North America have recently experienced their own election crises and calls for reform: the electoral rise of neo-nationalists in France, Netherlands, Denmark, and the UK, as well as the US presidential election fiasco of Autumn 2000.

In the 1990s, as the title of a key book *Thai Elections in Crisis* from 1993 tells us, Thailand was part of this general crisis movement for political reform (Sombat 1993). On the face of it, this is strange because the military coup of 1991 showed how Thailand was out of step with the “third wave” of democratization – until the mass uprising of May 1992 ousted the military rulers and put democracy back on track first through new elections and finally through a political reform movement which produced the 1997 “People’s Constitution.” Though many scholars like to draw the timelines which link

Draft copy: for comments

democratic movements in 1973, 1992 and 1997 to oppose autocratic moments in 1976 and 1991, the 1991 coup is interesting because it raised many of the same issues as the 1997 constitution. Both the coup and the constitution were in response to vote-buying which tarnished the legitimacy and efficacy of democratically-elected governments in Thailand.

This essay will explore why vote-buying is such an important issue in Thailand. It will argue that vote-buying now describes more than a simple transaction whereby a few bucks are exchanged for the promise of a vote in the general election. Vote-buying now has become a metaphor for the political disease of Thailand, a core problem not just for elections or politics, but for society in general. Thus, I will argue that the discourse of vote-buying not only points to legal and structural problems with the Thai political system, but in an ideological legerdemain, conceals a host of cultural and political-economic issues. In other words, vote-buying is more than just the red flag of Thai politics. It is also a red herring that displaces our attention away from another set of structural and ideological issues in a deferral of democracy. Closer examination shows that the historical links are not between democratic movements, but between anti-vote-buying campaigns and anti-democratic forces.

Through its implementation of the concepts of law, “good and able leaders,” gangsters, the middle class, civil society, and village life, vote-buying tells us about Thai images of self and Other. Identity, here, is not seen as autonomous and essential, but is produced in relation to difference and Other: “Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty” (Connolly 1991:64). As we will see, vote-buying is an image which defines Thai identity in this negative way: the positive ideals of a “democratic civil society” and “good and able leaders” only make sense when contrasted with their opposite: gangsters using money politics to manipulate the votes in patronage-ridden backward villages. The relationality is not crony capitalism’s collusion between corrupt government and business elites; rather the relations are between a series of Others which produce the Thai democratic self.

Draft copy: for comments

Therefore, vote-buying is more than a problem that can be excised from the Thai political system: vote-buying is actually quite useful to reformers as an ideological crutch. Thus in this paper, I will use vote-buying as an optic through which we can examine the politics of Thai society, the Third World, and political theory more generally. In this way, the analysis of vote-buying will move from a structural legal Schumpeterian concept of democracy through a political-cultural notion of civil society to a structural analysis of the Thai political-economy. To combat vote-buying, I argue, a direct focus on the details of electoral fraud actually defers us from important political issues. We have to question the system that makes vote-buying the key issue, and ask who benefits from this particular problematization of Thai politics. To understand Thai democracy we need to examine how vote-buying conceals the deeper issues of rural poverty and the institutional corruption of the Thai civil service.

In other words, the head-line grabbing denunciations of vote-buying actually tend to displace the main issues of Thai politics and possibilities for political change. The essay will conclude that we must question popular wisdom which sees vote-buying as a legal problem of criminal politicians or a cultural problem of rural idiocy. Rather, like other forms of corruption, vote-buying is produced by specific relations between political and economic, urban and rural, official and unofficial power. To challenge vote-buying, we need to challenge the dynamics of these relations. This follows from a broader notion of politics which argues that corruption does not stem from the exchange of money for votes, so much as how unbalanced relations between wealth and power which endanger democratic processes and values (Johnston 1996: 332).

Section I: Constitutionalism and Good Governance

The Asian financial crisis began in Bangkok when the Thai Baht was floated on international currency markets on 2 July 1997. Due to a combination of “overborrowing, banking mismanagement, crony capitalism, [and a] lack of regulation and transparency,” the Thai economy abruptly slipped from four decades of uninterrupted growth into a world-class depression (McVey 2000:1-2; Robison et al. 2000). Elsewhere in Asia, the crisis sparked anti-Chinese riots and anti-Western demonstrations which eventually led to change of regime in Indonesia, a change of government in South Korea, and an on-going

political crisis in Malaysia. In Thailand, on the other hand, the economic crisis spurred a critical self-examination of country's social and political institutions. The reform faction of the Thai elite blamed the crisis on inept politicians whose corruption had bankrupted the country's decades of economic growth in a few short months. They turned the crisis into an opportunity to institute far-reaching political reforms. The result was a new "People's Constitution" whereby the Thai reclaimed political sovereignty in October 1997.

Both activists and analysts agree that the 16th Constitution of Thailand was written to fight vote-buying. Former Election Commissioner and key democratic activist Gothom Arya explains, "One of the objectives of the present political reform is to stem vote buying. Many provisions of the Constitution were drafted having this problem in mind" (Gothom 2001b:7; also see Prawase 21; ANFREL 21). Thailand's foremost expert on electoral politics, Sombat Chantornvong, agrees: "The drafters of the new constitution appeared to be convinced that they had solved the problems of legitimacy and efficiency which had long destabilized the Thai political system. The practice of vote-buying by competing politicians was the source of many of these evils" (Sombat 2002:203; also see McCargo 1998; Croissant & Dosch 2; McVey 2000:17; FEER 28/xii/00:20).

Vote-buying was thus seen as the key issue for Thai political reform. Since vote-buying, according to Thai election monitoring NGOs and the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), was the most common fraud in Thai elections, reformists reasoned that "a better electoral process would produce a better political system" (P-Net in ANFREL 98; ECT 2001). The problem of buying votes was seen as an issue of law and order: "The rise of vote-buying meant that the electoral process was becoming increasingly exclusionary, controlled by an unholy alliance of so-called 'professional politicians,' provincial crooks and hoodlums, unsavory business interests..." (McCargo 1998:10; also see Callahan 2000: 45-59). Thai elder statesman and *bon vivant* Kukrit Pramoj underlined how the problem of money politics was a legal one: it was the result of the rise of gangsters (in Sombat 2000:55).

As vote-buying is illegal, the systemic problem is of the legal system. Institutional reforms of the constitution were necessary. Since the problem is legal, here the solution is

Draft copy: for comments

“good governance.” Good governance is a term which refers to a neo-liberal dominance of the global political economy. The World Bank and the IMF use it to describe and proscribe economic and political reform projects that are part of structural adjustment. But in a broader sense, good governance is a product of the Enlightenment mentality which defines rationality in terms of clean, clear, efficient, and transparent administration. It is a legalistic system of autonomous objective standards which are universally applied (see Foucault 1979:272). Like with the Enlightenment, good governance has the goal of a pure state of perfection. Money politics and vote-buying therefore are diseases which need to be surgically removed from the body politic via legal and institutional reform.

But good governance is not just the ideology of neo-liberal institutions. It also became popular in pre-1997 Bangkok. Chamlong Srimuang was elected the Governor of Bangkok in 1985 on a clean politics platform. In the 1990s, the three heavy-weights of Thai public life, Anand Panyarachun, Prawase Wasi and Thirayuth Boonmi, each promoted good governance (Pasuk & Baker 2000a:125). Though Thirayuth distanced himself from World Bank and IMF definitions of good governance by expanding the concept, which he called “*thammarat*-virtuous state,” to include democratic civil society and NGOs, the Enlightenment logic is still the same. Good governance is “the collaboration between public, social and private sectors to create governance and administration that are transparent, legitimate, accountable, and effective” (Thirayuth 31, 29-30). Good governance received an important institutional cachet when it was made the topic of the Thai Development Research Institute’s year-end conference in 1998. It became official policy when the prime minister adopted it in 1999 (Pasuk & Baker 2000a:126; Naruemon 2002:191).

According to good governance, the rational impartiality and universality of law will solve the irrational bias of politicians. Reform is instituted through constitutional politics. The title of a 1994 best-selling book which set the agenda for the 1997 constitution is telling: *Constitutionalism: The Solution for Thailand* (in Connors 1999:207). To avert a catastrophe which they thought would be even greater than the economic meltdown, political reformers used the Constitution to change the rules of the game, but not the game itself. This view of the salvation powers of Constitutions is not

Draft copy: for comments

new in Thailand. Two decades ago, Chai-anan Samudavanaija wrote that Thai politics is caught in a vicious circle of corruption, coup, constitution, and election (1983:1-3).

McCargo writes that Thailand is caught in a permanent constitutionalism comparable to Trotsky's permanent revolution. Constitutionalism is part of the Enlightenment project in that it depends upon the belief that *this* time will be different: *this constitution* will be the silver bullet, the "Solution for Thailand." The 16th Constitution in 65 years was seen as a "cure for political disease:" "unlike all previous constitutions, will be fail-safe, foolproof, cast-iron, lasting and eternal" (McCargo 1998:5, 7).

Vote-buying was thus seen as a technical problem of law, and the Constitution was crafted as the technical solution. Democracy is framed in Schumpeterian institutional terms of free and fair elections rather than a broader notion of civil society and socio-economic justice. In this context the problem of vote-buying is simple: gangster politicians buy their way into office as a way to take advantage of the riches of the country. As ministers, they warp the system to direct state resources to friends and relatives in their home province, while protecting their own illegal businesses of smuggling, logging, gambling, etc. (see Pasuk & Baker 2000a:134; Pasuk & Sungsidh 1994). As McVey summarizes: "Money has thus come to dominate politics at all levels: one must have money to run, and one must make money from office too" (McVey 2000:16). Prime Minister Banharn Silapa-acha (1995-96), the gravel merchant who enriched himself on state contracts, famously declared in 1992 that he could not afford to be out of government very long. For such politicians, business and politics are two complementary activities: political power allows them to firm up and expand their business activities, while income generated from business gives them access to political power (see Callahan 2000:17-43). In other words, they use proceeds from illegal business to buy votes to get into power, and then use that power to expand and protect their illegal ventures.

The constitutional solution to this problem is two-fold: a) to sever the link between elections and government ministries, and b) to change election procedures to restrict vote-buying. These separations and restrictions show the Enlightenment mentality of Thai elite: the aim is to plug up the legal loop-holes in the search for perfection. Under previous constitutions, the Senate was not elected, but appointed by the sitting

Draft copy: for comments

government. It was an enclave of the military-bureaucracy that was suspicious of the electoral politics of democracy. House of Representatives was elected from multiple-member constituencies.

The 1997 Constitution dramatically re-formed the National Assembly into three kinds of elected representatives: Senators, Constituency MPs, and Party-List MPs. The senate was directly elected from each province. It was meant not just to be an upper house for legislative scrutiny, but to be a separate a-political body that would be above the rough-and-tumble of partisanship. Senate candidates cannot be members of political parties, and are not allowed to campaign in the election (Section 126). They are limited to a single of six year term. As Sombat explains, “The charter writers wanted the new senate to be completely free from politics” (Sombat 2002:204). More to the point, Gotham tells us that “All these stipulations are aiming at the separation of the House and the Senate” (2001b:4).

The House of Representatives was divided into two sorts of MPs: 400 constituency MPs and 100 party-list MPs. Ministers could not be constituency MPs, hence they either had to be elected from the party-list, or they had to resign their seats and pay for the re-run of the election for their vacated seat. The purpose of this elaborate constitutional solution was two-fold. Not allowing constituency MPs to become ministers was seen as a clever way of cutting the corrupt link between vote-buying politicians and lucrative ministries (Section 118(7)). The party-list ballots would encourage voters to think of politics in terms of parties and policy rather than personalities and vote-buying. All of this was meant to “encourage better-known and more respectable personalities to enter politics” (Sombat 2002:203).

Constituency MPs, according to the constitutional reforms, would be elected from smaller single-member constituencies. This would encourage a closer bond between the representative and the represented. The constituency MP’s votes would be counted at a single central site (Organic Election Law, Section 68). Previously, votes had been counted at each polling station, which enabled politicians and their canvassers to gauge whether their bought-votes had been delivered. A single centralized vote counting site would deter vote-buying because all the ballots were mixed together before counting,

Draft copy: for comments

thus making voting more anonymous. The constitutional also made voting a duty for all Thai, hoping that expanded electoral participation would make vote-buying prohibitively expensive (Section 68). As mentioned above, constituency MPs are forbidden from holding ministerial posts. Because such MPs are barred office and influence, their job is largely confined to representing the views of local areas (McCargo 2002b:249).

All three kinds of representatives have to meet stricter criteria. Beyond the usual restrictions which disqualify convicts, the insane, the corrupt and the bankrupt, candidates for office now had to possess at least a Bachelor's degree and could not be addicts (Sections 107, 109, 125). The logic of this criteria, which excluded 95% of the Thai electorate and 99% of the farmers, was to "ensure a certain level of caliber and character" (Sombat 2002:205; Connors 1999:214; Pasuk & Baker 2000). Nominated ministers were further vetted according to more than thirty more criteria (McCargo 2002b:256).

To enforce these new rules, the Constitution created an independent organization, the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) to run the elections. This took the reigns of control away from the Ministry of Interior which had previously done this task. The Minister of Interior had often intervened to influence local government officials and police under his control. For example, in the 1995 general election, the Interior Minister used the police and bureaucrats to harass his rivals (Callahan 2000:57). The remit of the ECT, therefore, was to run "clean and fair" elections by "sever[ing] the crucial ties that exist between politicians and the civil servants responsible for administering elections" (Sombat 2002:204). As Gothom explains, the powers and duties of the Election Commission include:

- to organize elections of the members of the House of Representatives and of Senators...
- to register political parties and to support them
- to investigate to find facts and to adjudicate on litigation arising from the electoral and political laws
- to order re-election or re-polling in case of referendum when there are credible evidences that the election or the referendum are not just and fair
- to declare the results of the election or referendum

Draft copy: for comments

- to accredit and support NGO to monitor the election or referendum to implement, by itself or by coordinating with state agencies or by supporting NGO, political education programs (Gothom 2001a:4)

Most importantly, the constitution and the organic law give the ECT teeth: it was empowered to investigate and disqualify candidates for election fraud, and call for a re-run of elections where there were irregularities.

How did the political reform of the constitution and organic laws of elections and the ECT affect vote-buying and elections? In many ways, the reforms were a success. After successfully running the Senate elections in 2000 – where it courageously disqualified corrupt politicians – the ECT received the “Best Government Reformer” award from *Asiaweek* magazine (in Sombat 2002:209). For the first time in a generation, vote-buying was down in the April 2000 senate election and January 2001 general election (P-Net in ANFREL 97; Gothom 2001b; Croissant & Dosch 15). As the press release of a prominent election monitoring NGO declared for the January 2001 election, “money and intimidation no longer produced the desirable results” (P-Net in ANFREL 100). Because the election was organized by a neutral organization – the ECT – candidates were disqualified for the first time in history. The reforms crafted to encourage party voting rather than personality voting were reasonably successful. The ECT’s survey of twelve constituencies shows that the mixed system of constituency MPs and party-list MPs encouraged voters to think in terms of political parties and platforms: for the constituency ballot, 41% of the voters chose according to party while 50% voted according to personality. On the party-list ballot, 59% voted according to party and 19% according to personality. Thus 41% and 59% of voters chose according to party and platform (in Gothom 2001b:15-6).

Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party nearly won a clear majority in the House of Representatives, and much of this came from rural voters choosing the TRT on the basis of its party platform which stressed a redistribution of resources to the villages. Many of the elements of rural civil society such as the Assembly for the Poor, declared that they would not vote for the Democrat Party as its policies had favored metropolitan Bangkok and foreign finance over the rural poor (ANFREL 67, 70; McCargo 2002b:247; Pasuk & Baker 2000a:144-47). As it is difficult to buy votes for the party-list ballot, the TRT’s

Draft copy: for comments

success (gaining four million or 50% more votes than the Democrats) showed that the TRT was not able to simply purchase the election (McCargo 2002b:253). Thus the reforms encouraged parties to be more serious about writing policy platforms, and made political parties more of a national institution than a cobbling together of regional factions (Sombat 2002: 216).

But there were serious problems with the Senate and House elections. The ECT was successful in using its powers to disqualify candidates and re-run elections, but this quickly became a farce as in the end it took five months to finish the Senate elections, producing the longest election process in world history. Voter participation rapidly declined from 71% to around 30% (Gothom 2001b:10). The ban on campaigning and political party membership was twisted by prominent politicians to their advantage: over one third of the Senators turned out to be members of political families. Rather than the intended separation of powers between House and Senate, the Senate chamber was turned into a “politician’s wives’ club,” and an “assembly of clans and dynasties” (Sombat 2001:218). Thus for the Senate race, Sombat concludes that “The idea that the Senate could be free from ordinary politics has not been realized” (Sombat 2002:207).

There were also serious problems in the 2001 general election. Campaigning and vote-buying in Sumaleeburi province started early, before the House was dissolved on 9 November 2000, and thus were legal (CILPIN 2001).¹ Like in previous elections, vote-buying was preceded by candidate buying and canvasser recruitment. In Subinburi, the TRT gave its candidate 20 million Baht, and (unsuccessfully) tried to recruit the sitting MP with 40 million Baht. The TRT also bought canvassers – who are key to drumming up support and buying-votes – at the inflated price of 100,000 to 200,000 Baht up from

¹ Much of the data for this section comes from a report based on interviews with candidates and canvassers written by the Centre for Information on Local Politics in the Northeast at Mahasarakham University (CILPN 2001). To maintain the anonymity of interviewers and interviewees, I have changed the names of the provinces to Sumaleeburi, Subinburi and Sainsburi.

300 to 3,000 Baht in 1995 (CILPN 2001; Sombat 2002:215; Callahan 2000:24-8; Viengrat 2000:208).²

Despite hopes that the new Constitution would end the common practice of electoral fraud, vote-buying continued. A bank survey noted that during the campaign, the flow of cash increased by 25 billion Baht – which was 5 billion more than for the 1996 election (FEER 11/i/01:23). In addition to buying votes according to the usual methods – cash to individual voters, trips for local groups, donations to temples, and so on – vote-buying also adapted to the new situation (Callahan 2000:34-7). Due to increased scrutiny and a stiffer enforcement of penalties, it was more difficult to buy votes. Hence canvassers in Sainsburi used a more subtle “direct sales method” to buy votes from relatives and close friends who were unlikely to turn them in to the ECT (CILPN 2001). Rather than buying votes directly, some candidates expanded on a method used earlier in the 1990s to simply recruit most of the village as “small scale canvassers.” Hence rather than buying votes, candidates employed the voters in a strategy of “saturation recruitment” (ANFREL 22; Callahan 2000:27)

While political reformers hailed the success of party voting, canvassers used this modernizing trend to buy votes in different ways. In addition to paying voters directly for their support in cash or in kind, canvassers bought voters by recruiting them as party members. This turns the ideology of grassroots political parties on its head: party members do not pay membership fees to finance the local and national branches of a democratic party. The party pays them. Nation-wide, the TRT was proud to note that it had recruited 11 million new members – roughly equal to the number of votes its party-list received (Croissant & Dosch 10). In Sumaleeburi, the Democrat candidate urged voters to join his candidate’s club and political party: 20,000 joined the club and 10,000 joined the party. In Sainsburi, the TRT recruited 30,000 members, and the NAP was active as well. Members not only received a fee for joining, but could take advantage of services offered by the local party branch such as the use of a car for emergencies and

² For the April 2000 Senate race, canvassers were paid between 2000 and 5000 Baht in rural areas and up to 100,000 Baht in Chiangmai and 400,000 Baht in Samut Prakan (ECT 2000).

Draft copy: for comments

errands (CILPN 2001). The candidates and canvassers were able to enforce the link between party membership and voting through a campaign of disinformation. Since the election system was new, few people knew the rules. Voting was compulsory, and canvassers fraudulently told the voters that they were legally bound to vote for their new party (ANFREL 15).

Disinformation also played on the authority of the ECT. It was common for canvassers to tell voters that the rival candidate had been disqualified by the ECT. In Sainsburi, the Chart Thai Party canvassers pretended to be TRT canvassers and blatantly bought votes in order to provoke an ECT investigation of the TRT candidate. In Subinburi canvassers distributed anonymous fliers declaring that the rival candidate was a local mafioso. In other provinces canvassers impersonated the ECT and its NGO arms to harass rival canvassers and thus prevent them from vote-buying (CILPN 2001; ANFREL 15, 27; ECT 2000; Viengrat 2000:222; Callahan 2000:57) The election monitoring NGO P-Net concluded that “in many cases complaints about irregularity were wrongfully used in a political mud-sling[ing]” (in ANFREL 97). These actions show that electioneers can use the legitimacy of the ECT to undermine it. Such tactics were not completely new; people had impersonated PollWatch in previous elections to commit similar election fraud. Indeed, disinformation was anticipated by the organic election law which added “slandering candidates” as a new type of forbidden activity (section 44(5); compare with 1992 election law in Callahan 2000:45-6). But it is even more difficult to enforce the rules against disinformation than it is for vote-buying.

If these methods were not effective, candidates could switch from retail buying of individual votes to wholesale election fraud. Political parties and candidates sought to influence local election commissions at the district and provincial level in both legal and illegal ways. At the national level there was serious politicking when the 2nd Election Commission was chosen in late 2001. Gotham feels that this is a sign of the ECT’s success: since the ECT is seen as a strong organization, politicians want to get their people on the commission (Gotham 2001a:7). When they could not get political allies on election commissions in local areas for the 2001 election, candidates sought to buy the commission itself (Sombat 2002:209; McCargo 2002b:250; FEER 8/ii/01). In

Sumaleeburi, the TRT simply hired EC personnel at the poll stations and the district level.

The shift from retail to wholesale election fraud entails a shift from the problem of vote-buying to vote-counting. Centralized vote-counting was a major reform in the 1997 constitution; as mentioned above, mixing up the ballot boxes at the central counting site denied canvassers of the means of checking the effectiveness of their vote-buying in each village (Gothom 2001b:5). Still, vote-counting became a major issue in the 2001 election. Many of these problems were logistical: some polling stations ran out of ballots, vote-counters needed more training, and there were problems with transporting ballot boxes (ANFREL 56, 33). But other problems were very political: illegal ballots were counted and valid ballots were spoiled to the benefit of certain candidates. In Sumaleeburi such election fraud sparked a rash of anonymous fliers by the “Patriotic Democracy-lovers of Sumaleeburi” who demanded a re-run of the elections and the installation of a new provincial election commission. At the national level, a Senate Working Group Report stressed the problems of vote-counting, which it felt were more serious than vote-buying (in McCargo 2002b:249; Croissant & Dosch 15).

Hence, while the political reform movement which sought to elect a more legitimate government by eradicating vote-buying was only partially successful. Vote-buying continued in new forms, although in smaller numbers. It is a flexible practice which adapts to the new rules and regulations – no matter how rational they are. The best example of electioneering adapting to new conditions is in the role of political party membership. Low membership in the kingdom’s informal and non-ideological parties has often been listed as one of the pathologies of Thai politics. The reforms were crafted, in part, to encourage “real political parties” which have “mass membership, sophisticated administrative structure, local branches, representative leadership, ideological cohesion and concrete policy platforms” (McCargo 1997:115). But the 2001 election showed how vote-buying morphed into political party membership-buying. The TRT Party’s 11 million members voted for it on the party-list.

But the new reformist institutions missed many of these twists, because the ECT and the press concentrated on vote-buying to exclusion of other forms of electoral fraud.

Vote-buying makes great headlines; it sells newspapers and adds to the legitimacy of the ECT. Moreover, it concentrates our attention on the legal issues of the fraud committed by a few criminal politicians. Yet the Senate working group concluded that: “The Electoral Commission centrally assigned so much importance to this that they neglected other issues of electoral abuse” (in McCargo 2002:249; ECT 2002). Though vote-buying was often investigated by commission, problems of vote-counting were largely ignored, even when evidence of fraud was overwhelming. Indeed, as one activist concluded from the civic education movements in 1992 where there were “lots of posters to campaign against vote-buying, really stressing anti-vote-buying. I don’t think they should devote so many resources to anti-vote-buying” (Ananya 1992).

Hence we have to ask the more theoretical question, what are we missing in our Enlightenment obsession for technical solutions to vote-buying? Such legalistic problematizations to vote-buying encourage an elitist view of politics, and lead us away from the deeper structural issues of institutional corruption.

Section II: Good Leaders and the *Coup de Technocrats*

Though the reformists were happy that the new Constitution, organic election law and the ECT were able to clean up the 2001 elections, they were still unhappy with the election results. Thaksin’s TRT Party was able to win a landslide victory with its old style party-structure which cobbled together existing factions and veteran MPs from other parties. This underlines how for the reformers, the issue was not simply the legal problem of arresting vote-buyers. It was a leadership problem: the 2001 elections did not produce the “high quality” politicians envisioned by political reform. Here the discourse switches from good governance to the search for “good and able” leaders. Though the phrase does not appear in the Constitution, “good and able people-*khon di mi khwamsamart*” became a catch-phrase for the goal of constitutional reform (Prawes in McCargo 1998:12; ANFREL 13; Sombat 2002: 217; Pasuk & Baker 2000a:119; McCargo 2002b:248; Anek 1996:221; Callahan 2000:61). The Constitution shifts here from being a rational-legal document setting down universal standards, to a means by which the moral problem of elections can be solved by “good people.” The Constitution was therefore crafted to “fix” the elections for the “good and able” in both senses of the word: to repair and to

Draft copy: for comments

manipulate the electoral process. According to Thai political scientist Prudhisan Jumbala, the party-list was not only intended to deter vote-buying and strengthen party system. It was crafted to “encourage knowledgeable candidates who are not good at campaigning” (in Croissant & Dosch 13; Anek 1996:208).

Anand Panyarachun, the diplomat-turned-business executive who became prime minister at the invitation of the junta in 1991, is taken as the poster boy of the good and able people. Anand, who became PM again in 1992 after the Black May democratic uprising, was never elected. But the Anand I and Anand II governments are seen by many as the most effective and efficient in Thai memory: Anand I was able to pass over 200 bills (LoGerfo 2000:228; McCargo 2002a:5). A business magazine thus declared with glee that the 1991 military pusch was a “coup de technocrats.” Anand’s cabinet was the “dream-list” of the World Bank (Jansen 1991). After he left office in 1992, Anand became “the unofficial leader of conservative activism,” “the pin-up hero of the good governance set” who was chosen to be chairman of the Constitutional Drafting Committee in 1996 (Pasuk and Baker 2000a:125; Connors 1999:214; Prawase 2002:25).

This desire for government by good and able technocrats makes sense of many of the Constitution’s more elitist sections. Electoral reforms such as the Bachelor’s degree requirement makes sure that the government will be staffed “if not by the great and the good, at least by the educated and respectable” (McVey 2000:20). The restrictions on campaigning for the Senate would encourage virtuous metropolitan technocrats who “couldn’t deal with the rough and tumble of parliament and the media” (Pasuk & Baker 2000a:127). The main branch of the reformist movement therefore was motivated by a “desire for technocracy” which was “only shallowly rooted in democratic principles” (McCargo 2002a:5).

Reform was not so much about including more people in the democratic spirit, as it was about including a certain kind of person: the virtuous technocrat. This was accomplished not just through positive measures, but through negative ones as well. Political reform was largely motivated by the task of excluding certain kinds of people. To put it another way, the excluded were not simply criminals, but politicians in general. As the leader of the political reform movement states, “The public felt a mixture of

loathing and exasperation concerning the behavior of politicians...” (Prawase 2002: 23; Pasuk & Baker 2000a:116; Croissant & Dosch 5). The president of the Constitutional Drafting Assembly was more blunt: “Let’s behead a few politicians so our country can be better” (in Connors 1999:202). Politicians become, by definition, inept and self-seeking; “in eyes of the middle class, democracy turns out to be the rule of the corrupt and the incompetent” (Anek 1996:208). Anand, speaking as the chairman of the Constitutional Drafting Committee, made the intention of the charter clear: Political reform “is not an attempt to make bad people good, but it is a seeking of preventative ways to stop bad people having the opportunity to hold governing power... (in Connors 1999:215).³

These bad politicians, whom the people loath, are generally called the *jao pho*, the godfathers of provincial Thailand. The Constitution was “designed to reduce vote-buying and graft and break the hold of provincial barons on politics” (Croissant & Dosch 2). Indeed, the regional election monitoring NGO used dramatic terms to conclude that the 2001 election was a “showdown” between good and able technocrats and the vote-buying politicians, between metropolitan gentlemen and the crass outsiders of the provincial *nouveau riche* (ANFREL 20; LoGerfo 2000:231; McVey 2000:13; Pasuk & Baker 2000b:39). Provincial businessmen-politicians were seen as warping the nation’s governance with their money politics. Rather than clean and fair elections, we have the dirty vote-buying of the provincial yahoo tycoons. The poster boys of this sort of politician were Banharn and Democrat party member Major General Sanan Kachornprasart, as well as the behind-the-scenes machinations of Kamnan Poh in the East and Sia Leng in the Northeast.

The legalistic checks and balances, such as the division of constituency MPs and ministers, was meant to separate not just the executive from the legislative branch, economic from political power. In echoes of the 1991 coup, Prawase warned of the

³ Here Anand seems to be alluding to a famous quote by King Bhumipol from the 1960s: “In our country, there are both good and bad people. No one could make everyone be good people. To make the country happy and orderly is not to make everyone be good people, but to support the good people. Let them govern and control the bad people’s power and do not let the bad people make any trouble...” (in Callahan 2000:69).

dangers of “parliamentary dictatorship” (in McCargo 1998: 17; Connors 1999:208). Many of the conservative reforms echoed concerns of the military who had “viewed politicians as greedy and irresponsible” for decades (Anek 1993:92). Hence the reforms instituted an elite notion of democracy which sought to limit the powers of elected representatives. In this way, it was not a departure from old-style politics, but a return to pre-democratic politics dominated by the military-bureaucratic elite. Democracy in this sense is not a grassroots activity. Democratization is a state policy guided by national security concerns and anti-communist ideology (see Connors 2000). Threats to democracy do not come from the military, but from masses who, according to Anand, do not really understand democracy (in Connors 1999:215).

Thus it is not just that the public loathes politicians; technocrats loath the public: “the elite do not like submitting themselves to popular scrutiny and rejection,” “the cut-and-thrust of electoral politics.” Bureaucrats likewise find it “highly offensive” that they can be called to account by the public (Sombat 2002:210; McCargo 1998:17). Even civil society-*prachakhom* becomes a tool used by the elite state to coopt and control grassroots politics (FEER 8/ii/01; Somchai 2002:130, 135, 136; Somchai 2001). According to good governance theorists, civil society is not separate from the state, but needs to cooperate with the state. For example, Thirayuth and Chai-anan both think such problems will be solved by setting up yet another state-recognized committee: the National Commission for the Good Governance of Thailand (Thirayuth 2002:34; Somchai 2002:130).

Rather than moving from a bureaucratic polity to a bourgeois polity, as development theorists often argue, the reformist constitution was supported by a coalition of bureaucrats and business to assert a technocratic polity which restricts representative democracy in a *coup de technocrats*. In this way, Thailand’s Anand-style good governance follows the Singapore model of managed democracy which limits popular sovereignty to regular elections which produce an elite technocratic single-party state. As McCargo concludes: “Such a technocratic polity would not simply clean up electoral politics, but would effectively by-pass such politics altogether” (McCargo 1998:20). The technocratic-style constitution thus does not just build walls between the executive and legislative branches, but between politics and economics, and the political and anti-political.

Section III: The Political Culture of Followership

While the conservative reformists saw Thailand's political pathology as a leadership problem to be solved by the 1997 Constitution, another group of texts framed the issues as a followership problem. The main concern was not vote-buying, but vote-selling. Why do voters "sell their voice-*khai siang*" – the literal meaning of vote-selling. Rather than being a technical problem for lawyers or a moral conundrum for good people, this group of texts looks to the socio-economic issues that foster vote-selling. Since the frameworks of law and good people neither made sense of the problem, nor led us to reasonable solutions, a theoretical reform was needed. The main analytic division of this new understanding of vote-buying is urban/rural, more specifically the urban middle class civil society and rural patronage networks.

The urban/rural view of politics was popularized by Anek Laothammatas in a best-selling book that caught the attention of Thai public intellectuals in 1995 (Pasuk & Baker 2000:110, 157).⁴ In "A Tale of Two Democracies," Anek questions the received wisdom that the main political division in Thailand is between the civilian middle class and military dictators. Rather, it is between the urban middle class and rural patronage networks. This is an issue of governance and democracy because the rural areas control 90% of the seats in parliament. Though the urban middle class, through its propaganda organs in academia and the media, argued that vote-buying was a perversion of democracy, Anek told us that we need to better understand rural life. Rather than villagers simply engaging in "shameful vote-buying and perverted electoral behavior" which returned unqualified politicians, he wrote that election campaigns in rural Thailand are deeply normative activities (Anek 1996:202). While the aim of reformers is to get "good and able people" into office, in rural areas the patrons who buy votes are usually seen as "good people." Vote-buying is part of the social network of village life; canvassers are not criminals, but local leaders who achieve influence through local philanthropy (also see Ananya 1992; Callahan 2000). For example, a street food vendor

⁴ Anek had previously argued this point in an article in 1993, and restated it in 1996 (Anek 1993; Anek 1996).

Draft copy: for comments

and a grocery store owner are two of Chiangmai city's powerful canvassers – hardly the image of hoodlum politicians promoted by reformers (Viengrat 2000:209).

Hence the moralistic approach that the urban middle class uses to damn the villagers is not only unhelpful, but wrong. In vote-buying, villagers are “acting morally within the existing social norm” (Anek 1993:122). The problem, according to Anek, is that the urban middle class is imposing its Enlightenment idealist view of democracy on rural life which is still organized according to a hierarchical patron-client relationship. Villagers give their votes as a “favor” to candidates supported by canvassers who are local worthies: “For the poor whose lives lack security, the close local leaders offer some guarantee of survival” (Ananya 1992). The cash in vote-buying is largely symbolic: “confirm[ing] the social ties that link him and the local leaders” (Ananya 1992). The problem therefore is not a moral bankruptcy of the villagers, but the socio-economic gap between urban and rural sectors. Anek's solution to the problems of vote-buying – in a famous phrase that has been repeated many times since – is to “turn patronage-ridden villages into small towns of middle-class farmers or well-paid workers” (Anek 1993:125; see Pasuk & Baker 2000a:110; LoGerfo 2000:258).

Anek makes many interesting points in this argument, which are helpful in refocusing our attention away from the military to the problems of rural poverty. But its logic is problematic. He uses the urban/rural distinction to argue that we – the urban middle class – need to improve the rural dwellers through development programs. Once again, Anek is advocating a top-down rural development policy that has many echoes in the machinations of previous military-bureaucratic regimes (see Somchai 2002).

On a theoretical level, the binary division of Thailand into urban and rural has its problems. Though he states that sociological analysis is more edifying than moralizing, Anek invests a heavy moral code in his understanding of urban and rural life: urban civil society vs. rural patronage networks. This generalization of urban vs. rural is a common way of ordering society. As Raymond Williams argues in *The Country and the City*, urban and rural are heavily loaded categories:

On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an

Draft copy: for comments

achieved center: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times (Williams 1973:1).

The problem with this binary coding, Williams argues, is that it is very unstable. Meaning has to be continually constructed, not with the city and country as autonomous spaces, but as relations in tension. For example, the City varies in meaning from being the seat of civilization to the source of corruption. Whereas in English “the country” refers both to the whole nation and a geographic part of it, Thai is very urban-centric. “City-*muang*” refers both to the City and the whole nation. Though the village is the dominant image of the country in Thailand – *ban*-village also means “home” – in official discourse, the moral weighting of the division between the royal city and the rest of the country is clear. Everything outside the metropolitan area is *dang jangwat*: up-country, or the Other provinces.

The point that I want to make is that in the discourse of vote-buying, democracy takes shape as an urban practice of the middle class in civil society only when contrasted against the corruption of rural patronage networks. Though the village in Thailand is often portayed as the essential utopia of authentic Thai life (Hirsch 1991), here the country is the dystopic foil against which a utopia of middle class democracy is produced (see Pasuk & Baker 2000b:44; LoGerfo 2000; McCargo 1998:19; Somchai 2002:131). Rather than being a legal problem of the entire country, vote-buying is a cultural problem of rural life. The solution, according to Anek and the good governance theorists, is not just to write new laws, but “to develop new values and consciousness” (Prawase 2002:26; Thirayuth 2002:30).

Here we enter the domain of political development and political culture which are key elements in modernization theory. In the 1950-60s, American academics sought to explain why democracy failed in the Third World, as Westminster-style constitutions collapsed into dictatorship soon after decolonization. They concluded that the political structures of formal imperialism were not the only problem. Traditional culture was also

a problem that needed to be overcome for the political development of liberal democracy and the economic development of liberal capitalism (see Welch 1993; Pye & Verba 1965).⁵ Here, the scientific modernity of the city is valued. Like the good and able people examined in the previous section, here the city is seen as the civilizing agency which is rational, advanced, developed, and industrial (Williams 1973:279).

This developmentalist view of politics was popular in Thailand, which was an important site of US AID activity. Thus the notion that the city the civilized seat of legitimate power, in contrast to the country as the location of backward illegitimate unofficial “influence” is strong in Thailand. It is not a coincidence that the main reform movement organization appeals to the language of modernization: the *Democratic Development Committee* (Prawase 2002:23). Among urban Thai, there is a popular stereotype of villagers as stupid, lazy and unclean. Even local government officials feel that “The social problem comes from the rural dwellers’ lack of education and training. They lack motivation and knowledge” (Missingham 1997:157).

Village culture is thus seen as the obstacle to economic and political development. In the 1990s, reformers agreed that villagers were unable to choose the “good and able people”: “Thailand’s rurally weighted electorate could not be trusted to deliver a government which knew how to manage Thailand’s increasingly sophisticated, globalized, and delicate urban economy” (Pasuk & Baker 2000a:114). Vote-buying and rural backwardness are problems to be solved through modernization, urbanization and a creation of the middle class civil society: “economic development would create a more educated and urbanized population” (LoGerfo 2000:258). In other words, the solution to the vote-buying problem is not simply to modernize the peasants, but to develop them out of existence through, for example, a commercialization of agriculture. As one metropolitan business leader bluntly put it: Bangkok is Thailand, and Thailand is Bangkok. Indeed, this is an even more drastic use of the Singapore model: some Bangkok businessmen envy the city-state because it is able to exploit rural Malaysia without having to be responsible for it or influenced by it (Pasuk & Baker 2000b:48-9). Hence,

⁵ Political culture theory reappeared after 1989 to likewise explain transitions to democracy in Eastern Europe.

Draft copy: for comments

the conceptual prejudices of this urban/rural moralizing about elections reproduce an imperialist relation between country and city – both economically and ideologically (see Williams 1973:279ff).

Actually, the progressive urban middle class civil society that are the heroes of this tale of democratic development are actually a very small portion of the middle class. A closer examination of the arguments for “middle class democracy” shows how business is largely excluded: the virtuous middle class is composed of NGO activists, journalists, and intellectuals (LoGerfo 2000:240; Anek 1996:203; McVey 2000:19; Pasuk & Baker 2000b:44; Viengrat 223). Rural businessmen are demonized as godfathers and barons so metropolitan businesspeople can take their interests as the national interest. But after the metropolitan business’s dodgy deals and crony capitalism which led to the economic crisis of 1997, it can hardly be argued that the Bangkok elite engage in the accountable and transparent activities that their good governance demands of provincial politicians (McCargo 1998:19; Connors 1999:205; Somchai 2002:132-33). Indeed, *jao pho* are not limited to backward rural areas, but are also active in Bangkok and Chiangmai (Pasuk & Baker 2000b:40; Sombat 2000:71; Viengrat 208).

Rather than being the standard by which democracy is judged, the middle class in Thailand is famous for its fickleness: applauding both the coup in 1991 and the mass demonstrations in 1992. It has historically valued stability and prosperity over democracy. Even the “good governance” coalition broke down in August 2001 when the middle class applauded the Constitutional Court for finding Thaksin not-guilty of corruption on a technicality in the face of overwhelming evidence (FEER 16/viii/01). They had decided that Thaksin was the only person capable of running Thailand – regardless of whether he respected the law himself. More to the point, Constitutionalism is a source of the spoils of patronage for the intellectual elite. The media and the university were not simply watchdogs, but were intimately involved in the reform process. In addition to bringing fame to professors of Law and Political Science, the “constitution industry” was lucrative in terms of consultancy fees and other perks (McCargo 1998:24; McCargo 2002a:3; Connors 1999:214; Pasuk & Baker 2000a:117; Prawase 2002:24). Many academic reformers found new jobs (often after mandatory retirement at age 60) as appointed members of the Constitutional Court, and elected

Senators and party-list MPs. The requirement for a BA also provided a lucrative new market for the corrupt university system which eagerly sells degrees to politicians (Sombat 2002:212; Croissant & Dosch 10).

On the other hand, rural areas are the site of some of the most interesting democratic social movements in Thailand. Since the mid-1990s, most of the important social issues have pitted the urban middle class against rural dwellers. As part of Thailand's industrial development drive, which necessitates satisfying Bangkok's appetite for power and water, the state has declared large forest areas off-limits to farmers and constructed major dams in rural areas. This is typical of the Thai political-economy since 1960 where the city has industrialized on the back of peasantry. The countryside was the source of cheap labor, cheap food and export revenue which created the surplus necessary for the industrial capitalist economy. But then once industrial economy is successful, the middle class blames farmers for being poor and uneducated (Pasuk & Baker 2000a:128; McCargo 1998:19). In response, rural social movements have been active. In other words, rather than the rural Northeast being the prime location of the pathology of vote-buying, it has been the source of Thailand's major democratic social movements such as the Assembly of the Poor and Small Farmer's Assembly of Isarn (see Somchai 2001; Naruemon 2002). Rather than being poor because they are lazy, villagers are very active because they are poor.

Another response to the moral arguments of urban civil society has been to re-code the city from being the seat of civilization to the source of corruption, and switch images of the village from dystopia to utopia. Alongside the reform movement, a localism/nationalism movement gained currency after 1997. Rather than looking to official knowledge – which they saw as foreign – the localists looked to rural wisdom. Rather than the political culture of patron-client relations being a problem, the “community culture” of the Thai village was seen as the solution to both political and economic crises. Contrary to modernization theory's prescriptions, they did not wish to modernize rural life. Urbanization, industrialization and consumerism are seen as the main problems with the dominant development paradigm. While urban civil society is seen as a combination of Western and Chinese life-styles, community culture is the truly authentic Thai-style way of life. Like reformism, this localism comes in both

conservative and grassroots forms. The conservative bureaucrats use it to fight against foreign/Western influence, while the grassroots democrats use it to decentralize power (see Chatthip 2001:167-96; Callahan 2002; Hewison 2000; Pasuk & Baker 2000a:193ff). This positive moral coding of rural life involves romanticizing and Orientalizing the Thai village as a harmonious organic society guided by Buddhist caring and sharing (also see Williams 1973). This is a very complex reaction, but community culture approach is noteworthy in that discussions of vote-buying and electoral politics are conspicuously absent.

Section IV: Anti-vote-buying as Democratic Deferral

Received wisdom tells us that vote-buying is a pathology of rural life which defers democracy. In this last section, I would like to make the controversial argument that vote-buying itself is not as big a problem, as is our obsession with it. The concentration of academic attention on vote-buying – often to the exclusion of all other forms of electoral and institutional corruption – significantly narrows our understanding of politics in Thailand. As the restrictive sections of the 1997 Constitution show, reform politics easily becomes a neo-liberal anti-politics. Democracy involves not simply constitutionalism or electoral reform, but a reform of political-economic relations. I am not trying to turn our understanding of vote-buying on its head to applaud corruption as a democratizing development strategy (see Johnson 1986), or to wring my hands in a relativist questioning of definitions of “corruption.” Rather, I am trying to trace what the focus on vote-buying reveals and conceals.

Firstly, we should note how vote-buying became an issue only in the late 1980s as Thailand shifted from being a semi-democracy – an elected parliament led by an unelected military prime minister – into a parliamentary democracy. Vote-buying had been around since elections began in the 1930s, and became rampant with the 1983 by-election in Roi-Et province. But it only became an issue of popular concern in the late 1980s as power was shifting from the military-bureaucracy to provincial capitalists. Before the 1980s, electoral corruption was characterized by government officials stuffing ballot boxes. Hence the “privatization” of electoral cheating is much more recent (Anek 1996:204).

The liberalization of politics was accompanied by a liberalization of the media. Both print and electronic media had to respond more actively to the market, as well as the propaganda needs of the state. Hence, as the media opened up, there was a tabloidization of subject matter. Scandals and corruption became a major source of consumable stories – certainly much more readable than any structural analysis of rural poverty.

With the notable exception of Pasuk and Sungsidh's *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand*, this was part of a shift in analysis from radical structuralist criticism to reportage about vote-buying and corruption (Pasuk & Sungsidh 1995; Anek 1993:94). Most scholars note that vote-buying became a major topic in the press and then in academics in the late 1980s (Anek 1996:214). As Connors argues: "Analysis of forms of vote buying became a new academic past time and a form of journalistic scoop. Military radio constantly lampooned the capitalist politicians" (Connors 1999:204). Thus the stories of vote-buying were often tied to the even more graphic headlines gangsters and *jao pho* (Sombat 2000: 53; Pasuk & Baker 2000b:30; McVey 2000:14). Benedict Anderson's famous 1990 article, "Murder and Progress in Siam" brought this to the attention of an international readership.

Through this media process, the image of corruption was privatized from government officials to focus on civilian politicians. The military stands to profit from this shift of criticism to civilian politicians from the wide-spread "corruption, nepotism, and administrative incompetence also existed under military dictatorship" (Anek 1993: 123). Thus it is not surprising that the March 1992 general election organized by the junta included a "Village Democracy Project" which targeted vote-buying and politicians in general. For the 1995 general election, the Thai bureaucracy ran an expensive "Anti-Vote-Buying Committee" to target dirty politicians (see Callahan 2000:109-10).

The reasons for the rise of vote-buying, *jao pho* and provincial politicians are more than simply an issue of law and order; they are part of the Thai political-economy. Due to a combination of the shift in the development model to an export economy and the infrastructure projects sponsored by the US in the Vietnam War era, the provincial economy took off in the 1960s. But because of a weak legal system, this frontier-style capitalism depended on close relations between local entrepreneurs and local officials.

Draft copy: for comments

The *jao pho* needed to cultivate local officials to receive protection from the police as well as access to government concessions. The officials – who as part of the Thai bureaucratic system were always from another province – needed to cultivate local sources of wealth and power in the marketplace (McVey 2000:6).

The *jao pho* pattern of political and economic activity is actually quite familiar: it stems from the pariah capitalism of diasporic Chinese in Thailand who were conscious of their vulnerability as foreigners. Thus it is not surprising that many of the *jao pho* are first and second generation Chinese immigrants who were preyed upon by Thai government officials (Sombat 2000:56; Ockey 2000:81; Pasuk & Baker 2000a:136; McVey 2000: 9). The popular terms for provincial capitalist are Chinese: *Sia* is the appellation for tycoon. In other words, the corruption does not come just from the illegal activities of the gangsters, but from the political-economic relations forced upon them by government officials. Though the reformers analyzed in the first section were very confident about the rational distinction between the legal and the illegal, provincial capital and villagers often saw law as an instrumental exercise of arbitrary power: “What the Thai state declares to be illegal is often understood locally as officialdom laying claim to another source of monopoly” (McVey 2000:14).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the tables turned, and *jao pho* became more powerful than local officials. Thus when parliamentary politics became profitable, metropolitan business leaders came to the *jao pho* in the provinces because political parties lacked local party branches (Ockey 2000:83). There is an important parallel here between local branches of banks and political parties. Metropolitan banks had also come to the local elite – *jao pho* – to serve as compradors for Bangkok financial interests in the provinces (McVey 2000:10; Pasuk & Baker 2000b:38; Sombat 2000:59). Thus with the rise of parliamentary democracy, the *jao pho* became canvassers who pieced together a local election network much as they had pieced together a local financial network. Soon the *jao pho* would go straight for political power themselves – this is when they became a story. Hence vote-buying is one upshot of the extra-legal dynamic of pariah capitalism and official corruption. Contrary to popular view that vote-buying as a problem of civilian politicians in the provinces, the practice is tied into networks with both corrupt

Draft copy: for comments

government officials and Bangkok business. Provincial business was mainly reacting to the situation where the rule of law was arbitrary and the bureaucracy was corrupt.

Vote-buying likewise defers us from understanding the problems and solutions of rural life. Rather than legal or cultural issues, as we saw in the previous section, they are largely structural problems. But the popular view of rural idiocy and vote-buying defers any analysis of the political and economic structures that contribute to this poverty (Missingham 1997:158). As Ananya explains, “Vote-buying is only one manifestation of the limited choice available to villagers for solving their problems, and of their dependence on local leaders” (Ananya 1992). To transform clients into citizens, more is needed than the “alternative political culture” that I promoted in another publication (Callahan 2000:125-41). Many reformers note that vote-buying is necessary because there is a lack of local party branches and constituency support (Anek 1996: 207). I would argue that the problem is not one of political parties, but the arbitrary nature of official services. According to a World Bank report, over 40% of government positions in Thailand are secured through bribes (FEER 9/xi/00:19). Many have noted a decay in the abilities of government officials (Pasuk & Baker 2000a:115; Thirayuth 2002:30). Hence much like in the urban American political machines of yesteryear, Thai people have to depend on patrons and *jao pho* for help. Viengrat argues that without a change in the distribution of social welfare, ordinary people will still depend on the canvassers’ networks to provide services (Viengrat 2000:223-25). The way to fight vote-buying in the villages and the urban slums is to fight official corruption, and have a more regular and equal distribution of resources to rural areas.

The liberal and grassroots reform activists frame the problems in this way. They pushed for a more open government whereby Thai could assert the rights of individuals and communities against the state. The Constitution institutionalized this through the Administrative Court, the Ombudsman, the Human Right Commission, and the freedom of information law. Transparency applies here not just to politicians, but to the bureaucracy. Even so, grassroots democratic activists are increasingly less interested in the political reform of Thailand’s constitutional structures and vote-buying strategies; since 1997 they have “lost trust and confidence in political institutions.” NGO groups think that it is more important to develop a grassroots civil society which encourages

more political participation and the empowerment of local communities (Naruemon 2002:194-95).

The point here, again, is that vote-buying defers us from many of the issues of grassroots social movements. Indeed, a focus on vote-buying leads us away from a consideration of rural development policies. Thaksin and the TRT's metropolitan business bail-out policies have rightfully been criticized as an appeal to the poor to bail out the rich. It will result in a narrower political-economic oligopoly (FEER 28/xii/00:16). But the TRT's rural policy platform of a three year debt moratorium for farmers and a development fund of \$23,000 for Thailand's 60,000 villages do address villagers' needs. It is not surprising that they received a large majority of party-list votes in 2001. Sadly, Thirayuth and others dismissed such policies as yet another form of vote-buying (in ANFREL 65). This shows how middle class reformers restrict democracy to a legalistic process rather than a grassroots movement that could substantively benefit villages with what grassroots activists call "edible democracy." Gothom picks up this point when he notes that because some criticize reform as "a joint effort between the state sector and civil society to contain the alliance of politicians and businessmen," it is necessary to develop grassroots civil society (Gothom 2001a:7).

Conclusion: A true *coup de technocrats*

In this essay, I have taken a contrarian stance – but not the expected one which questions our concepts of corruption (Johnson 1986). Rather than lamenting the pox of vote-buying on the body politic, I have questioned our concern with this particular political practice. I have argued that such a tight focus on vote-buying – as a legal infraction of good governance, an ethical dilemma of leaders, or a cultural practice of village life – is misleading. Though I certainly do not dispute that money politics is problematic, I have also argued that an exclusive examination of the commercialization of politics leads to other political problems: legalistic delusion, elite technocracy, and a neo-colonial exploitation of rural areas. Most importantly, the focus on vote-buying warps our view of Thai politics, and politics in general. Vote-buying does not occur in a vacuum: it must be aided or allowed by local government officials. Indeed, elected politicians need to have relations with local worthies (including *jao pho*), and government officials to be

Draft copy: for comments

successful. Provincial capitalists are not the only devils in town, for the urban middle class has its own devilry. As I argue above, rather than the *jao pho*'s vote-buying producing corrupt politics, it is the corrupt bureaucratic system that produces *jao pho* and vote-buying. Corruption is not an ethical problem of autonomous individuals (*jao pho*) or communities (the village), but grows out of specific relations between political and economic, urban and rural, official and unofficial power. Unfortunately, the tight focus on vote-buying misses this point. While it is true that the 1997 Constitution is “a symbol of urban desire” (Pasuk & Baker 2000a:155), fulfilling this desire has involved the displacement and deferral of a host of important political-economic issues, and the practice of participatory democracy.

It is very common for commentators, especially Thai colleagues, to be very harsh about the pathologies of elections and democracy in Thailand. I agree with Gotham when he cautions that we need to be patient: “Old habits die hard. The sociological behavior of the people may not change from one day to another just because we have a new law” (in FEER 11/i/01:23). The ECT and the Constitutional Court need time to find their feet and adjust to their authority. They need to do this not just as independent and autonomous constitutional quangos (quasi-governmental organizations), but in relation to the popular democracy of grassroots social movements and civil society. Thus the most distressing thing about the 2001 election process was not the persistence of vote-buying, but the disaffection between the election monitoring NGOs and an increasingly bureaucratic ECT (Sombat 2002:210; ANFREL 40, 41, 80). The 2nd Election Commission installed in November 2001 is even more troubling as it is tainted by former military-bureaucrats who have been accused of electoral fraud themselves.

But rather than lament the problem of vote-buying which continues in the face of reforms, this essay has argued that the reform movement's myopic concentration on vote-buying has deferred us from a broader notion of democracy. It is not a coincidence that anti-vote-buying campaigns characteristically coincide with anti-democratic moves by conservative military-bureaucrats. I would like to argue that the focus on vote-buying by Thai academics and reformers has warped our understanding of politics. Democracy becomes elections, and campaigns become head-line grabbing showdowns between good technocrats and bad gangsters. Political-economic problems are obscured by reforms

Draft copy: for comments

which seek to separate politics from economics. Vicious stereotypes of rural idiocy are taken as common sense.

It is not surprising that the political reform movement's legalistic solution to vote-buying has not been successful. At the risk of sounding preachy, I would state that law is the problem. Constitutionalism is not the cure for Thailand's political disease, but is the disease itself (see McCargo 1998:7). Technocrats are not Thailand's saviors, but the jailers of democracy; thus a true coup de technocrats is necessary. Their elite power needs to be cut off through vigorous restrictions and monitoring. Otherwise, Thailand will not be transformed from a bureaucratic polity to a bourgeois polity or a democratic polity, but to a technocratic polity. Corruption cannot be solved with a silver bullet, but is part of the contradictions and tensions of modernity – and must be addressed in this spirit.

Bibliography (Following custom, Thai authors are alphabetized under their given names.)

- Ananya Bhuchongkul. 1992. Vote-buying: more than a sale. *Bangkok Post* (23 February):8.
- Anek Laothamatas. 1993. Sleeping Giant Awakens: The Middle Class in Thai Politics. *Asian Review* 1993, pp. 78-125.
- Anek Laothamatas. 1996. A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand. In *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, R.H. Taylor, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 201-223.
- Callahan, William A. 2000. *Pollwatching, Elections and Civil Society in Southeast Asia*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Callahan, William A. 2002. Beyond Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism: Diasporic Chinese and Neo-Nationalism in Thailand and China. Presented at International Studies Association conference, New Orleans, March.
- Chai-anan Samudavanaija. 1983. *The Thai Young Turks*. Singapore: ISEAS Press.
- Chatthip Nartsupha. 2001. *Noekhid setthakit chumchon: khosanue thaeng thrisadi naiparibot taeng sungkhom* [The concept of Community Economics: A theoretical proposal for an alternative society]. Bangkok: Satabun Withithat
- CILPN (Centre for Information on Local Politics in the Northeast). 2001. [*Kan chai nguen ha siang khong phak kanmuang nai kan luektang phuthaen rasadorn, 6 Makkalakhom 2544* [Political Party Campaign Expenditure for the House of Representatives Election 6 January 2001]]. University of Mahasarakham, (3 May).
- Connolly, William. 1991. *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Connors, Michael Kelly. 1999. Political Reform and the State in Thailand. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. 29:2, pp. 202-226.

Draft copy: for comments

- Connors, Michael Kelly. 2000. *Democracy and National Ideology in Thailand: Subjecting Citizens*. PhD Thesis. University of Melbourne, Australia.
- Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand. 1997. Bangkok: Council of State.
www.krisdika.go.th/law.
- Croissant, Aurel and Jorn Dosch. 2001. Old Wine in New Bottlenecks? Elections in Thailand under the 1997 Constitution. Working Paper, University of Leeds.
http://croissant.uni-hd.de/old_wine_in_new_bottlenecks.htm.
- ECT (Election Commission of Thailand). 2000. *Rai-ngan phon kan rup rueng rong rian lae chaeng het kan luektang* [Reports of complaints and incidents in the election campaign (for the Senate election of April 2000)]. Bangkok: Election Commission of Thailand.
- ECT (Election Commission of Thailand). 2002. 2001-2002 General Election Results.
www.ect.go.th/english/national/mp/mp1.html.
- FEER (*Far Eastern Economic Review*). Various dates.
- Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage.
- Hewison, Kevin. 2000. Resisting Globalization: a Study of Localism in Thailand. *Pacific Review*. 13 (2):279-96.
- Hirsch, Philip. 1991. What is *The Thai Village*? In *National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand, 1939-89*, Craig Reynolds, ed. Chiangmai: Silkworm Press, 323-40.
- Jansen, Peter. 1991. Coup de Technocrats. *Asian Business*. (April):16.
- Johnson, Chalmers. 1986. Tanaka Kakuei, Structural Corruption, and the Advent of Machine Politics in Japan. *Journal of Japan Studies*. 12(1):1-28.
- Johnston, Michael. 1996. The Search for Definitions: the Vitality of Politics and the Issue of Corruption. *International Social Science Journal* 149 (September): 331-35.
- LoGerfo, James P. 2000. Beyond Bangkok: The Provincial Middle Class in the 1992 Protests. In *Money & Power in Provincial Thailand*, Ruth McVey, ed. Singapore: ISEAS Press, pp. 221-70.
- McCargo, Duncan. 1997. Thailand's Political Parties: Real, Authentic and Actual. In *Political Change in Thailand: democracy and participation*, Kevin Hewison, ed. London: Routledge, pp. 114-31.
- McCargo, Duncan. 1998. Alternative Meanings of Political Reform in Contemporary Thailand. *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*. (13): 5-30.
- McCargo, Duncan. 2002a. Introduction: Understanding Political Reform in Thailand. In *Reforming Thai Politics*, Duncan McCargo, ed. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, pp. 1-18.
- McCargo, Duncan. 2002b. Thailand's January 2001 General Elections: Vindicating Reform? In *Reforming Thai Politics*, Duncan McCargo, ed. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, pp. 246-59.

Draft copy: for comments

- McVey, Ruth. 2000. Of Greed and Violence and Other Signs of Progress. In *Money & Power in Provincial Thailand*, Ruth McVey, ed. Singapore: ISEAS Press, pp. 1-29.
- Missingham, Bruce. 1997. Local Bureaucrats, Power and Participation: A Study of Two Village Schools in the Northeast. In *Political Change in Thailand: democracy and participation*, Kevin Hewison, ed. London: Routledge, pp. 149-6.
- Naruemon Thabchumpon. 2002. NGOs and Grassroots Participation in the Political Reform Process. In *Reforming Thai Politics*, Duncan McCargo, ed. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, pp. 183-99.
- Ockey, James. 2000. The Rise of Local Power in Thailand: Provincial Crime, Elections and Bureaucracy. In *Money & Power in Provincial Thailand*, Ruth McVey, ed. Singapore: ISEAS Press, pp. 74-96.
- Organic Law on the Election of the Members of the House of Representatives and Senators. 1998. (second amendment 1999, third amendment 2000). Bangkok: Council of State, www.ect.go.th/english/index.html.
- Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker. 2000a. *Thailand's Crisis*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker. 2000b. Chao Sua, Chao pho, Chai Thi: Lords of Thailand's Transition. In *Money & Power in Provincial Thailand*, Ruth McVey, ed. Singapore: ISEAS Press, pp. 30-52.
- Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidh Piriyarangsarn. 1994. *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand*. Bangkok: Political Economy Centre, Chulalongkorn University.
- Prawase Wasi. 2002. An Overview of Political Reform. In *Reforming Thai Politics*, Duncan McCargo, ed. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, pp. 21-7.
- Pye, Lucian W. and Sidney Verba. 1965. *Political Culture and Political Development*. Princeton University Press.
- Sombat Chantornvong. 2000. Local Godfathers in Thai Politics. In *Money & Power in Provincial Thailand*, Ruth McVey, ed. Singapore: ISEAS Press, pp. 53-73.
- Sombat Chantornvong. 1993. *Luekdangwikrit: panha le thang ok* [Thai Elections in Crisis: Problems and Solutions]. Bangkok: Kopfai.
- Sombat Chantornvong. 2002. The 1997 Constitution and the Politics of Electoral Reform. In *Reforming Thai Politics*, Duncan McCargo, ed. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, pp. 203-46.
- Somchai Phatharathananunth. 2001. *Civil Society in Northeast Thailand: The Struggle of the Small Farmer's Assembly of Isarn*. PhD Thesis. University of Leeds, England.
- Somchai Phatharathananunth. 2002. Civil Society and Democratization in Thailand: A Critique of Elite Democracy. In *Reforming Thai Politics*, Duncan McCargo, ed. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, pp. 125-42.
- Thirayuth Boonmi. 2002. Good governance: a strategy to restore Thailand. Savitri Gadavani, trans. In *Reforming Thai Politics*, Duncan McCargo, ed. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, pp. 29-35.

Draft copy: for comments

- Viengrat Netipho. 2000. Itthiphon nai kan muang thongthin khong Thai: suksa koranee muang Chiangmai [Influence in local politics in Thailand: Case study of Chiangmai] *Journal of Social Sciences* (Bangkok). 31:2 (July-December):168-235.
- Weber, Cynthia. 2001. *International Relations Theory: A Critical Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Welch, Stephen. 1993. *The Concept of Political Culture*. London: MacMillan.
- Williams, Raymond. 1973. *The Country and the City*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Acknowledgments

For sharing information and commenting on this research, I would like to thank Gothom Arya, Laddawan Tantiwittayaphitak, Naruemon Thabchumpon, Duncan McCargo, Sukanya Bumroongsook, Sumalee Bumroongsook, Somchai Phatharathananunth, Teera Vorrakitpokatorn, Thavesilp Subwattana, and Steve Welch. I would also like to thank Frederic Schaffer and Andreas Schedler for inviting me to this conference, and thus giving me a chance to think through the broader issues of elections and politics.