

# Thailand: The problem is politician-buying not vote-buying

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**Political Thailand is turning yet again to its favorite pastime - rewriting the constitution. Many MPs want to change clauses in the clumsy and deliberately anti-democratic 2007 charter. PAD has placed the issue of “political reform” on the table. Other groups are organizing to prevent PAD monopolizing the issue.**

PAD wants to change the electoral system on grounds that vote-buying is the root cause of the failure of Thai politics. Last month, Chang Noi argued this is wrong-headed. Certainly candidates hand out money. But voters have gained experience and knowledge about using the vote to much greater advantage than a few red notes in the hand. Party affiliation and personal qualities play a much bigger role in their choices. PAD focuses on vote-buying because it wants to disenfranchise the mass.

The PAD argument appeals to many people because it begins from some undeniable facts. Almost all MPs are drawn from the ranks of wealthy entrepreneurs who form a minute percentage of the general population. Some of them use their political power corruptly. In a big national survey on popular perceptions of corruption, politicians were ranked second-to-bottom, beaten only by the police. The PAD argument gains traction because many think Thai politics are ruined by money.

But perhaps PAD is pointing at the wrong deals. They need to focus further up the political food-chain. At the last poll, rather little money seems to have trickled down to the ordinary voter, but large amounts were mentioned in the deals made to stitch together political parties. Prachai Leophairatana boasted he had “even more money than Thaksin” to buy himself a party.

These upper levels of the political market developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Three kinds of political payment came into use. First, party and faction leaders would pay money to recruit “good” candidates before elections. This practice developed rapidly into complex “fertilizer formulas” with payments graded according to candidate quality and phased across the stages of the electoral process. Second, party leaders paid retainers to MPs to ensure their continued support. Banharn Silpa-archa was dubbed the “walking ATM.” Thaksin dramatically changed the scale by not only subsidizing a large chunk of the lower house but also a big cohort of senators. Conservative estimates reckoned the budget was around 2 billion baht a year. Third, payments were made to influence individual votes in the house, but these were rare and seem to have disappeared.

These transactions are important because of their consequences. Consider the example of Vatana Asavaheme. In mid last year, Vatana emerged as the major business financier of the Puea Phaendin party. When the party leader, resigned his ministership, Vatana orchestrated the changes in the party’s line-up of ministers. During the recent negotiations over the Cabinet, Vatana was again reported to have selected the Puea Phaendin ministerial cadre. The fact that he is a convicted criminal and fugitive from justice, and that his lieutenants had to leave the country and consult him in the back-rooms of a Cambodian casino, made no difference to his influence. A former police chief

did not mind being among Vatana's choices. A party spokesman explained that party MPs "still had respect" for Vatana. It's not difficult to decode what that statement really means.

Consider, then, the social cost of such a politician. Take the Khlong Dan case on which he was convicted. In order to make massive profits, a public investment project was significantly altered from its original design and location, resulting in a higher cost to the taxpayer, lower efficiency, greater environmental damage, greater inconvenience to large numbers of people, and ultimately large expenses for a long judicial process.

Now multiply those costs across a long political career. Time after time over the past decades, the smelly trail of a political boondoggle has led to him – and then gone dead. During the scandal over illegal felling of the Salween forest, a large haul of logs was found hidden in a lake. The ownership was traced to guess-who. During the epidemic of petroleum smuggling, the Asavahame family launched a chain of gas stations. He was also found guilty of vote-rigging. The judge had to absolve him of punishment because of a technical loophole, but took the extraordinary step of writing into the judgement that guilt had been established. There have also been other scandals over land, forest encroachment, construction contracts, and forgery.

Not all Thai politicians act like this. But a few use their political influence to make massive profits, to defend themselves against retribution, and to invest the proceeds in extending that influence.

Tinkering with the electoral system will not change this. The problem persists largely because of the weakness of the police and the judiciary. But the political parties also play a part. Has a party ever expelled a member for malpractice, or even reprimanded one? Although, as the survey data show, people perceive politicians as being corrupt, they are unable to prevent some of the most corrupt dominating the parties that are supposed to represent their interests.

The political parties are a highly undemocratic part of Thailand's political system. Party candidates are selected by a small clique. Party policies are put together without any reference to the membership. Party conferences are festivals celebrating the leader. Party membership is meaningless.

The political law does almost nothing to prevent this. Thailand's charter-writers agonise over election systems and monitoring institutions, but pay scant attention to the parties. Rules and laws cannot do much to change the parties, but they can do something. In other countries, laws force parties to gain membership approval of their policies, and give the constituency members the power to select local candidates. If those advocating wider political participation are really serious, they need to concentrate on bringing popular power into the parties, rather than excluding it from the ballot box.

Perhaps PAD's greatest contribution would be to transform itself into a party as a new model of a party based on a movement.

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**P.S.**

\* From Chang Noi's website:

<http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/partyproblem.htm>