

# The Normal Abnormalities: Elections as an Institution Opposes the Development of Democracy in Thailand

ปกติที่ไม่ปกติ : การเลือกตั้งในฐานะเครื่องมือที่ขัดขวางการ

พัฒนาประชาธิปไตยในประเทศไทย

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Nitchapat Kitcharern <sup>1</sup>

ณิชภัทร์ กิจเจริญ

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## Abstract

This paper aims to study the significant phenomena, the general election in Thailand between 2019-2023. In the understanding of the general public, the general election is a composite image of a democratic regime. In other words, elections are the most important method that leads to a democratic regime. However, some elections in Thailand are different. These events raise impotent questions about how elections,

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<sup>1</sup> School of Political Science, Sukhothaimathirath Open University

E-mail: Nitchapat@yahoo.com

as a democratic practice institution, can be counterproductive to their purpose and function of strengthening democracy.

This paper presents aspects of elections which are counterproductive to democratic development, with the main question being: “Which form of election has a positive effect on the development of democracy, as it seems that any form of election has the opposite effect? Why is that so?” There are three main conceptual frameworks used in the analysis, namely (i) conceptual framework on the basic principles of democratic elections, (ii) conceptual framework on development and consolidation of democracy, and (iii) conceptual framework on the characteristics of democratic development and the concept of authoritarianism and elections. This paper will bring the above conceptual frameworks to analyze the latest two Thai general elections in March 2019 and May 2023.

The findings indicated that an election that lacks two democratic precursors: elections that lack freedom and elections that lack fairness. In elections without freedom, people in society are unable to fully express their opinions, causing a state of tension. On the surface, society

may appear to be calm, but the emotions of the masses hidden beneath the surface may lead to more conflict or polarization instead of the development of democracy. Moreover, Elections that create unfair rules give one party an advantage or may lead to a decrease in public trust in the election, instead of encouraging people to feel the need for democracy. The worst thing that can happen when elections do not follow democratic principles is the development of conflict and violence. The collective emotions of those in society who are disappointed with the electoral system can lead, people, who feel that formal politics cannot meet their true democratic needs, to the streets.

**Keywords:** Elections, Democratic consolidation, Public trust

### บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้สำรวจบทบาทที่ขัดแย้งของการเลือกตั้งในฐานะสถาบันที่ในบางบริบทกลับขัดขวางการพัฒนาประชาธิปไตยในประเทศไทย ระหว่างปี 2019 ถึง 2023 การเลือกตั้งทั่วไปเป็นปรากฏการณ์สำคัญในภูมิทัศน์การเมืองของประเทศ ในมุมมองของประชาชน การเลือกตั้งมักถูกมองว่าเป็นสัญลักษณ์ของระบอบประชาธิปไตยซึ่งเป็นกลไกที่สำคัญที่สุดที่นำไปสู่การเกิดและหยั่งรากของ

ประชาธิปไตย อย่างไรก็ตาม การเลือกตั้งในประเทศไทยบางครั้งกลับเบี่ยงเบนจากอุดมคติ ซึ่งทำให้เกิดคำถามสำคัญเกี่ยวกับวิธีที่การเลือกตั้งซึ่งปกติถือเป็นการปฏิบัติทางประชาธิปไตย อาจทำลายจุดประสงค์และหน้าที่ของมันในการเสริมสร้างประชาธิปไตย

คำถามหลักของงานวิจัยนี้คือ "รูปแบบของการเลือกตั้งแบบใดที่มีผลเชิงบวกต่อการพัฒนาประชาธิปไตย เมื่อการเลือกตั้งที่ผ่านมาดูเหมือนจะมีผลตรงข้าม?" เพื่อหาคำตอบ บทความนี้ใช้กรอบแนวคิดสามประการ ได้แก่ (i) หลักการพื้นฐานของการเลือกตั้งประชาธิปไตย, (ii) การพัฒนาและการเสริมสร้างประชาธิปไตย, และ (iii) ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างอำนาจเผด็จการและการเลือกตั้งประชาธิปไตย กรอบแนวคิดเหล่านี้ถูกนำมาวิเคราะห์ในการเลือกตั้งทั่วไปของไทยในปี 2019 และ 2023

ผลการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่า การเลือกตั้งในประเทศไทยที่ขาดสองปัจจัยพื้นฐานทางประชาธิปไตย ได้แก่ การเลือกตั้งที่ขาดเสรีภาพและการเลือกตั้งที่ขาดความยุติธรรม ซึ่งทำให้เกิดผลลัพธ์ที่ขัดแย้งกับการพัฒนาประชาธิปไตย การเลือกตั้งที่ขาดเสรีภาพทำให้ประชาชนไม่สามารถแสดงความคิดเห็นได้อย่างเต็มที่ ส่งผลให้เกิดความตึงเครียด แม้ว่าสังคมอาจดูเหมือนสงบภายนอก แต่ความรู้สึกไม่พอใจที่ซ่อนอยู่ภายในอาจทำให้เกิดความขัดแย้งและการแบ่งแยกแทนที่จะเป็นการพัฒนาประชาธิปไตย นอกจากนี้ การเลือกตั้งที่มีการจัดกฎเกณฑ์ที่ไม่ยุติธรรม ซึ่งให้ข้อได้เปรียบกับพรรคการเมืองบางพรรค จะลดความเชื่อมั่นของประชาชนใน

กระบวนการเลือกตั้ง ทำให้เกิดความผิดหวังและความรู้สึกไม่เป็นธรรม การเลือกตั้งเช่นนี้ไม่ได้กระตุ้นให้ประชาชนเชื่อมั่นในกระบวนการประชาธิปไตย ความรุนแรงที่สุดที่อาจเกิดขึ้นเมื่อการเลือกตั้งไม่เป็นไปตามหลักการประชาธิปไตยคือการพัฒนาความขัดแย้งและความรุนแรง อารมณ์ร่วมของประชาชนที่ผิดหวังกับระบบการเลือกตั้งอาจทำให้ผู้คนที่รู้สึกว่าการเมืองอย่างเป็นทางการไม่สามารถตอบสนองความต้องการประชาธิปไตยที่แท้จริงของพวกเขา ออกมาเคลื่อนไหวในท้องถนน งานวิจัยนี้จะนำเสนอการวิเคราะห์และอภิปรายถึงพลศาสตร์เหล่านี้และวิธีที่มันมีส่วนทำให้การพัฒนาคุณค่าทางประชาธิปไตยในประเทศไทยหยุดชะงักหรือถอยหลัง

**คำสำคัญ:** การเลือกตั้ง การพัฒนาประชาธิปไตย การหยั่งรากของประชาธิปไตย อารมณ์ร่วมของมวลชน

## Introduction

In the understanding of the general public, the general election is a composite image of a democratic regime. In other words, elections are the most important method that leads to a democratic regime. The electoral system is something that will have direct, continuous, and long-lasting effects in the future on the political system within a country (Siripan Noksuan Sawaddee. 2018). Samuel P. Huntington (1998) stated

that elections, in addition to being an operation of democracy, are also a way to weaken dictatorial regimes as well as serve as a guillotine used to execute dictators. The operation of elections towards democracy also has the characteristics of a peaceful transition to democracy.

Elections, on the other hand, are not a tool or practice for building democracy, such as elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Huntington. 1998). The African country has been a hotspot for violent conflict that has led to the deaths of hundreds of Congolese citizens since 2010 (De Freytas-Tamura (2019). Elections in Kenya in 2017 were a catalyst for an insurgency and the protests in the wake of the elections caused led to widespread arrests, destroying the lives of many people (De Freytas-Tamura (2019). Even in Thailand, the 2014 elections brought protests and election obstruction by Yellow Shirts in many areas, who argued the necessity of pre-election reform as a prerequisite to creating an efficient and sustainable democracy. These events raise questions about how elections, as a democratic practice, can be counterproductive to their purpose and function of strengthening democracy.

This paper presents aspects of elections which are counterproductive to democratic development, with the main question being: “Which form of election has a positive effect on the development of democracy, as it seems that any form of election has the opposite effect? Why is that so?” There are three main conceptual frameworks used in the analysis, namely (i) conceptual framework on the basic principles of democratic elections, (ii) conceptual framework on development and consolidation of democracy, and (iii) conceptual framework on the characteristics of democratic development and the concept of authoritarianism and elections. This paper will bring the above conceptual frameworks to analyze the latest two Thai general elections in March 2019 and May 2023.

## Theoretical Framework

### Theory of Elections

The international theory of political elections states that elections must have two main elements: 1) elections must be free, meaning citizens must be able to participate and express their opinions

freely in politics and elections, along with having the freedom to make choices and 2) elections must be fair, meaning, among other things, all voters must have equal votes, and political parties and candidates for office must be in equal competition, with equal rights to campaign and hold meetings without governmental or opposition interference (Inter-parliament Union. 1994).

Another important theory about elections that is linked to democracy is the key features of democracy theory by Robert A. Dahl (1973), which are 1.) the right to vote 2.) the right to free and fair elections 3.) the right of political leaders to compete for votes 4.) the right to enter compete for public office; 5.) the right to form groups and organizations; 6.) freedom of expression; 7.) the ability to access a variety of information and 8.) political institutions to ensure that public policy reflects the needs of real people.

The concepts presented above indicate that elections and democratic development are interrelated. Elections conducted according to principles are the first steps in developing a strong democracy.

## Concepts on the development and consolidation of democracy

Samuel P. Huntington stated in the book *The Third Wave Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* that the development and consolidation of democracy must consist of three main elements (Huntington. 1998).

Firstly, newly elected leaders must be positioned far away from authoritarian leaders. If a newly elected leader still has relations with the authoritarian group, democratic development is often unsuccessful.

Secondly, electoral games that lead to the development of democracy must be free from intimidation, coercion, and fraud. Suppression of freedom of expression during elections often leads to a bad ending for elected Governments. Thirdly, the most important variable in the formation and development of democracy is the then existing social context. The middle class is often responsible for shaping the social context and driving democratic development within the country.

### The conceptual framework of authoritarianism and elections

Even though the words dictatorship and election seem to be words that are not in the same category or are similar. The word election often has a clear meaning of the way of governance in a democracy. But in some cases, the two words can be combined seamlessly together. Natasha Ezrow (Ezrow & Frantz. 2011) and experts on authoritarian and authoritarian theories, argue that elections are of interest to dictators because they want to use them. Elections can be tools to legitimize their existence. Election management under a dictatorial regime often has the following characteristics (Ezrow & Frantz. 2011);

- 1) unequal competition according to international principles.
- 2) election objectives not in accordance with democratic development guidelines.
- 3) attacks on the credibility of opponents of the dictator, particularly through the use of sham election results to assert widespread support for the dictator and public distrust of the opponent.
- 4) use of election management by a dictator as an opportunity to observe the behavior and tendencies of the elites in society.

5) use of election management to create legitimacy in the succession of power

6) To require foreign support According to international principles, governments that are not elected are generally not accepted by civilized nations. This lack of recognition can affect authoritarian governments in one way or another, for example, the economic consequences.

7) cheating or unfair rules.

8.) direct or indirect opponent intimidation.

9) monopoly on the power to legislate elections.

10) Building high barriers to political participation, such as issuing laws prohibiting certain groups of people from running for elections.

11) Vote buying through exertion of political powers (in addition to cash).

### **Election in 2019 under the military government**

For more than five years following the coup d'état by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) in May 2014 Thailand did

not have an elected Prime Minister. In March 2018 Thailand began moving towards the first election atmosphere to exist in several years. Each political party was going ahead with campaigning, announcing policies, and going out to meet the people. This election caught the eye of the world as it marked a significant transition in Thai politics. In addition, this election took place under the action of the military government, including the leader of the government, Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, who was appointed as a representative of a political party as prime minister. Amid the electoral stream and the political atmosphere that tends to lean towards democracy, the conduct of elections by the junta has been questioned on several grounds, including Prayuth's tenure as prime minister during elections and new electoral law, among several others.

Will holding elections under an authoritarian government bring democracy and consolidation of democracy in Thai politics? From the framework of electoral theory, democratic development and elections under a dictatorship, analysis through the theoretical framework can lead to certain observations. According to Dahl's theory of electoral

management, the free and fair elections lead to the development of democracy, which in turn must include free and fair elections. That the state gives freedom to political parties to express their opinions, show policy positions, and present arguments freely on various issues is considered a good starting point for the development of Thai democracy.

But if you look through the framework of Huntington's analysis however, the new government that wants to create democracy must distance itself from the old authoritarian government. In the aforementioned point, it is evident that in holding this election, several people have been involved and working in the old government, including as former ministers and even the government leaders themselves, who are running for office. That a party representative for Prime Minister in the new election is a government leader in the outgoing regime does more than merely lend credence to Huntington's assertion that ties between the old and new government should be cut. The presence of close ties between the old and new party leadership and

government calls into question the democratic development and whether the election will help move society toward democracy or not.

Another key issue in organizing elections under totalitarian governments is the legislation of electoral divisions in the Senate. Ezrow and Frantz stated in their writings that law is another way that authoritarian governments can continue to maintain power. Here, I would like to give an example of the origin of the 250 senators from the selection process. Could the existence of this Senate be the turning point that the election results do not truly reflect the will of the people? Ezrow and Frantz have repeatedly asserted in their work that organizing elections to legitimize succession may lead to the failure of elections and the failure of attempts to establish democratic ideas. Unfair elections often lead to people's doubts about the legitimacy of the government, and that suspicion can lead to conflict.

### May 2023 Elections

After the election vote count on the night of May 14, 2023, Move Forward Party's coming in first place in the votes created mixed feelings

among many groups of people. The so-called democratic side was filled with joy at their victory, but the old powers felt, and continue to feel destabilization of their power and may see future threats to the political status of the Thai right. Meanwhile, the Pheu Thai Party, another major party that has historically been successful, received second place in the election, but was unable to achieve the land slide victory it had planned. The progressive party faced many post-election obstacles and legal processes that prevented it from forming a government. In addition, the Prime Minister candidate from the Move Forward Party has also been prosecuted for holding an ownership stake in a media company while running for office, which is a violation of Thai election laws, and had his position as a member of the House of Representatives suspended. This post-election political phenomenon has created mixed feelings for Move Forward Party supporters, including hopes for the future and fear and anger over the treatment of the victorious candidate.

However, the normal abnormalities of Thai politics have continued. The party that came in second in the election formed a government that united all the old right-wing parties and the old powers

in parliament. The formation of this new government is itself a political event that indicates entry into a new era of Thai politics (Surachat Bamrungasuk. 2023). It can be seen that after the election process a new political battle has begun. The process of bargaining for state power takes place among politicians and the same elite group and is not decided only by the voice of the people through the election mechanism. This makes many parties view the results of the 2023 electoral process as detrimental to the development as democracy.

Gabriel Almond said that every political system has its own set of guidelines. It can be seen that political culture is an important factor and represents ongoing political activity. Lucian Pye defined political culture as a pattern of attitudes or beliefs that form a framework for the behavior of that political system, including a psychological dimension that appears in each political system. And this idea of political culture blurs the gap between the individual details and the collective. As an example, a democratic political culture has its own belief that the rule of democracy is to respect the majority, including paying attention to the rights, liberties, and equality of the people. The development of

democracy through elections must take into account social and cultural context. If we look at the Thai social context at present, there is a tendency to clearly develop into democracy. It can be observed from the political awakening of the new generation towards elections, evidenced in part by increased political activity on social media. Increased number of absentee ballots cast reflects increased uptake of democratic political values. With this trending social context, hopes for democratic development in Thailand may still be seen, although other trends, including elections, point to the opposite.

## Conclusions

From the main question raised in the beginning, which type of election has a positive effect on democratic development and does any form have the opposite effect, and why is this so? From the study of elections through a conceptual framework, it was found that elections that harm democratic development have the following characteristics:

1. An election that lacks two democratic precursors: elections that lack freedom and elections that lack fairness. In elections without

freedom, people in society are unable to fully express their opinions, causing a state of tension. On the surface, society may appear to be calm, but the emotions of the masses hidden beneath the surface may lead to more conflict or polarization instead of the development of democracy.

2. Elections that create unfair rules give one party an advantage or may lead to a decrease in public trust in the election, instead of encouraging people to feel the need for democracy.

3. The worst thing that can happen when elections do not follow democratic principles is the development of conflict and violence. The collective emotions of those in society who are disappointed with the electoral system can lead, people, who feel that formal politics cannot meet their true democratic needs, to the streets.

From the above, although noting that failures that may occur in the future, elections are generally a good sign for the development of democracy. Additionally, Thailand's the parliamentary system of government, with its checks and balances, can help build confidence among the people that government is working in their interests. This new

confidence has the potential to help voters be more tolerant when their candidates are unsuccessful and help them see the potential for victory in a future election rather than demanding an immediate regime change in the form of a coup d'état.

As for good elections, they should lead to the development of democracy. Such elections must be the ones that make democracy and the peoples' voice meaningful. Good elections must make people feel like they have power. Good elections must convince people to enter the same political arena under the same political rules for the development of complete democracy.

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