Cooperative Community Groups (CCG) And Municipal Government In Thailand

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Abstract

Under the tremendous pressures associated with the new responsibilities transferred from the central government, municipal governments are grappling with severe constraints and a shifting and unfamiliar regulatory and institutional context. Almost all municipal offices all over the country complain that they do not have the personnel necessary to meet their newly assigned tasks. To cope with their new administrative burdens, however, local governments have their own incentives to move in this direction. Municipal governments are trying to elicit cooperation from local communities in order to be able to offer services with the resources they have available. Municipal politicians and officials are now expected to facilitate local residents' participation in municipal affairs. This paper illustrates how local democratic institutions, focusing on town-level municipal governments, influence community group formation and use these groups to serve their administrative and political goals.

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Chapter IX of the new People's Constitution of 1997 calls for the rationalization of the assignment of administrative functions across central and local administrative jurisdictions and the creation of a decentralization committee to oversee implementation of new parliamentary enabling acts. The new constitution prompted steps to realize radical administrative and political decentralization in Thailand.

Decentralization is having an enormous impact on local governments, including the town-level municipalities that are the focus of this paper. Resources for Thai municipalities remain relatively constrained at the same time as their responsibilities expand. As a result, municipal governments are increasingly concerned to foster and extend cooperative links to their communities as a means to provide a range of new services within the bounds of still limited finances.

Traditional approaches to the study of state-society relations tend to focus first on the ways in which, and the extent to which, societies support and make demands of the state. Putnam's analysis of the impact of social capital on regional government performance in Italy has been criticized as being too society-oriented and ignoring the roles of government institutions in influencing or facilitating levels of social capital within society (Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Foley and Edwards, 1998; Lowndes and Wilson, 2001; Portes, 1998; Tarrow, 1996; Taylor, 2000; Woolcock, 1998). This paper goes beyond traditional approaches to the study of state-society relations to examine the ways in which central government and town-level municipalities shape opportunities for civic engagement at the local level. The author focuses heavily on qualitative data analysis, utilizing data gathered from more than a hundred in-depth and follow-up interviews, participatory observations in four town-level municipalities in central Thailand, and data from secondary sources.

Within municipal offices, mayors, deputy mayors, members of municipal administrative council and assemblies, and samples of municipal officials and

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employees at all levels were interviewed. For data gathered from local residents, both extensive and follow-up interviews and informal conversations were conducted with leaders and members of local community groups, leaders and members of local civic associations, and numbers of random citizens. Officials at the Ministry of Interior and academic scholars on decentralization and local government also were interviewed. This data gathering process elicited information about the evolution of decentralization in Thailand, impacts of decentralization policy on municipal governments, local institutional environments, and problems facing each municipality. The author also used participatory observation, spending at least one month observing each municipality to better understand the importance of local and intergovernmental networks and relationships between municipal governments and local communities in affecting the quality and capacity of local (both government and community) projects.

Based on data gathered from field research in four town-level municipalities in central Thailand, municipal governments, following central government recommendations, have utilized local networks and coopted local community groups in order to support municipal governments administratively and politically. State institutions influence civic engagement and local participation in municipal affairs and open up communications channels with local communities. As a result, municipal governments can better address their new responsibilities.

Under the tremendous pressures associated with the new responsibilities transferred from the central government, municipal governments are grappling with severe constraints and a shifting and unfamiliar regulatory and institutional context. Almost all municipal offices all over the country complain that they do not have the personnel necessary to meet their newly assigned tasks. To cope with their new administrative burdens, however, local governments have their own incentives to move in this direction. Municipal governments are trying to elicit cooperation from local communities in order to be able to offer services with the

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Cooperative Community Groups (CCGs)

One of the major goals of decentralization policy is to encourage public participation and to strengthen democracy at the grassroots level. Critics of decentralization in Thailand have worried that the result, instead, would be that local power brokers would boost their influence. In 1988, the Ministry of Interior issued an order to all local governments to encourage, organize, recognize, and support Cooperative Community Groups (CCGs) in municipal areas. CCGs are local groups of residents formally recognized by the municipal government as representatives of their communities. CCGs can be organized at municipal governments' behest or at the request of the groups themselves. (An approximate number of members is from 200 to 2,000.)

Municipal governments are supposed to help CCGs identify their leaders. The Ministry of Interior does not provide specific guidelines beyond recommending that CCGs' chairmen and committees should emerge through CCG elections among residents organized in each CCG. The main objective of the CCG is to encourage community groups to be strong and depend on themselves as much as they possibly can in solving their own problems. CCGs will, it is hoped, try to take care of their own needs and problems before going to municipal governments to seek help (Interview with municipal politician, April 10, 2002). Municipal governments have responded to the ministry's recommendations in part in the hope that CCGs may relieve municipal governments' workloads without increasing their

support bases.

Each CCG is composed of a chair, a couple of deputy chairs, and community committee members (no more than 15 people altogether). Each member serves in a position such as secretary or treasurer, or is charged with handling activities or finances. They hold these posts for two-year terms. CCG chairs and deputy chairs usually are selected through informal community elections (Interview with municipal officials, April 1, 2002).

The election of CCG leaders affords political leaders chances to use them for their own purposes. After CCGs are established and recognized by municipal governments, politicians prospect for potential leaders within each CCG, generally from among their political supporters. After a couple of potential candidates are identified, elections are organized and advertised among residents within that CCG. Any resident who shows up can vote (by hand). In some cases, depending on the decision of the CCGs, only the chair is elected. In others, the deputy also is elected. The chair selects residents to fill other positions. In poorer CCGs, municipal politicians usually select CCG leaders without election (Interview with municipal officials, May 10, 2002).

CCGs act as "messengers" between municipal residents in CCGs and municipal governments. CCG leaders are often the first to learn of problems such as flooding or electrical failures and bring these to the attention of municipal offices (Interviews with municipal residents, April 14, 2002). CCGs apparently make municipal residents feel closer to the municipal government. As a result, they are more likely to visit municipal offices.

Municipal politicians can no longer ignore, as traditionally believed, local residents' concerns. Rather, at least some local politicians are trying to bring local residents closer to municipal offices. Typical depictions of local politicians as corrupt, insincere, selfish and serving only their personal business interests or those of their cronies (see, for example, Argiros 2002), do not capture what ob-

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served in four town-level municipalities. Politicians intent on reelection may have to try to be responsive to their constituents even if they also are corrupt and lining their pockets. Conditions have changed with decentralization and vote buying alone is a less reliable means of being reelected. Politicians argue that their records and general reputations play increasing roles in municipal elections. Vote buying is not only expensive, but less reliable than it was in the past. This is particularly true in urban areas, especially those under this study, where people are more educated and familiar with the local government.

Municipal governments organize training sessions on health, environmental and vocational issues, national and local traditional festivals, and the formation of civic clubs. Municipal governments also organize volunteer groups such as Urban Area Volunteers (UAV, or Asa Samak Nai Kaet Mueng), originally initiated by the Ministry of Health to improve local people's basic knowledge about health and sanitary conditions. Another example is the Disaster Prevention Volunteer (DPV, or Asa Samak Pattana Pongkan Lae Raksa Kuam Plodpai). These volunteer groups generally are organized through CCGs and most members are drawn from areas covered by CCGs (Interviews with municipal officials, May 19, 2002).

The organization of municipal cultural festivals helps to illustrate some of the ways in which municipal governments use CCGs to extend their reach into the community. Municipal leaders initially work through CCGs to advertise events and   encourage residents to participate. While CCGs vary in their budgets and abilities to organize CCG activities, typically they enjoy joining in festivals. If formally invited to join municipal activities, CCG members may feel honored, to say nothing of seeking to have fun.

Municipal governments initiate and support local voluntary and social groups in many ways. Municipal governments, as well as provincial public health offices and regional police offices, provide basic training sessions. UAV and housewife club members receive vocational and basic healthcare training in sanitation, dia-

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betes, blood pressure, and childcare. Municipal governments provide a basic medical support to CCGs and other volunteer groups, such as first-aid kits, basic medicine chests, and blood pressure monitoring machines. Municipal officials also teach UAV volunteers and housewife club members to produce local products for extra income, such as dishwasher detergents, liquid soap, shampoo, chili paste, and picture frames. This vocational training is part of the central government "One-Tambon, One-Product" (O-TOP) project based on "local wisdom," (phoom panya chow bann).

DPV volunteers receive training in crisis relief and prevention, such as fire hazards and emergency aid for road-accident victims. DPV monthly training includes access to a liquid chemical tank for use in the event of fire in areas inaccessible to fire trucks. DPV subgroups specialize in reporting on drugs, crime watches, community watches, and fire fighting. These volunteers act as sources of information for municipal governments, the police, and CCGs (Interviews with municipal residents, April 23, 2002).

Support for training programs is in some cases linked to the benefits that local politicians see in these activities. In one municipality, the mayor and deputy mayors gave volunteers team shirts to try to sustain their morale. Many participants enjoy wearing uniforms as well as the training session. Uniforms lend them authority and make them more comfortable in dealing with police and government officials (Interview with municipal politician, April 18, 2002).

All four municipalities under this study offer "Moving Municipal Services" (MMS, or Tessaban Klearn Thee). Each month, municipal offices go out to each CCG and set up a temporary center there in order to provide municipal services to municipal residents. These include registrations and records, hair cutting, dental services, pet vaccinations, electronic merchandise maintenance, legal knowledge, painting competitions, and agricultural extension. Municipal governments provide food and drinks to residents who come for these services. Local public and pri-

vate hospitals and district sanitary services also get involved in providing these services, typically one evening a month. The services provided vary with local demand as conveyed through community development officials, assemblymen, or mayors or deputy mayors.

CCG leaders help to promote the MMS to residents in their areas. Volunteer groups take this opportunity to offer their services as well. The main objective of the MMS is to make it easier for local residents who do not have much time or easy access to municipal offices to receive basic services. It is also a way to prevent outbreaks such as dengue fever and polio in poorer neighborhoods.

Municipal governments initiate these activities and encourage CCGs and other volunteers to participate. The latter have an opportunity to help their local communities. Municipal governments, in turn, co-opt CCGs to help provide basic services. This kind of interaction seems to boost municipal governments' responsiveness, open up channels of communication, and give local residents opportunities to learn how to cooperate with each other and participate in municipal government activities.

CCGs and other volunteer groups can use their contacts with municipal officials to bring information to their attention. They can report instances of official abuse and on the quality of official services. Such contacts significantly reduce the distance separating politicians and their constituents. While municipal officials may resent such monitoring, municipal politicians see it as a way to improve the quality of municipal services. As one politician put it, "the closer the local residents are to us, the more they will feel they can trust us and believe we will be there for them" (Interview with municipal politician; April 2002). In short, CCGs help municipal government take care of some basic community problems. They are valuable sources of information on local conditions.

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CCGs support municipal governments in many ways. CCGs provide municipal offices with information that they otherwise might not have. In this respect, CCG leaders act as eyes and ears both for municipal offices and for their own communities. Politically, they act as power brokers for municipal politicians. Politicians can use CCGs to their advantage and therefore have incentives to serve CCG needs.

Municipal politicians work to ensure that their governments cooperate with CCGs smoothly. Before decentralization, local politicians depended heavily on CCGs for political support, but municipal officials' fortunes were tied to the Ministry of Interior. As a result, clashes between officials and politicians were common, often leading to deadlock. Mayors now have more power over municipal governments and, therefore, CCGs have more influence.

The constructive interaction between CCGs and municipal government is portrayed in Figure 1.
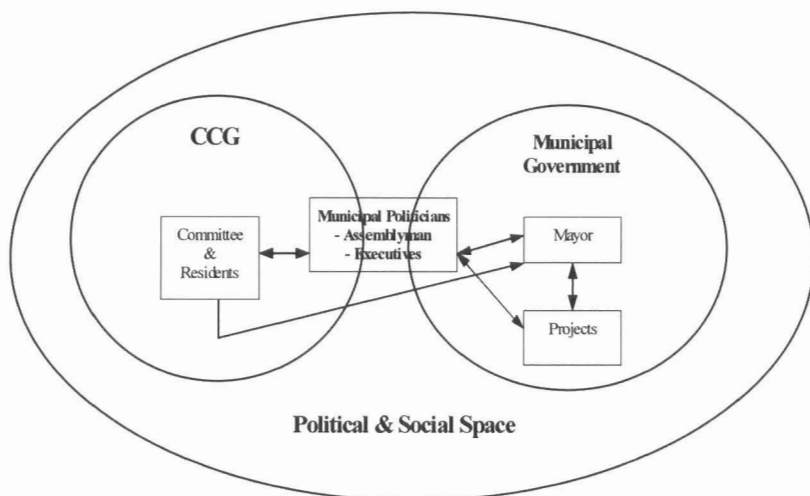
Figure 1: Pattern of Constructive Interaction between Municipal Government and CCGs

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A CCG committee communicates their problems with assemblymen who are also direct representatives of the CCG. Assemblymen try to get the mayor to agree to take action. Both the CCG committee and assemblymen follow up the process closely. This process has become possible with an opened political and social space. It requires an active and effective CCG committee that eschews simple clientelistic political ties with municipal politicians. CCG committees and assemblymen need to be trusted by CCG residents and be skillful in mobilizing them to support CCG projects. They also need to have a degree of financial stability. Most importantly, CCGs need real representation in the municipal assembly or executive council to be able to get things done. Real representation means not only an open information channel but also guidance through the byways of the government.

The general model laid out above depends on municipal government institutions that are performance oriented and accountable. These conditions are more likely as decentralization has widened the range of social space and freedom of association in municipalities. This new socio-political context opens up opportunities for those previously excluded from participating in municipal politics to interact and work together with the municipal government. Successful CCGs illustrate the emergence of formal democratic channels that facilitate both local development and municipal government performance. These conditions help the operation of checks and balances and greater local accountability.

Mechanisms Linking Municipal Governments with CCGs

Several mechanisms linking municipal government with CCGs are represented in Figure 2.
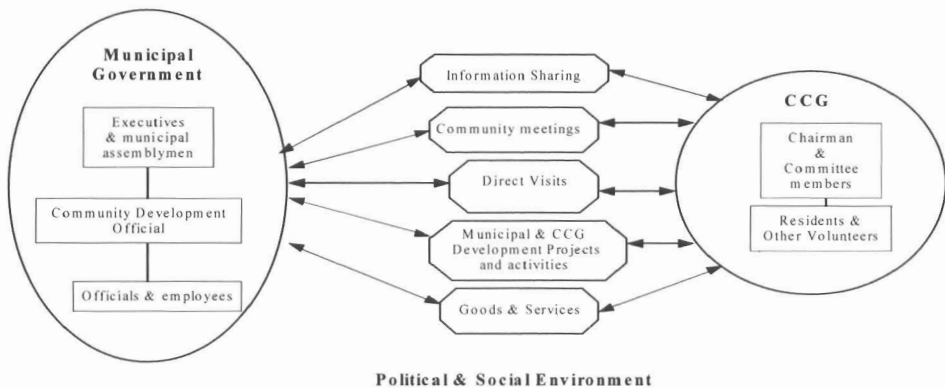
Figure 2: Mechanism Linking Municipal Government with CCG

Municipal governments and CCGs are connected by information passed along by CCG leaders, municipal politicians, and community development officials. CCG leaders act as messengers for the municipal government and also work as coordinators for municipal projects. This direct interaction certainly brings municipal residents and municipal government closer, enabling municipal services and community development. Municipal governments usually organize monthly meeting with CCG leaders and residents. In some municipalities, all CCGs gather in municipal buildings. In others, CCGs rotate as host for the meeting with municipal government representatives, assemblymen and community development officials. The municipal government may provide tables and chairs and audio materials. The municipal government itself will host the meeting once a year. These meetings allow CCGs and municipal governments to share information. Municipal governments explain what is going on in municipal offices and why some CCG needs cannot be met right away. Officials try to answer questions posed by CCGs.These meetings apparently increase the responsiveness of municipal governments and help in maintaining good relationships.

Visits by assemblymen and community development officials also link CCGs to the municipal government. It is easier to organize such visits in munici-

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palities without a political opposition. The absence of an opposition allows a "team-work strategy." Municipal executives assign assemblymen responsibility for specific CCGs. These assemblymen have primary responsibility in communicating with their CCGs. Municipal executives serve as back ups, going into the field should assemblymen be unable to handle problems. If the municipality has an opposition, those assemblymen are apt to try to gain popularity with CCGs in ways that undermine the sitting executives.

CCGs also engage with the municipality through participation in municipal projects and activities. CCGs usually contact the municipal government to initiate CCG projects in order to gain support from the government. Some projects require municipal government endorsement in order to be fully implemented, such as road construction and other basic infrastructure. Municipal projects and activities, on the other hand, frequently need the cooperation of CCGs and other volunteer groups. The Village Fund, Economic Stimulation Fund, One-Tambon One-Product scheme, and Municipal Development Fund are all initiated by the central government but also link municipal governments and CCGs.

Municipal governments and CCGs are also linked together through municipally provided goods and services. CCGs can relieve municipal government burdens through volunteer programs initiated by the municipal government. Moving Municipal Services give CCGs and other local residents opportunities to learn about and exploit available municipal services. All these mechanisms help to strengthen local communities at the grass-roots level while they also support the municipal governments. CCGs have become a major factor in local societal organizations that can support municipal governments and at the same time sustain local developments.

By disaggregating residents into CCGs and maintaining close contact with their representatives, municipal governments are able to learn what each CCG wants and to be more responsive. As a result, local state-society relations are

shifting from patron-client ties toward something closer to partnerships. This is resulting in part because of the demands for municipal services and constraints on resources associated with decentralization.

Municipal Politicians and CCGs

Including CCGs in municipal affairs has significant political implications. Mayors, deputy mayors, and municipal assemblymen have helped shape CCGs. Most CCGs are located in poorer areas. Many municipal officials and residents believe that politicians' interest in CCGs and support for training programs are motivated entirely by the recognition that CCGs can enhance politicians' popularity and provide them with effective canvassers. There is no question but that traditional patron-client relationships characterize interactions between local politicians and CCGs in poor areas. It also is true that CCG access to resources controlled by politicians depends on their political support and cooperation with the politicians.

Municipal officials typically have not had close links to local residents. The bonds between municipal politicians and CCGs, however, are stronger and rooted in the exchange of financial and development assistance for political support. CCG chairs and committee members are not only the eyes and ears of the municipal government administration. They also are expected to act as political supporters, political canvassers (hua-ka-naen), and to help mobilize votes within their CCGs for municipal politicians. In return, politicians support them financially and by other means. The fact that municipal politicians encourage CCGs in poorer areas where voters are less educated creates skepticism (Interview with municipal officials, April 3, 2002).

Politicians in power try to create new CCGs or support existing CCGs over which they can exercise control. They keep close contact with and support CCGs leaders. Mayors assign municipal assemblyman with whom they are allied

to look after a number of CCGs. The assemblymen are encouraged to visit the CCGs weekly to gather information and build ties. If the opposition controls part of the municipal assembly, things become more complicated. Politicians then compete for influence in CCGs often resulting in confusion and conflict among CCGs members. For CCGs associated with politicians in opposition, their links to the government may be diminished (Interview with municipal official, March 14, 2002).

Since CCGs usually do not cover the entire municipal area, this poses problems of equity in the access to resources available to those areas that do have CCGs and those that do not. Areas not covered often have either swing voters located in remote, poor, rural areas, or well-to-do central city residents. The former areas may witness extensive vote buying during municipal elections. Generally, those areas receive less attention and support and are less likely to get village funds from the central government. Politicians in power, however, try to increase the numbers of CCGs in order to expand their political bases and because having more CCGs increases chances of receiving development funds from the central government.

When many CCGs are involved in an issue, this can complicate matters for politicians. With more interests involved, negotiations can become more complex. Politicians' diplomatic and negotiating skills are critical under these conditions as they try to reward CCGs loyal to them without alienating others. Politicians' style may influence the extent to which they are successful in resolving differences among contending groups.

Municipal politicians can range along a continuum from "nakleng" (tough guy) to "phudii" (gentleman) in their styles of leadership. A politician can be "khon tid din" (down to earth) even if he is very rich. Such a figure with "khon tid din" style is usually described as a strong, powerful figure who can get CCGs to cooperate. Municipal residents, especially the poor, tend to feel more comfortable talking to a politician with a casual style who is informal and generous. Such

figures may be "seur puern wai" (literally, tiger with a quick rifle, describing someone who is kind and generous.) Such politicians have an easier time reaching out to their constituents and are contrasted with former bureaucrats of the phudii style by the former's disdain, or at least disinterest, for titles or social status.

In the past, local politicians were usually retired bureaucrats from provincial offices or former district officials. Since being a bureaucrat in Thailand elevates your social status, these people tended to be in the phudii mold. Local people tended to hesitate to contact local government offices if they had to deal with these phudii. The phudii type is now far less common because they are less effective in getting elected. Unlike the phudii, during elections the "khon tid din" style politicians join in social events organized by local residents and will even pitch in, helping the hosts by serving food and drinks. Were a phudii to try to "wai" (a traditional gesture of greeting that is used to signal relative social status) everybody, as do "khon tid din" politicians, the phudii would be seen as a fake. The "khon tid din" politicians often have local roots and can cite those roots, and perhaps their childhood poverty, in convincing voters that they understand their concerns.

The local boy or girl who made good has strong advantages in elections and typically emphasized the theme of equality of opportunity, for example in education. One politician insisted that "It is important for us to get to know everybody, from business owners to the operators of three-wheeled food carts" (Interview with municipal politician, February 2002). Successful "khon tid din" style politicians often have a distinctive administrative style captured by the phrase "kla kit-kla tam," (brave in thought and deed, or active and decisive.)

CCGs have helped to diminish the distance between municipal governments and municipal residents. Municipal officials are now to a greater degree under the authority of municipal politicians, and their careers affected by mayors, rather than the Department of Local Administration, as was true in the past. In the

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past, municipal residents often viewed municipal governments and officials as immune to local influence and unmoved by local concerns. Decentralization has given mayors more control over municipal officials and municipal administration and encouraged grassroots participation so that municipal governments and residents are now closer. Municipal politicians, officials, and residents now interact directly with each other for both administrative and political purposes.

The wide gap separating common Thais from bureaucrats and politicians once constituted a major social obstacle in Thai society to effective state-society cooperation. The traditional "bureaucratic polity" was socially and politically aloof both from ethnic Chinese business interests and the mass of rural farmers. The context of contemporary local Thai politics is dramatically different as many new actors, such as business enterprises, labor unions, and civic movements, have emerged in the political arena since the 1970s.

Many municipal politicians have as their primary goal boosting the fortunes of their business concerns. Vote buying and clientelism are alive and well. The survival of selfish impulses, however, does not preclude the possibility that these politicians are helping their constituents or fostering stronger local institutions. Most municipal government activities have a less direct impact on well-to-do residents than on the poor. Many municipal government activities focus on promoting economic development or serve as social safety nets for the poor at the municipal level. Municipal politicians use poor CCGs in poor neighborhoods as their political canvassers and control them by brokering access to new resources made available as a result of decentralization. At the same time, however, locals gain more opportunities to interact and cooperate with each other. Pressures grow for the municipal government to be more responsive and to strengthen information channels as a means to provide better public services.

Local Thai communities hardly represent a democratic ideal. It is a mistake, however, to think in terms of a "democratic-not democratic" dichotomous

variable. Clearly we are dealing with a continuum along which any movement is likely to take time. Promoting participation through CCGs reduces municipal government burdens and also seems to help foster stronger communities. CCGs (and residents more generally) and municipal politicians seem to benefit with the changes afoot in Thai municipal governments.

Municipal politicians may still favor clients and buy votes. New strategies to win popularity, however, seem to be increasingly important. As politicians foster CCGs to serve as their vote canvassers during elections, they also boost municipal residents' sense of efficacy and narrow the gap separating them from municipal governments, helping to create a positive environment of trust and increased regard for the public good.

Local residents are encouraged to try to help themselves, reducing burdens on municipal offices and, perhaps, making them more efficient and effective in responding to local needs. Politicians gain as a result. The CCGs that foster participation and a degree of self reliance are instruments available to support politicians' elections. CCGs also create opportunities for citizens to build networks and foster trust. Local politicians may be doing good not only for themselves but, in a variety of ways, for their communities as well. It may be too simplistic, in any case, to think of politicians having only financial interests.

Political participation involves a long-term learning process. As people learn what rights they have to try to influence municipal governments through democratic means, they need channels of access to the municipal government. The promotion of community associations and activities, whether or not designed to serve narrow political interests, is essential to the substance of democratization at the local level in Thailand. Inordinate attention to the seamier side of Thai localpolitics may tend to blind us to changes under way. It is useful to remind ourselves of the degree to which political attitudes and behaviors in Bangkok have changed. Comparable changes appear to be under way in other, smaller, urban

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areas in Thailand.

State institutions may have unintended effects on society. Municipal governments have tried to co-opt local communities to improve service delivery and to enhance their political fortunes, and their personal business interests. As a result, however, the closer interaction with municipal governments engenders imiar with municipal political dynamics and participatory democracy.

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