

# How Dreams are Driven: An Analysis of Advocacy Coalition Framework on Khon Kaen's Light Rail Transit Project in Thailand\*

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## Abstract

This study integrates the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to analyze how the winning coalition drives their desired policy—the light rail transit (LRT) system in Khon Kaen City, Thailand. This study also combines ACF's three-tiered belief structure to examine actors' types and roles based on ACF's actor ideal among diversified coalitions in LRT's policy subsystem. This study is conducted based on a qualitative methodology that depends on two data sources—primary data from previous field works and interviews and the author's experience working with the Khon Kaen coalition. The analytical framework for this empirical case is grounded on content analysis following the ACF ideal. The results show that there are two main coalitions within LRT's policy subsystem—Khon Kaen's local coalition and the central bureaucrat coalition. The Khon Kaen's coalition desires to drive their beliefs—solving traffic issues and advance their homeland, through the first LRT project that locally and fully owned by the five local governments in Khon Kaen City. However, the LRT project involves various ministries or overlapping authorities with the central bureaucrat coalitions—the Ministry of Transportation (MOT), Ministry of Finance (MOF), Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MOAC), and Ministry of Interior (MOI) who try to centralize the authority. Nonetheless, the Khon Kaen coalition changes strategies to push the project forwards through taking advantage of external events—national political climate to network and dialogue with top-rank national politicians. The project finally gets

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approved in 2019, after a decade of works among the coalitions. This study classifies three actors in LRT's policy subsystem based on the ACF: principal actors—KKTT, KKTS, MOT, MOF, MOAC, and MOI, policy brokers—national top-rank politicians, and auxiliary actors—local civil society organizations and residents.

**Keywords:** Advocacy coalition framework, light rail transit, Khon Kaen city, Thailand

# วิธีขับเคลื่อนความฝัน: การวิเคราะห์กรอบแนวร่วมสนับสนุนโครงการรถไฟฟ้า ขอนแก่นในประเทศไทย

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## บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้ร่วมເອກະກອບแนวคิดเครือข่ายพันธมิตรนโยบาย (ACF) เพื่อวิเคราะห์ว่ากลุ่มพันธมิตรขับเคลื่อนนโยบายที่ต้องการได้อย่างไร นั่นคือรถไฟฟ้า (LRT) ในเมืองขอนแก่น ประเทศไทย การศึกษานี้ยังรวมโครงสร้างความเชื่อสามขั้นของการอภิปรายแนวคิดเครือข่ายพันธมิตรนโยบาย เพื่อตรวจสอบประเภทและบทบาทของเครือข่ายพันธมิตรโดยอิงตามอุดมคติของเครือข่ายพันธมิตรของกรอบแนวคิดเครือข่ายพันธมิตรนโยบาย ในกลุ่มพันธมิตรที่หลากหลายในระบบย่อยนโยบายของระบบขนส่งมวลชนเบา การศึกษานี้ดำเนินการโดยใช้วิธีการเชิงคุณภาพที่ขึ้นอยู่กับแบบแล่งข้อมูล 2 แหล่ง ได้แก่ ข้อมูลหลักจากการศึกษาและสัมภาษณ์ครั้งก่อน และประสบการณ์ของผู้เขียนในการทำงานกับแนวร่วมจังหวัดขอนแก่น กระบวนการวิเคราะห์สำหรับกรณีเชิงประจักษ์นี้มีพื้นฐานมาจาก การวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาตามอุดมคติของกรอบแนวคิดเครือข่ายพันธมิตรนโยบาย ผลการวิจัยพบว่า มีแนวร่วมหลัก 2 กลุ่มภายในระบบย่อยนโยบายของระบบขนส่งมวลชนเบาคือ แนวร่วมท้องถิ่นของขอนแก่นและแนวร่วมราชการส่วนกลาง แนวร่วมจังหวัดขอนแก่น ประธานาธิบดีขับเคลื่อนความเชื่อของตน เพื่อแก้ปัญหาการจราจรและส่งเสริมบ้านเกิดเมืองนอน ผ่านโครงการระบบขนส่งมวลชนเบา โครงการแรกที่รัฐบาลท้องถิ่นห้าแห่งในเมืองขอนแก่นเป็นเจ้าของอย่างเต็มที่ อย่างไรก็ตาม โครงการระบบขนส่งมวลชนเบาเกี่ยวข้องกับกระทรวงต่าง ๆ หรือหน่วยงานที่ทับซ้อนกัน กับรัฐบาลกลาง - กระทรวงคมนาคม (MOT) กระทรวงการคลัง (MOF) กระทรวงเกษตรและสหกรณ์ (MOAC) และกระทรวงมหาดไทย (MOI) ที่พยายามเพื่อร่วมศูนย์อำนาจ อย่างไรก็ตาม แนวร่วมจังหวัดขอนแก่นเปลี่ยนกลยุทธ์เพื่อผลักดันโครงการไปข้างหน้าผ่านการใช้ประโยชน์จากเหตุการณ์ภัยนกและบรรยายกาศ ทางการเมืองระดับชาติสู่เครือข่ายและการเจรจาที่กับการเมืองระดับแนวหน้าของประเทศไทย ในที่สุด โครงการก็ได้รับการอนุมัติในปี พ.ศ.2562 หลังจากทศวรรษของการทำงานในกลุ่มพันธมิตร การศึกษานี้จำแนกผู้มีบทบาทระบบย่อยนโยบายของรถไฟฟ้า (LRT) โดยยึดตามกรอบแนวคิดเครือข่ายพันธมิตรนโยบายคือ 1) ผู้ดำเนินการหลัก (บริษัท ขอนแก่นพัฒนาเมือง (เคเคทีพี) จำกัด

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บริษัท ขอนแก่น ทรายซิท ชิสเท็ม จำกัด กระทรวงคมนาคม กระทรวงการคลัง กระทรวงเกษตรและสหกรณ์ และกระทรวงมหาดไทย) 2.นายหนานโยบาย (นักการเมืองระดับชาติ) และ 3) ผู้ดำเนินการเสริม (องค์กรภาคประชาชนในท้องถิ่นและผู้อุปถัมภ์)

**คำสำคัญ:** กรอบแนวคิดเครือข่ายพันธมิตรนโยบาย รถไฟรางเบา เมืองขอนแก่น ประเทศไทย

## Background of Study

There is no light rail transit (LRT) system to serve people in other parts of Thailand, except only in the Bangkok Metropolis. However, studies have proven that infrastructure development can increase growth and reflect inequality (Hulten & Schwab, 2000; Roller & Waverman, 2001). Therefore, it is possible to verify that the LRT's empirical case in Thailand mirrors the current inequalities based on infrastructure and development policies between central and regional areas.

Currently, the Khon Kaen City in Khon Kaen Province, the northeastern region's central city in Thailand, is now proposing to invest and establish the local governments' light rail transit system to serve the residents. Five municipalities in Khon Kaen City have been pushing the light rail transit system in a different approach, which opens new ways of local development for municipalities throughout Thailand. Khon Kaen is the first city to establish the "*Khon Kaen Think Tank (KKTT)*" where local firms, academia, civil organization, local governments, and regional non-profit organizations are working together to push the light rail transit project. The KKTT also performs as a supplementary organization to the public sector. The most distinct approach is that in 2017 Khon Kaen is the first city where five municipalities gathered an initial fund of 5 million baht and jointly founded the "*Khon Kaen Transit System (KKTS)*", a municipal corporation mutually owned by five neighboring municipalities. The KKTS is the central organization responsible for the light rail transit system project in Khon Kaen City. Furthermore, the KKTS is also the first municipal company in Thailand since the Municipality Act was enacted 67 years ago. Currently, experiences of city development in Khon Kaen City, especially the establishment of the KKTT has been modeled to other twenty provinces across Thailand and recognized as the "*Khon Kaen Model*" (Tangkitvanich, 2017; Wongthanavasu et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, the pathway in driving the light rail transit in Khon Kaen City is not easy. Even though the Municipality Act entitled the rights to establish a municipal company and manage railway transportation. The movements of local coalitions in Khon Kaen City have strived themselves with over-centralized authorities related to a railway transit project in Khon Kaen City since 2004. At the initial stage, the central authorities resisted the light rail project proposals, and the establishment of a municipal company—KKTS, faced various obstacles. Due to the movements of local coalitions driving the project, the KKTS was

eventually established in 2017. The light rail transit system was also approved by the Ministry of Interior, allowing the KKTS to invest and construct the light rail transit system in Khon Kaen City.

This study, therefore, aims to investigate how a local advocacy coalition drives its desired policy goal. Furthermore, based on Hank Jenkins-Smith, Daniel Nohrestedt, Christopher Weble and Karin Ingold (2017) suggested that future studies focus on the advocacy coalition actors. Therefore, this study also seeks to fill this gap by investigating multiple actors in alliances pushing light rail transit projects in Khon Kaen City, Thailand.

## **Objective**

First, this study aims to investigate the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), under what condition the Khon Kaen's LRT project has been finally approved—how the winning coalition drives their beliefs—between Khon Kaen local coalitions and the central bureaucrat coalitions.

Second, the author tries to analyze the ACF's three-tiered belief structure within the LRT's policy subsystem to display fundamental ideals and logics of Khon Kaen's local coalition through the lens of ACF's belief system. In the last part, this study also examines the actors in LRT's policy subsystem based on ACF's type of actors to identify actors' types and roles among local and central coalitions within the LRT's policy subsystem.

## **Methodology**

This study grounds on qualitative research methodology, which integrates primary data of interviews from the author's last field observation in 2019-2020 and documentary research methods as the study's primary approach. The interviewees are project leaders driving the Khon Kaen Light Rail Transit (LRT) Project, including Khon Kaen Municipality's mayor, chief of KKTS Co., Ltd., co-founder of KKTT Co., Ltd., professors, and civil society organizations. For documentary research, the author reviewed related publications in both Thai and English, such as previous research projects, journal articles, books related to Khon Kaen's smart city development. The author has also been working with members of KKTT, KKTS, and Khon Kaen Municipality on Khon Kaen Smart City projects since 2016. Therefore, parts of the study are also grounded from the author's experience.

## Literature Review and Framing the Study

### Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)

Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) was first created in early 1980 by Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins Smith. Initially, the ACF was intentionally made to deal with wicked problems (Sabatier & Weible, 2019: 189). Most ACF applications to the studies were primarily environmental and energy policy issues (Weible & Sabatier, 2007: 123-124), such as water policy, forest management, climate change, etc. Recently, the ACF has been widely applied in other fields: public health policy, education, political systems, etc. (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999: 126; Sabatier & Weible, 2019: 189-190). The ACF's intellectual foundations could be traced to science philosophy debates during the 1970s and 1980s. Especially Thomas Kuhn's scientific revolutions ideal and Imre Lakatos's evolution of scientific research program. Particularly, Lakatos's "hard core" of unchanging and axiomatic schemes encircled by a protective belt of hypotheses that can be falsifiable and rejected is regarded as a progenitor of the belief systems in the ACF (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2017: 136).

The ACF is a policy process analysis model clarifies how policies are changed and learned. Furthermore, the ACF offers a general foundation for both single case studies and comparative analyses of policy processes across various policy domains and governing systems (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2017: 138). As noted by Paul Sabatier and Christopher Weible (2019, 189; 2004, 123) the ACF is "a framework for policymaking process developed to deal with wicked problems or intense and complex public policy problems." The ACF helps analyst to understand actor belief and how policy changes. Many studies have confirmed that the ACF is useful to the study of public policy process analysis (Schlager, 1995: 243-270; Schlager & Blomquist, 1996: 651-672; Weible, 2005: 461-477; Henry et al., 2014: 299-312; Pierce, Peterson & Hicks, 2020: 64-86) Another perspective on ACF, Matthew Nowlin (2013: 190) simplify that the ACF focus on policy learning and policy change within a policy subsystem. Nowlin explained that policy change is a result of policy learning or external perturbations outside the policy subsystem.

The ACF's foundation is grounded on three major theories: advocacy coalitions, policy change, and policy-oriented learning (Pierce et al., 2017: 2). Advocacy coalition assumes that policy actors are based on a three-tiered belief system structure—deep core beliefs, policy core beliefs, and secondary beliefs. On the policy change, the ACF considers

two level of changes: major and minor changes. The major change is a shift in policy core beliefs while the minor change is a change in secondary beliefs. These policy changes display how winning coalitions' policy beliefs (Pierce & Weible, 2016: 22-23). Therefore, to investigate how policy change is an exploration in belief system (Pierce et al., 2017: 13-46). Furthermore, Jenkins-Smith, Nohrestedt, Weible and Ingold (2017) clarify four policy change pathways— external events, internal events, policy learning, and negotiated agreement. Finally, belief change comes from policy-oriented learning, which defined as “enduring alternations of thought or behavioral intentions that result from experience and which are concerned with the attainment or revision of the precepts of the belief system of individuals or of collectives” (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993: 42). In sum, the foundational and general conceptual framework of the ACF is shown in the Figure 1 and 2 below.

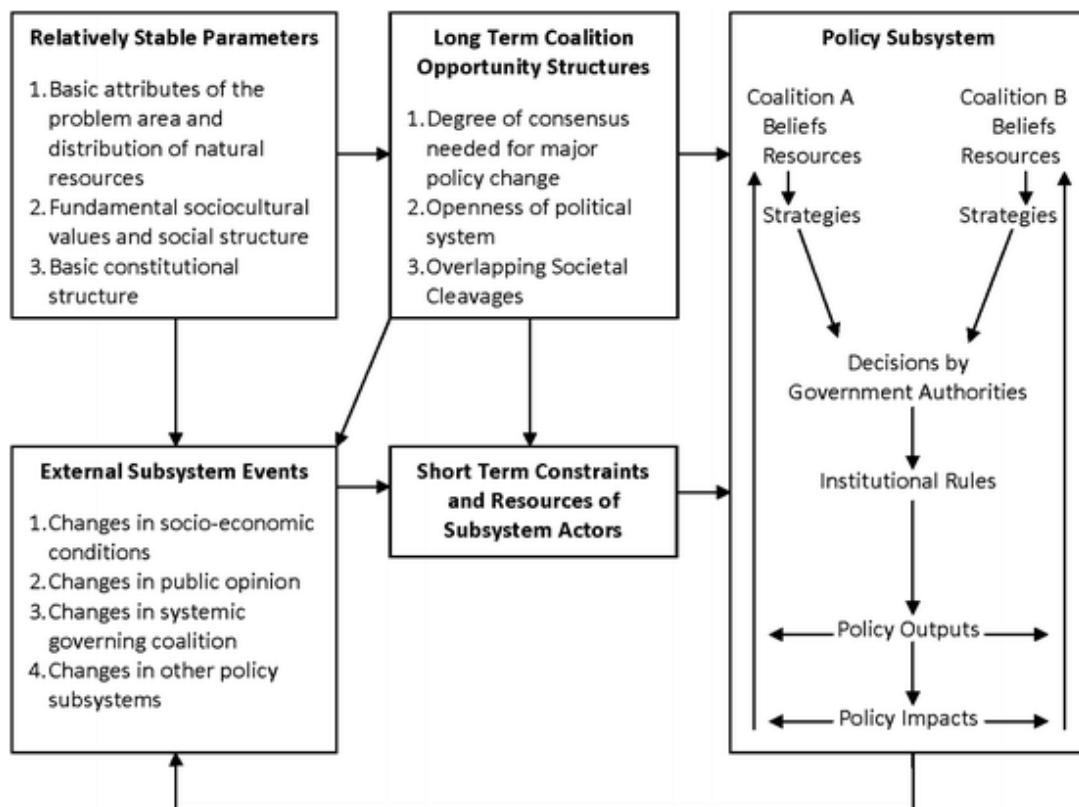
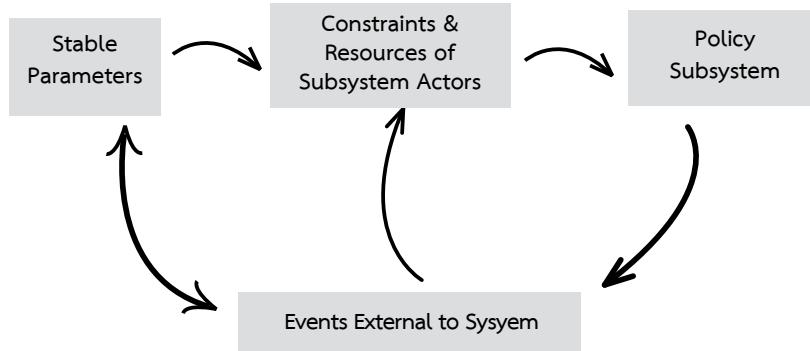


Figure 1.

Source: Cairney (2020) in “The Advocacy Coalition Framework”



**Figure 2.** Adapting the ACF's flow diagram

**Source:** Theodoulou (2013) in “In searching of a framework to understand the policy process”

However, scholars argue that the ACF tries mainly to investigate policy coalition, changes, and learning while ignoring historical and social contexts that policy alterations are made (Fischer, 2003). Another critique was that the ACF needs to refine its methodological studies and more applications to other policy fields rather than environmental and energy overwhelmingly in western countries (Pierce et al., 2017)

### Framing the Study

This study integrates the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), as shown in Figures 1 and 2, to analyze the phenomena of local coalitions in Khon Kaen City related to the LRT project plan and interactions between Khon Kaen's local coalition and central bureaucrat coalition—how winning coalitions work to the policy change. As noted by Sabatier (1988: 131), analyzing the policy change, we should “focus on the interaction of actors from different institutions—in policy subsystem.” Therefore, the author integrated the ACF's three-tiered belief structure and policy subsystem framework to identify the three main types of ACF actors—broker, principal, auxiliary, in the LRT's policy subsystem.

## Result

### Its Origin and Forming the Coalitions: Khon Kaen Light Rail Transit Project

As a globally leading country in traffic-jam and travel accidents, Thailand needs a better transportation system. As in other regions, Khon Kaen City has suffered from terrible traffic issues and low public transportation quality. Therefore, Khon Kaen residents—mainly local companies, civil organizations, and municipalities, mutually decided and committed

to launching the light rail transit (LRT) system as a new hope and solution for a better quality of life, solving public transpiration, and boosting the economy through the transit-oriented development approach.

The LRT's movement in Khon Kaen City began in 2008, leading through the Khon Kaen Municipality (KKM) and local firms that aim to advance their homeland's economic growth and social well-being. However, as the LRT project proposed by the KKM aims to be the first local-own LRT project in Thailand, the initial stage of a proposition is challenging due to the overlapping railway authority with national agencies. The KKM, therefore, networked with other four neighboring municipalities to gain mutual mass advocates from citizens—Tapra, Sila, Muangkao, Samlarn municipalities, and the leading local companies in Khon Kaen City—mainly Chor Tha Vee, property companies, Khon Kaen's Toyota, etc. who gathered another twenty local firms through their connection to push the LRT project together and strategize the ways of financial support for the project. Another alliance is the civil society organization called the “Khon Kaen Future Foundation”—a leading provincial civil society and “Khon Kaen's Citizen Council (KKCC)”—which includes more than existing 170 community organizations in the Khon Kean City. These are local coalitions—which comprise three sub-coalitions: five municipalities, local-firms, and civic organizations.

However, to push the LRT's project is to deal with legal and political power issues. As mentioned, there is no other right rail transit (LRT) systems in other parts of Thailand except in Bangkok Metropolis. And the Khon Kaen's LRT project is the first municipal-own LRT project in Thailand. Therefore, many difficulties happen. First, to push the LRT project strategically successful, there is the need to establish the “municipal company”—which never existed before in Thailand since the Municipal Act's promulgation has been enacted over 67 years. To do so, the KKM networked with those four neighboring municipalities to form the municipal company called “Khon Kaen Transit System or KKTS” proposed to the Ministry of Interior (MOI) for official approval of the establishment. However, the MOI's bureaucrat did hesitate to approve due to central and regional authorities' centralized power concerns under the MOI.

Another challenge is the legal issues related to railway duty between the municipality and the Ministry of Transportation (MOT) because the MOT claimed that all railway duties should be the responsibility of the MOT. Furthermore, the difficulties related to public land

use are the most challenging for Khon Kaen's LRT project. The railway routes and stations need to use public lands that own by the Treasury Department under the Ministry of Finance (MOF) and the land of the Rice Department under the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MOAC). But the Treasury Department and Rice Department did not endorse the proposal. In the beginning, the most challenging was also a clarification of the legal status of the KKTS— the first municipal company that is based mainly on the MOI's approval. These central bureaucrats and ministries were opponents to Khon Kaen's LRT project and considered *central/national bureaucrat coalitions*.

These two coalitions in LRT's policy subsystem share different beliefs under the ACF. According to Jenkins-Smith, Nohrstedt, Weible and Ingold (2017: 140), "*deep core beliefs are not policy specific and, thus, can be applied to multiple policy subsystems.*" Based on interviews with the co-founder of KKTT—Mr. Kangwarn Laovirojdhankul mentioned:

*"Khon Kaen's LRT project was initially driven from "sense of belonging"—the love of birthplace, that we—local people, have been facing many troubles in daily life—public transportation...we would like to solve and develop the growth of our homeland... and our goal is not only the LRT project but also trying to deliver a livable city for generations."*

(See also (in Thai) Wongthanavasu et al., 2018: 176-177).

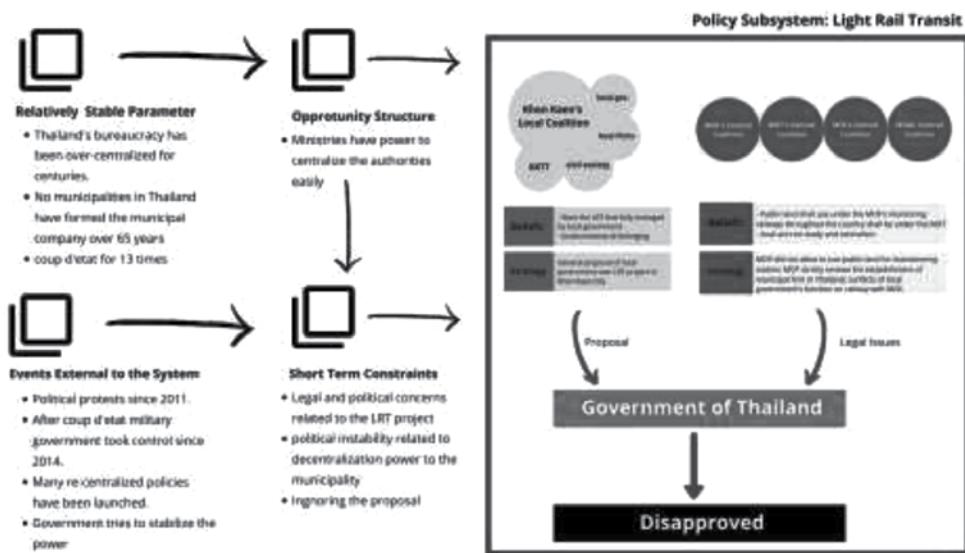
Therefore, the ontological axiom of transportation issues and normative values—a sense of belonging and localism, reflect the local's deep core belief. In contrast, the central bureaucrat coalition's core belief is based mainly on centralism to the LRT's policy subsystem.

### **The Run of Coalitions for Policy Change and Its External Events**

Chandler (2017: 121) noted that "*One value of the theory of advocacy coalitions is that its protagonists can place the policy making system in a framework of change. The policy may take many years to mature, and during this time, an advocacy coalition will itself evolve.*" Sabatier (1988: 131) also clarified that "*understanding the process of policy change—requires a time perspective of a decade or more.*" The case of Khon Kaen's LRT project has been driven for more than a decade since 2004. The first movement started by the Khon Kaen Municipality (KKM) and local firms aimed to boost the economy, urban infrastructure, and public transportation through the railway investment. After facing

difficulties, the KKM and partners have networked with other actors and altered the strategies to push the LRT proposal.

In the beginning, the LRT's proposal was initiated in 2004, the 2004's proposal was disregarded and asked by the central government for further in-depth re-considerations of details related to the project. Then, the second revised 2008's proposal was also ignored to push forward by national bureaucrats of MOT and MOI. Therefore, the local coalition leaders —20 local firms concerned that driving through governmental or official domain alone may be difficult. Twenty local companies, therefore, gathered their networks and resources established the “Khon Kaen Think Tank” or KKTT in 2015 with an initial fund of 200 million baht as an initial financing to push the LRT project and work as supplementary organization to municipalities in Khon Kaen City.



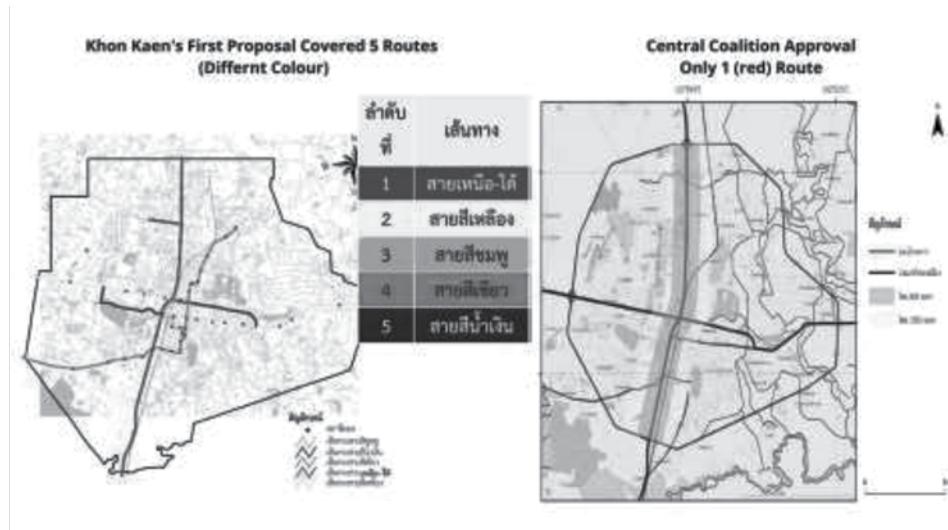
**Figure 3.** External events and the policy subsystem in the beginning.

To make the project progress, the KKTT and five municipalities—a local coalition, changed their strategies because they found themselves in a difficult position to challenge central bureaucrat coalitions. Therefore, the KKTT and five municipalities have met and dialogued formally and informally with the prime minister and ministers of MOI and MOT since 2015 about the benefits of LRT project and the formation of the KKTS—proposal for

establishment of the first municipal company. There have been several formal and informal dialogues between local coalitions and the ministers to discuss legal issues and difficulties related to the LRT and KKTS projects (Wongthanavasu et al., 2018). This dialoguing approach highly influences and helps the central coalition understand what Khon Kaen's local coalition really needed.

The new proposal was proposed in 2016. Many citizen consensuses were organized to show local people's needs—and as a constituency base for a political arena. Later, 2016's proposal was eventually approved in principle by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO)—the central command unit under military government control during coup d'etat at that time. Therefore, MOI and MOT must follow the NCPO's approval directly. Following the NCPO's consent, the KKTS was later established in 2017 to responsible for the LRT project in Khon Kaen City—reflecting an excellent starting point to move the project forwards. However, the MOT argued that 2016's proposal needs to be revised and concern more about rapid economic and social changes. In November 2016, local coalitions organized the big event—provincial consensus, related to the LRT project's progress and making a referendum reporting to the government. All existing sectors and agencies in Khon Kaen City—civil society organization, representatives of 170 community organizations from KKCC, universities, local firms, NGOs, and public organizations joined the event.

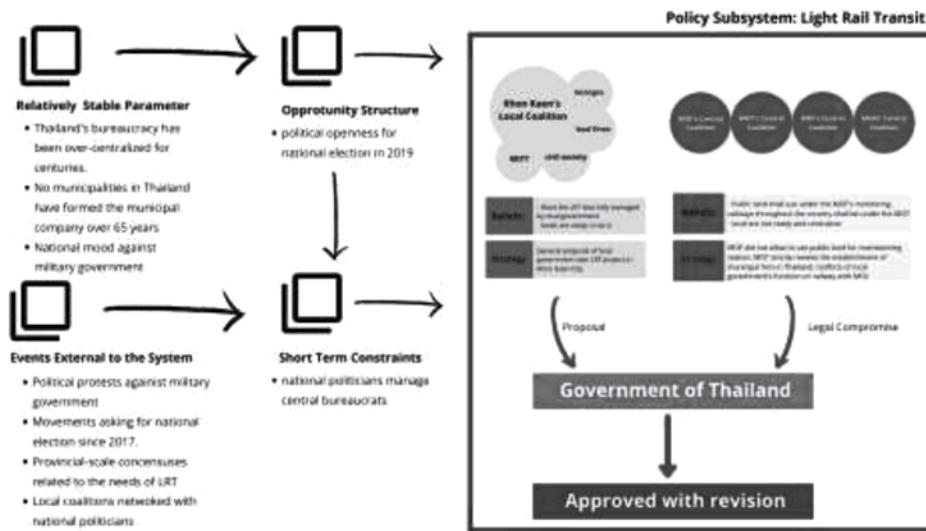
The 2016's revised proposal was officially approved in 2019. The ministries finally approved the LRT's project in Khon Kaen City and authorized responsibilities to manage the project to the KKTS in March 2019. The approval, however, allowed the KKTS to construct only one route. The railway routes in an original LRT's proposal were five routes covering the whole city, as shown in Figure 4 below (left side), but the government approved only one red-way (right side).



**Figure 4.** LRT's route proposed to the central coalition

**Source:** Wongthanavasu, Thaweeseangsakulthai, Pholsim & Kamnuansilapa (2018) in “The Khon Kaen Model”

Considering the LRT policy subsystem's external event during 2017-2019, there was a significant national climate—protesting the military government and public movement asking for a “national election” since 2017. And the military government's meeting in 2018 announced the national election would be organized in 2019. Based on the ACF's focus, the degree of consensuses in Khon Kean and the political openness of an upcoming national election could be regarded as a significant external event that opens the opportunity to the LRT's policy subsystem. Even though Khon Kaen province is mainly a political base for the liberal party—the majorities are against the military government and coup d'etat. However, to successfully drive their local desired policy—the LRT project, local coalitions need to change strategy by conforming with the military government and gaining allied politician support to deal with the central bureaucrat coalition. As noted by Paul Cairney (2014: 485), “people engage in politics to translate their beliefs, rather than their simple material interests, into action.” The moves of Khon Kaen's local coalitions to the top-rank politicians in the Thai government are how they strategized their beliefs into action.



**Figure 5.** External events during 2017-2019 to the policy subsystem.

#### Linking the Three: the ACF's Three-Tiered Belief Structure and Three Actors in Coalition

The ACF includes frameworks to analyze ideals that trigger actors to move in the preferred ways. These include the belief structure and policy-oriented learning (Sabatier & Weible, 2019; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993). Actors in coalitions are individuals who share a similar set of beliefs within the coalition. The ACF's belief system in a policy subsystem comprises three hierarchical structures—deep core belief, policy core belief, and secondary belief.

*The deep core belief* is a fundamental, general, and normative assumption that is difficult to change—for example, social and traditional value, ontological perception, proper roles of social and political institutions, liberty, and social duties. The deep core belief functions as a grounded principle of the coalition to drive their policy core beliefs. The policy core belief concerns the values of policy, seriousness, and origin of policy, and essential ideal and policy preference elements. According to Valman (2016: 3) explained that “the policy core beliefs... described as the ‘glue’ that holds coalitions together.” Therefore, the policy core belief performs entirely in its scope and interaction within a policy subsystem and links actors or coalitions to their deep core belief. The deep core belief and policy core belief are both difficult to change.

Finally, secondary belief is an empirical application to address a preferred policy core belief. The secondary belief is an operationalization of coalitions' beliefs—both deep core and policy core beliefs, including instrument, solution, institution, approach, resource, regulation, or particular actor movement that coalition used to change or achieve the policy. Among the three-tiered belief system, the secondary belief is most easy for changing.

As a policy subsystem, the LRT policy shows the deep core belief of local coalition is the need to solve public transportation and commitment to advance their homeland and the sense of belonging to the city (Tangkitvanich, 2017; Thai Association for Town Planning, 2018; Smart Growth Thailand, 2017). The reason is that there have been several movements toward solving traffic issues in Khon Kaen City, both municipal and civil campaigns. As a result, many feasibility studies related to public transportation development and investment have been conducted under the support of Khon Kaen Municipality and related agencies (Wongthanavasu et al., 2018) and becoming the main trigger to the LRT project. The necessity of improving “public transportation issues” and “localism” has performed as a grounded cause of multiple actors in Khon Kaen’s local coalition since 2004. Even though there were many difficulties, their desired deep core belief never changed and finally accepted in 2019.

To drive the deep core belief, local coalitions have decided the choice of actions to achieve their goal through policy core belief. The reflection of policy core belief displays a preferred solution to the deep core belief—the LRT project based on the transit-oriented development (TOD) approach (Hiranwong et al., 2020; Tangkitvanich, 2017; Thai Association for Town Planning, 2018). The TOD is the development approach that the LRT or other railway systems would lead economic growth, similarly to Japan and other developed countries. In other words, the TOD is LRT-led urban development (Wongthanavasu et al., 2018). The LRT’s project has also been collectively agreed among residents and stakeholders in Khon Kaen City through several consensuses in five cities to investigate their mutual choices of action to the policy core belief.

To operationalize the policy core belief—the LRT project, the local coalitions have driven their secondary belief strategically. The Khon Kaen local coalition’s secondary belief—or instrumental actions to achieve the policy core belief—reflects on the flexible strategies to push the project forward through networking, provincial consensuses,

the establishments of the KKTT and KKTS, taking advantage of the national political climate, and informal dialogues with a top-rank politician.

### *The Real Actor in Coalition*

Jenkins-Smith, Nohrestedt, Weible and Ingold (2017: 157) suggested that the ACF study should focus on actors' types. Therefore, this study tries to identify the ACF's type of actors in Khon Kaen's LRT policy subsystem. Conceptually, this study aims to classify three types of actors—principal actor, auxiliary actor, and policy broker or policy entrepreneur. The principal actor is constant in a policy subsystem while an auxiliary actor sporadically presents in coalitions. While a policy broker, noted by Karin Ingold and Frederic Varone (2011: 3), "seeks stability and play a crucial role in mediating conflicts between competing coalitions."

The principal actors in LRT's policy subsystem are the KKTT, KKTS, MOT, MOI, and TM. They represent two different beliefs of coalitions in policy subsystem—local and central bureaucrat coalitions. These actors' presence is constant, and their roles in policy subsystems are highly influential to the LRT project's policy change. In comparison, auxiliary actors in the policy subsystem are the sporadic presence of civil societies and even local people. During proposing the LRT project, civil societies and residents' presence would only appear when the principal local actors—the KKTT and KKTS, need to show a political alliance of their cities to the politician and reflect the needs of local people to the government. The KKTT and KKTS are the main actors who strategize the LRT's project's solutions until it has been approved.

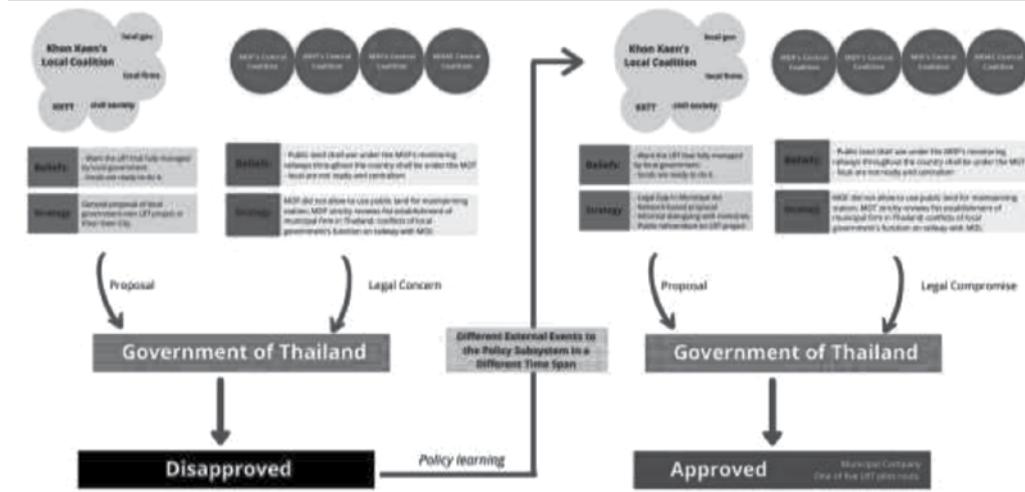
Finally, the presence of top-rank national politicians—the prime minister, vice-minister, ministers of MOI, MOF, MOAC, and MOT in the LRT policy subsystem are classified as policy brokers or policy entrepreneurs. The prime minister, vice-minister, and related ministers are a policy broker who tries to mediate conflicts and difficulties among local and central coalitions and take this as an opportunity to gain political support and popularity during the national political climate of an upcoming election.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

The ACF application helps public policy scholars understand how policy change and existing coalitions strategically interact in a particular policy subsystem to drive their

desired policy. The ACF is distinct from conventional actor analysis because it is more concerned about parameter and external events that affect a policy subsystem. the ACF also deepens policy analysis based on examining the belief structure— deep core, policy core, and secondary beliefs. These beliefs are a fundamental reflection that helps scholars truly comprehend how actors and coalitions are ideologically grounded and interact within a policy subsystem.

This study integrates the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to analyze how the policy changed regarding Khon Kaen's LRT project in Thailand. The LRT's policy subsystem comprises two sets of the coalition who share a different belief—local and central bureaucrat coalitions. The Khon Kaen's local coalition consists of three sub-coalitions: the Khon Kaen Think Tank Co., Ltd (KKTT)—twenty local firms, the Khon Kaen Transit System Co., Ltd (KKTS)—five municipalities, and civil society organization—Khon Kaen Future Foundation and Khon Kaen Citizen Council—more than 170 community organizations. In contrast, the central bureaucrat coalition includes the Ministry of Interior (MOI), Ministry of Transportation (MOT), Ministry of Finance (MOF), and Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MOAC). Central coalitions initially rejected the proposals due to legal concerns, and the external events to the policy subsystem were that the government's main aim was to stabilize the power. Therefore, proposals related to the establishment of the first municipal company—KKTS and the LRT project were also overlooked by the government—central coalitions. However, external events to the LRT policy subsystem during the 2017s have shifted. The national mood has been reflected through political movements against the military government and the request for a new national election since 2017. The military government postponed till 2019. Therefore, the local coalitions took the opportunities to organize several consensuses and networked with top-rank national politicians to push the project and deal with difficulties from the ministerial departments of MOT, MOI, MOF, and MOAC. The local coalition's altered strategy reflects the policy learning after driving the project for years.



**Figure 6.** A summary process of how coalitions drive their beliefs in policy subsystem in Khon Kaen's LRT project.

This study also integrates the ACF's belief structure to view fundamental ideals among actors. The ACF's deep core belief is to consider what is the actual value and issues that lead local coalitions to drive their belief. This study found the homeland's sense of belonging and public transportation issue represent the local coalition's deep core belief. Furthermore, how local coalitions come up with action choices to achieve their deep core belief—which is the LRT project through the TOD approach, reflects the central policy core belief of the local coalition. Finally, the local coalition's secondary belief reveals how coalitions operationalize their desired policy core belief and the instrumental approach they used, networking with politicians and changing their strategy as well as complying with military government to push the LRT project.

The results shown the main actors in the LRT's policy subsystem are the KKTT, KKTS, MOI, MOF, MOAC, MOT—these are principal actors who constantly appear in the LRT's policy subsystem. The national politicians are considered a policy broker who deals with interests of themselves while mediating the conflicts and difficulties between local and central bureaucrats' coalitions. The auxiliary actor in this policy subsystem is civic organizations and residents who would sporadically display when their representative actors—KKTT and KKTS face the problems and need mass-decisive support from the resident to gain interest from a policy broker. However, the point to further investigate is why the local people are not the principal actor in this policy subsystem but the leading local firms

and politicians. A comparative study based on a similar policy subsystem—LRT project at the local level, would show some differences or strategic adaptabilities among actors in a policy subsystem.

Furthermore, scholars argued that the ACF root is American populism and pluralism, which overwhelmingly concentrated on a different pattern of policy changes and doubted its applicability in other socio-political systems such as democratic corporatist and authoritarian regimes in European and Asian countries (Pierce et al., 2017: 4-5; Parsons, 1995). Recently, scholars increasingly applied the ACF in various policy domains and cases outside Western Europe and North American (Henry et al., 2014: 299-312). However, most ACF applications outside Western Europe and North American countries were counted very few, only 27 applications from 224 total study, and no studies focused on transportation policy (Henry et al., 2014: 303).

Findings from this study revealed that in the case of the mega-transportation policy—LRT project in Thailand. The power to push the project effectively is not solely a citizen due to Thailand's political settings—authoritarian and over-centralized functions of the railway system and other mega public services. Therefore, the citizen in Khon Kaen's LRT policy subsystem is considered as an auxiliary actor, not a principal actor as the local businessman. Still, they have been working together in a different role to push their desired policy. Based on the experience of Thailand's political setting, this study suggests further examination of the relationship between political instability and its relation to coalitions in a particular policy subsystem. Also, the need for common conceptualization on actors in the policy subsystem in a different socio-political system to clarify distinctions between a principal, policy broker, auxiliary actor, or other types of actors.

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