Decentralization Reforms and Social Changes in Thai Municipal Governments

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Abstract

In order to improve the performance of public institutions, Thailand over the past century has focused on institutional design--changing the incentives that confront actors in hopes of altering their behaviors. This article provides brief analysis of the institutional strategies through decentralization policy, and presents new data on associated changes in level of municipal government stability and municipal political leadership. The discussion also examines trends in political participation in municipalities, trust in local government, and political accountability in municipal government. The data presented in this article make clear that there have been substantial changes in the political leadership of larger municipalities in Thailand over a 30-year period spanning the adoption of important decentralization reforms. Also we can see a trend of more stable municipal governments under the new system of direct elections, higher levels of education among elected leaders, more political participation, higher levels of trust toward in government, and possibly higher levels of local political accountability.

Keywords: Decentralization, reform, constitution, political leadership, political participation, trust in local government, political accountability

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นโยบายการกระจายอำนาจกับการเปลี่ยนแปลงในมิติต่างๆของเทศบาลไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

ประเทศไทยในช่วงตลอดทศวรรษที่ผ่านมาได้มีความพยายามในการปรับปรุงและ
พัฒนาศักยภาพการทำงานของหน่วยงานสาธารณะมาโดยตลอด กลยุทธ์หนึ่งที่ถูกนำมาใช้อย่าง
กว้างขวางคือความพยายามในการออกแบบหรือเปลี่ยนแปลงบริบททางการเมืองและบริบท
ทางสังคม   ทั้งนี้ด้วยความหวังว่าบริบทที่เปลี่ยนแปลงไปนั้นจะเปลี่ยนแปลงพฤติกรรมของผู้ที่
เกี่ยวข้องให้เป็นไปในทางที่พึงปรารถนา   บทความนี้ได้นำเสนอการวิเคราะห์การนำกลยุทธ์
การออกแบบโครงสร้างสถาบันมาใช้ในบริบทของประเทศไทย   โดยจะเน้นที่การวิเคราะห์
นโยบายการกระจายอำนาจ อันเป็นผลเนื่องมาจากบทบัญญัติภายใต้รัฐธรรมนูญแห่งราชอาณาจักร
ไทย พ.ศ. 2540 เพื่อส่งเสริมศักยภาพในการบริหารงานและเป็นการเสริมสร้างรากฐานของ
ระบอบประชาธิปไตยส่วนท้องถิ่น   โดยบทความนี้ได้มีการนำเสนอข้อมูลในมิติต่างๆ ของ
เทศบาลไทยที่เปลี่ยนแปลงไป   โดยทำการเปรียบเทียบข้อมูลเหล่านี้ในช่วงก่อนและหลังการ
กระจายอำนาจ   มิติต่างๆดังกล่าวรวมถึงความมีเสถียรภาพที่มากขึ้นของเทศบาล   คุณลักษณะ
ของผู้บริหารเทศบาลที่เปลี่ยนแปลงไป   การมีส่วนร่วมทางการเมืองของประชาชนในเขตเทศบาล
ความไว้เนื้อเชื่อใจของประชาชนที่มีต่อหน่วยการปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่น   และความสามารถใน
การถูกตรวจสอบทางการเมืองของเทศบาล

คำสำคัญ: การกระจายอำนาจ การปฏิรูป รัฐธรรมนูญ ผู้นำทางการเมืองของท้องถิ่น การมีส่วนร่วม
ทางการเมือง ความไว้วางใจที่มีต่อหน่วยการปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่น ความสามารถในการถูกตรวจ
สอบทางการเมือง

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Introduction

In order to improve the performance of public institutions, Thailand over the past century employed two main strategies in its efforts. One strategy has focused on institutional design--changing the incentives that confront actors in hopes of altering their behaviors. This institutional redesign strategy has been employed in both national (ex. Constitution rewriting) and local levels (ex. Decentralization policy). A second strategy has emphasized changing broader social norms in the expectation that actors' goals, and subsequently the performance of public institutions, would change in desired ways. The former emphasis, reflecting broader global shifts in scholarship, has tended to prevail since at least in the 1980s.

This article consists of three main parts. The first part gives a synopsis of institutional design at the local level through decentralization reform. The second part discusses outcomes of decentralization reform at the local level and presents new data on associated changes in municipal government stability and municipal political leadership. The discussion also examines trends in political participation in Thai municipalities, trust in municipal government, and political accountability in municipal government. Comparing municipal mayors from before and after 1997 when Thailand adopted major institutional reforms, a number of interesting and important differences are presented. The last part includes discussion and conclusion.

I. Institutional Design at the Local Level: Decentralization Reform

Thailand has enjoyed many successes, as well as failures, in adapting to a modern world over the past century. These successes include Thailand's capacity to sustain its independence, its more recent decades of rapid economic growth, and relative social peace at least until early this century. Other features of the country's public policy record have been less successful. Thailand also has not done well in establishing a stable or quality democracy. More recently, the country has experienced sharp political polarization.

Debates in the social sciences on how to produce desired change in societies refer to two fundamentally different approaches, one emphasizing institutional engineering, the other focused on changing social values. The first approach focuses on changing behaviors by changing the context within which actors make choices, the nature of the various incentives they confront. The other approach pursues the same goals by seeking to change actors' goals, for example by boosting education or changing prevailing norms. These two approaches generally complement one another, although one may tend to be more predominant in a certain context. The abolition of slavery, for example, depended in large part on legal changes that subsequently sped up value changes. On the other hand, legal changes creating equal rights for women often tended to have limited impact unless and until appropriate changes in values emerged to support the legally created structure of incentives.

Reform through institutional design has reasonable advantages over trying to change fundamental social norms as a strategy of constructing social change. Appropriate institutional design would seem to offer a straightforward way to change behaviors. Institutional engineering is comparatively easy and, if it works, may produce desired results in a short period of time. However, as Putnam cautions, "that institutional reforms alter behavior is an hypothesis, not an axiom" (Putnam, 1993: 18). In the case of Thailand's search for good governance and stable liberal democracy, both strategies have been attempted. However, the adoption of institutional redesign strategy seems to be more prevalent.

Since Thailand adopted its first constitution in 1932, it has produced more constitutions than any other country in the world. Thailand's new constitution, expected late in 2015, will be its 20th, including interim ones (the most current interim constitution was promulgated on July 23, 2014). Not surprisingly, this record of Thailand's constitution production has been associated with frequent shifts between democracy and authoritarian rule. However, Thailand's most recent coup in 2014 was highly unusual, seen through a comparative political

framework, given that democracies very rarely fail in upper middle[1] or higher income countries (Unger and Mahakanjana, 2014).

The 1997 ("people's") constitution was a result of a call (mainly from the elite, academics, and urban population) for a more accountable form of government and it was the first constitution drafted by a partly popularly-elected Constitutional Drafting Assembly. There were several new features in the constitution including electoral reforms (compulsory voting, partial proportional representation, a new electoral commission, a requirement that MPs have a bachelor's degree); strengthening of the executive branch (a requirement that two-fifths of MPs support a vote for a no confidence debate against the prime minister); legislative reform (directly elected non-partisan senate); greater separation between the executive and legislative branches (requirement that MPs resign in order to become cabinet members); and the creation of several independent accountability agencies.[2] Of particular importance for the purposes here, the constitution also introduced important decentralization measures.

Theories from political science and public administration suggest that restructuring public institutions through decentralization would produce numbers of benefits including greater level of efficiency in determining service provision, responsiveness, fiscal responsibility, democratic accountability, transparency, opportunities for political participation, and better quality of local public services (Crook & Manor, 1998; Manor, 1999; Grindle, 2009). Numbers of countries worldwide are now experimenting with and assessing on decentralization. This article discusses outcomes of decentralization reform at the local level and presents new data on associated changes in municipal government stability, municipal political leadership, trends in local political participation, trust in local government, and political accountability in municipal government.

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[1]Thailand has been categorized (based on the World Bank data, 2013) as an upper middle income country, with Gross National Income (GNI) per capita around USD 7,450.

[2]1997 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand

Based on Cohen and Peterson's categorization, decentralization can be broken down into three interrelated dimensions (Cohen & Peterson, 1999). Political decentralization refers to the transfer of decision making power to local authorities, including the direct election of local government executives. Fiscal decentralization involves the empowerment of local authorities to raise revenues and exercise expenditure discretion. In the case of Thailand, this includes the increasing share of national revenue allocated to local governments. Administrative decentralization refers to the transfer of management discretion to local governments by decentralizing the civil service system and devolving functional/service responsibilities to local governments. The following section discusses the three dimensions of decentralization reform in Thailand.

a. Political Decentralization: The New Local Electoral System

Decentralization policy, which is considered as part of institutional reform strategy, initiated by the 1997 constitution[3] produced major and rapid changes in political and administrative systems in local governments in Thailand. Directly elected mayors and new personnel systems changed local administrations across Thailand.
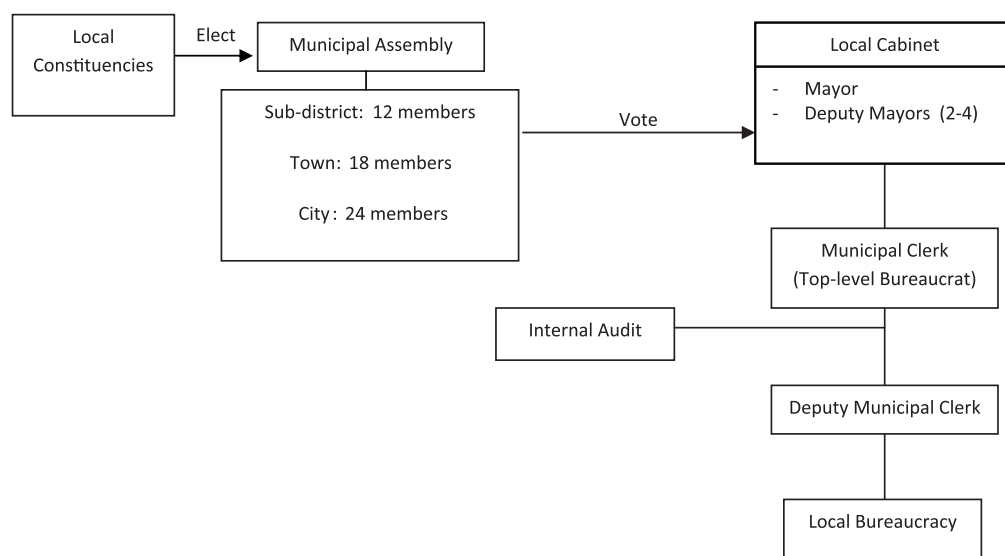

Figure 1: Municipal Electoral System Before Decentralization Reform

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[3]The policy has been continued through the 2007 constitution.

Based on the Municipal Act of 1933, there were three types of municipalities: sub-district, town, and city municipalities (Municipal Act of 1933).[4] The municipal types reflect differences in population.[5] All three types of municipality have similar governance structures consisting of legislative (municipal assembly) and executive (headed by mayor and deputy mayors) branches. Local governments before decentralization reforms were constituted through indirect elections in which local constituencies elected their assembly representatives who, in turn, elected the mayor and deputy mayors. Just as at the national level in the decades prior to these reforms, executives were very weak. Mayors generally did not complete their four-year terms (see Table 2). Instead, the mayorship would be rotated among assembly members from the same clique, or, in some cases, among the opposition assembly members as well in order to prevent conflicts. Typically, it was difficult for mayors to satisfy all members of the assembly. With power in the hands of the assembly (for example, in approving the draft municipal budget), assembly members often preferred to take turns holding the mayorship. This practice of rotation reduced tensions between the assembly and the mayor, but afforded little scope for local government accountability to voters. Diffuse responsibility tended to translate into diffused, and limited, accountability.[6]

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[4]Municipal Act of 1933, book number 50, section 6, April 24, 1933. In 1999, this legislation has been amended in order to change the mayor's term from five years to four years in accordance with article 285 of Thailand's 1997 constitution.

[5]Sub-district municipality: with population more than 7,000 (1,500/square kilometer)

Town municipality: with population more than 10,000 (3,000/square kilometer)

City municipality: with population more than 50,000 (3,000/square kilometer)

[6]Interviews with mayors and municipal clerks in Central, North, South and Northeast regions between 2009-2011
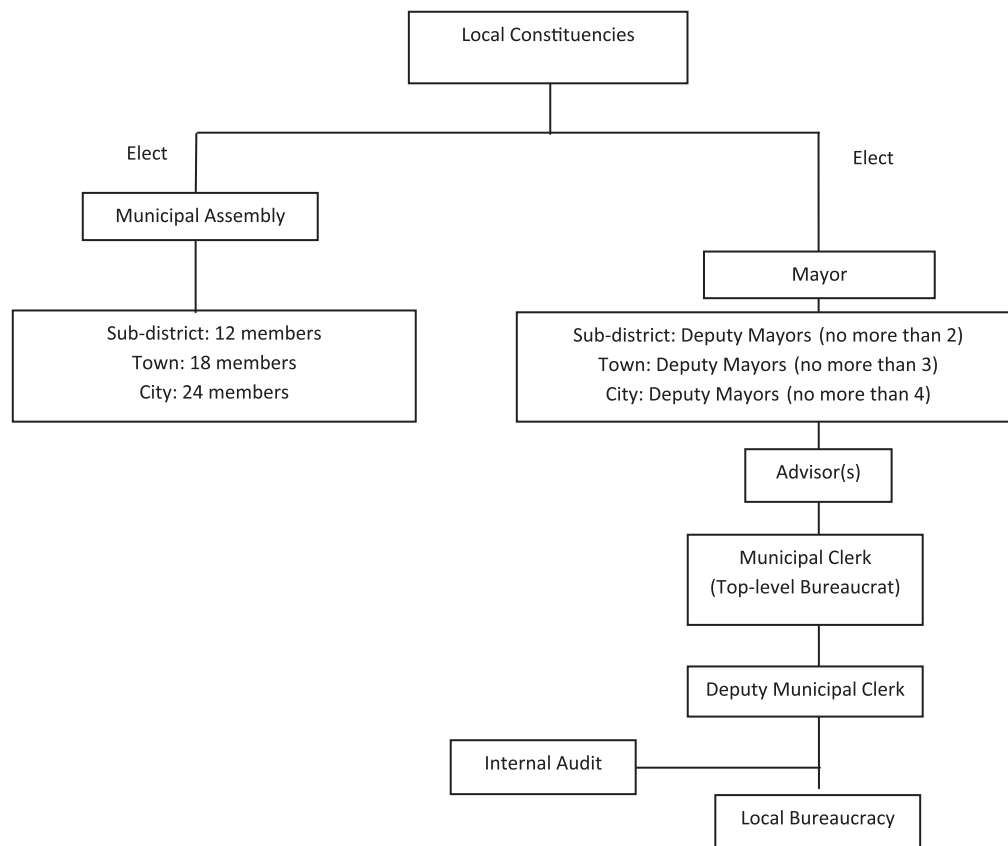
Figure 2: Municipal Electoral System After Decentralization Reform

The form and structure of municipal government in Thailand changed significantly after the promulgation of the 1997 constitution. Chapter Nine (Articles 282-290) focuses on decentralization. Section 285 of the constitution allowed municipalities to retain the indirect system of election but also provided the option of adopting a new direct election system. Almost all of the larger municipalities, such as those considered here, adopted direct election of mayors. In 2003, amendments to the Municipal Act of 1933 removed the element of choice. All municipalities, including the sub-district ones, were required to adopt direct election in order to strengthen the power of local executives.

b. Fiscal Decentralization: The Increasing Share of National Revenue Allocated to Local Governments

Table 1: Increasing Shares of National Revenue Allocated to Local Governments (2000-2010)[7]

Year	National Revenue (Million baht)	Local Revenue (Million baht)	Local Revenue as a Percentage of National Revenue
2000	749,948	99,936	13.33
2001	772,574	156,531	20.57
2002	803,651	176,155	21.99
2003	829,496	184,066	22.19
2004	1,063,600	241,947	22.75
2005	1,250,000	293,750	23.50
2006	1,360,000	327,113	24.10
2007	1,420,000	357,424	25.17
2008	1,495,000	376,740	25.20
2009	1,585,000	414,382	25.82
2010	1,350,000	337,800	25.02

Source: Fiscal Policy Section, Fiscal Policy Office, Ministry of Finance

Local governments in Thailand rely heavily on subsidies from the central government owing to their limited capacities and autonomy to collect their own revenue. As a result, the Decentralization Plan and Procedures Act of 1999 set

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[7]National revenue allocated to all five types of local government including sub-district administative organizations, provincial administrative organizations, municipalities, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, and Pattaya City.

goals to increase transferred shares of the national budget to local governments: 20 percent by 2001, rising to 35 percent by 2006. The proportion of national revenue transferred to local authorities increased from 13.33 percent in 2000 to 20.57 percent the subsequent year, but thereafter remained at around 25 percent and did not reach the goal of 35 percent of the national budget. However, this attempt to implement fiscal decentralization policy meant that local authorities were receiving more subsidies which in turn strengthened the power of local executives. Local electoral arenas became more attractive to politicians. In some cases, politicians previously active at national or provincial levels shifted to municipal level politics.

c. Administrative Decentralization: Increasing Executive's Power over Personnel System and Transferred Responsibilities

Municipal mayors were elected directly and were able to spend suddenly much larger budgets (though their spending discretion was limited). Mayors' powers also were enhanced by their greater control over local personnel decisions. Before decentralization, the local personnel system had been solely controlled by the central government's Ministry of Interior. This resulted in the situation where the cooperation between municipal clerks (top-level bureaucrat in municipality), together with other municipal officials, and mayors became difficult. After the reform, decision making on local personnel largely was in the hands of local executives. Local personnel no longer could easily transfer across local government jurisdictions. As a result, local officials had to work harder to cooperate with local executives and respond to their needs.[8] This change encouraged more political accountability on the part of officials to local executives. Relationships between local officials and local executives became more

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[8]Interviews with municipal clerks in the Central, North, and Northeast regions, July 2010-Febuary 2011.

significant in determining whether or not local administrations ran smoothly.[9]

Based on the Decentralization Plans and Procedures Act of 1999, many responsibilities formerly exercised by central and provincial governments were transferred to local governments. By 2005, 180 of a total of 245 responsibilities (categorized into six different types, including basic infrastructure, quality of life, social order, planning and investment promotion, natural resource and environmental management, and culture and local wisdom) had been transferred to local governments (Pattamasiriwat & Rayanakorn, 2009).

In summary, local government reforms fairly radically changed the institutional structures used to choose local leaders, shifting from an indirect electoral system to a strong executive system. The reforms also boosted local executives' powers over personnel and the financial resources they controlled. These changes were intentionally designed to make local governments more stable and accountable.

II. Impacts of Decentralization Reform on Thai Municipalities

Decentralization reforms in Thailand aimed to make local governments more stable, to raise the quality of local political leadership, to boost local political participation, to boost levels of trust in local governments, and to make government more accountable to local constituencies. In all these respects, the reforms enjoyed at least some success. This record therefore deserves more analysis even though it is true that the reforms probably failed to achieve other

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[9]Stronger government does not necessarily mean more responsive or accountable government. As the literature on delegative democracies suggests, as do scholars emphasizing the link between effective contraints on the executive and the survival of democratic regimes (Kapstein & Converse, 2008) power sharing arrangements are, in particular, more easily sustained than arrangements featuring unchecked powers. In the literature on "strong states" could be found arguments for the advantages of constraining "embeddedness" (Evans, 1995). In general, while the theoretical literature points to various possible conclusions, in the context of Thai local governments, the author believes there are grounds for believing that enhanced accountability tended to contribute to better local government performance.

goals such as reducing corruption in local government. The discussion below will demonstrate that the reforms were to some degree successful in achieving four of the five reform goals. They may also have achieved the fifth goal, to make government more accountable, but the evidence for that conclusion is more anecdotal.

The author conducted field research between February 2011 and December 2012 in town and city municipalities across Thailand (total of 167 municipalities). Data were taken from different sources as described below.

Data on political stability and political leadership: Between February 2011 and December 2012, survey questionnaires were sent to 142 town municipalities and 25 city municipalities across Thailand (total of 167 municipalities). The questionnaire solicited basic information about past and present mayors between 1982 and 2012, a 30 year period, in order to be able to compare the differences in characteristics of mayors before and after decentralization reforms. No systematic data on municipal mayors were available. The research team made direct contact with municipalities and visited a number of municipalities in order to collect information. In addition to the survey, the research team also conducted 38 interviews with mayors and municipal clerks in the Central, North, South, and Northeast regions between June 2010 and August 2012 in order to gain more understanding of the local political contexts before and after decentralization. Data derived from responses to the questionnaires provided much of the data employed in this article, including data on the length of mayors' tenures and their education levels.

Data on local political participation: Data on voter turnout in municipal elections from 1948 to 2013 were drawn from several sources such as official reports from the National Electoral Commission (1995-2013) and official reports on municipal elections issued by the Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior (1948-1980). The data analysis examines trends in voter turnout in municipal elections.

Data on trust in local government: Data on levels of trust in local governments were drawn from the Asian Barometer Survey data collected between 2002 and 2011 (during each of the first three waves of surveys). First wave: data collected in 2002; Second wave: data collected in 2006; Third wave: data collected between 2010-2011.

Data on accountability: Data on accountability is drawn mainly from interviews as well as secondary sources. Interviews with mayors and municipal clerks in the Central, North, South, and Northeast regions were carried out between June 2010 and August 2012.

The data revealed that the reforms had intended effects but also were associated with unintended ones. The intended effects included more stable municipal governments under the new system of direct elections, higher levels of education among elected leaders, more political participation (voter turnout), higher levels of trust in local government, and higher levels of political accountability in municipal government. The unintended effects included a shift in the dominant occupational backgrounds of mayors and growing numbers of women serving in municipal top executive positions. The following part focuses on the intended effects.

Stability of Political Leadership

Table 2: Length of Mayors' Tenures Before and After Decentralization (Percentages)

Years in Position	Before Decentralization (1982-1997)	After Decentralization (1998-2012)
Total	100.00	100.00
Less than 1-2 years	60.91	32.07
2-4 years	16.74	64.14
4-6 years	15.30	2.76
6-10 years	5.91	1.03
10-20 years	0.98	0.00
More than 20 years	0.15	0.00

Source: Data drawn from survey questionnaires sent to 142 town municipalities and 25 city municipalities across Thailand (total of 167 municipalities).

As noted earlier, before decentralization, municipal assemblies generally had more negotiating power than did mayors. As expected, relatively few mayors remained in office more than two years (39.09 percent). In many municipalities, rotation of the job of mayor among members of the assembly became a "tradition," especially among those who were from the same "team." Rotation aimed to retain peaceful and smooth operations within municipalities. After the new local electoral system was initiated, mayors' tenures of course grew more secure. Roughly 67 percent of mayors stayed in power for more than two years. The data shown in Table 2 simply reflects the higher level of stability of municipal executives after the new local electoral reform was put in place. However, the 32.07 percent of mayors who were in office less than a full term reported in Table 2 simply reflect the impact of some mayors still operating under the indirect election system immediately after 1997 constitution. Also, some mayors were active in office at the time of the data collection. In any case, the reform produced, by definition, the major intended effect.

Under the directly-elected mayor system, local constituencies vote directly for their mayors and the members of the assembly. The executive branch no longer can easily be overturned by the municipal assembly. Mayors' executive power was strengthened. Not only did their tenures become more secure, but the scale of resources under the municipalities' control grew. Budget shares allocated to local authorities grew substantially.

Quality of Political Leadership

The data from the survey (Table 3) shows that mayors' average level of education shifted following the municipal government reforms.

Table 3: Level of Education of Mayors Before and After Decentralization (Percentages)

Education level	Before Decentralization (1982-1997)	After Decentralization (1998-2012)
Total	100.00	100.00
Elementary	11.29	2.45
Junior High School	13.59	4.49
High School	32.49	13.88
Certificate	4.84	2.04
BA	30.88	37.14
MA	6.68	38.78
Higher than MA	0.23	1.22

Source: Data drawn from survey questionnaires sent to 142 town municipalities and 25 city municipalities across Thailand (total of 167 municipalities).

When looking at the level of education of mayors before and after decentralization in Table 3, we see that the level of mayors' education increased. Before decentralization, only 42.6 percent of mayors had more than high school education. After decentralization, that figure rose to near 80 percent, almost doubling. Efforts to boost the education levels of national level political leaders were evident in the controversial requirement in the 1997 constitution that MPs have bachelor's degrees. The Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior, encouraged local government leaders to boost their education credentials, allowing local governments to allocate budgets for officials, including mayors, to pursue Master's degree programs. Following this incentive, Khonkaen University offered a new Master's degree program especially designed for local government officials. The program was very popular among local executives. There is no doubt that part of the rise in mayors' education levels might be attributed to broader social changes, specifically rising education levels among Thais as a whole. A big jump in education levels in Thailand, beyond primary education, picked up pace not long before the decentralization reforms.[10]

Lower levels of education among municipal executives before decentralization probably contributed to municipal officials' negative perceptions, including suspicions of corruption, of mayors. These perceptions, coupled with the fact that mayors had little control over local personnel systems before decentralization, made local administration difficult. Officials generally feel that they actually worked for the Ministry of Interior, not local executives. Interviews with municipal clerks suggested that this perception had somewhat changed after decentralization. Mayors' influence over municipal personnel had grown much stronger. (More details on these changes appear below in the section on 'Local political accountability'.)

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[10]Undoubtedly, the level of education does not neccessarily reflect th quality of education in Thailand.

Political Participation in Thai Municipalities

In Thailand, as elsewhere, boosting local political participation was among the goals prompting decentralization initiatives. Considerable evidence suggests that political participation has been rising in Thailand over the past decade. For example, supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin established Red Shirt Villages and engaged in protests. Some observers have suggested that rising levels of participation stemmed in part from increasing familiarity with political issues as a result of the increased frequency of voting in local elections (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2012). When looking at data on voter turnout in municipal elections between 1948 and 2013, we see a significant rise. This rise, however, could be a result of making voting mandatory in the 1997 constitution. The data do not reveal any immediate sharp increase. The rising trend was evident only with municipal elections in 2003. This rise could be the result of a delayed effect of decentralization reform, or political polarization during the past decade. More research needs to be done in order to establish the actual causes of this increase in voter turnout.
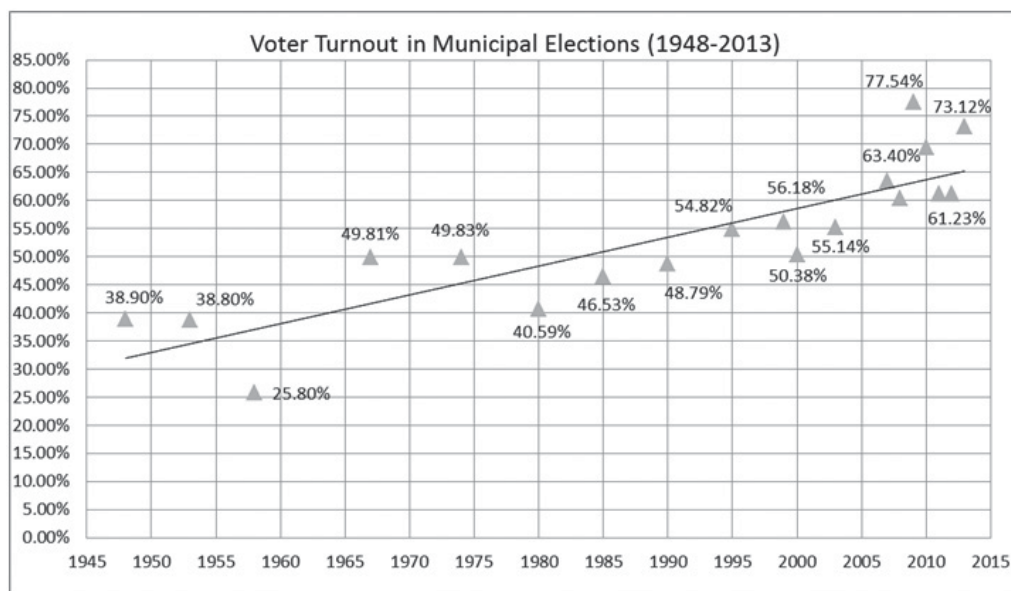

Figure 3: Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections (1948-2013)
Sources: Official reports from the National Electoral Commission (1995-2013) and official reports on municipal elections issued by the Department of Local Administration, within the Ministry of Interior (1948-1980). Data put together by Natthachai Chinatthaporn, graduate student at the Graduate School of Public Administration, National Institute of Development Administration.

Trust in Local Government

Looking at three waves[11] of Asian Barometer Survey data (Figure 4), we see, first, that the levels of trust in local government are quite high (64.4 percent). Then, when looking at the data in the second and third waves, we also see that the level of trust in local government as a whole increased about nine percent (from 64.4 percent in 2002 to 73.5 percent in 2010-2011). As mentioned earlier, after decentralization reforms, many responsibilities were transferred from the national government to local governments. The increasing levels of trust in local government could be resulting from the increasing roles and responsibilities of local governments.
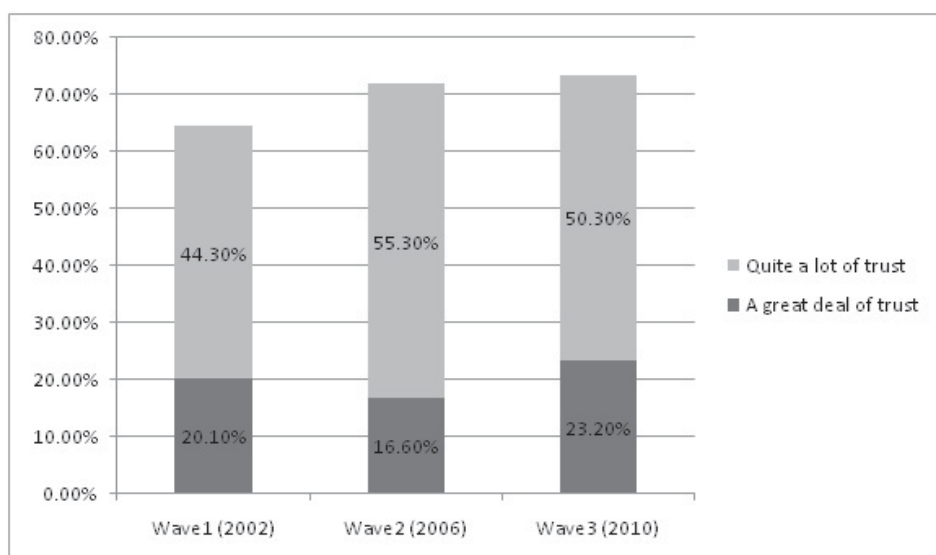

Figure 4: Trust in Local Government[12]
Source: Data drawn from Asian Barometer Survey from 2002-2011

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[11]First wave: data collected in 2002; Second wave: data collected in 2006; Third wave: data collected between 2010-2011.

[12]Percentage shown in Figure 4 does not include data on the following answers: "not at all," "not very much trust," "do not understand the question," "can't choose," and "decline to answer."

Interestingly, while levels of trust in local government have been increasing, levels of trust in the national government have been moving by about the same amount, but in the opposite direction (In Figure 5: from 64 percent in 2002, down to 54.6 percent in 2010-2011). The decline probably resulted from Thailand's sharp political polarization, instability, and violence. However, the rise in trust in local governments should not be ignored as being simply part of a broader national trend.
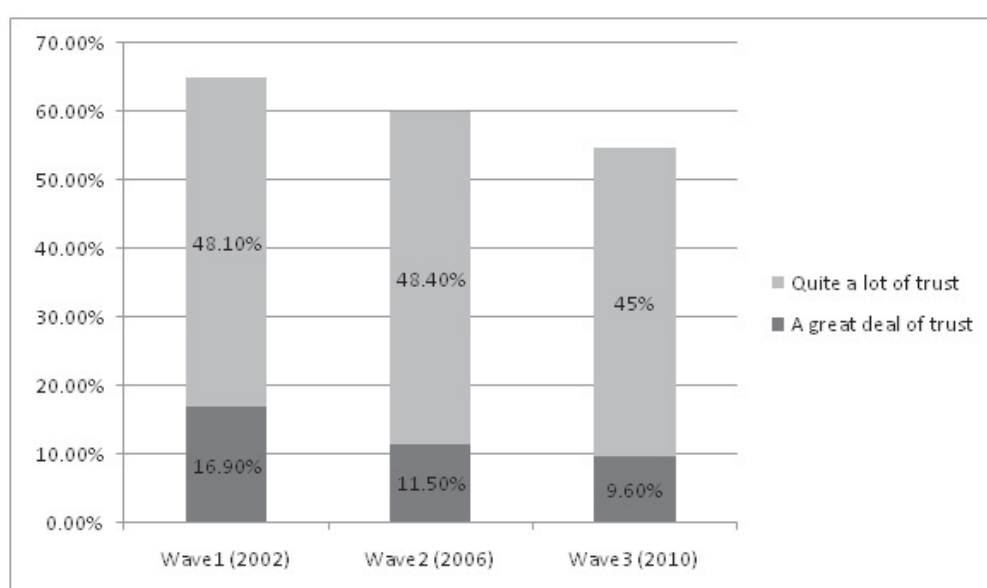

Figure 5: Trust in National Government[13]
Source: Data drawn from Asian Barometer Survey from 2002-2011

Political Accountability in Municipal Government

Before decentralization, mayors had been rather weak vis-à-vis both assemblies and the officials over whom the mayors were expected to exercise authority. Mayors often could not control assemblies and neither could they control municipal bureaucrats. Before the reforms, the local bureaucracy was controlled by the central government's Ministry of Interior. In this context, conflict between mayors and municipal bureaucrats was common.[14] Often,

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[13]Percentage shown in Figure 5 does not include data on the following answer: "not at all," "not very much trust," "do not understand the question," "can't choose," and "decline to answer."

[14]Interview with municipal clerks in Central, South and Northeast regions between 2009-2011.

mayors tried to serve local demands, demonstrating political accountability and responsiveness, but were usually obstructed by local bureaucrats' concerns to follow rules and regulations (thereby demonstrating legal and bureaucratic accountability). Municipal bureaucrats tended not to help mayors be responsive to their constituents because they generally held negative perceptions toward municipal executives as being uneducated and corrupted. Before decentralization, the bureaucrats' careers were determined by the Ministry of Interior, not the mayors. Further, mayors tended not to remain in office long (and part of the reason their tenures were short may have stemmed from the difficulties they faced in getting things done). As a result, they tended to stay in power very briefly.

It may also be that the complex nature of Thai local governance before (and after) decentralization slowed down local residents from understanding what officials (central, regional or local) were responsible for what services. It was and still is easy to confuse the elements of the central and regional government, including provincial governors and offices, district and sub-district and village offices and officials, with the elected governments at the local levels (Provincial Administrative Organizations, municipalities, or Sub-District Administrative Organizations). Given that elected governments had limited powers, and tended to be weak, the incentives to handle the complexity of this organizational structure might not have been strong.

After the decentralization reforms, financial resources, responsibilities, and political and administrative powers were transferred to local authorities. Municipal governments gained powers, in particular the executive branch, coupled with higher levels of education, thereby enabling mayors to act decisively in service of local needs. Municipal assemblies no longer could overthrow mayors. Municipal bureaucrats' careers came to depend on mayors' favor. Rather than putting themselves in conflict with mayors, local bureaucrats had incentives to find means of helping mayors achieve their goals without violating bureaucratic rules and regulations.

In short, the reforms would seem to have boosted local government accountability to citizens substantially. Mayors now have more of the resources, powers, education, and security necessary to serve the demands of their clients. They may at the same time be increasingly prone to corruption. In a context in which people assume that corruption is persistent, municipal residents may tend to feel it is more acceptable to have corruption with accountability than simply corruption. It is difficult not to notice that reforms at the local level have produced some of the ambiguities, and underlined differences among Thais in their conceptions of legitimacy, that became so obvious at the national level in Thailand in the context of its sharp political polarization that emerged in 2005.

Other than several intended effects of decentralization reform discussed in the previous section, the reform seems to have produced a couple of unintended effects, including a shift in dominant occupational backgrounds of municipal executives and numbers of women serving in municipal executive position. The following part focuses on the unintended effects.

Dominant Occupational Backgrounds of Municipal Executives

Table 4: Mayors' Previous Occupations (Percentages)

Previous occupation	Total	Agricultural sector	Civil Servant	Politician	Teacher	Lawyer	Business	Others
Before Decentralization (1982-1997)	100.00	4.20	22.12	0.00	0.88	13.94	55.75	3.09
After Decentralization (1998-2012)	100.00	1.63	6.91	6.10	0.00	2.44	76.83	6.1
Total	100.00	3.30	16.76	2.15	0.57	9.89	63.18	4.16

Source: Data drawn from survey questionnaires sent to 142 town municipalities and 25 city municipalities across Thailand (total of 167 municipalities).

Table 4 shows mayors' previous occupations before becoming mayors. Before decentralization, about four percent of mayors were in the agricultural sector, 22.12 percent were former bureaucrats, and about 55 percent were businessmen, the highest percentage. After decentralization, the predominance of mayors with business backgrounds increased about 21 percent, to some 77 percent. Many of these mayors' businesses likely related to municipal services. One concern of both the designers of decentralization policies and scholars working on the topic was the possibility that making mayors too powerful might tend to attract local mafia figures to the local executive positions. Similarly, there was concern that growing numbers of local contractors and other types of businessmen would win local elections. The data seem to confirm these concerns. The significant increase in local budgets and strengthening of the mayor also made the position more attractive to politicians previously active at the national level. In some cases, politicians would move from the national to the local level. This is evident, perhaps, in the six percent of mayors who indicated their previous occupation had been that of politicians. Before decentralization, no mayors identified politics as their previous job. The decrease in the percentage of those who were former bureaucrats also is interesting. About 22 percent of mayors before decentralization were former bureaucrats. However, the percentage decreased to only seven percent after decentralization. This drop may suggest that local politics grew less attractive (and perhaps too expensive) to civil servants even as it became more attractive to businessmen. It is also interesting to note that the percentage of mayors coming from the agricultural sector fell from 4.20 percent to 1.63 percent after decentralization. In the South, before decentralization 14 percent of mayors came from agricultural backgrounds. After decentralization, that figure fell to zero. Had money politics grown so in importance that farmers were unable to compete?

Numbers of Women Serving in Municipal Executive Positions

Table 5: Gender of Mayors Before and After Decentralization (Percentages)

Gender	Before Decentralization (1982–1997)	After Decentralization (1998–2012)
All Regions	100.00	100.00
Male	98.68	92.26
Female	1.32	7.74
Central	100.00	100.00
Male	96.52	94.87
Female	3.48	5.13
Northeast	100.00	100.00
Male	99.76	93.81
Female	0.24	6.19
South	100.00	100.00
Male	100	93.75
Female	0.00	6.25
North	100.00	100.00
Male	97.69	84.48
Female	2.31	15.52

Source: Data drawn from survey questionnaires sent to 142 town municipalities and 25 city municipalities across Thailand (total of 167 municipalities).

Another interesting change apparent after the reforms is a fairly modest rise in the numbers of women elected mayors. This effect was not intended and in some respect is surprising. In electoral systems based on single-member districts (as in the new electoral system for municipal mayors), fewer women tend to be elected than in those with proportional representation voting. Nonetheless, the number of women mayors rose modestly in municipalities after decentralization.

Table 5 shows that, before decentralization, male mayors accounted for 98.68 percent of all mayors around the country and female mayors for only 1.32 percent. The percentage of women mayors increased after the decentralization reforms to 7.74 percent. The local electoral reforms might have given women more chances to run for mayor if they no longer were being blocked by male members of their team. Before decentralization, those who ran for seats in the municipal assembly usually were running as part of a team, or slate of candidates. The head of the team expected to be mayor. These male-dominated teams might have avoided including women candidates, particularly at the top of their team. In any case, when looking at regional differences, we see that the northern region had the highest percentage of female mayors, increasing from only 2.31 percent before decentralization to 15.52 percent after the electoral reform.

As with the case of education, it is uncertain to what extent the modest increase in the numbers of women mayors was related to the reforms. Women in society during this period were generally enjoying greater success than in the past in rising to high level positions. Indeed, the numbers of women at all levels of politics, as well as in the top levels of the civil service, were rising. In 2013, 15 percent of MPs, 16 percent of senators, nine percent of local politicians, and 17 percent of top levels of the national bureaucracy were staffed by women (Bangkok Post, September 13, 2013, p.13). In 2014, about 16 percent of both elected and selected senators were female.

It also is possible that part of the rise in the number of women mayors reflected the growing tendency in Thai politics for the female relatives of successful male politicians to take political positions. This was true where men might be precluded from seeking office (for example, for members of political parties, in the Senate under the 1997 constitution). In some cases, a number of attractive political openings emerged, largely as a result of the new opportunities at local levels with decentralization. No one politician could occupy all these positions, so they might delegate family members, including women, to assume some of them.

III. Discussion and Conclusion

The data presented above make clear that there have been substantial changes in the political leadership of larger municipalities in Thailand over a 30-year period spanning the adoption of important decentralizing reforms. Also we can see a trend of more stable municipal governments under the new system of direct elections, higher levels of education among elected leaders, more political participation, higher levels of trust toward local government, and possibly higher levels of local political accountability. How should we assess this picture as a whole?

The reforms clearly were instrumental in producing some desired changes. The empirical data presented above suggests that after decentralization mayors' tenure grew more secure. Some of the changes reflected that Thais, such as the voters in these municipalities, would prefer the reformers who come from business backgrounds.

There are other elements of the new picture of local government in Thailand that are more ambiguous. Interview informants suggested that the enhanced scale of resources under mayors' control and the greater control over local bureaucrats helped to account for the rising numbers of business figures attracted to the position. Meanwhile, vote buying in local elections remains extensive and may have increased as the perceived incentives have grown. Many of the business figures active in local politics own construction companies and hope to win elections in order to boost their own business through municipal contracts.

These changes were not entirely unanticipated, but they were not intended. They account for the weakness of central government support for further decentralization. It seems that institutional changes at the local level in Thailand produced intended and unintended changes. Those changes, whether intended or not, may be seen as desirable by some but not by others. Local residents may be getting more of what they want from their leaders. Central

government bureaucrats may, at the same time, be increasingly distressed with the turn taken in local governance. These differences partly reflect different conceptions of legitimate governance. If asking the question, did institutions produce the effects intended or were the reforms coincidental with the local social context, the conclusion might be that it has been some of both.

Changes in mayors' backgrounds and experiences of governing suggest that the reforms were somewhat successful in achieving the goals of more stable local governments (length of mayors' tenure), higher quality political leadership (levels of education), higher rates of political participation (voter turnout in municipal elections), higher levels of trust in local governments, and greater political accountability of leaders to citizens. While it is not always possible to identify conclusively the causes of these changes, they appear to stem from both institutional changes adopted as part of broad decentralizing measures instituted in the wake of the 1997 constitution as well as broader and more diffuse processes of social change. For example, the shift from indirect to direct election of mayors with fixed terms created more stable municipal political institutions. Therefore, we can regard this reform as one example in which reform goals have in considerable part been achieved, in part by altering institutional design. Higher quality political leadership, at least to the extent that quality is captured by higher levels of education, was a product in part of institutional incentives, but also of ongoing rises in average levels of education across Thai society.

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