

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 26 May 2016

Special Feature

Survey Findings in Thailand on Public Attitudes towards Local Administration, and towards Politicians and Conflicts of Interest

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In collaboration with Thailand's National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA),¹ which conducts regular surveys in Thai society on a variety of issues, ISEAS' Thailand Studies Programme² publishes selected survey findings for ISEAS Perspective readers, which offer snapshots of Thai politics and society. This issue carries the findings of two different surveys – Public Attitudes towards Local Administration; and Public Attitudes towards Politicians and Conflicts of Interest.
- Concerns over good governance and bureaucratic independence in Thailand have grown since the May 2014 coup. Local administrations are the first point of contact between the public and the government and are thought by some to be losing their independence.
- Surprisingly, while most respondents believe that candidates should be elected, they are divided over whether local administrations should enjoy self-governance automatically or upon public request. This suggests widespread misunderstanding of one of the key principles of local administration, namely, local administrations represent the central government's delegation of power.
- The second survey suggests that a large number of Thais want to ban the spouses and relatives of political candidates from simultaneously running for office. This

¹ For more information on NIDA please contact Assistant Professor Dr. Suvicha Pouaree, Director of NIDA Poll, at nida_poll@nida.ac.th. The surveys relied on random sampling from NIDA Poll's master sample database. Data were collected through telephone interviews.

² The co-ordinators for ISEAS' Thailand Studies Programme are Michael Montesano and Terence Chong. For more information, please visit <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/country-studies/country-studies-programme/thailand-studies>

indicates a preference for mechanisms to prevent moral hazards over the right to participate in politics. Such bans are popular amongst the respondents because of the poor public perception of the country's Parliament, also popularly known as a "bolster parliament" or a "husband and wife parliament" because there are so many spouses and relatives who are MPs at the same time.

- However it is unclear whether support for these bans reflects the direct negative experiences of respondents or are the fruits of a long-running campaign on the part of bureaucratic, military and royalist interests in Thailand to use family relationships as a means of discrediting the electoral process in Thailand. Further polling to study the relative importance of the two effects is clearly necessary.

INTRODUCTION

ISEAS-Yusof Ishak's Thailand Studies Programme collaborates with Thailand's National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) in selecting for publication in *ISEAS Perspective* findings of surveys conducted by NIDA. NIDA surveys seek to provide snapshots of contemporary Thai politics and society. As usual, the present issue carries the findings of two separate surveys.

SURVEY ON PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS LOCAL ADMINISTRATION

The first survey focuses on public attitudes towards local administration and how it should be run. Thailand has three layers of government, namely, central, provincial and local. The country's local government, or administration, is undergoing transition. This transition has been a reflection of the wider democratic shift on the national political landscape. Over the years, local administrations saw significant development under elected governments. For example, from 1973 to 1993, the Thai central government supported two types of local administration models, one in Bangkok in 1975 and the other in Pattaya in 1978. Both models differed greatly from existing models, especially the one in Pattaya which was borrowed from the private sector and which focused on municipal management under a city manager.

However, since the military coup in May 2014, concerns over good governance and bureaucratic independence have grown. Local administrations, very often the first point of contact between the public and the government, are thought by some to be losing their independence. The survey on public attitudes towards local government or administration was conducted in 24-25 December 2015. It sought to gauge public attitude towards different types of local administration such as Tambon Administrative Organisations (TAO), municipalities, and Provincial Administrative Organisations (PAO).

The survey sample size was 1250 and comprised of Thais who were 18 years and above, and representing different levels of education and occupation. It relied on samples randomly selected from the Master Sample of NIDA Poll and divided five regions using systematic random sampling. Data was collected by telephone interviews with a reliability score at 95.0 percent and with the standard error (S.E.) not exceeding 1.4.

Respondents were asked under what circumstances local administrations should be endowed with the power for self-government (see Table 1). 47.12 per cent of respondents replied that "the government should endow local administrations with powers of self-governance without the public having to ask for them". 46.08 per cent of respondents answered that "the government should endow local administrations with powers of self-governance only when the public

asks for them”. 2.16 per cent of respondents answered “both” while 8.08 per cent answered “Unspecified/Uncertain”.

Table 1. Under what circumstances should local administrations be endowed with powers of self-governance?

The government should endow local administrations with powers of self-governance <u>without</u> the public having to ask for them.	47.12
The government should endow local administrations with powers of self-governance <u>only</u> when the public asks for them	46.08
Both	2.16
Unspecified/Uncertain	4.64
Total	100.00

The survey went on to ask respondents how local council members should be appointed (see Table 2). The question of democracy has been a major issue since the 2014 coup, especially in relation to concerns over accountability and reflection of popular will. According to the survey, the majority of respondents – 63.44 per cent – opined that local council members should be directly elected. This was followed by 16.32 per cent of respondents who believed that local council members should come from both elections and recruitment. Following closely behind at 16.16 per cent were respondents who did not mind any method as long as it allowed local participation. 3.76 per cent believed that local council members should be recruited; while 0.08 per cent wanted potential members to sit for exams. 0.24 per cent of respondents were unspecified/uncertain.

Table 2. In your opinion, how should local council members be appointed?

Local council members should be directly elected.	63.44
Local council members should come from both elections and recruitment.	16.32
Any method that allows the local people to participate.	16.16
Local council members should be recruited.	3.76
Selective examination.	0.08
Unspecified/Uncertain	0.24
Total	100.00

The survey proceeded to ask respondents how they think local administrators should be appointed (see Table 3). Unsurprisingly, the majority of respondents – 63.20 per cent - believed that local administrators should be directly elected. The second largest group – at 27.28 per cent – were those who opined that any method that allows the local people to participate would be acceptable. About 8.72 per cent said that local administrators should be elected with the local council’s approval while 0.56 per cent believed that they should be recruited and/or elected through transparent selective examination. Finally 0.24 per cent were unspecific or uncertain.

Table 3. In **your opinion**, how should local administrators be appointed?

Local administrators should be directly elected.	63.20
Any method that allows the local people to participate.	27.28
Local administrators should be elected with the local council’s approval.	8.72
They should be recruited and/or elected through transparent selective examination.	0.56
Unspecified/Uncertain	0.24
Total	100.00

ANALYSIS

According to Associate Professor Dr. Surasit Vajirakachorn from the Graduate School of Social and Environmental Development, NIDA, Thailand’s current local administration structure emphasises direct administrator elections based on a strong mayoral administrative system or a presidential system. This differs from the parliamentary system currently used by Thailand with the Prime Minister indirectly elected via Parliament. This difference is a political response to perceived problems from the previous system.

Dr. Surasit finds it interesting that public opinion is almost evenly divided on whether local administrations should be endowed with powers of self-governance without the public having to ask for them or only if they asked for such powers (47.12 per cent and 46.08 per cent, respectively) (see Table 1). The fact that the scores are similar indicates that most Thais continue to misunderstand the key principles of local administration. Local administrations are meant to represent the delegation of the central government’s power to the people. However, based on their responses, many respondents fail to understand that power resides with the people and that the government has to comply with their will.

SURVEY ON PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICIANS AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The second survey focused on conflicts of interests among politicians and office holders. It is not uncommon for family links to overlap with politics and bureaucratic power. In fact, the situation is so serious that Thailand’s parliament has been labelled a “bolster parliament” or a “husband and wife parliament” because of the many spouses and relatives who are Members of Parliament (MPs) at the same time. This has, naturally, raised suspicion over whether or not MPs are in power for their own personal interest or for the public.

This survey was conducted on 4-6 January 2016 among a population of 1,250 aged 18 years and above nationwide distributed across every level of education and occupation. It relied on samples randomly selected from the Master Sample of NIDA Poll divided into five regions using systematic random sampling.

Respondents were asked for their opinions on banning spouses, parents, or children of candidates for the Senate from running for the Senate at the same time (see Table 4). The majority of respondents agreed that a ban was necessary (60.88 per cent). About 37.36 per cent of respondents, however, disagreed. Meanwhile, only 0.08 per cent believed that each case should be considered separately while 1.68 per cent were unspecified or uncertain.

Table 4. Should spouses, parents, or children of candidates for the Senate be banned from running for Senate at the same time?

	%
I agree with the ban	60.88
I disagree with the ban	37.36
Each case should be considered separately. For example, if related candidates live in the same area, one of them should not run. But if they live in different areas, then they should be allowed to run.	0.08
Unspecified/Uncertain	1.68
Total	100.00

Respondents were also asked about candidates running for the House of Representatives (see Table 5). A majority – 60.88 per cent – agreed on a ban on spouses, parents, or children of candidates for the House of Representatives from running for Representative seats at the same time. This was followed by 38.16 per cent who disagreed with the ban. A small number – 0.08 per cent – believed that bans should be on a case-by-case basis. Lastly, 0.88 per cent were unspecified or uncertain.

Table 5 Should spouses, parents, or children of candidates for the House of Representative be banned from running for Representative at the same time?

I agree with the ban	60.88
I disagree with the ban	38.16
Each case should be considered separately. For example, if related candidates live in the same area, one of them should not run. But if they live in different areas, then they should be allowed to run.	0.08
Unspecified/Uncertain	0.88
Total	100.00

Lastly, respondents were asked if candidates should be banned from running for office or holding a ministerial position after removal from office, and if so, for how long (see Table 6). The majority of respondents – 32.40 per cent – believed that such candidates should be banned for 5 years upon removal from office. About 31.68 per cent of respondents believed that there should not be any bans at all, while 24.40 per cent said that there should be a 2-year ban. Meanwhile 6.08 per cent had a variety of different answers and 5.92 per cent were unspecified in their answers or were uncertain.

Table 6. What do you think of banning candidates from running for office or holding ministerial positions after removal from office?

There should be a ban for 2 years after removal from office	24.32
There should be a ban for 5 years after removal from office	32.40
There should not be any bans	31.28
Others: The ban should be for 1-4 years, or 8 years. Some wanted the ban to before 2-3 terms while others wanted a lifelong ban	6.08
Unspecified/Uncertain	5.92
Total	100.00

ANALYSIS

Assistant Professor Dr. Nattha Vinijnaiyapak, Graduate School of Public Administration, NIDA, noted the high number of respondents who agreed that bans were necessary. This may indicate that most people place more importance on creating mechanisms to prevent moral hazards caused by conflicting interests than on the right of people to participate in politics. These findings are in line with negative experiences stemming from the practice of allowing politicians to hold influential positions after their removal from office. In addition, Dr Nattha believes that such bans are popular amongst the respondents because of the poor public perception of the country’s Parliament as a “bolster parliament” or a “husband and wife parliament”.

Dr Michael Montesano, co-coordinator of the Thailand Studies Programme at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, observes that it is unclear whether the support indicated in these polls for restrictions on family members running for office at the same time reflects the direct negative experiences of respondents or are the fruits of a long-running campaign on the part of bureaucratic, military and royalist interests in Thailand to use family relationships among politicians as a means of discrediting the electoral process in Thailand. Further polling to study the relative importance of the two effects is clearly necessary. Polling to determine popular attitudes toward nepotism in the Thai military would also prove valuable. The matter of banning reflects anti-political rhetoric common among reactionary forces in Thailand in recent years. The poll results raise questions regarding popular perceptions of whether politicians should enjoy due process before being removed from office.

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