

PERSPECTIVE

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Vote-buying and Islamic Politics in Thailand’s Deep South

*Daungyewa (Hong) Utarasint**



Picture captured (by the author) of a lorry bearing the “Move Forward Party” logo (bottom, middle) at Sabarang, Pattani province, on 13 July 2023 during the recent Thai election. The Move Forward Party, which rejects vote-buying practices, emerged second in the party-list votes in the Deep South. Most of its voters are younger Malay Muslims who envision that old-school politics like vote-buying, patron-clientalism, and identity politics must be eradicated.

** Daungyewa (Hong) Utarasint was Visiting Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. She is Visiting Assistant Professor, Arts and Humanities at NYU Abu Dhabi (NYUAD). Her current research investigates women and voting behaviour amid conflict in the southernmost provinces of Thailand, examining obstacles to women’s political participation, and how religion and cultural norms affect women’s political mobility.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Vote-buying began to gain prominence in the region around 1992 when the New Aspiration Party took the lead in Thailand’s Deep South.
- Voters may distort or rationalize their views on vote-buying by framing it as conforming to Islamic principles, despite contradictory opinions on the matter. When accepting gifts and money in exchange for votes, villagers justify it as adherence to Islam.
- The more the political parties compete for seats, the higher is the magnitude of money spent in exchange for votes. In the past, voters typically received money from three to five sources. However, for the 2023 general election, with seven political parties competing, resources for vote-buying have expanded.
- While vote-buying might have reached unprecedented levels, there is a silver lining: the Move Forward Party, which rejects vote-buying practices, emerged second in the party-list votes. Most Move Forward Party supporters are younger Malay Muslims who feel that old-school politics—vote-buying, patron-clientelism, and identity politics—must be eradicated.

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, I facilitated a focus group discussion on peace and conflict in Pattani.¹ During the discussion, a participant inquired about my religious belief, and asked, “Are you a Muslim? And if so, why don't you wear a hijab?” In response, I shared with her my reasons and mentioned that many Arab women I had encountered did not wear the hijab. The woman replied, “Well, they aren't as strict as we are. We are the true Muslims. *We are at the Corridor of Mecca.*” That was the first time I ever heard someone claim they were more Muslim than others.² The phrase *Patani is the Corridor of Mecca* is commonly heard in the area. Many Malay Muslims in the region believe that Patani Darussalam is the hub of Islam in Southeast Asia, and they take great pride in this.

Ironically, while bribery and money politics are against Islamic teaching, vote-buying during election campaigns is rampant in South Thailand, and was remarkably so in the 2011 election. While conducting my research on voting behaviour in 2012, I discovered that the so-called *Corridor of Mecca* region was rife with this practice. Once, while interviewing a household in Pattani, a man approached and asked the homeowner how many residents were over the age of eighteen. He drew out a stack of money, counted it, and handed it to the household owner. He even gestured towards me asking, “Does she count?” The owner glanced at me then shook her head at the “vote buyer”. On another occasion, during a visit to a subdistrict chief in Pattani, I personally witnessed a local politician running for a provincial administrative office hand over a stack of money to the subdistrict chief. The local politician also gave another stack to a religious leader seated beside him. The whole incident happened right in front of the chief's house.³ Much like local politicians and government officials, many religious leaders and preachers, including Imams and Khatibs, act as vote-canvassers or brokers.

Over the past two decades, vote-buying in Thailand's Deep South has been on a steady rise. The trend has become more pronounced in the last ten years. In 2017, a retired village headman shared information that during his 27-year tenure (1984-2011), the amount offered for a vote escalated from 100 baht per person in 1984 to 500 baht in 2011. Alarming, the money offered per individual crept up to 1,000 to 3,000 baht in the 2019 and 2023 general election. For the 2023 general election,⁴ in the final stretch before election day, substantial amounts of money were believed to have been spent in various provinces. In Pattani alone, estimates suggest that close to a billion baht (30 million USD) was spent,⁵ while Yala saw expenditures of approximately 600 million baht (23 million USD). Narathiwat reportedly had spending similar to Pattani's. Based on the interviews conducted, of all the intense election battles in Thailand's Deep South, Narathiwat was the fiercest battleground, and was significantly infiltrated by dark money and mafias. The practice of vote-buying was so entrenched it seemed normal. This discrepancy led me to wonder: If the area is perceived to be profoundly religious, why has vote-buying become normalized?"

This article explores voters grappling with Islamic principles and their perception on vote-buying. Additionally, it seeks to understand the extent to which vote-buying is accepted among the Muslim populace in Thailand's Deep South. I propose two hypotheses: to mitigate their guilt when accepting money or gifts for votes, voters may distort or rationalize their views on vote-buying and seek justification in Islamic principles; and the higher the number of political

parties vying for the seats in Thailand's Deep South, the more money they spend on vote-buying.

The first section of this article delves into the evolution of vote-buying in Thailand's Deep South over the years. The subsequent section explores how voters justify accepting money or gifts in exchange for votes. The third section presents various debates surrounding the practice of vote-buying in Muslim communities. Finally, the article summarizes the main ideas and arguments and offers suggestions to address vote-buying.

THE ONSET OF VOTE-BUYING IN MALAY MUSLIM REGIONS

Both Wiroj Pipitpakdee and Den Tohmeena, former MPs from Pattani, attribute the escalation of vote-buying to the intense competition between General Kriangsak Chamanan, a former prime minister, and Bunlert Lertpreecha in Roi-et province (in Northeastern Thailand) in 1981. This contest, infamously known as the "Roi-et disease," supposedly ushered in the era of extravagant spending to gain votes. This phenomenon eventually spread to provinces across Thailand, including the Deep South. Wiroj recalled that when he first contested in the national elections in the late 1980s, vote-buying was not as rampant.

In 1986, a group of lawyers and teachers established a political group, and they were supported by Islamic religious and spiritual leaders in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. This group eventually evolved into the well-known *Wadah* political faction. Distinctly rooted in ethno-religious political identity, *Wadah* maintained its presence in Thai politics for almost three decades. Over the years, there were numerous transitions and transformations within the faction. In 2018, some of its members reorganized themselves to establish the Prachachart party. Back in 2012, I learned through my interviews with several *Wadah* members that the concept of vote-buying was not widespread at the beginning of their political career.

However, vote-buying began to gain prominence in the region around 1992 when the New Aspiration Party took the lead. At that time, the *Wadah* faction, under the leadership of Wan Muhammad Noor Matha and Den Tohmeena, was an integral part of the New Aspiration Party. Its leader, General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who served as the Prime Minister from 1996 to 1997, had a stronghold in the Northeastern part of Thailand. Arguably, the practice of vote-buying in Northeast Thailand spilled over into Thailand's Deep South via the New Aspiration Party. This article contends that this era marked the beginning of vote-buying in Thailand's Deep South.

THE ISLAMIC CONTEXT AND VOTER PERCEPTIONS ON VOTE-BUYING

While pouring funds into vote-buying does influence elections in the Deep South, it is not the sole determinant for victory. The efficiency of the vote-buying approach matters just as much, if not more. How vote-canvassers and their patrons efficiently utilize their funds and strategize their gift-giving play a crucial role. Effective time management and strategic scheduling are also vital in capturing more votes.⁶

How do Islamic institutions in Thailand's Deep South steer vote-buying? In such scenarios, religion could and should act as a potent deterrent. However, some individuals navigate its

teachings and find loopholes in how the religion interprets materialistic pursuits. This is not unique to Thailand and Islam. In Nigeria, a poll concluded that vote-buying and guidance from religious leaders were pivotal factors in Nigerian voters' decisions.⁷ In the Philippines, Imam Dr. Jamel Cayamodin, said in his Eid'l Fitr sermon stated that "Muslim communities have the highest instances of vote-buying."⁸ As for Thailand's Deep South, I interviewed a former member of Wadah, who expressed scepticism about the ability of the Islamic Council Committee of each province to monitor vote-buying. He stated that corruption was pervasive even within these committees. Furthermore, money was often used to influence votes for the position of the head of the Islamic Council in various provinces.

Besides, there is a debate whether the term *al-risywah*, an Arabic word which means bribe, can really capture the whole meaning of vote-buying in Thailand's Deep South. Imron, Yasmin, and Abdulawwal (2022) had mentioned in their article that even among religious leaders in Thailand's Deep South, there was no unanimous agreement whether the term *risywah* encompasses the practice of vote-buying.⁹ Younger Malay Muslims, however, are critical in these views, and believe that receiving or giving money in exchange for votes is *al-risywah*. The debate surfaced across social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, predominantly among the younger generation of Malay Muslims. Besides the discussion of *al-risywah*, a verse from Quran 2:188 says, "Do not consume one another's wealth unjustly, nor deliberately bribe authorities in order to devour a portion of others' property, knowing that it is a sin." (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:188)¹⁰ The verse has been interpreted differently by various Islamic scholars.¹¹ There remains a debate on whether the verse encompasses the act of vote-buying.

In many cases, it is difficult to discern whether a gift is given in hopes of securing votes or simply done out of genuine generosity. In 2023, the election campaign coincided with the month of Ramadan. An incumbent politician from Narathiwat provided free petrol to residents, allowing them to fill up at any gas station in Sungai Kolok during Eid'l Fitr, which was celebrated on 21 April, 2023. This gesture was ostensibly to facilitate people visiting their relatives across different villages. However, with election day then looming on 14 May, less than a month after the festival, one cannot help but be sceptical of the politician's true motives. It is puzzling that the Election Committee of Thailand (ECT) did not view this as suspicious. While we were not dealing with direct cash handouts, it was undeniably a form of gift-giving.

Perceptions of what contradicts Islamic principles can differ. Several instances that may seem irrational to a literate person or urbanite are ways in which villagers justify their adherence to Islamic righteousness when accepting gifts and money in exchange for votes. They tend to adapt their voting behaviour so as not to be in violation of Islamic principles. In 2012, during an interview in Narathiwat, a woman in her 70s recounted that several vote-buyers from various political parties approached her, offering different sums for her vote: some proposed 200 baht, others 300 baht, and a few 500 baht.

One might assume that she would have accepted the highest offer of 500 baht, but she denied it, saying it would be against Islam. She explained that the individual who offered her 200 baht approached her first and she accepted that offer. According to her, accepting a later, higher offer after already committing to the first would be breaking a promise, which is against Islamic principles. She then burst into tears, pleading with us not to inform the police. We were taken

aback, unsure of the situation. It was not until she confessed that the true dilemma became clear. At the polling booth, she had inadvertently voted for a candidate other than the one she had promised to support. She insisted it was an honest mistake; she had simply forgotten the number of the candidate she had intended to vote for.

During the 2023 general election, another interesting case emerged: an individual returned 500 baht (about 15 USD) to a vote-canvasser of one party after he had received 1,000 baht (roughly 30 USD) from another party. He believed it would be sinful to accept money from both sides. These cases clearly illustrate how Malay Muslim voters in the region develop ways to rationalize actions they recognize as transgressions against Islam.

VOTE-BUYING IN ISLAMIC COMMUNITIES

In Thailand's Deep South, while many are cognizant of and discuss the vote-buying practice, the exact sum of money used remains elusive to most. The 2023 election saw the highest number of competing political parties in Thailand's Deep South, with seven major parties vying for dominance. As mentioned earlier, the more political parties there are competing for seats, the more the magnitude of money spent to buy votes. In the past, voters typically received money from 3-5 sources. However, for the 2023 general election, with seven political parties competing in the region, resources for vote-buying funds have now expanded for voters.

Various social media platforms highlighted the issue of vote-buying in Thailand's Deep South during the 2019 general election. For many urban voters, this was the first glimpse into the magnitude of vote-buying taking place. Projek Sama-Sama, an impromptu election monitoring collective established by local journalists and volunteers, disclosed that in the 2019 elections, individual voters received amounts ranging from 200 to 3,000 baht (US\$6.2–US\$94) — marking the highest recorded figures in the region's history.¹² There are also non-government organizations such as the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) that actively monitor vote-buying and other suspicious activities during elections, and 'We Watch' (wewatchthailand.org), an organization that recruits volunteers to oversee polling stations across the country. Furthermore, new political entities like the Future Forward Party have set fresh standards for campaign strategies in Thailand's Deep South. The party's approach, which contrasts sharply with traditional election campaigns in the region, firmly rejects the use of money politics to secure votes. This has laid a new groundwork for the constituencies. Although the Future Forward Party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court in 2020, its successor, the progressive Move Forward Party, continues to refuse employing vote-buying. Like the Future Forward Party in 2019, Move Forward Party failed to secure any seats. But Move Forward Party were the runners-up for party-list votes in every constituency in Thailand's Deep South. This marks a notable progression from four years prior.

Unlike Thailand's Deep South, where Islamic institutions and the Islamic provincial council remain silent on vote-buying, mosques and Islamic preachers in the upper southern Thai provinces of Satun, Krabi, and Songkhla unequivocally condemn the practice. For instance, a mosque in Satun made national headlines when a large vinyl sign was displayed prominently at its entrance. The sign at *Ban Kuan-Sanai* mosque declared: "The Imams, Khatibs, Bilals, and the mosque committee have unanimously agreed that vote-buying/selling is strictly

prohibited in our village. This is because it is not only *haram* (sinful) but also against the law. Action will be taken against: 1) Those bringing money into the village for vote-buying purposes, and 2) Those distributing money to voters within the village. The Imams, Khatibs, Bilals, and the Mosque Committee will abstain from any Islamic activity involving those partaking in these condemnable practices, as well as their relatives.”¹³ In essence, the situation in Satun province indicates that the residents of Ban Kuan-Sanai believe vote-buying affects the reputation and daily lives of Muslims.

Another controversial incident unfolded just before election day. A letter from the Islamic Committee Council, intended for every mosque in the lower Southern Thailand region, found its way to social media. This letter, specifically addressed to all Imams in the Krabi province by the Islamic Committee of Krabi, firmly encouraged eligible voters to participate, and highlighted that vote-buying was *prohibited*. However, the letter’s conclusion was provocative; it explicitly directed everyone to vote for the Prachachart Party, number 11, urging support for the Islamic party, Prachachart. The letter spread like wildfire. Many, particularly the well-educated Muslims, condemned it. The Head of the Islamic Committee Council defended his position, stating that the letter had not been authorized by him but was instead issued by a secretary without his knowledge.¹⁴

As of March 2018, out of 3,943 mosques around Thailand, there were 707 mosques in Pattani; 666 mosques in Narathiwat; and 509 mosques in Yala.¹⁵ I was also told that the Prachachart Party approached Imams and the Islamic councils in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat using the same strategy they employed with the Islamic Council Committee in Krabi. The correspondence requested that Imams and ulama in each mosque encourage preachers and their congregations to support the Prachachart Party at the polls. While this may seem innocuous, the close ties between the Prachachart Party and the Islamic Council in each province effectively hinder other parties from campaigning in mosques. Restricting other political parties from seeking electoral support is considered undemocratic.

CONCLUSION

In the modern world, commercial transactions follow a legal norm wherein the exchange of goods and services between buyers and sellers is typically assured through regular market operations. Contrastingly, the relationship between vote-buyers and voters lacks this certainty. There is no guarantee that those who receive money will reciprocate as intended by the donors.¹⁶ Vote-buying has not only become the norm among those offering bribes, but voters have also started expecting monetary payments from candidates. Distributing money or gifts helps candidates remain competitive, but there is no guarantee that those who spend the most will fare better. Religion can be utilized to counteract vote-buying, but some individuals might navigate its teachings, finding loopholes in their religious principles to further their materialistic pursuits.

Nonetheless, the 2023 general election signalled a shift in the region, with contrasting developments emerging. While vote-buying might have reached unprecedented levels, there is a silver lining: the Move Forward Party, which rejects vote-buying practices, emerged as a second in the party-list votes. Most Move Forward Party supporters are younger Malay

Muslims who envision that old-school politics — vote-buying, patron-clientelism, and identity politics—need to be eradicated. To effectively mitigate vote-buying, a promising solution involves enlisting a greater number of local volunteers and NGOs. Their roles should not be limited to just election monitoring; they should also disperse throughout the region to educate villagers about the significance of free and fair elections for community development and growth. Engaging these volunteers with community and religious leaders could heighten awareness and potentially deter the practice of vote-buying.

ENDNOTES

¹ There is a distinction between "Pattani" and "Patani." "Pattani," spelled with two 'ts, refers to a province in Thailand's Deep South. In contrast, "Patani," with a single 't', denotes the ancient kingdom of the region. Previously, the term "Patani" was prohibited by security forces who viewed it as endorsement of a separatist movement. However, in recent times, Thai security authorities have become more accepting of its usage.

² I have had numerous encounters with people from southern Thailand who claim that Patani is more religious than some Arab regions.

³ My research assistants and I stepped out of the car. The local politician greeted us, asking, "Who are you and what brings you here?" He further asked, "Do you know who I am?" I affirmed. He bellowed with laughter, then asked for my number. Reluctantly, I gave it to him. After our departure, I received anonymous, harassing calls nearly every thirty minutes for two days. I had to change my phone number following that incident. (July, 2012). To this day, this local politician remains an influential political figure. Almost every political party seeks his support during general elections

⁴ In July 2023, I once again had the opportunity to conduct my fieldwork in Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani. Over a span of two weeks, I interviewed two former politicians, six political candidates, five vote-canvassers, and nine or ten villagers.

⁵ See Siamrath Newspaper Online. (17 May 2023). “เจาะลึก” สาเหตุหมวมัด อัลอิครุส”กับกลยุทธ์ที่เอาชนะ ส.ส. 4 สมัยในเขต 5 อ.ชะหฺริง บัตตานี,” at <https://siamrath.co.th/n/447576> [In Thai]

⁶ Take the 2011 national election, for instance. Political candidate “R” seldom visited his electorate but invested seventy million baht (around two million US dollars) in his campaign, ultimately winning the seat. Meanwhile, in Pattani province, political candidate “N” offered 1,000 baht to each eligible voter, while candidate “M” provided just 500 baht. Surprisingly, "M" won, despite spending less than "N". This highlights that the sheer volume of money is not always decisive. [Author’s personal experience during the interview conducted in 2012]

⁷ See Business Day (21 February, 2023). “Religious leaders, vote-buying influence voters’ choices, poll shows” at: <https://businessday.ng/news/article/religious-leaders-vote-buying-influence-voters-choices-poll-shows/>

⁸ See Rapper (5 June, 2019). “Imam hits vote-buying as Muslims mark Eid’l Fitr” at:

<https://www.rappler.com/nation/232350-imam-hits-vote-buying-corruption-eid-l-fitr-2019/>

⁹ Imron Sahoh, Yasmin Sattar, and Abdulawwal Sidi (2022). “Riswah and Election: From Islamic Principle to the Phenomenon of Melayu Muslim Community in Thailand’s Southernmost Border Provinces” *Journal of Political and Social Agenda* 1 (1), 39–56. [In Thai].

¹⁰ See <https://quran.com/al-baqarah/188>

¹¹ See MyIslam.org at: <https://myislam.org/surah-baqarah/ayat-188/>

¹² Daungyewa Utarasint. “The Deep South: Changing Times?” *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 41, no. 2 (2019): 207-215.

¹³ See Dailynews Online (6 May, 2023). “ชาวบ้านสุดจะทน! ขึ้นป้ายห้าม ‘หัวคะแนน’ เข้ามา ซื้อสิทธิ-ขายเสียงในหมู่บ้าน”

(Villagers have reached their limit. A displayed vinyl sign prohibits vote-buyers from engaging in the

practice within the village), at: <https://www.dailynews.co.th/news/2300964/> at: <https://www.dailynews.co.th/news/2300964/> [In Thai]

¹⁴ See The Standard (11 May, 2023). at: <https://thestandard.co/asnavy-mukura-explain-prachachat-party/> [In Thai]

¹⁵ See the Central Islamic of Thailand webpage at: <https://www.cicot.or.th/th/news/detail/260/สถิติจำนวนมัสยิดที่จดทะเบียนจัดตั้งในประเทศไทย-ทั่วราชอาณาจักร>

¹⁶ Frederic Charles Schaffer (2007). Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote-buying.

Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

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