

PERSPECTIVE

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The Approach of Elections in Trang, South Thailand — Part I: Context and Competition

*Michael J. Montesano**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Provincial voters will decide the outcome of Thailand’s 24 March elections, the first held since the country’s 2014 *coup d’état*. Provincial voters decide all of the country’s national elections.
- While no Thai province is “typical” or “representative”, focused study at the level of a single province is crucial to understanding political dynamics in Thailand.
- Even after a prolonged period of military dictatorship without an elected parliament, the Democrat Party is the *de facto* incumbent party in Trang Province, on the West Coast of South Thailand.
- On the eve of the start of campaigning for the March 2019 polls, political actors and others in Trang acknowledged constraints on political activity and the apparent determination of the National Council for Peace and Order junta to tilt the outcome of the polls in favour of pro-military parties.
- Notwithstanding this context, political actors and others in Trang looked forward to the coming elections as a meaningful, competitive exercise.

* *Coordinator, Thailand Studies Programme, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.*

INTRODUCTION

After nearly five years of military dictatorship, Thailand will go to the polls on 24 March 2019 in elections that will take place in a climate of political repression and under a constitution intended to foster a restrictive political order. Many observers have dismissed these elections as almost meaningless. This dismissive view is mistaken.

Elections, like the parliaments in which they result, are participatory exercises. In a social context like that of Thailand, even the most determined effort to impose controls on such exercises cannot produce the predictability and quiescence that have often seemed to be the goal of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta that seized state power on 22 May 2014. Nowhere is this reality so clear as in provincial Thailand.

Despite various schemes in the past two decades to introduce systems of proportional representation and thus to reduce the number of creatures of “up-country” society who win seats, demography alone dictates that votes cast in provincial Thailand determine the make-up of the lower house of the country’s elected parliaments. Social and economic diversity characterizes the Thai provinces. A majority of their inhabitants firmly support electoral democracy. The immediacy of distinctive local concerns and a simultaneous keen awareness of residing in the country’s hinterlands mark their outlooks. The interplay of all these factors gives Thai electoral democracy both its “colour” and its resistance to authoritarian programmes of guidance.¹

None of Thailand’s 76 provinces² can serve as a “typical” or “representative” case. But close scrutiny of any one of them offers otherwise inaccessible perspective on the dynamics of parliamentary democracy in the country. The present study draws on conversations with some three dozen informants in Trang Province, on the West Coast of Thailand’s Upper South, during 10-16 January.³ While Thailand’s Election Commission announced the boundaries of the single-member constituencies that would elect 350 of the 500 hundred members of the lower house of the Thai parliament in late November,⁴ publication of the royal decree that enabled the commission to set a date for the polls only came on 23 January.⁵ The weeks directly before that date were the last interval during which it was possible to gauge views on the approaching elections among residents of the province — including leading political actors there — before the official announcement of elections made possible the registration of candidates and triggered the start of serious formal campaigning.

In 2016, the population of Trang Province numbered 642,000.⁶ Among its inhabitants, 125,000 were younger than 15 years of age, and 201,000 were between 50 and 79 years of age;⁷ voting age in Thailand is 18. In the 2019 polls, voters in the province will elect members of parliament from three constituencies.⁸

ELECTIONS UNDER MILITARY RULE

Quiescence in the political arena — the peace of the desert — has ranked among the priorities of the NCPO dictatorship. Its overt commitment to a programme of depoliticization has waxed and waned, but recourse to intimidation, repression and

surveillance has proved steady.⁹ That feature of the NCPO era will be the context for the March 2019 elections.

Leading political actors and others in Trang understood this context. During NCPO rule, police officers or other members of the security forces had made a practice of sitting alongside one prominent Democrat Party politician when he offered comments to the press on such matters as the economic challenges facing the people of Trang.¹⁰ A leading Trang Red Shirt had also received visits from elements of the security forces on several occasions.¹¹ On the Yellow side of the divide, months of demonstrations in the province coincided with the protests in Bangkok against the Yingluck Shinawatra government during late 2013 and the first half of 2014 that led to the NCPO's *putsch*.¹² An aide to a prominent leader of the demonstrations in the province noted with a hint of pride the man's easy-going relations with military officers responsible for monitoring political activity on behalf of the current dictatorship.¹³ Both the Red Shirt leader and the anti-Yingluck protest leader were in mid-January prospective candidates in Constituency 1. The junta's aspirations to depoliticization notwithstanding, legacies of the political conflicts before 2014 would colour the coming campaign.

The junta's record of surveillance and intimidation left prospective candidates determined to campaign with caution. In the face of the power of the Election Commission to act against parties that violated regulations on campaigning, parties would need to abide by regulations on the number, size and placement of posters, and of course on spending.¹⁴ Concerns over extremely close official scrutiny of campaign activities related to the belief that alleged violations of regulations would give the dictatorship, with the assistance of the Election Commission, a means of besting its political opponents other than victory at the ballot box. A conviction that authorities were already proving less strict about holding favoured parties to legal constraints on campaigning and would continue to use state resources and power to give those parties an unfair advantage in the coming elections accompanied that belief.

Such concerns notwithstanding, understanding the approach of the 2019 elections in Trang demands awareness of the belief there in the significance of those polls — in implicit rejection of the idea that they were but a stunt to legitimize military-dominated government in Thailand. The views of a pair of Democrat Party heavy-weights in the province are instructive. One praised the NCPO's approach to security, possible thanks to junta leader and Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha's absolute powers under Article 44 of the interim constitution of 2014,¹⁵ while arguing that five years were enough; it was time for an election.¹⁶ The second regarded the security forces' close scrutiny of campaign activities as an unfortunate inevitability, but stressed that people in Trang wanted an election — even under such circumstances.¹⁷ This latter, and widely held, view amounted, in essence, to factoring in NCPO repression and intimidation, while still taking NCPO-organized polls seriously and competing in them wholeheartedly. It was a view that reflected shared, fundamental ideas about political legitimacy and the role of elections.¹⁸

COMPETITION IN TWO CONSTITUENCIES

While Thailand had not had an elected parliament since the 2014 coup, political actors and others in Trang looking ahead to the March 2019 polls nevertheless viewed the Democrat Party as the *de facto* incumbents in the province.¹⁹ Perceived voter loyalty to native son and

two-time²⁰ Democrat Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai was one factor in this understanding.²¹ Other factors included the perception that, along with a solid base of voters, the party had a very strong network of vote canvassers and influential supporters at the grass-roots level.²² Its leading figure in Yantakhao District went so far as to refer to support for the Democrats in Trang as a matter of “heritage”, or “legacy”.²³

These perceptions had three implications. First, as the perceived incumbents, the Democrats would be the party against which other parties ran, not least in blaming them — fairly or not — for adverse circumstances in the province.²⁴ Second, the party would have to decide against what or whom it was running.²⁵ Finally, these perceptions led to the question of whether the legacy party could find a way to maintain its appeal to younger voters, and thus to defy the idea that its most loyal supporters in the provinces were the elderly and the near-elderly.²⁶ Brief examination of early preparations for campaigning in Constituencies 1 and 3 of Trang illustrates the relevance of these matters to electoral competition in the run-up to the 24 March polls.²⁷

Constituency 1

Three parties planned to field well known, or “serious”, candidates to challenge the Democrats in Constituency 1 of Trang Province: the Phalang Pracharat Party, the Phalang Thongthin Thai Party, and the Thai Raksa Chat Party.²⁸

The first party, a vehicle for General Prayut’s retention of the premiership, would run a retired official of the Ministry of the Interior who had served as district officer in the Mueang, Ratsada and Kantang Districts of Trang and as vice governor of the province.²⁹ The selection of such a figure as a Phalang Pracharat candidate represented a logical extension of the NCPO’s drive to give greater political control to the country’s Bangkok-centric bureaucracy. In addition, the candidate was widely known in rural parts of the constituency and was generally well regarded. Observers wondered, however, if he could overcome his central-government official’s habit of command in engaging with voters or the fact that he was a native not of Trang but rather of neighbouring Phatthalung Province. One view was that his status as a former civil servant meant that his campaign would depend on mobilizing the resources of the state at the sub-district and village levels and on spending large quantities of money.³⁰

The Phalang Thongthin Thai — or “Thai Local Power” — Party³¹ candidate in the constituency had won election to four terms as mayor of Trang Municipality, serving from 1995 to 2012.³² Still a man of immense energy and very much a figure in the *nakleng*³³ mode, the former mayor had already begun an active programme of visits to voters by mid-January. Casting himself as a local politician rather than as a parliamentary politician, he offered a clear message. Every inch of Thailand was “local”, and development demanded the devolution of power, including budgetary power. While all parties talked about devolution, they failed to practice it. Provincial governors retained authority over elected provincial and sub-district administrative organizations, and a party, Phalang Thongthin Thai, that was comprised of mayors and leaders at other levels of decentralized administration would see that meaningful devolution happened.³⁴

The former mayor’s renown and his message had purchase — above all in Trang town, where a strong sense that the municipality had thrived while he was mayor and that he was

the man to give the Democrats some real competition for a change was evident among people at a variety of socio-economic levels.³⁵

The Phalang Pracharat and Phalang Thongthin Thai candidates, each in the past an ally of Chuan Leekpai, were now competing for the support many of the same voters as the Democrats.³⁶ In contrast, the dynamic *nakleng* type running under the banner of the Thai Raksa Chat Party in Constituency 1 was a self-proclaimed long-time critic of the lawyerly former prime minister and local hero. Perhaps the most prominent Red Shirt in Trang, this businessman credited Thaksin Shinawatra with inspiring his involvement in politics.³⁷

Conceived as a “team-mate” of the Phuea Thai Party, Thai Raksa Chat was to contest seats primarily in areas in which Thaksinite parties had not won in the past.³⁸ In presenting itself to Trang voters, it associated itself with the former premier — now in exile — as nakedly as possible. Its provincial headquarters, in a hotel owned by the candidate in Constituency 1, featured not only a large photograph of that candidate taken with Thaksin in Dubai but also elaborately framed pictures of each of the four Thaksinite former prime ministers of Thailand mounted side by side on a wall.³⁹

As of mid-January, the evidently well-funded Thai Raksa Chat was the only party openly advertising its candidate in locations besides its office, with placards on a number of Trang town’s distinctive tuk-tuks. Rather than giving the full name of the party, those placards carried only the abbreviation “Tho So Cho” (ทษช) in large letters, effectively prompting anyone who saw them to think of “Thaksin Chinnawat” (ทักษิณ ชินวัตร). Working flat-out to mobilize a network of supporters in the constituency, the party’s candidate estimated that only 15 or 20 per cent of Trang voters might still support the Democrats.⁴⁰ But much work lay ahead of him, as voters dismissive of Trang’s loyalty to the Democrats spoke of a determination to support the Phuea Thai Party — not fielding candidates in the province — or of their admiration for Thaksin, rather than of their awareness that Thai Raksa Chat would serve as the principal Thaksinite electoral vehicle in Trang in the coming elections.⁴¹

And what of the Democrats themselves? In the coming polls, the party opted to field in Constituency 1 a respected physician and veteran party member who had most recently won election to parliament in 2011, in the last successful national polls to date.⁴² As he and his party-mates awaited the release of the royal decree and the start of full-scale campaigning, this candidate stressed his party’s embeddedness in the province, the timeless appeal of its “good people” — like Chuan and others. The Democrats’ storied, principled approach to politics remained relevant, to voters of all generations. While the leader of the “People’s Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State” whose members and supporters campaigned to topple Yingluck in 2013-2014 had been a former secretary-general of the Democrat Party, the candidate noted that it was necessary to distinguish that group from the party. In 2019, the party would not be campaigning against Thaksin. It would stress its policies, not least concerning the economy.⁴³

This posture was not so Olympian as it might appear. The Democrats might talk about their laurels, but they were not resting on them. In Trang on 14 January to attend two funerals⁴⁴ — and thus both to honour his relationship with the deceased and to maintain the Democrats’ relations with the living, and voting⁴⁵ — Chuan himself remarked to the author that it was already a time of intense political activity.⁴⁶ While the Democrats had, then, begun their electioneering, the essence of their approach to the province’s electorate in fact

lay in keeping their networks active, ever-ready to ensure victory at the polls.⁴⁷ This was the import of the outlook expressed by the Democrat Party's candidate in Constituency 1, even if the coming campaign in Constituency 3 of Trang might well test party networks and their resilience.

Constituency 3

From the perspective of the Democrat Party's kingpin in Yantakhao District, polling day did not decide who entered parliament as members for Trang. Rather, the contest that mattered was the competition to become the party's candidate.⁴⁸ With the apparent approval of party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, the Democrats' central executive committee had selected that same man's own daughter to contest Constituency 3 under its banner in 2019.⁴⁹ An attorney in her late twenties with two post-graduate degrees from the United Kingdom, she had served for a time as secretary to one of Chuan Leekpai's brothers in his capacity as chairman of the Trang provincial administrative organization.⁵⁰ She was also a proud founding participant in the "New Dem" group that the Democrat Party had launched in Bangkok in November 2018.⁵¹ Using the slogan "*kao nok krop*" or "stride outside the boundaries" and adopting a self-consciously earnest and urban-cool "beautiful people" aesthetic, the group signalled the party's frank attempt to remain relevant to a new generation of Thai voters.⁵²

Meanwhile in Trang, the candidate's *nakleng*⁵³ father had begun to introduce his daughter to voters in Constituency 3, giving her a chance to listen to their concerns. He contended that the Democrats had a solid base of 40,000 votes in each of the province's three constituencies, and that the main question on polling day would be whether or not the party could improve on those totals.⁵⁴ One challenge would take the form of the candidate whom Phalang Pracharat was fielding in Constituency 3 — the son of his elder sister and long-time vote canvasser, and thus his nephew and the candidate's first cousin.⁵⁵ The sister had apparently hoped that her younger brother would endorse her son, who had been active in provincial politics, as the Democrat candidate in the constituency. That hope thwarted, the son signed on with the pro-junta party;⁵⁶ he could certainly count on his mother's electioneering network — previously in the service of the Democrats and his uncle — in his campaign against a rather green and untested opponent, his cousin.

This family intrigue and the concentration of *itthiphon* or "influence" that it bespoke exemplified the order that the Future Forward Party's candidate in Constituency 3 sought to challenge.⁵⁷ A thirty-nine-year-old native of the southernmost sub-district of the small coastal district of Hat Samran, he made his living through pursuits that included trading in rubber wood and seafood up and down the West Coast from Trang to Phuket. A former Phuea Thai Party mobilizer,⁵⁸ he was not a candidate who, like senior Democrats in the province, "went out to local areas"⁵⁹ to "listen to"⁶⁰ voters like those in the villages of the constituency. Everything about his self-presentation made clear, rather, that he worked and lived among such people.

The Future Forward Party's candidate in Constituency 3 seemed to typify the aspirational "emerging stakeholders" in provincial Thailand whose roles in the tumultuous 2010 Red Shirt protests in Bangkok Naruemon Thabchumpon and Duncan McCargo have stressed.⁶¹ His criticisms of Democrat hegemony in the province were strong, even bitter. Their tone contrasted markedly with that of the extensive media coverage highlighting the wealthy,

handsome, photogenic Future Forward leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit and his sunny appeal to young urban voters.⁶² Much of that coverage has assigned to Thanathorn's party an image little different from that of the "New Dem" group. But such coverage has little relevance to the campaign of the party's candidate in Trang's Constituency 3 — with its roughly equal proportions of Muslim and Buddhist voters,⁶³ its largely agricultural economy, and its extensive coastlines and the potential for conflict over resources along them. That coverage generally fails to account for the significance in the contexts in which most Thais live and vote of the party's democratic and egalitarian ideals, assault on privilege and patronage, and determination to build a "political institution belonging to the people".⁶⁴ In anticipating the new party's performance on 24 March, observers would do well to treat the idea of the much-hyped, ultimately urban, "youth vote" with some scepticism and to look instead to the potential resonance of Future Forward's message in the provinces.

CONCLUSION

Official registration of candidates for the 24 March polls would begin on 4 February. In Trang, this process took place under the close observation of undercover police officers and other elements of the Thai security forces. The sinister context of intimidation notwithstanding, however, the atmosphere was one of excitement and expectation. That atmosphere was also one of competition, as the various parties' candidates rushed off in campaign trucks to begin open electioneering in their constituencies immediately after completing their registration.⁶⁵

The campaign to follow would take unexpected turns. A month after former Prime Minister Thaksin's bungled attempt in early February to have the Thai Raksa Chat Party nominate King Vajiralongkorn's older sister as its candidate for the premiership, the Constitutional Court would dissolve the party.⁶⁶ The groundwork that it had laid in places like Trang and its artfully conceived complementarity to Phuea Thai would be squandered through a foolish own-goal. In the meantime, police in Phuket briefly detained the Future Forward Party's candidate in Constituency 3 in a case related to an apparently long-settled business dispute.⁶⁷ This episode mirrored in the provincial context the controversy in Bangkok over an error on the party's website in the biography of its leader Thanathorn, and the concern that the Election Commission might use that error as a pretext for banning him from politics.⁶⁸ Raising suspicions about electoral dirty tricks, the episode in Phuket also suggested that the candidate's campaigning in Trang's Constituency 3 was gaining real traction in the eyes of either his rivals or of the authorities.

Did that possibility suggest that the distinct undercurrent of dissatisfaction with Democrat hegemony in the province⁶⁹ amounted to more than familiar grousing? If so, would Democrat Party rallies, above all in the closing days of the campaign, work their customary magic?⁷⁰ And how much of a role would the money politics that, many observers noted, had come to infect elections in Trang play in the campaign?⁷¹

In mid-January, the answers to these questions were not yet clear. What was clear was that people in the province looked ahead not to elections held for show but to genuine competition, even while still under military dictatorship. Further, they understood this competition with reference to issues beyond those of democracy *versus* dictatorship or Red

versus Yellow. Part II of this study of the approach of the March 2019 elections in Trang turns to those issues.

¹ See Michael J. Montesano, “An election 50 years ago may hold lessons for Thailand in 2019”, *TODAY* (Singapore), 7 January 2019 (<https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/election-50-years-ago-may-hold-lessons-thailand-2019>, downloaded 21 February 2019), places this contention in historical perspective. David L. Morell, “Power and Parliament in Thailand: The Futile Challenge, 1968-1971”, doctoral dissertation, Princeton University, 1974, informs the analysis in that article.

² This total excludes Bangkok.

³ This study cites by name only current candidates for parliament and former members of parliament. It cites other informants with brief descriptions of their occupational status and with identifying numbers, indicated between parentheses in the notes that follow. The author thanks all those to whom he spoke in Trang during 11-16 January for their kindness, time, and insight, and Sarayut Chailak and Pannika Wanich of the Future Forward Party for making it possible for him to meet the party’s leadership in the province. For an interpretation of several aspects of the history of Trang in the latter two thirds of the last century, see Michael J. Montesano, “The Commerce of Trang, 1930s-1990s: Thailand’s National Integration in Social-Historical Perspective”, doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1998, and “Capital, State, and Society in the History of Chinese-Sponsored Education in Trang”, pp. 231-272 in Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory, eds., *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on a Plural Peninsula* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

⁴ See “Prakat khanakammakan kanlueaktang rueang baeng khetlueaktang samachik sapha phuthaenratsadon baepbaengkhetlueaktang” [Announcement of the Election Commission on constituencies for the election of constituency members of parliament], *Royal Gazette*, 29 November 2018 (http://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2561/A/101/T_0005.PDF, downloaded 25 February 2019). The remaining 150 members of parliament are to be elected through a system of proportional representation in which votes cast for the candidates of a given party in constituency races across the country will be totaled to determine how many candidates from its party list secure seats. Part II of this study briefly considers some of the implications of this system for the electoral contest in Trang.

⁵ See “Phraratchakritsadika hai mi kanlueaktang samachik sapha phuthaenratsadon pen kanthuapai pho so 2562” [Royal decree on general elections for the lower house of parliament, 2019], *Royal Gazette*, 23 January 2019

(http://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2562/A/008/T_0001.PDF, downloaded 25 February 2019).

⁶ Trang Provincial Statistical Office and National Statistical Office, *Trang Provincial Statistical Report 2560/2017*, “Table 1.1. Population from Registration Record, Percentage Change and Density by District: 2012 – 2016”, p. 3.

(<http://trang.nso.go.th/images/attachments/article/285/รวม1.สถิติประชากรศาสตร์%20ประชากรและคหะ.pdf>, downloaded 25 February 2019).

⁷ Calculated from *ibid.*, “Table 1.3. Population from Registration Record by Age Group and District: 2016”, p. 6.

⁸ See “Prakat khanakammakan kanlueaktang rueang baeng khetlueaktang”, 29 November 2018, p. 12. Constituency 1 includes the Mueang District of Trang, in which the province’s administrative seat and largest municipal centre is located, along with Nayong District and two sub-districts of Yantakhao District. Constituency 2 comprises Huai Yot, Ratsada, Wang Wiset and Sikao Districts, along with one sub-district of Kantang District, and Constituency 3 the remainder of Yantakhao and Kantang Districts, along with Palian and Hat Samran Districts.

⁹ One does need to keep matters in perspective. Even the Trang informant most strident in his criticism of the NCPO did acknowledge that the province had been spared the full weight of its repression; private school administrator (14), Trang, 13 January 2019. In this regard, one wonders if the level of the dictatorship's repression in different regions of Thailand has not been in proportion to levels of the threat to its authority, real or perceived. I am grateful to a colleague in the study of Thai history, left nameless here, for sharing this observation with me.

¹⁰ Sukit Atthopakon, Trang, 14 January 2019, who mentioned, in particular, representatives of the Army's Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), a relic of the Cold War era of counter-insurgency. On military regimes' use of ISOC in the past decade and a half, see Puangthong Pawakapan "The Central Role of Thailand's Internal Security Operations Command in the Post-Counter-Insurgency Period", *Trends in Southeast Asia* 2017, no. 17 (https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TRS17_17.pdf).

¹¹ Rat Phuklang, Trang, 16 January 2019. Rat would run as the Thai Raksa Chat Party's candidate in Constituency 1 in the 2019 elections, until the dissolution of that party in early March.

¹² Pripramot Loetworaphat, Trang, 14 January 2019, and member of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (8), Trang, 15 January 2019. Pripramot would run as the New Alternative Party's candidate in Constituency 1 in the 2019 elections.

¹³ Aide to Pripramot Loetworaphat (18), Trang, 14 January 2019; this informant specifically mentioned the ISOC.

¹⁴ Sukit, 14 January 2019; member of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (9), Trang, 12 January 2019; Pripramot, 14 January 2019; and Rat, 16 January 2019. See discussion of regulations governing campaigning for the coming elections in Jitsiree Thongnoi, "In Thailand, Election Campaigning has a Real Case of Military Fatigue", *The South China Morning Post*, 9 February 2019 (<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2185213/thailand-election-campaigning-has-real-case-military>, downloaded 16 February 2019).

¹⁵ See "Ratthathammanun haengratcha-anachak thai (chabap chuakhrao) pho so 2557" [Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (Interim) 2014], *Royal Gazette*, 22 July 2014 (<http://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2557/A/055/1.PDF>, downloaded 27 February 2019), p. 15.

¹⁶ Somchai Losathaphonphiphit, Yantakhao, 15 January 2019.

¹⁷ Sukit, 14 January 2019.

¹⁸ To be sure, another feature of the national political climate was on the minds of party-political actors in Trang in mid-January. Explaining that campaign activities were not yet in full swing, a number of them mentioned with noticeable awkwardness the delay in the publication of a royal decree authorizing elections. This observation perhaps spoke less to conditions of repression and intimidation under military rule than to another factor. The polls would be Thailand's first under a sovereign whose conception of royal power had yet to become clear.

¹⁹ Since 1983, there have been elections for 39 seats representing Trang the Thai parliament, and the victory scored by Phitak Rangsittham of the Chat Thai Party in July 1988 was the last time to date that a candidate not belonging to the Democrat Party won one of those races; Office of the Provincial Election Commission of Trang, 31 January 2017.

²⁰ That is, during 1992-1995 and 1997-2001.

²¹ For example, motorcycle-taxi drivers (4, 7), Trang, 11 and 12 January 2019. While noting the party's strength in the Upper South from the mid-1970s, Marc Askew, *Performing Political Identity: The Democrat Party in Southern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2008), p. 48, dates its "near hegemonic electoral hold" on the region to the time of Chuan's assumption of the leadership of the party in the early 1990s. Chuan represented Trang in parliament from 1969 to 2000, serving as a party-list member of parliament since 2001; Office of the Provincial Election Commission of Trang, "Thamniap so so" [List of MPs], 31 January 2017 (https://www.ect.go.th/trang/ewt_news.php?nid=77&filename=index, downloaded 5 March 2019).

If what Askew, pp. 151 and 232, calls Chuan's status as "the party's icon" and as the "most potent

electoral advantage wielded by the Democrats” in the region had a powerful effect on voters in other parts of the Upper South, one can imagine its particular significance in his native province.

²² Cooked-food vendor (17), Trang, 14 January 2019; Sukit, 14 January 2019; and Somchai, 15 January 2019.

²³ Somchai, 15 January 2019; he spoke of “*moradok thi suepthot ma*”.

²⁴ Part II of this study of the approach of the March 2019 elections in Trang focuses in greater detail on this latter matter, that of socio-economic conditions in Trang and their relevance to the polls.

²⁵ Askew’s 2008 classic, *Performing Political Identity*, to whose insight and value it is impossible to do justice here, treats a period, 2004-2005, in which the Democrat Party offered a clear and putatively principled alternative to Thaksin Shinawatra and all that he represented. A decade and a half later, and after five years of military dictatorship, the political landscape is very different.

²⁶ Businessman (6), Trang, 11 January 2019. Nationally, some seven million Thais will be newly eligible to cast ballots in the coming elections; Patpicha Tanakasempipat and Panarat Thepgumpanat, “Tired of Army Rule, Thai Youth a Rising Force in March Election”, *Reuters*, 29 January 2019 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-politics-youth/tired-of-army-rule-thai-youth-a-rising-force-in-march-election-idUSKCN1PN0HW>, downloaded 5 March 2019).

²⁷ A retired senior civil servant (21) estimated that the coming elections would see more than 20 different political parties field parliamentary candidates in the province; Trang, 15 January 2019. In fact, this estimate was low. A list of the thirty-six candidates running in Constituency 1, of the same number running in Constituency 2, and of the thirty-seven candidates running in Constituency 3 as of end of candidate registration is available at Office of the Provincial Election Commission of Trang, “Raichue phusamak samachik saphaphuthaenratsadon changwat Trang” [Roster of candidates for parliament, Trang Province], 9 February 2019 (https://www.ect.go.th/trang/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=451&filename=index, downloaded 7 March 2019). The discussion that follows is necessarily selective. In its focus on Constituencies 1 and 3, it does not mean to downplay the significance of events in Constituency 2 following the decision last November of the locally influential six-time Democrat member of parliament for Trang and former Phuea Thai party-list member of parliament Thawi Suraban to join the pro-junta Phalang Pracharat Party and run as a party-list candidate for that party; Office of the Provincial Election Commission of Trang, 31 January 2017, and “‘Thawi’ wai! pho po cho ro kwat so so tai pen kop pen kam yoei ‘phak kaokae’ krasaeniyom toktam” [Thawi! Phalang Pracharat sweeps up Southern MPs, mocks ‘the old party’ for its declining popularity” *Naeo na*, 15 November 2018 (<https://www.naewna.com/politic/377036>, downloaded 6 March 2019). The Democrat candidate in Constituency 2 in the 2019 elections is five-time Trang member of parliament, former minister in the Prime Minister’s Office in the 2008-2011 Abhisit Vejjajiva government, and senior party figure Sathit Wongnongtoei; “Poet chai Sathit Wongnongtoei chak dek 8 khuap su ngan kanmueang” [Sathit Wongnongtoei from eight-year-old child to political work], *MThai NEWS*, 17 June 2011 (<https://news.mthai.com/politics-news/118637.html>, downloaded 6 March 2019), and “‘Sathit Wongnongtoei’ rap po cho po thamngan nak mak phuea hai khon lueak chi luean lueaktang prachachon rap dai tae tong chatchen” [“Sathit Wongnongtoei” says that Democrats are working very hard to attract votes, says that people can accept delay in holding elections but it must be clear], *Matichon Online*, 10 January 2019

(https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_1312092, downloaded 6 March 2019). The same retired civil servant (21) estimated that Thawi’s influence in the constituency meant that Sathit had only a fifty-fifty chance of defeating the Phalang Prachachat candidate there; 15 January 2019.

²⁸ Former Democrat Party secretary-general and national leader of the 2013-2014 campaign to oust Yingluck from the premiership Suthep Thueaksuban, from the Upper Southern province of Suratthani, established the Ruam Phalang Prachachat or “Action Coalition for Thailand” Party to contest the 2019 elections. Notwithstanding the idea among some observers of Thailand that this party would cut into support for the Democrats in Upper Southern provinces like Trang, the party was noticeably inactive there as of mid-January. One observer noted, however, that its members

had appeared markets, introducing themselves and canvassing for support; aide to Pripramot (18), 14 January 2019.

²⁹ Niphan Sirithon, Phalang Pracharat Party business card, in author's possession.

³⁰ Business manager (3), Trang, 15 January; Pripramot, 14 January 2019; retired civil servant (21), 15 January; and member of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (9), 12 January 2019.

³¹ The leader of this party is the renowned urban-godfather-*cum*-Bangkok-“business leader” Chatchawan Khongudom or “Chat Taopun”; “‘Chat’ patha ‘Chuan’! Phalang Thongthin Thai tit khrueng poet tua so so ching kao-i mueang Trang” [“Chat” battles “Chuan”: Phalang Thongthin starts it engines, introduces parliamentary candidates for Trang], *Naew na*, 24 November 2018 (<https://www.naewna.com/politic/378976>, downloaded 6 March 2019). For a brief account of Chatchawan's career, see James Ockey, *Making Democracy: Leadership, Class, Gender, and Political Participation in Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 89-92.

³² Trang City Municipality, “Thamniap nayok thetsamontri” [List of Mayors], n.d. (<http://www.trangcity.go.th/trangsportday/index.php/2017-06-26-10-42-19/2017-06-26-11-04-52/2017-07-04-09-37-56>, downloaded 6 March 2019).

³³ A storied Thai leadership type that Ockey describes as “tough, charismatic, and, above all, loyal to friends” and, by extension, to followers; Ockey 2004, p. 229.

³⁴ Chali Kang-im, Trang, 11 January 2019.

³⁵ Cooked-food vendor (17), 14 January 2019; business manager (3), 15 January 2019; and motorcycle-taxi driver (10), Trang, 12 January 2019.

³⁶ Retired civil servant (21), 15 January. This observer even suggested that, had Sukit — the Democrats' eventual candidate in Constituency 1 — run as a party-list candidate instead, Niphan Sirithon would have been their candidate, rather than Phalang Pracharat's, in that constituency.

³⁷ Rat, 16 January 2019, on which the following sentences also draw. Also see Rat's comments in “Rat Phuklang wathiphusamak phak thai raksa chat” [Rat Phuklang, prospective Thai Raksa Chat candidate], *INNnews*, 29 November 2018 (https://www.innnews.co.th/regional-news/news_253621/, downloaded 7 March 2019). Rat's strong identification with Thaksin, over the course of many years, was widely recognized in Trang; retired civil servant (21), 15 January. His activities in support of the Red cause extended beyond the province, too. In March 2014, the police launched an investigation of Rat for inciting a blockade of the office of the National Anti-Corruption Commission in his speech to a rally in the Northeastern province of Nakhon Ratchasima the month before; “‘Tamruat’ laila klip prasai ‘Rat Phuklang’ plukradom muanchon pit so no ngo po po ch” [“Police” chase down clip of “Rat Phuklang” inciting crowd to close NACC office], *Isranews*, 6 March 2014 (https://www.isranews.org/isranews-news/27719-red_27719.html, downloaded 7 March 2019), and “NACC Fumes Over Govt Watchdog Jibes”, *Bangkok Post*, 5 March 2014 (<https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/398234/nacc-fumes-over-govt-watchdog-jibes>, downloaded 7 March).

³⁸ Rat, 16 January 2019. Pithay Pookaman, “Thai Election: Junta vs. Pro-Democracy Supporters”, *Asia Sentinel*, 4 February 2019 (<https://www.asiasentinel.com/politics/thailand-election-junta-vs-pro-democracy-supporters/>, downloaded 7 March 2019), discusses Thai Raksa Chat and several other newly formed Thaksinite parties meant either to serve as the Phuea Thai Party's allies in parliament or, in the event of the latter party's dissolution, to ensure a Thaksinite foothold there.

³⁹ That is, Thaksin himself (2001-2006), the late Samak Sunthorawet (2008), Thaksin's brother-in-law Somchai Wongsawat (2008), and his sister Yingluck (2011-2014).

⁴⁰ Rat, 16 January.

⁴¹ Motorcycle-taxi drivers (4, 7, 10, 15), Trang, 11, 12, 14 January.

⁴² Dr Sukit Atthopakon first entered parliament in 1986, joining Chuan and Wichian Khanchong as victorious Democrat candidates for the province. Not running again until 2007, he won re-election as a member of parliament for Trang in that year and in 2011; Office of the Provincial Election Commission of Trang, 31 January 2017.

⁴³ Sukit, 14 January 2019, on which this entire paragraph draws.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Askew 2008, p. 287, notes the importance of Thai constituency-level politicians' "attending funerals and numerous functions to bestow honor (*kiat*) on people and display their own closeness with the localities (*samphat phuenthi*).” One can only imagine the effect of a former prime minister's doing likewise.

⁴⁶ Chuan Leekpai, Trang, 14 January 2019.

⁴⁷ Askew 2008, p. 170, writes that Democrat members of parliament in the South “need to continually cultivate relationships among key local political actors to nurture the networks so vital to securing voting bases (*thansiang*)”.

⁴⁸ Somchai, 15 January 2018. Somchai Losathaphonphiphit is himself a four-time member parliament, first elected in 2001; Office of the Provincial Election Commission of Trang, 31 January 2017.

⁴⁹ Somchai, 15 January 2019, and Sukit, 14 January 2019.

⁵⁰ “Poet chai ‘thayat Losathanphonphiphit’ po cho po run mai susuek ‘Trang’” [Getting to know the “Losathaphonphiphit heiress”, new generation Democrat contesting “Trang”], *Thai Post*, 1 February 2019 (<https://www.thaipost.net/main/detail/28028>, downloaded 7 March 2019), and Somchai, 15 January 2019. Sunatcha Losathaphonphiphit graduated from the Faculty of Law at Thammasat University and earned master's degrees in insurance and trade law at Queen Mary University of London and the University of Kent at Canterbury, respectively.

⁵¹ Sunatcha Losathaphonphiphit, Yantakhao, 15 January 2019, and “Poet tua lueat mai ‘Prachathipat’ kao nok krop” [Introducing new blood, “Democrats” step outside boundaries], *Khom chat luek*, 13 November 2018 (<http://www.komchadluek.net/news/politic/352068>, downloaded 7 March 2019).

⁵² See the “New Dem – kao nok krop” video, in which Sunatcha appears (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOtfCRpLB6g>, downloaded 7 March 2019).

⁵³ Retired civil servant (21), 15 January, offered this description of Somchai.

⁵⁴ Somchai, 15 January 2019.

⁵⁵ Ibid. and “Suek sanam ching so so khet 3 Trang ‘dueat’ trakun ‘Losathaphonphiphit’ prat song ‘lukphi-luknong’ khaengkaneng” [Battle on the field to win parliamentary constituency 3 in Trang boils, Losathaphonphiphit family sends “cousins” to compete with each other], *Matichon*, 7 February 2019 (https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_1353024, downloaded 7 March 2019). The Phalang Pracharat candidate, now called Ditthanin Phakichon, previously also used the last name “Losathaphonphiphit”! On Democrat Party canvassers in the South, see Askew 2008, pp. 255-256.

⁵⁶ Retired civil servant (21), 15 January 2019.

⁵⁷ Yotsawat Thiratwatthanakun, Trang, 15 January 2019.

⁵⁸ Member of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (9), 12 January 2019.

⁵⁹ That is, “*ok phuenthi*”; Somchai, 14 January 2019. In “Poet chai ‘thayat losatanphonphiphit’ po cho po run mai susuek ‘Trang’”, 2019, Somchai's daughter Sunatcha speaks of having “*long phuenthi*” or “gone down to local areas” to have contact with villagers' way of life as a young girl accompanying her father on his political rounds.

⁶⁰ That is, “*rap fang*”; Sukit, 14 January 2019.

⁶¹ Naruemon Thabchumpon and Duncan McCargo, “Urbanized Villagers in the 2010 Thai Redshirt Protests: Not Just Poor Farmers?” *Asian Survey* LI, 6 (November/December 2011): 993–1018, p. 1004.

⁶² See, for example, Patpicha Tanakasempipat, “Thailand's Rising Political Star Under Fire as Election Nears”, *Reuters*, 26 February 2019 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-election-thanathorn/thailands-rising-political-star-under-fire-as-election-nears-idUSKCN1QF10H>, downloaded 5 March 2019); “Maverick Tycoon and Darling of Thai Millennials Decries Political Attacks”, *Channel NewsAsia*, 27 February 2019 (<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/maverick-tycoon-and-darling-of-thai-millennials->

[decries-political-attacks-11293942](#), downloaded 8 March 2019); and Eijas Ariffin, “Can the Future Forward Party Shift Thai Politics?”, *The ASEAN Post*, 9 February 2019 (<https://theaseanpost.com/article/can-future-forward-party-shift-thai-politics>, downloaded 8 March 2019). Yuda Masayuki, “Young Thai Billionaire Emerges as Potential Kingmaker in Election”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 22 February 2019 (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Turbulent-Thailand/Young-Thai-billionaire-emerges-as-potential-kingmaker-in-election>, downloaded 5 March 2019), offers a valuable partial corrective.

⁶³ Retired civil servant (21), 15 January 2019. The Future Forward Party’s “strategist” for Constituency 3 was a grizzled former contract soldier and long-time village headman (20) from Palian District, one of whose express roles was to serve as a liaison with his fellow Muslims in the constituency; meeting with Future Forward Party leadership team for Constituency 3, Trang, 15 January. The party attached importance to understanding the concerns of and to cultivating relations with the Thai-speaking Muslims of Trang; members of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (8, 9), Trang, 12 January 2019. The same was true of its approach in at least one other province of the Upper South, too; Pannika Wanich, Future Forward Party spokesperson, Bangkok, 2 August 2018.

⁶⁴ Member of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (9), 12 January 2019. That is, “*sathaban thangkanmueang khong prachachon*”.

⁶⁵ “Samak so so Trang wan raek khuekkhak! ‘nai hua Chuan’ nam thim prachathipat ching boe 3 khet” [First day of parliamentary candidate registration in Trang busy! “Boss Chuan” leads Democrat team to get candidate numbers], *Naew na*, 4 February 2019 (<https://www.naewna.com/politic/393178>, downloaded 9 March 2019).

⁶⁶ “Constitutional Court Disbands Thai Raksa Chart”, *Bangkok Post*, 7 March 2019 (<https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/1640796/constitutional-court-disbands-thai-raksa-chart>, downloaded 9 March 2019).

⁶⁷ “Pho o sun lueaktang khet 3 phak anakhot mai chae kanmueang Trang len sokkaprok” [Director of Future Forward Party Constituency 3 election centre says Trang politics is played dirty], *77 khao det*, 28 February 2019 (<https://www.77kaoded.com/content/340459>, downloaded 8 March), and “Nai Yotsawat Thiratwatthanakun phusamak so so khet 3 Trang poetchaiphoei pen rueang khaochaiphitkan” [Mr Yotsawat Thiratwatthanakun MP candidate in Constituency 3 of Trang reveals that it was a misunderstanding], *77 khao det*, 1 March 2019 (<https://www.77kaoded.com/content/341387>, downloaded 8 March 2019). Ironically, the other party to the dispute shared a surname, one common among old Chinese families in Trang, with Chang Chingchit, who became the province’s first-ever member of parliament in 1933; Office of the Provincial Election Commission of Trang, 31 January 2017.

⁶⁸ “EC Yet to Probe Thanathorn Case”, *Bangkok Post*, 23 February 2019 (<https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/1633518/ec-yet-to-probe-thanathorn-case>, 9 March 2019).

⁶⁹ Business manager (3), 11 January 2019; businessman (6), 11 January 2019; motorcycle-taxi drivers (4, 7, 10, 15), 11, 12, 13 January 2019; cooked-food vendor (17), 14 January 2019.

⁷⁰ Rat, 16 January 2019, and civil servant (22), Trang, 15 January 2019, noted the oratorical prowess of members of the Democrat Party, the importance of its mass campaign rallies, and the effectiveness of those rallies in winning electoral support. Also see Askew 2008, pp. 203-205, 227-228, 302.

⁷¹ Rat, 16 January 2019; Pripramot, 14 January 2019; retired civil servant (21), 15 January 2019; civil servant (22), 15 January 2019; motorcycle-taxi driver (12), Trang, 12 January 2019; and Wichian Khanchong, Trang, 14 January 2019. Running as a Democrat each time, Wichian won election to parliament from Trang in 1983, 1986, 1988, 1992 (both elections), 1995, and 1996; it was he whom the late, controversial Phitak Rangsittham defeated in the elections of July 1988; Office of the Provincial Election Commission of Trang, 31 January 2017.

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