

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 22 March 2019

The Approach of Elections in Trang, South Thailand — Part II: Economic Worries, Social Issues, and the Question of National Integration

*Michael J. Montesano**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On the eve of the start of campaigning for the March 2019 polls in Trang on the West Coast of South Thailand, the reality of low prices for rubber — the province's most important commodity — shaped views toward the coming elections more than any other concern.
- A second concern related to the Trang's level of economic development, not least as it was linked to the long-term electoral dominance of the Democrat Party.
- Trang offered a context for localization of the ideals, above all those concerning social equity, that have become an important factor in the politics of post-Thaksin Thailand.
- The preparations of political parties to field candidates in the province and to take advantage of the new mixed-member proportional representation system for the election of members of parliament underlined the role of Thailand's national elections in the negotiation of relations between Bangkok and its hinterlands.
- Attention to the significance of economic and social issues in provincial Thailand and to national elections as exercises in national integration will be basic to any understanding of the results of the 24 March 2019 polls.

** Coordinator, Thailand Studies Programme, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute*

INTRODUCTION

Part I of this study of the approach of the 2019 Thai elections in the Upper Southern province of Trang argued that, as of mid-January, both political actors and others there viewed the coming polls as both meaningful and competitive.¹ While those actors recognized the constraints that the current military dictatorship would impose on the campaign that lay ahead, they did not see the elections as a mere stunt intended to legitimate and perpetuate the Thai Army's domination of politics and of the state. Other residents of the province concurred with members of its political class on this point. Their attitudes reflected a widely shared, fundamental, and straightforward belief in elections as a means of choosing governments to address their society's problems.

This second part of the study considers economic and social issues on the minds of people in Trang as they looked ahead to the 2019 parliamentary elections. It draws, again, on conversations during a period that predated the release of the royal decree on elections on 23 January. That decree made it possible for the Election Commission to schedule the coming polls for 24 March, and to organize the official registration of candidates during the first week of February. Candidate registration would effectively trigger the start of formal campaigning. Mid-January was thus perhaps the last interval during which it was possible to discuss with people in Trang the issues that concerned them as the era of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta that had governed Thailand for nearly five years approached its end, but before the inevitable hurly-burly of the coming campaign began to colour their perspectives on those issues.²

The contests of democracy *versus* dictatorship and Red *versus* Yellow are very much at stake in Thailand's 24 March 2019 elections. At the same time, as the campaign for those elections approached, political actors and others in Trang were concerned about the price of rubber and the province's level of "development". The emerging electoral landscape reflected the importance of ideals, above all relating to social equity, in the politics of post-Thaksin Thailand. And parties' early positioning for the campaign to come found them negotiating the timeless question of how Bangkok and provincial Thailand related to each other.

WORRIES ABOUT THE ECONOMY

Trang's Constituency 1 included the province's Mueang District and thus its administrative and commercial hub with its distinctive tuk-tuks. In mid-January a number of those tuk-tuks were already moving through the streets with placards on their sides advertising the Thai Raksa Chat Party's prospective candidate in the constituency. Next to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's initials, those placards bore the candidate's name and picture and read, "The economy is unbearable. I volunteer to fix it".³

The emphasis on the economy in this first salvo of the campaign for the 2019 elections was likely to appeal to the inhabitants of Trang for two reasons. One concerned the province's most important agricultural commodity. The second concerned the broader perception that Trang was a developmental laggard.

In 2015, out of a total provincial area of 3.0 *rai*, 1.8 million *rai* were devoted to agriculture in Trang.⁴ Of that latter area, in the following crop year Pará rubber⁵ accounted for 1.55 million *rai*, and African oil palm⁶ and rice for 173,000 and 12,000 *rai*, respectively.⁷ Significant volatility— from week to week and month to month — characterizes the price of rubber. In mid-January 2010, according to Thai Rubber Association data, that price stood at 96 baht per kilogram, and it reached 157 baht per kilogram on 14 January 2011.⁸ Just half a decade later, rubber sold in Trang for 35 baht per kilogram on 14 January 2016. Such low prices turned “a hundred [baht] for three kilos” into a metaphor for hardship.⁹ And while 2017 had brought improvement in the price fetched by the commodity on which the economy of the province depended so overwhelmingly, to 84 baht per kilogram on 15 January 2017, it was back in the 45-47 baht per kilogram range in mid-January 2018.

In mid-January of this year, again according to Thai Rubber Association data, the price of rubber on the Trang market stood at 42 to 43 baht per kilogram, lower than at the same time last year.¹⁰ Whether farmers in fact received this price was another matter; two of the most prominent Democrat Party politicians in the province suggested that a price of 30 baht per kilogram reflected the reality that producers faced.¹¹ Whatever the case, the reality of low rubber prices, more than any other concern, shaped discussions of the approaching elections in the province.¹² The awareness on the part of leading members of political parties that the central issue in the coming campaign would be that of *pakthong*,¹³ or livelihood, reflected this concern.¹⁴

The Democrat Party’s prospective candidate in Constituency 1 estimated that households in the province had seen their incomes fall by 10,000 baht per month in the past four years. Unsurprisingly, he sought to associate falling prices for both rubber and oil palm, as well as the widespread indebtedness in which low prices had resulted, with the premiership of NCPO head General Prayut Chan-ocha. At the same time, cultivators in the province could not expect a return to rubber prices of 180 baht per kilogram, he acknowledged; their earning 50 or 60 baht would relieve their current distress.

Even while asserting that voters in Trang understood that the price of rubber was in the end a matter of market forces, of supply and demand, the candidate accepted the Democrats’ need to fight the coming campaign in the province on economic issues as well as on the storied ideals of their party.¹⁵ This posture was one of unmistakable defensiveness. Gestures toward blaming the NCPO for low rubber prices notwithstanding, the Democrat Party represented the *de facto* incumbents in Trang at a time of economic hardship in the province. And the Thai Raksa Chat Party, with its placards calling attention to the state of Trang’s economy, was not alone among the Democrats’ challengers in understanding the political opening that now presented itself. The provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party¹⁶ stressed that voters were more concerned with their livelihoods and the state of the economy than with personalities, or *tua bukkhon*;¹⁷ the latter term served as code for Democrat hero, Trang native, and former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai. Similarly, the astute and energetic long-time former mayor of Trang Municipality — now the prospective candidate of the Phalang Thongthin Thai Party¹⁸ in Constituency 1 — equated greater voter concern over economic issues with diminished appeal on the part of the Democrats and their brand of politics.¹⁹

The challenge that lower rubber prices presented to the Democrat Party, long hegemonic not only in Trang but across much of Upper Southern Thailand, had a further dimension.

The party's prospective candidate in Constituency 1 tacitly acknowledged that the high prices of the recent past remembered by so many voters were almost certainly aberrational.²⁰ But had those voters, the inhabitants of a province whose economy remained so dependent on a single commodity, come to expect a certain level of prosperity, even as the forces with the potential to jolt that prosperity had grown increasingly complex? Was this Trang's own "middle-income trap"? And what of the local political implications of that complexity?

The rise of rubber cultivation in and of exports from Northeast Thailand represented one change in the market environment in which the Southern Thai rubber sector operated.²¹ A second change, one of greater significance, related to China. In the decade or so after the turn of the century, Thai rubber exports had become heavily reliant, perhaps over-reliant, on the Chinese market.²² Not only were some of Thailand's neighbours on the Southeast Asian Mainland now increasingly able to serve that market, but, even more importantly, Chinese demand for rubber had softened.²³

It would not be clear until voters went to the polls whether the economic distress resulting from lower rubber prices dented the Democrat Party's sustained domination of Southern Thai politics. If it did, however, that change in the party's fortunes — and indeed in the established national political landscape — would owe in part to the growing China factor in Southeast Asia. This dynamic numbered among the many others playing out in Trang as the 2019 elections approached.

Those other political dynamics included a widely shared perception that Trang was a developmental laggard. This perception joined low rubber prices in giving economic issues importance in the approach of the 2019 elections.

As across Thailand, so in Trang does the idea of *kanphatthana* or "development" remain a national shibboleth even seventy years after it first gained currency during the 1957-1963 dictatorship of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat.²⁴ Invocations of the term work on both concrete and abstract levels. In mid-January, people from a variety of walks of life in Trang echoed the comments of the New Alternative Party's prospective candidate in Constituency 1, who decried the lack of development and change in the province and argued that economic progress required political change.²⁵ Such comments often took the form of comparisons with other Thai provinces — above all Krabi just to the north, with its world-famous tourism sector, and Suphanburi, the home province of the late Prime Minister Banhan Sinlapa-acha, in Central Thailand.²⁶ Those comments also often targeted the Democrat Party and even Chuan Leekpai himself.

Criticisms of the Democrats on developmentalist grounds took "soft" and "hard" forms. The former essentially cast the party and its local leaders as inactive — neglectful of or uninterested in economic matters and taking advantage of the fact that for decades voters in the province had no political alternative to the Democrat Party.²⁷ Or, as one man remarked, Trang was his own, but when he was premier, Chuan did nothing for it.²⁸

Many critics — again, with a nod to neighbouring Krabi — noted the potential for a larger tourism sector in Trang, with its coastline and islands.²⁹ And this issue of economic diversification also lay at the core of the hard form of criticism of the Democrats concerning Trang's putative underdevelopment. People in the province who advanced that form of criticism accused the party not of inactivity on the economic front but rather of culpability

in the underdevelopment of the province. The party, this line of criticism went, sought to “freeze” the provincial economy, to keep it dependent on the production of primary products.³⁰ The Democrats feared that economic diversification would weaken their hold on Trang.³¹ Regardless of the actual interests of the people of the province, this view suggested, the party considered underdevelopment, the preservation of a largely agricultural economy, and a resultant lack of economic diversification as the best guarantees, first, of the interests of those with whom it was aligned there, and, second, of the retention of its electoral base.³²

Early March would see the dissolution of the Thai Raksa Chat Party. It would not in the end contest the coming elections. But the placards that its prospective candidate in Constituency 1 had had mounted on tuk-tuks even before the Election Commission scheduled the polls spoke to concerns very much on the minds of people in Trang as they discussed the coming elections. In turn, those discussions bespoke a belief that elected members of parliament had the power to address such concerns.

SOCIAL ISSUES

Prajak Kongkirati argues that, since 2006 and the *coup d'état* of that year, there has been a reshaping of Thai electoral politics; the struggle of ideals has grown more intense.³³ What Prajak notes at the level of the political party has had an analogous effect throughout Thai society. This effect has worked in complementarity with what one long-time observer of Thailand calls “the nationalization of political space”³⁴ in the two decades since the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra.

In a context like that of Trang, these developments have had in a certain irony. In mid-January 2019, the Democrat Party prepared for an election campaign in which its traditional emphasis on unchanging ideals³⁵ would have to share space in its messaging with a focus on matters of livelihood. At the same moment, however, that party confronted a provincial electorate with a heightened interest in political and social ideals. This interest manifested itself in a variety of ways. On the one hand, in explaining what he stood for, the New Alternative Party’s ebullient candidate in Constituency 1 offered repeated, rather extravagant, proclamations that he is an “idealist” and a “street-side fighter” for the ordinary people of Trang.³⁶ On the other hand, a sober and practical retired shop-keeper sees “justice” and “inequality” as the only issues whose importance ought to rival that of the economy in the electoral campaign ahead.³⁷

Diagnoses, such as those discussed above, of Trang’s underdevelopment and accusations of Democrat complicity in “freezing” the economy of the province in order to protect the party’s own interests implied, of course, a broader sociological critique. The critique advanced by the Trang leadership of the Future Forward Party was, in contrast, explicit. It exemplified the way in which rather abstract ideals framed with reference to national politics might resonate with social concerns in the provinces, whose voters would determine the make-up of Thailand’s next parliament.

It was the Future Forward Party’s commitment to serving the truly disadvantaged and neglected and to combatting social inequality that had led its prospective candidate in Constituency 3 to sign on with it.³⁸ While the party prepared to stress those issues in waging

its national campaign, the candidate's own commitment to addressing them derived from his experiences in Trang, and on other parts of the West Coast of South Thailand. The determination of Future Forward leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit and secretary-general *Piyabut* Saengkanokkul to make Thai democracy secure also appealed to the candidate. The NCPO dictatorship had practiced unforgivable authoritarianism. Its leaders lacked the maturity needed to govern. But his experience of social realities on the West Coast meant that, in his own determination to make democracy secure, the party's candidate in Constituency 3 focused on opposing not the NCPO but rather the Democrats. Under their hegemony, "the reality of Trang"³⁹ was — he asserted — nothing but patronage, or clientelism.

The ideals and social vision expressed by members of the Future Forward Party's Trang leadership team shared these same parallel referents — national politics and provincial society. Their critiques of privilege and patronage had a dual nature. They took aim at those who had long dominated Trang politics as much as at those in power in Bangkok during a time of military dictatorship.⁴⁰

In January 2019, the Future Forward Party was poised to launch a campaign that would see it field candidates in each of the country's 350 parliamentary constituencies.⁴¹ Yet the evidence from Trang suggested the need to understand the nationalization of political life — and of concern with the great issues of democracy, dictatorship, Red, Yellow, and royalism — in post-Thaksin Thailand in direct relation to the localization of ideals and social commitments.

THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION

There was another respect in which the approach of the 2019 Thai elections in Trang Province spoke to the significance of those polls in national perspective. Each time that Thai voters cast their ballots to elect a parliament, they and their country confront the most important factor in Thailand's modern history and in its political, social, economic, cultural and administrative affairs. The polls of 24 March will represent another round of confrontation with that factor: the relationship between Bangkok, "the world's pre-eminent primate city",⁴² on the one hand, and the Thai provinces on the other.

The level of interest in the coming elections evident in Trang in mid-January and the shared belief that the polls had relevance to the province's problems reflected the established — but all too rarely recognized — role of parliamentary democracy as in its own right a feature of Thailand's national integration.⁴³ As the 2019 elections approached, two specific sets of developments highlighted that role.

The first related to national parties' cultivation of a provincial presence and, with that presence, of an organic means of appealing to voters. The Upper South's dominant Democrat Party has of course long since established a presence in Trang. In the case of that party, voters' repeated invocations of native son "Prime Minister Chuan"⁴⁴ and of his having served as the country's chief of government on two separate occasions⁴⁵ highlight the national standing of a party with strong provincial roots. For other parties, however, the situation different. And they addressed the practical question of how to graft themselves onto Trang roots in a range of ways.

The NCPO's Phalang Pracharat Party, for example, chose to run in Constituency 1 a retired civil servant who, while a native of Phatthalung, had earned considerable local stature through his long service in Trang. Its candidate in Constituency 3 was an established provincial-level politician who had access, through his mother, to a vote-canvassing operation originally developed to support the Democrats.⁴⁶ In tapping the former mayor of Trang Municipality as its candidate in Constituency 1, the Phalang Thongthin Thai Party not only associated itself with a widely respected local figure but also gained access to the "Trang River Team" that had served as his electoral organization in municipal contests.⁴⁷ The Thai Raksa Chat Party would run in that same constituency a man known to the party's backers outside the province — including Thaksin himself — for his previous activities in support of the Red Shirt cause. But, perhaps more importantly, that candidate was also a man who could deploy local manpower in electioneering and advise the party — its leadership unfamiliar with Trang — on the selection of other candidates to run there.⁴⁸ At the Yellow end of the political spectrum, the New Alternative Party chose as its candidate in Constituency 1 in the 2019 polls a man who had taken a leading role in the protests held in Trang in favour of ousting Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra a half-decade earlier.⁴⁹

The Future Forward Party's approach to this same problem — how to embed its campaign in provincial society — appears to have attracted little attention from observers of the party. After announcing his plan to found the new party, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit chose Trang as the destination of his first visit to provincial Thailand, in late April 2018. In a frank admission of his relative unfamiliarity with Thai realities outside Bangkok, he embraced the chance to understand provincial problems, and really to meet local people, while on the brief visit.⁵⁰

By early 2019, the Future Forward Party had some 600 members in the province,⁵¹ and well established leadership structures operating at the provincial and constituency levels. How had it established this presence in provincial Thailand in the intervening months? Like other parties contesting the 2019 elections, the Future Forward Party tapped into local social resources as it worked to establish a presence in provincial Thailand. In Trang, as across the country, the resources on which this new party drew comprised above all of a network of activists who had as students been members of the Student Federation of Thailand.⁵² Thanathorn had himself participated in that organization during his undergraduate years; he had won election as its deputy secretary-general in 2000.⁵³ Several other former members of the federation joined him as leading figures in the new party, not least in its effort to establish a provincial infrastructure.⁵⁴

The Future Forward Party's reliance on a network of former members of the Student Federation of Thailand in embedding itself in provincial society also spoke to the second set of developments that highlighted the importance of the 2019 elections as an exercise in national integration. One member of the party's leadership team in Trang noted that the idea of establishing a political party had for some time percolated in the provincial activist network of former members of the federation.⁵⁵ And, while it is surely unfair to brand the Future Forward Party nothing but the electoral vehicle of that network, the fact that that is precisely part of what the party is speaks to a significant and unprecedented aspect of Thailand's 2019 polls.

Proportional representation first became a feature of Thai parliaments with the promulgation of the country's reformist 1997 constitution. Its original goals included drawing "more respectable personalities into politics" and "undermin[ing] the proliferation of small parties, so reducing levels of political instability".⁵⁶ The specific means to these ends would be the creation of "party lists", from which voters would elect candidates not contesting constituency races by casting a second ballot indicating their party preferences.

The NCPO's 2017 constitution introduced a new system of "mixed-member proportional representation" in elections for the lower house of the Thai parliament.⁵⁷ Its ends are rather different. Voters will now cast a single ballot, for a candidate in one of 350 constituency races. But there will be no second ballot. The party preference ostensibly reflected in that vote at the constituency level will also count in the allocation of the remaining 150 seats in the lower house among parties contesting the election, with members drawn from party lists. However, party-list members of parliament will not be drawn off those lists in strict proportion to the votes that parties have received in constituency races. Rather, parties are to seat contingents of party-list members of parliament equal in number to that proportion of 150 *minus* the number of their elected constituency members.⁵⁸

The implications of this system are three-fold. First, it will, as intended and as has been widely noted, weaken large parties like the Thaksinite Phuea Thai Party.⁵⁹ Second, it has created an incentive for innumerable parties to field candidates in as many of the 350 constituency races as possible, in order to accumulate votes to elect one or a handful of their party-list candidates to parliament — even if they win few constituency races or even none.⁶⁰ Third, this same incentive has led to the establishment of parties serving as the electoral vehicles of particular interest groups — meant, apparently to give those interest groups a voice in the Thai parliament. This third implication of the introduction of mixed-member proportional representation offers those parties the chance to secure that voice even if they are not able to secure enough votes in any single constituency to win a constituency seat. The new system thus may have the unintended purpose of integrating supporters of various sectoral groups from across Thailand through elections.

In mid-January, prospective parliamentary candidates in Trang affirmed their determination to win in the constituencies that they were to contest, rather than simply to collect votes for their parties and thus help secure for them party-list seats in parliament.⁶¹ On the other hand, the Thai Raksa Chat Party's formidable candidate in Constituency 1 might fail to break the Democrats' hold on the seat. But he could be confident that enough voters in Trang remained determined to support Thaksin that his candidacy would help win party-list seats for his party and thus give Phuea Thai Party members of parliament additional allies in parliament belonging to Thai Raksa Chat.⁶² Yellow or pro-junta elements could take a similar approach. No fewer than sixteen different parties contacted the man who had by mid-January decided to run as the New Alternative Party's candidate in that same constituency.⁶³ His candidacy faced very long odds. But his leading role in the demonstrations in Trang against the Yingluck government would serve that party, whose founder and leader had played a similar role at the provincial level in Central Thailand,⁶⁴ not only — as noted above — in its effort to embed itself locally but also in its goal of accumulating votes toward one or more party-list seats in parliament.

Similarly, the former mayor of Trang Municipality might not win the seat for Constituency 1. Nevertheless, his local stature assured that he would win a significant number of votes

for a party, Phalang Thongthin Thai, that was grounded in a national association of elected local government officials and whose purpose was to further their interest in meaningful administrative and fiscal devolution in Thailand.⁶⁵ Also playing the sectoral game that the new party-list system made possible was the National Farmers Council.⁶⁶ It had sought to recruit candidates in Trang, with a frank lack of interest in their ability actually to win at the constituency level, to run under the auspices of a party intended to give it a voice in parliament through the presence of one or more party-list members.⁶⁷ Among sectoral groups, even Red Shirt community radio stations would have their party. The Phalang Puangchon Thai Party — along with Phuea Thai and Thai Raksa Chat, yet another party on the Thaksinite “team” — opened its Trang branch, the first in the South, on 11 January.⁶⁸ It announced its prospective candidates in the province’s three districts on that same day. His party planning to field candidates in all 350 constituencies in Thailand, its leader remarked to the author on his arrival in Trang that morning that it was the new electoral system that created opportunities for parties like his.⁶⁹ The small, relatively unknown, party could, in other words, draw enough votes in constituency races across the country to secure one or more party-list seats in an electoral system designed to discriminate against a large party like its Phuea Thai ally.

The NCPO dictatorship’s modification of the party-list system introduced to Thailand with the promulgation of the 1997 constitution had purposes diametrically opposed to the original purposes of the system. But, in creating electoral openings for parties that lacked the geographical concentrations of supporters necessary to win constituency seats in parliament, this modification had a perhaps unforeseen potential effect. It might integrate into Thailand’s Bangkok-centred political system voters from across the country to support specific interests or priorities in parliament. Rather than political atomization, that is, it had the potential to deliver a new form of national integration.

CONCLUSION

Krasae — strong currents of public opinion with logics all their own⁷⁰ — are a defining feature of electoral politics in Thailand. In mid-January, the *krasae* that would influence voters in the province when they went to the polls in the coming elections were still impossible to foresee. The next two months would see a wave of determination not to vote yet again for “Boss Chuan”⁷¹ and the Democrats among people in certain parts of the province. Does this sentiment reflect the usual griping, or will the former premier’s reputation and the Democrats’ campaign operation finally fail to work their usual magic in 2019?

Those months would also bring the dissolution of the Thai Raksa Chat Party, the leading Red or Thaksinite electoral vehicle to enter the elections in the province. Will that development drive support to the Future Forward Party, which the *krasae* in urban Thailand now seem increasingly to favour, in Trang, too? And how will votes cast in the province contribute to other parties’ competition for party-list seats in the new Thai parliament? All this remains unclear.

What was, however, clear even in mid-January was that the currents of public opinion that influenced the 2019 elections would originate, not least, in the concerns of Trang’s voters about economic and social issues. Similarly, the decisions that those voters made when

casting their ballots would reflect the success of the parties that they supported in linking provincial and national concerns.

No Thai province is “typical” or “representative”, but votes cast in provincial Thailand determine the composition of the country’s parliaments. The study of Thailand’s March 2019 elections and indeed the interpretation of their imminent results demand careful, sustained consideration of contexts like that of Trang, South Thailand.

¹ See Michael J. Montesano, “The Approach of Elections in Trang, South Thailand, 2019 — Part I: Context and Competition”, *ISEAS Perspective* 13/2019, 13 March 2019 (https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_13.pdf, downloaded 13 March 2019).

² The notes to this study cite by name only candidates in the 2019 parliamentary elections and former members of parliament. Both parts of the study cite all other, unnamed, informants with brief descriptions of their occupational status and with identifying numbers, indicated between parentheses in the notes that follow. The author again 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.

³ That is, “*Setthakit yamyae asa kaekhai*”; author’s observation, Trang Center Point Market, 12 January 2019. The candidate was Rat Phuklang, one of the most prominent Red Shirt leaders in the province.

⁴ Trang Provincial Statistical Office and National Statistical Office, *Trang Provincial Statistical Report 2560/2017*, “Table 11.1. Land Utilization: 2011 – 2015” and “Table 11.2. Type of Farm Holding Land: 2010 - 2015”

(<http://trang.nso.go.th/images/attachments/article/285/สรวม11.สถิติเกษตร%20และประมง.pdf>, downloaded 13 March 2019), pp. 91-92. One *rai* equals 0.16 hectare.

⁵ That is, *Hevea brasiliensis*.

⁶ That is, *Elaeis guineensis*.

⁷ Trang Provincial Statistical Office and National Statistical Office 2560/2017, “Table 11.3. Planted Area of Major Rice, Harvested Area, Production and Yield per Rai by Type of Rice and District: Crop Year 2016” and “Table 11.6. Planted Area of Fruit Trees and Tree Crops, Harvested Area, Production and Yield per Rai by Type of Fruit Trees and Tree Crops: Crop Year 2016”, pp. 93, 96.

⁸ Thai Rubber Association, “*Rakha yang nai talat thongthin*” [Rubber prices on local markets] (<http://www.thainr.com/en/?detail=pr-local>, downloaded 13 March 2019), from which the data in the rest of this paragraph also come. One expects that, in practice, farmers received prices lower than those quoted here.

⁹ Somchai Losathaphonphiphit, former four-time Democrat Party member of parliament for Trang, Yantakhao, 15 January 2019. The expression that he used was “*sam lo roi*”. Somchai also recalled the price of rubber in Trang reaching 202 baht per kilogram for two consecutive days at one point during the 2008-2011 premiership of Abhisit Vejjajiva.

¹⁰ Ibid. For longer-term perspective on the place of rubber in Trang, its economy and society, see Michael J. Montesano, “The Commerce of Trang, 1930s-1990s: Thailand’s National Integration in Social-Historical Perspective” (doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1998), esp. Chapters Four and Ten.

¹¹ Sukit Atthopakon, Democrat candidate in Constituency 1, Trang, 14 January 2019, and Somchai, 15 January 2019. The margin of difference between these price levels seems implausible, in the context of the operation of the rubber market in Southern Thailand.

¹² An ambitious entrepreneur who had returned home to the province some seven years ago, after two decades in Bangkok, complained that the collapse in rubber prices had led in turn to a steep drop in consumer spending; entrepreneur (2), Trang, 15 January 2019. A woman whom that same drop had pushed into a low-level supervisory role in the service sector after her mobile prepared-food business failed spoke of widespread indebtedness among the inhabitants of Trang; customer service supervisor (16), Trang, 14 January 2019. Rat Phuklang, the businessman whose Thai Raksa Chat candidacy in Constituency 1 the placards on Trang's tuk-tuks advertised, asserted that the annual income from his rubber lands had fallen from 3.0-4.0 million baht to less than 300,000 baht, and from his oil palm lands from 4.0 million baht to only 400,000 baht. His hotel in Trang town was, he reported, barely breaking even; Rat Phuklang, Trang, 15 January 2019.

¹³ Literally, "mouth [and] belly".

¹⁴ Among those to invoke this term were a member of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (9), Trang, 12 January 2019, and Pripamot Loetworaphat, Trang, 14 January 2019. The latter was the prospective candidate in Constituency 1 of the New Alternative Party (*Phak thanglueak mai*) in the 2019 elections.

¹⁵ Sukit, 14 January 2019. On the Democrats' *udomkan* or ideals and the use made of them in electioneering, see Marc Askew, *Performing Political Identity: The Democrat Party in Southern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkwood Books, 2008), pp. 221 ff.

¹⁶ That is, *Phak anakhot mai*.

¹⁷ Member of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (9), 12 January 2019.

¹⁸ That is, "Thai Local Power Party".

¹⁹ Chali Kang-im, Trang, 11 January 2019.

²⁰ Those prices had surely helped fuel the astonishing sprawl of Trang town in the past two or three decades; on that sprawl, retired merchant (5), Trang, 12 January 2019, and retired senior civil servant (21), Trang, 15 January 2019. Large commercial outlets — including Big C, Makro, and Tesco Lotus — had opened on what had been the peri-urban fringe. A massive Robinson shopping complex, with a vast parking lot, now occupied a site on the road to Phatthalung. The complex stood on land adjacent to the site of the provincial monument to Phraya Ratsadanupradit, the Penang Chinese credited with introducing Pará rubber to what is now South Thailand during his service to King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910) in administering the West Coast of Peninsular Siam; see Wirat Thiraphanmethi, *Phraya Ratsadanupradit (Kho Sim Bi Na Ranong) phetnam nueng khong krasuang mahatthai* [*Phraya Ratsadanupradit (Kho Sim Bi Na Ranong): A Sparkling Diamond of the Ministry of Interior*] (Bangkok, 1993 [?]); and Jennifer W. Cushman, *Family and State: The Formation of a Sino-Thai Tin Mining Dynasty* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991).

²¹ Retired civil servant (21), 15 January 2019. Also see Randy Thanthong-Knight, "The Battle to Win Thailand's Election Starts in Bruised Farms", *Bloomberg*, 10 March 2019 (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-09/distressed-rubber-lands-could-upend-thailand-s-electoral-map>, downloaded 14 March 2019).

²² This point draws on ongoing research undertaken by Richard Doner; personal communication 22 January 2019.

²³ Doner, personal communication, 22 January 2019; retired civil servant (21), 15 January 2019; and Thanthong-Knight, "The Battle to Win Thailand's Election Starts in Bruised Farms". A related trade in wood from felled stands of rubber trees and in the manufacture of goods from that wood had also come to have some importance in Trang in recent decades. Largely dependent on the China market, it, too, had long been in a slump by January 2019; entrepreneur (2), 15 January 2019, and investor (6), Trang, 11 January 2019.

²⁴ See Harvey Demaine, "Kanphatthana: Thai Views of Development", pp. 93-114 in Mark Hobart and Robert H. Taylor, editors, *Context, Meaning, and Power in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1986).

²⁵ Pripamot, 14 January 2019. Others to invoke Trang's insufficient "development" included entrepreneur (2), 11 January 2019; investor (6), 11 January 2019; motorcycle-

taxi driver (7), Trang, 12 January 2019; business manager (3), Trang, 15 January 2019; and merchant in central Trang town (23), Trang, 16 January 2019.

²⁶ Investor (6), 11 January 2019; retired civil servant (21), 15 January 2019; former Bangkok office worker retired in her native Trang (11), Trang, 12 January 2019; motorcycle taxi driver (13), Trang, 12 January 2019; and entrepreneur, 15 January 2019. On the “development” of Suphanburi, see Nishizaki Yoshinori, *Political Authority and Provincial Identity in Thailand: The Making of Banharn-buri* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2011). Banhan served as Thai premier during 1995-1996. Businessmen in Trang had in fact regarded the boom in Krabi’s tourism sector with wonder and envy for nearly thirty years; author’s interview with Somphon Chianwichai, hotel owner and founding member of the Trang Provincial Chamber of Commerce, Trang, 23 December 1992. By early 2019, however, some people in Trang had even come to envy the “development” of such provinces as the nearby and notoriously sleepy Phatthalung and Buriram in the Lower Northeast; merchant in central Trang town (23), 16 January 2019, and entrepreneur (2), 15 January 2019, respectively.

²⁷ Motorcycle-taxi driver (4), Trang, 11 January 2019; business manager (3), 15 January 2019; motorcycle-taxi driver (7), 12 January 2019; retired Bangkok office worker (11), Trang, 12 January 2019; and Yotsawat Thiratwatthanakun, Trang, 15 January 2019. Yotsawat is the Future Forward Party parliamentary candidate in Constituency 3.

²⁸ “*Pen khong khao khao mai tham arai hai*”; motorcycle-taxi driver (15), Trang, 14 January 2019. Yotsawat, 15 January 2019, also faulted Chuan for being essentially a tricky lawyer, with no vision of social or economic change. Contrasting with this line of criticism of the Democrats was the support, above all among people in central precincts of Trang town, for the prospective Phalang Thongthin Thai candidate in Constituency 1. This support was grounded in Chali Kang-im’s record of “development” while serving as mayor of Trang Municipality between 1995 and 2012, and in explicit expressions of the conviction that it was time for an alternative to the Democrats; motorcycle-taxi driver (10), Trang, 12 January 2019; cooked-food vendor (17), Trang, 14 January 2019; and business manager (3), 15 January 2019. As for the response of the Democrats to this line of criticism, Sukit, 14 January 2019, countered, first, that criticism of Chuan for failing to secure government resources for Trang rested on a misunderstanding of budgetary processes and, second, that the Democrats had through the promotion of education in Trang developed *people* — rather than the mere roads that the building contractor Banhan Sinlapa-acha had secured for his native province of Suphanburi. Similarly, a motorcycle-taxi driver (13), 12 January 2019, argued that, unlike Banhan, Chuan had been prime minister of the whole country. Yes, Trang lagged in development, but its native-son prime minister had not devoted himself simply to channelling resources to his home province. And a retired civil servant (21), 15 January 2019, also noted Chuan’s commitment to education and public health — to ideals rather than to material thing.

²⁹ Investor (6), 11 January 2019; Pripamot, 14 January 2019; and retired civil servant (21), 15 January 2019.

³⁰ Investor (6), 11 January 2019.

³¹ Entrepreneur (2), 15 January 2019.

³² A member of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (9), 12 January 2019, argued that the Democrats viewed Southern Thai voters merely as a base for their power in parliament — that, in effect, they had a thoroughly cynical and utilitarian view of those voters’ loyalty.

³³ Thaikhan Trisuwan, “*Lueaktang 2562: chak ‘phaendinwai kanmueang’ thueng ‘ratthaprahan prasat sai’*” [The 2019 elections: from “political earthquake” to “sandcastle coup”], *BBC Thai*, 6 March 2019 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-47450862>, downloaded 15 March 2019).

³⁴ The author owes the term and the insight, as well as permission to use them, to Professor Takahashi Masaki, personal communication, 18 February 2019.

³⁵ Askew 2008, p. 295, observes that many of the Democrats' supporters lacked a precise understanding of what those *udomkan* actually were.

³⁶ Pripramot, 14 January 2019. The terms that he used were “*nak-udomkang*” and “*naksu khang thanon*”. This emphasis on making such sweeping declarations was curious, as Pripramot had been one of the leading figures in the months-long demonstrations in Trang in support of the efforts of Suthep Thueaksuban and the so called “People's Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State” to oust Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra in late 2013 and the first half of 2014. To the degree that he enjoyed name recognition in Trang, it was because of that role. Yet he placed little stress on it in outlining his political convictions. The leader of Pripramot's party had served as the leader of that same group in Nonthaburi Province, adjacent to Bangkok; “*Rachen' nang huana phak thangleak mai phrom nun 'Prayut'*” [“Rachen” becomes leader of New Alternative Party, ready to support “Prayut”], PPTV, 24 March 2018

(<https://www.pptvhd36.com/news/ประเด็นร้อน/78240>, downloaded 16 March 2019).

³⁷ Retired merchant (5), Trang, 12 January 2019. The words used were “*khwamyutitham*” and “*khwamlueamlam*”. The author has discussed events and conditions in Trang with this man for nearly three decades; never before had he spoken in such terms. On inequality as the context for the 24 March elections in Thailand, see Marwaan Macan-Markar and Yuda Masayuki, “The 99% Election: Thais Are Worse Off after Five Years of Military Rule”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 6 March 2019 (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Cover-Story/The-99-election-Thais-are-worse-off-after-five-years-of-military-rule>, downloaded 7 March 2019).

³⁸ Yotsawat, 15 January 2019, on which the rest of this paragraph draws. Part I of this study notes the Future Forward Party's attention to its relationships with the Thai-speaking Muslims of Trang and other parts of the Upper South. On Thanathorn's socio-political views, see Dave Kendall, “The Future According to Thanathorn: Exclusive Interview”, *Bangkok Post*, 3 March 2019. (<https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/1637454/the-future-according-to-thanathorn-exclusive-interview>, downloaded 16 March 2019).

³⁹ Yotsawat used “*khwampentrang*”.

⁴⁰ Members of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (9, 19), Trang, 12 and 15 January 2019.

⁴¹ Kendall, “The Future According to Thanathorn”.

⁴² Larry Sternstein, “The Growth of the Population of the World's Pre-Eminent ‘Primate City’: Bangkok at its Bicentenary”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* XV, 1 (March 1984): 43-68, p. 68.

⁴³ Consider — to cite just one, very early, example — the radio addresses that members of the very first Thai parliament gave on national radio, to introduce listeners around the country, and above all in Bangkok, to the provinces that they represented. These addresses are collected in *Pathakatha khong phu thaen ratsadon rueang saphap khong changwat tang tang* [Lectures of members of parliament on the state of the various provinces] (Osaka: Thai Club of Japan, 1996; facsimile of original 1935 edition).

⁴⁴ That is, “*Nayok Chuan*”.

⁴⁵ For example, motorcycle-taxi driver (4), 11 January 2019; retired merchant (5), Trang, 11 January 2019; and motor-cycle taxi driver (7), 12 January 2019.

⁴⁶ On these two candidates, see Part I of the present study.

⁴⁷ That is “*thim mae nam Trang*”; Chali Kang-im, 11 January 2019. On the role of “teams” in municipal- and provincial-level electoral politics in Thailand, see James Ockey, “Team Work: Shifting Patterns and Relationships in Local and National Politics in Thailand”, *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* XXXIII, 3 (November 2017): 562-600.

⁴⁸ Rat, 15 January 2019. On Rat's participation in Red Shirt demonstrations beyond Trang's borders, see “*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).

⁴⁹ Pripamot, 14 January 2019, and also note 36 above; member of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (8), Trang, 15 January 2019.

⁵⁰ “‘Thanathorn’ phu yuenchottang phak anakhot mai buk mueang Trang patti mueang luang thangkanmueang pak tai” [“Thanathorn”, founder of the Future Forward Party, invades Trang, strikes the political capital of the South], *MGR Online*, 28 April 2018 (<https://amp.mgronline.com/south/9610000034675.html>, downloaded 16 January 2019).

⁵¹ Member of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (8), Trang, 12 January 2019.

⁵² That is, “*Sahaphan nisit naksueksa haengprathet thai*”.

⁵³ “‘Thanathorn’ lan kenthahan pen watthanatham amnatniyom” [“Thanathorn” hollers, military conscription is authoritarian culture], *Isaan Record*, 28 April 2018 (<https://isaanrecord.com/2018/04/28/special-talk-thanathorn-kku/>, downloaded 16 March 2019).

⁵⁴ Needless to say, the nature of the local social resources to which a given part chooses to have access in its efforts to root itself in local contexts also shapes the party’s orientation toward issues of concern in that context; the discussion above of the localization of the Future Forward Party’s ideals is a case in point.

⁵⁵ Member of Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (8), 12 January 2019.

⁵⁶ Sombat Chantornvong, “The 1997 Constitution and the Politics of Electoral Reform”, pp. 203-222 in Duncan McCargo, editor, *Reforming Thai Politics* (Copenhagen: NIAS Publishing, 2002). pp. 203-204.

⁵⁷ See Dave Kendall, “Explainer: New rules for the House of Representatives”, *Bangkok Post*, 6 January 2019 (<https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/1605898/explainer-new-rules-for-the-house-of-representatives>, downloaded 16 March 2019), and also see Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, “The Effects of Thailand’s Proposed Electoral System”, *Thai Data Points*, 10 February 2016 (<https://www.thaidatapoints.com/>, downloaded 20 March 2019).

⁵⁸ Kendall, “Explainer: New Rules for the House of Representatives”.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Note that the nature of the mixed member proportional representation system makes it nearly impossible to estimate in advance how many votes a party will have to win nationally in order to gain a party-list seat in the next Thai parliament; the author is grateful to James Ockey and Allen Hicken for their counsel in his effort to understand this matter.

⁶¹ All the same, a member of the Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party (9), 12 January 2019, acknowledged that he had originally assumed that his party would enter parliament through the party list, rather than by winning constituency races. While he had come to be more optimistic, he nevertheless mentioned Future Forward’s chances for winning those latter races in Bangkok and parts of Central Thailand, not in Trang! In contrast, his party’s candidate in Constituency 3 affirmed, without being asked about it, that his goal in running was actually to win, not merely to help accumulate votes to secure party-list seats for Future Forward; Yotsawat, 15 January 2019.

⁶² Many observers saw its potential to scoop up votes for the party list without winning constituency races in the provinces in which it was running as the primary function of Thai Raksa Chat; see Mongkol Bangprapa, “Thai Raksa Chart ‘a way round EC rules’”, *Bangkok Post*, 6 February 2019 (<https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/1624150/thai-raksa-chart-a-way-round-ec-rules>, downloaded 20 March 2019); Aekarach Sattaburuth, “Princess-bid Execs May Resign”, *Bangkok Post*, 11 February 2019

(<https://m.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/1627002/princess-bid-execs-may-resign>, downloaded 20 March 2019); and Kas Chanwanpen, “Shinawatra Camp Faces Crisis”, *The Nation*, 13 February 2019

(<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/politics/30364021>, downloaded 20 March 2019). Motorcycle-taxi drivers (4, 7, 10, 15), Trang, 11, 12, 14 January 2019, noted their determination to vote for “Phuea Thai”. That party was, of course, not fielding candidates in Trang; Thai Raksa Chat’s task was thus to make clear to such voters that it was the Thaksinite choice in the province in the coming elections.

⁶³ Pripamot Loetworaphat, 14 January 2019

⁶⁴ See note 36 above.

⁶⁵ Chali Kang-im, 11 January 2019.

⁶⁶ That is *Sapha kaset haengchat*.

⁶⁷ Retired civil servant (21), 15 January 2019.

⁶⁸ Nopparat Chotikasemkul, “*Phak buangchon thai poet tua sakha phak thi trang pen changwat raek khong phak tai*” [Buangchon Thai Party opens branch in Trang, its first in the South], *66 khao det*, 11 January 2019 (<https://www.77kaoded.com/content/280126>, downloaded 20 March 2019).

⁶⁹ Nikhom Bunwiset, Trang airport, 11 January 2016. Also see “*Phak suea daeng ro siap ‘thai raksa chat’*” [Red Shirt parties wait to pierce “Thai Raksa Chat”], *MSN khao*, 24 October 2018 (<https://www.msn.com/th-th/news/politics/พรรคเสื้อแดง-รอเสียบ-ไทยรักษาชาติ/ar-BBOOzGn>, downloaded, 20 March 2019), and Nopparat, “*Phak puangchon thai poet tua sakha*”. The party’s candidate for prime minister was former Thai Army commander General Chaisit Shinawatra, Thaksin’s cousin.

⁷⁰ On the importance of *krasae* in Thai politics, see Duncan McCargo, *Politics and the Press in Thailand: Media Machinations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 76-78. In 2019, the operation of social media — and political parties’ use of those media — will doubtless have proved one more factor in the *krasae* that course through the campaign for the 24 March elections. The author thanks Patrick Jory for this observation; personal communication, 14 March 2019.

⁷¹ That is “*Nai hua Chuan*”.

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by:</p> <p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Malcolm Cook, Lee Poh Onn, Benjamin Loh and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
--	---	--