

comparisons, scholars interested in other Southeast Asian presses will also find the book of substantial interest.

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***Democracy, Development and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand.* By Daniel Arghiros.** Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon, 2001. 308pp.

During the past decade, the consolidation of liberal democracy in Thailand has witnessed the emergence of tightly contested electoral races around the country and colourful parliamentary debates in Bangkok — a far cry from the internal regime factionalism and occasional coups of the old “bureaucratic polity”. Scholarly interest in this political transformation has been considerable. Prodded by a suggestive 1990 journal article by Benedict Anderson and pioneered by the work of James Ockey, academic research on machine politics and local “godfathers” has evolved into something of a small cottage industry in Thai studies, as signalled by the recent publication of a volume on *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2000), edited by Ruth McVey, and the single-authored volume by Daniel Arghiros reviewed here.

Overall, scholars working on electoral politics in contemporary Thailand appear to concur on the broad outlines of a common narrative. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, it is clear that the foundations of Thailand’s highly centralized, bureaucratic, and authoritarian polity began to give way in the face of trends towards greater influence and activism on the part of local powerbrokers in Thai society. Sustained rapid economic growth led not only to the emergence of an urban middle class but also to the transformation of small-town rural landowners, money-lenders, and rice millers into provincial businessmen with increasingly diverse interests and linkages. Counter-insurgency programmes in the 1970s, moreover, enhanced the importance of local notables as state authorities in Bangkok sought to mobilize forces in “civic action” and paramilitary groups against the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and other radical forces in Thai society. Most importantly, the emergence in the 1980s of a political system in which regular, competitive elections began to determine

access to state offices, resources, and regulatory prerogatives, decisively shifted power from top military officers in Bangkok to elected politicians in the provinces.

Scholars have likewise concurred on the most striking consequence of this political transformation: the empowerment of provincial businessmen whose interests depend heavily on the state and whose monetary resources and social networks facilitate the successful mobilization of voters. Thus, the national parliament in Bangkok is filled with up-country machine politicians, businessmen, and gangsters, so-called “godfathers” (*chao pho*) whose local political machines and economic empires mediate the workings of democracy and the market in much of contemporary Thailand. Local elected positions, now enhanced by legislation mandating decentralization, are likewise dominated by small-town construction magnates, real-estate moguls, and criminal bosses, or professional politicians who serve as their clients. Elections are decided by a combination of clientelist, coercive, and monetary inducements and pressures, with machine mobilization through vote brokers (*hua khanaen*) rather than “public opinion” largely dictating the outcomes. Instead of military coups, or “civil society” and “social movements”, today political machines, clientelism, corruption, and gangsterism are the bread and butter — or rice and fish — of Thai politics and Thai political studies.

It is against this backdrop that Daniel Arghiros’ fine study of a district in Central Thailand should be understood. For while scholars have concurred on the macro-political causes and consequences of “democratization” in Thailand, they have done little to explore the micro-sociological conditions, and micro-political processes, of democracy in the country today. Arghiros’ *Democracy, Development and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand*, by contrast, provides a thoroughly researched, elegantly written, and carefully considered account of what “makes democracy work” in contemporary Thailand. Together with the McVey volume cited above, this book should be required reading for all students of local politics in modern Southeast Asia.

Arghiros’ study, which is based on more than two years of field-work in the central Thai plains district of Klang since 1989, focuses on the key institution of contemporary Thai politics: elections. Through the core chapters of the book, he describes elections for sub-district head (*kamnan*), the provincial council (PAO), and for parliament in Klang, paying close attention to the key candidates and their campaign networks, resources, and strategies. His account is a highly complex and nuanced one, involving local business interests, national political intrigues, and the involvement of Buddhist monks, illegal gambling

bosses, and ordinary villagers. Arghiros traces webs of patronage and interdependence within and beyond the locality with considerable skill and clarity. He also takes great care to examine the ways in which money, patron–client relations, and various coercive pressures combine to provide the key mechanisms for machine mobilization. The conventional wisdom of the Bangkok middle class — that the predominance of corrupt provincial politicians reflects the ignorance, short-term self-interestedness, and unpreparedness of Thai peasants in the face of democracy — is effectively demolished in this study. At last, we have an account of how machine politics works “on the ground” in Thailand, and by and large a very convincing account at that.

That said, Arghiros’ account suggests the need for further empirical inquiry and analytical evaluation on at least two counts. First of all, as suggested by the title of Chapter 5 (“It’s About Giving”), the book’s description of electoral politics tends to stress the downward flows of money and favours, and the “pressures” and “demands” working on local politicians, whether as patrons of specific individuals or as representatives of entire localities. Whilst Arghiros is careful to note the ways money, machinery, and various forms of coercion shape and constrain the choices available to voters (and to actual and prospective candidates for office), the picture is largely one of politicians under abiding pressure “from below” to deliver particularistic goods to various clients and constituencies.

Insofar as his portrait is accurate, then Thai democracy should be understood as “responsive” to popular demands, albeit demands that are organized in a certain fashion to make other kinds of demands unimaginable and unattainable. Yet Arghiros’ attentiveness to these dynamics is fairly matched by his corresponding neglect of the dynamics of domination, extraction, and exploitation at work in Thai politics today. Individual politicians, it is clear, derive some benefits from control over state office, resources, and regulatory powers, but their importance is understated in favour of a more nuanced picture of these politicians’ culturally embedded ambitions for enhanced prestige and status in Thai society. “Corruption” is largely understood here in terms of amounts skimmed off the top, rather than a more complex web of monopoly and protection rents and cartel-like privileges which shape and constrain relations between classes and the very workings of “the market”. In short, whether viewed in terms of “capital accumulation” and “class domination” or “rent extraction” and

“interest articulation”, Arghiros’ study leaves unanswered fundamental questions about the role of individual politicians and electoral politics as a whole in reshaping Thai society since the 1980s.

In addition, Arghiros’ focus on a specific village, sub-district, and district determines the strengths and weaknesses of the study as a whole. On the one hand, the book succeeds in tracing the linkages between the different levels of state power from a single locality to the parliament in Bangkok, and his attentiveness to possibilities for change over the course of the 1990s allows for a measure of diachronic perspective. On the other hand, the absence of a point of comparison to Klang limits Arghiros’ capacity to extrapolate from his single-case findings. Thus, he tends to generalize from his case study without pointing to possible “axes” of variation in the pattern of machine politics observed across different localities. The local presence of a Brick Manufacturers’ Association, for example, is shown to be significant in the Ban Thung sub-district of Klang, but Arghiros does not suggest how we should understand the structure of the local economy to shape electoral politics in a systematic or structural fashion.

Perhaps these minor limitations of Arghiros’ fine-grained and masterfully recounted case study are simply those of Thai studies writ large. After all, for many years, Thais and Thai specialists alike have tended to approach the study of Thailand through the prism of exceptionalism rather than that of comparative analysis. Thus, the study of contemporary Thai politics remains largely innocent of the revisionist arguments, methodological innovations, and critical insights to be found in the abundant literature on clientelism, corruption, *mafia*, and machine politics in such locations as southern Italy, the United States, or Thailand’s unacknowledged twin in Southeast Asia: the Philippines. Today, instead of viewing *chao pho* and “money politics” as intriguing peculiarities or unique pathologies of Thai society, scholars would do well to understand them as enduring features of democracy, which deserve to be studied further through a close-up, critical, and comparative lens.

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