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## Local Government in Thailand: A case study Nankonratchasima Province

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### Introduction

The province was under a governor who was assisted by one or more deputy governors, an assistant governor, and officials from various central ministries, which, except for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, maintained field staffs in the provinces and districts. The governor supervised the overall administration of the province, maintained law and order, and coordinated the work of ministerial field staffs. These field officials carried out the policies and programs of their respective ministries as line administrators and also served as technical advisers to the governor. Although these officials were responsible to the governor in theory, in practice they reported to their own ministries in Bangkok and maintained communication with other province-level and district-level field staffs. The governor also was responsible for district and municipal administration, presiding over a provincial council composed of senior officials from the central ministries. The council, which served in an advisory capacity, met once a month to transmit central government directives to the district administrators. Apart from the council, an elected provincial assembly exercised limited legislative oversight over provincial affairs. District administration was under the charge of a district officer who was appointed by the minister of interior and reported to the provincial governor. Larger districts could be divided into two or more subdistricts, each under an assistant district officer. The district or the subdistrict was usually the only point of contact between the central authority and the populace; the central government had no appointed civil service officials below this level. The district officer's duties as overseer of the laws and policies of the central government were extensive. He supervised the collection of taxes, kept basic registers and vital statistics, registered schoolchildren and aliens, administered local elections at the commune and village levels, and coordinated the activities of field officials from Bangkok. Additionally, the district officer convened monthly meetings of the headmen of the communes and villages to inform them of government policies and instruct them on the implementation of these policies. As the chief magistrate of the district, he also was responsible for arbitration in land disputes; many villagers referred these disputes to the district officer rather than to a regular court.

All Constitution of Thailand aims to foster decentralization the development of local government in order to allow Thai people to participate in determining the direction for their own local development. Thus all local government organizations, for example, provincial administrative organizations, tambon administrative organizations, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and the Pattaya City administration, have the additional constitutional mandate to devise plans for decentralization and to receive budgets to implement those plans. All local government organizations must have the capacity in all areas to support decentralization. This is essential for improving the quality of life of the people.

Provincial administration is a part of the country's administrative machines, allowing local communities a certain level of autonomy. The local powers are under the state powers; the local administrations are not independent bodies; they are under the national laws, set up for the benefit and well-being of the members of the community. Decentralization is, amongst others, the fundamental principle of the local government to empower people of self-government according to their will. They will elect their representatives (members of the local assemblies or local administrators) to administer the local affairs instead of them with expectation of their better lives as well as protecting local interests and the country's as a whole. Therefore, all the local governmental organizations shall enjoy autonomy in laying down policies for their governance, administration, finance, and shall have powers and duties particularly on their own part. Members of the local assemblies or local administrators shall hold office for the period of four years." There are currently 5 kinds of Thailand's local (provincial) administration.

1) **Provincial Administration Organization** is the largest body of Thailand's provincial administration; each province has one, except Bangkok. The PAO covers the area of the whole province, set up with an

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aim to manage and provide public services within its province, helping the works of municipalities and the sub-district administrations; it does so by collaborating with other administrations within the same province to avoid power redundancy and appropriate budget allocation. Provincial Administrative organization (PAO) consists of two administrations. The first is the administrative body led by the chair of the provincial administrative organization; he or she is responsible for all the administrative affairs of the province. The second is the legislative body where members of the provincial administrative organization issues rules and regulations as well as monitor the management of the provincial organization. There is only one chair of each provincial administration organization; he or she is elected by the people in the province. The main duty is to monitor and manage the provincial administration organization led by the permanent secretary of the organization who functions as the top executive of the organization. The chair appoints his or her assistants who are not members of the provincial administration council to help him or her running the administrative affairs of the organization. The assistantship serves for four years. Their duties include managing and monitoring of the provincial administrative affairs, making sure that the administration is done in accordance with the provincial acts and regulations and the provincial development plan. Other duties include planning for the development of the province, setting up the annual budget to be submitted to the provincial administrative council, and reporting the performance and expenditures to the provincial administrative council. Members of the PAO are directly elected by the people; they are elected to a four-year term. Their duties and responsibilities include enacting rules and regulations to be used within a particular province or district such as regulations on petrol and tobacco taxes, monitoring of the administration of the PAO, and monitoring and evaluation of projects' expenditures. Their roles and responsibilities also include their roles in approving the provincial development plan which is a collection of plans and projects submitted from municipalities and sub-district administration organizations. The plan may entail road construction or other infrastructures. They also take part in approving the province's annual budget, which is the management of the public money, managing the collected taxes levied from the public; the taxes include property tax and indirect taxes such as trade and business taxes. These collected taxes, in principle, would return for the development of the province or city.

2) **Municipalities** refer to provincial political units, such as a city or town. It has three categories: (1) sub-district (Tambon) municipality, district (Muang) municipality, and (33) city (Nakorn) municipality, depending on the number of population and the civility and development of that particular area. Municipalities are set up to manage and provide basic infrastructures for people in local areas; they permeate the daily life of people from birth to death. In theory, a municipality has its autonomous administration. Municipal staff and the permanent secretary function as local government servants, carrying out their duties under the supervision of the municipal council directly elected by the people. A municipality entails two bodies: legislative and administrative bodies. The legislative body's main duty is to enact local regulations and monitor the administration of the municipal council; the administrative body manages the affairs of the municipality via the executive power of the mayor and the members of the municipal council.

The mayor is directly elected from the eligible people with a particular constituent, serving for the term of 4 years; each municipality entails 2 council members from each sub-district (Tambon), 3 council members from each district, and 4 council members from the province. Members of the municipal council are directly elected from the eligible voters, serving the term of 4 years. The number of the council members depends on the type of the municipality. The number is 12 for the sub-district municipal council, 18 for the district municipal council and 24 for the city municipal council.

3) **The Special Administration of Bangkok.** The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration divides its administration into districts and sub-districts. The Bangkok Administration Council functions as the legislative body; the governor of Bangkok is the head of the administrative body. The governor and members of the Bangkok Administration Council are elected from the voters. The term for the members of the council is 4 years.

4) **The Special Administration of Pattaya.** This administration entails the city council as the legislative branch entailing the 24 elected members. The mayor of Pattaya is elected by the people, serving as the head of the executive branch.

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5) **The Sub-District Administration Organization** is a local administrative organization under the Councils and Sub-district Administration Organization Act BE 2537, functioning as a local administrative organization at the sub-district (Tambon) level; it is, thus, very close to the people of the community. A Sub-district Administration Organization has developed from a Tambon Council with income up to a certain level. It is established to manage public services at the local level, villages and sub-districts, as it is impractical for the government to administer all of the villages in the country, the number of which is over 70000. A sub-district administration organization entails two branches: the legislative branch and the executive branch. The legislative branch entails members of the organization; their main duties are to pass the local laws and monitor the administrative affairs of the sub-district. The executive branch is led by the president of the organization who chairs the sub-district administration organization. The chair of a sub-district administration organization is elected by the people functioning as the head of the administrative branch, and the term is 4 years. Members of the sub-district administration organization are directly elected by the people of the community; their administrative term lasts for four years. The number of the members of for each sub-district varies, depending on the number of villages within a particular sub-district. The sub-district organization of only one village can only have 5 members. If the number of villages is two, each village is allowed to vote for three representatives. The organization with more than two villages is allowed to have two representatives for each village

#### **Provincial government**

The tambon as a subdivision has a long history. It was the second-level subdivision of the area administered by a provincial town in the 19th century. The governor of the province was supposed to appoint a communal elder, kamnan. In the administrative reforms started in 1892 under Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the first Thai Minister of the Interior, the three levels of subdivision of provinces were continued, i.e., starting from district to tambon to the lowest level called village.

#### **Village**

The subdistricts are subdivided into administrative villages as the lowest administrative subdivision. Usually these are referred to much more often by the village number than the actual name, especially as an administrative village may contain more than one settlement, or a large settlement may be split into more than one administrative village. One of the elected village headmen is elected as the subdistrict headman.

#### **Subdistrict administrative organization (SAO)**

With the Tambon Council and Tambon Administrative Authority Act BE 2537 (1994) and later by the constitution of 1997, tambon were decentralized into local government units with an elected tambon council. Depending on its size and tax income a tambon may either be administered by a Subdistrict (Tambon) Administrative Organization (SAO or TAO or a Tambon Council Thai. However, since 2001 all of the Tambon Councils have been upgraded to Tambon Administrative Organizations. The TAO council consists of two representatives from each administrative village in the subdistrict, and one directly elected president. The subdistrict area which belongs to a municipality (thesaban) is administered by the municipal council. In the event only part of the subdistrict is within a municipality, the remaining part is administrated by a TAO. Adjoining subdistricts of a single district can also have a joint TAO.

The Kingdom of Thailand is a unitary country with a strong tradition of centralization. Thailand's Sub-national administrative structure is organized into a dual system of local administration (decentralized) and local autonomous self-government (decentralized). The local administration consists in 75 decentralized entities or Provinces - Changwat, with a governor and head officials appointed directly by the Ministry of Interior. These Provinces are divided into districts and subdivided into sub-districts. Local autonomous governments have both directly elected councils and mayors at their head. However, they still placed under the control and supervision of provincial governors, district officers and the Minister of the Interior, who all along have the authority to approve their annual budget plans and local regulations, dissolve local councils, and dismiss local councilors. They consist in three types of municipalities: City municipalities (over 50 000 inhabitants), town municipalities and sub-district municipalities. Thailand local governments system also comprises two special status cities: Bangkok autonomous local government and Pattaya City, according to the Municipal Act of 1953, the Pattaya City Administrative Organization Act of 1999, and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration Act of 1985. The 2007 constitution supported by the 1999 legislation, states for the key principles of decentralization and

guarantees local governments autonomy especially in matter of policy formulation, administration, finance and human resources management.

The 2007 constitution states for a strict delineation of responsibilities and taxation resources between central and local governments and among local authorities, without setting the outlines of this division. Division of responsibilities is thus defined in the 1999 Decentralization Plan and Procedure Act. According to this text first level governments and Pattaya are responsible for a number Functions including city planning; transportation; social welfare service and protection of the vulnerable; maintenance of public infrastructures(markets, transportation means, ports) and public spaces ; education ; environment protection and natural resources management ; public security.

The city of Bangkok has the same responsibilities as the Provinces and is responsible for the implementation of local development plan and coordination between local authorities in its area; liquid and solid waste management; inter-municipal transportation means and infrastructures; commerce and tourism; local culture, arts and traditions protection and promotion. Decentralization has taken place since 1997 when the 1997 constitution was established. The structure of local government was restructured with more responsibilities and more budgets transferred from the central government. However, bureaucrats and national politicians have a dominant role in the politics of decentralization, and the role of local politicians and local public on decentralization process seems to be much more passive.

#### **Local Governance at a Glance**

- Thailand has three tiers of government: central, provincial, and local. Provincial governments including 76 provinces are headed by a provincial governor appointed by the central government. 795 districts, 7,255 sub-districts, and 71,864 villages are parts of provincial government (UCLG, 2008).
- The local government has 5 different types: provincial administrative organization, municipalities, sanitary districts, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), and the City of Pattaya.
- The Ministry of Interior determines the administrative status of most local governments.

#### **Nakhon Ratchasima Province**

Nakhon Ratchasim often called **Khorat** pronounced (often written as **Korat**) is one of the Isan provinces (*changwat*) of Thailand's northeast corner. It is the country's largest province by area, with a population of about 2.7 million who produce about 250 billion baht in GDP, the highest in Isan. Neighboring provinces are (clockwise, from north) Chaiyaphum, Khon Kaen, Buriram, Sa Kaeo, Prachinburi, Nakhon Nayok, Saraburi, and Lopburi. The capital of the province is the city of Nakhon Ratchasima in Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima District, also called Khorat.

#### **Geography**

The province is at the west end of the Khorat Plateau, separated from the Chao Phraya river valley by the Phetchabun and Dong Phraya Yen mountain ranges. Two national parks are in the province: Khao Yai in the west and Thap Lan in the south. Both parks are in the forested mountains of the Sankamphaeng Range, the southern prolongation of the Dong Phraya Yen Mountains. Nakhon Ratchasima is a large province on the northeastern plateau and acts as a gateway to other provinces in the northeast. It is 259 kilometers (161 mi) from Bangkok and has an area of around 20,494 square kilometers (7,913 sq. mi). The province is rich in Khmer culture and has a long history.

#### **History**

The area around Khorat was already an important center in the times of the Khmer empire in the 11th century, as can be seen by the temple ruins in Phimai historical park. Nakhon Ratchasima Province is one of the provinces where there is still a sizable northern Khmer population.

A new walled-city with a surrounding moat, designated as Nakhon Ratchasima, was built in the 17th century by order of the King Narai, as the easternmost "command post", guarding the kingdom's border. It continued this duty during the Bangkok Period, although it was briefly seized during Chao Anuwong of Vientiane's 1826 revolt against King Rama III of Siam.

Nakhon Ratchasima has long been the most important political and economic center in the northeastern region. In the late-19th century, the railroad reached Khorat and it became the junction of two main rail lines in the northeastern, Isan, region. In 1933 it was the stronghold of the royalist troops in the Boworadet Rebellion, as they fought against the new ostensibly democratic government in Bangkok. In the 1950s, the Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base was built in Nakhon Ratchasima; from 1961 until 26 February 1976, this facility was also used as a base by the United States Air Force.

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**Symbols**

The provincial seal depicts the revered heroine of Khorat, Thao Suranari. A monument to Thao Suranari (real name: *Khunying Mo*; 1771–1852) stands in front of the old *Pratu Chumphon* gate. Also called "The Great Heroine of Khorat", Kunying Mo was the wife of the Siamese-appointed deputy governor of Nakhon Ratchasima during the reign of King Rama III. In 1826, Khunying Mo managed to repel the Laotian army led by Prince Anouvong of Vientiane who tried to reinstate control over the Khorat plateau. King Rama III conferred the title of *Thao Suranari* on Khunying Mo, as well as additional ones honoring her bravery.

**Conclusion**

The decentralized budget in the area of social services is of particular interest as these budget items are closely related to people's quality of life. In principle, decentralization will enhance the efficiency of public services; theorists predict that local governments will provide more efficient services. This assumes a degree of accountability, demand responsiveness, and a competitive atmosphere within the local administration. Therefore, an empirical study that examines what actually happens in the field is desirable. Findings from empirical research would be useful for policy makers, planners, and central monitoring agencies.

Political decentralization gives local citizens and their elected representatives more power in local decision-making. Sometimes political decentralization is viewed as tool to support democratization by giving citizens or their representatives more influence in formulating and implementing policies. The fundamental argument for political decentralization is that greater public participation in decision-making leads to a better-informed citizenry and decisions that are more relevant to the diverse interests of the public than those that would be made nationally. This argument assumes that the selection of representatives from local electoral jurisdictions allows people to better know their political representatives, who better know the needs and desires of their constituents. Political decentralization alone, however, cannot guarantee the efficiency and accountability of local representatives. Strengthening the participation of both individuals and interest groups is necessary to counterbalance the influence of local politicians. Local government comprised both regular territorial administrative units and self-governing bodies. Local autonomy was limited, however, by the high degree of centralization of power. The Ministry of Interior controlled the policy, personnel, and finances of the local units at the provincial and district levels. Field officials from the ministry as well as other central ministries constituted the majority of administrators at local levels. In 1987 there were seventy-three provinces (*changwat*), including the metropolitan area of Bangkok, which had provincial status. The provinces were grouped into nine regions for administrative purposes. As of 1984 (the latest year for which information was available in 1987), the provinces were divided into 642 districts (*amphoe*), 78 subdistricts (*king amphoe*), 7,236 communes (*tambon*), 55,746 villages (*muban*), 123 municipalities (*tesaban*), and 729 sanitation districts (*sukhaphiban*). The province was under a governor (*phuwarachakan*), who was assisted by one or more deputy governors, an assistant governor, and officials from various central ministries, which, except for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, maintained field staffs in the provinces and districts. The governor supervised the overall administration of the province, maintained law and order, and coordinated the work of ministerial field staffs. These field officials carried out the policies and programs of their respective ministries as line administrators and also served as technical advisers to the governor. Although these officials were responsible to the governor in theory, in practice they reported to their own ministries in Bangkok and maintained communication with other province-level and district-level field staffs. The governor also was responsible for district and municipal administration, presiding over a provincial council composed of senior officials from the central ministries. The council, which served in an advisory capacity, met once a month to transmit central government directives to the district administrators. Apart from the council, an elected provincial assembly exercised limited legislative oversight over provincial affairs. District administration was under the charge of a district officer (*nai amphor*), who was appointed by the minister of interior and reported to the provincial governor. Larger districts could be divided into two or more subdistricts, each under an assistant district officer. The district or the subdistrict was usually the only point of contact between the central authority and the populace; the central government had no appointed civil service officials below this level. The district officer's duties as overseer of the laws and policies of the central government were extensive. He supervised the collection of taxes, kept basic

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registers and vital statistics, registered schoolchildren and aliens, administered local elections at the commune and village levels, and coordinated the activities of field officials from Bangkok. Additionally, the district officer convened monthly meetings of the headmen of the communes and villages to inform them of government policies and instruct them on the implementation of these policies. As the chief magistrate of the district, he also was responsible for arbitration in land disputes; many villagers referred these disputes to the district officer rather than to a regular court. In theory, the municipal authorities were self-governing, but in practice municipal government was an administrative arm of the central and provincial authorities. The Ministry of Interior had effective control over municipal affairs through the provincial administration, which had the authority to dissolve municipal assemblies and executive councils. Moreover, such key officials as the municipal clerk and section chiefs were recruited, assigned, and retired by the ministry, which also had the power to control and supervise the fiscal affairs of the perennially deficit-ridden municipalities.

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