


## Emotions and Awareness of Rights among the Thais



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[ *Abstract* ]

This article is based on a research conducted from 2009 to 2012, on the political disputes in Thailand. During the data collections periods, it was common to hear the frustration, bitterness and anger, expressed by the Redshirts, especially those who lived in the northeast and northern regions. Coming from the said research, this paper will examine the relationship between emotions and rights. According to the sociology of emotions, there are connections between macrolevel social processes and the arousal of emotions. Emotions arising from macrostructural processes may affect individuals at the microlevel, prompting them into actions collectively. In addition, expressions of resentment and articulation for vengeance can be interpreted as the emotions related to the awareness of rights, which may include the rights to one's needs and the access to resources that fulfill such needs. It will demonstrate how emotions, political demonstrations and the increasing awareness of rights, are related.

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## I . Rights-related Emotions

Between 2009 and 2012, my friends and I conducted a research on Thailand's political conflicts, which were otherwise known as the Yellowshirt-Redshirt movements. From the beginning, we assumed that the disputes were related to the socio-economic changes in the last few decades. Although the findings did not entirely contradict our assumption, some of them surprised us (and some of which persuaded us to investigate further). During the data collections periods, we often experienced the discontentment, frustration, bitterness, or even anger, expressed by the provincial people<sup>1)</sup>, particularly those who lived in the northeast and northern regions. They felt insulted by the comments and attitudes of the Bangkokians, who viewed the provincial people as being poor (*chon*, in Thai) or having little education (*khwamrunoi* literally, little knowledge). Our informants, particularly the northerners both the Redshirts and the Yellowshirts, complained that whatever they did was always wrong (*hetyangkophit*, in northeastern Thai) in the Bangkokian's points of view. Some of them said that in the past they did not dare to speak the northeastern Thai language (Isan) because they were afraid that the residents of Bangkok might look down (*duthuk*) on them. Isan people thought that their language was inferior to the language spoken in the capital. Some of them complained that they were left to be ignorant (*doipanya*), having little opportunity for development. Many northerners expressed that they were driven by being *noi nue tam chai* (feeling bitter and belittled) to become the Redshirts. Emotions stimulated them to join the protests that finally marched to the capital. According to the sociology of emotions,

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1) In this paper, the terms "provincial people" and "rural people" are used interchangeably. Owing to Thailand's uneven development, which heavily concentrates on Bangkok, the provincial and rural areas have long gained less improvement than the capital. In addition, since mobility between the rural and provincial areas is rather high, the lives of these peoples are not greatly different.

however, such feelings could be interpreted as the reactions of “resentment” and “vengeance”. It is said that both emotions are often related to the awareness of rights, which may include the rights to one’s needs and the access to resources that fulfill such needs.

Using some findings from our research, this paper aims to analyze the protestors’ emotions. It will apply concepts in the sociology of emotions to explore how emotions are related to the awareness of rights, especially among the provincial people who feel that their rights have been denied. It will also demonstrate that many Thais, the middle-class and the residents of Bangkok in particular, lack of knowledge of rural Thailand, which have been changing significantly in many aspects. As a matter of fact, lack of knowledge of the rural has led to the cultural prejudice, which is part of the urban-rural divergence.

## II. Interpreting the Emotions

One of the most striking experiences I had during our research was the emotions expressed by the provincial people, especially those who lived in the northeastern region who refer to themselves as *khon Isan*, or the Isan people (which means the northeasterners). Most Isan people felt bitter and angry by the comments of some public figures. The most insulting comment, many of them furiously responded, was that “Khon Isan pendaikhae khonrupchai kap dekpam” (Isan people can only be servants and petrol station attendants).<sup>2)</sup> Insulting the northeasterners,

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2) Most Redshirts believed that this comment was made by Chirmsak Pinthong, a famous public figure and former senator, and Seri Wongmontha. In the website called “Pantip.com”, however, it is stated that Charoen Kanthawongs, a former member of the Democrat Party, made the comment. In fact, he actually said that “Khunrumai, khonchakphakistan pen lukchang hai khonnaikrungthep khonrupchai khongphom machakphakistan lukchangpamnamman nai krungthep komachakphakistan” (You know, people from the northeastern region are employees of Bangkok’s residents. My servant is also from the northeast. Petrol station attendants all came from the northeast.) (Pantip.com. ““..Khonisan penhenglukchang..” chak Charoen Kanthawongs su Sombat Thamrongthanyawong “Nuengkhon nuengsiang yangchaikaphaimaidai” (“..Isan people are simply employees..”, from Charoen

however, is nothing new (see Keyes 1967, 2012, 2014), but I shall return to this issue later.

How do we interpret the frustration, repulsiveness, and fury of the provincial people, especially the northeasterners? How do we understand their emotional expressions, such as feeling bitter and belittled, or being insulted as poor, uneducated people, who were always wrong? One of the challenging tasks in sociology, it seems, is to develop concepts or theories “on how social structures determine the arousal and flow of emotions” (Turner and Stets 2005: 215). J. M. Barbalet, a sociologist who applies the macrosociological approach to investigate emotions, explains that “the structural properties of social interactions determine emotional experiences, and that particular emotional experiences determine inclinations to certain courses of action. Culture plays a role, certainly, in the details but not the gross character of an actor’s response to their circumstances. The point...is that emotion is a necessary link between social structure and social actor. The connection is never mechanical, because emotions are normally not behaviorally compelling but inclining” (Barbalet 2001: 27). Sociologists like Barbalet aim to understand the connection between macrolevel social processes and the arousal of emotions. He assumes that emotions arise from macrostructural processes may affect individuals at the microlevel, prompting them into actions collectively. He is interested in “the relationship among selected aspects and social structures, especially those revolving around inequality and power, and selected emotions, including *resentment, confidence, shame, vengefulness, and fear*” (Turner and Stets 2005: 252; italics not mine). I will here apply his assumptions of “resentment” and “vengefulness” to interpret the expression “noi nue tam chai” of the northeastern Redshirts.

Barbalet, citing Marshall’s work, confirms that social emotion must be examined in the “politico-economic framework”. He then explains that “the structure of social relations is important because it determines the level of class resentment. The level of

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Kanthawongs to Sombat Thamrongthanyawong “..One man, one vote, is not applicable with Thailand). 27 February 2015. <http://pantip.com/topic/31407472>).

class resentment is important because it determines the level of class conflict. Here, an emotion has both a basis in social relations and a society efficacy in changing those relations” (Barbalet 2001: 71).

He notes that “vengefulness and resentment are frequently treated together as forms or expressions of moral anger associated with claims to basic rights”. He then refers to Adam Smith, who “describes resentment and revenge as “the guardians of justice, and of the equality of its administration” (ibid: 134). A friend of mine, who is also a sociologist, observed that “resentment” was an emotion that led to “vengefulness”, which would possibly drive people into action. Barbalet, however, emphasizes that both emotions are related to basic rights, which “require basic needs” (ibid: 140). He then argues that basic needs are beyond human being’s natural or physical needs. They include needs to be in the society. He proposes that “basic needs ... are more likely to be commensurate with the needs for society” (ibid: 140-142). His conception of basic rights is interpreted as rights “to form meaningful social relationships and cooperate with others”, and basic needs as needs for meaningful social status and roles (Turner and Stets 2005: 255).

For Barbalet, resentment is a moral emotion “in the sense that individuals feel resentful when they perceived that others have gained in power or material well-being in contravention to norms and cultural expectations. Resentment can be a conscious feeling, but it can also remain subliminal, operating to influence people’s actions without their full awareness. The distribution of resources is typically the fuel of resentment because as people perceive others gaining resources that are not their due, resentment will increase. If one segment of a population must experience losses while others gain, the resentment becomes even more intense”. In addition, resentment may occur between social classes and in the segments of a particular social class (ibid: 253).

Vengefulness “emerges when those with power are seen by others to use their power to deny them their “basic rights””

(ibid: 255). It operates at the collective and the individual levels. It is “an emotion of power relations. It functions to correct imbalanced or disjointed power relationships. Vengefulness is concerned with restoring social actors to their rightful place in relationships. It is therefore both the appeal against an abrogation of rights and an assertion of an actor’s rights both to their accepted position and to punish those who would dispossess them of their rightful place” (Barbalet 2001: 136).

In brief, resentment and vengefulness, according to Barbalet, evolve when basic rights are violated. But the difference is that resentment arises “from perceptions that the denial of status in social relations violates normative expectations, or it comes from a sense that others are given more status in relations than they deserve by cultural codes”. Vengefulness, on the other hand, “comes from perceptions that third parties have used their power to deny person their rightful place in social relationships. It drives people to restore their place in social relations and to punish those who used their power to deny this basic right” (Turner and Stets 2005: 255). Barbalet’s conceptions of emotions imply that those who are in disadvantaged positions are more likely to be denied basic rights. His also suggests that this is because those who have power and wealth “can use their resources to occupy the most favored positions and play the most rewarding roles, whereas those without these resources will often perceive that they are denied rights to positions or that others are given access to positions that they do not deserve” (ibid: 256).

### **III. Views of the Poor**

For decades, it has been commonly believed that Thailand’s rural areas are poor and less-developed and the people are “stupid, poor and sick”, or “ngo chon chep” in Thai. A lot of Thais also believe that the rural people generally have little understanding of the politics. And they are often the victims of the politicians, who are corrupt and greedy. Politics in the rural areas are

viewed as “money politics”, where politicians can buy their way to power, or to the parliament, by way of “vote-buying” in the said areas. It is thus not surprising that many Thais, including academics, mass media and NGOs, view the election rather negatively and, as a result, they seem to have little faith in the representative democratic system. The following comments are the good examples of such views:

- “Khonchonnabot maimikhamrukhamkhaochai prachathippatai” (Rural people have neither knowledge nor understanding of democracy.), Chitpas Bhirombhakdi (Kridakorn)<sup>3)</sup>
- “Samsaensiang nai ko to mo taepensiangthimi khunnaphap yomdikwa siphalsiang nai to cho wo taeraikhunnaphap” (Three hundred thousand votes in Bangkok is better in quality than the fifteen million votes from the provinces.), Seri Wongmontha
- “Nuengkhon nuengsiang yangchaikapthaimaidai” (“One man, one vote” is not applicable for Thailand.), Sombat Thamrongthanyawong

The above three people were the members of the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), an anti-government group which began its street protest in Bangkok before the end of 2013 and eventually led to Thailand latest coup d’état on May 22, 2014. The three comments were expressed during the protest and, despite the undemocratic attitudes, were warmly received by many Thais, especially Bangkok’s middle class.

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3) Her comment led to an outcry among Thai people, especially those who lived in the rural area. Her father later apologized to the Thais on his daughter’s behalf via the mass media and explained that she had changed her surname to “Kridakorn”, the maiden name of her mother. Such an explanation was intended to tell the Thai public that the Bhirombhakdi, her fathers’ family which owned Boon Rawd Brewery, one of the country’s largest breweries, had distanced itself from Chitpas and her political activities (Khaosod online, December 23, 2013). It was speculated that such action was to prevent any damage to the family’s business caused by her comment.

#### IV. Myths of the Rural

Prachak Kongkirati, a young and well-known Thai political scientist, states that the Thai democracy has been dominated by a very influential tale. It is a political tale with moral notions, telling us about the struggle for democracy in Thailand. But it is hardly an academic explanation supported by data or a convincing debate. Rather, it is a description repeatedly produced by the media, activists, including some academics, through the mass media and the public sphere. It tells a story of how Thailand fails to be a democratic country. Among the problems are two villains. The first one is the rural people who are stupid, poor and sick, and the wicked politicians who are vulgar, dirty, and greedy. Both join forces to commit a crime called “suesitkhaisiang” (literally, “buying rights, selling votes”; vote-buying) during the elections. As a result, the elections have been downgraded to merely a meaningless political ritual, resulting in a corrupt and disgraced Thai politics. Unfortunately, the rural poor remain where they are, lacking in development and education, and comprising the majority. Their votes, therefore, always dominate the election’s results, leaving the minority, who are “suksabai chaladlam lae ruaylon” (literally, comfortable, clever, and rich),<sup>4)</sup> bearing the pains of defeat. It also tells about the heroes, the typical white knights, who come to rescue. They are the “khondi” (literally, good people), who are charismatic, enlightened, and moral, who will guide the country to success and prosperity. And since the elections are viewed as dirty and corrupt, the heroes need not come through the electoral system. They can be in power by appointments or, sometimes, by the use of force or by manipulating the legal system. The ultimate goal is to get the heroes to power (Prachak 2012: 3-4).

Prachak’s article may seem sarcastic, but it is not without justification. It has raised a number of the public misunderstandings, not only about Thai politics but also about rural economic development and poverty. Let me briefly discuss two issues,

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4) It implies the middle class Thais, who are generally wealthier and live more comfortable than the rural folks. They usually think that they are cleverer (Niti).



namely, rural poverty and vote-buying, to prove my point.

#### **4.1. Rural Poverty**

I do not deny that rural Thailand is less developed than the urban areas, especially Bangkok, in terms of infrastructures and other programs. The country's socio-economic developments in the last 3 to 4 decades, however, have changed the rural areas tremendously. It has altered the rural life from what James C. Scott calls a "subsistence ethic" (Scott 1976) to something Thais have not expected. The rural areas have been developed so much that many of their residents are now in Keyes' term 'cosmopolitan' villagers (Keyes 2012). They often travel far and wide, earning more income from the non-agricultural jobs. They also gain new experiences, information and knowledge, from such mobility. Keyes (2014: 149-157) reports that since the 1970s the northeastern villagers have travelled to find jobs outside their homes. Many men went as far as Taiwan and the Middle East to work. Some villagers who live in the village that Keyes studied, came back home with some savings and invested in new enterprises, for example, "food stalls, small restaurants, vehicle repair shops, tailoring shops, beauty shops, a bakery, convenience stores" (ibid: 155). Rural Thailand has been transformed in almost all aspects of life.

In terms of the rural poverty, a new study states that it has been reduced dramatically. In the 1960s, for example, "about 96 percent of rural household were living below the poverty line. ... The rate of rural poverty fell steadily during the 1960s and 1970s, increased as a result of the economic slowdown in the early 1980s, and then continued its downward trend until the middle of the 1990s, when it reached 14 percent". In 2007, it fell to only 10 percent (Walker 2012: 39). Another study reports that in 1988, 42.2% of the whole population was living under the poverty line. But in 2010, it fell to 7.7%. There was a sharp difference between the people who lived in the rural and urban areas in the aspect of poverty. In 1988, for example, people living under the poverty line in the rural areas were 49.7%, but it decreased

to 10.4% in 2010. But in the urban areas, it was 23.7% in 1988 and 2.6% in 2010. The average income per person increases 8.8% per annum and 7.3% per year for the expense (Apichat et al. 2013: 40-41). Walker estimates that the majority of the population outside the capital is “at least 50 percent above the poverty line”, ranging “from at least 80 percent in central Thailand to 70 percent in southern and northern Thailand and 60 percent in northeastern Thailand”. He thus calls them the “middle-income peasants”. He, however, also acknowledges that some 20 to 30 percent of the rural households “could be classified as poor or near poor” and among the poorest ones are “landless laborers, although given the increasing importance of nonfarm income, there is no longer a clear correlation between landlessness and poverty” (Walker 2012: 43).

It should also be noted that the increase of household incomes in the rural areas has shifted from the agriculture-related incomes to the non-agricultural ones. Between 1986 and 2006, for example, a survey indicates that the sources of rural household incomes include other occupations, such as trade, self-employment, and services, which increased quite significantly during the years (Apichat et al. 2013: 41-42). According to Keyes, who took surveys in a village in Maha Sarakham in the northeast region in 1963, 1980 and 2006, the significant source of income was non-agricultural work. And the “money the villagers brought back from urban or overseas work was increasingly invested not in agriculture but in small enterprises such as convenience stores, repair shops, and food stands as well as rice mills” (Keyes 2014: 143). It is clear that, firstly, rural Thailand is not as poor as it used to be or as one thought. Secondly, mobility is common among Thai villagers. Many of them had worked outside their villages. And it is not unusual to work overseas. Finally, the source of household income from non-agricultural jobs has increased significantly.

#### **4.2. Vote-buying**

Vote-buying is another issue that the rural people have been accused

of. As a political scientist pointed out, in Thailand it “is common to hear that vote buying is a key issue of Thai politics. The political disease of vote buying, according to prominent commentators, not only corrupted Thailand’s election system in the 1990s, but plagued Thai society more generally” (Callahan 2005: 95). It is also common to jump to a conclusion that this is because the rural people are poor and lack of education. They have, therefore, been the easy preys of crooked politicians who use money to buy themselves political power and wealth. Rural areas have always posed major challenges to the country’s modernization and democratization processes.

But using money in the elections does not guarantee the victory. A number of studies not only indicate that the practices of vote-buying vary from place to place, but the money used to buy votes must be spent wisely and strategically. In his frequently quoted article, Anek Laothamatas noted that voters are not simply concerned with the money they receive, they also tend to choose “politicians who visit them regularly; who help them cope with difficult personal or family problems, often in collaboration with their canvassers; who regularly attend social functions at the village level; who make generous donations to neighborhood monasteries or schools; and who bring in public programs that generate jobs, money, and reputation for their villages and provinces” (Anek 1996: 206). Other issues that voters take into consideration include the candidate’s qualifications, relationships between the voters and the candidates, and between the candidates and the political parties; and the party’s policies that will benefit the voters, the preferences of the communities, villages or kin groups (Apichat et al. 2013: 65-69). Most importantly, at the village level kin relations are often the most decisive factor. Pattana Kitiarsa reports that when his maternal relative decided to run for village headman, other relatives voted for him. He won the election because Pattana’s “mother’s family commands the largest kin network in my village, no one apart from my relatives has been able to win election as our village headman until today” (Pattana 2012: 238). At the national level, on the other hand, a study revealed that 46.79 percent of the

voters admitted they accepted the money given to them but did not vote for the candidate and 48.62 percent insisted that they would vote for the candidate they admired whether or not they received money. Only 4.59% of the voters declared that they would vote for the candidate who paid them (Thairath online, 17 August 2012).

Winning an election is a tactical, well-organized, and thoughtful task. Using money is just one of the many tactics, but it does not ensure a victory. A candidate need to understand his voters' needs and priorities, otherwise he may be beaten in the election. And rural voters, or "political peasants" in Walker's term (2012), certainly have new needs and aspirations, which have been generated by the economic development and prosperity in the last few decades.<sup>5)</sup>

## V. Political Conflicts

This section will provide some background details of Thailand's recent political crisis. The most well-known and recent one was probably the Yellowshirt-Redshirt conflicts. Sources often state that the conflicts started with the anti-Thaksin Shinawatra in 2005. Thaksin Shinawatra, a telecommunications mogul who founded the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT), won the 2001 election and became the Prime Minister. He soon introduced his populist policies, which mostly benefited the rural populace and the lower-middle class. He was seen as the first politician of the modern era that had not come from the traditional Thai elites. Thaksin therefore managed to attract a broad spectrum of the electorate, particularly in the north and northeast, and renewed his term of office by a large majority following the 2005 elections, which had a record participation of 75% (Hinojar 2012: 216).

But Thaksin was not without enemies. One of them was

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5) Other scholars propose the term "urbanized villagers" to call many rural Thais who have "lower middle class income levels and aspirations" (Naruemon Thabchumpon and McCargo 2011).

Sondhi Limtongkul, a well known media tycoon who founded the People Alliance for Democracy (PAD), known as the “Yellowshirts”, in 2005 which soon took the lead in the anti-Thaksin movements. The group was later joined by several state-enterprise unions, which were against Thaksin’s privatization plans for state enterprises, and a number of civil rights and human rights activists. Thaksin was criticized as being undemocratic, monopolizing the power, suppressing the freedom of press, violating human rights, including the harsh handling of the three southern Muslim-dominated provinces, and involvement in extrajudicial killings in the war against drugs. For the poor and rural voters, he was a popularly elected leader. For the urban middle-class voters and the intelligentsia, on the other hand, he was an abusive authoritarian and self-serving politician.

In February 2006, Thaksin Shinawatra dissolved parliament and called an election, which was boycotted by the Democratic Party and the rest of the opposition. The TRT won the election in April, but the political crisis was not averted. On Tuesday September 19, 2006, the Thai army staged a coup d’état against Thaksin Shinawatra, who at the time was in New York City. Since then, Thaksin has been living in exile. The military junta, which called itself the Council for National Security (CNS), soon set up a governing council and named retired General Surayud Chulanont as acting Prime Minister. In 2007, the Constitutional Court ruled that the electoral laws had been violated by the TRTP in the 2006 elections, thereby ordering the party’s dissolution and the disqualification of 111 of its members (ibid: 218). The 1997 Constitution, which was considered by many as the success of Thai democratic constitutional reform, was replaced by the 2007 Constitution. A new general election was then held on December 23, 2007.

The People Power Party (PPP) won the election by obtaining 45% of the votes. Samak Sundarajev, the party’s leader and a former Governor of Bangkok, became the new Prime Minister on January 29, 2008. But Samak and the coalition of five minority parties governed the country for less than a year, that is, from January to September 2008. During that time, the political crisis

deepened. The PAD resumed its activity, mobilizing campaigns against Samak in response to the drafting of a political amnesty law that would allegedly benefit Thaksin Shinawatra. In September 2008, a sentence passed by the Constitutional Court found Samak Sundarajev guilty of a “conflict of interest”. The verdict led to his resigning as head of the government. However, the appointment of Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin Shinawatra’s brother-in-law, as the new Prime Minister on September 17, 2008, was rejected by the PAD. The conflicts between the government and the PAD thus escalated. On December 2, 2008, the Constitutional Court of Thailand passed another sentence dissolving the PPP for electoral fraud, along with two other groups from the coalition. Their leaders were disqualified from holding public office for 5 years, including the recently appointed Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat, who was forced to resign. After the sentence, the PAD announced the end of its protests. Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the Democratic Party, became the Prime Minister in December 2008. He is said to be connected with certain members of the PAD and traditional aristocratic political blocs, which earned him the parliamentary election. The United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), commonly known as the “Redshirts”,<sup>6</sup> which emerged in 2006 in opposition to the military coup that deposed Thaksin Shinawatra, stepped up their protests against Abhisit (ibid: 218-219).

In early 2010, mass demonstrations organized by the UDD took place in several areas in Bangkok. In April and May of that year, the government used military forces to suppress the protestors. According to Truth for Justice (2012), there were 94 deaths and at least 1,283 injuries as a result of the crackdowns in April and May of that year. The Thai government appointed the Truth for Reconciliation Commission of Thailand (TRCT) to investigate the crackdowns. The report produced by the TRCT, however, was “widely criticized for blaming too much of the violence on the actions of rogue elements of the demonstrators and failing to focus tightly on the obvious legal transgressions of the security

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6) There are a number of papers on the Redshirts, for example, Keyes (2012), Naruemon and McCargo (2011), Nishizaki (2014), and Pattana (2012).

forces” (McCargo and Naruemon 2014).<sup>7)</sup> The court inquests, for example, confirmed that many Redshirt protestors and civilians were killed by soldiers’ bullets (The Guardian, August 6, 2013, The Nation, November 26, 2012, The Nation, October 1, 2013). The TRCT hardly mentions such deaths.

## VI. The Changing Rural

I will now present some findings from our research. But first, let me give you a background. It began as a pilot project, which focused on both Redshirt and Yellowshirt movements in 2009. Several months later, we completed an inception report (Apichat et al. 2010), which became the foundation of an extensive, more detailed research project that took two years to complete. It was an umbrella project for the other seven projects, which applied various approaches and methodologies. There were four community studies, including a southern village (Anusorn 2012), two communities in the northeast region (Jakkrit 2012, Yukti 2012), and one in the central (Prapart 2012). While Pinkaew Laungaramsri et al. (2012) employed a comparative method to study the Redshirt movements in several districts in Chiang Mai, Viengrat Nethipo (2012) examined the relations between the electoral system and the patron-client relationships in various locations. Wanwiphang Manachotphong (2012) applied a quantitative research methodology to analyze the public attitudes on the socio-economic changes. Data and findings from these projects are used for the analysis and conclusion in Apichat, et al. (2013), which is the principal investigator’s report.

Although the seven projects differed in terms of research settings and local details, their findings can be concluded, as follows. Firstly, the average household income has increased owing to the country’s economic development, at least in the last twenty years. Most people, including those who live in rural areas, have earned more income, often from non-agricultural

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7) McCargo and Naruemon (2014) also state that “by failing strongly to criticize the role of the military in most of the fatal shootings, the TRCT arguably helped pave the way for the 2014 coup”.

endeavors. Their lives are now modernized and are engaged in market economy. Most rural people are also highly mobile, often moving between their homes and towns or cities to work or for other activities. Their consumption, way of life, and viewpoints are not much different from those who live in urban areas. The distinction between rural and urban has therefore become blurred. Although the “new middle class”, as we call them, are not poor in terms of income and assets, their earnings are irregular, often from petty trading, remittances, or other non-agricultural wages. Consequently, their lives are rather insecure and vulnerable (ibid: 89-97). In summary, Thailand’s political conflicts in recent years were not the result of the economic disparity between the urban and the rural. Rather, the disputes were socio-culturally and politically related.

Our findings indicate that owing to the political reforms, at least since the 1990s, most of the rural populace has become politically active. The decentralization, for example, has encouraged local people to be enthusiastically involved in local elections. New laws have established local government units, such as the Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO), where officials are elected by the residents in the tambon. The *saphatambon* (tambon council) consists of two representatives from each administrative village in the tambon, both of whom are elected. Each TAO council has one president, who is also elected. Our informants agree that most local people actively participate in the elections of the tambon council’s members because the TAO’s administration and decisions directly affected their lives. Such elections are highly dynamic and competitive.

One of the most important political reforms, however, was the promulgation of the 1997 Constitution (Ratchakitchanubeksa. Ratthathammanun haeng ratcha-anachakthai phutthasakkarat 2540). It was said to be the first constitution to be drafted by a popularly-elected Constitutional Drafting Assembly. The constitution created a bicameral legislature and, for the first time in Thai history, both houses were directly elected. Many measures were established to increase the stability of elected governments. Other reforms included the separation between the executive and legislative



branches. Unlike in previous constitutions, Members of the Parliament were forced to resign from the House in order to become Cabinet Ministers. It also encouraged parties to put potential ministers on the “party list” rather than on a particular constituency. Consequently, the numbers of political parties at the national level was reduced, making the major parties bigger and stronger. It is reported, for example, that between 1986 and 1996 the number of political parties was 7.2, but it was reduced to 3.8 in 2001 and to 2.6 in 2005 (Apichat, et al. 2013: 104).<sup>8)</sup> Human rights were explicitly acknowledged in this constitution. Decentralization was strongly supported, such as the TAO mentioned above. New independent government agencies were established to separate powers and put in place check and balances in the government. And there were many other political reforms.<sup>9)</sup>

Life at the local level is also dynamically changing. Villagers in the central region, for example, have set up various kinds of groups for several purposes. Prapart Pintobtang reports that villagers in Ban Khlong Yong, most operating small-scale farms, have engaged in numerous organizations at the local and national levels for their politico-economic goals. They founded “Sahakon kanchaosue thidin khlongyong” (Khlong Yong Land Hire-Purchase Cooperative) in the 1970s in order to help small farmers buy land by way of an installment plan. A number of saving groups were established to collect funds for the agricultural activities, production, and welfare of members. Villagers, however, have also extended their networks beyond the local level. Their alliances at the national level include organizations, such as “Khruetakhai nisinchaona haeng prathetthai” (The Farmer’s Debts Network of Thailand), “Samatcha kaset raiyoi” (The Assembly of the Small Farmers), “Samatcha khonchon” (The Assembly of the Poor) (Prapart 2012). These networks not only provide help and support for Ban Khlong Yong’s residents, but also connect them

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8) Apichat, et al. (2013: 105, footnote 51) note that the number of political parties shown here is what Hicken calls the “effective number of political party”, which may not be an integer.

9) The 1997 Constitution, however, was repealed by the Council for Democratic Reform on September 19, 2006, following a successful military coup. It was soon replaced by the 2006 Constitution on October 1, 2006.

with other villagers throughout the country. Village life is no longer confined to a small local community. Villagers are not passive peasants anymore.

## VII. Cultural Prejudice

As demonstrated above, rural Thailand has changed rather significantly, but the public seems to have little knowledge about it. Or perhaps, I would argue, it reveals the negative attitudes towards the rural people. It is not uncommon, for example, that the urban people view the rural-folks as poor, less educated and “lack “progress” (*khvam charoen*)” (Keyes 2014: 185). In fact, such prejudice against the rural people, the northeasterners in particular, can be traced back over a hundred years. In the early twentieth century, for instance, it is documented that the high-ranking government officials made “constant reference to the “stupidity” and “ignorance” (*ngo*) of the northeastern populace” (ibid: 48). Migrants from the northeast who worked in the capital in the 1960s often experienced insults by the Bangkokians, who viewed them as “a Thai lower class” (Keyes 1967: 38; and Keyes 2014: 77). It is also noted that after working for a number of years in the capital, “the returned migrant carried home with him feelings of class and ethnic discrimination directed towards him as a rural northeasterner by the central Thai inhabitants of Bangkok and enhanced awareness of the common culture and problems which all northeasterners shared” (Keyes 1967: 39; and Keyes 2014: 78). Four decades later, the northeasterners still suffer many insults by urban Thais. Comments of the three PDRC’s members mentioned at the beginning of this paper exhibit such an insult and prejudice against rural people.<sup>10)</sup>

When we were conducting the interviews with the provincial

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10) In a couple of occasions, some international students, especially those who came from Western countries, asked me to clarify Seri Wongmontha’s comment. They wondered how the votes of the urban people were “better” than the rural ones. How could that be possible? And how could we measure the quality of political votes? On what criteria? I tried my best to explain, but I soon realized that some political comments were incomprehensible to foreigners.

people, the northeasterners in particular, it was common to hear them declare that

- “we were insulted (*duthuk*) because we were poor (*chon*) and had little education (*khvamrunoi*)”,
- “the society was divided into classes”,
- “there was no justice (*maimi khwamyutitham*) in the society. Whatever the Redshirts did was always wrong” (*hetyangkophit*),
- “there is inequality (*khwammaithaothiam*) in the society”.

Many Redshirts in Ubon Ratchathani, one of the biggest provinces in the northeast region, exclaimed that insulting comments made them feel *noi nue tam chai* (literally, little fresh, low heart, which is an expression of someone who feels bitter and belittled).

It is worth noting, however, that the Yellowshirts in Ubon Ratchathani, most of whom were school teachers and businessmen, also displayed similar bitterness and anger. They said, for example, that

- “in the past when we went to Bangkok, we did not dare to speak Isan language. We were afraid that they would look down on (*duthuk*) us”,
- “governments lacked of the long-term plans for the well-being of the Isan people”.

In Chiang Mai, the biggest city in the north, many Redshirts remarked that because they generally had limited opportunities, they wanted changes that might give them more opportunities. In contrast, the Bangkokians had many opportunities, which more or less provided stable security. Although the Chiang Mai’s Redshirts were not as furious as their comrades in the northeast, they were fully aware of their political movements. According to Pinkaew (2013), the Redshirts in Chiang Mai see themselves as second-class citizens ignored by the governments for a long time. Their aims are therefore to fight for the full citizenship in the liberal democratic society.

### **VIII. Rights over Resources through Elections**

I would add, however, that in the Redshirt's case, feelings of resentment and vengefulness were not merely about being denied a meaningful social status and roles. In their perception, basic rights should also cover access to and the use of resources, both material and non-material. As Jakkrit (2012) and Yukti (2012) have discovered, northeastern rural people now have new needs and aspirations, owing to the improvement of their lives. On the one hand, economic developments in the last few decades have not only improved their lives in general, but also raised their expectations. Political progress, on the other hand, has changed their perceptions about political participation. Ordinary people have realized that they need to participate actively in politics to acquire resources that fulfill their needs and aspirations.

In their view, one of the most important political participations was the election. Elections in the last ten years confirmed this view. Thaksin Shinawatra and his party, for example, won the election in 2005 by more than 19 million votes. It is said to be the highest voter turnouts in the Thai political history. One of the obvious reasons of his victory was Thaksin's populist policies, which was perceived by ordinary people as most favorable and beneficial to them. His policies include a four-year debt moratorium for farmers; the village fund; the 30 Baht universal healthcare program, which guarantees universal healthcare coverage; the One Tambon One Product (OTOP) program, which stimulates the development of rural small and medium-sized enterprises, among others. While the 30 Baht universal healthcare program seemed to be the most favorable policy, the four-year debt moratorium and the village fund were very popular among rural people. Thaksin was overthrown by a military coup d'état on September 19, 2006 and has lived in exile ever since. In the 2011 Thai general elections held on July 3, 2011, about 75.03% of the 46,921,682 eligible voters came to cast the ballot. Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, became the first female Prime Minister. Again, Yingluck's victory was also due to her party's populist policies. In the Redshirts' perception, political participation, especially voting

in the democratic electoral system, will secure their rights to resources that the elected government has promised to them. Pattana's statement emphasizes the importance of elections in the northeasterner's perception. He writes, "For the first time ever in the history of my village, people have had a chance for direct participation in national political events, and they have embraced it. My guess is that a strong sense of political consciousness and sensibility concerning voicing and claiming their rights in electoral politics are in the air. For these villagers, the message is clear: elections mean democracy" (Pattana 2012: 242).

### **IX. Rights Denied by Coup d'états**

Almost all of the Redshirts we interviewed, both in the rural and urban areas, confirmed that they joined the movement, or the UDD, because of the 2006 coup d'état. Many confessed that it was the first time they became aware of the importance of democracy and governments. They also realized how vulnerable an elected government was. A military coup d'état could destroy such a government, as well as deny their rights. Thus, it is not surprising for the Thais to experience a series of Redshirt political protests in Bangkok, which eventually became mass demonstrations between March and May 2010. Any Redshirts would say that they rallied for the return of an elected government. But, more importantly, they came to protect their rights.

On May 22, 2014, another military coup d'état took place. Yingluck Shinawatra, like her brother, was overthrown from power. A large number of civilians, including the Redshirts and their leaders were arrested. Many of them were imprisoned without trials. Internet Law Reform Dialogue (iLaw), a Thai human rights NGOs, reports that from May 22 to December 31, 2014, there was at least 666 people who were summoned to report to the junta. At least 362 people were arrested and at least 134 on the political demonstration charge (iLaw Freedom). All cases were prosecuted by the military court. In the rural areas, there have been numerous cases of forced relocation of

villagers and demolition of the villagers' properties by the military. Until now, the junta has not confirmed whether or not there will be an election.

## **X. Summary**

I have demonstrated in this paper that rural Thailand has transformed significantly. The new rural is "clearly not understood or, if it is, appreciated by those in Bangkok, who still assume that 'rural' people have (or should have) the same characteristics of subsistence-based agriculture that Phya Anuman described half a century ago" (Keyes 2012: 354-355; and Keyes 2014: 187). The transformations, however, have not only occurred in the economic and political spheres, but also altered the emotions of the people.

Emotional expressions of local residents in the northeast and northern regions, such as resentment and vengeance, do not only reveal their bitterness and anger for the insults hurled by some public figures and the Bangkokians. Both emotions are also associated with their perceptions of rights and denials of them. Resentment, which occurs when basic rights are denied, drove many northeasterners and northerners to join the Redshirt movements. They also believed that the democratic elected governments, especially the ones that they elected, would defend for their rights. This was one of the reasons for voting Thaksin Shinawatra and his party, and later on Yingluck Shinawatra. When the government they elected was overthrown from power by the military, they felt that their rights were violated and denied. They were furious. Resentment became vengeance. They marched to the streets of Bangkok to protest and fight for their basic rights, and "to punish those who used their power to deny" their rights. In addition, it must be noted that the Yellowshirts, at least in Ubon Ratchathani, also expressed their resentment and vengeance. It is quite clear that Isan people share some common emotions, no matter what political colors or ideologies they had.

Focusing solely on the politico-economic developments is not adequate to understand the fast-changing rural Thailand. We need to understand the people's emotions, especially those revolving around inequality and power, such as resentment and vengeance.

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