

THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNOR: SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION ON PROVINCIAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THAILAND.

by William Sommers

The following observations are suggested as working opinion and judgments that are, hopefully, valuable as points of departure. They are based on field trips, conversations and discussions with provincial and local government officials. The emphasis here is on the role of the provincial governor and his ability to coordinate and control the operations within his purview.

The office of the governor seems separated from the actual control and coordination of important changwad affairs. He has little or no trained staff to help carry through planning and budgeting in the detailed programs which especially are important in key growing changwads. Unlike his functional officers, it appears that he does not get sufficient technical aid and staff assistance of the ministry level.

The governor's relationship with the police is an example most often cited. The police have been slowly separated from direct supervision of the governor. They now do their own investigatory work which formerly was under the governor's control; in addition, the governor's power to discipline is very limited - usually to fourth grade officers. The governors feel that if the Police Department, a department within their own ministry, can pull away, then the other functional operations, reporting to separate ministries, will have even more reason and impetus in drawing away from the governor's authority in provincial operation.

Another example cited was the Highways Department where the governor is now devoid of engineering services unless he has a tesaban nearby which has an engineer or if he can persuade the regional highway office to loan him someone. In some respects, the governor, as one remarked, is a beggar of technical help at the mercy of personal relationships.

Again and again, the element of coordination was stressed - that is, the governor's inability to have horizontal coordination on an organizational basis. The governor cannot,

through the power of his office, coordinate the separate ministerial representatives to effect a total persuasion of the changwad need; he must rely on his own powers of persuasion or be overruled by ministries other than his own.

One official cited the instance of the kromakan changwad (provincial committee). At the meetings the governor and the palad (deputy) changwad do the talking because the others are not drawn into the operation by the force of organization, and consequently accept no responsibility for such operation. Where the kromakan changwad was designed as an instrument to coordinate consensus from the vertically directed functional officers, it does not serve this purpose because the governor has no power to coordinate. The simile might be that of a mason, his tools and his building blocks. If he has the right tools and if the building blocks yield to his hand, they can be fitted one to the other into a pattern of unity that gives strength and purpose. But lacking the right tools and faced with obdurate and uncooperative building blocks, the mason can only achieve a facade of strength and a shadow of unity. In this view the governor stands as the frustrated mason, without the right tools to shape the building blocks into a unified structure.

Then the need for staff work was stressed. The governor needs staff; this is apparently readily acceptable by the Ministry of Interior. He does not need a whole "brood" nor does he need an operation inconsistent with the breadth of his present authority; he needs a person with good experience in provincial and local administration with a good education who will be reasonably happy in a staff capacity. Moreover, it should be someone, appointed by the governor himself, from persons made available when general criteria have been established. And in thinking about this staff, the governors want to insure that the staff person as he develops in his job would not be moved nor "stolen" from them.

The usual complaint about rigid directives from the central government which are promulgated without too much reference to the facts of the situations was heard. This is not unusual but may be very real. An idea advanced was that the Ministry of Interior might require all personnel wanting to advance to third grade to spend at least two consecutive years out in the country, working at the changwad or amphur (district) level. This might "induce" some of the brighter minds to go out in the country before settling down to a career of "paper shuffling" in the ministry. However, it may be that this is already a policy of the ministry. This would be an area for appropriate investigation.

There was general agreement that if the budgetary power of the governor could be increased, there would be beneficial results. This is particularly true regarding the coordination of the ministerial budgets at the changwad level. The governor should have a defined power to coordinate the various budgets of education, health, highways, etc., so that the budget for the changwad would be a plan for the changwad as a total entity as well as the vertical result of policies of individual ministries. In this connection, too, comment was made that the changwad budget, which is the only budget actually under the direction of the governor, through the sapa (council) changwad, is of relatively minor importance in both amount and in ability to generate greater coordination in changwad affairs.

Another point made was that the governor should be allowed at least four years in which to operate in the changwad. This has some basis in administrative practice since it usually takes a while for the new governor to acquaint himself with the facts of the changwad, to test his subordinates and to work out his administrative procedure. Whether or not the pressures for shifting that are on the ministry would be outweighed by the probable benefits in having longer tenure for the governor is something that needs more analysis.

These observations are directed, not at amphur affairs, but at the role of the governor. However, it is clear that the role of the nai amphur (district officer) is crucial in the operation of municipal and local (tambol) government. We once attended a meeting of a sapa tambol which was very orderly, stately and quiet. The people spoke, they talked of their problems, particularly roads and health centers and presented their requests to the nai amphur. It was clear, too, that had the nai amphur not been receptive or deliberately interested in the operation of the tambol it would not have existed. Again, it is the personality and approach of the government official, such as the nai amphur in this case, that forms to a great extent the pattern that makes legal organization effective.

This, of course, is a truism of administration — organization has soul through the administrator's own personal devotion. Some western countries are accustomed to the survival of organization, in spite of the bad administrator, because the ultimate appeal is not the administration, but the people. They have the right and the periodic necessity of renewing or rejecting those who run the organization and the people have also their say on how government should be structured. These countries tend to gauge all the world by this standard.

But it does appear that in the immediate future the sapa tambol could play a significant role in the development of expression on the part of village people of their needs and the servicing of their needs. One shouldn't become romantic over these possibilities and overstress them. But the mechanism is there. This, of course, is based on the probability that the Ministry of Interior is interested.

Perhaps the ministry will eventually clear up the odd creatures in its municipal arsenal — the sanitary district and the tesaban. It is never really clear why there is one and not the other; it is clear, though, that personnel, effort and administrative operation might be better served by having a single unit that could be accelerated to serve varying needs.

These observations are too sketchy and too devoid of more intensive research to pass for conclusions. Yet it is valuable to list a few impressions gained from the foregoing discussion :

1. The operation of the governor's office needs to be reviewed so that the governor emerges as an administration person as well as a high official expressing the dignity of the Government. The governor should be more than a dignitary; he should be an administrator.

2. If there is a move to decentralize administration to the governor, his administrative and operational authority must first be improved. Decentralization is important but it could never work to the end conceived if the governor remains with little functional authority in his own bailiwick. He has plenty of responsibility now but apparently a smaller grant of authority.

3. The governor needs staff, conceived as practical to his needs, not as window dressing for the future.

4. The governor needs a device of coordination, probably through the changwad budget but more broadly deployed than it is now.

5. If the Thai Government wants to improve its municipal and local government, then there are existing mechanisms which, with modification and strengthening, could do the job to the limit of need and desire. Programs to this end ought to work through existing structures and not create extra-official or "sideline" operations.

6. The municipal picture ought to be clarified so that this area will more easily serve the needs of urban and semi-urban demands.

Our conclusion is apparent. Most governors and subordinate provincial and municipal officials are ready for some rather thorough revisions in the administrative area and are frank and intelligently critical of existing operations. But, at the same time, many remember parliamentary excesses of past years and tread lightly on any quick or return to wide elective power. They do not discount it but feel a need, based on their experience, of going slow. Of course, "going slow" may cover the fact of complete opposition. However, my impression is that some governors would like to encourage a gradual process toward a freer expression of the needs and opinions of the people.
