

# A BRIEF REVIEW OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THAILAND

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## **Introduction**

Since <sup>1947</sup>1951 the United States and Thailand have participated in joint economic cooperation. The United States has worked with Thailand to form a strong national network against the inroads of communist action in Southeast Asia. At the same time the United States is concerned that the economic and social development of Thailand keeps pace with the growing importance of Southeast Asia in world affairs.

Recently the United States and the Government of Thailand agreed on a program to translate these mutual aims into a practical operation called ARD—Accelerated Rural Development. This program will coordinate related assistance programs focusing on the problems of No 2<sup>th</sup> and Northeast Thailand; eventually this approach may be extended to other critical border areas. ARD will serve the mutual interests of Thailand and the United States by concentrating on areas of economic need to increase the people's living capacity while at the same time building a bulwark against communist opportunism which feeds on the imagined discontent of village people.

One of the most critical ingredients in the work of Accelerated Rural Development, in any effort which tries to give economic and social assistance directly to the people—is the structure and process of government at the local level. If the program is to serve people—the villagers—it should be related to what they want and what they need. Consequently, there must be a structure and process by which these needs can be expressed and given "authority". These expressions are given authority when the higher levels of government take them into consideration within an organized

framework of communication. Moreover, local government must have the right, based on law and not on whim, to act, to carry out programs by itself within the limitations of money and practicality.

### Local Government in Thailand

The discussion comes naturally to the problem of local government in Thailand.\* And here a brief explanation of the setting is worthwhile. The basic units of local government are: the province (Changwad), the rural township (Tambol), and the village (Muban). These units exist in a rural or semi-rural setting. Though the district (Amphur) is a vital part of the administrative fabric of Thailand, it is not a unit of local government but is a subdivision of provincial administration. However, the district officer (Nai Amphur) is a significant element in the development and encouragement of local government and, therefore, the district is included in the discussion which follows.

Urban government outside of the Bangkok - Thonburi metropolitan area is cared for through two forms: the municipality (Tesaban), and the special administrative district (Sukapibal). Actually many of the municipalities and the districts are rural units but with a higher concentration of population than the tambol. Consequently, many of the remarks here apply to these units of government as well.

The Ministry of Interior's Department of Local Administration is charged with the oversight of local administration in the provinces. To carry out this responsibility the Department has two bureaus. The Bureau of Provincial Administration covers provincial, district, tambol and village affairs of municipalities and special admi-

\*Little intelligent discussion of local government in Thailand can take place without an understanding of its historic and cultural background. While on such survey is attempted here a few of the excellent books on the subject are listed below:

- a. *Local Government and Administration in Thailand*,  
Frederick James Horrigan, 1959, Indiana University.

nistrative districts. In precise terms "local government" refers to the municipalities and special administrative districts while "provincial government" is the term used to describe provincial district, tambol and village operations. A better separation might be between "urban" and "rural" respectively. However, in this discussion the term "local government" is used generally for all government units from the province to the village.

### The Province

The province (changwad) is the first level of local government, that is, it is the next level after the central government in Bangkok. It is headed by the Governor (Phuwa Rajakan Changwad) appointed by the Minister of Interior upon recommendation of the Undersecretary of Interior. He is directly responsible to the Undersecretary and is looked upon as the chief administrative officer of the province, though his principal role is coordination. Each of the operating ministries has an officer in the province, as appropriate, who is sometimes called the functional officer. Together they are known as the provincial committee (Krommakarn Changwad) and serve as an advisory group to the Governor. There is also a provincial council (Sapa Changwad), once elected but now appointed upon recommendation of the Governor. The council has certain powers of

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- b. *Thai Administrative Behavior*, James N. Mosel, 1959, Indiana University.
  - c. *A comparative Survey of Local Government and Administration*, Daniel Wit, 1961, pp. 77-96, I.P.A. Thammasat University.
  - d. *Local Government in Thailand*, John W. Ryan, undated, I.P.A, Thammasat University.
  - e. *Municipality Government in Thailand*, Dr. Choop Karnjarnaprakorn, 1959, Indiana University.
  - f. *The Role of the Provincial Governor in Thailand*, Arsa Meksawan, 1961, Indiana University.

deliberation and passes the annual provincial budget which is made up of locally-raised revenue supplemented by a grant from the central government. The Deputy Governor (Palad Changwad) is appointed by the Department of Local Administration and is in charge of the provincial section of local administration which has administrative oversight of all personnel, registration, finances and general policy of the Department. The Deputy Governor also serves as Acting Governor in the absence of the Governor. The province is effective as administrative government. There are many difficulties that have been studied and restudied, difficulties involving coordination, control and authority. But these problems are neither insolvable nor defeating.

### **The District**

The district (Amphur) is an administrative arm or extension of the province for purposes of closer administrative supervision; it is provincial administration at a more direct level and, in terms of local government, is considered a part of the province. The district is headed by the District Officer (Nai Amphur) who is appointed by the Department of Local Administration and is charged with a long list of responsibilities which number more than two hundred. He reports directly to the Governor but for immediate administrative oversight he is under the Palad Changwad. Many of the ministries also have functional officers at the district level to carry out central government programs as well as to give advice and assistance to the Nai Amphur. There is no representative body at the district, though the District Officer sometimes uses meetings of his functional officers for discussion and advise.

### **Tambol and Muban**

The last two units are the rural township (Tambol) and the village (Muban). The rural township consists of from four to twenty villages and is headed by the Town-

ship Headman (Kamnan). He is elected by the village headmen within the township and serves as long as he can discharge his duties. He can be removed because of bad conduct. The township usually has a township council (Sapa Tambol), established under a famous Ministerial Order, which is made up of all the village headmen, the local teacher, the doctor, (if there is one) and other prominent people of the township. Their scope of operation is limited and is dependent in great measure on the wishes and views of the district officer. There is also a special kind of township which is an incorporated unit or a "juristic" person. Only a few of these exist but, in law, they have greater powers and greater potentiality as a unit of self government than does the ordinary township. The juristic township has, however, been neglected and lies in disuse. In recent months a program jointly sponsored by the Department of Local Administration and the Department of Community Development is making a serious attempt to re-invigorate the tambol. A training course for members of selected Sapa Tambols is held which is followed by a reorganization and the allocation of money for development purposes to be spent by the Sapa Tambols with a minimum of direction. The Ministerial Order has been revised to give greater representation to villagers and to give them a greater voice in their own affairs. The tambols are located in six of the ARD provinces in the Northeast. If the project proves feasible, this concept may be extended.

The village (Muban) is the smallest governmental, economic, and social unit whose official leader is the village headman (Puyaiban). He is elected to serve as long as long as he is capable and serves as an important link between the village, the township and the district officer. In many cases the township headman (Kamnan) and the village headman (Puyaiban) are "the eyes and ears" of the district officer.

### The District Officer

Amid the plethora of duties assigned to the district officer, one stands out as crucial to the development of rural abilities: supervision of the kamman and payaiban. Upon his ability to work well with these leaders, to gain their confidence and cooperate with them rests the "image" of "government" in general and specific policies in particular as they are in turn represented to the people. And since centrally conceived programs that are hopefully aimed at the village people must, if they are to be more than engaging press releases, go "through" the district officer, the latter's relationship to the headmen of the township and the village becomes the focal point around which many central programs revolve.

The focus on the district officer points up some of the disadvantages of local government in putting into motion local programs as well as keeping them going. For it is the district officer who does it, not the organization nor the structure. If the district officer works hard, is conscientious in his relations with the people and "keeps his house in order", progress may result. But there are over 500 district officers and if the majority were "first class" it would be remarkable in Thailand or in any country. The Department of Local Administration is painfully aware of the shortcomings of this system. It has put great emphasis in directives to the district officer to be solicitous of the people's need: training programs have been carried on regularly which stress this point over and over. But the feeling persists that the district officer is not representing the Government to the people in the "democratic way". Many district officers still use the people without serving them.

One of the missing ingredients in this system is a counterweight to the power and authority of the district officer, a counterweight that would not stem from the central government but would come from the people. If villagers could express themselves through a structure that was not wholly dependent on the district officer and

which had authority in its own right, the district officer would have to listen. Moreover, the present system puts too great a burden and value on the "personality" of the district officer and compounds his problems. He can't be thought of as an administrative god without playing at it occasionally.

### Local Self Government

There is local administration in Thailand and a workable system of control. The latter is overcentralized highly bureaucratic and sometimes whimsical but the system produces results. At the same time there is no local *self* government; there is only government at the local level. The absence of local self government is not an absolute disadvantage. But it is a relative detraction in a developing country where the loyalty and cooperation of villagers are necessary to the success of economic growth and anti-subversion programs. The disadvantage comes in this: without local self government and a structure to give it substance and authority, the possibility of economic development at the village level is diminished. If programs are worked out and put into "action" without a sound structure at the local level, be it township or village, the programs cannot usually be sustained. This might account for the proliferation of "ad hoc" arrangements and "by-passing" that occurs when a local program of economic improvement is begun. It takes the whole resource of the central government to get the program going at the local level — and in many cases when the central government is distracted by other problems, the local program lapses into a sleepy effort that is dressed up whenever a visiting dignitary comes along. Of course, there are additional reasons which have been well stated by other commentators, i.e. suspicion on the part of the villagers, lack of coordination, centralized control and a haughty disdain for the intelligence and potential of villagers. But even where considerable good will is exercised on the part of central government officials and where a sincere desire to get to the people exists, the lack of a "receiving structure" below the ampur level causes floundering and frustration.

## Needs of the People

Projects for local economic development administered at the changwad and amphur level sometimes operate on a one way street where a mystic aura replaces the representation of need. The Governor *knows* what the people want and the District Officer *knows* what people should have. Who needs to go further? And when the central government asks, sometimes very quickly, for particular needs to be registered, they are to some extent the needs of the Governor or the District Officer, easily justified by nothing them as the real needs of the people. Many times these officials are correct in their assessment of need and some programs have to start at this point because there is nothing else. But when the program gets going, how do people make it clear that there are errors in the program? May be through the township headman, may be through the district officer, may be not at all. If no corrective mechanism is built into the program, the chances of being wrong are greater because there is no effective check that comes from outside the administrative group, no way of having people give their views through an organized channel at regular intervals. Views differ on how this problem can or should be solved. Some feel that the problem does not exist but the latter are not in ascendancy. The possibility of a new constitution with an expected revision of election and administrative laws has given hope to many officials in the Department and the Ministry.

## Present Progress in Local Government

A progress is being made on the problems of local self government. Training is an area where considerable effort has been put into every level of government. The aim has been to increase acceptance of a more democratic approach, stressing human relations, while teaching management skills to make local government more effective. Much of this is successful and is already bearing fruit. However, there is an inclination for officials in the Department and the Ministry to substitute training in

"democratic ways" for the "democratic way" itself. The Department sometimes spends more time in showing local officials "how to do it" than in providing the "way" to do it. This is not to criticize training but to underline the simple fact that training will produce frustration if it does not result in concrete experience.

Several studies are being conducted through the Department to improve the organization and administration of local government. These include provincial and amphur administration together with a restudy of the juristic township (Tambol administrative organization). The purpose of these studies is to improve procedures, administrative relationships and processes so that the work of local administration will be simplified, enabling officials to free themselves for additional tasks. Such improvement may also bring the people and their administrative officials closer by eliminating the bureaucratic barriers.

The Department of Community Development has a considerable program at the village level in critical areas of the northeast and the south. These are correlated with local government and administration through semi-official community development committees. While there is much speculation on the results of this program, the fact that "ad hoc" and semi-official local councils had to be used points up the absence of local government. It also underlines the real difficulties in promoting a unified, effective program at the village and township area when the "receiving structure" is nearly non-existent.

A most promising program in the Community Development picture is the village leader training program which is coupled with other developments such as the program to re-invigorate the tambol. Here a sincere attempt is being made to bring together real and potential village leaders and to train them through discussion and participation in the care of their own affairs, while at the same time increasing their ability to strengthen the "voice of the village".

The Accelerated Rural Development program is making an important start in the de-concentration of rural program. By demonstrating in practical operation the value of greater autonomy at the provincial level and emphasizing the regional considerations of its program, a structure is evolving. Bolstered by substantial investments from Thailand and the United States, the program can have a considerable impact on the future of local self government.

### **More is needed**

But these efforts do not fully meet the problem of local self government. To do that requires some serious modification in the approach of the central government. What are the possibilities of incorporating a form of representative deliberation within the existing structure of government at the local level? What thought is given to this? The units where this can most probably be done, (where it existed before are:) the provincial council, the municipal council and the rural township council. Of the three the most important in the light of local self government and economic development, and in view of the population distribution in Thailand, is the rural township council, i.e. sapa tambol and the tambol administrative organization. The township council could represent people closer to village problems and within a framework that might achieve a better consensus of need at the level of economic reality. It would also serve as the "counterweight" to the district officer in the assessment of need and the scrutiny of existing programs put forward to meet that need.

Such a proposal raises serious questions, particularly regarding the tambol headman (Kamnan) and the village headman (Puyaiban). They are elected for life. They serve as dependable links from the village to the tambol to the district, and, eventually, to the province. Being elected for life, they come to play a considerable role not only in their own bailiwick but in shaping administrative directives and opera-

tional programs at the district level. If the headmen were elected for a term, their administrative reliability may be seriously hampered. On the other hand recurring election would in turn help the villagers by giving them a chance for periodic expressions. It would also give a more direct voice to village people, independent of administrative officials and this, in turn, could have a strong influence on policy at the local level.

Serious consideration should be given to a suggestion that members of the Provincial Council be indirectly elected from citizen members of the Provincial Councils. Without going into all the details, the non-governmental members of the Tambol Council in each Amphur would assemble to elect a certain number of their own members to seats on the Provincial Council. The number of representatives to be elected would be determined by the method of apportionment. The aim of this suggestion is to insure that village people are adequately represented on the Provincial Council; at the same time it would base the Provincial Council more solidly on the groundwork of a system of local self government.

Another perennial and universal problem is lack of money. The tambols have had practically nothing to spend nor have they had sources of additional revenue. This has been a major contribution to their disuse. But even the provincial budget has suffered from lack of adequate funds. This is no small problem and cannot be considered apart from the need for local self government. If there is to be some change to allow the functioning of local self government, it cannot be done without adequate financial resources.

One suggestion which deserves study is to give the provincial budget regular grants-in-aid directly from the Bureau of the Budget. These grants would be based on a simple formula which could reflect need, local taxing ability and centrally collected revenues within the province. A serious and valuable precedent has already been set

for those provinces operating under the Accelerated Rural Development program. These provincial budgets receive definite allocations to cover the costs of their ARD programs. The enlargement of this concept on a national basis, coupled with development programs not completely dependent on the whim and "selling ability" of the central government.

### **Conclusion**

Recommendations on precisely how to proceed are not in order. The shape that local "self" government *should* take must grow out of the desire of the Department and the Ministry to put the principle into action. The structure will have to be worked out by the weight given to the factors already mentioned and to many more that are hidden away in existing complex relationships. There is no absence of ideas on the subject of how to achieve workable local self government. But what is now absent is an articulated viewpoint of the department and the Ministry on the aims of local self government. With such an expression the pieces could be debated and fitted together.

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