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Professor Duncan McCargo

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School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds

This paper reviews some of the features of politics in the South of Thailand, seeking to establish to what extent there is a distinctive character to those politics. Specifically, how can we account for the longstanding strength of the Democrat Party in the South? To what extent is southern politics animated by deeper "primordial loyalties" than politics elsewhere in Thailand? To what extent does southern politics demonstrate a capacity to resist the recent trend towards commercialisation which has characterised electoral politics in the rest of Thailand? How far have specific aspects of history, culture, geography and religion contributed to the character of southern politics? The paper is intended as a preliminary contribution to the political historiography of the South.

Characterising the Politics of the South

Prior to the fifth reign, the South was recognised as a distinct entity; *kalahom*, the Ministry of the South, was responsible for the administrative organisation of this part of the kingdom, the minister acting as a kind of viceroy (Vickery 1970: 865; Wilson 1967: 144) – though in practice control was rather loose. The reforms of the fifth reign reflected the beginnings of attempts to create a modern nation state, in which the distinctiveness of individual regions was marginalised. Siam came under external pressures, especially from the British, to define its borders. In the mid-1870s, commissioners were appointed to perform the role of military commanders in the border regions, including one for the South (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 224). These commissioners usurped the role of local notables; meanwhile, in 1892– 94, King Chulalongkorn took control of the *kalahom* ministry that had previously overseen the indirect rule of the South, turning it into the Ministry of Defence. Like the European colonial powers they emulated, Siamese administrators adopted a mixture of direct and indirect rule; while most of the South was ruled directly from Bangkok, the seven Islamic southern states were ruled indirectly as *monthon* Pattani (Vickery 1970: 876), though in 1901 Pattani was incorporated into the *monthon* of Nakhon Si Thammarat (Suhrke 1970: 537). Faced with resistance from Malay Muslims, Siam ceded the

states around Kedah to the British in 1909, while the states around Pattani continued to be ruled with a light touch.

The process of integration was continued during the time of Phibun, who suppressed resistance and dissent. As Pasuk and Baker note:

> Since assimilation into Siam at the turn of the century, the Malay Muslims of the old Pattani sultanate on the southern border had resisted assimilation into the Thai, Buddhist nation. Until the 1930s, Bangkok managed this dissidence by leaving them alone. As part of his nationalist upsurge, Phibun … started to enforce assimilation (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 270)

The hereditary rulers of Narathiwat and Pattani retained their positions until 1940 (Vickery 1970: 871), but these provinces finally succumbed to full direct rule thereafter.

Wilson sees Thailand as divided by social, ethnic and occupational groups, and never highlights the divisions and differences between Central Thais, Northerners, Northeasterners and Southerners (Wilson 1967: 56– 57). Following the cue of the Thai elite, he downplays regionalism in favour of a homogenised account of the country's politics. As Jory notes, this kind of homogenising reading has been increasingly challenged in recent years, as different regional and ethnic groups have grown more assertive about their identities (Jory 2000; on this process in Isan, see McCargo and Krisadawan 2002).

In the deep South, Malay Muslim politics clearly has a very distinctive character, manifesting itself in resistance to centralised Buddhist education through a network of Islamic *pondok* schools, and in 1968 the formation of PULO (Pasuk and Baker 1985 273; 292– 93). Insurgents on the southern border formed a strategic alliance with the CPT, successfully harassing the Thai state for over a decade. At the same time, the politics "distinctive" to the four *chaidaen pak thai* border provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Satun and Yala was – and is – very different in character from that of the South as a whole. For many commentators, the large-looming politics of the "southern border" overshadow those of the rest of the region, obfuscating the more complex picture of a region characterised by considerable internal differentiation. Which

"South" do we mean? The literature on the region is actually concerned with two overlapping but distinct sub-regions: the border provinces and the rest.

Vickery's discussion of the classification of provinces in Rama 1's 1805 Law on Military and Provincial Ranks reveals only one southern province, Nakhon Sri Thammarat, among the eight first and second-class provinces – though Nakhon was one of only two first class provinces. Three out of seven third class provinces were in the South – Chaiya (Surat Thani), Phathalung and Chumpon – while the rest of the region was of fourth class or indeterminate status (Vickery 1970: 864–65). In other words, the main political importance of the South lay in what might be termed the middle South, along the Gulf of Siam – especially around Nakhon Sri Thammarat, which had briefly declared independence during the reign of King Taksin before being reduced to vassaldom by Rama I. Vickery notes that "Among the southern provincial rulers there appears to have been a disproportionate incidence of success" in becoming prominent government officials long after their hereditary powers were removed, while a number were also elected to the pre-war national assemblies (Vickery 1970: 878; 880–81).

Charles Keyes places greater emphasis on the "majority" Southern Thai mode of politics, stating:

> Southern Thai identity is rooted primarily in the political-religious history of the region, especially the history of the towns of Nakhon Si Thammarat and Chaiya. Because this history is closely linked in a positive way with the Siamese kingdoms, and because Southern Thai language and customs are not so clearly distinguishable from those of the Siamese as those of the Northern and Northeastern Thai are, Southern Thai identity has tended to be rather muted, although in recent years Southern Thai regionalism has become more evident (Keyes 1989: 18).

For Keyes, Southern Thai regionalism is not much of a political issue, though he does note that Southerners have experienced frustration and alienation at their inability to influence some government policies (Keyes 1989: 131), and led some to join communist-led insurrections. While socio-economic changes – especially industrialisation and seasonal migration – have had dramatic adverse impacts on the

quality of rural life in the Northeast and the North, partly because southern villages typically have a more diversified economy. Subsistence agriculture has often been supplemented by fishing, tin-mining and work on rubber plantations, as well as new businesses such as shrimp farming (Keyes 1989: 167–8). Yet many business activities are the preserve of Sino-Thais, and Keyes argues that ethnicity (Central Thai, Southern Thai, Chinese and Malay) remains a far more salient difference in the South than in other parts of the country. Yet he also notes that the South has a tradition of "banditry" (quite distinct from communist or Malay Muslim insurgency), a tradition that testifies to:

> A social world in which assumptions about the basis of the social order and ways in which conflicts within that order can best be mediated are not shared by at least some of its groups (Keyes 1989: 168).

Despite attempts to deal with these issues by use of the school system and the *sangha* to legitimate state rule, "banditry" does persist in some forms. This notion of the South as a potentially renegade region with a propensity for disorder is a highly salient one, begging questions about the origins and nature of banditry. Is such a phenomenon truly separate from support for insurgencies (be they communist, regionalist or religious in their underpinnings)? What instances in recent years testify to the continuing importance of banditry as a political phenomenon? Incidents such as the burning down of a controversial tantalum plant in Phuket by a 3000-strong mob in June 1986 reinforce this notion of the South as a potential powerkeg. The Thaksin government has repeatedly claimed that violent incidents in the border provinces since 2001 are the result of banditry or conflicts of interest, rather than politically motivated terrorism (see, for example, "Still much to do in the far South", *Bangkok Post*, 2 April 2002).

The Southern border
70 to 80 per cent of the population of the four border provinces are Malay Muslims; except in Satul, Malay is the dominant language. In 1975, it was reported that 85 per cent of tambon village heads in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat were Muslims who could not read and write in Thai (Girling 1981: 265), while the provinces were administered largely by central Thai Buddhist bureaucrats who could not speak Malay. As recently as 1947, a petition reportedly signed by half of the adult Muslim

population of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani was submitted to the UN, demanding incorporation of these provinces into the new Federation of Malaya (Suhrke 1970: 537) – though in subsequent decades joining Malaysia declined markedly as a popular demand. While a number of prominent political figures emerged from the region in the postwar period – some of whom entered parliament – certain of the most prominent disappeared, were arrested, or abandoned politics (Surin 1987: 87–89). Muslim politics then "shifted from parliamentary means to an unconventional path with no specific form or operational procedures – and a growing tendency to violence" (Surin 1987: 89). This violence was fuelled by alienation, and by a range of grievances: socio-economic divides between the different ethnic groups in the border provinces are much larger than in other parts of Thailand. Surin argues that in the post-1973 period, a significant "counter-elite" has emerged to challenge the official elite. Members of this counter-elite typically undergo a traditional Islamic education, study abroad in Muslim countries, and then return to assume social and political leadership roles (Surin 1987: 94–95).

In the deep south, there are several hundred *pondok*, family-run Islamic boarding schools, offering a traditional religious education that does not always provide a strong preparation for successful employment in wider Thai society. Education has been a central sphere of contention between the Thai state and Malay communities, each suspicious of the other's preferred education system and the political rationale behind it. Thai administrators suspected the *pondok* system of fostering separatist attitudes; for many Malay Muslims, imposing Thai secular education was a means for the state to enforce assimilation and undermine their identity (Suhrke 1977: 238). The Thai government has offered financial incentives for the *pondok* to modify their curriculum to include Thai-language and other standard subjects, proposals which have received a mixed response.

Suhrke argues that Muslims in Southern Thailand may be broadly divided into two groups: loyalists who are committed to working within the Thai state, and separatists who seek to secede from it (Suhrke 1977). She interviewed separatists who argued for an autonomous or independent border state between Thailand and Malaysia, and who felt that parliamentarians elected from the border provinces had sold out to the Thai state (1977: 245–6). Loyalists, by contrast, insisted that the only realistic option for

the sub-region was to remain within Thailand. She notes the importance for the United Pattani Freedom Movement of young men who have been educated at universities elsewhere in the Islamic world, notably in Malaysia, Pakistan and Egypt (Suhrke 1975: 199). Such men bring other perspectives to bear on the specific problems of Muslims in the Thai South, seeing them as part of a wider global struggle. She argues that the failure of separatists in the sub-region to "externalise" their struggle has been crucial in neutralising it; if the movement gains wider international support, especially from Malaysia, it could pose a much more effective challenge to the Thai state (1975: 202–03).

Although the government was in theory keen to increase the number of Muslims in the bureaucracy, in practice numerous obstacles ranging from educational attainment to demands for social conformity have limited such recruitment, especially to the higher grades (Suhrke 1970: 545–6; Thomas 1975: 5). Many of the Thai Buddhists sent to administer the Southern border provinces were unenthusiastic about postings to an alien society so far from Bangkok, and their dissatisfaction may sometimes have contributed to heightened tensions. Many Muslim villagers have generally preferred to avoid contact with officialdom wherever possible, and have particular shunned the police. *Kamnan* and *phuyaiban* often play the role of intermediaries between their communities and the Thai state (Thomas 1975: 11).

Andrew Cornish is critical of much of the literature analysing the politics of the Southern border provinces. He takes other analysts to task for reflecting Thai bureaucratic views (Suhrke) or failing to examine perspectives below the elite level (Surin). He is particularly critical of Suhrke's distinction between integrationist and separatist Muslims, arguing that he has never come across a single Malay Muslim whose world-view matched Suhrke's "loyalist" perspective (Cornish 1997: 113). He sees mutual mistrust and misunderstanding as playing a central role in relations between the two main groups in the sub-region. He argues that Malay Muslims in the border provinces see themselves as inhabiting a "Malay heartland" (*negeri melayu*) that goes unrecognised by the Thai state. His case study of two agricultural development projects suggests that whereas Thai officials saw themselves as creating economic opportunities for villagers, villagers themselves were actually instrumental in determining the viability of projects. As Chaiwat points out, even basic discussion

of such issues is a potential minefield, since apparently simple linguistic choices such as the spelling of Pattani (or Patani), and the use of phrases such as "Thai Muslims" or "Malay Muslims", turn out to be important markers (Chaiwat 1992: 32).

Girling described the politics on the Southern border as "By far the most complex, even chaotic, situation" in Thailand. There was considerable tension between the various groups, with allegations of insurgency or banditry often forming the basis of harassment or worse for Malay Muslims (Girling 1981: 266). Girling discusses three separate sources of conflict: "Malay nationalists" divided between conservative and radical elements; supporters of the well-organised Malaysian Communist Party, drawn from both local Malay Muslims, and Sino-Thais; and the Communist Party of Thailand, whose supporters were mainly of Thai ethnicity. Much of this discussion is now of only historical interest, but it serves to illustrate the difficulty of making simple generalisations about the politics of such a complicated sub-region.

Banditry

Suhrke prefaces Girling's three groups with another category of "ordinary bandits, *phurai*:

> The first group – the regular bandits – are everywhere. Their standard procedure in the South is to extort money, primarily from rubber planters, but also from small businessmen and even clerks. They are usually distinguished from terrorists by their tactics; the latter ambush the police while the bandits try to avoid the police. (Suhrke 1970: 539)

Thomas discusses three main forms of "common banditry": sea piracy; theft and robbery by small gangs; and large-scale crimes committed by more than ten (and sometimes over a hundred) gang members. He describes all of these as very common in the border provinces, citing examples such as the bombing of a Yala hotel whose owner refused to give in to extortion demands (Thomas 1975: 12–15). A foreign rail traveller in the 1970s reported that all passengers were advised to sit in one protected carriage, because of thieves from Phattalung who would try to swarm the train; the province was characterised by intermittent "banditry" on the highways (Abbey 1999). Thomas notes that many pirates were based in Nakhon Si Thammarat or Songkhla, and it seems clear that banditry *per se* was not a phenomenon linked solely to the four

border provinces. One Muslim MP from Narathiwat has argued that these provinces are "the theatre of much infighting over considerable resources" among influential groups which he terms "Southern border mafia gangs" (Senee 1987: 79). These gangs comprised "regional and provincial level government officials, wealthy and corrupt businessmen, and top local gangsters". In other words, neither "ordinary bandits" nor political insurgents were responsible, but organised criminals orchestrated by influential power holders.

There seems to be some evidence to suggest that the South more generally has been characterised by a certain lawlessness, testifying to a different mode of life from other parts of Thailand. That lawlessness has been accentuated and sometimes politicised in the border provinces, but it is not specific to those provinces, nor does it primarily reflect particular grievances of a political nature.

Cultural and historical factors?

Olli-Pekka Ruohomaki, who worked on Muslim fishing communities in Phangnga, argues that these communities are quite different from Malay Muslim communities in the border area, and have not joined insurgency movements. At the same time, these communities remain somewhat removed from Thai Buddhist society, and are viewed with some suspicion by the state: "If the villagers dislike the state and its representatives, the latter feel equally insecure and dislike dealing with the villagers" (Rouhomaki 1999: 101). He notes the negative stereotypes of the South commonly held by Thai bureaucrats and others:

> Whether true or not, southern Thailand has a reputation as a fearsome place where rival gangs are engaged in feuds with each other. For instance, many Bangkokians with whom I had discussions about Southern Thailand would characterise Southerners are stubborn (*hua khaeng*) and quick to anger (*do*) This is an image that is often portrayed in many Bangkok newspapers (Ruohomaki 1999: 98)

While suggesting that "the existence of these qualities is debatable" Ruohmaki notes that there are certain "real behavioural distinctions" between southerners and other Thais: "These distinctions are manifested in a kind of Southern regionalism, a feeling

of dislike for the central government and its representatives and pride in the local dialect, culture and history" (1999: 99). Over-reliance on cultural explanations of political behaviour clearly involves serious analytical dangers. Nevertheless, it is not possible simply to discount received ideas about "regional characteristics" as mere stereotyping, since – accurate or not – such images may serve to inform, and even partly to shape the character of politics in the South.

Suthivong Pongpaiboon, discussing the characteristic belief-systems of the South, has written that:

> The inhabitants of the South made their living from lowland and highland farming, fishing, selling products of the forest, and catching land and water animals. High risk was involved in life and property, with security and certainty hard to come by. They naturally lacked self-confidence (Suthivong 1995: 232)

At the same time, he argues that: "Bravery is a sign of manliness. A brave man is considered to possess a minimum for survival" (Suthivong 1995: 235). This potent combination of courage and uncertainty suggested a different set of values from the values of more secure central Thai peasants, living off some of the finest paddy land in the world. A man's life in the South was more raw, closer to the edge; surviving could require a robust masculinity, a readiness to fight, to defend oneself, and if necessary even to steal from others. These masculine skills were linked to verbal fluency. Ekawit argues that southerners are dynamic language users, talkative and argumentative (Ekawit 1997).

Sarup Ridchu (with Sumi Thongsai) has argued that the nature of southern politics reflects a distinctive set of socio-economic conditions, with deep historical roots. Focusing particularly on the role of elephants and elephant traders, she suggests that an 1899 law on the catching of wild elephants marked a turning point in southern history, coinciding with the domestication of communities and the beginning of a process of transforming jungles into farmland:

> During this stage, elephant-owning communities and those of other types enjoyed strong affinities and often united with the original town-level

communities, Buddhist as well as Muslim, to resist domination by the Thai state, resulting in a new power group of Chinese descent. (Sarup with Sumi 2000: jo)

In the postwar period, moves towards more intensive commercial agriculture produced intense competition over resources, and even sometimes violence:

The traditional image of local honorable fighters… gradually gave way to ruffianism. From this emerged Communist terrorists, Chinese and Malay bandits as viewed by the Thai-state machinery, edging toward community disintegration

The core argument is that heads of elephant-owning communities were transformed from a traditional local political and economic elite into the leading figures in various insurgencies, seeing themselves as pitted in a struggle against the Thai state, on behalf of their communities and their region. These figures assumed leadership roles in both communist and separatist armed struggles (Sarup with Sumi 2000: 205– 33). The case study communities used in this book are located in Phattalung, Surat Thani and Yala, so their arguments transcend the divide between border provinces and the rest of the Southern region. The clear implication here is that the banditry and insurgency of the border is simply a more acute manifestation of a general character of southern politics, rooted in a less settled and thus more insecure agrarian base, and a greater divide between the haves and the have-nots. Yet Sarup has not shown that leading politicians in the contemporary South are actually directly descended from the elephant-trading communities she has studied.

A study of southern bullfighting by Akhom Detthongkham published in 2000 (as part of the same TRF research project as the volume by Sarup and Sumi) provoked a furore. Akhom argued that the "backstage matadors" who orchestrated the fights – in Thailand, fights are between two bulls, rather than contests between a bull and a matador – would stop at nothing to win, even going so far as to poison opponent's bulls the night before a big fight. Akhom described Southerners as gifted speakers who were not especially friendly or outgoing: rather, they were strong-headed, frequently involved in heated arguments, straightforward and usually spoke without

consideration for the feelings of others (Akhom 2000: 56). He sought to present bullfighting as a metaphor for the character of southern people, a suggestion which provoked anger among Democrat politicians and their supporters: his research was assumed to suggest that southerners were totally unprincipled in the pursuit of their goals. The issue became front page news for a few days (see Kilen Pralongchoeng, "Nak chon wua", *Thai Rath*, 7 August 2000). *Matichon* quoted the president of the Nakhon Si Thammarat Chamber of Commerce as saying that Akhom's research was flawed, and would have a negative impact on southerners, who were really generous and caring. He suggested that Akhom might have been motivated by some sort of political disappointment or frustration (*Matichon*, 7 August 2000).

In a study of no confidence debates in Thailand, Savitri Gadavanij has suggested that the verbal sparring of these debates has analogies with the style of *nang talung*, a form of southern shadow play (Savitri 2002: 236). In *nang talung*, a character known as *ai theng* plays the role of jester, raising controversial issues and taboo topics. She suggests that southern politicians:

> such as Chuan Leekpai, Trairong Suwannakiri and Suthep Thueksuban share certain common characteristics. They are usually skilful performers. They bear characteristics of southerners, portrayed in the character of *ai theng*, cynical, argumentative, having excellent command of language and a witty way with words. (Savitri 2002: 237)

While Chuan is a master of subtlety and innuendo – parliament's "honey-coated razor" – Trairong and Suthep use a distinctive southern-accented *thong daeng* style, "argumentative, loud and direct" (Savitri 2002: 238). The southern contingent of MPs includes many of parliament's best performers, reflecting a political culture that emphasises public speaking skills, and prizes a certain mode of masculinity in its leaders. At the same time, Chuan himself clearly manifested a different mode of masculinity from either Trairong and Suthep – both of whom have very different modes of speaking – so illustrating the limitations of culturalist generalisations. Though interesting in themselves, Savitri's interpretations have only limited explanatory power.

Towards a new regionalism?

As Surin notes, the regionalisation of party support had become a pronounced trend by the early 1990s. This trend was led by the near-hegemonic dominance of the Democrat Party in the South by 1992, reflecting the rise of southerner Chuan Leekpai to the leadership of the party. Similar tendencies could be seen on a smaller scale in the New Aspiration Party's attempts to build a regional base in Isan, and in Chart Thai's longstanding support in parts of the central region. Chuan "capitalised on the more politically conscious and stronger sense of regionalism of southerners" in his two 1992 election campaigns, declaring in the southern dialect at an election rally in Nakhon Sri Thammarat: "Wouldn't you be proud of me if I became the 20th prime minister, the second one from the south"? (Surin 1992: 46, quoting *Bangkok Post* 12 September 1992).

The first prime minister from the south had been Prem Tinsulanond, whose integrity and perceived incorruptibility were much admired. By placing himself in the same tradition as Prem, Chuan was laying claim to a similar set of qualities. Implicitly, these could be cited as "southern values" and a southern mode of masculinity based upon straightforwardness, decency, and lack of pretension. A strong desire for an elected southern prime minister certainly contributed to the Democrats' success in winning 36 out of 45 southern seats in the September 1992 elections. They had gained 26 seats in the region in March 1992, compared to 13 out of 38 in 1979, 25 out of 41 in 1983, and 16 out of 43 in 1988 (Nelson 1999: 280– 84); in 1995 they gained a remarkable 46 out of 51 available seats, and in 1996, 47 out of 52. Despite the national landslide victory of the Thai Rak Thai party in the January 2001 elections, the Democrats still retained 48 of the 54 seats in the South, demonstrating the capacity of the region to buck wider political trends. These were extremely impressive results. Virtually the only southern seats not held by the Democrats from the mid-1990s were those of a group of Muslim MPs led by Wan Muhamad Nor Mata, under the NAP portfolio, all from the border provinces.

Allen Hicken has demonstrated that since the 1980s, the South has had fewer "effective parties" than other parts of Thailand (Hicken 2002: 156– 7). Generally, there have only been two serious parties contending southern constituencies; this

figure increased when the Democrats were split at the time of the 1988 election. Yet the figures show that overwhelming Democrat support in the South is quite a recent phenomenon. In January 1975 the Democrats gained 17 Southern seats; they were the largest party by far, but still gained less than half of the 36 seats in the region. In 1979, the Social Action Party actually won 17 seats in the region compared with the Democrats 13. The overwhelmingly dominant position of the Democrats is of relatively recent origin, and is closely associated with the rise of a strong group of southern MPs led by Chuan Leekpai.

In some ways, this was an ironic development: despite the traditional "banditry" of the region, featuring southerners preying on other southerners, southern voters during the 1990s tended to vote en bloc for their "kith and kin", the Democrats. This raises questions about when, how and when Southerners turn from robbing and abusing one another to supporting each other politically – questions which remain so far unresearched. Similarly, what does party affiliation actually mean to a typical southern voter, and how far do southern voters view parties differently from their counterparts in the North or the Northeast?

The 1995 land reform scandal and rise of regionalism

The Democrats' electoral grip on the region was greatly strengthened after the no-confidence debate of May 1995. This debate, which centred on a land reform scandal involving leading Southern Democrats – especially former deputy agriculture minister Suthep Theuksuban – came almost to resemble a regional dispute, pitting the South against the rest of the country. Democrat politicians were accused of abusing land reform provisions designed to assigned poor farmers, to benefit wealthy supporters and even their own relatives in Phuket and other provinces. A campaign against alleged abuses of power by southern Democrats was led by the top-selling daily newspaper *Thai Rath*, which "locked" the scandal onto its front page for over six months (see McCargo 2000: 15–17; Pasuk and Baker 1997: 33–5). The campaign was replete with rhetoric suggesting that the stubbornness and selfishness of southern politicians had led them to act against the national interest, illicitly channelling benefits to their own inside circle, and then failing properly to address their wrongdoing. While prime minister Chuan Leekpai was never accused of personal

impropriety over the land reform issue, his attempts to use his own reputation for integrity to shield less squeaky-clean colleagues had the effect of sullying his image, culminating in the downfall of his first administration in May 1995. Criticism of the southern Democrat leadership over the scandal provoked a strong reaction in some parts of the region, and contributed to the party's landslide success there in the subsequent July 1995 general election.

During the scandal, both sides sought to exploit regional tensions for their own advantage. When Suthep Theuksuban addressed a huge crowd in his Surat Thani constituency a month before the no-confidence debate, he was totally unrepentant about his role in the scandal, calling on his southern supporters to march on Bangkok in their hundreds of thousands to defend his reputation (*Siam Post*, 19 April 1995). News of this speech provoked uproar in the capital, confirming the views of many Bangkokians that Chuan's inner circle contained some over-excitable rabble-rousers. A week earlier, a column by *Thai Rath*'s Chalam Khiao had accused the Chuan administration of deliberately seeking to divide the country, "inciting and fomenting friction among southern people" (*Thai Rath*, 11 April 1995); Suthep's outburst appeared to support this view.

Yet many southerners saw *Thai Rath*'s attacks as part of a plot to bring down the government: anti-*Thai Rath* signs were erected all over the South – some even placed on police stations – and numerous southern readers boycotted the newspaper. *Thai Rath*'s weekly "Sunday political analysis" column on 9 April had argued that the Democrats had now forfeited their claims to be a national party, and had become essentially a regional party under Chuan's leadership. This was a vicious jibe, but reflected the fact that previously the Democrats – despite their parliamentary strength in the South – had been led mainly by Bangkokians. The Chuan period saw the provinces gaining the upper hand over Bangkok for the first time in the party's history, a development reflecting wider changes in Thailand's political economy associated with the rise of provincial business interests, and the commercialisation of politics.

The April 2003 victory of southerner Banyat Bantadtan over his Bangkokian rival for the Democrat leadership, Abhisit Vejjajiva, illustrates the extent to which the southern

faction exercises a continuing grip on the reins of power within the party. Banyat won out, despite the fact that Abhisit was explicitly endorsed by Chuan himself. He also won despite the fact that he had no obvious appeal to voters beyond the South, and little national credibility. Banyat's victory apparently testified to the triumph of southern tribalism over common sense, the subordination of the party to narrow regional interests.

Less vote-buying, fewer *jao pho*?
Commercialisation of the Thai electoral process increased rapidly from 1979 onwards, resulting in endemic vote-buying of various kinds, voter intimidation, and frequent abuses of power by electoral officials – as well as widespread "MP buying" (offering financial incentives to switch parties) (Surin and McCargo 1997). By the early 1990s, dissatisfaction with these practices had led to the creation of a "PollWatch" monitoring organisation; in 1997, the new constitution established an independent Election Commission. Vote-buying is perhaps at its more virulent in the Northeast, which has seen a very considerable turnover of MPs in the past two decades (Callahan and McCargo 1996). Callahan has argued that the south, with its more unified regional identity and strong leaning towards the Democrats, is often seen as "beyond vote-buying", yet his study details allegations of illegal practices by the Democrats in Hat Yai in 1995 (Callahan 2000: 50– 51), noting that Pollwatch officials believed Democrat vote-buying was widespread in the region (Callahan 2000: 20). He also suggests that bureaucratic bias in favour of the Democrats was quite pervasive in the South, including Chuan's own Trang constituency (Callahan 2000: 20, 57). While it may be the case that regionalist sympathies for the Democrats reduced the salience of electoral manipulation in the South – it might be suggested that the Democrats would largely "win anyway", even without cheating, and that illicit benefits offered around elections were simply part of an ongoing relationship between the party and its supporters – southern sympathy for the party did not prevent the commercialisation of elections in the region.

Pasuk and Sungsidh argue that the rise of "godfathers" (*jao pho*) in the Thai provinces, especially during the 1980s, had different manifestations in different regions. Neither they nor other analysts of *jao pho* in one recent volume (Sombat 2000, Ockey 2000) identify any major organised crime bosses further south than

Petchaburi and Prachuab Khiri Khan. Pasuk and Sungsidh suggest that while there is a group of old style southern "godfathers" – tin mining entrepreneurs with smuggling interests known as *nai hua* – there were relatively few "modern" godfathers. Those that did emerge recently operate mostly on a smaller scale, mainly in Hat Yai, Phuket, Sungaikolok and Nakhon Sri Thammarat (Pasuk and Sungsidh 1994: 87). They suggest that the existence of well-established local elites in many southern towns impeded the rise of new *jao pho*, while strong CPT activity in the 1960s and early 1970s "may have acted as a counterweight to the growth of new local potentates". Whether *nai hua* can really be termed "godfathers" begs some questions, but Pasuk and Sungsidh's overall argument – that strong urban elites in the south created a kind of proto-civil society, which in turn impeded the rise of bossism – is an interesting one.

Summary of points raised

A number of themes have emerged from this preliminary discussion. These include:

- A sense that southern Thai politics has been shaped by a distinctive history; parts of the region were until quite recently less directly subject to rule from Bangkok than other regions of Thailand.
- The troubled politics of the southern border provinces have rather overshadowed the politics of the region as a whole, at least in the imaginations of many bureaucrats and commentators.
- The border region is the most studied part of the South from a political perspective, and is clearly characterised by different concepts of identity held by the various ethnic and religious groups residing there.
- These contrasting identities have sometimes manifested themselves in the form of violent conflicts, including involvement with both the Malayan and Thai communist parties, and with separatist movements
- At the same time, the south more generally has a reputation for lawlessness and banditry (whether deserved or not), which is difficult to distinguish from political violence.

- A number of scholars have suggested cultural-historical "explanations" for southern politics behaviour, stressing factors such as preferences for certain leadership styles and the role of local elites.

- While unreliable and incomplete, the salience of these explanations cannot be entirely discounted.

- The pre-eminence of the Democrat Party in the south has long roots, but has been especially pronounced since Chuan Leekpai led the party to form two governments in the1990s.

- Evidence that vote-buying is less important in the south is difficult to come by, but the political economy of the region is distinctive and the recent phenomenon of influential "godfathers" has variant manifestations.

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Note on the author
Duncan McCargo is professor of Southeast Asian politics at the University of Leeds; his most recent book on Thailand is the edited volume *Reforming Thai Politics* (Copenhagen: NIAS 2002). Contact e-mail: d.j.mccargo@leeds.ac.uk