



ขอบคุณภาพจาก <https://goo.gl/BV6c6a>

การรวมศูนย์อำนาจครั้งใหม่: ฤๅนี่คืออนาคตของ ตำนานการชักเย่อระหว่างอำนาจรัฐบาลกลาง กับรัฐบาลท้องถิ่นของไทย

Recentralisation: Is it a way forward
for legendary Tug-of-War of Central-Local autonomy in Thailand?

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความชิ้นนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจขอบเขตอำนาจของรัฐบาลท้องถิ่นไทยในช่วง พ.ศ. 2552-2558 ผ่านการศึกษากฎการศึกษาในองค์กรปกครองท้องถิ่นในเขตจังหวัดน่านและจังหวัดเลยในสามประเด็น คือ อิสระภาพในการบริหารจัดการตนเองของรัฐบาลท้องถิ่นและชุมชนท้องถิ่น การตอบสนองของรัฐบาลท้องถิ่นและรัฐบาลกลางต่อการกระจายอำนาจและโอกาสและความท้าทายของรัฐบาลท้องถิ่นจากการกระจายอำนาจสู่ท้องถิ่น ผลการวิจัยพบว่า อิสระภาพและการตอบสนองของรัฐบาลท้องถิ่นต่อการกระจายอำนาจยังมีข้อจำกัดเนื่องจากรัฐบาลกลางมีปฏิกิริยาต่อการกระจายอำนาจในลักษณะของการรวมศูนย์อำนาจครั้งใหม่ที่กระจายอำนาจให้รัฐบาลท้องถิ่นเฉพาะเรื่อง ทำให้การตัดสินใจของรัฐบาลท้องถิ่นทั้งในมิติภายในและภายนอกองค์กรเกิดความคลุมเครือ อีกทั้งประเด็นด้านความสามารถอันจำกัดของข้าราชการส่วนท้องถิ่นและประชาชนในท้องถิ่นในการบริหารจัดการตนเองเป็นความท้าทายในการกระจายอำนาจสู่ท้องถิ่นอย่างแท้จริง ‘การเล่นชกเยื่อ’ ระหว่างอำนาจของรัฐบาลกลางกับรัฐบาลท้องถิ่นในปัจจุบันสามารถทำนายภาพอนาคตของการกระจายอำนาจในประเทศไทยที่มีแนวโน้มเป็นการกระจายอำนาจเทียม

คำสำคัญ: อิสระภาพของท้องถิ่น, การรวมศูนย์อำนาจครั้งใหม่, การกระจายอำนาจเทียม, การบริหารจัดการทรัพยากรมนุษย์, ประชาธิปไตยแบบมีส่วนร่วม, ประเทศไทย

Abstract

This paper aims to confer on the scope of local government power in Thailand during the period 2009-2015. A case study of local governments in Loei and Nan provinces will be explored in regards to three issues: the local autonomy of both the local government and the local community; the responses of local units and the central government to decentralisation and local autonomy; and the opportunities and challenges for Thai local units. The research has found that, empirically, local autonomy and local governments' responses to decentralisation are limited. On the other hand, the central government seems to embrace recentralisation, as decentralisation of specific functions has been authorised to local government. This situation has led to a myth to local governments in making decisions in both external and internal dimensions. Besides, challenges of genuine decentralisation depend upon adequate capacity of local civil servants, as well as local constituents. The

‘Tug-of-War’ game between the central and local government could influence Thailand’s future of decentralisation as recentralisation.

Keywords: Local autonomy, Recentralisation, Pseudo-decentralisation, Human Resource Management, Participatory democracy, Thailand

Introduction

Thailand has been a unitary state where centralisation has been exercised for centuries. Decentralisation has recently been employed in Thailand during the very last decade of the 20th century. However, it has been a challenging issue for the Thai public sector to adopt and initiate other extreme practices in reality. Recently, the pendulum of the decentralisation/centralisation dichotomy has swung back to reach the point of ‘recentralisation’. It is perceptible that recentralisation has become a novel term amongst scholars and practitioners. In accordance with their arguments, it is thought-provoking to refer to this phenomenon as ‘pseudo-decentralisation’. This is because some decentralised units or local governments have pretended to execute their tasks as if they have autonomy whereas, in reality, they evidently have none. In this aspect, decentralisation is selected to be examined in order to obtain a more profound understanding of the case of a transitional country, namely Thailand.

Regarding decentralisation, this article will closely explore a case study of the decentralised decision-making power of local government over human resource management and community forest management issues. Although decentralisation has prevailed in Thai public administration for decades, several pieces of evidence have revealed that decentralisation is actually recentralization in disguise. The genuine decision-making power of local entities is limited in both internal and external dimensions. The two cases of human resource management (hereafter, HRM) and community forest management at a local level may uncover a situation called pseudo-decentralisation.

This paper aims to discuss the scope of local autonomy in develop-

ing contexts, such as Thailand's. Three issues will be explored. First, local autonomy for both the local government and the local community will be investigated. Second is the issue of how Thai local units and the central government respond to decentralisation and local autonomy. Finally, the paper considers the opportunities and challenges for these local units.

Theoretical perspectives underpinning the research

This section introduces the intertwined theoretical relations amongst local autonomy, decentralisation and participatory democracy. These terms are claimed to be influential in public administration and local government literature.

The scope and meaning of local autonomy

In public administration, local autonomy has been widely understood to be a part of local democracy. Although the two terms have been used interchangeably, local autonomy usually refers to the process and the authority in decision-making. This means that, after decentralisation, the local units are expected to embrace their own authority or autonomy in making decisions on any related issues. Pratchett (2004) suggested that most scholars addressed local autonomy as the freedom granted by its central government as a basic foundation for local democracy. Local autonomy is related to the issue of 'sovereignty'. He also reiterated that this autonomy comes in two main forms: 'free from' and 'free to'. However, this freedom is still subjected to the readiness and capacity of those particular local units.

In addition, Verhoest et al. (2004) proposed that autonomy could be discussed at the national, community and organisational level, especially for public organisations. In this context, it is the autonomy of local organisations. The researchers stated clearly that the concept of local autonomy was initiated in OECD countries rather than developing ones. They also developed concrete indicators to analyse autonomy at an organisational level. They have distilled the concepts of autonomy based on literature reviews on 'autonomy'.

They have divided this literature into two main categories: autonomy as the level of decision-making competencies and autonomy as the exemption of constraints on the actual use of decision-making competencies. These two categories can be divided into sub-categories. Autonomy as decision-making competencies includes managerial autonomy and policy autonomy, while the latter includes structural autonomy, financial autonomy, legal autonomy and interventional autonomy.

On the private sector side, local autonomy has been discussed among private enterprises. They focus on who decides what between the headquarters and the subsidiaries. The subsidiaries of multinational corporations are their 'local units'. The main argument falls under the issue of the subsidiaries' size. If that subsidiary is big, more autonomy is believed to be granted. However, not all research found this relationship to be positive. Another main argument would be the cultural differences regarding organisational and national cultures. All in all, local autonomy in management has become one of the noticeable issues in private, as well as public organisation.

Since this paper aims to look at the autonomy of Thai local governments, the approach adopted by Verhoest et al. in 2004 will be the fundamental concept for the discussion. However, managerial autonomy will be the foremost issue with regard to the selected context, that of Thailand. Local autonomy will be discussed based on the internal and external dimensions of local governments: HRM and managing community forests.

The dichotomy of decentralisation, pseudo-decentralisation and recentralisation

Lately, there has been a back and forth force where the pendulum between the decentralisation and centralisation dichotomy has swung back to reach a point of semi-centralisation (Kessy and McCourt, 2010, Li, 2010). A question on recentralisation has emerged. It is conspicuous that recentralisation has become a contemporary term amongst practitioners and scholars. In accordance with their arguments, the authors would label this phenomenon

‘pseudo-decentralisation’. This is because some decentralised units or local governments have performed as if they have obtained their autonomy whereas, in reality, they retain only slight autonomy.” There are several pieces of evidence which help to assert that decentralisation has camouflaged recentralisation or even centralisation.

Wunsch has referred to ‘central reluctance’ in transferring authority to local units in some main functions of administration (Wunsch, 2001). He has addressed the cases of African states where local governance has been executed for 20 years but its outcome has been disputed. Still, intricacy in re-locating authorities and tasks to local units subsists. Central governments have claimed to have retained their authority, especially in the key areas of fiscal management and personnel systems. This is moderately apparent since there has been legislative consent for the central government to recheck or supervise the local governments. Wunsch has studied the recentralisation phenomenon in four main functions of local government units: planning and capital investment, budgeting and fiscal management, personnel systems and management, and finance and revenue. The findings showed that many African states have ultimately tried to defeat recentralisation since decentralisation outcomes have been relatively constructive and there have been firm arguments that decentralisation is still anticipated to bring improved effectiveness and efficiency for local people (Wunsch, 2001).

Correspondingly, Awortwi decisively indicated that decentralisation has been ‘pretence’ in the cases of Ghana and Uganda (Awortwi, 2010: 631). There has been a swing-back moment where decentralisation has been disengaged or inverted. Recentralisation has been exploited as a deliberate tool to recuperate some of the status of the central government, especially in personnel management schemes. This retrieval of central government status was not implemented illegally, but legislatively promulgated by law (Awortwi, 2010). Like Awortwi, the explanation of Rees and Hossain, in regard to the motive for decentralisation, has implied that there could be a case for recentralisation, especially regarding the political aspect. Since there has been

motivation to decentralise from the central government, the dominant political party would also be persuasive at the local level. This might rationally lead to a recentralisation stage where the national level and local level belong to the same political party. As a result, hierarchy of demand may occur (Rees and Hossain, 2010).

In a Tanzanian case, Kessy and McCourt enunciated that ‘an ostensible decentralisation can be recentralisation in disguise’ (Kessy and McCourt, 2010: 690). Besides this, they also concluded that a structure which is apparently decentralised may not directly entail decentralisation in reality. They assure that ‘the inherent de jure structural tension in the relationship between central and local government shows that decentralisation will always end up as de facto centralisations’ (Kessy and McCourt, 2010: 695).

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that there have been cases where decentralisation has reached the standing point of ‘pseudo-decentralisation’. As a result, it is interesting to explore this issue of recentralisation in other countries in order to academically contribute to some means of avoiding or accepting the momentum of recentralisation. In this research, a South East Asian country, namely Thailand, is investigated to ascertain whether recentralisation may be the case there. As a result, the next section sheds some light on decentralisation and human resource management which is one of the main dimensions explored in this paper.

Decentralisation and human resource management

There have been alterations when comparing conventional bureaucracy with modern ways of public management like NPM and decentralisation. HRM is an issue which has been perfunctorily affected by these new approaches to management (Brown, 2004). When mentioning ‘change’, it is denoted to some extent that there is also an ‘open system’ for HRM issues (Verbeeten, 2008). As a result, this change has also located HRM in an environment of exigencies rather than bureaucratically conservative ways of management.

It is obvious that conventional bureaucracy straightforwardly designated how HRM should function. Responsibilities or duties of people in an organisation would be entitled by the functions and tasks of their positions and jobs. It was formalised and officialised to gain legitimacy and authority for each employee. It has been rare that an arbitrary role would be set aside from the employee's main mission. Demands and orders have been completed through an organisational hierarchy. Policies have been translated into practice through hierarchical orders. This conventional administration has been in the form of centralisation. Therefore, HRM was certainly influenced and some sense of decentralisation has emerged.

...The adoption of New Public Management then may have opened the possibility of managers acquiring or developing sophisticated HRM techniques. Thus NPM principles allow a more flexible and responsive approach to questions of recruitment, selection, retention, training and development of public sector employees.... (Brown, 2004: 305)

New Public Management (NPM) has been the bigger umbrella term which includes decentralisation. NPM has been renowned for its market-based, administrative and flexible character. Most scholars have been more concerned with efficiency, effectiveness and performance of employees in accordance with the NPM approach (Verbeeten, 2008). This concern has urged an argument as to whether these scholars have considered the 'quality' of 'human beings' in each local unit. The financial and fiscal accomplishment is tangible while the human assets quality is the opposite. Moreover, Brown has clearly presented that a life time career and service of employment have certainly been borderline and questioned by embracing NPM. Trust amongst colleagues, long tenure of employee careers and loyalty to an organisation are vulnerable. Individual performance, output which could be used as an indicator for higher performance, might be prioritised rather than the unity of a department as a

mutual unit. Brown claimed that ‘multitasking, reorganised career paths, obliteration of seniority as a basis for promotion, greater emphasis on equity considerations and the removal of rigid employment categories have been shifted’ (Brown, 2004: 308). Staff would rather be ‘generalists’ than ‘professionals’ in each position, since contracting out and downsizing of an organisation may affect their employment. However, it is unarguable that performance-based approach is crucial. It could encourage employees to be productive rather than conducting only repetitive responsibilities. In addition, nurturing the mentality of tenure and realising the ultimate goal of the organisation would certainly heighten organisational capacity. Therefore, to answer the question of how harmonious decentralisation and HRM are, it could be argued here that they are both compatible with each other. However, one argument which is worth pointing out here is that decentralisation is based on theories which are more market driven, managerial, and publicly chosen, and which are mainly economic theories. It scarcely aims at the ‘human side’ of an organisation which is essentially based on behavioural science. Therefore, it is likely to be that NPM and decentralisation are theoretically more on the deleterious side of the compatibility aspect with HRM. Being public officials, their tasks, functions and roles might be divergent and it would be rather challenging to execute them efficiently and effectively while career development is ambiguous. Fast tracking and contracting out can do harm to an employee’s motivation and loyalty. Simultaneously, pure and real performance-based approaches could also exterminate or at least lessen the effects of the patronage and spoils system as a legacy of bureaucracy. Well-performing employees would therefore be benefitted with more opportunities.

Again, it would be rather more interesting to question how other practices would be exercised via decentralisation. HRM is more of an internal organisational administrative dimension. It is interesting to consider how decentralisation would function in a decentralised context, especially with community participation and community development. The outstanding issue

which is likely to be discussed most in developing countries is decentralisation and natural resource management. In this paper, we focused on community forest management and decentralisation. The next section profoundly addresses these issues.

Decentralisation and participatory democracy

Public participation has been widely discussed in the contemporary world. Public participation and decentralisation are not the same but they are intertwined. A concept of decentralisation might become less effective if genuine public participation was not engendered. Although public participation has been widely discussed recently, there is no standard criterion for evaluating how genuine citizen power is. The idea to evaluate citizen power was proposed by Arnstein in 1969. She called it a ladder of citizen participation. The model has initially applied as a guide to improve public involvement in the USA in which power has to be redistributed genuinely to encourage public participation.

Arnstein (1969) argued that citizens should have real power to make decisions involved with their lives and livelihoods. On this assumption, she developed a model which differentiated citizen participation into eight levels from the most to the least effective: citizen control, delegated power, partnership, placation, consultation, informing, therapy and manipulation. All of these are then grouped into three different groups. The “citizen power” group is composed of partnership, delegated and citizen control rungs. This is because citizens are able to share power with the policy-makers. The second group is called “tokenism” to illustrate the fact that people lack the power to ensure that their concerns will be taken into account. This group is composed of informing, consultation and placation rungs. “Non-participation” is the name of the third group, and includes brand manipulation and therapy rungs in which the citizens have no power to make any decisions at all. With regard to the ladder of citizen participation, the “citizen control” rung is the most preferred stage of public participation since the citizens have genuine power to determine their lives.

Since the ladder of citizen participation was developed for developed countries, Choguill has commented that the model may produce misleading results when applied to a development context. This is because citizens living in low-income communities in developing countries need more than just power. External institution involvement is important in terms of facilitating or carrying out community mutual-help projects (Choguill, 1996: 431). Therefore, Choguill has proposed a more universal model to be specifically used in a development context called a ladder of community participation. Individuals are considered members or representatives of a fully organised community which can make participation more plausible in rural communities in such development contexts (Choguill, 1996: 435). To measure community participation, Choguill follows Arntein's format to explain her idea. The scale of participation is categorised by the degree of governmental willingness to carry out community mutual-help projects. The model also has eight hierarchical rungs which are, from the lowest to the highest degree, self-management, conspiracy, informing, diplomacy, dissimulation, conciliation, partnership and empowerment. The empowerment and self-management rungs are extreme opposites but they almost represent the same degree of citizen power. However, they differ in that basic needs can be achieved with or without governmental support (Choguill, 1996: 431).

In a development context, the reality of decentralisation and citizen power may be perceived through a case of natural resource management which affects the lives and livelihoods of local people. Community forest management could possibly illustrate the relationship between citizen power and local government as the external institution. Although administrative power has been decentralised to local government, power of forest management has always been in the hands of central government. When power is centralised, local governments' and local citizens' power in managing community forests is questionable. Disputes about community forest management between government officials and local people have been found in many places. Both sides have accused each other of less

competency in preserving and managing community forests. Centralised forest management has ignored people's concerns of living and livelihoods. A local government may exploit the decentralised power through a community fund and wages in order to encourage citizen power through the community forest fund and wages. However, a local government is still unable to share the power of forest management even though the local community has been preserving a forest for decades. Therefore, the relationship of public participation, decentralisation and community forest management is worth exploring to explore whether decentralisation can genuinely benefit local communities or only pseudo-decentralisation. Based on the nature of the research questions and the underpinning theoretical perspectives, the next section discusses methodological stances and the selected case studies for this research.

Research methodologies applied

This paper is based on empirical research conducted in Loei Province and Nan Province in Thailand during the period 2009 to 2011 with revisits in 2012 and 2015, respectively. Sub-district municipalities, or *tessaban tambon*, were purposively selected to reflect the reality in the field. The researchers have adopted a qualitative methodology. Wide ranges of qualitative methods were conducted, including focus group discussion, in-depth interviews, elite interviews and direct observation.

1) Why Thailand?

The unparalleled history of the Kingdom of Thailand as a non-colonised country in South East Asia has inevitably had an effect on its administrative system and political regime (Haque, 2010). It allowed Thailand to obtain a unique evolution of public administration. Decentralisation which has emerged in a country of such centralisation, such as Thailand, is very interesting. The local community forest management and local personnel administration are selected to reflect the outcome of decentralisation in external and internal dimensions, respectively. Most research has studied only a single aspect, either internal or external. It is dubious whether the same

management approach, like decentralisation, could in fact establish similar or different outcomes on local units in Thailand.

Regarding the aspect of the external dimension for this paper, even though community forest management seems to be one of the most thought-provoking issues with regard to the development of citizen politics in Thailand, there have been scarce research studies that concentrate on the topic. For instance, in accordance with the Thailand Research Fund, the principal research funding organisation in Thailand, there are only three studies associated with community forests (Rojanasupot 2004; Srisupan 2006; Rungta-wanruengsri 2007). Of these three, only one was concerned with community participation. In a broader scope, 20 citizen participation research studies have been carried out but none of them relate to community forest issues. Only the work of Somsak (2002) studied the management and development of the community forest network in Nan province, while the others focus on the benefits of community forests to local people. Hence, this paper focussed on community forests within the aspect of decentralisation and its affect on the local community. In this case, therefore, Nan province can be a good case study to be explored. In Nan, where forest land has been condensed, the decreasing number of forests has hooked researchers' attention.

Simultaneously, the internal aspect of decentralised HRM in Thailand is also unique. Local administration in Thailand has been a critical part of the national agenda since the 1990s. The constitutions of 1997 and 2007 have instigated the issue's importance. Therefore, exploring the outcome of decentralisation on HRM at the local level is significant. Besides, the selected local government and municipalities are very outstanding units. The municipality is the local government form which has been sustained throughout Thai public administration's evolution. Thus, it is an important unit which needs to be explored, especially in Loei province where personnel administration has just started to be focussed on.

2) Qualitative research applied

This research adopted qualitative research methods. The fieldwork was initially concentrated on studying a literature review generated

from diverse disciplines and methodological backgrounds. Academic journal articles regarding HR practices in local governance and participatory democracy were explored. Simultaneously, documents and secondary data related to the evolution of local HRM, community forest management and participation in Thailand were intensely investigated.

An in-depth interview is particularly designed to apply a particular interview to crucial informants. Mayors, municipal clerks, higher position committee members in the Department of Local Administration (hereafter, DOLA) and other officials who are responsible for community forest management are considered as groups of people who are key informants. They are directly responsible for the researched issues. All mayors and municipal clerks in the selected municipalities in the North of Thailand were interviewed. To triangulate this with different interviewees, three officials at the central government in DOLA were interviewed in-depth. In addition, a focus group discussion with eight participants from each municipality was arranged. These participants came by their own will to participate and exchange their knowledge and experiences with the researchers in regard to community forest management and personnel management at their municipalities. Each participant was invited based on their main tasks which are related either to HRM or community forest management. The questions asked were derived from the literature review in the related fields. Data analysis was carried out by using ‘thematic analyses’. The themes were distilled from the literature review and discussed along with the indicated issues as aforementioned in the aim and objectives of the study.

Research findings and discussion: Central-local autonomy and its related issues in Thailand

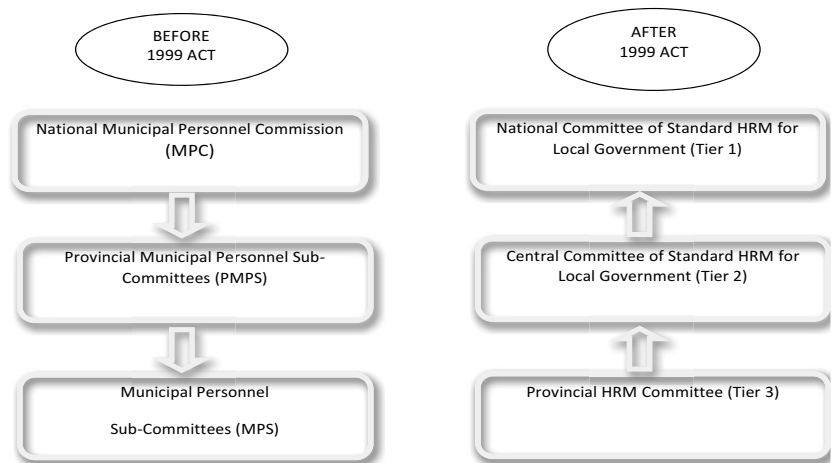
The status quo of local autonomy

1. Local autonomy and human resource management: Internal aspect

Decentralisation in Thailand has been officially directed since 1997 in terms of institutional and structural reforms. It has transformed state power

to local units. This action of decentralisation has also been deep-rooted by the promulgation of the Decentralisation Act 1999 which regulates and designates the processes for local government organisations including decentralisation procedures for municipalities. Moreover, the National Plan on Decentralisation 2001 has also been proclaimed to certify that decentralisation must be implemented meticulously. Both the Decentralisation Act 1999 and the National Plan on Decentralisation 2001 have been planned and framed on the basis of the Thai Constitution 1997. As a result, the devolution of local human resource management has unquestionably been one of the tasks devolved to the local governments.

Before the Decentralisation Act 1999 and the Local Personnel Administration Act 1999 were legislated, local personnel administration had been administrated in the form of ‘commissions’. The structure and hierarchy of personnel administration was enforced by the laws and acts related to municipality. The local personnel administration hierarchy was formulated into three tiers: the National Commission level, the Provincial Sub-Committee, and the Local Governments Sub-Committee. In the case of the municipality, its structure is presented in figure 1.



Source: Authors' construct

Figure 1: Structure of Municipal Personnel Administration before and after the Local Personnel Administration Act 1999

According to the figure, the diagram on the left-hand side presents the former hierarchy of local personnel administration in the form of three-tier committees. This commission has been responsible for the issuance of regulations on municipal personnel management throughout the country. It was believed that this hierarchical form of administration could provide constancy and security for the administration of the country at the national level. However, this particular type of commission was ended in 1999. A previous research study on the prior local personnel administration, conducted by Thammasat University in Thailand, clarified that there were approximately 7,770 sub-committees and committees which administrated local personnel management in the whole of Thailand. The decisions on local personnel management have always been finalised by the higher or highest level commission. This triggered disinclination, red-tape and overlapping in many tasks and procedures (DOLA-Office, 2003). In terms of HR practices, the authors have explored the stages of recruitment and selection, training and development and performance management. With regard to the Local Personnel Administration Act 1999, the triple tier of Local Personnel Committees has been authorised take charge of local personnel administration in Thailand. They are the key committees who are supposed to be in charge of forming all policies for local personnel administration. Besides this, they are hierarchically controlled and the lowest provincial and district levels perform as auditor and mentor for all municipalities’.

The diagram on the right-hand side presents how the recent HRM decision is expected to be made. The bottom level of decision is based at the provincial level. Although municipalities are designated to decide on their recruitment and selection, promotion, training and other stages of HRM, the provincial committee still plays the role of auditor and mentor. Whenever there is selection, promotion or rotation, the ‘provincial HRM committee’ is still involved. *‘I still have to wait for the signature of the Nai Amphur (District Chief Executive) to verify my decisions on my staff. It is because my municipality is a sub-district municipality; the Nai Amphur still supervises and*

audits us', said a mayor from a sub-district in Loei province, said a mayor where researchers had conducted a field visit in November 2011. The quotation shows that even mayors are embracing their power in HRM, but the final designation still belongs to the representative of the central government.

In regard to the selection process, exams and interviews are still the adopted approaches. There have been different stages after decentralisation. After the Local Personnel Administration Act 1999 was newly promulgated, municipalities were free to issue any examination and the exam content varies. This has caused a problematic era for Thai municipalities as well as other local government units. Tactics to get recruited and selected have been performed and they limitlessly spread throughout Thailand. Ultimately, this process of recruitment and selection were reconsidered and some authority has been returned to the central government based on the justification of corruption prevention. Therefore, these selection exams were once again designed and organised by the Department of Local Administration (DOLA). Thus, this conveys the sense that municipalities have loosened their local autonomy in HRM and returned some of it back to the central government.

2. Local autonomy and community forest management: External aspect

The promulgation of the 1997 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand authorised community and participation rights in the policy-making were processed at national and local levels. These rights were never officially stated in any of the previous constitutions. For example, articles 46 and 170 authorised local communities to preserve, conserve and protect their heritage and natural resources. When any new projects were proposed to a community, the government was required to organise a public hearing and referendum to listen to local communities' concerns, especially about issues that affected the community's livelihood. More specifically to local politics, it is perceptible that the 1997 constitution had given autonomy to local governments and communities to share decision-making power in managing local affairs.

Community forest management is one of the environmental issues challenging the existing power of the government. Local communities had self-regulated the community forests long before any of the related laws were promulgated. As most local people are agriculturalists, they depend on forest abundance for water, food and housing. However, the central government never acknowledged local communities' rights in managing community forests by claiming that protecting the forest is an issue of national security. Rights over community forest management are therefore an on-going issue to be discussed among relevant parties. Forestry politics is a complex political issue in Thailand as many players are involved in it. One main actor is the Royal Forestry Department (RFD), responsible for managing forestland across the country. Its main objective is forest protection but the RFD can also consider any other uses for forests, for example, creating national parks, forest reserve zones, and wildlife sanctuaries, or commercialising forestlands (Leungaramsri & Rajesh, 1992: 3). The RFD is therefore an organisational statue for centralised management over local communities that have been living in the forest areas before the promulgation of any forest laws.

Although the main purpose of the RFD is preventing forest exploitation, forest areas have continued to decrease – shrinking from 60% of Thailand's total area in the 1950s to 27% in 2000 (Somsak, 2002; Local Development Institution, 1993). In contrast, the forestland that is being managed by local communities with self-regulated management is pristine, e.g. the community forestland of Baan Luang District and Silalaeng Sub-district communities in Nan Province of northern Thailand. The RFD never accepted that it has failed in its duty and is a major obstacle to community forest management due to its top-down forestry regulations (Laird, 2000). Rather, the RFD accuses local communities for most of the deforestation, such as from shifted farming and illegal logging. A conflict between local interests and centralised control over community forestland has emerged. The two sides have no trust between each other. The decentralisation of forest management has been seen as the best way to resolve the conflict. At least local communities believe that

genuine local participation will give them more opportunities to determine what appropriate management for the community is.

Local autonomy, in reality, is still questionable with regard to natural resources management. Although there have been attempts to propose a community forest bill, all were cancelled by governments until recently. In addition, power that was decentralised to local governments was given without the power to manage natural resources. With regard to livelihood of the local people, the cooperation between local government and local communities in managing community forestland seems to be the most appropriate answer to the status quo of local autonomy. This is because most local people living in the area are affected by the abundance of forestland in one way or another. Also, they had bad experiences with severe forest destruction which nearly destroyed the livelihood of local communities. No one wishes that situation to ever happen again. Continuous community forest management has contributed to trust-building among local people and local government. Local communities and municipalities have shared the responsibilities of community forest management without governmental support. As a local government, one of the municipality's external tasks is being part of the community forest committee. It gives financial support to local communities with regard to forest patrols and related expenses while local communities give labour and cooperation in exchange. Working together can help them to strengthen community power without decentralised power of natural resource management. In this regard, the relationship between central and local governments may reflect the fact that local autonomy is still a tug-of-war game amidst decentralisation propaganda.

Responses of local units and the central government to decentralisation and local autonomy in Thailand

The question on how the local units respond to their new local autonomy is rather complicated. Based on the in-depth interviews with four

municipal clerks, not a single of them felt totally satisfied with decentralised human resource management (HRM). A municipal clerk, who has been working for the municipality for 18 years, classified the development of local personnel administration into three periods: 1995-2002, 2002-2006, and 2007 to present. This category is relevant to the changing period within the HRM evolution. To this end, the most noticeable practices for illustrating the evolution would be local officials' recruitment, training and performance management.

During 1995-2002, recruitment processes were still relatively centralised. All advertisement and recruiting routes were planned and directed at the central government level, meaning that they were all organised by the Department of Public Administration⁴ (DOPA). In all cases, the local governments are considered to be inferior for the Thais. Thai history has implanted the value of civil servants as being for the higher society group of people. Therefore, becoming a local civil servant was unattractive for Thai people during this period of time. Another inconvenient fact was that local governments received lower budget amounts which signified less power. As a result, the recruitment process was not successful at its initial stage. Municipalities could not attract as many candidates as the central government. During this period of time, no concrete local autonomy appeared.

Afterwards, during the period 2002-2006, it was called the era of 'catastrophe'. Recruitment, selection, promotion and other performance management tasks had legitimately been delegated to the local governments. Decentralisation had been implemented in accordance with the Local Personnel Act 1999 (LPA 1999). TAO, municipalities and PAO became famous as new work places for Thai people. They were celebrated as 'a work place in home vicinity, no serious or difficult tasks, receiving the same compensation that central civil servants are provided, and more people are needed'. This slogan stimulated new generations of workers to apply for a job and return home to work near their families. Later, local units became scandalous work

⁴DOLA or Department of Local Administration was separated from the DOPA in 2002 in accordance to the Thai Public Administration Reformation Act 2002.

places. This disastrous era started with the recruitment process. It was rather obvious about favouring certain groups of people to be informed of job vacancies. The focus group discussion with municipal officials illustrated that those who were recruited and appointed during 2002-2006 were informed about the job vacancies by mayors or municipal clerks who were their relatives, or at least their friends. The recruitment channels were limited to such a narrow circle – advertisement on municipal notice boards, internal official letters and notices to other municipalities in the same province, and unofficial advertisement by recent municipal officers. Therefore, prospective candidacy was quite restricted.

Eventually, because of this issue of restricted candidates, in 2007, some rules and regulations for HRM were reconsidered. A mayor suggested that the solution had been made too late. It was impossible to restart the recruitment process. It was also impossible to return those officials who had been promoted or rotated. Most of the municipalities around Thailand had been employed with people and allocations were completed. Therefore, the solution on rules and regulations revision was a way to absorb or resolve the problem. From 2007, a restructuring of HRM was launched. For instance, the HR plan and recruitment plan now had to be approved by the higher level of each municipality which meant that a municipality was under the monitoring system of the provincial HR committee of its province. The central government, by way of DOLA, once again held the responsibility for advertising vacancies and disseminating unoccupied posts to the public. However, the municipality could also implement the advertisement in accordance to the DOLA.

Thus, decentralised HRM has generated autonomy, in terms of the locality of the local civil servants. Municipalities have been able to recruit local people. Jobs are more equally spread between both urban and rural areas. This decentralisation has also created opportunities for job availability. Thus, the municipalities have responded well to their new responsibilities and autonomy. However, negative rumours exist among the population regarding the injustice of HRM in municipalities, resulting in fewer people wanting to work in these organisations. The most crucial result was that this HRM stage

is becoming ‘recentralised’ once again. Is this noticeably a starting point where the pendulum swings back to centralisation? To some extent, it can be a sign of recentralisation.

In addition, regarding the issue of community forest management, local units and the central government respond to decentralisation and local autonomy differently. On the one hand, it is perceptible that local government has never had power to manage the forestland in its area. From in-depth interviews with local leaders, they believe that the central government is, in reality, unwilling to give power to local governments and local communities on this aspect. Therefore, they see the central government as a significant obstacle to decentralisation and local autonomy. To respond to highly centralised forest management, the local community has sought cooperation from an outsider, the provincial NGOs network, while the local government acts as a supporting actor. In this respect, the local community is the frontrunner in demanding genuine local autonomy. For example, one of the key informants stated in response to centralised forest management that:

“I feel that standing and fighting here alone [as one community] is impossible at the present time. I think a direct counter-action that we [the committee] enforce over community forest violators cannot last long because many things change quickly.”

Since a real player in forestry politics is the central government which has the true power to control the decision-making process, unofficial forest protection is as essential as a demand for legitimised local control over community forest management. Self-regulated forest management is implemented to help preserve community forestland for the interest of all local communities. In addition, the provincial NGOs network may act as a facilitator for local communities in sharing information and experiences regarding community forest management or a bill. For example, one local community has shared their experience in response to centralised forest management by withdrawing the National Park landmark stones from their

community forest zone without being charged. Learning from others' experience may provide a local community some lessons in dealing with similar problems.

The provincial NGOs network is very useful in terms of training community leaders for effective participation at the national level while strengthening citizen power at the local level at the same time. With limited local autonomy, some interviewees think that self-regulated forest management is more powerful than centralised management because regulations are mutually agreed upon by local people and disseminated to nearby areas. When the power of forest management is centralised while check-and-balance mechanisms are weak, local people fear that corruption can arise. This is because all of the crucial decisions related to forest management are in the hands of a few elites. In contrast, decentralisation of forest management power to local communities could enable them with stronger check-and-balance mechanisms of community forest management. In addition, local involvement in forest management can be more responsible and accountable to local communities as decisions about forest management will affect their livelihood in one way or another.

Although local actors are energetic about being part of the centralised policy-making process, their voices are hardly ever heard. The central government still believes that it is in the public's interest that forests must be managed by well-trained forestry bureaucrats. Also, the government never talks about unaccountable forest management while local communities always want decentralised power to legalise accountable and sustainable forest management run by local governments. To benefit from established power decentralisation of local governments, local politicians may use a policy of continuous self-regulated forest management to win elections. It is mutual commitment that all benefit from the scheme while also mobilising support for the campaign for a community forest bill. Being part of the community forest network, acting as a collective whole can be more powerful for negotiating with the central government than acting alone.

On the other hand, the central government has enjoyed the status

quo of forest management. It has yet to lose power over forest management while continuing to benefit from local communities in forest protection through free labour. In regard to this status quo, pseudo-local autonomy is perceptible. If local communities wish to win the tug-of-war game of genuine decentralisation, they may have to put more force into it by mobilising more public support with good practices in community forest management.

The opportunities and challenges for Thai local units

Based on the data collection, it is quite obvious that decentralised human resource management (HRM) has influenced the autonomy of local personnel administration. It depicts the consequences of decentralisation which take into account the HRM facet of local government in Thailand. The municipality, the local unit which embraces the hierarchical form of administration from the central government, has been influenced by decentralised HRM. There are both challenges and opportunities for municipalities in terms of their autonomy. These influences occurred in the main three stages of HR practice: recruitment and selection, training and performance management.

Recruitment and selection have been the HR practice which was vastly influenced by the decentralisation policy. Considering the process of recruitment and selection, the two stages remain decided by the mayor under the auditing and supervising responsibility of the central government. Due to the fact that recruitment and selection are initial stages for HRM, they initiated some predicaments for decentralised HRM. Some of the power in organising selection practices has been returned to the DOLA, in the central government. Therefore, this situation has agitated the assertion of local officials and prospective candidates for municipalities. As a result, recentralisation is likely to be the solution for decentralised recruitment and selection.

Training has been marginally influenced by decentralisation. Based on the new tasks allocated to municipalities, they show a slight influence. This is because the training courses for local civil servants are still planned and

organised by the central government. The trainees will be sent to a college where all local civil servants from every province in Thailand will have to attend. These courses are also mainly for those who will be promoted. The trainees will not attend these classes because of their initial interest. Noticeably, once in a while, training opportunities were observed to be a reward for a municipal official who has performed outstandingly. This judgement is normally carried out by each mayor. Thus, there is some degree of doubt as to whether this is transparent and equitably judged. Therefore, decentralisation has not significantly changed training activities for municipal officials but it also shows some extent of local autonomy in making decisions. However, the same as recruitment and selection, a representative of the central government still supervises on any matters raised.

Amongst the three HR practices which were selected to be studied, the performance management process is perceived as the least affected one. Promotion was the exceptional concern. Compared to the training opportunities awarded, the promotion scheme is at a more serious degree of exemplifying itself as part of a spoils system. The findings are quite obvious that decentralisation initiatives have affected local personnel management in Thailand, but perhaps not in the ways initially expected. Promotion depends on the discretion of mayor in each municipality. This again confirms the local autonomy on the management of staff.

Based on the aforementioned status quo of local personnel management in Thailand, it is rather obvious that decentralisation has created an opportunity of local autonomy for local units as municipalities. Simultaneously, this same opportunity has created some unintended, unpleasant outcomes. To some extent, these have even confirmed and instigated recentralisation for local personnel management in local Thai governments.

On the other hand, the case of municipalities managing local natural resources has always illustrated the pseudo-autonomy of local administration in Thailand. Although local governments have more power to

manage local affairs when compared to the past, they still have limited power to decide over local natural resources such as community forests. Local communities with support from local networks have long challenged the centralized forest management for genuine autonomy. However, their attempts have never been endorsed. The challenge for local decision-making power over natural resources in local areas has been an on-going and challenging issue between local and central governments. The former has vital evidence to prove how local power can preserve the forest effectively. In contrast, the latter is less effective in managing forests for the benefit of local communities. The challenge is power-sharing between the two sides. Local communities wish for genuine power while the centralized government plays the cat and mouse game to keep authority over them. This kind of relationship is a challenge in itself.

Nevertheless, all local communities cannot claim the success of community forest management schemes. This reality is a critical point challenging both local and central governments as to whether the power of forest management should be decentralized more than it has been previously. It is questionable whether decentralized forest management is good for all. If many local communities are still less capable of managing natural resources, why should they be entitled to manage the nation's resources? The central government and many people can use this claim to challenge local communities not to be entitled with full power of forest management. This kind of claim can be an opportunity for the central government regarding their use of support to play seek-and-hide games in forestry politics. The central government may enjoy this opportunity by reminding the public that the owners of these natural resources are the general public themselves, not the local communities.

Local communities also have some opportunities regarding the community forest issue. First, local politicians may make use of the issue to boost votes at election times. The commitment to continue the forest management scheme is not difficult to promise since forest preservation has

always been implemented at a local level. Second, the battle for power is an important stage for local people and governments who are becoming familiar with participatory democracy. When they are active players, challenges for genuine participation may change the face of Thai politics.

With regard to community forest management, local units may face pseudo-decentralisation in Thailand. Re-centralization is not difficult to perceive where power of natural resource management is still in the hands of officials who work at the central government. Local governments may have learned from their own experiences that there is still a long way to go to get closer to genuine decentralized power. Although the community forest is currently self-governed, there is no guarantee for local rights of management. Opportunities and challenges of local units to win the tug-of-war game are questionable but worth the wait.

Conclusion: The legendary tug-of-war of central-local relations of Thai government

The case of Thai local government has always been interesting. It is rather obvious that the power of decision making is vital -. Local autonomy is such a critical issue in practice. Legislatively and theoretically, local autonomy has been granted by the central government. With the internal aspect, HRM has been devolved to local units. Both the 1997 and 2007 constitutions have consented to Thai local governments to exercise their autonomy. However, the decentralisation implementation could not be exercised spontaneously because of democratic government. While the central government perceived this early stage for preparation of monitoring and mentoring, the local government has perceived it as the central government is persisting with this autonomy. Especially, the decision on local personnel for local officials is being recentralised. Simultaneously, the external aspect has shown that there is also a tug-of-war between the central and local governments in Thailand. Community forest management has been a disputable issue at the central, local and community level.

It is also a double-edge sword for Thai local units. The studied municipalities have encountered difficulties in the capacities of local officials. Due to the fact that the response to the newly granted authority has distorted implementation, unintended practices like moneyless corruption have occurred. Vice versa, the Thai central government reacted to this implementation by committing recentralisation. Thus, the case shows to some extent, an example of the legendary tug-of-war. It has become almost mythical because the Thai central government has embraced the authority for a long time. This incident is not the first time. Thai Public Administration has been claimed as having the stage of ‘recentralisation’ on other government levels as well. Thus, this paper can claim and confirm that the Thai Administration is on a trajectory of recentralisation and pseudo-decentralisation especially since the coup d’etat was undertaken.

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